

Analysis

Kuwait Times
Established 1961
The First Daily in The Arabian Gulf

THE LEADING INDEPENDENT
DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF
ESTABLISHED 1961

Founder and Publisher
YOUSUF S. AL-ALYAN

Editor-in-Chief
ABD AL-RAHMAN AL-ALYAN

EDITORIAL : 24833199-24833358-24833432
ADVERTISING : 24835616/7
FAX : 24835620/1
CIRCULATION : 24833199 Extn. 163
ACCOUNTS : 24833199 Extn. 125
COMMERCIAL : 24835618

P.O.Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait.
Email: info@kuwaittimes.com
Website: www.kuwaittimes.net

How Ukraine's would-be leader is linked to tycoon

Volodymyr Zelenskiy, front runner to be the next Ukrainian president, has connections to one of the country's wealthiest tycoons that are undermining his image as an insurgent who will sweep aside the powerful moneyed elite. Presenting himself as an anti-establishment outsider backed by spontaneous grass-roots support, Zelenskiy won the first round of voting last month, and opinion polls make him strong favourite in the run-off on April 21 against the incumbent president, Petro Poroshenko.

Zelenskiy's ties to oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky have, however, become an election issue. Poroshenko has said that, if elected, Zelenskiy will do the businessman's bidding, something the front runner denies. In interviews, Zelenskiy has bristled at suggestions he is Kolomoisky's "puppet". The Ukrainian government has alleged that billions of dollars were fraudulently siphoned out of PrivatBank, Ukraine's biggest lender, while Kolomoisky owned it. It has since been nationalised. Kolomoisky denied any wrongdoing.

Zelenskiy's celebrity was established by a comedy show - in which he played an everyman who accidentally becomes president - broadcast by 1+1, a TV network controlled by Kolomoisky. A study by Reuters of vehicle registration databases, company ownership documents and photographic records indicates that Kolomoisky and the Zelenskiy intersect in other ways. According to that evidence, the two men have business partners in common. Zelenskiy uses security staff also seen in the past accompanying Kolomoisky, a former Kolomoisky adviser is on Zelenskiy's campaign team and at least two vehicles used by Zelenskiy and his entourage are owned by people or entities linked to Kolomoisky.

None of the evidence demonstrates that Kolomoisky is financing Zelenskiy's campaign or influencing him. Both Zelenskiy and Kolomoisky have said their relationship is strictly professional, and centred on the comedian's TV work. Both say no undue influence is being exerted by the oligarch.

Election result

While Zelenskiy's connections to Kolomoisky are not seen as swaying the election result, given the candidate's popularity with voters, commentators question how the relationship would develop later. "The risks of influence are there, and they will most likely become evident in his hiring policies," said Volodymyr Fesenko, political analyst and director of Kiev's Penta think-tank. "If Zelenskiy becomes president, taking into account that he basically doesn't have any people, or has very few, Kolomoisky can suggest different people to him (for government office) through whom he will then exert his influence on power."

Asked to comment on the connections documented by Reuters, Zelenskiy's campaign did not reply. Kolomoisky did not reply to a request for comment sent to him via his 1+1 media company. After one campaign stop on April 5, Zelenskiy squeezed through a scrum of journalists and climbed into a black bullet-proof Mercedes that was registered, according to a vehicle ownership database, to an associate of Kolomoisky.

The car is an example of a web of connections between Zelenskiy and Kolomoisky that have muddied the candidate's image as an outsider. The Mercedes was registered in the name of a Ukrainian businessman called Timur Mindych, who is on the board of trustees of the Jewish Community of Dnipropetrovsk, a body of which Kolomoisky is president. Until recently Mindych shared ownership with Kolomoisky of Vision TV. In 2017 Mindych was registered as holding a 9 percent stake in Kolomoisky's Belize offshore company, Harley Trading Limited, one of the firms via which Kolomoisky controls the 1+1 media empire.

Mindych is also a part of Zelenskiy's orbit. Cyprus and Ukrainian business registry records show that he is a co-owner of Cyprus-registered Green Family Ltd, founded by Zelenskiy and his partners in 2012. Zelenskiy exited the company in January this year. Ukrainian business ownership records list Mindych as co-owner, with Green Family Ltd and other owners, of three companies involved in producing Zelenskiy's TV shows, among other activities. Calls to a phone number listed for Mindych went unanswered.

Campaign

Some of the people helping Zelenskiy with his election campaign have worked in the past for Kolomoisky. A lawyer called Andrei Bogdan is on Zelenskiy's staff, and represented him at a meeting with a government official last week, the official's press office confirmed. Bogdan became Kolomoisky's adviser in 2014, when the businessman was the governor of Dnipropetrovsk region, the lawyer told the Ukrainian Pravda newspaper in 2016. — Reuters

All articles appearing on this page are the personal opinion of the writers. Kuwait Times takes no responsibility for views expressed therein.



