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International

Hope in the Streets, continued

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LOOKING AT A string of popular revolts, we wrote in our September-October issue (Against the Current 202): “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...” [1]

If that observation was germane then, in the brief subsequent time those upheavals have proliferated and the confrontations have become even sharper. As this is written, a mass strike is sweeping France against so-called pension “reform.” The costs of struggle and brutality of repression must not be ignored: hundreds of demonstrators fatally shot in Iraq and Iran, dozens killed and many blinded by police and military snipers in Chile, and that’s only the beginning.

The common theme in these diverse movements is identified by Gilbert Achcar in an extensive interview with Marxist Left Review (Australia): “(I)t is obvious now that we are witnessing a severe global crisis of the neoliberal stage of capitalism...If you look today at what is occurring in Chile, Ecuador, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Hong Kong and several other countries, it looks like the boiling point is reached by more and more countries.”

The Middle Eastern uprisings represent a new stage in the long, bitter series of struggles that began in the 2011 “Arab Spring.” But this by no means exhausts the picture. In Hong Kong the pro-Beijing government’s increasingly heavy-handed repression provoked massive street battles with activists, leading to a full-fledged police assault on university campuses and a massive electoral sweep by pro-democracy candidates in district council elections. [2]

We’d be remiss not to point to the role of U.S. imperial policy in every part of the global crisis. Donald Trump’s detestable Secretary of State Mike Pompeo “who’s up to his eyeballs in the Trump gang’s extortion of Ukraine” on November 18 proclaimed that Hong Kong’s government “must take clear steps to address public concern,” the very same day that he announced that Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories “are not per se inconsistent with international law.”

In fact, the plain text of international law expressly prohibits the placing of the occupying power’s population in the occupied territory. Pompeo’s announcement, instead, is consistent with U.S. doctrine that international law is what the United States and Israel’s colonial-settler policy say it is.

A global survey would also need to include Africa “where in Zimbabwe, for example, popular anger is boiling over due to the failures of the post-Mugabe ZANU-PF regime of Emerson Mnangagwa to deliver clean government and promised reforms. It’s a situation made worse by devastating regional drought conditions driven by climate change resulting in crop failures and desperate water shortages, all pointing to a future that faces tens of millions of people in southern and Central Africa.

Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, Argentina...

The bitter contradictions and escalating stakes of the confrontations are particularly evident in Latin America.

Following a contested election result, the forced “resignation” of Bolivian president Evo Morales enabled the extreme right, expressing the rage of white elites, to seize the levers of power. With strong Christian fundamentalist connections and fascist inclinations (although a marginal force electorally), they launched a murderous class and

race war against the poor and mainly Indigenous population. [3]

Among other measures, the “interim president” Jeanine Añez ordered the removal of Cuban doctors serving in Bolivia, the same measure enacted in Brazil by far-right president Bolsonaro — presumably acting on U.S. orders, to deprive Cuba of an important hard-currency income source. This will also create a desperate shortage of poor Bolivians’ access to health services, and quite likely a public health crisis.

Far from going unchallenged, however, the far-right takeover provoked angry uprisings and blockades in the Indigenous strongholds of El Alto and coca-growing regions, the sites of insurgencies that initially brought Evo Morales and MAS (Movement Toward Socialism) to power. Amidst military attacks that have produced dozens of civilian deaths at the least, the so-called interim government has promised peace negotiations and new elections, all of which remain to be seen.

Elsewhere, the rightwing reaction against what was called the “pink tide” in Latin America has produced, in turn, new popular revolts to block the re-imposition of savage neoliberalism.

In Colombia, the regime of Ivan Duque Marquez, a rightwing so-called populist, has gutted the implementation of the peace accords that ended a half-century guerilla war, leading to the targeting and killing of hundreds of activists and human rights workers — repeating the pattern that caused the collapse of a previous peace deal in the 1980s and a reversion to brutal civil and drug warfare.

Workers’ pensions and salaries are also threatened. In response, hundreds of thousands of Colombians have rallied to protest in the face of teargas and curfews.

In Chile president Sebastian Piñera called the military into the streets, for the first time since the days of the Pinochet regime, facing mass protests triggered by a rise in transit fares. The underlying issues run much deeper: The Pinochet-era constitution lifts the supremacy of private property over all social considerations, generating enormous inequality and insecurity for the majority of Chileans amidst decades of an official “economic miracle.”

During this period, practically everything in Chile was ruinously privatized, including most essential services and pension programs. With popular anger rising and the official death toll already in the dozens, the elites are scrambling to figure out how to contain the mass movement with minimal reforms.

In Argentina, similar policies of Mauricio Macri’s administration provoked large-scale street protests followed by the election of opposition candidate Alberto Fernandez with his vice-presidential running mate, former president Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner.

Unavoidably, a system that builds prosperity for the few on insecurity and misery for the majority is going to produce revolt — and that’s where the hope lies.

Lebanon, Iraq, Iran...

