



## IV550 - November 2020

### **Baba Jan and his comrades finally free!**

**29 November 2020, by Pierre Rousset**

The prosecution of Baba Jan was politically motivated. He was too popular and too radical for the established powers. This popularity was brilliantly confirmed on the electoral level: in 2015, despite being detained, he came second in his constituency in an election to the state assembly, far ahead of the third candidate. He threatened the hegemony of the ruling party and was hastily condemned, a veritable parody of justice, in order to be no longer eligible for election.

Baba Jan was imprisoned for supporting villagers who were victims of the formation of an artificial lake in 2010, following an ecological disaster in the Hunza basin. For this, in 2014, he was first sentenced to the equivalent of life imprisonment; then a second time for having organised a prisoners' strike, across religious divides, to ensure that their statutory rights (quality of food, access to healthcare...) were respected.

During his detention, Baba Jan was tortured. His health deteriorated dangerously and essential medical examinations were, for a time, refused to him. Very temporarily released on parole, he was threatened with kidnap. The Pakistani government thought that what was happening in the "remote" territory of Gilgit-Baltistan would remain ignored outside its borders. It was particularly shocked when the fate of Baba Jan was mentioned in a European Parliament resolution!

A multifaceted solidarity movement probably saved Baba Jan's life. It concludes today with his release and that of his comrades. His family, friends and comrades have always remained by his side. Well-known Pakistani lawyers have volunteered to defend him without charging a fee. The Human Rights Commission spoke out against his conviction. A wide

range of progressive forces, including his friend Farooq Tariq, maintained constant political pressure on the government. Demonstrations followed one another in Pakistan and in Gilgit-Baltistan. Numerous regional (in South Asia) and global networks campaigned, from eco-socialist circles (Baba Jan is a climate activist) to the Fourth International (the political tradition to which he belongs). A large number of signatures were collected, from 45 countries, including many members of parliament, mayors and other elected officials; intellectuals and academics; leaders of trade union, social and community-based movements, feminists; human rights organisations, citizens

Baba Jan represents one of those "common causes" where all democratic and progressive forces can stand together. We welcome his release.

*28 November 2020*

### **A country is entitled to refuse to repay a debt**

**29 November 2020, by Éric Toussaint**

**Mugica Review:** In 1927 Alexander Sack claimed that for a debt to be

defined as odious, the nature of the political regime is irrelevant.

In other words, it is irrelevant whether it is a dictatorship or a

**democracy, since the decisive factor is whether that debt was contracted against the interests of the people. Do you agree with that claim? Isn't the concept of "respecting the interests of the people" rather ambiguous?**

The doctrine elaborated in the 20th century by Alexander Sack on the basis of two centuries of jurisprudence from litigation over sovereign debt makes it perfectly clear that the nature of the government is not a criterion for determining the odious character of a debt

**Éric Toussaint:** The doctrine elaborated in the 20th century by Alexander Sack on the basis of two centuries of jurisprudence from litigation over sovereign debt makes it perfectly clear that the nature of the government is not a criterion for determining the odious character of a debt. Regarding the question of "against the People", there are three terms in the doctrine that make reference to this contradiction, namely debt contracted against the interests of the Nation, contracted against the People and/or against the interests of the State.

If we really want to put democracy into practice, it is up to the citizens, making use of domestic law and international jurisprudence, to say what is against the interests of the People, the Nation or the State. That is therefore a necessary part of democratic debate. In my view, in all circumstances there should be a debt audit to identify which parts of the debt demanded of a country are odious, illegitimate, illegal and/or unsustainable. In some cases a country's entire debt may be considered odious, illegitimate, illegal and/or unsustainable.

The 44 billion dollars paid out by the IMF aggravated the country's situation, the ongoing crisis worsened and the vast majority of the money loaned went straight

back out of the country

If we apply the doctrine to the specific case of Argentina, I would say that in 2018 President Mauricio Macri contracted an enormous debt with the IMF against the interests of the State, the Nation and the Argentine people. The government of Mauricio Macri, who was democratically elected in 2016 and was not a dictatorship, received 44 billion dollars from the IMF to try to get him re-elected in 2019. The IMF under pressure from Donald Trump's Administration, made this loan to Argentina with a view to keeping this ally of Washington in power. What actually happened was that the 44 billion dollars paid out by the IMF (the biggest loan the IMF has ever made to any country) aggravated the country's situation, the ongoing crisis worsened and the vast majority of the money loaned went straight back out of the country. The Argentine people rejected this policy and in 2019, they voted for the change proposed by Alberto Fernandez, who denounced Mauricio Macri's policy of indebtedness and promised to turn it on its head.

**Mugica Review: Both Sack and yourself, in the name of the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt (CADTM), focus on the collusion of creditors in determining whether a debt is odious. What tools could be used to establish objective criteria in proving creditors' complicity?**

**Éric Toussaint:** An audit carried out by the country's citizens is required, but obviously complicity means that the lenders are well aware of what the money allocated is being used for, whether they are a multilateral institution like the IMF, bondholders or countries and banks granting loans to the country. In the case of the IMF, there is no doubt that they impose their conditions in full knowledge of the use that is going to be made of the money. Not only do they know, but they play an active role in how the money is used, by agreeing on it with the government asking for the loan. A Letter of Intent is negotiated between the IMF and the government (whether it is Macri's or others, even with

dictatorships) giving the IMF guarantees.

It is crucial for a State to make sure that the investor's liability in buying securities comes before its own liability.

As far as other lenders are concerned, I would say that a bank or investment fund should be under obligation to analyse the solvency of the individual or country asking for money. That is common practice after all: even when a bank lends money to a household or a business, it has an obligation to investigate their solvency and discuss the conditions of repayment.

In the case of sovereign Argentine bonds, the Argentine government produced [a prospectus explaining the economic situation in which it gave details of the conditions under which the debt had been contracted](#). The investment fund should be under obligation to examine the truth of these claims. [Those who bought the centenary bonds issued by Macri's government obviously did not carry out a serious analysis before lending money](#) to Argentina for a hundred years, taking the state of the country's economy into account; they did it because the annual yield was almost 8% when US Treasury Bonds were yielding no more than 2% a year at best. US banks are thus out to garner higher profits, but are well aware that if a country offers almost 8%, this means that there is a risk of defaulting. By contrast, countries such as Germany, France or the USA borrow money at an often negative rate, and in the best of cases, with yields under 2%. So the lenders must bear the risk they have taken by buying the bonds, and should it transpire that the government's explanation of the situation was misleading, then there would be wrong-doing, but the bond-holders would be the wrong-doers for having accepted it. It is crucial for a State to make sure that the investor's liability in buying securities comes before its own liability.

**Mugica Review: Let us leave**

**creditors' liability aside for a moment, to discuss the responsibilities of local governments. Could they be brought to trial? Is there any international body that could intervene?**

**Éric Toussaint:** The doctrine of odious debt stipulates that when a regime changes, the new regime can refuse to honour debt contracted by the previous one, based on the argument that it did not sign the contract and that creditors bought securities to help the outgoing government knowing full well the risks they were taking.

The new regime can also question the use that this money had been put to, if it can be shown that the previous government accumulated debt in order to remain in power. This is what Mauricio Macri did, in a desperate attempt to win the elections. (Although the ploy didn't work, it certainly worsened the crisis.) In 2016, under the Macri government, the debt had begun to increase then in 2017, [a hundred-year bond was issued, which was pure folly](#). 2018 saw a headlong rush forward, with an IMF loan just before the elections. The whole episode can be seen as a case of a president accumulating debt in his own interests, to win the elections, without a moment's consideration of the interests of the Nation.

There is no international court of law competent to adjudicate on a country's debt towards a multilateral organism or private creditors. That is why the solution for a country is to exercise its sovereignty, in other words, for its government to rely upon jurisprudence, international law, domestic law, its own Constitution

As for a legal body competent to handle these matters, there is no International Debt Court. The question has been under debate for over a century and closely concerns Argentina. In the late 19th/early 20th century two important political figures and jurists, one Argentine and the

other Uruguayan, [Luis María Drago](#) and Carlos Calvo, vehemently took up this cause, also contesting the use of force by creditor powers like Great Britain, the United States, France Germany and Italy. Their action led to negotiations in The Hague, in the Netherlands. It was the first international conference of The Hague on the question of whether or not to use force to settle problems arising from debt. [During the negotiations between Drago, representing Argentina, and Porter, representing the United States, in 1906 - 1907](#), a constitution for an International Settlement Court to arbitrate disputes over sovereign debt was discussed but nothing came of it. During the crisis of the 1930s, once again there was talk of creating an international body, which again came to nothing. Then after the Argentine crisis of 2001, the First Deputy Managing Director of the IMF, Anne O. Krueger, also spoke of a mechanism for multilateral negotiation but yet again, no decision was reached. There is therefore no international court of law competent to adjudicate on a country's debt towards a multilateral organism or private creditors. That is why the solution for a country is to exercise its sovereignty, in other words, for its government to rely upon jurisprudence, international law, domestic law, its own Constitution, and to make a justified sovereign decision.

