

Autocratic wolf in liberal clothing

Boris Yeltsin's present confrontation is more due to his own greed for power than any communist threat, argues Hari Vasudevan

The unqualified support of the United States president, Mr Bill Clinton, for Mr Boris Yeltsin's assumption of special powers on Saturday and the similar chorus heard from other Western leaders are unfortunate signs of the paranoia regarding the possible reemergence of communism as a powerful force in Russia. It is argued only Mr Yeltsin can prevent the rise of communism or Russian nationalism and the recurrence of East-West tensions.

This opinion is ill founded, the measures are shortsighted and all sides display a poor sense of the folly of Mr Yeltsin's absolutism, a lack of regard for Russia's future or for the well being of its democracy. Even Mr Yeltsin is more lukewarm about his "regulations" than the West.

It is clear it is Mr Yeltsin who is responsible for Russia's constitutional crisis. He is well aware his exceptional powers as president were not intended to last beyond December 1, 1992. His authority over legislation was meant to revert to the prime minister and his cabinet. This was the case during the time of the Ivan Silayev ministry of June to August 1991.

The loss of his special powers would have only marginally reduced his authority. He would have been able to exert his influence on cabinet appointments through rights guaranteed under the law on the presidency. If necessary he could also have resorted to

decrees. But Mr Yeltsin was unwilling to relinquish his absolute control over legislation or work with a prime minister primarily responsible to the Congress of People's Deputies. When he went to Russia's parliament in December 1992 he wanted to ensure that all legislation would essentially depend on his decrees. Or upon individuals such as Mr Yegor Gaidar whose sole strength was his support.

Hence the vicious conflict with the congress last year. The result was the consequent agreement whereby a compromise prime minister was appointed and the *status quo* maintained until a referendum could be conducted in March or April of 1993. It was a compromise both Mr Ruslan Khasbulatov, the speaker of the Supreme Soviet who represents a range of party interests and government lobbies, and Mr Valery Zorkin of the Constitutional Court accepted.

Mr Yeltsin promptly broke the spirit of the agreement. He reduced his "compromise prime minister" Mr Viktor Chernomyrdin to a cipher. Worse, he retained the unpopular coterie of the Gaidar ministry in the cabinet and proceeded to create special institutions to control the media and foreign policy—a federal information centre and the inter-departmental commission for foreign affairs.

He planned the questions to be put to the proposed April

referendum with maximum benefit to himself. He set up a special team headed by his faithful supporters Messrs Genady Burbulis, Mikhail Poltaranin and Sergei Shakhrai to ensure a positive result from the referendum. It was suggested the pro-Yeltsin Democratic Russia movement and the research and propaganda unit RF-Politika conduct public opinion campaigns on his behalf.

The president then put it to parliament that it help in the organisation of the referendum and rubber stamp its own emasculation. Since most of Mr Yeltsin's plans had leaked out after skilful snooping around the Kremlin by members of the anti-Yeltsin "Union for the Regeneration of Russia", Mr Khasbulatov objected and refused to allow a referendum in such circumstances. Mr Yeltsin then argued it was best to maintain the *status quo* and continue with his own style of presidential republic.

For Mr Khasbulatov and his supporters this was the point of no return. Normally wily, Mr Yeltsin had clearly been outrightly deceitful, refusing to yield to parliament any substantial role in the governance of the country. Once again he appeared to have consolidated his position.

The speaker appealed to a conference of local govern-



Constitution on the rocks

ment representatives who met in Novosibirsk in late February to condemn the compromise. It did. He also obtained a similar rebuttal of the president's plans from the Supreme

Soviet after Mr Yeltsin rejected the recommendations of parliament's Ryabov and Mitukov commissions. This happened although the former was substantially staffed by

moderates and had made enormous concessions to presidential prerogative.

Mr Khasbulatov then called the emergency session of the congress which cancelled the referendum. In addition it broke new ground by specifically making new budget provisions dependent on parliament. It stripped Mr Yeltsin of his special powers thereby enforcing its intentions of December.

Mr Yeltsin consequently declared his "special rule" on Saturday night to preserve his authority.

Presently, he is posing as the victimised democrat pursued by a communist dominated parliament. He is tactfully ignoring the fact many of his opponents are centrists. Some, like Mr Arkady Volsky, are founder members of the Movement for Democratic Reforms, one of the main organisations that support him inside and outside parliament. Mr Yeltsin has stated that he will put his credentials to the test on April 25 through a referendum.

Mr Yeltsin's argument is that Russia's deputies are by and large corrupt. They represent the interests of local authorities and regional elites by the dozen all of whom form a privileged and self-aggrandising closed shop. He has put it about

that his opponents, like the *ex-nomenklatura* of such groups as the Communists of Russia and the "patriots" of the Russia and Fatherland parties, are backward looking. According to him, they have plundered as the country succumbed to its own form of loot raj in the past year. Entrepreneurs of all nationalities have flouted all government regulations in search of mega-profits.

The president has put all the corruption and incompetence in Russia at the door of parliament, including misuse of central bank note-issue. He has ignored the fact this occurred under the dispensation of his special powers. He has also ignored the corrupt practices of his "special representatives" are notorious.

Mr Yeltsin has called for elections to a constituent assembly should he be successful in his referendum and the disbanding of his present "communist" parliament. He is aware this would discredit a number of the skilled administrators and politically minded entrepreneurs and managers who are associated with the congress and the local soviets. But he has assumed his own supporters will take over from them.

In this Mr Yeltsin has ignored that his course will hand constitution making and parliamentary government to incompetent yes men. The admittedly committed professionals of the Democratic Russia movement, parliament's main pro-

Yeltsin faction, are hardly sufficient to take over the governance of Russia tomorrow. The administrative confusion that would follow such purge and restructuring, in the economic chaos of today, would be disastrous. After all, the president's own writ hardly runs anywhere day to day.

Regrettably, Mr Clinton and the West are lending their support to such schemes. They will have to bear a substantial part of the blame if Mr Yeltsin achieves his present narrow ends. Their sympathy and possibly covert material support will give the president the gumption to withstand impeachment measures and to deal with potential rivals, including his vice-president. Mr Yeltsin is almost certainly likely to triumph in the referendum. The turnout however is likely to be poor because of an inevitable boycott by local authorities.

Fortunately, Mr Yeltsin is more aware than his supporters in Washington that the next few weeks, as well as Russia's future, will be unpleasant if he takes a hard line on his Saturday decrees.

On Wednesday he began to amend his regulations to accord with what was considered "constitutional" by the Constitutional Court on Tuesday. Centrists and moderates in parliament, meanwhile, are also urging compromise. Hopefully all this will lead to a solution to the crisis. The alternative is turmoil which Mr Yeltsin's country can ill afford.

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