



Opposition supporters with a cutout figure depicting Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev participating in an anti-corruption rally in central Saint Petersburg on March 26.

PHOTO: AFP

# IS THERE PEOPLE POWER IN RUSSIA?

At present it is not powerful enough to threaten Putin's removal, but can effect change. **BY TERENCE LEE AND TED HOPF**

**L**AST weekend, scores of protests erupted across Russia. Thousands of marchers were out in the streets of Moscow and 90 other cities such as St Petersburg and Vladivostok to demonstrate against corruption and demand the resignation of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. The marches were the largest since a wave of anti-Kremlin demonstrations in 2011 and 2012, and come a year before a presidential election which Vladimir Putin is expected to contest, running for what would be a fourth term.

Popular demonstrations can lead to the collapse of authoritarian rule, as exemplified by those that brought down Middle East and North African regimes during the 2011 Arab Spring, and the ones that led to the ouster of presidents Marcos in the Philippines and Suharto in Indonesia. However, certain protests like those in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and Myanmar's Saffron movement in 2007 have also failed to dislodge governments.

If the Russian demonstrations persist, will they succeed? What are the critical aspects to watch for in the months ahead?

## Who participates?

Popular protests are more likely to succeed in overthrowing regimes when the participants represent a cross-section of society, in terms of sex, age, religion, ethnicity, ideology, professions, and socioeconomic status. The middle class and the young have traditionally been viewed as the vanguard of such mass movements because they represent the voice of the masses and are also the groups with the most to lose if their efforts fail.

Recent Russian demonstrations have indeed been marked by their youth. If the 2012 anti-Putin protests were largely urban middle-class affairs limited to Moscow and St Petersburg, last week's anti-government demonstrations were dominated by young people who came of age since the beginning of Mr Putin's

rule in 2000 and have erupted in Russian cities and towns far beyond the capital.

Significantly, unlike the 2011-12 protests, which were directed explicitly against election fraud, and so were aimed against the Putin government in particular, last week's protests have more potential to attract more than the hard-core opponents of Mr Putin. Corruption is a ubiquitous problem in Russia experienced by all social groups, including by those who support President Putin.

## Size matters

Larger protests have a better chance than smaller ones. Larger movements are also likely to engender more participation, as fence-sitters become emboldened by the actions of friends and family members.

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It would be hard to characterise the weekend's turnout as a mass movement, although they did stretch across 11 time zones and involved some tens of thousands of Russian citizens. Social media, like Facebook or Twitter, could increase the turnout or help improve organisation, but the larger question is whether corruption as an issue can serve as a rallying cry to mobilise larger numbers and sustain the protests for an extended period of time.

## Are there key figures to unite the opposition?

Visible opposition leaders can help unify often

fragmented and uncoordinated protests. These leaders are also important to articulate and channel the demands of the mass movements into a coherent message. Vital in this regard would be individuals with acknowledged authority in civil society, like those from labour organisations, political parties or religious groups.

Presidential and Moscow mayoral candidate Aleksei Navalny is the catalytic political figure that mobilised the most recent round of demonstrations. A media-savvy anti-corruption campaigner, he inspired Russians to take to the streets by circulating videos taken by drones of Prime Minister Medvedev's multi-million dollar country mansion. While formally ineligible to run for president as a result of a questionable conviction for fraud in a timber deal, he leads the polls as the main opposition figure to Mr Putin. Mr Navalny, though the embodiment as the single most important anti-corruption crusader in Russia today, may not himself become a viable rival to challenge Mr Putin who has the resources of a political party and the state behind him. However, Mr Navalny could spark a movement that would make demands on Mr Putin that will be hard for the president to ignore.

## Is the ruling coalition divided?

When the ruling coalition splits, it becomes easier for the mass protests to win over "soft-liners" who may be sympathetic to the cause of political change.

United Russia, Mr Putin's electoral vehicle for personalist rule, remains behind the president for the moment. However, this does not mean there are no divisions among the Russian elite. The main cleavage in Russia is over the country's future trajectory. One segment, the modernising, liberalising, Westernising faction, favours a more democratic Russia. The other faction favours a neo-Soviet trajectory and is represented by Mr Putin's coterie of serving and retired intelligence officers. The Putin group sees a Russia on its own unique path, contemptuous of both Western liberal democracy and Soviet Russia's tyrannical and economically underdeveloped past.

Recent protests have interestingly transcended these divides, with a focus on corrupt officialdom, whether looking West or towards the past. If the elite defect, it would be over the issue of corruption, as it is a huge obstacle to modernising the economy and making it evolve beyond remaining a raw material appendage of the developed world.

## Is the security apparatus unified?

Protestors have to win over the security apparatus, especially the military and the police, if they wish to avoid bloodshed. Support for the mass movement is more likely when security organisations are divided, with significant segments partial to the cause of the protests.

Mr Putin has lavished attention and resources on all elements of the state security apparatus: from strategic nuclear forces to the traffic police. However, a fissure within the military is evident between the newly-emergent professional army and the dwindling bulk of the armed forces, the draftees, who had insufficient connections or resources to avoid their conscription. The latter group may be more sympathetic to those demonstrating in the streets against corruption than the corrupt officials ordering them.

In short, Vladimir Putin at present retains control over segments of the Russian population that could cause him trouble. People power is not powerful enough to threaten his removal. However, to quell increasing public unease over corruption, the president may be forced to get rid of some of his highly placed allies or risk facing more mobilised anti-corruption protests in the run-up to presidential elections in 2018.

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