

THE NATURE OF DEMOCRATIZATION UNDER THE POLISH  
COMMUNIST REGIME  
1956 - 1961.

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F O R E W O R D

Poland attracted the attention of the whole world in 1956 by its bold and successful stand against Soviet pressure and its determination to follow a "Polish road to socialism". At that time the new leadership of the Polish United Workers' Party (Communist Party) under Wladyslaw Gomulka, promised a far-reaching democratization of Polish political life. This process was to affect all spheres and levels of Polish society, but Gomulka himself attached special importance to restoring the Sejm (Parliament) to its constitutional position as the supreme legislative organ, establishing workers' self-government in industry, and democratizing the Party and encouraging extra-Party political initiative. This thesis is an attempt to investigate the execution of this programme and to evaluate the results it achieved.

Since I can not read Polish, I have relied mainly on books and articles published in English in both Poland and the West. I am, however, indebted to Adam Straszynski, who translated some material for me from Polish.

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## A B S T R A C T

of the thesis

"The Nature of Democratization under  
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Democratization, which is the process of deliberately engaging the people in public affairs and increasing their participation in government, encounters a particularly difficult problem in Communist societies. This problem arises from the oligarchical position of the Communist Party, which dominates all mass organizations, controls all spheres of economic, social, and political life, and discourages the growth of liberty and political pluralism. During the post-war period, and particularly between 1949 and 1954, Poland has been governed by such a Party, which derived its authority from Moscow.

After the death of Stalin, the totalitarian grip of the Party was relaxed and compulsion, oppression, censorship, and control were gradually superseded by freedom, toleration, and spontaneity. In this relaxed atmosphere, the Party was unable to maintain its dominant position and it increasingly lost influence to previously suppressed or newly established groups and institutions, especially the Church, the Catholic press, the intellectuals' clubs and other reviving political parties. A movement for fundamental social and political reforms and extensive democratization, which originated amongst a small group of intellectuals and quickly spread amongst the people, eventually won the sympathy of a majority in the Party itself. Early in 1956, the demands for reform became increasingly associated with the rehabilitation of Wladyslaw Gomulka, the deposed Communist leader, who came to be regarded as the only acceptable alternative to the current regime. In October, 1956, a bloodless coup d'etat, effected despite the threat of Soviet intervention, returned Gomulka to power and brought the developing crisis to a head.

On assuming power, Gomulka criticized the failures and abuses of the previous regime and promised to effect a number of basic reforms in the structure and methods of government. He drew attention to three areas in particular. He

thought that the Sejm should be restored to its constitutional position as the supreme organ of state power. The system of industrial government should be decentralized, the workers having some participation in management through workers' councils. The Party itself should return to the practice of democratic centralism and avoid interfering with the work of the government departments. The object of these reforms was to reduce bureaucracy, and make the system of government more democratic and more acceptable to the people. Gomulka emphasized, however, that the Party must direct the process and warned that democratization would not be allowed to weaken the Communist regime.

Even before the change of government in 1956, the Sejm had begun to function more like a genuine parliament. After 1956, legislation was almost exclusively by Sejm laws, although the Party was the effective legislator, its directives forming the basis of most bills. There was little genuine debate on legislation, the general policy of the Party and the principle actions of the government being rarely questioned. The Sejm, however, does exercise some control over the more detailed and procedural aspects of administration through the Supreme Chamber of Control and the committees. The committees, which initiate most legislation, are the most active organs of the Sejm and the only scene of genuine discussion. Besides the P.U.W.P., two other parties, the United Peasant Party and the Democratic Party, are represented in the Sejm, but they have no status of their own. There is also a small Catholic representation, notably the Znak group, whose members are most interesting and the most vital in the Sejm.

