

Kudrin Calls for Repeat Duma Vote

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A former Cabinet member close to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has called for a rerun of the country's fraud-tinged parliamentary elections, in an apparent bid to soothe public outrage as Putin seeks to reclaim the presidency.

Former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin said on his blog on Friday that the government must open a dialogue with the opposition on holding a repeat ballot under revised electoral rules.

The statement appears aimed at stealing the opposition's thunder to prevent a challenge to Putin in March's presidential election.

Tens of thousands of protesters have rallied in Moscow to demand a rerun of the Dec. 4 parliamentary vote and urge an end to Putin's 12-year rule. It has been the largest outpouring of public anger since the Soviet collapse two decades ago.

While Putin faces no serious rivals in the presidential election, the protests signaled a sharp drop in popularity that may make it hard for him to garner more than 50 percent of the vote and avoid a runoff.

Kudrin said authorities must acknowledge that the Dec. 4 parliamentary elections were flawed, or risk undermining the legitimacy of the presidential vote.

Kudrin said the government and the opposition must conduct a dialogue on changing the electoral rules and laws on political parties. But, he added, a push to unseat Putin could end in turmoil.

“An attempt to simultaneously reform two branches of power ... would entail too big risks for the country,” he said.

Many in the opposition have warned that Putin would try to defuse the protests by luring their leaders into talks or offer them government jobs and other perks.

“I’m convinced that the main strategy of the Kremlin in the coming months would be to neutralize the protests by the usual deceit and bribes,” Alexei Navalny, who has become a leading figure in the protest movement, said on his blog.

Navalny has pledged to take up to 1 million protesters to the streets before the presidential election, calling it illegitimate because Putin has kept challengers away. ■ Kudrin, meanwhile, said it would take the opposition between 1 1/2 and 2 years to field a candidate capable of competing with Putin.

Kudrin was forced out of the Cabinet in September after 10 years following a public spat with President Dmitry Medvedev.

He has been widely credited for helping soften the blow of the 2008-09 global downturn in Russia. Putin hailed Kudrin’s expertise, and they have remained friends.

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