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Poland's Solidarity and Movements against Dictatorial Regimes

Political-process theories of social movements emphasize how constitutional arrangements, elite factionalism, and government behavior influence people's attempts to remake their world and redirect their histories. In competitive party systems, for example, movement leaders and activists often view elections and legislative work as effective tools for changing societies.

But what happens if constitutional arrangements preclude such legal initiatives? What happens if everyday people do not have constitutional rights to air their discontents? What happens if a government routinely represses nonelites' collective opposition to its decisions and policies?

Between 1960 and 1990, numerous social movements appeared in communist-party states, illustrating the generative capacity of movements even when constitutional arrangements and official hierarchies seem inimical to their existence. In Hungary and Czechoslovakia, for example, instances of local popular resistance, including rallies, marches, and building occupations, multiplied and became sizable during the 1970s and the 1980s. Even in the Soviet Union—the world's first stable communist-party state—increasingly large groups challenged the regime between 1970 and its collapse in 1989 (Bernhard 1993: 9–23; Hosking 1991; Mason 1992: 24–7, 36–7).

Solidarity, in Poland, was arguably the most internationally famous of these social movements. In 1981, approximately twelve million people (75 percent of the workforce) participated in the movement, despite the government's attempts to co-opt, intimidate, and coerce nonelite activists (Mason 1992: 29). The Polish party-state instituted martial law in December 1981, sending Solidarity underground. However, the movement reappeared toward the end of the 1980s and helped usher in a new regime. Let us ponder the context, predecessors, and aims and activities of Solidarity for clues as to how a large and influential social movement can emerge and evolve in a repressive political order.