

## **Democratic Movement and Emergence of Multi-Party System in Republic of Poland after the Collapse of Communism**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article provides a detailed historical insight to the evolution and development of multi-party system in the Republic of Poland. Political development, in this country, went through two distinct phases of political transformation, one during the communist regime and other during the post-communist regime. Considering the significance of comprehensive discussion, this article is divided into two sections. The first section discusses the political scenario during the communist era and its socio-political impact on the evolution of revolutionary movements in Republic of Poland. This section also includes a detailed note on revolutionary developments in the above mentioned country especially, the Solidarity Movement in Poland which can be considered to be the foundation steps for the emergence of multi-party system in this Country. Further this section includes a short study of the political transformation during 1980s. The political transformation during this period is considered to be a connecting bridge between the authoritarian regime and the new opposition which resulted in the formation of democratic governments in the above countries. The second section deals with the development of multi-party system in the post-communist regime. It throws light on the development of diverse political parties which emerged after the collapse of communist regime.

**Key Words :** Democratic movement, Transition, Multi-party system, Political parties

Poland can be characterized as emerging democracy where multi-party system has emerged after the collapse of communism in 1989. Since Poland is located in Central Europe, it holds some common experiences of the end of communism. Communism was marked by a combination of elite concessions, oppositionist pressures and broad public support for change. People of Central Europe and the former Soviet Union demanded right to freedom of speech, democratic assembly, private property and free market. Since the state was not ready to concede these demands, there was widespread opposition against the state policies in the entire region<sup>1</sup>.

With the fall of socialism a broad front of anti-communist opposition evolved, which included all variants of anti-communist political opinion. The Solidarity movement in Poland, Civic Forum in the Czech Republic were some such broad anti-communist fronts. These fronts began as mass protest movements that provided a focus for mobilisation of broad based and spontaneous popular pressure

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against communist power. Nevertheless, taken together these forums and civil movements led to the collapse of communism and evolution of multi-party system in Central Europe. These fronts themselves soon fragmented due to their inner contradictions paving the way for the rise of a great plurality of political parties. Thus more distinctive political groupings began to emerge at later stage. From another perspective the onset of multi-party politics began from 1985-86 with entry into parliamentary politics of a number of independent rather than regime-endorsed deputies.<sup>2</sup>

### **Democratic Movements in Republic Poland in Communist Period :**

Post-World War II period witnessed the establishment of Marxist-Leninist regimes over those areas of Central and Eastern Europe, which had been designated by the allied power as a part of Soviet sphere of influence. As a result, communist governments were established in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania. Though, the democratic movements in these countries did not occur in a systematic process, it happened through the process of several reformist movements till disintegration of Soviet Union. People were dissatisfied with the existing communist governments, and therefore revolts and protests against the rule, broke out in several countries. However, after the death of Stalin in 1953 and Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956<sup>3</sup>, the dissatisfaction among the masses in these countries gained stimulus and ideas of reform began to gain ground.<sup>4</sup>

Instances of mass political protests occurring during this period include the Berlin uprising of June 1953,<sup>5</sup> a small scale worker's revolt in Pilsen, Czechoslovakia in June 1953; worker's strikes in Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria; the Poznan uprising of June 1956 in Poland<sup>6</sup>; and the dramatic revolution in Hungary in Oct-Nov 1956. Apart from these, such political events as the political crisis and the student's revolt in Poland in March 1968; the Czechoslovak reform movement the same year; and two waves of workers unrest in Poland 1970 and 1976 might also be included in the first historical cluster.<sup>7</sup>

These emerging protests and movements challenged Stalin's supremacy in the region. Besides, Yugoslavia emphasized a "different road to socialism" based on the local conditions, which eventually made their communism appear different from the Soviet type. Several changes took place regarding the reformist movements, such as decentralization of decision making to local government in 1949, which was closely followed by devolution of certain powers to economic enterprises and emergence of the first self managing councils. Yugoslavia thus set the tone for the future reforms in Central and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, the end of the Stalin era brought decompression and new departures both in the USSR as well as in Eastern Europe<sup>8</sup>.

