

All Europe watches Polish experiment

The Poles are a dramatic people. No one ever has accused them of being boring. True to form, this past week Poland set off on a fascinating but perilous political voyage that has captured the attention of all Europe.

On Monday, the labor union Solidarity was legalized by the regime of Gen. Jaruzelski. In 1982 the union had been banned and most of its leaders jailed. Since then, Poland's never robust economy has gone from bad to critical.

Facing economic collapse and political upheaval, the Communist party made a deal with Solidarity's leader, Lech Walesa. The government would allow Solidarity a limited but still forceful role in the political system in exchange for a halt in strikes, moderation of wage demands and better productivity.

Poland now becomes the first Communist nation with a legal opposition. The deal stipulated that Solidarity would remain a minority party in the legislature for the next few years. After that, there's a chance it might become the ruling party.

The Communists are taking a big gamble that the "limited" opposition will not become the real government as angry Polish consumers flocked to Solidarity's banner. Solidarity is also taking a major risk. It will now have to accept a large share of the blame if the economy keeps nosediving even though it lacks the political power to make many necessary changes. Since there are no easy solutions to Poland's chronic economic woes, each side will work hard to blame the other for the growing mess.

The moderate Lech Walesa will also have a rough time trying to get some of his union hardliners to curb wage demands. What Poland badly needs right now are

Eric IV ARGOLIS



sensible, hard-working unions like those that pulled Germany out of the wreckage of war and didn't ask for a wage hike until the 1960s. What Poland has, by contrast, are a lot of militant hotheads who would feel right at home at Canada Post.

But few people this week were worrying about such glum thoughts. Lech Walesa jetted off to Rome and a very fancy reception by the Italian government and a long tete-a-tete with the Polish Pope. This was no mere courtesy call. Poland henceforth will be ruled by a trimmer: The Communist party, Solidarity and the Catholic Church.

In fact, the Vatican has been doing a lot more in Poland than just sending its blessings. For the past 15 years, the papacy has been secretly funding Solidarity through Panamanian and Argentine shell companies—a sort of Catholic version of the current Iran-Contra North drama now being played out in Washington.

Personally, I like to see the Vatican handing out funds for political warfare. I always admired the warrior popes of the Renaissance who used to ride off to battle at the head of their troops. Or the redoubtable Boniface VIII who fought off a band of would-be kidnapers with a sword he kept under his bed.

So, from now on, Poland will be run by an army general, a former electrician turned union boss and a Pope. This may sound rather eccentric, but Poles seem to have a historical fancy for such political oddities. Let's hope the curious trimmerate works and keeps angry Poles from blowing their collective top.

This is a matter that vitally concerns Poland's neighbors in Eastern Europe and, most of all, big brother in the Kremlin. Behind Poland's current political liberalization is the not-so-invisible hand of Mikhail Gorbachev. Some Soviets think he wants to do the same thing in the crusty old USSR. It is even whispered in Moscow that Gorbachev may want to downgrade the Communist parties of Poland to the USSR to advisory bodies without direct political power—rather like the Church in Poland.

Meanwhile, other East Europeans are carefully watching events in Poland: Prussian East Germany with cold contempt; easy-going Hungary with growing approval; shaky Czechoslovakia with dismay; wretched Romania with horror; and far-off Bulgaria with quizzical interest.

Equally noteworthy, the Soviet press has been giving comprehensive coverage to events in Poland. Soviet readers are learning there is actually an alternative to one-party rule, and one that won't cause the sky to fall. Western Europe is responding by offering up badly needed economic aid to Poland. Now that the Americans have run out of money, Poles are banking on support from rich Europeans who very much want to bring Poland back to where it belongs, in the Western European family.

But will the Poles co-operate? They're much better at battling invaders than battling budgets. Passion and bravery, alas, don't reduce deficits.