



IV514 - November 2017

A referendum that is far from a level playing field

30 November 2017, by **Bernard Alleton**

In 1988, the Matignon-Oudinot agreements put an end to a new revolt that had been crushed in the Ouvéa bloodbath, where 19 Kanaks were killed, some of them executed while they were prisoners. This agreement provided for a period of 10 years before the holding of a referendum on self-determination, but in 1998 the Nouméa agreement postponed the deadline until the end of 2018.

This agreement was signed by the independentists of the FLNKS [1] and the loyalists of the RPCR [2]. The French state is the third partner, supposed to accompany the establishment of the conditions of a possible independence and to ensure the application of the agreement.

22,780 Kanaks missing from the electoral registers

The Kanaks became a minority on their territory at the beginning of the 20th century. Eighty per cent of the population disappeared as a result of massacres and the plunder of their land, which led to malnutrition and deadly diseases imported by settlers. Since then, they have been kept in the minority by the immigration of French settlers, theorized in 1972 by Pierre

Messmer, Prime Minister at the time, who said: "In the long term the demand of the indigenous nationalists will be avoided only if the communities who do not come from the Pacific represent a majority demographic mass. "

The Nouméa agreement provides that the electoral body of the referendum is restricted, comprising only people who arrived before 1998 and have 20 years of continuous residence and young people born in the territory and resident for 10 years. For more than a year, independentists have warned the state about the absence of many Kanaks from the referendum list. As the deadline approaches, the current list completely distorts the outcome of the vote: 22,780 Kanaks, out of 90,740 of voting age, do not appear on the electoral rolls.

The UN Special Committee on Decolonization ruled in June this year that "it is essential to establish credible and transparent electoral lists in New Caledonia". In less diplomatic terms: the list is not credible.

The pressure is rising

Under the pressure of the Rally of Independentists and Nationalists (RIN,

which regroups practically all the pro-independence forces)), the committee of signatories responsible for monitoring the Nouméa agreement has just admitted the need to register on the electoral list 7,000 Kanaks living under customary civil law, people formerly governed by the Code de l'indigénat [3] and their descendants. Since 10,000 more Kanaks seem to be in the same situation, the sincerity of the vote is still far from being assured, even though the government has accepted that the revision of the electoral rolls be postponed beyond 31 December 2017 and that observers of the UN supervise the poll.

The mobilization of the independentists will continue, for the registration of all Kanaks, and over the wording of the question that will be asked during the referendum and the project of society. At present, each of the independentist parties is discussing these question in its own framework, but it will be necessary to have a firm and united position in the face of the government and the colonialists.

The colonialists are preparing for battle. The coming arrival of Manuel Valls at the head of a parliamentary mission to discuss the issue is part of this preparation. When he was Prime Minister, he dragged out the transfer

of responsibilities provided for by the Nouméa agreement and did nothing to organize the registration of Kanaks on the referendum list. He has never hidden his wish to keep New

Caledonia attached to France.

Information and support for the legitimate struggle of the Kanak needs

to be developed.

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30 November 2017, by robm

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A new political subject: self-organization

29 November 2017, by Jan Malewski

Effectiveness demonstrated on October 1st

Prohibited by the Spanish state, this referendum could not have taken place without a citizen mobilization. Polling stations, usually schools, were then occupied and defended for two or three days by the neighbourhoods concerned. A first experience of joint action, from below, of discussions, of organization of voting, of non-violent resistance to the attacks of the Guardia Civil sent by Madrid, of repression undergone in common, of celebrations after the results - impressive if we take into account the brutal repression - were announced. Self-organization from below had demonstrated its effectiveness, thousands of Catalans were having their first experience not during a day of protest, but by acting together against the de facto state of emergency imposed by the right wing Popular Party government, for several days.

The initiative for this citizens' mobilization did not come from the

Catalan government, but from below, from activists of the left parties, in particular the CUP (Candidatura de Unitat Popular), and social movements like the National Assembly Catalan (ANC) and Æmnium cultural (ÆC).

Pau Llonch, an activist in the pro-independence far-left electoral coalition Crida, which won the 2015 municipal elections in Sabadell (a city of 200,000 inhabitants in the province of Barcelona) and a member of the city's CDR, explained that the initiative was born "from the need to be organized in a scenario that has been imposed on us. CUP has emphasized the need to organize these committees without wanting to make it its patrimony". On October 1st families in Sabadell kept 23 electoral centres open. With the constitution of the CDR, what was at stake was creating an area of popular sovereignty and from the outset the trade unions, the youth groups, the students and some political parties got down to this construction.

"Nobody intended to create a homogeneous movement," said Llonch, "it was about building a space to cope with what could happen in the following weeks, but also in the case

of a possible constituent process". As a result, the CDR does not take a position itself on the results of the referendum - the victory of a yes to independence - but rather asserts the right to take decisions in a sovereign way. On the future of Catalonia -independent republic, federation or confederation of Iberian republics - the CDR has no definite collective position. [4]

"In our founding statutes, we have positioned ourselves in favour of the right to self-determination," says David Garcia (pseudonym), a CDR activist in Salt, a town of 30,000 inhabitants in the province of Girona. "The rapid evolution of the situation has made us work against the clock, not only here, but throughout Catalonia. First, we had to organize the voting day and then the general strike. Now we continue the activities, lunches, workshops, days of reflection", he adds. [5]

Following the success of the referendum, the citizen assemblies of these RDCs continued, even though the number of participants had decreased. Thus, in Vilanova - a city of 70,000 inhabitants in the province of Barcelona - out of the 835 enrolled, on

Saturday, October 7 there were around 200 taking part in the debates on the upcoming actions, according to anti-capitalist activists Cesar and Raquel. "The meeting was "popular", families had come with children, but to measure the level of mobilization we must remember that on October 1 around 2,000 of us occupied the twenty schools of the city and that at the general strike of October 3, more than 8,000 demonstrated in our city," they say. [6]

The CDR mobilized for the demonstrations against the repression and for the release of the political prisoners, the road and rail blockades on October 3 and on November 8, discussed how to prevent the stranglehold of the Rajoy government on Catalonia.

The leaders of the great historical social movements, ANC and ÆC, are now conscious of the significance of the emergence of the CDR:

"We complement each other, each plays his part" explained an ANC leader after the November 8 roadblocks, pointing out that the Rajoy government "thought that with the imprisonment of the two Jordis [Jordi Sanchez, President of the ANC, and Jordi Cuixart, president of ÆC] we would be disorganized, and it has been shown that this is not the case. And where we don't succeed, others come to do the work. There is a great capacity for self-organization on the territory". [7]

For the moment, the CDRs are the local nuclei of this self-organization. More than constituent structures from below, or "councils/soviets" representing the working population, they are action committees like those in France after May 1968.

National coordination

Until now there have been four national meetings of the CDRs - while some had advocated the articulation of a political leadership, because of their "heterogeneity" it was decided to settle for a "technical" coordination: thus, on November 8 this coordination

worked via WhatsApp and Twitter (@CDRCatOficial). At first, these CDRs were eclipsed in the media by the ANC, ÆC, the Catalan government or the pro-independence parties. On November 8 they hit the front-page headlines and experienced a new development. New CDRs have multiplied.

The first national meeting was convened "in secret" (by word of mouth, in principle nothing on the networks or by telephone) on October 14 at the initiative of the CDR in Sabadell, where CUP activators are the principal animators. Cesar, who represented the CDR of Vilanova, said: "The participation exceeded the expectations of the initiators, almost 100 committees or groups from all over Catalonia, even if the majority came from the province of Barcelona, and around 250 people present. There was a great variety of structures and "sensibilities": "referendum defence committees", "... the Republic", unnamed structures, delegates representing democratic assemblies and those of smaller committees. A bit of everything on the political level. Most significantly, there were a significant number of committees, perhaps a quarter, mainly from the "red belt" of Barcelona, which clearly positioned themselves on the defence of the right to decide and resistance to attack from the Rajoy government and not on independence or the Catalan Republic, explaining that there were some of their members who were not separatists. These positions were accepted without any problem. Proposals to define the type of "constituent process", so not to be limited to actions but to make proposals of the type of society - economy, education, health ... - that we want have been made, but it is the ways of resisting from day to day that dominated the discussion." [8]

The final, very succinct, press release reflects the level of agreement of the meeting: "to defend the right to self-determination of our people despite the repression of the state, we propose to advance in our network construction at the supra-municipal level". And it ends: "in the face of the imminent application of article 155 or if arrests occur, while we continue the effort of popular organization from

below, we will impel and take up mobilizations in the street to defend the popular will against the repression and for the withdrawal of the occupying forces from our house".

In the following days, the multiplicity of initiatives and platforms at the central level - a "United Platform Against Repression and for Freedoms", a "Table for Democracy" and a third, older, but revived for the occasion, "Stand for Peace", emerged as a result of the hesitations of the Catalan government, divided on how to resist the Madrid aggression which heightened the confusion in the movement.

The second national meeting of the RDCs, which brought together about as many committees and representatives in Igualda on October 21, ended without any step forward, either in the field of structuring or in the field of priority initiatives to support. It was the same at the third national meeting of the CDR in Argentona on October 28.

The CDR continued mobilizations - saucepan concerts, daily gatherings at 7 pm in front of the town halls or the central squares, road blockades, street demonstrations - around the idea of support of "our president" exiled in Brussels and for the release of those imprisoned in Madrid. In anticipation of the strike on November 8, in street demonstrations cries of "vaga" (strike) were increasingly massively taken up. In the social movements, the disarray that followed the announcement of Carles Puigdemont's exile began to make way for criticisms.

This is evidenced by the ANC of Sants-Montjuïc: "It is clear that from now on we must review our strategy. Perhaps it will be necessary to stop waiting to know what the leaders say and instead to decide more at the base, in spite of the dangers that this represents." [9]

The effect of such an evolution has been immediate within the RDCs, which include the most active part of the population fighting for the right to self-determination.

The fourth plenary meeting of the RDCs, meeting in Manlleu on

November 4, brought together a much larger number of committees. Its statement testifies: "We consider our organizational and operational structure established, following a process of consolidation that we wanted to be fast but effective. Through this network, which involves more than 172 RDCs across our country, we are in contact with organizations that fight for our national sovereignty and participate in committed trade unionism... We are prepared to defend the Republic in a peaceful but radical way. That is why we are calling on the public to participate actively in the defence committees of the Republic of their municipality... Faced with the coup d'état we are experiencing, today more than ever, we must break with the false normality it imposes: let's bring the country to a halt, imminently... Let's start from Wednesday [November 8] a step forward so that the European Union hears us; block the economy, even if the Spanish state tries to prevent us from exercising our right to strike."

The structure adopted by this national meeting is transversal, bringing together the full range of ideologies, members of social movements and political parties. The independence of local and district assemblies is

absolute, and they do not have to accept proposals of national or territorial scope. But local assemblies are coordinated, through their democratically elected representatives, at the territorial level who, in turn, choose spokespersons to go to national assemblies. This coordination makes national initiatives and actions possible.

November 8, a step forward

November 8 demonstrated the effectiveness of the new structure. While the strike was not as big as that of October 3, because few unions ultimately called for a strike, the country was paralyzed by widespread blockades of transport, highways, roads and railways. railways, organized by the CDRs. And the Rajoy government proved unable to impose its "order" in Catalonia. Raging, the Spanish interior minister spoke of "radicalized pickets", calling the blockades "sabotage" and announcing arrests.

And the development of the CDR continues: on November 10 the spokesperson of the CDR Sabadell, Helena Vazquez, announced the existence of 280 committees, one

hundred more than at the fourth national meeting that had taken place a week before.

Such a development could be used for the construction of a "constituent process from below" - an idea put forward until now by a minority of the radical left - moving towards a "Catalan Social Assembly", which could draw inspiration from the "Charter of Social Rights" elaborated by the activists in the various "marches" and "platforms". And even if the Catalan elections imposed by the Rajoy government on December 21 play a role of political division - which cannot be without effect on the CDR - the level of self-organization attained and its "transversal" nature constitute a good basis for progressing in the accumulation of more forces within such basic unitary organizations in order to involve in the constituent debates everybody interested in the definition of a new social model. Because the CDR have until now managed to bring together both pro-independence activists and those who, without wanting Catalan independence, aspire to a true democracy, the end of the Spanish monarchical regime of 1978 and the realization of the social needs of the greater number. They are a new political subject.

Lebanon in the crucible of regional conflict

28 November 2017, by **Joseph Daher**

Hariri's surprise announcement shocked Middle East commentators, but it was only the latest symptom of a brewing conflict between the region's most powerful countries—Saudi Arabia and Iran. This rivalry plays itself out through several proxy wars as well as within the dynamic of imperialist competition that crisscrosses the Middle East, as outside powers such as the U.S., Russia and China seek to secure their own national interests.

Joseph Daher is a Swiss-Syrian

socialist activist, founder of the Syria Freedom Forever blog and author of Hezbollah: Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God. He spoke to Ashley Smith about the roots of this crisis and the implications for the left around the world.

AS: The sequence of events surrounding the resignation of Lebanon's prime minister Saad Hariri has been confusing to say the least. What happened?

JD: Hariri precipitated a political crisis

in Lebanon on November 4 when he announced his resignation from Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. Hariri surprised everyone, including his own party, the Future Movement and its allies. His resignation would have brought down the government and generated a new round of conflict with Lebanon over the dispensation of political power between the country's various sectarian parties.

It was no accident that Hariri made the announcement in Saudi Arabia. The Saudis are Hariri's regional

patron, and they had summoned him to their capital. Many believed he was being detained there against his wishes.

Hariri maintains deep connections with the Gulf kingdom. He holds Saudi citizenship, and his family's interests in the country date back to 1978, when his father, the former Lebanese prime minister, Rafik Hariri founded the Saudi construction company Oger. After Rafik was assassinated in 2005, Saad succeeded him in his political career and benefited from Riyadh's largesse—and, more sinisterly, its manipulation.

In his resignation speech, Hariri made startling new allegations. He claimed to have uncovered an assassination plot against him. He also accused Iran and Hezbollah of sowing strife in his country and the region.

But even the Lebanese Internal Security Forces, considered loyal to Hariri, denied knowledge of any assassination plot. And Hariri had not made such charges against Iran and Hezbollah since he was appointed Prime Minister in December 2016.

Clearly Saudi Arabia had compelled Hariri to toe their political line. His statements resembled nearly word for word charges against Iran made by Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (known by his initials MBS).

After Hariri's resignation, Saudi Arabia escalated its war of words against the Lebanese government, which includes Hezbollah. Riyadh even went so far as to claim that the government had declared war against it.

The Lebanese political establishment refused to accept Hariri's resignation at face value. The president of Lebanon, Michel Aoun, stated it happened in "mysterious circumstances" abroad and went so far as to claim that Hariri was being held as hostage in Riyadh.

Hariri's own party, the Future Movement, asked for his return before making any decision regarding the premiership, and it implicitly criticized

Saudi Arabia for pressuring Hariri.

Even Hariri's rival Hezbollah called for him to return to Lebanon, remain in office and preserve the current government, while condemning the Saudi interference in Lebanese affairs and warning against an Israeli attack. The group also stated that it was open to "any dialogue and any discussion" with Hariri.

Clearly, Saudi Arabia pressured Hariri into resigning as part of its escalating conflict with its main regional competitor Iran and its Lebanese subsidiary Hezbollah.

Saudi Arabia had been angry with Hariri and his Future Movement, its client in Lebanon, for sharing power with Hezbollah rather than challenging it. Riyadh feared that Hariri was adapting to Iran's increased influence in Lebanon on the heels of Tehran's successes in the region, particularly in Syria and Iraq.

Saudi Arabia aimed to disrupt the political accommodation between Hariri's Future Movement and Hezbollah. That deal had produced a cabinet headed by Hariri as prime minister and the election of Hezbollah's ally, Michel Aoun, as president.

Hariri, like the rest of Lebanon's warlords, opted for precarious coexistence over confrontation with Hezbollah. They all were simply intimidated by the group superior arms and willingness to use them. Similarly, Hariri and his party balked at challenging Hezbollah's dramatic intervention in Syria to preserve the regime of Bashar al-Assad against the Syrian Revolution.

Saudi Arabia responded by cutting off its funding of Hariri, bankrupting his family's company Oger, and ending its financial support for the Lebanese army. All of this precipitated a full-scale crisis in Lebanon and intensified conflict in the region as a whole.

AS: How did the imperial powers respond to this crisis?

JD: The U.S. and other Western powers voiced their disapproval of these developments. They affirmed their support for Hariri, encouraged

him to revoke his resignation and urged him to preserve the current political settlement in Lebanon. They did not back Saudi Arabia and voiced concern about any escalation of its conflict with Iran.

United Nations Secretary General António Guterres warned of "devastating consequences" if there is a new conflict in the region. French President Emmanuel Macron, who traveled to Riyadh to meet with Hariri and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, said he did not share the kingdom's "very harsh opinions of Iran."

While U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson blamed Iran for much of the turmoil in the region, he said, "All the parties need to be careful about characterizing the start of yet another new war. My input would be: Let's be a little more cautious about what we say."

The State Department warned of using Lebanon as a base for "proxy conflicts" that could contribute to instability. Despite these criticisms of the Saudi manipulation of Hariri, the U.S. shares a common position with Riyadh that views Iran's rising power as a threat to ITS dominance in the region.

The Western imperialists' opposition to Saudi Arabia's provocation of the crisis explains France's intervention into the situation. With the implicit approval of the U.S., Macron got Saudi Arabia to release Hariri and then welcomed him to Paris.

Macron thus paved the way for Hariri to return to Lebanon, where he has rescinded his resignation, thereby diminishing the crisis for now. Hariri also declared that all Lebanese forces should commit to keeping the country out of regional conflicts, create partnerships with all outside powers and place Lebanon's interests above any other interests.

In a sign of ongoing tensions, however, Hariri also stated that he would not accept Hezbollah's positions that "affect our Arab brothers or target the security and stability of their countries."

Hariri's rescinding of his resignation represents a clear setback for Saudi Arabia and its attempt to harden up its front against Hezbollah and Iran in Lebanon. However, the regional competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran will continue and will probably have new and devastating consequences for Lebanon.

What, if any, are the causes of this crisis that are internal to Lebanon?

JD: The chief causes are to be found outside of Lebanon in the increasing regional competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the political developments of recent months in the region, especially Syria. The national unity government led by Hariri since 2016 actually allowed the various factions of the ruling class to stabilize the country.

The government adopted a budget for the first time since 2005. It continued to implement neoliberal policies, including escalating privatization of key sectors such as electricity. The ruling class used this political stability to prevent any challenges to the sectarian and bourgeois Lebanese political system that preserves their interests.

Western powers including the U.S. were satisfied with this settlement in Lebanon. They didn't want yet another crisis in the region.

But the stability was compromised by the regional tensions. In conjunction with Iran, Hezbollah escalated its military intervention in Syria in defense of Assad's dictatorship. Inevitably, this antagonized Saudi Arabia, which feared Iran would emerge with a greater sphere of influence.

Therefore, Saudi Arabia called in its chips with Hariri, threatening the political settlement in Lebanon. While Hariri has remained in power, his position and that of his Future Movement have been dramatically weakened on the Lebanese Sunni political scene.

A range of rivals, including former Justice Minister Ahmed Rifi and Salafist groups, may benefit. They are

sectarian and have an antagonistic posture toward Hezbollah and Iran.

AS: What is the basis of the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran?

JD: Saudi Arabia and Iran have been battling each other for regional hegemony for years. Saudi Arabia feared that it had suffered an enormous setback after the U.S.'s disastrous occupation of Iraq. Instead of consolidating a U.S.-Saudi-Iraqi axis against Iran, the Iraqi government has increasingly fallen into the orbit of Iran.

Hostilities increased after the Obama administration cut a deal with Iran over its nuclear program, requiring it to give up pursuit of nuclear weapons in exchange for sanctions relief. This irritated Saudi Arabia, which feared that the U.S. was backing down from confronting Iran.

Riyadh saw Iran piling up victories, either directly or through its proxies in Syria and Iraq. In response, Saudi Arabia began to act increasingly to counteract Iranian influence throughout the region from Iraq to Syria, Yemen and Lebanon.

The Iranian gains should not be underestimated. They have secured a key ally in Iraq through the government of Haidar Abadi and his Shia fundamentalist Da'wa Party. Many other Shia military factions and parties with influence in Iraq are directly answerable to Iran.

In Syria, Iran has also gained unprecedented influence in the country in the past few years. While Russia has supplied air power in defense of Assad, Iran and its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah have provided tens of thousands of militiamen who have preserved Assad's reign. They will try to play a big role in the country from now on.

Saudi Arabia has balked at directly confronting Iran or its proxies in those two countries. But it has done so in Yemen. Houthi rebels, a religious group affiliated with the Zaydi sect of Shia Islam, along with forces loyal to former Yemeni dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh, took control of large parts of

the country in 2014. They have received backing from Iran.

Riyadh, supported by the U.S., has engaged in an aerial bombing campaign and blockade against the Houthi forces. The war has killed more than 10,000 people and left more than 20 million people, including 11 million children, in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. But the Houthis have maintained control of the capital of Sanaa and ports on the southern coast.

The Houthis took credit for a ballistic missile fired at the Saudi capital of Riyadh on November 5. The Saudis claimed the missile was supplied by Iran, saying it constituted a declaration of war. Iran strongly denied supplying any missiles to the rebels, saying that it would have been impossible to do so in the face of a Saudi-led air and sea blockade.

The other theater where the Saudis have challenged Iran's proxies has been in Lebanon. Indeed, as I have tried to show, the latest political crisis in Lebanon must be understood as a battle for influence between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

AS: What role has Israel played in these conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia?

JD: Relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel have never been closer, becoming nearly official. They both oppose the growing influence of Iran in the Middle East.

On November 16, Israel's military chief Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot gave an unprecedented interview to a Saudi newspaper underlining the ways in which the two countries could unite to counter Iran's influence in the region.

This interview, which was the first of its kind between an Israeli chief of staff and a Saudi news site, may indicate that the romance between Israel and Saudi Arabia may finally go public, after taking place behind the scenes for a long time.

The Israeli official said that Tel Aviv had no intention of attacking Hezbollah in Lebanon, but would also not tolerate a strategic threat to its borders. Israel has nevertheless

intensified its bombing in Syria against Hezbollah and Iranian-linked militias and locations where they are located.

Israel has on several occasions denounced the growing influence of Iran in Syria, and Benjamin Netanyahu declared that Israel will continue to enforce its security interests in Syria.

The winding down of the Syrian war and the near-end of the ISIS proto-state are ushering in a new phase of instability in the region. Washington, Tel Aviv and the Gulf states oppose increased Iranian regional power as a result of its gains in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon. Far from peace, more conflict between the imperial and regional powers is on the horizon.

AS: How much of Saudi Arabia's aggressive assertion of its interests has to do with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's attempt to consolidate his accession to power?

JD: The Saudis were pursuing this conflict with Iran before Salman's move to push aside his rivals through his anti-corruption campaign. But Salman has no doubt escalated it for domestic and regional reasons.

He wants to consolidate his power through repression of his rivals, initiate a more aggressive foreign policy, establish a popular base through militarism and Saudi chauvinism, and attempt a dramatic reform of Saudi Arabia's economy.

At a deeper level, Salman's policies mark a turning point in the traditional patrimonial system. In this system, the ruling family divided up control of the state and its oil rent. They used their monies to pay off a vast network of businesses and patrons. This produced a precarious balance of power between family factions and their clientelist networks.

Salman is trying to bring an end to this factionalized state and consolidate power in his own hands. He has targeted key royal personalities, four ministers, and dozens of other officials and prominent businessmen such as Bakr bin Laden, the head of Saudi

Arabia's biggest construction company, and the famous billionaire Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal, chairman of Kingdom Holding 4280.SE.

The sons of all four key men in the House of Saud who comprised the core of the family through the last four decades have been targeted. They are the sons of King Fahd bin Abdulaziz, King Abdullah, Prince Sultan and Prince Nayef.

This represents an unprecedented attack on the position and wealth of the pillars of al-Saud, including the three most prominent figures of the ruling Sudairi clan. The last prince theoretically capable of standing up to MBS, Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Nayef in title until June 2017, was dismissed from all his functions.

The purge against other members of the royal family is unprecedented in the kingdom's modern history. Family unity, which guaranteed the stability of the state since its foundation, has been shattered. The last event of this magnitude was the overthrow of King Saud by his brother Prince Faisal in 1964.

Contrary to liberal illusions that Salman is carrying out some kind of liberal political reform, he has also cracked down on any and all protest against the regime. Before his campaign against corruption, Salman had targeted intellectuals, academics, writers, feminists, human rights defenders and key Islamist figures.

To justify these repressive measures, MBS has put forward two main reasons to prepare the kingdom for the future. First, he claims that he needs to consolidate state control to make Saudi Arabia fit to take on what he calls Iranian expansionism.

Second, he contends that he needs a rationalized state to implement his project of economic reform and austerity called "Vision 2030." Its objective is to attract foreign and local investment to diversify its economy away from oil and help the private sector flourish by creating policies and providing security for private capital.

This project aims to create 450,000 jobs in the private sector by 2020 and

bolster the private-sector share of GDP to 60 percent from 40 percent in 2014.

Saudi Arabia has said it aims to raise around \$200 billion in the next several years through privatization programs in 16 sectors ranging from oil to health care, education, airports and grain milling. In other words, Salman is ushering in a new project of neoliberalism with Saudi characteristics.

AS: What are the positions of the imperial powers in this crisis—in particular, the U.S.? And what does this mean for the balance of imperial power in the region?

JD: As I have said, the U.S. and the other Western imperial powers opposed Saudi Arabia's attempt to break up the Lebanese government.

But American policy is mired in a host of contradictions that flow from its weakened position after its setback in Iraq. Of course, the U.S. remains the most important power in the world, but it has witnessed a relative decline against international and regional rivals, particularly in the Middle East.

The failure of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the global economic and financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 were severe blows to the hegemony of the U.S. This left more space for other imperialist powers like China and Russia, but also benefited regional powers throughout the world. The relative decline of the U.S. allowed all of these states to act more autonomously and even at times contrary to U.S. interests.

This is particularly visible in the Middle East. Russia has been able to increase its influence and play a significant role in Syria in saving the Assad regime, while various regional states like Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel have played a growing role in the region, intervening in the revolutionary processes in support of various actors in conflict with popular demands for democracy, social justice and equality.

The rivalries and competitions among all these actors has intensified conflicts and tensions while extending

the counterrevolution's influence throughout the region.

At the same time, it is important to note that the various imperialists and regional powers, despite their rivalries, can collaborate when the global imperialist system is threatened. For example, they all have common interests in the defeat of the popular revolutions in the region, including in Syria, and in the

maintaining of the status quo.

All these regimes are capitalist powers and enemies of popular uprisings. They are interested in a stable political environment that allows them to build and develop their political power and the accumulation of capital at the expense of the popular classes.

Progressive forces should not choose between international imperialist powers or regional forces that

compete for political gains and over the exploitation of resources and peoples. The struggle of progressive forces must always be in favor of the interests of the working and popular classes in their struggle for liberation and emancipation against all forms of imperialism.

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Socialistworker.org

A tradition of stolen elections

27 November 2017, by Firoze Manji

A few days after the elections held in Kenya on 8 August, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) announced that the incumbent president, Uhuru Kenyatta, son of Jomo Kenyatta, first president of Kenya, had won by a margin of 9% against his main challenger, Raila Odinga, son of Oginga Odinga, former vice-president and nationalist opponent of Jomo.

The results were challenged by Odinga in Kenya's Supreme Court and, on August 18, the Supreme Court announced its decision by a majority of 4-2 that the elections were null and void. The international media and many across the world were aghast! Why were they surprised? Is it because across the continent the judiciary is not expected to demonstrate independence, nor to have the courage to make decisions that are against the incumbent despot? There is little doubt that the announcement of the decision took great courage.

But the fact is that there has been a tradition of stolen elections over the last ten years in Kenya, a tradition that has made the thieves increasingly complacent about the ease with which this can be done and how its consequences managed.

Complacent fraud

Just prior to the elections, the body of Chris Masando, the head IT specialist at the IEBC, was found mutilated. John Kerry, the former US Secretary of State, called on the police to investigate this killing, but many believe that the police were themselves deeply implicated in Masando's murder.

The final report of the majority judges was published on 21 September, and it comprises a damning catalogue of incompetence and ineptness on the part of the IEBC and Kenyatta's entourage in the way that they organised the attempted theft. They also disregarded orders of the court to provide access to computers and documentation that they claimed proved that there was no fraud involved. There was evidence of wide-scale tampering, missing returns, replacement of returning officers, intimidation of local government officials and the press, who were told not to report on the results.

So confident was the incumbent regime and the IEBC that they would get away with the theft, that they made little effort to hide what they had done. The IEBC announced the results of the elections even before all the results had been counted – just one example of their arrogance.

Faced with such devastating evidence, combined with what appears to have been poor representation on the part of the respondents, it should not be surprising that the majority of the Supreme Court judges decided to uphold the complaint made by Odinga.

Tradition of electoral theft...

But to fully understand the consequences of this decision, we need to understand how the tradition of electoral theft has developed in Kenya. The tradition harks back to the times of the former President Daniel Arap Moi, but here I will focus only on the elections over the past decade.

In December 2007, as the results of the presidential elections started to come in, by all accounts it appeared to be a close run between the then president, Mwai Kibaki, and Raila Odinga. Indeed, as many of us watched the results, the exit polls suggested that Odinga looked set to win a majority. Suddenly, even before all the results came through from the polling stations, the police and security forces surrounded the Kenyatta International Conference Centre, the central election coordination point, and expelled all observers and members of the media. The websites, including those of the

media that were providing regular updates on the election results, suddenly stopped reporting. There was alarm across the country about what was going on. And then, late into the night, a private swearing-in ceremony was carried out at the president's residence, State House, in which Mwai Kibaki was sworn in as the president by compliant members of the judiciary, even before the final results were counted. This was effectively a *civilian coup d'état*.

The reaction of the public was understandable. There was outrage and anger at the stolen election which had been until then, one of the most peaceful. People took to the streets to express their anger in spontaneous demonstrations. Inevitably in such cases there were attacks against symbols of power and wealth by some of the protesters.

...and post-election violence

The response of the state was to release the Government Service Unit (GSU), a para-military force answerable exclusively to the president, as well as the police, who went on a rampage, killing, raping and maiming civilians on the streets and shack-dwellers in the many slums around the city. Many of these attacks were recorded (see for example [here](#)) and complaints were made, but with no result. In a country where statutory bodies and human rights NGOs have confirmed that it has become the norm for the police to carry out extrajudicial killings with impunity, people are outraged, but not surprised.

Another wave of violence was released against citizens, especially against those who were known to have voted against Kibaki, or who were supporters of Odinga. Also targeted were those who occupied territory in the Rift Valley, which the ruling Mount Kenya elite had long craved. This wave came from armed militia who had been well prepared and instructed prior to the elections. The most horrendous series of killings, burnings, rapes, slaughter and carnage resulted eventually in at least 1,000 deaths and more than half a

million people condemned to being permanent internally displaced people, with no right of return to their homes. It is said that supporters of Odinga were also engaged in militias, but clear evidence to that effect has been difficult to find. Local and international media described these terrible acts of violence by armed militia and by the police and GSU as being "post-election violence" and examples of "tribalism".

The outcome of these events was to bring Kofi Annan to Kenya to oversee the establishment of a "Government of National Unity" between the coup leader, Mwai Kibaki, and Raila Odinga, the former as president and the latter as prime minister. Those responsible for the carnage were never arrested, charged or tried. The police and security forces involved in killings and other abuses were never brought to account. The militia were never disarmed. Impunity prevailed. And those who lost their land and possessions were effectively told, as John Kerry was to tell Odinga ten years later, to "get over it." What was established, thus, was a *government of national impunity*, ardently supported by Kenya's civil society organisations. "We didn't have a choice, it was the only way to guarantee peace," I was told by the head of a leading human rights organisation. Quite what peace was enjoyed by the victims and survivors is not entirely clear. Very little protest was made by civil society against the growing culture of impunity nor was any attention paid to the failure to disarm the militias.

So then came the 2013 elections

Uhuru Kenyatta and his loyal ally, William Ruto, stood for elections. These are two individuals who had been implicated in crimes against humanity and who were to be brought before the International Criminal Court. They were able to present the threat of prosecution by the ICC as the attempt of imperialism to interfere in the election. So they gained popularity by presenting themselves as resisters against empire. The proposed prosecution collapsed when witnesses disappeared, died under mysterious

circumstances, or refused to testify.

But it became clear as the elections results began to be tallied that there had been, according to many, widespread fraud that was designed to ensure Kenyatta's victory. Once again, as in 2017, the IEBC was found to have been engaged in corrupt deals and manipulation of the electronic data. Odinga challenged the results at the Supreme Court, which was headed at that time by long-term human rights defender and former political prisoner, Willy Mutunga. But Odinga failed to provide adequate evidence that would have allowed the court to uphold his appeal. To the chagrin of many in civil society who expected Mutunga to give Odinga the benefit of any doubt, the results of the election were upheld. Kenyatta was therefore sworn in as president.

And so we come to 2017

This time the Odinga camp was meticulous in preparing water-tight evidence about the scale of fraud that had been carried out by the IEBC and the Kenyatta camp. But they were also aided by what appears to have been a surprising degree of complacency amongst the incumbents that they would get away with theft once again. Not only was there overwhelming evidence of an attempt to steal the elections, but also confirmation that the thieves were not particularly competent in what they set out to do.

The response of Kenyatta to the Supreme Court was to appear on television to say that while he accepts the decision of the court, it was "a coup by four people in court". He [denounced the judges](#) as "wakora" - crooks! He claimed that the judgment showed that "the voice of the people matters no more." His announcements have become more and more belligerent, fostering a mood amongst his followers that could result in encouraging them to resort to violence. Meanwhile, in an attempt to undermine those in civil society who were critical, the regime arranged to [deregister and freeze the assets](#) of two human rights organisations, including the Kenya Human Rights Commission.

The judges have said that they have received death threats, and have demanded protection. Given the collusion of the security forces and the police in carrying out extrajudicial killings against political opponents, as documented by Al Jazeera recently, it is unclear who would provide such protection.

And that is what is terrifying. We know from 2007/8 what happens when armed thugs are released to deal with those who challenge the outcome of the presidential elections. The current spread of hate radio, Facebook announcements and hate videos on the internet is frighteningly reminiscent of the hateful agitation of Radio Mille Collines in Rwanda before the 1994 genocide. Kenyatta's agitation and threats could easily result in the outbreak of civil war if the election results don't go his way.

Meanwhile, recent polls undertaken by [Infotrak in September 2017](#) indicate that 77% of Kenyans are satisfied with the Supreme Court's ruling, but 52% have no confidence in the IEBC to conduct free and fair elections. Furthermore, there are petitions lodged with the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions calling for criminal prosecutions against those involved in election fraud. In response, Uhuru Kenyatta has sought to exercise his powers to establish a commission of inquiry into the Supreme Court's decision which he claims stole the elections. [Kenyatta issued a statement](#) claiming that the Supreme Court had carried out a "judicial coup".

But what is the likelihood of the elections being run fairly, or indeed at all? The private company that is responsible for the election technology claims that there is no way that adequate infrastructure can be put in place before the end of October. That is well beyond the 60-day rule that is required by the Constitution. The critical issue is that those responsible for the fraudulent election results at the IEBC remain in place, despite calls for their resignation in the light of evidence of their collusion in the electoral fraud. There is evidence of growing intimidation of local government officials by Kenyatta's

people; some claim that Kenyatta has mobilised volunteers to pay or press people to vote for him. So, the outcome is uncertain.