**Mugica Review: In contexts where debt is "financialized" and where there is automatic renewal, spread over multiple creditors whose identity is no longer known, how can you determine which part of the debt is odious and which creditors are complicit?**

A possible solution would be for a legitimate government, at a given point in time, to demand a register of creditors, and to negotiate only with bond-holders who declare themselves to the authorities

**Éric Toussaint:** An investment fund that buys up debt on the secondary market must also analyse the

country's economic situation. A securities buyer on the secondary market cannot simply say "I know nothing about this country's situation. I bought a bond and they must repay me". We know they do analyse the situation, and that is how the term "vulture funds" came into use. They are funds which buy up securities with the express intention of taking the country to court, knowing full well that it is in a dire economic situation, which is why the securities are being sold at 10 or 20% of their true nominal value. The vulture funds' strategy is to wait for an improvement in the situation, as happened in Argentina after 2005, to take the country to court. A possible solution would be for a legitimate government, at a given point in time, to demand a register of creditors, and to negotiate only with bond-holders who declare themselves to the authorities. They must be registered with the Argentine Consulate in the United States, Italy or whatever the bond-holder's country might be, which would enable international control. Jurisprudence exists on this subject, as in the case of Mexico against its creditors, mainly North-Americans, in the 1920s and '30s. Mexico made an agreement with a cartel of creditors presided by the JPMorgan Bank and on that occasion, it was stipulated that all bond-holders should register and present their securities [1], so that the Consulate could stamp them and the bond could no longer change hands on the strength of belonging to "the holder" without the buyer's name appearing anywhere.

**Mugica Review: In 2015, following a decision of the Hellenic Parliament, you coordinated the Truth Committee on Greek Public Debt. What was the result of that report and how was it used by the government?**

**Éric Toussaint:** The honest truth is that the Greek government simply ignored the audit committee and the Speaker's decision. Officially and in front of the Greek people the government supported it. [The Prime Minister came to the inaugural session of the audit committee's work on 4 April 2015 and also attended the presentation of its conclusions on 17 June 2015](#) but he was not on the same

wavelength regarding negotiation; indeed this turned out to be a disaster for Greece. In my view, [the case of Greece is a typical example of a government without the courage to confront its creditors](#); and the outcome of that lack of courage is that in Greece today, the ratio of public debt to GDP is almost 200 %. The situation is absolutely catastrophic: there has been no reduction of debt between 2015 and 2020. It is a disaster for Greece. The population is disillusioned and demoralized. Positive examples are Ecuador in 2007/2008 or Iceland in 2008; Greece in 2015 is a very sad example.

**Mugica Review : On the basis of what has been explained above, you maintain that Argentina's debt can be considered as "odious". Do you think we are empowered to refuse to pay it back?**

It is so important for the government to inform the citizens and associate them with the analysis of debts claimed

**Éric Toussaint:** Yes, I am certain that it is possible, but a country will only have the strength to go through with it if it relies on a very strong decision, based on arguments from international law and domestic law. That's why it is so important for the government to inform the citizens and associate them with the analysis of debts claimed. That way they will have the legitimacy to make the decision to repudiate the debt or suspend payments and be able to count on popular support. For a decision to be implemented, there has of course to be a confrontation with the creditors, but the relationship between financial interests and public authorities is never going to be a story of calm and friendly negotiations. It is a matter of the balance of power and confrontation. And to be frank, the moral support of Pope Francis and friendly declarations from other governments will never be enough. If the government of an indebted country is convinced that it has the right to refuse to pay, it must be extremely decisive in constructing a

balance of power with the creditors.

**Mugica Review : Considering the pandemic and the legal instruments that empower a State to decide to cease payments because of "a state of necessity", "a change of circumstances" or "in a case of force majeure", do you think Argentina has missed an opportunity to refuse to pay its debt?**

**Éric Toussaint:** Yes, an opportunity was missed at the end of 2019-beginning of 2020 in the first months of Alberto Fernandez's presidency but the initiative can still be taken back: an argument could be that the country had hoped for a little understanding but that now it is facing a second wave of the pandemic throughout the Americas. In such circumstances the government must take urgent measures, buy equipment to deal with the situation and prioritize the population's health. **In this case the decision to cease debt payments is independent of whether or not it is odious.** The operative problem would be "a state of necessity", "force majeure" or "a fundamental change of circumstances".

**Mugica Review: We often hear that beyond the legality of the issue, in practice, refusing to pay a debt, even an odious one, would come at an enormous cost for a country in terms of credit access for public and private sectors.**

**Éric Toussaint:** Evidence to the contrary can be found in several studies of this question, particularly by former senior officials of the Inter-American Development Bank like Ugo Panizza, who is now a university professor in Geneva. He published a study in 2011 which concluded that suspension of debt payment is the first step in economic recovery. He bases this claim on the cases of Argentina in 2001/2005 and of Russia in 1998/2003, amongst other examples.

In an article published by the *Journal of Development Economics* entitled "The elusive costs of sovereign defaults", Eduardo Levy Yeyati and Ugo Panizza present the results of their detailed research into defaults of payment for about forty countries.

One of their conclusions was as follows: "The periods of suspension of payment mark the beginning of economic recovery". It couldn't be clearer.

The idea that a country that suspends debt payments cannot return to the markets is thus ill-founded

In a collective work published in 2010 by OUP, [2] Joseph Stiglitz claims that Russia in 1998 and Argentina in the 2000s were the proof that unilateral suspension of debt repayment can be beneficial to countries that make this decision: "Both theory and evidence suggest that the threat of a cut-off of credit has probably been exaggerated." (p. 48).

Under this scenario the number of the firms that are forced into bankruptcy is lowered, both because of the lower interest rates and because of the improved overall economic performance of the economy that follows. As the economy strengthens, government tax revenues are increased - again improving the fiscal position of the government. [...] All this means that the government's fiscal position is stronger going forward, making it more (not less) likely that creditors will be willing to again provide finance." (p.48) He adds: "Empirically, there is little evidence in support of the position that a default leads to an extended period of exclusion from the market. Russia re-turned to the market within two years of its default which was admittedly a 'messy one' involving no prior consultation with creditors [...] Thus, in practice, the threat of credit being cut off appears not to be effective. (p. 49)

Several analyses show that there is competition between lenders. So if a country imposes a very large financial burden on its creditors, when the economic situation improves other potential lenders appear on the scene. Indeed their decision to grant a loan is based on the very fact that the country's situation has improved, its debt has been reduced and economic

growth has increased. The idea that a country that suspends debt payments cannot return to the markets is thus ill-founded.

**Mugica Review: What do you think will be the most likely scenario after the pandemic?**

Countries like Brazil, South Africa and countries of the North (like several European countries) are going to find themselves in an unprecedented situation, very difficult to resolve, with questions of possible suspension of payments, rescheduling the debt

and endless negotiations, amongst other things

**Éric Toussaint:** The situation will be worse in the immediate future because States will have increased their public debt substantially. For Europe, that is obvious. In my country, Belgium, the ratio of public debt to GDP was a little less than 100 % in 2019 and could officially exceed 120 % in 2021; France is in the same position. Italy, however, will reach 150%. The situation in countries of the South like Argentina, Brazil and Southern Africa will worsen. To face the economic crisis, States are looking

for fresh loans. The same is happening in the North. So my impression is that public debt crises will intensify over the next 5 or 10 years and that this will become a central issue on the international level. Countries like Brazil, South Africa and countries of the North (like several European countries) are going to find themselves in an unprecedented situation, very difficult to resolve, with questions of possible suspension of payments, rescheduling the debt and endless negotiations, amongst other things.

*Translated from the French by Vicki Briault and Christine Pagnouille for CADTM.*

## A blow against Mitsotakis and his liberticidal measures!

**28 November 2020, by Andreas Sartzekis**

We knew that with the explosion of Covid-19 infection this autumn, due solely to the policy of the ultra-liberal government, 17 November would be different, without a mass character, even if the unions and left-wing parties have organized in recent months beautiful demonstrations with all health precautions.

