

Poland



Socialism or Social Democracy

Given the opportunity, the Polish people delivered a humiliating defeat to the ruling Polish United Workers Party (PUMP) in last month's parliamentary election.

On the basis of a 62% turnout, the June elections provided Solidarnosc with a popular endorsement that showed the mass discontent with the alleged socialism of the PUMP.

At the voting booths, Polish voters crossed out 33 of the 35 PUMP candidates on an uncontested list. Those on the establishment's national list required at least 50% endorsement to gain a seat. Among those crossed out were the Polish Prime Minister, Rakowski, and other senior government officials. The government had hurriedly to assemble new candidates to contest the vacant seats in a second round of elections.

The elections did contain an element of choice. This was, however, strictly limited as overall controlling power lies with the Sejm (lower house) where a majority of 65% of the seats are guaranteed to the PUMP's national list. The upper house of the Polish Parliament consists of the Solidarnosc-controlled Senate, elected by popular mandate. It only has powers of a limited veto.

In the aftermath of the elections, the offer of a PUMP-led coalition with Solidarnosc was initially rejected by the trade union which insisted that it fought the elections as the opposition to the PUMP.

Government officials said that there had been a low turnout and that the vote was against the government rather than in favour of the Solidarnosc programme. What they did not say was the dependency on the Soviet Union has been traditionally associated with the PUMP. A vote for Solidarnosc was a vote for Polish independence.

What is likely to follow is a period of consolidation and some form of political accommodation. Polish leader, General Jaruzelski, observed that: "The presence of Gorbachev makes our situation easier because it underlines the correctness of our path of reform." The general also has the cautious goodwill of some Solidarnosc leaders to draw on. One of the movement's election slogans was: Don't emigrate. Vote Solidarnosc.

FROM REPRESSION TO DIALOGUE

Today's official recognition given to the once outlawed trade union is the result of the failures and tensions within Polish society. By the 1970's, the PUMP was seen to have failed. Two workers' revolts (in 1970 and 1976) had culminated in the emergence of NSZZ-Solidarnosc: the independent self-governing trade union, Solidarity, with a membership of up to ten million. The economic crisis and political stalemate forced the PUMP into negotiations with Solidarnosc that resulted in the Gdansk Compromise of August 1981.

In the eyes of some, that political accommodation marked the bankruptcy of the ruling party, which was unable to come to terms with Polish reality.

The party had failed. So the Polish military, headed by General Jaruzelski, stepped into the vacuum, pre-empting any Soviet initiative in that direction. The general was then seen as a Soviet puppet.

Solidarnosc was outlawed. But the following years did not resolve the situation that brought about the military intervention in December 1981. Since the Gdansk Compromise, the PUMP and government had not been able to govern as before. In a very real sense, a whole society had risen against the injustices of Polish reality.

As martial law failed to suppress Solidarnosc, dialogue became inevitable. The question was on what terms? The economic situation continued to deteriorate, and the state's political authority disintegrated even after the lifting of martial law. The attempted return to normalisation revealed the same basic problems that had given rise to the mass popular protest and creation of Solidarnosc.

The pace has been forced this year after the Polish leader embarked upon direct negotiations with Solidarnosc's leadership during the Round Table talks from February to April and the subsequent legalisation of the independent union.

These days, the Solidarnosc leader, Lech Walesa, is photographed smiling with General Jaruzelski, who is now credited with being a Polish patriot despite his role in 1981.

This change of approach has been forced upon the PUMP as it needs union co-operation in the major tasks that face it.

GIVING SUPPORT TO UNPOPULAR POLICIES

General Jaruzelski described what faces them as "the taking of economically necessary, but socially unpopular decisions - what Mrs Thatcher did with the miners, and in other cases."

The man who ordered the tanks onto the streets of Warsaw in December 1981, needs at least the tacit support of Solidarnosc in "the bold historical experiment" as he describes it, in which political pluralism is the reward for shared responsibility in economic reconstruction.

"You cannot solve a problem without all social and political forces," he said, "after the elections. "The only possibility is dialogue and compromise."

The Polish leader faces divisions within the PUMP. It is rumoured that the more reform-minded members (including some in the leadership) plan to abandon the PUMP and form a new leftist (social-democratic) organisation without any facade of Marxist-Leninist norms.

REVISIONISM IN CONTROL

Past manifestations of opportunism and revisionism have led to the political degeneration of the PUMP and of the Polish state. The unhealthy parody of socialism in Polish post-war developments allowed the

conditions to exist in the country for open anti-communist propaganda and for it to penetrate and flourish amidst the development of an ineffective, bureaucratic rule by the PUMP.

The consolidation of revisionist rule in Poland saw the PUMP become more removed from real developments in Polish society. It was no longer rooted in the Polish working class, which led to important ramifications for the nature of the Solidarnosc opposition.

Although the composition of Solidarnosc is overwhelmingly of working people, it is not under the leadership of an independent working class perspective. In the absence of a revolutionary working class organisation, the Polish working class has fallen back on building its own trade unions. Left to its own devices, in an environment where socialism was discredited, the working class acted powerfully in strikes and demonstrations but lacked revolutionary consciousness or a Marxist-Leninist world outlook.

It is social democracy that is playing the leading role, ideologically. Its objective is bourgeois political forms which would break the political monopoly of the revisionist PUMP. This in turn would open up avenues for genuine Marxist-Leninist forces to undertake the task of re-building a political party of the working class.

MANY ROADS TO CAPITALISM

With national strife in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, economic collapse in Poland and Rumania, and the moves to western political forms in Hungary, the Western media have made a great play about the supposed crisis in communism from Poland to Beijing. They are not too keen to highlight the fact that the crisis in so-called socialist countries is the result of re-introducing capitalist values and practices. One newspaper editorial did, however, sarcastically suggest that "there are many roads to capitalism".

Capitalism is quick to proclaim that Marxism is incapable of providing a positive alternative to solve the problems of the modern world. The media point to the likes of General Jaruzelski queuing up for an International Monetary Fund financial package to bail out the Polish economy. Significantly, Mrs Thatcher promised the Polish leader £25 million for management training in market economics during his visit to Britain. But, unlike Thatcher, the General, in good social-democratic fashion, believes that class collaboration policies are needed to resolve the Polish crisis. But in Poland, as in Britain, it is the working class that is expected to bear the cost of these policies.

It remains open to question how far Solidarnosc will be able to set its own political agenda and withstand the woeing of the PUMP. Whatever choice is made, could it be any worse than what the Polish working class has already endured?