

Putin's Ascendancy in Russian Politics

Rakesh Gupta*

*Prof. Rakesh Gupta is Faculty in the Centre for Political Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

[This article was in press when the Presidential Elections were held in Russia. The Elections took place on 26 March 2000, in which Vladimir Putin, a career Soviet KGB agent and chosen by Boris Yeltsin as his successor, scored an easy win against Zyuganov securing almost 57 per cent of the votes in his favour. Zyuganov came next with 30 percent of the votes. Nearly 69 per cent of the electorate exercised their franchise in the elections. Putin will enjoy a four year term starting from May 2000.— Ed.]

It is election time in the Russian Federation, with the Presidential elections being held on March 26, as a result of pre-ponement, after Vladimir Putin stepped into the Kremlin once Boris Yeltsin resigned prematurely, in the wake of a melt down of Russian economy and polity that began in May 1998. A 110 strong Initiative Group composed of deputies of St. Petersburg Legislative Assembly, Sergei Mronov and Igro Matveyev, St. Petersburg Writers' Union Chairman Mikhail Chulaki, the Unity movement north-west division leader Boris Gyzlov, St. Petersburg's State University Chancellor, Lyudmilla Verbitskaya, Mining Institute Dean Vladimir Litvinenko, as well as directors of the leading industrial enterprises such as Krishin Efteergsyntcz (Krisihi refinery), Glynozem (black-soil) Joint Stock Company and Lenteransgaz (Gas transportation company) supported his candidature.

The parties, he has the support of are All Russia Movement of Yakovlev, Our Home Is Russia of victor Chernomyrdin, Democratic Russia, Common Cause leaders, Peasants Party of Russia and Free Democrats. Ex-Prime Minister, Primakov made an announcement that the Fatherland movement will take a positive attitude towards Putin. The chances of Putin of consolidating further are bright while the support base of Zyuganov is already split. The Union of Public and Political forces (UPPF) a split away faction of the Patriotic union of Russia held a Congress and announced their displeasure at the hegemonic attitude of the communists, under the leadership of Valeriy Tarasor. Putin has the support of Trade Unions and Multi Talagat Tadzhdin.

The long registration process shows that the list of original fifteen aspirants is getting reduced to eleven as the nomination process is coming to a close. The nomination process suggests that the shrinkage is due to factional fights, loss of original support base and corruption that investigations of original election papers that were submitted by candidates like Zhirinovskiy. He is now debarred from elections and has threatened to take the Election Commission to the Court. Zyuganov was as well asked to explain his possession of two flats and four Volkswagens, and his commercial bank accounts and wife's shares in the joint stock company. The two incidents show a coincidental prejudice on behalf of the Election Commission. Zyuganov continues to be a challenge to Putin. Owing to the performance of the Communists in the preceding elections to Duma in December,

1999, i.e., polling highest votes to the tune of 24-29 per cent and owing to the suspicion of Putin's proclivities, some political forces talk of impending dictatorship, especially in the wake of Putin's support to a communist for speakership of Duma.

The context of the present elections is Russia's descent into dismal anarchy since the introduction of the market, that has meant mafiaisation of economy, society and polity, with absence of strengths of pursuing a democratic path under the Constitution, which is patterned on the French. The winter of discontent that Russia witnessed during the failure of *Perestroika* has deepened beyond recognition. To take a shorter view of the descent, it can be traced back to August 1998 when the rouble was devalued owing to the growth of oligarchs instead of entrepreneurs. This meant that drift of power is towards (a) the DUMA and (b) the regions. The drift has been caused by dysfunctioning of the economy, high inflation, societal dislocation, budgetary collapse and the criminalisation of the military. Yeltsin charisma and authority touched its nadir, owing to his *nomenclature*, the role of his daughter, the corruption surrounding the family, and, significantly lack of German and Japanese support once Kohl and Hashimoto left their respective political scenes.

