The Centre Folds

As the tank tracks fade, commentators have put the spotlight on Gorbachev’s responsibility for the August Soviet coup. Graeme Gill thinks history will be rather kinder to Mikhail Sergeyevich.

The attempted Soviet coup in August raises many questions about the course of reform in an authoritarian system. Among these questions, one of the most important is the charge made against Gorbachev by many in the West, as well as by some prominent figures in the USSR, that he was at least indirectly responsible for the coup.

This argument has two main variants. The first, most recently enunciated by Eduard Shevardnadze, is that Gorbachev had been warned about the coup, and had failed to take action to counter it. This view, which focuses upon the presumed lack of judgement of Gorbachev, has some weight, but it concerns the immediate events triggering the coup and tells us nothing about the underlying forces which brought the coup about.

The second sort of argument relates to the role Gorbachev has played in the reform process since his election in 1985, and is reflected in many of the criticisms made of him by radical democrats in the Soviet Union in the last couple of years. The heart of this argument is the charge that, ever since coming to power, Gorbachev has temporised, refusing to take the radical measures necessary decisively to break with the past. Instead of forging an alliance with the more radical proponents of reform and using this to force through substantial change, he has preferred to introduce half measures which have had the effect both of leading reform into a blind alley and enabling anti-reform forces to consolidate their positions. This raises the more general question of the role of the centrist in the introduction of reform. Is the centrist doomed to fail both personally and in effectively guiding society through the shoals of reform to a new future?

Since his election as General Secretary in March 1985, Gorbachev has been on a steep learning curve. His initial prescriptions about what was needed to overcome the Soviet crisis were soon superseded by more radical solutions, and this process of radicalisation has continued. One need only compare the sorts of policies he favoured soon...
after coming to power with those he has espoused in the last 12 months. In the economic sphere, he has moved from favouring a streamlining of the central command system, to support for replacement of that system by one based on the market. Politically, he has moved from support for the continued leadership role of a monolithic communist party to a situation in which that party is to be at the most only one of a number of parties within a democratic structure.

But the radicalisation of the Gorbachev program has not proceeded smoothly, but in fits and starts. Two factors seem to have been significant in this.

The first is the limit to Gorbachev's own vision. The General Secretary was a product of the system in the sense that he had risen to prominence by way of an orthodox career through the party apparatus. But unlike many of his
colleagues, he retained a capacity and willingness to question much of what he saw. Ultimately, that meant questioning all that he had stood and worked for throughout his life. Each step away from that past was difficult and painful. It is little wonder, therefore, that his own personal odyssey should be characterised by hesitation and doubt, but it is also a measure of the man that he has been able to adjust and to meet the changing demands made upon him.

The second, which may in part flow from the first, is the broad strategy of reform which Gorbachev has adopted. He seems to have had a conscious strategy at each stage of moving only as far as was compatible with not completely alienating conservative elements in the leadership. These considerations have meant that the advances have been partial and inadequate in the eyes of the reformists, while being excessive in the eyes of the conservatives, which explains why Gorbachev was distrusted by both sides.

**Gorbachev’s centrist role was essential to the reformers’ survival**

One charge against Gorbachev made by both reformers and conservatives is that his measures have led to the downward spiral of the Soviet economy and the disintegration of society. For the conservatives, these resulted from the implementation of fundamentally misguided measures which disrupted basically healthy structures and processes. For the reformers, they reflect the failure to push through the needed reforms, thereby neither completely transcending existing structures, nor putting in place new ones to displace them. There is some truth in both of these charges. The effect of Gorbachev’s measures was often to create confusion and to disrupt the operation of existing structures and processes, contributing directly to the erosion of the established command structure, without putting anything effective in its place.

All of this had a deleterious effect on economic performance and social cohesion and harmony. Of course it isn’t clear that in the absence of such measures, similar results would not have been attained by the general process of economic decay which had made reform necessary in the first place. Nor is it certain that more radical measures would have produced different results. However, Gorbachev’s role should not be seen only in this negative light. It may be argued that the Gorbachevian centrist strategy was in fact the saviour of the whole reform program. The ultimate aim of the radical reformers, a democratic political system based on a market economy, could not be achieved without the destruction of the old system.

But that destruction was not something that could be achieved easily. The value of the centrist strategy is that it kept both conservatives and radicals in the game while the position of the former was being eroded and that of the latter strengthened. Gorbachev thereby provided a shield for the reformists until their power and position had been consolidated sufficiently to enable them to rebuff the inevitable conservative reaction when it came. Had the coup been mounted in 1989, the result would have been very different. That it did not occur until the middle of 1991 is partly a function of the role played by Gorbachev in keeping the conservatives on side.

The radical democrat may respond that Gorbachev could have decisively tilted the balance in a reformist direction earlier by unambiguously cutting his ties with the conservatives and throwing his weight firmly behind radical reform. But this runs into the problem of vision noted above. By pursuing his centrist path, Gorbachev had effectively deprived himself of a firm power base. By failing to submit to popular election in 1989 or early 1990, he lacked popular legitimacy. The party he headed and the legislature of which he was chair were both overwhelmingly conservative in disposition and therefore could not constitute a real power base for a reformist leader.

He could not play the nationalist card like Yeltsin, and the fledgling democratic movement lacked the sort of organisational structure which could act as a base for him. Even the presidency, with the enhanced formal powers it gained in 1990, was deficient in this regard — as Gorbachev’s inability to ensure implementation of his decrees shows. Given these constraints, his strategy makes some sense.

If the above argument is accurate, the centrist role played by Gorbachev was essential to the survival of reformism and the failure of the conservative attack. It does not assume that this was a clearly-defined game plan by Gorbachev. It may be that he sought to play his balancing role in order to defend the reformists while they gathered strength, skillfully tacking to the conservatives when necessary in order the better to protect the reform process. There is no evidence that this was how Gorbachev saw the situation. Indeed, all of his public statements suggest that he believed that his centrist course would ultimately be successful; his belief in the reformability of the communist party reflects this view. Nevertheless, objectively, his role did have this effect.

All of the above is now history. Now, in the wake of the defeat of the coup, with the conservative forces discredited, there can be no excuse for continuing on with a centrist course. The coup seems to have opened Gorbachev’s eyes to the real limits of the attempt to continue to carry the conservatives with the process of reform. It must now be apparent that only full commitment to reform can produce the results to which he aspires. The time of the centrist, while essential to the success of the radical reformers, has now passed.

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