



The Rise of Illiberal Democracy in Post-Communist Poland

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Abstract

Recent developments on Polish politics indicate the illiberal characteristics of the democratic regime in Poland. In this article, Polish illiberal democracy is examined to explain how and why liberal-originated political system has become illiberal or brought about illiberal outcome in post-communist Poland. The author argues that this is because Polish society has lacked the internalization of liberalism as fundamental emancipative values. This lack has resulted from the legacy of communist era, in which the ruling party's policies on social control and nation-building deteriorated social groups and group politics, including inclusive common identification. Also, the post-communist governments' policies of shock and hollow Westernization have caused socio-economic grievance and, thus, poor reputation of liberalism among lower-class populations. In addition, the non-economic narratives, used by elites to explain such grievance, have emphasized exclusionary discourses in Polish society and obstructed the process of internalization as well.

Keywords: Illiberal Democracy, Poland, Democratization, Post-Communist, identification

In 2015, the right-wing populist Law and Justice Party (PiS) won the general election in Poland and could establish new government, led by President Andrzej Duda, after almost eight-year reign of the liberal conservative Civic Platform (PO). With broad popular support, it began the effort to take control of the Constitutional Court,¹ strip the independence of the Supreme Court, and threaten freedom of the press. Moreover, it opposed to receive EU-quota immigrants and has been in long conflict with the European Commission since then.² Latest, Polish Parliament passed the Holocaust denial bill that would criminalize those accusing the Polish of collaborating in the Holocaust or other war crimes.³ Although these measures were executed by the elected government in democratic political system that originated from liberal idea, they seem definitely incompatible with liberalism. This reflects illiberal characteristic of Polish democracy that is not a new phenomenon but has existed since the fall of communism in the late 1980s. It is interesting that how and why has liberal-originated political system become illiberal or brought about illiberal outcome, especially in post-communist Poland – the first former Soviet Union (USSR)’s satellite state in Eastern Europe where the

1 Philip Oltermann, “Can Europe’s new xenophobes reshape the continent?,” *The Guardian*, February 3, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/03/europe-xenophobes-continent-poland-hungary-austria-nationalism-migrants>

2 Ian Bremmer, “Liberal Democracy Is Eroding Right In Europe’s Backyard,” *Time*, July 27, 2017, <http://time.com/4876072/liberal-democracy-is-eroding-right-in-europes-backyard/>

3 Oltermann, “Can Europe’s new xenophobes reshape the continent?.”

citizen could successfully organize to revolt against the communist autocratic government for liberty?

In this article, I will argue that post-communist Polish democracy has been “illiberal democracy” because it has consisted of only democratic formal rule and mechanism but Polish society has lacked of internalization of liberalism as fundamental emancipative values. This lack has been resulted from the idea of sacred and homogeneity-stressed patriotism, and anomic individualism, risen in the communist era. It has also been caused by the idea and policy of neoliberalism, implemented in Poland since the fall of communism, that has been connected with political liberalism but failed to satisfy lower-class population, to include them into national democratization, and to explain causes of their economic and social grievance. This explanation gap has been fulfilled by exclusionary discourses, blaming on some “others,” such as, pagans, foreigners, immigrants, and the European Union (EU).

To explain my argument, I will (1) start with a brief description on the development of Polish politics since the late communist era. Secondly, I will (2) define the operational definition for “liberal democracy” and then indicate why Polish democracy has been only electoral democracy but illiberal with statistic data and public opinion survey. Next, I will explore the causes of that characteristics by explaining (3) the idea of nation and subjectivity, which is the legacy from the communist era; (4) the problem of neoliberalism on Polish politics, society and liberalism; and

(5) the exclusionary discourse on the others. In the last part, I will (6) conclude this article.

Like many other Eastern European countries, after the end of the Second World War (1939-1945), Poland was under the USSR influence and was governed by the USSR-backed communist regime. During this period, socialism became the main national political-economic ideology and state took control of all activities in public sphere. To promote equality among population and, more importantly, to maintain such control against resistance, all political, economic and social organization was banned. Meanwhile, to strengthen the legitimacy of the regime, Polish traditional nationalism was intensively socialized to its population.⁴ However, the resistance from the local against the foreign-backed regime was growing by the time.

