

Kernel of truth in Gorbachov rumors

by Konstantin George

The world was rocked by the report on Jan. 30, from American CNN Television, that Mikhail Gorbachov was planning to resign as Communist Party General Secretary, but would remain President of the U.S.S.R. That report was based on a deliberate leak from the Soviet KGB. For the weeks just ahead, nothing of the sort will happen; yet, the report contains a very important kernel of truth, because it opens the question of what direction the Soviet leadership is taking, in its efforts to respond to the systemic breakdown crisis shaking their empire.

The indications are multiplying that the Soviet Union is moving very quickly in the direction of an *executive state dictatorship*, with a dictatorial concentration of power in the hands of the President, or head of state. One week before the CNN report, an editorial in the Soviet government newspaper *Izvestia* demanded a “dictatorship of law,” and that “the head of state” act now to proclaim one. The Jan. 31 Communist Party daily *Pravda* answered, in the form of a roundtable discussion in which participants responded to “readers’ demands” that President Gorbachov be granted expanded powers. The participants, quoted approvingly in *Pravda*, stressed that “the powers of the Soviet President should be strengthened”; that Gorbachov was blocked from taking earlier decisive action to deal with the revolts in Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan, because, allegedly, “The President could have had his say, but he had no authority.”

Policy, not personalities

It would be ridiculous to locate the drive for an executive state dictatorship in the framework of pro- or anti-Gorbachov factions. The policy leading to a form of nationwide martial law, euphemistically labeled “dictatorship of law,” is not a policy revolving around the person of Mikhail Gorbachov. It is a policy that has the total support of the Soviet KGB, the Military Command, the Interior Ministry police apparatus, the Justice apparatus, and, last but not least, that part of the Communist Party leadership, above all the leaders of the military industrial complex, who, while nominally occupying high posts in the Politburo and Central Committee Secretariat, institutionally identify primarily with the Russian state. The presidential dictatorship in the making will be based on these powerful forces, and the President-dictator

will submit to their demands. For the short term, that dictator-President will be Mikhail Gorbachov; beyond that, it is an open question who will fill that role.

The Soviet security apparatus is being restructured at present in accordance with such a “dictatorship of law.” On Jan. 31, Radio Moscow cited KGB chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov’s endorsement of the new draft law for the KGB, being worked out by the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet’s Committee on Defense and State Security. According to Kryuchkov, the new law “will place on a legal basis all activities by the KGB,” and will place the KGB “under the Supreme Soviet.” To the average Westerner, such language means that the KGB is now being placed under “parliamentary” controls, and therefore it “sounds good.” Reality is quite different. The U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet is ruled by its Presidium, and the chairman of that Presidium is the Soviet President—Gorbachov. Thus, the KGB, which until now, at least in theory, was responsible to the Council of Ministers, or government, is being placed, under the disguise of “parliamentary control,” under the jurisdiction of the presidency.

This having been said, we return to the CNN report concerning Gorbachov’s intention to resign as General Secretary. That question cannot yet be definitively answered, though once the executive state dictatorship is established, that option indeed will exist for the Soviet President. The Soviet Communist Party is in a mortal crisis. Its authority has collapsed across the country. Members are quitting in droves, and in the Party youth organization, the Komsomol, the departures have reached such flood proportions, that the institution is beyond salvage. The full dimensions of the Party’s demise will become very clear in early March, after the local, regional, and republic-level “elections” in the three republics constituting the empire’s core: Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia. Those elections will produce an across-the-board defeat for party officials, with devastating implications for the Communist Party as a whole.

In short, the locus of power in the Soviet Union has shifted from the party apparatus to the state apparatus. That process has not yet matured sufficiently to where a Soviet President can say privately to his colleagues, “Given the growing irrelevance of the Party, holding on to the post of General Secretary no longer really matters, so I can concentrate on the post of President, from which real power is wielded.”

Matters have come so far in Moscow’s most loyal satellite, Bulgaria. On Jan. 30, as the CNN report was making headlines, Bulgaria’s Communist President, Petar Mladenov, opened the Bulgarian Communist Party Congress by proposing that the posts of President and General Secretary no longer be occupied by the same person, namely himself. Mladenov made no secret of where true power will lie, when he told the delegates that he would remain President, and throw open the post of General Secretary to a successor. Today Bulgaria, tomorrow Russia?