Crisis in Ukraine: rival camps await Supreme Court verdict on election

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In the power struggle surrounding the Ukrainian presidency, the camp of Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich has been increasingly pushed onto the defensive. Nevertheless, following the narrow passage of a no-confidence vote in parliament on Wednesday, Yanukovich said he would not step down as prime minister, declaring the vote unconstitutional.

On Wednesday afternoon, Yanukovich and his rival, opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko, met face to face under the auspices of a European Union delegation, led by EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana. They both pledged to accept the verdict of the Supreme Court, which has been meeting for three days to consider Yushchenko's appeal against the official election results, which declared Yanukovich the winner of the November 21 runoff.

A growing number of officials have switched over to the side of Yushchenko, and it is expected that the court will invalidate the election result in one form or another. Both camps seem to have resigned themselves to the fact that there will be a new election, but the confrontation between them continues.

Yushchenko, who is supported by Washington and most European capitals, has rejected a new election starting from scratch, in which other candidates would be allowed to run, and is instead demanding that a new vote be limited to another runoff contest between himself and Yanukovich, who was openly supported in the election by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Yushchenko has, moreover, called for a revote to be held quickly. After the meeting with Solana, Yushchenko announced December 19 as the election date, even though no such agreement had been reached.

Yanukovich and Ukraine President Leonid Kuchma insist on a repetition of the election as a whole. That would take more time to prepare, and would open up the possibility for the Moscow-backed forces to select an alternative candidate capable of generating broader support than Yanukovich could muster.

Yushchenko and his Western backers, who have sanctioned daily mass demonstrations in the capital Kiev, fear they could lose momentum if a new election were delayed and the demonstrations allowed to peter out.

Yushchenko's social and political base is extremely heterogeneous. He himself stands for a right-wing, neo-liberal economic programme and speaks for a tiny elite. His campaign is financed by right-wing American institutes and wealthy Ukrainian businessmen, such as Petro Poroshenko, who is the joint owner of the television Channel 5 and is regarded as Yushchenko's financier.

It is by no means clear that Yushchenko actually won the November 21 election, as his supporters—and the Western media—claim. The alleged extent of election fraud remains thus far unproven. There are, moreover, reasons why many people, particularly in the eastern Ukraine, have supported the government candidate, despite his corrupt and reactionary character.

Yanukovich is the representative of the oligarchs in the eastern Ukraine, whose wealth is largely based on control of the industrial sectors that were state-owned when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union. They, like their counterparts in the opposition camp, have amassed enormous fortunes through quasi-criminal means.

Among industrial workers in the east, there are justifiable fears of massive job cuts should Yushchenko's free-market policies be implemented. He has a very poor reputation in the Donbas industrial region. During his short time as head of government in 1999-2000, several unprofitable mines were shut down.

At that time, miners' monthly wages averaged 290 Grywna (about 45 euros). Today, they are nearly double this figure.

Ukrainian workers are also aware of the fate of heavy industry and mining in the former East Germany and Poland, where hundreds of thousands lost their jobs. The loss of employment in Ukraine means the loss of nearly all social benefits and facilities—from kindergartens to medical care. Since Soviet times, these have been closely linked to the factories.

In addition, the Russian-speaking population in the region fears discrimination, should the strongly Ukrainian nationalist opposition come to power. Repressive measures against minorities were widespread in many other former Soviet republics following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In the ten days since the November 21 election, the Yushchenko camp has repeatedly escalated its demands, risking the danger of civil war and the break-up of the country. In particular, the second figurehead of the opposition camp, Yulia Tymoshenko, has done her best to exacerbate an already tense situation.

After governors in the eastern regions of Ukraine threatened to respond to the opposition campaign with demands for autonomy, she issued an ultimatum on Monday in the name of the Committee for National Salvation. She demanded the resignation of the government, the resignation of the general prosecutor, and the prosecution of the governors of Kharkov, Donets and Lugansk, who had threatened autonomy. In front of demonstrators in Kiev, Tymoshenko also threatened to limit president Kuchma's freedom of movement and block railways, motorways and airports.

Her stance was clearly aimed at heading off any compromise, even if that meant a break-up of the country, a development that could assume just as bloody and catastrophic forms as in the former Yugoslavia. Were this to happen, a direct conflict between the great powers could not be ruled out. Rumours are already circulating about the presence of Russian special units in Kiev.