

**RAND/UCLA  
Center for Soviet Studies**

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THE SOVIET POLITICAL SYSTEM IN CRISIS

Symposium Report

Rapporteur:

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The RAND Corporation



## **INTRODUCTION**

**Dr. Abraham Becker**  
**Director, RAND/UCLA Center for Soviet Studies**

On April 24, 1990, the RAND/UCLA Center for Soviet Studies held its fourth semiannual symposium. Dr. Becker opened the symposium by reminding the audience that the last symposium had already been pervaded by a vivid sense of impending crisis, and he reported that the underlying situation in the Soviet Union has deteriorated since then. He pointed to some progress, particularly in the foreign policy sphere, where the legal foundations of a pluralist society have been laid that may eventually lead the Soviet Union to real democracy. Despite progress, however, Dr. Becker maintained that the domestic problems facing the Soviet people and leadership have become more acute.

## **POLARIZATION OF SOVIET POLITICS AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS**

**Dr. Jeremy Azrael**  
**Senior Staff Member**  
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### **Disenchantment with Gorbachev**

Dr. Azrael started his analysis by remarking that after five years of Gorbachevism, there is a profound disenchantment with Gorbachev across all strata and segments of the Soviet population. Centrist policies seem to become more and more discredited, and Gorbachev has come to be seen as part of the problem rather than of the solution. One of the clearest signs of the growing gap between Gorbachev and public opinion, according to Dr. Azrael, was Gorbachev's decision to limit the Soviet presidential election to the Congress of People's Deputies rather than a broader popular vote, despite the overwhelming benefits he could have gained from a popular endorsement of his rule.

### **Rising Criticism from Two Sides**

Absent this clear popular mandate, Gorbachev's addition of yet another title before his name is, in Dr. Azrael's view, unlikely to persuade either his right-wing or left-wing critics to continue to give him the benefit of the doubt, as they were generally inclined to do until late in his first term. On the contrary, his critics will become more insistent that he stop temporizing and do something decisive to assert real leadership. These critics were also likely to "not only have more bark, but also more bite."

One reason Gorbachev's critics are likely to become more difficult to handle is that they have become spokesmen of increasingly coherent and mobilized constituencies. Although it would be an exaggeration to speak about full-fledged left-wing and right-wing combat parties, according to Dr. Azrael, alliances have emerged that show definite signs of evolving from loose coalitions into much more potent organizational weapons.

### **The Soviet Political "Right"**

Various right-wing organizations have come together under the umbrella organization of the Leningrad-based United Workers' Front. Dr. Azrael described the front's ideology as neo-Stalinist: emphasizing unity, discipline, patriotism, and the need for vigilance against a roll-back of the socialist achievements and the undermining of the USSR's territorial integrity. Whereas it is yet unclear what the social composition of the Front is, Dr. Azrael emphasized that it has the support of several million Soviet citizens of all ages and walks of life. These include the high-level patronage of B. Gidasov, Ye. Ligachev, and other party apparatchiki of conservative persuasion as well as several high-ranking officers from the Soviet Armed Forces and the KGB. Recent statements by Minister of Defense Yazov, Chief of the General Staff Moyseyev, and KGB-chief Kryuchkov bear a striking resemblance to the Front's platform.

### **The Soviet Political "Left"**

The Movement for a Democratic Russia on the "left" advocates a multi-party system, a market economy, and a federation from which the constituent members can freely secede. The Movement is no longer confined to some fringe intellectuals, but seems to have the support of the majority of the mainstream intelligentsia, younger military and Party officials, and economic managers. Dr. Azrael said that the Movement is also supported by millions of rank-and-file workers, who turn out to be "far less eager to escape from freedom than most outside observers once supposed." The landslide victory of the Movement's de facto leader, B. Yeltsin, and of numerous other candidates endorsed by the Movement was seen by Dr. Azrael as reflecting its broad electoral base.

### **The Optimistic Interpretation**

To illustrate these escalating cross-pressures, Dr. Azrael referred to recent statements by both Ligachev and Yeltsin, warning Gorbachev against an impending conservative backlash and a radical revolution from below. Until recently, the analytical and political community certainly did not take these "forecasts of really stormy weather" very seriously. Even now, the mainstream interpretation is still that having "created a strong executive presidency, Gorbachev will be able to confine these two factions to the status of pressure groups or lobbies." According to this interpretation, the recent increased political militancy might have been caused by the elections and might thus abate in the coming period. However, Dr. Azrael pointed out, this interpretation fails to address the question of whether the growing schism in the Russian body politic may make Gorbachev's presidential powers largely illusory.



