

Proletarian vanguard as sons of soil

As Moscow holds the trial of the century, Russia considers what to do with the remnants of the CPSU, writes Hari Vasudevan

On May 26 the Constitutional Court of Russia began hearing arguments against the presidential ban on the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The continuing trial touches on a subject of importance to the nation's political life. Although the CPSU is a shadow of what it was, it can still influence the course of politics but has yet to find itself a role.

Russian Communists are highly divided. Both perestroika and democratic reforms have gutted party institutions. But in conditions where Russia's leaders hold their position by virtue of public apathy and political disension, the party, given legal recognition, could make or break coalitions arrayed against Mr Boris Yeltsin. Its uncertain future seems enmeshed with the rise of patriotism in Russia.

The bench has been witness to wrangles clearly meant to force it to some kind of verdict. The judges who heard the case ignored the contention of the former deputy general secretary, Mr Ivashko, that he would speak on behalf of the CPSU only if the court accepted he had a right to do so. This was tantamount to recognising the legal existence of the party.

A decision was put off until when Mr Ivashko, Mr Mikhail Gorbachev and others would appear. There is every likelihood things will be put off even further despite the government pressing a case for the ban and trial of the CPSU.

Many of those active in the

Democratic Russia forum — which supports the government in the Supreme Soviet — consider the party a criminal organisation. Its members are labour camp survivors, active in organisations such as "Memorial", devoted to assisting those shattered by the gulag. They support ventures like the "Return" publishing group, which brings out old gulag poetry and holds seminars to focus attention on KGB records.

Little note is taken of commentators who point out that there is little comparison between the CPSU and the Nazi regime of Germany. It is self-evident that those who committed the ghastly crimes of Stalinism are dead, that those who will ultimately face trial are those who tried to reform the party.

There is a chance that half of those who are with Mr Yeltsin today would also be in the dock. A Nuremberg-style trial and a reinforcement of the presidential ban on the party would cause a mess. It would have no moral value. The government is not swayed by these arguments.

There are issues of political importance which determine such a stand. What is involved is not merely the government's image of being anti-CPSU and the sentiments of a number of influential ex-gulag prisoners. Confirmation of the presidential ban will remove a major irritant from the political scene: a well organised and well entrenched political unit.

The survival of the Gaidar

government rests on the lack of a credible alternative. The CPSU may prove instrumental in finding that alternative if permitted to work legally. The funds associated with the party are still in circulation in the economy. Also a large number of personal networks at a local level are still in place.

Determined efforts to get the CPSU to the ground—legally or otherwise—have made the government more aware of this problem. At a meeting in the suburbs of Moscow a few weeks ago, a number of representatives of the various groups which have evolved from the CPSU met at a "party conference".

Members of the former central committee were to summon a plenum, expel the leaders who had betrayed the party and dissolve the politburo and the secretariat. Later, at a meeting of a new group named the Union of Communists, held on May 25, it was announced that there was considerable interest in the possible revival of the CPSU. This is particularly so in the ex-Soviet republics where there are large Russian minorities contending with new nation-states. The Trans-Dniestr region and the Crimea are good examples.

At both meetings the fundamental problems in any Communist revival were self-evident. Firstly, the party that may emerge will almost certainly be Russian. In most other states of the Commonwealth of Independent States erstwhile leaders are either being turned out or adopting courses that



One Russian who thinks the party's still on

rule out any reversion to their positions. Second, Russian Communists are deeply divided.

Mr Gorbachev had undermined the cohesiveness of the party long before the events of last August, creating "reformers" and "Soviet socialist conservatives" who were themselves further divided. Some of these actually left the party. But major divisions remain in the rump of the CPSU, especially since August.

There are a number of Communist organisations that have developed since the ban on the CPSU. Some assert their own claims to being the successor party. The more important include the Russian Communist Workers Party and the All Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks. Any decision on unity must also have the acceptance of the Moscow committee of the Komsomol, still a powerful organisation.

The implications of such divi-

sions were evident at the party conference, held near Moscow to plan the future party congress. When it was decided the CPSU would be recreated in accordance with how various party platforms were placed against a norm, the RCWP refused to agree and walked out.

Again at the founding congress of the Union of Communists, the RCWP delegate spent much of his time decrying the failure of Communists

to support the candidacy of General Makashov for the presidency. Since there is a close link between the associations Trudovaya Rossiya and Trudovaya Moskva and the RCWP, such divisions must be treated seriously. The associations have amply demonstrated their determination to lead the opposition to the Gaidar reforms.

The recent declaration by the president of the Trans-Dniestr republic that General Makashov will be his military advisor against the Moldovans is as much a warning to those seeking the reunification of the Communist Party as it is to Mr Yeltsin.

Even if such cracks are papered over, any Communist movement that emerges will find itself the weaker for them. Old Communists have close links now with the Socialist Party led by Mr Boris Kagarlitsky. Support for Communists among the working class has fallen. The official trade unions of the past are weak and a number of independent trade unions have emerged which have little unity among them.

A major source of weakness among Communists, moreover, is the slow involvement of old senior leaders in the evolving industrial and trading set up. The Valentin Tsouy scandal, which attracted attention recently, showed how a supporter of the party had become enmeshed in private enterprise, pseudo-philanthropy and petty graft in the Russian far east.

And there are undoubtedly

many like Mr Tsouy, who were good organisers though indifferent Communists in the past. They are necessary for any party revival but aspire to do well under privatisation.

All this indicates that even if unity talks are successful and the ban on the CPSU is lifted, what will return to open politics will be a fragmented and weakened unit. Communists as a united force, with the full weight of the CPSU's traditions behind them, will have to act in conjunction with other forces.

It is not clear with whom the new Communist Party, should it emerge, would work. "Left forces" may not have a strong enough following in the country to make a go of it on their own.

Such problems will certainly emerge if state ownership comes to mean little, as may be likely after large scale privatisation. The reorganisation of government, with a strong presidency and a new system of local government will undoubtedly throw up new issues. The surprise, then, that occurred at the April congress may repeat itself — "patriotism" and "nationalism" may be crucial aspects of the Party platform. It may seek its partners in the odd fraction of the Russian Unity bloc.

Such a development would be a greater indication of bankruptcy that even the indecision of 1991. If nationalism is all there will be for a revived Communist Party, one may well wonder whether such a party is worth reviving.

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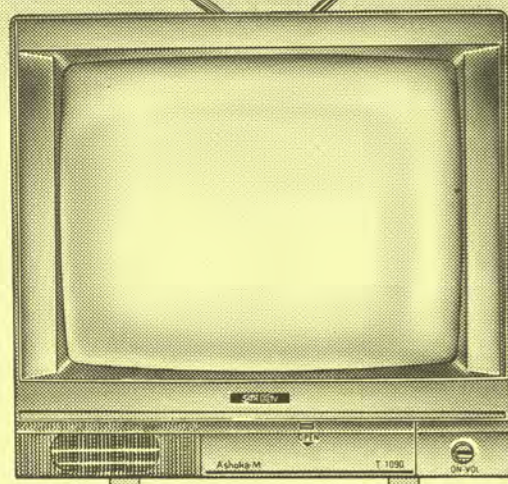
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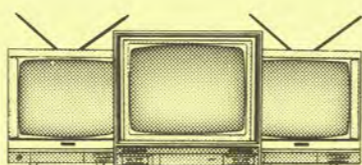
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