Springtime In Moscow

Has Gorbachev's bold experiment lost momentum? Can he now push the Communist Party into its own bout of perestroika?

In the first of two articles Monty Johnstone interviewed Roy Medvedev in Moscow after the recent Party conference.

Roy Medvedev, the Soviet historian and political analyst, lives in a fifth-floor flat on a housing estate on the outskirts of Moscow. For most of his life, he has been viewed as a socialist dissident. During the Brezhnev "stagnation period" he was ostracised and his safety threatened. None of his numerous books and articles have been published in the Soviet Union, though they have become well-known in the West. A measure of the changes taking place in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev is that he now finds himself being interviewed by Soviet papers, press agencies, television and radio.

Recently he held a press conference at the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs press centre. And Soviet publishers are now interested in bringing out his monumental work on the Stalin period, Let History Judge, written more than twenty years ago.

Monty Johnstone interviewed Medvedev in his Moscow flat following the extraordinary conference of the Soviet Communist Party, in early July. This interview will be appearing in slightly different form in the August edition of Marxism Today.

What are your general impressions of the recent Communist Party conference? Do you think it represents a significant advance for democratisation in Soviet society?

The conference certainly represents a significant step forward in what we can call the democratisation of our society. I think it was an interesting and important event. People followed everything that was published and shown on TV. Even though it wasn't shown in full on TV, those parts that were shown aroused great public interest. Ten or twenty years ago when party congresses took place, people didn’t bother to read the papers because they weren’t interested in Brezhnev’s reports and the speeches that followed them. This conference was different because there was real debate and controversy. The delegates’ speeches were not all alike. Gorbachev’s report was perhaps rather too long by Western standards, but not by Soviet ones. He combined two reports in one. The conference revealed the different tendencies, points of view, trends and even factions in the party — although officially the existence of factions is denied.

Are they sufficiently firmly formed to be called factions? Aren’t they something rather looser?

They aren’t, of course, factions as understood in common political vocabulary as something organised. They are political trends to be understood in a looser sense.

Do these trends exist throughout the party or only in any stable form in the leading bodies of the party?

They are characteristic of the whole party at all levels. The party is not responding uniformly to the process of perestroika.

If one had to identify these tendencies or trends with leading figures in them, could one talk very approximately of a Gorbachev trend, a Ligachev trend and a Yeltsin trend?

It is possible to speak of a Gorbachev trend and a Ligachev trend, but not of a Yeltsin one. Yeltsin doesn’t represent any particular trend now, though there are other people who think the same way. But Yeltsin has shown that he is broken as a politician and cannot lead any trend within the party. There are very many different trends in the party but the party conference represented three main tendencies. The first is the tendency of the opponents of perestroika in general. They are people who want to return to the past, people who are being thrown out of social and political life by perestroika. There are very many such opponents and they still have a huge influence in the running of the country.

But they didn’t express themselves openly at the conference.
They mostly kept silent. They were criticised at the conference. I have in mind the top levels of the bureaucracy — people whose activities symbolise stagnation and what we refer to as the breaking mechanism holding back perestroika. They didn’t reply to the criticisms. For example, the ministry of finance was strongly criticised but the minister didn’t come into the discussion to explain his position to the conference. The huge and extremely rich ministry of land conservation and water resources also came under sharp attack for doing a great deal of ecological damage to our country, but that minister didn’t say anything either.

Although these people were represented at the conference they realised that if they spoke they would get a hostile reception. Only one person from this tendency spoke at the conference, and that was the writer Bondarev. He represents that part of our literature which perestroika is casting aside. People of a different level are now coming to the fore in our literature and in our culture generally. People like Bondarev and Markov were, for twenty years, the bosses of our literature. They formed a mafia which decided the policy of the publishing houses and determined who should and should not be published and what royalties they should receive. Now it is not these people who decide — they have lost power.

And the second trend?

