

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6201>



International

Hope Is in the Streets

- IV Online magazine - 2019 - iV535 - August 2019 -

Publication date: Saturday 31 August 2019

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

HONG KONG, SUDAN, ALGERIA, Puerto Rico and more. These are part of a wave of democratic mobilizations challenging repressive, authoritarian systems. In a world that seems dominated by vicious reaction, these are signs of hope for a better future, even though in most cases the struggles' outcomes remain unclear, the political leadership vague at best, the internal contradictions often complex.

This isn't the place to produce a comprehensive list or detailed analysis, but rather we'll hit some of the leading examples and discuss some features they have in common as well as their diverse qualities. (Note: We're not taking up the case of Palestine, which is discussed in depth in Bill V. Mullen's presentation in this issue.)

As this editorial is being drafted, the explosive eruption of popular anger and determination in Hong Kong is challenging the Chinese regime's intensifying assault on the rights of Hong Kong's population, which were supposed to be enshrined for 50 years following the 1997 transfer of the former British "crown colony" to Chinese sovereignty.

That Hong Kong is historically Chinese doesn't in any way negate the legitimacy of its people's commitment to defending the rights they were promised under the slippery formula of "one country, two systems." It's entirely predictable that the Chinese regime, fighting as it is for supremacy as a global capitalist power under Communist party dictatorship, would attribute Hong Kong's upheaval to United States manipulation much as U.S. white supremacists called the American Civil Rights movement a product of Communist infiltration. But there's nothing about this crisis that's so hard to understand.

Contrary to the promise that Hong Kong voters would have expanded rights to elect their legislators and Chief Executive, candidates in the elections are tightly vetted by Beijing loyalist institutions, with elected representatives who refuse to recite the imposed loyalty oath to the Chinese state stripped of their office or imprisoned.

Everyone knows that the present crisis blew up when the unusually tone-deaf Chief Executive Carrie Lam, whether on Beijing's prompting or her own miscalculation, introduced a bill to allow extradition from Hong Kong to China's courts. In a context where some Hong Kong citizens have been notoriously "disappeared" to the mainland, and where the whole world knows that two or three million Chinese Uighurs are interned in "re-education" (slave-labor concentration) camps, this signaled to Hong Kong's people that here was the final choice to revolt or roll over.

Less publicized is the fact that the pro-Beijing elites who control Hong Kong politics have also made housing and the cost of living unaffordable for much of the younger and working-class population, adding an economic dimension to the democratic political revolt.

Mass protests began as entirely peaceful and mainly middle-class mobilizations of tens, then hundreds of thousands of people. When the government made clear that it would simply ignore the popular will, angry young people began combating the police, ultimately occupying and trashing the legislative building, and attacking other symbols of power and Beijing's authority.

Militant tactics supposedly alienated part of the broader movement, but one needs to understand that for today's Hong Kong teenage youth or early twenty-somethings, the prospect is that as adults in 2047 they'll be under unmediated Chinese state rule unless there's a mass democratic transformation in China by then the equivalent of death. Beijing's tactics now include demanding that companies doing business with the mainland fire

employees for protest activity.

The uprising appears leaderless. We don't know much about the politics or whatever organized forces might be engaged, but their combative spirit and tactical creativity in desperate circumstances can only be admired. (For more detailed analysis see "Localism's Contradictions in Hong Kong" by Promise Li at <https://solidarity-us.org>.)

The Arab Uprising Revives

The insurgency called the "Arab Spring" has been widely dismissed for dead in the catastrophic Syrian civil war and the murderously repressive al-Sisi presidentialist dictatorship that hijacked Egypt's popular revolution. But in the past few months, when Algeria's sclerotic FLN (National Liberation Front) regime put forward the half-dead president Abdelaziz Bouteflika for a fifth(!) term, the population took to the streets and said enough was enough.

In what's called Algeria's "Smile" or "Hirak" revolution, between February and July 2019, a popular uprising that spread from the countryside, forced the army to back down and set the stage for a still uncertain political transition.

Then in Sudan, against all apparent odds, a general strike in Khartoum and major cities and ports forced out the 30-year dictator Omar el-Bashir. In a too familiar pattern, a self-appointed Transitional Military Council assumed power, promising "reforms" somewhere in the future. Meanwhile, the TMC set the militia (the "Rapid Support Forces" — formerly called the "Janjaweed" in the regime's genocidal Darfur massacres) on the civilian population with hundreds of fatalities.

The clear intent was to terrorize people into submission to whatever new order the TMC — supported by the Egyptian dictatorship and Saudi monarchy — would design. Incredibly, the population would have none of it. With trade unions and women's organizations playing leading roles, the struggle remained mobilized until the military was forced to accept a three-year "transitional government" that's supposed to result in democratic civilian rule. It's a controversial arrangement that's sharply divided the popular movement, particularly because women have been almost completely sidetracked. The Sudanese people need to remain on guard against the military's continued power. The risks are enormous.

As in the first Middle East and North African (MENA) uprisings of Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, there were multiple underlying causes. The long, brutal suppression of democratic aspirations and unbearable kleptocratic regime corruption are obviously central. But there's also a burgeoning revolt against the degradation of popular classes' economic lives caused by privatization of services, slashes of subsidies in the prices of basic necessities, and governments' adaptations to the neoliberal demands of global markets and financial institutions.

