



## IV507 - April 2017

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30 April 2017, by **robm**

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## Trump's unbelievably small attack on Syria

30 April 2017, by **Gilbert Achcar**

That the Pentagon had indeed made use of this old plan seems corroborated by the statement of the Russian Defence Ministry, whose spokesman described the attack in the following terms:

On April 7, from 3.42 to 3.56 (Moscow Standard Time), two destroyers of the US Navy (USS Ross and USS Porter) made a massive strike with 59 cruise Tomahawk missiles from the area near Crete Island (Mediterranean Sea) against the Syrian Shayrat Air Base (Homs province). According to the objective monitoring data, 23 missiles reached the Syrian Air Base. . . . Therefore, the combat effectiveness of the American massive missile strike on the Syrian Air Base is extremely low. Today it is obvious that the American cruise missile strike had been planned long before this event. It is necessary [usually, prior to such a strike] to conduct reconnaissance operations, to plan and prepare the missile flight paths, and put them on full combat alert. It is clear for any specialist that

the decision for the missile strike on Syria had been made well in advance of the events in Khan Sheikhoun, which have become just a formal reason for the attack, while the demonstration of military power has been dictated only by reasons of internal policy.

The attack was so "unbelievably small" and its deterrent effect so limited that the Syrian Air Force resumed its bombing of Khan Sheikhoun the day after, while repair work started at the Shayrat Air Base. Contrarily to countless comments about the miracle that would have happened had Barack Obama ordered a similar strike in 2013, it is most likely that it would not have changed much of the course of the Syrian war. Only an attack on a much larger scale could have made a big impact by spreading panic among the ranks of the Asad regime. Had the former president enforced his "red line" in 2013 with a "very limited" attack like the one that Trump did launch, it

could at best have prevented the killing by chemical weapons of the eighty-six victims at Khan Sheikhoun—out of close to half a million Syrians killed by "conventional" weapons since the start of the war.

Obama's "red line" itself was utterly amoral. It was like saying: "Kill as much as you wish with conventional arms, but do not use chemical weapons as they can spill over the border." The latter weapons were prohibited because, as Obama stated on 20 August 2012, "that's an issue that doesn't just concern Syria; it concerns our close allies in the region, including Israel." As for Trump's shedding of crocodile tears for the "beautiful babies" massacred by gas bombs, it was unbelievably hypocritical. It would be quite hard indeed to believe that the US president had previously never seen killed and mutilated Syrian babies on Fox News, his only "reliable" source of information. His greenlighting of the

“unbelievably small” attack designed under his predecessor was anything but a spontaneous act of moral outrage. Militarily rushed, the attack was a well-thought-out political decision. Its political impact was unbelievably big, indeed. Luke Harding aptly summarized its effect in the Guardian:

For the White House Thursday brought obvious dividends. After a chaotic period, in which the administration had been dogged by its apparent ties to the Kremlin, the news agenda had decisively flipped. For months, Trump had been unable to shake off accusations that he had colluded with Putin before the US election. Now the president was acting publicly against Russia’s strategic interests. Or at least he appeared to be.

Some of Trump’s sharpest Republican critics on Russia – senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham – praised his action. Hours before the strike Hillary Clinton said she backed intervening. Trump’s opinion poll

ratings are at historic lows. One imagines they will now creep upwards.

But there is much more to the story than such “reasons of internal policy” that the Russian military spokesman himself had detected. The Shayrat attack is actually the opening salvo in Trump’s unfolding grand strategy. It neatly fits into Trump’s foreign policy doctrine that Josh Rogin had aptly summed up in the Washington Post on 19 March, days before the Shayrat attack, with the motto: “Escalate to de-escalate.” His article is worth mulling over as it is most likely to appear in retrospect as the roadmap for what we might be witnessing in the coming weeks. The Shayrat attack could well turn out to be the escalation that was indispensable for Donald Trump’s long-heralded de-escalation with Russia and accommodation with Bashar al-Asad, at the same time as it was a message addressed to Iran, the designated arch-enemy of the Trump administration.

Taking place during Trump’s dinner

with Xi Jinping, it was also “a message to China about North Korea. Trump, who had derided Obama’s “red line” on Syria, has drawn one of his own on North Korea when he put Pyongyang “on notice” in early January, before even inaugurating his presidency. Thus, the Shayrat attack may very well have been a demonstration on an easier target of what Trump would be willing to do against North Korea, were it to carry on its development of an intercontinental ballistic missile: a message that Xi Jinping could not have failed to perceive.

Anyone believing that the Shayrat attack was the proof that Trump was moved by humane feelings after all and that it signalled a turn for the better in US foreign policy would be well advised to revise their view. The new attack should only be regarded as a most serious additional reason to be deeply worried about the new administration’s erratic behavior in world affairs.

[Jadaliyya](#)

## Victory as agreement is signed

**29 April 2017, by Jean-Marc Burgaud**

The social movement that has paralyzed Guyana for more than a month has ended with the signing of an agreement between the state, elected representatives and the collective “Pou La Gwiyaan dékolé” (“For Guiana taking off”) who led the mobilization. In front of the prefecture of Cayenne, approximately 500 people gathered, many wearing the tee-shirt “nou gon ké sa” (“enough”), the symbol of the blockade.

What a lesson on the eve of the first round [of France’s presidential election]! Guianese have voted how many times without result? In a determined mobilization, by all necessary means, they won. And not a little amount: 3.2 billion Euros. Work it out: for a population of 250 000 inhabitants, this means 13,000 Euros

of investment and sundry expenditure per person.

It will be necessary to monitor the application of the agreement. The movement has already ensured that the plan for the 3.2 billion is published in the Official Journal, which will allow legal recourse if the next government tries to escape its obligations. And it has not ruled out resuming its action, starting by blockading the Kourou Space Center.

In Kourou, the roundabout at the entrance of the Guiana Space Center remains blocked by activists demanding “a letter from the Minister of Health” recording in writing “the passage into the public sector of the Kourou medical-surgical centre”. Flights to Cayenne will also resume in

these coming days.

In relation to the first agreements drawn up in Cayenne by the government on April 1st:

- the government has given the green light for the construction of a “judicial precinct in Cayenne”
- there is acceptance that the question of the “total reconveyance” of land “be discussed during the next general assembly of Guyana”
- there is referral, by the congress of elected officials of French Guyana, on a “statutory evolution” of the territory.

It’s victory for the people in struggle in Guiana, but also those who have supported their movement. It is also a demonstration that, in the face of capital and its state, the only tool that

works is not decades of elections, but strikes, street activities, blockades, and all other means necessary.

# Economic chaos, violence and the search for alternatives

**28 April 2017, by Franck Gaudichaud, Pedro Huarcaya**

For several weeks Venezuela has seemed to be plunged into chaos, with demonstrations and counter-demonstrations by the opposition and the Maduro government, followed by violent confrontations, leading to the death of more than 20 people. The MUD (Mesa de la Unidad - Democratic Unity Roundtable), a heterogeneous coalition, demands the holding of immediate general elections to put an end to Nicolás Maduro's government. The situation worsened when, on March 30 of this year, the Supreme Court of Justice (where government sympathisers have a majority) stripped the National Assembly (where the opposition have a majority) of its prerogatives, because of the presence inside it of three deputies who were fraudulently elected. Faced with the scandal aroused by this move, the Venezuelan authorities finally backed down while sentencing the opposition candidate at the last two presidential elections, Henrique Capriles, to fifteen years of ineligibility.

The government's authoritarian drift does not only concern the opposing political elites. The regional and trade union elections have also been postponed without any date being assigned for when they will take place. The "People's Liberation Operation" aimed at restoring security in the popular neighbourhoods, is accused of dozens of killings by human rights

organisations. And political formations which until now were close to "critical Chavismo" and independent of the PSUV (Maduro's party), like Marea Socialista or the Venezuelan Communist Party, are now obliged to submit to draconian conditions to maintain a legal existence.

As for the MUD, it is clearly dominated by neoliberals and centred on a political project of social revenge, pro-imperialist and restoration of a "stable" government in the service of the dominant classes and international capital. Remember that during the aborted coup of April 2002, this same opposition had immediately overthrown the legal authorities and exerted an immediate repression against the people and supporters of Chávez.

Whether Maduro remains in power or a "national unity" government is put in place, the situation of Venezuela's popular classes remains very worrying. The country's economy, a prisoner of extractivism and the oil rent, has been hit full on by the rapid fall in oil prices since summer 2014. In a desperate gamble, the government has accelerated its mining mega-project in the Orinoco, under the control of the army and in alliance with the multinationals, which affects around 12% of the national territory, to the detriment of the environment,

the exceptional biodiversity of this area and the numerous indigenous communities who live there.

Meanwhile, the explosion of the black market, the collapse of the national currency, the "economic war" waged by many big private companies, the immense corruption of many senior civil servants and an ever more arrogant "Bolivarian bourgeoisie" mean that Venezuelans are confronted by immense shortages of food, services and medical supplies: hunger is reappearing in several Caracas neighbourhoods. Another phenomenon runs alongside the weakening of Maduro: the coming to power of the conservative right in several Latin American countries, thus a loss of regional support.

This general situation of political and social regression means nothing positive for the Venezuelan masses. If we obviously denounce any attempt at external destabilisation, our solidarity is above all with the social, indigenous and workers' movement of the country, with those at the bottom and the forces of the critical left who, while denouncing the projects of neoliberal restoration of the opposition and the "Boli-bourgeois", seek to chart a path independent of the government, clearly anti-capitalist and self-managing, in very difficult conditions.

## What Kind of Opposition?

28 April 2017, by **Against the Current**

Ross is indeed a special piece of work. As reported by the Washington Post, Ross was “(d)ubbed the ‘king of bankruptcy’ for his leveraged buyouts of battered companies in the steel, coal, textile and banking industries.” He “has generated a fortune of \$2.5 billion, ranking him among the wealthiest 250 people in America.” At the Rothschild investment bank, Ross “represented Trump’s failing Taj Mahal casino and helped forge a deal that allowed Trump to retain ownership. In the early 2000s, Ross purchased some of America’s largest steel mills, including Pennsylvania’s Bethlehem Steel and Cleveland’s LTV Corp. He later sold his steel conglomerate to India’s Mittal Steel, helping to form what is now the world’s largest steel company.”

In his confirmation hearings, Ross was asked about “his business ties to Russian shareholders while serving on the board of directors of a Cypriot bank.

“Some critics have condemn(ed) Ross for taking over troubled companies and shipping jobs overseas, while his supporters claim he saved the companies from going under and preserved American jobs in the process. Trump has [praised Ross as a savvy businessman and one of the most valuable advisers in his administration](#).

Then the “relatively uncontroversial” nomination of this billionaire job destroyer and exporter, murky Russian connections and all, was approved by a Senate vote of 72-27. Since there are 52 Republican Senators, that means 20 Democratic Senators voted to confirm Ross – which says a lot about the ultimate quality of the opposition the Democrats can be expected to provide.

To be sure, the congressional Democrats unanimously opposed the Ryan-Trump “repeal and replace Obamacare” scheme, which crashed and burned thanks to the ultra-right tea-party “Freedom Caucus” and the

absurdist shambles of Paul Ryan’s improvisations as he tried to line up Republican votes. And Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch is such an extreme ideologue that the Senate Democrats attempted to filibuster his confirmation.

And yes, all the Democrats voted against Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, along with the Republicans Susan Collins and Lisa Murkowski, forcing vice-president Pence to break a 50-50 tie in her favor. Because teachers’ unions demanded that they block the confirmation of this avowed destroyer of public education, that’s where Democrats took a stand – not overly troubled by the attacks on public schools and educators already ramped up under president Obama’s Education Secretary Arne Duncan.

Yet even Ben Carson, who’s as qualified to run Housing and Urban Development as the editors of this journal are to perform complex neurosurgery, scraped up six Democratic votes in his 58-41 confirmation.

There’s all manner of Democratic sound and fury at the real, although still unproven, possibility that Trump campaign operatives were playing footsie with those nasty Russians during the election. That’s a kind of opposition, although not necessarily of a particularly progressive type. (The United States of course never interferes in other countries’ elections, except for the 50 or so times when it did.) And no one knows whether the investigations of purported “collusion” are more likely to produce a damp squib or a political explosion.

When it comes to imperialism, there’s been next to no criticism from the Democrats – and frankly, not much even from Bernie Sanders – of Trump’s expanding U.S. special forces and ground troops in the Middle East. As we discuss elsewhere in this issue, these escalations are more in continuity than a break with the Obama administration’s strategic

policies. Mostly they’ve expressed dismay over Trump’s tweeting and bleating disrespect of NATO – again, not exactly the most “progressive” opposition.

## Grassroots Resistance and the Democrats

So what’s going on here? The Democrats are certainly parliamentary opponents of the Trump and Republican menace, but beyond those tactics do they represent a meaningful opposition?

Popular resistance exploded against the Republican and Trump agenda – on the Muslim travel ban, on immigration raids and deportation, on the drive to kill the Affordable Care Act, on the threat to wipe out what’s left of women’s reproductive rights and access to legal and safe abortion – from the fantastic January 21 Women’s March and airport mobilizations to local demonstrations and protests all across the country. Rightwing legislators’ “town hall” meetings were deluged with angry constituents demanding the preservation of health care.

The Democrats of course cannot ignore these developments, which picked up where the previous Occupy movement left off. The Democratic Party naturally seeks to ride the wave of this popular anger. It’s entirely capable of being (relatively) liberal, when pressed by social movements, on critically important issues like abortion, LGBT rights, and opposing the pure vicious cruelty of Trump’s war on immigrants and Muslims.

Some Democratic heavyweights, particularly the Congressional Black Caucus and Latino representatives like Luis Gutiérrez, are outspoken on issues like the Muslim travel ban and immigration raids. Along with grassroots outrage, this places some limits on how far the Trump gang can



go. For their own survival, Democrats have to try to prevent the wave of racist voter suppression and gerrymandering tactics sweeping across Republican-controlled state legislatures. They're also opposed to the most extreme and lunatic rightwing moves to cut taxes on the super-rich and let climate change run amok.

But the Democratic Party itself is a party of Wall Street and corporate capital as much as the GOP — which matters when it comes to core issues of the economy that ruling elites really care about. That's why the Obama-Clinton party "center" pulled out all the stops to prevent the election of Bernie Sanders supporter Keith Ellison as Democratic National Committee chair. It's why Sanders himself never had a chance of winning the presidential nomination.

It's why the Democratic and Republican leadership have worked together on poisonous "free trade" deals, from NAFTA to the World Trade Organization to the now-dead Trans Pacific Partnership, which are less about trade than about expanding corporate power over the entire globe at working people's expense.

## No Answers to Offer

Most important, the reality of the Democratic Party — where its funding comes from and where its class loyalties lie — is why it ultimately has nothing to say to a huge sector of Donald Trump's voting base. Although the core of that base are the affluent and rightwing business and white-supremacist elements, as we've discussed in previous issues of [ATC](#) what made the narrow difference in the Electoral College was a big share of the working-class vote in Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin.

It's foolish to ignore or dismiss the fact that a very substantial minority of working-class voters are drawn to Trump's "Make America Great Again" message, as false and cynical as his promises are. These are people who would be victims of the repeal of the

Affordable Care Act, the dismantling of Medicaid for low-paid workers, the wipeout of miners' pensions and the destruction of vitally important federal programs proposed under Trump's horrific budget blueprint.

But it's not enough to wistfully hope that Trump's head will explode after some "Saturday Night Live" episode, or that Russiagate will lead to rapid impeachment (and if it did, what then?). Hoping for this administration to self-destruct might be a Democratic strategy, but certainly not one for a progressive left.

Yet what else do the Democrats have to offer? Take another look at health care. Even though the Affordable Care Act is not about to "implode and explode" as Trump blathers, its shortcomings are unfolding in a slow-motion crisis as insurance companies withdraw from participation in the Obamacare exchanges.

It doesn't take a policy genius to understand that the failures of the health care system cry out for single-payer insurance, guaranteed "Medicare for All." That's actually the only effective way to cut through the tangle of inequities, bureaucratic entanglements and rising costs that have plagued Obamacare from the outset, and that left tens of millions uninsured under the hemorrhaging private insurance system.

But when the Democrats had majorities in Congress and the Obama White House, the leadership wouldn't even allow debate on single-payer, or even the soft-substitute "public option" alongside the private insurance industry. That's not because these options are unpopular; it's because they are popular — and entirely unacceptable to the insurance industry on which the Democrats relied to shape the Affordable Care Act.

Those are the interests that dictated the limits of what was "acceptable and practical." Yes, the delivery of health care under the previous setup was so horrible that Obamacare, as flawed as it is, was an improvement. Turning back the clock would be a human disaster and public health nightmare — but rearguard actions aren't a

viable answer.

Today, Bernie Sanders can fill arenas in "red" Republican states calling for single payer. Yet how many Democratic congresspeople will support the single payer bill he intends to introduce, even though it's one that could attract millions of Trump voters who think they hate "Obamacare" but like the coverage they have with the Affordable Care Act?

### Building an Alternative

Trump's supposed budget blueprint is a chainsaw massacre of federal programs that are vital in many cases to his own voters. Some examples are discussed in a New York Times article (Saturday, March 18: A1), "Nerves Frayed As Cuts' Import Grows Clearer."

"I was a productive citizen. Don't make me feel worthless now," says a retired nurse in rural southern Ohio recovering from radiation therapy, who depends on a federal heating subsidy she receives through the nonprofit Highland County Community Action Organization. Eliminating that program would force her out of her home.

Wiping out the Appalachian Regional Commission would devastate 420 counties across 13 states, 399 of which voted for Trump. Killing the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative would reverse decades of cleanup work, bring the cyanobacteria toxic blooms back to spreading on Lake Erie, and possibly hasten the migration of Asian carp species into the Great Lakes (goodbye ecosystem). Gutting the National Institutes of Health budget would cripple ongoing research and practically stop new projects.

Much of this extreme ideological "blueprint," obviously, won't become legislative reality, partly because so many Republican politicians' constituents are directly impacted, and also because reducing the State Department budget by 37% and cutting (non-military) foreign aid to almost nothing would tremendously weaken imperialist "U.S. leadership." And the Trump regime's clout has been weakened by its health care

debacle.

The very idea of killing off vital programs speaks volumes about the Trump-Republican notion of “rebuilding our infrastructure.” Billions for border walls and ecocidal pipelines; nothing for absolutely essential human services — a formula for Making America Third-Rate Again? Yet leading Democrats still talk about “working with

President Trump on rebuilding infrastructure” — and yes, on anti-Chinese protectionism too. That’s why those 20 Democratic Senators voted for Wilbur Ross. But what would be expected from a party whose basic argument is that it can protect corporate power more effectively than the Trump gang?

To address the millions of Trump supporters whose lives are devastated by his government demands a

different kind of politics, based on today’s movements of resistance with no regard for what corporate capital deems acceptable. That requires building an independent — and yes, socialist — left with uncompromising loyalty to the working class and oppressed people of the United States and the world, not to the liberal wing of capital or the Democratic Party.

[Against the Current](#)

# What is Reproductive Justice?

27 April 2017, by **Angi Becker Stevens**

You are all here today because you realize what a vital time this is for building a feminist resistance. It is also a crucial time to build the type of truly intersectional feminist movement we need, one that speaks for the rights of all women and not just a few. And one essential way to build that movement is by moving beyond pro-choice politics which center on abortion and contraception, to a more complete picture of what full reproductive justice means.

Reproductive justice is a framework conceived of by women of color, defined by the core belief that every woman has the right to decide if and when she will have a baby, to decide if she will not have a baby, and to parent the children she already has in a safe environment and healthy community, without the threat of either interpersonal or state violence.

Reproductive justice means not only that abortion remains legal, but that all women — including poor women, who are disproportionately likely to also be women of color — actually have access to it. That means free abortion, available close to home and without barriers like mandatory waiting periods, invasive ultrasounds, or required parental consent.

Reproductive justice means having full control over all aspects of our sexual and reproductive lives, which means

an end to all sexual violence.

Reproductive justice means that trans men and women, as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming people, have access to quality reproductive, sexual, and gender-confirming healthcare without shame or stigma.

Reproductive justice means access to quality nutrition and maternity care for all pregnant women. Reproductive justice means empowering all women to make truly informed choices about their reproductive healthcare, from contraception to childbirth.

Reproductive justice means the right of queer people to have children and form families with the support of their communities, without fear of violence.

Reproductive justice means supporting pregnant women regardless of their age, race, immigration status, or economic status.

Reproductive justice means the right of women to mother their children. Reproductive justice means no longer removing children from the care of parents whose only crime is being poor. Reproductive justice means no more shaming of Black women as “welfare queens.”

Reproductive justice means food security and clean drinking water.

Reproductive justice means that instead of telling people who are living in poverty not to have children, we end the capitalist system which forces people into poverty in the first place.

Reproductive justice means guaranteed paid maternity leave. Reproductive justice means providing for women who are doing the currently un-waged labor of childcare at home, and providing free, quality childcare for those working outside of the home.

Reproductive justice means treatment instead of criminalization of drug use during pregnancy, and an end to the entire racist prison system that tears families apart. Reproductive justice means quality healthcare and other services for pregnant women behind bars, and programs to help them mother their children after their release.

Reproductive justice means an end to police violence. It means that Black mothers should never have to bury their children because they were wearing hoodies or playing in a park.

Reproductive justice means environmental justice, and an end to environmental racism. It means that pregnant women and babies and children should never have to breathe air that’s been poisoned by incinerators or drink water that’s been

poisoned by lead.

Reproductive justice means that no women or children should have to live in fear of violence in their own homes, and that victims of intimate partner violence have access to resources which allow them to escape abuse.

Reproductive justice means no more imperialist wars killing children and their parents around the globe. It

means welcoming refugees who seek only a safe place to exist.

Reproductive justice means no more parents separated from their children by deportations, detentions, or incarceration.

We must organize and fight back against the attacks on reproductive rights from this current administration. But we must also recognize that full reproductive justice

for all is impossible under any president from either major party within the context of our current system. We cannot achieve full reproductive justice without dismantling the capitalist, imperialist, white-supremacist hetero-patriarchy. And I believe it's time to build a feminist movement that will settle for nothing less.

[Against the Current](#)

## India's New Consensus

26 April 2017, by **Achin Vanaik**

One can hardly overstate the significance of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) remarkable showing in India's recent state assembly elections in Manipur, Goa, Punjab, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh (UP), whose results were announced on March 11. Already the central point of political reference in the country and the only party with a genuinely national presence, the BJP made a qualitative leap forward. Its growing influence threatens to transform India into an authoritarian, Hindutva-ized polity and to strip the country's institutions of democracy.

While the BJP's victory in UP will be the main focus in what follows, the party's performance elsewhere cannot be ignored. The election results show its growing hegemony over the country as a whole, which will not only allow it to enact its Hindu-nationalist agenda but also help it further centralize power. In the face of BJP advances, India's progressive forces — ranging from the mainstream, anti-BJP parties to its Communist formations — must work together to change the national discourse and protect democracy nationwide.

### New Territories, New Challengers

The BJP's breakthrough in the northeast — a region that its main

rivals, the Indian National Congress (INC), has long dominated — represents the party's second-most important long-term gain. The INC could once cite this area as evidence that it had the widest geographical spread, but, thanks to the BJP's strong performance in Manipur, Modi's call for a "Congress-free" country has taken on greater resonance.

Modi's general election victory in 2014 helped him propel his party into governance in two of the seven northeast states for the first time. In Manipur, the BJP has now jumped from next to nothing to controlling a third of the assembly with twenty-one seats out of sixty. With the help of local parties, desperate to curry favor with Modi, the BJP has formed the government outmaneuvering the INC and its twenty-eight seats.

This comes after the BJP's strong performance in last April's assembly elections in Assam, the most populated of the seven northeast states. There, it won sixty out of the total of 126 seats; with the fourteen seats controlled by the regional Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), Modi's party established a comfortable governing majority.

In nearby Arunachal Pradesh, the INC won forty-three out of sixty seats in the 2014 assembly elections, but, by late 2016 — after farcical rounds of

mass defections — forty-two of those legislative assembly members moved over to the People's Party of Arunachal (PPA), which promptly joined the BJP-led Northeast Democratic Alliance (NEDA) to form the government. Again, the lure of handouts from the central government was too tempting to resist.

Outside its northeastern stronghold, the INC defeated the BJP in Goa — taking seventeen seats to its rival's thirteen — but secured only 29.4 percent of vote. (The BJP took 32.5 percent.) Here again, the BJP has formed and leads the coalition government, testifying once more to the INC's declining appeal. In both Manipur and Goa, pliant, BJP-appointed governors skirted constitutional proprieties to secure these outcomes for their benefactor.

INC did secure a comfortable majority in Punjab, where it won seventy-seven out of the total 117 seats, pushing the new Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) into second place. The greatly discredited leading coalition of the BJP and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), which caters to the majority Sikh community with an upper-caste bias, took eighteen seats.

This result represents a major loss for the AAP, which had anticipated either being the largest party or even securing an absolute majority. In

2014, it won four seats in the Lok Sabha, India's lower house. A year later, it formed the local government in Delhi and invested a major grassroots effort to prepare for these assembly elections.

Had the AAP achieved a majority, it would have appeared as the INC's most likely successor – a bourgeois, centrist force that could attract the widest cross section of the Indian electorate. Further, the win would have made the young party the only one besides the BJP with expanding popularity and geographic reach. Its results in Goa, however, dashed these expectations.

The AAP had reasonably high hopes of making a mark in that state, but it ended with only 6.3 percent of the vote (which was almost half the percentage tally of those voters who pressed the "None of the Above" button rather than choose any party) and no legislative seats. This reveals that, even with widespread disillusionment, the AAP couldn't seriously connect to local needs and issues.

As a result of this loss, it will struggle to construct an effective national challenge to the BJP. Now it is marking time, leaning on its performance as the leading party in Delhi and as the main opposition in Punjab to determine whether it can grow or whether, like other upstart parties, it will fade away.

We can easily identify the AAP's fatal flaw: at a moment when politics is moving steadily to the right, it would not seriously challenge the BJP's Hindutva agenda. Hoping to avoid the issue altogether, the AAP instead focused on safer, public-service campaigns that cut across class, caste, religious, and regional lines, revealing that it will neither emulate nor confront the Hindutva platform. The AAP, in fact, has no distinctive ideology and offers no alternative to the BJP's nationalist discourse. Indeed, it sometimes even bends to its rival's agenda. AAP may be able to win over the non-BJP parties' voters, but it cannot make a serious dent in the leading party's base, which is expanding because of – not despite – its Hindutva ideology.

In the northern province of Uttarakhand, where the INC held just one more seat than the BJP, the former lost twenty-one seats (leaving it with only eleven), and the BJP gained twenty-six, giving it fifty-seven seats and a clear majority. In UP, the BJP took 312 seats out of 403, giving it another super majority. Even in the context of India's first-past-the-post system, these results are extraordinary.

For the last three decades, UP's demographics have largely determined electoral outcomes, but this seems to be changing. Here, two major communities – the Dalits, which make up about 20 percent of the population, and Muslims, which make up over 19 percent – do not support the BJP. Despite this, Modi's party has won large majorities in the past two elections.

In the 2014 general elections, Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) obtained 20 percent of the vote, and the BJP took 42 percent. Yet her party won no seats, and Modi's bagged seventy-one out of the total eighty. [This year](#), Mayawati's vote share went up to 22.2 percent, but she secured only nineteen seats. The Samajwadi Party (SP), which enjoys support from the Yadav and Muslim communities, also fared dismally, taking forty-seven seats on a vote of 21.8 percent.

Of course, uneven demographics partially explain these results. The BSP's 20 percent represents an average across the state. In some areas, it would not have reached even double digits while, in majority Dalit regions, it likely took around 40 percent, give or take. Nevertheless, the surprising results have raised concerns about the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) that India has used since 2004.

No other democracy has relied on this system so repeatedly or extensively. Indeed, most advanced democracies have rejected its use because the machines do not leave a paper trail to ensure accurate results. It is not surprising, then, that [Mayawati publicly accused](#) the BJP of manipulating the system. Her party's general secretary also wrote a formal letter of complaint to the election

commission (EC).

Indeed, a team comprised of three experts from India, Netherlands, and the United States has studied the EVMs, and [their documentary](#) reveals how easily the machines can be tampered with. Further, in April 2014, evidence that one [machine could only record BJP votes](#) went public. On this occasion, the INC complained, but when it last won the general elections in 2009, the opposition parties – including the BJP – registered their concerns about the system. Since it took the 2014 general election, Modi's party has been silent about the issue.

While there is surely great potential for voter fraud across India, exit polls in UP – which skirt the issue of EVMs completely – all predicted that the BJP would win somewhere between 180 and 280 seats. We must then analyze how Modi's party won and what its victory means for the country and the future.

## Uttar Pradesh, Why and How?

The 2014 general elections marked the first time since independence that the majority party in the Lok Sabha did not have a single Muslim MP. In the 2017 UP elections, the BJP did not put up a single Muslim candidate. Modi's message is clear: the BJP does not care about the Muslim vote, proving that it, unlike all the other parties, refuses to play the politics of appeasement.

The BJP's victory in UP raises a number of questions. Considering the state's population is 20 percent Muslim – and that both the SP and BSP courted these votes – how did the Hindu nationalists secure victory? Do Muslims vote en bloc? Did they in fact vote for the BJP in substantial numbers, as party leaders like Amit Shah and others have claimed?

Put simply, Shah is incorrect. Given his party's Hindutva ideology, its leadership's venomous attitude toward Muslims, and the brutal history of both communal riots and individually targeted assaults carried out by the BJP's affiliates, like the Rashtriya



Swayemsevak Sangh (RSS), Muslims as a group oppose the BJP. That said, the Muslim community does not have a consolidated strategic vote, which the BJP's success in these areas makes evident.