The second trend is represented by people who are supporters of perestroika. They understand that our economy is in a critical state, as Gorbachev said. They want to restructure it, but without glasnost, without press freedom, without democratisation — by the old administrative methods and orders. They are people who come out against corruption and abuses and oppose the mafias. They are mostly honest communists and Soviet people, but they have got used to the old ways of working. The most striking representative of this group
is Ligachev who, himself, organised the Nina Andreeva article. But they won’t achieve their objectives without using the levers of glasnost against the bureaucracy. Without a free press, it is simply impossible to formulate a point of view.

This group embraces the majority of regional and city party secretaries, the majority of the apparatus. It was quite active at the conference, where its attacks on the press were applauded. It is characterised by both innovation and conservatism, impulses to move forward and dogmatism. It combines both old stereotypes and new thinking. It occupies an intermediate position. It is the strongest group in our party but it does not dominate it because complete power in the party is not in its hands. In his conference speech, Ligachev warned Gorbachev, and it was an unmistakable warning: Without us you wouldn’t have become general secretary of the party — that is, without the votes in March 1985 of Politbureau members Chebrikov, Gromyko and Solomentsev, whom he named.

And the third tendency is Gorbachev’s?

Yes, the third group can be called that of Gorbachev himself. This group strives for perestroika, for the reform of all economic and political structures. I myself don’t understand some of their reforms, for instance, some of Gorbachev’s conference proposals for changes in the political system. But, at all events, they are people looking for a way out for our country, for means to take it further forward. They want to give socialism a new face and make it more attractive. Their intention is to do so through democracy, glasnost and a relatively free press, and through involving the whole people in the process of perestroika. And, you see, there is a conservatism to be overcome not only in the apparatus but also among ordinary people, among workers and peasants who need to be got to work better.

And Yeltsin?

Yeltsin represents vanguardism in the party. He doesn’t represent a trend as such but only some individuals. He wants to push perestroika ahead more quickly, more energetically, but this is not realistic. Yeltsin is saying much what Gorbachev was saying at the beginning, but there is very little support for this now. Yeltsin’s political collapse is due to not appreciating that if we start going too fast it will lead to the end of perestroika, rather than its success. In our conditions, it is possible for perestroika to move forward fairly quickly but not by leaps. Politics is the art of the possible. Yeltsin always spoke of a time span of one or two years. When he went to a factory when he was Moscow secretary he used to say: “I give you two years to fulfil perestroika here.” That sort of thing is not possible. And now we see that neither he nor any of the enterprises that he visited have achieved this goal.

How far do you think that, in the interests of pursuing the politics of the possible, Gorbachev has made certain compromises with Ligachev and his tendency, and how far would you see these compromises reflected in the conference decisions?

Gorbachev has always proceeded by means of compromises. There is no other road open to him. The leader of the party and the country emerges from the same stratum that represents the old elite and the previous epoch. Gorbachev was elected from among the Brezhnev elite. He is always making compromises with Ligachev’s group and even with the conservatives. But there are compromises and compromises: those which take things backwards and those which move them forward. Gorbachev has shown himself to be a master of compromises, and each of his compromises enables the country to take one step forward and sometimes more than one. The party conference represented another step forward.

Is this compromise between Gorbachev and his trend, on the one hand, and Ligachev and his trend on the other, a long-term compromise which will last a number of years, or a short-term one liable to break asunder in the foreseeable future?

Each compromise has its time span. I don’t think the compromise between Gorbachev’s and Ligachev’s groups will last very long. But it is not excluded that it could last for two to three years. The main intention of this compromise is to defeat the other main group — the most conservative group of bureaucrats represented by the officials of the ministries and those departments of the central committee which deal directly with different branches of industry and agriculture, like energy, construction and transport. They feed off that power and are often corrupted by it. We need to do away with these surplus parts of our apparatus.

Ligachev and the regional party secretaries also understand that these are bureaucratic obstacles that need to be removed as they are hampering perestroika. It is quite unnatural that one-third of the adult population should be employed in performing administrative functions of one kind or another. It would be quite reasonable if the service sector were bigger than the industrial sector, for instance, as this is a feature of industrially developed countries. But it is unacceptable that a third of the workforce should be employed in administration. In general, the compromise is directed against the most reactionary section of the party and against the opponents of perestroika as a whole.