### The Covid, a pretext for gagging popular anger

Very early on, it was Chryssochoïdis, Minister of Police, who set the tone: banning all demonstrations... for health reasons. Faced with mass rejection of this policy, the last straw came with a ban on gatherings of more than three people (on pain of heavy fines)... between 15 and 18 November! As a result, a response on the ground was necessary, but even more limited this time, as the danger

of infection became a reality: police repression would break health precautions. But, although this is what happened on the 17th, with violent repression, tearing off masks, arrests in several towns, these liberticidal measures reinforced popular will to contest in the streets a measure worthy of the junta!

We saw a surprise rally of 250 militants of the KKE (Greek CP) next to the US embassy, laying of wreaths to the resistance by the cadres of the KKE, and of Syriza, "demonstration" of 6 deputies of Mera 25 (Varoufakis's party), and throughout the country, thousands of (very many young) activists of the anti-capitalist left, of the KKE, trade unionists, in rallies or demonstrations often repressed with rage, notably in Athens by cops furious at the initiatives imposed in the morning. But on the evening of the 17th, it was enough to see the annoyance of Chryssochoïdis: 17 November was a big slap in the face for the right!

### A first unitary step to be consolidated

This success must be an encouragement to the struggles and to the denunciation of the flagrant "urbanisation" of Prime Minister Mitsotakis and his clique, the next step being a national strike on 26 November. But to advance, it will be necessary to push very hard for unity of action, and it is necessary to underline a small important sign in the Greek sectarian context: a text protesting against the bans signed by KKE, Syriza, Mera 25 and many trade union activists. And joint initiatives here and there on 17 November. But we have work to do: on the one hand, the slogans of KKE on the 17th were often the self-celebration of KKE, on the other hand, a good part of the anti-capitalist left, including our comrades from NAR, the main group, favours only "disobedience" and withdrew its signatures from the "unitary" text because it was signed by the MPs Syriza and Mera 25. NAR also

criticizes the appearances of Syriza and Mera - who certainly did not mobilize their militants - although everything that was done on the 17th

was clearly perceived as weakening the right. So, more than ever before, of course an indispensable criticism of reformist paths, but also the need to build unity of action, with, why not, in

perspective a mass united demonstration against the social and health catastrophe this government embodies.

# From the Ground Up - the Climate Movement Gets in Shape for COP26

27 November 2020, by **Iain Bruce**

With Via Campesina and small farmers from South East Asia and South Africa to the Western Isles of Scotland, activists discussed the need to replace industrial agriculture with local, agroecological production as a way of getting food on our plates. Indigenous activists from Central America and the Amazon to Sulawesi talked about the struggle to defend their forests and lands from extractive industries, including the important issue of mining the minerals needed for electric motors. Oil and aviation workers, from the North Sea to the South Atlantic, debated alongside public transport campaigners from Glasgow and retrofitters from Leeds the need for a just transition to climate jobs that really responds to, and is steered by, the workers concerned. Feminist and Black Lives Matter activists from North and South America talked about the overlap between their mass protests and the climate struggle.

Veronica Gago, of the Ni Una Menos movement in Argentina, said we need to go beyond solidarity, and think in terms of building bridges between the different actions we take, wherever we are. One of the main leaders of the October 2019 uprising in Ecuador, the Indigenous leader Leonidas Iza, called for the climate movement, the feminist movement and the youth movement to agree on a worldwide uprising next year in the run up to Glasgow, "because capitalism threatens the end of humanity".

If anyone thought the pandemic had silenced the climate movement, this

event should have set them straight. It showed that this movement is now a key site where concerns, anger and proposals over the combined climate, health and economic crises are coming together. The British government under Boris Johnson, reflecting the consequences of the election of Joe Biden in the US, is now seeking to relaunch its image with burnished green credentials. The movement around COP26 has the potential to become a strong counter pole to this promotion of "Green Capitalism".

## Same storm, different boats

The COP26 Coalition issued an important second political statement a day before the event which acknowledged that the fact so many governments and corporations are talking about getting rid of fossil fuels is itself a victory for the years of street protests and resistance by front line communities. [3] But the movement should not trust these elites to follow through. The statement was signed by dozens of organisations within the Coalition and stated:

The global pandemic has made clear that the multiple crises we face today - climate breakdown, ecological destruction, racism, patriarchy, hunger, poverty, the mass displacement of peoples - are all interconnected. These crises

share common roots that see the earth's resources exploited for the benefit of the few at the cost of the many, and the poor and marginalised bear the worst consequences. We may all be in the midst of the same storm, but we are patently not all in the same boat.

This was the message taken into the centre of Glasgow on the second day of the event, as activists sailed a boat, decked in banners reading "Same Storm, Different Boats", down the River Clyde to the Scottish Events Campus where the COP will take place. [4] Standing next to the boat, the Coalition's Scottish Coordinator, Quan Nguyen, said: "We need the UK and Scottish Governments to acknowledge that their targets of net zero 2045 and 2050 are not only too late, but open loopholes for fossil fuel corporations who have caused the crisis in the first place to continue polluting and burning the planet... The Governments need to hold polluters to account, shut down fossil fuel corporations and fossil fuel sites. They need to stop exporting fossil fuel technology, and start paying reparations to countries and communities in the Global South."

## A diverse, militant, internationalism

## **movement**

To some extent, the From the Ground Up event showed that the movement around the COP26 Coalition has already broken beyond the NGO framework that gave rise to it. Those taking part are mainly young, probably more women than men, and fairly diverse, although this is an area it certainly wants to develop further. The tone is militant, and the content largely anti-capitalist, even if not everyone wants to use that kind of language. And it is resolutely internationalist.

It may have been a blessing in disguise that the big figures of the environmental movement – Greta Thunberg, Naomi Klein, AOC – couldn't make it. Their absence reinforced the sensation of a broad, horizontal, mass movement, reemerging from within the lockdown.

Big challenges certainly lie ahead. Sustaining the momentum and building on it will be one of them.

In the short term, there is the governmental Climate Ambition Summit on 12 December, which the Johnson government is organising together with the UN, France, Italy and Chile, to mark five years since the conclusion of the Paris Agreement. From the Coalition and the wider climate movement, we need to make our presence felt and raise those big questions about the promises being made, and the assumptions behind them.

In March there may be another, shorter online event of the Coalition, to talk more about strategies for action. In particular, plans will have to be developed for the kinds of protest that are needed at the G7 summit to be hosted somewhere in the UK in the summer 2021, and leading up to the COP itself in Glasgow 1-11 November 2021. The Glasgow COP will be preceded by a UN pre-summit in Milan, Italy 30 September – 2 October, and earlier preparatory talks, possibly in Bonn, Germany, at dates that are still to be decided. So these could also become targets for protests. But even if all these meetings do become physical events,

and even if social distancing is no longer a necessity by November, it is likely that the plans for the Glasgow COP will aim at decentralised activities – maybe culminating in a big event and protest in Glasgow itself in November 2021, combined with rolling protests in other parts of the world, and maybe online convergences too. The Fridays for the Future movement of schoolchildren striking for climate action has shown the possibility of wider action by workers through strike and protest action in workplaces.

Scottish politics are going to intersect with the run up to COP too. The demand for good, green jobs to build out of the pandemic will only grow, as Scotland likely becomes one of the parts of Europe worst hit by unemployment in 2021. The devolved Scottish government's record on climate action so far has been one of the weakest points of its governing party, the Scottish National Party (SNP). But if, as seems almost certain, the SNP wins a majority in next May's elections to the Scottish parliament or an overwhelming majority in alliance with the Scottish Green Party, the swelling support for independence and a new referendum will reach a crescendo. That means the months leading up to COP26 could well see a full-blown constitutional crisis of the British state, pitting the official hosts, the UK government of Boris Johnson, against the de-facto local hosts in the Scottish government, Glasgow City Council and the people of the city and Scotland. On the ground, Independence will be the big political issue of the day. Many in the Scottish climate movement have already taken a position in favour of this. But how this works out in the wider British movement could be more complicated.

## **Some absences from the movement**

There remain some absences in the COP movement that ought to be addressed. Although the strong presence of the Global South was one of the most impressive aspects of this online gathering, it was uneven. The

participation from Africa was weaker. So was that from East Asia, to some extent South Asia, and the Middle East. More surprisingly perhaps, mainland European climate movements were largely absent. The questions over EU climate policy are ones that need to be taken very seriously at COP26, especially if the extreme centre around Biden seeks to team up with the EU elites to reassert their hegemony.