### **The Other Alternative: Toward Civil War?**

While Dr. Azrael noted that what he called "the mainstream interpretation of the current and emerging correlation of forces in the Soviet Union" may be correct, he also sketched an alternative that haunts some thoughtful Soviets. According to this much more pessimistic assessment, political polarization is accelerating so quickly and has gone so far, that further and more violent confrontations between right- and left-wing forces are almost inevitable. Dr. Azrael cited the doyen of Soviet historians, Academician Likhachev, who recently implored his fellow liberals in the Supreme Soviet not to pressure Gorbachev to hold a democratic presidential election, because any increase in political mobilization would plunge the country into a repetition of the fratricidal civil war that tore it apart between 1917 and 1921.

Although some of these statements might be exaggerated, most if not all of the necessary ingredients are present for the outbreak of domestic violence on a massive--even warlike--scale: (1) a president without much confidence among the public and large parts of the political elite; (2) a sharply divided political class and a politically mobilized and polarized population; (3) a militarily trained population with access to arms (which in some regions has already armed itself and formed paramilitary groups); (4) a conscript army with extremely low morale and discipline, that is furthermore increasingly fragmented along political as well as ethnic lines; (5) a publicly critical and divided officer corps (with de facto competing political organizations); and finally (6) the existence of a new constitutional order, characterized by a good deal of uncertainty and disagreement about the scope and procedural aspects of the new presidential powers.

Dr. Azrael qualified this grim prediction of the future by saying that he sees nothing fatalistically inevitable in it: "At the brink, the clear and present danger of massive bloodshed often has a way of calming the passions of even diehard militants." Nevertheless passions run very high and Dr. Azrael warned that there are a number of good reasons for believing that they might stay on an upward trajectory for some time to come. He suggested that perestroika might "end with a bang instead of a whimper." Invoking another Irishman, Dr. Azrael stated that such a gloomy outcome is particularly likely if perestroika continues to be governed by Murphy's Law, as it has very much in the past. Such a "violent implosion" of the Soviet Union, Dr. Azrael concluded, has become more than merely an academic debate, and its consequences for U.S. policy planning should be not be ignored.

## **WHAT KEEPS GORBACHEV IN POWER: GORBACHEV'S BALANCING ACT**

**Dr. Richard Anderson**  
**Professor of Political Science, UCLA**

Dr. Anderson started out by agreeing with Dr. Azrael's factual evidence but raised the questions of how and why Gorbachev succeeded in staying in power, despite all the adversities described by Dr. Azrael.

### **A Leader without Support?**

Dr. Anderson analyzed Gorbachev's hold over potential power bases and concluded that Gorbachev seems to have incomplete control over the main traditional depositories of power. In the Politburo, he seems at best to enjoy the support of only five Politburo members, and the strong criticism he has received at recent Central Committee plenums suggests he does not have a majority there either. At the same time, Gorbachev also seems to lack popular support, evidenced from some popularity polls and from the fact that he refused to run for President. The obvious question then becomes, How does Gorbachev manage to stay in power despite the lack of support of either the highest Party forces or the population?

### **Gorbachev's Balancing Tactics**

Dr. Anderson posits that Gorbachev performs a balancing act between party officialdom and the population. While neither of these two groups seems to like Gorbachev, they still prefer him over any potential candidate coming from the opposite group, which, according to Dr. Anderson, allows Gorbachev to adopt the only political strategy that could work under these circumstances: to position himself at the intersection of the population and the party.

In Dr. Anderson's view, Gorbachev was chosen as General Secretary in 1985 based on three-part program: (1) a limited economic reform envisaging decentralization of economic decisionmaking from central planners to factory managers; (2) an increased supply of consumer goods to give the workers an incentive to work; and (3) a reduction of Soviet-American hostility in order to justify domestic decentralization programs. Dr. Anderson remarked, however, that throughout Soviet history this has been a losing program, as personified by Bukharin, Malenkov, and Kosygin. Why then did Gorbachev succeed in being elected by the Brezhnevite Politburo in 1985 on essentially the same program?

