

Thai govt wins
no-confidence
vote

BANGKOK, Dec 20 (AFP) - Thailand's government survived a no-confidence vote Monday but was left licking its wounds after a five-day debate laced with opposition charges of corruption and economic mismanagement, reports AFP.

The parliamentary majority of the six-party Democrat-led coalition of Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai held rock steady despite volleys of bitter opposition attacks aimed at key ministers.

In all, 229 members voted with the government against the opposition motion which was supported by 125 MPs. Thirteen members of the lower House of Representatives abstained.

The opposition's failure to unseat Chuan's two-year-old government was not a surprise but its tacticians had hoped to inflict as much damage as possible ahead of an election due next year.

Chuan immediately pledged the government would get back to work after the vote on a motion alleging corruption and economic mismanagement and charging the ministers with ceding economic sovereignty to foreigners.

"Although some people are wary of the government, most people still have confidence in us," he told reporters.

Red alert in Lanka ahead of today's elections

COLOMBO, Dec 20 : Sri Lankan police and troops went on red alert ahead of tomorrow's presidential elections amid fears that Tamil Tiger rebels may carry out more attacks to disrupt the vote, the defence ministry said, reports AFP.

Army troops have been placed on standby to help the police who are charged with providing security at some 9,890 polling stations throughout the country, except in a few areas where Tiger rebels are in control.

Defence ministry spokesman Sunil Thennako said the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were aiming to disrupt voting in the northern peninsula of Jaffna but they were ready to meet any eventualities.

The LTTE will try to terrorise the people not to go to cast their vote," Thennako told reporters here. "Our main concern is to ensure that people can go and vote freely."

He said the Tigers had fired artillery towards the Jaffna peninsula but there were no casualties. However, further south

of the peninsula at Paranthan, heavy fighting raged on Monday.

Thennako said he had no immediate details of the latest fighting but said nearly 1,000 Tiger rebels had been either killed or wounded in fighting in the past nine days.

The army lost 87 troops killed and about 870 wounded during the same period, Thennako said.

He said army had sufficient troops in the Jaffna peninsula to protect voters on Tuesday and more units will be kept on standby in the rest of the country to assist local police in case of violence.

A police spokesman said they had made arrangements to deploy two armed constables at each of the polling stations while mobile patrols will be stepped up.

Policemen have had their leave cancelled indefinitely and the authorities may consider local curfews in case of trouble after voting ends on Tuesday, a police spokesman said.

He said curfews were imposed in several areas after local

council elections in April and June and there could be a repeat this time too.

The campaign for Tuesday's election has been marred with violence, including an assassination attempt on President Chandrika Kumaratunga at her final public rally here on Saturday.

Twenty one people were wounded in the attack. An opposition rally was bombed around the same time leaving 12 people killed.

Poll monitors have said there had been nearly 800 violent incidents during the campaign.

Chandrika recovering

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who narrowly escaped assassination by a woman suicide bomber, was still in bandages today, just a day before her re-election bid, officials and doctors said.

Eye surgeons were treating a swelling of the right eye that was hit by shrapnel from the human bomb triggered at Kumaratunga's final presidential

election campaign rally here on Saturday night.

"She is under observation," a doctor treating Kumaratunga said.

Kumaratunga and her prime minister mother, Sirima Bandaranaike, are due to vote Tuesday at their home constituency of Gampaha, just outside the capital Colombo.

However, it was not immediately clear if doctors would allow the president to leave hospital to cast her ballot. The voting will be open for nine hours Tuesday.

"I shall be up and about soon," Kumaratunga said in an audio recording broadcast Sunday night over state-run television, which showed a still portrait of the president taken before the attack.

"The election will go ahead as scheduled," she added.

