

Russian Elections: A Fore Gone Conclusion?

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The four other contestants for the Russian Presidential elections, besides Vladimir Putin, are Gennady Zyuganov, a nominee of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, Sergeev Mironov of A Just Russia party, Vladimir Zhirinosky of Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and an independent – Mikhial Prokorov. Consequent to the loss of 77 seats by Putin's United Russia Party in the recent elections for the Duma has led to a resurgence of political activism in Russia by way of massive street protests, the latest being the 30,000 human chain protests on Sunday last in Moscow. All this because the Putin of 1999, is not viewed as the 'saviour' anymore. The dissent in the past decade was muted primarily because the Russian people wanted the country to be strengthened.

Ironically this strengthening with years of relative stability, yearned for by the Russian citizens after a decade of chaotic revolutionary change, have ushered in a feeling of social, economic and political security. The strengthening of the Russian economy has created a middle class like never before and saw the swapping of the presidency as cynical and an insult to their intelligence. The present generation in the 20-30 age group has seen little of the former Soviet Union. It is these shifts that have loosened Putin's hold not only in Russia but also within the United Russia Party.

While Putin's reaction to these crises has been considered uncharacteristically slow by some Western observers – in contrast it would seem to be a more deliberate and considered response and not a knee jerk reaction as most in the western world would have wanted him to do.

Putin seems to be classic example of being closer to a controlled democracy than a liberal autocracy. He has not come down with a heavy hand on the protestors as the "democratic world" would have expected or liked. Instead Putin has acknowledged his present position by declaring that he could face a run off in the March Presidential elections.

Putin has taken particular care as not be seen showing any disrespect for democracy by instituting vote monitors for strict observance of election code of conduct and also ordered installation of

web cameras in polling stations to counter claims of vote rigging. He has gone as far as warning local authorities that any effort to manipulate votes in his favour would do him more harm. (Probably taking a clue from the “elephant draping” in UP). Instead of blocking social networks, which are agog with criticism of Putin, he has chosen to offer to place his posts.

Putin has four rivals in the elections - besides the Zyuganov of the communist party, there is the billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov (owner of New Jersey Nets Basketball team) who recently opined that only Putin could control the prevailing inefficient system and being at the helm for 12 years a lot had been done but he felt that he could do better. This really amounts to a tacit support if not surrender to Putin. Now the 6% of vote that is purported to him would favour Putin by slicing into the votes of the other three. It would be naive to believe that Prokhorov - if not a US plant - has the backing of the US given his stakes there.

The Western observers believe that a weak Putin would adversely affect the Russian handling of economic and security challenges, consequently discouraging foreign investors thus preventing its massive modernisation programmes. This, they feel will also control Russian resurgence in the former Soviet states as also in Central Europe.

The Russian effort to reassert in the UN on the Iranian and Syrian issues, whereas the US and Europe, thus far, have been prevailing on issue like the Ivory Coast and Libya, have not gone well with Western world. Russian, by its support to Syria is projecting itself as a more reliable ally vis-à-vis the US which abandoned one of its closest ally - Hosni Mubarak.

The Russian opposition to the “regime change ideas” which it believes to be “extremely dangerous” has found favour in the BRICS comity.

One would believe that the US interest in a weakened Putin and a weakened Russia would help it to portray Russia as not as powerful as claimed, thus undermining the Russian clout which is pressurizing US interest in Europe. At the same time the US would definitely prefer a weakened Putin in power vis-à-vis Zyuganov of the Communist Party. The advent of a communist regime would bring China and Russia closer ideologically which would be challenge to America's power status.

The Chinese at this stage of their development would much rather prefer an economic assistance than an ideological one. Energy security being their major concern, an ongoing tie up with the Russian would be more beneficial.

The European despite all issues would be more comfortable with Russia under Putin than a fall back to a Communist Russia.

India, had a close association with the erstwhile Communist Soviet regime which centred around security against threats from China and Pakistan. However, after removal of the vital defence clause from the 1971 Indo-Soviet treaty by President Yeltsin – Putin, on coming to power tried to recast the relationship with a “strategic partnership”. All these are reflected in joint ventures and scientific and technological tie ups. After the Gorbachev and Yeltsin experience, Putin will remain the best bet for India.