Dr. Anderson contended that the Polish Solidarity episodes of the early 1980s played an important role in the Soviet succession deliberations. A part of the Soviet leadership became convinced that the introduction of new reforms might lead to a Polish-like crisis, and in order to avoid this they sided with Gorbachev and his proponents. The calculation of the conservatives was to eliminate the rest of the old Brezhnevites with Gorbachev's help and then to rally a majority against Gorbachev and finally empower a figure like Ligachev as leader.

### **Balancing at Work: Mobilizing the Population**

Once in power, Gorbachev was fully aware of this danger and consequently looked for a counterweight to contend with the Brezhnevite conservative majority that brought him to power. He found it, according to Dr. Anderson, in popular dissatisfaction and alienation from the Communist Party, and decided to harness this energy by getting the support of the people on the streets. It is Dr. Anderson's hypothesis that Gorbachev consciously introduced three new issues that would politicize a population that had been excluded from politics for so long: ecology, morality ("popular resentment at living a lie"), and ethnicity. Dr. Anderson disagreed with the general supposition that the ethnic unrest in several republics came as a surprise to Gorbachev. In fact, Gorbachev explicitly called for an "ethnic renaissance" (especially targeted to the Russian nation) in order to incite the people to become more politically active and thus create a counterbalance for his minority position within the Party leadership.

### **Gorbachev and the Conservative Majority**

The only possibility for the conservative majority to counter this development would be to engage in massive repression, which would be a self-defeating policy according to Dr. Anderson, because the purpose of giving Gorbachev a chance was to get the people to work and to avoid a Polish-style crisis. The conservatives also hoped that Gorbachev's program would alienate the population by impoverishing Soviet society. This would then make the people retreat from their political activism and enable the conservatives to throw Gorbachev out and regain control over the agenda.

While Gorbachev is indeed losing his popularity with the population, Dr. Anderson continued, at the same time this very fact recommends him to his rivals in the Politburo over figures who are becoming more popular with the people such as Yeltsin. Consequently, Gorbachev's position in the Politburo becomes more stable, enhancing his political power. This need for Gorbachev to hold the middle-ground ("always being better to the Politburo than the popular alternative, always being better to the people than the Politburo's alternative") explains the mixed pattern of policy we have seen over the last months. Dr. Anderson gave the example that whereas Gorbachev was able to force free elections to the Soviets in order to let the population vent its discontent, he at the same time also had to refuse to abolish the economic ministries.

### **Tactics with a Vision**

Over time, however, Gorbachev has still been able, in Dr. Anderson's opinion, to use his balancing to move the system forward incrementally. For example, Gorbachev gradually moved from agreeing with his Politburo colleagues against introducing Party competition through stating that "it would not be a tragedy" to finally coming out in support of it.

One of the lessons of history, according to Dr. Anderson, is that once an electoral democracy with party competition takes hold, it tends to be stable regardless of economic unrest and ethnic tension (he referred to Canada, Switzerland and Belgium, which are as stable as ethnically unified states such as Germany and France). Therefore Gorbachev's marginal increments through tactical balancing have been able to create this inherently stable situation without major crises.

Dr. Anderson criticized those analysts who see Gorbachev as a skilled tactician who lacked broader vision. It is true that his tactics have kept him in power. But at the same time, Gorbachev embraces the view that the government should represent what people want, and that it must represent what people want through the establishment of democracy. This is a visionary notion indeed for a Soviet communist.

#### **THE POLITICAL RETURN OF THE MILITARY**

**Mr. Robert Nurick**

**Senior Staff Member**

**Political Science Department, The RAND Corporation**

#### **An Institution under Siege**

Mr. Nurick described the Soviet military establishment under Gorbachev as an institution under siege. Its internal practices have been subject to harsh criticism, it has suffered from social (especially nationalist) unrest, it has had to endure cuts in budgets and force strength, it has seen the military sector of the Soviet economy undercut, and finally its traditional privileges and status have been eroded. The striking aspect of the military's reaction to all of these reversals, until recently, was its remarkable acquiescence. Officers did speak out on certain specific issues, but did not directly and publicly challenge Gorbachev's programs. In the last months, however, the Soviet High Command has begun to challenge the basic assumptions of Gorbachev's foreign and security policies.