Another relative absence has been that of the radical left, both in Scotland and more widely across Britain. This is not so much a problem for the climate movement as it is for the left itself. Individuals of course took part. A few of the environmental campaigns have left-wing activists centrally involved. But there was little sense of a political contribution or exchange, much less symbiosis, at least in any positive, organised way. There may be good reasons for this, historical, generational, cultural. But they ought to be addressed, sensitively, and in the first place by the left itself, with a reorientation towards an ecosocialist perspective. Fortunately, these gaps seem to exist far less, if at all, in the Global South.

## **“A fundamental reckoning with and transformation of our economic, social, and political systems”**

In the end, the central message of this reemerging climate movement is one that is, or should be, shared by the left as a whole, and well beyond too. In the words of that Coalition statement [5]:

We are in uncharted waters. The world is on track to breach the carbon budget for 1.5oC global warming well before 2030. Our role in the run-up to COP26 must be to maintain at the forefront of public consciousness what this

warming of 1.5oC means: for our lives and for our livelihoods, for the interests of all citizens globally

and for the future of our planetary ecosystem. And what it would take to avoid: nothing less than a fundamental reckoning with and

transformation of our economic, social, and political systems.

# Local elections indicate a new moment in Brazil

26 November 2020, by **Bruno Magalhães**

It was the first election after Bolsonaro came to power and had as great defeats the candidates supported by the president, in a movement very different from the Bolsonarism electoral phenomenon in 2018. Of the thirteen mayoral candidates nominated by Bolsonaro throughout the country, nine were defeated in the first round, and of the 45 candidates for councilman with more prominence among the Bolsonarism holders, only ten were elected. The traditional right grew again and occupied part of the space conquered by the radical Bolsonarism holders two years ago.

On the other hand, the combative left represented by the PSOL conquered an unprecedented advance in the history of the party, with the election of 88 of council seats throughout the country - with significant number of women and black representatives - and the arrival to the second round in the city hall of two capitals: São Paulo, the largest city in the country, with comrade Guilherme Boulos, and Belém, a large city in the Amazon region, with comrade Edmilson Costa.

## Brazil is not an island

As internationalists, we cannot think of the Brazilian elections detached from the context of struggle that spread to Latin America and the United States in 2020. In 2019, the protests that overthrew the governor of Puerto Rico and the popular revolts against neoliberalism that began in Chile and Ecuador began days of

struggle that developed on the American continent and intensified in recent months. The incredible antiracist revolt in the United States, the resistance to the parliamentary coup in Bolivia, the marches of the Colombian youth and now the uprising of the Peruvian people show that the working class in the continent faces a scenario of great polarization and continues fighting, far from being defeated.

All these processes are significant and still open. The uprising of the U.S. colony in the Caribbean has put the left of Puerto Rico in a new situation that is now reflected in the election of comrade Rafael Bernabe to the Senate, as well as the Ecuadorian uprising that continues to express itself in the country's political struggle. In Chile, cradle and possible grave of neoliberalism, the people - especially the youth - overthrew the constitution of Pinochet and gave a stop to the decades of mercantilization of life, seeking new models with the next constituent. And in Bolivia broad sections of the population rejected the coup and murderous government of Jeanine Áñez and the openly fascist regionalist groups, bringing MAS in the process of renewal back to power.

The black uprising over George Floyd's death in the U.S. took place in this context of struggles, striking at the international authoritarian conservatism that has Donald Trump as its principal model. The rebellion at the center of the empire, in which the masses defeated the repressive state apparatus, definitively altered the correlation of forces not only in "America" (as the U.S. legislative

elections indicate), but throughout the American continent. We have no illusions about Biden, a legitimate representative of the imperialist bourgeoisie, but Trump's defeat was the institutional change that most positively impacted the Latin American class struggle, with strong repercussions in Brazil.

And today we also see a democratic insurrection in Peru, very interesting because it has as one of its axes the fight against corruption that, unlike Brazil, has not been abandoned by the left or captured by the right. The political instability there has overthrown presidents, disorganized traditional political parties, and opened more and more space for action by socialists in the struggle for more democratic spaces in a country with a great tradition of class struggle.

The recent Brazilian elections are a distorted reflection of this multifaceted scenario. They are a reflection because they show the same trends as other international processes and are distorted because their results occurred without the pressure of the streets we see in other countries. Therefore we can see an element of polarization: the radical left advancing while traditional and bureaucratized progressive parties lose space; but we also see an apparent tendency toward political "normalization" due to the absence of street influence in the electoral process, which is expressed in the growth of traditional right-wing parties and the dehydration of the stock market.

# The Bolsonarism Crisis

Bolsonarism is still a robust and dangerous political force in Brazil's political reality, but in these two years the Bolsonaro government has experienced a series of crises that demonstrate its limitations. First, because the initial composition of its government already engendered great contradictions by bringing together the military (including many of the active ones), ultra-liberal economists (represented by Economy Minister Paulo Guedes), traditional corrupt politicians and sectors of judicial activism represented by Sérgio Moro, judge of Operation Car Wash and Justice Minister appointed by the Bolsonaro at the beginning of the government that directed the main investigations to cover cases of corruption in the government of the Workers' Party (PT).

This Bolsonarism composition, combined with rhetoric of violence against the left and social movements, represented a real risk of closure of the regime at the beginning of the government and led many organizations of the left to fear and impressionism. However, the very internal contradictions of the extreme right's power condominium led to the successive crises faced by the Bolsonaro government.

An example of these crises came with the corruption issue, with the disclosure of the "Queiroz case" in which Fabrício Queiroz, a former ally and advisor to Bolsonaro, was discovered in a money laundering scheme involving the president's family, notably his son Flavio Bolsonaro and first lady Michelle. Queiroz is a former police officer with proven connections to paramilitary groups in Rio de Janeiro (who executed PSOL councilwoman Marielle Franco in 2018) and was on the run from justice after the scandal was spread, being found in a house owned by Bolsonaro's own lawyer. Throughout the process, it is remarkable the effort of Bolsonaro in using all the institutional tools he has to defend his son.

This scenario made Sérgio Moro's position unsustainable, as he had electoral pretensions and stood as a "paladin of justice," making Moro resign in April 2020 and generating the first major rupture in the Bolsonarism base, turning away from the government a sector that saw him as an expression of the anti-corruption struggle and bringing him closer to the traditional and corrupt right so criticized by the president before the elections. As a symbol of this change, the government today has as one of its main defenders Roberto Jefferson, symbolic leadership of the parliamentary group called "centrão" (Central-Wing) (parties that operate opportunistically without clear political ideology) that was arrested as a consequence of the Mensalão corruption scandal that took place in the first Lula administration.

The deepening of the relationship between Bolsonaro and the traditional right wing parties notably weakened his "outsider" discourse to the extent that he approached right wing parties that were also at the root of the Lula and Dilma governments. His neoliberal base, which expected deep economic reforms, saw the weight of Paulo Guedes diminish more and more as the government approached the political groups it had criticized so much before.

Moreover, his extremist rhetoric was not enough to mobilize and organize a neo-fascist militancy in his favor, which occurred with the failure to legalize the Alliance for Brazil party, a bet by Bolsonaro for a political organization proper to the extreme right with violent discourse and evidently neo-fascist traits (his number in the ballot box would be 38, inspired by the caliber of the most popular firearm in the country). Despite the enormous danger represented by the "militias," paramilitary gangs in the state of Rio de Janeiro made up mainly of police officers who work with extortion, misdemeanors, and drug trafficking, and have a great political reference in the Bolsonaro family, it is important to note that no "fascist bands" have formed in the Brazilian middle class, such as the so-called "youth unions" in Bolivia or the white supremacists in the US.

The government's scientific negationism was also a negative mark before important sectors of society. Its denial of the environmental catastrophe that hits the Amazon through arson and deforestation, in addition to the unscientific rhetoric in the face of the coronavirus pandemic and even against the vaccine itself for this disease caused great worldwide commotion and directly influenced the displacement of sectors of the right that seek to differentiate themselves from the obscurantism represented by Bolsonaro

Broken since 2019 with the PSL (Partido Social Liberal), the small "rental party" he used to come to power, Bolsonaro is today on the verge of entering some traditional party and moving further and further away from the fallacious position of "new" in politics, which indicates the emptying of its ideological support base but may also result in the construction of a new political base that reorganizes the right. Bolsonaro continues to be an enormous danger for Brazil, but is losing more and more credibility before the people - especially among women and youth - which places new tasks on Brazilian socialists.