The [Hindustan Times](#) analyzed forty-two of the seventy-three constituencies where the population is over 30 percent Muslim and found that the BJP won thirty-one. (The SP took ten and the BSP only one.) Besides voting against the BJP, Muslims pick their candidates like everyone else: class, caste, and local concerns shape their preferences.

In states with a two-horse race between Congress and BJP, Congress wins the Muslim vote. In states where neither the BJP nor Congress has power, the Muslim vote splits among other regional parties. In states with three or more major parties like [UP](#), the votes are spread between Congress, SP, and BSP.

Here, region, class, and caste play a decisive role. For example, more poor Pasmanda Muslims support the BSP than the SP. Likewise, the Yadav community, officially classified as an "otherwise backward caste" (OBC), prefers the SP, and the Jatav community, which belongs to the Dalit caste, largely votes for the BSP. In the 2012 assembly elections, the Yadav and Jatav communities offered more consolidated support for their parties than Muslim and Brahmin voters. Two years later, however, Brahmins and Muslims were more consolidated than the Yadavs and Jatavs. In areas where riots have taken place, the Muslim vote understandably comes together more tightly.

Fortunately, UP did not have a repeat of the 2013 riots, but the BJP nevertheless played the ethnic card in its campaign. It did so on various registers, ranging from Modi's more masked "but still clearly abusive" rhetoric to many of the party's candidates more naked hate speeches. These tactics should have forced the EC to disqualify the candidates, but it did not.

When it comes to caste, the RSS/BJP and cohort organizations had to operate differently. Given that the

Yadav OBCs constitute a loyal SP block, that the Jatavs go for the BSP, and that Muslims would never vote for the BJP, the party had to win as much as possible of the remaining 60 percent of the electorate, which is comprised of Brahmins and other upper castes (around 25 percent), non-Yadav OBCs (around 30 percent), and non-Jatav Dalits.

The BJP's strategy depended on the nation's rapidly changing economics and ideology. Uneven capitalist development, accelerated by the neoliberal turn, has combined with the communications revolution to begin to unify the country. Fewer and fewer Indians rely on the agricultural sector for employment, turning instead to the low-paid and insecure non-farm rural and urban labor markets. Migration to major cities and to larger towns in the rural areas has created new links between rural and urban life, confronting citizens with the connection between economics and politics.

Voters now recognize the central government's power to shape life in the provinces, the inequalities within and across states and regions, the ever starker contrasts between the rich and the poor, and the corrupt processes that have helped create this situation. Life becomes more precarious for many while others are making steady progress, creating class and caste resentment. Meanwhile, a nationalist identity is developing alongside more local and traditional forms of collective identification.

In India, the emotional content and practical thrust of nationalism is very much under construction. Here the numerous organizations that make up the Hindu-nationalist Sangh Parivar have been incredibly effective: the BJP has taken up residence in the halls of state and central government while the rest of the Sangh's organizations have integrated themselves throughout civil society. The Sangh built its power on a longer process that cultivated a sense of belonging to a broader cross-caste religious community among Hindus.

This growing sense of nationalist identification does not necessarily oppose more local forms of

identification. Rather, in UP and elsewhere, the national and the local have started to meld. This change is by no means permanent, but only particular forms of struggle can move politics in a more progressive direction. Indeed, the caste reservation systems, which guaranteed representation in government and civil society for historically oppressed groups like Dalits and the OBCs' lower layers, acted for a time as barriers to the advance of the BJP/RSS. Not anymore.

On the one hand, the BJP/RSS has largely accepted the principle of reservations. On the other hand, the profound limitations of this, the strongest form of affirmative action, have now been laid bare. Reservations can only exist for a small minority within the reserved ranks, and its application has disproportionately favored the children of those who already used the system to climb the social ladder. The system no longer meets the needs of those left behind. At the same time, it has created frustration among the higher rural castes as they watched their fortunes erode thanks to rising production costs, declining inherited land holdings, and so on.

Now, upper-caste OBCs and even some forward castes demand reservations for themselves and scapegoat those whom the system was designed to favor. There is the absence of enough decently paid jobs throughout urban India, and the country's utterly inadequate health, social security, and educational services means that huge numbers cannot be lifted out of poverty. The turn to religious forms of consolation "a global development" is an unsurprising response to the forms of alienation that the neoliberal order imposes everywhere.

It is in this fertile soil that the BJP's leaders have been diligently planting their message. They accuse the parties that oppose them "the protectors of the Hindu faith" of trying to appease Muslims. What about the Hindus? Then they point out that the BSP favors the Jatavs and the SP favors the Yadavs. What about the rest of the Dalits and OBCs?

When it comes to Muslims, the Sangh Parivar plays its nationalist card, emphasizing the rising danger presented by homegrown Muslim terrorism and by Pakistan. Indian Muslims, they presume, sympathize with the enemy by virtue of religious affiliation. Indeed, [Modi did not hesitate](#) to imply, without any evidence, that a railway accident in UP was the work of foreigners.

If there had once been widespread indifference toward the plight of Muslims, now resentment and even hostility has grown. As a result, a majority religious community has come to believe that it is the victim. This gives the BJP more latitude to deploy its Muslim-baiting agenda, both regionally and nationally.

Finally, we must take two other factors into account. Alongside the Hindutva narrative â€” ably spread by a powerful grassroots network of cadres that is unmatched by any other collection of party organizations â€” the BJP has repeatedly claimed that the Modi regime brought about rapid economic development. In truth, the party's overall record, both in central government and in BJP-ruled states, is quite unremarkable when compared to public requirements, to non-BJP ruled states, and to Congress's record. But Modi understands that short-term perceptions now have greater weight than actual performance.

Secondly, the greater influence of media on politics has paved the way for a new kind of personalized populism, allowing for a seemingly more direct relationship between the supreme leader and the public. This bypasses representative institutions because the public feels that its concerns are reaching the very top. The supreme leader can thereby centralize more power through both representative institutions and internal party structures.

In UP, the BJP refused to name a chief ministerial candidate, relying on Modi to lead the campaign. Never before has any prime minister taken so much time off from central responsibilities. He and BJP president Amit Shah are therefore taking credit for the UP victory, making them effectively unassailable from internal criticism at

least until the next general election. This constitutes a shift within the Sangh in the favor of the Modi/Shah-controlled BJP. Even RSS cadres are extending greater loyalty to Modi personally. The RSS leadership, already wary of concentrating power in the prime minister's hands, will not like this development.

Finally, Modi appears to voters as an incorruptible politician. His poor OBC background â€” a first for India's prime minister â€” further boosts his popularity. Over time, this highly exaggerated self-projection might lead to a dramatic popular disillusionment, but if the short-term gains are important enough â€” as they are in UP â€” the long-term benefits are also considerable.

For example, Modi believed that the [demonetization gamble](#) would win him huge public support. Despite the fact that it imposed substantial socioeconomic distress on a wide scale, the strategy has succeeded. Modi came across as a single-minded warrior against the rich and their ill-gotten wealth. The assembly election results in UP and elsewhere underline that Modi won the battle of perceptions. Those who suffered as a result of demonetization believed they were making a honorable sacrifice for the greater public good. Modi effectively welded class resentment to nationalist fervor.

## The Sangh's Next Moves

This victory now makes many courses of action that once seemed distant more feasible. Most importantly, of course, Modi and the BJP are now the frontrunners for the next general elections, which are due in mid-2019. Assembly elections in Gujarat (currently held by the BJP) and Himachal Pradesh (held by the INC) will take place in November-December 2017. The BJP will pull out all stops to win these, particularly Modi's home state of Gujarat, where the main contender is once again the Congress. In November-December 2018, elections are due in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh (MP), and Chhattisgarh, all three

ruled by BJP administrations. Modi may call for general elections around that time.

The central government has already put out floaters to assess support for synchronizing the central and state elections. The BJP no doubt feels this change would play to its advantage everywhere and set a precedent for future elections. Adopting synchronized elections, however, would reduce the political diversity that has marked the Indian polity since the late 1960s, which have made it much more difficult for a single party to dominate the whole country.

In July, an electoral college â€” consisting of MPs from both houses of parliament and MLAs from the state assemblies â€” will choose a new president. The BJP's gains in the state assemblies almost certainly guarantee that they will get to pick the president.

In 2020, seats in India's upper house, the Rajya Sabha, will be up for election, and its composition will depend on how well parties do in the next general elections. The BJP wants to ensure that it holds a two-thirds majority in both houses, which will put it in a position to carry out major constitutional amendments. Should this happen, it may move toward a system of governance more centered on the president.

The Sangh has its own policy ambitions, many of them religious in nature. In UP, it will likely build the [Ram Mandir](#), which it wants to place on a site where a mosque was destroyed in 1992. The plan has been held in abeyance by the Supreme Court since then, but the BJP/RSS might start construction after making a deal with the puppet Muslim religious organization in the disputed area. Such a deal would give them legal justification. The temple would concretize the Sangh's claims that India is not only a Hindu nation but in fact a Hindu state in all but name. The surprise announcement that Yogi Adityanath â€” a godman turned politician (with criminal cases lodged against him) and hitherto seen as occupying the extreme â€”fringe' among Hindutva fanatics â€” the clearest signal that the temple issue will be upfront for the 2019 general

elections.

The Sangh will also push for outlawing [triple talaq](#) within the Muslim community. All progressive sections of society, including many Muslim women, will support this plan. Much trickier would be trying to establish a Uniform Civil Code (UCC), although the Sangh has long called for one. Any genuinely non-discriminatory UCC would have to address the patriarchal characteristics of existing Hindu inheritance and tax laws as well as marriage customs. This explains why, for all their tirades against Muslim law, the Sangh has never put forward a draft UCC for public discussion. We can also expect mobilizations and proposals to ban the sale of beef and its transport nationwide. Yogi Adityanath has already announced the closure of “illegal” abattoirs in UP, which has encouraged physical assaults on Muslim-run businesses as well as sending a political message that Hindutva concerns on various fronts will be strongly advanced.

Existing efforts to carry out education reform will be enhanced at both the central level and in states ruled by the BJP. Already, the Sangh has revised curricula and hired new personnel in hopes of changing the terms of intellectual discourse. Since 2014, central universities have faced systematic assaults, including physical violence. Most recently, the students and faculty in Delhi University, the country’s largest, have seen an attack on freedom of speech and of association in the name of preventing supposedly antinational discourse and organization. Self-censorship and fear of physical reprisals have become widespread among dissenters, critics, and even neutral parties.

Labor reforms that give more power to employers to set wage and working conditions have already been introduced, and many more are on the way, further pushing the economy in a neoliberal direction.

The BJP will also become more aggressive in the [Kashmir Valley](#), and they will likely escalate their attempt to finish off the Naxalites in Central India, irrespective of the collateral damage inflicted on local tribes. This is no campaign to win over hearts and

minds.

The government will also accelerate the effort to make holding a Unique Identification Document necessary if not compulsory for all citizens. Given the absence of meaningful safeguards against invasion of privacy, this will start transforming India into a strong surveillance state. The Sangh has always wanted this outcome so that it can better monitor the behavior not only of its principal enemies “Muslims and the Left” but also of those it considers opponents of the Hindutva project.

Higher levels of the judiciary have shown some resistance to the Modi regime, but they will not remain immune to the shifting balances of forces in society at large.

## The Opposition

The election results predict a bleak future in which opposition parties and marginalized sections of society will be forced to survive. Among Muslims, the search for self-protection could go in two directions: many will decide to declare loyalty to the BJP, while others will become more attracted to radicalized Islam. While counterproductive, we cannot dismiss this development as inconceivable.

Meanwhile, membership in Sangh organizations will grow. Greater ideological agreement will account for some of this, but straightforward money-making and career-enhancing reasons will also swell the group’s membership. Certainly, the Sangh’s more dedicated foot soldiers will have greater freedom of action.

A number of factors will shape the responses of the political parties that rule non-BJP states. First, they will have to assess their confidence in their future prospects. The BJP made it clear immediately after the election that it would target the [120 Lok Sabha](#) seats in the states where it has yet to gain a foothold, which include West Bengal, Odisha, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and the remaining states of the northeast.

Further, these opposition parties will have to determine how much they

depend on central largesse to pursue policies that will strengthen their base. Their historical relationship with the BJP and their ambitions for the future will play an important role as well. Some have been content to remain purely regional forces and therefore are more open to reaching a *modus vivendi* with the BJP, while others have wanted to expand their presence and influence, which would demand some kind of confrontation.

The Congress, the BSP, the SP, and the mainstream left parties “the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI (M), the Communist Party of India (CPI), and the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation (CPI-ML)” all have, for differing reasons, no choice but to come out in strong opposition to the BJP. Even the AAP may do so.

These forces could become the building blocks for a national opposition, but there are reasons to doubt that they can cooperate with each other, let alone bring in other allies. For one, they have regional rivalries. Furthermore, the elections have sparked serious internal tensions within the INC, SP, and BSP. The SP might split, while we can expect calls for leadership change in the other two parties. In all three, members will likely defect to join the BJP. Fear of a common opponent without a unifying platform does not offer much promise for a strong coalition.

The mainstream left faces another kind of crisis. The CPI-ML is the smallest party, with no parliamentary representation. It has an active student base in Delhi and parts of Bihar, but the other two parties do not take it seriously. The CPI and CPI (M) now have two kinds of members: those with little or no ideological commitment who will shift loyalties if material or political gains are available, and more ideologically committed members who now suffer from low morale. While no longer confident in their parties’ vision, they want to be active on the ground. If the leadership can guide them, they will engage seriously in grassroots struggles.

We now face not merely an interlude of BJP dominance; we must recognize

that the party “ and the Sangh more generally “ has established a certain level of hegemony that is still expanding. The more immediate effort to defeat Modi’s party in the upcoming elections must be integrated into a long-term strategy to establish a more humane and progressive consensus.

The Modi regime’s neoliberal policies cannot provide the development that the prime minister promised. Undernourishment and malnourishment will remain at unacceptably high levels, calling into question his claims that absolute poverty is declining. As it is, the government measures this poverty level through household income surveys that do not include the cost of most basic requirements like education, health care, housing, and social security. Modi cannot meet, either quantitatively or qualitatively, the two needs that are the most demanded “ decent jobs and public healthcare. Income inequality is rising rapidly, creating increasing frustration. These failures guarantee mass discontent, but how will this anger and frustration be channeled politically?

Party-level politics to defeat the BJP in the forthcoming elections will undoubtedly be pursued with very uncertain outcomes. To the extent that the Left and other progressive forces can contribute to this effort, fine. But we must also begin to construct a broader anti-neoliberal platform from which a newly rejuvenated left can emerge. Where this invigorated resistance comes from is a separate discussion.

For now, I’ll propose five concrete areas around which the mainstream left and other progressive organizations can build anti-BJP momentum.

#### **1. Fight for rural employment**

2.

Modi has called the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) wasteful and proposed diminishing its scope of operation. Unable to completely repeal it, he had to retain its promise of 100 days of annual employment at guaranteed wages for all those demanding work.

He has not fulfilled this promise, and corruption among the officials assigned to oversee its implementation remains widespread. Since the scheme was democratically enacted, the situation offers a perfect opportunity for mainstream left parties “ which have both the material and human resources “ to intervene. They should audit its implementation and mobilize the beneficiaries to make sure its provisions are carried out. This engagement would directly connect the Left with the poor and downtrodden, win their support, and geographically extend its base.

Today, a few progressive civil society groups and local movements perform what little auditing is done. They would surely welcome an infusion of effort, which would also regenerate activism and enthusiasm among grassroots workers and cadres.

#### **2. Build coalitions with social movements**

3.

A host of progressive movements, which by their very nature oppose the Sangh’s ethnic orientation and development plans, would benefit from Left engagement. These organizations operate all over the country. Some work on specific issues, others on the concerns of particular sections of the population, including tribal groups, lower castes, women, fisherfolk, and those displaced by dams and other big infrastructure projects.

The Left has the capacity, even without the support of the other non-BJP parties, to bring these movements together and coordinate their struggles. Over time, this network could develop a common platform that all its constituents would own. This would represent a major political breakthrough with national resonance.

#### **3. Engage with Dalit activists**

4.

The Dalit question remains fundamental. The reservation policies’ dead end means that more young Dalit leaders recognize the need to go beyond the old politics of recognition and move toward redistribution. To do so, they will need to strike wider alliances with other lower castes, with

deprived classes, with besieged minorities (religious and tribal), and with left and progressive forces. The rising popularity of Jignesh Mevani, a young Dalit lawyer in Gujarat who has called for land reform for Dalits (many of whom are landless workers), reflects this new reality.

The Left has many opportunities and openings to explore. But, since even the ordinary cadres of these parties are steeped in caste practices, the leadership must model how to make connections that transform the interactions between their members and those of Dalit organizations.

#### **4. Preserve civil liberties**

5.

The Left can unite with other non-BJP parties around protecting civil liberties. Repeated, large-scale extra-parliamentary agitations will matter more here than any legislative opposition. Drafting a joint Charter of Rights through public discussion would be one way to start.

Further, this coalition could attack one of the BJP’s weakest points. Like most right-wing and far-right neoliberal forces, the Hindu nationalist party has depoliticized the notion of human flourishing by presenting marketed pleasures as the route to self-fulfillment. This brings the principle of lifestyle freedoms “ such as sexual orientation and partnership choices “ with it. Growing numbers of educated, young Indians of both genders believe in sexual freedom, and it could become the basis for strong resistance to the Sangh’s “love jihads” “ their crude attempt to portray young Muslim males as sexual predators. The opposition can highlight not so much the Muslim-Hindu interface but simply the right to love for all, including for gays and lesbians.

The media features many liberal commentators who oppose these restrictive laws, but no party has felt comfortable enough to support, let alone plan, street protests around these issues. A pro-love movement would rile Hindutva forces and find support even among the educated, young voters otherwise sympathetic to the BJP and its affiliates.



Further, women's political activity is growing, as reflected in their rising turnout at elections. Progressive forces should capture this momentum. Women have always participated in struggles around everyday problems of livelihood. The mobile revolution has made it easier for women to organize around gendered issues — all the more reason for the Left to focus on such concerns.

## 5. Change the discourse

6.

Finally, the terms of public discourse will not change unless a counter-hegemonic strategy challenges what now prevails. There must be a continuing battle of ideas. In fact, the intellectual challenge to the BJP and Sangh has often seemed more successful than the political one.

Certainly, the Sangh understands the importance of this terrain, which is why it has fought to transform education, but left, liberal, feminist, and Dalit students have organized demonstrations and confronted the Sangh. To be sure, the battle of ideas will never be the decisive lever that brings about a hegemonic shift, but it will play an important role. Without gaining ground here, electoral and political defeats for the BJP — no matter how severe — will not produce a more just national consensus.

# A New Consensus

Struggles on the terrain of discourse should take up four broad themes: a more humane nationalism, a more democratic India, a greater commitment to social justice, and a wholesale rejection of neoliberalism.

For all of nationalism's limitations and its inherently two-faced character, the left must challenge the Hindutva version with its own. The nation state remains the principal political unit in which ordinary people feel politically empowered; they are at least the legitimizers, if not the exercisers, of power. Opposition forces must present a secular and democratic vision of the nation to oppose the Sangh's exclusivist and authoritarian Hindu nationalism.

Indeed, secularism is a necessary but not sufficient condition for democracy. Seeing that no country is as culturally diverse as India, there is no reason to believe that a particular Hindu order lies at the heart of Indian identity. The Left's central message has to be that there are different ways of being and feeling Indian, which can only happen once all citizens' cultures, languages, and religions are respected and their material needs and concerns impartially addressed. Only then can India construct a nationalism that gets its strength from its humaneness and democracy.

Indeed, Hindutva ideology poses a serious threat to democracy. The Left must find ways to stop this erosion and to further strengthen Indian institutions. Here two issues must come to fore: first, we must reject any attempt by this or future governments to synchronize elections. Almost all the non-BJP parties should be able to agree on this and mobilize against it because they fear losing any electoral ground. But this is a narrow and self-serving reason.

More fundamentally, synchronization will erode Indian federalism's distinctive nature and thereby weaken the nation's democracy. Unlike in the United States, the distribution of powers between the federal and state governments favors centralized power, making the potential for authoritarianism greater. State legislatures and judiciaries do not have the same freedom in India as they do in the United States to counter, for example, Trump's white nationalist agenda.

To further strengthen democracy, the opposition parties should support replacing first-past-the-post polling with proportional representation. The non-BJP parties will need to be convinced, as doing so will lessen their chances of winning majority rule in the provinces. But because the fear of overall domination by the BJP at both the provincial and central levels is growing, some parties might come around. Regardless, making this change will establish a crucial institutional barrier to Hindutva political domination.

By any standard of basic democratic

principles, the first-past-the-post system is a disgrace. The main argument for it has been that it provides stability of rule. Not only is this not itself an indisputable virtue, but there is little evidence to support this claim. The Indian experience has shown that the system does not necessarily produce a two- or three-party system. Further, coalition governments in India and elsewhere can and do enjoy stable power.

Ending first-past-the-post would require a constitutional amendment, with two-thirds of both houses in support — something that is far from today's reality. But the time has come to begin serious public discussion about it and about ways to strengthen the democratic character of the polity.

Third, India needs much greater social justice. Here the issue of caste is paramount. While continuing to defend different forms of affirmative action, we must now fight to empower the lower castes and to completely destroy the caste system.

Here again, a strong momentum to achieve this would strike a body blow to the forces of Hindutva, which must retain a Brahminized version of the religion. Howsoever loosely accommodative this Brahminism might be, it would remain fundamentally inimical to Ambedkar's project and hopes.

The project would start with a constitutional amendment outlawing caste itself, refusing to be satisfied with the existing clause that only bans discrimination. This provision endorses the belief that a non-discriminatory caste system is possible and would be acceptable — an absurdity that has never been sufficiently attacked. Modi and the Sangh are trying to appropriate Ambedkar's legacy, and they should not be allowed to get away with this.

Lastly, the Left must oppose the neoliberal policy framework, arguing as forcefully as possible that it has proven to be a comprehensive failure on economic, social, political, and ecological grounds. Simply, it does not address basic needs; it has already created and will continue to create unacceptable levels of income

inequality, an affront to the principle of basic dignity for all. Equal basic liberties without equal basic sufficiencies hollows out democracy, while growing economic disparities result in plutocrats' rising influence in the corridors of political power.

Ecologically, the single-minded

obsession with achieving and sustaining the highest possible average growth rates spells disaster. Steadily retreating natural forest cover, expanding desertification, declining water table levels, soil erosion, phosphate poisoning, greater air pollution, and diminishing biodiversity are all processes in motion.

If avoiding these future disasters through an alternative development path to that of neoliberal capitalism remains in doubt, the necessity of fighting for one has never been clearer.

Jacobin

# Trump and the Middle East

25 April 2017, by David Finkel

Suddenly Donald Trump's image became so very seriously "presidential." Overshadowed at least for the moment were the Republicans' internal civil war over health care, infighting between the Steve Bannon and Jared Kushner power centers in the West Wing, Trump's "budget blueprint" wiping out every government program that actually helps people, and "tax reform" to stuff the pockets of the rich and super-rich at the expense of everyone else.

Many peace activists, understandably, were horrified by Trump's twin display of military muscle in Syria and Afghanistan. Republicans, with the exceptions of Rand Paul and a few hardline "America First" nationalists, are generally thrilled. John McCain, along with quite a few Democrats, immediately urged that the hit on the Syrian airbase should be "only the first step." A first step toward exactly what? Not clear, to say the least.

There's little doubt that in Trump's mind at least, dropping the huge tunnel-busting bomb on ISIS in Afghanistan is supposed to send a warning, notably to North Korea and Iran. One suspects that the military chiefs know better: ISIS has no anti-aircraft capacity to bring down the giant transport plane that delivers the MOAB, but significant "enemy states" most certainly do.

In any case, this writer's own estimate is that these strikes are not really a matter of Trump going rogue, but

signs of his global stance becoming "normalized" — which is not necessarily less scary. Raining Cruise missiles on the Syrian air base that presumably launched the poison gas attack on the village Khan Sheikhoun seems very much what Hillary Clinton would have done. (A statement by the National Committee of Solidarity responding to these events is posted [here](#).)

The affair seems to be the occasion for the Trump team to pivot toward a more conventional antagonistic stance toward Moscow, to the approval of most U.S. foreign policy "thinkers."

Despite activists' understandable skepticism, whatever small doubts might have existed over the reality of the Assad regime's criminal chemical weapons attack should have dissipated by now. Some antiwar critics have questioned why the Syrian regime would resort to such an act when it already has a military upper hand, and immediately after the U.S. statement that removing Assad "is not our priority."

But equally, if Washington believed the Russian claim that the poison gas came from stockpiles of al-Qaeda or other forces of "radical Islamic terror" (in Trump's favorite phrase), it would surely have served Trump's agenda to say so.

The antiwar case, in my view, is poorly served by clinging to threadbare doubts that the Assad regime, either

at the top or perhaps by some midlevel commander's decision, was responsible for this atrocity.

More importantly, if Trump's Cruise missile strike was just a one-time action, it doesn't change the situation in Syria at all — planes were again flying bombing runs from that same base a day or two later — and if it's the start of a big U.S. escalation as leading Republicans and Clintonian Democrats advocate, it has the potential to make everything even worse.

Instead of looking at the actions in Syria and Afghanistan as turning points, it makes sense to view them against the backdrop of an ongoing — and spreading — catastrophe that imperialism has done so much to cause and can do so little to solve.

Well before Assad's latest poison gas crime and Trump's Cruise and MOAB strikes, a cascading series of global disasters and imperial war maneuvers were unfolding. Although these were largely inherited from the Obama administration and earlier, there's every indication that the Trump gang will make them even worse whether by intervention or neglect.

— Twenty million people are facing starvation from war and drought-induced famine in Nigeria, across eastern Africa and in Yemen. The United Nations says it's received around two percent of the funding needed to meet the crisis.

Threats and counter-threats are escalating on the Korean peninsula, where—as China’s leadership is warning—war could break out by miscalculation more than intent, with catastrophic and uncontrollable potential consequences.

Before the Cruise missiles hit, more U.S. troops were already heading into Syria, with no evident strategy for “victory” or exit. The goal appears to be preventing Turkey and U.S.-allied Kurdish forces from violent conflict as much as it is to fight ISIS.

Meanwhile Afghanistan melts down (the MOAB strike has nothing to do with fighting the Taliban), and the assault on Mosul in Iraq grinds on with large-scale civilian deaths.

#### The Botched Yemen Raid

A recent U.S. military operation serves as a window on one particular underreported catastrophe—the destruction of Yemen. A February 9 raid on an outpost of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was a great success, according to Trump and press secretary Sean Spicer, capturing a “trove” of intelligence in computers, thumb drives and cell phones, although “what was actually captured has not been mentioned.” [1]

At what cost? The women and children who were killed included the eight-year-old daughter of Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S. citizen killed by a 2011 U.S. drone strike on the claim that he was a high-value terrorist target. After initially denying reports from Yemeni sources on the ground, the Pentagon admitted 25 civilian deaths. A U.S. Navy Seal, William “Ryan” Owens, was killed and four other SEALs wounded in the firefight when the noise of low-flying drones tipped off the AQAP forces that the raid was coming.

A \$75 million MV-22 Osprey came down hard and was destroyed by a Marine jet bomber to prevent it being captured. All told, it was quite a “success” as Senator John McCain caustically remarked. Trump, according to reports, was not watching these events in the situation room; he was tweeting about an interview to air later that evening on “The Brody File.”

When Trump made his February 28 address to the joint session of Congress—which the Democrats did not boycott, for reasons they should be too embarrassed to explain—he got a standing ovation by introducing Carryn Owens, widow of Ryan Owens. The networks interpreted this as Trump “becoming presidential,” setting that bar about as low as it can get. Ryan’s father Bill Owens said he holds Trump responsible, refused to meet with him, and demanded an investigation.

This debacle is just a slice of the Yemeni tragedy, as Saudi Arabia bombs the country with U.S.-supplied aircraft indiscriminately and with no regard for the consequences:

“More than 30 Somali migrants, including children, were killed in the Red Sea on Friday when a military helicopter fired on their boat, according to Yemeni and United Nations officials.

“The boat’s Yemeni captain was shot in the leg [he subsequently bled to death] but piloted the boat toward the Yemeni port city of Al-Hudaydah, where rescue workers were so overwhelmed that they put the dead in coolers normally used for fish...” (New York Times, March 18: A5)

The refugees from Somalia were trying to escape from Yemen to Sudan and then Egypt, Libya and eventually to Europe.

Washington supplies not only the planes but in-flight refueling services for the Saudi aircraft to carry out bombing runs against allegedly Iranian-backed Houthi fighters in Yemen’s civil war. Saudi pilots never bothered to check whom they were bombing.

With an estimated 80% of the Yemeni population desperately dependent on international food aid, the Al-Hudaydah port has been bombed to the point where goods can no longer be received there. Only the port at Sanaa, at much greater distance from the worst affected areas, remains available.

The politics of the horror in Yemen are—a proxy Saudi-Iran conflict

superimposed on a more-than-two-sided civil war—are endlessly tangled, but the bottom line is this: It’s conventional to refer to a place like Yemen as a “failed state,” but more accurately for imperialism it’s a throwaway state. Donald Trump has made the disaster worse, but he didn’t create it.

The Obama administration effectively sacrificed Yemen and its people for the sake of the U.S. strategic alliance with Saudi Arabia, the fundamentalist state that’s the actual godfather of what Trump repeatedly calls “radical Islamic terrorism.”

