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NEW POLITICAL ALLIANCES EMERGE IN UKRAINE

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As Ukraine prepares for the September 30 parliamentary elections, the balance of power among political forces is markedly shifting. The pre-democratic “Orange” camp is reconfiguring while the long-dominant Dnipropetrovsk camp is dwindling in influence.

On Thursday, June 28, President Viktor Yushchenko’s Our Ukraine party, headed by Vyacheslav Kyrylenko, and Yuriy Lutsenko’s People’s Self Defense signed an agreement to create an election bloc for the September 30 parliamentary elections. The election bloc still must decide who will head the bloc and who will take the first 10 places.

The Our Ukraine-People’s Self Defense alliance has three advantages:

First, it likely will add another 6-7% to Our Ukraine’s expected 14% vote level, returning the party to its 2002 level.

Second, it will attract voters in central Ukraine, the traditional stronghold of the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc (BYuT), the Socialists, and the Agrarians. Although Yushchenko swept central Ukraine in the 2004 presidential election, Our Ukraine fared poorly in the region in the 2006 parliamentary races.

Third, the alliance rehabilitates Our Ukraine, as Lutsenko is popular among Socialist and Pora voters and NGO activists. Our Ukraine’s popularity fell following “corruption” charges against its senior business leaders in September 2005.

The new Our Ukraine-Lutsenko alliance called upon other “democratic” forces to join them. The Pora party has agreed to merge with the new bloc. Other national democrats, including the Reform and Order party) joined BYuT earlier, while the Ukrainian Rightists are unwilling to give up their independence. The Ukrainian Rightists have balked at plans to merge Our Ukraine and People’s Self Defense following the elections.

However, including the Ukrainian Rightists will not help the Orange alliance much. With returns of only 1-2% expected, the Ukrainian Rightists would add few votes. In addition, their main base of support, five oblasts of Galicia and Volhynia in western Ukraine, are already strongholds of Our Ukraine. The Ukrainian Rightists include several discredited politicians, such as the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists, led by sacked Naftohaz Ukrainy chairman Oleksiy Ivchenko. Our Ukraine refused to include Ivchenko in its list. The Ukrainian Rightists may also include the extreme right All Ukrainian "Svoboda" (Liberty) party led by Oleh Tiahnybok, who was expelled from Our Ukraine's parliamentary faction in 2004 following a scandalous anti-Russian and anti-Semitic speech.

Despite these shifting alliances, Ukrainian politics are becoming more predictable. Most observers agree that the winning party will take 45-55% of the total, and no party is likely to win a landslide. This result mirrors the pattern of the Ukrainian presidential elections in 1994 and 2004, where the winner similarly took about 52%.

Only four of the five political forces now in parliament are likely to win seats for a 2007-2012 term. Parliament will feature two Blue forces (Party of Regions, Communists) and two Orange forces (Our Ukraine bloc, BYuT). These two camps are likely to have similar vote tallies and a similar number of parliamentary deputies. The Socialist Party, which won four parliamentary elections between 1994-2006, is now polling barely 1%.

This configuration makes Viktor Yanukovich and Tymoshenko the leading candidates for the more powerful prime minister's position. While President Yushchenko was willing to accept Yanukovich as prime minister in 2006, he no longer trusts Yanukovich in this position.

A three-party system appears to be emerging, composed of two Orange parties (center-left BYuT and center-right Our Ukraine-Lutsenko) and the centrist Party of Regions. Since the 2004 presidential and 2006 parliamentary elections, the Communist Party has lost support to the Party of Regions, and it is unlikely to survive as a serious political force.

One major development is the marginalization of the Dnipropetrovsk clan. Ukraine's regionalism means that no political force has nation-wide appeal. Two Orange political forces dominate western and central Ukraine, while the Party of Regions controls the other half of Ukraine. This is the first time in Ukraine's history that the Donetsk clan has controlled Ukraine. In the Soviet era, Ukrainian politics were dominated by the famous Dnipropetrovsk clan (which included Soviet leaders Leonid Brezhnev and Nikita Khrushchev), Kyiv, and Kharkiv.

Although its influence dipped immediately following independence, the Dnipropetrovsk clan re-entered Ukrainian politics after Leonid Kuchma was elected president in July 1994.

After three years of political crises, the upcoming parliamentary elections give Ukraine a chance over the following five-year parliament to consolidate the democratic gains of the Orange Revolution. The three keys to this consolidation will be repairing the rule of law, which was badly damaged during the spring crisis, settling constitutional questions, and quickly establishing a parliamentary coalition and government following the elections.

(Washington Post, November 19, 2004, www.samooborona.in.ua,
www.razom.org.ua, Ukrayinska pravda, June 25-28)

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