Do you think that, in two or three years’ time, it might come to a showdown between the supporters of Gorbachev and those of Ligachev? Is there a danger that, as in 1964 against Khrushchev, an alliance of different trends might be formed to get rid of Gorbachev? In this case an alliance of the Ligachev forces with the directly anti-perestroika taking advantage perhaps of the fact that the economic situation had not adequately improved?

Of course there are various possibilities. One of them is that anti-perestroika forces might consolidate themselves, win support from some of the forces now supporting perestroika and overthrow
No hard feelings. In the run-up to the Soviet party conference, several noted Gorbachev supporters were conspicuously omitted from the delegates lists by regional party bosses. One was Moscow historian Yuri Afanasyev, who was passed over for the conference’s youngest delegate, 21-year-old Vitalina Trifolenko. When the CPSU’s Central Committee insisted on Afanasyev’s inclusion, the official press agency posed both delegates together for a publicity shot.

Gorbachev. But this is not the most likely possibility. It is more likely that the anti-perestroika forces will be thrown out as they don’t respond to national interests. And there is a hope that people now associated with Ligachev’s group will learn how to speak to people, and how to work in a democratic way. Some of the secretaries of district party committees may learn some lessons which will enable them to work for perestroika in the proper way.

So, broadly speaking, Roy Aleksandrovich, you are optimistic about the prospects of perestroika?

I was optimistic when we were living through the worst times here. I said then that perestroika and changes of a completely new kind were possible in our country. It may then have seemed the least likely prospect, but there are many examples of what seems least likely coming about because basic national interests assert themselves. In that respect I am an optimist. I understand that Gorbachev personally might suffer a defeat. He might make a serious mistake, take a false step. A monetary reform or price reform that was unpopular might be used by demagogues against him. The country might again, for a short time, enter a period of stagnation, but that would once again come to an end.

The election of Chernenko was an absolutely false step for the country. In the interests of a small group, time was lost which was precious for the country. For the sake of a fatally ill man a whole year in the life of the country was sacrificed. Such a situation can no longer be accepted. Time is very important for the Soviet Union because such a great power cannot allow itself to fall behind countries like Brazil or South Korea. Ultimately, the national interests of the country will carry the day.

What do you think of the reforms in the political system put forward in Gorbachev’s report? In particular, how do you assess the proposal that, in future, first secretaries of party committees should be nominated as chairpersons of soviets at corresponding levels?

Frankly speaking, I don’t understand these proposals and I don’t know how they will work. It seems to me to be a reform in the spirit of Khrushchev when he thought that something needed doing but did not test it experimentally. I cannot imagine how it will work on the level of a city, a district, a region or a republic. I think the new system is simply impossible locally and will immediately show its ineffectiveness.

Gorbachev argued for a separation between party and state organs with each getting on with its own work — the party concentrating on political strategy and policy and the soviets on economic and other matters. But combining the posts of party secretary and soviet chairperson in one person will have just the opposite effect. It hasn’t been thought through. It’s just going to lead to confusion and the mixing up of functions. Moreover, it’s not realistic. I know in practice how people in these posts operate: even now they are overloaded with work.

Academician Abalkin in his conference speech expressed disagreement with this proposal of Gorbachev. If I had been a delegate at the conference I would also have voted against it. But many voted to accept it because they believe in Gorbachev.

One other point is worth mentioning. Lenin’s idea was that the soviets should combine legislative and executive power in one organ. I think that Gorbachev in his proposals forgot about this. Gorbachev’s proposal for promoting the separation of powers between legislative and executive bodies by barring deputies elected to soviets from serving on their soviet’s executive committee clearly represents the opposite of what Lenin was proposing in his The State and Revolution — which doesn’t of course mean that Gorbachev must be wrong!
What do you think of Gorbachev's constitutional proposals for setting up a Congress of People's Deputies meeting once a year and electing a President with considerable powers, and a smaller two-chamber Supreme Soviet whose members would be full-time parliamentarians?

Maybe it is easier to imagine how the changes at the top will work because every leader of our party eventually became leader of the state. Stalin became prime minister. Khrushchev became prime minister. Brezhnev became president of the Supreme Soviet. Now Gorbachev will get the post of president with increased powers.

