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SOLIDARITY IN THE ARAB SPRING

Leaders from the former Eastern bloc are sharing their experience of revolution with reformers in North Africa

BY GARETH JONES AND
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WARSAW, JUNE 16

LECH WALESZA CHUCKLES as he recounts a conversation he had in April with reformers in Tunisia, cradle of the Arab Spring.

"They told me they want to purge everybody linked to the old regime," says the former shipyard electrician who brought democracy to his native Poland in 1989 as

head of the Solidarity trade union.

"I asked, 'How many's that?' and they said '2.3 million people.'

"That makes no sense,' I said. 'That will mean civil war. You should just convict the worst butchers and let the rest be.'"

Making sense in the aftermath of revolution is never easy. But as countries such as Tunisia and Egypt -- the success stories of the Arab Spring -- grapple with how to rebuild institutions and build democracies, a few of

the stewards of Eastern Europe's great break from communism seem ready with advice, money and help.

Walesa's trip to Tunisia was part of a diplomatic push by Poland to pass on its experience. "Instead of sending F-16s we are sending Lech Walesa," one newspaper enthused. Besides the former president, Warsaw has sent Poland's Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, political scientists and representatives of non-government



POLAND'S F-16: Lech Walesa, pictured here in Gdansk last year, was part of a diplomatic push by Poland to pass on its experience. REUTERS/PETER ANDREWS



organisations to Tunisia, while Sikorski was the first senior developed world official to visit rebel-held Benghazi in Libya. Another Polish delegation will swing by Tunisia and Egypt this week.

Warsaw also hopes to launch an endowment to help the Arab world during Poland's six-month presidency of the European Union, due to start on July 1. Funds would come from Brussels, member states and other countries. The endowment would model itself on the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy, a private, non-profit foundation funded by the U.S. Congress and set up in the 1980s to promote democracy in the Soviet bloc and elsewhere.

"We remember how much help we received from the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy and other party institutions from the United States and Germany. That is why I believe Europe should create such a fund and provide it with generous funding," said Sikorski. "Promoting democracy is cheap, \$100 million is the price of two F-16s. I think it is worth it."

Bulgaria says it is ready to help Arab countries with drafting new constitutions and laws, setting up political parties and organising free elections.

Poland and Bulgaria have also hosted international conferences to discuss the Arab Spring. Heads of state from 20 countries in eastern Europe and also from Germany, Italy and Austria attended the Warsaw event -- and

were joined by U.S. President Barack Obama for dinner -- while U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon joined the Sofia talks. Obama hailed Poland as "a living example of what is possible when countries take reform seriously".

Walesa, plumper now, his trademark moustache white, says the advice and help is not about imposing an eastern European template of change on North Africa and the Middle East, but about reaching common principles. "The goals are similar," he says. "Freedom, justice and human rights."

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

THERE ARE DIFFERENCES of course. For one thing, reformers in Tunisia and Egypt lack the incentive of membership in clubs such as NATO and the European Union to keep reform programmes on track.

The Group of Eight major powers has promised tens of billions of dollars in aid, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development has offered its expertise to Arab reformers. But the EU has no plans to expand to North Africa and appears more focused on how to deter new waves of migrants and political refugees reaching its southern shores.

Then there are the historic and cultural differences. Aleksander Smolar, a Polish political scientist who accompanied Walesa to Tunis, said the deep tribal and religious divisions that run through many Arab nations have few parallels in eastern Europe, at least outside the former Yugoslavia.

With a couple of exceptions -- Slobodan Milosevic's Yugoslavia and Nicolae Ceausescu's Romania -- the transition in central Europe was largely bloodless, while much of the Arab Spring has been marred by violence. The Arab uprisings have also lacked charismatic national leaders like Walesa or the then-Czechoslovakia's Vaclav Havel. In the age of social media, the heroes have been savvy organisers or victims of the old regimes.

"Even the most economically backward central and eastern European countries were modern nation states," said Smolar, who in his discussions with Tunisian officials focused on the reform of local government, free elections and how to encourage free media.

