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Brexit earthquake could spur another aftershock in UK election

By XUAN LOC DOAN
APRIL 22, 2017

On Tuesday, April 18, out of the blue, British Prime Minister Theresa May announced an early general election, to be held on June 8. The next day, 522 lawmakers in the country's 650-seat Parliament voted to back her call, officially sending UK voters to the polls for the third time in two years.

The world's fifth-biggest economy held a general election in May 2015 and a referendum on European Union membership in June 2016. In many ways, the upcoming snap poll is the consequence of these two, notably the latter.

A key pledge in the 2015 election manifesto of the Conservative Party then led by David Cameron was to hold a plebiscite on the United Kingdom's membership in the EU. Having won the election with a 17-seat majority, Cameron was forced to call the referendum.

May's abrupt volte-face

Though he strongly campaigned for the UK to remain in the 28-member regional bloc and all polls and experts overwhelmingly predicted a Remain victory, the country's electorate voted on June 23 to exit the bloc.

The stunning Brexit vote, described by some as a political earthquake, shook Westminster to the core and sent shockwaves across Europe and the globe. It dislodged Cameron as party leader and prime minister.

In a Conservative Party leadership contest held afterward, Theresa May was chosen to replace him. This was because, as a reluctant Remainer and widely seen as a trustworthy and experienced politician, the then home secretary was viewed as the "safe pair of hands" that could unite and lead a party and a country that were deeply divided and faced unprecedented challenges after the Brexit vote.

At the launch of her leadership bid on June 30 last year, May said there should be no general election until 2020. Since then, on many different occasions, she and her team explicitly reiterated she would not go to the country before 2020, when the next general election was due.

May's key argument against an early election was that after the EU referendum, the UK needed "a period of stability" as such a poll would cause "instability". In her election announcement on Tuesday, she used the exact same reason to justify her decision to call the snap election, stating that holding the poll was "the only way to guarantee certainty and stability for the years ahead".

Her about-face, coupled with the fact that only a handful of her closest aides and ministers knew about it in advance and that she had hitherto been seen as a promise-keeping and risk-averse stateswoman, stunned not only British politicians and the British people but also EU leaders.

However, in a post-truth world in which leaders, notably US President Donald Trump, do not always say what they mean, mean what they say or do what they promised, May's election U-turn is not so surprising – all the more so when taking into account her actual position and the current state of her party and other political parties in Westminster.

Good reasons

Indeed, Theresa May and her Tory colleagues have many good reasons to go to the country. One is that May succeeded Cameron as prime minister via a party leadership contest, not by a general election. That is why she has been criticized as not having the mandate to lead the country. Coupled with the fact that her party has only a slim majority, the lack of such a popular mandate significantly limits her ability both to set her own agenda at home and to negotiate Britain's EU exit.

Another is that May is currently being provided with a unique opportunity not only to gain her personal mandate but also to extend her party's working majority. The latest survey from YouGov gave the Conservatives a 24-point lead over the Labour Party – three points higher than

the already historic lead in two polls released earlier. One poll gave May a 37-point lead over Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn in terms of who would make the best prime minister.

May's and the Tories' historic leads in opinion polls are not merely because she and the party she leads are that popular. It is mainly because the Labour Party, which won three successive elections under Tony Blair, is currently dysfunctional. The centre-left party, which was in power from 1997 to 2010, is in such disarray largely because of the unpopularity of its uncharismatic far-leftist leader.

Given the record lows of their largest political rival and official opposition in Parliament, it is very likely that the Conservatives will win a major landslide in seven weeks.

In her election statement, May said that after the Brexit vote, the country "is coming together, but Westminster is not", accusing other political parties, including Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party, of sabotaging the UK's departure from the EU.

While it is true that the Lib Dems and the SNP, both of which are pro-EU, opposed a "hard" Brexit and criticized May's stance on – and her government's dealing with – Brexit, this does not mean the British people are uniting around their country's EU exit while political parties at Westminster are not, as May suggested.

In fact, the contrary is true. In February, Parliament dutifully and resoundingly backed the legislation allowing her to trigger Article 50 (to launch formally the UK's EU withdrawal) by 492 votes to 122. In contrast, in last June's referendum only 52% of the British electorate voted to leave, and since then British people remain divided over whether it is right to leave their country's biggest market.

But there are potential risks

Thus while a landslide victory in June will, without doubt, allow May to claim popular backing and, thus, give her more freedom and power in negotiations with the EU, there are potential risks.

By deciding to call a snap general election, May also hopes that her party's good performance, especially in Scotland, will cut down the number of seats the SNP holds in Parliament and, thereby, weaken its call for a second Scottish independence vote.

However, this calculation could backfire. Scotland voted to stay in the EU by 62% to 38%, with all 32 council areas backing Remain. The day May officially triggered Article 50, the Scottish Parliament backed a second independence referendum, but she refused to grant the plebiscite, arguing that it would be irresponsible to hold such a vote when the terms of Britain's exit were not yet clear.

Having called the general election to be held before she actually enters formal negotiations with the EU on the exit deal, it would be hard for her to make the same argument should the SNP match or better its results in the 2015 election. Indeed, an equal or better result in June would put

Scottish secessionists in a stronger position to demand the second referendum and to achieve independence from the UK.

In her Tuesday announcement as well as her Article 50 statement on March 29, May made clear that her country was leaving the EU and “there can be no turning back”. Judging by these remarks and many others, the reluctant Remainer May is now a firm Brexiteer, who wants a clean break with the EU.

Yet it is not certain whether all those who voted to leave one of the world’s largest economies and trading blocs last June really want a complete divorce from the EU and, consequently, how they will cast their vote this June. With an anti-Brexit and pro-EU stance, the Lib Dems have picked up seats in council elections and a parliamentary by-election since the EU referendum.

This remains the core message of the Lib Dems’ current campaign. “If you want to avoid a disastrous hard Brexit, if you want to keep Britain in the single market ... this is your chance,” said their leader, Tim Farron. For those who are feeling concerned about Brexit, such a message could be appealing. Should this pro-EU party perform well in June, it would cause another headache for Theresa May.

Moreover, after the unexpected Brexit vote and Donald Trump’s unpredicted win in the United States, it is not certain that the Conservative Party will win a major landslide as current opinion polls indicate. That is why it cannot be completely ruled out that this election will produce some surprising results. If so, nearly a year after the referendum, Brexit could still cause aftershocks.