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BRIEFING

Why Solidarity Appears Unable To Make Progress / Poland's "inner circle" struggling

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Lech Walesa will meet with President Bush and address Congress next week. Walesa, on his first trip to the United States, says he hopes ""to gain friends" and U.S. support in the struggle to get Poland back on its feet. Walesa was not allowed to travel abroad for seven years after martial law was imposed to crush Solidarity. -----

Like the Communist Party, Solidarity has had very little experience that would prepare it to build consensus democratically within its own organization, to encourage broad-based grass-roots political participation, or to negotiate with other political groups. Many professional oppositionists, including the new prime minister, earned their status by devoting their lives to conspiracy and suffering the consequences dealt out by Communist authorities.

Solidarity and the preceding 15 years of opposition movements excelled in conspiracy, rhetoric and symbolic protest, not in democratic processes like accommodation, consensus and compromise. As one activist put it, ""We haven't learned the culture of parliamentary democracy."

Being an oppositionist was a 24-hour-a-day occupation with many cult-like aspects: One spent hours every day with people who shared the same world view. Contacts outside the group became less important and eventually were cut off, and within these circles guru-type leaders arose who were revered and obeyed.

The inner circle provided a family-like ""normal" environment for people who felt lonely in Poland's atomized society. Loyalty to the group, of utmost significance, was enforced with vigor. For disloyalty, one risked losing friends as well as the economic support provided by the group's access to well-supplied informal markets in an economy beset with shortages of goods.

This was a very exclusive group. Most oppositionists came from intellectual families who had lived in Warsaw for generations. Many had parents who went to school together or fought in the wartime resistance together.

Those who became leaders tended to be privileged enough not to have to worry about material needs. Well-known oppositionists Jacek Kuron and Adam Michnik were unemployed most of their lives and thus could devote full time to their opposition activities. There were people who resented the elitist nature of the opposition milieu. Veteran oppositionist Wojciech Arkuszewski once confided to me exactly why he resisted leadership positions: ""People were imprisoned in the opposition circle because there was no life for them outside of it. They could not live any other life, and that is why they easily surrendered to the strong discipline and authorities of the opposition." Arkuszewski noted that the hierarchy in opposition circles was more clearly defined than it was in other Polish settings: ""Everyone knew who was most important, whose opinion counted most, who was less important and who didn't count at all." CALL FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

In 1980-81, Solidarity's first free period, Poles publicly called for accountability, openness and democratic process. The birth of Solidarity as a legalized organization created a structure of formal relations and groups within the movement, which thousands of new people joined.

But the old cliques still influenced who got what and who could sway whom. With the imposition of martial

law and the outlawing of Solidarity in 1981, these long-established allegiances enabled Solidarity to survive through eight years of underground operation.

And, with the re-legalization of Solidarity, some of these alliances have surfaced to carry out political activities openly. Throughout the recent campaign, election and aftermath, Lech Walesa and his inner circle continued to operate from the old-style allegiances.

Dissent from within the ranks stems from allegations that Walesa and those closest to him did not act democratically because of the highly structured choice presented to voters in the recent election: They could choose only between a slate put forward by the ruling Communists and another advanced by a non-institutional but very tightly knit inner circle of about 10 seasoned oppositionists formed around Walesa.

I spent many hours in private apartments interviewing leaders close to the inner circle and hanging out at Solidarity headquarters. They behaved more like a handful of the chosen calling upon the nation to follow them than like the leaders of a broad-based de facto political party (nonCommunist groups are not officially recognized as political parties in Poland). This was, at least in part, a conscious strategy: The inner circle's objective was to fill all possible seats and to maintain a central authority in choosing candidates.

Many candidates promoted by Walesa's group were enthusiastically endorsed in their assigned regions. But in several regions, local groups with their own candidates argued sharply with the powers in Warsaw. Disputes invariably were resolved in favor of Walesa's group.

Some activists outside the innermost circle - and even some inside it - denounced the lack of democracy in these procedures. They allege, for example, that many of the movement's diverse elements were passed over - especially the more hot-headed, and several people who had been hand-picked by Cardinal Jozef Glemp, primate of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland.

