



Dmitry Medvedev

Insider Medvedev shows Kremlin's softer side

AFP, Moscow

A former law professor who completed his meteoric rise to the Kremlin in a presidential election Sunday, Dmitry Medvedev is seen as a Kremlin insider with a liberal tinge.

Plucked from obscurity by his old friend Vladimir Putin, Medvedev, 42, has a milder manner than his KGB-trained mentor, focusing on social projects rather than military might and hinting at a softer stance towards the West.

But having spent the past eight years at the heart of Moscow's Byzantine political machine and overseeing the Gazprom gas giant as it played hardball with Russia's neighbours, Medvedev is clearly a creature of the Putin regime.

The unimposing lawyer met Putin in the early 1990s when he acted as a legal consultant to Saint Petersburg City Hall where Putin worked -- an office that has served as a crucible for much of today's Kremlin leadership.

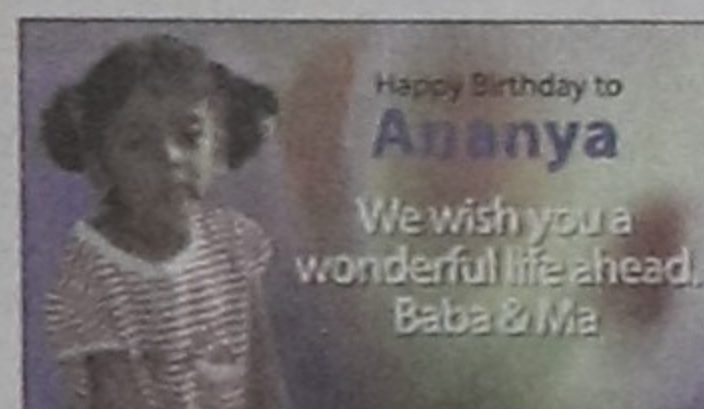
After spending most of the decade as a professor of law at Saint Petersburg University and a legal consultant in the forestry business, he was whisked to Moscow to run then prime minister Putin's first election campaign in 2000.

From penning textbooks on civil law, Medvedev suddenly found himself helping to run the Kremlin after Putin's victory, while also acting as chairman of state-controlled Gazprom, one of the world's largest energy companies.

Medvedev is credited with helping build the pyramid of power that has secured Putin's position, notably through his role in curbing the influence of billionaire oligarchs who held sway under Putin's predecessor Boris Yeltsin.

Under his stewardship, the Gazprom monopoly -- which controls a quarter of the world's known gas reserves -- has been accused of using the threat of gas supply cuts to some of Russia's ex-Soviet neighbours as a geopolitical weapon.

But Medvedev only really stepped into the limelight with his appointment as first deputy prime minister in 2005, a post he used to pump Russia's windfall oil profits into social projects in health, education, housing and agriculture.



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NEWS ANALYSIS

Israel needs to talk to Hamas to halt rockets

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel is likely to launch more deadly assaults on the Gaza Strip before it realises that it is an ineffective strategy for ending rocket attacks by militants, analysts warned on Monday, with one saying the Jewish state was acting like a "blind Goliath".

The escalation of violence that erupted last Wednesday left 22 children among the 116 Palestinian dead, prompting the moderate Palestinian leadership to break off contacts and drawing a chorus of international criticism against Israel.

But even though the onslaught failed to halt the rocket fire from more striking the city of Ashkelon on Monday, analysts predicted that the Israeli government would launch more such offensives before realising that talks with Gaza's Hamas masters were the only answer.

Former top military intelligence official Yaakov Amidror said the government appeared determined "to demonstrate to the population of Gaza, to Hamas and to the world that if there is no other choice, there will be an even deadlier operation".

Only then will the government realise that ultimately there are only two alternatives -- a full-scale re-occupation of Gaza, or talks with the Islamists, he said.

Menachem Klein, a Middle East expert at Tel Aviv's Bar Ilan university, said the weekend's deadly air and ground incursion was a symptom of Israel's frustration at its inability to halt the persistent rocket fire that has killed 14 Israeli civilians since September 2000.

"Israel is behaving like a blind Goliath who strikes hard without a political objective," he said.

"The rocket fire exposes its weakness. Offended, it hits out. This is an erroneous concept, void of any

strategic thought and which leads nowhere.

"It demonstrated once again that Israel does not understand Palestinians," said Klein, who believes nonetheless that "another operation like this could take place very soon."