It could also be noted, that reformism in Central and Eastern Europe was closely related to its sub-regional diversities. Thus, in Central Europe the reformist ideas propagated were distinct from the rest of the countries in the communist bloc. Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, which belong to this reformist category, always displayed their distinctiveness. Further, it was this peculiar strength of Central European reformism, based as it was on wider social support, which created condition for almost violence free and smooth transition from socialism to liberal democracy. In the following sections the issue of political development in Poland is systematically analysed.

### **The Republic of Poland :**

The evolution of political parties in Poland can be traced from the Solidarity movement. Solidarity was not a political organisation; it evolved as a trade union. Subsequently, it became a social movement as many of its members considered themselves as social activists<sup>9</sup>. Poland was also different from other communist regimes as it experienced extensive cooperation of the intelligentsia and workers after 1976 when Committee in Defence of Workers (KOR) was formed. This circumstance provided a strong base for the opposition with large counter-elite who in the sunset years of communism assumed power and lead the country's transition from communism.<sup>10</sup>

There had been three earlier revolutions in 1956, 1970-71 and 1976 in Poland. They were not successful, as it was driven by self interest of the factions of Solidarity movement. It did not acquire popular support by the masses; therefore easily suppressed by the state. In 1980s, once again there was workers upsurge in Poland. This movement, unlike the earlier struggles was more tightly organised, enjoyed widespread support (10 million workers from the nationalised sector of industry, six lakh peasants in rural Solidarity and a third of the communist party members), and had a greater political clarity.<sup>11</sup> After the Second World War, the newly re-formed communist party and the Polish Socialist Party were merged with the support of a sizeable section of the working class<sup>12</sup>.

There was political instability in Poland. People were frustrated with the existing political system, which led to state disruption. The active rebellious intellectuals were those, who associated with *Prostu* magazine and *Kersey Kolo* discussion clubs. During 1956, a number of pro-reformist working class centres of debate were also formed in several major cities. One significant consequence of the widespread popular agitation and discontent which resulted in the public protests by workers in Poznon was the replacement of the party first secretary Edward Ochab by the native Communist Gomulka<sup>13</sup> in October 1956.<sup>14</sup>

Gomulka represented an anti-Stalinist “national focused” brand of communism. He gained the support of many critical students and non party intellectuals, who believed that they could provide support to the growing liberalization movement. Uneconomic collective farms were largely dissolved, which led to re-privatization of the bulk of agriculture. Religious freedoms were restored through a guarded reconciliation with the Catholic Church. However, the significant democratizing gains of the “Polish October”<sup>15</sup> gradually eroded. The worker’s councils were rendered powerless and no significant economic improvements took place. But in respect of voting rights, it had been regularly extended as all candidates remained communist party nominees.<sup>16</sup>

The worker-intellectual groups gave rise to the origin of independent free trade union Solidarity on 31 August 1980. It followed a wave of strikes and protests on economic situations. The union raised such political demands which were unacceptable to the communist regime. Therefore, as protest resumed, martial law was enforced in the country to prohibit those demands and political organizations. In order to escape from the escalating political instability in Poland, the government agreed to negotiate with the opposition. As a result, Roundtable negotiations between communist officials and Solidarity representatives began in February 1989 and ended in April 1989 with signing of several successful agreements on political and economic reforms.<sup>17</sup> The main resolutions of the negotiations were the establishment of second chamber of Parliament *i.e.*, the Senate; parity elections to the Sejm, the establishment of the office of the President chosen by both the houses of Parliament for the term of six years.<sup>18</sup>

### **Political Transition in Republic of Poland :**

The political system in Poland gradually changed from communist regime to parliamentary democracy. This transition process is marked by several development processes in Poland.

