Civic Forum’s win in Czechoslovakia on June 8 was the only victory for the former dissident groups in Eastern Europe - the same groups which led the revolutions of 1989. To find out why, Paul Hockenos talked to Civic Forum leader Jan Kavan in Prague.

Jan Kavan, 45, is an elected member of the Civic Forum executive council and head of the group’s information department. A leader in the student and worker passive resistance movement during the Prague Spring, Kavan was forced into exile a year later. In London, where he has lived for the past two decades, Kavan co-founded the quarterly journal East European Reporter, and the Czechoslovakia Solidarity Fund. He returned to Prague in November 1989. The interview was conducted in the Civic Forum headquarters on Wenceslas Square.

Mr Kavan, the former dissident groups that have recently contested elections in East Germany and Hungary have fared much worse than expected. Yet Civic Forum (CF) has now been elected in its own right as the new Czechoslovak government. Why has CF’s vote held up so much better than, say, the Free Democrats in Hungary or New Forum in the GDR?

I’m not sure that I would compare the fate of the Free Democrats in Hungary and the opposition groups in East Germany. New Forum and the others did very badly for specific GDR reasons. CF doesn’t run the risk of becoming marginalised in the way that New Forum now is. The Free Democrats did less well than they had hoped, but they are still the second strongest party in Hungary.

Obviously, if we had had an election in January, or even March, we would have won by a landslide. But since then CF has experienced a loss of popularity. In the post-revolution period there was a great feeling of euphoria with the abolition of the status quo after forty years. People thought that we were just going to walk into paradise. Of course, no opposition could fulfil such high expectations. So, as the quasi-governmental party, CF has been blamed for the many problems that persist.

At the same time, CF is a very broad political movement which encompasses a spectrum wider than any traditional political party. This is both a weakness and a strength. Some people argue that it is too all-encompassing and not specific enough. Yet it unites within the framework of its political program quite a large number of people of different political opinions.

But popular fronts have a history of short life spans.
What will keep these forces together? How divergent are the views within CF?

The common denominator was the desire to build democratic structures again, to ensure that fair elections take place and to maintain a role for CF after the elections. Creating real democratic structures is much more complicated than preparing one set of elections. That will take several years. CF not only embodies the ideals of the revolution itself, but it is also a guarantor for democratic conditions here.

There is a clear Left and Right wing within CF. For example, I'm perceived as being on the Left and when I address voters I will elaborate certain aspects of the CF program such as social justice and programs to deal with the high levels of unemployment.

Right factions also exist, such as the Alliance for Democratic Citizens which runs on the CF ticket. It is a party which has views very close to some of the neo-conservative philosophy behind Thatcherism. The strength of the Civic Forum is that it incorporates such diverse tendencies within a democratic bloc.

Does the CF's concept of democracy differ from that of western parliamentary democracy?

The idea that we were brought up with in our schools here, that there is bourgeois democracy and there is social democracy, is a distinction that I always found hard to understand.

The restoration of parliamentary democracy is definitely very important to us. But that does not mean that all of us wish to restrict expressions of political life only to parliament. The political activities of individuals shouldn't be limited to going to the ballot box once every four years.

I sense that CF will develop into two kinds of bodies. One form will be closer to a classical political party with a hierarchy and membership. Another would remain a political movement and operate on a regional and district level. Its function would be to help ensure the involvement of people in political life outside of political parties. Also, as a representative of grassroots citizens' movements, it could act as a kind of corrective not only within CF, but to anybody who is in power. Hopefully, the new assembly will pass laws on popular referenda. There are many forms of participatory democracy which would ensure that the gap between politicians in power and the people would never be too great.

So the notion of anti-politics, as formulated by Václav Havel and the Hungarian philosopher György Konrad, is still alive in CF.

Yes, at least in the movement as such. Once we no longer have to fight for power, it will go back to some of the original ideas of last November. Anti-politics will still be necessary to encourage the development of civil society, a kind of network of citizens' initiatives and interests that exist in the grey area between government and the rest of society.

In such work, activists are governed more by ethical and moral considerations and therefore it would be closer to what Havel and Konrad described as anti-political politics. It's part of the legacy of the pre-revolutionary struggle, the rejection of the classical perception of politics and, above all, of the methods of the Communist Party. The opposition tried for years to articulate that there's an alternative to
official politics or angry silence. An ethical approach filled that gap very well. Now we have more democratic conditions, but there is still the need for building a strong civil society on this basis.