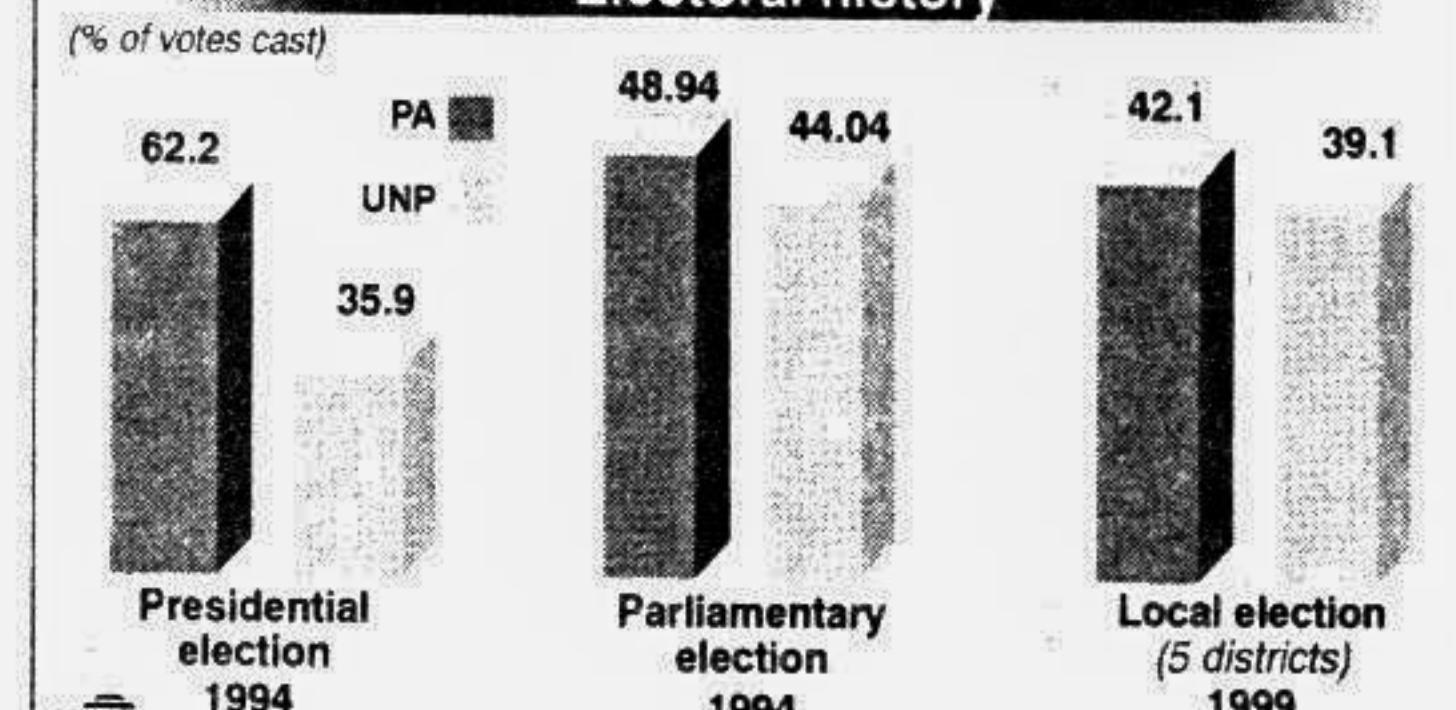
Unprecedented security was imposed at the private Nawaloka hospital where Kumaratunga was being treated, with police cordoning off the premises and blocking approach roads with police trucks and buses.

Sri Lankan presidential race

Main contenders

	Chandrika Kumaratunga incumbent president Party: People's Alliance (PA) Support base: Majority Sinhalese, some minority parties Advantages: Charisma; sympathy after bomb attack Dec. 19 Disadvantages: Perceived poor record in office
	Ranil Wickremesinghe opposition leader Party: United National Party (UNP) Support base: Majority Sinhalese, ethnic minority backing rising Advantages: Good campaigner; long track record Disadvantages: Lacks charisma

Electoral history



ROK president apologises over scandals

SEOUL, Dec 20 : South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung has made a public apology over a series of political scandals implicating aides and top government officials, reports AFP.

"I apologise for causing discomfort to the people with a series of scandals," Kim said in an interview with state television KBS on Sunday.

Kim's apology, the first since he took office in February 1997, related to the so-called "fur-coat" scandal in which top government officials were lobbied by a jailed tycoon and his wife.