## Hope takes up positions

The PSOL's great victory in the local elections raises a number of important reflections. The countless evidences that we live in a scenario of interregnum and polarization in Latin America and the United States have overturned the impressionistic and paralyzing hypotheses of the supposed "conservative wave" defended by many comrades and leftist organizations in Brazil, including within the PSOL. On the contrary, we see that the world crisis and the very crisis of US imperialism radicalize the political scenario, emptying the moderate center-right and center-left poles in favor of alternatives that present themselves bluntly against the current political system.

A situation of political and social polarization does not necessarily mean a balance of forces, and in recent

years we have experienced a polarization in which the right-wing pole advanced but also suffered great resistance. The example of Ele Não!, a day of gigantic demonstrations against Bolsonaro before the 2018 elections, was one of the first strong signs of this resistance, which was consolidated in other demonstrations such as the “Education Tsunami” against the cuts in funds for public universities in 2019 and now shows its fruits in the local elections.

Brazilian local elections were never easy for the left because we fought against the economic power of traditional political groups and even mafias that control basic public services such as public transportation, children’s education and even health care. Clientelism and even vote buying are a real problem in local election processes, making it very difficult for city councils to compete.

However, never have so many black men and women been elected, and the strong electoral expression of blackness indicates, as do the street movements, the structural importance of the antiracist agenda in political struggle. The electoral success of representatives of historically excluded sectors of society and the protagonism of the PSOL as the main party tool that gives voice to these representatives indicate a qualitative change in the political scenario of the country and the advance of a democratic and leftist camp in response to the successive absurdities of the Bolsonaro government.

This contrasts with the performance of traditional left-wing parties such as the Workers’ Party (PT), which went from 256 to 179 victories in local governments, and the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), which lost half of its governing mayors. This process of weakening the PT is even more significant because the party won no capital in the first round and runs the second round in only one

(Recife, capital of Pernambuco), with only 8% of the vote in São Paulo and 6th in the city that was once the party’s fortress. The PCdoB is disputing the city hall in the second round in Porto Alegre, capital of Rio Grande do Sul with a great tradition of voting on the left.

The unprecedented arrival of the PSOL in the second round in São Paulo with Boulos, as well as the result of Belém, are significant victories that confirm the argument of the qualitative change in the situation lived in the country. The PSOL consolidates itself as a left-wing alternative, aware of the need for the broadest unity of action against fascism and the extreme right but with an independent and radical profile to give concrete answers to the difficult questions presented in a continental country. This new stature achieved by the party changes its characterization from being “the rebel brother of the PT” to affirming itself more and more as the pole of a radical and popular left that affirms itself against sectarianism and opportunism.

## A future of possibilities and risks

Great possibilities are opening up in Brazil in the midst of the evident risks caused by the extreme-right government and the deepening of the social and economic crisis that could occur from 2021 onwards, especially with the possible end of the emergency financial aid distributed due to the coronavirus pandemic. The consequences of the pandemic such as bankruptcies and the very high rate of unemployment, as well as the neoliberal government’s refusal to carry out deeper distributive measures, as well as a priority export policy that has driven up the price of food and the cost of living in general, are data that form a scenario of

poverty and instability that can be as explosive as in other countries.

Likewise, Bolsonaro’s movement toward traditional parties, abandoning his narrative of “new politics” but maintaining the call for a deeply conservative agenda, does not mean a defeat of the Brazilian far-right project, but a relocation that allows for a strengthening of this field on new bases of governability. Political violence tends to grow, as already seen in these elections against opposition candidates in general and the PSOL in particular in several states (and with the case of comrade congresswoman Talíria Petrone as the most significant), as well as the widespread dissemination of fake news that absurdly associate the PSOL with crimes such as pedophilia or drug trafficking.

As in the continent as a whole, the Brazilian socialists are facing a risky path but with great possibilities. Electoral victories increase our responsibilities, including because possible demoralizations and failures will serve as arguments for future attacks by the extreme right.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the only way out of this scenario is to respond as a whole in an international manner, increasingly articulating the social organizations and movements that do not face in each country the neoliberal and authoritarian exits. The deep connections that reality establishes between the struggles of the peoples of Latin America and the United States open a new field of action that demands this articulation in an increasingly deep way. This is the task of the socialists of the American continent at this moment.

24 November 2020

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# Ecosocialism and/or Degrowth?

25 November 2020, by **Michael Löwy**

- the concept of “degrowth” is insufficient to define an alternative program;
- it does not make clear if degrowth can be achieved in the framework of capitalism or not;
- it does not distinguish between activities that need to be reduced and those that need to be developed.

It is important to take into account that the degrowth current, which is particularly influential in France, is not homogeneous: inspired by critics of the consumer society, Henri Lefebvre, Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, and of the “technical system,” Jacques Ellul, it contains different political outlooks. There are at least two poles which are quite distant, if not opposed: on one side, critics of Western culture tempted by cultural relativism (Serge Latouche), on the other side, universalist left ecologists (Vincent Cheynet, Paul Ariès).

Serge Latouche, who is well known worldwide, is one of the most controversial French degrowth theoreticians. For sure, some of his arguments are legitimate: demystification of “sustainable development,” critique of the religion of growth and “progress,” call for a cultural revolution. But his wholesale rejection of Western humanism, of the Enlightenment and of representative democracy, as well as his cultural relativism (no universal values) and his immoderate celebration of the Stone Age are very much open to criticism. But there is worse. His critique of ecosocialist development proposals for countries of the Global South — more clean water, schools and hospitals — as “ethnocentric,” “Westernizing” and “destructive of local ways of life,” is quite unbearable.

Last but not least, his argument that there is no need to talk about capitalism, since this critique “has already been done, and done well, by

Marx” is not serious: it is as if one would say that there is no need to denounce the productivist destruction of the planet because this has already been done, “and done well,” by André Gorz (or Rachel Carson).

Nearer to the Left is the universalist current, represented in France by the journal *La Décroissance* (Degrowth), even if one can criticize the French “republicanism” of some of its theoreticians (Vincent Cheynet, Paul Ariès). Unlike the first, this second pole of the degrowth movement has many points of convergence — despite occasional polemics — with the Global Justice movements (ATTAC), the ecosocialists and the radical left parties: extension of gratuity [goods, services, or amenities that are offered for free], predominance of use-value over exchange-value, reduction of labor time, struggle against social inequalities, development of “non-market” activities, reorganization of production according to social needs and the protection of the environment.

Many degrowth theoreticians seem to believe that the only alternative to productivism is to stop growth altogether, or to replace it by negative growth, i.e. to drastically reduce the excessively high level of consumption of the population by cutting by half the expenditure of energy, by renouncing individual houses, central heating, washing machines etc. Since these and similar measures of draconian austerity risk being quite unpopular, some of them — including such an important author as Hans Jonas, in his *Principle Responsibility* — play with the idea of a sort of “ecological dictatorship.”

Against such pessimistic views, socialist optimists believe that technical progress and the use of renewable sources of energy will permit an unlimited growth and abundance, so that each can receive “according to his needs.”

It seems to me that these two schools share a purely quantitative conception of — positive or negative — “growth,” or of the development of productive forces. There is a third position, which seems to me more appropriate: a qualitative transformation of development. This means putting an end to the monstrous waste of resources by capitalism, based on the production, on a large scale, of useless and/or harmful products: the armaments industry is a good example, but a great part of the “goods” produced in capitalism, with their inbuilt obsolescence, have no other usefulness but to generate profit for the big corporations.

The issue is not “excessive consumption” in the abstract, but the prevalent type of consumption, based as it is on conspicuous acquisition, massive waste, mercantile alienation, obsessive accumulation of goods, and the compulsive purchase of pseudo-novelties imposed by “fashion”. A new society would orient production towards the satisfaction of authentic needs, beginning with those which could be described as “biblical” — water, food, clothing, housing — but including also the basic services: health, education, transport, culture.

How to distinguish the authentic from the artificial, factitious (artificially created) and makeshift needs? The last ones are induced by mental manipulation, i.e. advertisement. The advertising system has invaded all spheres of human life in modern capitalist societies: not only food and clothing, but sports, culture, religion and politics are shaped according to its rules. It has invaded our streets, mail boxes, TV-screens, newspapers, landscapes, in a permanent, aggressive and insidious way, and it decisively contributes to habits of conspicuous and compulsive consumption. Moreover, it wastes an astronomical amount of oil, electricity, labor time, paper, chemicals, and

other raw materials — all paid by the consumers — in a branch of “production” which is not only useless, from a human viewpoint, but directly in contradiction with real social needs.