Why the international endorsement for Kenyatta?

How do we account for the fact that John Kerry for the US, as well as the European Union and African Union observers claimed that the elections were fair? As the Supreme Court points out, the observers only monitored the process of citizens casting their vote at the ballot box, and completely ignored what happened thereafter. There were numerous examples of forgeries, lost and corrupted data and imaginary returns that these observers decided not to focus on despite the fact that the evidence of the 2013 elections indicated that it was precisely in these areas that there had been acts aimed at depriving the country of fair elections.

But there was another reason for the enthusiastic, if somewhat premature, endorsement of Kenyatta and his regime. This is the regime that has enthusiastically collaborated with the transnational corporations and with international financial institutions in privatising healthcare, education, water, transport and communications and anything else that allows for a fast buck to be made. This is the regime that allows "nay, encourages" these corporations to avoid taxes, to be free to undertake extraction of natural resources, to repatriate profits, to grab land for industrial agriculture using GMOs, paying paltry wages to the few that are employed. This is the regime that has overseen the impoverishment of millions. According to the Society for International Development, 45 per cent of the population lives on less than the US\$1 per day that they claim is the poverty line.

But, as [Jason Hickel](#) has pointed out, in reality, those earning less than US\$5 a day are amongst the most

impoverished. That means that at least 85 per cent of people in the country are impoverished. Life expectancy which in 1989 had reached 60 years, by 2008 had fallen to 56 years. In the same period, maternal mortality ratio has increased from 365 to 488 per 100,000 births. Meanwhile, value-added production has been in decline for decades, but the scale of wealth of the minority has continued to soar. Every month new buildings are constructed in Nairobi and examples of conspicuous consumption abound. Where is that wealth coming from? True, some of it may be associated with the presence of UN organisations based in Nairobi. But it is hard not to conclude that money laundering is the source of much of it.

Why is there such antipathy amongst the international community to the possibility of a Raila Odinga victory? We should not delude ourselves that Odinga represents a radical alternative to Kenyatta from the point of view of the policies offered. We should remember that Odinga once served as a minister in the despotic Moi government, as well as prime minister in the government of national impunity.

That said, however, there is a mood amongst the young and the dispossessed for change, and Odinga's election rhetoric appeals to many. Capital is not threatened by Odinga's politics *per se*. What they fear is that he may not be able to control the desire of his popular base for change.

At this point we can only speculate on whether Raila could win. But we should not discount the possibility that such a victory would be met with violence from armed militia at the encouragement and behest of the Mount Kenya Mafia, who are the real power brokers in Kenya. They have had access to the state machinery that has allowed them to accumulate at an unprecedented scale. They won't give that up without a fight.

[Amandla](#)

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Lebanon on a knife edge

26 November 2017, by **Omar Hassan**

The circumstances of the resignation are extremely dubious. According to the Independent newspaper, Hariri had gone to visit the Saudi king after receiving an unexpected summons just days after a previous trip. At some point, he was surrounded by Saudi police and his phone confiscated. He has since been more or less incommunicado, either refusing or unable to explain his rationale or plans.

For months, Hariri had been facing criticism from hardline Sunni leaders in Lebanon, plus the Saudis themselves, after forming a cabinet by endorsing Hezbollah-aligned Michel Aoun for president last year. This came after a two-year stalemate between the pro-Hezbollah and pro-Hariri wings of the establishment, which had left Lebanon without an official government and substantially delayed parliamentary elections, last held in 2009.

The government has nothing to recommend it, having failed to do anything to resolve lingering economic and social crises in the country. Instead, it focused on updating the archaic and sectarian electoral system in a way that entrenches communal loyalties and the power of the elites. It also oversaw a crackdown on freedom of speech and protest, and has attempted to build a cult of the military to quash dissent.

Yet nobody was expecting this resignation, least of all Hariri himself, who had scheduled several meetings in the days after his impromptu trip. The overwhelming response in Lebanon, including from the leaders of Hezbollah and Hariri's Future Movement, has been to demand Saudi Arabia let him return to Lebanon. This is a correct response to Saudi attempts to stoke sectarian conflict to regain influence in the country.

Building crisis

The two sides of the political schism in Lebanon are equally reprehensible, led by corrupt dynasties of criminal patriarchs who have enriched themselves at the cost of the workers and poor of the country. Their social bases eroded as economic conditions deteriorated, a process accelerated by the lack of investment from the Gulf following the 2015 oil price crash. To prop up their support, they have turned to increasingly sectarian and authoritarian methods of organising, tactics refined to an art in a country defined by its recurring social and constitutional crises.

The balance of power between the two blocks has been shifting in favour of Hezbollah and its allies, who have benefited from the party's superior military and organisational capacities. This process began following the 2006 war, in which Hezbollah inflicted a massive defeat on Israel, resulting in a surge of support across Lebanon and the Arab world.

For a while, the party de-emphasised the sectarian aspects of its program in favour of a sort of plebeian Arab nationalism, and lent its support to many of the uprisings in 2011. When Hezbollah refused Hariri's demand that it abolish its independent communication and military apparatuses, it received substantial support - many people recognised them as crucial to the party's successful resistance to Israel.

This changed following the outbreak of the revolution in Syria, when Hezbollah adopted an unswerving defence of Assad, who was a long time ally of Iran, their primary source of funding and military training. This involved sending thousands of soldiers to fight directly, and providing crucial logistical support and training for several Iranian-backed sectarian

Shi'ite militias that had largely replaced the defunct Syrian Army.

Because of this, the yellow flag of Hezbollah is front and centre in most footage of "regime victories" against the rebels. The party has also played a role in supporting the Houthis against the Saudi intervention in Yemen, although in an overwhelmingly advisory capacity. The effect of this shift has been no small contribution to the heightened sectarian discourse across the region in recent times.

Saudi aggression

The Saudis have watched the steady rise in the power and influence of Hezbollah with equal parts fear and loathing. While they've failed to halt its rise within Lebanese politics, they have successfully lobbied the Arab League to add Hezbollah to its list of terrorist organisations, which has resulted in economic and political difficulties for the group.

Imposing regional constraints on Iran and its allies has become a growing priority because Iran has essentially taken over the affairs of the Iraqi and Syrian states. Allowing Lebanon to fall into the Iranian sphere of influence would be a defeat that the crisis-ridden Saudis could ill afford.

Yet this is exactly what has been happening. It is likely that Hariri's resignation is merely the first step in a concerted effort by the new Saudi regime to organise a political alliance that can turn the political tide in Lebanon back in its favour.

The main factor underpinning this sudden shift in Saudi policy is the rise of crown prince Mohammad bin Salman, who has staked his career on transforming the oil-rich kingdom. His goal is to privatise state assets, expand the exploitation of both immigrant and domestic workers in

special tax-free economic zones and push back against Iranian influence across the region. As an addendum to these grand plans, bin Salman has also promised to allow women to drive by 2018, an unremarkable reform praised to high heaven by cynical Western media elites for whom the bill was designed.

All of this entails a massive shakeup of what is otherwise a highly conservative establishment, with the inevitable backlash that entails. To preclude serious opposition, the enterprising young prince has done what all good dictators do and sent his rivals to jail.

Prospects

It is difficult to predict what comes next. As is typical in Lebanese politics, there is a dizzying array of local, regional and global actors with a stake in the game.

Judging from the past week, it would be a mistake to underestimate the imperial arrogance of the new crown prince. The devastating assault and siege on Yemen that he initiated in 2015 as defence minister indicates that he is prepared to do whatever it takes to impose his will.

The Trump administration won't be a

fetter on any Saudi military ambitions. It sold the regime \$100 billion in weaponry earlier this year on the basis of support for exactly this sort of aggressive approach. In fact, weakening Hezbollah in Lebanon would probably be welcomed by an administration trying to find ways of undermining Iran and Obama's nuclear deal.

The Israelis – close allies of the Saudis going way back – have joined the renewed campaign against Hezbollah, threatening a new war on Lebanon. This week the outgoing Israeli air force commander boasted: "What we could do in 34 days during the second Lebanon war [in 2006] we can now do in 48 to 60 hours. The growth of our strength has not been linear. This is potential power unimaginable in its scope".

The 2006 assault on Lebanon cost 1,200 lives, with 5,000 more wounded. The Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz reported that Israel used more than a million illegal cluster bombs during the month-long war, half of which failed to detonate on impact. They continue to explode in the hands of unsuspecting civilians. White phosphorus, akin to napalm, was used extensively and ruined crucial infrastructure and farmlands, setting the country back years.

The Israelis are also concerned by the ongoing influence of Hamas, which also has ties to Iran via Hezbollah.

Domestically, Lebanon is perpetually split between sectarian leaders who differ only on the prospect of who is to profit from the plundering of the country. While unity has prevailed thus far in demanding Hariri's return, it is possible that some opportunist figure will decide that there is a career to be made in being the Saudi/Israeli stooge.

Given Hezbollah's increased military and organisational prowess following its extended counter-revolutionary intervention into Syria, another war is not necessarily the most likely outcome. However, both the Saudis and the Israelis are led by tyrants with a record of aggressive militarism and both are frustrated by Iran's successes, so it cannot be discounted.

Eventually, only the abolition of the sectarian model of Lebanese politics can allow the country to move past these periodic crises. For now, the left must oppose Saudi and Israeli intervention, and be prepared to mobilise against a horrific new war.

13 November 2017

[Red Flag](#)

Austria's Right Turn

25 November 2017, by Benjamin Opratko

We will remember the general election of October 22 in Austria as a turning point in the nation's postwar history, the culmination of a political dynamic that dates back to the 1980s, when the [far-right Freedom Party of Austria](#) (FPÖ-) began its rise.

Austrian voters have elected the most right-wing parliament since 1945. The FPÖ- gained 5.5 points, totaling 26 percent of the vote. But the undisputed winner was the conservative People's Party (ÖVP),

which rose from 24 percent in 2013 to 31.5 percent.

With a combined share of 57.5 percent of the vote and 103 (out of 183) MPs, the right bloc has never been larger. After you add in the neoliberal, pro-business "Neos," who entered parliament with 5.3 percent, right-wing elements enjoy a two-thirds majority, giving them the power to potentially change constitutional law.

The ÖVP's recent transformation

makes these results even more worrying. Sebastian Kurz captured the traditional party of Austrian conservatism in a coup earlier this year. The thirty-one-year-old former leader of the party's youth organization became Austria's youngest member of government when he was appointed State Secretary for Integration in 2011. Now he will become the country's youngest head of government.

When Kurz took over as party

chairman in May, the ÖVP capitulated to his vision, and he promised to lead it to new glory. He changed the party's name on the ballot to "Liste Kurz – The New People's Party"; he replaced the party's traditional black with hip turquoise; and he claimed veto power over the list of candidates.

Kurz accomplished all this because he managed to become almost autonomous from the party's old structures and resources. He and his team of allies won full support – and significant donations – from large sections of big capital, which saw him as their best shot for liberating the ÖVP from their seemingly eternal coalition partner, the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ).

The change in internal structure and outward appearance came with a new political profile. Kurz and his team of loyal followers realized that they could only win mass support for their pro-capital, antiwelfare program if they fully adopted the racist, authoritarian, and antimigrant positions of the FPÖ, which, until Kurz's takeover, had been leading every national poll for almost two years.

The plan worked. With Kurz, Austrian voters could vote for the FPÖ's program without associating themselves with the far right or fascism. The [extreme right's](#) preferred topics – Islam, [migration](#), refugees – dominated the campaign. Both Kurz and FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache presented closed borders and [Islamophobic](#) laws as the best solution to the country's social and political problems.

Their rhetoric shifted public opinion in Austria even further to the right, allowing Kurz's "new" ÖVP to win without hurting the FPÖ. Strache himself gave the best summary of the election when he declared, "Tonight, almost 60 percent voted for the FPÖ's platform."

In my [2015 article on the FPÖ's rise](#), I wrote:

Across the border, some one hundred kilometers from Vienna, Viktor Orbán has transformed the Hungarian Republic into a semi-authoritarian regime, strangling progressive

elements of civil society, marginalizing the opposition, and curtailing civil liberties. The FPÖ leadership has explicitly and repeatedly stated its affinity for Orbán's project. . . They will aim not to be part of a government, but to "become the state," as Gramsci said.

This analysis left one question open: how will the extreme right implement such a deep transformation of the state by democratic means? The election results reveal one possible answer.

Right-wing authoritarian populism is no longer limited to one party. This political, social, and cultural force now controls two parties in parliament, and they will most likely form a coalition government within the next weeks.

Pessimism of the Intellect

Two elements sit at the center of this new configuration of authoritarian populism in Austria: [neoliberal](#) reform and racist exclusion.

Both the FPÖ and ÖVP have announced plans to drastically cut unemployment benefits and introduce flexible labor legislation, raising the maximum working time for employees from eight to twelve hours per day and from forty to sixty hours per week.

The new right-wing government will also target Austria's system of collective bargaining, a key component of wage regulation in a country where 97 percent of all employment contracts are covered by a minimum union wage. Together, these reforms will create a low-wage sector with a highly flexible – read: precarious – workforce, which will drive up profits from global export markets.

At the same time, the FPÖ and ÖVP plan to slash public spending for social benefits, cut corporate tax rates, and unravel tenancy laws that have kept rent in Austrian cities comparatively low.

All of these measures, of course, serve the interests of those factions of capital that have backed both parties

over the past few years: export-oriented industrial capital looking for cheaper wages and flexible workers, [finance capital](#) looking for new ways to financialize social reproduction, and real estate capital looking to raise rents and create new incentives for home ownership.

This radical attack on living standards will come with a deepening of authoritarianism and racist exclusion. Internally, Muslims have been the focus of these measures. The SPÖ-ÖVP coalition government already introduced laws that specifically target Islamic associations and places of worship.

The newly reformed *Islamgesetz* ("Islam law") created special regulations and provisions that don't apply to any other religion, and both Kurz and Strache promised that they would reform this legislation to make it easier to shut down Islamic organizations. Most recently, Austria outlawed wearing face veils in all public spaces with the full support of the SPÖ.

During the election campaign, both the ÖVP and the FPÖ pushed their Islamophobic agenda relentlessly. In one of many episodes of moral panic, Kurz demanded that the state close the kindergartens run by Muslim providers, claiming that they were indoctrinating toddlers with the values of "political Islam." Meanwhile, Strache banged on about "Muslim sex predators" threatening "our women."

This constant wave of Islamophobic rhetoric and policy has already created a climate of fear for many Muslim Austrians, who make up six hundred thousand of the country's population of eight million.

Class warfare and racist exclusion are structurally connected. To shore up support for potentially unpopular social cuts, the state increases its attacks on Muslims and refugees. The right-wing parties have already proposed authoritarian measures like expanding police surveillance, curtailing the right to protest, and controlling public broadcasting, and the new ÖVP-FPÖ government is likely to implement them. Resistance to these measures has, until now,

remained very limited.

Optimism of the Will

Where, in this dire situation, is the Left? It has not been weaker since the end of World War II.

At first glance, the SPÄ-, which has led the government since 2007, seemed to have maintained its support from the 2013 election, when it lost five seats. But a closer look shows that a significant number of voters abandoned the Social Democrats for the two right-wing parties, and the SPÄ- made up the difference with votes from former Green party supporters.

For the Greens, this meant total meltdown. After thirty-one years in parliament, the party born from the environmental and peace movements of the 1980s fell below the 4 percent threshold, losing more than two-thirds of its voters. They will no longer have any representation in Austria's *Nationalrat*. In their stead, the Liste

Pilz, a party founded by former Green politician Peter Pilz just this July, will enter.

Pilz ran on a platform of "protecting the homeland" against both the "right-wing populists" and "political Islam." Pandering to the prevailing anti-Muslim sentiment, he managed to win 4.4 percent of the vote.

Further to the left, the communist KPÄ- ran in an alliance with the Greens' former youth branch and independent leftists. Despite this broader base and an impressive campaign, KPÄ- Plus, as this coalition was called, actually *lost* from their already marginal position, receiving less than 1 percent of the vote.

Authoritarian right-wing populism has now become a truly hegemonic, cross-class project. 74 percent of blue-collar workers voted for one of the two right-wing parties, as did 64 percent of entrepreneurs. Shockingly, the FPÄ- won among voters 16 to 29 years old with 30 percent of the vote. Add Kurz's 28 percent, and you have a 58 percent majority for authoritarian right-wing populism among young people. The only demographic that

liked the Social Democrats were pensioners. This is what deep, right-wing hegemony looks like.

How stable this hegemony proves to be remains to be seen. The coming attacks on wages and pensions, on the welfare state and social security, will provoke resistance.

If and how this resistance fuels a resurgent Austrian left will depend on a number of factors: will the Left successfully cut through the Right's racist scaremongering to garner support? Will the Social Democrats and trade unions actively fight government attacks? Will the shattered Greens reconstitute themselves as a party that stands for real social and ecological change? Will the different parts of the Left inside and outside of political parties manage to come together into a popular, more unified project? These will be the challenges facing any political force aiming to build a real alternative to Austria's right-wing hegemony.

23 October 2017

[Jacobin](#)

Power Play

24 November 2017, by [Derek Davison](#)

Many western analysts have [referred](#) to Saudi Arabia's thirty-two-year old crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman (MBS), as the "de facto ruler" of the Saudi kingdom, acting in the name of his father, King Salman. There's good reason for this â€" the state of the eighty-one-year-old Salman's faculties has been the subject of Saudi gossip for [some time now](#), and the kingdom's increasingly forceful foreign policy certainly seems to bear MBS's imprimatur alone.

But at some point, either due to his father's eventual death or perhaps abdication (another [favorite topic](#) of Saudi speculation), MBS will become the kingdom's de jure ruler as well.

And over the past several days, under the guise of a purported anti-corruption campaign, the Saudi prince has been working overtime to sideline any potential rivals to his eventual accession to the throne.

On November 4, scores of prominent Saudi figures, including eleven princes and several of the kingdom's wealthiest individuals, were [arrested](#) under the authority of an anti-corruption committee that had been formed â€" at the bidding of MBS, naturally â€" just hours earlier. While [the Saudi media](#), and some particularly credulous [western reporters](#), have dutifully characterized these detentions (and at least one

[royal death](#)) as part of a crackdown on Saudi corruption, it's difficult to avoid the conclusion that they more about removing potential sources of opposition to MBS's succession and his policies.

The most prominent name on the list, at least to western audiences, is probably Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, chairman of the Kingdom Holding Company and one of the wealthiest people in the world (though he's [a bit poorer now](#) than before his arrest). Bakr bin Laden â€" the brother of Osama and chairman of the Saudi Binladin construction giant â€" also stands out among the arrested.

But the most interesting targets of the anti-corruption committee, at least so far, appear to be Prince Mutaib bin Abdullah and his brother, Prince Turki bin Abdullah. Both are sons of the former King Abdullah. Turki served as governor of Riyadh for a few months in 2014-15, but Mutaib has been in charge of the kingdom's powerful national guard since 2010 (he was [fired](#) from that post shortly before being taken into custody). Because of his position, as well as his stature within the royal family, Mutaib was a potential rival for MBS.

But to fully understand why, we need to take a brief detour into the inner workings of the House of Saud.

Since the death of Saudi Arabia's founder, Abdulaziz Al Saud (often referred to simply as Ibn Saud), in 1953, the kingship has passed in succession to six of his forty-five sons. With that generation now well beyond its prime (Ibn Saud's youngest surviving son, former crown prince Muqrin, is seventy-two), speculation has abounded about which of Ibn Saud's untold number of grandsons will be next on the throne.

For some time it appeared that the honor would go to the fifty-eight-year-old Muhammad bin Nayef (MBN), the former Saudi interior minister. Now, barring any sudden changes, it is MBS who will be the first of Ibn Saud's grandsons to rule the kingdom – and given his youth (and wealth), he may be the last.

His likely accession is significant for a couple reasons: first, it blocks many of his cousins from a path to the throne. And second, because he stands to inherit the kingdom from his father, it raises questions of [nepotism](#) in a country where power has traditionally been dispersed among the many branches of Ibn Saud's family tree.

Mutaib bin Abdullah shared a number of characteristics with his cousin, Muhammad bin Nayef. He too was a prominent, well-regarded grandson of Ibn Saud, one of the eldest of that generation at sixty-five. Like MBN, who had built up a power base within the kingdom's interior ministry before

his ouster as minister in June, Mutaib had amassed a loyal bloc within the national guard. And now, like MBN, he's also had his name attached to scandal after being sacked: for MBN it was [rumors of drug addiction](#), for Mutaib it's corruption. Replacing them – with successors no doubt hand-picked by the crown prince – has brought all three of the kingdom's armed forces under MBS's control (who has been serving as defense minister since 2015).

In other words, if any Saudi prince were thinking of raising an armed objection to MBS or his agenda, that prince would now certainly find himself heavily outgunned.

MBS's signature policy is his Vision 2030 plan, which aims to shift the kingdom's economy from one dependent on oil to one based on foreign investment. So far his plan has proven quite popular, with the crown prince focusing attention on its [splashier elements](#) and [demonstrating a commitment](#) to certain varieties of long-awaited social reform. MBS's own popularity, particularly high among young Saudis, has also no doubt helped buoy support.

But Vision 2030 is less a forward-thinking transformation than a reaction to the decline in global oil prices and the inevitable depletion of Saudi oil reserves. It's not going to be all IPOs and megacities in the desert and youth-friendly social changes. Eventually, [painful austerity](#) and privatization measures will be part of the reform package.

MBS has already tried to introduce austerity and been [forced to ease off](#), but when push comes to shove and it's time to choose between government salaries and his next war of choice (these days it's Yemen), or between social-welfare programs and the monarchy's financial well-being, there's little question what a King MBS will do. Many of the business leaders who have been jailed were thought to have disagreed with parts of the Vision 2030 plan (and with parts of MBS's foreign policy), and some – like Alwaleed bin Talal – had the money and the media prominence to become very visible opponents of the

plan if they chose to do so.

A robust welfare state has always been part of the Saudi social contract: agree not to raise a fuss about the absence of democratic rights, and we'll ensure your lives are as easy as possible. Making a show of rooting out elite corruption is a way to win popular acquiescence for shrinking government expenditures.

And there is no question that corruption is [endemic](#) to the Saudi regime – so endemic, in fact, that it's been [hard to figure out](#) exactly what these particular princes could have done to cross the line from normal practice to something criminal. That's part of the reason why it's so difficult to see the purge as purely anti-corruption, especially not when MBS stands to benefit from its outcome.

MBS's Vision 2030 initiative promises to remake Saudi Arabia's finances, but his treatment of potential rivals has already begun to remake the Saudi state. He's taken a monarchy in which power once rested in and across Ibn Saud's entire family tree, where decisions were made by the king but generally with the consensus of the king's brothers, nephews, and cousins, and turned it into a monarchy in which absolute power rests in one man: himself. In doing so, he's fashioned himself [another Ibn Saud](#), the founder of a new Saudi state.

But he also appears to have looked abroad for inspiration: MBS has patterned himself after no one more than his [biggest American cheerleader](#), Donald Trump – cynically appealing to the Saudi people with a mixture of nationalism and faux populism in order to bypass the country's other power centers and accumulate as much authority as possible.

And at least for now, it's working. With his greatest potential rivals – and many of his [critics](#) – effectively handled, Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler may not yet be sitting on the throne, but he is sitting pretty.

(9 November 2017)

What Does It Mean to be a South African Marxist, 100 Years after the Russian Revolution?

23 November 2017, by **Andrew Nash**

This was partly because of the way a working-class, dependent on wage-labour, had been created in South Africa, and partly because of the ethnic and linguistic diversity of a settler-colonial society. Early socialist organisations after 1900 were mainly white (and male). They reflected the dominance of white wage-labour then. These organisations drew on different national backgrounds, including Britain, Australia and the United States. They conducted their business in different languages, including Yiddish, German and Italian. There was no common set of problems and assumptions that bound them together, although the question of mobilising black workers – the most oppressed section of the workforce – became increasingly prominent for all of them.

By the time of the revolution, there was a Marxist organization with a national presence, called the International Socialist League (ISL). It had structures in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban. It had emerged from a split from the South African Labour Party (SALP) in 1915, motivated by the SALP's support of Britain in World War I.

The ISL was the first political organisation in South Africa to recruit members without regard to race and gender. Its members were at first mainly white. Its position on the racial question was progressive, but abstract: "Labour cannot emancipate itself in a white skin while it is branded in a black skin." It's an important perspective, but doesn't tell us much about how emancipation can happen in the conditions of the time.

The emergence of South African Marxism

We can see the emergence of a distinctive South African Marxism in the period from the formation of the Communist Party in South Africa (CPSA) in 1921 to the Black Republic thesis adopted at the sixth congress of the Communist International in 1928. The Marxism of the ISL (and CPSA until about 1928) was displaced by the ideas and practice of the CPSA and South African Marxism more generally. I will outline three elements of that displacement.

First, the ISL (and the CPSA until 1928) prided itself on its diversity of outlook. It saw Marxism as a "living growth", developing through open discussion, in the light of fresh experience. Against this, the Comintern imposed the idea of "iron discipline" as the hallmark of the party member and the essential link between party and class through the twenty-one conditions drafted by Lenin for joining the Comintern. The conditions were aimed at creating a clean break from the reformist Second International. It called for expulsion of numerous, but badly defined, categories of party members: reformists and centrists, those who did not agitate within the military; "untrustworthy half reformists" and "unreliable elements" and for regular "clearance" of members "in order systematically to disembarass the party from the petty bourgeois elements that may penetrate it." It also called for expelling those who disagreed with these expulsions.

Second, the ISL prided itself on its "harmony of spirit", its "devotion to the cause of International Socialism and the whole empire of ideas which that implies" and had "the most interesting diversity of outlook and opinion" within its ranks. There is no sign that it sought to establish a single theoretical framework to which all members would subscribe. Instead, each would learn and teach as they could, and engage with others. Increasingly, after 1917, ISL/CPSA politics were animated by the achievement of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. But the terms of this orientation were to change dramatically.

The CPSA newspaper, *The International* – still writing in the ISL tradition – described Lenin on his death as "the greatest of Marxian philosophers . . . the outstanding intellectual who, all the more because he was such, penetrated and assimilated and lived in the feelings and ideas of the masses and them only." Lenin was a model for Marxists to learn from, rather than an infallible source.

In place of this somewhat open-ended conception of Marxist internationalism, the SACP instilled an idea of Marxism as a complete and final doctrine, requiring only correct application in its local context; put differently, an idea of Marxism in which theory is separated from practice, and theoretical credentials decide practical questions.

Third, the ISL/CPSA was committed to internationalism. This did not exclude mobilising black workers in South Africa. That mobilisation was its main focus, along with political education through night schools, and the

majority of CPSA members were black. Its aim in all this was to heighten class consciousness.

But this was to be replaced after 1928 by a focus on the strategy of seeking alliances with African nationalism. This strategy was motivated partly by Stalin's wish to build support in British dominions, including South Africa, as a potential counter to a possible British invasion of the Soviet Union. Its meaning changed as Comintern policy shifted, along with Stalin's calculation of the diplomatic needs of the Soviet Union, mainly in relation to Europe.

Frequently, this led to CPSA strategies aimed at appealing to conservative sections of the African middle class. Thus, Moses Kotane argued in his Cradock letter of 1934 that the party should recognize that "Africa is culturally or economically backward" and "the majority of the African population are more national conscious than class conscious."

The CPSA's Stalinism was not the only current of Marxism in South Africa by then. Its main rival, Trotskyism, was also a product of the Russian Revolution. It relied on a rival (far more intelligent) account of Lenin's thought and practice as the key source of political insight. Trotsky's famous letter on the draft theses of the Workers Party of South Africa rejects the CPSA slogan of a Black Republic. But he has no choice but to contest the CPSA programme in its own terms. He argues that "the historical weapon of national liberation can only be the Class Struggle." He rejects the Comintern's transformation of the "national liberation of colonial people into an empty democratic abstraction elevated above the reality of class relations." But he has to find better ways of answering the same questions, and ensure that he is not outflanked on any issue by his rivals, even accepting the "complete and unconditional right of the blacks to independence" in a separate state.

The Russian Revolution opened up a perspective of world revolution. But it was the distortion of this perspective, in the decades that followed, that made possible a distinctive form for South African Marxism. This became

our common framework for debate and contestation. Its legacy still defines large swathes of socialist and nationalist politics in South Africa, although now distorted as much by neoliberalism as by Stalinism. But that framework has effectively become a barrier to fundamental renewal within South African revolutionary politics, which remains caught within its terms.

The legacy of the revolution today in South Africa

How we see the Russian Revolution depends on the context from which we look at it. In South Africa, in recent decades, that context has changed dramatically, and further dramatic changes are very likely, although we can't be certain of their direction.

For the past decade or more, we have seen a new movement emerging in working class struggles against the conditions perpetuated by the ANC government. But this new movement has depended, implicitly or explicitly, on political perspectives taken from the struggle against racial domination before 1994, protesting against broken promises, but not developing new perspectives.

The new movement has different component parts, and its composition is much contested. At its core is a wave of community protest against poor living conditions, failed social services and infrastructure, increased fees and tariffs, unemployment and the like. All of these are attributed to neoliberal policies, corruption and a ruling class focused on self-enrichment. These protests have grown over time from sporadic beginnings, and gained momentum since 2004, with an estimated 2 million people involved in such protests each year, thousands of arrests, vast damage to property and some deaths.

These struggles often have a local focus, which may prevent them from developing larger perspectives. The result is that, instead of speaking for itself, the country-wide upheaval is

described variously by analysts and officials as service delivery protest, illegal demonstration, land occupation or wildcat strike.

Since the Marikana massacre of 2012, the rift between the black working class and poor and the ruling elite has been evident for all to see. In response to that widening rift, new organisational initiatives have emerged—most prominently, the Economic Freedom Fighters and NUMSA initiatives such as the United Front and the new trade union federation SAFTU; and in some ways also #FeesMustFall.

These initiatives seek to draw on the militant mood and energies of the new movement, based largely in informal settlements and among casualised workers. Their perspectives and symbols are drawn from the 1950s and 1970s: the Freedom Charter, national democratic revolution, colonialism of a special type, decolonisation, black consciousness. They have been given new décor, new energy and sometimes new slogans, but they have not been reinterpreted or developed for their new context.

How do we explain this paradox of a new anti-capitalist movement emerging in South Africa, but failing to develop new collective perspectives that define its character, identity and goals, and comes to be spoken for in the language of that was used to betray its aspirations? At what point does the movement ask what brought that betrayal about? Even if it is understandable to demand that the perspectives of the past should now be upheld, the world has changed since the old perspectives were formulated. The collective task of developing new perspectives still lies ahead.

Look at the process, not the product

In this, we have more to learn from the process of developing perspectives in the context of the Russian Revolution than from the outcome of that process. That is to say, there is nothing that can simply be cut-and-

paste from their context to ours. Even when we come to the same conclusions as our comrades did a century ago, we have to reach those conclusions afresh. And, if we do, we will probably find that their meaning has changed.

In that spirit, I offer some thoughts on that process of forming perspectives for a renewed Marxism in South Africa, which can inform the struggles that lie ahead.

First, it is necessary to recognize the reality of the present. Is it enough still to condemn neoliberal capitalism, as if capitalism has a way back to social democracy? The reality is that capitalism, especially as the effects of climate change become more severe, is entering a phase of exterminism¹ in the term Peter Frase has borrowed and repurposed from E.P. Thompson. If that is so, then it has implications for all of the analyses, demands and strategies of the working-class movement.

Second, developing a perspective means seeing the present as part of a long historical process. The longer the period, the broader the perspective.

We cannot go back only to the Russian Revolution, for example; we need to see it as a sequel to the Paris Commune of 1871, which Lenin celebrated after 1917. The language of decoloniality has reminded us that we need to extend our perspectives further back than that, to the world-historical turning point of 1492, when the process of Western global domination took off. The threat of climate change may require a perspective that extends even further back, to a time when human societies cohabited with nature rather than seeking to dominate it completely.

Third, all of this requires of Marxists a certain modesty about our own perspectives, and patience about historical outcomes. It may seem counter-intuitive to suggest this, when the challenges are so urgent. Marxists are sometimes accused of arrogance by feminists, ecologists and others, and there is some truth to the accusation. We can uphold revolutionary perspectives without claiming to have all the answers. We stand in a tradition which goes back 150 years or more and extends around the world. Individually and collectively, we can contribute

modestly to developing it, making it accessible and making its aspirations a reality.

The disasters of Stalinism are a reminder of the damage done by forcing the pace of history. Reformists have the illusion that they can force the pace of history by working within the framework of capitalism, with the hope that a kinder, gentler form of exploitation will result. But we cannot know what the eventual results of our actions will be. Better to do the work well, to do what we can, and hope that others will build further on those foundations. They will do it in the way that seems right to them.

Recognizing reality; seeing the present as part of a long historical process; cultivating modesty of outlook and patience about outcomes: these are ways in which we can recognize the world-changing revolutionary struggles of a hundred years ago.

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[Amanda](#)

A cycle of mobilization and violence

22 November 2017, by **Pedro Huarcaya**

The Bolivarian process, which aroused great expectations in the radical left, is today in a critical situation. Between April and July of 2017, the country experienced violent clashes. The political polarization between the supporters of the government and its opponents has reached very high levels whereas most of the population, faced with a growing precariousness, does not support either side. The fall in oil prices and the collapse of the currency are causing major economic difficulties for the Venezuelan working class: there is rampant inflation and massive shortages, including of basic necessities.

Political violence on all sides

Between April and July, opposition demonstrations followed by violent clashes killed 124 people and left several thousand wounded. A UN report, considered biased by the government, reported a brutal crackdown by government supporters, accusing police officers of being responsible for 46 deaths and pro-government armed groups for 27 killings. The opposition was held responsible for 28 deaths (15 in accidents related to barricades, 8

members of the police killed and 5 Chavist militants lynched). [10]

During these four months, the opposition called demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of people. Some were violent, with *guarimberos* [11], mostly young, calling themselves Resistencia, clashing with the police. Among these violent actions opposed to the government, there were some acts marked by a spirit of social revenge against ordinary Chavist militants, with a certain tolerance from the leaders of the conservative opposition. In such a context, more precise insurrectionary impulses manifest

themselves; such as the grenade attack on the Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) and the Ministry of the Interior by a soldier who stole a police helicopter, or the assault on the Naguanagua military base by about 20 men claiming to be carry out “civic and military action”.

On the government side, there are also armed groups, *colectivos*, which are very heterogeneous. There are some old groups, remnants of the guerrillas of the 1960s, now with a certain autonomy from the government, which are developing a real social presence and ensuring the safety of their neighbourhood against delinquency. Others were created much more recently, serving as “shock troops” for the government, threatening those who do not support President Nicolás Maduro with suspending social programs, and sometimes physically blocking peaceful demonstrations. Some attacked the National Assembly, sequestering deputies and employees on the spot for nine hours with a relative complicity from the government. For their part, the army and the police maintain an increasingly repressive order. The state of emergency in force for a year and a half limits the right to protest; under the Zamora Plan, arrested protesters are brought before military courts.