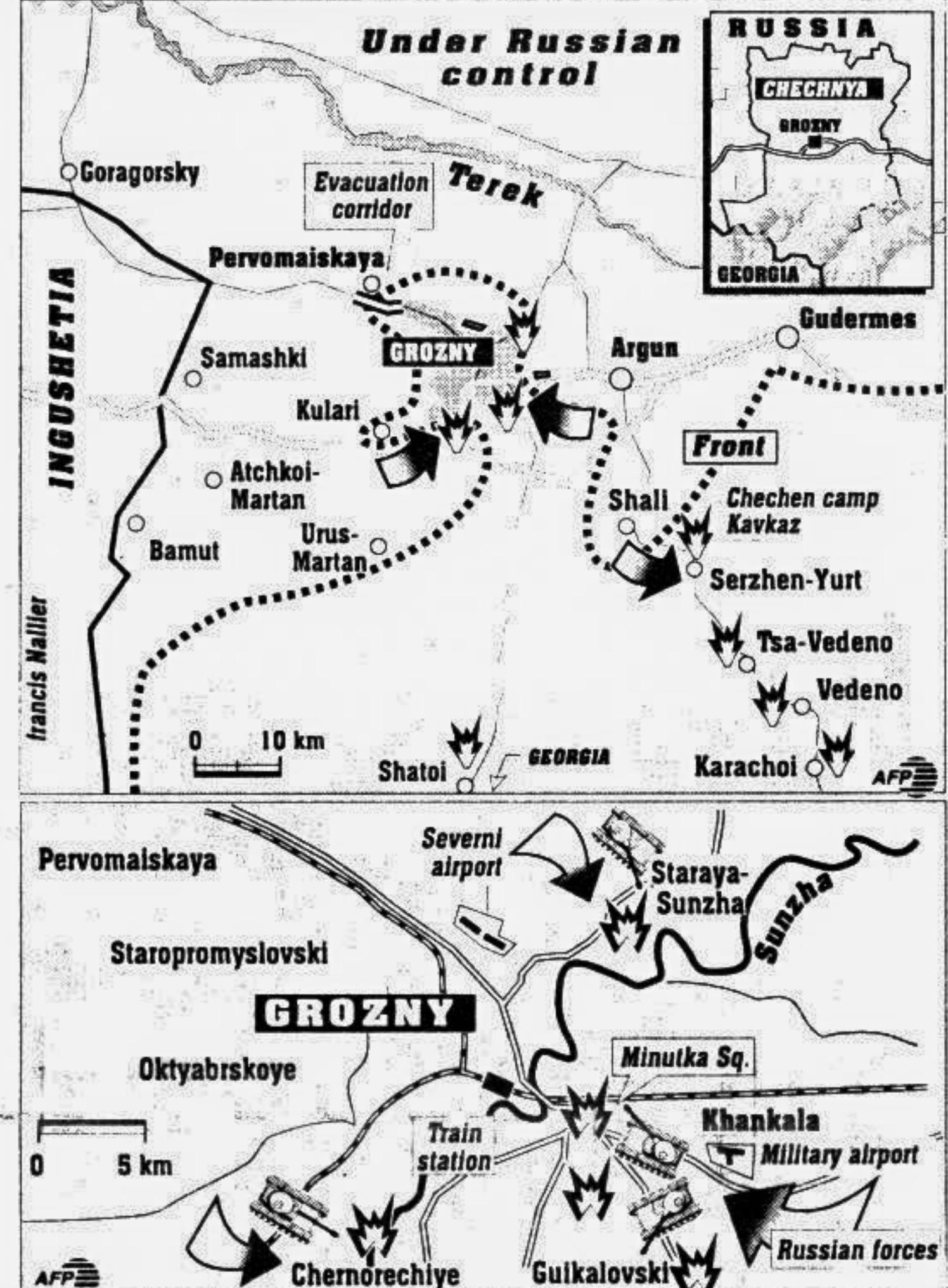
Despite his success in pulling South Korea out of its worst economic crisis, Kim has suffered a decline in popularity in the lead up to parliamentary elections in April.

