

Kuwait Times
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 : 24835619
COMMERCIAL : 24835618

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

Focus

BRAZIL LEADER
FIGHTS FOR HER
POLITICAL LIFE

By Sebastian Smith

President Dilma Rousseff claims to detect a glimmer at the end of the tunnel in Brazil's political crisis, but what she really may be seeing, analysts say, are the headlights of an oncoming train. Twin courtroom rulings this week left Rousseff's already shaky presidency tottering and now the former leftist guerrilla's hopes for survival depend on a hostile Congress where powerful forces want her impeached. Less than a year into her second term, Rousseff faces an economy in steep recession, a corruption scandal engulfing much of the elite, and personal popularity ratings of just 10 percent.

On Wednesday, she put on a brave face to announce that she saw "light at the end of the tunnel." But that same day the country's accounts court, or TCU, declared her government's budgeting practices illegal - and suddenly she was left fighting for her political life. According to the court's unanimous 8-0 ruling, Rousseff's government broke the law in 2014 by using creative accounting, including taking unauthorized loans from state-owned banks, to cover fiscal holes.

Just one day earlier a different court opened another damaging probe into Rousseff's 2014 election campaign funding, questioning whether among other alleged malpractices she had taken money linked to the Petrobras bribes and embezzlement scandal. As if that weren't enough for one week, Rousseff was also humiliated in Congress, twice failing to gather enough lawmakers to be able to vote on sustaining her vetoes on important laws - political battles underlining her ebbing control. "In about 24 hours, President Dilma Rousseff suffered a sequence of defeats in the judiciary and legislature that show, with unheard of eloquence, just how fragile she is," the Folha de Sao Paulo daily said Thursday.

Few Friends

The electoral court's probe into Rousseff's campaign funds could in a worst case scenario end in annulment of her 2014 re-election victory. However, that is a distant prospect. Wednesday's ruling by the accounts court presents a more immediate risk. Under Brazilian law, the court's opinion now goes to Congress for reviews and a series of votes in committees and then the floor. If the government is defeated at each step, impeachment proceedings could be launched. That could still take months. However, Brazil's Congress, seething with shifting loyalties, is not friendly territory for Rousseff.

Her biggest danger is the speaker of the lower house, Eduardo Cunha, an ostensible ally until July when he transformed himself as point man for a campaign to impeach Rousseff - a campaign she says amounts to a "coup plot." A weakness of the pro-impeachment lobby has been that it had little to go on, beyond popular dissatisfaction over Rousseff.

But now with the TCU ruling on government rule breaking - the first such condemnation since 1937 - the impeachment push has a burst of political momentum. "The opposition and those associated with them who want to go down the road to impeachment were waiting exactly for this," Michael Freitas Mohallem, a politics professor at the FGV Law School, said. "I imagine it will trigger a more intense effort to go forward with President Dilma's impeachment."

Can she survive? David Fleischer, a political science professor at University of Brasilia, said Rousseff has "destroyed her parliamentary base" and could find her few remaining friends in a weak ruling coalition melting away when it came to impeachment votes. But Gabriel Petrus, a political analyst at Barral M Jorge consultants, says that "she still has some leverage" because the long, winding procedures would give her multiple opportunities to strike deals. "In this gloomy situation there is a chance the government may still survive. It may survive because of inertia, because of the political contradictions when you transfer a technical decision (of the TCU) into a political decision," Petrus said.

Leadership Vacuum

A major variable is Cunha himself. Rousseff's scourge has been implicated in the Petrobras scandal and accused of stashing millions of dollars in Switzerland. He refuses to resign his speaker's post and says he has done nothing wrong. Given Cunha's problems, he may be ready to cut compromises with Rousseff and "negotiate his future," Petrus said. The real question, analysts say, is how Rousseff, regularly accused of lacking leadership qualities, will react. Will she come out swinging - or give up? "Some people think she might simply resign, but she is a very firm woman, very resolute and thinks she does everything right, so stepping down is not in her modus operandi," Fleischer said. With an economy badly in need of reform and the Petrobras scandal exposing a culture of high-level theft, the political games add to Brazil's sense of dangerous drift. "It's a black hole," Petrus said. "It's really sad we're suffering this, that we have no alternatives." —AFP

All articles appearing on these pages are the personal opinion of the writers. Kuwait Times takes no responsibility for views expressed therein. Kuwait Times invites readers to voice their opinions. Please send submissions via email to: opinion@kuwaittimes.net or via snail mail to PO Box 1301 Safat, Kuwait. The editor reserves the right to edit any submission as necessary.