While advertising is an indispensable dimension of the capitalist market economy, it would have no place in a society in transition to socialism, where it would be replaced by information on goods and services provided by consumer associations. The criteria for distinguishing an authentic from an artificial need, is its persistence after the suppression of advertisement (Coca Cola!). Of course, during some years, old habits of consumption would persist, and nobody has the right to tell the people what their needs are. The change in the patterns of consumption is a historical process, as well as an educational challenge.

Some commodities, such as the individual car, raise more complex problems. Private cars are a public nuisance, killing and maiming hundreds of thousand people yearly on a world scale, polluting the air in the great towns, with dire consequences for the health of children and older people, and significantly contributing to climate change. However, they correspond to a real need, by transporting people to their work, home or leisure. Local experiences in some European towns with ecologically minded administrations show that it is possible, and approved by the majority of the population, to progressively limit the part of the individual car in circulation, to the advantage of buses and trams.

In a process of transition to ecosocialism, where public transportation, above or underground, would be vastly extended and free of charge for the users, and where pedestrians and cyclists will have protected lanes, the private car would have a much smaller role than in bourgeois society, where it has become a fetishized commodity, promoted by insistent and aggressive advertisement, a prestige symbol, a sign of identity.

In the US, a driving license is the recognized ID — and the car is a center of personal, social and erotic

life.

It will be much easier, in the transition to a new society, to drastically reduce the transportation of goods by trucks — responsible for terrible accidents, and high levels of pollution — replacing it by the train, or by what the French call *ferroustage* (trucks transported in trains from one town to the other): only the absurd logic of capitalist “competitiveness” explains the dangerous growth of the truck-system.

Yes, the pessimists will answer, but individuals are moved by infinite aspirations and desires, that have to be controlled, checked, contained and if necessary repressed, and this may need some limitations on democracy. Now, ecosocialism is based on a wager, which was already Marx’s: the predominance, in a society without classes and liberated of capitalist alienation, of “being” over “having,” i.e. of free time for the personal accomplishment by cultural, sportive, playful, scientific, erotic, artistic and political activities, rather than the desire for an infinite possession of products.

Compulsive acquisitiveness is induced by the commodity fetishism inherent in the capitalist system, by the dominant ideology and by advertisement: nothing proves that it is part of an “eternal human nature,” as the reactionary discourse wants us to believe.

As Ernest Mandel emphasized: “The continual accumulation of more and more goods (with declining “marginal utility”) is by no means a universal and even predominant feature of human behaviour. The development of talents and inclinations for their own sake; the protection of health and life; care for children; the development of rich social relations ... all these become major motivations once basic material needs have been satisfied.”

This does not mean that there will not arise conflicts, particularly during the transitional process, between the requirements of environmental protection and social needs, between ecological imperatives and the necessity of developing basic infrastructures, particularly in the poor countries, between popular

consumer habits and the scarcity of resources. Such contradictions are inevitable: it will be the task of democratic planning, in an ecosocialist perspective, liberated from the imperatives of capital and profit-making, to solve them, by a pluralist and open discussion, leading to decision-making by society itself. Such a grassroots and participative democracy is the only way, not to avoid errors, but to permit self-correction, of its own mistakes, by society collectively.

What could be the relations between ecosocialists and the degrowth movement? In spite of the disagreements, can there be an active alliance around common objectives? In a book published some years ago, *La décroissance est-elle souhaitable?* (Is degrowth desirable?), French ecologist Stéphane Lavignotte proposes such an alliance. He acknowledges that there are many controversial issues between both viewpoints. Should one emphasize the social class relations and the struggle against inequalities or the denunciation of the unlimited growth of the productive forces? What is more important, individual initiatives, local experiences, voluntary simplicity, or changing the productive apparatus and the capitalist “megamachine”?

Lavignotte refuses to choose, and proposes to associate these two complementary practices. The challenge is, he argues, to combine the struggle for the ecological class interest of the majority, i.e. the non-owners of capital, and the politics of active minorities for a radical cultural transformation. In other words, to achieve, without hiding the inevitable disagreements, a “political composition” of all those who have understood that the survival of life on the planet and of humanity in particular are contradictory to capitalism and productivism, and therefore look for the way out of this destructive and inhumane system.

As an ecosocialist, and as a member of the Fourth International, I share this viewpoint. The coming together of all varieties of anti-capitalist ecology is an important step towards the urgent and necessary task of stopping the suicidal course of the present

civilization — before it is too late.

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# Towards a test of strength

24 November 2020, by **Pierre Rousset**

The government is threatening severe repression. The democracy movement is calling for increased mobilization. The first key date is 25 November;

The militaro-monarchist oligarchy that controls Thai institutions would like to put a definitive end to the pro-democracy mobilizations that have been going on for months. [6] The days of 17-18 November showed that it is not so easy to do so. The confrontation in Bangkok between police and activists lasted almost 6 hours. [7] In spite of powerful water cannons (with coloured water sometimes containing irritating chemicals), riot tanks, tear gas, barbed wire, the presence of armed ultra-monarchists and at the cost of at least 55 wounded (including 6 shot), the demonstrators broke through the roadblocks and were able to gather in front of the parliament (with the security forces retreating behind its gates).

The live-ammunition shootings against the activists of the democratic movement represent a very worrying escalation of violence. It is notably provoked by the intervention, encouraged by the government, of ultra-royalist armed groups, often paramilitaries, such as the loyal Thais (Loyal Thais, Thai Phakdi group) or the Yellow Shirts (the colour of royalty in Thailand) who already 10 years ago targeted the Red Shirts, supporters of the elected government of Thaksin Shinawara. [8]

As a sign of the times, young monks have formed the "New Religion Reform Group" which demands the separation of church and state and an end to the involvement of religion in profit-making economic activities. It thus challenges the official authority

of the Buddhist clergy, the Sangha Supreme Council, which forms the third pillar of the conservative order in Thailand, along with the royal family and the army. [9]

In the face of these developments and the scandal caused in Germany by his action, the absentee king Rama X and the queen left their residence in Bavaria to return permanently this time, at least it seems, to Bangkok – which the royal couple had refused to do when the Covid epidemic hit the kingdom and the economy collapsed (an indifference that shocked many).

The dreaded "crime" of *lèse-majesté* had not been used for some time. [10] Prime Minister General Prayuth announced on 19 November that he would use it again. This announcement sounds like a declaration of war when he states that "all existing laws" can be used against the pro-democracy movement.

The regime is trying to divide the front line of rejection it faces by, for example, talking about reforms to secondary school students who are now standing up against the archaism of the education system – unsuccessfully, for the time being.

More and more students are speaking out against the moral corset to which they are subject, the rigid hierarchy and authoritarianism of the teaching profession, the lack of freedom of expression and the stifling conservatism of the curriculum. One group, calling itself the Bad Student, adds to the core demands of the democratic movement the demand for a fundamental overhaul of the education system. It denounces abusive and humiliating teacher behaviour (such as cutting hair as

punishment) or the continuation of corporal punishment despite its official prohibition. It calls for better protection of LGBT women and students. One student, wearing a school uniform, demonstrated, with her mouth taped shut, holding up a sign: "I was sexually abused by teachers. School is not a safe place." [11]

Thailand's growing democracy movement has clarified its legal claims. It is now presenting 10 amendments to the Constitution (with the support of more than one hundred thousand people) in order to guarantee the constitutional character of the monarchy and the depoliticization of the armed forces. It calls for the convocation of a Constituent Assembly. In response, Parliament envisages a constitutional process under its own control, but rejects the amendments.

One of the great qualities of the Thai movement is to allow many "skills" to contribute to the construction of the edifice of the struggle. For example, the amendments to the Constitution were written with the help of the Internet Dialogue on Law Reform (iLaw), which has been working for years on drafting a democratic constitution, and now sponsors it.

The pro-democracy movement has joined the #MilkTeaAlliance, which was launched on Twitter by activists in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Thailand committed to the democratic struggle. [12] In all three countries, tea is drunk with milk – but not in China. Links are being forged throughout the region to resist the backward-looking logic of the Cold War and the risk of (in this case Chinese) dependence. A new pan-

Asiaticism is emerging, a development that may prove to be very important. It also affirms, beyond its regional identity, its community of struggle with the Chilean people and the struggles, throughout the world, for democracy and pluralism.