Walesa also points out that Eastern Europe "had a powerful external enemy in the Soviet Union," which helped the region's reformers stick together.

HISTORY RHYMES

DESPITE THOSE DIFFERENCES, there are real similarities between central Europe 1989 and North Africa 2011. As Mark Twain said, history may not repeat itself but it does rhyme.

The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, the young Tunisian forced to shut down his vegetable stall whose act triggered the initial protests, recalled the self-immolation of Czech protester Jan Palach in 1969, over the Soviet invasion of his country. Protests in Prague marking the 20th anniversary of Palach's death proved a catalyst for the Czechs' 1989



"TIME TO GET TO WORK": Experience in the former East bloc shows the appetite for change can fade quickly. Here, refugees in Tunisia queue for transport to a camp on the Libyan border. REUTERS/YOUSSEF BOUDLAL

Velvet Revolution.

Onetime Solidarity activist Krzysztof Sliwinski, a former Polish ambassador to Morocco, said the contagious nature of the Arab demonstrations and the role of technology both reminded him of 1989.

"There is the same sense that history is on your side and not with the senile rulers... Then we used short-wave radio, now they have social media," he said, referring to the use of Twitter and Facebook by today's Arabs to evade state censorship.

"We don't perhaps have a big lesson to impart to the Arab world but we can give them a reason to be self-confident. There, just as in 1989, you can sense the old regimes losing the ability to frighten their peoples."

Such shared experience might end up being the basis of the help eastern Europe can provide. When Polish Foreign Minister Sikorski visited Benghazi, the anti-Gaddafi rebels he met included two dissidents who had spent 15 and 30 years in jail, as well as Gaddafi's former

justice minister.

"Today they work together and this recalls Poland's Round Table," Sikorski told Reuters, referring to the talks between Poland's communist regime and Solidarity which paved the way for partially free elections in 1989, and central Europe's first pro-capitalist, pro-Western government since World War Two.

DON'T TARRY

ONE THING EASTERN Europeans know: the easy part may be getting rid of the old regime.

Then "comes the shock at suddenly having to take over responsibility for the running of the country," Estonia's President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, a former dissident, told a conference in Tallinn in comments aimed at the Arab reformers.

"No one any longer taps your phone, you are now in charge and now you wonder if those long-time employees working in the ministry you run are trustworthy. You pinch yourself

and wonder is this real, after all this time. Yes it is... Time to get to work."

Sikorski says at that point there's a real need for speed. The appetite for change and the willingness to endure the pain that entails can fade all too soon. In Poland, the period of grace was about a year, he said.

"I told the Libyan interim government they need an action plan for each ministry before they enter Tripoli... They must have an idea of what they want to do because the period of extraordinary politics is very short," Sikorski said.

Vaclav Bartuska, a student leader during Prague's Velvet Revolution and now the Czech government's special envoy for energy security, echoed that need. "The basic feeling (in 1989) was that suddenly everything was extremely easy and everything could be done very fast. Things that had not moved for decades suddenly happened... But in a few weeks, things began to stiffen up quickly," he said.

"We could say in mid-December 1989 that we want Havel to be president and three

weeks later he was in Prague Castle. I don't know what would have happened if we had waited until March or May 1990."

In North Africa, stagnation may already be creeping in. Tunisia will hold elections in October, not in July as earlier planned, stirring criticism among opposition parties that the interim government may renege on its promise of democracy.

THE OLD ENEMY

AVOIDING VINDICTIVE PURGES and witch hunts and harnessing the know-how and contacts of those who served the old regime is also important.

"When I became ambassador to Morocco, I had a deputy who spoke fluent Arabic but was a communist. I said I would set our course as captain of the ship but I wanted to be sure my chief engineer had the right skills," said ex-dissident Sliwinski.

Jan Wojciech Piekarski, an urbane retired diplomat and Middle East veteran whose career spanned Poland's communist and democratic eras, points to the U.S. decisions to exclude all members of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party from Iraq's new government and to disband the Iraqi army as disastrous.

