

Ukraine elections: Yanukovich -- Man for all seasons

Written by Eric Walberg

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Ukraine's new president -- unless there is another Orange Revolution -- has fashioned a comeback worthy of Nixon, marvels Eric Walberg

Ukraine's presidential elections Sunday were remarkable in more ways than one. The winner of the first round and favourite to lead Ukraine at a crucial moment in its history is the one politician observers long ago dismissed as a has-been. Viktor Yanukovich is mocked by his opponents as an illiterate bumpkin, a puppet of Ukrainian business magnates, a former criminal and communist, a conspirer against the brave democrats of the legendary Orange Revolution of 2004. Have I left anything out? Does he kick dogs or beat his mother?

As the results came in, pro-Western commentators rushed to claim that Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko (25 per cent) would surge past Viktor Yanukovich (36 per cent) in the runoff 7 February, Tymoshenko announcing she would immediately seek the support of the also-rans to "move forward with uniting the democratic forces." However, the two candidates who came third and fourth, former Central Bank chief Sergei Tigipko (13 per cent) and former parliament speaker Arseniy Yatsenyuk (seven per cent), said they would not support any candidate in the second round. President Viktor Yushchenko polled five per cent and Ukrainians are holding their breath till they see the last of him.

The real story behind the rivals is not as it appears. Tymoshenko, with her *faux* peasant blond braids and *matri ushka* doll demeanour, amassed a fortune in her years of speculative buying and selling of Russian gas, for which she spent several months in prison under president Leonid Kuchma. Her pretenses as a populist democrat are skin-deep.

Yanukovich comes from a working class background and worked his way up honestly literally from rags to hard-won respectability. He lost his mother at the age of two and grew up in bleak post-WWII Ukraine. His attitude towards dogs is unclear, but he was indeed jailed for hooliganism at the age of 17, apparently learned his lesson, was released after eight months for good behaviour and never looked back, at least until the so-called Orange Revolution of 2004. In the waning days of the Soviet Union, he graduated in engineering from the Donetsk Polytechnic Institute and joined the Communist Party, when it was no longer fashionable or of much use, suggesting he is much more a populist than any of his elite rivals (Yushchenko and Tigipko are bankers). He served under president Leonid Kuchma as prime minister, and was the favourite to succeed him.

Certainly, the 2004 elections were marred by electoral rigging, but to blame Yanukovich is a mistake, as the whole process was infiltrated by US-sponsored NGOs as part of policy of "colour revolutions" across the region. Ukraine is sharply divided -- a legacy of Stalin -- between the anti-Russian west (formerly part of Poland) and the pro-Russian east, with rigging taking place according to these preferences across the country whenever possible.

The first results in the previous elections were probably more or less fair, with Viktor Yanukovich winning, but Western-organised street protests and the possibility of rioting and bloodshed (a la Iran this past summer) convinced Yanukovich to allow a rerun. Of course, when you blink,

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people figure you're the loser. Western-backed Viktor Yushchenko dramatically claimed he was poisoned by his rival namesake, a ploy now consigned to storybooks, but with all the media hype, Yushchenko managed to snatch the victor's laurels, so to speak. Ukrainian affairs lurched from one crisis to another under the Orange revolutionaries, including arming the mad Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili in his wars against Russia. Doubts about the possibility of a truly fair election this time linger, with 57 per cent saying the results could well be manipulated.

In an interview with *The Times*, Yanukovich outlined his policies, stating clearly Ukraine would not join NATO, but that it "can and must take an active part in the creation of a European collective defense system." He wants to return relations with Russia to a friendly basis: "Relations should be natural, as they are between the Ukrainian people and the Russian people." He has expressed sympathy for retaining the Russian Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol when its lease expires in 2017, a wise move considering that Crimea has a large Russian population that would be delighted if Russia took it back (it was ceded to Ukraine on a whim by Khrushchev in 1954). He has indicated he would recognise Georgia's two breakaway regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia (as well might Turkey, with its large Abkhazian diaspora) and said he would sign up to a Russian-led economic co-operation agreement between former Soviet republics.

Russia, despite accumulated grievances over the past five years, has stayed out of the fray this time, bracing itself for the possible election of Tymoshenko, who fancies herself a compromise bridging the east-west divide in Ukraine.

But in addition to her Orange baggage, she is assiduously courted by Saakashvili, who Russian media reported sent three charter flights with 400 "athletic" Georgians to Kiev and Donetsk, both strongholds of Yanukovich, prior to election day, part of a planned 3,000 Georgian election "observers" apparently approved by Tymoshenko. "Some of them had lists of all polling stations in the region, though they told border guards that the purpose of their visit was to meet with Ukrainian girls they met on social networking sites." The Georgians were to "interfere in the electoral process with an aim to change the outcome of the elections and disrupt the vote," Party of the Regions member Mykola Azarov told a news conference on Saturday. Yanukovich called for them to stay in Tbilisi on Sunday.

Is this perhaps the latest ploy by Saakashvili and his National Endowment for Democracy advisers to ensure the survival of his fraternal colour revolutionaries? Stranger things have happened when NED gets involved in ensuring democratic procedures are observed.

Georgia continues to be the region's loose cannon, with both the Russian Interior Ministry and Federal Security Service accusing it of harbouring and funding terrorist groups from the Caucasus. The US continues to pour millions of dollars of weapons into Georgia, and it can only be concluded that Washington is well informed of what Saakashvili is up to. NATO will soon approve the 2010 Action Plan for Georgia. "It is important for us to continue the reforms that bring Georgia to the organisation," Georgia's European Integration Minister Giorgi Baramidze said last week.

A victory in the runoff for Tymoshenko will be a bitter blow for Ukrainians who seek

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accommodation with Russia, most of whom according to polls would prefer a union with their neighbour to the present hollow independence. This yearning by Ukrainians and Russians alike for union is perhaps hard for outsiders to understand. Explains James Sherr, at the London-based Chatham House, "Ukraine, for Russia, is not just a neighbour. Ukraine, for Russia, is part of Russia's own identity. Kiyv and Rus is the origin of the Russian, as well as the Ukrainian state."

Despite the ravages of Stalin in Ukraine in the 1930s, this sense of a common identity is shared by virtually all Ukrainians except for those in the west who identify more with Polish (hence, anti-Russian) history. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is the most popular foreign politician and, according to one poll, would have won the Ukrainian presidential election if he had run.

Bizarre as Ukrainian politics are, both Yanukovich and Tymoshenko acted as prime ministers under the pockmarked president, the former, briefly, because of an early falling-out between Tymoshenko and her democratic comrade-in-arms. Yulia, a shrewd politician, managed to mend fences with both Yushchenko and the Russians and is still PM. She talks now only of her beloved "democratic forces", but her claims that she will breeze past the nasty, undemocratic Yanukovich are belied by the fact that she shares the blame for the disaster of the failed Orange Revolution (she makes no mention of it these days, to be sure). This is confirmed by the refusal of her rivals to have anything to do with her, though her American advisers -- the firm of Obama's closest political adviser David Axelrod -- assure her this problem can be overcome.