
JUDICIAL REFORM: POLISH CIVIL SOCIETY RISES UP

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Party bosses are regularly booed, and KOD-founder (Committee for the Defense of Democracy) Mateusz Kijowski was even chased away from the lower house of parliament, the Sejm. The main enemy of young Polish protestors is Law and Justice (PiS) party chairman Jaroslaw Kaczynski but opposition parties were also asked not to bring flags or insignia to the country's massive march on the Presidential Palace.

The liberal opposition parties Civic Platform (PO) and Modern (Polish: Nowoczesna), as well as the small farmers' party PSL have been marginalized in parliament since the PiS won Poland's 2015 general elections. Not only did the PiS win an absolute majority in both the upper and lower houses of parliament, it has consistently shut the opposition out of all policy discussions. Now demonstrators have shown that they, too, have had enough of the opposition.

Proposed reform to the justice system has sparked a summer of protest in Poland

The PO's arrogance during the eight years that it governed have a lot to do with that fact. Party chairman Grzegorz Schetyna also lacks the social skills of someone like the party's co-founder, former Prime Minister Donald Tusk. The Modern party, which split away from the PO before the 2015 election, has been unable to rid itself of the negative taint of the PO's years in government as well. Moreover, a number of small scandals involving its chairman, Ryszard Petru, have cost the liberal party sympathy among young Poles.

Optimism in civil society

But demonstrations against Kaczynski's proposed judicial reforms in late July showed just how much protest potential civil society in Poland has. "It was the first time that large numbers of young Poles with no party affiliation took part in protests," said political scientist Filip Pazderski at a debate at the Institute for Public Affairs (ISP) in Warsaw. He emphasized the fact that the protests – which led to Polish President Andrzej Duda vetoing two of Kaczynski's anti-democratic judicial reforms – were organized independently of all political parties.

Social networks, he said, played a major role – much as they did during the 2014 Maidan revolution in Ukraine. Those began as student protests and it was not until later that democratic opposition parties joined in. Polish sociologists point out that new forces joined the Polish anti-government protests in late July. "The only comparable mobilization we have seen came during the so-called Black Monday protests against the prohibition of abortion," said Pazderski. However, fewer Poles took to the streets during those October 2016 protests, and the wave of

demonstrations did not make its way into the country's smaller towns and villages.

As Pazderski sees it, summer vacation has actually helped the protests: "Kaczynski totally miscalculated." The PiS once again attempted to push through controversial reforms in the middle of the night and right before a recess. That infuriated young Poles. Facebook profiles popped up immediately and suddenly it became fashionable to report from protests via Snapchat. Pazderski says that the situation was aided by the fact that many Poles had time off for summer vacation.

Lech Walesa remains the only authority

The new protests have attracted large numbers of young people who only know of the old communist People's Republic from hearsay, yet they nevertheless acknowledge activist hero and later president, Lech Walesa, as an authoritative figure. Many are angered by PiS attempts to defame Walesa for supposed spy activity and to erase him from Polish history books.

Walesa's announcement that he would appear at a counter-demonstration to the PiS' official monthly commemoration of the plane crash at Smolensk — which killed Kaczynski's brother Lech, then Polish president, along with 96 others in 2010 — mobilized many young Poles. But Polish radio outlets have reported that Walesa will likely be unable to participate due to health problems.

Poland's Kaczynski blames Tusk for crash

The counter-demonstration will nevertheless draw larger crowds than in the past. Walesa and former Solidarity activist Wladyslaw Frasnyniuk have called for Poles to participate in this type of protest against Kaczynski. The counter-demonstrations have so far been organized by the citizen movement Obywatele RP.

New initiatives replacing KOD

Obywatele RP is among Poland's most well-known new civil movements. But a number of other such movements were involved in organizing protests against the proposed judicial reforms.

New organizations — started by young Poles — are popping up daily. The KOD, which kicked off protests against government plans to block Constitutional Court appointments in late 2015, on the other hand, is in the process of falling apart.

The KOD's controversial founder, Mateusz Kijowski, who is accused of having embezzled donation money, was even booed off the stage at a demonstration in July. KOD marches have mostly attracted older dissidents and Poles around 50, whereas the latest wave of protests have seen a massive influx of younger Poles and thus begun a new phase. One coordinator exhibiting a great potential to mobilize has been the group Women's Strike which was previously very active during the Black Monday protests.

Meanwhile, these various democratic initiatives have begun assembling a shared organizational platform, to which opposition parties are currently welcome to join. "The success of the protest movement will depend upon the reaction from established political parties," says Pazderski. In contrast to cooperation with the KOD, this time round the parties will be expected to offer less leadership posturing.

The only thing that is certain at this point is that the PiS will soon open new fronts in the ongoing battle. The government has already announced plans to "repolarize" private media outlets and,

like Hungary, to curb the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). But before that happens, President Andrzej Duda is expected to send two new proposed bills on judicial reform to parliament. Poland, it seems, is heading for a hot autumn.

Kaynak/Source: