

Outside View: Ukraine's election as dirty as in 2004

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 25 (UPI) -- WASHINGTON, Oct. 25 (UPI) -- Andriy Magera, deputy head of Ukraine's Central Election Commission, says Ukraine's Oct. 28 parliamentary election is as dirty as the first of four he worked on in 2004.

Both elections were overseen by Viktor Yanukovich, then as prime minister and now as president, with one major difference: Six years ago election fraud brought one-in-five Ukrainians on the streets in the Orange Revolution whereas today mass protests are unlikely.

"You can't get fooled again," the song by the British band The Who, is a good metaphor for voter disillusionment brought on by the failed presidency of orange hero Viktor Yushchenko. Ukrainians have never been as estranged from their state institutions and politicians as currently and only 3 percent of Ukrainians asked say there will be a free election.

The imprisonment of Ukraine's most charismatic politician and best rabble-rouser Yulia Tymoshenko has produced a lackluster opposition campaign led by geeky-looking Arseniy Yatseniuk. Two years ago the young Yatseniuk, who had just qualified to run in the presidential elections after turning 35, ran the worst election campaign in Ukraine's history after permitting it to be run by Russian advisers.

Ukraine's new political force UDAR (Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reforms) led by boxing champion Vitali Klitschko has captured disillusioned orange and young voters and UDAR, meaning knockout, could come in second place. Klitschko is though as intellectually challenged as the president and, with only 40 knockouts and no political acumen to his name, is out of his depth in Ukraine's Byzantine political chimera. UDAR is dogged by media reports of well known oligarchs Dmytro Firtash and Igor Kolomoysky providing extensive financial support.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe last Friday issued its second report that pointed to massive and blatant abuse of state administrative resources by the Party of Regions. One poll found that more than 55 percent of Ukrainians queried say election fraud would be organized by the Party of Regions compared to 14 who thought it would be the opposition. Independent no-governmental organization such as Opora (Resistance), Chesno (Honesty) and the European Network Election Monitoring Organizations have reported similar widespread abuses.

The Yanukovich political machine is pressuring businessmen to not support the opposition and the Party of Regions dominates the television channels owned by oligarchs who are beholden to the president. Election commissions that count votes are packed with authorities' representatives.

Buying of voters through cash payments and food products are the highest of any election assisted by public disillusionment producing a willingness by ten percent of Ukrainian voters to sell their votes. Magera said, "What is striking is the scale of bribes of voters in the election."

Buying up votes is not restricted to the Party of Regions -- a recently posted video showed Petro Yushchenko, elder brother of the disgraced president, bribing voters in his home region with foodstuffs.

Upcoming elections have returned to a mixed proportional and first-past-the-post system to elect 450 deputies last used in 1998 and 2002. Then -- and now -- a mixed system favors the ruling authorities and oligarchs who camouflage their candidates as "independents" who can be bought to join the Party of Regions coalition. In 2010-11, millions of dollars were paid to bribe opposition deputies to defect to the pro-presidential coalition.

Surprisingly, some of the opposition voted for the new election law even though under the old proportional system the opposition would have received a parliamentary majority -- as it did in 2006 and 2007.

The argument that deputies elected in first past the post districts are known to voters and therefore an improvement on the faceless proportional system is proving to be a misnomer as the majority of election abuses have come from these candidates.

Chesno, an activist NGO, says two-thirds of Party of Regions candidates have bought up voters, abused state-administrative resources and official positions, have a major gulf between their expenditures and declared incomes and infringed freedom of speech. First past the post candidates were worse than proportional candidates in each of their six categories.

The mixed election system is also bad for women who have fewer candidates than in any previous Ukrainian election in the last decade. The Merezha (Network) NGO reported seven times fewer women than men candidates, especially in first-past-the-post districts.

Yanukovich has repeatedly promised to have a free election but we should be not surprised that he is failing to keep his promise. Six years ago President Leonid Kuchma and Yanukovich also promised to have democratic elections and instead organized massive election fraud.

Yanukovich is in fact a serial election fraudster who has presided over seven non-democratic elections, three as Donetsk governor (1998, 1999, 2002), two as prime minister (2002, 2004) and two as president (2010, 2012).

Election fraud undertaken on Yanukovich's watch is particularly galling when taking into consideration he was elected by a democratic election two years ago that he wishes to deny to others.

Yanukovich cannot fulfill Western demands for democratic elections after imprisoning opposition leaders and because he seeks control of Parliament to win a second term in three years' time.

Losing is therefore not an option while threats of Western sanctions are not taken seriously in Kiev when the United States has delegated responsibility for Ukraine to an European Union that has repeatedly sent out mixed signals.

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