

Ukraine runoff elections down to two arch rivals

Candidates using any possible means to win

By ANDREY VOLKOV
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KYIV, Ukraine—During the three-week window of time between election rounds in Ukraine, the two remaining candidates for the presidency are doing everything possible to assure their own final victory.

In a campaign marked by vicious mud-slinging, the battle between Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and opposition leader Viktor Yanukovich is mainly to pick up voters whose first-round election choice was eliminated.

This represents more than 37 percent of the vote. In the first round on Jan. 17, Yanukovich pulled in 35 percent of the vote, 10 points ahead of his main rival, Tymoshenko. Eighteen candidates ran in the January poll; the Feb. 7 runoff is a contest of two.

Tymoshenko's strategy is to pull over to her side candidates who dropped out after the first round, among them Sergei Tigipko, who took third place in the vote at 13 percent. Ms. Tymoshenko has repeatedly promised him the post of prime minister if she wins the presidency.

While Tigipko has not refused the offer, he has stated that he does not want to support any one candidate

and is ready to cooperate with any president.

The fourth place vote-getter, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, has called upon politicians not to "bargain."

Yanukovich's strategy is more restrained. He is relying on the citizens' choice to secure his political future, trying to change the electoral law.

Current President Viktor Yushchenko, hero of the Orange Revolution, who has also not declared his support for either candidate, considers neither choice a boon for democracy.

"Those citizens who share democratic values and prospects, they have no choice in the second round," said Yushchenko in a statement.

Yushchenko failed in the first round of voting and thus so did his Orange Revolution. He did not manage to implement democratic reforms in the country or improve the quality peoples' lives. "He is an ideologist," said political scientist Alexei Garan.

A BITTER BATTLE

The campaign waged between the two candidates has been anything but calm. Each has been slinging dirt at the other through the newspapers and on television.

Tymoshenko has attacked



BITTER: Political rivals Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko (R) and opposition leader Viktor Yanukovich (L), are fighting out a bitter battle for the Ukrainian presidency to be decided on Feb. 7. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Yanukovich's character, calling him pro-Russian and claiming that he will not do anything for Ukraine because what can a prisoner do? Both Yanukovich and Tymoshenko have served prison terms.

Yanukovich has called Tymoshenko a liar who has done nothing for Ukraine over the last five years but make promises and more promises. He blames her for not carrying out the budget, and because of that, the

country does not have the money to pay any loans or pensions.

Last Friday, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, some participants reportedly watched the film "Mr. and Mrs. Smith"—about a married couple who are both assassins, each hired to kill the other—and compared the Tymoshenko and Yanukovich fight to the film.

"There is no trust between the two candidates," said Ivan Zajac, deputy

from the Ukrainian People's Party.

Now, both camps are trying to make changes to the electoral law in the final few days before the vote.

At an unscheduled session of Parliament last Thursday, members from both parties proposed competing amendments to electoral legislation. Opposition members cheered, but Tymoshenko's party members were disappointed with the results. More than half the members

present voted in favour of an opposition bill to remove from the current law a rule under which the territorial electoral commission is considered as legal if it has a quorum of at least of two-thirds of its membership.

The opposition believes that Tymoshenko's team wants to use the rule to disrupt the normal work of the electoral commission on Election Day by withdrawing its members from the commission.

At the same time, a bill proposed by Tymoshenko's party was not adopted. Her members insisted on adding an amendment to the current law stipulating that 'home voting'—the practice of applying to vote from home if you're medically unable to make it to a polling station—should only be allowed if the voter gets a medical certificate.

They believe that the status quo, of no certificate required, will be exploited by Yanukovich's team to push the voting results in his favour.

According to the international observers, the 'home-voting' mechanism was used to commit mass voter fraud during the 2004 elections that led to a Supreme Court-ordered re-vote and eventually the Orange Revolution.

Parliament members are now officially on vacation. However, the opposition insisted that an extraordinary session of Parliament be convened this coming Wednesday to resolve the issue on the spot. This will be a tall order since in Ukraine, any law or amendment is normally hard to pass. And for an electoral law, in particular, officially they should be made one year before a vote.

Australia's population boom threatens quality of life

AUSTRALIA CONTINUED FROM P1

According to social demographer Bernard Salt, 443,000 people are being added to the Australian continent every year.

"We have upped the birth rate. Generation X is producing about 50,000 more babies per year now than we did in the year 2000 and the level of overseas migration has skyrocketed from an average of about 100,000 per year in the 1990s to around 240,000 now," he told the ABC.

Australia now has the fastest population growth in the developed world, surpassing that of the U.S. and the United Kingdom, and even many developing countries including Indonesia and China.

It is estimated that Brisbane and Perth will double their population size to 4 million and 3.5 million respectively, while Sydney and Melbourne are expected to near 7 million by 2049.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd favours strong population growth.

"I have said before that I believe in a big Australia," he told a business forum last year. "This is good for our national security, good for our long-term prosperity, and good in enhancing our role in the region and the world."

Mr. Rudd, however, admits it will be challenging.

"These challenges underscore the need for national leadership in planning the future of our cities," he said.

OVERLOADING AUSTRALIA

Mark O'Connor, co-author of "Overloading Australia," says Australia is not equipped geographically to cope with further population growth and the government is talking it up to excite business.