Fellow Middle East expert Emmanuel Sivan said it was time for Israel to end its boycott of all contacts with the Islamists of Hamas and negotiate a reciprocal ceasefire.

"The only solution is to negotiate with Hamas, but not a peace agreement, which is impossible considering that movement's views, but a ceasefire that is in both parties' interest," he told Israel's privately run Channel 10 television.

Although Hamas is committed in its charter to establishing an Islamic state in the whole of historic Palestine, the group's leaders have said in the past that, without recog-

nising Israel, they are prepared to agree to a ceasefire lasting as much as 50 years or even longer.

The former head of army planning, Shlomo Brom, also predicted more deadly assaults on Gaza but he too agreed that they would have to be accompanied by negotiations with the Islamists if they were to stop the rocket fire.

It is an approach that opinion polls suggest has the backing of many Israelis. A survey published by the Haaretz daily last Wednesday found that 64 percent of respondents believe Israel should hold direct talks with Hamas.

But Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert remained firmly wedded to a military strategy on Monday.

"We are still in the midst of the battle and this is not a one-off," a senior official quoted him as saying. "Everything is possible... air strikes, ground strikes and special operations are all being discussed."



PHOTO AFP

An elderly Palestinian woman sits outside a destroyed house in Jabaliya refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip yesterday following the deadly Israeli assault.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Ahmadinejad pokes Uncle Sam in eye with Iraq love-fest

AFP, Baghdad

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad poked his finger in the eye of Uncle Sam on his visit to Iraq on Sunday, displaying his country's regional influence in the face of 158,000 US soldiers in Iraq.

Top officials from the US-supported Iraqi government welcomed Ahmadinejad with hugs and kisses on a trip that opens a new phase between former enemies which fought a bitter war in the 1980s.

The televised love-fest was enough to give supporters of US President George W Bush's a seizure.

In 2002, Bush famously described Iraq -- then under Saddam Hussein -- as Iran and North Korea as the Axis of Evil. One year later, US-led forces stormed Iraq and toppled Saddam.

Nearly five years, billions of dollars and 3,972 US dead later, American soldiers are holed up in fortified bases while the Islamic republic's leader is welcomed with flowers in Baghdad.

Ahmadinejad talked about regional stability upon arrival. He acknowledged Iraqis were going through "tough" times, but he was certain the Iraqi people would "overcome the situation".

After a red-carpet welcome at President Jalal Talabani's Baghdad residence, Ahmadinejad traveled to the heart of the US presence in Iraq -- the Green Zone citadel -- for talks with Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

US officials went to great lengths to distance themselves from the visit, emphasising that Ahmadinejad was an Iraqi guest, and that the US military was not involved in anyway.

Washington broke off diplomatic ties with Tehran in 1980 after Iranian students stormed the US embassy in Tehran and held the staff hostage.

At Maliki's office, Ahmadinejad



PHOTO AFP

Standing beneath portraits of Mohammed Baqr al-Hakim (upper L) and Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani (upper R), Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (L) speaks during a joint press conference alongside powerful Shia leader Abdel Aziz al-Hakim (R) at the latter's residence in Baghdad on Sunday.

took a verbal swipe at Bush, who on Saturday accused him of "exporting terror" and urged Tehran to "quit sending in sophisticated equipment that's killing our citizens."

Ahmadinejad's response: "Bush cannot solve US problems in the region by accusing others. Gone is the era of accusations. The Iraqi nation does not want the US."

Joost Hiltermann, a Middle East analyst with the International Crisis Group, said the Iranians were profiting from the US presence in Iraq.

"The Iranians were very happy that the regime of Saddam Hussein was removed," said Hiltermann, interviewed by telephone from Ankara. "They were just not happy that it was done by the Americans."

Yet for all the rhetoric, if the US forces went home, Iran would have to fill the security void. "For all practical purposes they want the Americans to stay, they just don't want them to succeed," Hiltermann said.

Washington has consistently underestimated Iran's importance to Iraq, said Juan Cole, a Middle East expert at the University of

Michigan in the United States.

And under Saddam's rule many politicians prominent today -- including Talabani, Maliki, and Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, leader of the influential Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC) party -- were exiled in Iran.

As for Iranian-supplied weapons, "how do we make a distinction between black market weapons and those supplied by a deliberate government policy?" Cole asked.