A controversial Constituent Assembly

The starting point of these mobilizations was, on March 30, the decision of the Supreme Court (which supports Maduro) to strip the National Assembly (in the hands of the opposition) of its prerogatives and to lift the immunity of parliamentarians. The Venezuelan authorities have backed down on this initiative but, since the opposition won the parliamentary elections in December 2015, the decisions of the National Assembly have been invalidated on suspicion of fraud in relation to the election of the three deputies from Amazonas. The opposition wanted to call a recall referendum, provided for

in the 1999 Constitution, against Maduro. Its implementation was systematically delayed and in fact suspended by the electoral authorities, favourable to Maduro.

Faced with this crisis, on May 1, 2017 Nicolás Maduro convened a National Constituent Assembly (ANC), to be elected on July 20. It is made up of 545 constituents, one third of whom are elected by sector and the other two thirds by universal suffrage by municipality, with a very strong overrepresentation of rural areas, where Chavismo is more resistant. In the first college, it was found that five million Venezuelans did not benefit from the sectoral vote. Since the opposition had boycotted the vote, the only issue was the breadth of participation.

The official bodies have announced nearly 8.1 million voters, in “the largest vote of the Revolution” in the words of Maduro. In the absence of opposition observers, it is difficult to verify this data. It is, however, rather unlikely that a government with a favourability rating of around 20% has mobilized more than Hugo Chávez at his maximum popularity. This vote must be understood in the context of an extremely strong political polarization. Maduro himself threatened public sector workers and beneficiaries of social programs with reprisals if they abstained. In a number of neighbourhoods, opponents intimidated voters so that they would not vote, forcing the government to concentrate offices in areas under its control. Candidates who were critical of the government in one sector could be declared, by the electoral bodies, candidates in another sector where they were not so well known, according to Stalin Pérez, who is nonetheless favourable to the ANC.

The protests have reached the Chavist elites. The Attorney General, Luisa Ortega, appointed by the Chavistas, rightly criticized the decree of the TSJ which poured oil on the flames, the scale of the repression and the convening of a Constituent Assembly without holding a prior referendum as Hugo Chávez had done. Accused of being the intellectual author of the spring violence, her accounts were frozen, and she was banned from

leaving the country. In such a context of polarization, where it is difficult to remain independent of Chavismo and the opposition, she has gone into exile, now protected by the conservative governments in the region.

Reactions to the crisis

The MUD (the Venezuelan right-wing opposition coalition) is not a progressive political perspective. It is still led by neo-liberals who have never accepted the presence in power of a leader of modest origins backed by the popular classes, Hugo Chávez then Nicolás Maduro. For nearly two decades, its social base has remained mostly centred on the wealthy classes, even though, in recent years, the urban popular classes have increasingly turned their backs on Chavismo. At the level of public liberties, there is nothing to suggest that it would be less authoritarian. During the failed coup d'état of April 2002, the opposition immediately dismissed all the authorities and repressed the population. In February 1989, the orthodox application of an IMF adjustment plan triggered a rebellion suppressed at the cost of 1,000 deaths.

The authoritarian drift of the Maduro government does not only affect opposing political elites. In the steel company, SIDOR, or in the state-owned oil company, PDVSA, union elections have been postponed indefinitely. In these two strategic firms, the protests are old but the postponement of the elections betrays the government's fear of seeing opponents, often on the left, win. “People's Liberation Organizations”, responsible for restoring security in working-class neighbourhoods, have been accused of dozens of killings by human rights organizations.

The left is divided with regard to these initiatives. On the one hand, organisations like the Venezuelan Communist Party and Luchas participated in the ANC which, according to them, could be the opportunity to block the offensive of the right and deepen the process of change. On the other hand, groups are

mobilizing in the streets and denouncing an authoritarian government that has driven the Constituent Assembly to stay in power at all costs despite growing unpopularity. For example, the Partido Socialismo y Libertad adopts the slogan “Maduro Out” and participates in the political actions of the opposition. Meanwhile, Marea Socialista and the Liga of Trabajadores por el Socialismo maintain independence with respect to both camps, trying with difficulty to embody an alternative way for the Venezuelan popular classes.

Regional elections were held on October 15, 2017 and saw the victory of the government in 18 out of 23 states, mainly through the demobilization of the opposition. However, the political crisis is not over for two reasons: polarization remains strong in the country and the economic situation is critical.

The collapse of a rentier economic model

Whether Nicolás Maduro remains in power or not, whether or not a government of national unity is in place, the economic situation of the Venezuelan working classes will remain a matter of concern. The government explains that this is an “economic war” waged by former elites in search of revenge. The executive also accuses those who resell subsidized products on the other side of the border, called *bachaqueros*. This term covers some very different realities, from the family trying to find individual solutions to survive to the criminal at the head of a juicy business generating tens of thousands of dollars in profits. To avoid this diversion of subsidized products, the government has decided to create Local Supply and Production Committees (CLAP) which bring the products directly to the beneficiaries. This individualized implementation is accused of representing a clientelist drift in the allocation of social programs.

From the discovery of oil, almost a

century ago, investments have abandoned agriculture for oil extraction. Since then, the country’s economy has been of the rentier type, dependent on oil which represents more than 95% of the country’s exports, the biggest proven global reserves. If Hugo Chávez redistributed some of the wealth to the most modest, he did not diversify sources of income. Imprisoned by this extractivism, the Venezuelan economy has been hit hard by the fall in oil prices since the summer of 2014.

The extractivist rush

In a desperate headlong rush in early 2016, the Maduro government issued the so-called “Orinoco Mining Arc” decree, aimed at entrusting 112,000 km² or 12% of the national territory to dozens of foreign multinationals (Chinese and Russian, but also Western like the Canadian Gold Reserve) for the exploitation of gold, diamonds, iron, coltan, bauxite and other minerals.

This project contradicts the assertion of national sovereignty over underground resources, proclaimed in the Constitution promulgated at the time of the accession of Hugo Chávez to power. The Orinoco Mining Arc owes its legal existence to its status as an economic zone of national development, a Venezuelan declension of the Chinese Special Economic Zone, derogating from tax and employment law. This project is harmful for the employees but also for the dozens of indigenous communities that have lived on these lands for centuries.

Behind this project, we note the maintenance of the extractivist paradigm in the perspectives of the government, a paradigm at the origin of the current economic crisis, accentuating dependence on oil, neglecting diversification of the sources of income, enclosing humanity in a logic of the short term. If the neoliberal opposition radically criticizes the Constituent Assembly project, it does not mobilize against the Orinoco Mining Arc, sharing the project of dispossession of indigenous lands, exploitation of workers and

predation of the environment with the Maduro government.

Exchange rate diversion

Another phenomenon contributes to this economic crisis, the collapse of the currency. For nearly fifteen years, large corporations have been avoiding exchange control, with the complicity of senior government officials, by overbilling imports or requests for subsidized dollars for unrealized imports. Economists report a leakage of several hundred billion by this path.

Today, the difference between official and unofficial exchange rates is 1 to more than 3,000. This gap limits imports, including staple goods. For more than a year, Venezuelans have been facing shortages of food and medicine. The inflation rate is spiralling upwards. According to the IMF, it was 69% in 2014, 181% in 2015, 255% in 2016. It is forecast at 1134% in 2017 and 2530% in 2018. Salaries are very far from following such an evolution. The “full salary”, comprising the minimum wage plus luncheon vouchers, represents only 24.5% of a household’s monthly food expenditure and 18.7% of basic expenses (including health care, housing and so on).

Facing the “end of cycle” of progressive governments

The Maduro government is not only weakened by a political and economic crisis, but also by the coming to power of conservative coalitions in other Latin American countries. For fifteen years, progressive governments were elected thanks to the active support of social movements and benefiting from high prices of raw materials. While Hugo Chávez had benefited from the support of his continental counterparts at critical junctures, the failed coup d’état of April 2002 or the economic blockade between December 2002 and February 2003, a

turnaround has occurred since autumn 2015 in South America.

The election of neoliberal presidents in Argentina and Peru and the institutional coup in Brazil have been bad news for Nicolás Maduro. Those countries that have recently switched right are putting pressure on the Maduro government to accept the opposition's demands. Venezuela was suspended from the regional free-trade organization, Mercosur, for "breaking with the democratic order", a motive that paradoxically was not invoked against Brazil during the institutional coup of spring 2016, testifying to the political character of the "democratic" label as a tool of legitimization or delegitimization.

Institutionalization of the Bolivarian process

The Venezuelan situation today is very different from the period 2002-2004, when the opposition also led an insurgency strategy to overthrow the government of Hugo Chávez. In the first half of the 2000s, employers were a major player in the putschist coalition. The ephemeral president from the April 2002 coup d'état was the leader of the main employers' federation, Fedecámaras. The Chávez government did not have complete control of law enforcement and judicial institutions, but used its popularity among the popular classes to defeat the attempted overthrows.

More than a decade later, the government now consults regularly with employers in the framework of the National Council of the Productive Economy, which met 48 times in 2016. Nicolás Maduro now uses his guardianship of judicial institutions and law enforcement agencies to try to contain growing discontent within the working classes.

A permanent

pressure from US imperialism

If there is continuity throughout the period, it is the diplomatic confrontation between the Chavist government and the imperialist power of the region, the United States. Uncle Sam, then headed by George W. Bush, was one of two states in the world (with Spain's José María Aznar) to have recognized the ephemeral putschist government of April 2002. In March 2015, Barack Obama issued a decree against Venezuelan leaders saying that "the government's erosion of human rights guarantees... constitutes an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security of the United States".

The coming to power in Washington of a president as unpredictable as Donald Trump could foreshadow an evolution, in view of the revelation by the press of the financing of his investiture by up to half a million dollars by the Venezuelan government via Citgo, the US subsidiary of PDVSA. The sanctions by the White House involving the freezing of assets, affecting about twenty leaders including Maduro, are in line with a decade and a half of interference. Trump has even threatened Venezuela with the military option, which was not accompanied by military exercises and seems, for the time being, to remain just another outrage by the US president.

At the economic level, relations between the United States and Venezuela have long been marked by a certain economic pragmatism. More than eighteen years after the accession to power of Hugo Chávez, the United States remains the biggest customer and the largest supplier of Venezuela. Conversely, the geographically close South American nation is the third largest oil supplier to the US, and any a suspension of these flows would lead to a rise in the

price of gasoline.

So far, diplomatic clashes have had limited commercial consequences. Total exports and imports with the United States fell by 10 points between the first and second half of the Chávez presidency, while trade with Brazil, and even more with China, increased in a similar proportion. The Trump administration has, however, issued a decree that prohibits the purchase of new bonds issued by Venezuela or PDVSA. This decision is likely to have serious consequences for a country already in crisis and could precipitate a default. The MUD welcomed these measures, revealing even more its reactionary nature.

Rebuilding an anti-capitalist perspective

The Venezuelan popular classes are currently experiencing a particularly tragic situation for multiple reasons, a crisis that is both political and economic. The government, unable to put an end to the shortages, continues to pay a growing external debt which will be more and more difficult to pay with the US sanctions. If the trend of recent months continues, the establishment of an authoritarian regime with a strong military influence cannot be ruled out.

The MUD opposition does not represent a progressive perspective. Its neoliberal orientation and appeal to the armed forces are not likely to improve the daily life of the Venezuelan popular classes. With a socialist ideal mistakenly identified with the Maduro government, left-wing forces now have less room for manoeuvre. In these difficult conditions, we must affirm our solidarity with all those in the country who continue to struggle with the prospect of redistributing wealth through the self-organization of the people.

“The mobilization against the repression will continue”

21 November 2017, by **Andreu Coll**

The strike was very weak in the private sector, but stronger in the public sector, especially in education (around 40 per cent) and, to a lesser extent, in transport. Many teachers felt concerned by the indictment of eight teachers for "indoctrination" and "hatred" for having discussed the issue of police violence on the day of the referendum in front of their students, following the complaint of parents working in the Guardia Civil. Societat Civil Catalana (which organized the unionist demonstrations, with a key role played by far-right elements) is campaigning for more complaints to be filed in order to reinforce the intimidation of teachers.

In general, the popular layers and the working class remained very much on the sidelines, except in the public sector. The main dynamic element of the week has been the action of the Committees for the Defence of the Republic (CDR), which played a big role. A conservative but lucid journalist compares them with the dynamics of Lotta Continua in the 1970s in Italy, highlighting the dynamism of local groups and their ability to take action. The CDRs remain basically very heterogeneous, but they are developing. They are today almost 300, spread over the territory, recalling the dynamics of the 15M. the CDRs have blocked streets, highways and high-speed trains with hundreds of people, and the police have had a hard time intervening.

The mobilization against the repression will continue. The next step will be the procedures against over 700 mayors.

What about the political organizations and the December 21st elections?

Puigdemont has expressed his request

for compromise in the framework of a more flexible Spanish state, with a modus vivendi without independence. Within PDCAT (the party of Puigdemont), the debates are very tense. Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) will be the leading force in the elections. They are now coming out for a republican bloc, not independentist, a very ambiguous formula.

The independentists feel betrayed by the fact that the parties in power are changing their discourse: it is ridiculous to see Puigdemont say that he is no longer for independence after all that has happened! The ERC explains that the confrontation was not possible, that it was necessary to maintain a peaceful action. The independentist camp is now in difficulty for shaving sold an unrealistic solution...

In Podem, there is a very big mess following the departure of Albano Dante Fachin. Madrid negotiated directly with Catalunya en Comú (CeC, led by the mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau) and imposed the candidates by going over the head of the Catalan organization. The approach of CeC is very electoral, their logic is roughly to win the base of the PSC because the drop in its support releases a space for a left social-democracy... The orientation of the activists of Anticapitalistas in Podem is to support the agreement with CeC despite their opposition to the authoritarian methods of the Podemos leadership, but also to have an opening towards the CUP, but this proposal remains very much a minority in Podem and in Catalunya in Comú.

The CUP has modified its project of building an independentist group, towards a "rupturist" block, which is

pretty much correct. On this basis, it proposed an agreement for a list to Albano Dante Fachin. It is an intelligent proposition and a step forward, even though the opening remains limited to independents, small groups of activists, but not to other organized political groups.

How do you see the next phase of the movement? How can you pose, in the elections and beyond, the question of the participation of the popular classes?

The electoral campaign effectively slows the momentum for a constituent process. For now, the demands remain focused on democratic questions. The ANC and Omnium lobbied for a united list, but it is now a thing of the past, because the ERC and the CUP will go it alone. The ANC and Omnium came across as supporting Puigdemont, backing the united list to the end.

In the CDRs, the discussion is just beginning. This framework is more sensitive to developments, discussions and experiences. We are trying, but it remains difficult, to move forward on the social demands, because the dynamic of rejection of the repression remains the central element. The mobilization is continuing at the local level, people mobilize every day, there are regular meetings to discuss, as during the movement of the indignados.

It is in the CDRs that the independentist sectors, those inherited from the 15M, and the popular layers are mixed, so this is where we intervene mainly.

This interview was conducted on November 14th by Antoine Larrache and published in Hebdo L'Anticapitaliste, weekly of the NPA, N° 405, November 15th 2017.

An unhappy affair: The changing fortunes of a China and Hong Kong funded Bahamian mega-resort project

20 November 2017, by **Robin Lee**

Plans for this \$3.5 billion project had first been initiated after Christie had approached Sarkis Izmirlian, a Swiss-born businessman and billionaire heir to a peanut empire. In the mid-2000s, Izmirlian then bought land that Christie had persuaded the previous owner to sell, secured financing and contracted a construction company to work on the resort's construction. After US company, Harrah's Entertainment Inc., pulled out of the project in 2008 during the economic crisis, however, a search for new investment and financing had to commence. The search resulted in significant Chinese investment being made in the project that came with conditions that were to have important implications for its future direction.

A contract for the resort's construction was subsequently awarded to China Construction America (CCA), a subsidiary of China State Construction Engineering Corp. Ltd. (CSCEC), a major Chinese state-owned company and the third largest construction company in the world. CSCEC invested \$150 million and reportedly directed Izmirlian (who was providing \$850 million) to the Export-Import Bank of China (Exim), which provided \$2.45 billion in construction loans [12]. Exim is a Chinese state-owned bank subordinate to China's State Council and aims to implement state policy in promotion of foreign trade and investment as well as development assistance. The loans by Exim were reportedly made under the provision that Izmirlian could not fire the construction company and that work would be carried out by Chinese labour. [13] Work on the project has since then involved more than 4,000 Chinese construction workers.

Under the new agreement, the resort

was originally intended to open in December 2014. But complications soon arose and significant delays, which in turn led to legal disputes, kept on stalling the project. Soon this major investment project was being described by the media as having turned into "the world's biggest white elephant". [14] In June 2015, blaming CCA for the delays that were costing Baha Mar, which had already hired staff to work at the resort, around \$4 million per month, Baha Mar Ltd. filed for bankruptcy protection in Delaware in the United States. CCA claimed that the delays were the fault of the developer and its mismanagement. After the bankruptcy filing was largely dismissed by the US court on the grounds that Baha Mar's future should be decided in the Supreme Court in the Bahamas, the Bahamian court put liquidators in charge of the resort, and the China Export-Import Bank appointed Deloitte & Touche as a receiver. In a letter to the bank, Izmirlian is reported to have complained about the process, stating that, "Many have already commented that the sale process for Baha Mar launched by the receivers is opaque, fraught with obstacles and irregularities and is not designed to maximize value for all." [15] As the contract between Baha Mar and CSCEC had been signed under English Law, Baha Mar also filed a \$192 million claim for damages due to breach of contract against CSCEC at the UK High Court, however this was stalled when the liquidators were brought in [16].

Following the legal battle over its delay, Baha Mar Ltd. and Izmirlian lost control of the project, with the Bahamian government dependent on Chinese investment favouring the Chinese creditors and at one point

reportedly threatening to revoke Izmirlian's residency permit [17]

This deal with CTFE has subsequently led to some degree of criticism and controversy. On the one hand, Izmirlian has continued to criticise the deal, not only claiming that his company made a superior offer but also for its continued delays, staggered opening, and lack of use of Bahamian workers. [18] Moreover, prior to election as the governing party in May, CTFE's ownership of the resort was also criticized by then opposition party the Free National Movement. In March 2017, Hubert Minnis, who following the elections replaced Christie as Prime Minister, pledged that if his party was elected it would find a, "a qualified and respectable purchaser who believes in Bahamians", only engage Bahamian labour, and disclose details of Baha Mar deal (which at the time had not yet been disclosed) as well as other Chinese investments [19].

In fact the project appears to have been very politically and economically important to both the Bahamas and Chinese governments from early on. Chinese investment in Baha Mar has been accompanied by high profile visits to the Bahamas by Chinese officials. In September 2009 agreements between Izmirlian and Exim and CSCEC were signed during a visit by Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, Wu Bangguo, to the Bahamas, who was at the time the highest ranking Chinese official to have visited the Bahamas. In response to this visit, a US embassy cable that was subsequently leaked by WikiLeaks made the following comment:

"The Chinese appear committed to

establishing a firm financial hold on projects, such as the Baha Mar, that will have a major impact on the Bahamian economy and leave the GCOB [Government of the Commonwealth of the Bahamas] indebted to Chinese interests for years to come.” [20]. Chinese investment in Baha Mar also coincides with a trend towards increased importance being attached to investment by Chinese state-owned enterprises more generally in the Caribbean, and some Chinese officials have more recently linked the Caribbean to the Maritime Silk Road and claimed that funds for China’s Belt and Road Initiative will also include Caribbean countries. [21] The way that such investments have been made has raised concerns about contributing to the risk of making Caribbean economies dependent on China. As is commonly the case in such treaties, the 2010 Bilateral Investment Treaty that China signed with the Bahamas, for instance, includes Investor State Dispute Settlement provisions that will potentially allow Chinese investors to sue the country for changes to government policies that affect the interests of the investment [22].

Meanwhile, for the Bahamas government, the resort has been seen as highly important for its economic impact, increasing tourism to such an extent that it was expected to boost the island’s GDP by 12% [23]. Despite being 97% complete, the potential impact on the economy after the project’s delay was such that it led to the Standard & Poor’s credit rating for the Bahamas being downgraded to one step above junk. With the project

initially aimed to have a single opening, and with the partial opening ceremony in April having occurred so close to the elections, some critics in the Bahamas labelled it a “sham opening” [24] and it been subsequently alleged that only unpaid guests of the Progressive Liberal Party attended [25]. It might be worth asking whether the election of a new government that had been highly critical of the former government’s approach to the Chinese investment in Baha Mar will concretely lead to any future changes regarding the government’s handling of Baha Mar matters in the future. In this regard, it is interesting to note, that the original developer, Izmirlian, attended the swearing in of new Prime Minister Minnis. Nevertheless, by late June of this year the new government was already stating its intention to push the project’s completion ahead due to its economic impact on the Bahamas.

While the Baha Mar case is notable due to the way it highlights some of the potential high level stakes and political interests and conflicts involved with Chinese overseas investment, additional concerns also relate to the impacts that mismanagement and conflict between the different investors has on those involved in working on the project. According to reports, the management of the construction and delays of the project also negatively impacted on 2,000 workers who had been employed to work at the resort in advance of its original expected opening date were dismissed in October 2015. It was reported that while local workers from the Bahamas

eventually received compensation for wages and severance, around 200 foreign employees (mostly in management and specialist skills positions) reportedly had not received anything as of April 2017 and the Supreme Court later ruled that sums owed to these foreign employees, which reportedly included wages, gratuities, benefits and living expenses, did not rank ahead of Exim in the creditors’ queue [26].

On a side additional note, recently in September 2017 the resort came under further criticism when it was forced to evacuate guests and told them they had to seek shelter elsewhere ahead of Hurricane Irma. Despite the resort’s location in a hurricane belt, it has been suggested that poor planning when the resort was being constructed meant that the resort was unable to deal with guest safety there.

With the resort still incomplete (there are plans for additional hotels to open in stages later in 2017 and 2018), a change in government in the Bahamas to one which might be more critical of the Chinese investment, and a change in attitude by the Chinese government towards certain types of overseas investment, including a ban on investments in the gambling industry and restrictions on investments in the hotel industry, the future of this resort and other similar projects [27] the workers they employ and the impact of Chinese investment on the Bahamian economy are perhaps still uncertain.

Borderless Hong Kong

Militant Buddhism is on the march in South-East Asia - where did it come from?

19 November 2017

It’s not just in Myanmar that this militant Buddhism is on the rise: it’s also surfacing in the other two leading Theravadin countries: Sri Lanka and

Thailand. In all three countries, Buddhists make up the vast majority of the population: 70% in Sri Lanka, 88% in Myanmar, and 93% in

Thailand->http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/15635/1/Burke_3433.pdf]. One could be excused for thinking that there is nothing to worry about: with such

towering demographic majorities, Buddhists are surely to some extent safe and secure in their respective countries.

This is not how the militant monks see things. They are convinced that Buddhism is under siege, and in grave danger of being wiped out. To explain this, they point out that while Muslims or Hindu Tamils (in the case of Sri Lanka) are in the minority in these countries, they enjoy significant support from beyond their national borders.

In Sri Lanka and Myanmar, the notion that a non-Buddhist minority is the vanguard of an imminent invasion is [very strong](#) indeed. It is believed that firm action has to be taken to prevent “them” from taking over Buddhist lands and eradicating Buddhism. Basically, the militant monks see their communities as targets of a relentless “holy war”, and see it as their duty, to respond in kind with their own variant of “holy war”.

Justifying violence

The conviction that Buddhism is under threat also allows these leaders to justify the use of violence. Militant monks usually start their argumentation by pointing out that even the Buddha himself showed some understanding for the wars conducted by his benefactor King Pasenadi instead of condemning them. He did still [warn him](#) that “killing, you gain your killer, conquering, you gain the one who will conquer you” – the message being that violence begets violence. Even for the Buddha, then, nonviolence was not necessarily an absolute value – a point seized on by many of today’s militant monks. Although they readily concede that an offensive use of violence should never be allowed, they point out that peaceful and nonviolent Buddhist communities still have the right to defend themselves, especially if and when the survival of the religion as such is at stake.

This point of view is dated. As soon as Buddhist-majority states came into

being, the monkhood had to find ways to justify violence, including war, especially that perpetrated by their virtuous sovereign against an opponent. Indeed it was by the monarch’s benevolence, and under the law and order he created, that the monastic order was able to survive.

An early example of such a justification comes from the [Sinhalese Mahāvamsa](#) (the Great Chronicle): After a battle against a Hindu-Tamil army, Buddhist King Dutugāmuṇu felt remorse for all the deaths he had caused, and asked senior monks for advice. They basically told him not to worry since he had caused the deaths of only one and a half persons – one who had just converted to Buddhism, and another who had been a Buddhist lay follower. All the rest had just been “unbelievers and men of evil life [...], not more to be esteemed than beasts”.

This notable verdict implies that killing is excusable as long as the intention behind it is in the defence of the religion. Not surprisingly, this quote still is used to condone the use of violence – most recently by the [Sitagu Sayadaw](#), an esteemed Burmese monastic leader, in order to justify the current persecution of perceived enemies of both state and religion – in this case, the Rohingya.

Sanctioning the violent actions of one’s ruler or one’s government is one thing; actively inciting lay-followers to commit such acts in defence of the religion is something completely different. Compared to “preachers of hate” from Abrahamic religions, today’s militant monks have a difficult tightrope to walk, since incitement to murder constitutes one of Buddhism’s four disrobing offences (pārājikas) – offences resulting in the automatic expulsion from the monkhood. In September for example, a [Thai monk was forced to disrobe](#) because he had publicly demanded that for each monk killed in Thailand’s deep south, a mosque should be torched.

Most militant monks are therefore very careful in avoiding open calls to

violence – instead, they attend mass rallies and demonstrations to stoke anti-Muslim sentiments and to preach “passive resistance” or “pro-Buddhist affirmative action”: not buying from Muslims, not selling to Muslims, not fraternising with Muslims, not allowing one’s children to marry Muslims. They leave it to their followers, especially those organised in pro-state vigilante groups or Buddhist militias, to draw the right conclusions.

Although there is anecdotal [evidence](#) of armed monks actively taking part in violence, the majority of militant monks shy away from directly becoming involved: again, this would be a grave violation of the monastic code. [Ashin Wirathu](#), a monk and leader of the Burmese anti-Muslim movement, describes this passive role very eloquently: “I am only warning people about Muslims. Consider it like if you had a dog, that would bark at strangers coming to your house – it is to warn you. I am like that dog. I bark.”

The rise of this strain of militant Theravāda Buddhism can be explained in ethnic, social and economic terms, but from the perspective of the militant monks themselves, it’s about religion. It’s not about the control of resources or worldly goods, but a defensive “holy war” or “Dhamma Yudhaya” in response to a perceived aggressive “jihad” against Buddhism that has been waged for centuries, from the destruction of the [Buddhist library in Nalanda/Bihar](#) at the end of the 12th century, to the destruction of the famous [Bamiyan Buddhas](#) in March 2001.

This somewhat simplistic reading of history, reminiscent of [Samuel P. Huntington’s](#) “clash of civilizations” thesis, reinforces the militant monks’ belief that now is the time not for peaceful meditation, but for firm action. The Buddha’s warning that violence begets violence seems to have fallen on deaf ears for the time being.

[The conversation](#)

A historic repudiation of the conservative right

18 November 2017, by **Louise O'Shea**

Instead of accepting, as we have become so used to doing, injustice and discrimination being carried out in our name by our elected representatives, the mass of people have finally had a say. And they have expressed a resounding and unambiguous desire for equality and social justice. They have voted for decency and respect to be shown to a minority subject over many, many decades to humiliating secrecy, persecution and shame.

61.6 per cent of total voters, 133 out of 150 electorates and a majority in every state returned their forms with the "Yes" box ticked.

It was impossible not to be moved by the jubilant celebrations. Thousands in capital cities and towns around the country were electrified by a result that sent a message to every LGBTI person that the majority has their back. Strangers embraced, overcome with pride that they had been able to make their small contribution to this long overdue win.

This is not what the likes of Peter Dutton and Tony Abbott had in mind when they proposed the postal survey back in July. They hoped that by throwing enough hurdles in the way of equality, one might prove a stumbling block. They hoped via the postal survey to whip up a homophobic hate campaign and stoke anti-"political correctness" hysteria.

And they hoped to draw on the putative "silent majority" - that mysterious demographic that has been repeatedly evoked since the Howard years as evidence for a mandate for everything from wars in the Middle East to attacks on multiculturalism and "political correctness" - to prevail against the forces of progress. Despite repeated polling indicating majority support for marriage equality, the right insisted that this was the product

of intimidation by the "political correctness police" (a force more powerful apparently than the combined might of the law, religious establishment, tabloid press and mainstream political parties).

This "silent majority" trope has been exposed as a lie. When given the choice, and encouraged by a determined social justice campaign, the majority have very loudly rejected bigotry and hate. They have demonstrated themselves to be for equality and respect, not discrimination and prejudice, and shown that they care more about these values than the supposed pitfalls of political correctness. They have proven that the reactionary religious right in Australia belongs to a bygone era, and speaks only for a shrinking minority.

What was once the abc of conservatism - that the nuclear family must consist of a male bread winner, dutiful wife and obedient children never to be deviated from and imposed on people via law - is now the stock in trade only of the reactionary fringe of the Liberal Party and their religious cheerleaders. There is no longer a majority, let alone a social consensus, behind them.

And yet these reactionaries - Abbott, Abetz, Andrews, Dutton - continue to enjoy a privileged and powerful place in society. They have successfully held the country to ransom over the issue of marriage equality, and via a compliant media and political connections have enjoyed a platform for their ideas out of all proportion to their support. Their scare campaigns about religious freedom and encroaching cultural Marxism have been encouraged, and acceded to, with shamefully little push back in the mainstream press. The conservative

right unabashedly present themselves as the spokespeople for sensible middle Australia when most of this demographic wants nothing to do with them.

But you wouldn't know this from the reverence with which they are treated by the rest of the political establishment. Successive Labor and Liberal governments have maintained marriage discrimination at the behest of their outspoken but unrepresentative right wings over thirteen years. It has taken the actions of the majority outside of parliament to achieve what the political class has been unable to.

It is now time to stand up to their belligerence and make marriage equality a reality. In a country with one of the lowest rates of church attendance and religious conviction in the world, the fact that the issue of religious freedom has been allowed to significantly encroach on the public discussion and debate about this issue is a disgrace. The same people who rail against Muslims for not assimilating because they refuse to give up their religious practices claim to be the champions of religious freedom when it means slandering and encouraging prejudice towards another minority. This transparent and spurious attempt to stymie progress must be rejected.

The bill that will be put to parliament is that drafted by Liberal Dean Smith. This bill is far from the rebuke to bigots that the postal survey provides a mandate for. Indeed, it does as much to placate religious prejudice as it does establish real equality in relation to marriage. It should be significantly amended to remove these concessions, and any attempt by Abbott and co to make it more reactionary should be roundly rejected.

Perhaps most pertinently though, further delay should not be endured. The postal survey results mean that

LGBTI people deserve to be walking down the aisle by Christmas. The parliament must immediately make

this happen.

[Red Flag](#)

Leon Trotsky Was My Grandfather

17 November 2017

Esteban Volkov was thirteen when assassins tried to murder him. Because his grandfather was [Leon Trotsky](#). Now ninety-one, Volkov keeps Trotsky's memory alive at a museum in Mexico City.

The building is one of countless villas in Coyoacán: a house with a garden behind a very high wall. Coyoacán used to be a rural town outside of Mexico City where artists sought tranquility. Today it's a hip neighborhood in the middle of the megacity, a few steps from a subway station. The garden full of cacti could be idyllic – if it weren't for the noise and smell of the highway.

When we arrive, Volkov is waiting for us in a gray suit and a red baseball cap from the Brazilian trade union federation CUT. His deep-set eyes look severe – but soon he starts laughing. Without any noticeable difficulty, he guides us through the house – the residence where Trotsky spent the final years of his life. We see the bullet holes, the walled-up windows, the heavy steel doors – a bit like a prison. All this is now a museum for his family, the majority of whom fell victim to political murders.

[Trotsky](#) was forced to leave the Soviet Union in 1929 and found refuge on the Turkish island of Prinkipo. After a few years, he was expelled from Turkey, then from France and Norway as well. In 1937, he received asylum in Mexico.

Trotsky's daughter, Zinaida Volkova, suffered from severe depression and took her own life in 1933, leaving behind a small son, Vsevolod "Seva" Volkov. After briefly joining his uncle – who had to flee to Paris to escape the Nazis, and was subsequently killed

by Stalinist agents – the young Seva moved in with his grandfather in Mexico.

He still recalls those months with the famous revolutionary, going on cacti excursions and narrowly dodging assassination attempts. Then, on August 20, 1940, Trotsky's luck ran out. He was killed by a Stalinist agent.

Life went on after. Sedov became a Mexican citizen and adopted a Spanish version of his name: Esteban. He studied to be a chemist, and invented a method for the industrial production of the contraceptive pill.

But he didn't forget his grandfather's legacy. Since 1989, Sedov has served as the director of the [Museo Casa León Trotsky](#).

WF :What are your first memories of Leon Trotsky?

EV : I was thirteen and a half when I first arrived in this house – from Paris, with Alfred and Marguerite Rosmer. The contrast was stark. Europe in winter is gray, gray, gray. I came from a sinister climate full of grief: after the death of my uncle, Lev Sedov, I was emotionally damaged. Sedov died in February 1938. His widow wanted to keep me in her care, and grandfather had to resort to lawyers. In August 1939, I finally came to Coyoacán.

My first impression was: color! Mexico is a country full of colors. At that time, this was a village completely isolated from Mexico City. You had to go

through fields of beets and corn to reach the city. The dirt roads turned to rivers when it rained.

WF : Was it safer for you here?

EV :Somewhat. But the Stalinist secret service was active here as well. The first assassination attempt was on May 24, 1940. I hid under my bed. The assassins came into my bedroom from three different directions and emptied a pistol into the mattress. Seven or eight shots, one of which hit my big toe.

WF :They shot at a child?

EV : Of course. They murdered many Trotskyists and wanted to eliminate his entire family. Trotsky's son, Sergei Sedov, who remained in Russia and was not interested in politics, was also shot.

In May 1940, a young bodyguard from the USA named Sheldon Harte had just arrived. He was a Stalinist agent and opened the door for the assassins. Later they killed him and buried his body in a park outside the city. In the Stalinist archives it was claimed that he had criticized his comrades – if he had known that they intended to murder the child as well, he would not have participated, he said.

So he was branded a traitor. That is how the Stalinist system worked: when something went wrong, you had to find someone to blame. And in this case, it was very easy to blame the American: they said Harte had warned Trotsky who then hid in the cellar.

The story was filmed this way several times. But that is absurd. As if grandfather would have left me alone.

WF :How did it really go down?

EV : Grandfather took pills to help him sleep. When the shooting started, he first thought it was fireworks from some Mexican religious celebration. [laughs] His partner Natalia jumped right up. She dragged him to his feet, pushed him into a dark corner, and saved his life.

WF : What happened after the attack?

EV :The Stalinists tried to present it as a farce that Trotsky had organized himself. They paid a policeman and two cooks who had worked here to give false testimony. All three said that the guards had been nervous that night and had been talking in grandfather's office until very late. In the beginning, the police fell for this lie.

But more than twenty people were involved – gangsters and Stalinists. And somehow they caught one who was bragging about it in a bar. The famous painter [Alfaro Siqueiros](#), a leader of the Communist Party, had led the plot. Siqueiros was briefly in prison, but then he emigrated to Chile.

WF :How did life change in the house after that?

