

Havel's candidacy good news for Czechs tired of ideologues

By Jiří Pehe

President Václav Havel's recent announcement that he will seek another five-year term is welcome news for the country. For Havel represents the last solid axis around which the Czech political system can rotate. Fourteen months ago, the president, whose constitutional powers are rather weak, had to vie for that role with a powerful prime minister and his coalition Cabinet.

However, after parliamentary elections ended in political deadlock in June 1996, Prime Minister Václav Klaus' influence slipped significantly as power spread more equally between the coalition and the opposition. Havel's role was greatly strengthened after he brokered an agreement that allowed Klaus to form a minority government despite the coalition's losing the elections. With the government increasingly paralyzed and the opposition unable to form a government of its own, Havel has remained the only real center of political power ever since.

No other politician in the country could play such a crucial role at the moment. There is simply no other politician with comparable moral authority who is, at the same time, viewed as non-partisan. Only Havel can convince party leaders to occasionally put aside their partisan interests for the sake of a common good. His exceptional moral and political status plays an important role in stabilizing the entire political system.

If elected, this would be Havel's last term as Czech president, since the constitution prohibits anyone from serving more

than two terms. In announcing his candidacy, Havel said he would like to concentrate more on domestic problems in the next five years. He will clearly be in a better position to do so because he will no longer need to worry about alienating political parties. Since the president is elected by Parliament, Havel has so far had to perform a careful balancing act between expressing outright criticism of an individual party and making sure he does not lose that party's support. The president has been consistently and directly critical of only the Communists and the extreme-right Republicans.

In the past, this has clearly tied his hands. But Havel can now afford to be much more outspoken about what he considers the failures of individual parties — and politicians. He can use this new freedom to be more specific in pointing to various social and political ills.

Havel has said he will continue stressing the general themes he has espoused until now; namely, the need for a civil society, decentralization, ethical underpinning of reforms, rule of law and political culture. There is no doubt that the country needs to be aware of and keep discussing these issues. And once again, there is no other politician in the country with the authority to discuss them without being accused of pursuing partisan interests.

Havel has been critical of excessive partisanship and will continue to be so. His critics occasionally accuse him of continuing to push the nonpolitical politics that he once advocated. But in reality, Havel has embraced a system based on political parties and understands parties' significance in a parliamentary democracy. He is — and

will continue to be — opposed to Czech parties' proclivity for mindless ideological arguments. The president says he does not want political parties to "own the state." The current political crisis was caused partly by the occurrence of exactly this phenomenon. Havel will thus demand from political parties a less ideological approach to politics and will urge leaders to help a civil society develop.

As it is highly unlikely that another politician enjoying authority similar to Havel's will emerge any time soon, one of the president's most important tasks will be preparing the country for a president of a different kind than himself. Havel will probably not campaign to change the election process, but the reality that Parliament, rather than the people, elects the president will make anyone else's election subject to strong party pressures. Without Havel's involvement or direct backing, the next president could easily be reduced to the "lowest common denominator" on which political parties can agree. Such a development would clearly denigrate the post.

There is little doubt that Havel will be re-elected. Failure to re-elect him would greatly diminish the country's international prestige. Not only would Western democracies find it difficult to understand, but given the Czech Republic's current problems, failing to elect Havel — probably the country's most valuable export article — could even complicate admission to NATO and the European Union. Havel represents continuity and provides the best guarantee that the country's democratic development will stay on track.

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