#### Continuity

In this respect there is continuity between Trump’s policy and his predecessors Obama and Bush. As Phyllis Bennis, an expert analyst and author of a recent study of the region, explains:

“(I)n 2011, documents released by Wikileaks indicated that the U.S. was launching drone attacks against both Somalia and Yemen from a base in Djibouti on the northwest African coast, and the U.S. was planning another drone base in Ethiopia.

“Obama’s expansion of the drone war was not only geographic. It also included expansion of potential targets. Originally aiming drones at specific, identified targets—extra-judicial assassination, already way outside the bounds of international law—the administration soon created a particularly frightening version known as “signature” strikes. This meant that any person or group of people acting in a certain way, or present in a particular area, would be considered appropriate targets for drone strike because of their “signature” actions.” (Understanding ISIS and the New Global War on Terror. A Primer, 82. Olive Branch Press, 2015)

The main difference with Obama is that Trump boasts of giving the military a free tactical hand, as in dropping the MOAB. That way Trump can claim “success” while the commanders in the field will take the blame for failures and losses.

Meanwhile Trump tweets about

keeping refugees out of the United States, and zeroes out the grossly

inadequate U.S. humanitarian aid budget. It all poses the question: Which is the real "failed state"?

[Against the Current](#)

# "The perspective is to challenge this system, all of us together"

**24 April 2017, by NPA - Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste**

First of all, we want to thank the voters who chose to vote for us. Through their vote, they wanted to express rejection of a system of professional politicians who are often corrupt, and allow in fact the capitalists and bankers to run the country. They wanted to say that the change will come through mobilization and a break with this system.

This campaign has shown the abyss that increasingly separates the population from a political system that does not represent us and that basically does not take into account our living conditions, in fact worsens them year after year ... All these politicians represent fewer and fewer voters, especially in poorer areas.

The unprecedented outcome of this first round is the absence in the second round of the candidates of the Socialist and the Republicans. This is the sign of a major political crisis: the two parties that have governed the country for 60 years have been eliminated. But the second round of Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron is not good news, let alone a break with everything we have been suffering for decades.

The FN claims to be an anti-system party that defends the workers, but it is a capitalist party like the others, it has as many corruption scandals, it never fights against redundancies and the bosses' plans, which protect the rich and hit the exploited hard. Moreover, this party is a serious danger because, through racism, it stirs up hatred and division against immigrants and ethnic minorities,

aiming to divert wage-earners anger from those responsible for unemployment and poverty.

The other candidate will therefore be Emmanuel Macron, who is an impostor in several ways: he is not a new anti-system candidate but an offshoot of the banks and François Hollande, and as responsible as Hollande for the policies we have suffered during the last five years. And his policies promise more austerity and inequality.

The political crisis - the elimination of the major parties and Le Pen's score - demonstrate the urgent need for us to take control of our affairs and mobilize. It is even more important than in 2002 not to rely on a "republican front" but on a broad mobilization, especially among youth, against the National Front and neoliberal policies. This is indispensable. We have to fight in the workplace and localities, without waiting for the outcome of the second round.

On Sunday, 7 May, many will want to block the FN by voting Macron. We understand their desire to reject the deadly danger for all social progress and for all rights, especially for immigrant and immigrant populations, that Marine Le Pen's election would represent. But it should be remembered that it is the austerity and security policies, particularly of a so-called left government, that are the reason for the rise of the FN and its nauseous ideas. Macron is not a bulwark against the FN; to impose a

lasting retreat there is no alternative but to take the streets against the far right and against all those who, like Macron, impose or try to impose anti-social measures. The NPA and its militants will participate actively in all protests against the FN.

We want to say to all those who refused to vote or are denied the right to vote, to those who voted Mélenchon wanting to break with the system, to those who voted Lutte Ouvrière, we would like to say this evening, more than ever, we need a new political force to represent us: a party that represents our interests, a tool for our daily struggles, to end the capitalist system, to defend the perspective of a society rid of exploitation and all oppressions.

For the weeks to come, we will first be present on the street on 1 May to show international solidarity at a time when France is engaged in neocolonial interventions and the butcher Assad continues to inflict death and destruction, but also to defend our democratic freedoms and our social rights. After that, the NPA will continue its daily activity in the workplaces, in mobilisations, in working-class districts and cities, on the questions I and my comrades have been campaigning on during the last few months.

On the evening of this first round, the perspective is still to challenge this system, all of us together.

*Paris*

23 April 2017



# Latin America: is the progressive era over?

23 April 2017, by **Franck Gaudichaud**

**What has become of the “attempts at alternatives, local or national enfranchisements, in construction” that you have previously referred to?**

Rather than an “end of cycle” in Latin America, the theme of many current debates, we are witnessing a turnaround in the socio-political conjuncture and more exactly the reflux of the progressive or national-popular forces in several key countries, notably Venezuela where the opposition now controls Parliament and where there is a huge economic and political crisis, and in Brazil, with the parliamentary coup which has led to the dismissal of Dilma Rousseff, and where there is a dissatisfaction among some of the popular and middle layers with the balance sheet of the Workers’ Party (PT) and, even more, faced with the current corrupt conservative government. Other symbols of this reflux are Argentina, with the arrival of the neoliberal Mauricio Macri, who is the man of the employers and the multinationals, as a result of the failure in the presidential elections of Cristina Kirchner. We could continue as well - but to a much lesser extent - with the defeat of Evo Morales in Bolivia in the last referendum, even if Morales is still popular. Finally, there are many tensions and open conflicts between social-environmental movements, trade unions or indigenous peoples and the Correa government in Ecuador.

These political and electoral setback relating to what we can call for the sake of convenience “progressive governments” and the new political forces that have been hegemonic in a dozen South American countries since 2002-2005 is accompanied by a critical balance on the question of extractivism and the use of natural resources, as regards the new dependency of economies, on modes of development and production, a

debate led by some sectors of the social movements and indigenous peoples, as well as by currents of the anti-capitalist left (which remains very much a minority). A balance sheet which, on the level of the social advances and the reconstruction of a social state in these various countries, is clearly positive compared with the neoliberal period earlier, as regularly pointed out by the Brazilian sociologist Emir Sader and various intellectuals concerning the progressive governments. However, we need to go beyond the state and institutional level to see also the popular effervescence which continues, “from below” and from the left, in terms of self-organization, creation of self managed spaces, recuperated enterprises, indigenous communities who take control of their territory and oppose the multinational companies (like the Shuar in Ecuador), or community media within the popular neighborhoods, urban or rural (such as Radio Villa Francia or Channel SeÑal3 in Santiago in Chile).

This effervescence can also be seen in the Zapatista construction in Mexico with the idea of the nomination of an indigenous woman for the next presidential elections, supported by an indigenous council, which is excellent news (after years of retreat on their land in Chiapas). These are also the communal councils and rural cooperative organizations existing in the framework of the Bolivarian process, some of which are still dynamic: the idea of communal construction continues despite the deep current decomposition. And despite the constant attacks against recuperated enterprises in Argentina, we can speak of conquest over the long term for dozens of them. In the Cauca in Colombia or in Cuba innovative experiences in agro-ecology are conducted and so on. Therefore, despite a certain reflux “above” and the return of the right wing, and also

the neoliberal, imperialist, military, paramilitary and drug related violence (in Mexico, Colombia, Central America), there is a set of experiences that places on the agenda the strategic debate on how to transform the world and distribute power, on the need to combine construction from below without abandoning the radical transformation of the state - but the limits of the progressive movement of the decade shows how difficult that is.

**Has there been a political translation of the popular movements in the institutionalized powers, in the state structures of the different countries?**

We come back to the debate (intense since the end of the 1990s) on “changing the world without taking (state) power” or, on the contrary, having as objective the conquest of the government and of the state via the ballot box to forge a counter-hegemony in the face of neo-liberalism in liaison with the social movements. It is overall a false dichotomy. The terms of the debate are no longer in any case - for the moment? - as in the 1970s, the “armed road” against “institutional transition”. It can be seen that the major part of new political movements on the left, or old ones like the PT, took note, sometimes even before the fall of the Wall, of the weight of the institutions and the electoral moments to try to build a political space. But this does not prevent the dilemma being always there: when you win the government, do you seize real power? The economic, military, media, class power finally is to a large degree elsewhere: the “deep” state is much wider than the government alone, and even than parliament and the representative institutions. This real power is often difficult to conquer, even more to transform. Hence the importance of insisting on self-organization, the ability to construct at the local, regional or national level forms of

constituent popular power, which can develop finally into constituted popular power.

Yet the control of states by the left has allowed the most important social advances of the decade in countries such as Ecuador, Bolivia or Venezuela. And if the question of the link between the instituting and the instituted, between movements and parties, remains essential, learning the lessons of the great Latin American revolutionary processes of the twentieth century, Mexico, El Salvador, Cuba, Chile, Nicaragua, and so on, is just as much so. What rupture at a given time with the old forms of state organization, within the armed forces? This is the whole difficulty of the social transformation that is underway, for example in Bolivia. This has also been the subject of discussions on the left during the recent presidential campaign in Ecuador between Alianza Pa'As and other sectors which drew up a balance sheet which was very critical of the technocratic management of Correa: on the expansion of the mining frontier, deforestation, the massive extraction of resources for the benefit of the multinationals. This is a real question directly related to modes of production, accumulation and the exploitation of nature which is continuing.

### **How have relations evolved between the Latin American countries and the efforts at consolidation of regional partnership?**

The regional integrations are also effectively essential. We cannot draw up a balance sheet of the different progressive governments, without thinking about their margins of actual maneuver at the continental level and in the face of the imperial powers (to begin with the USA). A "small country", a country impoverished by neocolonial pillage like Bolivia, can hardly emerge alone from unequal exchange, internal oligarchic domination and inequality. To create alternatives, it needs partnerships, inter-state associations and also an active internationalism between popular movements. The Cuban experience reminds us that isolation (and blockade) accelerate the internal

involutions. Bolívar's dream, which Hugo Chávez highlighted, i.e. a perspective of Bolivarian anti-imperialist integration, is an issue of a crushing contemporary relevance. And the reflux of the progressive governments and movements is also linked to its absence. The regional evolution has however undergone some quite interesting advances. For example the project of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) was quite original, when it was driven by Chávez, that is to say the possibility of "bartering" between countries, a complementary relationship, of receiving more than one gives if it is a small economy, for example receiving Venezuelan oil to lower the price of food a bit, when it is a small island like Dominica or even Cuba. The project is interesting, but it quickly entered into crisis at the same time as the crisis of the Bolivarian process, and has also encountered other barriers (including the contradictory interests of the Brazilian regime).

We should also stress the very significant political and diplomatic progress, with the construction from 2009 of the UNASUR, the Union of South American Nations: for the first time the 22 South American countries are grouped within a diplomatic entity, also for the management and settlement of conflicts, without the OAS (Organization of American States) and therefore without the United States. Then in 2010, comes the CELAC, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, which thinks of Latin America without the giants of the North, a progress which has allowed the reintegration of Cuba in the Latin American concert, even before the restoration of relations between Cuba and the United States.

### **What is the nature of the forces of opposition to the progressive governments still in place or those that have been overthrown as in Brazil?**

The panorama is dark enough at this level, with the return of the neoliberal and conservative right and the emergence of new rights which have "restyled" the old oligarchies a little. This is the case, for example, with Macri in Argentina and his movement

Compromiso para el cambio ("Commitment for Change"), which has used and abused political marketing to give a "modern" face. But these new or former rights remain socially violent, marked from the point of view of class and they defend the project of the globalized bourgeoisie, with on the societal level an ultraconservative vision which is repressive of the social movements.

In Brazil, the impeachment against Dilma Rousseff is a victory of the most reactionary sectors, that of the "4 B's" (for bullets, bible, beef and banks), that is to say the armaments and security sector, evangelists, large landowners and the financial sector. These are also the most corrupt, starting with Temer, the current illegitimate president, because even if the PT leadership is also imbued with the culture of clientelist corruption, it is still a little less so than those who are today at the head of the Brazilian state. Let us recall that the current situation is also the product of unnatural alliances between the PT and these sectors, since today it is the former allies of the PT who have turned their coats and allied themselves with the most reactionary right. In Venezuela, the majority of the National Assembly is in the hands of the opposition, the MUD (Mesa de la Unidad Democrática), a heterogeneous coalition but with an openly neoliberal hard core, with two tendencies: an "insurreccional" sector (those who supported the coup of April 2002 and the guarimbas (street barricades) in 2014, therefore violence on the streets, led by Leopoldo López, currently imprisoned and characterized as a "political prisoner" by the opposition); and another group of parties which seeks more of an institutional path, believing that after having won control of parliament, the request for a recall referendum which has been underway for more than a year could lead to the dismissal of Maduro by the ballot box. Which is very likely given the state of disrepair of the country, the magnitude of the economic crisis, and the dimension of corruption and patronage at all levels of the state, from whence the authoritarian responses of the government which has done everything to prevent this referendum being held up to now.

Overall, we are faced with the hard right, supported by Washington, whose escalation in power allows a realignment of the stars in the direction of the United States and its two major allies, namely Mexico and Colombia. And now, we also have Argentina and Brazil which are pressuring other "non-aligned" governments such as Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia.

**Can we speak of a more or less rapid return to a "long neo-liberal night"? And are there still potential popular outbursts to counter this?**

At the end of the 1990s, there was a period of great popular struggles against this "long neoliberal night", and these exceptional social movements combined with the crisis of legitimacy of the traditional political parties led to a dozen South American countries moving to the left, with a certain diversity - center left, national-popular left, social-liberal or more anti-imperialist. We could add to this list Nicaragua in particular, or Honduras before the coup. In many cases, the traditional parties of local bourgeoisies were marginalized (Social Democrats, Christian Democrats or Conservatives), which opened a window of opportunity for the popular movements, to strengthen those political forces which seemed more open to change, for example the PT in Brazil, or to create new forces like Alianza PaÑs (Ecuador), the Bolivian MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo), or the Fifth Republic Movement (Movimiento V Rep blica) in Venezuela around Hugo Ch vez and so on. The successive electoral victories of these left governments allowed in particular the creation of important "targeted" social programmes (not universal, therefore) in Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, or Uruguay: poverty has thus declined as never before, during the decade 2000-2010; with, in parallel, conquests on social rights, wages, education, a decline in illiteracy and so on. For a decade, the very high price of raw materials led to a redistribution of profits from natural resources, while "arranging the goat and cabbage", capital and labor, in a perspective which was typically "neo-developmental". With a barrel at

more than a hundred dollars, it was possible to redistribute part of the oil or gas profits towards social programs for the poorest, but without destabilizing or attacking the fundamental interests of the dominant classes

Inequalities have also declined, but the class social structure has been maintained. Yet, the old white (and racist) oligarchies, the dominant classes have taken a very dim view of seeing previously marginalized actors rise up, and win: indigenous peoples, trade unionists, women, priests supportive of liberation theology, who arrived at the center of politics and brought with them - but in a subordinate manner - part of the increasingly politicized subordinate classes. Are we today facing a return to the long night of neo-liberalism? A return as such, to the 1990s, no. There have been profound changes, which remain. For example the progressive national-popular space is still either in government, or the main opposition force in a number of countries. It remains in government in Venezuela, Ecuador with a probable victory of Len n Moreno (the successor to Correa); in Bolivia where Evo Morales, despite the defeat of the last referendum, has enough electoral support to consider a re-election. In other countries this progressive space is the main opposition force: Peronism Of course, and Kirchnerism in Argentina; the PT today is very weakened, marked by the cases of corruption (Petrobras, Odebrecht), criticized by a part of the left and the youth, the working class, and the trade union movements for its balance sheet. But it remains a big institutional party of opposition in the face of the neo-liberal right.

What we must see above all is the capacity of popular movements, of the anti-capitalist or eco-socialist left (like the FIT in Argentina) to draw critical balance sheets of the national progressive-popular period, but also the construction of unitary fronts to oppose the hard, violent, neoliberal, right, and the renewed agenda of Washington, over the next few years. Some critical intellectuals, such as for example Massimo Modenesi (Mexico), Raul Zibechi (Uruguay) or Maristella Svampa (Argentina), show that

progressivism has in part disarmed the autonomy of popular movements, their capacity to respond, that they have found themselves caught in the clientelist webs, sometimes even in the spheres of integration into the apparatus of the state (in Argentina, for example). A phenomenon reinforced by the caudillismo or "hyper-presidentialism" underway, because if the charismatic leadership can effectively mobilize or politicize "those below" they hinder and are an obstacle to attempts at self-management and popular power. Without counting the various forms of open criminalization of social movements (in Ecuador or Brazil for example), while in Ecuador an intellectual like Alberto Acosta describes a "conservative restoration". Pablo Davalos refers to "disciplinary democracy" to analyze the post-neoliberal experiences. All this has sapped the capacity of resistance, even if major struggles are coming in the new situation.

Also, in Argentina, the class struggle trade union movement is in the process of organizing itself in the face of the war machine that is the Macri government, which has laid off more than 100,000 people and will attack employment rights. In Venezuela, a defeat for Maduro would signal the return of a right wing bent on class vengeance, which wants to undo the conquests of popular Chavismo in terms of organization but also of social rights. In Peru, an openly neoliberal right governs, with very significant levels of repression, notably of indigenous struggles around the Conga mining project. If we look at what is happening in Mexico for some years, with a permanent brutalization of society and of the popular struggles, the future may seem bleak indeed. But still with glimmers of hope, as shown by the massive mobilizations underway for a few weeks now against the measures of the federal government of Pe a Nieto. There are then serious things at stake, in a scenario which is very complex. If there is a resurgence, a capacity of resistance, the question today is that of alternatives. Will we try to recompose the PT or Kirchnerism? Or draw balance sheets and rebuild an eco-socialist anti-capitalist left, with all the independent

social and political sectors that are ready?

### **What will the Trump era mean for Latin America?**

That is THE problem of the moment, it seems to me. We have already seen the violent, racist, xenophobic relationship of Trump with the Chicanos and with all Latin Americans, undocumented workers in the United States, with promises and a beginning of mass deportations. It must be remembered that Obama also deported hundreds of thousands of people without papers, just as he did not put an end to the warlike imperial policy of the United States, quite the contrary! But with Trump, the danger is even greater. The announcement on the extension of the wall with Mexico is a strong symbol of his politics of hate. Trump is challenging the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with Cuba, and could threaten the peace process in Colombia.

This is not without contradictory effects. Let us remember that if the Zapatista movement publicly arose at the beginning of 1994 in Mexico it was also to fight against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Today, it is Trump who denounces this Agreement. It is a paradox of history. The reactionary populism and protectionism of Trump is also opposed to some multilateral, or even bilateral, neoliberal agreements. Also, he questions the Transpacific Partnership (TPP), in which countries such as Chile, Peru and Mexico were also engaged. Michèle Bachelet has finally announced that Chile will also withdraw from the Treaty since the United States was no longer participating. It is not therefore the social movements that have defeated this treaty, but a hegemonic reactionary force in the North, the United States. Some analysts are glad of these unexpected consequences of

the election of Trump. It seems to me that we should not mistake our allies! Because if Trump calls into question these treaties, it is to defend even more the selfish interests of the United States, impose new still tougher agreements and in no case to abandon the hegemony of Washington in Latin America (over natural resources, fresh water, rare earth, agricultural land, Venezuelan oil, Chilean copper and so on). Even if for the moment nothing suggests that the region is part of its immediate priorities. Yet, if the balance sheet of Obama's geopolitics is awful enough, what is coming may be even more so in terms of global chaos.

There are therefore great struggles to be fought, and also the need to reorganize internationalist solidarity with Latin America and its popular movements. That is what we are trying to do - modestly - through the Association France Amérique Latine, and I take this opportunity to invite readers to support us and to join us!

## **The breach is opened, strengthen the NO!**

**22 April 2017, by Sosyalist Demokrasi için Yeniyol**

51.3 % voting "yes" against 48.7% voting "no" was certainly not the result the regime expected. The latter had in recent months, which were marked by a state of emergency, mobilised all the resources of the state to wage incessant propaganda in favour of a "yes" vote, while criminalizing and repressing supporters of a "no" vote.

Religious discourse, nationalist rhetoric, anti-Western populism based on conspiracy theories which were brilliant in their imbecility ... everything was done to stigmatise the defenders of a "no" vote. Despite this, even according to the results declared by the regime, the vote was won by a margin of only one million three hundred thousand out of eighty million people.

It is indisputably a defeat for the

Islamic-nationalist bloc guided by Erdogan. Also, it is a poor result for the alliance between the AKP and the far right MHP who, compared to the elections of November 2015, lost almost 10% of their vote in total.

But what intensifies this defeat is the "no" victory in the three biggest cities, Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir; all the more so inasmuch as the first two are controlled by the AKP. In addition, traditionally conservative- Islamist circumscriptions of Istanbul manifestly opted for "no". 10% of AKP voters and 73% of MHP voters were lost to the "no" camp.

The total submission of the MHP leader - in the face of a powerful opposition - to Erdogan to save his position, did not then receive the approval of his rank and file. The latter was thus a significant element

in the "no" result. This crisis will undoubtedly lead the historic party of the far right into a profound process of disintegration and restructuring.

This being said, alongside the absence of equity during the campaign period, it was above all the "official" attempt at fraud implemented by the Turkish state during the referendum which renders the results highly dubious if not illegitimate. Apart from the various irregularities to which the AKP often has recourse, this time it was the Higher Electoral Commission itself which decided - in the midst of the referendum and at the request of an AKP deputy - that ballot papers and envelopes without the official seal would be valid, so long as it was proved they did not come from abroad!

A second supplementary resolution



was the acceptance of ballot papers where the choice had been marked with the stamps of previous elections which of course had no reason to be found in the hands of the managers of the polling stations. Then to render valid all “yes” votes prepared in advance –even in the absence of the new stamp – and exchanged at the last minute with those which came out of the ballot boxes.

However most ballot papers without the official seal were used in Kurdistan where massive cases of “yes” voting en bloc, from ballot boxes without any “no” votes and identical signatures for thousands of voters were indicated. According to the HDP, the left reformist party linked to the Kurdish movement, these cases would after initial observations concern 500,000 votes. The arrest of two HDP scrutineers in the days preceding the referendum and their removal from the voting offices by soldiers during the counting of votes clearly show that fraud was planned.

Nonetheless if there was a fall of 10% in the “no” vote in Kurdistan compared with the 2015 results, before rushing to deduce that a significant number of Kurds had supported Erdogan and abandoned the Kurdish movement, we should first take into account the weight of the fraud but also should not forget that Kurdistan has over the last twenty months suffered veritable massacres,

destruction of towns and the forced displacement of 500,000 persons, including 300,000 voters, who in order to vote had to overcome financial and above all psychological difficulties in returning to their decimated neighbourhoods. Also, the campaign took place in the absence of 13 HDP deputies (including its co-presidents), more than 80 mayors and thousands of activists who are behind bars.

Would it have been possible without the regime’s electoral fraud that the No vote could have exceeded the Yes vote, given the narrow gap? It’s a strong probability. According to the republican CHP and the HDP there was a manipulation of 3-4% of the votes. But in any case, these serious breaches of electoral law, beyond rendering the results dubious, render the referendum illegitimate and necessitate its cancellation.

However the régime does not seem ready to go into reverse, Erdogan from the first night said “do not tire the country with useless discussions ... do not waste your time in trying to oppose”. Faithful to the Turkish Duce, the Higher Electoral Commission thus rejected the appeals filed by the opposition parties demanding the cancellation of the ballot. Meanwhile 40 “no” activists were arrested following house or office raids for having contested the legitimacy of the “yes” vote.

Faced with electoral fraud and repression, the democratic forces of the No front, identifiable with the political composition and above all the spirit of the Gezi revolt, and specifically the youth, are in the street. The declared victory of the transition to autocracy and thus a hardening of the repressive character of the régime have not led to any discouragement or demobilization among No supporters. Very much to the contrary, there is awareness that it is the mobilization for a No vote which has contributed to the weakening of Erdogan’s hegemony and that, despite the contradictions which run through the various tendencies within it, when it strikes together, half of society has the power to open a breach in the ruling bloc, which has developed the combativeness of considerable sectors of society.

The risk of course exists that in the absence of clear orientation and tactical objectives the mobilisation will run its course. The movement must self-organise and the No meetings built during the campaign, with a great contribution from the radical left, can serve as the basis of such a restructuring.

The fight will be tough but in any case the breach is now opened. So we shout with all our strength: “NO it isn’t over, it’s only just begun!”

## French presidential elections: should Philippe Poutou stand down?

21 April 2017, by **Daniel Tanuro**

Let’s first look at things through a very, very narrow prism, since this is the way they’ve been posed to us on social media. Shouldn’t the NPA withdraw its presidential candidate, Philippe Poutou? Shouldn’t the NPA call for a vote for Jean-Luc Mélenchon? Wouldn’t this give Mélenchon a better chance of getting

through the first round and beating Le Pen in the second, and therefore of repealing the labour reform, increasing the minimum wage and striking a blow against EU austerity ?

For many leftists looking at the political situation in France from afar, through media and polls, the answer

seems clear. With the four leading candidates so close to one another, Poutou’s two or 2.5% could make all the difference. Poutou has run a strong campaign; he effectively confronted Fillon and Le Pen in the big TV debate and the NPA have had the media impact they sought; so that’s enough now, Poutou should

withdraw his candidacy and call for a Mélenchon vote, while continuing to voice his criticisms. Not doing so would be sectarian, we are told.

This line of reasoning does not withstand closer scrutiny

In fact, things aren't so straightforward after all. Not from a human angle, not from a practical angle, and not from the angle of purely electoral calculations. What's more, it ignores the key political problem: in both social-movement and political terms, leader maximo Jean-Luc Mélenchon's French national-populist project is an obstacle to the unity of the Left against the Right and far-Right. But let's not get ahead of ourselves; let's start by looking at some concrete matters.

From a strictly human point of view, with just a few days before the vote and without something major in return, it would be impossible to snap one's fingers and stop thousands of supporters who have been actively campaigning for their ideas and vision of society. These activists have made big sacrifices (especially just to collect the signatures required to run in the first place) and are seeing the benefits in terms of media coverage, public support, attendance at campaign rallies and increased membership.

From a practical point of view, the ballots have been printed and nothing can prevent voters who wish to do so from voting for Philippe Poutou. Furthermore, if the NPA were to publicly declare that they are withdrawing their candidate in favour of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, they wouldn't be certain that their campaign expenses would be refunded (each candidate can spend up to 800,000 euros and receive a refund upon submission of receipts). Who would take such a risk? Quite clearly, it's not the backseat drivers who will be paying the bills!

The math is all wrong

Lastly, from the point of view of purely electoral calculations, the math is all wrong. There is a large mass of undecided voters. What's more, the support for Philippe Poutou (and, to a lesser extent, Lutte Ouvrière

candidate Nathalie Arthaud) reflects a current of radicalism that is very much present within French society. To put things simply, this current of radicalism does not in any way at all identify with the French flag, the national anthem, the July 14th military parade and Mélenchon's unsavoury statements around a whole range of topics - posted workers, recourse to nuclear weapons, support for Russian bombs in Syria, and "the honour of the Republic's police uniforms," just to name a few.

It's probable that there are more Poutou and Arthaud supporters than the polls have been suggesting. Many of them have opted to vote Mélenchon for "strategic" reasons and in spite of their often serious doubts. But what about those who haven't made this decision in spite of all the recent pressure to do so? Were Poutou to withdraw, what would these voters do? Well, most would vote for Nathalie Arthaud or just stay home on election day. They simply don't like Mélenchon's program or style, not to mention that of his supporters. For such voters, Philippe Poutou is the strategic choice - because he represents their ideas. And they're right: why should they commit harakiri in the first round of the elections? And, by the by, how on earth is a working-class candidate who took down Le Pen and Fillon in front of six million people in the TV debate not "strategic"?

Yes, unity is the key question!

Let's now look at the broader questions. The unity of the "people of the Left" against the Right and far-Right after the elections will be the central question, whatever the outcome. This will obviously be the case if centre-Right candidate Emmanuel Macron or hard-Right candidate François Fillon defeats Le Pen in the second round. Both candidates will launch very aggressive austerity attacks against labour, young people and people of foreign origin. But it would also be the central question if, by some miracle, Mélenchon were to be elected president. Under a Mélenchon presidency, meaningful left-wing measures would only be implemented if, first, legislative elections held one

month after the presidential elections were to produce a left-wing majority government; and, second, the broadest and most united labour and social-movement resistance were built in response to the inevitable domestic and international counter-offensive. None of this can be magically pulled out of a hat.

This would be true even in an ideal situation, but in fact the French Left is deeply divided, if not in ruins. The Left Front (FG) of the Communist Party (PCF), the Left Party (PG) and Ensemble has collapsed. On the one hand, the PCF sought to pursue at all costs its old reformist strategy of allying with the Socialists (PS), because its elected officials depended on this alliance for their survival. On the other hand, Mélenchon drew inspiration from Podemos in Spain and created a movement to support his presidential aspirations - which only individuals could join, forced to accept the rules laid down by Mélenchon and his loyalists. This movement (France Insoumise, or France Unbowed), presents itself as a left-populist alternative to political parties organized around a charismatic leader for the Nation. The third component of the Left Front, Ensemble, found itself trapped in between, with no option but to support Mélenchon. The PCF ended up doing the same, although it took its leader Pierre Laurent a couple of attempts before securing a majority for this position.