#### **Reasons for Increased Political Activism**

The intensification of nationalist upheavals and the growing resentment within the Army of its internal policing function, especially since the bloody repression of the Tbilisi demonstration in May 1989, has triggered increased activism within the ranks. The policing activities have exacerbated the Army's internal ethnic problem and have darkened the military's public image. Furthermore, they have given rise to some new nationalist demands such as allowing conscripts to serve in their own republic or creating territorial militias. But whereas the corrosive effects of nationalism have affected the military's internal cohesion, morale, and prestige, it has also dramatized the extent to which the political leadership still looks to the military as a final guarantor of internal order. This has reinforced the military's evident bitterness and has led its leaders to speak out against being cast as the eternal scapegoat.

A second key development leading to increased assertiveness on the part of the military, has been the unraveling of Communist Party control and the Soviet presence in Eastern Europe. The military has claimed it was fully involved in the decisionmaking process concerning the shift toward a "defensive" force structure and unilateral troop withdrawals from Eastern Europe. Mr. Nurick stated he was personally skeptical of this claim, that they were certainly not prepared for the imminent unraveling of the Pact, nor for the prospect that their long-standing buffer and forward presence in Eastern Europe might erode so quickly without any corresponding changes in the West. The Soviet High Command now has to have a contingency plan for ensuring the defense of the homeland largely, if not entirely, from Soviet territory, without any guarantees that the forces of diplomacy or history will soon produce commensurate limitations on NATO and the United States.

#### **Themes of Renewed Activism**

Military leaders are becoming increasingly sensitive to criticisms about internal practices. They have become very outspoken on the growing problems of draft resistance/evasion in restive republics and they complain that this is being abetted by local authorities. But even beyond these matters, the developments in Eastern Europe and in the national republics appear to have crystallized concerns among senior officers that what may now be at stake are not only the armed forces' institutional interests, but also the social order at home and fundamental Soviet geostrategic interests abroad.

There are several themes surfacing in the Soviet military press: (1) domestic economic reform has failed either to rejuvenate the economy as a whole or to reduce the gap in defense technology with the West; (2) the conversion program has produced major dislocations in the defense industrial sector, so far without even producing any visible improvements in the civilian sector; (3) further unilateral cuts in defense spending or force structure would be dangerous; (4) the loss of Eastern Europe represents a strategic setback of major proportion, which requires a fundamental reevaluation of defense policy. The military's basic message is that the threat coming from the West continues to exist, which, combined with events in Eastern Europe and at home, means that demands on the military are rising, not attenuating.

When Gorbachev came to power, his argument was that the real threat to the Soviet military was the USSR's technological backwardness, and hence it was not surprising that the military agreed with Gorbachev's perestroika. Over time, however, they were increasingly reluctant to pay the price for this agenda in terms of procurement, research and development funding, and institutional and force structure size. As a consequence, they are now starting to draw more or less explicit links between their institutional concerns and broader issues of foreign and domestic policy.

### **Implications for the Military's Future Political Role**

The implications of these developments for the role of the military have become an important set of issues in the Soviet domestic political arena. Mr. Nurick stated his belief that a coup is highly unlikely, mainly because there is no such tradition in Soviet political life, nor are there any precedents. The senior officer corps, moreover, seems to remain committed to Party control. Nevertheless, the military's role in Soviet political life is likely to increase. The Soviet officer corps is far from homogeneous: it appears split along generational lines, with numerous younger officers (especially those in the Congress of People's Deputies) staking out strongly reform-oriented positions. Mr. Nurick warned, however, that in the event of the growth of a major political challenge to Gorbachev within the political leadership, the High Command could become more predisposed to be drawn in and to throw its political weight on the conservative side of the ledger.

### **THE DECOLONIZATION OF THE LAST EUROPEAN EMPIRE**

**Mr. Alex Alexiev**  
**Senior Staff Member**  
**Political Science Department, RAND Corporation**

Mr. Alexiev addressed the topic of national and ethnic unrest and its threat to the cohesion of the Soviet state, as exemplified by the recent dramatic explosion of nationalist unrest in the Transcaucasian and Baltic republics. Mr. Alexiev stated that he sees the problem as a systemic, and hence intractable one, which has been triggered by the gradual decline of the last great European empire.