"In my view, the instability still rumbling on in Iraq is the result of the destruction of the human and administrative infrastructure (caused by the de-Baathification policy)," said Piekarski, who served in Baghdad in the 1990s when Poland officially represented U.S. interests in Iraq.

"Do not treat anybody as an enemy just because they worked for the old regime," he said. "Whoever takes power in Tunisia or Egypt must realise their administrations are staffed with people who understand their country's national interests."

LEGACY OF THE PAST

THE ROLE OF THE ARMY and security forces can prove critical.

"You need to include the armed forces and other uniformed services in the transition and

make sure they come to terms with losing power and shifting to democratic principles," said Leszek Miller, who once worked for the communist regime and later served as a leftist prime minister of democratic Poland.

"Exclude them and you run the risk of provoking a coup."

But opening up the secrets of the past is tricky. In Europe, the former East Germany threw open files kept by the Stasi secret police in the heat of German reunification. Revelations of betrayal stirred emotions, divided families and soured friendships. Other countries moved more cautiously, in some cases reflecting sensitivities over previous cooperation between reformers and the regimes they wanted to overthrow.

Walesa, whose brave moral stand against the communists won him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983, is still dogged by accusations that he worked as an informer for the regime as a young man. He denies the allegations but his plea in Tunis for a softly-softly approach on vetting can be seen in that light.

BLOODSHED

DIFFERENT COUNTRIES WILL take different paths. Slovakia, a small country of five million in the heart of Europe and now a paid-up member of western clubs including the euro zone, became a virtual pariah state in the 1990s under Vladimir Meciar's nationalist rule. Just to the east of prosperous, democratic Poland lies Belarus, where President Alexander Lukashenko brooks no dissent and behaves as though the Berlin Wall never fell.

Russia, with its "managed democracy", is less open and free today than in the free-wheeling final years of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of glasnost, though its economy is far stronger, thanks mainly to high global oil prices.

And then there is Yugoslavia. Feted as the freest and most open country in the communist world, it descended into nationalism-fueled wars.

Vuk Draskovic, who fought for democratic

change in his native Serbia, still bears a facial scar from one of at least two assassination attempts by Slobodan Milosevic's secret services. Draskovic sees obvious parallels between Arab rulers trying now to cling to power and Milosevic.

"The common theme to both is a lack of readiness to recognise reality," said Draskovic, who served briefly as deputy prime minister in Milosevic's government in 1999.

"Milosevic refused to recognise reality in the new Europe, to recognise the fact that Communism was dead... Probably the leaders in the Arab countries, some of them, are not ready right now to recognise this is the beginning of the 21st century."

PERCEPTIONS

IT'S NOT JUST ATTITUDES at home that need to change. Western leaders such as France's President Francois Mitterrand played down the chances of democracy taking root in the Eastern bloc and suggested it might not be ready to join the EU for another 50 or 60 years.

"Twenty years ago, many people said Orthodox Christians were not capable of democracy or that Slavic countries could not have a market economy... That has been proven wrong," Bulgaria's Foreign Minister Nikolai Mladenov said in Sofia.

"Why should those people now filling the squares of the Middle East not prove wrong the idea that Islam and democracy cannot go together?"

The idea that democracy and human rights are universal values, not geographically defined ones, is perhaps the most important lesson ex-communist Europe can teach.

"Those who inherited a functioning democracy without having to fight to create it don't quite know what it means," said Estonia's Ilves. "Those who had to build it do."

(Additional reporting by Jan Lopatka in Prague, Adam Tanner in Belgrade, Tsvetelia Tzolova in Sofia; Writing by Gareth Jones, editing by Simon Robinson and Sara Ledwith)

COVER PHOTO: Poland's Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski (L) and Abdil-Hafiz Goga, spokesman for the Libyan rebel council, in Benghazi in May. REUTERS/ESAM AL-FETORI

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