EV :Before, we often had trips to the countryside with friends to collect cacti. Grandfather was a big cactus fan. There is a great variety in Mexico, and the challenge was to find new species. We spent hours traveling in the car on gravel roads.

After the first assassination attempt, these trips stopped. I went to school every day, but grandfather was basically a prisoner in his home.

Originally, an Italian family had rented out this house. The [Trotskyist party in the USA](#) collected money and bought it so that they could build fortifications, wall up windows, and construct bunkers on the roof. Trotsky

himself knew that the next assassination would not be a simple repetition.

WF : Could you not have fled to a different place?

EV : It would have been the same. Trotsky's secretaries were criticized for not taking the right precautions. But Trotsky knew that he had only received a short respite. Perhaps one could have extended his life by a few months. But Stalin was prepared to do anything to get rid of Trotsky. Three months later, the Catalan Ramón Mercader was successful.

WF :Were you in the house on August 20, 1940?

EV: I arrived shortly after the [murder](#). I saw a man in the corner, detained by policemen. Mercader was put in prison for twenty years.

WF : How was your grandfather in everyday life?

EV : Affectionate, with a strong sense of humor. He was a person with great vitality and boundless energy. If we were to look for an actor to portray Trotsky, the only one who could play the role really well would be Kirk Douglas (laughs). Douglas has that drive that was typical of grandfather.

Trotsky spoke many languages. He spoke English with the American guards, German with the Czechoslovak secretary Jan Bazan, and French with the secretary Jean van Heijenoort. He spoke French to me as well.

WF : Not Russian?

EV : No, I did not know Russian anymore. At home, most of the secretaries were Americans. One of the conditions imposed by the government for Trotsky's exile was that he not interfere in Mexican politics – so we couldn't hire Mexican assistants.

WF : But there are numerous essays by Trotsky about Mexican politics.

EV : He wrote a bit about Mexico under a pseudonym, but he did not intervene in politics.

WF : What happened to the house after Trotsky's death?

EV : We continued to live here. [Natalia](#) died in 1962 and was buried in the garden together with Trotsky. In 1965, soldiers occupied the house – the government's revenge against students with Trotskyist convictions. [laughs] But after a few months they called us – they did not know what to do with the house, and so we moved in again.

We stayed another fifteen years, and then we opened the museum. In 1990 it was expanded to include an institute for the right to asylum. Some empty squash halls were refurbished to create an auditorium, an exhibition space, and a library.

I myself always stayed on the margins of politics. Grandfather had told the secretaries: if you talk to my grandson, nothing about politics.

WF : What is the significance of Trotsky today?

EV : He had an [absolute faith](#) that socialism would determine the future of mankind. He had no doubt. But the clock of history moves more slowly than one would like. A human life is very short compared to the historical cycles.

But it is unquestionable that humanity needs a different form of social organization if it is to survive. For capitalism always reaches new levels of destruction.

Adapted from [Der Freitag](#)
[Jacobin](#).

The Avoidable Rise of Andrej Babiš

16 November 2017, by Dan Swain

Only one person won last month's Czech elections: billionaire [Andrej Babiš](#). His party, ANO – which notionally stands for Action for Dissatisfied Citizens but also means “yes” in Czech – received almost 30 percent of the vote, taking 78 out of the 200 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Its nearest competitor, the conservative Civic Democratic Party (ODS), received only 11 percent and 25 deputies.

Babiš's runaway success has created a deep sense of unease among the Czech and European establishment. Some are suggesting that he represents an [existential threat](#) to a state that isn't even twenty-five years old.

But Babiš is more fragile than many would admit. The divisive election produced the most fragmented parliament in Czech history, leaving him with few options for coalition partners. Despite winning the highest vote share in a decade, his path to the premiership remains unclear. Even if he becomes prime minister, [corruption charges](#) still hang over him and a whiff of scandal refuses to go away.

The second richest man in the Czech Republic, the Slovakian-born Babiš owns the country's fourth largest company, the vast agricultural concern [Agrofert](#). Recently, his company extended its influence into media, purchasing two major newspapers and a radio station.

Babiš entered politics in 2012, presenting himself as a hard-headed businessman ready to step in and sort out the mess left by incompetent politicians. He made a familiar promise: “I will run this country like I run my business.”

But his public life has long been accompanied by accusations of corruption. He's currently facing charges of [misdirecting](#) European

Union farm subsidies, and he has also been accused of [tax evasion](#) after buying untaxed penny bonds in his own business. Persistent allegations that he was involved in the Slovak secret police won't go away. He strenuously denies this, but the Slovak government [recently announced](#) it would investigate. Many of his opponents treat these rumors as fact.

Still, Babiš's electoral victory has felt inevitable for some time. In 2013, when ANO first participated in parliamentary elections, it came second with 19 percent of the vote, taking most of its support from the ODS. The latter, a right-wing party founded by former president Vaclav Klaus, has played a leading role in Czech politics since the Velvet Revolution. It had belonged to center-right coalitions in the previous two governments.

In 2013, ANO formed a coalition with the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) and the Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL). Though the social democrats won that election with 20 percent of the vote, they actually saw a decrease in their vote share. Knives were out for party leader Bohuslav Sobotka, who was almost ousted as leader before he could become prime minister. Babiš took on the role of finance minister.

When ANO won the European elections in 2014 and the regional elections in 2016 it seemed obvious that ANO and ČSSD would end up swapping places and Babiš would become the major partner.

Then, this summer, Sobotka attempted a high-stakes gamble and lost badly. As charges against Babiš started to mount, the prime minister announced that they could no longer work together, so he promised to resign and dissolve the government.

This produced a [constitutional](#)

[standoff](#) between Sobotka, Babiš, and President Miloš Zeman (Babiš's ally and former ČSSD leader, who many believed was orchestrating Sobotka's attempted ouster). Zeman insisted that Sobotka's resignation did not mean the entire government needed to be reformed. As a result, Sobotka decided not to resign and demanded Babiš do so instead.

After a weeklong stalemate, Babiš agreed, and Sobotka appeared to have won. That is, until polls showed a collapse in support for the ČSSD. The party removed Sobotka, making him a lame duck prime minister, and Babiš's support soared.

At this point, most thought that the elections would produce a coalition between ODS and ANO, but, as the vote approached, polls started to indicate something far more alarming. ODS was also lagging while smaller, more radical parties were gaining momentum.

Polls suddenly began predicting that the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), a largely unreconstructed formation that still commands a substantial sector of support, might come in second behind Babiš. Meanwhile Tomio Okamura's virulently anti-Islam and anti-immigrant party, Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), started to rise in popularity.

In response, politicians from the various center-right parties tried to turn the election into a referendum on democracy, warning about the risks of a majority of “anti-democratic forces” – meaning Babiš, the SPD, and the KSČM.

In the end, the results were even more volatile than anyone expected. Nine different parties entered parliament. The Social Democrats and the Communists saw their vote collapse further than any poll had suggested.

Okamura's SPD received more than 10 percent, but the left-libertarian Pirate Party beat it to third place. ODS rallied to come in second.

These results make BabiÅi's path to power very complicated. Indeed, some are suggesting that he will hand the premiership to another ANO member. But this week Zeman charged BabiÅi with forming a government, a symbolic gesture that likely means he will become prime minister. The question that remains is how he will do it.

The most obvious strategy is to form a coalition with ODS, but the right-wing establishment spent the election denouncing him as an enemy of democracy. There are rumors of a leadership change within ODS, which would smooth the way toward such a deal.

ANO could also restore the old coalition with ?SSD and KDU-?SL, with the balance of power significantly transformed. But this too seems difficult given the breakdown in relationships and ?SSD's urgent need to reflect and rebuild.

Another, increasingly likely option is forming a minority government, perhaps with new elections early next year. Further complicating negotiations, Zeman is up for reelection in February and so has good reason to help BabiÅi assemble a coalition that aligns with his own base of support.

The Chimera of Populism

Reaction to BabiÅi's victory has been predictable. The international press has incorporated it into the narrative of rising populism sweeping across Central and Eastern Europe, coming fast on the heels of the [German](#) and [Austrian](#) elections. BabiÅi's detractors within the Czech Republic seem almost desperate to paint him as a Czech manifestation of this Europe-wide phenomenon, so much so that political commentators are now talking as if this election represents the end of Czech democracy or the birth of a new

republic.

Almost everyone classifies BabiÅi as a populist, but it's harder to find someone who can define what that means. BabiÅi presents himself as a straight-talking man of the people, standing above petty party politics, and he has chimed in with anti-immigrant rhetoric and rejected European Union quotas on migrants. Yet to lump him in with the governments of Poland and Hungary, or the far right in Germany and Austria, stretches the definition of populism beyond meaning. In fact, looking for evidence of this affiliation, a BBC correspondent resorted to commenting on his "handing out donuts at Metro stations."

BabiÅi is no ideologue: he is first and foremost a [technocrat](#). He packed his manifesto with language that describes challenging corruption and building a smaller, more efficient, and more transparent government. He wants to introduce e-government, citing Qatar as a model, and he wants to grow the number of professionals and businessmen who participate in civil service, increasing wages to compete with the private sector. The words "transparent" and "understandable" appear throughout this platform, and his campaign presented him as man of action, opposed to other politicians' "blah-blah-blahing."

His favorite metaphor, naturally, comes from business, which the manifesto's preamble makes clear:

Today we already have experience, and if you give us a chance, we will show you that the government can be so different from what traditional politicians have so far demonstrated. We want to show that we can be active, economic, and loyal employees of this great family business, which is called the Czech Republic and belongs to you.

In this fantasy, the people are the employer, and BabiÅi is their loyal servant, but his patrician tone betrays his real vision â€" he sees himself as the benevolent head of the family business.

His party, too, is stuffed with

technocratic figures. The man who replaced him as finance minister formerly served as the Czech head of Microsoft, and many of his ministers will likely come from the ranks of his former employees and advisors.

These facts should invite comparisons with another insurgent party: Emmanuel Macron's En Marche. The two men differ in appearance â€" the slick young financier versus the brash older oligarch â€" but the parties' make up and attitudes are much closer than many would admit. But, at least according to the media, Macron is the great destroyer of populism, while BabiÅi is one of its many avatars.

This view largely boils down to their different opinions on the European Union: BabiÅi wants to suspend long-term plans for the Czech Republic to join the euro, and he will continue the previous government's opposition to EU refugee policies.

But this hardly amounts to root and branch opposition. Indeed, the European Union has helped make BabiÅi very rich, and members of ANO already sit in the European Parliament as part of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. One of them even serves as commissioner for justice, consumers, and gender equality. That few news outlets have commented on this reflects how distorted European politics look when seen through the prism of centrism against populism.

BabiÅi undoubtedly poses a threat to democracy. He sees himself as a benevolent boss at the head of a mighty corporate state, a vision fundamentally at odds with any idea of a society in which people make collective decisions about their own lives. His concentration of economic and political power will allow for serious abuse, and any government he leads will oppose the interests of workers and the oppressed.

But he shares these views with a large portion of his detractors, both at home and abroad. The conception of politics as a managerial enterprise, dominated by experts, professionals, and businesspeople belongs to most of the political establishment. This is what

makes their criticisms of him sound so hollow.

“You Created Me”

BabiÅi loves to remind the political establishment that they created him. Most obviously, he means that if they hadn't engaged in petty politicking and corrupt deals, he would never have gotten involved in politics in the first place.

But the statement rings true in a stronger sense as well: BabiÅi is very much the product of a political system in deep crisis. This fact forms a great deal of his strength — every corruption charge levelled against him looks like hypocrisy. Why, voters ask, are politicians suddenly worried that personal and business interests are dominating politics, as if it hasn't always been this way?

In this sense, BabiÅi is a symptom of the broader decline in support for traditional political parties. The two parties that have dominated Czech politics since the 1990s — the ODS and the ČSSD — received less than 20 percent of the vote between them. A survey of high-school students voting for the first time found that they were most likely to support either the Pirates or SPD, neither of which had any previous representation.

Although BabiÅi himself is nowhere near as hostile to the European Union as some suggest, anti-European sentiment clearly played a big part in this election. Although few outside the SPD seriously want to leave, TOP 09, the only party that openly campaigned in favor of the EU, barely scraped past the 5 percent threshold.

A split from the KDU-ČSL, TOP 09 ran what appeared to be intelligently targeted ads designed to appeal to their base: a metropolitan liberal audience that supports the European Union and wants a “sensible” approach. That constituency was either smaller than they thought or went elsewhere. Hostility to status quo runs increasingly deep, and the European Union appears as another element of it.

This crisis has deep roots. The Czech

Republic presents itself as an economic success story, and much Western reporting on BabiÅi's victory has affected a kind of bemused bafflement that Czechs would vote for change under such circumstances.

Admittedly, the Czech economy has grown, the Czech crown is strong, and people in Prague talk about a shortage of workers rather than a shortage of jobs. But this masks great regional variation, low wages, and deep inequality.

Journalist SaÅia Uhlová has published several [impressive exposés](#) uncovering the reality of Czech industry, exposing the long hours and low pay many workers experience in manufacturing and food production. Substantial numbers of people can't find jobs and subsist in real poverty. Politicians label them unadaptable or undesirable and [enact policies](#) to get rid of them. Much of this poverty falls on Roma communities, who still face both casual and institutional racism.

In this context, BabiÅi is not the most morbid symptom. That honor goes to Okamura and his SPD.

Okamura became an MP in 2013 when he still belonged to Dawn, the party he left in 2015. His rise was unexpected and came thanks to a prominent, well-funded, and outright racist campaign. In the lead-up to the election, Okamura equated Islam with terrorism and called for it to be banned as a hateful ideology. A prominent poster read “taxes for services, not parasites,” a clear dog-whistle for anti-Roma sentiment.

In much of this, though, Okamura is just following in the establishment's lead. In response to various terrorist incidents, particularly the 2016 attack on a Christmas market in Berlin, several leading politicians have talked up the risk of something similar happening in Prague. In particular, Interior Minister Milan Chovanec (now ČSSD leader) sought to transform migration and refugees into national security issues, even floating the idea of loosening gun restrictions so that people could defend themselves.

This rhetoric seems to have worked:

[61 percent of Czechs](#) believe that refugees are a threat to national security, while 54 percent believe they are likely to increase crime. By all accounts, Okamura simply saw the way the wind was blowing: the establishment created the conditions that allowed him to thrive.

What's Left of the Left

This brings us to what remains of the Czech left. The two traditional leftist parties took heavy beatings. ČSSD collapsed to 7.3 percent, while KSČM fell from 14.9 percent to 7.8 percent, losing over half its deputies.

The Social Democrats' story is wearily familiar: a party detached from its base, largely embracing neoliberal politics, and divided between modernizers and traditionalists. After ditching Sobotka, they took something of a left turn, trying to fight the election on traditional left-right questions of taxation and health care. But leading members have also embraced anti-migrant politics when it suits them.

Going from fifty deputies to fifteen presents an existential crisis for the party, and we can predict a period of bloodletting between various factions. The ČSSD shares this predicament with almost every other social-democratic party in Europe — a fact that only underlines the significance of Corbyn's success in Britain.

A peculiarity of Czech politics allows the communist KSČM to still receive even 7 percent, not to mention the 15 percent they won in 2013. Unlike in many other Eastern Bloc states, the remnants of the Communist Party in the Czech Republic never joined broader left-wing coalitions.

They also have an established base, largely among older voters in the west of the country, which has enabled them to win mayoral and other regional positions. However, an aging base keeps aging, and this election may signal that the KSČM's support is disappearing.

Moreover, the party is increasingly

communist in name only. While it's somewhat comforting to see election posters calling for world peace on the Metro, KS?M has also quite happily attacked refugees and migrants. Indeed, early analysis suggests that they bled votes to Okamura's SPD, which should remind us once again of the dangers of the Left trying to use the far right's rhetoric.

The election was also a catastrophe for the Green Party, which received only 1.5 percent of the vote, half its last share. The Greens attract left-wing activists at their youth level, as the Young Greens help organize May Day marches in Prague with anarchists and socialists. At a national level, though, they are still trying to recover from their participation in a center-right coalition in 2010, which dealt a blow to their base of support. Their bland and not particularly left-wing campaign certainly didn't help

matters.

Then there's the election's other big winner: the Pirate Party, which is a sort of hipster version of ANO's technocracy, with networked platforms replacing Babiš's vision of a large family business. The Pirates' campaign focused on technical solutions, like online voting and direct democracy, while one of their more prominent billboards read "Ecology without ideology."

Their leader, however, is likeable and has good antifascist credentials. They attract and contain various left-wing elements, including those who oppose NATO membership, those calling for universal basic income, and those who reject intellectual property legislation. It will be interesting to watch how they handle their sudden status as the third largest parliamentary block: there is already talk of a split.

For the Czech leftists that stand outside these parties, the results present both a challenge and an opportunity. They will need to combat Okamura and the far right, and the flash demonstration against him that followed the election was a good start.

But amid the wreckage of the Social Democrats, Communists, and Greens, the broader left must also think about alternatives. The activists and writers around publications like [A2larm](#) and groups like [Socialistická Solidarita](#) may feel small and isolated, but they should look to Poland, where Razem started with a small base in a situation where the old left had become discredited and ossified and ending up winning over half-a-million votes.

There's a long way to go for now, though.

[Jacobin](#)

Progressive Democrats Have Little Power Without an Independent Left

15 November 2017, by [Howie Hawkins](#)

Luce's analysis misses the role of the independent left and the votes Cuomo lost to the Green Party in 2014. In 2014 I ran for Governor of New York with the teacher and socialist activist, Brian Jones, as my Lt. Governor running mate. Our ticket received 5% of the vote in the general election (185,419), which was about the same number of votes (192,210) as Zephyr Teachout's 33% vote in the Democratic primary. The Green vote jumped the Green Party past the Working Families and Independence parties on all state ballots, which list parties in order of their votes for the gubernatorial ticket.

The votes for candidates to Cuomo's left in both the primary and general elections mattered to him. The 5% Green vote was the most for an independent left party ticket for Governor/Lt. Governor in New York

history except for the 6% received by the Socialist tickets in 1918 and 1920. It was widely reported when Cuomo started his 2014 campaign that he hoped to surpass his father Mario's best win of 66% in 1986 and use that result as a launching pad for a presidential bid. Instead, Cuomo's 54% in 2014 was way down from his 63% in 2010 and well below all winning Democrats in modern New York history. He knows he lost most of those votes to his left. The Greens don't claim sole credit for Cuomo adopting policies that he opposed, or would not commit to, when the Green ticket campaigned for them in both 2010 and 2014. Those policies include not only the fracking ban, \$15 minimum wage, tuition-free public universities, and paid family leave that Luce mentions, but also funding a state plan for 100% renewable energy by 2030, Raise the Age (i.e., end the

prosecution 16 and 17 year-olds as adults), a ban on solitary for incarcerated minors, and making New York a sanctuary state.

Greens give the reform Democrats their due. We acknowledge that Cuomo felt and feels their pressure. But they should give the independent left its due as well, especially when, according to Luce, the WFP is trying to rebuild trust with progressives who were so dismayed at WFP's nomination of Cuomo. That trust-building has certainly not been extended to the Greens. WFP is making no attempt to build positive working relationships with the left that is independent of the corporate-financed Democrats. Rather, they work to keep the independent left out of the decision-making and the speakers' platforms in coalitions they influence.

A Missed Opportunity for Cooperation

As the 2014 gubernatorial campaign got under way, many WFP supporters, including state committee members, urged me to seek the WFP as well as Green nominations. They could not stand the thought of WFP endorsing Cuomo again. Fusion – being nominated and appearing on the ballot of more than one party – is legal and common in New York State. It takes 50,000 votes for the gubernatorial ticket to create a ballot line party for the next four years. Of the eight parties now with ballot status, only the Green Party line was created by running a candidate who was not also the candidate of the Democrats or Republicans. The other five “minor” parties routinely cross-endorse the “major” party with which they are aligned. Green Party rules in New York preclude fusion with the corporate parties and their satellites like WFP.

But given the many appeals from WFP supporters in 2014, I wrote a letter to the WFP co-chairs in April asking for a meeting to discuss how we might work together to oppose Cuomo and his conservative economic agenda in the 2014 elections. In the meantime, I drafted a Green Party rules change that if adopted would have allowed fusion with WFP on a case-by-case basis for a two-year trial period if WFP was willing to run a joint ticket against Cuomo and run more progressive independents against corporate Democrats. I never received a response to my letter and the rule change was not proposed at the Green nominating convention.

WFP Supports a Conservative Democrat Against a Green

The rule change I drafted was certainly controversial within the Green Party because of bad experiences with WFP and its endorsed Democrats. In my own case in two-way city council races in 2011 and 2013 where I was running against a Democrat, WFP brought in their

upstate and downstate political directors to coordinate paid campaign workers to canvass and get out the vote in order to defeat me. In 2011, I received 48% of the vote, losing by just 96 votes. In office, my Democratic Party opponent, Khalid Bey, was known for spearheading tax breaks for developers, slow walking and weakening ordinances to Ban the Box and hire more city residents on city contracts, towing Cuomo’s line against increased state revenue sharing for high-poverty fiscally-strapped cities like Syracuse, and being the only city councilor to vote against extending non-discrimination protection to transgender people in the wake of a hate crime murder of a transgender woman.

In 2013, WFP’s second invasion of my council district – there is no WFP organization in the district or the city – prompted a petition by labor and socialist activists around the state asking the WFP to stop campaigning against me in favor of a centrist Democrat.

WFP defenders often dismiss the Green Party as more interested in political posturing than political power. Although Greens are critical of the strategies of reform Democrats, Greens do work with progressive Democrats for policy reforms in coalitions where decision-making and speaking platforms are shared across the Green/Democratic party divide. While WFP has not been a willing ally of the Greens, we have many Democratic allies we work with on issue campaigns. Just two examples: Green party activists have worked with Democratic Senator Richard Gottfried, principal sponsor of New York’s single-payer health care bill and with members of the New York Assembly to include in the state budget funding to plan for 100% clean energy by 2030.

NY Greens Lever the Political Landscape Left

By remaining independent and raising movement demands without dilution, Greens have been able to lever the political landscape to the left, including WFP positions, on some issues. It was the elected Greens of New Paltz, Mayor Jason West and Deputy Mayor Rebecca Rotzler, who

got the marriage equality movement going in New York in 2005 by performing two dozen gay marriages in defiance of objections from Democratic-oriented LGBT groups and until a court injunction secured by the Democratic State Attorney General, Elliot Spitzer. By 2011, the marriage equality was New York law. In my 2010 gubernatorial campaign, I called for a state bank, which got a good response in the wake of the 2008 financial crash and foreclosure crisis. After the election, WFP’s policy shop, the Center for Working Families, produced policy papers on public banking and sought state legislative sponsors for a state bank bill.

In 2009 and 2010 the environmental movement was debating whether natural gas was a “bridge to renewables” or whether a moratorium on fracking while it was studied was in order. In contrast, the Green Party campaigned for a ban on fracking.

The demand for an immediate ban came from the grassroots movement, from Greens, other environmentalists, home owners, farmers – Democratic, Republican, and independent – in the southern tier of New York, which was ground zero for potential fracking wells. One of the grassroots leaders was a Green elected to the town board of Afton, Mary Jo Long. I took that demand into the 2010 gubernatorial campaign and it caught fire. The environmental movement in New York abandoned the natural gas “bridge” and the ban replaced the moratorium demand. WFP, which had been circulating moratorium petitions before the election, began circulating ban petitions after the election.

WFP, through the Working Families Organization, the 501c4 organizational and money power behind the party organization shell, and other liberal Democratic groups and funders, moved in to create the New Yorkers Against Fracking that Luce mentions. Unfortunately, NYAF too often gave Greens the usual run arounds when it came to seats at the decision-making tables and speakers at demonstrations and news conferences. “The Greens are political and it will jeopardize our non-profit status.” When a Democratic politician was scheduled to speak, we were told,

"That's different. They're elected." When we offered our own elected officials, we were told our electeds were "only" municipal officials. The grassroots movements in the southern tier were similarly marginalized as the funded and staffed group grabbed the media spotlight. NYAF's constant activities and dogging of Cuomo were no doubt important in the governor ultimately accepting the ban recommendation from his health commissioner. But NYAF's organizing style did not always build trust with organizers in the grassroots movement.

Cuomo's gestures to his left have not changed his core conservative program. Luce identifies areas where he remains terrible, from inadequate and inequitable school funding and the test-punish-and-privatize school reform agenda to corporate tax cuts and his New Year's Eve veto of full funding for public defenders. To this we must add and emphasize the Wall Street- and real estate-friendly reactionary core of Cuomo's policy agenda: tax and budget policies that impose austerity on upstate cities, counties, and towns while doling out

tax breaks and grants as a corporate patronage system. Greens Are Not Afraid to be Anti-Imperialist

We must also note that WFP, and reform Democrats like Teachout and Sanders generally, avoid raising anti-imperialist foreign and military policy demands, which have enormous consequences for domestic policies that affect working people. For example, during the 2014 gubernatorial campaign, Cuomo travelled to Israel where he met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and declared his support for Israel's military campaign in Gaza. As Cuomo's primary opponent, Teachout refused in several media queries to take a position on Israel's Gaza campaign or Cuomo's Israel visit. She did say she opposed BDS and that she wanted the U.S. to maintain its "special relationship" with Israel. The Hawkins-Jones campaign, by contrast, denounced Israel's military campaign in Gaza when it started and then Cuomo's trip to Israel to support it.

We need an independent left that is free to raise issues that those caught

inside the Democratic Party power structure will not raise, because they fear becoming marginalized. That power structure is organized around entrepreneurial candidate organizations that seek investments from big donors. The big donors call the shots in the end.

While I urge progressives inside the Democratic Party to leave and help build a powerful independent left, I also urge those that remain to see the independent left as their allies, not their competitors. The stronger the independent left is, the more leverage progressives inside the Democratic Party will have. Unfortunately, the WFP exemplifies a sectarian trend among many progressive Democrats whose narratives simply erase the independent left and whose practice often fights that independent left more than it fights the right.

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October 29, 2017

[Against the Current](#)

Punitive Neoliberalism in Puerto Rico

14 November 2017, by Rafael Bernabe

Isolating the situation of Puerto Rico is one of the mechanisms used to seek acceptance of the austerity policies that are now being imposed on the Island. [28] If the crisis is seen as the result of actions by Puerto Ricans or their government "if the responsibility lies, exclusively or fundamentally, in Puerto Rico" then it is logical that it bears the consequences of its own deeds or misdeeds, painful as they may be.

On the contrary, to recognize that the crisis of indebtedness is a global phenomenon, that the debate over fiscal crises and austerity policies spans the planet, indicates that the crisis in Puerto Rico, with all its

colonial particularities, is in fact not unique. This also suggests that the crisis has structural, systemic roots, linked to the contradictions of the dominant economic order in its present stage. It cannot be attributed to some specifically Puerto Rican pathology.

From this, two conclusions may follow. First, just as austerity policies are resisted elsewhere, we should not acquiesce to them in Puerto Rico. Second, we need to connect with resistances elsewhere, including of course the United States.

Here I examine current debates in Puerto Rico using two concepts,

punitive neoliberalism and financial melancholia, elaborated by several students of similar debates in Great Britain, among them William Davies and Liam Stanley (see references below).

I begin with some general points regarding unemployment and debt.

A Global Ideology

...

Unemployment is a normal aspect of capitalism. During its recurrent recessions and depressions, unemployment increases above

normal levels.

In colonial and underdeveloped economies, unemployment is typically much higher, not periodically but chronically. In response to this, and often thanks to labor and social reform movements, many governments have instituted programs that lessen the privations provoked by lack of employment in a market economy.

Nevertheless, we are all aware of the popularity of the notion that unemployment results from the fact that “people don’t want to work” and that welfare, that is to say, programs that compensate for no or low income, promote and reward “laziness.”

According to this logic, the problem is laziness, not capitalism or colonial capitalism; the poor, not the system that impoverishes them; welfare, not the system that does not generate employment.

It would be hard to exaggerate the reach of this ideology that exonerates capitalism while blaming others “indeed blaming some of its victims” for its consequences. This misrepresentation of reality, perfectly fitted to the reproduction of the existing social system, has penetrated all social sectors.

Something similar happens in the case of debt, over-indebtedness and fiscal crises. To put it briefly: in its present epoch capitalism cannot exist without very high levels of debt.

For example, capital seeks to lower its tax burden and to freeze or cut real wages, yet it must increase its sales to individuals and the state. The bridge between these contradictory impulses is built on debt.

Meanwhile, deregulation frees speculation with debt-based financial instruments, one of the key factors leading to the financial meltdown of 2008, at which point governments organized massive bailouts of their banking and financial sectors, for which they incurred new and massive debts.

This is the real source of the present fiscal crises: not excessive spending or overgenerous social programs, but three decades of corporate tax cuts;

not fiscal excesses, but the cost of rescuing capital from its speculative irresponsibility and excesses.

Yet personal over-indebtedness is not attributed to the dominant economic system, but to individual negligence. The system is not the problem, but rather the individuals who have irresponsibly “lived beyond their means.”

Similarly, the fiscal crisis is blamed on excessive spending, high public sector wages, and over-generous social programs or subsidies. Capital is again exonerated: the source of the crisis is the irresponsibility of individuals and governments.

All this has practical consequences. If welfare and a bloated public sector are considered to be the causes of unemployment and of the fiscal and debt crises, the solution must then consist of welfare and public spending cuts. This may be painful “so we are told” but it is inevitable.

Yet there is a discordant fact: austerity policies do not have the promised effect. In country after country they have had a depressive impact. Thus, justifying them in spite of their manifest failure requires turning the economic debate into a moral drama: perhaps austerity policies do not function as well as expected, but they are morally deserved. Austerity is the deserved bitter consequence of our irresponsibility.

William Davies thus speaks of a third stage of neoliberalism: punitive neoliberalism, characterized by the justification of austerity as punishment, a deserved punishment for past excesses that must be administered regardless of other considerations. [29]

From that punitive perspective, to protest against austerity seems particularly perverse: such protests perpetuate the very same irresponsible behavior that lies at the root of the crisis, affirming the infantile desire to live whichever way without facing any consequences. There’s more: individuals and governments must regain the “trust” of the financial markets. That is to say:

capital, which has caused the crisis, becomes the moral authority, the arbiter of probity whose absolution we must seek.

Furthermore, if the fiscal and debt crisis is the result of the irresponsible actions of citizens or politicians, then it must be concluded that both the electorate and its representatives are part of the problem (either because elected officials obey an irresponsible electorate or because they seek its support by enacting popular but unaffordable programs, or both). As they can hardly be expected to lead in the solution if left without proper guidance, an authority “above electoral pressures” is needed to impose the required discipline.

For neoliberalism, people have a tendency to demand interventions that interfere with the infallible discipline of the market, and democratic governments tend to yield to those “populist” pressures.

Thus, from its inception neoliberalism demands reduced democratic accountability, as it shifts key policy decisions to unelected bodies (such as the independent powers conferred on central bank directors). This is often done and justified in the name of “depoliticizing” decisions, of creating “non-party,” “non-partisan” or technocratic institutions or placing decisions in the hands of professionals or so-called “experts.”

... And its Puerto Rican Version

All this applies to the crisis in Puerto Rico. I already referred to the widespread notion of chronic unemployment as the result of purported laziness and of the demoralizing impact of welfare.

Regarding debt it is no different: Public debt, we are told, is the consequence of fiscal excess, government overspending or government overexpansion. (“Gigantismo gubernamental” is the most common term in Puerto Rico.)

Individually and collectively we have lived “beyond our means.” But the

unavoidable day of reckoning is upon us. This is the logic that is to be found in editorials, opinion columns, radio and TV programs, policy papers and interventions in public hearings. [30]

The “party is over,” the “mirage” we tried to inhabit, the “false glitz” covering our misery has dissolved: readjustment will be painful, but deserved. To protest is unrealistic, irresponsible and infantile.

Davies and Liam Stanley have also studied what they call “financial melancholia,” which afflicts persons who internalize the guilt for their situation of over-indebtedness, who blame themselves for it in spite of evidence that speaks to the contrary and who feel they deserve punishment for it. [31]

Needless to say, this is the mindset that best corresponds to an attitude of acceptance toward the policies of austerity typical of punitive neoliberalism. And this is the mentality incessantly promoted by editorialists, columnists, commentators and analysts.

In Puerto Rico this comes with an additional twist. As mentioned above, Puerto Rico is usually portrayed as isolated from the global crisis, as if this were the only place undergoing a fiscal and debt crisis.

What allegedly we face is not a particular case in a global crisis, but a strictly Puerto Rican disaster, rooted in the incapacity of Puerto Ricans to adequately manage their own affairs.

The alleged specifically Puerto Rican pathology at the root of the crisis justifies that an external agent, such as the Federal Fiscal Control Board created by Congress in 2016 through the Puerto Rico Oversight Management and Stability Act (PROMESA), be put in charge of rectifying Puerto Rico’s fiscal practices. (As the cynicism of Congress has no limits, the promesa means “promise” in Spanish.)

In our case, the neoliberal explanation of the debt crisis as the result of personal or public irresponsibility “and therefore austerity enforced by non-elected, undemocratic bodies as

the necessary corrective “both draws upon and reaffirms colonial notions of native inadequacy for self-government that long pre-dated this crisis. [32]

But we know that austerity policies have an unjust and counterproductive impact. Economist Sergio Marxuach, associated with the mainstream Center for a New Economy, recently calculated that the budget cuts adopted by Governor Rosselló in collaboration with the Federal Control Board will depress Puerto Rico’s GNP by at least 6.5%. [33] Under existing policies, most economists predict continued stagnation of Puerto Rico’s economy through 2024. [34]

This is not the place to detail the present austerity program; suffice it to say that it includes more than halving the state’s contribution to Puerto Rico’s public university.

Resistance: To Act and Connect

The struggle against punitive neoliberalism and its ideology begins with the rejection of its myths. Unemployment is not the result of laziness, but an aspect of capitalism and of colonial and dependent capitalism. Debt and over-indebtedness are not caused by personal irresponsibility or over-generous public spending, but are inherent to capitalism, particularly in its most recent period, with its anti-labor policies, corporate tax cuts and bailouts.

People and states “owe” capital but only because capital owes all of society. In Puerto Rico this manifests itself in a paradox: a stagnant economy with a bankrupt government still generates massive profits for a handful of primarily U.S. corporations.

The fiscal and debt crisis is not a Puerto Rican particularity but a global process. Austerity is not inevitable, it is the policy that global capital seeks to impose to make us pay for its crisis. The extent to which it is imposed is not preordained, but rather depends on the outcome of the clash, or series of clashes, between its promoters and

the resistance to it.

In Puerto Rico, the prevailing orthodoxy repeats that since austerity and neoliberal policies have been adopted globally, we cannot do otherwise. This discourse is deployed everywhere: since such policies are dominant elsewhere they must be adopted everywhere.

To break the chain of global neoliberalism “ultimately an international task, if there ever was one “we need two things. First, nobody anywhere, no people, can afford or should wait for others to resist or struggle.

If all wait for others to act elsewhere, then nobody will act anywhere. If all wait for a more favorable international situation, then the international situation will remain unfavorable. We must act, wherever we are, even when initially isolated, if such is the case.

Admittedly, this is a more challenging task in small and economically weak countries, since it is harder for them to alter the international balance of forces. This is a reason to discard any facile optimism and to prepare for a long struggle, not for quietism or passivity. Help will only come to those who help themselves.