### **Concept of Transition:**

The interval between an authoritarian political regime and a democratic one is commonly referred to as the transition period. This transition process runs from the point, at which the previous authoritarian system begins to be dismantled. There are various types of transition pathways, which can be identified cross nationally, for ultimately each national case has its peculiarities, although comparative approaches seek to relate the national-specifics to the general.<sup>19</sup>

The emphasis on different negotiation patterns also contributes to a better understanding of the transition process. It allows one to distinguish between different stages in the transition process without having to rely solely on particular events such as founding elections. In this context, different

stages in the transition process are defined by different modes of conflict resolution. Here, the successful transition process towards the democratic political rule involves three stages:<sup>20</sup>

- Liberalization of the authoritarian regime is accompanied by decline in the use of command and imposition as the prevailing modes of conflict resolution.
- As the transition proceeds to extrication from the old regime and institutionalization of a new political system, bargaining and compromise emerge as the key features in decision making, and
- Consolidation of the transition is distinguished by the increasing dominance of competition and cooperation as the prevailing means of conflict resolution.

Democratic transition theory has been dominant in two schools of thought known as the *functionalist and the genetic or macro and micro-oriented* transitional theories. Former focuses on structural or environmental-notably, economic and social-determinants of political system change; and it views regime changes as pre-conditioned by particular conditions like economic development or cultural patterns or simply modernization. On the other hand, the genetic school gives priority to conjunctural and volition variables and especially political determinants of regime change, and therefore emphasized the importance of political choice and strategy by actors during the transition process.<sup>21</sup> However, these schools failed to provide clear demarcation on the political transition in Poland. The main determinants of the transition process are discussed below in the following section.

#### **Transition Process in Republic of Poland :**

The transition process in these countries is characterized by several features which are as follows:<sup>22</sup>

- Transition in Political System:
- Reform of electoral system



**Fig. 1 : Local Polish Rally for Solidarity December, 1981**

(Source: [http://csudigitalhumanities.org/exhibits/files/original/rally-for-solidairty014\\_6cad1f5fe5.jpg](http://csudigitalhumanities.org/exhibits/files/original/rally-for-solidairty014_6cad1f5fe5.jpg))

- Reform of structure of government (including issues of decentralization)
- Selection of new political elite
- Development of institutions of interest articulation and interest aggregation (e.g., political parties, interest groups)
  - Constitution making
  - Prosecution and purge of communist party officials and members of security apparatus
  - Restitution of past injustices
  - Return of media sector
- Transition in Economy :
  - Macroeconomic stabilization (e.g. reform of monetary and fiscal policies)
  - Price reform (e.g., price liberalization, currency convertibility)
  - Structural reform (e.g., privatization, trade liberalization)
  - Institutional reform (e.g. reform of legal and banking system)
  - Educational reform (e.g. management training)
- Political communication among emerging political actors.
- An important characteristic of the transition is that it is elite-centred. Independent of whether regime change has been initiated from above by political elites or from below by the masses, the terms of transitions are settled by emerging elites, not by the public. In Central and Eastern Europe, with its long history of intellectual dissidents and politicians, the gap between the political elites and the masses reinforced disillusionment and distance between the rulers and ruled.

Bargaining, negotiations aimed at reaching compromises with greatest advantage to each participating party. It can take a variety of forms (including ad-hoc meetings) but more often took place in an institutionalized setting in Central and Eastern Europe. The stage of “bargaining and compromise” was characterized by roundtable negotiations in Poland.<sup>23</sup>

In Round Table negotiation, the representatives of the old communist political system discussed the terms of transition with representatives of opposition. In some countries, members of political and social organisations who were closely aligned with the ruling Communist Party participated in the negotiations. In Poland, the churches played the role of mediator in the round table negotiation.<sup>24</sup>

In the cases of Poland, immediate and drastic economic reforms became an urgent necessity. However, the opposition had always been elitist, thus isolated from the masses and not initiated in the process of democratization.<sup>25</sup> The mandate of the round table representatives was self-imposed and exclusive. Since, it was not based on elections; its legitimacy was indeterminate.<sup>26</sup>