Washington Watch

RESPONDING TO CHALLENGE OF RUSSIA IN SYRIA

By Dr James J Zogby

No one should have been surprised that Russia committed their military to the task of saving their ally in Syria from defeat. And no one should now be surprised if Saudi Arabia steps up its support for the Syrian opposition; or if the opposition attacks Russian forces in Syria. From the very beginning, the tragedy of Syria has been a multi-layered drama. There was the internal conflict with its undercurrents of class and sect tensions. There was also a regional aspect with proxies for Iran and the Arab Gulf States squared off against each other. And then there was the Russia/NATO dimension with Moscow determined not to lose another strategic partner at the hands of the West.

All of this should have been evident from the very start of the conflict, and yet the combatants and their supporters have consistently failed to factor this complexity into their calculations thereby insuring that the war in Syria would grow into the horror it has become. To recap: drought and failed economic policies by a corrupt state system wreaked havoc on millions of Syrians driving them from their land in search of the means of survival. Their demands for economic justice and greater rights were brutally put down by the government. Repression, mass imprisonment, torture, and the wanton killing of civilians didn't silence the demonstrators; instead it led many to adopt violent means, as well.

The armed opposition to the regime was never a simple phenomenon. There were elements who left the Syrian Army and turned against the regime they had once served. There were groups, some motivated by religious beliefs seeking to impose their ideology on the state while others simply sought revenge for the brutal excesses of the regime. There were even armed gangs of smugglers who simply took advantage of the opportunity created by the growing conflict. There were also unarmed

oppositionists, some who were organizing outside of the country, and others who worked, under great duress, in an effort to promote change inside Syria.

Arrayed against all of these forces was a regime with its political, military, and security apparatus - all of which were well-practiced in the use of violence and political repression. If this were the whole story of Syria, the drama might have played out very differently. But there was more. First there were millions of Syrians who, when push came to shove, proved to be more afraid of the opposition than they were of the regime. They were a mix of religious minorities, secular urban elites, and others who were just trying to live their lives. Many had experienced repression at the hands of the state, but they dreaded the disruption of daily life they saw accompanying the civil war and they recoiled in the face of the ideologies espoused by elements of the armed opposition.

Compromise

The fact that both the state and the opposition had real bases of support should have given everyone pause. It established, early on, that unless there was pressure on all sides to negotiate a compromise solution, this conflict would not end easily or quickly.

But there was still more. With their ally threatened, Iran stepped in to offer support. Some Arab Gulf States still reeling from Iran's recently secured foothold in Iraq and Islamic Republic's meddlesome involvement in other parts of the region, simultaneously increased their support for both the armed and unarmed opposition. Each step taken by one side was matched by the other.

In reaction to the mounting death toll and reports of horrifying atrocities, the US hesitantly entered the fray, publicly offering non-lethal support to the opposition while covertly providing training and arms, as well. As the conflict worsened

and the brutality of the regime intensified, the US increased its political posture stating that the regime had "lost its legitimacy" and that its leader "must go." This served to embolden the opposition justifying their rejection of any form of compromise with the regime, while at the same time hardening the Russian position. Russia had seen the US having its way with Serbia, Iraq, and Libya, and was not about to surrender its strategic asset in Syria. Early efforts by the US and Russia to create a framework that might have led to negotiations stalemated.

All of these layers and rivalries are present in Syria. And yet players in the conflict ignore them with devastatingly deadly consequences. They act as if the conflict were simple mathematics, and not the complex calculus that it is; as if the actions they take will stand alone and not impact and cause reactions on all the other layers of the conflict.

Because all of the parties on each layer have their interests to protect, they feel that defeat is not an option. What this should have led to is the recognition that this is a conflict that no one will win and everyone will lose. The tragedy is that this has not yet taken hold and so everyone keeps pouring more gasoline on the fire only to be shocked when it burns more brightly.

Politicians who are now calling for a more forceful US military response are, in effect, asking that we too join the bucket-brigade of gasoline pourers. This is clearly not smart since it will only exacerbate an already intolerable situation for Syrians and for the region. What we ought to do, instead, is design a strategy utilizing all of the diplomatic and economic levers that are available to us and our NATO and Arab allies to pressure the Russians and the Iranians back to the Geneva negotiating process.

NOTE: Dr James J Zogby is the President of the Arab American Institute

'TSAR PUTIN': AS SECURE AS HE SEEMS?

By Guy Faulconbridge and Stephen Grey

Vladimir Putin turned 63 last week with his now traditional display of sporting prowess, and an announcement that Russian naval vessels had launched a wave of missiles against Islamic State in Syria. The Russian leader has never appeared more confident and his grip on power never more secure. In the past two years he has outmanoeuvred the West in Crimea, eastern Ukraine and Syria. Western sanctions have apparently failed to blunt his ambition. But some of Putin's former allies, those who have fallen from grace during his 15 years in power, paint a different picture: Putin's position as the Russian leader may be far less assured, they say.

