
Outcome of Elections In Belarus and Kyrgyzstan: Crisis and Contrast

Dr R.G.Gidadhubli

Elections were held recently in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, which were Republics of the former Soviet Union, the outcome of which has been persisting crisis. An effort has been made to highlight the factors leading to the crisis and prevailing contrast in these two counties.

The Presidential election took place in Belarus on the 9th August 2020, in which the present president Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who has been in power during the last 26 years claimed landslide victory with 80 pc of votes. But a large section of the population have challenged and not accepted the official results. They have been protesting in many parts of Belarus arguing that the results were falsified and contending that opposition leader Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya won most votes. Thus the country has been experiencing protests carried out by people during the last over two months. Hence the outcome of election is ongoing crisis.

Firstly, the outcome of the election has been that due to aggressive violent attack on peaceful protestors that resulted in death of some youth and a few hundreds of people including opposition leaders have been put in the jail. Lukashenka has not shown any sign of giving in to the demonstrators' demands to step down and not ready to hold free and fair election. Many western countries have not supported the outcome of election and even advised Lukashenka for holding free and fair election as demanded by the people of Belarus. Apart from criticizing the action taken by Lukashenka, the Western political leaders have expressed their deep concern about unjust detention of opposition leader including Marrya Kalesnikova and her colleagues in Belarus. It is worth noting that as per reports a large number of lawmakers from Europe and North America have written to Alyaksandr Lukashenka advising that he should release Belarus's political prisoners, a move underscoring widespread outrage in the West over the violent repression of protests in the country.

Secondly, what is most astonishing is that despite ongoing agitation and disapproval, Lukashenka has exposed his shrewdness by arranging a program on 23rd Sept. during which he was secretly sworn in as the president sparking outrage both at home and abroad. On 27th Sept, Tsikhanouskaya urged Belarusians should take to the streets to push for the "goal of new, honest elections." On 13th Oct Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya has demanded Alyaksandr Lukashenka should step down in 12 days or face a nationwide strike from 26th Oct.

Thirdly, opposition leader Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya managed to leave the country by the end of August taking shelter in the neighboring Baltic State Lithuania and has been meeting leaders of Europe including Germany for bringing peace in the country and unfair election in Belarus. As per reports, on the 6th Oct. Tsikhanouskaya met German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin in a bid to further raise international pressure on Lukashenka, which might add to the global political impact on Belarus. In fact in the first week of October, the 27-nation bloc overcame weeks-long political stalemate and agreed to impose visa bans and asset freezes on 40 Belarus officials deemed responsible for electoral fraud and a brutal crackdown on protesters and opposition members. The European Union on 12th October decided to add Lukashenka to its sanctions list. Moreover, in a telephonic call with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated the EU's support for Belarusians to pick their leader "through new, free and fair elections, without external interference." The fact that the EU does not recognize the election results has a major global implication for Belarus.

Fourthly, it was most unexpected of a leader that Lukashenka, who has not only refused to step down but has also, rejected the opposition's calls for dialogue. Lukashenka has been a dominant and autocratic leader and has not succeeded in transforming the country from the Soviet era totalitarian Communist system to political democracy and market economy.

Fifth, it is important to note that Western governments in Europe as also USA have refused to recognize Lukashenka as the legitimate leader of Belarus and have called on him to peacefully transfer power. Even neighboring Baltic countries and East European countries have not accepted the election of Lukashenka. The State Department official of USA stated "The United States cannot consider Lukashenka the legitimately elected leader of Belarus". Similarly, the EU foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell stated that the 9th August election and "the new mandate claimed by [Lukashenka] lack any democratic legitimacy."

Sixth, a serious issue impacting external relations for Belarus is that many Western countries have called back their ambassadors, which is an indication of disapproval of the results of election and this may damage the reputation of the country.

Seventh, not caring for lack of support from the West, it was reported on 2nd Oct. that the Belarusian Ministry of

Foreign Affairs took a decision to annul all foreign media accreditations in Belarus being uncomfortable that news outlets from around the world have been covering ongoing opposition protests in Belarus and have also challenged the official results of 9th August presidential election that handed incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka claims of landslide victory. Moreover, during the last 3 months many foreign journalists have faced harassment in carrying out their operations in Belarus who were covering ongoing opposition protests as stated by Daisy Sindelar. From this it is evident that Lukashenka did not want to be exposed in the world for his atrocities. Thus the impact of the election has worsened relations of Belarus with the Western countries and yet he is displaying his authoritarian power.