The talks had been conducted between the communist government, on one side, and its, recent, political prisoners, dissident intellectuals and members of newly emerged political parties, on the other side. It established a ground for easy dismantling of the political system and beginning of democratization process in Poland.<sup>27</sup> The main goal of the round tables was to set the terms for the creation of a reformed or a new political system.<sup>28</sup>

One principal feature of round table negotiations involved power-sharing, attempts to resolve the inherent division and their aim was to make compromises, which was to be acceptable to both sides. This extended political participation for the previously excluded opposition groups and permitted outgoing administration to “save face”.<sup>29</sup> The communist were no longer able to govern without the active participation and support of oppositional forces. As a result, power-sharing emerged among the political parties.

After the transition process, a democratic system evolved in Poland. In this country, political parties developed in the form of umbrella organizations, conglomerate parties, or movement parties. These terms were used to describe political organizations which combined a variety of different political groups and political parties in a loose movement without a structured programme or institutionalized structure. The intense desire for political participation resulted in an exceptional

proliferation of political parties and movements.<sup>30</sup>

### **Evolution of Multi-Party System in Poland, in the Post-Communist Era :**

The communist system collapsed in 1989 followed by the disintegration of USSR into several democratic countries in the Central European Region. This was followed by countries adopting democratic constitutions which in turn formed the basis of creating democratic institutions of governance such as; the presidency, parliament and assemblies, independent judiciary, regular elections, codification of individual and group rights and liberties. This provided a conducive atmosphere for the political parties to develop and participate in the political process.<sup>31</sup> A number of political parties have developed in Poland which is discussed in detail.

Poland was the first Central European state to end communist rule in 1989. However, the process of party development in post-communist Poland has been complex and unstable for long period<sup>32</sup>. After the spring 1989, Roundtable Talks between the Solidarity opposition and the communist authorities, the partially free elections to the Sejm were held in May-June 1989. Due to this, a competitive party system emerges. In that election, Solidarity-backed candidates won all 161, openly contested seats for the Sejm *i.e.*, the lower house of Parliament, and 99 of the 100 seats in the Senate, *i.e.* the upper house. A new government formed, in August 1989, led by Solidarity advisor Tadeusz Mazowiecki.<sup>33</sup> The historical context of party formation in post-1989 Poland can be divided into six broad, historical phases:

- During the first phase of Polish party development several political parties which were functioning in the communist period were legalized. In this period politics and the process of party formation were dominated by developments within the Solidarity movement and its subsequent decomposition.<sup>34</sup>
- In the run-up to the first fully competitive parliamentary elections of October 1991 the process of party formation accelerated and the number of parties flourished during this second phase of party development,<sup>35</sup>
- The third phase of party development was the period between 1991 election to 1993 parliamentary election. It was characterized by splits, disintegration and re-merge of political parties, which originated from the Solidarity camp. The large number of newly emerged parties created unstable coalition government at the Polish political scene.<sup>36</sup>
- The fourth phase of party development ran from the September 1993 parliamentary election through the November 1995 presidential election. The new SLD-PSL coalition government, which emerged under PSL leader Waldemar Pawlak, was the first since 1989 to enjoy a stable majority in the legislature.<sup>37</sup>
- The fifth phase of party development, from November 1995 presidential election until the September 1997 parliamentary election, opened with the SLD-PSL coalition government immediately involved in crisis.<sup>38</sup>
- In the sixth phase of party development, from September 1997 to the October 1998 local elections, it was characterized by the consolidation of the party system around four of these six groupings- AWS, SdRP/SLD, PSL, and UW-with ROP and UP which slowly declined in the Polish party system.<sup>39</sup>

