

Stormy times lie ahead for Poland

by Frank Hahn

Political chaos in Poland, rumors of a possible military putsch, ungovernability: These are the buzzwords which the western European media have been using to describe the mood in Poland following the fall of the government of Prime Minister Jan Olszewski on June 5. But all the hot-headed propaganda and sensational journalism miss the underlying dynamic: The brutal austerity policy forced upon Poland by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has brought the country to the brink of collapse.

An impasse has been reached: It is simply not possible to make further cuts in support to pensioners who are currently receiving only about \$42 a month; one cannot simply close down every factory, hospital, and school in the country in order to balance the national budget. The Olszewski government, despite all its well-meaning intentions and assurances, never really challenged the IMF's scorched-earth policy in open battle, and this unwillingness to act became grist for the mill of Olszewski's opposition.

The collapse of Olszewski's government became inevitable in early May, when Poland's Supreme Court ruled that the low wages set for government employees were unconstitutional. When the matter came back to the Polish Parliament, the (formerly communist) Peasants' Party chaired by Waldemar Pawlak—up to then still part of Olszewski's coalition—joined with the former communist party and the Confederation for an Independent Poland (KPN) in a majority vote backing the Supreme Court's ruling. Some commentators over-hastily acclaimed this as a vote against the IMF; but in fact the IMF's name was not mentioned once during the entire parliamentary debate.

Pawlak's error is obvious: If he and his voting bloc had called for declaring the IMF measures themselves unconstitutional, this could have meant Poland's belated liberation from its two years of bondage under the IMF. But by singling out only one isolated IMF directive—a wage freeze for civil servants—without rejecting the IMF high commissioners' entire package, the effect was to plunge Olszewski into a dilemma, which was precisely what the former communists wanted to happen. The government had the choice of either acting in open violation of the Constitution, or of paying out retroactively the wages demanded by the court, which would throw the entire budget into a cocked hat. In the wake of this debacle, the Peasants' Party quit the ruling coalition, and the

Olszewski cabinet had to proceed without any budget at all.

The government worsened its own situation even further when it made the tactical mistake of attempting to parry pressure from the left by publishing the lists of former agents of the Polish communist secret service. It would have been far smarter and more statesmanlike, had Olszewski followed up the Supreme Court decision by declaring the entire IMF package to be unconstitutional. In this way he could have exposed the hypocrisy of the old communists, who up to then had spared the IMF from any frontal attacks—most likely because the IMF's measures for currency devaluation, budget control, and usury are so much in keeping with the plundering of Poland carried out by their former masters in Moscow.

Worse still, former Internal Affairs Minister Antoni Macierowicz's unfortunate flight-forward reaction with his publication of the lists, began to boomerang back on the government. When even the name of President Lech Walesa turned up among the spies for the former communist system, the insulted President quickly set into motion what more and more Poles are describing as a "left-wing putsch." Over the night of June 4-5, Olszewski was toppled by a vote of no confidence. The 32-year-old Pawlak was named the new prime minister, and the heads of the Defense Ministry, Internal Affairs Ministry, police, and television were all replaced.

Pawlak doomed to failure

Political observers in Warsaw believe it highly unlikely that the designated prime minister, Pawlak, can succeed in forming a new government, since at present he is immersed in an intra-party wrangle fraught with the greatest imaginable differences between Tadeusz Mazowiecki's Democratic Union, the Liberals around the former parliamentarian Jan Bielecki, Pawlak's own Peasants' Party, and the nationalist KPN. The daily *Berliner Zeitung* sarcastically compared Pawlak's tricky mission with the attempt to "square the circle."

But what will happen after Pawlak presumably fails? We will not speculate on that, but two observations are pertinent. First: The option whereby Walesa arrogates to himself the double function of President and prime minister, seems quite unlikely in light of the outcome of the latest national conference of his Solidarnosc movement in Gdansk. The former leader of the labor resistance was booed off the podium, and unofficial polls among the delegates found only 20% still backing Walesa and his policies.

Second: The toppled prime minister Olszewski has called in the meantime for a broad alliance against the "recommunitizing" of Poland. The Center Alliance, the Christian-National Union, and the Land Solidarity Party (PL) have all signed a joint declaration on the coming collapse of the Pawlak government. Political observers in Warsaw and Poznan have been noting the development of a broad wave of popular solidarity with Olszewski.