Members of the MS-13 gang attend a class in Chalatenango prison, 84 km north of San Salvador, on March 29, 2019. — AFP

Salvador gang members have message for Trump

Some 1,700 imprisoned gang members in El Salvador claiming to be turning around their lives in a rehabilitation program have signed up for the "Yo Cambio" (I'm changing) program. "We're people like everyone else: human beings. At the high-security Chalatenango prison in the north of the country - where an AFP team passed through full body scans to gain access - inmates are taking classes in bakery, tailoring, carpentry, woodwork and even art and culture, in a bid to prepare for life after incarceration.

Despite not disassociating themselves from the notorious Mara Salvatrucha - or MS-13 - gang, the Chalatenango inmates have signed up for the "Yo Cambio" (I'm changing) program. "We're people like everyone else: human beings. We've changed and we're showing that those gang members deprived of liberty can contribute something positive to society," the program's coordinator Alexis Castro, a 33-year-old MS-13 gang member serving a 10-year sentence, told AFP as three armed guards watched on.

Some 1,700 heavily tattooed prisoners, mostly youngsters, are crammed into a prison with a capacity of just 350, enduring searing heat as well as tough conditions - telephone calls and visits are banned here. They've been accused of a range of offences including murder, extortion, drug selling, vehicle theft and the forcible recruitment of children.

Yet many are still bristling at Trump branding MS-13 as "violent animals," as well as the Supreme Court declaring in 2015 that gangs, including Barrio 18 - another notorious outfit - are "terrorist groups" because they carry out "systematic attacks on the life (and) security" of the population.

'We're not terrorists'

"We're labeled terrorists but we've never been terrorists at any point," said Castro. "We say to Donald Trump, we're not terrorists, we're human, normal and ordinary people." Nestor Mendoza, 29, has served nine years out of a 30-year sentence, but he's eagerly preparing to "reintegrate" into society. "Trump called us animals and we're here to show society and him that we're people with hearts and that we're prepared to make a dramatic change in our lives," said Mendoza.

The classes are mostly theoretical as the inmates lack the necessary materials to take part in practical training. They are hoping that newly elected President-elect Nayib Bukele - who takes office on June 1 - will implement a "government of opportunities" that opens work centers for gang members, Castro said. Gangs like MS-13 were born on the streets of Los Angeles in the US before spreading to Central America. El Salvador currently counts an estimated

70,000 gang members, more than 16,000 of whom are behind bars. Some 3,300 of those have enrolled in training programs. Prisons general manager Marco Tulio Lima said that three other penitentiaries holding gang members are participating in the training program but said that prisoners must show "evidence of change" to continue in the scheme.

Productive life

On top of the training program at Chalatenango, a prison band plays cumbia and salsa rhythms to alleviate the hardship of penal life. The "Prisoners of Time" band use makeshift instruments made out of pieces of iron and plastic, although they're hoping that one day a charity or church will donate them real instruments. "I write songs with my cellmates to lighten the atmosphere," said Ramon Villegas, a 30-year-old singer who has served six years of a 40-year sentence for various crimes.

In another corner of the prison, Cristobal Arias, 30, gives guitar lessons and says he wants to compose a song for his two daughters, aged four and 10, whom he misses "terribly". "I can't wait to leave here and show society that we really can lead a productive life," said Arias, who is halfway through an eight-year sentence for extortion. — AFP

Buttigieg aims to appeal to Trump voters

When Pete Buttigieg declared his candidacy for US president, he was greeted with a roaring cheer and the drip, drip, drip of a leaky roof in a former auto plant. The 37-year-old - who has catapulted from relative obscurity to third place among Democrats in the latest polls - spoke in front of thousands Sunday in the cavernous Studebaker complex in his hometown. The roof was a reminder that the entire plant has been abandoned and decaying for decades.

But just steps from where Buttigieg gave his speech was a far different scene - gone were rusted roofs and broken windows. Instead, that section of the complex had been redeveloped into gleaming new offices for high-tech companies. Studebaker is one of the young mayor's proudest success stories - and an example of where he wants to take America's Rust Belt. "There is a myth being sold to industrial and rural communities: The myth that we can stop the clock and turn it back," Buttigieg said in his speech.

Fed up blue-collar workers voted for then-Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump in 2016 largely on his promise to revitalize American manufacturing and return their towns to their former glory. But Buttigieg is now trying to win over those same voters with a competing vision. "That's why I'm here today. To tell a different story than 'Make America Great Again,'" he said, invoking President Trump's campaign slogan. "It's time to walk away from the politics of the past, and toward something totally different."

A growing city

"Mayor Pete," as he's affectionately called, is proposing to do for America what he has done for South Bend. The city managed to reverse decades of decline, and attract new development and investment. Its population has grown slightly every year since 2013, two years after Buttigieg became mayor. The labor force has grown, unemployment has declined, and wages are up, according to a report by Indiana University. The changes inspired Gillian Shaw, a New Jersey native, to remain in South Bend after she completed her studies at nearby University of Notre Dame.



Pete Buttigieg

She co-founded a healthcare technology company that is located in the Studebaker building. "I moved here the same year that Pete was elected mayor," she said. "And I have seen just the revitalization of this city, and I love it and I want to be part of it." These are no small achievements for a town Newsweek in 2011 called one of America's 10 dying cities. "The mayor was able to create a sense of optimism," said South Bend-based political science professor Elizabeth Bennion of Indiana University.

