

Persuasions so consistently conflictual history essay

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Title:

Why were Lech Walesa's relations with successive governments of all political

persuasions so consistently conflictual?

Word Count: For official use only Mark: Tutor signature: Date: The charismatic leader of Poland's Solidarity movement, Lech Walesa played a key role during the transition period in Poland. He participated in the negotiations of the Gdansk agreement between the government and striking workers, and was instrumental to the Round Table Agreement of 1989 that led to the June parliamentary elections and a solidarity-led government. Following the parliamentary elections he decided to run, and won the newly established office of president becoming the first democratically elected president of Poland. During his presidency, Walesa guided Poland through the transition to a free-market economy, a period of reformulation of Poland's foreign policy and Poland's 1991 first completely free parliamentary elections. A mark of Walesa's presidency was the constant " conflict" with all political classes that opposed his political conceptions. As president, Walesa treated parties as tools and when constrained by the new democratic institutions, they were considered to be obstacles to reform. Walesa has been criticised for his confrontational style and for stimulating conflicts inside the government, whereby former allies clashed with one another, provoking constant changes of government. The aim of this paper is to analyse the conflictual nature of Lech Walesa's relations with the governments that he dealt with and try to explain the reasons behind such struggles. I will cover

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briefly the historical context that Poland was inserted at the time and examine the composition of the successive governments and the Executive-Legislative relations under Walesa. Finally, I will draw some conclusions and possible answers to the paper's question. The final years of the Polish People's Republic were defined by economic stagnation, which resulted in a rupture of the State, social apathy, and a feeling of discontent and hopelessness. The communist system had lost its last vestiges of legitimacy in 1980-1981, during the clashes with Solidarity and martial law. The existence of a strong democratic opposition in Poland, which had survived the persecutions of the early 1980s and managed to reconstruct its organisation at the end of the decade, provided the government with a potential solution to the crisis: the dialogue with the opposition. Unlike before, the Polish Communist leaders were being allowed by Moscow to find their own way out of the impasse and the strategy of the government was to co-opt the opposition, using carefully chosen political concessions in order to share in the responsibility of governing the country and thus recover some political legitimacy for themselves. The preliminary interactions with Solidarity Leaders took place in summer 1988 and the first public reflection of negotiations between the authorities and the opposition represented by Solidarity was a television appearance of Lech Walesa, President of the then illegal union Solidarity, along with the officially sanctioned union president in December 1988. The debate before the Polish audience resulted in resounding victory for the Nobel Prize winner, Lech Walesa and also served to legitimize the opposition in the eyes of society. Thus the authorities began to take new steps towards enabling the participation of the opposition in

public life. The conditions for such participation would be determined in the Round Table agreement. Talks started in February and after two months concluded with an agreement outlining the further changes in Poland. These included partially free parliamentary elections, the legalization of the Solidarity trade union and a significant increase in media freedom. Designed to establish a system of checks and balances, these agreements protected each of the sides from being outmanoeuvred during the transitional power-sharing period. The Communists insisted on a strong President, through which they could preserve their share of power and also provide the arrangement a degree of legitimacy aimed at Poland's international allies. The President should be elected by the National Assembly and given substantial powers, such as a legislative veto and the right to appoint ministers responsible for security matters. The specific powers of the presidency were designed to fit both Jaruzelski's role as a guarantor of continuity in Poland's foreign and military policies, and his personal preference for being a mediator rather than the chief of the executive branch (Jasiewicz, 1997). In its turn, Solidarity sought to ensure the rights of a freely elected Parliament and to institutionalize a cabinet fully accountable to the Parliament, enhancing the balancing power of the democratic opposition and thus rendering the whole arrangements more legitimacy. These agreements remained in force until replaced by the Small Constitution of October 1992 and the semi-presidential system resulting from these talks was a compromise. A mixture of parliamentarism and presidentialism, it preserved a strong parliamentary nature but also entrusted new powers to the president and quickly led to conflicts between the President and the

Government. The coexistence between communist President Jaruzelski and the government led by Solidarity, headed by Prime Minister Mazowiecki, took place surprisingly peacefully, given the involvement of Jaruzelski in the repression of Solidarity after the proclamation of martial law in 1981.

However, in the second half of 1990 Walesa decided to step in and force Jaruzelski out of office. The political pressure launched by the supporters of Walesa resulted in Jaruzelski's initiative to amend the constitution and call for democratic presidential elections. Jaruzelski didn't run for a re-election and Walesa won overwhelmingly. After being elected to a five-year term as president, Lech Walesa dominated a government entirely composed of elements of Solidarity and led by Bielecki, a politically fragile prime minister. Walesa seemed to understand that the limited democratic legitimacy of the Sejm would allow him to make liberal use of the constitutional powers he had inherited from Jaruzelski. As a result, Poland arrived "as close as possible to a Government of presidential initiative" (Zubek, 2001), and until the next parliamentary election president Walesa clearly had the upper hand. The 1991 election produced a highly fragmented Sejm, with the strongest party - the Mazowiecki led Democratic Union - holding a mere 13.5% of the seats and no majority coalition of fewer than five parties being possible. This was a result very favourable to Walesa since a weak parliament, unable to generate and support a stable coalition government would have to yield to the president. The deputies, however, were well aware of their weakness and were determined to prevent the president from assuming a dominating position at their expense. President Walesa did not officially support any party and had no permanent base in the parliament. While the post-