Former justice minister Kim Tae-Jung was arrested last month for tampering with and leaking secret official documents on the results of a government probe.

The ex-minister's wife is suspected of taking expensive boutique clothes as bribes from the wife of Shin Donghak Group chief Choi Soon-Yong.

The bribes were allegedly paid in connection with attempts by Choi's family to secure his release from jail following his conviction for embezzlement.

Fierce fighting in Chechnya



Street battles rage in Grozny

MOSCOW, Dec 20 : Russian warplanes and artillery maintained a merciless barrage against Grozny overnight as federal troops fought street battles in the Chechen capital in a bid to cut off rebel fighters, reports AFP.

Forty rebel fighters were killed in air strikes and artillery fire in the past 24 hours, the state-run ORT television said early today, citing the Russian military command for the Chechnya operation.

Grozny remained completely surrounded and federal troops were maintaining heavy pressure on the Pervomaiskaya and Oktyabrskoye districts of Grozny and the Staraya Terek settlement of the capital.

Up to 40,000 civilians are believed to be trapped by the fighting in the besieged Chechen capital, whose defenders are coming under increasing pressure from advancing Russian forces who invaded the rebel republic on October 1.

Officials at the main Russian military headquarters base in Mozdok, North Ossetia, told AFP on Sunday that heavy fighting was raging in Grozny's southern Chernorechye district, which is partially under Russian control.

Clashes were also reported in the Staraya Sunzha area on the northeastern edge of the city.

Chechen military sources told another AFP correspon-

dent in Shali, just southeast of the capital, that the loss of the two areas would be a major setback as they adjoined wooded areas which provided cover for escape.

Moscow has already moved into the northwestern Staropromyloskaya suburb and Kankala on the eastern edge of the city, although clashes continued Sunday around the latter area.

Meanwhile in the former rebel bastion of Urus-Martan, 20 km southwest of Grozny, pro-Moscow battalions of Chechen volunteers were being recruited, the private NTV television station reported.

Russian troops were shown handing out assault rifles, documents and uniforms to dozens of Chechen men.

The Chechen problem cannot be solved without Chechens. Without Chechen volunteer groups Grozny cannot be liberated," one volunteer said.

Russian Chief-of-Staff General Anatoly Kvashnin revealed that direct peace talks had taken place with top members of Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov's government.

There have been contacts with representatives of (Maskhadov's) cabinet, two deputy premiers and a few ministers," Kvashnin said after returning overnight to the Moscow region from the northern Caucasus.

Most Chechen fighters have retreated south into the mountain region that proved so inhospitable to Russian forces during the 1994-96 war.

Maoist rebels bomb politician's house in Andhra

NEW DELHI, Dec 20 : Maoist guerrillas bombed the house of a local politician in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh Monday in the latest terror attack in the troubled province, the Press Trust of India reported, says AFP.

Police said activists of the outlawed People's War Group (PWG) blasted the house of Dasarath Reddy in the state's Nizamabad district at 2:30 a.m. (3:00 am BST) after asking the occupants to leave the building.

The house was destroyed, the police said. Reddy is a member of Andhra Pradesh's ruling Telugu Desam Party, whose members have been long targeted by the PWG.

The attack coincided with polling for state-level elections in the adjoining district of Adilabad today.

Taiwan spurns China's reunification goals

TAIPEI, Dec 20 : Taiwanese Vice President Lien Chan today dismissed China's latest offer of reunification as "ridiculous" because the formula for Macau and Hong Kong was only suitable for colonies, reports AFP.

Responding to President Jiang Zemin's remarks on reunification with Taiwan at the handover of Macau to Chinese rule early Monday, Lien said there was a crucial difference between Macau, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Lien is a presidential candidate for the ruling Kuomintang in the island's second direct presidential poll scheduled for March.

Jiang earlier Monday vowed Taiwan would soon be reunited with China under the "one country, two systems" formula guaranteeing autonomy for Macau, a former Portuguese territory, and Hong Kong, which was a British territory until 1997.

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Indigenous population, which is 98 percent Chinese.

Lingering concerns over inadequate legal and education systems and a lack of democratic opposition have failed to dampen a mood of genuine celebration.

