

# TAKING GORBACHEV'S MEASURE

*The new Soviet regime has caught a generation of  
Kremlin-watchers off-guard.*

BY TIMOTHY J. COLTON

**M**IKHAIL GORBACHEV IS challenging not only many inherited structures and policies in his own country but also the intellectual frameworks we on the outside use to interpret Soviet affairs.

For a generation, Western Sovietologists have been preoccupied with questions of power and influence. How great is the political clout of the General Secretary? How does it compare with that of his fellow Kremlin leaders? What say, if any, do bureaucratic agencies have, or think tanks, or local and ethnic constituencies? There is no universally accepted wisdom on these matters. But it is fair to say that foreign specialists, while paying rather greater attention to the political role of groups and interests other than the party oligarchy in Moscow, have continued to see the Soviet Union as highly centralized and authoritarian by comparison with the liberal democracies.

If such issues have lost none of their ultimate import, they are tending to be overshadowed in the late 1980s by dilemmas put forward by the rise of Gorbachev and his ringing announcement of the need for systemic reform. It is now less the distribution of power than the capacity of the Soviet system for innovation and adaptation that grabs our attention. Can Soviet political and economic institutions indeed be modernized and, as Gorbachev now propounds, "democratized"? What are the factors that stimulate and retard reform? How much reform can the system handle without losing its Marxist-Leninist essence?

The change to change in Moscow has caught most of us off guard. Not only is it forcing research scholars and government officials to pay close attention to current developments in a way deemed unnecessary during the long and seemingly changeless Brezhnev era. It is also prodding us to look afresh at assumptions about the connection between political power and system capacity. In the past, we tended to think that it was precisely the great concentration of power at the centre of the regime that made it so resistant to change. But what happens when those at the apex of the system are committed to changing it, rather than to conserving it as was the case during the Brezhnev hibernation? Gorbachev and his reformist administration are providing a fascinating real-life experiment that may help us eventually to come up with an answer.

I say "eventually," because today, in only the third year of the Gorbachev era, it is far too early to say with confidence what the outcome is to be. One factor complicating our assessments is that Gorbachev's own views about what needs to be changed have fluctuated. When he came to power in March 1985, his emphasis was mostly on technological modernization and the tightening of state "discipline" over deviance, in forms such as alcohol abuse, graft, and absenteeism and sloth on the job. By the time of the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress in early 1986, Gorbachev's ambitions were increasing and he was speaking of "radical reform" of the mechanism of economic planning and management. And by the summer of 1986 his rhetoric about

*perestroika*, or national reconstruction, was soaring still higher. Gorbachev now insists that Soviet society must undergo revolutionary changes, not just piecemeal reforms, and equally important, that these transformations have to go beyond technology and economic structures to encompass politics, culture, and personal morality. He also emphasizes the dynamic nature of reform, saying it must be done "on the march," by trying out initiatives and learning from experience, rather than by imposing a preconceived blueprint.

MIKHAIL GORBACHEV IS A MOVING target, not a static one. Moreover, there is much about his programme that remains vague, tentative, and even contradictory. More time will be needed before we and, for that matter, the Soviet people see what exactly he has in mind.

In the economic area, for instance, Gorbachev seems to advocate simultaneous decentralization and recentralization within the bureaucracy, goals that may in principle be reconcilable but have yet to be sorted out with any rigour in his statements. Gorbachev supports greater freedom for individual and co-operative enterprise, and new legislation coming into effect in 1987 embodies this idea, but entrepreneurs are still hedged in with restrictions which, on some points, are harsher than before. In the cultural and intellectual sphere, Gorbachev, especially since mid-1986, has promoted a remarkable thaw, not seen since the Khrushchev years, a development for which he and his fellow leaders deserve full credit. Yet he

clearly harbors at least residual doubts about unimpeded public discussion of the vexed Stalin issue, and he has failed so far to deliver on promises of legal changes that would institutionalize press and artistic freedom.

One of Gorbachev's most intriguing proposals, made at the January 1987 plenum of the party's Central Committee, is for multi-candidate elections, not only for government legislative bodies, as has been done for years in Eastern Europe, but within the ruling Communist Party itself. In putting the proposal forward, however, he claimed without explanation that it would not compromise the time-honored principle of "democratic centralism," whereby decisions of high-level party bodies are binding on officials of lower rank.

Adding further to the difficulty of analyzing recent Soviet developments is the unmistakable but elusive evidence of resistance to Gorbachev's ideas. Of the nine Politburo members (apart from Gorbachev himself) in place in March 1985, four have been retired, presumably for refusing to go along with the new General Secretary's approach. In every single speech since the party congress, Gorbachev has commented on the widespread nature of the resistance.

He stated in a February 1987 speech that reservations about the electoral and other political proposals he put forward in January were so great among the membership of the Central Committee that the plenum had to be postponed three times before he could achieve the needed consensus. In another address, in April 1987, Gorbachev declared that detractors were to be found "at the level of the Central