In the meantime, there's no question that Mélenchon's project has been remarkably successful. His campaign has created genuine momentum and tremendous hope. The France Insoumise mass campaign rallies are an illustration of this. There can be no denying the candidate's many qualities. For one, he is an excellent speaker. For another, France Insoumise has run an excellent, engaging campaign. Still, this success is in part the consequence of a very specific context. With Le Pen and Fillon mired in scandal, on the one hand, and the void created by the defeat of the party apparatus in the PS primaries, on the other, Mélenchon was able to rise in the polls like balloon carried up by a blast of hot air. Good for him! But it would be a serious error to conclude that the

momentum behind France Insoumise can continue to grow in a linear fashion and obviate the need for strategic thinking around what alliances could act as a springboard for left-wing unity, and around the platform that is necessary for this unity.

Social-movement illusion, political illusion

First of all, it would be a serious error because the coming confrontation with the Right and far-Right will ultimately play out in the streets. It can only be won if all sectors of the exploited and oppressed are united, whether they have legal papers or not. So not only “my fellow French citizens”. Mélenchon’s uber-secularist and flag-waving rhetoric about the “one and indivisible” Nation (“I want to give France back to the French”!) enables him to secure broad electoral support. But it raises a real problem when it comes to achieving unity in social struggles. Internationalism is not an optional perk; it’s a vital precondition for any real left-wing political action plan.

Secondly, it’s illusory for political reasons. Mélenchon swallowed up the Left Front. In order to launch France Insoumise, he even put the Left Party on ice, although this is the party that he himself created! His conduct has created and continues to create huge divisions and a great deal of resentment. This is a very concrete issue. France Insoumise has already announced that it will run its own candidates against PCF incumbents in the legislative elections – even though the PCF is supporting the Mélenchon presidential campaign! France Insoumise’s aims are actually pretty transparent: in the footsteps of former

president François Mitterrand, and in the guise of “moving beyond political parties”, they want to destroy the PCF. It’s no secret that many Communists can’t stand Mélenchon. So much for “unity”!

But the key political question concerns the approach to take toward the PS rank and file. 1.2 million voters selected Benoît Hamon in the PS primaries. This signalled a shift to the left and a slap in the face for the authoritarian social-liberalism of outgoing prime minister Manuel Valls and president Hollande. The social-democratic apparatus responded by sabotaging Hamon’s candidacy and even by openly supporting Macron. Hamon sought to accommodate PS party bosses and plummeted to eight percent in the polls. And what did Mélenchon have to say? Well, basically that it served Hamon right and that it was proof that he, Mélenchon, should continue his solo effort. Alas, things aren’t so simple. While it might be possible for Mélenchon to get into the second round without the support of PS voters looking for an alternative, it is totally excluded that he can win in the second round against Macron, or probably even against Fillon, without them.

Mélenchon holds the key

If Mélenchon wants to win, he has to change tack. He has to take an initiative aimed at uniting the “people of the Left”. He has to propose a common governmental program to potential partners based on a handful of key measures that tackle the urgent social and environmental issues of the day; along with an agreement for the June legislative elections and a mobilization strategy for the post-

election period. There isn’t a single insurmountable obstacle on this path. For one thing, France Insoumise, Hamon and the PCF all claim to provide an alternative to social-liberalism while eschewing the far-Left’s anti-capitalism. What’s more, Mélenchon is in the driver’s seat and therefore in a position to dictate the main features of any agreement resulting from his own initiative.

Such an initiative would give Mélenchon a far better chance of reaching the second round. It is also his only chance at winning a second round run-off against Macron or Fillon, should things turn out that way (we shouldn’t accept the hackneyed idea that Le Pen will necessarily make it through to the second round; she has yet to recover from Poutou’s withering remark about “working-class immunity” in the TV debate!). Mélenchon holds the key to victory.

He holds the key but refuses to turn it. And each passing day of course makes it increasingly improbable that he ever will. As I write these lines, there is good reason to fear that the possibility of preventing right-wing victory in the second round of the French presidential elections is evaporating before our eyes. Is this because Philippe Poutou hasn’t withdrawn his candidacy? No, it’s because Mélenchon is clinging to his strategy in order to become the caudillo of a national-populist Left force in which dissenting voices will be weak and fragmented.

That’s the real debate, the crucial strategic debate for the Left. Those pointing fingers at Poutou are dodging it, consciously or not.

Translation from French: Nathan Rao

## Politics and Propaganda in Lebanon and Syria

21 April 2017, by **Joseph Daher**

**CM: You write about Hezbollah: "Many have pointed to its provision of social services as a sign of the organization's progressive hue. This claim, however, doesn't hold up to reality. Hezbollah has, over time, positioned itself on the wrong side of social and economic struggles in Lebanon and shed some of its former roots, aligning itself with an emerging fraction of the Shi'a bourgeoisie."**

Has Hezbollah, then, gone neoliberal? Have they abandoned their social service progressivism for public-private partnerships and market solutions for the problems faced by the people of Lebanon?

JD: Indeed. Throughout the decadesâ€”Hezbollah was officially established in '85â€”it increasingly witnessed a bourgeoisification of its cadres and leadership. It's important to say that it has always done charity services, and not social services from a perspective of emancipating the popular classes. If we consider charity services as social justice, then we should consider the Vatican one of the most progressive institutions in the world.

Throughout the world, religious fundamentalist groups have simultaneously supported neoliberal policies while providing charity services, meanwhile undermining the welfare state. Through their private provision of charity services, they can also provide their political message and build their clientelist bases; thus Hezbollah is today one of the key actors in the Lebanese sectarian and bourgeois political system.

**CM: Is it fair to characterize their charity services as a kind of bribery for political support?**

JD: If you're in Lebanon as a Shi'a citizen, you'll want to receive charity services, because the Lebanese state does not provide services. We cannot accuse the people receiving these kinds of charity services of accepting bribesâ€”I wouldn't call it bribery, I would call it a way of building hegemony through coercion and consent. The charity part of Hezbollah is about building hegemony within the

Shi'a population of Lebanon.

All the Lebanese sectarian and bourgeois partiesâ€”Hezbollah or others like the Future Movement and other Lebanese sectarian elitesâ€”have an interest in keeping the Lebanese state very minimal and not being able to provide services, because it would break all their popular advantages based on sectarian dynamics.

So not only Hezbollah but all of the Lebanese sectarian elite is in favor of a minimal Lebanese state that only intervenes to break a popular or cross-sectarian social movement.

**CM: Is Lebanon, then, the epitome of a neoliberal state? Would you assume that neoliberals here in the United States would wish to have a government like Lebanon's, as the epitome of the neoliberal state?**

JD: Indeed. If you look at the right wing and a large section of the Republican Partyâ€”and to a certain extent the Democrats as wellâ€”they are in favor of diminishing public services and privatizing wide sectors of the state. It's a dream for neoliberals to have a very weak state when it comes to social services, and one that only plays a role regarding security issues. This is the whole ideology of neoliberalism: undermining social services and the welfare state while increasing the security instruments of the state to break any kind of social movements challenging neoliberal policies and authoritarian practice, which often go together.

There were movements in Lebanon throughout the 1980sâ€”and more recently with the campaign You Stink in the summer of 2015â€”that brought together large segments of the Lebanese people, from various sects, challenging the Lebanese sectarian bourgeois system and turning an ecological crisis into a political crisis. There have also been social movementsâ€”for example after 2011-2012, and in the nineties as wellâ€”regarding teachers and public services, and trade unions with massive mobilizations, hundreds of thousands of people striking. The

various sectarian and bourgeois parties always broke these movements. But there is always hope that people can try to rebuild movements from below and an alternative that is secular, democratic, and in favor of social justice.

All the parties in Lebanon completely refuse any kind of reform. There was the case of a particular minister who tried reforms and was put aside by the political parties. Across the Middle East and North Africa, one of the key reasons for the uprisings of 2011 were the consequences of neoliberal policies over the past few decades.

**CM: Is it fair to characterize Hezbollah as a once-revolutionary party that came to power and then turned their backs on their revolutionary past? Or is that an oversimplification?**

JD: I think Hezbollah was never a revolutionary party. It was established for various reasons: obviously the occupation of Lebanon by Israel, but also following the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It's always been completely linked to the Islamic Republic of Iran, which I would not call an anti-imperialist or revolutionary state. The Islamic Republic of Iran and its leadership were never revolutionary. They crushed the major radical sectors of the popular revolution in Iran, and are now as then crushing their own population, being authoritarian, having very neoliberal policies. Hezbollah, by extension, is a typical religious fundamentalist party, a trans-class party.

Obviously when Israel attacks Lebanon, I stand with the Lebanese people and the rights of resistance. But this does not mean that I support a political project that is opposed to the popular classes of Lebanon and the region and that has pursued sectarian policies, anti-woman policies, and policies that have not improved the condition of Palestinian refugees or Syrian refugeesâ€”quite the opposite. It's never been a revolutionary party.

If we look at the history of Islamic fundamentalismâ€”and not only Shi'a or Sunniâ€”they have always been very much in favor of liberal



economies, privatization. Take for example the historical path of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: they have always been very pro-neoliberal even when not in power. When they came to power, also they were very neoliberal.

I think it's very important to understand that we cannot characterize a political party as anti-imperialist or pro-resistance only because it says "Death to America" or opposes Western culture. Otherwise we should consider Al Qaeda one of the most progressive organizations in the world. It must be according to its political program, policies regarding the popular classes, women's issues, sectarian issues, etcetera.

**CM: How much, in your opinion, has privatization, liberalization, and opening up to foreign capital led to increased poverty and inequality since Hezbollah has risen to the political power it now has within parliament? Is Hezbollah simply unwilling to admit any connection between neoliberalism and inequality?**

JD: In my interviews with various Hezbollah cadres, they didn't see any kind of contradiction between supporting neoliberal policies—for example, one of their ministers was in charge of the privatization of the electricity sector and various other privatization policies—and social justice. But they don't understand social justice the way you and I understand it, as the emancipation of the popular classes.

Hezbollah through time has become more entrenched within the Lebanese sectarian and bourgeois system that it opposed in the beginning—but on a reactionary basis, saying that they wanted to establish an Islamic state. This is why I'm saying it was never really progressive. But through the decades and through the increasing participation of the Shi'a fraction of the bourgeoisie within the party, it has been listening more to sections of society in Lebanon that are in favor of more neoliberal policies.

The issue is that none of the political parties want to speak about class, because this would be the end of their

domination of the society. Sectarianism is used as an instrument of division among the various popular classes, therefore preventing them from collaborating together. This is very important to understand: that throughout the Middle East, sectarianism has become an instrument of counterrevolution dividing popular classes, trying to prevent any cross-sectarian alternative movement. Hezbollah is not different, in this regard, from other religious fundamentalist movements.

**CM: You point out that Hezbollah has a long history of protecting the Lebanese government from mass trade union and worker mobilizations. You show example after example of that. How much of an obstacle has Hezbollah become, then, for those who want workers' rights in Lebanon?**

JD: Just like the other Lebanese sectarian elites, it's preventing any kind of independent labor movement combatively challenging the neoliberal policies of the government, and this has been the case since the mid- to late nineties. First against the main trade union in Lebanon that is called the CGTL, and after 2011 when it was around the movement of union coordination committees. In both cases we saw all the various Lebanese sectarian elite parties unite to crush the combative trade unionist leadership.

Today there are various parties that are trying to build an alternative and to put forward labor rights, but unfortunately on a mass basis this does not exist. There are contradictions that are increasingly appearing among the popular classes, but unfortunately because of the lack of a popular alternative on the ground, people cannot seek something else. Even though there are contradictions and criticism of Hezbollah's increasing neoliberal policies and participation in government, if you don't have an alternative that you can join, this unfortunately remains just criticism.

The state of the workers in Lebanon is unfortunately very negative, and diminishing on nearly a daily basis. And unfortunately with the heads of

the trade unions controlled by the various Lebanese sectarian elites—instead of seeing the numbers of new Syrian refugees in Lebanon as allies to do cross-national struggles together, they accuse Syrian labor of pushing down salaries, of being the problem when it comes to the economy, just like the Lebanese sectarian elites. This is very unfortunate.

**CM: Is the anti-labor stance that Hezbollah seems to take a threat to their own power? Are they undermining their own power by being so neoliberal?**

JD: In the mid- to long term, definitely. But as I said, the main issue is that today because of ideology and the domination of a sectarian perspective among the Lebanese society, because of the structure of the state that is based on political sectarianism, this prevents the building of an alternative.

This is a key issue. You can show the contradictions of Hezbollah, but you cannot build on these contradictions without an alternative that is present among the Lebanese people, the popular classes. And this is the key issue that a lot of people are trying to work on in Lebanon. This is why it is so important, every time there is a movement from below (what happened after 2011 with the movements that want the fall of sectarianism, or more recently with the You Stink! campaign that challenged the whole elite), to build on this. Without this, it's not possible to benefit from the contradictions of Hezbollah or the Lebanese sectarian bourgeois parties.

Hezbollah considers—as do other religious fundamentalist parties throughout the world—the class issue as very bad. It is division of the believers. This perspective combined with neoliberalism (the people who become rich do so because they are good believers) is the kind of discourse that is very much present.

**CM: I want to get to Syria—let's start with the relationship between Hezbollah and Assad. What is the purpose of Hezbollah supporting Assad? What are they telling the**

**people within Lebanon, the people within their party, about why it's so important to defend Bashar al Assad?**

JD: It is important to remind everyone that the relationship between these two actors was very much strengthened following the arrival to power of Bashar al Assad, who allowed the provision of all kinds of weapons to Hezbollah, which had not been the case before 2000 under the rule of Hafez al Assad, the father. And the relationship was no longer tactical; it became strategic "as we can see with the intervention of Hezbollah in Syria to assist the Assad regime in crushing the popular uprising. The main issue is that the weapons that are provided to Hezbollah by Iran go through Damascus. Therefore it is absolutely a key issue for Hezbollah that the Assad regime stays in power.

The discourse of Hezbollah to justify its intervention in Syria varies. First there is the main rhetoric saying that Daesh, the so-called Islamic State, has expanded; the various *takfiri* Sunni jihadist forces have expanded in Syria, and therefore they must intervene to save not only the Syrian people but Lebanon. It's a preemptive intervention to protect the Lebanese people. After that, there is the second main discourse saying it's to protect the axis of resistance: Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran, against the coalition of Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United States. And finally there is this sectarian Shi'a discourse saying it's a new Karbala "in the Islamic history this has a specific resonance among Shi'a people" and they must protect the Shi'a people.

All these kinds of discourse are present within Hezbollah's propaganda to justify its intervention in Syria.

**CM: Is that propaganda successful? Is it popular? Does it work on the people of Lebanon? Or just on a small faction?**

JD: It has become the main dominant message, and it is working. At the beginning there was criticism even within some sections of Hezbollah, for example people saying, "Listen, we

are ready to send our children to fight against Israel" but Syria, no. We disagree with this. These are our brothers and sisters."

But this discourse, this kind of criticism was increasingly undermined, because of the rise in summer 2013 of the Islamic State. There were attacks in Shi'a neighborhoods of Lebanon by jihadist forces, and therefore some of the people saw the only option to preserve and protect their lives was Hezbollah's weapons. So these kinds of criticisms have been increasingly disappearing.

And I'm sorry to point this out repeatedly, but again the lack of a democratic and progressive alternative is key: if you don't have Hezbollah to protect you, who will protect you? And if we don't build this democratic, progressive alternative in Lebanon...people won't leave Hezbollah just for free.

**CM: I really want you to explain something about what's taking place in Syria. This has been a huge controversy, and I've had fallings out with some people who have been on the show in the past, and I've had some people enjoy some of the guests that we've had on in the past who have talked about the democratic opposition in Syria.**

There was an interview posted with you at Syria Freedom Forever this week entitled "[The New Balance of Terror in Syria](#)." The introduction to that interview calls Assad's government a dictatorship. What would you say to those who would argue that it is not a dictatorship because it has been elected (even if one of those elections was during the ongoing war)?

JD: For the past four decades in Syria, there have been elections, since the arrival to power of the father of Bashar al Assad, Hafez al Assad, in 1970. And it's more of a referendum on whether you accept or not. There was a joke in Syria "there are two options on the ballot: Yes, and underneath, instead of No, it says, Give us your address. Everyone knows Syria has been a complete dictatorship for the past four decades.

There are also other examples of authoritarian governments organizing elections just to legitimize or justify their power to the population, or more precisely, to other international or regional actors. It's not even a matter of debate to say that Assad's regime is a dictatorship.

**CM: A couple months ago, all of the sudden I saw this video all over social media for like three or four days, then it took no time for everything that this Canadian journalist Eva Bartlett said to be debunked.**

But what would you say about somebody like Eva Bartlett who is telling people that the Assad regime was democratically elected when clearly that process wasn't democratic?

JD: I would tell Eva Bartlett that while in the past she has stood with oppressed people, notably in Palestine, today unfortunately she stands with the oppressor. And you know, there is also this whole discourse that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East "I think this same kind of joke is being made with the case of Assad's dictatorship as a democracy. In both cases, we have to reject this, and always stand with the oppressed.

Does that mean that the uprising in Syria is a single color? Obviously not. Everywhere in history when there has been an uprising, not all people who participate in it are democrats, or progressive. This is obviously the reality. In Syria, and in the uprisings all over the Middle East and North Africa, there were two faces of the counterrevolution. The old regimes and Islamic fundamentalism. But we must stand with people sharing similar ideals "democratic ideals, progressive ideals" and these were the majority within the popular movements throughout the area. These are the people who I stand with. Not for oppressors, whether they say they are oppressing people in the name of religion or oppressing them in the name of secularism. In both cases it's propaganda.

The key issue is standing with the oppressed. Unfortunately, Eva Bartlett

has forgotten this.

**CM: What would you say to someone who argues that there is not nowâ€”nor was there everâ€”a democratic opposition in Syria? I've had people come up to me during our office hours and say that there was never a democratic opposition, and all I can say is that I've talked to people on the air who have been in Aleppo, who have been in Syria, and they say that there was a democratic opposition.**

JD: These uprisings have been documented in a way that has never been seen before in history. There is documentation of the uprising, of the organization of Local Coordinating Committees. There is YouTube video of, for example, Homs Square: 50,000 people. Would you say that Tahrir Square didn't happen? It's on the screen, you can't say it's a conspiracy. To believe that someone can move millions of people like on a Playstation or a chess boardâ€”it's completely out of reality. You're just ignoringâ€”and suppressingâ€”the agency of the people who came out in the street.

No one is denying that today the popular movement in Syria is very much diminished, first because of the massive repression of the regime, and then the rise of Islamic fundamentalist forces, but I can give you a couple of examples where there are Local Coordinating Committees, local councils still present on the ground. In January 2017 there was the election of a local council by civilians in Idlib region. Just lately in Attareb, which is a small town in Aleppo province, there were huge demonstrations and strikes within the city to protest the attempts of Jabhat al Nusra (former Al Qaeda), to take control of the bakery, which would have enabled it to control the whole region because of the bread. There are still people on the ground fighting for their democratic aspirations, and every time we have seen even a partial ceasefire in Syria, there have been hundreds of demonstrations throughout liberated areas (meaning not under the control of the Assad regime or the so-called Islamic State), with democratic, non-sectarian slogans.

If you want to see them, you can.

These are documented. In Syria there were strong strikes and demonstrations in the seventiesâ€”unfortunately this memory was not kept and is not well-known if you are not in leftist or democratic circles. But this memory is present today. And this memory should not be seen as only looking back at the past, but taking this past to build on the future. Because the political experiences that have been accumulated over the past six years will not disappear.

**CM: To you, then, what explains the apparent inability of the left outside of Syriaâ€”especially in the West, and especially in the United Statesâ€”not to be able to see that there was a democratic opposition and that there is a democratic opposition in Syria today?**

JD: I would like to say some sections of the left. There have been other sections of the left in the Middle East and North Africa and Western countries supporting the Syrian revolution. I think the key issue is first of all the bad definition and characterization of the Assad regime as a socialist, secular, anti-imperialist state. These are the three big lies in Syria.

If you understand socialism to be sharing the wealth of Syria within a single familyâ€”the Assad familyâ€”then maybe it's socialism, but a very specific one. For example the cousin of Bashar al Assad, Rami Makhlouf in Syria, had direct control of sixty percent of the wealth of Syria. Would you call this socialism? In a satirical newspaper in the 2000s in Syria, there was a leftist who wrote a headline: "After forty years of socialism, feudalism is back." Because the amount of privatization of wealth had come back to levels similar to before 1963.

As for anti-imperialism: the Assad regime has a history of collaboration with various imperialist forces. Just lately, Assad said that Trump's ban on Muslims in the United States is not against Muslimsâ€”it's against terrorists! So there is this connection between the extreme far-right discourse and the Assad regime. I

could go on with these kinds of examples.

But I think the key issue is how you see emancipation. How do you see liberation of the people? Is it through a socialism from below, or socialism from above, meaning you support a dictatorship that isn't even socialism from above anymore? It's just dictatorship from above. I believe in the self-emancipation of people by their own. I think we should stand in solidarity with the Syrian people in their struggle.

Just a late example: Russia Today said that all the mass mobilizations going on in the US are George Soros-funded. So you're in the same situation as us, facing a conspiracy, apparently, from a foreign government or other actors against a legitimate government that has been elected by its own people!

**CM: One last question for you, and as we do with all of our guests, it's the Question from Hell: the question we hate to ask, you might hate to answer, or our audience is going to hate the response.**

With the fall of eastern Aleppo, is the democratic revolution in Syria over?

JD: I think it's not completely dead. As I said, the political experiences that have accumulated will not disappear. There are still examples of civilian democratic resistance in Syria, as I mentioned before. But I am in favor of the end of the war by all means possible. This does not mean that I support the relegitimization of the government on an international basis. We have to fight against it. But on a humanitarian basis, enabling internally displaced people to go back to their homes is a necessity. Politically, as well: every time we've seen a partial ceasefire, people were able to self-organize. So I don't think it's the end.

Revolutionary processes are long term, with ups and downs, but it's not the end of this history. In the French Revolution, six years after its beginning, it wasn't looking very good either. So therefore we should have hope even in these catastrophic times, and it's very far from being the end. The contradictions of the Assad

regime will stay. The conditions that allowed for the beginning of these uprisings are still present.

**CM: I cannot thank you enough for coming into the studio this morning.**

JD: It has been a pleasure. Thank you.

[antidotezine](#)

# Assessing the Pink Tide

20 April 2017, by **Jeffery R Webber**

When Ecuador gained independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century, the country did not launch a social revolution that would overturn colonial society's racism and inequality. Instead, the elite descendants of Spanish conquistadores now ruled on their own behalf rather than for the Spanish crown. For those beneath them, much remained as it had been.

Thus a popular slogan of the early republican period emerged in the graffiti lining the walls of Quito, the capital city: the last day of despotism, and the first day of the same; or, as [Luis Macas](#), a leading indigenous activist remembered it in a 2010 interview with me, the last day of oppression, and the first day of the same.

This expression captures something essential about the first decade and a half of twenty-first-century Latin American politics. Indeed, some on the Left have celebrated the most recent period of the region's history as Latin America's Second Independence, referring to the region's relative autonomy from the domination of the United States and the crudest dictates of orthodox neoliberalism.

But the nineteenth-century Ecuadorian slogan resonates in ways that suggest a more somber view. At the end of the latest left experiments in Latin America, the chasm between what this challenge to neoliberalism promised and what political-economic strategies left and center-left governments actually adopted is clearer than ever.

## From the Streets to the State

Latin American social movements between 2000 and 2005 emphasized direct action, grassroots participatory democracy, and the de-professionalization of politics. The assembly form became a privileged site of deliberative decision-making. Popular organizations combined confronting the state with building new forms of self-governance that prefigured the post-neoliberal, and in some cases post-capitalist, societies they hoped to forge.

When progressive parties assumed the mantle of state leadership over the mid-2000s, however, the social movements were limited to "subaltern participation," which Mabel Thwaites Rey and Hernán Ouyá±a [define](#) as the pacifying incorporation of popular sectors into the gears of the capitalist state, rather than "autonomous and antagonistic participation," in which they maintain their capacity to disrupt and to lay the groundwork for emancipatory transformation. The necessary struggle *against, within, and beyond* the state transformed into a moderated struggle captured by the state.

Social movements lost sight of the connection between specific popular organization dynamics and the revolutionary horizon of transforming capitalist society in its totality. Modest reforms and increases in consumptive capacities became ends in themselves, rather than the basis for more audacious structural ruptures with the existing order. The new left governments channeled the momentum of social change from

below rather than encouraging an ongoing rebalance of class forces that would favor the laboring classes.

Left governments cannot capture a capitalist state's actually existing apparatuses and straightforwardly retool them for any purpose besides the reproduction of capitalist society. That, however, does not mean that we should think of the state as merely an instrument of the bourgeoisie. Within a specific national territory, and within the limits of capitalist reproduction, the state represents the balance of class forces. The [positive aspects](#) of state services "public education, health care, and so on" are the accumulated legacy of past popular struggle, always unevenly achieved and [under threat of reversal](#). Ultimately, the state cannot be transformed from within given the fundamental role it plays in reproducing dominant class relations and the mode of capitalist exploitation.

There may be a revolutionary road to post-capitalism that begins with left forces assuming electoral office, but, as [Panagiotis Sotiris](#) has argued, such a process would quickly lead to an organic crisis of the state and fierce counterattack by bourgeois forces. What began with elections would then become something else altogether.

Anticapitalist revolution requires the purposeful creation of new forms of solidarity and self-management, the institutionalization of new social and political forms of struggle, and the extension of modalities of popular power from below, outside of, and against the bourgeois state, even if left parties and social movements do participate in the electoral terrain of competition.



With the exhaustion of the current progressive cycle in Latin America, the political moment will likely become much darker before it gets brighter. If, however, today's popular movements "those [fighting the parliamentary coup](#) in Brazil, or [taking on the Macri government](#) in the streets of Argentina, or aligned against the authoritarian government in Honduras" presage struggles to come, the tide will turn again, creating conditions more favorable to the popular sectors' self-activity.

But what form this next left assumes in the medium term, and whether it can transcend inherited habits and institutional patterns, will depend in part on its ability to ruthlessly assess the last fifteen years.

## Passive Revolution

Gramsci [describes](#) passive revolution as a period marked by the unequal and dialectical combination of restorative and transformative tendencies.

Transformative dynamics work to change social relations, but these changes are ultimately limited. The fundamental structure of social domination persists, even if its political expressions have been altered.

The last day of oppression, and the first day of the same.

The specific class content of passive revolutions varies within certain limits "that is, popular demands (the transformative tendency) are incorporated to different degrees within a structure that ultimately sustains the foundations of the status quo ante (the restorative tendency). Passive revolutions involve neither the total restoration of the old order nor radical revolution.

Instead, they generate a dialectic of revolution/restoration, transformation/preservation. Capacities for social mobilization from below are co-opted, contained, or selectively repressed, while the dominant classes' political initiative is restored. Meanwhile, conservative reforms appear in the guise of impulses emerging from below,

thereby achieving the dominated classes' passive consensus.

Rather than an instantaneous restoration, the balance of forces changes at a molecular level until the capacities for popular self-organization and self-activity are completely drained through co-optation, bureaucratization, and so on. This process guarantees passivity to the new order and controls what mobilization occurs, if not encouraging complete demobilization.

At the end of Latin America's most recent progressive cycle, we can discern the sharpest periods of transformation and of restoration over the last fifteen years of left resurgence as well as characterize the epoch since the late 1990s as a whole.

## Explaining the End of the Cycle

Some have responded to the fading of center-left hegemony in Latin America with denial. Broadly speaking, two versions of this position dominate. First, from a social-democratic perspective, the Right's resurgence "evident in [Mauricio Macri's 2015 election](#) in Argentina, the conservative opposition's [congressional victory](#) in Venezuela that same year, Evo Morales's [failed attempt](#) to run for a third consecutive term as Bolivian president, Rafael Correa's decision [not to seek reelection](#) in Ecuador, and [Brazil's parliamentary coup](#) a year ago" appears as a string of relatively superficial setbacks.

"For the past 15 years," Mark Weisbrot writes in [an emblematic intervention](#), "Washington has sought to get rid of Latin America's left governments; but its efforts have really succeeded, so far, only in the poorest and weakest countries: Haiti (2004 and 2011), Honduras (2009), and Paraguay (2012)." The region has more independence than ever, and the poor are better off now than at any time in recent decades.

The Latin American left, Weisbrot argues, overturned economic and political relations with the behemoth to the north, constituting a "second independence" after it secured

freedom from Spain and Portugal two centuries ago. Riding on this legacy, Weisbrot predicts that the region's progressives are "likely to remain the dominant force in the region for a long time to come."

Such a perspective sees the recent close-call results of the second round of Ecuador's presidential contest as further evidence of Pink Tide continuity. Correa's successor, Lenín Moreno [won](#) 51.6 percent of the vote, defeating retrograde conservative Guillermo Lasso, who garnered 48.8 percent. Downplayed is the fact that Correa's government shifted to the right in recent years, was in open conflict with the indigenous movement and public sector unions, and was suffering a decline in popularity as the economy sunk into serious recession with the end of the oil boom.

In the 2006 and 2013 general elections, Correa won in the first round with 57 percent of the popular vote. In 2017, Moreno, Correa's vice president from 2007 to 2013 and clearly a continuity candidate, won only 39 percent in the first round "falling shy of the 40 percent needed to avoid a second round, despite a fractured right-wing opposition. While less calamitous than a Lasso victory would have been, it is very likely that Moreno will introduce new austerity measures, prioritize debt repayment, and maintain Correa's development program of capitalist modernization in the extractive sectors of mining and oil.

