

Navalny Verdict Turns Vote Into Good vs. Evil

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July 21, 2013

The  **Moscow Times**

With opposition leader Alexei Navalny running for mayor of Moscow with a jail sentence around his neck and thousands of his supporters prepared to stage large protests if he is arrested, the Kremlin faces a political crisis with potentially devastating consequences.

The plan was to cement President Vladimir Putin's control over Moscow by calling a snap election with the opposition unprepared and polls favoring the incumbent. It went awry when it was decided to "spice up" the race to increase its legitimacy by helping Navalny get on the ballot only to be trounced at the polls. It will not happen.

Navalny's five-year sentence transforms the election from a small debate about bike trails and traffic jams into an epic battle between Good and Evil. Navalny becomes the authentic alternative to the system, turning the election into a two-way race as other candidates fade in the distance.

Who needs fakes if one can vote for the real deal?

Navalny energizes and consolidates the protest vote. Anyone with a grudge to bear against the system would get a low-risk opportunity to send a message directly to the Kremlin by voting for Navalny. Turnout could be high, making massive vote fraud problematic.

The race is now competitive. Incumbent Mayor Sergei Sobyanin is a dull candidate of "more of the same," his support is shaky. Navalny, who had been surging in the polls even before his jail sentence, is now the candidate of "hope and change."

All Navalny needs to do now is walk the streets of Moscow with his beautiful wife and shake hands to get more than 30 percent of the vote. If he is taken off the ballot and sent to prison, or if he is jailed after he collects a large percentage of the vote, riots could break out in support of Navalny.

The Kremlin's Navalny problem is now bigger than the Moscow race. Navalny's guilty verdict disenfranchises him from standing in any election for life. But his growing popular support makes any federal election without Navalny and his political party, which was denied registration on a technicality, illegitimate. The presidential election in 2018 without Navalny will be a sham.

The only good option now is to strike down Navalny's verdict, allow a fair vote for him in Moscow and incorporate him into legal politics as a leader of genuine, not fake, opposition. The alternative is to stop faking a dictatorship.

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