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Poland

The strange death of Solidarnosc

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The results of the Polish parliamentary elections of September 23, 2001 have profoundly restructured the country's political landscape. Polish observers are generally agreed that what has happened amounts to a genuine earthquake, albeit a limited one, in three respects.

The first is the crushing defeat - the complete loss of parliamentary representation of the main political forces identifying themselves with the traditions of Solidarnosc. [1] The second is the resounding victory of a social democracy originating from the party which had been in power under the former bureaucratic regime: the Polish Unified Workers' Party (PZPR). And the third is the unexpectedly high score for Samoobrona ("Self-defence"), a movement of social protest and direct action which was until now extra-parliamentary.

1993: The first earthquake

To avoid any misunderstanding, we should be clear that the change is relative in two aspects. First, the so-called "post-communist" Social Democrats had already returned to power in the 1993-1997 period. That too was an earthquake, bigger than the current one: to resume power barely four years after the fall of the self-styled "actually existing socialism" represented an undoubted political exploit and a very strong sign of the growing loss of legitimacy of the "gravediggers of Communism" and restorers of capitalism. The parties of the right who enjoyed the support of the Solidarnosc union were, for the first time, completely deprived of Parliamentary representation. The parties of the conservative, nationalist, clerical and extreme right were in general small but their strength resided in their support inside the trade union apparatus of Solidarnosc. Incapable of implementing any more or less unitary policy, they entered the 1993 elections in disunity, leading to their disappearance from parliament. However another force, originating from the old "democratic opposition" (Committee for the Defence of Workers, KOR, active from 1976-1981), the Democratic Union (UD), renamed the Union of Liberty (UW), remained in parliament.

Representing, on the side of the opposition, the main beneficiaries of the "round table" agreement with the regime in 1989 that had allowed the transfer of power, it became the party of the liberal right and the neo-liberal shock therapy embodied in the so-called "Balcerowicz plan". [2]

It was the popular reaction to the disastrous social effects of this plan and to the restoration of capitalism in general which brought to power the Alliance of the Democratic Left (SLD) in coalition with the Polish Popular/Peasant Party (PSL) [3] Like the SLD, the PSL originated from a party of the old régime, but it was rooted in the tradition, specific to Poland and some other eastern European countries, of mass peasant parties.

For the right, it was the revenge of the "Communists", all the more so in that the presidential elections of 1995 saw the outgoing president, Lech Walesa, the man who loved to say that he had "defeated Communism on a world scale", defeated by Aleksander Kwasniewski, leader of the SLD. Despairing at their fall, the right, with Walesa at the helm, mounted an attempt to destabilize and overthrow the "post-Communist" government: it accused the social democratic prime minister Jozef Oleksy of having been, in the past, an agent of Soviet espionage. The affair, as it transpired finally, was a complete frame-up and a secret service provocation.

The SLD-PSL government was not, obviously, some kind of throwback to the old régime. As declared partisans of the restoration of capitalism and the Atlantic alliance they would assure the continuity of the policies of the right, including privatisation and neo-liberal restructuring. They attempted at best to mitigate their increasingly dangerous

social effects, in particular to significantly reduce the devastating mass unemployment affecting entire regions of the country. The PSL, moderately anti-neo-liberal, restrained the neo-liberal tendencies of the SLD in some areas. This coalition also limited the ideological reactionary, clerical, nationalist and aggressively anti-communist pressures that had pervaded the life of Polish society since 1989.

1997: Return of the right

However, in 1997 the SLD unexpectedly lost the elections. Three factors were at the origin of this defeat. First, its electorate shrank, discouraged and disillusioned by the continuation of the neo-liberal course. Secondly, the SLD, convinced it would win, did not wage an electoral campaign and thus demobilized part of its 'hard core' electorate. Third, the parties of the right unified their forces in the Solidarnosc Electoral Alliance (AWS). It was the Solidarnosc union bureaucracy who imposed this unity on them. And it was the AWS who won the elections. The feat was comparable to that of the SLD in 1993.

The AWS formed a coalition government with its fraternal enemy the UW, ceding control of economic and financial policy to the latter party in the person of its president, Leszek Balcerowicz. It represented the return in full force of an orthodox neo-liberalism aimed head on at the working class, the popular layers, women, the old and the young. Accusing the previous government of having drawn back from "the most indispensable and urgent reforms", the AWS-UW coalition forced them through at high speed. Suddenly it radically changed the administrative structure of the country, reforming the health service, social security and national education along neo-liberal lines. At the same time the neo-liberal restructuring of the economy resumed its forced march with the rapid growth of social inequalities, poverty and unemployment (reduced to 8% of the active population under the SLD-PSL coalition, it rose above 16% in 2001).

