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POLISH DEMOCRACY IS OFF AND RUNNING AGAIN

MAZOWIECKI'S ANNOUNCEMENT ON THE EVENING OF OCTOBER 4 THAT HE IS RUNNING FOR POLAND'S FIRST FREELY-ELECTED POSTWAR PRESIDENCY PUTS POLISH DEMOCRACY BACK ON THE FAST TRACK. THE CAMPAIGN WILL BE BRIEF AND INTENSE, AND WE WILL BE REPORTING ITS TO-AND-FRO. IN TERMS OF THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN THIS PART OF THE WORLD, IT IS CERTAIN TO BE A FORWARD STEP.

MOST POLES WILL NOT NECESSARILY SEE IT THAT WAY. THE CAMPAIGN WILL BE HEATED. DEMOCRACY IS STILL NEW AND SOMEWHAT FRIGHTENING HERE, ALL THE MORE SO THIS TIME BECAUSE THIS CONTEST WILL REQUIRE ELEMENTS OF THE VICTORIOUS SOLIDARITY COALITION TO SQUARE OFF AGAINST EACH OTHER. UNITY, EVEN IN TEMPORARY COLLABORATION WITH THE COMMUNIST REAR GUARD, WAS EASIER. FORTIFIED BY THEIR SOLIDARITY, THE FORCES OF POLISH DEMOCRACY WERE WILLING TO COMPROMISE--TO SACRIFICE THE ALL-OR-NOTHING APPROACH TO POLITICS THEY IMBIBE WITH THEIR MOTHER'S MILK-- BECAUSE IN THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF 1989 IT DID NOT THREATEN THE US-VERSUS-THEM MENTALITY WHICH IS EVEN MORE FUNDAMENTAL TO THEIR POLITICAL CULTURE.

IN THE NEXT STEP THAT STARTS TODAY, IT WILL BE US-VERSUS-US, AND THIS IS CREATING A LOT OF NOSTALGIA WHEN IT COMES TO FRAMING THE ISSUES. MOST POLES ARE CONSCIOUS FIRST OF ALL OF THE RISKS; MANY WILL BE LOOKING BACKWARD, TO MORE FAMILIAR AND CONGENIAL TERMS OF REFERENCE, AND TELLING WESTERN REPORTERS ABOUT IT. MAZOWIECKI SUPPORTERS, AND MAZOWIECKI HIMSELF, WOULD HAVE PREFERRED TO PUT OFF THE DAY UNTIL NEXT SPRING, WHEN THE ECONOMIC SITUATION MIGHT BE BETTER, WHEN THERE MIGHT BE MORE SUCCESSES FOR THE GOVERNMENT'S PROGRAM TO POINT TO, WHEN THE HABITS OF DEMOCRACY MIGHT HAVE SUNK IN A LITTLE DEEPER. THEY ARE WORRIED THAT THE PASSIONS OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICS IN A DETERIORATING ECONOMY WILL CALL UP FORCES FROM THE DEEP, ANCESTRAL VOICES PROPHECYING BLOOD AND WAR, WHICH WILL MAKE IT HARDER TO DEAL WITH THE COUNTRY'S PROBLEMS, WHICH WILL SET BACK POLAND'S RETURN TO EUROPE. HENCE THE DARK MUTTERINGS ABOUT WALESA'S POPULISM, THE THREAT OF PERONISM, THE SPECTER OF PILSUDSKI, ANTI-SEMITISM; AND THEY MAY BECOME SHARPER AND MORE POINTED IN THE MONTHS AHEAD.

