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TRANSITIONS ONLINE: **Which Way Is Right?**

by Jane L. Curry

15 October 1997

"LEFT, Right, But Always Forward" was this year's election slogan for the Freedom Union, whose leaders went from anti-communist opposition to head the first noncommunist government in Poland in 1989. Today's Polish party leaders show the same lack of concern with traditional political definitions. Back when the Communist Party was voted out, the meaning of the election seemed clear to most voters: the choice was for or against continued communist control. Now, left and right have blurred and compromised. Parties focus on political theory rather than on voters' legitimate concerns about the economy. As a result, last month's elections in Poland presented no clear options for voters.

Initially, no matter how much the former communist elites sought to change their colors and to advocate reform, they were pariahs, their political system rejected. Questioning the wisdom of rapid economic change and advocating a welfare state were equated with supporting a return of the communist system. In the new version of the "us versus them" mentality of the Cold War world, no one was welcome to question the wisdom of doing away with all that had been communist and going full speed ahead with capitalism. So the increasing popular dissatisfaction with the new capitalism had no place in acceptable political discussion.

And it still has no place among leaders. Like it or not, the economic course is set. Political elites on the right and center in Poland focus on issues of what the "national interest" is and who did what, when, why, and where in the communist days even though most voters don't care. They care about where the economy is going. And on that issue, left and right are almost reversed. Former communists support establishing Western capitalism, while rabid anti-communists want to keep Western interests out and keep the socialist welfare system in. Centrist parties like the Freedom Union, which helped design the economic and political transformation, are shrinking uncomfortably in the middle.

Politics in Poland has become less about what should be done than about blame. Political rhetoric focuses on elites' arguments with each other and not on what people want to hear: how their lives can get better. Voters are left to vote against what has already happened rather than for any particular alternative. That gives elections a surreal quality. While hardly anyone would return to the old system, many people simply don't vote, doubting anyone speaks for them.

FINDING A PARTNER

When the newly transformed communists were voted into power in 1993, they were seen as efficient, nonideological politicians. Their return from internal exile did not make politics more rational or open the spectrum of discussion. Nor did it provide leadership that would advocate for the "losers" in the transition. In their decisions, image mattered more than ideas.

The Polish communists-turned-social-democrats benefit from the long-term growth of the economy and avoidance from the bitter debates that fragment the old Solidarity opposition. They were able, until recently, to look like the efficient professionals Poles wanted as rulers. The former communists in the Democratic Left Alliance know well the importance of resources and organization to electoral victory and to working as a party. They have made sure they have faxes, telephones, internal publications, and local offices in every region. Other parties tended to be much less concerned with having such "frills" and spent the money they had elsewhere. Although the Democratic Left Alliance has never had the open support of a majority, it is the first party to win successive elections in Poland. Members presented themselves as rational moderates who do not engage publicly in fights over policy and who mounted campaigns to talk to citizens in even the smallest towns in Poland. As a result, by this year, they controlled or dominated the presidency, legislature, and local government.

Only in the last year have the former communists begun to be tarnished: former Prime Minister Josef Oleksy was charged with spying; the division of party and government posts once all held by Aleksander Kwasniewski made internal disputes clearer; health workers' strikes and demonstrations over the closing of the Gdansk shipyard (the birthplace of Solidarity) became increasingly violent; and the government failed to deal immediately and effectively with the massive summer floods.

The wild card in Polish politics now is the Solidarity Electoral Alliance. Like other right-wing parties in Eastern Europe, it reflects as much disillusionment with the new system as opposition to the old. Its leaders are quite willing to be provocative to get heard.

The Solidarity Electoral Alliance is far stronger than other right-wing parties. In organization it comes close to matching the former communists. The Solidarity trade union committed its network of offices, funds, and local organizers to winning the election, so the electoral alliance didn't have to rely on the church or individual leaders' resources to mount a campaign. What it could not guarantee was that its ad-hoc coalition, made up of right-wing parties that couldn't work together in the last election and of Solidarity trade unionists who want to preserve the old economic supports, could hold together.

The final chink in the strange left-right spectrum is the Union of Workers. It has fashioned itself as a true socialist party that can't be tarred as communist because its leaders come mostly from Solidarity and from the intellectual fringes of the old Communist Party. Its focus is on the economic and real-life questions voters say they care about. What it doesn't have are organization, resources, and experience in government.

In 1993, the Union of Workers rejected the Democratic Left Alliance's courtship not because of its communist heritage but because of its willingness to give in. Its need now is to go from being a small but vocal critic in parliament to showing supporters it can act. In September's election, that brings it to the negotiating table with the Democratic Left Alliance.

The irony of the election was that the winner-whether the Solidarity coalition or the Democratic Left Alliance-would have to battle for enough support from other parties to form a government. Neither the right nor the left had easy options for brokering a government coalition or holding it together. For both, the ideological confusion that makes politicians unresponsive to voters' economic concerns complicates attempts to make a coalition.

For the Democratic Left Alliance, having almost any coalition partner is better than being tainted as communist. They have proved their flexibility. Four years ago, they wanted the Freedom Union to join them. But the only party willing to join them was the Polish Peasant Party, with whom they had little in common other than communist-era cooperation. They gave up much even for that coalition, including, initially, control of the prime ministership.