Social democrats never believed that revolutionary change was possible or even desirable in twenty-first century Latin America. As a result, they have interpreted the shift to the center of the political spectrum by left and center-left governments over the last several years as an adaptation to reality, a prudent course of moderation. These governments and the social movements that support them must accept the inevitable and make a virtue of necessity, [following](#) Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's and Dilma Rousseff's lead in Brazil. The only possible alternative to neoliberal capitalism is a regulated and humane capitalism "other desires are either nefarious or naïve.

A second denialist track claims a certain Marxist pedigree. It emphasizes the state's centrality as an agent of social change and aligns itself closely with the Bolivian, Cuban, and Venezuelan governments, and sometimes to those in Uruguay, Nicaragua, and, until recently, Brazil and Argentina. The Left's apparent setbacks appear, from this point of view, as symptoms of the natural ebbs and flows of the revolutionary process — part of the anticipated dynamics of advance and retreat, unsurprising unless one has innocently expected a linear revolutionary ascent.

This group interprets the growing tensions between left governments and social movements — as long as they stay in agreement with the government's objectives — as creative and revolutionary impulses that ultimately help transformative processes mature. The state managers and loyalists in these administrations reduce independent opposition from the Left or from indigenous organizations to machinations of imperialist powers or the domestic right. Indeed, they see left-indigenous movements as little more than the willing allies or useful idiots of empire.

Despite periodic hiccups and policy reversals, left governments are understood to be building advanced, industrial capitalism in the region, thereby creating the conditions for a slow transition to socialism. Such change does not drop from the sky, nor is it achieved over night. The transitional phase will last decades, perhaps centuries.

Both of these narratives misunderstand the Latin American context. The global economic crisis made a delayed landing in the region, and the center-left's hegemony is now in sustained and protracted retreat. New right-wing formations are appearing, but they cannot offer an alternative hegemonic project.

This is a novel period of political impasse, structured by deep continuities in underlying patterns of regional accumulation and Latin America's still-subordinate position as primary commodity producer in the international division of labor. A balanced assessment of these

progressive governments and the social movements that preceded them cannot restrict itself to unidimensional criticisms of American intervention and belligerent right-wing movements, even when these represent crucial components of the story.

Instead, we might start with the Latin American left's trajectory since the early 1990s, paying particular attention to the shifting balance of forces between the popular classes, ruling classes, and imperial forces across the last twenty-five years. From a nadir in the early 1990s, an extra-parliamentary left gradually renewed itself during the economic crisis of 1998-2002, which eventually became a political crisis for right-wing governments throughout much of South America.

This movement left's radicalism, particularly in Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador, was subsequently moderated in various ways as movement actors began participating in elections, center-left and left governments rose in the mid-2000s, and China's dynamic accumulation drove a worldwide commodity boom. Progressive governments consolidated into what Eduardo Gudynas [calls](#) the "compensatory state," in which wealth is redistributed but does not change society's underlying class structure or seriously confront profitability and property regimes — a model that depends on strong commodity prices.

The global economic crisis initially had a relatively weak impact on the region, particularly in South America. But by 2012, the tide had shifted, and crisis rolled through the region. With a downturn in commodity prices, easy rent for redistribution disappeared, and center-left governments became austerity managers, alienating both the sections of capital that had reconciled themselves to progressive rule and the regimes' traditional social bases.

This dual retraction of support provoked a decline in center-left hegemony and the uneven appearance of new right-wing social and political movements. Ecuador, Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela are prominent exemplars of this new reality.

## Looking Back

These center-left governments achieved myriad social gains. Alternative regional integration projects began to develop in opposition to American dominance. The Argentine Supreme Court declared laws that granted immunity to leading figures of the dictatorship unconstitutional, and constituent assemblies in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador inserted some transformative elements into their countries' new constitutions.

Politically, the contrast with the repressive governments in Colombia, Peru, Paraguay, Honduras, and Mexico is stark. Ideologically, anti-imperialist discourse was revived, and, in some places, strategic debates over socialism and paths of transition to post-capitalism proliferated.

Progressive governments used the bonanza of export rent to fund targeted social policies for the poorest social strata, to increase and sustain employment rates (albeit typically in insecure and low-paid jobs), and to boost domestic consumption. The popular classes' living conditions measurably improved. Poverty went down, and income inequality fell slightly. (That said, this also happened in some countries in the region led by right-wing governments, as a cursory comparison of International Monetary Fund figures for Colombia and Brazil reveals, and the region remains the most unequal in the world.)

The pace of privatizations slowed and was even reversed in some economic sectors in a few countries. Spending on basic social services and infrastructure in poor urban neighborhoods and marginalized rural areas increased. These governments expanded access to basic free education and, in some cases, democratized access to universities. In the words of Ecuadorian sociologist [Pablo Ospina Peralta](#), Latin American progressivism offered "something," however minimal, in the face of the "nothing" that dominated in the decades of neoliberalism that preceded it.

But, as the global economic crisis seriously began to pinch state

revenues, even these slight gains were slowed or reversed. As sociologist Franck Gaudichaud [observes](#):

[The] social, political, and economic cycle of medium duration seems to be slowly exhausting itself, although in multiform and nonlinear ways. With their real (but relative) advances, their difficulties and important limitations, the different experiences of very distinct progressive governments of the region . . . appear to be running up against significant endogenous problems, robust conservative powers (national as well as global), and lack of direction and unresolved strategic dilemmas.

## Looking Ahead

A new period is opening up, likely to feature more intense forms of right-wing rule that, lacking societal consent, will rely on militarized and repressive domination. But the Right cannot solve the structural problems underlying the region's economics. This new period will be marked by economic, social, and political instability, by renewed interventionism from the United

States, and by deteriorating living conditions for the majority of Latin American populations.

Progressive governments are increasingly trapped between popular demands for the continuation of recent social gains and the intensifying discontent of foreign and domestic capitals that had learned to live with center-left hegemony when there seemed to be no other option.

In the present scenario, none of these governments have the ideological, organizational, or political capacity to take the kind of audacious steps against capital "like nationalizing banks, monopolizing trade, enacting agrarian reform and mass employment schemes, enforcing environmental regulations, boosting popular consumption, and controlling money laundering" that might realign them with their popular bases of support. These "governments fear popular mobilization of their own bases of support," Guillermo Almeyra [notes](#), "more than being toppled by the Right, which is on the offensive." The cycle of progressivism in Latin America has demonstrated that the mass mobilizations against neoliberalism in the early part of this

century and the subsequent occupation of state apparatuses by progressive governments of different shades cannot structurally transform society, the state, and the economy on their own. Indeed, the occupation of the state often domesticated social movements and tamed their desires by partially incorporating their demands into an underlying framework of continuity.

This observation hardly vindicates the radical autonomist view of changing the world [without taking power](#), of ignoring state power and buckling down in defensive islands while the Right governs the sea. The new situation demands a sober assessment of the period, an interrogation of established revolutionary truths, and ongoing, open-ended discussions of the strategic lessons to be drawn.

"When major historical processes come to an end, and in turn major political defeats transpire," Raúl Zibechi [explains](#), "confusion and despondency set in, desire intermingles with reality, and the most coherent analytical frameworks blur."

[Jacobin](#)

# Japan and South Korea's latest row could have deeper consequences

18 April 2017, by [Ra Mason](#)

Ever since a corruption scandal brought down South Korea's now-suspended president, [Park Geun-hye](#), South Korean politics has been [thrown into turmoil](#), and the government currently has very little practical political power. It was therefore in no position to focus on repairing Japan-Korea relations, particularly given the widespread anti-Japanese sentiments among the population at large.

Instead, confronted with the decision of whether or not to remove the figure, the government passed the buck to Busan's local authorities.

Tokyo, however, saw this as a tacit endorsement of the statue, which was created by activists hostile towards Japan.

By making a "final and irreversible" agreement to end this dispute in 2015, Japan's government doubtless hoped that the spectre of sexual slavery had finally been put to rest. But neither government made a concerted effort to gain full acceptance for the agreement from the Korean people – including former victims. So it is hardly surprising that following (then in power) Park's collapse, public anger

and resentment has resurfaced.

The causes of the dispute run deeper, though, than Korea's internal political situation.

## Tough times

Since Japan-Korea relations were normalised in 1965 under [Park's father \(Chung-hee\)](#), the comfort women issue has haunted all sides. Depending on each government's agenda, it has either been inflamed or subdued, but has been used

repeatedly for political leverage. Korea's people, meanwhile, have remained largely consistent in their outlook, often trying to frame Japan as the wrongdoer and extract an acknowledgment of responsibility from Tokyo.

In addition to genuine anger and outrage, however, there are at least two other forces at work. The first is a deep-rooted Korean nationalism: South Korea is, after all, a relatively small nation sandwiched between the two great powers of China and Japan. As such, a national inferiority complex has been intensified by suffering sexual enslavement, which embodies [physical domination](#). The second is the behaviour of Koreans during wartime.

In Korea itself, for example, soldiers of both nationalities visited "comfort stations", and sexual slavery was reportedly widespread during the Korean War. In this sense, an attempt may have been made to divert the eyes of the world away from disturbing episodes of Korean men and their allies systematically abusing Korean women. This is achieved by placing the blame entirely upon Japan's notorious wartime military.

Either way, this grisly affair could have all sorts of implications. For a Japanese government seeking to diversify its international security role

under the banner of "proactive peace", the timing of the new row is particularly bad – not least for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who surely wants to avoid attention on Japanese forces' previous misdeeds as he tries to steadily modernise his military.

Nevertheless, if Japan had blinked on an issue it officially considers resolved, other historical disputes might also have resurfaced as a result. In light of this, Tokyo took the decisive action to temporarily recall its ambassador and consulate general from Korea.

## A balance upset

Regardless of the legality of the bronze statue, Japan faces a potentially serious political backlash. South Korea's economy is increasingly integrated with China's; if this latest spat acts as a further catalyst for Seoul to move away from Tokyo towards Beijing, Japan could find itself more isolated in East Asia than ever.

That would mean Seoul and Tokyo only being close partners in the security arena. Their militaries operate together largely thanks to the influence and brokerage of the US – and if the ill-feeling of the comfort women affair boils over, for example into Korea's and Japan's separate plans for deployment of the US-backed

Terminal High-Altitude Air Defence missile defence system, parts of the security framework that hold the region in balance could be put at risk.

This is all bad for both sides. International coverage of the row will expose the Abe administration's hawkish approach to its neighbours and its clear lack of genuine sympathy for former comfort women; it may also confirm other countries' concerns about a [resurgent Japanese militarism](#). On the other side, large sections of Korea's population do indeed harbour nationalist sentiments that feed into the anti-Japanese rhetoric over sexual slavery. But the idea that if this bias could be overcome the issue would or should disappear is wrongheaded.

Whether committed by Japan or any other state, systematic sexual abuse during wartime needs to be more comprehensively dealt with. The timely appearance of the bronze statue in Busan is a chance for the Japanese government to openly and honestly readdress its wartime history, to start moving on from the worst of its recent past. Abe could then seize the opportunity to take the lead in tackling a regionally divisive issue. Instead, the endless row goes on.

January 18, 2017

[The Conversation](#)

# The First Strike

16 April 2017, by **Cinzia Arruzza, Doug Henwood**

**How did this idea for a women's strike come up?**

The idea came up after the [Polish women's strike](#) and the [women's strike in Argentina](#). It was launched by the Polish feminist activists; they were the ones who started working on this project in the fall.

Of course, one big motivation to do so was the extraordinary success of the women's strike in Poland that

managed to stop the abortion ban and to actually give birth to a new feminist movement. Also, the success of the women's strikes and the demonstrations seen in Argentina.

[In January](#), when we thought of organizing the women's strike, the international organization of the strike was already going on. We were actually late in the game. The reason we thought it was possible to organize this in the United States had to do

with the success of the women's marches in January. We saw that, given the enormous mobilization of women in January against Trump's administration, there could be some willingness to also engage women's strike on a more radical platform.

**The strike in Poland, although it was inspired by the abortion ban, did acquire a broader agenda than that, didn't it?**



Yes. Of course the immediate goal was to stop the abortion ban, but the strike was also against gender violence more generally. Especially after the mobilizations in Argentina, the call for the international women's strike had to do with reproductive justice but also with violence against women very broadly understood.

For example, it considered economic "slow violence" — the violence of policies that destroy welfare state, public services, and also the casualization of labor that impacts especially women. The concept was also broadened to include state violence, in terms, for example, of migration policies or wars that clearly affect women in significant ways.

The idea was also to give the autonomy to the various feminist groups in the various countries to actually elaborate their own platform, to adjust the platform and demands according to the needs and the concrete situation in each country.

I would say in general the character of the strike was actually much broader than the usual left feminist mobilization on, for example, reproductive justice and gender violence, because it addressed issues of racism, colonial wars, and economic policies.

### **What was the agenda for the US women's strike?**

For the United States, we put together an expansive agenda that included demands concerning the welfare state — universal health care and public services, reproductive services — and also a minimum wage of fifteen dollars and pay equality. It is very important to combine those two things because clearly wage equality across genders can be achieved also by compressing male wages to the bottom. It's not sufficient just to demand wage equality.

Then we had a very strong profile in terms of antiracism, opposition to white supremacy, opposition to US wars, imperialist wars, and also the opposition to [Israel's policies](#) in Palestine. We demanded the decolonization of Palestine, which was probably one of the most controversial

demands in our agenda, as we were attacked for this demand that was actually key to our platform. We also articulated demands concerning support in favor of indigenous women, especially in [Standing Rock](#).

The idea was to have a platform that addressed the various problems that affect women in a different way according to class, gender, ethnicity, race, or ability. The idea was, in order to have a really universalistic platform, a platform that responded to the demands and needs of the larger majority of women, we needed to emphasize the demands and needs of the most oppressed women, which means immigrant women, women of color, working-class women.

Otherwise, the risk is to put forward very generic demands for women's rights that actually don't take into account the fundamental differences in conditions of life and social situation of the women who live in the country.

The women's march that happened just after Trump's inauguration was criticized for [not having any demands at all](#). I've heard people criticize your women's strike for having demands that would [alienate a broad constituency](#). I guess women can't do anything right. How do you respond to that critique?

First of all, it is not entirely true that the women's march did not have demands. It is true they elaborated a platform only in a second moment, and the platform was relatively progressive, as it included demands concerning minimum wage and social provisioning.

Clearly, the mass mobilization for the women's marches can be explained also by the fact that although the platform was there, this was not the main mobilizing factor. The main mobilizing factor was opposition to Trump, which means that the people who participated in the marches had not necessarily the same politics, or did not necessarily embrace radical left politics. Certainly, they shared in common an opposition to Trump.

[Our platform](#) was set to be more radical and also more articulated, but the reason why we chose to do this

was precisely because we wanted to make an intervention in the feminist debate in the United States, and also in the process rebuild a feminist movement for the 99 percent in the United States.

What we wanted to rebuild was precisely a class and left perspective within the feminist movement. In order to do this, we needed to articulate a more complex and more radical platform that would allow us to build a bridge among social groups and women working on different issues and putting forward different struggles.

In a sense, the platform was meant to work as a catalyst, to carry on the work of the re-groupment of the various struggles that are going on in the country.

We were perfectly aware that the size of the women's strike would not be the same as the size of the women's marches. This was impossible because, again, the profile of the strike was much more defined and much more on the Left, but this was a precise choice because we felt that our contribution would be significant precisely in delineating a leftist current within the feminist movement.

**You've also been criticized for using the word "strike," since this was not rooted in traditional union activity. It was too ambitious. You were calling a strike that would not have mass participation. How do you plead on that?**

The most obvious and defensive response could be that we did not invent the name of the day of action. This was again already called as a women's strike internationally. But this would be a defensive response.

We actually have a more political response, in the sense that appropriating the term "strike" for a day of action for the feminist movement had various meanings and played various roles. First of all, we wanted to make visible the labor that women perform not only in the workplace, but also outside of the workplace, in the sphere of social reproduction.

This work isn't paid in most cases, but it is **nonetheless work**, and should be recognized as such. This is why the women's strike was very different as a concept from a general strike because it was a strike not only from work in the workplace, but also from unpaid work outside of the workplace.

Secondly, I think the meaningfulness of using the term "strike" had also to do with emphasizing the fact that women are also workers, and allowing women to identify themselves not only as women but also as workers.

Thirdly, I think that it is very important to relegitimize the term "strike" in United States. This is not a very popular notion, politically speaking. As a matter of fact, the women's march had quite an amount of pushback from their constituency that was challenging the notion of a strike. But not from, say, the perspective of labor organizers being worried that we are misusing the term "strike." Criticism came from people who do not have any sympathy for strike as a form of struggle. From this viewpoint, I think it was very important to reintroduce the notion of striking within the political language in the United States and to relegitimize it.

Finally, we were also hoping to have some strikes in workplaces. We were particularly aware that given the labor laws in the United States, these strikes would not be formal strikes because labor laws prevent workers from organizing political strikes.

From this viewpoint, the day of action was very successful because three entire school districts closed on March 8. For example, in **Prince George County School District**, apparently 1,700 teachers asked for a day off, and 30 percent of the transportation staff. These are big numbers.

The next step would then be to understand who organized this. I am skeptical that 1,700 teachers decided to take a day off without having any kind of even informal network, but I think the fact that three districts shut down showed that there is willingness and readiness to take some more radical actions in the workplace. This is a very important signal for working

on organizing in the workplace.

**I'm sorry to keep reciting criticisms of your action, but another one is that you had no sympathy for women who are tenuously employed. It would be too risky for them to strike. How could they have the nerve, to let's say, walk out, when they could lose their jobs as a result?**

First of all, we didn't ask women to walk out and lose their job. We asked women to organize a strike in the workplace, where they thought the conditions were in place to do so.

The idea that you shouldn't call for a women's strike because this would be an **action for privileged women** because only privileged women can strike is offensive to working-class and migrant women and women of color. It's extremely patronizing. It is also antihistorical. First of all, precisely the most vulnerable women in terms of social status, race, or citizenship status are the ones who have played a **crucial role** in all the mobilizations of recent years.

In doing so, they clearly have faced a number of risks. The idea that we should have some form of patronizing attitude toward them, telling them what they can or they cannot do, is extremely offensive. It doesn't really take into account the agency of these women, who can decide for themselves the risk they can take or they cannot take.

In addition to this, these kinds of criticism came from feminists who have supported Hillary Clinton's campaign, and who tended then to suggest that a more effective form of protest would be to call Democratic representatives. I think the real political intention behind these kinds of accusations was to downplay a potentially radical action taken by women, an attempt to identify in the Democratic Party the political force that will solve our problems.

Clearly, our day of action was precisely to state the opposite. We cannot expect to be saved from Trump by the Democratic Party. We need to take action ourselves, and by the way, we need to take action not only

against Trump, but in general against neoliberal and racist policies, even when they are carried out by the Democratic Party.

**You used a phrase a little while ago: the "political strike." People are more familiar with economic strikes. What is a political strike exactly, and what are the relations between it and an economic strike?**

This is a concept that is not familiar in the United States precisely because there are no or very few political strikes, and they are not formal political strikes. In a number of countries, political strikes are allowed, and they are strikes that do not have at their core specific economic demands related to the renewal of a contract or a negotiation on the workplace.

It can be strikes, for example, against general policies carried out by a government. For example, one of the biggest general strikes in Italy was the 1994 strike against Berlusconi's reform of the pension system with the participation of millions of workers. This was decisive in the fall of the first **Berlusconi government**.

Usually, political strikes take on the government, rather than an individual employer or an economic measure within a specific workplace or firm. In this sense, clearly the women's strike was a political strike. It was not an economic strike because it was a strike based on a political platform and clearly addressed against a government.

**It seems that reactionary governments "you mentioned Poland, and it has one of those, and the Trump administration" seem to have a special place in their heart for misogyny. Is that a correct perception?**

Yeah, of course. In recent years we have seen "and this is also why it is so important to rearticulate a clearly left feminism, not only in the United States but worldwide" the co-optation of elements of the feminist discourse by conservative and reactionary racist governments.

For example, [Islamophobic policies](#) are very often justified on the basis of pseudo-feminist discourses. The use of this pseudo-feminist discourse also hides the fact that the concrete policies carried out by conservative governments usually target women, for example, policies centered around reproductive rights and reproductive justice – particularly abortion – but also targeting women on a socioeconomic level by destroying the welfare state or public services.

Certainly misogyny, both implicit in the policies carried down and explicit in the statements of political figures such as Trump or Berlusconi, is part of conservative politics.

**There was a critique that there was something wrong with singling out women, having this be a women's strike, and not something that included men. How do you react to that?**

Honestly, in the organization of the women's strike, we had the help and support of a lot of men. I'm not sure how strong this position is. It is very vocal on social media. I'm not sure how much it really represents a widespread feeling or an opposition among men on the Left. I would be more optimistic.

That said, I think the accusation is absurd in the sense that there is the tendency to think that by emphasizing struggles on issues that are key for specific sectors of the working class, for example, race, one then gives up about universalistic political projects. I would say it is the other way around.

Of course, there is a risk of falling into a kind of identity politics that makes solidarity and universalistic politics impossible. We have seen this in the last two decades. However, I don't

think the correct political response to this is to then suggest that we should make abstraction from differences and hierarchies that are in any case produced by capitalism and divide the working class.

On the contrary, I think the only way to achieve truly universalistic political projects of transformation of social relations is by identifying these hierarchies and these differences, and by articulating demands and critiques that are specific to these different conditions.

From this viewpoint, I would suggest that we'll achieve true universalistic politics when we will manage to combine together all the various demands and perspectives and critiques that relate to these various positions within the social structure. This is what we tried to do with the women's strike.

The women's strike was not based on a strong notion of identity, but rather pointed to the necessity of building a bridge among various women – for example, Muslim women, black women, immigrant women from South America or Central America, working-class women, and so on. The way to do this was not by hiding the differences, but by combining together the various demands in a single platform.

**I think the underlying message is, "Shut up. Your time will come."**

I think this is a social media phenomenon, because in actual organizing, we had a lot of solidarity from men on the Left. At the same time, I must say that if March 8 had been an international day of action and mobilization not on a feminist platform, it would have been welcomed with more widespread

enthusiasm.

The fact that it was a feminist international mobilization explains a large part of the critiques we've received. This is very unfortunate. At the same time, once again, I do think that this is a minority of internet leftists. We can also ignore this phenomenon.

**I hope you're right on that one. Finally, you didn't conceive this as a one-off thing. You're still continuing. There will be more events, more organizing in the future, correct?**

Yes, we have just decided that we want to continue working together on a national level because this experience was absolutely positive from all viewpoints, also from the viewpoint of the capacity of working together and building solidarity and trust and cooperation among the organizers, who had never worked together previously.

We have identified May Day as the next big national mobilization that we want to contribute to build. The idea is to try to build a very strong left feminist participation in the May Day mobilizations.

You have a little bit more time to organize for May Day than you did for this one. So how can people who want to get involved sign up?

They can write to us. We have a website, and they can email us. We are also creating our database of local contacts and hopefully we will be able to provide a network of activists on a national level, who can then be reference points for those who want to get involved and get organized and participate.

Source: 6 April 2017 [Jacobin](#).

# Vote Poutou - and prepare for confrontation

15 April 2017, by [Léon Crémieux](#)

Many journalists have also hailed his salutary “rant”, the breath of fresh air which ran through this debate thanks to him. On the other hand, the usual valets of the political and media world and its codes, both sartorial and verbal, have incessantly denounced Philippe for the blasphemies they hold him guilty of. [2]

## From popular anger...

We can only rejoice at these revealing reactions. Philippe has simply said out loud what the popular classes think about the political world, this immense majority which has only its wages or meagre benefits to live on, as against a small minority which lives on our backs, whether they are capitalists, rentiers or professional politicians.

The words are those of a worker, a wage earner, sweeping aside the agreed on respect to firmly put Fillon, Macron and Le Pen in their place. The latter was hit directly in the Achilles heel of the Front National. A big bourgeois, daughter of the millionaire Jean Marie Le Pen, the so-called candidate of the people, of the workers opposed to the system, was directly put in her place as a bourgeois politician who profits from the political system and from public money.

Philippe is the spokesperson for popular exasperation, for the millions of people who, at least for this, recognize themselves in him. But he is

not in this campaign to be simply the spokesperson of anger and exasperation. Because, too often in recent years, the ruling class and the media it controls has perpetuated the idea that, certainly, there is great exasperation, which often leads to the rejection of politics or to votes for “populists”, but that there is no alternative to the austerity policies followed in Europe, that we can only soften them or postpone them for a little while.

## ... to social mobilisation

Opposed to this discourse which distils impotence, Philippe Poutou echoes the social struggles, all the big social movements which show the way to action and popular mobilisation. Where the other candidates say “I” or “me, president”, Philippe talks about collective strength, about the popular mobilisation which can alone change things. As shown recently by the Spanish and Polish women blocking reactionary attacks against abortion rights, or the mobilizations of the Romanian and Korean peoples against corruption, or the hundreds of thousands of people in the streets of Barcelona demanding the admission of migrants.

Philippe Poutou doesn't say “Count on me” but rather “Count on ourselves” to take things in hand, fight for our rights, for jobs, for open frontiers, against police violence and useless projects.

## Confronting the real power, the system

Philippe and the NPA are not fighting for a cosmetic clean-up. The message is clear: we need a clean sweep to end social injustice and corruption, the arbitrariness of the bosses, the racist and reactionary turn, the discrimination, the seizure of wealth by a minority. This clean sweep requires an attack on the capitalist system itself, on private ownership of the means of production, without which any attempt at reform will come up against the real power, that of the capitalists and bankers.

The programme Philippe defends in this campaign (and on the media when he is allowed to do so!) takes up the demands of all the social movements which confront the system, those of the women and men who struggle in the workplaces and popular neighbourhoods. But also he defends the need to construct, starting from all these social struggles, a solid and united political force, not only to sound off but above all strong enough to impose the clean sweep we need.

On Sunday April 23, a vote for Poutou will have this meaning, that of a gesture of agreement with these popular demands and this programme, but also that of a collective undertaking to mobilise ourselves, affirming that, all together, we can get things moving and confront the system.

## What happened on 26 March? Russia's movement against corruption and perspectives for the Left

14 April 2017, by **Ilya Budraitskis**

Many of the rallies were uncoordinated, which has inspired the

intense interest of the police; the official mass media, however, has

tried to ignore the events. In the rally in Moscow, there were about 7-8



thousand participants, according to the data of the GUVd (the Moscow State Police); there were about 10 thousand, according to the estimations of the eyewitnesses; and the OVD-info has reported 1,042 people detained. In Petersburg, about 10 thousand people also came out to Marsovo Polye. Afterwards, about 2-3 thousand people set off to the Palace Square, to Isaac's and to the Office of Civic Registration. About 130 people were detained.

More than 2 thousand people rallied in Ekaterinburg and over 4,000 came out in Novosibirsk. In addition, people took to the streets of Tomsk, Chelyabinsk, Saratov, Voronezh, Irkutsk, Perm, and other cities. Based on the data from the local mass media, photos, and the video footage from Echo Moscow, about 60 thousand people participated in rallies all over Russia.

Ilya Budraitskis and Kirill Medvedev tell us how everything went, how the present protest differ from the Bolotnaya rallies five years ago, what we can expect from it, and what this protest means for the Left.

**Ilya Budraitskis:** Today, a day after the events in Moscow and other cities, the liberal media is full of speculations about the "school kids," the fundamentally new age audience which Navalny was able to mobilize. The mass participation of youth in yesterday's "walks" is, of course, a fact. However, I am more inclined to agree with the sociologist Alexander Bikbov, who noted that, after all, the majority of the protesters belonged to that generation around thirty years old. Nonetheless, these protests extended well beyond the group that came out to the Bolotnaya protests five years ago. For many of the people who came out into the streets—“not only in Moscow, but in a dozen other large cities”—the vital question has become not the lack of political freedoms, but the widening chasm between the absolute majority of the population and the ultra-rich corrupt elite.

The present movement is born out of the economic crisis and the deterioration of the Putin social model. Navalny has deftly captured this mood, increasing the social-

populist component of his investigations and public statements throughout the past year. He has clearly indicated that corruption is not a defect, but rather a part of a system which is based on large-scale upward redistribution of property. As to the pathos of his revelations, it has sometimes bordered on the red line of frank hatred towards the hedonist elite. One might say that right now, Navalny is doing what the Left called on the public to do during the Bolotnaya protests five years ago. He is widening the audience, drawing connections between political and social demands. The fundamental difference, however, is that for him, this is an instrumental, technical move, subordinate to an emphasis on his own status as the unquestionable leader of the opposition.

For the Left, this situation presents both new possibilities and new threats: the people, who came out yesterday to rally at the protests are more open to our ideas. And yet, at the same time, the configuration that is concentrated around Navalny's movement complicates the development of any other alternative, organized centers. In contrast to 2011, the protest has not yet become a place for the collision of different ideas. The Left participated quite actively in yesterday's protests in Moscow, Petersburg, Vladivostok and other cities, but was unable (and didn't even really try) to designate itself as a noticeable single pole of attraction. It is evident that throughout this year, events will develop at an accelerated rate and we must urgently draw conclusions from the experience of March 26th.

**Kiril Medvedev:** In part, the people who came out to Tverskaya street in Moscow were the Bolotnaya crowd; others were those who have been recently politicized and, overwhelmingly, as has been mentioned many times already, they were young people.

Importantly, through his film, Navalny has been able to emotionally overcome the effect of the Crimea and Donbass story, the forceful impact of which has paralyzed protest politics for the past three years. That's even more important than the specific facts that

are being exposed.

Incredibly ably and practically alone, Navalny is destabilizing the system.