Poland was the first European country of the region to establish non-communist government based on the Warsaw Pact and the historic round table agreement held in April 1989 between the communist government and the opposition movement led by Solidarity.<sup>40</sup> After dismantling the communist regime in 1989, Poland's political development faced multiple challenges in establishing democratic government. Parliamentary elections were held in October 1991 and the parties which contested in the election were found to be weak, fragmented and ill equipped to sustain effective government<sup>41</sup>. It led to the expression that a 'deep and dangerous political crisis' had in Poland and

its transitional institutions seemed to lag behind the developments elsewhere in Central and Eastern European region.<sup>42</sup>

However, as explained in the above sections, the political development of Poland was the result of several factors. Poland was the first of the East European countries to break with the communist power monopoly which created plentiful of complex issues. It was also the first to implement a radical programme of economic reform and take a range of measures to establish a market economy. This certainly imposed considerable costs on the population.<sup>43</sup> It fostered sentiments of resentment both to the realm of politics in general and to liberal (*i.e.* free-market inclined) politicians in particular.

A significant factor contributing to the uncertainty of Polish political scene and fragmentation of the 1991-93 parliaments was the application of an electoral system of proportional representation without any threshold being imposed to discourage the representation of large numbers of small political groupings.<sup>44</sup> In fact, the knowledge of the Polish history alerts one to particularly the fragmentation of the post-World War I parliament and abundance of parties that provided the context for Pilsudski's coup *d'état* in 1926.<sup>45</sup> There were widespread feelings that the problems of establishing organised political discipline and developing a viable multi-party system, derived in some way from Polish cultural traditions, and that might also be expected in the context of post-communist transition.<sup>46</sup>

The Polish Solidarity camp developed soon after the victory of 1989, while the gradual process of consolidation took place on after wards, marginalized left. The presidential campaign and an intensifying war at the top within the Solidarity leadership were major factors that contributed to the polarization of the movement as parties began to form.<sup>47</sup> In August 1990, a law on political parties came into force as the struggle for the presidency deepened. A centre accord was founded in May 1990 to promote Walesa's campaign for the presidency, the association being transformed into a political party in March 1991. An equivalent party was set up by Mazowiecki supporters in December 1990 as the Democratic Union. The old communist party dissolved itself in January 1990 and established a new Social Democracy of the Police Republic.<sup>48</sup>

In Poland, political parties which established on the background of the former regime had absolute advantages and maintained a significant political presence, whereas the fate of most other parties across the centre and right-wing was more mixed. These political parties such as, The Democratic Union which was renamed as the Freedom Union following a merger with the congress of the Liberal Democrats in 1994, survived more successfully than most other parties. Its performance in the 1997 elections was found to be better than other parties.<sup>49</sup> More right-wing, populist parties generally did less well in the 1990s although the Confederation for Independent Poland, founded by dissident activist Leszek Moczulski during 1979, won some parliamentary seats both in the first fully competitive elections of 1991 and those held in 1993 elections.<sup>50</sup>

The newly formed parties did not help the initial emergence of stable party system. More than hundred parties existed in early 1991 and around seventy-five had been formally registered.<sup>51</sup> Until the enactment of new legislation, a party only needed fifteen members to qualify for registration. This minimal requirement led to the party proliferation. Though, the number of officially recorded parties did not necessarily present an accurate reflection of the number of effective organisations in existence. By 1997, when new legislation was passed, as many as 370 parties were said to exist but in early 1998 only forty had been registered under the new regulations. The others were deregistered and disappeared from the scene altogether. However, the field was still open for the formation of new organisations. Solidarity was nevertheless, revived as an organised electoral force only in June 1996 and it proceeded to win the elections held in September the following year.<sup>52</sup>

#### **Ideological Division of Political Parties in Poland :**

The Polish political scene is characterized by a large number of parties and groupings with various political affiliations. In September 1992 there were 150 registered political parties rising to 174

by January 1993. There were also a number of unregistered political groups.<sup>53</sup> In Poland, several political parties have formed on the basis of varied ideological and social orientations. Few of them come under Socialists and Social Democrats political parties, while others are liberal and leftist political parties.

