Democracy: The Never-Ending Battle
A Conversation with Lech Walesa

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Question: What were your first thoughts upon your election as President of Poland?

Lech Walesa: I had not intended to become president, but I was forced in that direction by circumstances. I had previously reached a very disadvantageous compromise with the communists, which was to leave the presidency to them, as well as the leadership of three major departments. So, this was not a true victory for us. Actually, it was a defeat. In order to safeguard our victory, I had to become the president and take charge of those three major departments.

Q: Explain your strategy, which presumably required secrecy.

A: Yes, I could not speak about this strategy openly, because the communists would have killed me. In fact, several assassinations were attempted, but they failed. That dangerous situation caused me to plan and implement many actions without talking openly about them. Becoming the president was the guarantee that I would succeed in winning the final victory and defeating the communists, who had been in power for 50 years, in every sphere of our lives.

Q: What was the source of your bravery in taking on Poland’s communist system a quarter-century ago?
A: We had made previous attempts to change communism in Poland. Based on our failures, we improved our strategies. We lost a few battles, but we ultimately won the war. With each step in such endeavors, you go a bit further, to the extent that you cannot really go back. I had not intended to become a leader or to become so involved in the fighting. But as time went by, I learned from my failures and became even more determined to confront the communists. The foundation for this was my belief in God and also a belief in what I was doing. I don’t think you need much more. But you certainly need one thing, a full commitment on one’s part. Had I had the least doubt at any moment, I would have lost.

Q: We recently marked the first anniversary of the passing of Pope John Paul II. To what extent did he inspire you in your efforts?

A: The communism system had oppressed so many of us for so long that it was hard to believe it would ever go away, both in the oppressed countries and in the West. Only a nuclear war could have changed that reality. At that moment, when we felt so totally helpless, John Paul was elected pope. He motivated our spiritual powers. He inspired the nation to become fully confident. Despite all the nuclear potential, we moved ahead. Without that awakening, that inspiration, communism would have lasted much longer, although eventually it would have met its end with bloodshed. The communist leaders were not afraid of the actual words the pope used, but his words served to awaken the people, which the communists did fear. The communists used to claim that they represented the working class. Through our demonstrations, we proved that this was not true. We organized all of the working class groups and said directly into the face of the communists, “You do not represent us. It’s not true that we want you to run our country.” It was no longer the pope at that stage. It was what we did, we the working people. We denounced communism. Again, though, without the pope’s inspiration, it would not have happened.
Q: What were the most pressing challenges that your new government confronted?

A: To give to the Polish people all of the victory that was won, especially access to the principles of democracy and a free-market economy. To make the Polish people get involved and committed to implementing democratic reforms, to free-market practices, to training. Later, I was faced with two alternatives, either to remain the leader of the nation throughout the implementation of the reforms, or to inspire the Polish people to implement those reforms on their own. I opted for the latter, to set the nation in motion. So, an open question remains as to whether that was a good or bad decision.

Q: Where is Polish democracy today?

A: Democracy is made up of two major components. One is the legal framework of freedoms and rights that accompanies the political process, what actually gives you the ability to carry out democracy. The other component is the extent to which one takes advantage of it. The second component cannot be enforced. Either people take advantage of freedoms or they decide not to. We have seen this in the example of Iraq. One of the components is in place; the other is not yet.

Q: And in Poland?

A: In Poland and the other formerly communist countries, the situation is very similar. The first of the components is operating, whereas the other is not. The people do not take part fully in political activities; they do not participate completely in elections. But, of course, something similar happens in the United States, although for other reasons. Here, too, people do not take full advantage of their right of democracy. A difference is that you do not need democratic political participation as much as other countries do. Here, you have many other structures in place that help safeguard democracy, such as businesses and both formal and informal groups.
Q: How do you respond to situations such as the one in Russia, where officials made advances in reforms and then chose to backtrack?

A: Democracy and freedoms always have to be analyzed within a specific context. It is difficult when you have 100 people watching and waiting for the moment when you do something wrong, hoping to take your position, as you had in Russia. We also have to remember that it was Russia that suffered the most in the course of the transition and all of the reforms.

Q: What caused that disproportionate suffering?

A: The fathers of the Soviet system had a sort of basic ideology and strategy. They economically subjugated every country that they managed to oppress and conquer. We can illustrate this in a simple manner, in that each oppressed country was allowed to manufacture only half of a given final product. The remaining half had to be produced in Russia. This was a strategy aimed at maintaining communist integrity and unity. Those who devised that strategy never imagined what would happen, that the subdued countries would break away from Russia almost overnight. Each of those countries was left with its half of the final product, and Russia with its half. So, Russia found itself in the worst possible position, having lost its markets and economic cooperation. Smaller countries such as Poland can cope much better with their little half than Russia. We can illustrate this in another way.

Q: How so?

A: The old Soviet economy created entire cities with 100,000 inhabitants or more that focused on the cooperation with other countries. Once cooperation ended, it left entire cities useless. What do you do with them? It has made it more difficult for Russians to embrace democracy. So, life in Russia has become even harder for many people. I don’t think they can easily fit into the democracy that is the model one.
Q: What are the prospects for people living in the remaining communist countries, in China, Cuba, Vietnam and North Korea? Is there reason to believe that those populations also will be free one day, that communism will be gone?

A: The communist system has collapsed, totally and unquestionably. The 21st century has deprived the communist system of any favorable conditions for its existence. Since it is not really dangerous in the countries where it remains, the world has sort of agreed to tolerate it. But also it will take time for former communist countries to overcome their many problems. There are so many challenges to making them perform properly. Once the transformation is complete, we will be able to turn our attention to remaining communist countries. Even now, though, those countries do not follow the original principles of communism. China, in particular, is far away from communist ideology. As for Cuba, I have my suspicions that the United States wants to keep it as a sort of Jurassic Park of communism.

Q: You have accomplished more in your lifetime than most people could ever imagine. What do you hope to achieve in your remaining years of service to your country and the world?

A: I actually have accomplished only about half of what I need to do, what I originally intended. We helped end the era of division, of war. We opened the door to a new system in the world, to a new era of information, of the Internet, of globalization. With this, we have an open question: What system, what structures are best in this new era? We cannot continue with the status quo. We have to ask probing questions, encourage debates, even make people angry. That is what I have chosen as my task.
Lech Walesa – an electrician by trade – co-founded the Solidarity Labor Movement and led a nationwide protest in Poland against communist rule in the 1980s, for which he received worldwide acclaim and the Nobel Peace Prize. In the end, communism fell not only in Poland but across the Soviet bloc and eventually in Moscow itself. Riding a tide of popular support, Walesa ran for office and became Poland's first democratically elected president, serving from 1990 to 1995. He presently heads the Lech Walesa Institute in Warsaw, http://www.ilw.org.pl/english/otfundr.html, which champions democracy and free-market reform in Eastern Europe and the developing world. Walesa shared his thoughts with the editorial staff of the Worldviews for the 21st Century monograph series during a visit to Orlando for presentations at the University of Central Florida in April 2006.