

Poland's Transition to Democracy: Insights for Cuba, Iraq?

Konstanty Gebert, a journalist and leader of Poland's Solidarity movement, spoke in Miami in late September on the lessons of the Polish experience for other countries preparing for the transition to democracy. With the Institute of Cuban Studies and Florida International University's Latin American and Caribbean Center and Cuban Research Institute as the sponsors, Cuba was the main focus of his comments, but the subject of Iraq was also very much on the minds of participants.

In his presentation, "Poland: The Perils of Transition," Gebert emphasized Poland's peaceful transition from communism to democracy. This was due in large part, according to him, by the nature of the anti-communist leadership. The Solidarity Movement was more than a labor union movement and came to encompass all levels and sectors of society. It grew and learned effective anti-regime tactics gradually. It focused on helping the persons that were harmed by the regime rather than seeking immediate overthrow of the system. Solidarity became a nationwide, grass-roots movement that over time obliged the communist regime to negotiate with it for specific, community-based issues, if not for political power. Its ranks included all political opinions, social levels and religions. The leadership was moderate, dedicated and of high integrity. Eventually, it negotiated the modalities for holding elections and ending the communist regime.

Another factor that assisted the peaceful transition, Gebert continued, was the homogeneity of Polish society. Because of the tragic history of their country in the twentieth century, he claimed, Poles more readily identify with socially mobile Americans than with more tradition-bound Europeans. This also explains why there was no lashing out at minorities or internal conflict, as was the case in the former Yugoslavia.

Gebert also discussed some of the difficulties Poland has experienced since its transition to democracy. For example, while he praised the integrity of the Solidarity Movement during the years of organized opposition, he lamented how quickly many of the leaders became corrupt after the fall of the old system. This may have been due to the large sums of money that were in play and inexperience with the temptations of the capitalist system. Unfortunately, many former communist leaders were able to take advantage of the move toward economic freedom and privatization of state-owned companies, and they often benefited the most from the emerging capitalism.

Gebert also noted continuing problems with the Solidarity leadership's decision not to prosecute communists for their political sins, as opposed to criminal acts; this was due both to the country's precarious position as the first to break with communism and to a desire to break the cycle of revenge. This position was not necessarily endorsed by the citizenry, and years later, the issue still festers.

Poland's International Role

Since its own transition to democracy, Poland has supported similar efforts around the world. Recently, the Polish government surprised its European neighbors by sending troops to support the US in Iraq even though the major European powers - Germany

and France - opposed the war. These countries had expected Poland, an aspiring EU member, to follow their lead. According to the Polish authorities, however, they supported the overthrow of Saddam Hussein because for so many years their own struggle to overthrow communism was ignored by the Western European democracies. This does not mean that Poland does not want to be a member of the EU. It very much wants to be "in Europe" and to be part of the EU, but without compromising its security and independence.

Mr. Gebert did not want to talk explicitly about "lessons" for other countries but felt the Polish experience might offer some insights for those that are facing or soon will face transition from totalitarian regimes to democracy. Summarizing his own position, he argued that the peaceful transition in Poland was assisted by a homogeneous society, a hunger for democracy and a brief experience with it in the twentieth century, a moderate leadership and a unified opposition - at least in the struggle-for-change period - and finally, a willingness to forgive the hierarchy of the repressive regime.

Observations

Cuba does not have a homogeneous society, but it also does not have an ethnic majority and the Catholic Church is not dominant. Cuba had intermittent experiences with democracy after its independence. It does not have a unified opposition and, therefore, its leadership runs the gamut from moderate to radical. Willingness to forgive is hard to gauge in Cuba; certainly in Miami it is not a shared value of the majority of the exile community. Perhaps one thing in favor of a peaceful transition is the sheer exhaustion of the country, its tremendous needs and crushing poverty, which may not leave much energy left over for recriminations.

In Iraq, the situation is less promising. Iraq has little knowledge of or experience with democracy. It has no unified opposition. It has deep ethnic and religious divisions that have a long history of animosity. Hatred of America is for now a substitute for hatred of more traditional rivals, but this will last only as long as the US Army is present. Moderate leaders are often discredited by radicals for their willingness to work with the Americans to pacify the country. Forgiveness is not such an issue at present as the focus is on the American occupation, but once it is gone or reduced the old grievances may emerge. Will the Kurds forgive the Sunnis for, among other things, the gassing of their population? Will the Shiites forgive being dominated for so many years by the minority Sunnis? Short of throwing up their hands, the US must continue to work for the gradual dominance of moderate elements on all sides.