From the 1970s, the long economic recession led to more resistance from lower-class population, especially the labor. In the early 1980, the great number of labors could organize themselves as a powerful inclusive trade union, namely Solidarity,⁵ led by Anna Walentynowicz and Lech Wałęsa. Solidarity became the leading uprising movement against the regime and could broadly mobilize support from

4 Ewa Sidorenko, "Which Way to Poland? Re-emerging from Romantic Unity," Martin Myant and Terry Cox (eds.), *Reinventing Poland: Economic and Political Transformation and Evolving National Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 116.

5 David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 1-3.

both Polish population and external Western powers, such as, the United States. Although the communist government implemented the martial law since 1981, Solidarity could continue and expand its leverage, while the government was less supported by the weakening USSR and needed to negotiate with resisting movements.

Democratization in Poland began at that time. The more negotiation rounds were held, the more rights and freedom non-ruling-party-member citizens gained. Finally, in 1989, the Polish legislative election was held and it led to the fall of Polish communist regime as the ruling party hugely loosed its seats in the parliament. Solidarity Citizens' Committee, which was the political wing of Solidarity, was the leader of resisting movements in such negotiations and the victor in the election. As a result, it could establish the first democratic elected government and Wałęsa became the first democratic elected president of Poland.

The Wałęsa government (1990-1995) implemented “Westernization” measures as a tool for reconstruction, reformation, and development of Poland: further democratization, neoliberal reform, and EU accession. The interim constitution for the new republic had adopted in 1992 before the new – and current – constitution was completed and adopted in 1997. While, the economic reform towards neoliberalism through the doctrine of “Shock Therapy”⁶

6 Jittipat Poonkham and Natthanan Kunnamas, *Central and Eastern Europe: A Return to Europe and Liberal Economy* (Bangkok: European Studies Center at Chulalongkorn University, 2013), 38.

caused great economic and social grievance among labors, who were the main bastion of the Solidarity. Consequently, Polish democratic and economic performance from the fall of communism to the early 2000s was in low standard: weak government, low distribution of power, weak political organizations, low popular participation, high unemployment, high inflation rate and high inequality⁷ According to the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS)'s survey, between 2001 and 2005, the number of samples that said they satisfied with Polish democracy was not larger than the number of the dissatisfied.⁸ Since 2007 Polish democratic and economic performance has developed and been very impressive in comparison with other Eastern European countries until recently. The survey shown that the satisfied outnumbered the unsatisfied for the first time in that year.⁹

Considering this development, Poland has had the elections that citizens can participate in political decision by voting to choose their representatives in the parliament since 1989 and had the permanent constitution that set the ascribed basic principles and rules for citizens' rights, rule of law, and check-balance mechanism since 1997. Given that, it has seemed to have democracy, liberal-originated government regime, since then but I would like to argue

7 Claudia-Yvette Matthes, "The State of Democracy in Poland after 2007: Analyzing the Linkage between Economic Development and Political Participation," *Problems of Post-Communism* 63 (5-6), 2016, 290-292.

8 Ibid., 292.

9 Ibid.

that, despite the electoral and representative democracy, Polish democracy has been illiberal.

In my opinion, liberalism is a civilization, borrowing Samuel Huntington's word. It is the grand set of culture constituting particular set of meaning, understanding, identities, values, and norms. This set of culture gives an utmost importance on, according to John Locke's idea, unalienable natural rights in life, liberty and property.¹⁰ In contemporary context, these rights should be not only of some specific groups of people but of everyone, regardless of their difference on class, nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and etc. Therefore, liberalism calls for some level of common self-identification, common subjectivity, and empathy among all humankind. Democracy is a government "form" that has been developed as a rule and mechanism for using under and fulfilling the will of such set of culture. However, given it can be only a form, it can be developed to use within other civilizations. It is, thus, not always liberal. In this sense, liberal democracy is a government "regime" operating under liberal grand set of culture. Meanwhile, illiberal democracy can be existed as other regimes, borrowing some institutional forms from democracy but operating under other grand sets of culture that may go against liberalism.

10 Jim Powell, "John Locke: Natural Rights to Life, Liberty, and Property," *Foundation for Economic Education*, August 1, 1996, <https://fee.org/articles/john-locke-natural-rights-to-life-liberty-and-property/> (accessed on May 4, 2018).