Second, we must understand that nobody, no people can succeed on their own. We cannot wait for anybody to initiate the struggle, yes, but we must count on others and immediately seek to link our struggle with resistance elsewhere, beginning in our case with U.S. struggles.

Puerto Rico urgently needs (a) a program of economic reconstruction; (b) the political powers necessary for it; (c) a movement capable of formulating and pressuring for the former and of demanding and attaining the latter; (d) international allies without which no alternative to the dictates of capital can succeed; and (e) a true process of decolonization and national self-determination.

In other texts, I have summarized some of the key aspects of Puerto Rican society under U.S. rule. Allow me to restate six of them. [35]

First, since 1900 Puerto Rico's economy has been shaped by the priorities and preferences of U.S. capital. It has been, and remains, a classically dependent and colonial economy. [36]

Secondly, while specializing in the production for export, largely controlled by U.S. capital, the island has imported most of the consumer goods needed for its reproduction. An example this one-sidedness is the destruction of Puerto Rico's agriculture. Today Puerto Rico imports around 85% of our food.

Thirdly, a further consequence of the domination by U.S. capital has been the outflow of a significant portion of the income generated in Puerto Rico. Presently, around \$35 billion leave every year, in the form of payments to external investors. This is around 35% of Puerto Rico's Gross Domestic Product.

Needless to say, this is capital that is not reinvested in Puerto Rico, leading to a fourth feature of its economy since 1900: Puerto Rico's dependent economy has never been able to provide sufficient employment for its workforce. At present, Puerto Rico has a 40% labor participation rate. The official unemployment rate is 12%. [37]

Fifth: Given the lack of employment, considerable migration has been another feature of Puerto Rican life since the early 20th century. [38]

High unemployment also conspires against higher wages, which deepens economic inequality and ensures high levels of poverty. This helps explain the sixth feature: the persistence of the wide gap in living standards between Puerto Rico and the U.S. mainland. Puerto Rico's per capita income is a third of the U.S. figure. It is half of the per capita income of the poorest state.

Around 45% of the people in Puerto Rico live under the U.S. poverty level. The corresponding figure in the mainland is 15%.

Whatever material progress Puerto Rico has made over the last century, and that progress is undeniable, must

be tempered by the acknowledgement of these limitations and contradictions. They are not, it should be underlined, the result of restrictions on movement of capital or goods between Puerto Rico and the United States. They are, if anything, the result of free trade, of unfettered capital, not of restrictions to it. [39]

In other words, the dogmas of free trade are part of the problem, not the solution. We need a planned reconstruction of our economy, with broadened public and cooperative sectors. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the proposals emanating at present from Puerto Rico's government, the Federal Fiscal Control Board or Congress, for that matter.

To orient our resistance to their punitive neoliberal agenda, we have presented a program that, in general terms, includes:

• Revoke PROMESA.

• Maintain the stay on the claims by creditors on Puerto Rico's public debts.

• Audit, annul the illegitimate portion, and renegotiate the remainder of the debt with three priorities: protecting pensions, essential public services and retaining resources required for economic renewal.

• Declare a moratorium on all debt payments until the audit has been completed.

• Adopt an economic reconstruction plan centered on reinvesting profits generated in the Island that must include a reconsideration of the existing tax-exemption policies.

• Democratically reform the public sector with active labor and citizen participation.

• Self-initiate a process of decolonization and self-determination through a constitutional status convention.

• Seek and obtain sizable funding from Congress for Puerto Rico's economic reconstruction as well as action for Puerto Rico's

decolonization. [40]

Mobilization and Alliances

Are these goals attainable? Yes, but only through consistent and growing mobilization on the Island and of our allies in the U.S. mainland. Is it possible to find such allies? Yes, although that alliance can and should be based not only on sympathy for Puerto Rico, not only on links with the Puerto Rican Diaspora, important as these are, but on a shared agenda of resistance against policies that affect all working, poor and oppressed peoples in the United States.

There is a solid objective basis for such a shared agenda: Working and poor people in the United States today face the impact of several decades of neoliberal corporate tax, fiscal, social and economic policies, to which we must now add the frankly racist and universally reactionary agenda of the Trump administration.

As much as we in Puerto Rico, they need a vast program of economic reconstruction, geared toward the creation of jobs and the satisfaction of basic social needs. Such a project that would require an expansion (and transformation) of the public sector and which must be financed through a radical redistribution of wealth. [41]

We must connect with all movements pointing in that direction. We should ensure that our program and demands for economic reconstruction and political self-determination become part of their program, which begins by mobilizing for them in Puerto Rico.

The fact that these movements are still minority forces in both the United States and Puerto Rico makes it all the more urgent that those seeking to build them join forces and collaborate as effectively as possible.

Related/background publications

Puerto Rico: crisis y alternativas, (R o Piedras: Hurac n, 2014) " Desahogo contra el espejismo o los espejismos del desahogo?" (17 July 2014)

"Ni Kruegger, ni Krugman" (7 August

2015)

"La amnesia del capital" (26 September 2014)

"La noche oscura del neoliberalismo"

(21 July 2015)

"Detrás de la crisis de la deuda de Puerto Rico" (30 July 2015)

"El régimen de los acreedores y la

crisis de la deuda" (21 August 2015)

"The End of an Era: From Dependence to Self-Propelled Development" (Caribbean Business, 2 September 2016)

Dissidents among Dissidents

13 November 2017, by Ilya Budraitskis

China Mieville's *October* was arguably the best-written of the actual accounts of the revolutionary year. It's a matter of argument whether many other volumes have contributed to a genuine reimagination of 1917 or have played more to the need for contemporary myths of the revolution. For many though (and especially amongst the Western left) the need to tailor the myth of *October* to one's political position has counted more rather than any general re-evaluation of the Russian Revolution or the Soviet experience per se.

What is certain, though, is that the conversation about the Revolution and its legacy within the Western Left has taken place in complete ignorance of the conversation that the critical Russian Left has been having. This "non-communication" is, of course, not new. There has always been a significant divergence between the discourses of Russian Leftists and Marxists and those in the West. Yet some of those barriers that went up in Soviet times after being eliminated have since metamorphosed into other parallel barriers.

Certainly there exists a rather one-sided exchange: a well-read Russian leftist might well know of western writers on Russian 20th century and contemporary history and, in general, will know of a large spectrum of contemporary western thinkers but this is very rarely reciprocated by western leftists. Clearly this has much to do with the general lack of translations of left Russian authors (and the rare willingness of western journals and publishers to discover Russian authors), and so one-way

traffic that intellectual thought has moved is only reaffirmed further. In recent decades a small conduit has opened up through the world of art: indeed, many Russian leftists are published more often in art journals than they are in the conventionally political leftist public spheres. Otherwise any contacts that there are have been restricted to the academic sphere.

Ilya Budraitskis's collection of essays, *Dissidents Among Dissidents*, published by Kirill Medvedev's Free Marxist Press is a major contribution to this dialogue. In fact, several of its essays, have been published in English either on LeftEast or in the more arts oriented e-flux. Vasile Ernu of CriticAtac interviews him about it.

Vasile Ernu: In your recently published book about Soviet dissidents, you offer a narrative very different from the one we are used to seeing. What did you want to reveal in this book? What was your purpose?

Ilya Budraitskis: *Dissidents Among Dissidents* is a collection of texts I wrote in recent years that bring together my thoughts on the Soviet heritage in society, politics, and culture. I try to reject both liberal anti-communism as well as nostalgic defenses of the USSR. These apparently dichotomous approaches converge in treating the Soviet legacy as somehow homogeneous, devoid of its own politics—"simplistically either a totalitarian evil incarnate, or a golden age, robbed by traitors and western spies.

The specter of this mythologized past continues to play an active part in today's post-Soviet society. Calls to "overcome the criminal past," or, conversely, for historical restoration, have become extremely effective means of ideological manipulation wielded by those in power. As a result, in Russia, a country that has been setting world records for social inequality and the off-shoring of capital, the authorities have succeeded in portraying themselves as the legitimate heirs to the Soviet past. Russia's economic and political elites came into power by destroying Soviet society, yet an essential element of their ideological hegemony consists of declaring loyalty to Soviet state tradition.

Thus, the question of what we mean by "the Soviet," in terms of society, politics, and culture, is not only a historical question, but also one that asks after key contradictions in the present.

The book's longest chapter is a survey of the history of socialist dissidents in the USSR from the mid-1950s to the early 1980s. Understanding this movement—the various, predominantly Marxist, critics of the USSR on the left, the attempts to create divisions between its pro-liberation and authoritarian factions, as well as the suppressed conflict between the majority and the reigning bureaucracy—is exceptionally important today in resisting the various ways in which the Soviet legacy is manipulated.

Vasile Ernu: When we talk about dissidence, we usually only have in

mind liberal groups. You state that there was also substantial dissidence “on the left” in relation to the Soviet regime. Was there really “leftist dissidence” in the USSR?

Ilya Budraitskis: It is true that, when people talk about dissidents, it has become the norm to identify them with the human rights movement that formed in the second half of the 1960s. However, even though today’s liberals brazenly claim this tradition as their own, in the 1960s there were practically no people who directly identified themselves with political liberalism, its market principles, concept of “negative freedom,” and so on. Human rights advocates basically refused to participate in “politics,” in the sense of conceptualizing alternatives to the status quo, as they tried to champion human rights in what was then the here and now.

Socialism, from the perspective of many human rights activists, was not incommensurate with individual freedom. On the contrary, achieving that freedom was socialism’s programmatic principle. Many thought that the level of technical development achieved by the USSR towards the end of the 1950s would enable Soviet socialism to move from its vulgar, repressive manifestations towards realizing its ultimate humanistic concerns. For those people who distributed samizdat or signed joint letters in the 1960s, “socialism with a human face” remained the consensus. Still, by the 1970s and 1980s, a significant number of the dissident human rights movement became disillusioned with socialism and moved to the right.

Nevertheless, during that time “from period of “the Thaw” in the 1950s and 1960s, up to the start of the 1980s” we see Soviet dissidents who were Marxists, whose approach was to highlight the paradoxical status of Marxism in the USSR: namely, that while it remained official dogma, using Marxist theory as a measure of the Soviet state, and the nature of Soviet society and its contradictions, was criminalized. In my essay, I describe the main groups who provided such a critique of the USSR on the left, as well as certain important socialist

samizdat writers.

Vasile Ernu: Who were the most well-known dissidents “on the left?” Which were the important groups? And what were their main features?

Ilya Budraitskis: Key individual figures were Petro Grigorenko, Raisa Lert, Leonid Plyushch, and Roy Medvedev. Examples of important groups were the Krasnopevtsev group at Moscow State University at the end of the 1950s, the Leningrad Union of Communards in the early 1960s, and the Moscow “Young Socialists” in the late 1970s.

Vasile Ernu: What happened to these people and groups after the end of the Soviet Union? Where did they end up? Was there such a huge difference between liberal and “leftist” dissidents? What united and divided them?

Ilya Budraitskis: Practically all participants in these socialist groups were repressed by the KGB: many went through political camps and prisons, others simply had their lives destroyed and lost their jobs. By the beginning of the 1980s, the dissident scene had been basically swept away by a powerful wave of repression, part of the political climate of rejecting “Détente” and the strengthening of Andropov’s position.

By the beginning of Perestroika, the majority of former socialist dissidents were already different people—some disappearing into private life or academic work, while others, who moved to the right of the political spectrum, continued to participate in political life, but no longer as socialists. Of course, there were a few who remained faithful to their convictions. Even if there wasn’t really any significant continuity between the Soviet left-wing dissidents and the post-Soviet leftist movement, it’s important for me to restore this genealogy. In recent years, there have been more and more scholarly articles devoted to the history of particular underground socialist groups in the Soviet era. I hope that my essay will make a modest contribution to bringing back awareness of this forgotten heritage among current non-

Stalinist leftists in the post-Soviet region.

Vasile Ernu: There is a myth about the so-called “red person,” the eternal problem of the indelible mark of “Soviet mentality.” Apparently, everything in our societies is a mess because of this mentality, this “legacy” of the past. And the dominant discourse tells us that everything will turn out fine if we rid ourselves of it. How do you explain this phenomenon?

Ilya Budraitskis: That’s what a whole chapter of my book called “The Eternal Hunt for the Red Person” is about. It is an exploration of this reification in the prevailing liberal rhetoric of the “undefeated past,” which has produced the image of a mass “Soviet person,” submissive, envious and bitter, unadapted to the market, suspicious of minorities, and uninterested in high culture.

It’s this concept known in Russian as “sovok,” which continues to dominate everyday anthropology even 25 years after the end of the USSR and the expansion of the market. Putin’s Russia, in this reading, is a kind of nature reserve, inhabited by these engineered, damaged people. The reform program, consequently, consists of returning this population to accepted norms.

This false idea of the “red person” hijacks discussion of the present moment’s contradictions (while, of course, not making Russia any less a part of global capitalism), replacing it with a symbolic struggle over names and monuments. On the other hand, the scarecrow of the “red person” has facilitated the success of the Russian establishment’s anti-Western rhetoric, where supposedly we, as the bearers of some alternative, higher set of values, oppose the West. Whereas in reality, the aggressive individualism and contempt for the common interest shown by Russian elites, who annually remove billions of dollars out of the country into offshore accounts, in no way distinguish them morally from the norms and values of market relations.

Vasile Ernu: There is a widespread myth in Russia that the “liberal

intelligentsia” craves freedom, but the people traditionally want “despotic rule.” You are claiming that this is really not the case. What is your explanation? What is really happening?

Ilya Budraitskis: This myth, which is extremely useful to the authorities,

dates back to the nineteenth century, when the then rulers rationalized the union of the people and autocratic rule by asserting the necessity of constantly reigning in flawed human nature. Konstantin Leontiev even referred to autocracy as a form of “self-torture for the Russian people.” Today this sado-masochistic image of national life is used by both those in

power as well as liberal intellectuals, for whom striving for freedom is seen as a personal project, unrelated to the rebuilding of a country that has no hope. This pessimistic take on nature, this organicism of Putinism, should be the object of sustained criticism.

[LeftEast](#)

The Ghosts of St. Louis Future

12 November 2017, by **William J Maxwell**

What Judge Wilson described as the “factual events at issue” had unfolded nearly six years earlier on December 20, 2011, when a silver Buick driven by Smith pulled into the parking lot of a Church’s Fried Chicken on the city’s long-suffering North Side. Despite persistent efforts by Smith’s family and by veteran Black St. Louis activists Anthony Shahid and the Reverend Philip Duvall, more than five years dragged by before Stockley was charged with any crime related to Smith’s death.

In May 2016, then-Circuit Attorney Jennifer Joyce finally agreed to throw the book at Smith’s killer. With glaring symbolism, she resurrected and reversed the 2014 non-indictment of Darren Wilson, the suburban St. Louis policeman who fatally shot Michael Brown, on the more favorable ground of an open-and-shut case. Joyce had forgotten, however, that in the Show Me State, as in the 49 others, no case brought against a white cop for the murder of a Black citizen is ever perfectly obvious.

Weeks before Judge Wilson’s verdict, the St. Louis police and the newly installed Republican governor of Missouri, Eric Greitens, were tipped that Stockley might go free, and began preparing a redo of their own. Local cops wrapped metal barricades around police headquarters and two downtown courthouses, and Greitens placed the Missouri National Guard on standby. This time, the governor

vowed, the rights of property would be protected by preemptive conversation as well as by fences and arms.

“Too often in the past in Missouri, leaders have waited for pain to visit us before we make a decision to visit with each other,” Greitens announced. “Too often in our country, leaders have waited for sirens to be blaring and people to be screaming before we decide that it’s time to sit down and talk.”

Greitens — an ex-Rhodes Scholar and onetime Navy SEAL and the incarnation of all fears of a smarter, slicker Donald Trump — somehow failed to take his own advice.

He neglected to reach out to Missouri state representative Bruce Franks and other Black Lives Matter organizers planning mass protests if Stockley walked. Had Greitens done so, he would have learned that these organizers were also motivated by the ghosts of Ferguson.

Perhaps the single thing that the governor shared with those praying for a Stockley conviction, in fact, was the assumption that St. Louis’s recent past was swamped by unburied racial traumas, by events surrounding the violent passing of Michael Brown not fully grasped or admitted, and thus doomed to haunt one of America’s most segregated cities.

“We’re Killing This Motherfucker”

Joyce and her successor Kim Gardner, St. Louis’s first-ever African-American Circuit Attorney, can be forgiven for assuming that they could help the city heal by breaking the national string of non-convictions of white police shooters. In the long wait between Smith’s death and Stockley’s indictment, the city’s Board of Police Commissioners had agreed to settle a wrongful death lawsuit, brought on behalf of Smith’s infant daughter, to the record-setting tune of \$900,000.

Then there were the documented facts of Stockley’s wildly improper conduct, admitted by his lawyers as well as the State’s. When Stockley initially approached Smith outside the fast food joint, suspecting him of dealing drugs, he violated department policy by toting his own AK-47 Draco pistol.

During a three-minute car pursuit sparked when Smith backed his Buick into a police SUV, dash-cam audio caught Stockley swearing that “we’re killing this motherfucker, don’t you know.” And after the SUV rammed the Buick to a stop, Stockley did just that, firing five fatal shots at Smith, still in the driver’s seat, at close range.

A .38 revolver found in Smith’s car — the reason for Stockley’s fusillade, or so said Stockley — coated with DNA, all of which matched the officer, and

none his victim. To top it off, Stockley admitted that he had used a third handgun, a department-issued Baretta, to take potshots at Smith's fleeing car as it cleared the parking lot.

In the words of one retired St. Louis detective, a friend of a friend not known for exaggeration, the whole fishy and brutal scene testified that Smith had been executed by a classic "rogue cop." But no part of the scene was sufficient to find Stockley guilty.

Because the accused officer (wisely) opted for a bench trial rather than a jury of St. Louis peers, we have access to an unusually detailed and revealing record of how his case was decided, and how the criterion of reasonable doubt becomes fully unreasonable in a legal system evidently convinced that white policemen deserve unequal protection under the law. (For your information, St. Louis's Black police union "the city is sufficiently divided to require two" publicly called for Stockley's conviction, concluding that "[h]e wasn't defending himself in the line of duty.")

The 30-page official decision that Judge Wilson was compelled to release on September 15th ends by declaring that "the State has failed in its burden of proof," and that Stockley was therefore guilty neither of murder nor of "the lesser degrees of homicide including involuntary manslaughter."

I am no lawyer "I've never even played one in print" but I'm convinced that the strained, narrow and prejudicial logic deployed by the judge reveals that he reasoned backwards from a pre-finding (as opposed to a presumption) of innocence.

Take the acknowledged facts that Stockley's partner, Brian Bianchi, holstered his service weapon at Church's and related afterwards that he did not believe that Smith presented a threat. "At the time of the shooting," the judge argues, "Bianchi was an inexperienced police officer. To draw compelling inferences from Bianchi's actions or inactions would amount to mere speculation." (Inferences drawn from Bianchi's years of service, by contrast, are not

at all speculative.)

The seemingly planted gun plastered with Stockley's DNA? DNA traces can stem from collecting as well as planting a weapon, claims the judge. What's more, "the Court observes, based on its nearly thirty years on the bench, that an urban heroin dealer not in possession of a firearm would be an anomaly." (Anomalies can never disallow old-school stereotypes, of course "if the victim is Black, that is, or make that ethnically "urban.")

Finally, Stockley's spoken guarantee that he or his partner or both of them will kill the man he killed minutes afterward? "People say all kinds of things in the heat of the moment or while in stressful situations, and whether Stockley's statement that "we're killing this motherfucker," which can be ambiguous depending on the context, constituted a real threat of action or was a means of releasing tension has to be judged by his subsequent conduct."

I would observe, based on my thirty years off the bench, that the term "motherfucker" is rarely used ambiguously. But in any case, since Stockley's subsequent conduct included really killing his announced target, it looks to me that the choice of "real threat of action" is clear.

In short, Judge Wilson's report on his verdict threw everything but the kitchen sink "not excluding explicit racial caricature and English major-style ambiguity-hunting" into the task of setting Stockley free. Hacking a slender path to legal uncertainty, the judge systematically undercut every bit of evidence incriminating Smith's killer.

Outrage and Militarized Police

Outrage and disbelief over Wilson's report contributed to quickly swelling demonstrations against Stockley's acquittal in downtown St. Louis.

Within an hour of reading the decision on the afternoon of the 15th, I had taken the metro to a stop near Busch Stadium, the home of the baseball

Cardinals, and walked five blocks west to the intersection of Spruce Street and Tucker Boulevard.

There, hundreds of officers in riot shields and helmets, alternately guarding and boarding rented buses, faced off against a roughly equal number of protestors in t-shirts and bandanas.

The youngest of the latter group, Black and white and brown, eagerly crowded into the front lines, trained by months of similar standoffs in Ferguson. Some of the loudest kids taunted individual officers as flunkies and murderers, and all chanted slogans made world-famous a few miles away in 2014: "Who shuts shit down? We shut shit down!" and "No justice, no peace. No racist police."

At this daylight action called at the height of protestor anger, nothing heavier than water and half-empty plastic bottles were thrown toward police lines. But flying teams of cops burst out of formation to grab, pepper-spray, and arrest individual offenders, infuriating nearby demonstrators.

St. Louis police had come looking for excuses, convinced "likely with the governor's help" that the tactical lesson of Ferguson was precisely the opposite of that discussed in the national media and the Obama Justice Department. It was the lack of an aggressive, effectively militarized response to protestors testing the boundaries, they seemed to decide, that had plunged the streets into chaos in 2014.

I left downtown St. Louis that first Friday evening certain that greater violence would erupt later that night and fearful that it would be prompted in part by a police force that wanted nothing less. Law enforcement's plan to bury Ferguson's ghosts, I worried, would only open more graves.

Violence did follow: on that first night, at the Central West End home of St. Louis mayor Lyda Krewson, and on the next in the Delmar Loop, a hip (by our flyover-country standard) entertainment mecca near Washington University. Protestors' bricks forced a handful of cops to the hospital, and about thirty windows were shattered

over forty-eight hours – just what Missouri's governor ordered for his reelection campaign commercials.

The morning after property damage on Delmar, Greitens, an early adopter of Trumpian rule-by-social-media, Facebooked this Wyatt Earp imitation, complete with a heavy dose of common-man contractions: "Saturday night, some criminals decided to pick up rocks and break windows. They thought they'd get away with it. They were wrong. Our officers caught 'em, cuffed 'em, and threw 'em in jail. In the past, our leaders let people break windows, loot, start fires. They let them do it. Not this time."

Protest Growing

What Greitens did not bank on, however, was an African-American protest leadership that readily shed

the criminal label. St. Louis's seasoned Black Lives Matter movement has sponsored large-scale, nonviolent civil disobedience actions every day since September 15th.

In addition to Bruce Franks, mentioned above, the charismatic nurse-pastor Cori Bush and the SCLC veteran Darryl Gray imagine their city as "the new Selma," like the old one a national focal point for anti-racist agitation. As Gray told the Pittsburgh Courier, "St. Louis is the heart of America. It's America's center. And the racism in St. Louis is similar to Selma where it is deeply embedded."

While CNN and company have been training their cameras elsewhere, a surprisingly wide range of local institutions have been pushed to view the Stockley case and its aftermath as signs of shameful and unsustainable

inequity.

To take just one example, both the Missouri ACLU and the business-friendly St. Louis Post-Dispatch have joined the mayor's office and the interim police chief in calling for a federal investigation into police misconduct during a head-cracking "kettling" arrest on September 17th, after which officers chanted "Whose streets? Our streets!" at protestors like a rival gang.

There is no panacea to be found, of course, in petitioning Trump's post-civil rights Justice Department for racial justice. But such actions, steered by the "Ferguson Frontline" and joining factions of a bitterly divided city, may offer St. Louis its best hope to transform repetitive convulsions into dignified burials and real rebirths.

St. Louis, Missouri, October 8, 2017

The Marikana women's fight for justice, five years on

11 November 2017, by Marienna Pope-Weidemann

The fatal police shooting of 37 striking workers at Lonmin's Marikana platinum mine in August 2012 was the worst recorded instance of police violence in post-apartheid South Africa. Five years on, there have been no prosecutions and no real improvements – no compensation for the families living in grief and dire poverty.

There has also been no apology, although staggeringly Lonmin has [created a commercial](#) out of the incident. But as always with the Marikana story, the most important characters were left out.

A few weeks after the massacre there was another death in the community. Amidst a brutal crackdown Paulina Masuhlo, a powerful community leader, died after being shot by police. Paulina's death helped galvanise the

birth of Sikhala Sonke, a grassroots social justice group led by the women of Marikana.

As well as demanding criminal prosecution for the killings and compensation for the families, Sikhala Sonke also carries forward the demands those workers died for: a living wage and dignified conditions.

We cry together

It's anyone's guess how Lonmin accumulated its impressive collection of corporate social responsibility awards. More than ten years after signing a legal obligation to build 5,500 homes in exchange for mining rights, the world's third-largest platinum producer has erected just three show homes, while the families of its workers live in shacks without

electricity or running water. This despite a staggering \$15million loan from the International Finance Corporation solely for the social development of Marikana.

Like many killings in black communities, wherever they occur, the horror is not easily absorbed by white society. It will be a stretch for many in the UK to imagine that a British mining company would rather let employees be shot and killed than pay a fair wage. But is it any more unimaginable than cutting corners to cut costs on the Grenfell tower blocks? Or fighting wars for oil even as our dependence on them threatens millions of lives with climate chaos? It becomes clearer every day that we live in a system fuelled by the unimaginable.

Marikana might be far away, in a

country very different from our own, but the struggle at the heart of Sikhala Sonke is one we should be able to identify with: the struggle of those hurt most by a powerful corporation to hold it accountable for its crimes. In Britain too, we are searching for ways to take back control of our lives and country from elite interests that see us as expendable.

In August I met and talked with two of Sikhala Sonke's leading figures, Primrose Sonti and Thumeka Magwangqana. They explained that for five years, the women of Sikhala Sonke have had to 'fight with two hands'. With one, they fight Lonmin on behalf of their community. With the other, they have had to fight for their place within that community, to be recognised as social justice leaders by a male-dominated union movement.

Sikhala Sonke means 'we cry together' and the name speaks to a pain older and deeper than the massacre itself. Far from transcending the yawning inequalities of the apartheid era, South Africa has now become the [most unequal country in the world](#). Though less than 10 percent of the population, [white South Africans still control the vast majority of the nation's wealth](#).

As well as being highly racialised, this inequality is also highly gendered. A third of women in poor households are [survivors of gendered violence](#) and young women are eight times more likely to be affected by HIV/AIDS. They are far more likely to be in low-paid and unpaid work, while in Marikana, the only compensation offered to grieving women is to take up the jobs of their dead in the dark labyrinth of mines, where they live under the [constant threat of rape and assault](#). Look deeper, to where racism and patriarchy intersect, and it is black women who bear the brunt of oppression in modern South Africa and around the world.

The erasure of black women from political struggle [began long before Marikana](#).

While much is said of men who had to leave their families to work in mines and cities or resist apartheid, what is less visible is the contribution of women, both to the family and to the cause. Every dead or absent father leaves a mother to carry the family alone: a lifetime of unpaid labour alongside paid work to make ends meet. And while media coverage of the commission into the massacre cast the women of Marikana as grieving widows, that is only where their story began.

Keeping hope alive

In an economic system that sees value only in a wage, this inequality is embedded in the logic of the system. The profoundly political nature of unpaid family and movement support, without which no anti-apartheid movement in South Africa or strike in Marikana would be possible, fades into the background - along with the indispensable role played by women of colour in the movement for global justice.

Black women live each day on the [intersection](#) of racial, patriarchal and class oppression. In this much complained about ['age of identity politics'](#), which is more broadly recognised amongst progressive circles in the global north, it has become 'polite' to concede that women of colour have a powerful role to play in movements for social change - but all too often this is mere lip service, paid in the interests of meeting diversity quotas or meant as 'compensation' for their experience, as though a slot on a speaking panel could redress generations of oppression.

But beneath all that is a simple truth: that like all the most painful experiences in life, oppression can be a great teacher. Being born on the intersection is not an enviable position. However, as those of us lucky enough to have learned from brave and brilliant women of colour in social justice work will know, that pain can

develop into a profound sensitivity towards unjust applications of power; the sort that sneak up on those without the eyes to see them and collapse our efforts towards equality from the inside. This kind of leadership, too concerned with power over others, stifles the oxygen needed to spark real change from below.

It is from intersections like this that our most powerful stories, inspiring ideas and promising leaders emerge. Recognising that means stepping back to seed spaces for that leadership but it does not mean stepping out. [Allies too have a vital role to play](#) and the difference between recognising leadership from those most oppressed and reinforcing oppressive hierarchies by leaving them to all that labour alone, is about whether we are prepared to stay connected and above all, to listen.

Sikhala Sonke describe Lonmin and the ANC government as 'twins', both responsible for the situation in Marikana. And now is a vital moment because both are on thinning ice. Lonmin's share price is at an all-time low and last year, a five-month miners' strike forced a basic pay rise of 20 percent. Meanwhile the ANC, which has ruled South Africa since apartheid, is losing its majority as the next generation of South Africans feel they have sold out to white economic interests. It is hard to think of a place where this is clearer than Marikana.

Exploited by Lonmin and abandoned by their government, the women of Sikhala Sonke have kept the faith by refusing to abandon each other. It is that solidarity, they say, that keeps hope alive.

War on Want has partnered with Sikhala Sonke to support their work. [Click here to find out more](#) and help get the word out by [joining our Thunderclap](#). This marks the start of a renewed campaign supporting Sikhala Sonke here in the UK. The campaign is in memory of Marikana woman Paulinah Masuhlo, who died in September 2012 after being shot by South African police.

[Red Pepper](#)

Plan for a republic or imaginary republic?

10 November 2017, by Josep Maria Antentas

Thus, without ever recognizing it, the government changed course from the attitude it had adopted in the fall 2014 when it refused to try to carry out the November 9 referendum on independence that has been declared illegal by Supreme Court, instead opting for a nonbinding citizens' consultation. After a long detour, the government returned to the idea of a vote as a solution—the referendum.

As the date approached, the executive office of Catalan President Carles Puigdemont carried out preparations, although they were never convinced the referendum would really come to pass, and they expected that their actions would be abruptly halted by the intervention of the Spanish state at any time. For Puigdemont, then, it was a matter riding the wave for as long as possible. But in the end, he ended up going much farther than he ever imagined he might—or was prepared to venture.

2. No turning back. The logistical success of the October 1 referendum, despite the seizure of ballots by the Spanish police, was real. However, the referendum took place not because of detailed planning by the Puigdemont administration or the leadership of the National Catalan Assembly (ANC), but because of the dynamic of self-organization from below—including people occupying and defending voting stations—that exploded after the wave of repression unleashed by the Spanish state on September 20 that only accelerated as the referendum got closer.

Both the Catalan government and the ANC were content to keep voting stations open and distribute ballot boxes and voting papers. They assumed the Spanish police would prevent a vote—their objective was to get photo ops of long lines of citizens waiting at voting stations that had been closed by force. Things turned out very differently, as we all know.

The referendum took place and indignation over repression pushed forward a mass mobilization on October 3.

Then began a series of political vacillations on the part of the Catalan government, which never foresaw this potential scenario nor knew how to deal with the escalating confrontations that might erupt if, one way or the other, it proclaimed a Catalan Republic. Neither did it have any strategy for allying with political forces that mobilized on October 1 and 3, and did not necessarily support independence, but nonetheless would support a break with the Spanish state in the wake of its repressive actions.

After Puigdemont's badly staged "suspension" of the declaration of independence on October 10, and a failed attempt to promise elections if the Spanish government withdrew the application of article 155, on October 26, the Catalan president was forced to proclaim a Catalan Republic without any real plan of what to do next in order to transform the declaration into something more than symbolism.

3. Irresponsible responsibility. Managing time and space is critical for any political or social movement. Since October 3, the Catalan government and the ANC have managed both variables badly. They have allowed the initial momentum to become tangled in a secretive and poorly communicated policy that has upset and disoriented many of their supporters, leaving the long-awaited proclamation of the Republic somewhat cold. Then they renounced any institutional gesture that conveyed a real will to defend the proclamation or, above all, to mobilize in the streets or occupy symbolic and strategic spaces.

Since October 27, there has been an absolute vacuum and an absence of

direction. Puigdemont and his cabinet paint an image of resignation and lack of will power—they seem to be following a playbook of what not to do. The history of popular movements is replete with similar situations in which moderate political and social leaderships are incapable of coherently directing the movement they lead, leading at decisive moments to discontent within their own base and, in the end, giving an opening to reaction that organizes itself under the banner of prudence. We can call this policy "irresponsible responsibility."

4. A chance to break with the "process"? The proclamation of the Republic without a strategic plan to make it effective is, in a certain sense, the political culmination of the official policy of pursuing an independence "process" from 2010 onwards—that is, the policy of permanently playing for time and postponing any confrontation. However, the road to October 1, after the government committed to a referendum in September 2016, only came about owing to the exhaustion of the process. And October 1 tended toward confrontation with the Spanish state, denying the essence of the process itself.

The confrontation resulted from dynamics put in motion by the independence process and was managed by those who supported it, yet the conflict only occurred due to the overwhelming pressure of those who never supported the process to begin with. All this culminated in a series of actions all out of line with the policy of the so-called independence process, including the proclamation of the Republic, in a manner (paradoxically) completely in keeping with the habits of the process—that is, employing entirely symbolic and empty gesture.

5. Reasons. The source of the limits

shown by the Catalan government at the moment of truth must be sought in its nature, class composition and political culture.

The Catalan European Democratic Party [PDeCAT, led by Puigdemont and controlling the most seats in the Catalan parliament] is a neoliberal party that was pushed down the road to independence only because it had no alternative. Many of its cadre have come to support independence only recently, while others, like Puigdemont, have always done so. But it is a party of order, with a conservative social base. It has no affinity for ruptures and abrupt changes—it is pragmatic and gradualist by nature, linked to major economic interests (although big capital remains suspicious because of its independence leanings) and vulnerable to pressures from it. It distrusts of popular mobilization.

The Republican Left of Catalonia [ERC, a left-wing party that ran on a joint slate with the PDeCAT in the 2015 elections], on the other hand, perfectly embodies a synthesis between a genuine pro-independence conviction and a political culture little disposed to struggle. It is gradualist, with a progressive, middle-class base that, except in some sectors linked to education, has largely remained outside the great social mobilizations of recent years for causes not directly linked to independence. As they say, it lacks punch.

During these decisive weeks, all strategic conceptions and political visions, and the social bases that support the Catalan government and sustain the independence process, have been put to a decisive stress test that exposed their shortcomings (the only exception has been CUP, which is backed by an important minority of the population). These limits, however, were perfectly visible from the beginning to those willing to notice.

6. Ambiguities. The events of September and October have revealed the ambiguity of the Catalan's government's attitude to popular mobilization. Its incompetent management of its social base's expectations, and those of the movement, between October 3 and 27

is nothing more than a reflection how it conceives of politics, trapped within institutional maneuvers and lacking any ability to direct a mass movement. Beyond government, September 20 and its aftermath clearly demonstrated the strategic impasses of the ANC as well as the Omnium [a highly influential Catalan cultural organization], even if the latter played a secondary role and was, in many way, more audacious than others.

