Boris Yeltsin

Boris Yeltsin seems an unlikely candidate for a Soviet popular hero. Now aged 58, he has spent the past 20 years in the party machine, working his way up to membership of the Politbureau in 1987. At first appearance, he seems a typical bureaucrat, even down to his hair style and his taste for double-breasted suits and chauffeured limousines. He does not affect a beard and long hair, like many of his admirers among the youth and intelligentsia. Yet what does differentiate him from the usual bureaucrat is his flair for appealing to crowds. He reminds one, in that respect, of Khrushchev.

Yeltsin graduated from the Urals Polytechnic in 1955 and became a foreman in the local building industry, climbing up the ladder to become a director of an integrated house building factory. In 1968, he became a department head of the Sverdlovsk regional party committee and by 1976 was its first secretary. In 1981, he became a member of the party central committee.

He was appointed first secretary of the Moscow City party committee in December 1985 and became an alternate member of the Politbureau in January 1987, but in November 1987 he was dismissed from his Moscow party post and soon after from the Politbureau. Yeltsin was one of the "impatient" who wanted the process of perestroika speeded up. He publicly attacked Igor Ligachev, reputedly the leader of the conservatives.

Yeltsin was demoted to become a junior Construction Minister but, unlike many leaders disgraced in the past, he was unwilling to fade quietly into the background. He continued to criticise strongly the bureaucratic elite, particularly their many privileges.

A resurgence of conservatism followed Yeltsin's dismissal. It reached a peak in March 1988 with the publication of the infamous letter by Nina Andreyeva, attacking destalinisation and "revisionism". On orders from above, many other newspapers reprinted her manifesto. Only a few weeks later did Pravda denounce it. Gorbachev's hand was evident in this repudiation of the conservatives.

Although he undoubtedly shared much of Yeltsin's impatience with the bureaucratic obstacles facing his reforms, Gorbachev was also among those in the Politbureau who criticised Yeltsin.

But Gorbachev must operate within the party's top leadership which reflects the multiple power groupings below. He can astutely combine an ability to manoeuvre and compromise with direct appeals to the masses. Yeltsin was unwilling to play the game according to such rules.

However, it suited Gorbachev to place himself in the "Centre" between the conservative Right and Yeltsin's impatient "Left".

After Pravda attacked Andreyeva's manifesto, the conservatives were forced into retreat. The Party Conference in June 1988 was undoubtedly a victory for Gorbachev and for the more outspoken radicals.

But after the conference, the conservatives counter-attacked. It seems that, whatever happens, the bureaucratic apparatus can rely on its own inertia to resist, then be able to mobilise for a response.

Only in the past few months, as the election campaign gathered momentum, have supporters of radical perestroika been able to reassert their strength.

Conservative forces soon recognised the danger which the elections posed to their power. The electoral regulations were sufficiently vague and the means of supervision inadequate enough for the conservatives to rig the nomination of candidates in many electorates. The Soviet media documented many abuses.

Yeltsin was a particular subject of such attacks. After trying to stop him being accepted as a candidate, obstacles were placed in the way of him holding some campaign meetings.

The Moscow party apparatus circulated an 11-page document attacking him. The party information newspaper published the full text of the session of the Politbureau which expelled him. A party commission was set up to investigate whether he had adopted "anti-party" positions.

As we now know, all these measures had the opposite effect to that intended. Yeltsin's electoral machine, operating with almost western-style sophistication was able to present him as the victim of a campaign by those bureaucrats whose privileges he wanted to abolish.

Finally, Yeltsin was invited to debate his opponent on Moscow TV and had a stunning victory, not unlike that won by Jack Kennedy over Nixon in the first such TV confrontation in a US presidential election.

Yeltsin presents the image of a man of the people. Such politicians can, of course, become demagogues, but they can also have an extremely valuable role in cutting through bureaucratic double-talk.

Yeltsin says he hopes to form a loose bloc of 400 or so deputies in the 2,500-strong Congress of People's Deputies. But the Congress will meet only a few days a year. It will elect the 422-member Supreme Soviet, which will meet over six months each year and play a much more important supervisory and legislative role. If Yeltsin and other outspoken advocates of radical perestroika are frozen out of the Supreme Soviet, then its credibility - and usefulness - will be severely limited. Perestroika needs its "left" opposition in the Supreme Soviet, even if there is a whiff of demagoguery involved.

-Denis Freney