In the case of post-communist Poland, most of existed democratization was only the establishment or reformation of formal state-level institutions. Post-communist elites made a great effort to build parliament – and market – but failed, intentionally or unintentionally, to socialize the liberal set of culture among Polish population,¹¹ as I will discuss the causes in the following parts. Hence, according to Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, Polish society has lacked of internalization of liberalism as fundamental emancipative values.¹² The CBOS’s survey in 2014 shows that many of the Polish have adopted the liberal-originated government form, liberal-like democracy, because it has rather been the “survival values,” being the prerequisite for self-identification as the West not the East, better economic and social well-being, including international security and status of Poland,¹³ as we can see in another survey result mentioned in the previous part that the liberal democratic reputation among Polish citizens has changed along with the economic performance. They have not valued the reason for liberal-like adoption as indispensable set of culture for protection and promotion of all humans’ natural rights. Furthermore, some have even seen that liberal-like democracy has caused negative effect on some of more important things, especially religiosity and morality (more than two-

11 Marcin Krol, “Democracy in Poland,” Mark Kaldor and Ivan Vejvoda (eds.), *Democratization in Central and Eastern Europe* (London and New York: Pinter, 1999).

12 Matthes, “The State of Democracy in Poland after 2007,” 292-293.

13 *Ibid.*, 292.

third of the samples).¹⁴ In this sense, Polish democracy has, thus, been illiberal democracy.

To understand the reasons why liberalism could not be internalized as the fundamental grand set of culture of Polish society, we need to start from exploring some characteristics in the communist era, when the Polish were triggered to resist against the regime while Solidarity, the early manager of post-communist democratization project, gradually formed as a major resisting movement. Although the communist regime ended almost three decades ago, those characteristics and their effect have continued to influence Polish grand set of culture.

As mentioned above, the communist regime made a great effort to control public sphere and all activities there. All non-government political, economic, and social organization was banned and criminalized. In this context, according to Ewa Sidorenko, Polish society was “de-structured,”¹⁵ in the other words, most of the interest groups in Polish domestic public sphere, such as, political parties, trade unions, vocational associations, and ethnic groups, were deteriorated. In long term, de-structurization weakened common identity, common interest, including empathy among people, and as a result, it destroyed groups and subjectivities in the politics. However, not all social group settings were disappeared. The nation, which was only one

14 Ibid., 293.

15 Sidorenko, “Which Way to Poland?,” 115.

public subjectivity the regime allowed, as well as individuals and families, which were definitely in private sphere, became the most important social groups at that time.¹⁶

A shift towards the subjectivities of nation, individual and family brought about another important phenomenon that Sidorenko referred as “re-traditionalization.”¹⁷ It meant the revival of the idea of Polish patriotism and the prioritized importance of family. Patriotism was used from both the regime and the resistant to affirm their legitimacy and mobilize broad popular support.¹⁸ For the regime, it was implemented as a tool to foster ruling party’s idea among the population that all Polish had a common “dream” to create an “ideal” society, in which everyone is equal, replacing exploitative capitalist society and the party was the only one representative who could led all Polish to fulfill their dream. Meanwhile, for the resisting movements, it was used to define all Polish as common victim to rise up against external threat, the foreign-back regime. However, because the public sphere, especially political sphere, was strictly controlled by state and the dissemination of political message was, thus, banned, patriotism tended to develop on “traditional” idea rather than modern political liberalism. This Polish “dream,” “ideal,” and “traditional” patriotism was explained by Andrzej Walicki as the “Romantic” patriotism¹⁹ consisted of three main narratives developed

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 115-116.

18 Ibid., 117.

19 Ibid.

from Polish political history: (1) Poland as an unanimous nation, within which is free from the different point of view, like its ancient consensual political decision mechanism in the Early-Modern period; (2) Poland as a sacred savior nation, which has always been sacrificed to maintain peace and stability in Europe, for example, in the incident of Poland partition in the eighteenth century, like the Jesus who had to sacrifice for all humankind; and (3) Poland as a homogeneity nation, stressed the national core values by common characteristics of the Polish who were often stateless and were displaced to be under foreigners' rule, like the period of Poland partition.²⁰ This Romantic patriotism laid the basis for contemporary Polish nationalism as a sacred and homogeneity-stressed nation which has the united sameness and opposes to the diversity within.

