

14 of 45 DOCUMENTS

Christian Science Monitor (Boston, MA)

September 28, 1989, Thursday

The Grass-Roots Revolution in Poland

BYLINE: Janine R. Wedel. Janine Wedel, an anthropologist and scholar on East European affairs, is author of "The Private Poland." She recently returned from a three-month trip to Poland.

SECTION: OPINION; Pg. 18

LENGTH: 812 words

SOLIDARITY'S takeover of the prime ministership and many Cabinet-level posts, following its victory in the recent legislative election, have stirred much excitement in both Poland and the West. For the first time in 40 years, Poles are realizing that someone will represent them and their interests in the halls of power. This was evident in the anticipatory atmosphere of the recent election and at campaign appearances in which hundreds of people crowded into church parishes.

But while Solidarity's victory is the most dramatic sign of democratic reform, a quiet revolution not heralded by Western headlines is permanently altering the face of Polish society. Since the early 1980s, Poles have discovered the art of representing themselves through thousands of grass-roots organizations paving the way for a truly pluralistic society.

Many citizens have awakened from the helplessness and inertia into which they had been thrust by martial law and have become newly resourceful. Hundreds of organizers have sought and received government registration, enabling them to operate openly - to raise money, hold meetings, and publish.

Martial law was characterized by an emotionally charged polarization between "we" (society and opposition) and "they" (state rulers.) To be accepted as a true friend of freedom and resistance, it was essential to demonstrate loyalty to Solidarity; those who deviated were subjected to harsh social pressure.

But in Poland of 1989, the we/they split has, to a large degree, lost its intensity and is ceasing to be the driving force in politics. It is no longer a sin to look for one's identity outside of Solidarity and to organize likeminded individuals.

Even before Solidarity's takeover of the highest ranks of government this summer, political organizers were startlingly open and self-assured compared to a year ago. During the summer of 1989 activists openly sold underground periodicals in universities and book fairs. People were candidly introduced to me as the editors of underground periodicals - still explicitly banned. Only a year earlier the same editors and writers would not have revealed their activities for fear of imprisonment.

The flourishing of civil society is, to a large extent, a backlash against anonymity, a bold demand for recognition, an emphatic "we are here." The declaration of identity frequently energizes the groups, many of which are founded by people with established political names.

The very act of organizing one's own political and social circle of colleagues, drafting a manifesto, and declaring

the group's existence can be the most essential activity of its entire history.

Some groups that have no explicit political aspirations are acting as political players and policymakers. Two environmental activists and founders of an illegal ecology organization in the industrial region of Katowice were asked by Lech Walesa to campaign on the Solidarity ticket in Katowice. A Solidarity stronghold, Katowice is reported by many scientists to be the most polluted region in Europe. No one in Walesa's inner circle knew the two environmental activists personally. But since they represented an important constituency, not part of mainstream Solidarity, it was deemed important to capture this constituency.

The influence of some groups hinges on access to money. Some finance themselves through their own private businesses - often brokerage companies that trade computers, VCRs, or information.

But now more than ever, Western money and contacts affect a group's ability inside Poland to win political influence. Access to Solidarity's inner circle also can open doors to money, Western connections, and legitimacy.

In my recent trip to Poland, many leaders asked me for advice about gaining access to particular American funding sources. This would have been considered inappropriate several years ago.

How far can these independent social and political initiatives go? Solidarity's entrance into the government is helping to legitimize them. But the long-term future of the groups, like Solidarity's own success, hinges largely on their ability to implement economic reforms.

If reform is to move forward, the government will have to continue to raise prices, a familiar measure that often results in strikes and street riots. Even if imposed by the new Solidarity government, price increases likely will result in spontaneous protest and strikes for higher pay. This could lead to repression and the suspension of trade unions and citizens' groups.

Whether or not developments in Poland will permit independent initiatives to flourish remains to be seen. Yet after years of frustration and deadlock, Polish society is authentically engaged in grass-roots organizing - a development that is essential in a pluralistic society bent on economic and political change.

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

Copyright 1989 The Christian Science Publishing Society