The eruption of popular revolt in the Middle East shows features that may portend a more promising future. As analyst Gilbert Achcar notes, “The events in the Arab region fit into (the) general global crisis, to be sure. But there is something specific about that regional upheaval” — the context that he calls “patrimonialism,” where “ruling families

own the state, whether they own it by law under absolutist conditions or just in fact” and regard it as their private property.

When neoliberal reforms are applied in that circumstance, they “got their worst economic results in the Arab region of all parts of the world,” because “what you wind up getting is most of private investment going into quick profit and speculation” rather than key productive sectors including manufacturing and agriculture. That goes some way toward explaining the roots of the explosion in Syria, for example.

Today reform struggles in Algeria, Tunisia and Sudan continue “and most promising in the case of Sudan, a coherent leadership has come forward in the form of the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), beginning in 2016 as an underground movement of teachers, journalists and doctors which Gilbert Achcar says has now “developed into a much larger network involving workers’ unions of all sectors of the working class.”

Importantly, the SPA doesn’t have illusions about either the Sudanese military or Islamic fundamentalism, the two poles of counterrevolution. It’s the crucial element of political leadership that doesn’t yet exist in most of the other regional struggles, exciting as they are.

There’s a revival of democratic protest in the face of severe repression in Egypt “but the most explosive new developments are breaking out in a trio of countries, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran. In each case, economic deprivation, government neglect and corruption are the driving issues. What’s amazing is how sectarian divisions, which in conventional accounts were postulated to be permanent and overriding, are being transcended.

Lebanon’s 75-year political system entrenches a three-part division of power where the presidency is held by a Maronite Christian, and the prime minister and parliamentary speaker positions respectively by a Sunni and a Shia Muslim. Supposedly, such a division of power was the only way to preserve the unity of a country dominated by communal loyalties. That colonial-derived sectarian arrangement hasn’t been updated for today’s more modern society, let alone for the neoliberal era.

Instead, activists say that the result has been a carveup of state functions into sect fiefdoms, all with self-enriching bureaucracies at the expense of horrendous inefficiency and incompetence “symbolized for many Lebanese in piles of uncollected garbage. The situation is made even worse, of course, as international lenders are pressing down on Lebanon for expedited debt payments. People in every community are rising up, not against “the other guys” but rather against “their own” communal rulers.

Most dramatic perhaps, that includes folks in the Hezbollah in southern Beirut protesting against the “Party of God,” long respected for its role in resisting Israeli aggression and as a champion of the poor Shia population. And throughout the country, people formed a mass human chain to proclaim that Lebanese of all communities refuse to be divided by confessional loyalty or by region. This may be the opening of a genuine Lebanese political revolution.

In Iraq, the catastrophic 2003 U.S. invasion overturned the Sunni-dominated Saddam Hussein regime and brought the country into the sphere of influence of the Shiite Iranian regime. But the heavy-handed tactics of Iran and its client militias in Iraq have brought it, along with the Iraqi regime itself, into disrepute with wide parts of the Iraqi population, including Shiite centers in the south.

One of Iraq’s leading Shia clerics and political figures, Moqtada al-Sadr, is spearheading a demand that Iran get out of Iraq’s affairs. Sadr is the effective leader of Sadr City, a vast concentration of a mostly poor Shiite population in Baghdad. And in the south, Iranian-backed militia forces have reportedly been the most vicious in cracking down on protests. Again, ostensible sectarian loyalties are being cracked by social contradictions.

Hope in the Streets, continued

Inside Iran, a combination of regime mismanagement and corruption, brutal U.S. economic sanctions, and catastrophic drought — more and more, a common factor in many of these crises — led to an uprising around the country triggered by an increase in gasoline prices that many people stretched to the limit simply can't afford. It's a revolt that's likely to run deeper than the Green Movement protests against the regime's blatant electoral fraud in 2009 — and by accounts that have come out despite the cutoff of internet service, violent repression has already caused hundreds of deaths particularly in the southwest region.

Socialists must be absolutely clear both in condemning brutal U.S. imperialist sanctions that are crushing Iran's economy and immiserating its people, and in our solidarity with the people resisting a murderous regime that doesn't hesitate to gun them down in the streets. Nothing progressive can come about through either through externally manipulated regime change, or illusions about the rulers of the Islamic Republic.

The outcome of all these developments is impossible to predict but they have the potential to reshape the contours of Middle East politics. And they're part of a growing global phenomenon of protest and revolt against unjust and increasingly unbearable conditions. The price of resistance as we've seen can be very high, but for hundreds of millions of people life offers no other choice. In so many places, hope is in the streets.

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[1] See "[Hope Is in the Streets](#)".

[2] For updates and analysis on Hong Kong from left activists, we refer our readers to articles on the Lausan website. Of particular interest: a critical perspective on U.S. "support" for Hong Kong democracy, "[Between Washington and Beijing](#)".

[3] On Bolivia, see Bret Gustafson's update in this issue of *Against the Current* as well as a lengthy interview with Jeffery Webber and Forrest Hylton, "[The Eighteenth Brumaire of Macho Camacho](#)".