Since its inception in 2012, the independence process has been an unprecedented mass movement under the social leadership of the ANC. But its conception of organization has been vertical and controlled from above, more in keeping with a culture of representation and delegation than to self-organization. Between September 20 and the events of October 1 and 3, the movement overflowed these limits (although only partially and we should not exaggerate). This caught the government and the ANC (as well as Omnium) off guard, generating fear and apprehension among these forces that they might lose of control of the situation.

In view of the leadership vacuum shown by the Catalan government after September 27, a secondary limitation of the ANC appeared: its subordination to the majority separatist parties (that is, those to its right politically) and its inability to assume a leadership role independently of them.

The ANC's policy as of 2012 was to pressure the Catalan government to move forward, but without ever challenging or disturbing it. The ANC merely pleaded meekly to then-President Artur Mas to carry out the November 9, 2014, referendum after it was banned by the Constitutional Court. Moreover, it accepted a proposal to convert the elections of September 27, 2015 elections into a consultative plebiscite and the illusory roadmap toward a future "disconnection" from the Spanish state. This was a road map in which the initiative was increasingly in the hands of the government, with the ANC playing a decreasingly determining role.

7. A coup in practice. The call for elections in Catalonia by Rajoy after having dissolved the Catalan government makes the real correlation of forces plain to see. More than a duality of powers, what has existed in Catalonia in the last two months is a duality of legitimacy. Rajoy regained the initiative by calling for elections, showing that the legality of the Spanish state is still in effect and pushing the independence movement down a defensive path.

This demonstration of force on the part of the Spanish government also contains, however, a sign of relative weakness: It was unable to enforce an absolute, long-term suspension of Catalan autonomy with the aim of dismantling its fundamental pillars (public media, educational, etc.). This option was impossible not only because of the great difficulties in containing its impact, but also, most probably, due to pressure from European authorities that, most likely, pressed for a less damaging outcome, more in keeping with their official hypocrisy.

Rajoy has bought time with the elections. He has succeeded in determining the tempo and has quashed any question about who controls Catalonia. Yet this does not necessarily imply that he has managed to defeat the independence movement in a deeper sense, since the electoral calendar may well once again deliver a parliamentary majority in favor of independence.

8. Offensive repudiationism. The polarization driven by the acceleration of the independence process in September and October has favored, in the short term, conservative forces in the Spanish state, causing a closing of the ranks behind the pro-regime bloc and the entire state apparatus under hegemony of the most conservative sectors. The restoration of Spanish authority in Catalonia is a kind of offensive denialism.

"Repudiation" because it cannot offer a reform from above that at least partially integrates the demands of those who today have been left out of the political framework of the 1978, post-Franco political and social arrangement (principally, the social

base of Podemos and the Catalan independence movement), nor can it generate a new distribution of political and institutional power. Neither can it offer a new form of economic and social integration for the bulk of the middle classes, skilled workers and precarious youth.

"Offensive," though, because it is very aggressive and authoritarian, happily taking advantage of the Catalan crisis to recentralize the entire structure of the Spanish state and isolate Podemos. But the very logic of this offensive repudiationism, in the medium term, will deepen the underlying factors that have created a crisis in the 1978 political framework.

9. Bifurcated futures. The main complicating factor of Catalan politics is that that the May 15 movement of mass occupations in 2011 and its subsequent ripples, on the one hand, and the independence process, on the other, have led to divergent expectations, although there are clear similarities.

These bifurcated horizons, in a broader sense, express the complexity of the relationship between the social and the national question in Catalan politics and society. And, on a more concrete level, this problem can be seen in the lack of alliance between pro-independence forces and those who defend Catalonia's right to self-determination within a federal Spanish framework. This failure continues despite Rajoy's repressive actions where the denial of the exercise of this right could open doors for common action.

The independence movement's basic political shortcoming was to dissociate its objective of winning its own state from elucidating a concrete anti-austerity and pro-democracy policy for such a state. Obsessed with not losing support from conservative Catalan forces all along the way, the promoters of the independence movement lacked, from the start, a solid analysis of Catalan social structure. They were indifferent to building an alliance with the kind of social sectors that every project for change needs, and they failed to involve, or even approach, the social base of significant social movements

and political forces on the left that did not see their primary objective as independence—perhaps only thinking that sooner or later these would become convinced of the need for independence or at least adapt to it.

Demanding a Catalan Republic in such a way that it could potentially end in independence or in a federation with the Spanish state, clearly articulating a constituent process for such a Catalan Republic, and proposing an emergency plan for resolving ordinary Catalans' most pressing concerns (like unemployment, education, etc.) would have been three elements for overcoming the contradictions emanating from the bifurcated expectations between the May 15 movement [also known as the Indignados movement] and the independence process.

If overcoming these divisions is difficult, then it is surprising how the main actors of Catalan politics have devoted so little strategic attention to this problem over these five years. Attempting to do so would have implied operating both within and outside of the independence process—no doubt a difficult task, but one that left should have embraced as its own.

10. Division on the left. Within the independence movement, the CUP, of course, has represented a vision that goes far beyond the "pure and simple" independence movement, defending a program that not only linked nationalist and social issues, but also posed an openly anti-capitalist option, in favor of a rupture with the status quo.

Thus, the CUP represented a countertendency to the growing institutionalization of most of the "forces of change" emerged in 2014 and 2015. But it became too focused on its (honest and sincere) role as the guarantor that the independence process would fight all the way to a conclusion, and this meant that it did not have an aggressive policy of discussions with and implantation among the left and its social base, which tended to operate outside the independence process.

For its part, the left outside the

independence movement, such as Catalonia en Comú⁹, adopted a passive, wait-and-see policy. It pointed out the many real problems associated with the official independence proposal, among them the emptiness of the idea of independence" as a panacea, the difficulty of bringing the independence project to fruition, the polarization of identities it might generate and the downplaying of other issues and conflicts in favor of the national question's omnipresence. But Catalonia en Comú's lack of real involvement in the process prevented it from intervening in the aforementioned questions.

Its policy represents a kind of paradoxical passivity, in which the contradictions and negative aspects of a situation serve to justify a passive policy, exacerbating the consequences of those same negative aspects. This infernal spiral of passivity is a self-fulfilling prophecy and, in a certain way, reflects a kind of strategic nostalgia for a nonexistent reality in which neither the independence process nor the national question were present.

11. Scenarios. The road to the December 21 elections is still difficult to foresee. The imprisonment of members of the Catalan government, as well as those in effective exile in Brussels, shows that the elections are not going to be held, for better or for worse, in a normal context. Yet this is precisely the key to the situation. We must not accept the dynamics imposed by Rajoy as normal.

The blows struck against the Catalan government come in the wake of a vacuum and crisis of leadership. The message recorded from Brussels on November 2 by Puigdemont criticizing the arrests only highlights the Catalan government's incapacity: he condemned the repression, but merely offered a generic call for mobilization without any concrete proposals or goals.

The first reactions after the arrests (protests outside the parliament and in the central squares of several municipalities) seem likely to be followed by a daylong strike on November 8 and a mass demonstration on the November 11. It

is still early to gauge these actions' magnitude, but with half the government arrested and the other lacking any political initiative, both the ANC and Omnium, as well as other pro-independence political forces and those opposing the Spanish state's repression, must take a leadership role and set a clear agenda for mobilizing, framed in a strategic perspective that makes sense. Electoral preparations will not help us concentrate on these tasks.

If there is a political agenda defined from above, the dynamics from below, driven by the Committees of Defense of the Republic (CDR), could become important. The CDRs can play, as they did between September 20 and October 3, a role in overflowing the official structures. However, they do not seem to have the strength to unleash their own perspective of struggle from below if slogans and demands are not issued from above that at least push in this direction—yet quite to the contrary, we can see symptoms of paralysis and bewilderment.

12. Electoral perspectives. It is difficult to predict election results, although it is possible the outcome may be similar to what happened in 2015. No doubt, the independence movement has won support as a result of the repression, but the Catalan government's zigzags between October 1 and 27 and its subsequent paralysis have baffled part of its social base.

On the other hand, the pro-Spanish bloc inside Catalonia has managed, for the first time in five years, to emerge as a social force, demonstrating its weight in the streets with the October 21 march of tens of thousands of people. It has finally found an objective for which to fight. In this situation, the capacity to mobilize supporters will count for more than sympathies tending in one direction or the other. This, in fact, is a weak point for the independence forces. And this is why the December 21 campaign must be understood in relation to, and linked to, extra-electoral mobilizations (or their absence).

13. Unilateralism and fraternity. The opposition between a unilateral

path (accumulating forces for the rupture from within Catalonia) and the option of building a political majority for change in the Spanish state as a whole has been one of the great strategic problems of Catalan and Spanish politics. In reality, unilateralism and fraternity should be seen as complementary. Without a unilateral pro-independence movement (and/or a referendum), no Spanish political forces would have arisen to defend the right to self-determination for Catalonia or to speak in favor of a negotiated resolution.

Unidos Podemos [as the alliance between the Podemos party and the United Left coalition led by the Communist Party is known] now supports such a resolution in response to the political reality created inside Catalonia by the movement. On the other hand, the perspective for a unilateral rupture—like the one proposed by the independence forces—irrespective of what happens outside of Catalonia is lacking because it doesn't take the overall political crisis in the Spanish state into account, forgetting that the Catalan independence movement can only hope to succeed because of this crisis.

Rather than seeing this as a strategic counterposition between two antagonistic approaches, the challenge is to find a strategic point where they can merge, based on a complex center-periphery dialectic. This implies linking, without liquidating, the pro-independence project with those forces that look to an internal rupture of the 1978 regime throughout the Spanish state. In a scenario where the pro-independence confrontation in Catalonia is being used by the conservative Popular Party and the entire state apparatus to close ranks and shift discourse to the right, this is a decisive issue. Seeking alliances and winning sympathy outside of Catalonia is, if not the main one, one of the great challenges for the Catalan independence movement—and of those who, without necessarily supporting independence, defend the movement's democratic challenge to the state.

There are three keys to accomplishing this: explicitly linking the defense of

the Catalan Republic to the hope for a sister Spanish Republic in the future; not delinking hopes for independence from a possible future confederation between the rest of the Spanish state and Catalonia; and, in the immediate term, connecting independence to anti-austerity policies that can arouse sympathies from within the Spanish popular classes. Unfortunately, today, these proposals remain entirely absent from the strategic agenda of the independence movement's political leadership.

14. Another plebiscite? The independence movement has not yet defined its approach to the elections called by Rajoy for December 21. It may be facing a new sort of consultative plebiscite on independence as on September 27, 2015. Then, the argument went that winning a majority for independence in elections considered legitimate by independence opponents, the Spanish state and the European Union would put the Rajoy government in a very complex situation.

There is an element of truth in this argument. But, at the same time, it presents several problems. The first is that a seemingly endless debate centered around "Yes" or "No" for independence tends to divide the political and social bloc that was created during October 1 and 3, when forces beyond the independence movement joined in, including sectors of the democratic-rupturist left. Some of these forces may now vote for pro-independence parties such as CUP or ERC. But others will support forces that defend the right to self-determination, but not independence, such as the Catalonia in ComÀr party.

The second problem is that it is not clear—in a race where people are voting for political parties and not only on the question of independence—that pro-independence forces will secure 50 percent of the votes (for instance, they obtained 47.7 percent in 2015). In any case, accepting the framework of a plebiscite pushes the movement into seeking a technical majority, which may be only a limited victory.

The third problem is that the next steps after a possible victory of the independence movement are not

clear. Saying December 21 will "validate" the declaration of independence on October 27 sounds good, but does not propose any real action plan for the day after.

15. Constituent hypothesis. Undoubtedly the December 21 election will have, whether it is promoted or not, a plebiscitary aspect, meaning people will see the elections as a de facto referendum on independence, as is to be expected. At the same time, a basic defensive element will be in play: the rejection of Article 155 and the demand for the freedom to organize along with amnesty for all those arrested and prosecuted.

The question is how to simultaneously set out a positive project, which includes a pro-democratic and anti-repressive dimension, as well as a plan for institutional resistance after December 21, but one that also goes beyond these components in order to establish alliances between the independence bloc and sectors that support Catalonia's right to decide, but not necessarily independence, such as Catalunya en Com  .

That is where the constituent hypothesis comes in—that is, a process that intentionally brings forces into dialogue and action as they create their own vision for radically

restructuring the Catalan and Spanish state system/s. In one sense, the best possible development might be for all democratic forces opposed to Ciudadanos, the PP and the [neoliberal] Catalan Socialist Party bloc to establish some kind of agreement that, beyond basic anti-repression demands, would imply a constituent road map for a Catalan Republic whose horizon is compatible with either independence or a federal/confederation proposal. In sum, a constituent process can bring together forces to fight in unity for a break with the Spanish regime, while leaving the specifics of the outcome open.

Of course, we should note that a constituent framework is not without problems. The most important challenge is reaching an agreement between the independence bloc and Catalunya en Com   which does not now exist. The second problem is that, in the absence of a real political break inside the Catalan state institutions, proposals become merely rhetorical or symbolic institutional and social initiatives.

Although it remains fragile and uncertain, the constituent hypothesis—as a point of confluence between federalists/confederationists and independents remains the great unexplored potential for Catalan politics. For it to make sense, of

course, it must champion urgent and tangible social measures that can broaden the social base of the democratic forces opposed to the reactionary bloc, inside and outside of Catalonia. Anti-repressive defensive struggles and common positive perspective are difficult to articulate in the midst of today's difficult juncture—realities that can hardly be wished away if we want to build alliances on a sound footing.

16. Dilemmas. How should we conceive of our work: defensive battles against repression and Article 155, the struggle for a Catalan Republic, or a self-satisfied process in defense of an imaginary Republic? Should we counterpoise independence to defending the right to decide or the potential for a common, future rupture? Is this an exclusively Catalan battle, should it be subordinated to politics in the Spanish state as a whole, or is it possible to articulate a center-periphery dialectic?

There is little doubt that we are facing a triple strategic dilemma as complex as it is inescapable. The question is whether it is also as unresolvable as it is decisive.

This article first appeared at [Viento Sur](#) and was translated into English by Todd Chretien for [socialistworker.org](#).

What's Happening in Raqqa, Idlib and in Syria

10 November 2017, by **Joseph Daher**

The war continues and the suffering does not diminish on the ground. The Russian and Syrian air forces have intensified their bombing since September in support of the pro-regime troops' military campaigns assisted by pro-Iranian Shi'a Islamic fundamentalist militias and Hezbollah in several regions: Deraa, Deir ez-Zor, Hama, Homs, Eastern Ghouta, Idlib.

In the eastern Ghouta region, more than 1,100 children have suffered from acute malnutrition in the past three months, UNICEF said. This area has been besieged by regime's forces since 2013. No less than 397 civilians, including 206 children and 67 women, have died due to starvation and medication shortage particularly between the start of the siege in

Eastern Ghouta in October 2012 and Oct. 22, 2017. Fadel Abdul Ghany, chairman of Syrian Network for Human Rights declared regarding this situation:

"It is not only that the Syrian regime used siege as a mean of warfare, but the siege is now beyond military necessities and their proportions, as

the siege has turned into a matter of starving and restricting civilians. Its cost is higher than any anticipated military objective, and has become a form of collective punishment that denied civilians basic services and food."

On Oct. 24, Russia vetoed a UN Security Council draft resolution to extend by one year the investigation on the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Russia has rejected a renewal of the mandate of the UN experts and the OPCW (Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons) to investigate the use of chemical weapons in Syria. This is the ninth time Moscow has used its veto to protect its Syrian ally.

The United States is also not left out with its bombings in their so-called "war on terror" and especially in the campaign for the conquest of Raqqa. According to the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights (SOHR), more than 3,000 civilians and soldiers died in September alone, the deadliest month of the year. Many essential infrastructures have also been destroyed, including multiple hospitals in areas outside the control of the regime and Islamic State (IS). War torn destruction in Raqqa and Syria

War torn destruction in Raqqa and Syria

Raqqa, IS defeated, but ...

The IS was definitively expelled from the city of Raqqa in mid-October by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of fighters (Kurds, Arabs, Syrians) dominated by the YPG, armed wing of the PYD, with the support of United States-led international coalition aviation after four months of intense fighting. The defeat of the jihadist group in Raqqa is certainly good news, but the cost in human terms, as in Mosul a few months ago, is terrible.

More than 80% of the city is destroyed and/or uninhabitable and basic infrastructure is now virtually non-

existent. "The humanitarian crisis is more serious than ever," the NGO Save the Children said in a statement a few days before IS troops were expelled, with a serious shortage of food, medicine, electricity, drinking water, and basic necessities. There are also no functioning medical facilities in the city and schools have long been closed.

In four months, the fighting killed between 1,300 and 1,800 civilians [42]. About 270,000 to 320,000 people have been displaced by the fighting and are living in miserable conditions in overcrowded camps in the outskirts of the city. They will not be able to return until the city is cleared of the mines and explosives scattered by the IS. Fourteen people were actually killed in the explosion of mines left in the ruins of Raqqa since IS's expulsion from the city.

With the loss of Raqqa, IS now controls only 10% of the Syrian territory "compared with 33% at the beginning of the year" of which more than half in the province of Deir Zor, close to that of Raqqa. IS is the target of two separate offensives in Deir Zor: one led by the regime's troops and its allies, supported by Russia, the other by the SDF supported by the United States. The province of Deir Zor has also suffered tremendously from these offensives and bombings. Since September 10, between 660 and 880 civilians have died, while more than 200,000 people have fled the province.

However, this succession of defeats has not prevented the IS from multiplying suicide operations and car bomb attacks in different regions of the country. The jihadist group has also increased the number of abuses against civilians in the areas in which its soldiers are withdrawing, for example, on Oct. 23, the IS has been accused of "executing at least 116 civilians" in the city of al-Qaryatayn in Homs Province before being expelled. Qaryatayn was once home to roughly 14,000 Syrian Muslims and Christians reliant on agriculture and government jobs in Damascus. When the town first fell to the IS in 2015, thousands of its residents fled for safety.

After the end of the military

operations in Raqqa, large sections of the SDF left Raqqa for other regions, mainly for Deir Zor. The SDF announced that the city and its province would be part of a decentralized and federal Syria and that they intended to entrust the administration to a civil council, create a local police and protect the borders of the province from external threats.

The Raqqa civil council is composed of local dignitaries and was created six months ago under the guidance of the SDF. The council has a dual presidency, a man and a woman like the other SDF councils, led by Leila Mustafa, a Kurdish woman from the border town of Tel Abyad, mostly populated by Arabs, and her Arab counterpart Mahmoud al-Borsan, a former member of the Syrian parliament and a leader of the Walda tribe, who is influential in Raqqa.

The real dominant political force remains, however, the PYD, the Syrian branch of the PKK. Huge portraits of PKK founder Abdullah Å-calan were actually displayed in Raqqa's central square, Naeem, during the announcement of SDF's victory, while SDF commanders dedicated the victory of Raqqa to Å-calan and all the women.

It is necessary to underline a certain fear and mistrust present among certain sectors of the local Arab population against the SDF. Some Syrian activists have even spoken of a new occupation ... [43]

Everything remains to be done in Raqqa to rebuild the city, help local people to resume a decent life and regain the trust of the local population.

On its side, the regime by the voice of its dictator Bashar al-Assad has promised to restore the authority of the state over the entire national territory, including Raqqa. For his part, the Minister for National Reconciliation, Ali Haidar, said that the future of Raqqa could be addressed "only within the framework of the final political structure of the Syrian state" in response to the communiqué of the SDF.

Idlib, but especially Afrin, in Ankara's horizon

The Turkish army deployed in Idlib province in northern Syria, setting up observation posts as part of a mission to control SDF, whereas initially, the mission was officially aimed at dislodging Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a military alliance dominated by the jihadists of Jabhat al-Nusra. HTS actually agreed not to interfere with Turkish operations along the border and is therefore relatively spared for the moment by Ankara.

This Turkish military deployment in collaboration with Syrian armed opposition groups is part of the so-called de-escalation agreements reached with Iran and Russia in September and May. This new military expansion at the border came three months after another one between Aazaz and al-Bab. The objective is to isolate the city of Afrin controlled by the SDF. The Turkish pro-government daily Yeni Safak did not hesitate to titrate use as a headline in one of its editions at this period: "Today Idleb, tomorrow Afrin." The Turkish government also placed in the areas opposition armed groups that it sponsors and supports. At the time of writing, the Turkish forces continued their incursions into the northern territories of the country.

As a reminder, Turkey occupies territories in the north of Syria, including towns and villages like Jarablus and al-Bab. They have even

established their own institutions, favor their own humanitarian organizations, depriving others of acting, including local ones, and set up a local police trained in Turkey.

Popular resistances despite everything

This endless war against the Syrian people has not prevented popular resistance actions. On October 14, significant demonstrations took place in the provinces of Idlib, Homs, Eastern Ghouta and several other cities for the "day of rage," despite the bombardments of the regime and Russia and the threat of Islamic fundamentalist groups often opposed to these mobilizations and not hesitating to repress activists and other sectors of civil society.

A few days before, on October 11, a strike was organized by shopkeepers and workers in the city of Idlib demanding the resignation of the officials in the HTS-led civil authority in Idlib, and that the jihadist coalition's security forces remove the masks and hoods that conceal their identities. Increasing complains against HTS can be heard by the inhabitants of Idlib regarding the encroaching on almost every aspect of civilian life by the jihadist coalition. In recent months, HTS members continuously demonstrated intentions to impose control over civilian affairs: it has monitored money transfers, prohibited education projects that do not have its approval and sought control over bakeries, and water and

transportation directorates in the province. HTS has committed numerous Human Rights violations in these past few months following their full control of the city and the province, including murders, arbitrary arrests, and raids relief organizations.

In addition, at the Central Prison in Homs, 500 political prisoners went on hunger strike in mid-October to demand international action for their release as they were under the threat of major repression by the regime. The prison's director has however continued to threaten the prisoners after their call and detainees reported that the prison director also threatened to burn them with their families. Several Syrian organizations demanded that the Syrian regime immediately accept the demands of hunger strikers, to end referring prisoners to military courts or other courts, such as "the Terrorism Court," and to stop all arbitrary executions. We should support the demands of the hunger strikers and moreover demand the liberation of all political prisoners.

Local popular and democratic initiatives were also continuing in different regions against the regime and Islamic fundamentalist organizations.

The resilience of what remains of the sectors of the popular democratic movement against the multiple enemies of freedom and dignity is admirable in this atmosphere of continuous war, of which the end remains the absolute priority to lessen the suffering of the civilian population.

[Peace News](#)

Honduras Since the 2009 Coup

9 November 2017, by **Victoria Cervantes**

As this is being written, news arrives of arrests and serious charges filed against 14 community members of a poor area of Choluteca for opposing land grabs to build a solar energy

plant; 28 small farmers in the northern Agujón Valley criminalized for trying to keep and work their land; and 31 university students and three human rights defenders facing jail

after government attacks on student protests in Tegucigalpa.

This is not unusual, as repression and even violence including assassinations

are a weekly if not daily occurrence.

Honduras has long been one of the unfortunate countries to have a "special relationship" with the United States that has meant military coups, death squads and support for dictatorships and use as a military staging ground for the U.S. Southern Command. This doesn't change much, no matter who the president is in Washington, District of Columbia.

The 2009 coup overthrew President Manuel Zelaya, who was implementing a reform program influenced by the Bolivarian governments in Venezuela and Bolivia. Despite the fact that even the U.S. ambassador in Honduras at the time, Hugo Llorens, cabled Hillary Clinton's Department of State (as revealed by Wikileaks) that the coup was illegal, the Obama administration supported and worked to make legitimize the coup regime. The United States continues to provide military and police aid and training and to refuse to recognize the human rights crisis in Hondurans.

Since the coup the question of whether or not to participate in elections has challenged the unity of a resistance movement that has astonished the Honduran oligarchy and coup supporters, including the U.S. government).

Starting only hours after President Zelaya was detained, many thousands of people defiantly protested in the streets and villages across the whole country every day for months, and organized the National Popular Resistance Front (FNRP). The FNRP brought together the established left organizations, trade unions, peasant unions, indigenous and student organizations with the newer movements of LGBT, feminist, youth and religious groups, and with thousands of people who had not previously belonged to any organization.

All but a tiny sector of the resistance movement agreed to boycott the November 2009 elections. These took place right after the coup "despite the fact that an illegal, violent coup was occurring.

Election Boycott Debates

In 2011 Zelaya, back in the country after an agreement was negotiated in Venezuela, proposed that the FNRP should form a party and participate in the elections of November 2013. His argument was that the mass demonstrations had not been able to reverse the coup and could not be sustained. He and the Zelayista groups who had joined the resistance were anxious to return to an electoral struggle.

There was strong opposition to this proposal from some important resistance organizations including the Lenca indigenous organization COPINH led by Berta Cáceres "who was assassinated in March 2016" and the Fraternal Black Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH) whose leader Miriam Miranda is right now under death threats.

They argued that it is impossible to have even vaguely fair elections with so much power in the hands of the dictators, and that the electoral organizing would debilitate the mass resistance movement. After heated debate the proposal to participate was approved by a majority vote in the FNRP assembly, and the LIBRE (Liberty and Refoundation) Party was formed.

Although organizations remained united in opposition to the dictatorship, the FNRP lost momentum as it turned to organizing the political party while other organizations focused energy on their sectoral demands and struggles rather than on the FNRP.

The 2013 elections were heavily monitored by international and local human rights and electoral observers, including the author of this article. We reported hundreds of irregularities, acts of intimidation and of vote buying, as well as violence including political assassinations, but the elections were declared a big success by the Organization of American States (OAS) and the European Union (EU), although a minority from the EU group denounced the fraud.

The Obama administration praised the election process "in fact the U.S. ambassador at that time, Lisa Kubiske, was so happy with the elections that

she called the right wing National Party the winner in the press even before the official count was announced.

Elections this coming November have high stakes. The coup regime led by President Juan Orlando Hernandez (JOH) of the National Party has tightened control now over the presidency, the congress and the judiciary and is heavily-handedly supported by the military. Although the Honduran Constitution does not allow presidential reelection, Hernandez has authorization from the Supreme Court to run again.

The goal is to formalize a permanent dictatorship. The Penal Code has been revised to criminalize protest and resistance, and the military have taken on the role of policing. Highly armed, masked military police are commonly seen on the streets. JOH and his supporters in the oligarchy are protecting an ambitious neoliberal program of mining, hydroelectric projects (35% of the country has been handed in concessions to corporations for these projects) and agribusiness land grabs.

What Comes Next?

The LIBRE Party believes that it can only overcome the fraud and repression by building a much bigger majority than it had in 2013, and so has created an alliance with members of the Anti-Corruption Party (PAC) and other smaller groups. The PAC leader, Salvador Nasralla, is the presidential candidate of this new formation, the Opposition Alliance (Alianza), and LIBRE's presidential candidate in 2013, Xiomara Castro Zelaya, the wife of Manuel Zelaya, is a vice presidential candidate.

The Alianza is raising alarms about the danger of fraud again in the upcoming election. They have analyzed the national voter registry that is the responsibility of the central government to maintain and found large numbers of duplicate names, dead people still on the list, and other errors that set the stage for vote fraud. This is in addition to the anticipated intimidations, obstacles at the polling places and vote buying. There continues to be skepticism about the Alianza and the electoral

process from organizations like COPINH, OFRANEH and others that have been subjected to so much violence from the government, but there is also support from mass organizations in the peasant movement and trade unions.

There have been recent moves towards strengthening unity, including a non-electoral coalition against the legalization of Hernandez's re-election called *Convergencia Contra el Continuismo* (Convergence Against Continuism), which includes support

from a broader grouping of human rights and activist organizations including COPINH as well as groups that support LIBRE and Alianza.

There are fears that the JOH regime will intensify repression and violence around the elections to prevent any electoral threat from the opposition alliance, and to continue trying to destroy all the movements that fight for social and economic justice. Many solidarity and human rights groups in the United States, Canada and Europe are responding to requests from all the Honduran social

movements to go to Honduras and provide human rights accompaniment as well as to demand that the United States stop aiding the dictatorship.

This effort includes the Honduras Solidarity Network (HSN) in North America. HSN member organizations are working to get the House of Representatives to cancel all U.S. aid, through the Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act. HSN organizations are also taking human rights solidarity observers to Honduras in November.

Sweden's Potato Revolution

8 November 2017, by Hakan Blomqvist

The conservative Swedish government in 1914 didn't organize the country's food supply until it was too late. Meat, fat, livestock, potatoes and other crops together with leather, clothes, shoes and everything needed by a war economy were exported to Germany with mounting profits for Swedish tradesmen and wealthy farmers.

From 1916 the food situation of the Swedish working class deteriorated and rationing was introduced through a complicated system of state organs. As real wages had fallen since the outbreak of the war, strikes broke out among steel workers and social unrest spread.

In January 1917 bread was rationed. Three months later the rations were cut, and social protests exploded under the influence of the Russian revolution.

As in Petrograd in March, they began with working-class women protesting in small towns with demands for more ration cards and lower prices of milk and potatoes. The protests spread to the larger cities, and during the last two weeks of April more than a quarter of a million women and men participated in food protests all over Sweden – this in a population of 5.9 million with 70% living in the

countryside.

Worker protests were not only in the form of demonstrations and meetings. They were often followed by direct action in the form of inventories of stores and storehouses, farms and other places where the protesters hoped to find food, particularly potatoes.

A group of women would forcefully enter a grocery store demanding to inspect it for hidden food. If they found some, they forced the owner to sell the items at their posted prices. In some areas these inventories took the form of mass actions, as when 5,000 sawmill workers with families marched through the countryside in northern Å...dalen to investigate farms and village shops and force the owners to sell. In some places the investigations led to plundering.

Specter of Revolution

To the authorities the development seemed to get out of hand as conscript soldiers joined the hunger protests. In several of the garrison cities in Sweden, soldiers in uniform and in disciplined detachments, although disarmed by their officers, marched together with the civilian protesters or participated in socialist meetings discussing the Russian revolution.

During the spring of 1917 the reformist Social Democratic Party split as the left wing formed a new more revolutionary party, later to become the Swedish Communist Party. The new party was joined by the big social democratic youth movement.

Together with the anarcho-syndicalists the new party formed a left minority flank within Swedish labor. Inspired by developments in Russia, the youth movement formed an association named "Soldiers and Workers" within the army to fraternize with the workers under the slogan: "Don't fire against your class brothers!"

Fearing revolution and lacking confidence in the loyalty of conscript soldiers, the authorities in Stockholm decided to organize a clandestine guard of some thousands of armed civilians. When these plans were revealed, the socialist left called for arming the working class, and forced the authorities to back down.

This was a couple of days before May First and many feared a general and violent confrontation as the labor movement mobilized its forces on the big day. The largest First of May demonstrations in Swedish history were disciplined and peaceful, however, as thousands of workers'

guards protected them and prevented looting and confrontations with the military.

Beneath the surface of protests, inventories and demonstrations an important development of self-organizing unfolded. To formulate their needs and put forward their demands to the authorities, protesters in different parts of the country elected "hunger" or workers' committees, often as highly temporary organs of the mass movement.

In some places, however, the committees turned into workers' councils of the same type as in Russia and later in many parts of the world. The most famous example was the "Workers' Committee of April 16" in the small industrial town of Västervik in southern Sweden.

The committee of five delegates was elected at a mass meeting of striking and protesting workers, men and women, to take control of the city's food supply. It established workers' control of prices and profits, supervised the quality of food and grain, issued export licenses for fisheries, and upheld law and order through workers' guards. This was not done violently, except for some initial incidents, and the local liberal mayor cooperated with the committee and rejected an offer from higher authorities for military support.

The manifesto from Västervik "with demands for food, land to grow potatoes, an eight-hour work day and release of all arrested protesters from the hunger demonstrations" gained mass support throughout Sweden. Similar workers' committees were established in around 40 cities and towns, some with participation of all the currents of the labor movement, other only with the anarcho-syndicalists and the socialist left.

In some places, as in the northern city of Härnösand and the region of Ångermanland with large sawmill populations, the workers' councils established local power similar to Västervik. In Härnösand even the local police elected delegates to the council.

Split and Movement Decline

The movement, however, was soon to split. On May 7 the leaders of the old social democratic party and the Swedish Trades Union Council proclaimed the founding of "1917 Års Arbetarkommitté," the Labor Committee of 1917, as a central leadership of all the local hunger and workers' committees in the country. The local struggles were instructed to abstain from illegal and direct action, to instead concentrate on the forthcoming general elections in September.

With a victory for social democracy and the liberals, it was promised that the rightwing government would be defeated, the food situation solved and universal suffrage established. (In 1917 most men could vote for members of the second chamber in the Swedish riksdag/parliament, but the first chamber, which was elected indirectly through the municipalities and where the richest individual could have up to 40 votes, could stop legislation in the riksdag. Of course, women lacked voting rights.)

With this measure from above, local committees split as social democratic unions and labor communes withdrew. The leftwing forces tried to counter the development through electing their own central leadership of the mass movement. On June 6, "Arbetarnas landsråds" "the national council of workers" was elected at a mass meeting of 20,000 workers in Stockholm.

The council has been called the Petrograd soviet of Sweden. But in contrast to the Russian central soviet, the Swedish one was not elected from the local committees and councils but was more like a front or campaign organization of left-wing forces.

It was formed the day after a severe confrontation in Stockholm, with tens of thousands of workers protesting outside the Riksdag. The police and military attacked the assembled masses. While some thought that this was the prelude to a revolution as in Russia, it was in fact the last act of the Swedish hunger movement of 1917.

During the month of May violent confrontations and riots had unfolded in several Swedish cities as desperate

women tried to get access to bread and potatoes and were met by mounted police and military. The culmination of this social unrest occurred when sawmill workers disarmed a military force on the island of Seskarö, as far north in the Baltic Sea as you can go.

After the first summer harvest the food crisis eased, and in September social democrats and liberals won the elections and formed a coalition government. The liberal-socialist government, however, was blocked by the conservatives in the first chamber from carrying through constitutional reforms. As the war continued, the food situation again deteriorated the following year.

By then the hopes from the Bolshevik revolution were gone as the Finnish civil war ended in a bloody defeat of the reds with tens of thousands killed, wounded, imprisoned or disappeared. The horrible year of 1918 saw the decline of the Swedish left and the workers' committees generally reduced to small collectives of leftist unions and groups, in some places only organs of the anarcho-syndicalists.

The activity centered around prices and quality of food, shoes and other necessities. But since the anarcho-syndicalists abstained from "politics" and wouldn't get involved in struggle for universal suffrage and elections, the committees were marginalized when the issue of democracy again became central on the agenda.

With the German revolution of November 1918, even the Swedish Social Democrats threatened the conservatives in the first chamber with revolution. Through a mass demonstration in Stockholm with a thousand women workers in the front, they reminded the conservatives of the wave of hunger protests and revolutionary climate of the spring of 1917.

At the same time, the left socialists organized mass meetings for a Swedish socialist republic based on workers' soldiers' and peasants' councils. This imitation of the Bolshevik example certainly raised some fear within the Swedish

bourgeoisie and monarchy. But in reality the movement of self-organizing from below was gone, and the result of the political struggle was a compromise.

What usually in Sweden is called the “democratic breakthrough” ended with the conservatives accepting universal suffrage in exchange for the

survival of the monarchy, and a parliamentary system that didn’t leave room for any self-organized workers’ councils from below.

For the reformist Swedish social democracy this was the road to follow. For the left socialists becoming communists, the central problem of the councils of 1917 was the low

consciousness of the workers. As a path to “the dictatorship of the proletariat,” workers’ councils were seen not mainly as an expression of workers’ self-organizing, but rather of the party’s own consciousness and plans. The high point reached by the struggle of 1917 would not return.

