Alexei Navalny and Russia

What is the issue?

- The latest happening in relation with anti-Putin activist Alexei Navalny is his detention on arrival from Berlin and the subsequent country-wide public protests.
- The events surrounding Navalny needs attention and here is a look at the likely impact of his presence and role in Russia.

Who is Alexei Navalny?

- Navalny is a lawyer-turned-activist.
- His political career started with the liberal opposition party, Yabloko, in the early 2000s.
- He subsequently broke away to form his own nationalist group.
- His anti-corruption campaigns began in the late 2000s.
- As a shareholder of large companies such as Rosneft, Gazprom, he tried to seek greater transparency about their financial dealings.
- He followed this up with several exposes of key members of the Russian elite.
- He came to prominence in 2008 after he started exposing corruption in Russian politics through a blog.
- In 2018, he was barred from standing against Putin in the presidential elections.
- He has also been arrested on multiple occasions.
- Since he started his political campaigning, Navalny has spearheaded many anti-corruption rallies in Russia.
- The latest, now viral exposure, targets Russian President Vladimir Putin himself.
- Navalny is considered to be the face of the opposition in Russia, a country that has long been known to eliminate dissidents and spies by poisoning them.

What happened to him recently?

- In August 2020, Navalny was put on ventilator support in a Siberian hospital after he consumed a cup of tea that is suspected to be poisoned.
    - While Navalny was returning to Moscow by air, he felt unwell as a result of which the plane made an emergency landing in Omsk.

    - Navalny had toxic poisoning.
- Reportedly, Russian intelligence operatives trained in poisons, who had been trailing Navalny for years, were nearby him around this time.
- It was assumed that Alexei was poisoned with something mixed into the tea. It was the only thing that he drank that morning.
- At the request of his wife, he was taken to Germany where he completed his treatment and had a miraculous recovery.

What is the controversy around this?

- The German government felt that it had enough evidence to accuse the Russian security services of poisoning Mr. Navalny.
- The Germans claim that he was struck with the now infamous Novichok poison.
- This led to the European Union imposing sanctions on six Russian officials, including the head of the national security outfit, Federal Security Service (FSB) and a chemical research centre.
- Russia denies the accusations.
- But the Russian government still has many questions to answer about the poisoning.
- Also, this was not the first time that Navalny was faced with such a situation. As learnt, there had been several attempts to kill him.

What has Russia’s reaction been?

- Russian authorities have denied playing a role in Navalny’s poisoning.
- Last month, Russian president Vladimir Putin, who is entering his 22nd year in power, alleged that Navalny “relies on the support of US special services.”
- Putin has even told journalists with a laugh that if Russian operatives wanted to kill Navalny, “they would have probably finished the job.”

What is the significance of the current protests?

- The present charges against Navalny for detention include an old case in which he received a suspended sentence and a new case of fraudulent use of public money.
- Mr. Navalny denies all charges.
- The protests demanding his release are widespread, occurring in every major city, from the Pacific coast to the Baltic Sea.
- They resulted in about 3,000 people being detained and released.
- These are not the largest seen in Russia.
- However, what is different this time is that people from various strata and age groups joined the mostly peaceful protest actions.

    - Normally, Navalny-related demonstrations attract primarily youth (15-25 years old).
    - The fact that others joined the protest this time is significant.
- It is probably a reflection of the deep disillusionment with the drop in living standards.
    - This is sparked off by years of Ukraine-related sanctions and lower energy prices.
    - The conditions were worsened by the pandemic-driven economic downturn.

Why is it a challenge for the government?

- What would worry the government now is Navalny's call for 'smart voting' in the forthcoming parliamentary elections.
- All opposition voting for one person against the ruling party candidate is a cause of concern for the present government.
- Also, it is suggested that Navalny was used as a tool in the internal battles among the elites.
- This is supported by the fact that some of the information that Mr. Navalny uses in his anti-corruption campaigns would be difficult, actually impossible, to find in publicly available sources.
- This kind of knowledge would have to come from someone not just inside, but very high-up in the system.

What is the likely impact?

- The anti-regime protests expectedly sparked off mixed reactions.
- Some suggest that these are the beginning of serious moves for regime change.
- Navalny's return from Germany is even compared to a similar journey in 1917 in a sealed train by iconic Bolshevik leader (Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov) Lenin.
    - This was the precursor to the October revolution of that year.
- Notwithstanding the euphoria, Alexei Navalny is unlikely to be the catalyst that will lead to 'regime change' in Russia
- And whatever the reasoning, Mr. Navalny is no Lenin, even if the protests for his release continue.
- His nationalist platform is not currently capable of appealing to all sections of Russian society or convincing the political opposition to coalesce around it.
- However, it is clear that now, Mr. Navalny will have a more prominent role in Russian politics.
- He is likely to emerge as a favourable figure of the western media.

- Navalny’s presence and role is also an indication of serious churn among the Russian elites.
- To note, in Russia, historically, barring once, change usually begins in the upper echelons of power.

Source: The Indian Express, The Hindu

