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David S. Mason
Butler University, dmason@butler.edu

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Solidarity Enters the Fray

By David S. Mason

The recent agreements between the Polish government and the Solidarity-led opposition are path-breaking developments. They herald the dawning of democracy and could portend the eventual disintegration of the Soviet bloc. But they also confront the opposition with formidable challenges. The outcome of the elections is by no means certain.

The April agreements included provisions on social policy, economic reform, and trade union pluralism (which legalizes Solidarity). Most important are the political reforms. The agreement calls for "radical reform of the state" and for "political pluralism," including the right to freely form political and social organizations. It also recognizes the right of a political opposition to legal activity.

An institutional role for the opposition is provided in a restructured national legislature. The existing parliament, the Sejm, will be elected in June with 35 percent of the seats reserved for "nonparty" candidates; that is, for people not belonging to the ruling communist party or its coalition partners. A second legislative chamber, the Senate, will be reconstituted, with freely contested elections for all 100 seats. Candidates can be registered by collecting signatures from 3,000 eligible voters in their districts. The new Senate will have the right to veto legislation passed by the Sejm.

These arrangements make it possible for Solidarity to control one chamber of the legislature and therefore to exercise a major voice in Poland's future. But first Solidarity must win the elections - a task which, in spite of widespread popular disgust with the regime, may not be so easy. Seven years of political and economic stagnation have turned most Poles away from politics altogether.

Until the last few months, public opinion polls, both official and unofficial, have shown low levels of support for both the regime and the opposition. Lech Walesa's and Solidarity's popularity skyrocketed to 70 percent and 70 percent, respectively, during the round-table discussions, but it remains to be seen whether this level of support will continue. Compared with past years, even under martial law, there are few signs of support for the opposition in the streets of Warsaw. A related problem is the division within the opposition.

Mr. Walesa has created a Citizens' Committee of about 100 prominent opposition figures, which will take responsibility for managing the campaign for the opposition. But this committee contains representatives of different constituencies: the "old" leadership of Solidarity from 1980-81; some of the more militant leaders of the strikes in 1988; representatives of other underground opposition groups, such as "Freedom and Peace," academics; farmers; and the Roman Catholic intelligentsia.

Walesa faces a major task in holding together these various constituencies, at least until the elections. He expressed concern himself about this phenomenon on his recent visit to Rome: "Solidarity for the moment is huge, but it will become smaller with the growth of other organizations." This is the logical course of events.

Given the relatively easy procedure for registering candidates, it is likely that there will be more than two candidates for some of the "opposition" seats. This raises the possibility that a splintered opposition will divide its votes and allow the regime's candidates to win.

This eventuality is diminished somewhat by the two-step electoral procedure provided for in the agreements. A candidate must win 50 percent of the votes in the first round; otherwise the top two candidates face a runoff election in the second round. This is similar to the French electoral system: a compromise between the American "winner-take-all" system and the other extreme of proportional representation. It is not likely to help regime candidates, who on the other hand, could lead to a multiplicity of groups (or even perhaps parties) on the opposition side.

Thus, the divisions in the opposition will be reflected in the legislature itself. This will require bargaining and compromises within the opposition, as well as between the opposition and the regime. The word "compromise" has almost entirely negative connotations for most Poles; this is one reason so many were skeptical about the round-table negotiations and agreements. For good or ill, however, compromise will be necessary for the new legislative arrangements to work.

Solidarity faces another challenge - from those who support the regime, or oppose Solidarity. The Western myth holds that everyone supports Solidarity. But that was not true even at the end of 1981, when the bitter political battles, strikes, and economic collapses cut away at its popularity. Polls in the mid-1980s showed about a third of the population supported the opposition, a third supported the regime, and the rest constituted a Polish silent "majority." The regime can expect support from its third, and will campaign for support from the silent third. There are many sentiments the party can tap: support for egalitarianism; for "law and order"; for evolutionary change.

The agreements are cast as "the beginning of the road to parliamentary democracy." But such a system is not easy to achieve; only about 20 countries worldwide have maintained such a system over a sustained period. Solidarity and the Polish opposition will learn quickly how difficult the path will be. They may not "win" this June. But the contest is the beginning of the end of traditional communism.

David S. Mason is a visiting scholar at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, and author of "Public Opinion and Political Change in Poland."