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NEWSLETTER

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## Managing Expectations in a New Democracy

*As countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa are swept up in a tide of revolution, the **Project on Justice in Times of Transition** is looking to past transitions for insight into the coming challenges for governments transitioning from authoritarian regimes to democracies. **Konstanty Gebert**, a Polish journalist, who first reported on the Polish Roundtable Talks led by Lech Wałęsa, Czesław Kiszczak, and General Jaruzelski, and then participated in the negotiations as a free agent, shared some reflections with PJTT Editor **Arielle Berney** on the early transition and the managing the expectations of change in 1989 Poland.*



The Polish Roundtable Talks took place in Warsaw, Poland in 1989.

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### The Polish Experience

In Gebert's view, the Polish Roundtable Talks, aimed at creating a unified vision for a future Poland, were "a huge success." He explains that in 1989, the need for a nonviolent solution became clear to both sides as different economic, social, religious and international forces combined to bring the communist government and the non-communist trade union group, Solidarity, to the negotiating table. As communism was not "dead" and the potential for greater conflict growing, getting competing actors with different expectations to the negotiating table was a major accomplishment.

The setting of the negotiations also played an important role. A custom-made, 64-person round table (see photo) was constructed for the negotiations. With a round table, no one is seated at the head or in a more central location than anyone else. The talks also took place in the government palace, which was meaningful because Solidarity preferred to negotiate with the government than with the Communist party, to avoid legitimizing it (apparently, the party itself had a similar

perspective on Solidarity). Gebert compared these carefully and thoughtfully considered talks to the initial talks Ex-Vice President Omar Suleiman held with the opposition groups in Egypt in early February 2011, in which the parties convened at a table beneath the smiling portrait of Mubarak. “We would never have accepted that,” he said, likening it to negotiating under a portrait of Lenin.

### **From Democratic Dream to Harsh Reality**

While negotiating their political vision, Gebert remembers that “at a certain moment, to their mutual horror, both sides discovered a common interest: if we fail, political enemies within our respective camps will eat us alive. Neither side could survive defeat.” Each side had more to lose by not succeeding in negotiations than by what they might lose in a compromised deal. Gebert believes that this realization can unify conflicting sides.

On a psychological level, the people were on a high at this first stage of transition, when the power first got handed over. “We were living the dream,” but the dream was crashing into reality rather quickly. “How long can activists attract television cameras? Eventually they have to shut up and administer.” But he notes that it’s more fun to give speeches about how nothing will be the same once we are in power than to actually deal with the duties of being a deputy minister of government. “Giving up the high was painful.”

Gebert describes the process of going from critiquing a government to running it as “a nightmare.” “The fundamental problem is the sharp divide between competence and merit.” He explains that just because someone was a valued member of the underground does not make him a good minister of transportation. They were forced to rely on a lot of people from the old regime, which was viewed by many as horribly unfair. “We were the solution! And we have to rely on them!” This rankled people, and continues to rankle them today.

### **The Death of Unity**

Revolutions rely on unity to succeed; it is a major factor of victory. We see this in Egypt where the people united to kick Mubarak out of power. But what comes next? “In a democracy, unity is ridiculous.” In the call for democracy, everyone shares the same belief; “that is a hard concept to let go of.” Gebert recalls that political life in Poland initially consisted of everyone screaming that his way was the “correct course.” He states that finally “unity was given a burial” by democracy.

There are so many contentious issues that arise that being united by them is impossible. Gebert rattles them off in quick succession. What should the role of religion be? Should it be oppressed as it was in Communist Poland? If there are no limitations, will religion then become the oppressor, as some claim about post-Communist Poland? What about journalists? Do they have the right to criticize the country? In Egypt, “All of these things have to be decided within the context of a society without democratic experience.”

### **It Takes Practice**

But he says, the only way to do it is to practice democracy. “You have to practice.” Gebert acknowledges that it’s a painful process, “some will say they were better off before, but Egyptians will have to figure it out.”

Democracy doesn't limit corruption, stop unemployment, improve the economy or do anything on its own, "it creates the preconditions for those issues to be addressed – it makes solving possible." Democracy raises expectations, but Gebert argues that's a good thing. "It means people feel they have rights. Without that, you'd be at square one." It's a matter of tempering those expectations with reality, and that is a nasty, painful and unpleasant process. "Try telling people who have just overthrown a dictator that they should learn from somebody else – it's ridiculous! But there's no other way."

Gebert gives two hypothetical speeches for two as of yet unknown candidates who will be running for election in Egypt in six months – one gives a speech about how they will solve Egypt's problems, how the days of the old regime are over, how everything is going to be different now. The second one explains that changes don't happen overnight, that it is going to be a long and grueling process to achieve change, and that some might not reap the benefits of these changes in their lifetimes. "Who are the people going to vote for?"

### **Role of the International Community**

Gebert recalls that Poland needed massive economic aid and political support in the wake of 1989. For Poland, the prospect of becoming part of the EU and NATO was "a fundamental stabilizing force." Egypt doesn't have those institutions to join, "therefore an international support program must be invented that will be massive enough to make a difference." Gebert believes that substantial foreign assistance is "a precondition to solving problems." He argues that "the populations who have stood up for their values and our values should not pay the price for the legacy of dictatorship." While he sees that some might say the need is just too big and it will be a sinkhole for money, he counters, "you don't know unless you try."

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