#### **Trends Leading to Ethnic Explosion**

Mr. Alexiev explained how congruence of several existing trends fueled ethnic tensions. The first factor is economic decline of the Soviet Union: a gradual decline in the standards of living and the quality of life, increasing grievances of economic exploitation, political indifference or even oppression, and ecological neglect.

Second, there has been a large-scale demographic shift in favor of the non-Russian population, more specifically the Muslim Turkic population of Central Asia and the Caucasus. This development is taking place against a background of stagnation of the core Russian population, which is in the process of decline.

Third, the ruling Soviet ideology is losing whatever prestige and power it had left; Marxism-Leninism was essentially replaced by a system where corruption, careerism, nepotism, and bureaucracy flourished. The ideological void thus created has stimulated a return to traditional values, such as religion and nationalism.

These three fundamental trends have led to an explosion of nationalist awareness and ethnic pride under the conditions of glasnost and perestroika, introduced by Gorbachev: "They have unleashed powerful centrifugal forces that are very difficult or even impossible to bottle up."

### **Implications of These Trends**

The implications of these trends are, in Mr. Alexiev's opinion, extremely serious. In the short term, they are likely to affect (and have already affected) the instruments of central control that kept the Soviet empire together.

Politically, the Communist Party, which used to be the major instrument of central control, and the various so-called transmission belt organizations (such as trade unions) are no longer reliable, according to Mr. Alexiev. They are split not only along ideological, but also along nationalist lines (e.g., the Communist Party of Lithuania is much closer to the Lithuanian nationalist forces than to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union). Mr. Alexiev claimed that this was happening in virtually every republic.

In the security field, the impact of these forces is not nearly as clearly felt, but there too can be seen a fragmentation (especially among rank-and-file soldiers) that has an impact on the ability of the Soviet Armed Forces to be an effective instrument of internal policing. The KGB has also been swayed by nationalist turmoil, although it is not yet entirely clear to what extent. He reminded the audience that in a number of recent conflicts, such as in Tbilisi and Baku, the local militia organs have steadfastly sided with the demonstrators.

In the economic domain, there has been a similar loss of central control because of the resurgence of regional institutions, interests, and autonomous trends.

### **Options for the Center**

Moscow could attempt to reverse these trends and assure cohesion, by pursuing two options. First, the Center could use military force or economic blackmail, (similar to tactics used in Lithuania) to coerce dissonant forces to comply. Mr. Alexiev asserted, however, that the short-term squelching of nationalist expressions would be only a temporary solution. Second, construction of a more equitable Soviet confederal structure would alleviate the present grievances. Mr. Alexiev cautioned that it might be too late to do this.

### **Prognosis**

Mr. Alexiev concluded by saying that his own prognosis is pessimistic. He predicts that the decolonization process will continue for the next year or two and that several republics might in effect, secede from the Soviet Union (apart from the Baltic republics, likely candidates he mentioned were Georgia and Moldavia.) By the turn of the century, it is likely that the Soviet Union will disintegrate as a unitary state.

### **THREE DIMENSIONS OF SOVIET ECONOMIC CRISIS**

#### **Dr. Abraham Becker**

Dr. Becker observed that after five years in power, Gorbachev is at a crucial crossroads. When he came to power, Gorbachev feared a further relative decline vis-a-vis the West, but now he is threatened by a dangerous economic tailspin--an accelerated spiral of inflation combined with a shrinkage of real national product. The key question has become how far and how fast he wants to go and how much he can safely postpone.

#### **The Microeconomic Dimension**

Gorbachev's economic problems are of a three-dimensional nature. First, there are the traditional problems of overregulation, centralization, hyperbureaucratization, perverse incentives, inflexible prices, and monopoly producers, which plague the Soviet system. The combination of these factors led to a concentration on quantity at the expense of quality, an incapacity to innovate culminating in an increased technological backwardness. Gorbachev clearly misunderstood the nature of this problem when in 1985 he addressed the situation by merely trying to restore discipline, selectively increasing wage and salary rates, as well as increasing and reallocating investment. Clearly, according to Dr. Becker, these measures cannot substitute for systemic reform in accelerating the Soviet Union's technological progress.