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MEANWHILE, AND INVERSELY, WALESA AND HIS VARIED SUPPORTERS WILL HAVE THEIR OWN SET OF SPECTERS: POINTY-HEADED INTELLECTUALS PROTECTING COMMUNISTS AND REPRODUCING THE COMMUNIST PARADIGM OF FICTITIOUS UNITY IN ORDER TO IMPOSE REAL HARDSHIP UPON THE SILENT MAJORITY IN THE NAME OF A BRIGHT FUTURE. HENCE THE DARK MUTTERINGS ABOUT THE GOVERNMENT'S "LEFTIST" CAST, ITS REMOTENESS, EVEN THE ROLE OF THE FEW JEWS ACTIVE IN IT; AND THEY MAY BECOME SHARPER AND MORE POINTED IN THE MONTHS AHEAD. FOR MAZOWIECKI SUPPORTERS, DEMOCRATIC POLITICS IS COMING TOO EARLY; FOR WALESA SUPPORTERS, IT MAY ALREADY BE TOO LATE. CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND HUNGARY HAVE GOTTEN RID OF THEIR COMMUNISTS, THEY SAY; POLAND IS NOW BEHIND, AND THAT IS WHY THE COMMON MARKET DOES NOT WANT US, WHY WESTERN BUSINESS WON'T INVEST HERE, WHY WESTERN GOVERNMENTS WON'T REDUCE OUR DEBT. UNLESS WE HURRY, THE DEATH OF COMMUNISM IN POLAND WILL BE YESTERDAY'S NEWS. WITHOUT WESTERN HELP WE ARE CONDEMNED TO SECOND-RATE SEEDINESS; THE POLES WILL RELAPSE INTO PASSIVITY; THE FRUITS OF SOLIDARITY'S VICTORY--1989 AND THE HOPE OF DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT IT BROUGHT WITH IT--WILL ROT AWAY; THEY CAN ONLY RIPEN IF SOLIDARITY ITSELF IS DESTROYED.

SUCH ARE THE GARISH COLORS IN WHICH MANY POLES ARE LIKELY TO PAINT THE ISSUES IN THIS CAMPAIGN. AND WESTERN REPORTERS ARE LIKELY TO REPRODUCE THOSE COLORS, MAGNIFIED AND FORESHORTENED FOR US. AFTER ALL, THAT IS WHAT WESTERN POLITICAL REPORTING TRAINS THEM TO DO. OBVIOUSLY SOME FORTY MILLION POLES AND SOME DOZENS OF CAPABLE WESTERN MEDIA REPS CANNOT BE ALL WRONG. DEMOCRACY AS WE UNDERSTAND IT IS NEW AND FRAGILE HERE; PASSIVITY--RUNNING FROM SKEPTICISM TO HOSTILITY, BUT STILL PASSIVITY--IS A NATURAL POLITICAL OPTION; UNSIGHTLY AND POTENTIALLY UNDEMOCRATIC ATAVISMS DO NOT RUN DEEP IN POLISH POLITICAL CULTURE; THEY CAN BE BROUGHT TO THE SURFACE BY A HEATED CAMPAIGN FOR VOTES IN A COUNTRY UNDERGOING THE RIGORS OF POST-COMMUNIST EUROPE'S MOST RADICAL ECONOMIC REFORM PROGRAM.

AND YET WESTERN GOVERNMENTS SHOULD BE VERY CAREFUL ABOUT TAKING THE POLES AT THEIR DARKEST WORD. AS THEY STEP BACK INTO THE DEMOCRATIC TIDE, THEY ARE NATURALLY AFRAID OF BEING SWEEPED AWAY. WE CAN AFFORD TO STAND ON THE BANK AND JUDGE WHAT IS HAPPENING HERE FROM A WIDER PERSPECTIVE. AND IN THAT PERSPECTIVE, THIS CAMPAIGN WILL PUT POLAND ONCE AGAIN IN THE FOREFRONT OF DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE AREA BETWEEN GERMANY AND RUSSIA.

