

Ukraine power struggle: constitutional settlement favors opposition leader Yushchenko

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Under strong international pressure, the Ukrainian parliament on December 8 enacted a new election law and a change in the constitution that largely met the demands of the opposition movement led by Viktor Yushchenko. The measures were immediately signed into law by President Leonid Kuchma.

The settlement appeared to remove all obstacles to a new run-off election between presidential candidates Yushchenko, backed by the US and the European Union (EU), and Viktor Yanukovich, the sitting prime minister who is supported by Russian President Vladimir Putin. In the original run-off vote, held November 21, state election officials declared Yanukovich, the favored candidate of outgoing President Kuchma, the winner. But the opposition and its Western backers complained of widespread election fraud on the part of the government camp and organized mass protests in Kiev, leading to a Supreme Court ruling voiding the first vote and setting December 26 as the date for a new election.

Wednesday's settlement between the two camps and the vote in parliament pave the way for a revote that most observers believe will be won by Yushchenko.

Of the 450 parliamentary deputies, 402 voted in favor of the compromise worked out by Kuchma and Yushchenko, under mediation from the EU. The agreement bans, as the opposition demanded, the use of absentee ballots and voting at home. Constitutional changes reducing the power of the president in favor of parliament will take effect only in September of 2005—not this month, as Kuchma had demanded. This means the winner of the election will have nine months to form a cabinet and carry out important political changes with little interference from parliament.

The only opposition demands that were not met were the immediate resignation of the sitting government and the replacement of all members of the Central Election Commission. However, President Kuchma had already ordered Prime Minister Yanukovich to take a “holiday” last Tuesday. And both the chairman of the election commission, Serhiy Kivalov, and two of its members, who are accused of being partisans of Yanukovich, will be replaced. This means that supporters of the opposition will hold a majority on the election commission.

Yushchenko hailed the agreement. “Seventeen days of peaceful civic resistance brought us to final victory,” he told a gathering of his supporters in the centre of Kiev. “We are now a different country. We finally feel ourselves to be a European nation.” Boasting that no blood had been spilled, he called on the demonstrators to end their blockade of government buildings.

His opponent, Yanukovich, denounced the agreement as a “creeping coup.” But the votes in parliament opposing the settlement did not come from his camp, which almost completely fell into line behind President Kuchma's endorsement of the changes. Rather, the “no” votes were cast by supporters of the second most prominent opposition leader, Yulia Tymoshenko, who was not prepared to accept anything less than complete and unconditional capitulation by the Kuchma camp.

Tymoshenko accused Yushchenko of making unacceptable concessions and announced she would challenge the electoral and constitutional changes before the constitutional court.

The events in Kiev have inflamed tensions between Moscow and Washington. The coming to power of an anti-Russian and pro-Western regime in Kiev is a

massive blow to Russian foreign policy interests, which have already been dealt severe blows by Washington's aggressive policies.

At a meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Bulgaria on Tuesday, a heated exchange occurred between US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Lavrov accused the OSCE, which had sent hundreds of election observers to Ukraine, of turning election monitoring "into a political instrument." Powell defended the OSCE, saying, "What we have seen is the international community coming together to support democracy."

He went on to voice concern "about developments in Russia, most notably, those affecting freedom of the press and the rule of law." He also reiterated US demands that Russia remove its troops from Georgia and Moldova.

Powell's statements suggested, by implication, that the Putin regime itself could become the target of a future made-in-America "democracy movement," and underscored Washington's intention of continuing its political and diplomatic offensive to weaken Russia's hold on its traditional spheres of influence, including former Soviet republics that border the Russian Federation.

Putin, for his part, has repeatedly attacked US foreign policy in recent days. On Monday he warned that Europe might be divided once again "into people for the West and people for the East." For Putin there is much stake in Ukraine. The aggressive expansion of the US into the former Soviet Union increasingly threatens to isolate Russia economically, politically and militarily.

The US has stationed troops in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and increased its influence in the Caucasus, especially Georgia, where it brought to power a pro-US regime one year ago. The Baltic states are, meanwhile, all members of both NATO and the EU.

If Ukraine is taken over by a pro-US-regime, Russia might lose not only access to one of the most important industrial regions of the former Soviet Union and control over the most important export routes for its gas and oil, it could also lose control over Sevastopol, the home base of the Russian black sea fleet. This would

cut off the Russian fleet from the Black Sea and access to the Mediterranean.

On Thursday, the German *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* noted that "President George Bush asserted the doctrine that Washington will never allow the rise of a power which could challenge America economically, politically or even militarily," and warned that the aggressive politics of Washington could lead to the bloody dismemberment of the Russian Federation.

The newspaper wrote: "Now that Kiev, too, threatens to go over to the Western camp, Putin can no longer stand by and watch without doing anything. If Moscow loses Ukraine, all hope for great power status will be lost. And what is more, the centrifugal forces, which have already torn apart the Soviet empire, could spill over into the ethnically and religiously mixed Russian Federation: Kalmucks, Tatars and Bashkirs, but also Russians in the Far East have all waited for a long time to get more independence from the Kremlin."

The US, having thrown the Middle East into bloody chaos with its war against Iraq, threatens to do the same with Ukraine and other parts of the former Soviet Union. "Democracy" serves as a mere pretense.

Yushchenko and his partner Tymoshenko, on the one side, and Kuchma and Yanukovich on the other, represent different factions of the same nouveau riche elite—one that has enriched itself at the expense of the people after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The major difference is that the former believe their interests can be better served under the protection of the US and the European Union, while the latter are more inclined toward Russia.

The so-called "democrats" in the leadership of the opposition have no interest whatsoever in real democracy, which is inseparable from social justice and equality. Genuine democracy cannot be reconciled with their right-wing, "free market" economic program. This is already indicated by their insistence that Yushchenko, as the future president, enjoy the same authoritarian powers which they opposed under President Kuchma.



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