[Against the Current](#)

The Legacy of the October Revolution

7 November 2017, by **David Mandel**

But the main legacy of the October Revolution for the left today is, in fact, the least ambiguous. It can be summed up in two words: “They dared.” By that, I mean that the Bolsheviks, in organizing the revolutionary seizure of political and economic power and its defense from the propertied classes, were true to their mission as a workers’ party: they provided the workers - and peasants too - with the leadership that they needed and wanted.

It is more than ironic, therefore, that many historians, and following them, popular opinion, have viewed October as a terrible crime, motivated by the ideologically-inspired project to build a socialist utopia. According to this view, October was an arbitrary act that diverted Russia from its normal path of development toward a capitalist democracy. October was, moreover, the cause of the civil war that devastated Russia for almost three years.

A modified version of that view is espoused even by some on the left, who reject “Leninism” (or what they believe to have been Lenin’s strategy), because of the authoritarian dynamic that a revolutionary seizure of power and a civil war unleash.

What strikes one most, however, when one studies the revolution “from below,” [44] is how little, in fact, the Bolsheviks, and the workers who supported them, were motivated by “ideology,” in the sense of theirs being

some sort of chiliastic movement with socialism as its goal. In reality, and above all, October was a practical response to very serious and concrete, social and political problems confronting the popular classes. That, of course, was also Marx and Engel’s approach to socialism - not as a utopia to be constructed according to some preconceived design, but a set of concrete solutions to the real conditions of workers under capitalism. That is why Marx obstinately refused to offer “recipes for the cook-shops of the future.” [45]

The immediate and the main goal of the October insurrection was to forestall a counterrevolution, supported by the bourgeoisie’s policy of economic sabotage, which would have wiped out the democratic gains and promises of the February Revolution and kept Russia involved in the imperialist slaughter of the world war. A victorious counterrevolution - and that was the only real alternative to October - would likely have given the world its first experience of a fascist state, anticipating by several years the somewhat belated responses of the Italian and German bourgeoisies to similarly failed revolutionary upsurges.

The Bolsheviks, and most urbanized industrial workers in Russia, were, of course, socialists. But all currents of Russian Marxism considered that Russia lacked the political and economic conditions for socialism. There was, to be sure, hope that the

revolutionary seizure of power in Russia would encourage workers in more developed countries to the west to rise up too against the war and against capitalism and open broader perspectives for Russia’s revolution. That was indeed a hope, but it was far from a certainty. And October would have happened without it.

In my historical work, I present documented, and to my view, convincing, support for that view of October and I will not attempt to summarize the evidence here. I want rather to explain how painfully aware the Bolsheviks, and the workers that supported them - the party was overwhelmingly working-class in composition - were of the threat of civil war; how much they tried to avoid it, and, failing that, to minimize its severity. In doing so, I want to put into sharper focus the meaning of “they dared,” as October’s legacy.

The desire to avert civil war was why most Bolsheviks, along with most workers, supported “dual power” in the early period of the revolution. Under that arrangement, executive authority was wielded by a provisional government, initially composed exclusively of liberal politicians, representatives of the propertied classes. At the same time the soviets, political organizations elected by the workers and soldiers, were to monitor the government, ensuring its loyalty to the revolution’s programme. That programme consisted of four main elements: a democratic republic, land

reform, the eight-hour workday, and an energetic diplomacy aimed at securing a rapid, democratic end to the war. There was nothing of itself that was socialist in that programme.

Support for dual power marked a radical break with the party's longstanding rejection of the bourgeoisie as a potential ally in the fight against the autocracy. That rejection had been the very foundation of Bolshevism as a workers' party. It was the reason the party acquired hegemonic status in the workers' movement during the pre-war years of labour upsurge. That rejection of the bourgeoisie (which was, at the same time, a rejection of Menshevism) had its roots in the workers' long and painful experience of the bourgeoisie's intimate collaboration with the autocratic state against their democratic and social aspirations.

The initial support for dual power reflected a willingness to give the liberals a chance, since the propertied classes (the liberal Constitutional-Democratic (Kadet) Party became their principal political representative in 1917) had, albeit rather belatedly, rallied to the revolution, or so it appeared. Their adherence to the revolution greatly facilitated its bloodless victory across the vast territory of Russia and at the front. The assumption of power by the soviets in February would have alienated the propertied classes from the revolution, raising the specter of civil war. Besides, workers were not prepared to assume direct responsibility for running the state and the economy.

Their later rejection of dual power and their demand to transfer of power to the soviets were by no means an automatic response to Lenin's return to Russia and publication of his April theses. Fundamentally, the theses were a recall to the party's traditional position, but in conditions of world war and a victorious democratic revolution. If Lenin's position came to prevail, it was because it had become increasingly clear that the propertied classes and their liberal representatives in the government were hostile to the revolution's goals and wanted, in fact, to reverse the revolution.

As early as the middle of April, the liberal government made clear its support for the war and its imperialist aims. And even before that, the bourgeois press put an end to the brief honeymoon of national unity with its campaign against the workers' alleged egoism in pursuing their narrow economic interests at the expense of war production. The clear intention was to undermine the worker-soldier alliance that had made the revolution possible.

Not unrelated was the growing suspicion among workers of a creeping lockout, masked as supply difficulties, a suspicion that was amplified by the industrialists' adamant rejection of government regulation of the faltering economy. Lockouts had long been a favourite weapon of the factory owners. In only the six months preceding the outbreak of war, the capital's industrialists, in concert with the administration of the state-owned factories, organized no less than three generalized lockouts, in the course of which a total of 300,000 workers were fired. And ten years earlier, in November and December 1905, two general lockouts in the capital had dealt a mortal blow to Russia's first revolution.

By the late spring and early summer of 1917, prominent personalities of "census society" (the propertied classes) were calling for suppression of the soviets and receiving standing ovations from assemblies of their class. Then in mid-June, under strong pressure from the allies, the provisional government launched a military offensive, putting an end to the de facto cease-fire that had reigned on the eastern front since February.

And so by June, a majority of the capital's workers had already embraced the Bolsheviks' demand to free government policy from the influence of the propertied classes. That, in essence, was the meaning of "all power to the soviets": a government responsible uniquely to the workers and peasants. To that extent, the Bolsheviks, along with most of the capital's workers, had come to accept the inevitability of civil war.

But that in itself was not so frightening, since the workers and peasants (the soldiers were overwhelmingly young peasants) were the great majority of the population. Much more worrying was the prospect of civil war within the ranks of the popular classes, within "revolutionary democracy." For the moderate socialists, the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), dominated most of the soviets outside the capital, as well as the Central Executive Committee (TsIK) of soviets and the peasant Executive Committee. And they supported the liberals, to the extent of delegating their leaders to a coalition government, in an effort to shore up the latter's weak popular authority.

The threat of a civil war within revolutionary democracy was forcefully driven home at the beginning of July, when, together with units of the garrison, the capital's workers demonstrated massively in order to press the TsIK to take power on its own. They not only failed in that aim, but their demonstrations were marked by the first serious bloodshed of the revolution, followed by a wave of government a wave of repressive measures against the left that were condoned by the moderate socialists.

The July Days thus left the Bolsheviks and their worker supporters without a clear way forward. Formally, the party adopted a new slogan that Lenin proposed: power to a "government of workers and the poorest peasants" - with no mention of the soviets, as they were dominated outside the capital by the moderate socialists. Lenin meant that as a call to prepare an insurrection, one that would bypass the soviets, and, if it came to that, even be directed against them. But the slogan was not accepted in practice either by the party or by the capital's workers, since it meant going against the popular masses who still supported the moderates - and so, civil war within revolutionary democracy.

A particular concern was the attitude of the socialist, that is, left-leaning, intelligentsia, itself a minority of the educated. For the left intelligentsia almost universally supported the moderate socialists. The Bolsheviks

were an overwhelmingly plebeian party, and the same was true of the Left Social Revolutionaries, who split off from the SRs (Russia's peasant party) in September 1917 and formed a coalition soviet government with the Bolsheviks in November. The prospect of having to run the state, and probably also the economy, without the support of educated people was deeply worrying, and in particular to the activists of the factory-committees, overwhelmingly Bolsheviks.

General Kornilov's abortive uprising at the end of August, which had the enthusiastic support of the propertied classes, appeared initially to open a way out of the impasse. In face of the obvious, the moderate socialists seemed to accept the necessity of a break with the liberals. (The liberal ministers had resigned on the eve of the uprising). The workers reacted to news of Kornilov's march on Petrograd with curious mixture of relief and alarm. They were relieved that they could at last take action against the advancing counterrevolution - and they did so with great energy - in unison with, and not against, the rest of revolutionary democracy. Lenin, following Kornilov's defeat, offered the TsIK his party's support, to the extent of acting as a loyal opposition, if it would take power.

But after some brief wavering, the moderates socialists refused to break with the propertied classes. They allowed Kerensky to form a new coalition government, which included some particularly odious bourgeois personalities, such as industrialist S.A. Smirnov, who had only recently locked out the workers of his textile mills.

But by the end of September, the Bolsheviks already had majorities in most of the soviets throughout Russia and so could count on a majority at the Congress of Soviets, grudgingly set by the TsIK for October 25. Still in hiding from an arrest order, Lenin demanded that his party's central committee prepare an insurrection. But the central committee's majority hesitated, preferring to await a constituent assembly. And one can understand their hesitation. After all, an insurrection would unleash the still largely latent civil war. It was a

terrifying leap into the unknown that would place on the party the responsibility for governing in conditions of deep economic and political crisis. On other hand, the hope that a constituent assembly could overcome the profound polarization the characterized Russian society or that the propertied classes would accept its verdict, if it went against them, was certainly an illusion. And in the meanwhile, industrial collapse and mass hunger were fast approaching.

If the Bolshevik leadership decided to organize an insurrection, it was not because of Lenin's personal authority, but rather under pressure from the middle and lower ranks of the party, to whom Lenin had been appealing. The party organization in Petrograd numbered 43,000 members in October 1917, of whom 28,000 were workers (in a total industrial work force of some 420,000), and 6000 were soldiers. And these workers were ready to act.

The mood among the mass of workers outside the party, was, however, more complex. They strongly supported the demand to transfer power to the soviets. But they were not about to take the initiative themselves. This was a marked reversal from the first five months of the revolution, when the worker rank and file had held the initiative and compelled the party to follow. It had been so in the February Revolution, in the April protests against the government's war policy, in the movement for workers' control, aimed at forestalling a creeping lockout, and in the July demonstrations aimed at pressuring the TsIK to take power.

But the bloodshed in the July Days and the repression that followed had changed things. True, the political situation had since evolved, to the point that the Bolsheviks almost everywhere stood at the head of the soviets. But in the days preceding the insurrection, the entire non-Bolshevik press was confidently predicting an even bloodier defeat of an insurrection than the workers had suffered in the July Days.

Another source of the workers' hesitation was the looming specter of

mass unemployment. The advancing industrial collapse was the most potent argument in favour of immediate action. But it was also a source of insecurity that made workers hesitate.

The initiative, therefore, fell to the party. And it was not as if Bolshevik workers were themselves free of doubt. But they had certain qualities, forged over the years of intense struggle against the autocracy and the industrialists, that allowed them to overcome it. One of these qualities was their aspiration to class independence from the bourgeoisie, which was also the defining trait of Bolshevism as a workers' movement. In the pre-revolutionary years that aspiration had expressed itself in these workers' insistence that their organizations, be they political, economic or cultural, remain free of the influence of the propertied classes.

Closely related to that was these workers' strong sense of dignity, both as individuals and as members of the working class. The concept of a "conscious worker" in Russia embraced an entire world view and moral code that were separate from, and largely opposed to, those of census society. The sense of dignity manifested itself, among other ways, in the demand for "polite address", that invariably figured in lists of workers' strike demands. It was a demand to be addressed by management in the polite second person plural, rather than the informal singular, reserved for close friends, children and underlings. In its compilation of strike statistics, the Tsarist Ministry of Internal Affairs put "polite address" in the column of political demands, presumably because it implied a rejection of the workers' subordinate position in society. In 1917, resolutions of factory meetings in 1917 often referred to the provisional government's policies as a "mockery" of the working class. And in October, when the workers' red guards refused to bend over while running or to fight lying down, since they considered that a display of cowardice and a disgrace for revolutionary workers, the soldiers had to explain to them that there is no honour in offering one's forehead to the enemy. But if the sense of class

honour was a military liability, it is unlikely there would have been an October Revolution without it.

Although the initiative fell largely to the party members in October, the insurrection was welcomed by virtually all the workers, even by most of the printers, traditionally supporters of the Mensheviks. But the question of the composition of the new government arose at once. All the workers' organizations, by then headed by Bolsheviks, and the Bolshevik party organization itself, called for a coalition government of all the socialist parties.

Once again, this expressed the concern for unity of revolutionary democracy and the desire to avoid civil war within its ranks. In the Bolshevik central committee, Lenin and Trotsky were opposed to including the moderate socialists (but not the Left SRs and Menshevik-Internationalists), considering that they would paralyze the government's action. But they stood aside, while the negotiations proceeded.

That coalition, however, was not to be. Talks soon broke down over the issue of soviet power: the Bolsheviks, and the vast majority of workers, wanted the government to be responsible to the soviets - that is, a popular government free of the influence of the propertied classes. The moderate socialists, however, considered the soviets too narrow a basis for a viable government. They continued to insist, albeit in somewhat masked form, on the inclusion of representatives of the propertied classes, or, at least, of the "intermediate strata" not represented in the soviets. But Russian society was deeply divided, and the latter, including most of the intelligentsia, were aligned with the propertied classes. More to the point, the moderates refused any government with a Bolshevik majority, even though the Bolsheviks had been the majority at the Congress of Soviets that voted to take power. In essence, the moderates were demanding to annul the October insurrection.

Once that became clear, the workers' support for a broad coalition evaporated. Soon afterwards, the Left SRs, who reached the same conclusion

as the workers, formed a coalition government with the Bolsheviks. Toward the end of November, a national peasant congress, in which the Left SRs dominated, decided to merge its executive committee with the TsIK of workers' and soldiers' deputies, a decision that was met with relief and jubilation in the Bolshevik party and by workers generally: unity had been achieved, at least from below, although without the left intelligentsia, aligned in its majority with the moderate socialists. (It should be noted, however, that the Mensheviks, unlike the SRs, did not take up arms against the soviet government.)

This, then, is the meaning of "they dared," as the legacy of October. The Bolsheviks, as a genuine workers' party, acted according to the maxim "Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra" (Do what one must; happen what will), which, in Trotsky's view, should guide revolutionaries in all great struggles of principle. [46] But I have tried to show that the challenge was not accepted lightly. The Bolsheviks were not adventurists. They feared civil war, tried to avoid it, and, if that was not possible, at least to limit its severity and improve the odds.

In an essay written in 1923, the Menshevik leader, Fedor Dan, explained his party's refusal to break with the propertied classes even after Kornilov's uprising. It was because the "middle strata," that part of "democracy" not represented in the soviets (Dan mentions a teacher, a cooperator, the mayor of Moscow...) would not countenance a break with the propertied classes - they were convinced that the country could not be governed without them. And they would not even consider participating in a government with Bolsheviks. Dan continued:

Then - theoretically! - there remained only one path for an immediate break with the coalition [with representatives of the propertied classes]: the formation of a government with Bolsheviks - one not together with "non-soviet" democracy [the "middle strata"], but against it. We considered that path unacceptable, given the position that

the Bolsheviks were adopting by the time. We understood clearly that to enter onto that path meant to enter onto the path of terror and civil war, to do everything that the Bolsheviks were, in fact, later forced to do. None of us felt it possible to assume responsibility for such a policy of a non-coalition government. [47]

Dan's position can be contrasted that with that of another moderate socialist, the SR V.B. Stankevich, a rare figure in his party (who had been a commissar at the front under the provisional government). In a letter from February 1918 to his party comrades, he wrote:

We have to see that by this time the forces of the popular movement are on the side of the new regime ...

There are two paths open to them [the moderate socialists]: pursue their irreconcilable struggle against the government, or peaceful, creative work as a loyal opposition ...

Can the former ruling parties say that they have by now become so experienced that they can manage the task of running the country, a task that has become not easier, but harder? For, in essence, they have no programme to oppose to that of the Bolsheviks. And a struggle without a programme is nothing better than the adventures of Mexican generals. And even if there the possibility of creating a programme existed, you have to understand that you don't have the forces to carry it out. For to overthrow Bolshevism you need, if not formally, then at least in fact, the united efforts of everyone, from the SRs to the extreme right. But even in those conditions, the Bolsheviks are stronger...

There is but one path: the path of a united popular front, united national work, common creativity...

And so what tomorrow? To continue the pointless, meaningless and in essence adventurist attempts to seize power? Or to work together with the people in realistic efforts to help it to deal with the problems that face Russia, problems that are linked to the peaceful struggle for eternal political principles, for genuinely democratic

bases for governing the country! [48]

I will let the reader decide which position, Dan's or Stankevich's, had more merit. But one can make a convincing argument that the moderate socialists' refusal "to dare" contributed to the outcome that they claimed so to fear.

History since October 1917 is replete with examples of left parties that did not dare, when they should have. One can mention, among others, the German Social Democrats in 1918, the Italian Socialists in 1920, the Spanish left in 1936, the French and Italian Communists in 1945 and 1968-69, the

Chilean Unidad Popular in 1970-73, most recently Syriza in Greece. The point, of course, is not that they failed to organize an insurrection at some particular moment, but rather that they refused from the very outset to adopt a strategy whose goal was to wrest economic and political power from the bourgeoisie, a strategy that necessarily requires, at some point, a revolutionary break with the capitalist state.

Today, when the alternatives facing humanity are so deeply polarized, when, more than ever, the only real options are socialism or barbarism, when the future of civilized society

itself is at stake, the left should take inspiration from October. That means, despite the historic defeat suffered by the working class and allied social forces over the past decades, to reject as illusory the goal of restoring the Keynesian welfare-state, a return to "genuine social democracy." For such a programme in contemporary capitalism is bound to fail and further demobilize. To dare today means to develop a strategy whose end-goal is socialism and to accept that that goal will necessarily involve, at one point or another, a revolutionary break with the economic and political power of the bourgeoisie, and so with the capitalist state.

Zionism, anti-semitism, and the Balfour Declaration

6 November 2017, by **Gilbert Achcar**

Close to a year ago, on 12 December of last year, PM Theresa May addressed the Annual Business Lunch of the Conservative Friends of Israel in these terms: "On November 2, 1917, the then Foreign Secretary - a Conservative Foreign Secretary - Arthur James Balfour wrote: 'His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, ...'"

The PM read the whole text of the letter I will be getting back to later. She then went on saying: "It is one of the most important letters in history. It demonstrates Britain's vital role in creating a homeland for the Jewish people. And it is an anniversary we will be marking with pride."

The PM added: "Born of that letter, and the efforts of so many people, is a remarkable country." A country, Israel, which the PM described as "a thriving democracy, a beacon of tolerance, an engine of enterprise and an example to the rest of the world for

overcoming adversity and defying disadvantages."

The PM then seized the opportunity of her speech to attack the Labour Party on the issue of anti-semitism. This came a few days after a similar event organised by Labour Friends of Israel: "I understand this lunch has a lot to live up to after the extraordinary scenes at the Labour Friends of Israel event. It began, unusually, with Tom Watson giving a full-throated rendition of Am Yisrael Hai. The audience joined in as his baritone voice carried across the hall. 'Am Yisrael Hai - the people of Israel live.' It is a sentiment that everybody in this room wholeheartedly agrees with. But let me say this: no amount of karaoke can make up for turning a blind eye to anti-Semitism."

The PM went on taking pride in her own achievements as Minister and the achievements of her party and government in combatting anti-semitism (and conflating it with anti-Zionism). The PM's speech thus rested upon what anyone who knows the true circumstances of the Balfour

Declaration can identify as a blatant contradiction.

Edwin Samuel Montagu was the only Jewish member of the cabinet headed by David Lloyd George, to which Balfour belonged, and only the third Jewish minister in British history. Here is how he commented on the draft of the Balfour letter when he received it in August 1917: "I wish to place on record my view that the policy of His Majesty's Government is anti-Semitic and in result will prove a rallying ground for Anti-Semites in every country in the world."

Montagu commented that "it seems to be inconceivable that Zionism should be officially recognised by the British Government, and that Mr. Balfour should be authorized to say that Palestine was to be reconstituted as the "national home of the Jewish people". I do not know what this involves, but I assume that it means that Mahommedans and Christians are to make way for the Jews and that the Jews should be put in all positions of preference and should be peculiarly associated with Palestine in the same

way that England is with the English or France with the French, that Turks and other Mahommedans in Palestine will be regarded as foreigners, just in the same way as Jews will hereafter be treated as foreigners in every country but Palestine."

He then added - ironically, as he probably believed it to be: "Perhaps also citizenship must be granted only as a result of a religious test." This last sentence proved prescient indeed, as the granting of citizenship in the state of Israel was to become inseparably linked with religious identification as Jewish.

You may understand Edwin Montagu's worry about Muslims and Christians in Palestine - they constituted over 90% of the land's population at that time - but wonder why he viewed "the policy of His Majesty's Government" as "anti-Semitic". The matter becomes clear if you read the whole text of his Memorandum to the Cabinet.

Referring to two publications of that time, the conservative paper *The Morning Post*, which will distinguish itself in 1920 by publishing a chapter of the notorious anti-Semitic forgery known as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, and a notoriously anti-Semitic contemporary weekly called *The New Witness*, Montagu wrote: "I can easily understand the editors of the *Morning Post* and of the *New Witness* being Zionists, and I am not in the least surprised that the non-Jews of England may welcome this policy."

Montagu was thus putting his finger on the complementarity between the anti-Semitic desire to get rid of the Jews and the Zionist project of sending all Jews to Palestine. He knew very well this fact that PM Theresa May seems to ignore: that the British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour himself was influenced by the anti-Semitic current known as "Christian Zionism", the current that supports the "return" of the Jews to Palestine. The true goal of this support - undeclared in most cases but sometimes openly stated - is to get rid of Jewish presence in Christian-majority lands. Christian Zionists see in the Jews' "return" to Palestine a fulfilment of the condition of the Second Coming of the Christ, which

will be followed by the Last Judgment condemning all Jews to eternal suffering in Hell, unless they convert to Christianity. This same current constitutes nowadays in the USA the staunchest supporter of Zionism in general and of the Zionist right in particular.

Indeed, when he was Prime Minister himself, between 1902 and 1905, Arthur Balfour promulgated the 1905 Aliens Act, whose aim was to stop the immigration to Britain of Jewish refugees fleeing the murderous anti-Semitism that was thriving in the Russian Empire. The direct continuity between this fact and the letter of which PM May is proud, could not escape Edwin Montagu's understanding. The Jewish Minister was particularly aware of the fact that the Zionists were counting on the anti-Semites for the fulfilment of their project of establishing a Zionist state in Palestine.

The clear gaze of Theodor Herzl

None is clearer on this actually than Theodor Herzl himself, the founder of the Zionist movement and the author of its manifesto, *Der Judenstaat* (The State of the Jews), which was translated in English as *The Jewish State*. In the preface to that book, Herzl stated most bluntly the following: "Everything depends on our propelling force. And what is our propelling force? The misery of the Jews."

Herzl continued in the same vein and with even greater bluntness in the introduction to his book, addressing the "assimilated" secular Jews of Western Europe who wanted to get rid of poor Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe and whom he did not hesitate to describe as "anti-Semites of Jewish origin" with no pejorative intention:

"The 'assimilated' would profit even more than Christian citizens by the departure of faithful Jews; for they would be rid of the disquieting, incalculable, and unavoidable rivalry of a Jewish proletariat, driven by poverty and political pressure from place to place, from land to land. This

floating proletariat would become stationary. Many Christian citizens - whom we call Anti-Semites - can now offer determined resistance to the immigration of foreign Jews. Jewish citizens cannot do this, although it affects them far more nearly; for on them they feel first of all the keen competition of individuals carrying on similar branches of industry, who, in addition, either introduce Anti-Semitism where it does not exist, or intensify it where it does.

The 'assimilated' give expression to this secret grievance in 'philanthropic' undertakings. They found emigration societies for wandering Jews. There is a reverse to the picture which would be comic, if it did not deal with human beings. For some of these charitable institutions are created not for, but against, persecuted Jews, they are created to despatch these poor creatures just as fast and far as possible. And thus, many an apparent friend of the Jews turns out, on careful inspection, to be nothing more than an Anti-Semite of Jewish origin, disguised in the garb of a philanthropist. But the attempts at colonization made even by really benevolent men, interesting attempts though they were, have so far been unsuccessful. ... These attempts were interesting, in that they represented on a small scale the practical fore-runners of the idea of a Jewish State."

The new project devised by Herzl in replacement of the failed "philanthropic" colonial enterprises that he mentioned was to shift from benevolent actions to a political endeavour integrated into the European colonialist framework, aimed at the foundation of a Jewish state that would belong to this framework and reinforce it.

For this, Herzl realized that Christian anti-Semites would be his project's staunchest supporters. His main argument, in the section entitled "The Plan" of his book's second chapter, is the following: "The creation of a new State is neither ridiculous nor impossible. ... The Governments of all countries scourged by Anti-Semitism will be keenly interested in assisting us to obtain the sovereignty we want."

All that was needed was to select the

territory upon which the Zionist project would materialize:

"Here two territories come under consideration, Palestine and Argentina. In both countries important experiments in colonization have been made, though on the mistaken principle of a gradual infiltration of Jews. An infiltration is bound to end badly. It continues till the inevitable moment when the native population feels itself threatened, and forces the Government to stop a further influx of Jews. Immigration is consequently futile unless based on an assured supremacy. The Society of Jews will treat with the present masters of the land, putting itself under the protectorate of the European Powers, if they prove friendly to the plan."

Toward the end of his book's last chapter, where he explained the "Benefits of the Emigration of the Jews", Herzl reassured those he addressed that the governments will pay attention to his scheme "either voluntarily or under pressure from the Anti-Semites".

You can now understand why Edwin Montagu denounced the Balfour Letter project as the product of collusion between the Zionist movement and British anti-Semites; why he stated categorically that "the policy of His Majesty's Government is anti-Semitic and in result will prove a rallying ground for Anti-Semites in every country in the world."

Abysmal record

David Lloyd George's cabinet tried to assuage Montagu's concerns about the fate of the Palestinian non-Jewish majority and the fate of the Jews who were unwilling to become colonial settlers in Palestine by adding to their pledge to "use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement" of the object of "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people" the provision that it was "clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."

We know the abysmal record of the British government in keeping with these two provisos that were in complete contradiction with the central pledge of the infamous letter as well as with its true spirit.

That PM Theresa May, a century later, could find in the infamous Balfour Declaration a matter of pride while stating her satisfaction at her party's and government's stance against antisemitism is indeed a reason for dismay at the low level of historical knowledge of Her Majesty's present government and their speechwriters.

2 November 2017

[Open Democracy](#)

Delivered at the conference "The Balfour Declaration, One Century After" organised by the Centre for Palestine Studies at SOAS, University of London, on 26 October 2017. This talk is partly based on [a paper](#) that was posted on Jadaliyya on November 3.

The Korean crisis, geopolitical instability and nuclear proliferation

5 November 2017, by **Pierre Rousset**

Long announced, the repositioning of the United States on the Asia Pacific "pivot" did not really take place under the Obama presidency. Donald Trump has begun to disengage from this key region, withdrawing from free trade agreements under negotiation (the Transpacific Partnership - TPP) and thus leaving the field open to China, which is promoting, with some success, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

During the Korean crisis, Donald Trump took the initiative, this time on the military level, where US supremacy is most overwhelming. His character is imponderable, and his way of abusing Twitter and invective

is both disturbing and laughable. The cockfight between Trump and Kim, however, should not hide the point: the US offensive is serious, sustained and beginning to have profound consequences.

A conflictual equilibrium point had developed in East Asia. Beijing had the initiative in the South China Sea thanks to its economic weight and military occupation of the maritime area. Washington had the upper hand in the North thanks to its network of bases and its more or less subordinate allies (South Korea, Japan). Russia, although a Siberian power, was kept at the margins.

Such an equilibrium could only be temporary. In the South, Washington has sent the 7th Fleet to the edge of artificial islands built by China, while in the north, Beijing has sent planes and ships to challenge Japanese claims on the micro-archipelago of Senkaku / Diaoyu, thereby testing the determination of the US. This unstable equilibrium has now been broken by the extent of US intervention on the Korean issue, but also by a wake-up call from the Pentagon in the Philippines.

The deployment of the US offensive

Economic sanctions have not, until now, forced the North Korean leadership to bend or opened a crisis of the regime. Washington has consistently underestimated Pyongyang's capacity for resilience. During the 1950-1954 Korean conflict, the United States reduced the North to dust and committed multiple war crimes. The people have not forgotten and, although they live in great poverty, fear above all another devastating aggression. A privileged social elite has emerged and modernized, providing a social base for autocratic power - which has expanded by allowing market relations to develop in the pores of the planned economy. Ethno-identity nationalism is an effective ideological cement. A flawless preventive repression prohibits the emergence of an alternative within the regime itself.

The fact that previous sanctions have not succeeded does not of course mean that a break point will not be reached tomorrow. This is one of the "open" questions posed by the evolution of the situation.

The seventh series of sanctions adopted by the UN on August 5, 2017 aims to deprive the regime of one billion dollars (850 million euros) of annual revenues from exports. It prohibits the creation of any new joint venture between foreign and North Korean companies; stops any additional investment in existing ones; increases quotas on North Korean workers abroad; bans from the ports of all countries North Korean ships which violate UN resolutions; and freezes the assets of Pyongyang's foreign trade bank.

On September 11, 2017 a new set of sanctions was adopted by the UN Security Council including a partial and progressive embargo on oil and its derivatives (total on natural gas). This time, with few exceptions, all joint ventures with North Korean companies are prohibited and existing ones must be closed within one hundred and twenty days. Washington is taking action against banks.

As for cyberattack, under Obama, an electronic warfare program was set up, notably to sabotage the North Korean nuclear programme. It is possible that a number of "misses" (defective missile launches and so on) can be explained as a result, but this has not prevented considerable progress in the development of North Korean capabilities.

Military pressure has been constantly maintained by Washington against North Korea, particularly through the major naval manoeuvres conducted jointly with the South Korean Army each year. A South Korean elite unit is going to be formed with the mandate to assassinate Kim Jong-un. with the mandate to assassinate Kim Jong-un. This pressure has been steadily reinforced with the setting up of an underwater base on Jeju Island, the airlift of an aircraft carrier, the deployment of Thaad missile batteries, and finally the flyover by bombers of the North Korean coastal zone, something which had not happened since the 1950s.

The multifaceted offensive pursued by the United States has only confirmed, in the eyes of the North Korean regime, that its survival depended on its ability to be a nuclear nuisance. It has not bent. However, Washington's policy has already borne fruit in South Korea, Japan, China, the Philippines, and more generally in the Asian geopolitical space.

South Korea is a keystone of the regional system for the United States. However, the election of May 9, 2017 was a very serious setback for Donald Trump. Following a huge mobilization of citizens, occupying public space, remarkable in its scope and duration, the previous regime (radical right, heir to the dictatorships of yesteryear) was defeated at the polls. The population has given much more importance to domestic issues (corruption scandals, repression and so on) than to regional military tensions. The warlike policy of the United States was in its eyes the business of Trump, not theirs.

The new president, Moon Jae-in, belongs to a rather important political movement in South Korea that does

not break with the canons of neoliberalism, but attaches great importance to the national question, namely the reunification of the country, particularly by way of negotiations (his party is classified as "centre left"). Moon had opposed the accelerated deployment of Thaad missile batteries on South Korean soil and, since his election, he has advocated opening a dialogue with Pyongyang. This was met with a brutal dismissal from Kim Jong-un, which caused his diplomatic initiative to lose all credit. In these conditions and facing the spiral of provocations and counter-provocations, both nuclear and military, between Kim and Trump, he is partially back on-side.

Hostility to the US aggression policy is likely to remain deep in the South Korean population. President Moon has just decided on humanitarian aid to the North's population of \$ 8 billion; a gesture that has a political dimension. However, the conditions of action for the anti-war movement are now much less favourable than last May.

Meanwhile the Japanese right has seized its opportunity. The ruling militarist right wants to end once and for all the pacifist clause of the Constitution, but in their majority, the people oppose this revision. North Korean missiles now periodically fly over the archipelago (without causing panic).

Prime Minister Abe Shinto decided to dissolve the House of Representatives and call for new parliamentary elections. He did not need to do so, already enjoying a two-thirds majority in both Houses. His calculation: to take advantage of the current situation to renew his majority in 2018 and thus ensure his continued rule until 2021 (and also draw attention from the scandals of favouritism affecting his wife).

Abe took little risk in deciding on an early election. The opposition is divided. The only danger was from a new political party, the Party of Hope (launched by Ms. Yuriko Koike, governor of Tokyo, which refers to the example of Emmanuel Macron!). By acting quickly, Abe Shinto is making sure there is no time for it to take

root.

The relationship between Japan and the United States is complex, with Tokyo being Washington's main ally in the region (home to its largest military bases) and a potentially competing power. For now, however, Abe Shinto is supporting Donald Trump, saying any attempt at dialogue with Pyongyang would be useless.

In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte, elected in May 2016, has violently denounced the US hold on the archipelago, insulting Barak Obama. He has moved closer to China (eyeing his ability to invest), and opened up to Russia. The crisis in the southern island of Mindanao has given Washington the opportunity to quietly remind it that you cannot change alliances like shirts.

In May, fierce fighting erupted in the Muslim city of Marawi between government forces and jihadist Islamist movements, provoking a major humanitarian crisis and giving Duterte the opportunity to impose martial law throughout the island of Mindanao. [49] A creeping state of war still persists.

The United States has provided, according to defence agreements which are still valid, multifaceted aid to the Philippine army - whose officers are sent to US military academies: weapons, piloting of observation drones, tactical information, armed "advisors" on the ground, and so on. All things that neither China nor Russia can do today.

The Duterte regime has dictatorial traits (perhaps 13,000 deaths in one year in the name of the "war on drugs"). Its future remains uncertain. In any case, the United States has just reaffirmed its presence in its former colony, while the Philippine archipelago occupies a strategic position in the South China Sea - an area over which Beijing wants to consolidate its hegemony. Other countries in the region will not fail to note it.

For now, Beijing is unable to take the initiative on the Korean issue. China is suffering from the situation. At the United Nations Security Council, it

has been forced to vote, like Russia, to strengthen sanctions against Pyongyang. Thus, all North Korean economic entities on Chinese soil, or in which North Korean companies participate, will be dissolved. It must be clear: its influence on the Pyongyang regime is very small, if not zero. If the latter collapses, China may one day see the US Army camp on its border; a nightmare.

Chinese personalities are sounding alarm bells through the international media. Their argument is simple: South Korea is much more important to China than the North. Pyongyang will lose its showdown with Washington. Beijing must urgently negotiate with the United States an intervention plan in case the Northern regime enters an open crisis; otherwise it will be out of the game and the response to the crisis will be for the sole benefit of the USA.

The problem is that this kind of negotiation (secret or public) requires a minimum climate of confidence, which does not exist, and which probably cannot exist between a rising power (China) that requires its place in the sun and an established power (the United States) which will not let go of its pre-eminence. In addition, Washington can rely on a solid network of inter-state alliances, while Beijing can only oppose it with fragile punctual agreements with Russia or with countries without strategic weight.