Against all odds, the pro-democracy movement has kept its humour. The seat of the Parliament is on the bank of the Chao Phraya River that runs through Bangkok. To symbolise its "attack", the activists have brought

giant inflatable ducks, in the image of a child's toy, which have become their "Military Fleet". More practically, they acted as a barrage in front of the police water cannons (like the "turtles" formed by rows of umbrellas inherited from the demonstrations in Hong Kong). Here are the police forces, all dressed in black, challenged by walls of yellow ducks! Similarly, as a symbolic game, militants dressed as tyrannosaurs have been expelled from a shopping centre: in tyrannosaurs, there is "tyrant"...

The pro-democracy movement thus keeps its liveliness, its inventiveness, its joy. The threats it has to face are no less, as shown by the remarks made on 30 October by a member of the Senate, close to the Prime Minister, who did not hesitate to mention, against him, the assassination of Samuel Paty: "I do not know if the situation will lead to something like decapitation in France. But there could be a madman, a third party, or a planned attack."

## Hugo Blanco: "I was neither a 'Castroite guerrilla' nor a 'terrorist'"

23 November 2020, by **Hugo Blanco**

**Roberto Ochoa: Are you aware of the turmoil caused by the screening of the documentary *Hugo Blanco, Río Profundo*?**

Hugo Blanco: Yes, I am aware of the turmoil caused in Peru and internationally. And I am also moved by the multiple expressions of solidarity that reach me from several places in Peru and around the world. From those who are leading struggles close to mine, but also from young people who until then did not know of my existence, but who are now interested in my trajectory of struggles.

Every day, dozens of solidarity messages reach me and my daughter Carmen by email and other social networks. I thank all these expressions of solidarity, including those of personalities, unions and organizations who have taken a stand. Once again, national and international solidarity comforts me, as was the case in the 1960s when I was threatened with the death penalty, during the whole trial and when I was a prisoner in Arequipa and El Frontón. And also during other attempts to eliminate or stigmatize me which took place later, for example in the 1980s.

**Roberto Ochoa: Did you like the documentary?**

Hugo Blanco: The documentary is constructed from the point of view of a young woman, whose life was influenced as much by the struggles for the land, indirectly through the tales of her father, as by the bloody historical processes of the decade. 1980-1990.

Thus the documentary starts from the filmmaker's perceptions, but at the same time it contributes to recovering fragments of the history of collective struggles in Peru and helps new generations to know the history of collective struggles, which is not normally what is taught in schools. It is therefore very important that this documentary be screened in the provinces and localities of the country, as has happened in recent months, so that young people understand that the collective struggles of their ancestors have opened up breaches for their rights. This is in opposition to sectors which, although intending to fight injustices, believe themselves to be the owners of "the truth" and try to impose it by force.

Personally, what I consider to be most important in the trajectory of my life is

the struggle for the land to belong to whoever works it, the organization of this struggle in a democratic way by making decisions in assemblies and the demand for the dignity of the indigenous and peasant population. And it is also important to remember the consequences that these struggles have for social activists, in my personal case the long prison sentence in the penitentiary on El Frontón Island.

But I am neither a filmmaker nor a librarian, unlike Malena Martínez. So she is the one who knows why she dealt with certain aspects in the film and not others. And I appreciate that the documentary also opened the way for reflections and discussions on these processes. As well as interviews like this which allow me to say what I consider important.

**Roberto Ochoa: Retired soldiers contest the screening of the documentary, calling it "an apology for terrorism" and calling you a "Castroite guerrilla". How would you answer them?**

Hugo Blanco: I would like to clarify that I was neither a "Castroite guerrilla" nor a "terrorist". The collective process in which I

participated was a reaction against the abuse and exploitation of the peasantry of La Convención and against the servility of the police towards the feudal-type latifundists, who abused their power and exercised violence against the peasants. So, the assembly of delegates of the indigenous peasantry of the province of La Convención (department of Cuzco) decided to organize armed self-defence, and this assembly democratically appointed me to lead this self-defence. The Quechua peasantry of the Provincial Federation of Peasants of La Convención and Lares (FEPCACYL) initiated the agrarian reform that liquidated the semi-feudal latifundium, putting the land into the hands of those who work it. Seeing this, the indigenous people and other peasants of the Peruvian highlands also began or continued their respective struggles for the right to land and against the system of large estates.

**Roberto Ochoa: A year ago, we celebrated 50 years of the Velasquist agrarian reform . If you specifically fought for this reform, why were you deported by General Velasco? [13]**

Hugo Blanco: As I told you, the Quechua peasantry of the Provincial Federation of Peasants of La Convención and Lares (FEPCACYL) initiated the agrarian reform which liquidated the semi-feudal latifundium, putting the land into the hands of those who work it.

These events inspired other indigenous people and peasants of the Peruvian highlands to begin reclaiming land from the great landowners who for centuries had usurped the land of the indigenous people.

Faced with these processes which threatened to upset and overwhelm the system, General Velasco attempted to seek a solution that did not threaten the root of the land problem, a historical problem of the American continent since the invasion and conquest. He thus initiated a process of agrarian reform, that is to say of redistribution of land, but in conciliation with the big landowners.

Velasco therefore defended the interests of the capitalist system, which wanted to get rid of the feudal vestiges to move to a system of land exploitation more suited to capitalism. However, I obeyed the orders of peasant organizations which wanted the land to be not only worked, but also organized according to their own criteria, probably inspired by historical forms of organization of agriculture.

I was pursued and arrested under the presidency of Belaunde Terry [14]. Then, thanks to a coup, General Velasco became president. After some time he amnestied me and other comrades who had fought for the right to land. However, faced with my refusal to cooperate with his government, he forced me to live in Lima and not to return to the sierra. A punishment for someone whose base of struggle is in the countryside. Probably, Velasco feared that I would reintegrate myself into the peasant struggle.

As I did not agree with this measure, he then chose to deport me, which is unconstitutional, since you cannot deport citizens from their own country.

**Roberto Ochoa: Do you believe that this reform has worked?**

Hugo Blanco: Velasco's agrarian reform has only partially worked. Not only because the redistribution and the new organization of land were carried out vertically, according to the criteria of the state agrarian officials, but also because the peasantry had to pay the usurpers, descendants of the conquerors, for their own land. These peasants who had been unpaid serfs had to pay for their land, thus remaining without money for tools, seeds, fertilizers, for the education of their children, medicines, etc.

Later, there was a neoliberal land counter-reform, meaning that although the large estates as such no longer exist, it is today the agro-exporting companies - especially on the coast - that control immense stretches of land. The land is not cultivated to meet the food needs of Peruvians, but in order to provide food for other countries. Thus, in Peru,

located in the middle of the Andes - historically one of the agrarian centres of the world, which had domesticated foods like potatoes, quinoa, maize, etc. - our population suffers from malnutrition. And this is happening scandalously and overwhelmingly in rural areas.

**Roberto Ochoa: The historian and archaeologist Luis Guillermo Lumbreras told us, in a recent interview, that "Velasco corresponded to an international strategy to prevent processes like the one that occurred in Peru with the Shining Path [15]. It was not an exclusively Peruvian initiative. In fact, we built a platform for state action to try to prevent the success of major popular demands. One of these demands was the question of oil, of land reform... ". Do you share this opinion?**

Hugo Blanco: I share this analysis. It was a time when the capitalist system saw that the unjust and unequal distribution of land throughout Latin America could lead to a social explosion, multiple and synchronized, and that this should be avoided. They saw that the struggle for land was gaining strength in several places in the Latin American region, this time not only on the basis of unjust access to land, but also inspired by the Cuban revolution which, a few months after it began, initiated an agrarian reform.

Therefore, either they carried out land reforms themselves under government control, or they ran the risk of land reforms, which would not be limited to this point, but could develop into revolutions that would challenge not only inequalities in relation to the possession of land, but which might call into question inequalities at all levels.

That is why, in country after country, during the 1960s and early 1970s, they hastened or "were pushed" to carry out land reforms, partially mitigating injustices in the countryside and thus slowing down peasant struggles.

**Roberto Ochoa: A personal question. Why are you in Sweden and not in Mexico?**

Hugo Blanco: My son Marco David and his partner, who live in Germany, were going to have a baby; my partner Ana and I wanted to be there. Before the birth of my granddaughter, I took the opportunity to visit my daughter Carmen who lives in Sweden. But, a few days before my arrival in Sweden, the pandemic broke out and I am staying there until the world health situation is normalized and I can return to Mexico where my partner lives. Considering my age, I belong to the group that runs the greatest risks and travelling right now would not make sense at all.