These "reforms" don't reduce, but in fact exacerbate, the crony capitalism and clientelism plaguing these societies. They were particularly crucial, for example, in the years leading up to the attempted revolution in Syria. They have been important in the current Algerian and Sudanese upheavals, which also remind us — as expert left analysts such as Gilbert Achcar and Joseph Daher stress — that the transformation of the region is a protracted revolutionary process and not a linear march of triumphant events.

A Wider View of Revolt

Taking a wider lens to the global picture, the outstanding example of popular revolt against neoliberal economic strangulation has to be the Yellow Vest eruption in France. As Patrick Le Trehondat points out in the Summer 2019 issue of *New Politics*, it is made up of the people who've been priced out of the gentrified city centers and are now living in smaller towns and rural areas where a car is a necessity to get to work and reach basic public services.

It's not hard to see parallels with the grievances, and people's sense of abandonment by the system's elites and their institutions, that in the United States fueled the political rise both of Bernie Sanders on the progressive left and of Donald Trump on the reactionary right. Predictably, the Yellow Vests have been put under a microscope for every real or alleged expression of backwardness (e.g. anti-Semitism), and tarred as "anti-environmentalist" by privileged sectors who don't feel the pain.

In fact, the attempts by Marine le Pen's "Rally" (formerly National Front) party to exploit the movement appear to have largely fizzled. Whether the Yellow Vest phenomenon proves to be episodic "or as Le Trehondat argues, "Now the entire system has been called into question. A new social consciousness and political collectivity is appearing" remains an open question. The point here is that it's an important example that will not be isolated in the framework of a crisis-ridden capitalist system in the "core" and "periphery."

If as seems likely, a global economic slowdown or recession is on the way with the inevitable ruling-class responses of austerity, such mass interventions can be expected to become more frequent and intense.

Further Examples

We note a few other examples where mass popular action has made a difference in the recent past, or is doing so right now.

• In Turkey, Erdogan's presidentialist regime was defeated in the politically crucial Istanbul municipal election not just once but a second time, and by a larger margin, after the regime's puppet electoral council forced a re-vote. More than just a mayoral election, this was a popular mobilization in the face of Erdogan's increasingly autocratic rule.

• In Poland in 2017, angry pushback forced the withdrawal of extreme anti-abortion legislation pushed by the rightwing nationalist ruling party. And in Ireland, abortion and the right to divorce was legalized in May 2018 as in Poland, in defiance of the dictates of the Catholic hierarchy. This is the climax of a transformation that has virtually hurled the Irish Republic from the late 19th right into the 21st century.

• In Russia, where economic stagnation and social disintegration have alarmingly accelerated, people are in the streets defying the government's suppression of the right of opposition candidates to run in Moscow municipal elections. The persistence of these actions is especially remarkable in view of the circumstances where no short-term victory seems possible.

• In Armenia, a vastly underreported nonviolent political revolution "the first insurrection in a post-Soviet state that legitimately boiled up from the streets, free of influence from outside forces" (Marc Cooper, *The Nation*, December 7, 2018) led to the resignation of president Serz Sargsyan and brought to office a reform government headed by veteran activist Nikol Pashinyan. Because it didn't particularly fit any power's geopolitical agenda, it was barely noticed.

• In the face of immediate climate catastrophe, young people's strikes called by Greta Thunberg demanding emergency action on climate change are gaining momentum in Europe and North America, with global actions called for September 20-27.

â€¢ The Puerto Rican people have forced out the corrupt governor Ricardo Rosselló and are pushing back against the “emergency financial oversight” board imposed by U.S. colonial diktat.

â€¢ Here in the United States, although on a smaller scale, revulsion against the white-nationalist right, for women’s rights that are under sweeping attack, and in defense of terrorized immigrant communities has persisted throughout the vicious and cynical politics of Donald Trump and the bottomless corrupt cesspool of his administration.

What’s Coming?

Reporters interview participants in these countries who insist it is their obligation to come out and protest against repression and to demand their democratic rights. It is the same message articulated by Palestinians marching in the Gaza Strip, by Hong Kongers rallying in the rain and by the Sudanese and Algerian women raising their demands for freedom and equality.

The courage of people to continue in the face of brutal repression is inspiring, but frightening as well. Labeled as “terrorists,” beaten by police, military or paramilitaries, and threatened with severe prison sentences, they continue.

Whether Beijing will deploy the Peoples Liberation Army to crush the uprising as they did in Tiananmen Square 30 years ago, or whether Carrie Lam can force a sufficient crackdown, experts suspect the potential economic and political fallout would be too great. But India’s takeover of Kashmir has not unleashed a storm of protest! Nor has Bangladesh’s attempted repatriation of the nearly one million Rohingya Muslims, who fled from Myanmar for their lives just two years ago, unleashed massive protest.

The outcome of these struggles remains open. What’s clear is that new social actors are rising up and socialists need to stand with them â€” our solidarity lies with those in the streets, squares and roundabouts.

Source September-October 2019, [ATC 202](#).

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of *International Viewpoint*. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.