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(Poland)

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WHAT IS GOING ON IN POLAND?

1. The following comments and definitions may be helpful in assessing developments in the last few weeks in the evolution of the Polish reform programme.

2. What is being reformed?

In principle, and according to the propaganda, the reforms affect the economic and political life of the country. But there is a wide gap between the (in theory) far-reaching reforms now put forward and the much more modest political reforms. The economic reform is dramatic in concept and radical in content. It could bring a serious restructuring of the Polish economy, and its reinvigoration. But that depends on implementation, of which more below. The political reforms go much less far in attempting to liberate initiative and enterprise. Indeed, it seems likely that they will be characterised by a desire by the central authorities to maintain a very tight grip on political life. It is significant that the first details released about one of the reforms put forward in the Politburo report for the VI Plenum, the reform of electoral law for the 1988 local council elections, indicates a withdrawal from one of the more interesting proposals. Instead of permitting pre-electoral meetings to put forward candidates, the right to put forward candidates will be confined to organised bodies, including the new local Consultative Councils. In general the proposals reveal tight control of the whole electoral process.

3. The purpose of the reform

It is easy to be beguiled by the propaganda, particularly in the openness and apparent freedom of Poland. And certainly there are aspects of the reform programme which are ideologically heretical to the Communist party - hence the search for ideological justification for them. Conservatives have also argued that the reform threatens the party's leading role. But the reformers in the party see the reform as a way of making the present political system work. They recognise that the system has failed economically, and that politically it has not been successful in defusing social tension in the past. The economic reform should in principle restore Poland's economic growth rate and ultimately its status as a major medium-sized economy, with all the political benefits that would follow. Political reforms would bridge gaps in society and provide mechanisms for dealing with grievances and opposition. At the end of the day, the aim is to preserve the party's position, not to weaken it.

4. Reformists and Conservatives

These are inevitably shorthand labels, sharpening differences of position artificially. Nonetheless, there is a group of reformists in the government and among Jaruzelski's closest advisers. There is an important distinction between the radical reformers and the cautious, step-by-step adjusters. There are

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also individuals and interest groups which for reasons of ideology, political intuition, natural caution, or naked self interest can be described as conservatives and are opposed to some if not all changes. In between there is a very grey mass comprising officials and politicians and other functionaries who have no strong view one way or the other but would perhaps prefer a quiet life. They are on the whole a brake on reform or at best a filter through which the reform process must flow. The reformers have effective control of the central and influential media. They are also, for obvious reasons, the natural interlocutors for Western embassies. For these two reasons our understanding of those who obstruct reform is very imperfect compared with our understanding of those who promote it.

5. Implementation

It is a truism that implementation of any reform is difficult. The authorities can of course implement their political reforms although subsequent application of eg. changes to the electoral law may well vary from one part of the country to another for political reasons. It is however much harder to implement the economic reforms, particularly in Poland where the regional authorities enjoy exceptional power. It is worth remembering that Poland in the provinces can be Mafia-like, with strange combinations of Party Secretary, local government official, local business and sometimes local priest, pursuing their own policies and able to ignore much of what emanates from the centre. It will be very difficult to change this. The drive from the centre needs to be exceptionally strong and to be followed up through the party's own bureaucracy if the economic reform is to bite.

6. Social perceptions of reform

There is little public confidence in the capacity of the government to introduce meaningful economic reform, and even less interest in the political reforms which leave the basic system intact. The average Pole is deeply cynical, and there is little doubt that people expect the economic reform to comprise price rises and no benefits. The propaganda can never offset reality in Poland, since Poles are so easily able to check with their own eyes what they are told by the TV and press. It is therefore unlikely that public perceptions will change. There are some who believe that the impact of the reform will be to heighten social tension, and may lead to an explosion. This is very difficult to judge. There are bound to be protests, in factories and possibly in larger social groupings. The likely approach of the authorities (who are better informed on social attitudes - because of opinion polling - than any previous Polish regime) would be to try to isolate such discontent and buy it off.

7. The Leadership

One factor affecting the cynicism prevalent among even well-informed observers is that the political elite in charge of the reform process is largely unchanged from the group which oversaw the first (and ineffective) stage of the economic reform. It also contains many names from the group prominent during

martial law. Even Rakowski, a name identified by Western observers and many Poles with the liberal wing of the party, belongs to this group. He is of course much disliked by the opposition and may indeed have won friends among the hard-liners for his role in the crushing of Solidarity. It is possible that the absence of credible alternative policies has led the party leadership to support reformist policies to which they feel no particular personal commitment. In this respect the situation is sharply different from that in the Soviet Union where the reform is associated with a new leader bringing his own men into office with him. There is also some weight in the view that there is political stalemate in the upper ranks of the party, which is why so few new faces have been brought in. It is certainly no coincidence that the leading proponent of the economic reform, the Vice-Premier, Sadowski, is non-party. He can easily be tossed aside without much damage, if the reform grinds to a halt.

Comment

8. This is not a very rosy picture, but there is considerable room for doubt about the capacity of the authorities to implement the reform. It is important that the West recognise this. It is also important that we recognise the intentions of the authorities where these are worthy: there are certainly some who wish to preside over an economic recovery and are prepared for the tough measures required; there are some too who would like to see more, and more real, "democratisation". It is also true that the authorities' proposals for very limited democratisation could still unintentionally provide increased (albeit still very restricted) possibilities for quasi-political activity by the opposition. This remains to be seen. We certainly need to evaluate critically every move by the regime, bearing in mind that failure to implement the economic reform would produce a very difficult situation, both inside the party and in the country as a whole. Whatever happens, the pressures for meaningful political reforms seem most unlikely to diminish.