THAT IS BECAUSE THE CAMPAIGN CAN BE SEEN AS THE AREA'S FIRST GREAT TEST RUN OF POST-COMMUNIST MASS DEMOCRATIC POLITICS. IN THE SOVIET UNION AND IN SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE, POLITICS ARE STILL "ABOUT" HOW TO WORK OUT A MODUS VIVENDI BETWEEN REFORM COMMUNISTS AND NON-COMMUNISTS THAT WILL MAKE

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POSSIBLE A PEACEFUL TRANSITION TO MORE DEMOCRATIC POLITICS AND MORE MARKET-ORIENTED ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT, I.E., THEY ARE WHERE POLAND WAS ABOUT TWO YEARS AGO.

BY CONTRAST, CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND HUNGARY ARE, LIKE POLAND, AT THE THRESHOLD OF THE POST-COMMUNIST WORLD. IN THESE THREE COUNTRIES, THE COMMUNISTS ARE IRREVERSIBLY OUT, OR ON THEIR WAY OUT. IN ALL THREE, AS IN THE UPCOMING POLISH PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN, THE SPEED OF THEIR DEPARTURE CAN STILL BE A POLITICAL ISSUE, BUT IT SHOULD BE RECOGNIZED FOR THE NOSTALGIA ISSUE IT IS. NOSTALGIA CAN BE POWERFUL POLITICAL FEEDSTOCK IN ALL THREE OF THE FLEDGLING DEMOCRACIES. BUT IN ALL THREE, IT CAN ALSO BE TRANSCENDED. THE COMMUNISTS ARE NOW SO WEAK THAT THESE POLITICAL SYSTEMS CAN NOW AFFORD TO GRAPPLE WITH THE FUTURE--THE ACTUAL PROBLEMS OF THE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY AND THE MARKET--RATHER THAN JUST THE POWERFUL BUT ESSENTIALLY SYMBOLIC ISSUES OF A BURDENSOME PAST.

IT IS HERE THAT POLAND STANDS OUT. WHOEVER WINS IN THIS PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN, POLAND WILL CROSS THE THRESHOLD INTO THE WORLD OF POST-COMMUNIST DEMOCRATIC MASS POLITICS IN A WAY THAT HER BROTHERS-IN-ARMS TO THE SOUTH ARE NOT YET PREPARED TO DO. THE NEW GOVERNMENTS IN BUDAPEST AND PRAGUE ARE STILL BUILDING POLITICAL SUPPORT FOR ECONOMIC REFORM BY CONCENTRATING ON POLITICAL DEMOCRATIZATION AND FREEDOM FROM EAST-BLOC INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS. THAT WAS WHERE POLAND WAS A YEAR AGO. NOW THE POLES FEEL BACKWARD. IN THIS PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN, THEY WANT TO GO BEYOND THE COMPROMISE OF 1989 TO CATCH UP WITH CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND HUNGARY. BUT IT REMAINS TRUE THAT THAT NOW-OBSOLETE COMPROMISE GAVE THE MAZOWIECKI GOVERNMENT THE CONFIDENCE AND POLITICAL SUPPORT TO PUT IN PLACE THIS YEAR THE KIND OF RADICAL ECONOMIC PROGRAM THAT PRAGUE AND BUDAPEST ARE STILL EDGING TOWARD, AND TO SUSTAIN IT THROUGH NINE TOUGH MONTHS. IT HAS ACHIEVED SUBSTANTIAL STABILIZATION, AND THE STAGE IS SET FOR DETERMINED MOVEMENT TOWARD PRIVATIZATION.

NOW, AS MOST POLISH AND WESTERN OBSERVERS HAVE LONG EXPECTED, THE RIGORS OF THE PROGRAM ARE STARTING TO EAT SERIOUSLY INTO THE POLITICAL SUPPORT REQUIRED TO SUSTAIN IT. SOMETIME THIS WINTER THOSE RIGORS ARE GOING TO BE EXACERBATED BY REDUCTIONS IN ENERGY SUPPLIES FROM BOTH IRAQ AND THE SOVIET UNION. THAT IS WHAT THIS PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN IS ABOUT. THE ISSUE IS NOT HOW TO CREATE SUPPORT FOR ECONOMIC REFORM, AS IT IS FURTHER SOUTH, BUT WHETHER POLITICAL SUPPORT FOR AN EXISTING RADICAL PROGRAM CAN BE CONSOLIDATED, RECREATED, THROUGH DEMOCRATIC POLITICS, TO SUSTAIN THE ECONOMIC REFORM IN ITS MOVE FROM AUSTERITY TO STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION.

