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International

Rebellion and Reaction – Worldwide anti-austerity upsurge met with brutal repression

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Across the globe workers, indigenous people and youth are taking to the streets to protest against austerity, corruption, dictatorship and climate extinction – despite the setback of electoral victories by the hard right. How can we understand these movements, and what political obstacles do they face?

Last Thursday (28 November) 40 more people were killed by security forces across Iraq during rioting against corruption and austerity. Just another episode of brutal repression against rebel movements in many parts of the world in the last two months. In this period, we have seen the most widespread mobilisations against economic, political and climate injustice since the wave of struggles that followed the financial crash in 2008. Hundreds have been killed and thousands wounded or arrested. The international movement against climate extinction has been massive, but not (yet) met with the same level of brutal repression. [1]

In Chile, Ecuador, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Egypt, young people have been to the fore – people who were children or young teenagers at the time of the Arab Spring and Occupy! movements in 2010-12. While repression has been harsh, it has not in most places defeated the protest movements, even if it has succeeded in pushing them back for a while.

In Iran, as in Ecuador and Chile, the movement started as a protest against price increases – in this case a sharp increase in the price of fuel. As Borgou Daragahi explained:

“A sharp spike in fuel prices has ignited days of anti-government protests across Iran... potentially plunging the country into a new political crisis.

“Thousands of demonstrators defied freezing temperatures to take to the streets of the capital Tehran and other towns and cities including Isfahan, Shiraz and Tabriz. ...

“In one widespread gesture of defiance, drivers in numerous cities simply abandoned their vehicles, leading to major traffic jams.

“Security forces have responded with characteristic harshness, shooting teargas and possibly live fire to disperse crowds amid dire warnings by top government authorities.” [2]

It is now known that more than around 250 have been killed by security forces and seven thousand arrested in 165 cities. Declining living standards are linked to harsh sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies. But Iranians know that those in power in the Islamic Republic are corrupt, and the lifestyles of the rich are untouched by sanctions.

The situation for ordinary people in Iraq is even worse than in Iran. The country’s infrastructure remains in ruins, never having been rebuilt after the 2003 war. Hundreds of thousands have died in sectarian conflict, victims especially of Isis, al Qaeda and pro-Iranian Shia militias.

Patrick Cockburn, reporting from Baghdad, puts it the following way:

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“All Iraqis know that the country possesses vast oil wealth, bringing in \$6.5bn a month, but they live with widescale unemployment, lack of electricity, pervasive corruption and a poor quality health and education system. They know that vast fortunes have been made by government officials siphoning off money for projects that are never completed and, frequently, are never even begun.”

One of the very positive characteristics of the current movement is that it is not based on sectarian Shia/Sunni lines, but has united people from all communities.

In the past few years the political tide in Latin America has been running sharply against the Left. The defeat of left-wing reformist governments in Brazil, Ecuador and now the coup against the Evo Morales government in Bolivia, has not prevented the re-emergence of mass rebellion, notably in Chile and Ecuador – but now (late November) joined by another outburst of mass protest in Colombia, in a movement whose demands are typical of Latin America’s anti-neoliberal revolt. [3]

The huge mass rebellion in Chile has been detailed by a previous article on this site. [4] The country has a notional GNP of \$19,000 per capita, but the icy grip of privatisation of pensions and health care has plunged much of the country into poverty. The movement started as a protest against a price rise on the Santiago metro, decreed as part of an austerity package by neoliberal president Sebastián Piñera.

The deployment of troops on the streets of Santiago and other major cities, an eerie throwback to the Pinochet coup in 1973, has resulted in more than 30 dead, 80+ suffering grave injuries and thousands arrested – many reporting being brutalised or raped. On November 21 it was reported that many people had been blinded by rubber bullets.

Piñera has responded by sacking half his cabinet and apologising for “not having understood” the demands of the protestors. Few are deceived by these manoeuvres. Piñera understood the meaning of the movement only too well. And the mass movement refuses to go away.

In Ecuador the announcement by the government of the inaptly named Lenín Moreno of a US\$2.2bn package of austerity measures led to a huge protest movement. The government responded with brutal police repression and on 3 October, declared a state of emergency for 60 days.