The breach that he is creating, the challenges that he is thrusting at the official Left, forcing it to react and, at least somewhat, become more radicalized, must be exploited. The best possible result would be a conditional unification of the forces unleashed in 1991 and 1993, that is, of those people for whom the fight for democracy is a fight against the usurpation of power by a party and those for whom this is a fight against the possibility of small groups of the rich and the privileged to control the majority (even when it's happening in the most lawful, uncorrupt, and "transitory" fashion). Retrospectively, the social forces of these two years typically get opposed to each other: now we have a chance for their carriers to come together. And, of course, yesterday's school kids, if they don't become disillusioned in politics, will ultimately adopt one of these two perspectives.

This unification would be the most terrible nightmare of the regime, as well as a quite unpleasant piece of news for those nationalists and liberals who hope, above all else, to call it quits on the Soviet heritage and its carriers.

Navalny, in his case, attempts to settle this paradox through the power of his own figure; thus, the unification of the movement is directly dependent on direct loyalty towards his persona. This is a problem. But no other serious oppositional movement, separate from the Navalny-initiated anti-corruption protest, exists or will exist in the near future. Therefore, naturally, we must be with those who participate in it. But by remembering how a pair of irreplaceable national leaders (first Yeltsin, then Putin) was forced upon us (partially by the same circle of people) in the 1990s, it is necessary to participate in these protests with the most democratic and anti-authoritarian program.

We don't need a Navalny cult; we don't need President Navalny or any other president. Nor do we need nationalism, which he tries to mobilize

for his own support. Therefore, this is a Trojan horse, which can implode from inside, destroying the entire movement, the society or, at the minimum, will again relinquish the power of initiative to the regime.

We need to reboot the system. We need a new field for political and ideological conflicts, one in which the Left will finally be able to be an independent, mass, democratic force. A field for transferring the expert and creative potential we have gained over the past years into real politics; enabling leftist economists to create a realistic program, in which corruption

would not be seen as the main and only evil, but just one of the structural elements of our semi-peripheral capitalism, which must be destroyed. We need left politics and speakers to learn to clothe this program into lucid words and for artists to create it into a story that is as powerful as the Crimea and Donbass story ("Russians never forsake their own!") or as Navalny's film.

In other words, for the Left the time for real politics and mass propaganda is approaching. The goal is to speak and show complex truth in simple, emotional language. Otherwise, we

might as well abandon all political ambitions.

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\* LeftEast. April 1, 2017:

<http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/what-happened-on-march-26th/>

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<http://openleft.ru/?p=9223>

## What About Racism?

13 April 2017, by **Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor**

The movement is relatively new, but the racism that spawned it is not. By every barometer in American society — health care, education, employment, poverty — African Americans are worse off.

Elected officials from across the political spectrum often blame these disparities on an absence of "personal responsibility" or view them as a [cultural phenomenon](#) particular to African Americans.

In reality, racial inequality has been largely produced by government policy and private institutions that not only impoverish African Americans but also demonize and criminalize them.

Yet racism is not simply a product of errant public policy or even the individual attitudes of racist white people — and understanding the roots of racism in American society is critical for eradicating it.

Crafting better public policy and banning discriminatory behavior by individuals or institutions won't do the job. And while there is a serious need for government action barring practices that harm entire groups of people, these strategies fail to grasp the scale and depth of racial inequality

in the United States.

To understand why the United States seems so resistant to racial equality, we have to look beyond the actions of elected officials or even those who prosper from racial discrimination in [the private sector](#). We have to look at the way American society is organized under capitalism.

### The Basic Division

Capitalism is an economic system based on the exploitation of the many by the few. Because of the gross inequality it produces, capitalism relies on various political, social, and ideological tools to rationalize that inequality while simultaneously dividing the majority, who have every interest in uniting to resist it.

How does the one percent maintain its disproportionate control of the wealth and resources in American society? By a process of divide and rule.

Racism is only one among many oppressions intended to serve this purpose. For example, American racism developed as a justification for the enslavement of Africans at a time when the world was celebrating the

concepts of liberty, freedom, and self-determination.

The dehumanization and subjection of black people had to be rationalized in this moment of new political possibilities. But the central objective was preserving the institution of slavery and the enormous riches that it produced.

As Marx recognized:

Direct slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that has given the colonies their value; it is the colonies that have created world trade, and it is world trade that is the pre-condition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance.

Marx also identified the centrality of African slave labor to the genesis of capitalism when he wrote that the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of Black skins, signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.

The labor needs of capital alone could explain how racism functioned under capitalism. The literal dehumanization of Africans for the sake of labor was used to justify their harsh treatment and their debased status in the United States.

This dehumanization did not simply end when [slavery was abolished](#) ; instead, the mark of inferiority branded onto black skin carried over into Emancipation and laid the basis for the second-class citizenship African Americans experienced for close to a hundred years after slavery.

The debasement of blacks also made African Americans more vulnerable to economic coercion and manipulation – not just “anti-blackness.” Coercion and manipulation were rooted in the evolving economic demands of capital, but their impact rippled far beyond the economic realm. Black people were stripped of their right to vote, subjected to wanton violence, and locked into menial and poorly paid labor. This was the political economy of American racism.

There was another consequence of racism and the marking of blacks. African Americans were so thoroughly banished from political, civil, and social life that it was virtually impossible for the vast majority of poor and working-class whites to even conceive of uniting with blacks to challenge the rule and authority of the ruling white clique.

Marx recognized this basic division within the working class when he observed, “In the United States of America, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the Black it is branded.”

Marx grasped the modern dynamics of racism as the means by which workers who had common objective interests could also become mortal enemies because of subjective – but nevertheless real – racist and nationalist ideas. Looking at the tensions between Irish and English workers, Marx wrote:

Every industrial and commercial center in England possesses a working

class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians.

The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country against Ireland.

This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organization. It is the secret by which the capitalist maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it.

For socialists in the United States, recognizing the centrality of racism in dividing the class that has the actual power to undo capitalism has typically meant that socialists have been heavily involved in [campaigns](#) and social movements to end racism.

But within the socialist tradition, many have also argued that because African Americans and most other nonwhites are disproportionately poor and working class, campaigns aimed at ending economic inequality alone would stop their oppression.

This stance ignores how racism constitutes its own basis for oppression for nonwhite people. Ordinary blacks and other nonwhite minorities are oppressed not only because of their poverty, but also because of their racial or ethnic identities.

There is also no direct correlation between economic expansion or improved economic conditions and a decrease in racial inequality. In reality, [racial discrimination](#) often prevents African Americans and others from fully accessing the fruits of economic expansion.

After all, the black insurgency of the 1960s coincided with the robust and thriving economy of the 1960s – black people were rebelling because they were locked out of American affluence.

Looking at racism as only a byproduct of economic inequality ignores the ways that racism exists as an independent force that wreaks havoc in the lives of all African Americans.

The struggle against racism regularly intersects with struggles for economic equality, but racism does not only express itself over economic questions. Antiracist struggles also take place in response to the social crises black communities experience, including struggles against racial profiling, police brutality, housing, health care, educational inequality, and mass incarceration and other aspects of the “criminal justice” system.

These fights against racial inequality are critical, both for improving the lives of African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities in the here-and-now; and for demonstrating to ordinary white people the destructive impact of racism in the lives of nonwhite people.

Winning ordinary whites to an antiracist program is a key component in building a genuine, unified mass movement capable of challenging capital. Unity cannot be achieved by suggesting that black people should downplay the role of racism in our society so as not to alienate whites – while only focusing on the “more important” struggle against economic inequality.

This is why multiracial groupings of socialists have always participated in struggles against racism. This was particularly true throughout the twentieth century, as African Americans became a

### [more urban population](#)

were describing a kind of socialist vision of the future. In a 1966 presentation to a gathering of his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, King commented:

We must honestly face the fact that the movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people here. And one day we must ask the question, “Why are there forty million poor

people in America?" And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy . . .

"Who owns the oil?" You begin to ask the question, "Who owns the iron ore?" You begin to ask the question, "Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that is two-thirds

water?" These are questions that must be asked.

As movements continued to radicalize, groups like the [Black Panthers](#) and the [League of Revolutionary Black Workers](#) followed in the tradition of Malcolm X when they linked black oppression directly to capitalism.

The Panthers and the League went further than Malcolm by attempting to build socialist organizations for the

specific purpose of organizing working-class blacks to fight for a socialist future.

Today the challenge for socialists is no different: being centrally involved in the struggles against racism while also fighting for a better world based on human need, not profit.

[Jacobin-><https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/black-lives-matter-slavery-discrimination-socialism/>]

# What South Korean president Park's political demise means for the region's geopolitics

12 April 2017, by **The Conversation UK**

An election to decide on her replacement will be held on May 9, and it could see profound changes in South Korean foreign policy.

According to opinion polls, the most likely person to be [elected president](#) is opposition leader Moon Jae-in, of the liberal Democratic Party of Korea. A civil rights lawyer (and former Special Forces paratrooper during his military service), Moon was the campaign manager and chief of staff for his friend and political mentor, former president Roh Mu-hyun (February 2003 to March 2004 and May 2004 to February 2008).

A year after he left office, Roh died by jumping off a mountain cliff; his brother was indicted for corruption, and he and other members of his family had been under investigation.

Despite his ties to Roh, if Moon still manages to win the election by riding the wave of opprobrium against Park's conservative Liberal Korea Party, he will confront [serious domestic and foreign policy challenges](#).

## A broad mandate

Moon's potential mandate will encompass his calls for [reform of](#)

[conglomerates](#), known in South Korea as chaebol. The head of the biggest of these conglomerates [Lee Jae-yong was arrested](#) in February for allegedly paying millions of dollars in bribes to Park's friend and key player in the scandal Choi Soon-sil, who is also in custody.

Moon will need to address the nation's worsening economic inequality, as well as employment insecurity and subsequent cost-of-living pressures that [lay behind the public outrage](#) and mass demonstrations which led to Park's ousting.

In foreign affairs, [Moon may seek to renegotiate the deal](#) made by Park's government at the end of 2015 with Japan, which promised compensation payments for the wartime abuse of Korean women as sex slaves (euphemistically known as "comfort women"). The deal is already under strain, as Japan's ambassador to South Korea was recalled in February [over a statue commemorating the sex slaves](#) being placed outside the Japanese consulate in Busan. Similar statues have since appeared in other cities around the world.

Any deterioration in relations between Japan and South Korea will again frustrate long-running [diplomatic](#)

[efforts by the United States](#) to reconcile its key Northeast Asian military allies. [Recently increased security cooperation](#), particularly in intelligence sharing, may also be under threat.

The most significant foreign policy issue to confront Moon will be relations with the ever-belligerent Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and the US deployment to [South Korea of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense \(THAAD\)](#) anti-ballistic missile system, decided on by the Obama administration in July 2016.

Moon [has expressed a desire to improve relations with the North](#), and said he is willing to visit Pyongyang to do so. This raises the prospect of restoring the ["Sunshine policy" of the Kim Dae-jung](#) (1998-2003) and Roh Mu-hyun governments, which saw [extensive trade relations](#) between the two separated countries from 1998 to 2008, including significant investment by South Korean companies, and family reunions and tourist visits to the North.



## Regional implications

Under the oppressive rule of its authoritarian leader Kim Jong-un, North Korea would certainly exploit Moon's ambivalent position on THAAD. Along with a rowdy anti-THAAD protest movement in South Korea, [Kim could press for him to withdraw it](#) as a precondition for any chance of resuming improved relations.

THAAD is also firmly resisted by China, which fears the system's powerful radar will be used to [monitor and potentially interdict](#) its own strategic missile forces. [Russia is similarly opposed](#), despite US declarations that THAAD is solely to counter the North Korean missile threat.

There is hence a risk that THAAD deployment may encourage China, North Korea, and Russia to [expand their nuclear arsenals further](#).

China has already taken a hostile posture towards South Korea over THAAD. [Various products and services from the country](#), including highly popular television dramas and tours by K-pop performers have been banned; boycotts by Chinese tourists are being encouraged; and stores run in China by the chaebol Lotte have been closed for "safety inspections". South Korea has protested [these actions](#) to the World Trade Organization.

Moon is thus already under immense pressure from China, which poses a dire threat to any prospect of the economic recovery he hopes to restore. Should he become president,

Moon will certainly head off promptly to Beijing in an attempt to assuage China's concerns.

Meanwhile, the powerful South Korean military and intelligence service, the KCIA, would likely join the US in trying to convince Moon [to hold firm](#) on THAAD deployment.

## North Korean concerns

On his first trip to Asia - covering Japan, South Korea and China - North Korea's missile threat was US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's dominant concern. Tillerson declared in Tokyo and Seoul that past US policy towards North Korea had failed, and a ["new approach"](#) was needed.

Although no further details were offered, Tillerson stated that "all options were on the table", implying [that preemptive military strikes by the US against North Korea may be under consideration](#).

The recent series of North Korean missile tests is already the most pressing foreign policy issue confronting the Trump administration in Asia. In 2016, North Korea conducted 24 missile tests, and two nuclear weapon tests, [in repeated violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions](#).

The first test of 2017 was conducted on February 11, [during Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to the United States](#). On March 6, a salvo of four missiles was launched by North Korea towards the Sea of Japan, [landing the closest so far](#) to the main Japanese islands. The US [began deployment of the THAAD system](#) in

South Korea a day later.

The most recent missile test on March 22 [was said by the US and South Korea](#) to have been a failure. It came just after [North Korea declared a successful test of a solid-fuel rocket engine](#), which is vital to its plans for developing operational intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. These would - theoretically, at least - be capable of reaching mainland United States.

But despite US President Donald Trump's recent condemnation of North Korea ["acting very, very badly"](#), his administration is confronted with the same dilemma faced by all others since armistice was declared in the Korean War in 1953.

Any military action to punish North Korea risks escalation into a massively destructive war that could engulf South Korea and Japan, and threaten the stability of the Asia-Pacific region and the global economy. While the DPRK would face its own destruction in such a scenario, [it has long calculated](#) that the US would not risk such an escalation.

A withdrawal of THAAD from South Korea would be a clear strategic gain for North Korea, China, and Russia. To compensate, the United States would have no alternative but to deploy it to Japan, something Prime Minister Shinzo Abe would be more than happy with.

Beyond her own personal humiliation, the ramifications of Park's fall are already reverberating from domestic South Korean politics into the fraught geopolitics of Northeast Asia.

Source : [The Conversation](#).

## The Experience of Local Councils in the Syrian Revolution

11 April 2017, by [Walid Daou](#)

This text will review the most prominent local councils, where Aziz played a major role in drafting the founding papers. [3] It will also point out the shortcomings of this type of organization, at least in terms of application.

The increase of the Syrian regime's crackdown on the revolutionary uprising in Syria, in its peaceful phase, coincided with the desertion of many soldiers and the beginning of skirmishes between the Syrian army and what was to become the Free Syrian Army. The need arose for the creation of organizational structures to manage people's lives, due to the withdrawal of the regime from its simplest duties, already begun with the implementation of neoliberal "reforms".

While the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) had been formed as organizational structures to prepare, call for, and document demonstrations, the idea was that the local councils would be an alternative to the regime and its institutions. According to Omar Aziz, the goal behind forming these councils was "assisting people in running their lives independently from state institutions...; the creation of a space for collective expression, which supports solidarity between individuals and elevates their daily actions into political expression...; providing support and assistance for new arrivals and families of prisoners...; providing a space for discussing livelihood issues...; building horizontal links between local councils...; defending lands in the area in the face of government appropriation to the benefit of the wealthy or military and security officers in the state..." This is in addition to the documentation of violations perpetrated by the regime and its thugs (only), as well as providing relief, coordinating with medical committees, and supporting

and coordinating educational activities.

However, due to "the absence of electoral practice in the current situation," as Omar Aziz says, "the local councils will be formed of workers in the social field and those who enjoy public respect and have expertise in [various] areas." What is noteworthy here is how to measure "public respect" and when will "the current situation" end? Despite the continuity of the "the current situation," local council elections were held on the municipal level and a general assembly of local councils, which included members of local councils, was formed on the district level. District councils were also formed and elected an executive office and a president. All these councils were attached to the Ministry of Local Administration, Relief, and Refugee Issues in the provisional government. [4]

In fact, however, the work of these councils was limited to municipal affairs, such as various services, accompanied (competing with?) a constellation of NGOs focusing on the same work. Armed groups remained outside the supervision of local councils. At the same time, the Syrian National Council, the Syrian interim government, and the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition forces monopolized the "high political rhetoric."

Thus, the original idea behind the councils became meaningless. Under the hegemony of weapons and conditional funding, the space for council work closed up. Thus, the possibility of building an alternative, democratic authority from below, which could lead the revolution and speak in its name, was diminished. Although these councils were chosen through elections, democracy cannot be limited to the ballot box or a few minutes of electoral practice. It should

also mean that women are allowed to participate as candidates and voters. [5] It should also mean being aware of racism and sectarianism. It means the participation of all people in running all their affairs, not merely those related to the right to food, health, and education, and away from the control of warlords from all sides. It also means striving to achieve the aspirations of thousands of Syrian men and women who demonstrated, got arrested, were martyred, or displaced. It should ultimately mean striving towards liberty, dignity, and democracy.

Syrian revolutionaries cannot be blamed for the outcome of the revolution. Omar Aziz did not detain himself and did not commit suicide in jail. From the onset, they faced a ruthless enemy, adept at killing at exploiting mercilessly. But this enemy was not alone. It was supported by a wide group of globally and regionally hegemonic countries and Syrian and non-Syrian armed groups. At the same time, Syrians were plagued with a leadership that was nothing but a pawn for the Gulf States and Turkey and begged for western intervention, until this "outside" intervened in favor of the existing regime, either directly or indirectly.

There is much to be learned from the ongoing experience of the local council, both negative and positive. Struggles by people, or humans, as the martyr and comrade Omar Aziz used to call them, are connected and interlinked. People devise their own ways of steadfastness and confrontation. Our destiny is to confront and struggle on various levels and front and to learn from the mistakes of the past and present. It is not merely to honor the dead, and they are many, but to celebrate life.

*Published first in Arabic on 6 March, 2017. Translated by Ghassan Makarem for [al-manshour](#).*

## An analysis of the present stage of the

# biggest popular movement

10 April 2017, by **Adrien Guilleau, Jan Malewski**

## Guiana: a French colony

### 1. A trading-post economy

Since its colonization in the seventeenth century, the colonial economic structure of Guiana has not varied. It is still characterized today by appropriation of the territory's wealth and a commercial monopoly. The Guianan wealth most exploited by France is the Guiana Space Centre (CSG), which was built in Guiana for its geographical position, the absence of seismic or volcanic risks and the political stability of the colony. For the year 2017 alone, CNES (a state-owned group that operates the CSG) announced an order book of 5.3 billion euros, representing 140 per cent of GDP in Guiana! Concerning trade, the French monopoly is organized by the Martinican *béké* (descendants of settlers and large landowners). Thus, regional trade with Brazil, Surinam and Latin America is non-existent. Everything is imported by containers directly from French ports and everything passes through the distribution groups of the *béké*. [6]

### 2. Endogenous underdevelopment

As in all colonies, the economic domination of the metropolis is accompanied by endogenous underdevelopment. This underdevelopment can be seen in economic, demographic, health and educational statistics. In this country of 250,000 inhabitants the population has doubled every 20 years since the 1950s. This population growth is driven by a high birth-rate accompanied by a largely positive balance of migration. This migratory attraction is linked in particular to the special status of this South American country, which is part of the European Union. To accompany demographic development, the investments of France ought to be massive, but they are not. Thus, the unemployment rate

is over 20 per cent, more than 40 per cent of the active population are unemployed, and the poverty rate is over 60 per cent (using French reference calculations).

As for educational statistics, the situation is no better; more than 2,000 children between the ages of 6 and 16 are not in school due to lack of space in the schools. Today it would be necessary to open 500 primary school classes, five in middle schools and ten in high schools to make up for the structural backlog!

In terms of health, the situation is catastrophic; the life expectancy at birth of a man is three years lower than France. A study by the Regional Health Agency showed that because of the structural problems, between 2005 and 2007 58 per cent of deaths in Guiana would have been avoided in France. The number of beds per inhabitant is almost half that in France. Many medical specialties are not developed on the territory, obliging Guianans to go to France or the Antilles for treatment. Lastly there is no teaching hospital, which makes it impossible to train the necessary skilled medical personnel and leaves Guiana totally dependent on external personnel.

Finally, Guiana is the most violent of the territories administered by France, with the highest per capita homicide rate (42 homicides in 2016). However, Guiana is also the territory that has the highest concentration of French soldiers in the world, one soldier for every 117 inhabitants. On top of the soldiers, we must add the 950 policemen and gendarmes spread over the territory. This makes French Guiana the most militarized French territory!

### 3. The question of land and the indigenous peoples

Other problems specific to the colonial question are to be found in Guiana,

such as the problem of land tenure or the question of indigenous peoples. More than 90 per cent of the territory belongs to the French state. This creates enormous difficulties for any economic or structural development. For example, in order to build a high school, it is absolutely essential to go through a phase of retrocession of the land from the state to the local authorities. Moreover, the Guianan Space Centre, which occupies an area as big as the island of Réunion, has never paid a single cent in local taxes.

For their part, the indigenous peoples are confronted, for constitutional reasons, with France's categorical refusal to recognize their right to collective property and to transfer back to them the territories they have occupied for hundreds of years. To this we can add massive and disturbing waves of suicide among young Amerindians.

These land-related problems alone bring to light the total incompatibility of the status of Guiana as an overseas department.

## Analysis of the present movement

It is still difficult to make a detailed and thoroughly pertinent analysis of the situation of this movement, in particular because of the very many relationships of forces that confront it. We will nevertheless try to provide a history of the movement, introducing the main actors

### 1. Pact for the Future

During his visit to Guiana in 2013, François Hollande pledged to implement a Pact for the Future for French Guiana. The aim of this pact was to reduce structural delays over a period of ten years, in particular by an investment by the state of 600 million euros. However, following

negotiations in December 2016, the President of the Territorial Collectivity of Guiana (CTG), Rodolphe Alexandre, refused to sign it. Under the pressure of local employers, the President of the CTG asked for an increased sum of 2 billion euros and the retrocession of 200,000 hectares of territory.

## **2. The relationship of forces of Rodolphe Alexandre, associated with socio-professional sectors and the MEDEF**

The visit of Ségolène Royale on March 15th was the signal for the start of the mobilization. Thus, the minister was welcomed by a mobilization of "socio-professionals" (road haulage managers among others), the CGPME (association of small and medium-sized enterprises) and the main employers' association, the MEDEF. For the occasion, they put up a blockade in front of the entrance to the Territorial Collectivity of Guiana, as well as another one in front of the commercial port, which was due to see the arrival of cement-mixer lorries for the construction of the Ariane 5 launch pad, against the interests of local road haulage firms. In the course of a pathetically staged scene, Ségolène managed to unblock the situation by calling her ex-partner and President, François Hollande. In two minutes everything was settled, the government undertaking to immediately release 150 million euros to close the budget of the CTG and to retrocede 200,000 hectares of land.

## **3. The irruption of the "500 Brothers"**

Everything could have or should have stopped there, but a grain of sand got into the machine, in the form of the collective of "500 brothers against delinquency". This collective had begun to attract attention a week previously by reacting to a homicide in a neighbourhood of Cayenne. Their specialty is to organize lightning actions, dressed in black and wearing hoods. Although it is extremely difficult, even today, to say who makes up this collective, we can note that its demands are reactionary and partly xenophobic. Indeed, many of their demands go in the direction of having more police, evicting squats and deporting migrants who are supposedly responsible for violence. However, as soon as they had

organized themselves they questioned the role of the French state for its inability to restore order. So we have there a nationalist and reactionary discourse.

This collective invited itself to the party. While blocking the entrances of the consulates of Surinam and Haiti to demand that their nationals held in prison in Guiana be deported immediately, they disembarked, hooded, at the CTG in the midst of an international gathering of 25 Caribbean states, the United States and France, the latter represented by Ségolène Royal. They challenged the minister by asking that she take their security demands into account and then withdrew. That same evening, the minister cut short her visit to Guiana and returned to Paris. At the same time, farmers joined the battle by occupying the headquarters of the Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry in Cayenne. Was it due to the surprise effect of the incursion of the "500 brothers", or in solidarity with their reactionary demands, or even waiting for the official signing of the Pact of the Future? The employers maintained their blockades.

Lastly, it should be noted that in the confrontation with reality on the ground, the spokespersons of the collective of the "500 brothers" had to modify their discourse and their actions. When the blockades were set up, they served as mediators with young people from working-class neighborhoods, who were setting up "unofficial" blockades, in order to avoid confrontation with the police. They even succeeded in getting some of these young people to join the main pickets. Moreover, during the march on March 28th and during the negotiations on March 30th, they took on the role of a stewarding force by making contact with the forces of repression. It is probably these actions and the fact that they have so far never used violence that makes them so popular.

## **4. The workers get involved in the struggle**

Taking advantage of this climate of defiance, workers threw themselves into the movement. On March 20th, workers at EDF (who are in dispute with their local management), ENDEL

(who are calling for the reopening of wage negotiations) and the Medical-Surgical Centre of Kourou (who are fighting against the sale of the hospital to private predators) decided to block the launch of the Ariane rocket scheduled for the next day. A blockade was set up in front of the Guianan Space Centre and the population and some elected representatives quickly joined in. ENDEL workers, who are the only ones able to carry the rocket onto its launching range, succeeded, by a strike in which 80 per cent of the workforce participated, in postponing and then cancelling the launch. In the wake of this, negotiations were reopened and they obtained a substantial salary increase. From March 21st, the day initially planned for the launch, the town of Kourou was totally blocked; no one was able to get in or out.

## **5. A general upsurge, Guiana is blocked!**

From March 21st and 22nd the "500 brothers" converged on Kourou. At the meeting of the Extraordinary Council of the trade-union confederation Workers' Union of Guiana (UTG) on the evening of March 22nd, it was decided to support the movement, with a first day of mobilization scheduled for March 24th. The UTG structure of education will vote the strike as of March 22 as of March 27th. But during the night everything accelerated; the coordinating committee of Kourou, joined by the "500 brothers" and the socio-professionals, decided to block the country. On the morning of March 23rd, all roads were closed by roadblocks. Blockades were also established in front of the Prefecture and on the road leading to the airport. The Rectorate quickly announced the closure of all school buildings for security reasons and the following day the students and the teachers' unions in their turn put up a blockade in front of the Rectorate.

## **6. The role of Radio Pèyi as a vehicle for mobilization**

As soon as the blockades were set up, Radio Pèyi (belonging to the RTL group) became the voice of the mobilization. All their programmes were interrupted and the radio broadcasts covered the social



movement 24 hours a day. Correspondents were in place on each blockade; the evolution of the social situation was reported in real time; all the listeners were able to speak out on air, all day long; political personalities, especially independents, were invited to speak, sometimes for several hours non-stop. Radio Pèyi became "Radio Barricade" and allowed the entire population to get a feeling of the movement. Besides, all the blockades were joined by thousands of anonymous people who spent the day there, the evening, even the night. As from March 24th there were approximately 4,000 people every night on the blockades of Suzini and Crique Fouillé.

### **7. The march of the elected representatives**

On March 24th, all the Guianan elected representatives came together to march behind the Guianan flag from the town centre of Kourou to the picket at the Guiana Space Centre. In the overseas territories, elected representatives are widely considered to play the role of mediators between the French state and the population. This role was moreover entirely assumed by the parliamentarians (two deputies and two senators) who tried in vain to open negotiations between the collective Pou Lagwiyan Dékolé ("For Guiana taking off") and the inter-ministerial delegation. The march of the elected representatives wearing the tricolour scarf and holding the Guianan flag as a banner was an extremely strong symbolic moment. In fact, this flag flies over hardly any town halls, no more, moreover, than that of the CTG. Besides, let us not forget that this movement was born thanks to the region's president in spite of himself, when, by mobilizing his political support, he tried to come out of the situation with a good image by asking for the renegotiation of an improved Pact for a Better Future!

### **8. The intervention of the CTG and the general strike**

On March 25th, during the UTG National Council, 37 unions present voted for an unlimited general strike as from March 27th. The mobilization then moved on to another stage. Although the economic blockades were not necessarily superior to what

already existed (almost the entire economy was at a standstill as early as March 24th), the internal relationship of forces in the mobilization shifted, social demands becoming paramount over ones based on security. However, the historical trade-union confederation of Guiana has been in internal crisis for several years and it is difficult to know if it has today a real possibility of organizing an economic blockade.

### **9. The setting up of Pou Lagwiyan Dékolé and the coming together of popular demands**

As of March 22nd and 23rd, the challenge was to be able to unify all the different forms of discontent in a common platform of demands. An intense process of negotiation began from March 23rd, with a first meeting of the coordinating committee. Thus 19 collectives, trade-union and professional organizations came together in the Pou Lagwiyan Dékolé Committee. Seven themes of demands were chosen: education, health, insecurity, land, energy, the economy and indigenous peoples. In the space of four days, a first platform of demands was drawn up, after consultation with all the parties concerned. At the same time, many popular demands were emerging, and other collectives were forming and joining the committee. As of March 28th, 39 collectives, trade unions and professional organizations were party to Pou Lagwiyan Dékolé. Popular discontent was such that it was difficult to complete the list of grievances before the ministers arrived on March 29th.