Eighth, it appears there is some impact of these developments. Possibly under western pressure, as reported on 12th Oct 2020 Lukashenka went to jail to meet political leaders whom he has put behind the bars for the last over two months to discuss plans for constitutional reforms. But according to critics this was a mere tactic to end political crisis. This is evident from the fact that Lukashenka has asked security forces to take strong action on protestors. Hence on 12th October, riot police used harsh measures to stop a march in Minsk of pensioners, beating and arresting dozens of peaceful protestors. The same day, an Interior Ministry official warned that police would use "lethal weapons if need be" against protestors, which is unjustifiable.

Ninth, the outcome of election will adversely affect economy of Belarus which is already not in good shape with low economic growth, unemployment and so on. Belarus is dependent upon subsidized Russian oil and gas supply and preferential access to Russian market. Despite being in power for more than 26 years, Lukashenka has not brought about economic growth and transition to market economy and has not succeeded in getting much needed foreign capital and technology. About 80 pc of industry remains in state hands, and foreign investment has virtually disappeared. Several businesses have been renationalized. State-owned entities account for 70-75 pc of GDP, and state banks make up 75 pc of the banking sector. As per reports GDP per capita in Belarus is about half of Russia. Many of the businesses in Belarus are outdated, inefficient and would probably require more cash to modernize.

Tenth, in fact Minsk which is the capital city of Belarus has long prided itself on a vibrant and innovative IT sector that has managed to thrive amid an authoritarian political system. But as stated by Western expert Matthew Luxmoore subsequent to 9th August election many of its developers have left Minsk for nearby countries like Latvia and Poland. This will immensely damage economy of Belarus. Neglect of economic growth seems to be a major cause for agitation and public protest in the country and

against leadership of Lukashenka for CHANGE OF LEADERSHIP.

KYRGYZSTAN

Parliamentary elections held on 4th Oct. in Kyrgyzstan, in which 16 political parties participated. As per official sources the results of the elections handed victory to pro-government parties. But opposition parties refused to accept the results. There had been unrest in the country sparked by allegations of vote buying and impropriety during parliamentary elections that has gripped Kyrgyzstan sparking angry street protests.

Secondly, the outcome and magnitude of crisis was unimaginable as thousands of demonstrators were spilling into the streets and seizing government buildings. Protestors even entered the office of the President and destroyed papers and possibly documents, which may become a major problem in the future. Moreover, protestors also forcibly entered jails and released several leaders including former president Atambaev and leaders including Jaspárov who were legally imprisoned.

Thirdly, even as president was appealing for calm there was large scale protest that resulted in the Central Elections Commission which he had to annul the results of election and rival political forces were vying for control.

Fourthly, in the wake of ongoing protests the Kyrgyz prime minister resigned and the government was dissolved. As per reports up to 8th Oct. the President Sooronbai Jeenbekov, who was not to be seen in public since government was ousted by mass protests, tried to resolve the crisis and held his first round of talks with members of parliament as they look to restore order in the Central Asian nation. In fact it was appreciable that as per reports he even discussed the possibility of his own impeachment with Myktybek Abdylđaev, whom a group of lawmakers named as parliament's new speaker in the wake of the protests.

Fifthly, as the political situation was getting from bad to worse, on the 12th Oct embattled Kyrgyz President Sooronbai Jeenbekov, signed a decree reintroducing a state of emergency from 12th to 19th Oct. after thousands poured into the streets throwing the country into chaos over contested parliamentary elections. This was unavoidable since there had been conflict among 16 political parties as regards formation of government. In fact Jeenbekov had dismissed the government and announced that he was ready to step down after all necessary steps to establish law and order in the country are restored.

Sixth, on 14th Oct. Jeenbekov was forced to appoint Sadyr Japarov as the country's new prime minister, whose supporters broke him out of jail on 6th October. It is amazing to note that Japarov, who had been serving an 11 1/2-year

sentence after being convicted in 2017 of taking a government official hostage and other crimes, has perhaps put pressure on Jeenbekov and managed to become Prime Minister, even as he was not elected by majority of leaders in the parliament. However, there are expectations that Japarov's 14th October 14 confirmation as prime minister moved Kyrgyzstan toward resolving the crisis sparked by the demonstrations over the official results of 4th October parliamentary elections.