#### **New Crisis Dimensions under Gorbachev**

Dr. Becker stated that Gorbachev only realized the need for genuine systemic reform in 1986-1987, and even then the actual reforms promulgated were only partial and inconsistent. The "new" economic system the 1987 reform package envisaged was essentially the old one: only small changes in state ownership, and retention of central direction, administered prices, and the state monopoly. Not only was this program unable to cure the fundamental ills of the Soviet economy, it also allowed a macroeconomic crisis to develop on top of the existing microeconomic imbalances. Dr. Becker mentioned that the roots of this macroeconomic crisis were present under the old regime as well, but that they reached critical proportions under Gorbachev.

This second dimension, the fiscal-financial crisis, manifested itself in excess government spending, loose controls over wage and salary regulation, poor credit control, increases in state currency emissions (up by 60 percent in 1989!), and substantial inflation. Inflationary pressures combined with continuing control over prices in state stores led to hoarding, empty shelves, and a "flight from the ruble," as consumers try to find something valuable they can spend their increasingly less valuable money on.



The present period has even added a third dimension to the micro- and macroeconomic crisis, in Dr. Becker's analysis. A combination of strikes, ethnic national conflict, and local protectionism has obstructed the interregional flow of goods and services, which was already strained by the undercapitalized and poorly maintained railroad transportation system (which in the Soviet Union carries the bulk of freight transport).

#### **What Can Be Done?**

It is not surprising that aggregate output is dropping, prices are rising, the national market is disintegrating, and that consumer dissatisfaction has reached politically dangerous levels. But what can be done about this?

Dr. Becker outlined three basic approaches. The first is to reimpose the command system. This approach would eliminate the timid attempts at liberalization that increase inflation by pushing up wages without producing and/or distributing the necessary goods and services to absorb the increased purchasing power. A second step could be to abolish the cooperatives, which are already quite unpopular in the Soviet Union. Another step could be to ration scarce goods until production can catch up, while reimposing the system of strict price controls. This approach would probably include an all-out attack on corruption and other economic crimes. Dr. Becker stressed this would mean the end of reform and probably the beginning of the end of glasnost and democratization, since such a program could only be enforced through terror. This package does not correspond with Gorbachev's idea of how to bring the Soviet Union into the 21st century. Nevertheless, certain elements of this program might easily surface in one form or another: Even some of Gorbachev's liberal friends favor a ban on strikes for the next few years, for example.

The second approach, "shock therapy," would be the polar opposite to the first scenario. Gorbachev would go all out in an effort to break the back of the three-dimensional crisis by an immediate transition to a market economy: free all prices, privatize all state industry, and allow free competition domestically and through imports from abroad. Dr. Becker asserted he did not think this was Gorbachev's plan either.

In fact, Dr. Becker said, Gorbachev is wavering around the centrist approach. The goal remains a "regulated market system," whatever is meant by this elusive concept (the Swedish paradigm seemed popular, and lately even the Japanese example is discussed). But the strategy and tactics to arrive at this goal remain fiercely debated. In the early part of 1990, the basic approach seemed to be stabilization of the situation first and then proceed with a radical reform. In the initial stabilization stage, the government would slash budget expenditures and boost budget revenues (by different means such as selling state-owned apartments to the present tenants, leasing land, selling stock in enterprises to the workers). The envisaged effect would be to cut the

budget deficit in half and absorb some of the huge volume of savings and cash hoards in mattresses that threaten to cause runaway inflation. At the same time, consumer dissatisfaction would be appeased by a sharp increase in the output (and import) of consumer goods. The fierce debates that have centered on how the foundations of the real reform should be laid and how long the first stage should last.

After the appointment of Gorbachev as President on March 15, there was a spate of rumors that Gorbachev had decided to follow the Polish example and pursue dramatic remedies. Dr. Becker stated that the appointment of the liberal economists, Petrakov and Shatalin, to the new Presidential Council seemed to support this hypothesis. Now it appears, however, that the most difficult elements of the reform (removing price controls, abolishing the ministries and giving the enterprises complete freedom of operation) are being postponed because of fears of inflation and mass unemployment.

Dr. Becker agreed it was possible to sympathize with these fears, but he stressed that the continued inability of the government to "bite the bullets" of radical reform implies the continuation and worsening of the three dimensions of the crisis he described.