Chinese troops cross border into Macau

Meanwhile, a battalion of 500 troops from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) crossed over the border into Macau this noon, 12 hours after Portugal handed the enclave back to China.

Crowds of tens of thousands waving flags and flowers and holding welcome banners lined the streets as the convoy of 10 armoured personnel carriers, and 60 jeeps and military trucks drove through the border gateway.

The convoy then paraded slowly through the streets of the former Portuguese enclave where they were greeted by more colourful flags and cheering crowds, many hailing the PLA's arrival with parades and marching bands.

Macau's return takes China a step closer to realising the 50-year communist dream of national reunification.

After Hong Kong and Macau, only the nationalist island of Taiwan remains outside the "motherland." Taiwan split from the mainland in 1949 after nationalist forces fled there following defeat by Mao Zedong's forces.

In marked contrast to the July 1997 handover of Hong Kong, Macau's return has been largely welcomed by Macau's

It will remain a free port and

Pro-Kremlin bloc makes surprise breakthrough in Russian polls

MOSCOW, Dec 20 : A pro-Kremlin party edged the Communists to snatch a surprise lead today in Russia's general elections, holding out the prospect of an unprecedented pro-reform majority in parliament, reports AFP.

With more than half the ballot tallied, only a handful of parties separated Unity and the Communists, who both grabbed a 25 percent share in Russia's third general election Sunday since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

The strong showing by a party barely two months old underscored Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's position as the leading contender to replace Boris Yeltsin in next June's presidential elections. Putin has won unprecedented popularity thanks to his tough stance on Chechnya.

In the southern Chechen mountains, Russian warplanes and attack helicopters pummeled rebel strongholds, including Itum-Kale in the far south, and Vedeno, Tsa-Vedeno and Kharachoi in the southeast, Chechen sources said.

The local population has had to flee their homes to take refuge in neighbouring forests, since their dwellings had no underground cellars to use as bomb shelters, the sources said.

Most Chechen fighters have retreated south into the mountain region that proved so inhospitable to Russian forces during the 1994-96 war.

This is a unique opportunity, for the first time there will be a constructive majority in the new Duma -- SPS, Yabloko and Unity," the former prime minister said.

"For the first time in our political history, we will have a reformist Duma," said Georgy Satarov, head of the INDEM

think-tank here. Flamboyant ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky was also set for a return to parliament, his bloc garnering 6.58 percent of the vote, outshining the liberal Yabloko group on 5.9 percent.

While the Communists outpolled Unity in the individual constituency races 38 to 8, the bulk of the 107 independent deputies elected were expected to back Putin's government when the new Duma convenes.

The main loser was the anti-Kremlin OVR bloc led by by Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov and former prime minister Yevgeny Primakov. It was a distant third with 9.24 percent.

A breakthrough by the Union of Rightist Forces (SPS) further boosted Putin, who tough handling of the Chechnya war has made him favourite to succeed Boris Yeltsin in presidential elections set for June.

Jubilant SPS leader Sergei Kiriyenko talked excitedly of forming a grand anti-Communist coalition in the State Duma lower house of parliament after his grouping of market reformers grabbed 8.77 percent of the vote.

This is a unique opportunity, for the first time there will be a "moral" claim to cabinet posts, although OVR's setback appeared to scuttle its hopes of forming a grand centre-left alliance.

Analysts also blamed Yeltsin's failure to make a breakthrough on leader Grigory Yavlinsky's opposition to the

mainland's Fatherland-All Russia (OVR). The Communist Party took 12 per cent in Moscow against 25.06 per cent nationally. The Union of Rightist Forces (SPS) 12 per cent (8.77), Yabloko 9.57 per cent (5.89) and Unity just 7.89 per cent against 25.32 per cent nationwide.

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Meanwhile, an anti-Kremlin coalition headed by Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov and former prime minister Yevgeny Primakov swept the poll in Moscow with over 40 per cent of the vote in the general election, partial results showed, although it trailed nationally with just 9.24 per cent.

The voters of Moscow, like those of second city Saint Petersburg, have a reputation for voting differently from the rest of