Workers' self-government began to function in Poland in 1956 through the workers' councils, which first appeared during the mid-summer of that year. In November, 1956, the councils were legally established by an Act of the Sejm. The main significance of the Act was that it gave the workers the opportunity to discuss the problems of the enterprise and gave them a say in management. But by legislation of December, 1958, the councils were integrated with the Party and the Trade Unions to form a Conference of Workers' Self-government. This law reduced to competence of the workers' councils and, as Party control tightened, the workers gradually lost interest in them. In addition to the workers' councils there was also some experiment with lay courts in factories for the trial of petty crime.

After the revolution the Party attempted to forge closer ties with the masses by interesting the people in its activities. At the same time, the leadership insisted on ideological conformity, disciplined organization, and monolithic unity within the Party. The two aims, however, proved incompatible. As the Party regained its strength and re-asserted its authority, it lost the support of non-communist organizations and the sympathy of the people. Within the Party, Gomulka's programme was criticized by the Stalinist and revisionist factions, both of which Gomulka sought to eliminate. But to Stalinists were so firmly entrenched in the Party apparatus that it proved almost impossible to remove them, except from the hierarchy itself. Furthermore, in his efforts to defeat the Stalinists, Gomulka, for fear of antagonising the Soviet Union and jeopardizing his own position, was forced to deal severely with the revisionists. In consequence, he was obliged, despite himself, to rely increasingly on the Stalinists and to forego his promises of democratization. Thus, although the Party apparatus, which previously exercised absolute control over all levels of the administration, was drastically reduced, the internal democratization of the Party organizations remained strictly on paper.

After the 1956 revolution, Communism in Poland assumed a remarkably liberal and tolerant attitude and many pluralistic and democratic features appeared in Polish society. During the succeeding years, however, the pressure was gradually resumed by the infiltration of non-Party organizations with renewed insistence on Party control, imposition of censorship, and harassment of the intellectuals and the clergy. Five years after the revolution, although all the gains had not been lost, most of the achievements of that unique event had been nullified and much of its promise unfulfilled.

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## CHAPTER I

### The Problem of Democratization in a Communist Society

Democracy is an ideal and an aspiration. It is a collection of beliefs regarding the ends and the means of political organization based on the assumption that all men are equal and on the conviction that government exists for the benefit of free individuals and that, therefore, self-government is the best government. It is a product of the Age of Reason and the current faith in the rationality and nobility of man, drawing its deeper inspirations from Christianity and the city states of Ancient Greece. Political democracy has fallen far short of the ideal, yet self-government has been and remains one of the most powerful aspirations of mankind in modern times. The history of the last few decades has shown conclusively that men prefer to mismanage their own affairs than to have these affairs well managed for them.

But although the twentieth century has seen a great advance of democracy, and although hardly anyone to-day dares to reject the principle itself, there seems to be little agreement as to what democracy in practice really is. There are various "types" of democracy - parliamentary, presidential, soviet, popular, directed, guided - all presenting themselves as the genuine article. The use of the word democracy to describe most of these systems is only euphemistic and often deliberately misleading and propagandistic. But more important, the criteria on which they generally present themselves as democratic are of a merely formal character, for example, the provisions of the constitution, the electoral system, the number of political parties, etc. Almost all societies to-day pay lip service to the forms of democracy, but the extent to which they are democratic is a moot point. For example, the Soviet Constitution is one of the most democratic ever written, but few unattached observers would claim that Soviet government is democratic in its operation. Communist elections are "no more than a plebiscite by which a whole people puts itself in the power of a small gang".<sup>1</sup> Thus the forms and procedures of democracy persist, while democracy itself is destroyed.

Merely formal criteria are insufficient or even erroneous because democracy is not a system of government or an institution, but a way of life, a style of political behaviour. Of course, certain political arrangements

1 Bertrand de Jouvenal, On Power, p.275

i.e., institutions, are necessary in order that the style of democratic politics can be attained. Perhaps it is because the early democrats outlined these arrangements so clearly that the forms of democracy are often mistaken for democracy itself. Thus, when evaluating the democratic character of a system of government, the actual political practice is more important than the formal provisions because it is only in practice that the scope of genuine discussion, the extent to which government takes or has to take account of public opinion, the real nature of the relations between the people and their representatives and the authorities can be determined.