The Financial Mess

The condition of the Russian economy is revealed by the following data released by the Russian Economic Ministry, as reported by the end of January, 2000 (a) citizen's official money incomes in 1999 fell by 15 per cent in contrast to the previous year; (b) every third Russian is below the poverty line; (c) purchasing power of money fell by 20 per cent; (d) 2/3rd of the country's population experienced a drop in living standards in 1991; (e) pensioners and disabled became especially poor; (f) purchasing power of families with many children, single mothers, public sector workers and employees shrank by almost 1/4th; (g) the poor-rich divide is especially acute (40 fold) in Magadan, Kamchatka and Amur regions, Yakutia, Khabarovsk Territory and Moscow. These are the regions that are richer and where packages of mixed economy (read welfare) are in operation. Of course, every Russian family has alternatives sources of income, but, legal wages do not exceed more than 40 per cent of the overall composition; (h) finally the number of unemployed at the end of 1999 December were 8.65 million, i.e., down by 11.1 per cent from the figure of January 1999. Crime reached unprecedented heights with theft, robbery and contract killings heading the list of 1999.

This is the condition despite the fact that 1999 witnessed positive trends, i.e., 9-10 per cent growth in industry, 5 fold increase in positive balance of profits to losses, lower inflation rate, i.e., down to 38 and doubling of balance of trade from 15.1 billion to 29 billion dollars. However, economic recession continues and disintegration of Russia is the forecast for the first decade of the 21st century because the decline in the federal income was 19.4 per cent below the projected figure. This means that regional governors have become powerful and their support to the Presidential candidate will be a deciding factor.

Regionalisation has not only caused Chechnya, but has also meant that regions pursue their own economic, diplomatic and foreign policies. There is a general failure of the Russian system owing to the non-intervention of the Russian State that has allowed the oligarchs to grow. In that context, Putin's popularity has taken an upswing because of Russian victory in Chechnya. Howsoever, you

may judge it— from the perspective of state or that of human rights, the Russian state has asserted itself.

Candidates and Issues

Russian presidential candidates are faced with the tasks of building statehood, market and capitalism with a human, if not, a humane face. The election campaign shows that there is talk of banishing the oligarchs. They were compared by Putin with Lobbyists and Corporations in the US. However, he bemoaned the fact that their influence is not institutionalised, and also that institutions, including that of the Presidency were not above their influence. There is talk of privatising gas, electricity and rail monopolies. Putin opposed the dismembering of the Unified Energy System of Russia Joint Stock Company Gazprom and the Ministry of Railways. There is a fuel and food crisis, especially in the North.

Given the threat of Russian State's deepening meltdown what route will Russia take with these Elections? Going by the programmes of some of the candidates, it is difficult to give an answer that will negate the dismal prognostications for the present decade. Zyuganov analyses of the situation, attacks the oligarchs and suggests that national assets should benefit the people and not the former. He suggests the introduction of State monopolies in tobacco and vodka, which will help the budget to triple straight away, and the State would be able to guarantee a minimal of monthly payment of 1,000 roubles to each person. He suggests tax reduction, prevention of drain of hard currency to the tune of one to two billion dollars each month from the country. Primakov, who has announced his tentative support to Putin says the reasons for support to Putin are the latter's defence of the principles of statehood, order, the development of the real sector of the economy, support for the domestic producer, a socially oriented economy, and the preservation of the State's territorial integrity. On the political front, Zyuganov suggests amendment of the Constitution to curtail the power of the President, increase those of the Duma and the ministry, support to local self-government, creation of a Procurator General's Office and the support to courts that are paralysed by criminal cases because almost 10 million people are involved in latent or hidden crime.

The rightwing parties programme suggests a referendum (rejected by the Election Commission) on issues of property rights, immunity of legislators, making the army professional, and, for making amendments to the Constitution and limiting the right of the President to dismiss the government. They are, generally, for market society, individual rights and restructuring the regions. The last has to be seen in the context of various proposals being made to decrease the number of regions. For example, a Presidential candidate Tuleyev suggests that number of regions should be reduced and that the governors should be centrally nominated for a period of five years.