communist Democratic Left Alliance had been his traditional foe, new opponents emerged from the ranks of his former followers. In addition to Mazowiecki and his Democratic Union, some staunch supporters of Walesa's bid for president turned also into his critics. Under these circumstances, the coalition building process was painfully slow. Finally, a minority coalition of five parties emerged, with Jan Olszewski of the Center Alliance as their choice of premiership. With the required absolute majority of votes in the Sejm obtained, Walesa reluctantly nominated Olszewski to the post of prime minister. However, the self proclaimed " first truly non-communist government in Poland since World War II" led by Olszewski lasted only twenty four weeks. Shortly after assuming their offices, Olszewski and his ministers realized that the condition of the state treasury would not allow them to fulfill the economic promises they had made before the elections. They harshly criticised the austerity policies of the Mazowiecki and Bielecki governments, but had no other options than to continue the economic policies of their predecessors. In an effort to differentiate themselves from the two previous governments, the Olszewski cabinet started a campaign of " decommunization". It took a form of a personal purge aimed at the remnants of communist bureaucracy and parties or individuals of the two previous administrations that supposedly supported or tolerated former communists. The ill-advised decommunization scheme and the antagonistic relationship with the president did not strengthen the position of Olszewski government, and in fact proved to be fatal to them. After a series of scandals affecting high ranking officials and their involvement with the communist secret police, Walesa moved for immediate dismissal of the government.

Unsurprisingly, in June 1992 the Sejm voted Olszewski out of office. Enjoying the support of the parliamentary majority for a short time, President Walesa nominated another new prime minister, the young leader of the Polish Peasant Party, Waldemar Pawlak. A surprising move to many, Pawlak won a vote of confidence but after a month of intense negotiations failed to build a coalition. After his resignation, Walesa threatened to use his constitutional powers, probably by calling new elections. The Parliament, under threat, moved for another round of discussions involving a wide group of post-Solidarity parties. Overcoming several political and ideological differences, a fragile coalition of seven parties emerged and Hanna Suchocka, one of the parliamentarians of the Democratic Union, was approved as prime minister. Although numerically strong, the opposition was unable to present an alternative to Suchocka's cabinet because of deep divisions between right-wing and left-wing parties. Hence, a weak cabinet, whose very existence depended on these divisions within the opposition. The fragmentation of Parliament and the difficulty of building a two-thirds majority needed to adopt a new constitution led to a provisional solution. Some constitutional matters, specifically the relationship between the executive and the legislative branches of government, had to be regulated in a new way and there was a need to create an institutional framework that would allow for the formation of a strong, stable executive. The deputies also learned some lessons from the clashes with President Walesa and, afraid of his ambitions, sought to limit the conditions under which the president could influence the legislative process, cabinet formation and also exercise his authority over the cabinet. The Constitutional Act, or "Small Constitution" as it is known in

Poland, entered into force in October 1992. Intended as a temporary act, the Small constitution reflected the major concerns of the deputies and reshaped the relations between the executive and legislative powers in such a way that the cabinet was strengthened at the expense of the president. With the Small Constitution of October 1992, the Polish political system kept its semi-presidential character. Although the incumbent president, Walesa, had managed to keep intact most of its presidential prerogatives, some of the President's powers were limited, giving way to a more moderate variant of semi-presidentialism. The President continued to be directly elected and though he retained the power to veto legislation, Parliament could now reject this veto by a two-thirds majority of MPs. Only after a few months after the promulgation of the Small Constitution, the Sejm passed a vote of no confidence in Suchocka's government. The initiative came from the Solidarity parliamentary representation and was supported by the opposition parties. Since Parliament had failed to name a successor, president Walesa refused Suchocka's resignation and dissolved Parliament. The President's decision was an unplanned, unforeseen and broadly undesired result of a specific political game. Solidarity's small parliamentary representation did not aim to oust her cabinet. Its intent instead was to enhance Solidarity's own bargaining power vis-a-vis the government and improve its eroding popularity amongst workers. Solidarity evidently overplayed its game and ended up by helping Walesa to dissolve Parliament and consequently undermine the political well-being of many of his foes. The election of September 1993 came with surprising results and produced a radical change in the composition of the Parliament. Because of the 5% threshold adopted