He noted that most of the violence was the work of Sunni extremists.

Brigadier General Kevin Bergner, a spokesman for the US-led forces in Iraq, agreed. "al-Qaeda in Iraq continues to be the main threat overall to the security situation in Iraq," he said.

Cole instead sees US complaints against Iraq as part of a game of influence over the leading Iraqi players. "I see the whole thing as a jealous girlfriend story," he said.

The Iraqis know that the US presence is "here today, gone tomorrow," Hiltermann said, while their relationship with Iran has been "forged by history and geography, and will be forever".

Kremlin transition key to Russia's future

AFP, Moscow

With presidential elections behind it, Russia now enters a transition period that will provide important clues on the future direction of the nuclear-armed energy powerhouse, analysts said yesterday.

No one expects president-elect Dmitry Medvedev to make any abrupt departures from the main policies of his mentor President Vladimir Putin, and indeed the incoming Kremlin chief has made clear that his priority is continuity.

At the same time however, Medvedev will have to assemble a team of his own, and even if he names Putin to head the government, the two men must now make concrete arrangements about who handles what in the future.

This division of prerogatives -- and the selection of people to fulfill them -- will be worked out ahead of Medvedev's scheduled May 7 inauguration, and every move will be scrutinised intensely for signs of Russia's future path.

"This period is crucial," said Maria Lipman, a political analyst

with the Moscow Carnegie Centre think tank.

"The extent to which those who rise now will owe it to Medvedev and not to Putin is the big question. It will not be an overnight event -- it will take a few months to see the trend. But there should be clarity by the summer."

Within hours of the close of polls in Sunday's presidential election, Medvedev, 42, had already moved to answer one of the big questions the world has about his presidency: Who will be in charge of Russian foreign policy?

"Foreign policy, according to the constitution, is determined by the president," he stated in his first post-election news conference.

Words are the easy part however and analysts say it is the deeds that must be ironed out in the coming months that will prove most challenging.

"He will now work on forming his administration and his government, including on the practical division of powers," explained Sergei Markov, a Kremlin-connected political commentator.

"And here there are many important questions to be resolved. For example, there is nothing written in the constitution about who controls state television -- the president or the government," he said.

"There is nothing written anywhere about who controls Gazprom and Rosneft. There is nothing written about who controls the United Russia party. And though the president nominates regional governors, the government also plays a role."

It is considered virtually a foregone conclusion that Medvedev, who owes his meteoric political rise entirely to Putin, will appoint the outgoing president as his prime minister, but how they resolve these and other issues will be key.

Another vital question to watch during the spring transition period is the fate of powerful Putin aides like Igor Sechin and Vladislav Surkov known as the "siloviki" -- Russian for "the strong ones" -- for their ties to the military and intelligence services.

Will they move with Putin into the government headquarters

building, remain in the Kremlin to watch over Medvedev or be shifted out of official responsibilities altogether?

"That is the big question we would all like to know the answer to" and that will have to be resolved in the months ahead, said Markov.

Analysts agree that a reshuffle of the current government is on the cards, though they expect key figures like Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Kudrin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to be kept on in the near term.

Whatever lies in store, the outside world will see little of the mechanics of the transition itself and will learn of any changes only well after they have been agreed on in every detail, expert say.

"Not in 15 years has there been such a campaign with no sign of electoral struggle between the presidential candidates," commented Alexander Kononov, director of the Institute for Strategic Assessment.

"But there is plenty of invisible struggle taking place elsewhere. It's just that the people do not witness it."

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China mulls change to one-child policy

AP, Beijing

China may consider changing its one-child policy because it has helped slow population growth over the last three decades, a Chinese official said Sunday.

The policy, launched in the 1970s, has produced "very good results," said Wu Jianmin spokesman for the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, an advisory body to parliament.

There would be an estimated 400 million more people in China without it, Wu said.

"The one-child policy was the only choice we had given the conditions when we initiated the policy," Wu told reporters at a news conference the day before the CPPCC convened for its annual session. However, he added, "when designing a policy we need to take into consideration the reality."

"So as things develop, there might be some changes to the policy and relevant departments are considering this," Wu said without giving a timeline or details on which departments would be involved.

Wu's comments echo a position China's communist government has been thinking about for some time. On Thursday, a senior family planning official said changes were being considered but that family planning policies would not be scrapped altogether.