

CLOSE • UP
ON

Gorbachev

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IN March this year, the Soviet Union finally ended its succession crisis, after a decade of enfeebled leaders, by electing Mikhail Gorbachev as general secretary of the Communist Party.

Only a week before, President Konstantin Chernenko, his predecessor, had appeared on Soviet television after two months of total seclusion. His face was pale and puffy and he was visibly holding himself upright by gripping the back of a chair with both hands.

A member of the delegation he was receiving stepped forward to hand him a bouquet of red flowers and across the Soviet Union millions of tv viewers watched President Chernenko try several times to lift a hand from the back of the chair to take the bunch of flowers. After several efforts he failed to do so and an aide sprang forward to take the bouquet.

A few days later, President Chernenko was dead and Gorbachev elected as the new leader. By July he had secured his authority by appointing four new members to the politburo (Chernenko had appointed none), elevating Andrei Gromyko from the foreign ministry, where he had been for 28 years, to the presidency and removing Grigori Romanov, once considered Gorbachev's rival for the leadership, from the politburo. When Nikolai Tikhonov, who has already resigned as prime minister, leaves the politburo, half of the 12 members of the ruling body will have been appointed within the last two years.

The change has been a long time coming. Gorbachev rose to power so quickly because of the need for economic reform and the evident ossification of the government after 1970. The new general secretary only moved from his home in Stavropol in the rich plains below

the Caucasus mountains in 1978.

The longevity in power of senior members of the Brezhnev government has been overstressed as an explanation for economic failure in recent years, but the lack of serious commitment to economic change was symbolised by men such as Vasili Garbuzov, the finance minister, appointed in 1960 and Nikolai Patolichev, the foreign trade minister, who has held his job since 1958. The record is held by the non-ferrous metals minister who has been in his post, with a few short breaks, since 1940. Under the direction of such men the way in which the Soviet economy is run has changed little since the late 1930s.

To break this mould - to change significantly the distribution of economic power in the Soviet Union - requires equally dramatic political change.

The argument of the proponents of economic reform such as Gorbachev is that the way in which economic output was raised between the late 1920s and the 1960s is outdated. The period was typified by the mobilisation of previously under-used resources: labour, capital, natural wealth. Vast factories were built because expertise was limited and communications inadequate. Industrialisation was achieved but at the cost of high technology and over-concentration on heavy industry.

After the overthrow of Khrushchev in 1964, his successors, Brezhnev and Kosygin, his prime minister, continued to run the economy by the same methods. Economic reform was only contemplated where it was politically risk-free. Economic experiments were safely cordoned off from the rest of the economy.

Since he came to power, Gorbachev has emphasised that all this must change. Grandiose projects are no longer fashionable and the



aim is to raise the productivity of labour and the quality of output. There is talk, though as yet no more than this, of greater incentives and price rises.

Radical economic reform of this type requires significant political change. This makes the next few months up to the next Communist party congress on 25 February 1985 very important. A new central committee is being chosen which is drawn from the most powerful party, administrative and military office holders. Already more than a third of the 300-strong central committee have been changed or have died.

This political change must take place if economic reform is to have any reality. The retirement last month of Nikolai Baibakov at 74 after 20 years as head of the state planning organisation, Gosplan, is one sign that such change is on the way.

Gorbachev has moved much faster than expected to secure political

control - primarily through short-circuiting the normal secretive political procedures. As soon as he was elected, he started a series of tours of the Soviet Union with speeches attacking the way in which the Soviet Union has been run for 20 years. Soviets were astonished to find all this heavily reported in *Pravda* and on tv. The new openness culminated in screening an interview given to French tv but shown in Moscow in which the interviewer asks about the position of Jews and dissidents in the Soviet Union. This is not normal television fare.

Given the control of the central party secretariat exercised by Gorbachev, this puts him in a strong position to implement economic reform. The degree to which he will do so is still a critical question in Soviet politics. The answer to this will become clear over the next year as the party congress meets and the new five year plan is implemented.