### **10. The inter-ministerial delegation and the refusal of negotiations**

The reaction of the French state was in line with the colonial experience of France. As early as March 25th, an inter-ministerial delegation composed of high-ranking officials (a prefect, a general...) who had previously occupied positions in Guiana landed. At a meeting on the night of March 24th-25th, a common position of Pou Lagwiyan Dékolé was found: there would be no meeting outside the committee with this delegation, and since this delegation did not include any minister, there would be no meeting with it. This radical position

succeeded in surviving the intense work of sabotage being attempted by the inter-ministerial delegation. No one, apart from a farming union, met officially with this delegation. For their part, the ministers conducted a campaign of disinformation and contempt for the mobilization. Initially, they excluded any negotiation in Guiana and demanded the lifting of the blockades. The French media depicted the movement as being violent in order to undermine the solidarity of the population. However, since the beginning of the movement an incredible calm accompanied the mobilization. Only the use of teargas by the security forces against elected representatives on the CSG blockade at the very beginning of the movement, as well as some fires in rubbish bins during the first night of blockading are to be regretted!

### **11. The march on March 28th and the unity of a country**

The march organized on March 28th was a test of support for the movement. The mobilization of the population was exceptional. As the prefecture itself had to recognize, these were the "biggest demonstrations that had ever been organized on the territory". More than 20,000 people gathered in Cayenne and 5,000 in Saint Laurent du Maroni. The most striking feature of these demonstrations was that all the cultural communities of Guiana were represented, marching together for the first time. Behind the Amerindians who opened the march, there were hundreds of Guianan flags, followed by Brazilian, Haitian and Dominican flags... A journalist of Radio Pèyi rightly asserted that a "nation was born" on March 28th. By its own example, this mobilization alone has shattered terrible prejudices that everyone had about the others. Even the "500 brothers" had to moderate what they said, now announcing that "we are all Guianan (Brazilians, Haitians, Surinamese, Guianan...)". The other characteristic of this mobilization is the incredible determination that emerged from it. Not a moment passed without slogans: "Nou Gon ke sa" ("We can't take it any more") "Lagwiyan levee" ("Rise up, Guiana") and speeches for several hours in front of the prefecture.

## 12. The arrival of ministers and attempts to dislocate the movement.

At the end of the demonstration, Prime Minister Bernard Cazeneuve announced that he was sending the Ministers of Overseas Territories and the Interior to Guiana on the following day, March 29th. The incredible popular mobilization had forced the government to act very quickly to try to find a way out of this movement. The dispatch of the ministers was accompanied by promises of investment of up to 4 billion euros in less than 10 years. After the opening of negotiations on March 30th, the relationship of forces in favour of the Committee was intense. Thus, with the mobilization of the population in front of the Prefecture, Pou Lagwiann Dékolé managed to obtain the presence of the media during the first half-hour of negotiations. Soon after, the Overseas Minister, who had been particularly scornful towards the Guianan since the beginning of the movement, went out onto the balcony of the prefecture to make a public apology to the population massed in front of the building. The next 48 hours would be decisive for the movement, the socio-professionals and the employers who, finding themselves, in spite of their intentions, in a movement that was totally beyond their control, were looking for a way to get out as quickly as possible. They already announced that if they were satisfied they would lift the blockades!

Today, March 31st, the collective pulled off the exploit of putting the political representatives out of play. Thus, following a meeting between Pou Lagwiann Dékolé and the elected representatives, it was decided that the elected representatives would not sign any document with the state until the collective had signed it. Moreover, it was stipulated that they would participate in negotiations as experts and not as negotiators. Finally, the collective has just announced that any agreement with the government will have to obtain popular approval before it can be signed. The movement is therefore moving into a second phase, marked by self-organization with a real distrust of the elected representatives.

## What are the perspectives for this movement?

As a revolutionary activist, the first concern must be to keep this movement alive after the departure of the ministers. In fact, if the movement survives the visit of these two ministers then other questions will arise. Since the French state is currently in a period of power vacuum, the failure of the negotiations would mean that it will be the next government that will have to solve the Guianan problem. This absence of interlocutor will open up "the field of possibilities" and will put the question of the status of Guiana at the centre of what is at stake!

To do this, three themes have to be developed:

â€¢ Strengthen the self-organization of the blockades and the pickets. In fact, the blockades must no longer depend on the lorries of the transporters which block the traffic. Committees for the organization of blockades must be organized everywhere and alternative solutions must be thought of (blockades consisting of private vehicles, for example).

â€¢ Organize democratic control over the strike. The negotiations must be subject to popular control. General assemblies must be organized on each picket to take decisions on the continuation of the movement. To facilitate this organization, each workplace involved in the struggle could position itself on a blockade to organize this democratic life. Finally, Radio Pèyi could serve as a coordinator thanks to its technical means, so that all the decisions that are taken can converge.

â€¢ Highlight the reality of the class struggle and neutralize the bosses. It is almost impossible for the employers to continue this mobilization and it is necessary to prepare already for their withdrawal. Again, actions can be considered with, for example, the blocking of enterprises that seek to abandon the movement. This attempt

by the bosses to withdraw must also be an opportunity to highlight the reality of the class struggle, which is illustrated by the opposition between different class interests.

Finally, we must think about the means that we will use to impose the demands concerning status as an essential element of this movement. Should we insist on demands that are incompatible with the status of an overseas department, such as demands concerning land or those of the indigenous peoples, or should we focus rather on the more political problems of institutional governance and local democracy? This is a subject of debate among the various revolutionary activists involved in the movement.

Cayenne, March 31st, 2017

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## A balance of power with the State

Supported by all the mobilized population, the collective *Pou Lagwiann dékolé* refused on 2 April the promise of a billion euros from the French government. "One billion proposed over 10 years, it is only 100 million per year (...). We are calm because the 2.5 billion is a fair medium, a justice, compared to what needs to be done to ensure that Guiana emerges from this major crisis," said Davy Rimane, UTG lighting and one of the spokespersons of the collective. And he added: "The debt to suppliers of the Cayenne hospital is 39 million euros, but the state puts 20 million on the table." The same observation for education. The government also refuses the creation of a special status for Guiana. "The limits of the current administrative organization still do not allow for the expected efficiency in the implementation of public policies both local and national," justifies the collective. The community, composed of an assembly, an executive council and specific councils, could make decisions in the areas of spatial

planning, environmental management, local taxation or primary education.

On 3 April, Bernard Cazeneuve (Prime Minister) called the collective's request "unrealistic". "The state has decided to leave us the crumbs and this time we have been told no. We are entering into a power struggle with the State, the state must realize that the Guyanese people do not demobilize," comments the collective.

The general strike continues. On April 3, Guiana experienced a dead city day at the call of the collective. On 4 April, in the village Saramaca de Kourou - "where the rocket takes off, but we have no light", as one resident summarized - tens of thousands of Guianans should gather. Collective representatives have warned, the Ariane rocket will remain on the ground as long as Guiana does not take off.

In Guiana, a whole population is mobilized against the concrete policy of capital. Solidarity!

(Jan Malewski, 3 April, 2017)

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## KANT E KANT EPI PEP GUIYANN

Forward in Martinique, Guadeloupe and the last remaining colonies!

French political leaders are finally discovering that Guyane, overwhelmed by problems, is rising up as one man, as one woman!

As in 2009, [7] the French press and the government first of all stayed silent. But the barrages and blockades, sector after sector, have forced them to end their silence.

Today everyone wants to "take an interest" in Guyanese problems. But we point out:

â€¢ Without the struggle, the initiative and the determination of the Guyanese, the indifference and the contempt would have continued.

â€¢ The envoys from Paris, even if they are the ministers that people are demanding, will only do a temporary repair job if the Guyanese workers and people do not remain mobilized, do not ensure strict control of the negotiations, do not obtain the powers that will enable them to implement the measures that the situation demands.

The fact that the trade union movement has moved into action is an excellent thing.

By taking to the streets, the Guyanese popular forces are clearly indicating that their demands concern everything that these ladies and gentlemen call "overseas".

Yes, everyone knows that 2009 posed the problems in our countries, obtained positive measures, woke people up, but that the government and the profiteers, in taking back control, did not respect many agreements, sabotaged some and put an end to the implementation of the others as soon as they could.

Today Guyane has once again opened up a breach.

We will neither copy it, nor leave it on its own, nor remain inactive.

What is necessary is to take once again the path of struggle, working overtime to make up for the delay in rebuilding trade-union and popular unity and redefining an overall platform of demands.

Everyone is concerned: unions, working-class parties, combative associations and ordinary citizens.

We can begin with some sectors, not all of them and not only one. But we must begin.

The situation demands that we mobilize;

NOU PARE! ANNOU PARE! NOU DOUBOUT! ANNOU DOUBOUT!

Solidarité! Unité! Mobilisation!

*Révolutionnaire Socialiste  
Fort de France, Martinique  
27 mars 2017*

# Why Being Against Assad Matters Too

10 April 2017, by **Bashir Abu-Manneh**

Alex Gourevitch's [brief piece](#) on Syria concludes with the following statement: And in the end, this is a thin humanitarianism, since one never finds the humanitarian militarists arguing the true humanitarian case: not bombs but open borders. Let in anyone who wishes to escape.

Rather than bombing the Assad regime, Gourevitch says, let the [Syrian](#)

[refugees](#) into the United States. What's being advocated here is clear: no to empire, yes to refugees. Needless to say, I too subscribe to that notion and am against US imperial intervention.

But I fear that these two positions are just not enough. On their own, they constitute an impoverished politics.

In order to explain why, let's briefly apply the same principles to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. When Israel brutally [kills Palestinians](#), as it regularly does, do progressives in America only say "let those Palestinian refugees who manage to escape come to the US"? Absolutely not. Because they know that this would just aid Israel's [colonial designs](#) and invite Israel to continue behaving with

impunity in the region.

Progressives stand in [solidarity](#) with the Palestinians, call for an end to Israel's bombings, and demand that Israel be prosecuted for crimes against humanity. They also push their own imperial state to stop all [military aid](#) for Israel, stop feeding Israel's colonial appetite, and stop shielding it from international justice.

Why is the Syrian case so different? The reality is that the [Syrian catastrophe](#) is even more acute. With half a million dead and millions displaced, the scale of the Syrian carnage is vast. Assad's dictatorship would rather kill, besiege, and starve the population than allow them dignity and democracy. Either live in humiliation and servitude, leave, or die. No people should have to accept these miserable options.

Yet some American progressives haven't afforded the Syrian people what they have so admirably afforded the Palestinians. Why is there no clear condemnation of Russian and Iranian intervention in Syria, without which the Assad government would have collapsed? Why was there no mention of the fact that Washington blocked Syrian opposition access to anti-aircraft weaponry, without which the regime was free to rain bombs on them?

US progressives cannot keep ignoring the fact that the Syrian people's cause is just and that their right to freedom is as important as anyone else's. We need to address the root cause of the [refugee crisis](#) and formulate a genuinely internationalist response to the Syrian catastrophe.

Being contra-empire and pro-refugee is not enough. It is simply unacceptable to stand by and see a

brutal regime like Assad's get away with emptying Syria of its own people. Syrians have a right both to live and to live freely in their homeland. No regime should be allowed to massacre its own people or force them into a life of permanent exile and displacement.

If the answer to Israel's [colonial persecution](#) and dispossession of Palestinians is to help Palestinians stay in their homeland and fight for their rights-><https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/10/intifada-palestine-israel-settler-violence-jerusalem/>], then the same solidarity principle should apply to Syrians.

Do open your borders to the wretched of the earth, but also stand in solidarity with the fight for their rights in their homeland.

[Jacobin](#)

# On Assad's Chemical Bombing & Trump's Latest Airstrikes

9 April 2017, by [Frieda Afary](#), [Joseph Daher](#)

The chemical bombing of innocent civilians in the Syrian town of Khan Sheikhoun (Idlib province) which was perpetrated by the Assad regime and its allies, Russia and Iran on April 4, is yet another step in the murderous campaign to destroy what is left of the popular opposition to the Assad regime. After putting under siege and destroying Eastern Aleppo, the most important center of the popular and democratic opposition, and forcing the survivors as well as the survivors from other besieged opposition areas to go to Idlib, the regime is now concentrating its forces on bombing the civilian population in Idlib and Aleppo provinces.

The Trump administration's April 6 targeted missile strike on the Syrian airbase from which the chemical attack was launched, is not a

reflection of any genuine concern for the Syrian people. It will not help the struggle against the Assad regime, ISIS and Al Qaida. Instead, this administration's latest airstrikes are motivated by other aims.

Just two days earlier the Trump administration had announced that its priority was not the ouster of Assad. Once the Assad regime's chemical bombing delivered a blow to the credibility of U.S. imperialism however, the decision was made to strike Assad's air base. In order to calm some dissent within the Republican party's leadership, Trump had to show that contrary to Obama, he had some "red lines."

Furthermore, given the daily new revelations about the Trump administrations close ties to Putin's

Russia and the ways in which these revelations have seriously damaged its credibility even among its supporters, the missile strike in Syria was a way for this administration to partially distance itself from Russia. However, at this point, we can say that this strike which was announced in advance to the Russian government, does not indicate any strategic change in U.S. policy concerning the future of Syria or the Assad regime. The focus of the U.S. government will still be seeking a transition in which the core of the Assad regime is not challenged. Such a policy will be justified by this administration in the name of the "War on Terror."

In general, since coming to office, the Trump administration has given every indication that its goal is to promote undemocratic, racist, sexist Middle



Eastern leaders and strengthen the repressive environment of the Middle East. He or his advisers have met with Israeli president Benjamin Netanyahu, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, Egyptian president, General Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, Saudi Arabian Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, King Abdullah of Jordan. On March 30, U.S. Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson's visit to Turkey gave a nod of approval to Erdogan who has arrested over 70,000 people in the past year, continually bombed the Kurdish population of Turkey and Syria, and is aiming to vastly expand his repressive powers against all forms of dissent, through a referendum on April 16. Tillerson's visit also led to some unannounced agreements which do not bode well for the Kurds in Turkey and Syria.

Most importantly, recent American airstrikes in Mosul, Aleppo and Raqqa which are supposedly aimed at stopping ISIS, have brought about large civilian death tolls. They have been some of the deadliest since U.S. airstrikes on Syria started in 2014. They show that greater U.S. military intervention in Syria will only lead to more death and destruction. One resident of Mosul, Iraq who was fleeing ISIS, compared the destruction brought about by the latest U.S. airstrikes in Mosul to the U.S. dropping of a nuclear bomb on Hiroshima. (See Tim Arango, "Civilian Deaths Rising in Iraq and Syria as Battles Intensify in Dense City Areas." New York Times, March 28, 2017). According to Airwars, during the month of March alone, as many as a thousand civilians have been killed by U.S. airstrikes in Iraq and Syria in the name of the "[War on Terror](#)."

These realities not only reveal the Trump administration's motives but also compel us to condemn all the states that are carrying out wars against innocent civilians in the

Middle East: The Syrian and Iranian regimes, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, all the other authoritarian regimes in the region, ISIS, Al Qaida, as well as Russian and Western military interventions. They are all part of an imperialist logic and the maintenance of authoritarian and unjust systems. They all oppose the self-determination of the peoples of the region and their struggles for emancipation. Hence, anti-war activists whether in the Middle East or the West need to address all forms of repression and authoritarianism, and condemn all forms of foreign intervention against the interests of the people of the region, instead of limiting their criticisms only to the West and Israel.

Clearly, no peaceful and just solution in Syria can be reached with Bashar al-Assad and his clique in power. He is the biggest criminal in Syria and must be prosecuted for his crimes instead of being legitimized by international and regional imperialist powers.

Clearly, an effective way to help Syrians and to change the worsening course of events in the region today is for those Iranians and Russians who oppose their rulers' military intervention in Syria to build strong anti-war movements that show the connections between their governments' support for the Assad regime and the worsening domestic repression and impoverishment. Why has this not happened? Is government repression inside Russia and Iran the only reason?

In Russia, last week, tens of thousands demonstrated against the corrupt practices of prime minister Dmitry Medvedev and other Russian oligarchs. Criticism of Putin's imperialist wars however was not highlighted by most who focused on the internal corruption of the rich. Whether these demonstrations expand their horizons remains to be seen.

In Iran, not a day goes by without

labor protests in various parts of the country. These protests have focused on the non-payment of wages, layoffs, temporary contracts without any rights or benefits, "privatization" of government jobs, lack of work and safety regulations, non-payment of pensions and the very low minimum wage (\$240 per month) in a country in which the minimum needed for an urban family of four to survive is \$1000 per month.

It is the responsibility of Iranian socialists to show the connections between the worsening economic and social conditions of the Iranian workers, teachers and service workers, and Iran's capitalist, militarist and imperialist policies in Syria and in the Middle East region as a whole.

The failure to draw these connections partly stems from the strength of the Iranian regime's propaganda which presents the Syrian opposition to the Assad regime as entirely consisting of ISIS and Al Qaida. The nationalism of those Iranian leftists who implicitly or explicitly support the Assad regime and Putin, has also assisted the Iranian government.

As the Alliance of Syrian and Iranian Socialists, we have made efforts to address these issues through our analyses and by airing the views of those Iranians who oppose their government's military intervention in Syria. We welcome more ideas and comments from those who represent THE OTHER IRAN and who want to create an anti-war movement to stop Iran's support for the Assad regime.

We agree with those Palestinian who protested in Ramallah, Occupied Palestine, against the Syrian regime's chemical bombing of Khan Sheikhoun. They chanted: "Not Leftists, Not Leftists, Those Who Stand with Bashar al-Assad."

*April 7, 2017*

## Trump's New and Used Middle East War

## 8 April 2017, by **Solidarity National Committee**

Last night, supposedly in response to the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, President Trump ordered a missile attack on a Syrian air base, the first U.S. military strike directly against the regime (though hardly the first U.S. intervention in the war). As socialists and internationalists, we oppose both imperialist intervention and the atrocities of the Syrian government.

All the external powers intervening in the Syrian catastrophe—the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey—have told much of the truth about the other side's crimes, while systematically lying about their own.

The Assad regime's chemical attack is a world-class war crime. We discount the unlikely possibility that the Russian cover story that the gas came from an al-Qaeda depot might be true. The context is clear. Assad has used chemical weapons before, bombed humanitarian aid convoys and committed uncountable other atrocities. Russia has aided and abetted them all, especially since directly entering the war in 2015.

Trump talks about the chemical weapons attack in Syria during a press conference with King Abdullah II of Jordan.

The civilians and the children in Khan Sheikhoun suffered horrible deaths. So did the 200 estimated civilians in Mosul, Iraq when the United States bombed a dense residential neighborhood. So will many of the millions of children in Yemen facing starvation and death under U.S.-supported bombing by Saudi Arabia. So did 25 Yemeni civilians who died in the February 9 botched U.S. raid, and the dozens of fleeing Somali refugees bombed from the air by a Saudi military helicopter on March 16. These are just a few of the cases that we know about (and we don't yet know the "collateral damage" in the village next to the bombed-out Syrian air

base).

Imperialism creates problems that it cannot solve, and absolves itself of responsibility for the consequences. The children and civilians of Syria, Yemen, Somalia who suffer the consequences of imperialist wars, and in whose name U.S. forces are now expanding those wars, are the same refugees that Donald Trump wants to keep out of the United States by executive fiat.

Arguably, much of Trump's motivation is to build popular support and distract from the failures of his domestic agenda. Overshadowed at least for the moment are the Republicans' internal civil war over health care, the infighting between the Steve Bannon and Jared Kushner power centers in the West Wing, Trump's "budget blueprint" wiping out every government program that actually helps people, and pending "tax reform" to stuff the pockets of the rich and super-rich at the expense of everyone else.

Republicans, except Rand Paul and a few hardline "America Firsters," are rushing to hail Trump's "leadership" in bombing Syria. Most Democrats are too (Hillary Clinton called for an air strike even before Trump did), with the caveat that he should have sought approval from Congress. Mainstream media, including the supposedly liberal outlets, are rushing to build legitimacy for the intervention.

But what comes next? The politicians and thuggish policy "thinkers" rushing to praise Trump's presidential leadership have various conflicting agendas. Some hope that a one-time U.S. air strike will get Russia to bring Assad to serious political negotiations at last. That might be a least-bad-case scenario, but Russia might just as easily double down on its commitment to Assad, even if Vladimir Putin gives his Damascus client the message that more chemical attacks would be

extremely stupid.

Others frankly want not only more extensive bombing of Syria, beginning with the no-fly-zone advocated by John McCain and Hillary Clinton, but a wider war drive aimed ultimately at Iran and wrecking the international nuclear deal with that country. What Donald Trump thinks is an unknown variable that intrigues some pundits and terrifies others. In the end, if the April 6 missile strike is a one-time contained action, it doesn't really change the character of the Syrian disaster or the bleak prospects for ending it. If it's the beginning of a bigger military campaign, it carries the potential for making everything even worse in Syria and beyond.

If antiwar forces in the United States are to play a useful role in this unfolding crisis, we must be unconditionally opposed to U.S. military action, without any sympathy or support for the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian patrons. And we must resist the pressure to support demands like those the Democrats are putting forward about the need for Congressional approval or international cooperation, which amount to seeking the cover of legitimacy for wholly illegitimate acts.

We also must continue to resist the right's domestic agenda, including by demanding that the United States be open to refugees who want to come here, and provide massive humanitarian aid to those who are internally displaced and struggling to survive. Donald Trump's new and used war can't hide his brutal immigration roundups and deportations, the rise of Islamophobic hate crimes, the Justice Department's enabling of police brutality, and the full frontal assault on civil rights. Bombing other people's countries can't enable this government to get away with looting its own.

Source: [Solidarity](#).

# After the US bombing in Syria

8 April 2017

For the first time in six years, the army of the war criminal El Assad has been the target of air strikes. 59 US missiles destroyed the Shayrat air base, from base of the aircraft responsible for Tuesday's attack on chemical weapons against the civilian population of Khan Sheikhoun, which killed at least 86, including 27 children.

For us who are in solidarity with the Syrian insurgent people, this surprise operation of Trump leaves a feeling of disgust. Just a week ago, his team amplified its previous position by indicating that an agreement with Bashar Al-Assad was envisaged within the framework of the "war on terror", as was confirmed by other oppressive powers like those of Putin, Sissi or Nethanyahu. These signals were clearly interpreted by the Syrian regime as an encouragement to pursue its course, and after Obama, Trump therefore has his share of

responsibility in the atrocious chemical attack and the deaths of Khan Cheikhoun.

Butcher El Assad with the Iranian and Russian armies has killed hundreds of thousands of Syrians, constantly bombarding the civilian population and resistance forces with his bloodthirsty regime. They have been able to justify themselves to a section of public opinion by relying on the so-called "fight against terrorism" and the bombing of Western and regional powers in the Middle East.

The NPA is opposed to all foreign military interventions in Syria. They helped El Assad to stay in place. On the other hand, we have always demanded the lifting of the embargo on arms sales to non-denominational resistance, an embargo that left it without real defence, only the fundamentalist jihadists have been able to procure arms - and not in anti-aircraft weapons - from the Gulf

countries and Turkey.

The militants of the Syrian revolution would be wrong to hope that the American president is on their side. We fear that Trump's military "coup d'éclat" will serve as a cover for upcoming opportunistic diplomatic maneuvers in alliance with other oppressive powers, serve new adventurous - and counterproductive - military operations in the world, and economic attacks, all to the detriment of the oppressed peoples and the American people itself.

Therefore, without any support for or hope in the American army strikes, we will not join the protests of the French political parties, who, in order to advocate a "reasonable" peace with El Assad and his minions, close their eyes to the hundreds of thousands of deaths killed by the dictator and the millions of displaced and refugees.

Montreuil, April 7, 2017

# In support of Philippe Poutou

7 April 2017, by **Anticapitalistas**

The next French elections are very important for the future of Europe. The rise of the new extreme right led by Marine Le Pen represents a challenge for all the democratic political forces opposed to neoliberalism that we cannot ignore. It is part of a more general phenomenon of reactionary and authoritarian rise in Europe and United States. The traditional political forces that have been the pillars of the Fifth Republic regime, the Socialist Party and the Gaullist right are in a strong crisis of identity, project and legitimacy, and

for some implicated in corruption cases, like Fillon. On the other hand, an elite sector supports Macron: a "novelty", but only for employers and the financial world, who have found a cool way to renew the neoliberal project.

The institutional political crisis also reflects a deep social crisis: a society torn apart by questions of identity, austerity policies, exclusions, and the end of the welfare state. Of course, in this context, there is resistance: we do not forget Nuit Debout nor the strikes led by the CGT that brought to light

the strength of the organized working class. However, the left has not been able to put forward a broad and unified candidature that gathers all this potential and discontent with a programme against austerity, a grouping from the sectors of anti-neoliberal reformism to anti-capitalist forces and revolutionaries like the NPA, and which can be a credible alternative to Le Pen. A project that is a barrier to the rise of the neo-fascists, which is committed to breaking with the austerity of the EU and confronts the economic powers in favour of the

popular classes.

In the present circumstances, as Anticapitalistas, we want to express our support for the candidacy of Philippe Poutou and the NPA: an anti-racist, ecologist, feminist and anti-capitalist candidacy, which puts the working class and internationalism at

the center, introducing questions that other candidates do not ask and which are essential to the construction of a transformation project. The fact that Poutou is the only candidate candidate for these presidential elections, in the face of a group of political professionals, seems to us a positive gesture of great symbolic value.

We hope that you will have the best possible results in these difficult elections, helping to ensure that anti-capitalism is an essential weapon in the fight that is coming.

Anticapitalistas, 6 April 2017  
[Http://www.anticapitalistas.org](http://www.anticapitalistas.org)

## Europe's false choice

4 April 2017, by **Miguel Urbán Crespo**

Today Europeans need neither empty exercises in nostalgia nor discussions about who should go down the fast track and who down the slow one. The key question is not how fast we should go, or in what vehicle (be it a more federal one or a more inter-governmental one), but what direction the European project is headed and who it's leaving by the wayside.

The celebrations in Rome were marked by the publication of a white paper in which European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker established various possible scenarios for the EU's future "keep the current rhythm, step on the accelerator, apply the brakes, or go into reverse. Not a word was offered on the substance, the policies, that would define these routes. Nothing on youth unemployment, the migration crisis, cuts, violence against women, or climate change. In an umpteenth display of ignorance, Europe's elite closed their eyes to the crises affecting the continent and the concerns of those experiencing them.

Ignoring its population's real problems, the EU continues to be the most important mechanism for generating euroscepticism in Europe today. But does this owe to the European elites' disconnect, to their being trapped in an ivory tower? Or is it a strategy for diverting attention, for avoiding having to speak about the problems that impact millions of people every day? Or, still less, having to recognize their failure to resolve

them?

With its aggressive foreign policy, the European Union has intensified conflicts around the world and contributed to fresh waves of forced migration. With its police management of its borders, it has turned the Mediterranean into an enormous mass grave, asylum into an exception and immigration into a danger for whoever is fleeing from bombs and misery. With its institutional xenophobia, the EU has normalized the discourse and proposals of the new radical right formations and the xenophobic populism that are today spreading across Europe, a specter of the past now [Le Pen-izing](#) minds across the continent.

Hollowing out sovereignty and democracy, and distancing political decision-making from the people subject to its legislation, the European Union has fed a general malaise, the series of Brexits and the rise of exclusive, identitarian nationalisms. With successive treaties, the EU has incorporated neoliberalism into its central normative corpus. Its collaboration with TTIP and [CETA trade agreements](#) has driven through lex mercatoria over human rights. Through their management of the financial crisis, European elites have placed sovereign debt and the sustainability of pensions under threat, while increasing inequalities, poverty, and unemployment. In under ten years, the EU has progressed from a proclaimed

ambition to "reform capitalism" to leading the plundering of the resources, the withdrawal of the freedoms, and the dispossession of the rights of millions in Europe and around the world. Today the European Union is world neoliberalism's leading and most advanced political instrument. Yet none of this appeared in Juncker's White Paper, or in the discussions and celebrations in Rome last weekend.

Everything points to the "[Rome declaration](#)" "so solemnly signed last Saturday" formalizing the "Europe à la carte" which Merkel's Germany and other central and northern EU countries have dreamed about for years. The issue is not only that some member states will be able to advance more quickly than others along the road to European integration (something that was happening already "as we see from the eurozone and the Schengen area), but that these different rhythms will be applied to a pick-and-mix set of concrete questions.

There will be more Europe on some matters, in others, the brakes will be applied, and in some regards, there will even be less Europe. And we should be clear, the empty words that usually mark this kind of declaration will not be the only thing that matters. Europe à la carte has a very concrete, restricted menu: one focused on inviting members to join in with "more Europe" in the fields of security and defense.



For EU elites, this is the great (and apparently only) strategic stake for the coming period: while we cannot offer prosperity or democracy, at least we can provide security in the face of growing threats across the world. And to this end, they will drive forward “strengthened cooperation” among the member states who want it, creating a European defense fund, a common military and arms industry, or greater police and military coordination. They will do so in order finally “who knows how soon or how late” to see the birth of a European army.

In a European landscape characterized by an ever greater imbalance in its internal power relations “to the advantage countries with greater competitive potential” and with its institutions democratically delegitimized and lacking the resources and political will necessary to undertake redistributive policies and reverse the austerity agenda, the EU’s only real bet is to stake everything on militarization, defense, and security. Although they were not invited to the Rome dinner, certainly on Saturday the arms firms and their Brussels lobbyists will have organized parties around the continent to celebrate the EU’s new “speed.”

Sixty years ago, what is today the

European Union was born as a project to create a single market, a customs union, and greater coordination between states in coal mining and steel production. Extractivism, free competition, and commodity circulation are the germ of the European project. Let’s not trick ourselves by presenting the policies of the last decade as somehow exceptional. Market logic and monetary and budget questions have always been the priority.

Advances in democracy, peace, welfare, and rights were welcome accompaniments when the conditions of capitalist accumulation allowed for them, but they never made up the ultimate objective of those who designed, constructed and today lead the EU. When the conditions were not favorable for this “social pact,” it became starkly apparent what really held the project together. The well-worn foundational myths dissolved and authoritarian austerity emerged as the only roadmap.

