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EAST GERMANY: Political Vacuum in the Making

Premier Modrow and other democratically minded forces are scrambling to develop an alternative political structure as Communist rule crumbles in East Germany.

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The State Council yesterday named Liberal Democratic Party leader Manfred Gerlach the country's first non-Communist president, replacing Egon Krenz. The Peasants' Party and Gerlach's Liberal Democrats have followed the Christian Democrats in withdrawing from the National Front group, which the Communists have used in their effort to assert authority. According to Western press reports, the State Council has accepted the resignation of the entire National Defense Council—the supreme commanding body for the military and security services. The Communist party, meanwhile, announced that it is moving up its emergency party congress by a week, to tomorrow.

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Roundtable talks are to open today in East Berlin between opposition and government leaders. The Communists will have two representative out of 31; opposition groups will have 14, the four non-Communist parties 12, and the Protestant Church three.

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Comment: The Communist party is virtually finished as an effective authority in East Germany; democratic forces will have to move fast to prevent anarchy. Though Gerlach is probably an interim figure, his appointment is a major step toward a non-Communist government, which is certain to follow a national election; that election could come as early as the next few months. The small parties formerly allied with the Communist party probably will scramble to establish their independence before an election.

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The roundtable talks are likely to get off to a slow start because participants will be jockeying for position on the issue of power sharing. The talks probably will diverge onto other issues, including reunification, which may become a major election theme.

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The Communist party probably will split at tomorrow's congress over efforts to reconstitute itself as a reformed socialist party. Even a reformed party is likely to do poorly in an election. Modrow must build on what legitimacy he has if he is to stay ahead of events. At a minimum he will have to bring independent activists into his cabinet and assign them key portfolios such as foreign affairs or interior.

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