Although it may be safely assumed that the extent of democracy in communist societies is in practice small, the concrete situation seems to vary from country to country. Part of the problem is that the forms of democracy are there but the substance is, for the most part, lacking. Of course communist governments are not entirely insensitive to public opinion. They must keep in touch with it, if only to know what the people will stand. But for any government or power elite this is a matter of self-interest not necessarily involving any respect for the democratic principle. The process by which public opinion reaches the government in a communist country differs from the process of permeation and pressure from below that is familiar in the Western democracies. Instead, public opinion is organized in a rigid hierarchy beginning with the Party leadership and descending through the intermediate organs of the Party to the activists who work at the grass roots. Thus the process is organized from above in order to discover the trend of public opinion and manipulate it. The post-Stalin agitations and revolts in Eastern Europe indicate that this object was not completely achieved. The risings themselves were important because they brought about significant changes in the relations between government and people. Also as a result of these disturbances, some of the communist regimes attempted to bring a further measure of democracy into the process of government.

This immediately raises the question of the extent to which a communist system can be democratized and remain communist. Here the problem is that policy is made and power is wielded outside the actual governmental structure. The de facto government is by a single party which is not constitutionally responsible to the people. The Party imposes a strict ideological and political control and freedom of association and expression within and outside it are restricted. In addition there is a rigidly hierarchical structure in



all social and political organizations whether these be trade unions, consumers' co-operatives, or youth clubs. Within this undemocratic framework, the opportunities for democratization are few, short of eliminating the features that distinguish communist society. Thus the communist leaders who attempted to democratize their regimes in the middle 'fifties, were in effect, faced with this dilemma: if democratization was to amount to anything at all, it might lead to the collapse of communist institutions; yet, if communism and its institutions were to be preserved (and it was never intended otherwise) there could be very little democratization. This meant that there was only room for democratization in a narrow strip, where the demands of democracy and the practice of communism were compatible.

Although democracy is a very intangible thing, and its institutions are not uniform, its presence or absence may be recognized. There are many significant differences in the structure of government in Britain and the United States, both systems have their shortcomings, yet both are considered democratic. In fact democracy, being an ideal is always beyond complete realization. It is but a model of perfection, a guide to achieving the most in practice. But, given that perfect democracy is impossible, it is reasonable to expect the fulfillment of certain conditions if a political system is to be considered democratic. Democracy requires that the ruling social elites should be subject to the control of the people, and that there should be competitive elections to make possible a choice of governments and programmes. It also requires that there be continuous open and informed discussion of alternative policies and leaderships, and that the government in power be sensitive to the opinions expressed in this discussion.

Thus, the minimum requirement of democracy is that the government has the consent of public opinion and that the policies it implements are in accordance with the expressed will of the people. To give effect to this principle, public opinion must be organized and expressed in such a way as to have some influence and control over the governors. To increase the possibilities of this is the aim of democratization. It is the process of organizing the participation of the people in public affairs, engaging their interest, and opening avenues of expression.

When talking about democratization, it is helpful to bear three distinctions in mind. First, there is an important difference between democratization in a society which already has democratically functioning

institutions, and one which does not. Compare, for example, England at the turn of the nineteenth century and contemporary communist societies. Early nineteenth century England was governed by an oligarchy, but within that oligarchy the principles of parliamentary government and individual freedom were already well established. By contrast, the modern communist oligarchies are not only irresponsible, they are autocratic. This means that the machinery of democracy has not simply to be extended, but has to be introduced from the beginning. Second, one should distinguish between democratization within the government and administration, i.e., decentralization and devolution, and democratization at the roots, i.e., bringing more people into participation in government. As has been suggested, the structure of communist government is inimical to such participation. Finally, it is necessary to distinguish between political and social democratization. Political democratization means making the people sovereign and increasing the extent of free and equal citizenship. Social democratization, which is quite common to-day, merely means satisfying the more material demands of the people, for example, by an increased supply of consumer goods, by an increased availability of education, by increased participation in controlled cultural activities and mass organizations, i.e., by giving the appearance of social equality and equal participation, while leaving the essential problems of politics and power untouched.