Daniel Bensaïd said that the struggle of the oppressed begins with a negative definition. Such is our rejection of the project of organizing Europe politically under the constraint of a monetary straitjacket, debt-discipline, and a security state. Our alternative project for Europe must now develop.

We are fighting the EU project not in

order to reclaim a threatened national identity and sovereignty, in the mode of the radical right. We do so from a class point of view, in the name of a social solidarity under attack from Euroliberalism. That means taking sides between the European elites’ implacable competitive logic “the ‘frosty breath of commodity society’ Benjamin wrote about, and the ‘warm breath of solidarity and the public good’ defended by Bensaïd.

We could say that today Europe is in dispute. They want to trap us in a false dichotomy where we have to choose between a neoliberal EU or a [xenophobic retreat](#) into the nation. This choice is not only a trick, it is a mutually reinforcing one.

We need a Plan B for Europe “and its problem is not its speed, but its direction. Let’s start to give form to a European project that recovers the roots of democracy in partisan antifascism, solidarity, peace, and social justice. A European project that neither excludes nor expels anyone, for it is a project no one would want to walk away from. That task has today become as urgent as it is indispensable.

2 April 2017

Jacobin-><https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/04/podemos-treaty-of-rome-european-union-eu-eurozone/>

# Ireland Strikes for Repeal

3 April 2017, by **Aoife Frances**

**Can you tell us a bit about the abortion situation in Ireland currently?**

Abortion is illegal in Ireland, north and south, with a few extremely rare exceptions. In the Republic of Ireland, this prohibition is underwritten by the Eighth Amendment to the constitution, passed in the early 1980s, which gives equal value to the life of the mother and the fetus. Without repealing this provision of the constitution, it is

impossible to progress abortion rights in any significant way.

This was proven recently when the last government passed the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act. It came about after a prolonged campaign of lobbying by NGOs as well as increasing pressure to act on a decades-old Supreme Court ruling. But it also came after the high-profile and tragic death of Savita Halappanavar, denied the necessary

medical treatment that could have saved her life despite facing an “inevitable miscarriage.” [8]

This is a terrible piece of legislation that not only limits the conditions abortions may be carried out to ones where the mother’s life is at risk, and subjects women to medical inquisition to prove this to be the case, but criminalizes those who pursue abortions through other means with penalties of up to fourteen years in

prison.

The result of this has been very few women using it – the vast majority of women in Ireland still travel abroad for abortions. In 2014 only twenty-six abortions were carried out in the Republic of Ireland under these laws; at the same time, we had twelve women a day travelling to Britain [for abortions].

The costs of this journey are prohibitive. This week, we learned on a national television program about a woman whose pregnancy suffered from a fatal fetal abnormality. She and her partner had to travel to Liverpool at a cost of ~3,000 to terminate a non-viable pregnancy. Many families in these cases have to carry remains home in a box. [9]

For the women who can't travel, the legislation has absolutely not stopped tragedies such as Savita or the X-case before her. In 2014, there was the so-called Y-case, which was horrendous: a young asylum seeker, having become pregnant after being raped in her native country, and being unable to travel because of her status, was denied access to abortion repeatedly. Following a suicide attempt and hunger strike, she was effectively forced to give birth by Caesarean section at twenty-four weeks. [10]

In response to these horrors, there have been attempts by numerous feminist support networks across Ireland to provide access to abortion pills. [Women Help Women](#) is an international organization offering information and access to these pills, but applicants need a Northern Irish address and ~75. [Need Abortion Ireland](#) was set up in April of last year to help make the connection for women in the Republic of Ireland. In the last six months, it has received over two hundred texts and emails.

Abortion pills seem to be relatively widely-used in Ireland, although it is hard to get exact figures. As an indication in 2014 over 1,000 packages containing them were seized by customs. If that is the quantity seized it suggests that many thousands are getting through. In the Republic of Ireland the state is largely taking a hands-off approach to this,

given the litany of recent scandals, but in Northern Ireland there are currently three pending cases before the courts related to abortion pills.

The latest development in the south is that there is a Citizens' Assembly underway which has been given the remit to discuss Ireland's abortion laws. We, and I think most repeal activists, see it as a delaying tactic. For one, the Assembly has no standing in Irish law, so it amounts to little more than a talking shop – and even then it has excluded some of the most important groups impacted by the prohibition on abortion from having their voices heard. [11]

### **What made you decide to respond to this situation with a strike?**

In the first instance we were inspired by the Polish women's strike last October against their proposed abortion laws. [12] There is a large Polish migrant community in Ireland, and the strike attracted a lot of attention in our repeal movements.

Seeing the success of their action, I think, made clear that we needed to move the campaign for repeal of the Eighth amendment in Ireland forward. We had been quite patient through recent years – organizing a successful annual March for Choice, [13] building support and activist groups, and lobbying the government. But the Irish government refuses even to give in to pressure from the United Nations to act on our abortion laws, so many of us felt we needed some more radical action to encourage those in power to show political will. [14]

Strikes have proven effective in workers' struggles as direct, economic interventions, but social strikes, such as the 1975 women's strike in Iceland, have also had significant impacts. [15] Similarly to Iceland, we have put a focus on domestic labor in our calls for a strike. But we are aware of the difficulties involved in women taking strike action in all of its various forms, so we've tried to be as inclusive and respectful of this reality as possible.

### **In America, there have been criticisms of the women's strike from liberal commentators who**

### **argue only the "privileged" can strike. [16]**

This is something we were thinking about, so we put out a call for the strike with a number of options: not going to work, not doing domestic work, turning up at a protest, or wearing black. [17] These last two were also used in Poland and open the door to more general civil disobedience as well as what would normally be considered a strike.

In Dublin, at 12:30, we have organized a mass rally on the city's main bridge, which will disrupt the normal operations of the city. We have also organized pickets outside the Departments of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Health and Justice, which will target the government. So there are a diverse range of ways to participate in this strike.

And there will also be diverse locations: there will be actions in every major city and town in Ireland, most major ones in Britain, with its large Irish emigrant population, and as far afield as Buenos Aires, Montreal, and Berlin. There is also a March4Repeal, organized by a wider coalition and happening later in the day in Dublin, which we support. [18]

But we do want to emphasize that abortion is a workplace issue. People having abortions in Ireland need to take sick days or annual leave; they struggle to get a doctors' note for an illegal procedure if they suffer effects afterwards; and their work provides them with access to the finance they will need to travel. So the issue of abortion rights is very much one that warrants a strike.

### **Have you had much support from the organized labor movement in Ireland?**

A number of the organizers of Strike4Repeal are trade union activists, but they are participating as individuals. We didn't approach trade unions to support the action because it is not a traditional trade union dispute. The conditions unions need to meet, under Irish law, to call for a strike are very narrow. And there has been significant success inside trade unions in recent years passing motions

in support of repeal, so we didn't want to jeopardize that work. There is now a [Trade Union Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment](#) which has won battles in a number of unions for pro-choice positions.

But we have received significant support from other areas, most strikingly the student movement. The national representative body, the Union of Students in Ireland, endorsed the strike and there are groups organized on most campuses around the country. We expect colleges and universities to see significant impacts.

The strike is supported by the Sex Workers' Alliance, which is particularly impressive solidarity because sex work is criminalized in Ireland. They [published a statement](#) which recognized the difficulties this entailed for striking and suggested ways people could participate without putting themselves at risk. And maybe most importantly, given the recent Y-

case, the [Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland](#) have endorsed the strike as well.

Numerous small businesses "from pubs and cafés to art studios, design shops and venues" have also supported the strike in various ways, some by offering to close and others by providing free facilities or services to those who will be striking.

Strike4Repeal has also received significant political backing. Dublin City Council recently passed a motion by 80 percent supporting the strike, led by the broad left-wing majority on the council.

### **What do you hope will be the outcome of Wednesday's strike?**

The first demand we have is for a date to be set for a referendum on the repeal of the Eighth Amendment.

We have heard from the government

that a referendum could be held in 2018. But we have previously seen promises on this issue dragged out for years and even beyond a decade. We need a firm date, and one as soon as possible. This is the demand that all parts of the repeal movement are making at the moment. We don't trust that it will come through the Citizens' Assembly process, so we need to keep the pressure up, and we need to keep engaging our political imagination, as we have done with this strike, to find ways of doing that.

After Wednesday, Strike4Repeal will cease to exist, but the more than fifty groups organized to make it happen will continue. Many of them are in rural areas where the need for campaigning around the referendum is strongest. Looking forward, we're hopeful these will provide new vitality to Ireland's increasingly strong and radical pro-choice movement.

Source [Jacobin](#).

# **Romania's protests - from social justice to class politics**

**2 April 2017, by Ovidiu Tichindeleanu**

From the outset I have to insist that the direct line drawn between the December 1989 Revolution and the protests of February 2017, as well as the accompanying comparisons to Ceaușescu [19] are just sensationalist titles which are falsifying history. They reflect the Western erasure of the catastrophic history of post-socialist Eastern Europe, as well as the ongoing self-colonization of the Romanian middle-class, pandering to Western preconceptions. Equally false is the claim that the February protests have been "the first mass social movement in Romania after 1989". The 2012 popular protests had spread at national level in more than 60 cities and, as opposed to the current protests, were focused on concrete social problems, struggling against the neoliberal cuts in wages, pensions, the

health and education systems. Equally important is to analyse the internal dynamics of the protest movement, as opposed to projecting judgments from the outside. While the current protests have started as popular indignation against a furtive decision of the current social-democrat government, on the background of the widespread discontent with the ongoing production of poverty and social division, they have been increasingly taken over by the right-leaning middle-class, which has currently no party representation.

## **The truth about**

## **anticorruption**

The Romanian campaign against corruption has provided an important background of the protests. While the struggle against corruption is a good idea, we have to observe it in its particular institutional history and politico-social context.

The Romanian anticorruption campaign was much lauded and became a feature about "Romania" and the region in the Western press; in one typical report Bulgaria was said to be "ten years behind" Romania, in the Eurocentric timeline to civilization [20]. However, the rise of the National Directorate of Anticorruptio (NDA), the state institution capacitated with the fight

against corruption, coincided with the end of the popular illusions with the European dream and the post-socialist transition to capitalism, after the brutal period of primitive accumulation of the 1990s-2000s. The Romanian economy presents now monopolies or quasi-monopolies in almost every economical sector as well as at regional levels. The transition to capitalism meant for Romania massive losses of state wealth (through fire-sale privatizations and deindustrialization), human capital (migrant work), and a massive production of poverty and inequality. 40% of the population is "at risk of poverty or social exclusion", while 29% are estimated to be "severely materially deprived" [21]. Within EU, the gap between the poor and the rich is the biggest in Romania [22]. As a consequence, it has become very hard to sustain, like in the 1990s and 2000s, that capitalism is the "natural environment of democracy". After 28 years of transition to capitalism, one cannot argue easily that capitalism will bring a prosperous future anytime soon. Consequently, for the Eurocentric and Capitalocentric-oriented classes, to blame are the local perversions of the Western model: the "savage" or "Balkan" capitalism, tainted by corruption and inefficiency. In the local public sphere, very much dominated by the ideology of anticommunism and by Western mimetism, the "communists" (who stand for anybody from the "left") and the poor (the local inferior people, racialized) are to blame for the underdevelopment and the corruption of the transition to the capitalist civilization.

Romania's anticorruption campaign raised to prominence in 2013, after the anti-neoliberal protests of 2012, under the new lead of the NDA. In 2014, NDA proudly reported the highest ever number of investigated high-ranked officials. This state institution had been created through a governmental executive order (no.43) in 2002, but acquired its current name and extended powers through another executive order (no.134 from 2005), under the decade-long right-wing presidency of Traian Băsescu (2004-2014). Băsescu also brought together the NDA with the intelligence

services by deciding in the Supreme Council of National Defence (17/28.02.2005) that corruption is to be considered a "threat to the national security". The number of arrests made by NDA increased from 360 in 2006 to a whopping 1258 in 2015, including a former prime-minister, five ministers, 67 MPs, 97 mayors and vice-mayors, and 32 directors of state-owned companies. The rate of condemnation reached 90% [23].

What hardly transpired in the liberal Western press was that the anticorruption campaign was based on denunciations and pressure exerted with the active but shadowy involvement of the Romanian Intelligence Service (RIS). The campaign took the form of an internal struggle between groups of private interests, which was articulated through an open conflict between different state apparatuses. Thus, NDA mainly focused on public officers and state-owned companies, prosecuting with extremely high conviction rates. In spite of a few spectacular cases (involving for instance Microsoft in 2014 [24]), the NDA was much less effective in bringing to discussion the corruption of the private sector, although it arguably brought to public visibility the fact that the corruption of the state comes mainly from the direction of private capital. If a capitalist businessman denounced a bribe-taking public officer, this had consequences mostly for the latter. In the process, the close collaboration of NDA with RIS, the main Romanian intelligence service, lead to an unprecedented rise in power of these two agencies. At one point even former president Băsescu, who created this autonomous concentration of power within the state, accused the NDA of acting unconstitutionally and against human rights. As a consequence, even the Western press started to temper its enthusiasm and caught up with the abuses of anticorruption: New York Times talked in condescending terms about "Romania's anti-corruption mania" [25]; The Guardian cautioned on a high tone that the anticorruption campaign was now "weakening democracy" [26]; the Financial Times argued that the "fetish of anticorruption" is basically bad for

business [27]. Within Romania, the increasing public disclosure of the abuses of NDA and RIS lead to the President Iohannis (moderate right-wing) having to admit that the involvement of RIS was outside the bounds of the constitution [28], and to fire the top RIS general Florian Coldea.

In conclusion, the anti-corruption campaign has been a form of internal critique which appeared precisely when the injustices of capitalism have become too obvious. It never questioned the general paradigm of the transition and never asked for systemic change. The anti-corruption campaign has been the ideological answer of Eurocentric liberalism to the popular demand for social justice and the emerging consciousness that the post-socialist transition has been a social catastrophe. The anticorruption campaign was only ever meant to "clean the system" and kept on falling back to the vocabulary of "setbacks", "inefficiency", as Eastern Europe was still "catching up". Within Romania, the anti-corruption campaign represented the success story of an internal civilizing mission, which was acceptable as long as it represented the only stately preoccupation with social justice. In reality it also brought an unprecedented reorganisation of power within the state apparatuses, as the secretive collaboration between NDA and RIS was instrumental in the struggle between different interest groups and accentuated the internal fragmentation of the post-socialist state under capitalism.

## The recent popular protests in Romania

Notwithstanding the internal struggles for power and external pressures, the rise in power of the Romanian anticorruption agency has come on the social background of an increasing public demand for social justice. Here, before admiring the impressive numbers of protesters from February 2017, it is important to underline that Romania already had a strong track record of popular protests with significant consequences in recent



history.

Thus, the anti-neoliberal popular protests from 2012 lead to the demise of the neoliberal Prime-minister Boc (2008-2012) and the eventual exit of President Băsescu (2004-2014), who has arguably been the most important figure of right-wing politics of the post-socialist transition. Most importantly, the protests of 2012 marked a nominal change of the local political sphere from the right to the left, which has not been fully accepted until the present. After 2012, the right was forced to soften its neoliberal radicalism and even to borrow from the themes and vocabulary of the left. Of course, the official “left” was represented by the Social-Democrat Party, which ran center-left and center-right policies but relied traditionally on a significant electoral base amongst the poor and disenfranchised. Nevertheless, the 2012 protests were the first state-wide protests after 1989 that articulated the general discontent of the population with the direction of the post-socialist transition to capitalism. More than two decades after 1989, a new historical consciousness seemed to take shape, fueled by the subjective feeling of having been cheated and robbed in the transition, as well as by the objective perception of the plunder of the considerable wealth of the former communist state.

One year later, in September 2013, popular protests flared up again, with mobilizations across the country and amongst the migrant workers abroad, united against the gold mining project at Roșia Montana. The resulting “Uniți Salvăm” movement also articulated protests against an amnesty project and featured prominently the slogan “Nu corporația face legislația!” (The Corporation Does Not Make The Legislation). However, as opposed to 2012, the protest movements of 2013 were marked by the clear rise of the middle-class and a change in tone and direction. The protest signs tended to be less confrontational, more “funny and smart”, more metaphorical, and the chants fell often into anti-communist and ethno-nationalist tropes. Yet the protests succeeded in stopping the gold mine project at Roșia Montana, which was declared

“closed” by the then prime-minister Ponta (social-democrat), leading also to a fall in the stocks of the Canadian Gabriel Resources corporation. However, when in October 2013 a rural revolt erupted in Pungești against another extractivist project, the urban middle-classes of the Uniți Salvăm movement failed to react to the same extent. Moreover, the movement failed to counter the new discourse which distinguished the “bad capitalists” at Roșia Montana from the good capitalists at Pungești (Chevron, “real professionals”). The police declared an emergency situation in the region, the Pungești revolt was silenced, and Chevron announced in December that it resumed work. I would suggest that the obvious contradiction lead informally to the dissolution of the movement. Nevertheless, the movement and associated developments did lead eventually to the formation of the newest political party with parliamentary representation in Romania (USR), which currently includes MPs with a background in social protests.

In November 2014, right-leaning mobilizations in the last two weeks leading to the presidential elections determined the surprise victory of Klaus Iohannis against the social-democrat candidate Ponta, who remained, however, prime-minister. One year later, in November 2015, after the tragic fire at Colectiv Club on October 30 2015, Bucharest witnessed once again massive demonstrations – featuring predominantly the urban middle class. Corruption was blamed for the tragedy and the protests lead to the resignation of the weakened prime-minister Ponta, accused of ...plagiarism. A provisional government of “technocrats” was installed in November 2015 – mostly bureaucrats with careers in EU apparatuses and Western development agencies. Finally, the general elections of 2016 brought a clear electoral victory of the social-democrats and promised the first period of governing stability since 2012.

It can be argued that from 2012 to 2017, as the political sphere nominally switched to the left, Romania dealt with an ongoing situation of

governmental instability. In 2012 Romania had three different acting prime-ministers; the same in 2015; between 2012-2014, the “social-democrat” Ponta lead three different governments, under strong internal and external pressures. At the end, Ponta was forced to resign. The following technocrat government of Cioloș (2015-2016, right-leaning) was mainly responsible with keeping the state afloat, but also conceived a “plan for ending poverty”, which did address the general public concern and promised implicitly a more humane revival of the moderate right-wing [29]. Let’s also recall shortly that during the same period, in neighboring Ukraine, the local popular protests were stifled by the overarching geopolitical moves of the West and Russia. The Bucharest protests were rather indifferent or to the fact that a convoy with hundreds of US armoured tanks (!) were just crossing the country and were deployed on the Eastern border of Romania. At the non-socialist end of the transition to “capitalism and democracy”, Eastern Europe has disappeared as a political entity, becoming simply a geopolitical borderline between the West and Russia and a mirror used to reflect the Western face. Yet, during the time of the Obama administration, Eastern Europe has become one of the “conflict regions” of the world where capitalist oligarchs and elite nationalists assume political power.

The return of ethno-nationalists in Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria certainly show a systemic disillusionment with the liberal European dream. The anticorruption campaign that became so prominent in the Romanian state seemed to keep alive a pro-Western, moderately right-leaning struggle for liberal democracy. When seen from the standpoint of Eastern Europe, the Romanian anticorruption campaign actually belongs to the same right-wing register as the contemporary ethno-nationalism of Hungary and Poland. Finally, in 2017, after a new nominal switch to the left which promised governmental stability, protests erupted in Bucharest, prompted by an incredible blunder of the social-democrat government.

# The protests of February 2017

As if they were completely oblivious to their own history and society, the new government furtively passed during the night of January 31/ February 1st (!) an executive urgency act which introduced a few changes to the Penal Code, aiming to soften or decriminalize the abuse of public office. Amongst many other politicians, the leader of the ruling social-democrat party was to be positively affected by the change. Massive protests promptly erupted in most of the cities of Romania, and prominently in Bucharest. After five days of protests, the government was forced to issue on February 5 another urgency act cancelling the first one, in a decree which clumsily acknowledged the power of the street.

This time around, the protests oscillated from the beginning between calls to cancel the decriminalizing decree and, on the contrary, step up the social justice campaign, and anti-communist chants simply aimed at the governing social-democrats (the “red pest”). The protests were generally peaceful and exerted little to no pressure on the police. As the days went by, they featured giant laser projectors, lots of “smart and funny” signs, and kept on bringing to prominence the new generation of “beautiful people”, the urban middle classes, including the “creatives”, IT workers, capitalist businessmen, and even a bank director. The street rallies were very much rallies on the social media too; one of the massive rallies was choreographed so that the crowd produced with its smartphones a giant version of the Romanian flag, sharing afterwards on social media all the reports of the event from the Western press. As expected, a report was soon published on Washington Post with the title “Romanian creativity is hallmark of huge anti-graft protests” [30]. Promptly, a Romanian news site reported back the Western reaction with the added title “What Does It Mean To Protest Like a Romanian” [31]. The idea of the “Romanian” was clearly determined in this instance by the Western take.

The next week, the protests tended to be self-focused or self-interested rather than focused on social issues; every other protester seemed to stream live on social media “from the protest” and to share Western reports praising the struggle for democracy of the “Romanian people”. After the cancelling of the decriminalizing act, the protests centered on anti-government messages (“thieves” and “incompetents”), and insulting messages targeting the electoral base of the social-democrats (poor, old, smelly, with bad teeth) and the pro-government part of the culture industry (“fake news”). The indignation of the middle-class took not only classist, but downright proto-fascist tones. The situation became such that a journalist felt free to express on social media her indignation that the uneducated, poor people are eating from the dumpsters. Furthermore, one could clearly see the return of certain neoliberal tropes (such as arguments against increasing the minimum wage), as well as a barrage of sympathetic interviews with businessmen and entrepreneurs [32] and even initiatives from the good IT people to censor the “fake news”. The manifestations also tended to praise the NDA as a social justice institution. The public faces of the protests arguably tended to revert to dreams of a clean and civilized capitalism by way of anticorruption, which would eliminate the incompetent people from governance and the ugly people from relevance.

## Reactions from the left

The Romanian independent left, which encompasses very different groups and tendencies, while appreciative of the initial mass mobilization, was remarkably united in the criticism of the context and the direction taken by the protests. Many reactions from the independent left focused on the class politics of the anticorruption campaign, criticism of the governing party, analyses of the social composition of the protests and the ensuing tasks for the left.

Tudorina Mihai underlined [33] that

the right-leaning culture industry and social media has simply not accepted the nominal switch to the left, namely the fact that the winners of the democratic elections of 2016 were the “corrupts”. She noticed that in the aftermath of PSD’s blunder, “the public debate is currently monopolized by the issue of corruption. The debates about wages, pensions, contributions, social houses, schools, kindergartens and nurseries have become ancillary. Even the national anti-poverty campaign... was forgotten”. She also expressed serious doubts about the capacity of PSD to assume a leftist discourse.

Ciprian ?iulea wrote in Baricada [34] that the “anticorruption is the local equivalent of the ethnical and religious chauvinisms sustaining nowadays the surrogates of Western democracy in Hungary and Poland... it is the main force ensuring the domination of the middle class of ‘civilisation’ and ‘ocidentalism’ against the retrograde crowd of fools”. As for the government party, he noticed that “PSD has blown up the political stability and made a mockery of the people who placed hopes in their governing program”. As a consequence, “during a time of serious social and economic problems, the social and economic perspective is nowhere to be found in the public space” and “the debate on the dubious relations between the secret services and the justice system has been stifled”. He underlined the mutations of power determined by the rise of anticorruption: “PSD did not understand how much power has moved outside the political system. NDA has become an extraordinary center of right-wing power, able to work with the services and to make alliances with other state institutions or the presidency... Why right-wing? Because by identifying democracy and the public good with the rule of law, the anticorruption eliminates the social state... reduces it to the negative action of combating illegality, and sustains a social order that privileges the upper classes: a lot of legality, small taxes and very few social services”.

Costi Rogozanu noticed in VoxPublica and for CriticAtac [35] that the protests featured for the first time

“many of the top 5 percenters”. As a consequence, “the protests are dominated by the discourse of a middle class asking for a new post-crisis contract, which would enlist the exclusive support of a part of the state”. He further observes that “while the political abuse is met with intransigence, the abuses of the business world are easily accepted” and calls for the rejection of the alternative between social policies coming with corruption, on one side, and anticorruption coming with the destruction of the social state, on the other.

Mășina de Lucru (CWI supporters in Romania) also emphasized the class politics of the protests [36]: “the tendency to diabolize the entire electorate of PSD, often in class terms... comes packed with a lazy narrative about ‘the two Romanias’: on the one hand, the urban, middle-class, educated half that wants a democratic and modern country and which is now in the streets; on the other hand, the rural, poor, uneducated half that holds us back by voting with corrupt parties like PSD”. Consequently, ML argued that “the left has to categorically denounce the PSD government with all its undemocratic abuses and right-wing agenda, while at the same time drawing attention to the limits of the anti-corruption struggle as well as to the right-wing features of the protests”.

Răzvrata (anarcho-communists) argued [37] that anticorruption is a power struggle between different factions within the state and therefore presents no interest for the working class, but warned that a fascist tendency may well lurk underneath the sympathies of the protesters for authoritarian institutions like the NDA and the deep resentments of middle-class protesters for the perceived inferior class.

The Demos Platform [38] insisted on the complexity of the movement and against the reduction of the protests to a right-wing tendency, and pleaded for the reformation of the democratic left outside and against PSD, which is considered “fundamentally corrupt and unreformable”.

Florin Poenaru wrote for Political Critique [39] that “anti-corruption has been a very destabilizing factor of Romanian politics ... it dialed down on the powers of Parliament and cut the leadership of the mainstream parties to the bone. Additionally, anti-corruption managed to compromise politics itself ... To put it shortly, politics itself became a synonym for corruption”. He also emphasized the resulting fragmentation of the state: “we now witness a split within the executive of the country: on the one hand is the Prime Minister, backed by the Parliamentary majority; on the other hand is the President, who enjoys the support of the judicial system and controls the secret intelligence service. The protesters on the streets are clearly in favor of the latter, sometimes in explicit terms”. He also noticed the class politics of the protests: “the mobilization against the government was also a mobilization against its economic policies. The Social Democrats increased the minimum wage and pensions, cut taxes for the poorest segments, and increased – even though just slightly, compared to the needs – the social welfare spending.... Unsurprisingly, corporate workers (especially their bosses), were on the streets to protest. People in Bucharest’s corporations were offered free days off work to be able to stay up at night and protest against the government”.

## Conclusion

The Romanian protests from February 2017 exposed the corrupt and/or inept organization of the ruling PSD, but also emphasized the size of its political apparatus; they tended to exert right-wing pressures on the center-right social-democrat party and gave new expression to class politics. The events underlined that the issue of anticorruption is not ideologically neutral, but leans heavily to the right and has appeared in a particular historical context, as the “European dream” unravels at the disappointing end of the transition to capitalism of the former socialist bloc. After admitting its mistake, the government has been significantly weakened but trudges along. For now, we are

confronted with a situation in which the left seems to temporarily have “lost the street”, and yet the protesting middle class is clearly new to the culture of protest, and stops short of pushing for a regime change.

In the longer view, the former socialist bloc is at the end of the transition to capitalism. We are confronted with a generalized disenchantment with the liberal European dream (which marks the return of ethno-nationalists but could also spark renewed politics of the communal, as well as regional internationalism against the West-Russia divisions). We also face a generalized discontent with the plunder of local wealth and with the current situation of capitalist monopolies and quasi-monopolies. At this end, we are presented with two deeply diverging tendencies: one towards the recomposition of capital (the transition 2.0), the other towards the social recomposition of a deeply unequal society. Although the protests started from the common ground of asking for social justice at the core of governance, the participating middle-class moved clearly in the first direction, articulating the vision of a capitalist state with a cleaner and maybe more humane face. Society would still be organized around money, but would be run by a competent elite of Westernized experts. The discontent is also caused by the fact that currently the middle-class simply lacks real political representation outside the Presidency. The one-year Cioloș government seemed to embody a new generation of moderate right-wing politics, yet remained non-committal as the crisis exploded. It is important to recall that at this point all three right-wing parties that have governed during the post-socialist transition have been poetically sanctioned by the Romanian people: they have either disappeared (PNT, PDL) or are at their lowest level yet (PNL).

The events from Bucharest may signal indeed a shifting terrain of politics, a degradation of electoral democracy, in which the political struggle takes place to a significant extent outside the electoral field. The anti-corruption campaign and the dissolution of the dominant post-socialist ideologies have depleted the political class. In a

fragmented state the urban middle class tries to claim the support of certain state institutions with good reputation, willing to either pay the price or ignore that they acquired power in conjunction with private interests and by aligning to hegemonic external pressures. The economic stagnation coupled with the emergence in political power of capitalist oligarchs throughout the region may also indicate the coming of yet another wave of privatization and recomposition of capital, under "innovative" forms claiming to combat inefficiency and corruption.

The social and communal background of the protests remains justified and unrepresented, expressing a historical desire for social justice and well-being which cannot be reduced to the struggle against corruption. For now, the pressing issues of the redistribution of wealth and of regaining popular sovereignty lurk in the background but are not explicitly on the table of either the left or right. The radically increased contradiction between popular sovereignty and state sovereignty (expressed by the ascension of the NDA police and the secret services to the public sphere)

may lead to further aggravations in the context of external militarization. In this situation, organizing a social forum on wealth redistribution, popular sovereignty and regional peace, or simply on changing positively the direction of the transition, seems more necessary and opportune than ever, especially if it brings together the various groups of the protest movements, the independent left and the progressives from existent parliamentary parties. To be continued with another effort.

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