He argues that the erratic water supply, a shortage of arable land, and the lack of infrastructure cannot support large populations.

The 5 percent cut in carbon emissions, proposed in the government's Emissions Trading Scheme, does not factor in population growth, he adds.

"If the Rudd government does not change course, even painful per capita [carbon] cuts will deliver no overall cuts, but an increase," he wrote in The Sydney Morning Herald.

Australian businessman Dick Smith is opposed to population growth and says Australia should cut its skilled migration intake and encourage people to have fewer children.

"Our politicians are completely letting the Australian public down," he said. "Nine out of 10 Aussies don't want 40 million people here, but there's no discussion, there's no debate."

Former New South Wales Premier Bob Carr, a long-time opponent of population growth, says he is resigned to the fact Australia cannot close its borders. He believes it is not so much the numbers, but the rate at which the population grows that will determine how Australia copes

in the future.

"There's no argument that we're going to have a strong, robust immigration policy. It is the rate of immigration that is now the issue that faces us," he said on ABC's Lateline. "And I am very worried about that. I don't think we've got the carrying capacity. I think our cities can cope; I think there are robust plans in place in Sydney and Melbourne. Higher densities and urban sprawl will be part of it though; that's unavoidable. And I think Australians ought to be appreciating that the argument over the quality of our urban life begins with the rate of population increase, the rate of immigration."

Former Victorian Premier Steve Bracks, however, is upbeat. He says population growth is unavoidable and while it will be challenging, "a challenge is an opportunity as well."

"We can't close our borders. We can't say to the rest of the world: 'Whatever happens there is not going to happen in Australia.' We will have population increase," he told the ABC.

It is the responsibility of legislators, business, industry, and community to make sure that the increase in population is provided for, he says.

"And there will be opportunities there. Greater density will mean that certain public options become viable; better public transport's viable ... so there's all sorts of ways that we can deal with this. But closing our minds and our hearts to people from around the world is not the way that's going to do that," he added.

Paid news: A cancer in Indian media

INDIAN MEDIA CONTINUED FROM P1

The Indian media has been seen as sensitive, patriotic, and very much an influential tool in the socio-political sphere since the days of the freedom movement. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the Indian nation, initiated his movement with the moral power of active journalism. Today, with a population of a billion, India supports nearly 70,000 registered newspapers and over 450 television channels.

The Indian media as a whole often plays the role of constructive opposition in Parliament as well as in various legislative assemblies of the state. Journalists are, by and large, honoured and accepted as the moral guide in Indian society. While newspapers in Europe and the United States are losing their readership, Indian print media is still going strong with huge circulation figures.

For a democratic India, the media continues to be acclaimed as the fourth important pillar after the judiciary, parliament, and bureaucracy. But unfortunately, a cancer in the form of paid news has been taking hold in the media.

Attendees at the Mumbai aired serious concerns over the trend of the commercialization of mainstream media, and the degradation of media ethics and practices in India. All the speakers were unanimous that the media must make changes to maintain the public trust.

In his speech, P. Sainath, eminent journalist and rural affairs editor for The Hindu, said that in his opinion

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that the corporatization of the media world has threatened the existence of free media.

"The newspaper owners are greatly influenced by political clout. The proprietors now grant space for vivid coverage for the benefit of their 'friendly politicians' in the newspapers. Furthermore, to entertain their growing demands, many media groups have even gone for arranging extra space in this advantageous period," Sainath said.

Meanwhile, the press council, a quasi judicial body, has decided to investigate the issue and has already set up a committee to examine violations of the journalistic code of fair and objective reporting by having paid news.

Retired Press Council Chairman Justice GN Ray publicly stated that

a section of Indian media had "indulged in monetary deals with some politicians and candidates by publishing their views as news items and bringing out negative news items against rival candidates" during the last election.

Media critic Guha Thakurta, a member of the press council team, said in an interview that the committee had received many complaints from journalists and that a large number of newspapers and television channels in various languages had been receiving money for providing news space and even editorials for the benefit of politicians.

Mr. Thakurta claims that the paid news culture has violated the guidelines of the Indian election commission, which restricts expenditures of political candidates.

"Amazingly, we have found that some newspapers even prepared rate cards for the candidates in the last few elections. There are different rates for positive news coverage, interviews, editorials, and also putting out damaging reports against the opponents," he said.

Despite the extent of the practice, the Indian election commission is now taking the issue seriously. The commission recently asked the Press Council of India to define what constitutes paid political news so that it can adopt guidelines accordingly.

Nava Thakuria is a freelance journalist based in Guwahati, northeast India.

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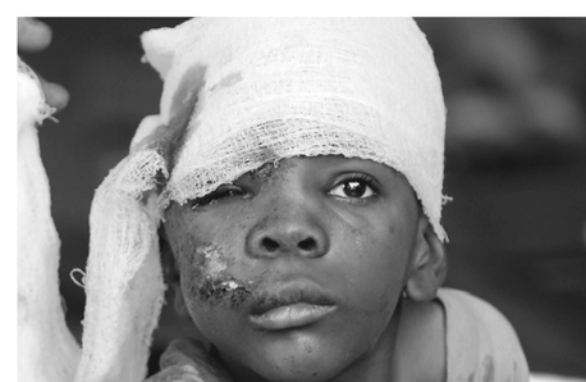
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