"Putin is a hostage of his entourage," Sergei Pugachev, who once counted the Kremlin chief as a close family friend, told Reuters in an interview in Paris. The animosity between Pugachev and the Russian government is well documented. Pugachev says his \$15 billion business empire spanning shipbuilding, coal and real estate was expropriated by Kremlin rivals. He is suing Russia for \$12 billion. Russia, meanwhile, is seeking Pugachev's arrest for embezzlement and misappropriation of assets, charges Pugachev denies.

Given the secrecy of Putin's Kremlin, it was impossible to confirm Pugachev's account. But interviews with other Russian businessmen and foreign diplomats painted a similar picture, albeit a partial one. The descriptions may offer rare first-hand views of Putin's court and some clues about a question that has preoccupied oligarchs, Western governments and even Putin's advisers: How long will Putin remain as Russia's paramount leader?

For Pugachev, the keys to the puzzle are Putin's perceptions of his own personal safety, finding a successor and the clan battles over the spoils of a former superpower. "Until he finds a path to an arrangement which secures his safety, he will remain in power," Pugachev said. "He no longer has confidence in his closest circle and if I were

in his place I would not trust them either: What they say to his face and what they say when he is not there is completely different." When asked about Pugachev's comments, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said: "We see them as the words of a citizen who is on a wanted list."

Tsar Putin?

Since Putin was appointed acting president by Boris Yeltsin on Dec 31, 1999, he has been cast, variously, as Tsar, reformer, secret policeman and Russia's richest man. In diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks in 2010, US diplomats depicted Putin as Russia's "alpha-dog" autocrat who ruled by allowing corrupt officials and spies to steal. The Kremlin called that idea ridiculous. Friends and enemies have cast Putin as a leader attempting to unite modern Russia with its Soviet superpower past and the mystical traditions of pre-revolutionary Orthodox Tsars.

The Kremlin has shown Putin grappling with a Siberian tiger while supporters this year unveiled a bust in his home town showing him as a modern Caesar. The New York Review of Books has written of "The Emperor Vladimir". But Pugachev's description of a less secure leader chimes with the views of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, once Russia's richest man, who was arrested in 2003 before his YUKOS business empire was ripped apart and its main production units taken over by Gazprom and Rosneft.

"No matter what the PR machine and propaganda of the Kremlin might say, President Putin is no superman," Khodorkovsky, who was freed in 2013 after a decade in Russian jails, told an audience in London in February. "The Russian business and ruling elite is becoming increasingly anxious in response to Putin's political course; even those who are loyal to him. It is obvious that autumn has arrived for Putin."

Moscow Rules

For Pugachev, the cruder interpretations of Putin's power miss the underlying instability of post-Soviet Russia: Putin must navigate the chaotic clan battle for wealth with care. "These people, it is the way they are, will serve anyone who defends their venal interests," Pugachev, 52, said of the clans around Putin. "These people are hostages to their crimes - basically the whole establishment - and they need someone who will at minimum represent their interests. If the situation changes and they consider Putin is not sufficiently defending their interests then I think anything could happen." Behind the patriotic swagger of wealthy Muscovites, according to this analysis, there lies a dan-

ger for Putin: The fall in the oil price and Western sanctions for his war in Ukraine have reduced the profits of this moneyed class. A Western diplomatic source said Putin was poorly informed and it was unclear how long he would remain in power given Russia's economic problems. The rouble has halved in value against the US dollar since 2012, the year Putin was elected for a third term. "In these situations, you see nothing and then all of a sudden it goes," the diplomat said. An influential Russian businessman, speaking on condition of anonymity because of a Russian taboo on discussing Putin's future, said: "The economy is very bad." "These situations are impossible to predict but they can change very fast. When it happens it goes very fast," the Russian said. He used the Russian word for 'brittle' to describe the current economic and political situation.

Leader for Life?

Pugachev said Putin's shift towards confrontation with the West over Ukraine flowed from his reliance on the guidance of hardliners inside the Kremlin. "He trusted the hawks and he has had a lack of success. He is not a leader of the hawks himself but over the 15 years he has migrated between the different circles," he said. Another Russian businessman with knowledge of the Kremlin cast Putin as an isolated leader who understood he could never leave power. "No one tells him the truth," said the Russian who spoke on condition of anonymity. "He cannot leave. He knows that. He believes in plots."

One Russian emigre, however, cautioned against overestimating internal opposition. "Yes, Vladimir Putin has to take into account interests of various stakeholders," said Sergei Guriev, an economist who fled Russia in 2013 for France. "However, in the current system - certainly, since the Yukos affair - nobody within the Russian elite could come even close to him in terms of power and authority. If he personally decides to do X, no clans or elite groups will be able to stop it." So will Putin stay in power for life? "It is difficult for me to say how it all ends," Pugachev said. "I think that stagnation is probably here to stay for a long time." —Reuters