Another result of re-traditionalization was the prioritization of individual and family. Economic hardship and lack of enough social welfare pushed the Polish to focus more on survival of themselves and their families. Under the circumstance that state took control of the public sphere and political interest articulation was banned, only remained choice for Polish population was to sustain themselves. Consequently in long term, Walicki proposed that, according to Emile Durkheim's Theory of Anomie, the society tended to shift towards more anomic society²¹ that people mainly focused more and more on private materialistic interest and

20 Ibid., 117-120.

21 Ibid., 120-123.

lost their common identity, common interest, and empathy with the others. This kind of situation caused individualism in Poland to form as anomic individualism, unlike individualism in general meaning that stresses on the freedom to think, decide, and do, of everyone without any external control and pressure.

How have these phenomena affected the lack of liberal values in the Polish society? Firstly, group politics are part of the most important element of liberalism in modern political practice. The group is the fundamental unit that individual can participate in politics through interest articulation and interest aggregation. In this sense, it is also the practical space for socialization of liberalism. However, the lack of interest group and social subjectivity in public sphere, the demand for homogeneity of the nation and the anomic individualism have naturally had negative effect on group politics. Secondly, the patriotism centered on sacred and homogeneous nation is exclusionary. Because the Polish have indeed been diverse in their culture, many people have inevitably unfit with such united sameness. As a result, this patriotism is an obstacle against liberalism in contemporary context calling for some level of common identity and empathy among all humankind.

The fall of communism with the rise of democratic Solidarity from the late 1980s to the early 1990s seemed to be the appropriate turning point that Poland could eradicate those communist legacies and reform towards liberal democracy, and indeed, according to David Ost, Solidarity at

that time had potential to succeed.²² However, as mentioned above, the legacies obstructing liberalism has remained; liberalism could not be internalized in Polish society; and Polish democracy has continued volatile since then until nowadays. This failure can be explained by neoliberalism, the political-economic ideology adopted as post-communist Polish reform doctrine. Despite similar name consisting of the word “liberalism,” neoliberalism has been one of the most important obstacles against Polish shift towards liberal democracy.

Solidarity was the trade union that could mobilize support from all sectors in Polish society. When Polish common threat – the foreign-backed communist regime – was still in power, it was very inclusionary thanks to broad economic anger in Poland.²³ This characteristic was reflected through the first legislative election result that it gained 99 percent of seats in the Senate. However, despite best condition, Solidarity did not use this inclusionary context to promote political participation and then socialize liberalism among Polish population. On the contrary, it ruined this condition itself immediately with neoliberalism.

After Solidarity led by Wałęsa assumed government office, the government made a great effort to westernize Poland. This was understandable because Poland had just been able to get out of the East, the USSR’s sphere of

22 Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity*, 1.

23 Ibid.

civilization and influence; and in the late twentieth century European context, when the East civilization fell, there was only one possible alternative: to join the club of the West civilization, transforming this “former European” country back to Europe. It was so huge process; therefore, I will focus only on political economy question. Under the rule of communist regime, economic order of the East civilization caused broad hardship and grievance among Polish population. Certainly, everyone needed change and believed that the new order would bring about better well-being. The dominant economic idea in the core of Western world at that time, at least in academic sphere, was neoliberalism. It was the idea that supported economic liberalization and opposed to state intervention in economic sphere. To do that, trade liberalization, deregulation, privatization, financial stabilization, and implementation of fiscal discipline were proposed to use as measures. This ideology was adopted as the new political economic regime of most former communist states in Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland. Moreover, for this area, Jeffrey Sach, notable economist and chief architect of this “neoliberalization” project, proposed to use “Shock Therapy” to change economic system suddenly²⁴ and the Wałęsa government decided to implement this measure, similar to many other neighbor countries.

