DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 05.03.2024 | Jan Zielonka

From populism into the unknown

Poland is in a better place than five months ago, but the return of liberals to power does not automatically imply the end of illiberal politics

Democrats prevailed over populists in Poland's parliamentary elections last October. But after five months of considerable legal and political disarray, democracy is still in bad shape.

The reasons for this sorry state of affairs are not necessarily parochial. Poles may well have an inward-looking reputation as anarchical and unwilling to compromise. (To paraphrase Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Polish love of liberty does not go hand in hand with the virtue of citizenship.) Yet, the current deadlock is the child of eight years of populist rule, which is proving difficult to undo. It seems the old communist saying still stands: you can make a fish soup out of a (democratic) aquarium, but not the other way around.

The Poles have ample experience of constructing a democratic system on the ruins of authoritarian rule. If they cannot overcome a populist legacy, who can? The exit from communism may, however, with hindsight appear an easier task.

Today, the liberal and illiberal political camps are hopelessly divided and do not share basic positions on capitalism, democracy and European integration.

In 1989, the conflicting parties in Poland – the ruling 'United Workers' Party' and the *Solidarność* trade union leading the opposition – shared a broad objective: they wanted to join the affluent, peaceful and democratic part of Europe. The Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev was no longer willing and able to stop that and so they managed to sit at a 'round table' and strike a power deal.

Today, the liberal and illiberal political camps are hopelessly divided and do not share basic positions on capitalism, democracy and European integration. A power-sharing agreement cannot, moreover, be just about carving up lucrative posts: it should reflect the aspirations of most citizens. This time, however, a common vision for the future is lacking.

While politicians are trying to deliver a mortal blow to the opposing party, the Poles are pondering what the power struggle will mean for them. Will the future be better than today? Today, the politics is pretty messy, making it difficult for the government to advance any social causes. Sounds familiar?

Dangers to democracy

Let us start with the legal dilemma. The illiberal party running Poland over the last eight years was called Law and Justice (its Polish acronym is PiS), but the laws adopted by it aimed chiefly to do justice to the ruling party and its nominees in various state bodies. Today, even courts are staffed with party-political judges, often selected illegally. The president is also a PiS nominee and he can veto emerging laws.

So there is no way to undo the populist legacy by purely legal means, which begs a thorny question: can the rule of law be re-established in an illegal way? So far, the new government has moved forward by issuing parliamentary declarations which cannot be vetoed by the president but which are not formally a source of law. One can agree with Maximilien Robespierre that revolutions are not accomplished with a penal code to hand; Robespierre, however, is not a liberal hero and no one wants to see guillotines in Poland.

In Poland, as in other parts of Europe, liberals do not see eye-to-eye with populists.

This leads to another familiar dilemma: how to persuade illiberal voters to back a liberal project. Although PiS was unable to form a government following the last elections, it remained the party with the greatest popular support. In Poland, as in other parts of Europe, liberals do not see eye-to-eye with populists. They cherish different values, come from different social environments and blame each other for destroying democracy and, in some cases, personal careers.

Eradicating the illiberal 'disease' was promised in the Polish election campaign and there is mounting pressure to purge PiS appointees, not only from ministries and courts but also public enterprises, museums, schools, hospitals and even theatres. Democracy can only function if the losers accept electoral defeat. The vanquished are unlikely to co-operate, though, if pressed against the wall by the victors — and if they resist or rebel, as is the case in Poland, chaos reigns.

Populists thrive in an atmosphere of civil war, but this is deadly for democracy. Yet, giving shelter to autocratic politicians and allowing them to bounce back is not conducive to democracy either. Should those from the former regime who broke the law go unpunished?

Mistakes bound to be repeated?

Ralf Dahrendorf once perversely argued that democracy is a form of government, not a steam bath in popular feelings. The problem is that government is run by political parties with ever less public input: they have become 'cadre' and 'cartel' parties, with few members and loyal voters. They treat citizens as consumers, subject to refined instruments of opinion testing. Detached from any social base, parties are ignorant, arrogant and self-serving. This is the case across Europe, but it proves particularly problematic in Poland.

Although the new coalition government claims to be restoring democracy, it has so far chiefly restored the power base of the liberal party cadres. Senior and junior ministerial posts have been stuffed with party officials rather than genuine experts. The heads of the public media and enterprises have been appointed by the parties with little public consultation or competition.

The government claims that this is only the first stage of a long democratic transition, but one wonders whether a meaningful public input in governmental affairs will ever take shape. If not, we shall have a new elite in power, with citizens unable to transform their vote into a voice. In time, this will generate frustration, not just with the party elite but with democracy as such.

Can Europe or the United States facilitate Poland's return to the democratic path? The French and German governments are pleased to see the former president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, back as Poland's prime minister, but they are chiefly preoccupied with their domestic populist threats. In capitals such as Rome, Bratislava or Budapest, meanwhile, the fall of populism in Poland is seen with concern. The president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, comes from the same centre-right family as Tusk, but some of her commissioners are less liberal, to put it mildly. The populist presence in the European Parliament is likely to increase after the forthcoming elections. The European Court of Justice has sided with Poland's liberal judges, but its power is increasingly being questioned — not only in Poland.

Democracy cannot thrive on good intentions alone: it should be able to solve citizens' problems and offer meaningful avenues of participation in public affairs.

Joe Biden's US administration was cosy with the PiS government for strategic reasons. Poland is America's key ally in the effort to stem the Russian invasion of Ukraine, no matter who oversees its government. A possible return of Donald Trump to the White House would, of course, boost the populist cause in Poland and elsewhere.

Poland is in a better place than five months ago, but the return of liberals to power does not automatically imply the end of illiberal politics. The PiS may well disintegrate in the coming months, but new aggressive leaders will always emerge to represent the frustrated part of the electorate.

Democracy cannot thrive on good intentions alone: it should be able to solve citizens' problems and offer meaningful avenues of participation in public affairs. Political parties should listen to civil-society organisations and academic experts. The latter offer intelligence and knowledge, while the former bring real-life experience to bear. States should work closely with local, municipal and transnational bodies. The latter offer greater weight, while the former create bridges between the elite and the citizens.

Democracy ought to be reinvented, in other words, because the way it malfunctioned in recent years elevated populists – claiming to speak for the 'little man' against the remote 'elite' – to power. This is a tall order — not just for Poland but for the entire European continent.

If it is indeed impossible to transform the populist fish soup into a traditional democratic aquarium, we should try something novel. Let us have the courage to experiment!

This is a joint publication by Social Europe *and* IPS-Journal

---



Jan Zielonka
Oxford

Jan Zielonka is Professor of Politics and International Relations at the Universities of Venice and Oxford. His latest book is *The Lost Future and How to Reclaim It* (Yale University Press, 2023).