These distinctions are at the very core of the problem of evaluating democratization in a communist society. Since the object is to make the government not only responsive, but responsible to public opinion, the principle question is whether the government will submit to popular control and not just make social and economic concessions in lieu of genuine democratization. The problem is further complicated by the attitude of the ruling elite, that is, the Communist Party itself, which is coloured by the conviction that it has been historically chosen for the task of leadership, and that the people, that is the working class, has to be educated to a "correct" outlook before it can assume the roles of self-government. Thus, in brief, the specific problem of democratization in a communist society is whether the communist governmental machinery can be adapted so that the majority of the citizens, acting freely, have an effective say in the decisions that have to be made, and control over those who actually make them; whether the people, as distinct from the ideologically weighted "working class" can play a significant role in communist society.

The term, public opinion, is generally employed to designate the people in their political role. The importance of public opinion in democracies has been recognized for a long time, but students of politics are now aware that it also plays a part in non-democratic regimes, even if it does not control the government. It is not easy to define public opinion or to determine when a public opinion exists. There are two general conditions. First, public opinion must be genuine, that is really public, which is not always the same as a majority opinion. Suppose, for example, that in a communist country a clear majority of the Party were in favour of a certain plan for the national economy, this opinion, even if arrived at by a free vote after open and thorough discussion, could not be a public opinion. This is because, even if its views were taken into account, the public at large did not participate in the discussion and the Party is not representative of the people, and any way in which it happens to be representative is quite random. But even the opinion of the majority of the whole population may not be a public opinion. If the minority feels so strongly about its position (for example, on the teaching of religion in schools) that it cannot simply agree to disagree with the majority, then there are two or more public opinions, not one. Thus although a genuine public opinion must be based on the majority view, the minority must be prepared to abide by the will of the majority, and the majority must respect the minority's position. Otherwise government is by coercion, not by consent.

It is not only necessary that public opinion should be really public, but that it should be a real opinion. An opinion involves a considered judgment, that is, a judgment made after dealing with facts, experience and other people's comments. This means that there are many matters, mainly technical, on which most people can have no opinion because they cannot assess the material. Thus there is always a small percentage of opinion that always matters more because it is better informed, more authoritative, or more influential. Again, it is only an attentive minority of the people who are informed, interested, and engaged in public affairs. Then intensity of opinion also matters. A small minority feeling passionately about something may be able to carry a majority with them, or at least persuade a sufficient number not to object to their considered opinions. This roughly is what happened in Eastern Europe in 1955-1956, when a small circle of intellectuals infected the whole society with their views and ideas.

The important thing in practice is that public opinion should be effective. An effective opinion may not include the whole population, as half of the people may be uninterested or ignorant of the issue. Then the opinion with which the government has to reckon, may be the careful, well-informed opinion of an interested few or of a dissenting section of the social elite. In communist countries, public opinion has, in most cases, only been able to make itself effective when such a division has occurred in the elite, that is, in the Party itself. Of course, effective opinion, especially in communist countries, need not be well informed and may judge unwisely, even when information is available. Furthermore, public opinion is not necessarily careful. It may be uncritical and unrestrained, swayed by emotion, rumour, and "mob sense". This presents a danger to democracy anywhere, especially where the institutions are weak or the elites are insecure.