The government has already announced some tough economic measures to put the Czechoslovakian economy on a competitive, market-oriented basis. Is this transition compatible with the notion of social justice that you're talking about?

It's going to be difficult. CF is making it clear that it can offer no short-term solutions to the economic crisis. Most people don't really believe that they will be hit by economic measures, so it's not a big issue at the moment. Unemployment will have its impact after the first elections.

On the whole, I think that some measure of economic reform is compatible with social justice and social welfare. CF is in agreement that the economy should be more sensitive to market relations, that it reflect the genuine price of goods and so on. We must phase out these totally inefficient and unproductive big industries.

Some of us emphasise accompanying measures to retrain redundant workers and to assist workers in setting up their own businesses and co-operatives. Steps to institutionalise what you call the welfare state are a priority.

Others argue for a quick shock policy to achieve a competitive level of efficiency as quickly as possible. Social policies will take a secondary role to coding the gap between us and the technically more advanced western countries. After a short period of sacrifice, they say, all of us will be better off.

I understand that we must pay a price for restoring sense to this economy. But I differ from some of my colleagues on the magnitude of that price. A hasty transition would result not only in strikes, but social upheaval in general.

Along the same lines, environmental protection is at odds with 'efficiency' and a profit-oriented economy.

The high level of pollution here makes this country one of the dirtiest in Europe. We are very clear that we want an ecologically oriented, efficient economy. That may sound as if we want to have our cake and eat it too, but it conveys that we put those criteria on an equal level. CF opposes economic policies that may guarantee greater profits but would affect the environment adversely.

For me, a country cannot be prosperous if it is surrounded by a devastated countryside, polluted water and this heavy, dirty air. Our position is very close to our friends in the Green Party with whom we are co-operating in the election and possibly afterwards in some form.

CF ran against a strong Christian conservative coalition similar to those which took the votes in East Germany and Hungary. How do you assess them?

The Christian democratic parties have polled quite strongly, especially in Slovakia where they will quite likely be the strongest party. Our traditions are more social democratic than Christian-conservative, but the social democratic tradition has received a major knock on its head from forty years of communist party rule. They discredited not only socialist ideals, but social democratic views, too.

We are witnessing now a natural swing of the pendulum. People are endorsing the opposite of what they lived through. Many people, not necessarily religious, support Christian views as a reaction to the really narrow-minded amoral atheism that had been forced upon them. In the not too distant future, the pendulum should swing back to the middle, reflecting Czech traditions more.

Another factor is that the Western Christian parties have been very generous in their support for their groups and parties here. The same type of assistance from socialist and social democratic parties has been less than impressive, to put it mildly.

How does CF see the relationship between the Czech nation and Slovakia? Any differently from the way the Communist Party did?

The Public Against Violence (PAV) is our sister organisation in Slovakia. PAV is fully independent, although we consult one another and co-operate very closely. CF supports the idea of a federation with the two nations being absolutely equal.

We do not, however, feel that all of the investment policies of the old regime were fair. Some of these must be re-evaluated without in any way endangering the autonomy of Slovakia. Some MPs from industrialised northern Bohemia, for example, argue that an undue percentage of its wealth was invested in Slovakia. The party's aim was not so much to close the gap between the north and the less industrialised south as to build a power base for the party there.

A considerable nationalist movement has emerged in Slovakia with some groups even calling for secession. Does this worry you?

All nationalism worries me, not just Slovakian. It is an understandable phenomenon now that the empire has broken up. These feelings are fuelled by resentment over the injustices that people have suffered for years. But that doesn't mean that it mustn't be combatted.

On the one hand, such nationalism is obviously out of place in an integrated Europe. On the other hand, one shouldn't reject it completely because it reflects the need to have one's national identity respected, which is something the past regimes didn't do.

Nationalist feelings will subside when an appropriate balance is struck between nations and between nations and their minorities, when nationalities are treated with dignity and sovereignty. Not that it will be easy, but I think that we will succeed in Czechoslovakia. I hope that Czechoslovakia will play a major role in bringing this region together. By integrating this part of the world slowly, but surely, we can help pave the way for the integration of the whole of the European continent.

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