

Ukrainian political crisis deepens after Yushchenko dissolves parliament

Vladimir Volkov**17 April 2007**

The political crisis in Ukraine, which had been brewing for several months, reached the boiling point April 2 when President Viktor Yushchenko signed a decree dissolving parliament and setting May 27 as the date for an early election. Supporters of Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, Yushchenko's bitter rival, flocked to Kiev in large numbers to protest the decision.

Yanukovich and his majority coalition partners have refused to abide by the orders or release funds to allow for the vote. For his part, Yushchenko has instructed prosecutors and police to take legal action against any officials who refuse to carry out his order to dissolve parliament and call for the early election. The Constitutional Court will begin hearings on the legality of the president's decree April 17.

Yushchenko's April 2 decision, taken at a point when his authority and power had sunk to a new low, expresses some degree of desperation. He is making one last attempt to salvage the political results of the "Orange Revolution" of late 2004. At the time, regime change in Ukraine corresponded to Western and, first and foremost, American geopolitical interests. It significantly curtailed Russian influence in Ukraine, which remains the second most populous and economically significant of all the post-Soviet republics.

Yulia Timoshenko, one of the two principal leaders of the "Orange Revolution" along with Yushchenko, was apparently the moving spirit behind the action to dissolve parliament. She visited the US only a few weeks ago, where she was received by leading figures in the Bush administration, including Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Many observers interpreted her high-profile visit as a sign that Washington is relying on Timoshenko to advance its interests in the region.

Upon her return from the US, Timoshenko redoubled her efforts to see the current parliament dismissed, threatening to organize new mass demonstrations in the style of the "Maidan" [Independence Square] protests two and a half years ago.

On March 13 the opposition, composed of President Yushchenko's party Our Ukraine and the Yulia Timoshenko Bloc (the official name of her party), delivered an ultimatum demanding a change in the constitution limiting the powers of the parliament, a speed-up in the move to join NATO and a halt to "attacks on Ukrainian language and culture."

The ultimatum contained as well a number of populist demands. It called for an end to the "politicization, criminalization and corruption of the power structures" and the removal from office of those government officials "who have direct ties to the criminal milieus."

But it is the so-called "gas princess" Timoshenko herself who most thoroughly embodies corruption and criminal methods of business. She is closely tied to Pavlo Lazarenko, the former Ukrainian prime

minister who was arrested in the US and charged with money-laundering involving hundreds of millions of dollars, corruption and fraud. Timoshenko was also accused of stealing hundreds of millions from the Russian budget during the 1990's through her contracts with the Russian defense ministry.

Yushchenko hesitated to dissolve parliament until the last moment. His final public explanation as to why he was taking the action was weak and unconvincing, and the results of the May 27 elections may marginalize him even further.

As recently as a month ago Yushchenko labeled the demand for early elections as "a road to nowhere." He said that they would not improve the situation in the country since "social moods are such that the same political forces will remain, and these would still have to somehow agree."

However, he decided to take this risky step after 11 deputies from his coalition defected to the side of Yanukovich's parliamentary majority on March 23. The majority bloc now comprises Yanukovich's Party of the Regions, the Socialist party of Oleksander Moroz, the parliamentary speaker, and the Communist Party headed by Petro Simonenko.

Even before that Yanukovich was joined by the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs headed by Anatoliy Kinakh, who served as prime minister under President Leonid Kuchma (2001-02).

As a result, Yanukovich's supporters in the Rada (parliament), who had already obtained a secure majority of 260 seats, out of a total of 450, now had the chance to have a two-thirds majority, which would enable them to make constitutional changes.

A shift in the center of gravity of political power in Ukraine began quite soon after the victory of the "Orange Revolution," an event cheered on by the American media and supported by Washington.

Increasingly bogged down in the Iraq quagmire, the US lost the ability to maneuver freely and act decisively in the post-Soviet world. At the same time, the reality of Ukraine's dependence on Europe, on the one hand, and on Russia and, specifically, the transport of energy resources from Russia, on the other, led to an inevitable strengthening of the layers of the ruling elite associated with those economic relationships.

By the autumn of 2005, less than a year after the regime change, Yushchenko was forced to dismiss Timoshenko from her post as prime minister because she was too tactless about promoting the business people around her and too openly hostile toward Russia. Shifting to the opposition, Timoshenko split the Orange ranks and this allowed Yanukovich to strengthen his position.

The new parliamentary elections in March 2006 resulted in a major win for Yanukovich, although for a while the Orange side maintained

its majority with the support of Speaker Moroz. But Moroz felt slighted by the division of governmental posts and suddenly went over to the side of Yanukovich, who soon after became prime minister.

In August 2006 Prime Minister Yanukovich and President Yushchenko signed a so-called “Universal of National Unity,” or Declaration of National Unity, which provided for parity between the two sides in terms of the government offices. However, the situation did not stabilize, and Yanukovich continued to gain the upper hand.