– **Socialists and Social Democrats** : Political Parties such as Democratic Left Alliance (DLA), Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (SDRP), Union of Labour (UL), National Party of Senior Citizens and Pensioners (NPSCP) and All-Polish Accord of Trade Unions were formed on the principle of democratic socialism and state control.<sup>54</sup>

– **Liberals** : Political Parties such as Freedom Union (FU) and Liberal Conservative Movements of the One Hundred (LCMOH) are liberal parties existing in Poland. Liberal parties are dominated by urban intellectuals and the most educated section of society. They tend to focus on the role of states in the economic reform process. They oppose authoritarianism, nationalism and state authority in their policies.<sup>55</sup>

– **Christian Democrats** : Political Parties such as Solidarity Electoral Action (SEA), Christian National Union (CNU), and Conservative Peasant Party (CPP), Non-Party Bloc for the Support of Reforms (NBSR), Centre Democratic Accord (CDA) and Union of Real Politics (URP) are based on the principle of Christianity and associated with the Catholic teachings.<sup>56</sup>

– **Agrarians** : Polish Peasant Party (PPP) was one of the largest political parties in Poland working successfully in its rural constituencies. Mikotajczyk-Polish Peasant Party (M-PPP) and Peasant Alliance (PA) are other large agrarian political parties. Agrarian parties are more successful in the region with an extensive farming sector, a tradition of rural politics and government policies which have negatively affected the rural people. They have diverse ideological and programmatic profiles in seeking favourable governmental policies towards farmers.<sup>57</sup>

– **Greens** : Polish Green Party (PGP) is an environmental based political party. There were three main representatives of the Polish ecological movement *i.e.* Polish Green Party (PGP), the Polish Ecological Party of Greens (PEPG) and the All-Poland Union of Greens (APUG). Its priorities were the protection of the natural environment and changing ecological attitudes in society. However, due to single-issue focus, it remained marginal political parties in the region.<sup>58</sup>

– **Nationalists** : Confederation for Independent Poland (CIP/KPN) challenged the communist ruling and called for an independent Poland. Movement for the Republic (MfR/RDR), National Democratic Party (NDP/SND), and National Party (NP/SN), Movement for the Reconstruction of Poland (MRP/ROP) are some of the nationalist based political parties of Poland. These political parties placed more emphasis on ethnic identity, language, culture and religion for determining citizenship rights.<sup>59</sup>

### Conclusion :

This article discussed the evolution and growth of multi-party system in the Republic of Poland. In doing so, this article not only highlighted the historical evolution of party system in this Country but also elaborated the political reformation processes which took place during the communist and post communist period. The establishment of democratic institutions in Republic of Poland is result of broad mass movements which led to the end of communism in this country. The peaceful revolution of 1989 was based on the resistance legacy of the Country as reflected in the Solidarity movement in Poland. They have continued the process of transformation from eastern bloc communism to independent, democratic and free-market-oriented states integrated into Europe. Internally, successive governments have been consolidating market economic reforms and democratic institutions. Externally, Central European countries are seeking to integrate with Western Europe and achieve membership in the European Union (EU) and NATO.<sup>60</sup>

However, the process of emergence of multi-party system has been same in Hungary, Poland and Czech Republic; while its consequences are different. Political stability varied among these



countries. Social movements like Solidarity movement of Poland and Civic Forum of Czech Republic were initially seen as a substitute for parties; not just a force that was significant in bringing about the end of communism. In this context, it is hardly surprising that the emergence of political parties has not always been welcomed, the political activities surrounding their growth sometimes unstable and parties' performance inconsistent. Nevertheless, the emergence of political parties in Poland is fragile and fragmented and less stable party system during 1989-2007. The political process in this newly democracy is strengthening in present times with increasing participation and representation of its people.

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56. Ibid., pp. 179-187
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58. Ibid., p. 49
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60. Julie Kim (1996), "Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary: Recent Developments", CRS Issue Brief, [Online web] Accessed 23 September 2010, URL: <http://www.fas.org/man/crs/92-051.htm>

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