The Neoliberal Shock Therapy resulted in economic hardship and impacted the well-being of Polish lower-class

24 Poonkham and Kunnamas, Central and Eastern Europe, 37-39.

population fiercely, especially the labor. The work and wage protection in communist era was abolished while the inflation rate rose significantly. As a result, the unemployment rate reached almost 20 percent and many lower-class citizens fell in poverty or went bankrupt.²⁵ Moreover, social welfare, used to be provided poorly by the communist regime, was cut and remained little to not too provoke population.²⁶ Despite great grievance of lower-class, the government, originally supported by labors, did not change its policies and had no effective remedial measure. The more labors made a demand on the government for their better life, the more the government identified them as the obstacle and pushed them as the others.²⁷ The inclusiveness of Polish politics collapsed shortly after it had developed by the organization which led in such development.

The implication of this neoliberalization on liberal values in Poland was expansive. Although, in the same period, the government attempted to more democratize Polish politics and society, it was not successful. Since it tried to reach the criteria of EU accession quickly to lead Poland back to Europe more completely, the democratization process was mostly top-down. It could only establish or develop formal state-level democratic institutions. Nevertheless, these institutions were weak and could not function efficiently because they lacked of strong support

25 Matthes, "The State of Democracy in Poland after 2007," 291.

26 Poonkham and Kunnamas, *Central and Eastern Europe*, 105.

27 Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity*, 37.

and participation from liberal-valued society.²⁸ It was impossible that this kind of democratization could foster liberal values among Polish citizens well, especially when we calculated the implication from neoliberalization. Firstly, as many people connected neoliberalization with liberalism, the economic and social grievance impacted the reputation of liberalism among lower-class population; therefore, it was harder to socialize this new civilization to them. Secondly, they also distrusted liberal-originated democratic institutions including political parties and politicians because they felt they were betrayed by their former trade union. As a result, they tended to not participate with established democratic institutions and activities and the opportunity for them to be socialized liberalism through democratic practice was, thus, more and more shut down. Thirdly, in addition to effect from two first implications that caused lower-class to leave from democratic politics, the neoliberal policies pushed them out in another way. The influence of neoliberalism blinded elites from other political economic alternatives and made them choose to exclude lower-class, “the obstacle,” from national democracy to protect national neoliberalization project.²⁹ In this sense, as mentioned above, the exclusion of its own citizens reflected that the government left liberalism themselves too. Last but not least, all these phenomena reflected the failure of liberal civilization to be internalized in Polish society. Given the communist civilization had

28 Krol, “Democracy in Poland,” 69-73.

29 Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity*, 9.

collapsed before, there were the gap of meaning, understanding, identities, values, and norms in the society.³⁰ What fulfilled in this gap in some extent have been the legacies of communist era: the idea of sacred and homogeneity-stressed patriotism, and anomic individualism; therefore, they have continued to influence Polish politics and society.

Another gap needed to be fulfilled. The neoliberalism caused economic anger among lower-class population but how has Polish society explained the causes of the grievance? Given neoliberalism has been internalized in Polish society, especially among political and economic elites, as the most appropriate political economic model and the lower-class has had the potential to obstruct the development in neoliberal way, Polish society could not blame neoliberalism definitely. Nevertheless, the economic anger needs to be explained and organized. According to David Ost, it has been organized along non-economic line.³¹ To avoid blaming on neoliberalism, the explanation needs not to be discourses of class or critics of neoliberal capitalism. In the other words, to explain economic problems with economic narratives has been impossible. As a result, non-economic subjectivities of the others, such as, nation, race, ethnicity, and religious denomination, have been blamed as the causes of all problems. Some examples are anti-immigrant, Islamophobia, and populist narratives that the others became scapegoats in unrelated issues. Again,

30 Ibid., 5-6.

31 Ibid., 9.

this is an exclusionary narrative that has more and more obstructed the internalization of liberalism and also liberal democracy.

To be concluded, this article would like to explain how and why has liberal-originated political system become illiberal or brought about illiberal outcome in post-communist Poland. It argued that because the Polish society has lacked of liberalism as the strong fundamental values, the Polish democracy, therefore, has gone illiberal democracy. This lack has been resulted from the legacy of communist era, in which the ruling party's policies on social control and nation-building deteriorated social groups and group politics, including inclusive common identification. Also, the post-communist governments' policies of shock and hollow Westernization have caused socio-economic grievance and, thus, poor reputation of liberalism among lower-class populations. In addition, the non-economic narratives, used by elites to explain such grievance, have emphasized exclusionary discourses in Polish society and obstructed the process of internalization as well.