in the new electoral law for the Sejm elections, the number of parties was reduced to six (against twenty nine in the 1991 election (Wiatr, 1996)) and a strong shift to the left was evident. The elections resulted in a major victory for the two post-communist parties, the Democratic Left Alliance and the Polish Peasant Party. Various factors contributed to this victory, mainly the growing frustration with the economic performance of the two previous governments led by post-solidarity parties. Together the Democratic Left Alliance and the Polish Peasant Party won almost two-thirds of the seats in the Sejm and almost three-quarters of the seats in the Senate. Such a result produced a situation where a a stable parliamentary majority was possible as long as both parties cooperated and also strengthened the Parliament vis-a-vis the President. The coalition's choice for Prime Minister was the leader of the Polish Peasant Party, Waldemar Pawlak. The general concern that the " neo-communists" in power would reverse the course of polish reforms were not materialised at the time and Pawlak's government pursued policies of continuity with those of its predecessors. Under the Little Constitution the prime minister was now required to consult the president on candidates for the ministries of defence, foreign policy and the interior, and Pawlak unconditionally accepted Walesa's suggestions for these posts. During the first months of Pawlak's term of office the Prime Minister and the President avoided open conflicts, but eventually issues appeared. In December 1994 Walesa orchestrated a major assault against Pawlak's Government. With a series of complex legal manoeuvres regarding the government's fiscal policies, Walesa delayed the presentation of the state budget. According to the provisions of the Constitutional Act, the government had three months to

pass the state budget and if failed to do so, this would give the President the right to dissolve the Parliament. With this option in his hands, Walesa categorically threatened to use such an action. Confronted with almost unanimous opposition from the Parliament, as well as with negative reactions from foreign governments and the domestic public opinion, Walesa indicated that he would remove his objections to the budget if the coalition agreed to oust Pawlak from the post. The Democratic Left Alliance, increasingly critical of Pawlak, accepted Walesa's suggestion and submitted to the Sejm a constructive vote of no confidence in Pawlak's government. The coalition regrouped and after dismissing Waldemar Pawlak, a new cabinet under the social-democrat Jozef Oleksy took office on 6 of March 1995. With the conflict resolved Walesa had once more achieved something apparently unachievable. He faced a formidable foe in a ruling coalition that commanded almost two-thirds of the seats in the Sejm, and all the same was able to cause the fall of a government supported by this coalition. Possibly the coalition bowed to Walesa only because it hoped for his approaching departure, with the new presidential election due before the end of the year. It could be expected that after four years in office, Walesa would have at his disposal a strong political machine and a group of loyal and competent advisers. However, his arrogance proved fatal to him. Since 1989 he had gradually alienated all his allies and in early 1995 there was practically nobody to run Walesa's re-election campaign besides the president himself. His popular following was also insubstantial, as his actions and aggressive attitude towards other political actors hurt considerably his popularity. His credibility was also damaged since his campaign was filled with promises

that neither he or anybody else could deliver. Finally, Walesa's campaign was as amateurish as his opponent's was professional, and failed to respond adequately to the changing mood of the public. Ultimately, Walesa lost in 1995 due to his own ego. Portraying himself as the president of all Poles, he believed he represented a "true and plebiscitary majority" (Jasiewicz, 1997) but never in fact, accomplished this. His aptitude to act during crisis remains unparalleled in Polish politics, but also does his talent to cause crises where was no need for them. After the analysis of Walesa's rise and fall as a president there is no doubt of the conflictual character of his relations with the successive governments he faced. One of the hypothesis that could account for that, as pointed by Jasiewicz (1997), is that the office of president taken by Walesa was 'customised' to fit the presidency of Jaruzelski, and a strong president was needed to keep the Parliament in check thus ensuring a stable, crisis free transition to democracy. During transition period, the communist elite would pass the necessary economic reforms and transform itself into a social-democratic party. At the same time, Solidarity would be able to develop the middle level personnel needed to effectively run the country if they would win the elections planned for 1993. However, besides all the carefully laid plans, the situation changed dramatically. As we seen Solidarity won a stupendous victory and the Solidarity elite, who had at first been prudent and uneager to reach for power, had become emboldened. This impressive change in direction jeopardised Poland's transition period as the Solidarity led government didn't have the political maturity to assume a government, neither the personnel to effectively continue the transformation towards a market economy. Also,

after ascending into power, the former opposition, headed by Solidarity dispersed into a vast array of parties that had little in common besides ousting the communists. This fragmentation led to the instability of the system and the difficulty into building workable coalitions, all of which were exploited by Walesa in his attempts of empowering himself. The main argument here is that the structural faults in Poland's transitional period led to the instability and subsequent conflicts between the Executive and the Legislative. Its also evident the role of Walesa himself, whose constant manoeuvring for greater power contributed significantly to the instability of the Polish political system. As pointed by Millard (2000) " the role of personalities becomes exceptionally important; and individuals may use the same formal powers very differently". Posts can shape individuals, but likewise individuals also shape posts. Walesa was unsuited for the role of an arbiter. He retained the mentality of opposition, with a highly confrontational style and failed to grasp the importance of negotiation and compromise. He wanted to exercise political leadership, and spent most of his term in office trying to maintain it, even in detriment of the political process. His effort to block the 1994's budget and the unconstitutional attempt to oust the Pawlak's government clearly show a man that had no other reasons for this behaviour but his own egotistical political interests.