Challenges

The question before voters will be whether Buttigieg has shown enough results in his hometown to steer the world's biggest economy. Like the Studebaker plant, South Bend is an unfinished project. Its streets are mixed with new development and buildings that look barely used, if not vacant. Indiana University forecasted that South Bend and surrounding areas will grow in 2019, but at "a fairly modest rate". Bennion said the city "continues to face many of the same challenges of other urban cities," including high poverty and homicide rates.

Buttigieg also will have stiff competition for the hearts of Trump voters. Eighteen Democrats have already declared they are running for their party's nomination to face Trump in 2020. Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota also is claiming the Middle America mantle, saying she can speak to swing voters. Bernie Sanders, meanwhile, is aiming squarely for the Rust Belt. The democratic socialist polls twice as well as Buttigieg and last week traveled to Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania - all states where blue-collar workers narrowly handed Trump the presidency.

And then, there is Joe Biden. The former vice president during the Barack Obama administration is widely expected to declare his candidacy soon. "A lot depends on what Biden does," because the former VP appeals to the same voters Buttigieg is courting, said Paul Beck, a political science professor at Ohio State University. — AFP

Inside the dark world of Mexico intel services

Lee Harvey Oswald was here just before he shot John F Kennedy. Fidel Castro and Che Guevara were, too, not long before the Cuban Revolution. Mexico's intelligence services gathered material on all of them, and millions more. Now, President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador is throwing open the spy agencies' files, part of his promise of sweeping change. Lopez Obrador, an anti-establishment leftist, apologized last month for past abuses committed by the intelligence services, saying: "We lived for decades under an authoritarian regime that limited freedom and persecuted social activists."

Calling to "strengthen our memory of history," he ordered the spy agencies to open their files - 12 million in all. Anyone will now be able to visit the former prison where the archives are housed and peruse any file - though most of them are not available yet. Officials are redacting them to remove sensitive personal information, a process they say will take about four years. The files - a small number of which had already been released for other reasons - reveal how Mexico spied on a huge range of figures, from comedians to presidents to the writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez and the painters Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera.

Oswald has a 110-page file, declassified in 2016, chronicling his brief and bizarre visit to Mexico City in 1963, when he tried and failed to obtain Cuban and Soviet visas - one of the most scrutinized chapters in the Kennedy assassination. Castro's and Guevara's files, declassified in 2017, meanwhile show how Mexico tracked the young revolutionaries, and at one point arrested them - but then mysteriously let them go.

Dirty secrets, one-way mirrors

The opening of the intelligence files has shined a new spotlight on the tactics the Mexican state used to spy during the Cold War and the "dirty war", a brutal crackdown on leftist militants in the 1960s and 1970s. Mexico was governed at the time by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which ruled the country as a one-party state for 71 years. The president changed every six years, but the party kept an iron grip on power throughout - a system the writer Mario Vargas Llosa once called "the perfect dictatorship."

Two veterans of the intelligence services told AFP about the tactics they used,

speaking on condition of anonymity for security reasons and omitting any dates. One, the "collector," was recruited as a young student. A man he thought was a university administrator asked him to collaborate on a study by gathering information about student life. He did it so well the man then offered him a permanent job - which is when he found out he was actually working for the intelligence agency. He was furious at first. But ultimately, he took the offer. "We didn't have a lot of money at home," he said.

He infiltrated the student scene by attending protests, concerts and football games. Friendly and mild-mannered, he passed easily as a student. In the days before cell phones, his tools were his memory and a notepad. When a student or academic seemed to be an emerging leader, he started a file detailing his or her activities and personal life. "Part of the profile was their vulnerabilities, their vices, their sexual preferences," he said. "Those are the things you use to bring them down."

The files contained dirty secrets, extramarital affairs, financial indiscretions - all photographed and documented in detail. The information then went to the "softener" - an office with a one-way mirror where politicians, labor leaders and student activists were summoned for a meeting with an important government official. The office contained a table with cookies, coffee... and a file. "We would leave them there a while," the second agency veteran said in an interview. "At some point, they would get up and serve themselves some cookies and coffee," he said. "Eventually, they would give in to temptation and open the file. That's when you saw their faces change. And that's when the boss went in," to tell his prey what the "perfect dictatorship" wanted from them.

That's politics!

The official was matter-of-fact about his job. "That's politics. That's the way it is in every country, all through history," he said. He was critical of the government's moves to curb domestic espionage since the transition to multi-party democracy in 2000. It is no coincidence, he argued, that the crime and violence plaguing Mexico today got worse around that time. Spying "was a way to feel the vibe on the street, to know what was happening day to day and keep society under control," he said. But espionage has not stopped in Mexico - far from it. In 2017, a scandal broke out when numerous journalists, activists and opposition leaders alleged the government had been using an invasive Israeli spyware called Pegasus to turn their cell phones into pocket spies. — AFP