Some of those associated with the inner circle were open in acknowledging the validity of such allegations. During his Senate campaign, Jozef Slisz was stridently challenged on the nomination procedures at a campaign meeting I attended in a town parish. "From the beginning it wasn't democratic," he replied. "You can create democracy if you aren't up against a system that has all the power. We have to be realists."

The spring campaign heightened expectations that the people actually could have a say in how they are governed. It was the first experience many Poles had with the idea that someone in legislative office could represent them. But people did not vote for reform programs or platforms, nor did they reflect on the differences in the merits or political positions of candidates. VOTE AGAINST THE PAST

Many candidates deliberately avoided discussing programs for the future. Thus, the election was not the culmination of a process designed to develop policies for the future but a vote against the past. In the main election, Solidarity carried nearly half the seats in the Sejm (lower house) and newly formed Senate combined. The Communist coalition hung on to barely half the total seats it had occupied without challenge just weeks before. But the biggest blow - for both sides - was suffered when only two of those on the "national list," a bloc of 35 seats in the Sejm for which only Communists could present themselves, survived the initial election.

A successful grass-roots movement, not endorsed by Solidarity's leaders, had urged voters to "cross off the Communists" on the national ballot. Struck down were members of the Communist establishment - including heads of the three Communist alliance coalition parties, the premier, and the speaker of the Sejm - who were the very reformers who had made the election possible.

This forced a run-off in which the guaranteed Communist seats were won by more uncompromising candidates whom the party had substituted for the moderates. Many gained office with the support of only 2 percent to 3 percent of the votes cast. And this, in turn, led to a parliamentary standoff, the defection of two parties in the Communist coalition (the Peasants Party and the Democratic Party), and the stunning selection of a Solidarity man as prime minister.

Very different but almost equally powerful obstacles make it impossible for any one political force to govern Poland alone or with full authority. The three main political players - the Communists, Solidarity, and the Catholic Church - are cooperating with one another out of sheer desperation. None of the players is proposing a complete overhaul of the bureaucratic and economic system, and none has the resources to implement such change.

Solidarity is attempting to maintain stability, not foment revolution. This is why Walesa conceded on his own initiative that the Communists should retain their absolute authority over the army and the police. GOVERNMENT IN SHACKLES

Solidarity's ability to govern Poland is shackled: The Communist Party maintains a grip on executive and

management positions in nearly all spheres of government and administration. Under this system of privilege, known as nomenklatura, a tangle of loyalties and favoritisms precludes broader political and social participation by non-Communist Poles.

Moreover, the entire economy is without resources and without much likelihood of being bailed out by the West. For the time being, the impoverished, incompetent bureaucratic and economic system will remain in place; Solidarity doesn't have the wealth or the apparatus skills to replace it.

The country's almost insurmountable economic problems and this obstacle to real power are the main reasons that, until recently, Solidarity persistently refused to enter into a coalition with the Communists.

Although the Communists are not yet out the door, many Poles believe that, in the future, their bread will more likely be buttered by Solidarity than by the Communists. The Communist coalition, rock-solid for 40 years, has crumbled. And we are also witnessing a true identity crisis in Solidarity. As it enters the corrupt world of Communist politics and attempts to deal with the country's entrenched problems, Solidarity is caught in a quandary. The movement's legitimacy in the eyes of many of its supporters, not to mention its positive world image, largely depends on its ability to exercise a responsible role in the Polish government. Yet its reputation as an untainted and uncompromising moral force seems sure to become tarnished. The organization can expect factionalism, blame and loss of its old integrity as it struggles with the tough choices of political office.

The latent drag of many Communist institutions that will survive even under a Solidarity government and the lack of a really democratic decision-making process within Solidarity itself will sorely inhibit the Solidarity administration's ability to make progress. THINGS HAVEN'T IMPROVED

The economic crisis is what induced the Communists to invite Solidarity to dinner in the first place. Now the continuing crisis could work against the Solidarity administration and capsize it in a single dramatic moment. Things haven't been improving.