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NO ONE--NOT THE POLES, NOT WE IN THE WEST--CAN ANSWER THAT QUESTION FOR THEM AT THIS POINT. THE ANSWER CAN TAKE A VARIETY OF FORMS, WHICH WILL PROBABLY EMERGE PIECEMEAL IN THE COURSE OF THE CAMPAIGN. THE POWERS OF THE PRESIDENCY, THE SHAPE OF "CHECKS-AND-BALANCES" AMONG A PRESIDENT ELECTED BY UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE, A PREMIER, AND A PARLIAMENT TO WHOM THE PREMIER IS RESPONSIBLE, THE SHAPE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM THAT WILL EMERGE: THESE WILL ALL BEAR ON THE BIG QUESTION. BUT IT IS THAT BIG QUESTION, RATHER THAN THE PIECEMEAL ANSWERS, THAT SHOULD MATTER TO US. IT IS THE QUESTION OF HOW TO SUSTAIN POLITICAL SUPPORT FOR RADICAL ECONOMIC REFORM IN POLAND. RIGHT NOW AMONG THE EMERGING DEMOCRACIES IN THIS PART OF THE WORLD, IT IS A QUESTION ONLY THE POLES ARE ASKING THEMSELVES.

THEY ARE ALSO ASKING IT THE RIGHT WAY, GIVEN OUR INTEREST IN DEMOCRATIZATION: THROUGH A FREE, OPEN, NATIONAL ELECTION. THEY DID NOT PLAN IT THIS WAY, NOR ARE THEY MERELY SEEKING TO APPEAL TO THE WEST, ALTHOUGH ALL SIDES WANT TO DO THAT TOO. RATHER, IT IS THEIR OWN POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DYNAMICS THAT ARE DRIVING THEM DOWN THE DEMOCRATIC PATH. THE COMPROMISE OF 1989 IS EXHAUSTED. THEY HAVE CARRIED IT AS FAR AS THEY CAN, AND NOW, AS THE RUBBER OF ECONOMIC REFORM HITS THE BUMPY ROAD OF POLITICS AGAIN, THEY ARE GOING TO MOVE FORWARD THE WAY WE DO: AN ELECTION CAMPAIGN THAT WILL BE TURBULENT, PERHAPS GAUDY, PERHAPS NEGATIVE AND NASTY, PERHAPS EVEN DECISIVE, BUT ABOVE ALL FREE. THE "RETURN TO EUROPE" IS CONSENSUS POLITICS HERE, AND ALL THE PARTIES AT PRIMATE GLEMP'S SEPTEMBER 18 "TEA TABLE" ARE TELLING EACH OTHER HOW IMPORTANT IT IS FOR POLAND'S WESTERN IMAGE THAT THE CAMPAIGN BE "CIVIL," "CIVILIZED." BUT THEY CAME TO THIS CAMPAIGN BECAUSE THAT IS THE WAY THEY ARE GOING. NO ONE CAN PREDICT HOW CLEAN IT WILL BE, OR WHAT ISSUES IT WILL SPARK ON, OR WHAT THE OUTCOME WILL BE. THAT IS THE WAY DEMOCRACY IS, ESPECIALLY IN A NEW DEMOCRACY. BUT IT IS DEMOCRACY. WE SHOULD NOW REJOICE THAT IT HAS RETURNED TO THIS CENTER OF EUROPE.

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