**Putin s nemesis...**

BY M A H I R A L I 2021-02-17

THE scale of the threat Alexei Navalny poses to the status quo in Russia is hard to estimate.

After all, even the unusually widespread protests that erupted across the vast country after Navalny was arrested on his return from Germany attracted tens of thousands of participants. In themselves, they could hardly be viewed as a serious challenge to Vladimir Putin`s grip on power, which has been reinforced during his 20-plus years at the helm.

That longevity itself could be problematic.

An entire generation has grown up without experiencing a change in leadership. There have been rumours of restlessness even within the power structure. The state has in many ways been stagnating for at least a decade a phenomenon reminiscent of the soulsapping Brezhnev years that contributed to the demise of the Soviet Union.

The absence of viable alternatives eventually begins to take its toll, especially if it begins to seem indefinite. By lifting term limits, Putin has effectively ensconced himself as president for life, should he wish to carry on.

Legislation indemnifying all past presidents has also been rubber-stamped by the State Duma, pre-emptively thwarting any legal proceedings should Putin be obliged to step down.

Authoritarian regimes are sometimes inclined to permit a certain amount of opposition, provided it serves only as a safety valve allowing disaffected segments of the population to let off steam and stops well short of posing a serious threat. Until last summer, it was possible to see Navalny`s campaign against corruption in that light.

Last August, though, Navalny became agonisingly ill during a flight across Siberia. The pilots arranged an emergency landing in Omsk, where the paramedics and medics took over. The German doctors who treated him after he was airlifted out of Russia acknowledged the pilots and paramedics had saved hislife.

When the Germans announced that Navalny had been poisoned with novichok a chemical poison accessible only to state operatives, which had previously been deployed against military intelligence defector Sergei Skripal and his daughterin England the Putin administration predictably denied all responsibility.

Navalny eventually came out of his coma, and during his recuperation managed to prankcall one of the perpetrators of the assassination attempt. It turned out that the poisoning was a rear-end manoeuvre Navalny`s underpants had been laced with the deadly substance. Which explains why blue underwear was among the emblems paraded by protesters last month.

Another was toilet brushes. That related toan almost two-hour video released on Navalny`s YouTube channel a couple of days after hislatest arrest, which explainsin detail the genesis of Putin`s corrupt practices and focuses on their apogee: a billion-dollar estate on the Black Sea coast that stretches to more than 30 times the size of the European principality of Monaco.

This goes beyond garden-variety luxury and more than matches tsarist extravagance. The props apparently include golden toilet brushes worth 800 euros each. The median Russian monthly wage is less than 400 euros. The overpriced excrement-wipers inevitably struck a chord.Sodidtheoverallimpressionofresources being dedicated to an exclusive luxury resort while atleast 20 million Russians subsist below the poverty line and others struggle to make ends meet. Many others bristle at the direct or indirect restrictions on freedom of thought.

Navalny has used social media cleverly for more than a decade, and the effort has borne fruit. His `Putin`s Palace` video has been viewed more than 100 million times on YouTube.The administration could not ignore it, so Putin denied he owned the estate, and within days a reliable poodle was prodded into claiming ownership of the sprawling estate.

Although the existence of the `palace` had been revealed more than 10 years ago, most Russians had forgottenabout it until Navalny`s video surfaced as a searing reminder.

Navalny`s crusade against corruption and for corporate transparency was initially tolerated to an extent but has lately been deemed too dangerous. It`s interesting, though, that the regime`s propaganda has largely overlooked his former dedication to far-right nationalism, perhaps because it chimes too closely with Putin`s own predilections.

Navalny, it is said, has since moved on. He no longer rants about immigration from Central Asia, or militates against assistance to Russia`s Muslim populations in the Caucasus. But what exactly he stands for is difficult to ascertain, beyond his admirable campaign against corruption.

Interestingly, even among those who have risked arrest and brutalisation at the hands of the ruthless Russian security forces in recent weeks, less than a quarter would like to see Navalny replace Putin. Yet Putin is clearly rattled. Whether something deeper is stirring in the Russian psyche, only the years ahead will tell. m mahir.dawn@gmail.com