Imperfect as it may be, the idea of public opinion is closely concerned with the idea of democracy. But if it is to be consonant with democracy, it must be able to form freely. This in turn depends on the extent to which there is freedom of speech, freedom of association, and freedom of the press, and is inversely proportionate to the scope and severity of censorship and the degree of ideological and political conformity expected by the ruling class. In the West, these elementary freedoms are considered important in themselves, but they are also of practical significance anywhere because public opinion is formed in numerous unorganized ways - in restaurants and pubs, in factory canteens and village market places, on long train journeys and at any number of casual social functions, indeed wherever there are people gathered together.

Amongst the forces actually shaping public opinion, are the various social institutions like clubs, professional associations, trade unions, learned societies, where there are people with similar problems, interests and attitudes. The more there are of such societies and the more lively they are, the more vigorous and influential public opinion will be. If they are allowed to remain ideologically and politically independent, they can help to stimulate valuable social attitudes and to develop the habit of interest and activity in public affairs. Democratization implies greater freedom for such independent societies, for political and social criticism and for publicly expressed opinions.

Until the advent of mass media, public opinion could only be organized locally or amongst a small educated and mobile upper-class. To-day however,

public opinion is mainly formed by the instruments of mass communication, notably the press, radio and television, and the cinema. As these are generally organized, they give to a few - in communist countries a few government or Party officials - an immense influence on the opinions of a whole people. Unfortunately, also, despite their capacity for encouraging thoughtful interest, they generally appeal to emotion and prejudice. If mass media were to perform a truly democratic function, they would provide the public with reliable information and varied comments on which to base its own political judgments. In this connection, much can be done by the press, not only in presenting the facts and the background to the news, but in informing people of their rights and presenting the various points of view in controversial matters. The press, however, is not read by all the citizens and, in communist countries, is subject to varying degrees of control.

Radio is an immense force in moulding public opinion, whether used by Moscow, the B.B.C. or an East European government. One talk may reach more people than a thousand pamphlets, and a few good broadcasts may swing the opinion of a whole nation. Yet, in communist countries, the liberty of the air is almost completely denied except to the officially favoured viewpoint.

As against mass media, which play such a large part in shaping immediate opinions, education is more important in the long term, because it determines people's outlook and their mode of thinking about problems. It determines how they approach political issues, how they react to news and events, how far they are critical or uncritical. Education helps people to evaluate facts and make sensible judgments. It is therefore important that education should develop a questioning attitude, that it should be varied, and free from doctrinal bias. This is most important when political thinking is done within a narrow ideological framework, but it is then least likely to be achieved.

If all the means of forming public opinion in a modern society, social and political organizations, mass media and education, are to be controlled by one authority, the government, then there can be no hope for democracy and no opportunity for democratization. Nothing that can be called public opinion can develop, if all information and comment can come from only one source. And there is absolutely no question of public opinion, inasmuch as it can be so called, having any effective control on the government because that opinion is just what the government in power chooses to make it.

Public opinion is a positive and determining force only if it is organized. If it is unorganized, it remains vague and dissipated and cannot hope to control the government. Often public opinion is organized in the same centres as it is formed, namely the various voluntary organizations. But the principal means of organizing political opinion is the political party. Political parties draw people together, concentrate opinions and sort out conflicting views. Their role is to clarify complex issues and present them more simply for the popular verdict. They also make possible a measure of intercourse between government and people. The people can keep track of central policy, and the government can keep in touch with public opinion, through the local branches.

But the greatest value of the party system is that it enables people directly and simply to choose a government. Then responsibility for political action is pinned down to a specific group of elected politicians. This principle, however, is not accepted in communist countries. Political parties are regarded by the communists as an expression of the class conflicts of bourgeois society. When society unites in a single common purpose, that is "building socialism", competition among political parties becomes irrelevant, and the Communist Party is left alone in the field. This, clearly, is a profoundly undemocratic attitude; it is no more than a crude rationalization of the narrow interests of the Communist Party. Further it is an attitude which permits the suppression of criticism and minority opinions beyond the point where it can be justified by any theory. The system as a whole rests on the assumption, not only that the people want more than anything to build socialism, but also that they support everything else that the Party stands for.