By January 2007 Yanukovich and his supporters had gained a majority in the Rada and they took the crucial step of passing a law in regard to the Cabinet of Ministers, which in reality made the cabinet independent of the president. On February 5, the Russian internet publication Lenta.ru commented, “Who could have supposed a couple of years ago that Viktor Yanukovich, who had so disgracefully lost the presidential election, would return to Kiev ‘on a white horse’ and concentrate in his hands the levers of real power?”

Yushchenko refused to sign the above-mentioned decision, claiming the act was unconstitutional, but it was nevertheless adopted into law.

From that moment on the tug of war between the president and the prime minister turned into an open confrontation, and Yanukovich kept gaining ground. This was revealed during Yushchenko’s failed attempt to appoint Vladimir Ogryzko as foreign minister. The Ukrainian president submitted the candidacy several times, but parliament refused to confirm Ogryzko because of his pro-American reputation. Instead, a supporter of Yanukovich, Arseny Yatseniuk, became the new foreign minister.

Now, the cards in this political game have been reshuffled, but the outlook remains unpromising for Yushchenko in the coming elections. A survey conducted in late March by the Foundation for Social Opinion in Ukraine found that even though it had some support, Yanukovich’s Party of Regions should still get 24.5 percent of the vote; the Timoshenko Bloc and Our Ukraine would together gather around 27 percent. If the Communist Party, a member of the ruling coalition, which receives around 5 percent of the vote, is taken into account, then even if the pro-Yanukovich socialists and the pro-Russian party of Natalia Vitrenko (Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine) do not get enough votes to win seats in parliament, the supporters of Yanukovich would still obtain a majority.

So what is the “Orange” group hoping for? First of all, that the US will actively support them, along with the military and the state apparatus. Defense minister Anatoly Gritsenko has already said that the armed forces will carry out the orders of the supreme commander, i.e. President Yushchenko. Additionally, “Orange” supporters are in control of Ukraine’s Security Service, which they took over under Timoshenko’s premiership who appointed her supporter Alexander Turchinov to head the service.

After dissolving parliament, one of the first decisions made by Yushchenko was to appoint the head of the internal security forces, Alexander Kikhtenko, to be a member of the Council for National Security and Defense, which the president heads.

Yushchenko is relying as well on the loyalty of the regional governors whom he appointed. Twenty-four governors, including those from the important Kiev and Donetsk regions, have already come out with a statement of readiness to carry out his orders.

The actions of Yushchenko and Timoshenko are openly authoritarian. They are willing to take any and all measures to defend their regime. This itself exposes the fraud of the “Orange Revolution,” according to whose supporters the new regime embodied “democracy” and the will of the people. In reality, once the “Orange”

faction members took power in their hands they directed it toward lowering the living standards of the people and restricting their civil rights, resulting in a sharp fall of their authority and popularity.

However, Yanukovich and his cohorts are just as little representative of wide layers of the population. They constitute a rival wing of the Ukrainian ruling elite, which enriched itself by means of exploiting natural resources and the criminal takeover of the most profitable portions of national industry. This explains their hostility to the predatory encroachment of international corporations. Also, the industries they control are more directly tied to the Russian economy.

Aside from this, there are no significant distinctions between the two reactionary camps.

At first, Yanukovich responded with hostility to the dissolution of parliament. He called Yushchenko’s decree an “usurpation of power” and an “attempt to overturn the constitution,” and hinted that if the president’s decree to dissolve the parliament was not revoked this might lead to an early presidential election. In its turn, the Rada forbade the government from funding the parliamentary elections and termed the dissolution of itself as a “coup d’état.”

A day later Yanukovich turned around completely. On April 4 he announced that the Party of Regions would agree to early elections if the president and the opposition insisted.

The central reason for the about-turn is Yanukovich’s desire not to intensify the conflict with American imperialism, represented in Ukraine by the “Orange” crowd. Yanukovich will try as hard as he can to find a compromise and is prepared to give in, as already happened once in the autumn of 2004.

Much will depend on the behavior of the Kremlin and the leading Western Europe powers. The latter have shifted in their attitudes toward the Yanukovich-Yushchenko split over the past two and a half years. The German press, for example, far from demonizing Yanukovich, approvingly notes his support for economic reforms and his orientation toward cooperation with the European Union (EU).

These events demonstrate once again the dangerous consequences of the struggle of the leading world powers for geopolitical influence and hegemony.

Recently, the United States signed an agreement with the governments of Poland and the Czech republic to set up an American missile defense system on the territory of those nations. Discussions are taking place about a further expansion of this missile defense network on Georgian and Ukrainian soil. Although this missile network is presented as a step toward neutralizing the Iranian “nuclear weapon” program, it threatens first and foremost Russia, and also the interests of the states of “old Europe”—specifically Germany.

In the economic sphere, a number of projects that will transport energy resources from Siberia, Central Asia and the Caspian basin, which Russia and the EU are now undertaking, are competing with American schemes, like the Baky-Ceyhan oil pipeline, and threaten to undermine American plans to dominate this region. Knowing the character of the Washington elite, as shown in Iraq, we should expect that the US government will be ready to take extreme measures to defend its influence in Ukraine and throughout the region.



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