China retains a strong capacity for international initiative in other areas and in other places. On the Korean file, however, it faces two bad choices: bet on the resilience of the Pyongyang regime whatever the latter's policies, or hope for US concessions while it is in a position of weakness. Beijing does not seem to have found, so far, how to open a third way.

The deadly rationality of Kim Jong-un

The historical responsibility of US imperialism in the Korean crisis is evident. The war of 1950-1953 had

nothing to do with the defence of democracy (the pro-US regime in the South was a dictatorship) or the right of peoples to self-determination; it was a question of countering the Maoist regime and avoiding the victory of an authentic Korean revolution. Washington has always refused to sign a peace treaty with Pyongyang, even when the North Korean regime was inward-looking (the "hermit kingdom"). The state of war has therefore been maintained with very real implications mentioned above.

In the past (under Clinton in particular), limited diplomatic agreements (such as the energy aid freeze on the nuclear program) have proved their effectiveness - but Washington has more or less quickly stopped respecting them. Many authorized voices this year urged Donald Trump to open negotiations with Pyongyang without being heard. The Korean crisis allows the United States to resume the initiative in East Asia, the US military to demand an increase in its budget and Trump to forget his troubles in domestic matters. Why deprive yourself?

The North Korean regime is indeed under threat, and this threat is now active. Given the fate of Saddam Hussein in Iraq or Gaddafi in Libya, it is logical that Kim Jong-un has concluded that the US only respects nuclear-weapon states. As many experts have pointed out, Pyongyang's choices are rational; but what rationality are we talking about?

Kim Jong-un has reinterpreted the concept of nuclear deterrence from the weak to the strong. He could have been satisfied with a "deterrent" capacity targeting South Korea and Japan. He claims to threaten the United States directly. Despite the progress made in intercontinental missiles, the technicality of the bomb or the size of the warheads, he is still far from the mark. On the other hand, he contributes to the revival of a general arms race (which includes missile defence shields), which permanently restores US pre-eminence and has deleterious consequences throughout the world.

In choosing nuclear escalation, Kim Jong-un rejected another path: to

appeal to popular aspirations in the region to peace against the warlike policy of the United States. However, this alternative choice was possible and was not simply right "in principle". As evidence, the overthrow of the revanchist right in South Korea and the election of Moon Jae-in - or the deep strength of Japanese pacifism; not to mention the fragility of Trump in the USA. From Pakistan and India to the Philippines, anti-nuclear and anti-war movements exist. They could have found, with the Korean crisis, a trans-Asian point of convergence. This is a precious opportunity, because mobilizing movements from South, South-East and East Asia together is not easy, each region having its own history.

At the UN, 122 states have this year adopted the treaty to abolish nuclear weapons. All these struggles are continuing today, but they are weakened by Pyongyang's policy.

The rationality of Kim Jong-un's policies is based on the nature of his autocratic, dynastic, ethno-nationalist regime. The very idea of appealing to international solidarity, of promoting the development of anti-imperialist popular movements, of building broad diplomatic alliances, of playing on internal divisions in the United States, is obviously "organically" foreign to it.

We must denounce US interventionism, demand the cessation of its war policy, seek to impose immediate de-escalation, fight for the dismantling of its bases and the withdrawal of its armed forces. It is not necessary to present Kim Jong-un as a hero of resistance to imperialism in order to do this!

The great Asian game

Central (or Mid) Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Far East ... Muslim, Indian and Chinese worlds ... Asia does not exist historically as an entity - except, especially since the twentieth century, geo-strategically, if only because of China whose borders extend from Korea to Kazakhstan. The

USA / China competition is played out on all continents and in all fields, but it takes a particular density in Asia.

Since the implosion of the USSR, quite spectacular reversals of alliance have occurred. Yesterday, Washington and Beijing jointly supported Islamabad against New Delhi, backed by Moscow. Today, the United States favours India. China for its part is securing its hold in Pakistan with major investments related to the construction of a "corridor" giving it privileged access to the ocean.

In South Asia, in addition to the US / China power struggle, the China / India competition is decisive, from Sri Lanka to Nepal or Afghanistan. India, China and the USA are now in direct competition in Burma, recently open to foreign investment. [50] Southeast Asia is diplomatically paralyzed by divisions between the client states of China (Laos, Cambodia, Brunei) or Thailand, under Chinese influence; a Vietnam which is fiercely opposed to Beijing; Malaysia and Singapore, which occupy niche markets in the global market, but are under economic pressure from China; and the Indonesian giant which still lives in the ideological era of the cold war.

The geostrategic balances in Asia are more and more unstable. If China has so far lost the initiative in the east of the continent, it has launched a gigantic project of expansion to the south and west: the development of two new "silk roads" (in a reference to the very old trade routes that linked Asia to Europe), the sea route to Africa and the Middle East, the land route to Kazakhstan and Eastern Europe. This project is still in its initial stages and it is too early to know what will actually happen; but it symbolizes Xi Jinping's level of ambition in China.

For the abolition of nuclear weapons!

We are witnessing two contradictory movements. On the one hand, the nuclear arms race has begun again.

The impact of the Korean crisis in China illustrates it. Until then, Beijing considered that the possession of a relatively limited number of missiles and warheads allowed it to be a member of the closed club of recognized nuclear-armed powers and to apply the (perverse) doctrine of deterrence from the weak to the strong.

The deployment of Thaad antimissile missile batteries in South Korea has changed the game. Their scope covers a large part of the Chinese territory, and not only the north of the peninsula, neutralizing to a large extent the existing arsenal. Beijing must therefore acquire a fleet of strategic submarines (like Russia) to be dispersed in the oceans. To do this, it must modernize its submarines and make them less "noisy", change its command system, miniaturize its warheads and so on. All things that are not self-evident; but the decision in principle seems taken.

The North Korean case also shows that proliferation continues beyond the official holders (there is already in addition Israel, Pakistan, India ... tomorrow Japan?). If the weapon exists, it will be used one day, it is a certainty. States like the US or France are considering it. The main nuclear threat to the world obviously does not come from Pyongyang and its micro-arsenal, but from Washington, the superpower in this area. Listen to Trump.

The counter-trend is expressed by the adoption at the UN last July of the treaty for the abolition of nuclear weapons, open today for ratification and the signature of states - and boycotted by the powers. Who in France has heard of this treaty? The French nuclear consensus has killed the news. With the exception of some countries (Japan, India, Pakistan and some others), the radical left has not invested in the disarmament movement, preferring at best petitions of principle.

The Korean crisis could be an opportunity for an examination of conscience on our part, a prelude to a serious political investment on a vital issue.

A coup by the state

4 November 2017, by **Josep María Antentas**

On October 1, an estimated 90 percent of people of those voting in a referendum held in Catalonia—which lies on Mediterranean coast, south of France—cast their ballots for independence. This was despite the Spanish state declaring the vote illegal and heavy-handed police repression to stop the referendum. On October 3, unions and pro-independence political parties carried out a general strike in Barcelona and across Catalonia to show their defiance of the repression of the Rajoy government. Mobilizations continued through late last week, putting pressure on Puigdemont when it looked like he would seek a deal rather than allow the parliament to vote on independence.

Pablo Iglesias, leader of the left-wing Podemos party, opposed the Catalan parliament's "declaration of independence, not just because it is illegal, but because it is illegitimate." Podemos was alone among the major parties in Spain in defending the October 1 referendum in Catalonia, and Iglesias also said he opposed Rajoy's implementation of direct rule, using Article 155 of the constitution that allows the Spanish state to strip powers of autonomy.

Author and activist Josep MarÀa Antentas, who is based in Barcelona, wrote the following article in mid-October, before the showdown last weekend. The article was published in Spanish at Viento Sur and was translated into English by Todd Chretien.

1. A coup from inside the state.

This is the simplest way to explain the array of measures taken by the conservative Popular Party (PP) government of Mariano Rajoy—with support from the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and the right-wing populist Citizens party (Ciudadanos). These were made public October 20 and go to the Spanish Senate for

approval on October 27.

Perhaps more critical than Rajoy's uncertain application of Article 155—which gives the central government the authority to intervene if an autonomous region is "seriously prejudicing the general interests of Spain"—is the de facto suspension of Catalonia's self-government using Article 155 as a pretext. The lack of precedent in Article 155's use, together with this moment's climate of institutional exceptionality, allows the Spanish government to make not only authoritarian and anti-democratic decisions, but ones of dubious constitutionality as well.

The state power is violating its own norms by resorting to force and creating an extraordinary political situation. It is opening all the security spigots at its disposal to defend its position during these difficult times and is changing the rules of the game in the name of defending those same rules. Using today's exceptional circumstances as an excuse, the state is taking measures that themselves suppose a subversion of the previous order, even as it continues to use that order to justify and legitimize its actions, with the aim of altering the political and social dynamics at play in Catalonia.

All this in order to establish a *new normal*, with contours more favorable to the Spanish state. We are witnessing a frontal attack on democracy, in the name of democracy. The state hopes to develop a new democratic normalcy, one where everything passes through acceptable channels, but only after it has reestablished an order to its liking during a contentious period.

All this, far from representing an anomaly, provides a clear example of the nature of capitalist law and the state in general, and of the Spanish political regime of 1978 in particular.

The state's behavior ought to dismantle any and all fetishistic and foolish illusions in the law, in legality and the institutions to which we have become so accustomed in times of normalcy.

Without a doubt, over the past few weeks, we have all been exposed to an advanced seminar and practical laboratory course in state theory, driving us toward an accelerated, strategic maturation of a movement whose common sense avoided any vision of a clash with the state; until now, the movement for democracy and self-determination in Catalonia dreamed of a pleasant disconnection from the Spanish state.

2. The new PSOE's brief adventure.

The new PSOE's flight under the direction of party leader Pedro Sánchez—who appeared for a time to lean to the left—has been short. Very short—both in duration and distance.

His victory in the PSOE's primary elections last May against both the party's apparatus and the combined power of mainstream media and financial industry was, without doubt, unprecedented. Yet if his triumph expressed a genuinely important dynamic at the grassroots, a rebellion from below that demonstrated the magnitude of the party's crisis, then Sánchez himself was always an imposter. He reinvented himself as a knight in shining armor who would defend the party's rank and file. He adopted left-wing values to opportunistically channel internal discontent to win his seat as the party's general secretary, even as Sánchez's team never planned to break with social-liberalism.

At the same time, his inner circle took advantage—because of their unexpected victory in the primaries—of a certain relative autonomy from Spain's economic and media powers and the state apparatus,

which allowed it to hint at a future alliance with the left-wing Podemos party. They did so in the expectation that their rhetorical tilt to the left would curtail the political space within which Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias would be able to maneuver.

Nevertheless, before the Catalan crisis, Sánchez bowed before the "logic of the state"—the very same state that is obsessed with short-term, immediate interests; that embodies Spain's political-financial elite in general, and its most right-wing faction in particular; that is unable to think of a viable state project based on a stable constitutional compromise.

The Spanish state is driven by a logic that insures it will tackle the Catalan crisis in an authoritarian way. Worse, it will use the crisis to temporarily strengthen nationalist cohesion—Castilians versus Catalans—to fill in cracks in the regime's pillars, without addressing any of the causes that have weakened it in the first place. It hardly even seems capable of adopting the sort of wisdom offered by Italian novelist Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, one of whose characters once famously suggested, "Unless we ourselves take a hand now, they'll foist a republic on us. If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change."

In fact, the PSOE has subordinated itself to a reactionary bloc, with no prospects for controlling it. It's possible that this has permitted Sánchez to safeguard himself in this way from the media and financial pressure he would have suffered if he showed the slightest hesitation in going along, but tranquility in the short term can become a problem in the long run.

Acting as a *statesman* when one directs neither the process, nor the times, nor anything at all, does not usually bring excessively positive returns. Neither does trying to strong-arm the right while playing their own game.

3. Podemos' democratic solitude. Faced with the closing of ranks by the PP-PSOE-Ciudadanos bloc, all the powers of the state up to and including the King, and big finance

and the main media conglomerates, Unidos Podemos [as the electoral alliance between Izquierda Unida and Podemos is known] navigates a countercurrent, expressing the solitary democratic position. Undoubtedly, this position has its limits, and it is not free of contradictions and errors (in particular, the tepidness displayed before the October 1 referendum), yet the policy of Unidos Podemos represents at least a dignified and unique democratic exception in the Spanish political landscape.

The internal dynamics of the party illuminate, however, a point that must be kept in mind: its intermediate, regional, and local structures (with the exception of the Catalan leadership) appear to be less able to resist political pressure, adapting to the dominant Spanish nationalism, than the central nucleus of direction, with Pablo Iglesias at its head.

This is the most important example of the failure Podemos' organizational and political model. The organizational failure sprang from the party's verticalism, centralism and authoritarianism that, right from the start, marginalized many of the best cadres and silenced critical voices, while promoting opportunists without principles or qualities beyond their loyalty to the central leadership in the local and regional structures. The political failure sprang from its focus on electoralism and short-term tactical considerations along with the centrality of communications management—we might say "image."

All this downplayed program and principles, and led to the neglect of training party cadres and political organizers, except in technical or communicative matters. Neither the party's activists nor its intermediate leaders received much political education on the national question or how this related to the regime's crisis beyond generic proclamations about support for a multinational state—that is, a Spanish state based on respect for limited autonomy for those regions with nationalist aspirations. And even these generalizations lacked concrete analysis or a strong foundation in historical and theoretical traditions.

As the situation grew more intense, precipitated by the Catalan crisis, many middle leaders and local party circles found themselves politically disarmed and unable to follow the line or actively defend it in public. The superficiality of Podemos' electoral-communicative politics, although executed courageously by the leadership, thus clashed with the complexities of real politics.

4. Implications. It is impossible to predict how the October rupture will play out, but we can state that, come what may, its impact will be felt far beyond Catalonia.

Undoubtedly, the attack on Catalan institutions declared by Rajoy constitutes an unprecedented use of repression. If the Spanish state is victorious, this will have serious implications for its overall political model and, in a more indirect manner, for other European countries. The state's triumph will broaden the *possibilities* for power and what is officially *tolerable* within the European context, of what can be *done* in specific instances.

In response to future crises, it will point the way toward a new authoritarian turn and will greatly facilitate the implosion of democratic institutions, which are being thrown up in the air all over the continent, especially in southern Europe along the Mediterranean periphery. If the Catalan October is resolved by means of repression and authoritarianism, then further crises, no matter their nature, will be dispatched in the same way.

5. The unknown dimensions. In the Catalan context, the challenges of the moment are clear.

First, we must put forward our own positive agenda that goes beyond a defense of Catalan institutions—one that proposes concrete objectives for a Catalan Republic and Catalan constitutive political process.

Second, the political and social bloc that won the referendum on October 1 and then launched the general strike and mass protests on October 3 must be maintained. This includes the independence movement, the broader

democratic sector that favors a rupture with the Spanish state and, if possible, the Catalunya en Comú party, which must decide if it will merely continue participating in the struggle against repression and in defense of democracy, or if it will attempt to define and push forward constitutive roadmap.

Third, it is necessary to reinforce the political bloc that opposes an endless *procedural* strategy for independence in favor of an open rupture—one based on pressure and mass action from below. Only such a bloc can present a unified policy to the Catalan

government as well as influential mass, nationalist formations like the Catalan National Congress and the Barcelona-based Omnium cultural-political organization.

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Socialistworker.org

Metal Fatigue. Controversies and polemics in the AKP following the referendum

3 November 2017, by **Uraz Aydin**

The need to explain these results and do something about them with a view to the coming regional, legislative and presidential elections in 2019, has been expressed by an entanglement and a superposition of various debates and polemics in the media and social networks. Two main positions have emerged from this multitude of controversies.

An implicit internal opposition

On one side we find the defenders of a more moderate line, who consider that the results of the referendum call for a revision of the policy of cultural-religious polarization, criminalization of the opposition and the hunt for traitors. They advocate a positive change in Turkey's relations with West, accompanied by democratic measures internally, without of course abandoning the fight against those involved in the attempted coup d'état, while nevertheless criticizing the excesses of the repression of the Gullenists. So what is involved here is a vision of a return to the original ideas of the AKP's "conservative-democratic" project.

Among the defenders of this line we find all the sectors of the AKP which disagree with Erdogan's authoritarian course. First of all, Islamists whom we could describe as "moderates", like the former President of the Republic

Abdullah Gül and the former Prime Minister Ahmet Davoglu. All the same, this term ("moderate") must be used cautiously, taking into account the fact that they are certainly not opposed to the increasing number of references to religion, both in the sphere of civil society and in the functioning of the state apparatus. But they are opposed to the sharp repressive turn taken by Erdogan, to which, moreover, they contributed quite a lot, before being pushed aside "in a delicate way".

Among the defenders of this line we also find sectors of the traditional Turkish right who have up to now supported the AKP. These electors hold to conservative-religious values, but are at the same time secular (that is to say, according to the well-known Turkish saying, those "who pray on Fridays, but also drink their raki") no longer feel comfortable with Erdogan's project. These two sectors, which can of course overlap, are nostalgic for the first period of the AKP (from 2003 to 2011, or even 2013 for some of them), when values other than the sultanate of Erdogan were dominant, or at least supposed to be. And it was, according to them, democratic values in the sense that the representation of religious Muslims and the visibility of Islamic references in the public sphere were a question of democracy, in opposition to the authoritarian secularism of Kemalist origin of the autistic nature. At the same time, of course, as maintaining the course towards

joining the European Union.

More radical Islamists are also to be found among the discontented. We should remember that various more or less fundamentalist Islamist currents had called for a No vote during the referendum. Especially, the commitment to the No vote of the Saadet Partisi (Party of Happiness), which represents the historic Milli Görü (National Opinion) current from which the AKP came – and which was much more religious than the party – countered the attempt of Erdogan to identify the objective of the referendum with a religious cause. But it is precisely the effacement of the Islamic cause before the single goal of the ascendancy of Erdogan that pushed various Islamists into the camp of the opposition.

The devoted ones

In the opposite camp we find the reisçi (pronounced Â«rayischiÂ») as they call themselves, that is, the fervent defenders of the Reis, the Captain. It is above all the victory of Erdogan and of the "national will" that they stress, in the face of all the conspiracies engineered by the Western powers – from the revolt of Gezi Park (in May-June 2013), with thousands of arrests, with many people injured, even killed, a movement which spread to the main cities, to the 2013 anti-corruption operations, the PKK's "terrorist"

actions and the attempted coup d'état.

They are nevertheless conscious of the drop in their vote, but they interpret it through an analytical framework based once again on the concept of treason. A young reisçi who is well known on social media and close to the party apparatus, whom I met just a few days after the referendum, told me: "The party did not work. The hidden partisans of "No", like the people around Davutoglu and Gül, are still influential in the party. These groups must be defeated. As well as the followers of Gülen. They say that 120 MPs downloaded Bylock - the communication application the members of the Gülen fraternity. The purges have not yet targeted members of the party. We are still waiting for an anti-putschist operation against the politicians".

These two important figures of the party, Gül and Davutoglu, represent in the eyes of the reisçi the enemy who is close by, capable of being in contact with Fethullah Gülen. The fact that Gül declined the invitation of Erdogan to take part in a rally for the "Yes" during the campaign and that Davutoglu, although he did not refuse, made no call in his speech for a "Yes" vote, represents in their eyes evidence of the conspiracy.

According to the Marxist political analyst Dogan Cetinkaya, who follows closely the Islamic movement, this vision is based on the belief in a total identification with Erdogan: "For the reisçi, there must be no deviation from the path of Erdogan: anything else is considered to be giving aid to traitors. So it is necessary to support his discourse and his actions, which can generally change orientation in the space of a few weeks, indeed a few days. The contradictions are not a problem, the important thing is the unquestioning loyalty". The return of Erdogan to the presidency of the party on May 21, 2017, following the constitutional referendum which abolished the obligation for the President of the Republic to be independent, is for Cetinkaya a logical consequence of Erdoganism: there is no longer any party, in the strict sense of the term, outside of Erdogan. No debate between opposing positions, no objection to the line decided by the

Reis is possible. The only way of influencing the chief is through personal relations established with him. And in this way we can witness a race to see who will be the most reisçi, with the aim of discrediting competitors at the slightest sign of a lack of loyalty and consolidating one's place in the sphere of power".

Reisçi vs Islamists?

Erdogan's close circle, especially after the eviction of Gül, of well-known founding members of the party (such as Bulent Arinc), and then Davutoglu, is increasingly composed of - relatively - young journalists, economists, men and women of secular political origins, who had not previously been in any party. Their ideological positions are to say the least hazy. For them identifying with Erdogan has become in itself a political cause. This is of course a deliberate choice on the part of the Reis, who no longer wants to be encumbered by political personalities who have their own profile and who might be somewhat at variance with his opinions. However, the confidence with which these careerists speak in Erdogan's name, criminalizing any deviation, especially after the attempted coup d'état, has led to many protests on the part of conservative-religious sectors, and in particular longtime party members.

Thus, the intervention of the pseudo-journalist Cem Kucuk during a televised broadcast several days after the referendum sparked off a controversy that crystallized all the opposition currents. Kucuk is a columnist and commentator, whose main specialty is to call publicly for the dismissal, the lynching by the media or even the arrest of dissident journalists, intellectuals and politicians. This time he took on the Islamists, in particular the foundation which organized the flotilla in support of Gaza - around 700 people on the ship Mavi Marmara - which was attacked by the State of Israel in May 2010, causing the death of nine volunteers: "It is time for the AKP to separate itself from the radical Islamists, the crazy people on the

Mavi Marmara, absurdly opposed to Israel, to the West, to everything. I have a feeling that that is what Mr. Tayyip (Erdogan) is going to do". Kucuk's impertinence thus led to a vast polemic that was perceived by public opinion as a settlement of accounts between reisçi and Islamists.

The articles by Ahmet Tasgetiren, longtime Islamist columnist, give a good idea of the state of mind of the "old-timers", of the defenders of the Islamic cause. Tasgetiren jokes in one of his articles about "the war drums of an anti-Islamist war, coming from a group of which we know neither the origins nor who is a member of it. Enough of these creatures who come out from behind walls and spread their mud every day. The split between Islamists and non-Islamists will destroy the AKP (...). It is an operation against Erdogan and the AKP (...). Some people want to make the aims and the existence of the AKP explode, that is my analysis". (*Star*, April 27, 2017).

I met Cihangir Islam, a dissident Muslim intellectual, after the end of the fast, in a little pizza restaurant in Taksim, to ask him about this so-called debate between reisçi and Islamists. Islam was in the 1980s one of the close advisers of the late Necmettin Erbakan, historic figure of Turkish institutional Islam and leader of Milli Gurus. The human rights association with a strong Muslim influence, Mazlum-Der, which Cihangir Islam founded in the same decade, was recently confiscated by the AKP through a change in its leadership. The Has, a party founded in 2010, influenced by religion and advocating democracy and social justice, to which Islam contributed, was reduced to nothing by its leadership being taken over by the AKP. Cihangir Islam, who is a professor of surgery, was recently dismissed from his post at the university by a decree of Erdogan, because he signed a petition in favour of freedom of expression, in support of university staff who had signed the peace petition.

"This is the fourth time that I have been expelled from the university, he said. The three previous times were in the 1990s because of my activities in favour of human rights and mainly the

right to wear the veil. And the fourth time, today under Erdogan: back then we could lodge an appeal, but not today." Erdogan's regime represents in his opinion a Machiavellian and Bonapartist administration. "The AKP is not an Islamist, party, it is independent of any political values and only wants to stay in power. The consolidation around the chief has become so primordial that the expression of loyalty is based on an oath to be repeated every day, it has almost become an obligation. Legitimacy comes from the Reis. That is why even the criticisms of those who call themselves Islamists do not target Erdogan, but those around him. And that is why the Islamists have nothing to do in this party, because even above the prophet there is a principle, an axiom if you like, beyond the individual will."

A specialist in Turkish Islamic brotherhoods and columnist for the daily *Cumhuriyet* (several of whose journalists and editors are in prison) Professor Tayfun Atay shares this view: "The AKP was never Islamist, on the contrary it was when its founders bid farewell to Islamism that the AKP was born, thus paving the way for post-Islamism", he told me.. Playing on words, Atay clarified his point of view: "It is not a religious party (dindar), but a religious fraud (dinbaz), that is to say that it mobilizes religion in view of its secular, material interests. Islamic rhetoric is preserved and even accentuated, but ultimately what lies beneath is a halal capitalism."

According to him, the case of the brotherhoods is a good demonstration of this transformation: "Religious sects and brotherhoods are today all foundations, holdings that manage media organs, hospitals, Koran lessons, supermarkets, various financial companies. It was Erdogan who opened this path for them and today they are subject to him". Regarding the reisçi, Tayfun Atay believes that "the cult of personality based on Erdogan's charisma and the patronage structure of the party has led to the emergence of all these supporters of the Reis, these trolls,

this lumpen-intelligentsia which takes on the functions of a hangman with regard to the opposition and especially against the nearest dissidents. It is no longer post-Islamism, but now a post-mortem Islamism that they represent".

President Erdogan tried to put an end to the polemic at the beginning of May 2017, addressing criticisms to both sides: "It is completely wrong to make a division between those who are Islamists and those who are not, within political activity. [In the party] we are not trying to find disciples for a dervish lodge." He did not, however, forget to address the dissidents: "Some people supported the party of which I am the founder. But they forked. They got off the train. We have witnessed unacceptable approaches in recent times. This is a deviation from the right path".

A tired party

Although the intensity of the controversy actually subsided after the intervention of the Reis, discontent continued to accumulate during the summer and new debates rebounded along the same dividing lines. At the end of May, President Erdogan finally announced his vision of the reasons for the fall in votes in the referendum: his party was hit by "metal fatigue". Conscious of the fact that the elections of 2019 will bring a major risk of a loss of power at all levels, the Reis has been calling since then, on every occasion, for a "profound change" of the party cadres, a renewal of the apparatus that would bring forward young people and women. If Erdogan asked those who felt weary to pass the baton, this call was perceived, as it should be, as the announcement of forthcoming purges to remove the "proxy-Gülenists", those who would agitate in the name of the brotherhood (of the "Fethullahist terrorist organization") within the party.

The daily *Karar*, which regroups the main dissidents of the AKP and is suspected by the reisçis to be remotely controlled by Davutoglu (his former adviser, the Armenian liberal

intellectual Etyen Mahcupyan, regularly writes columns) reacted to this explanation with "fatigue", while not taking a position directly against the Reis. A long-time journalist and former AKP MP (and also a poet), Mehmet Ocaktan, criticized this approach by putting it in perspective: "If the president felt the need to intervene directly, he must have seen that the party was perceived as tired in the eyes of society. But the main question is whether this is only a problem of fatigue of the apparatus, or is it the loss of a clear discourse on the universal standards of freedom, democracy and change that the AKP had declared to society, based on its founding philosophy. "(*Karar*, August 18, 2017) According to Ocaktan the party must, in parallel with the initiative of renovation, conduct a reflection on the causes of its turning in on itself and its attitude "to practically explain everything through the concepts of homeland-nation/foreign enemy" (*Karar*, August 21, 2017).

Much more explicitly, Hakan Albayrak, another columnist for *Karar*, says that the party needs to find a heterogeneity "that would not succumb under the weight of the charisma of a leader". He calls on "party elders, MPs, ministers and ex-ministers to express their reactions publicly": "If there is no point in talking behind closed doors, there remains no other solution than to discuss in front of public opinion, to try to create social pressure." (*Karar*, September 14, 2017)

However, renewal is progressing at a snail's pace for the moment. Because Erdogan is well aware that although he needs a party that is completely loyal to him, a major clean-out also carries the risk of offending many of his supporters, whether in the apparatus or at the level of his electoral base. Moreover, although there is no doubt, for the moment, about the loyalty of the reisçi careerists, as Professor Atay underlines, "we know very well that they will be the first to leave him when the time comes. And Erdogan is aware of that too."

One hundred years of the Balfour declaration

2 November 2017, by **Rabab Abdulhadi**

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

What does this tell us?

First, that the colonization of Palestine started before 1948.

Second, the British Foreign Secretary is actively expressing specific support to the Zionist cause.

Third, Balfour is also legitimizing the Zionist aim to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

Fourth, though Balfour wrote the declaration to Lord Rothschild, the audience was the Zionist movement and the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland, established in 1899 to campaign for a "permanent homeland for the Jews in Palestine." At the time the Zionist Federation was headed by Herbert Samuel, who was actually working on the Uganda project [a short-lived idea for Jewish settlement in east Africa "ed.].

Rothschild and Chaim Weizmann had submitted a draft of a public declaration. Further drafts were discussed by the British Cabinet during September and October, with input from Zionist and anti-Zionist Jews but with no representation from the Palestinian population. The release of the final declaration was authorized by 31 October.

Rothschild himself was not part of the

World Zionist Organization, but had funded the first agricultural colonies of the first major wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine in the 1880s " retrospectively named the "First Aliyah" " and transferred the colonies to the Jewish Colonization Association in 1899.

In declaring that it's okay for the British to support the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, the intended audience was the Zionist Federation. In a typical colonial move, the indigenous people of the land were not consulted or considered, otherized and defined in the Balfour declaration while the future colonizers were centered.

The Balfour Declaration then not only legitimized the Zionist project in Palestine and transformed it into a contender in international relations. It in effect precipitated the spread of Zionism among British Jews.

Prior to that time, only some 8,000 out of Britain's 300,000 Jews were considered Zionists. The Declaration also led to a spike in Zionist sympathies among U.S. Jews from 7500 in 200 societies in 1914 to 30,000 members in 600 societies in 1918 and 149,000 members in 1919, although still a small minority of the Jewish population.

The second half of the declaration was added to satisfy opponents of the policy, who had claimed that it would otherwise prejudice the position of the local population of Palestine and encourage antisemitism against Jews worldwide.

Balfour was saying that the Zionist project was approved as long as it did not affect the "locals." "Nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine," referring to the Palestinians " but not by name.

He is also not saying Arabs or Muslims. What does it mean not to identify the people of the lands by name, but to name a colonial group in a colonial context? It speaks of (1) Balfour's colonial-centered perspective, (2) his familiarity with the Zionist movement, and (3) his acknowledging Zionism as part of his world view.

At this time, World War I was still going on. The Ottoman Empire was in control of Palestine as well as the rest of the Arab world. What would be postwar British Mandate for Palestine hadn't been established yet, so the British were basically preparing for Zionism as a colonial outpost in Palestine.

According to Ottoman statistics studied by Justin McCarthy, the population of Palestine in the early 19th century was 350,000, in 1860 it was 411,000, and in 1900 about 600,000 of which 94% were Arabs. In 1914 Palestine had a population of 657,000 Muslim Arabs, 81,000 Christian Arabs, and 59,000 Jewish Arabs.

It's necessary to pay attention to every single word when we are analyzing these events. Balfour's not talking about Palestinian Jews. He's talking specifically about the Zionist movement. So the long-existing non-Jewish and Jewish communities in Palestine are marginalized here.

Balfour then refers to the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in other countries. Why is he saying that? If Palestine is going to become the place where a homeland for the Jews is going to be, why should Jews be in any other country? Why do you think he's saying that, if they would all move there? In fact, the great majority of Jews had no intention of doing so, and would have considered the suggestion outrageous.

What is Zionism?

There was a debate in the Zionist movement before, during and after the first Zionist conference in 1897 in Basel, Switzerland. The conference was organized by Theodor Herzl, who is often referred to as the father of Zionism. "Father" obviously is gendered, but so was the Zionist movement.

What is the Zionist movement? What is Zionism? It's about the establishment of a Jewish state centered around "Jewishness."

Why is it called Zionism? It's a call back to a religious identification in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible,

with "the Land of Israel" as the homeland for the Jewish faith. But Zionism means specifically an ethnoreligious nationalist movement – a mixture of a religious identity along with an ethnic identity (even if many Israeli Jews are not religious, and many do not come from a European ethnicity or experience).

That's a contradiction that has never been resolved. But where does the identity come from? It's traced to the persecution of the Jewish experience throughout Europe. It was manifested in pogroms.

What are pogroms? In Russia, Jewish communities were literally driven out. Their homes were burned and

businesses were confiscated. Jews were made to be scapegoats for feudal Christian landed "gentry."

Jews were constructed as scapegoats by the ruling elites in Europe. In Russia, the riots were called pogroms. At some times, Jews were held captive in ghettos. People are locked into their communities, locked in at night. The doors are closed at a certain time. There's a curfew at seven pm – much like the apartheid wall in Palestine now....

So that's where the story of Zionism and the colonization of Palestine begins, and the Balfour Declaration was one of its pivotal moments.

[Against the Current](#)

A complex and unstable political situation

1 November 2017, by **Andreu Coll**

It was not possible to create a state for three basic reasons:

- The Generalitat lacked the means to put it in place (so-called "state structures").

- It was impossible to avoid a violent conflict with the Spanish State, which has always been opposed by the "proces" (a contraction of the sovereignist process that defines everything that is linked to the movement for the right to decide in Catalonia).

- It is doubtful there is an overtly independentist social majority that is able to maintain a conflict with these characteristics.

Weakness (es) of the Catalan Government

We have enough information to interpret the recent events.

- The referendum of 1 October was

held fundamentally thanks to the civil society (Omnium, Catalan National Assembly, but also the Committees of defense of the referendum much more decided) and to the volunteers, in spite of the passivity of the Govern (Catalan autonomous government) and its officials. The Govern would have simply denounced the repression if the referendum had not been able to take place.

- The Govern had been aware since the beginning of the impossibility of putting into practice the mandate of 1 October, given the central government's refusal to negotiate and the impossibility of resolving the problem of power (since the state is ready to use violence to the end).

- The proposal of Puigdemont on 26 October - not to implement the UDI (unilateral declaration of independence) and to convene ordinary elections - was thwarted not so much by the apparent willingness of the PP (Popular Party) to maintain the application of Article 155 but by the desire to avoid a fracture of the independence bloc.

- The Govern avoided aggravating the situation and called for no resistance plan to defend the republic on 27 October. It preferred to protect itself from repression in the short term and to internationalize the conflict by directly appealing to the states and European institutions, even if it accepts the electoral challenge of Rajoy.

Lasting political crisis

Despite the confusion created by the Catalan government "in exile", the demoralization caused by the lack of concrete calls for mobilization, and the fact that the Prosecutor General Maza has aligned itself with Rajoy's otherwise daring strategy, the open political crisis in the Spanish state remains of great importance for several reasons:

- Article 155 creates a very serious antidemocratic precedent, which can be generalized against any autonomous community that does not

like monarchical tripartism (PP, Ciudadanos, PSOE), and in particular to the most corrupt party in Europe (the PP), with all that implies in terms of the risk of political regression.

- The governmental formula of monarchical tripartism places, in the medium and long term, the PSOE on the path of an irreversible historical decline, after it has contributed to Rajoy remaining in the minority in the

presidency, and that he has helped to transform itself into de facto president of the Generality while being the weakest force of the parliament of Catalonia), and has no spare part to avoid the erosion of the whole system.

- The monarchy has emerged weakened, playing a clearly authoritarian and threatening role, very far from the role of moderator and arbitrator attributed to it by the

Constitution.

That is why we must maintain support for the right to self-determination and a struggle to open a constituent process in Catalonia, which can be generalized to the rest of the State and reaffirms the need to break with the monarchical regime of 1978 which, as demonstrated by the Catalan crisis, is nothing but the reformed Franco regime.