The Communist Party system poses enormous problems in bringing public opinion to bear democratically on government. Public opinion comes to bear on government either as an unorganized whole, or through the leadership of various organizations. A single party system heightens the importance of these non-political organs of public opinion, but it also inhibits them. This is especially true of a communist society where, although associations are allowed, they are not allowed to become effective.<sup>2</sup> In fact, all important

<sup>2</sup> Significantly, non-party organizations have flourished in communist countries only at times when the Party itself is weak and divided, or has lost the initiative. This was the case with the Intellectuals' discussion clubs in Poland, etc. in 1955-1956. They became the equivalent of "political assemblies in which important issues were debated and attitudes crystallized. From their sessions emerged ideas which gradually reached the populace". Z. Bzrezinski, *The Soviet Bloc*, p.240

organizations in communist countries are joined together in a "united front" associated with the Communist Party and, therefore, with the government, a feature which almost eliminates the possibility of organized pressure from below. The absence of a legal opposition is also a serious restriction on democratic expression and responsible criticism. Opposition within a party is much less effective, and is almost non-existent in the Communist Party, because of its structure, rules of procedure, and disciplined conformity. Further, the Party may be run by a small, dictatorial clique or become a stepping stone for professional politicians concerned with their private ambitions more than the public good. Thus the Party itself is the greatest limitation of the opportunities for democratization in a communist society.

If the single party system has to be accepted, it is even more important than usual that its internal organization be democratic. In the Communist Party, much could be done in the way of democratization and to prevent the Party from becoming merely a machine. All branches could hold regular meetings and do as much as possible to enlist local support. Elections, including those of branch offices, could be conducted democratically and votes made in secret. In central policy making, the opinions expressed at all levels could be taken into account, and there could be close liaison between national offices and local branches to avoid misunderstandings. In debates at all levels, discussion and argument could be encouraged, all criticism seriously considered, and majority decisions accepted. Regional conferences, national executive meetings, and national congresses could be held regularly and their proceedings made public. New membership could be enlisted without any bias with regard to person or, within limits, belief. At elections, the Party could not only give an adequate choice, but also give the electorate a reasonable opportunity to estimate their qualities. Finally, the Party could try to satisfy the reasonable demands of the people, and try to interest the people in its activities, encourage discussion, and agitate for the democratic acceptance of its policies. This would provide a framework for some degree of democracy in a one party system, provided the Party could represent the people as well as lead them.

One of the problems of democratization is passive citizenship, which is not peculiar to communist societies. But in communist societies, there may be no alternative to passivity. For those who are quite unable to

arouse enthusiasm for the Communist Party there is little choice but to withdraw from politics. But, even for Party sympathizers, there is often not much incentive. No one can accept for long the repetitive exhortations and moralizing persuasions of Party leaders as a valid motive in politics. Thus people react to the distorted ideological dogmas and the stereotyped opinions of the Party and retreat into indifference and apathy. Thus, for communist and non-communist alike, there is little incentive to take an active part in politics. It would be difficult to estimate how much interest is stifled and how much apathy is camouflaged in this situation, but it is probably safe to assume that it is considerable.

This obviously is a serious handicap to democracy. It would be indeed difficult for a Communist Party to permit a substantial measure of democratization without resigning its supreme power, the *raison d'etre* of its existence. In recent years, however, there has been some decentralization and devolution in communist countries, usually in the cause of efficient administration, but sometimes as measures of genuine democratization. Particularly in Poland, the communist regime attempted some degree of political democratization without sacrificing the position of the Party. There were some experiments in grass roots democratization in government and industry, and even the Party itself showed a readiness to keep in touch with the people. This Polish experiment is important in itself as an essay in democratization and because of the peculiar circumstances in which it developed. But it has a much wider significance as an indication of the extent to which democratization is feasible at all under a Communist Party regime.