But I don't know how the new-style Supreme Soviet in Moscow will operate when even the present type of Supreme Soviet hasn't learnt to work democratically. What will the 400-450 delegates do who will be full-time deputies of the Supreme Soviet? Great Britain, for instance, has very old parliamentary traditions which go back hundred of years. But here, unfortunately, people are not accustomed to such things and they will have to learn a lot. It will take time.

Next Spring elections are due to take place to the new Congress of People's Deputies. Do you believe they will allow for contests between candidates with different platforms, and in a certain sense maybe even protoparties? For instance, if you have green candidates standing on a distinctive green program, might this not represent something approximating a green party and therefore a move towards the de facto ending of the one-party system?

There is no doubt that such "informal" movements and organisations will try to stand their own candidates in the elections to the Congress of People's Deputies. They openly say this. But I don't know whether they will be allowed to or not. Under our system an electoral commission decides which organisations have and do not have the right to put up candidates. Such unofficial organisations have not been allowed to stand candidates in the past. They were considered undesirable elements in our society, and many of their representatives were arrested or put under permanent pressure by the authorities. Also, judging by the conference resolutions there are different sorts of informal groups — useful and harmful. It is impossible yet to say what will happen in the future and who will be allowed to stand.

Some commentators have described the national question in the Soviet Union as a "time bomb" under the whole process of democratisation. Do you foresee such a danger? Do you think that solutions will be found to such problems as Nagorny Karabakh and the demands of the Baltic republics for greater political and economic autonomy?

I must say that I don't see the activation of national movements as a "time bomb" against democratisation. It is a factor for the development of perestroika. But there are different types of national movement. In Azerbaijan, for instance, they go on the streets with slogans like "Make Ligachev general secretary" because they liked his speech which said that Nagorny Karabakh would always remain a part of Azerbaijan. In Armenia, they demonstrate with different slogans.

"Lenin, Party, Gorbachev!"

Yes, as against "Stalin, Brezhnev, Ligachev!" in Azerbaijan. I suppose! The situation in the Baltic republics is quite different. In Estonia, for instance, they've set up a very strong People's Front for perestroika. They see in perestroika the guarantee for their national traditions and for democratisation.

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Yes, there's obviously a big difference between these positive developments in the Baltic republics and the conflict that has developed between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorny Karabakh accompanied by prolonged strikes and inter-ethnic violence. If no solution can be found to this problem in the period ahead, it is not going to produce a backlash against perestroika with some people saying, as our driver was saying today, that in Stalin's times, such disorders didn't happen?

It's not true that such things didn't happen in Stalin's time though, of course, they were cruelly suppressed. What the driver was expressing was the idealisation of Stalin's time. There were strikes, uprisings, urban disorders and mutinies in the armed forces. Because of the absence of glasnost people didn't know about them. Certainly, it is essential to solve the problem of Nagorny Karabakh one way or another. There are no problems for which no solution can be found. Maybe some people will still remain dissatisfied, but that's only to be expected. However, it can take a long time to solve a problem which is, after all, 1,600 years old.

But Gorbachev hasn't got that much time to solve it!

I can give no prognosis here. It is a regional problem. In the same way that the problem of Northern Ireland hasn't killed British democracy...

It is a danger though ...

... the problem of Nagorny Karabakh won't destroy perestroika. It is a problem that concerns only a small part of the Soviet population and it will be solved either by compromise or by force. But in the end it will be solved.

1. A long article appeared in one of the central committee's papers, Sovetskaya Rossiya, in March under the name of Nina Andreeva, a Leningrad chemistry lecturer, challenging the whole course of democratisation and glasnost. It was strongly attacked by Pravda.

2. Chernenko, an undistinguished apparatchik, was appointed party general secretary after Andropov's death in 1984 in preference to Gorbachev, and died the next year.

3. The present practice is for those elected to the Supreme Soviet to combine their normal parliamentary duties with their duties as deputies. The Supreme Soviet normally meets briefly only once a year.

4. An autonomous region which has, since 1923, been attached to Azerbaijan but whose predominantly Armenian population has been seeking to be transferred to Armenia. Azerbaijan has refused this request which was made by the region's elected representative body.

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