Putin's agenda

Putin's views are significant and that will influence the subsequent years, for, he is the likely winner. His personality is little known, but whatever is known (through his earlier colleagues) of this 47 years old Leningrader, the security service officer shows him to be a very private person, secretive, rarely thaws but with few, and is 'tough, cynical and ambitious' with colossal capacity for work; bit of a snob, and values technology for professionalism. The men whom he brought

after he came into Kremlin show his bias towards Leningraders and security services background. These are Aleksey Pudrin, Dmitriy Kozak, Igor Sechin, Viktor Cherkosov, Leonid Reyman, Sergei Ivanov, Yuri Shevchenko, Dro Tiry Medvedev, Vladimir Kozhing, German Gref, Victor Ivanov, Yuri Zaostrovskiy and Alexander Abramov. He praised these for their professional qualities. His elections campaign staff is headed by Dimitriy Medvedev— a Leningrader.

High on Putin's agenda and low on Western estimates of Putin has been the Russian Army's Chechen campaign. Putin decided to be in Chechnya because of security concerns. Rebutting the suggestion that he should not focus on the issue he said, 'I am absolutely convinced that we will solve no problems— neither economic, military nor social— in the conditions where the State is falling apart. Therefore, I believe that there is nothing unusual in the fact that we are now, currently, attaching such an importance and paying such attention to the problem of fighting terrorism. We must solve this problem once and for all. This is why I made the trip there'. He announced the successful completion of campaign in Grozny and gave directives for normalisation of social and political situation in Chechnya by supplying electricity to the Shali and Urus-Martan administration districts and to the whole of the Chechen plains not later than March 15 and return gas service to lowlands by 1st of March, as also the opening of schools and hospitals by then. He ordered that by September 1, 2000 schools, oil institutes and universities should open. In retaliation, Chechen leaders, like Ring-General, Vakha Assanov and Commander of Eastern Front announced the beginning of total combat operations in the entire state of Russia.

Commenting on the labour parameters, Putin said, "... it is now very important for both the State and the trade union movement to establish a civilized labour market,' by bringing in labour legislation to manage relations between the labour and entrepreneur associations, to work towards the development of the small and medium businessman as well as open the possibilities of new jobs. He supported the right wing's proposal for a referendum mentioned above. He supported property rights, opposed absolute immunity for members of Parliament, did not commit himself on the issue of dismissal of government and said that Russia should move in the direction of the professional army keeping in view the possibilities of the statehood. He supported protection of the rights of citizen-patriotism and people's welfare, rights and freedom. He admitted that life of the ordinary Russian is very hard. He opposed the communists' demand for redistribution of property and intended to have pro-market reforms.

For the 'near abroad', he wanted that the CIS should integrate. In a CIS council meeting he discussed the free trade zone, which was not on the agenda and set up an "expert group" from among representatives of the Commonwealth countries to perfect free trade mechanisms. The Russian military doctrine is also in for further change and in this reemphasis on the nuclear arms has been announced. Given the need for the State to assert itself with reference to domestic economic and federal turmoil, Putin will assert this in external policy as well. A foreign policy reorientation towards Asia and South Asia will dovetail his westernised slant in the context of NATO expansion.

What happens on the 26 of March when elections are to be held would depend upon a variety of factors, namely, (a) alliance with regional governors, who are playing their own game of altering regional alignments, (b) alliances with the Russian Oligarchs, (c) levels of disruption of the electoral process, (d) winning over of the rival's support base and (e) international support.

DUMA elections' pattern will not be repeated here. Putin's chances seem better than Zyuganov's. The fight is between two parameters of State intervention: a little more than minimalist and less than maximalist. Putin seems to be symbolizing this mixed ground and receiving lot of popular acclaim for that in Russia.