Steep inflation, 7 percent to 9 percent monthly, raised prices by 50 percent in the first six months of 1989. Food costs were increasing almost daily even before price controls on some goods were lifted, causing prices to jump as much as fourfold overnight. Sources in the Ministry of Finance say money is being printed day and night.

Both the Communists and Solidarity say that such unpopular austerities as wage freezes must be implemented.

As a former Communist Party apparatchik told me after the rushed election schedule was announced: "The authorities are in such a hurry to hold elections not out of eagerness to share power with Solidarity, but because they are absolutely desperate to share the blame." Ridiculous as this looked to some Westerners, that is exactly why Walesa and his group fidgeted for weeks, even summoning their former nemesis, Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski, to be head of state, before finally offering up one of their own as prime minister.

Even under a Solidarity-led government, the potential for volatility is considerable. Wildcat strikes and protests might lead to police intervention and the suspension of trade unions.

Newly chosen Sen. Krzysztof Kozłowski, deputy head of an influential Catholic weekly, cautioned shortly after the election celebrations had worn off: "People are impatient because of the worsening economy. There are forces such as spontaneous strikes that can't be controlled by the Opposition, Solidarity, Church or Party . . . We want very fast changes, but they may turn out to be too slow, given the state of people's nerves and their stamina."

And while Walesa and his team of advisers from the labor union core of Solidarity agree on an austerity program - only a quibble or two away from the Communist program - many who were part of the pro-Solidarity consensus at the polls disagree.

Among Solidarity's strongest supporters are a burgeoning intellectual army of what are known in Poland as "liberals," for their 19th-century forebears, although the term might confuse some Americans. Their ultimate goal may be a free-market /government mix not unlike that favored by American liberals. But, given Poland's Communist history, these activists are now fully bent on pushing capitalism.

The liberals are vocal and stir public discussion but have less chance to implement their policies than their outspoken proponents assert. Liberal spokesman Janusz Korwin-Mikke says that unemployment is not a problem and that the only concern of an enterprise should be profit.

But as strong as is the reaction against communism, public opinion surveys show that meat-and-potatoes socialist values are widely endorsed by the population. Guaranteed jobs, housing, medical care and social

security benefits are generally favored.

Even Poles who choose lucrative private employment feel they should be entitled to the same social welfare benefits as state workers. Eight percent surveyed in a 1989 University of Krakow study expected paid vacations, free health care and nurseries at the workplace, and they viewed employment in the private sector as temporary and essentially insecure. ANTI-COMMUNIST SENTIMENT

With everyone facing the same crises, the we/they divisions of the past are crumbling. New trends and interests cut across the three major organizations, dissolving divisions and creating new alliances. The Communist Party, Solidarity and the Catholic Church all speak of economic and political reform, democracy, and pluralism. Powerful elements in both the party and Solidarity advocate socialist values. But almost everyone, including party officials, is anti-Communist.

Solidarity's entrance into the government is the beginning of the end, but Poland cannot be transformed overnight. The forces of change may have generated political effects that astounded all participants, but the forces of continuity run deep. None of the leaders and very few of the followers want to press matters to an unresolvable extreme. The directions of Polish political and economic life - the redefining of communism, the evolution toward a competitive party system, and the struggle to displace an entrenched bureaucracy - make for an ambitious agenda and depend on the continued indulgence of the Soviet leaders.

By voting down the Communists, Poles have called for renewal. The challenge for the new coalition government is to keep that renewal from igniting into a full-fledged rebellion with possibly anarchic and international consequences. While the new government strives to maintain stability, it also will have to become more open and accountable as the party, Solidarity, and the Polish people learn constitutionalism and democracy.

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PHOTO; Caption: (1) Solidarity leader Lech Walesa (left) talked to General Wojciech Jaruzelski during a World War II 50th Anniversary ceremony held last month in Gdansk. Jaruzelski was responsible for Walesa's 11-month detention in 1981, (2) Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki / BY ASSOCIATED PRESS

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