The policy of the AWS-UW coalition was adventurist and politically suicidal. The AWS began to undergo a succession of crises, splits and increasingly difficult recompositions. Entire layers of this heterogeneous bloc deserted neo-liberal policies and for this reason the ruling coalition increasingly began to be defeated in parliament.

The National Agreement of Trade Unions (OPZZ), the largest trade union organization, linked to the SLD, formed a coordination with all the workers' and peasants' trade unions (except Solidarnosc) mobilizing for street demonstrations and protests against the policy of the government.

The peasant union Samoobrona ("Self-defence"), under the leadership of Andrzej Lepper and drawing behind it other peasant unions, organized massive coordinated actions on a national scale, blocking motorways and generating heated confrontations between peasants and police. The workers of the crisis-hit arms industry descended on Warsaw and also clashed with the police. On two occasions, Poland's nurses launched formidably organized and coordinated struggles, showing a surprising capacity to invent new forms of action. Drawing inspiration from the peasants, they also carried out spectacular blockades of motorways and border crossings. The polls revealed large majority support for both peasant and nurse struggles.

2000: Re-election of Kwasniewski

In summer 2000, faced with the deep unpopularity of the government, the UW left it, hoping thus to save its skin, while Balcerowicz was removed from the presidency of the party. The government, supported only by the AWS in decomposition, became a minority in parliament. In October 2000 the presidential elections confirmed in striking

fashion that the SLD had the wind in its sails: Kwasniewski won on the first round (54%), beating a neo-liberal independent, Andrzej Olechowski (18%) and the AWS leader (leader also of the Solidarnosc trade union) Marian Krzaklewski (15%).

On the basis of these results, the SLD began a triumphal march towards power - all the more triumphal in that the Union of Labour (UP), a small social democratic party originating in part (like the SLD) from the PZPR, and in part from the moderate left of Solidarnosc, decided to ally with it. Olechowski, together with some elements from the UW and the AWS, organized a new neo-liberal force, the so-called Citizens Platform (PO).

The AWS broke up and reconstituted itself as Electoral Action Solidarity (AWSP), getting rid of Krzaklewski as leader. Thus Walesa's successor at the head of Solidarity followed his predecessor into political oblivion (at the presidential elections Walesa received barely 3% of the votes).

As a heavy defeat for the AWSP and UW was certain, the right proceeded to significant recompositions. In addition to the PO of Olechowski, regrouping the most hardcore neo-liberals who had deserted the UW and the most moderate conservatives who had deserted the AWS, two other right wing forces were formed. The first was Law and Justice (PiS), led by the Jaroslaw brothers and Lech Kaczynski, former minor leaders of Solidarnosc, a conservative formation with a radical law and order discourse, on the lines of New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani and his "zero tolerance".

The other formation is the League of Polish Families (LRP), a hotch-potch of groups from the radical, extreme, nationalist and clerical right, hostile to EU membership but advocating privileged links with the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA)! Its main leader is Antoni Macierewicz, one of the founders of KOR, who has gone from the left to the far right. The LRP won very precious support from Radio Mary, a powerful radio controlled by the fundamentalist current inside the Catholic Church.

2001: Second earthquake

In the weeks preceding the parliamentary elections, Polish society was shocked to learn that the economy had entered into recession and that there was an enormous hole of around 90 billion zlotys in the budget. The polls gave between 47% and 50% of votes to the SLD-UP, so the social democratic coalition was absolutely sure it would obtain an absolute majority in parliament and govern alone. But two days before the elections, two bombs exploded. The first was: the announcement by the future finance minister, Marek Belka (known as the "social democratic Balcerowicz" because of his fidelity to neo-liberal dogmas) of his plan to fill the budgetary hole, which aroused deep disquiet in popular layers. The second: after polling around 3% for months, support for "Self-defence" shot up to 8-9%.

The election results constituted a great surprise for an SLD-UP which had been plunged in triumphalism: it got between 6-9% less votes than it had expected. It had only a relative majority in parliament, meaning it had to form either a minority or a coalition government. From being an extra parliamentary movement, considered by all the political elite, media and the Church hierarchy as a gang of hooligans, with a leader subject to persistent legal harassment, "Self-defence" emerged as the third biggest force in parliament, overtaking the PSL.