Seventh, the situation worsened and president Jeenbekov decided to resign on 15th Oct. Jeenbekov said on its website that he had decided to resign "because peace and unity in our country is more important than any post." He further added "I am not holding onto power. I do not want to be known in the history of Kyrgyzstan as a president who spilled blood and shot at his own citizens. So I decided to resign." It is the third time in 15 years that public protests have brought down a president in the former Soviet republic in Central Asia.

Eighth, it is worth noting that during the last about two decades, Kyrgyzstan has been witnessing strong differences and clashes among people from different clans and regions, each trying to gain political control. Moreover, as opined by analysts there was corruption prevailing on a large scale, and money laundering in election that has resulted in the ouster of ministers and political leaders.

Ninth, it needs to be noted that on the one hand as rightly opined by many analysts, Kyrgyzstan is the only Central Asian country with elements of democracy, and witnessed Tulip Revolution to make the country open and democratic. But at the same time it has been destabilized by poverty, corruption, clan rivalries, and deep divisions between its northern and southern regions. Hence the country has witnessed 5 presidents - Akaev from 1991-2005 fled to Moscow; Bakiev 2005-2010 taken asylum in Belarus; Otunbaeva for 2011; Atambaev from 2011-2017; Jeenbekov 2018- 2020.

Tenth, under the prevailing scenario how the situation will prevail is yet to be seen. Because in the second week of October Kyrgyzstan's opposition parties were celebrating after their protest of what some called the "dirtiest" parliamentary elections ever forced the Central Election Commission to annul the 4th October election results. But now the opposition is divided and in disarray as their goal of installing a new government with fresh faces has been hijacked. As rightly opined by Bruce Pannier opposition parties in Kyrgyzstan have lost their momentum in a fit of disunity and now find themselves in perhaps a worse situation than what the situation was when the election results were announced.

RUSSIA FACTOR

Russia is the closest political, economic, and military ally of Belarus. In response to domestic and international

pressure on Belarus, the Russian president Vladimir Putin has pledged economic aid and potentially security support to prop up Lukashenka if the situation deteriorates, which is going to be a big challenge for Russia. In fact Russia has not only backed Lukashenka since the election but also offered a \$1.5 billion loan and vows of possible military help, including support from a police brigade.

It needs to be added that Russia and Belarus have some ethnic commonality, both being Slavic States. Moreover, Belarus is a member of Eurasian Economic Union formed under the initiative of Russia. Russia has been giving oil and natural gas to Belarus at concessional rates below prevailing international price which has helped Belarus, apart from charges for Russia's Nord Stream-2 pipeline passing through Belarus for export of oil and gas to West Europe and mainly to Germany. But this may become problematic for Belarus and Russia considering Western disapproval of Lukashenka's regime after election.

Thus Russia is one among the few countries that have approved election in Belarus and initially opined that West also should support him as elected president. At the same time Putin is aware of the fact that Lukashenka who, during his regime for over two and half decades, has been trying to get the best of both from Russia in the East and from Europe in the West. But now Lukashenka is left with no alternative but to depend on Moscow for his survival. At the same time under the hanging scenario, as opined by western expert Tony Weslowsky, the Kremlin will flex its military might on the eastern fringes of NATO and exacts concessions from the embattled Belarusian strongman. For instance, Russia which has military units in Belarus will put pressure on Lukashenka to give a permanent military base which will strengthen Russian military presence in Belarus that would alter the geopolitical chessboard in Europe.

Kyrgyzstan has close and cordial relations with Russia and is a member of Eurasian Economic Union and Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This Central Asian nation borders China and hosts a Russian military airbase. Hence as per reports the Russian president Vladimir Putin is trying to help Kyrgyzstan to overcome the crisis, which is evident from the fact that on 7th Oct. Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) head Aleksandr Bortnikov held talks with the Kyrgyz deputy secretary of the Security Council, Omurbek Suvanaliev. Hence whether he will solve the problem is not certain.

In lieu of conclusion it may be stated that crisis in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan is not yet over and might persist in the near future. Hence Russia, despite having close political and economic ties with both Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, is in a dilemma as to how to solve their crisis and promote peace.

**(Dr R.G.Gidadhubli, Professor and Former
Director, Center for Central Eurasian Studies,
University of Mumbai, Mumbai)**