Lenín Moreno’s package includes lifting subsidies on fuel prices, cuts in public spending, an assault on the acquired rights of civil servants and public sector workers (reduction of paid holidays from 30 to 15 days a year, a one-day-of-wages special contribution, and the renewal of temporary contracts with a 20 percent loss in pay), a plan for mass lay-offs in the public sector, an across-the-board assault on employment rights. These measures aimed at unravelling the left-wing legacy of former president Rafael Correa.

Here the movement was led not just by youth but especially by indigenous people, who make up 25% of the population and have been at the forefront of social struggles in the last decade. So huge and militant was the movement that Moreno and his cabinet left the capital Quito, and eventually withdrew the austerity package. Direct negotiations with indigenous leaders produced a compromise whereby the rebels will form a joint committee with the government to discuss economic reform. We’ll see what comes of that, but for the moment Moreno’s austerity moves have been pushed back.

The rebellions referred to above are not a complete picture of global insurgency. Earlier in the year an anti-austerity, anti-corruption movement shook Algeria. In Sudan the democracy movement that started in December 2018 overthrew President Omar al-Bashir in April, although it is still held back by the power of the corrupt military. In September an absolutely remarkable rebellion took place in Egypt against the corrupt and sadistic al-Sisi regime,

with its predictable result in hundreds killed and more than seven thousand arrested. [5]

How should we understand this wave of protests movements? What can they achieve and what obstacles do they face? The following are essential factors that that must be integrated into an analysis of these events.

The themes of being anti-austerity, anti-corruption and pro-democracy in different combinations unite all these movements. These themes are no accident, they reflect the consequences of the catastrophic response of capitalist governments worldwide to the economic crash of 2007-8 – a crash which dramatically exposed the way that neoliberalism has worsened inequality, impoverished many millions, and enabled corrupt elites to fill their pockets through control of the state apparatus.

From the advent of neoliberalism in the 1980s, until the 2008 crash, huge fortunes were made by financial elites, but the system also encouraged state corruption and the vast accumulation of wealth by a tiny elites. [6]

Massive amounts of money were hidden in tax havens and fortunes were made by the banks' connivance at so-called illegal activities like drug dealing, pilfering stature assets and the trading of blood diamonds and minerals.

When this system came crashing down in 2007-8, a radical anti-austerity, pro-democracy movement emerged in many countries. Its most dramatic forms were the Arab Spring and the Occupy! movement, but it also involved repeated huge anti-austerity mobilisations like the Indignados in Spain and numerous general strikes in Greece.

Capitalist governments did not respond to the 2008 crisis by reverting to a more regulated form of capitalism like Keynesianism, which would have involved a more equitable distribution of wealth, the prevention of debt bubbles, and limits to tax evasion – in other words some limits on the ultra-rich.

Instead the response has been to double down on neoliberal economics and confront anti-system movements in two ways – brutal repression and the building of far right and fascist movements to head off popular rebellion. [7]

While the level of repression in the Middle East is astonishing, elsewhere repression – bad enough in Chile and Ecuador – has gone alongside political manoeuvres designed to head off or placate the movement.

In the United States and Europe, with strong traditions of capitalist democracy, massive repression is, for the moment, not acceptable, although ultra-violent police tactics have been used against the Yellow Vest rebellion in France, and the Catalan independence movement.

While anti-austerity movements have remained buoyant in Latin America, the right continues to make gains at the level of government. In November, Bolivia's radical president Evo Morales was ousted in a de facto military coup; in Uruguay the right-wing National Party won the presidential election against the centre-left Broad Front. Brazil, Chile, Bolivia and Colombia have also moved rightward to varying degrees, though Argentina recently elected a centre-left president. Venezuela's leftist government is hanging on despite political and economic turmoil.

If in Iraq, Iran and Egypt corrupt and dictatorial governments rely on vast quantities of brutality to stay in power, elsewhere radical and socialist movements that try to give political expression to the mass protests face a strong political counter-attack.