The results of the elections to the Polish Diet

SLD (Alliance of the Democratic Left) - UP (Union of Labour, social democrats)	41.0%	216 seats
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PO (Citizens Platform, liberal)	12.7%	65 seats
Samoobrona ("Self defence", radical peasant)	10.2%	53 seats
PiS (Law and Justice, conservative)	9.5%	44 seats
PSL (Polish Peasant/Popular Party, moderate peasant)	9.0%	42 seats
LRP (League of Polish Families, far right)	7.9%	38 seats
AWSP (Electoral Action Solidarity, conservative)	5.6%	0 seats
UW (Union for Liberty, liberal)	3.1%	0 seats
PPS (Polish Socialist Party, to the left of the SLD)	0.1%	0 seats

In the countryside the vote for the PSL was a little higher than that of "Self-defence", but in the cities it was the latter that won, garnering the "social protest vote" among unskilled workers, the unemployed and the poor.

"Self-defence" is fiercely anti-neo-liberal and hostile to the "political class" in its entirety. It proclaims itself "neither right nor left, but Polish" and its profile is that of an intransigent defender of the interests of the peasants and urban poor. The leitmotiv of Lepper's discourse is: "either we change rapidly and radically the whole of our economic and social policy, breaking with neo-liberalism and favouring the popular layers, or in one year the country will experience a mass uprising".

The man is unpredictable: held in contempt as a hooligan by the SLD leaders who stigmatise him as a possible Polish incarnation of Haider (a baseless association), he announced that "Self-defence" would offer conditional support to the SLD-UP government and exerted strong pressure on the SLD-UP and the PSL to form a coalition government. Suddenly the social democrats were obliged to treat him with respect, negotiate with him and even say that he was completely capable of becoming... "a statesman".

Only the new rightwing formations - the PO, PiS and the LRP - gained representation in the new parliament. With the elimination from the parliamentary game of the AWSP and UW the so-called "Poland of August 1980" has come to an end and with it a whole historic myth has been defeated, barely 12 years after its triumph. It is the price that they have both paid for having shamefully betrayed the aspirations of the great mass uprising of 1980-1981 and the interests of the working class whose struggles against the bureaucratic regime opened up their road to power.

Politically the relationship of forces following these elections presents itself in the following fashion: the social democracy and the anti-neo-liberal parties with a peasant base received in total more than 60% of the votes, whereas all the right wing formations together received less than 40%.

With hesitations and reticence, the SLD-UP chose the formation of a coalition government with the sole partner possible: the PSL. "Self-defence" declared themselves ready to support it. This "marriage of convenience" will surely be difficult to consummate: in the leanest of times, how will it be possible to reconcile the SLD's support for neo-liberal globalisation and the pursuit of neo-liberal restructuring of the economy, society and state with the (either moderately or radically) anti-neo-liberal tendencies of all its allies, near or distant - the UP, PSL and Self-defence?

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[1] The self-managed independent trade union Solidarity (NSZZ Solidarnosc) was founded in September 1980 following a national meeting of the regional strike committees elected during the strikes which spread across the country in August 1980.

Legalized in November 1980, it had 10 million members (out of 13 million employees). At its congress in September-October 1981 it adopted the programme of the "Self managed Republic", "a new socio-economic order which would link the plan, self-management and market" based on the "socialization of planning". The bureaucratic repression which followed the coup d'État of general Jaruzelski pushed this immense mass movement into clandestinity, isolating the underground leadership from its working class base. Faced with a new generalized strike movement in 1988, the Jaruzelski leadership negotiated a compromise with the underground leadership, conceding parliamentary elections.

In June 1989 the candidates of the Solidarity leadership won thus all 261 contested seats out 560 in the Diet (the others were reserved to the candidates of the bureaucracy) and 99% of the seats in the Senate which led in September 1989 to the formation of a coalition government led by Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a Solidarity technocrat, which began the process of capitalist restoration.

The social effects of this policy, carried out as a forced march under the diktat of the IMF, did not allow the re-legalized Solidarity trade union to recover its strength of 1980-81. From 1991 the OPZZ ("National Agreement of Trade Unions"), created under the dictatorship of general Jaruzelski and inside which some underground Solidarity activists had attempted to pursue a "legal" activity inside the bureaucratic apparatus, became the main union force in the country.

[2] Leszek Balcerowicz was, in autumn 1981, one of the economic experts who negotiated the formulation of the law on self-management. After the coup d'État by general Jaruzelski (December 13, 1981) and the banning of the Solidarnosc union, Balcerowicz was one of the experts who, linked with the US administration, pushed the underground leadership to modify the economic project of Solidarnosc in a more "market" and less "self-management" direction. He became minister of finance in September 1989 and adopted a new monetarist economic policy imposed by the IMF, known as the "Balcerowicz Plan".

[3] "Peasant/popular" because the Polish word "ludowe" means two things; traditionally peasant based, this party now plays on the ambiguity of its name to present itself as a "party of the people" with a rural and urban base.