Now, their goal again is to form a coalition with the Freedom Union, whose leaders led the original transformation government. Compromise would be easier than with the Peasant Party. And symbolically and tactically, it would mean the Democratic Left Alliance is no longer a pariah but has joined the mainstream.

Many of the Freedom Union's leaders are still close enough to Solidarity-era detentions and underground work not to want to share a political bed and be tainted "red." Yet there is so much enmity and so little political agreement between the Freedom Union's and the Solidarity electoral coalition's leaders-over everything from the Solidarity legacy to the value of creating a Western-style capitalist economy-that the Freedom Union is just as reluctant to join Solidarity in a coalition. Besides, the Solidarity coalition has not even extended an invitation.

BLURRING LEFT AND RIGHT

The right in Poland exhibits some of the qualities of the Western old left. The right assails the Democratic Left Alliance for the past horrors of communism yet fights to retain the perks of a socialist welfare state. It leaves no middle ground on questions of values: you either agree with the right or you are disloyal to the nation as the communists were.

Some of the far right has portrayed Western consumerism and industries as threats to Polish culture and to the economic establishment. Even as the right has assailed the communists for selling their country out to the Soviet Union, they attack the social democrats and the center Freedom Union for selling out to the West, turning over the economy to Western corporations free of tax, and letting sex shops and shopping centers pollute Polish culture.

It was the former communists who brought Poland into NATO while the parties on the right railed about Western imperialism. For the former communists, Western aid was not only a necessity but also proof they were respectable and legitimate rulers on the world stage.

The left has no real tie to religion or nationalism as a call to arms. In general, former communist parties have eschewed the battle and sought compromise, apologies for the past (although without accepting responsibility), and partial concessions on noneconomic issues. The Democratic Left Alliance compromised with the religious right over the treatment of religious issues in the constitution. Even so, the

constitution was still opposed by the right and passed by only a slim margin. In the end, the former communist left's goal has simply been not to give the right any grounds for attacking it as communist.

For leaders of the various political parties, economics is not the dividing line that decommunization and nationalism are. Former communists and the original reformers who now are in the center of the political spectrum initially voted for the same economic changes to jettison the "communist way." Be it on labor-management relations, privatization, or economic reform, most of the communist and "democratic opposition" elites voted and continue to vote together. Once the transformation began, neither left nor right challenged the direction of change, only its implementation and timing.

The elites of the standard left and right parties still come from different professional backgrounds: those who rose to the top through the Communist Party, after all, had worked in the system. Those who came to power from the democratic opposition into the right- and left-wing parties that formed later were generally barred from high-level administration. But the new and "old" elites' attitudes are not that different. Most of the top leaders who have written the political agenda are educated and affluent. Much of the "political class" is young. They are the ones who have "made it" in the new system and have the resources to spend time on politics.

VOICELESS VOTERS

The voters, however, hold a different view than the policy-makers across the political spectrum. In fact, in an unpublished 1996 survey of local leaders of the Solidarity and pro-government unions in Poland, leaders from both the right and left held views closer to each other than to their individual union membership.

Few voters feel themselves represented by their party officials. They know a return to the old communist political and even economic system is not an option, yet most do not see themselves as unqualified gainers from the new system, either. Their concerns are primarily economic; purging former communists is irrelevant. To most, it seems that politicians, whether new or old, worry about their own issues and serve their own interests, not the public interest.

Identifying with a political party or even deciding to vote is not an easy decision. The political picture has grown too complex; not only are there many new parties, but also voters are confused about where the parties stand, beyond being "on the right" or "on the left."

Essentially, the Polish political leadership is divided over support for the communist past or opposition to it, support for Westernization or for "traditional culture," and support for pure capitalism or for some state welfare. Since the Catholic Church is strong, there is also debate over the role of religion in politics.

The goal of the Democratic Left Alliance has been to convince voters that it crosses those divides or sits squarely with the reformers, so its leaders have been more than willing to compromise. The right cornered the left by not compromising and by holding firm stands on political issues. What neither side has done is focus on ways to solve the daily problems of housing, employment, state services, and salaries that plague most of the population. It is that void that the small left-wing party of dissidents from both the Solidarity movement and the former communist party, the Union of Workers, filled to make a place for itself in the September election with its campaign of "You deserve better."

Until 1993, it appeared that all of the left, even when it won seats in the parliament, was excluded from political debate. The victory of the Social Democrats and Peasant Party in Poland should have spelled the end of that distorted political spectrum, paved the way for all views and groups to be represented, and let bygones be bygones. After all, if voters voted for the former communists, how could other politicians continue to use the horrors of the communist era as the political divide?

Somehow, they could. The major players on both sides have stubbornly clung to the old ways. No matter what opinion surveys show, the former communists have not forgotten their time of exile. All that was their history is hidden away. In their platform, even the word "worker" has disappeared. Their goal is to draw the most inclusive possible image and constituency.

The right and center remember the past and want to make sure they are not tainted "pink" by association. The center can hearken back to its leadership in rejecting the "communist era." For the right, the constituency that has been unrepresented and that the right has taken on were the losers in the new system, the workers who lost with privatization, marketization, and Westernization. They need relief. The right promises it but has not come up with ways to bring that relief. As a result, it feels more comfortable opposing those in power and trying to frighten voters with the horrors of the past.

Without a left and right that reflects the different interests in the society and not the bitterness of the political elite, democracy will go on. Elections will take place. Parties will come and go. But voters may never know where or whether their views are represented.

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