Reactionary anti-government movements in Venezuela and Peru have been strongly financed and advised from

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outside, principally from the United States. Egypt's bloody military regime gets military aid and political support from the West, as do other reactionary regimes. *But a key plank in the global system of neoliberal reaction is to prevent, de-legitimise and if at all possible smash up left-wing movements that might challenge for governmental power in advanced capitalist countries.* The slanders heaped on Jeremy Corbyn are an obvious example of this, as was the EU's treatment of the Syriza government in Greece. [8]

This prolonged campaign has different wings. Hard right American billionaires have poured millions of dollars into reactionary think tanks, as revealed in the recent book *Billionaires and Stealth Politics* by Matthew Lacombe et al. [9] *The Guardian* recently showed how influential right-wing think tanks can be in reshaping pro-capitalist politics in the long term, by reference to Britain. [10]

But the campaign against any form of radicalism in the West depends not just on pushing the intelligentsia to the right, but of intervening in mass politics on key themes that can harden out a reactionary core of millions of middle class voters, but also of demoralised older working class voters, in 'left behind' areas like the smaller towns in northern England, French former industrial towns in the Pas-de-Calais and the American rustbelt.

The key political themes for this operation are xenophobia, nationalism and racism. The key instruments are the right-dominated mass media, whose scope and power is much more expansive than in the pre-second world war period and is frequently under-emphasised on the Left. We are seeing this process in spades in the current British general election through the media blitz to discredit and demonise Jeremy Corbyn.

In terms of political organisation this process can take the form of the hard-right capturing mainstream right-wing parties (as has happened in the United States and Britain) or support given to extreme right and fascist parties, as is happening with the Alternative for Germany, Vox in Spain and the Lega in Italy. As far as these countries are concerned, the term Creeping Fascism may be an underestimate of the speed of what is going on. [11]

American and British liberals tend to present phenomena like Donald Trump as distasteful 'populist' aberrations, based on the unfortunate and excluded ultra-poor. This is wrong on every count. In most places the ultra-right mass movements have their core in the comfortable (and generally older) middle classes, however much working class support they eventually garner. What is happening goes way beyond 'populism'.

Trotsky said that the situation in each country is a unique crystallisation of the elements of the world process. [12]

The attempt to crush anti-austerity, anti-corruption protest and movements is indeed part of a world process. Brutal repression, far right movements and demonisation of the Left are part of a single process. Dictatorships and the reactionary right everywhere are politically buoyed and financially aided by the power of ultra-reaction in the United States and Europe.

After the general election in Britain there must be a thoroughgoing discussion and re-assessment of how socialists and radicals confront and defeat the power of the right. At the core of that must be the struggle against racism and for internationalism.

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[1] Although the level of extra-legal violence against environmental defenders is considerable, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/aug/05/environmental-activist-murders-double>.

[2] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iran-protests-fuel-petrol-price-rise-death-toll-arrests-government-latest-a9206206.html>.

[3] *Foreign Policy* magazine reports: "...hundreds of thousands of Colombians across the country took to the streets with flags and rallying cries. Indigenous leaders, students, union workers, and anti-corruption advocates took the lead on the streets of major cities. Protesters' demands include addressing targeted violence against social leaders, implementing key parts of the country's peace process, putting in place anti-corruption measures, and stopping a range of rumoured economic reforms.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/22/colombia-protest-latin-america-chile-ecuador/>.

[4] <https://prruk.org/the-battle-for-chile/>.

[5] I have not included the Hong Kong insurgency in this list, because although it is certainly a movement for democracy, and has faced brutal repression, it is not against austerity or the effects of neoliberalism. To understand this movement, a good place to start is

https://www.rs21.org.uk/author/colin_sparks/.

[6] As I pointed out in a previous article on the Left Unity site: <http://leftunity.org/neo-liberalisms-world-of-corruption/>.

[7] See my review of Robert Ketners *Can Democracy Survive Globalised Capitalism?* At <http://socialistresistance.org/is-fascism-inevitable/12385>.

[8] The last 20 years should have put a definitive end to the notion, popularised by John Holloway, of changing the world without taking power.

[9] See <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/07/billionaires-and-stealth-politics>.

[10] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/29/rightwing-thinktank-conservative-boris-johnson-brex-it-atlas-network>.

[11] <https://prruk.org/product/creeping-fascism-what-it-is-and-how-to-fight-it/>.

[12] In the collection *The Third International After Lenin*.