**Roberto Ochoa: When was the last time you were in Cuzco?**

Hugo Blanco: I made a short visit last year, and until three years ago I lived in Lima, so I could go there often. I really like Cuzco, which is like my mother, and I remember a song in Quechua, learned when I was a child: "Qosqo llaqta / Ohapay mamay / Inka yawarniq samisqan" [16].

**Roberto Ochoa: Do you maintain contact with the peasants with whom you fought in La Convención?**

Hugo Blanco: About six years ago, I celebrated my 80th birthday by walking through emblematic places of these struggles and by visiting my comrades from La Convención. It was very important to me. Unfortunately, many peasants belonging to my generation, along with whom I have struggled, do not master the Internet, but sometimes when their children or grandchildren communicate with me, they transmit their messages to me. Recently, it was very painful for me to learn, through his granddaughter, of the death of Gerardo Carpio, one of those who fought alongside me in the self-defence units.

And now, with the turmoil caused by the documentary, several grandchildren of my comrades-in-arms at La Convención have contacted me, as they also see these attacks as attacks on the struggles of their fathers and grandfathers. Young people from other places have also contacted me, they are the children of people that I have accompanied in their struggles, whether on the theme

of the land as in Puno in the 1980s or in struggles against extractivism: in Ayabaca and Tambogrande, in Piura, Celendin y Bambarca, in Cajamarca, in various places of the department of Cuzco, such as for example Espinar, Valle de Tamba in Arequipa, etc. They contact me saying that they remember me when they were children or that their fathers told them that they knew me and sometimes they tell me that they themselves are also involved in current struggles, messages that arouse in me hopes for the future. For example, the united union of civil construction workers in La Convención spoke out a few days ago to support me. I take it that the sons or grandchildren of those who fought with me for the land are in the ranks of this union or that these young people carry the collective memory within them.

**Roberto Ochoa: What would you recommend to the Peruvian left?**

Hugo Blanco: I would recommend that they link together the traditional social struggles and the struggles in defense of Pachamama [17]. These struggles defend life itself and should involve all who are affected by the system. Capitalism systematically perpetuates ecocides everywhere, and these attacks on ecosystems threaten the reproduction of life and its continuity. Forest fires, water shortage and poisoning, natural disasters and possibly this pandemic are the result of this system's contempt for life. That is why I would recommend to the left, if it does not already do so, to unite the social struggles that the left has always led to the struggles for the defense of Pachamama. For this, I recommend that they hold assemblies of the different sectors of the oppressed, where we show how everything is connected and linked. Life is a living tissue and it is time for the left parties to defend all this living tissue. And, by the way, I would recommend that they listen to and learn from these various struggles and respect them. This means leaving aside the dogmas and verticalism that characterize the traditional left.

**Roberto Ochoa: Is it true that you were a member of APRA [18] before becoming a member of a**

**Trotskyist party?**

Hugo Blanco: I was never an APRA activist, but my older sister and brother, Luisa and Oscar, belonged to it and they were repressed for that reason. So, very young, I also sympathized with APRA when it was still an anti-imperialist party and before its deformation and turn to the right, but I never joined that party.

**Roberto Ochoa: The pandemic has highlighted the enormous social inequalities and precariousness in the Peruvian state. How do you see Peru on the eve of celebrating the bicentenary of independence?**

Hugo Blanco: To begin with, I would say, like radical sectors in many parts of Latin America, where the 200 years since the start of the Republican stage have already taken place: "There is absolutely nothing to celebrate".

On the one hand, injustices against indigenous people and Afro-descendants continue, large sectors of Latin American societies remain plunged into poverty, as the dispossessions, looting and ecocides initiated 500 years ago continue. As does the uneven distribution of land and water, vital for subsistence. Racism and aggravated machismo etc. also continue.

That is why our countries are by no means "independent", but they are ruled today not by a colonialist country, but by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the multinationals which plunder the planet.

"Independence" was political independence from Spain, of which we were a colony; but we are still embedded in an unjust global system of domination which treats us as the colony of the aforementioned companies and international organizations. In addition, in our societies, a colonized and colonizing way of seeing not only Pachamama, but also the beings who live there, including people, is maintained.

**Roberto Ochoa: You had a life that one could make a film about.. Do you repent of anything in your political trajectory?**

Hugo Blanco: I probably made a lot of mistakes, but I don't repent. Because when it happened, I did it without knowing I was mistaken.

*This interview was first published on 22 June 2020 by [La República](#) (Lima) on June 22, 2020. This version translated from the French translation by Hans-Peter Renk.*

## Peru Timeline 1900-1979

### 1911

Discovery of the city of Machu Picchu by the American archaeologist Hiram Bingham.

### 1958

On April 27, Richard Nixon was greeted in Lima by student demonstrations. Nixon was forced to return to his car under a hail of projectiles.

### 1960

On his return from Argentina, Hugo Blanco returned to Cuzco and worked in a hacienda in the valley of La Convención. The countryside had a semi-feudal regime inherited from colonialism. In exchange for permission to cultivate a plot of land, the owner required the peasants to work at the hacienda and do all kinds of domestic chores. The peasant unions called an indefinite strike that encountered the violent opposition of the landowners and sparked the creation of structures of self-defence.

### 1962

Hugo Blanco organized peasant leagues in the valley of La Convención. He became president of the Cuzco Workers' Federation.

Creation of the MIR (Revolutionary Left Movement), pro-Castro.

### 1963

Presidency of Fernando Belaunde Terry (until 1968). The Communist Party contributed to his election.

In May, Hugo was captured after an assault on a barracks of the Civil Guard.

### 1966

In September, Hugo Blanco, Trotskyist activist and leader of an organization of poor peasants, was tried by a military court. He was sentenced to death following the death of two gendarmes during a demonstration. At his trial Hugo conducted a magnificent defence. A campaign in defence of him managed to successfully oppose the death penalty which would certainly have been handed down by the court if world opinion had not been alerted and mobilized. Thanks to a global campaign spurred by the Fourth International which garnered many supporters (Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Isaac Deutscher, Bertrand Russell, etc.) - Hugo Blanco escaped the death sentence and was sentenced to 25 years in prison.

### 1968

Velazco Alvarado became president of Peru (until 1975) following a military coup on October 3.

He nationalized the oil sector, restricted freedom of the press, and nationalized key sectors of the economy (fisheries, mines, telecommunications, energy, grouped together in state-administered conglomerates).

The exchange rate and foreign trade were tightly controlled.

He established a partnership with the USSR and Cuba.

### 1969

In June, an agrarian reform aimed at eliminating the large haciendas with expropriation against compensation. But the peasants who had been unpaid serfs had to pay for their land, thus

remaining without money for tools, seeds, fertilizers, for the education of their children, medicines, etc.

### 1970

Hugo Blanco was freed by the regime of General Juan Velasco Alvarado, which was seeking support from the Peruvian left.

### 1971

Mining law restoring full ownership of the subsoil to the state. State monopoly of the marketing of mining products. Two large American groups were expropriated.

Hugo Blanco was deported to Mexico. He then lived in Chile.

### 1972

General Law of Education. Literacy.

### 1973

In May, in the vital fishing sector, the junta decided to take over the industry of fishmeal and fish oil by creating a national enterprise.

Economic crisis.

### 1974

A strike by employees of the major newspaper *El Comercio* led to the nationalization of the press.

### 1975

Government of General Francisco Morales Bermudez (until 1980).

"Gradualist" policy consisting in bringing back capital and reviving small and medium-sized industries. Return to economic liberalism.

### 1977

A general strike shook the government of Francisco Morales Bermúdez.

### 1978

Hugo Blanco returned to Peru and was elected to the Constituent Assembly representing the Frente obrero, campesino, estudiantil y popular (FOCEP).

Source [Inprecor](#).

## Down with the king!

## 22 November 2020, by Jaime Pastor , Miguel Urbán Crespo

Among these, as is already being highlighted by sections of the media (*La Marea*, *CTXT*, *El Salto*, *Crític*, *Público*, among others), the most notable is the verification that 48 per cent of the population (including 59.8 per cent of PSOE voters) are in favour of a referendum (compared to 36.1% against) and that if it were held, 40.9 per cent would vote in favour of a republic compared to 34.9% who would do so for the monarchy, with 12.9 per cent undecided. A favourable percentage that reaches higher levels in Autonomous Communities like Catalonia (66.5 per cent compared to 14.6 per cent), the Basque Country and Navarra and in the age cohorts under 65.

Along with this unquestionable data, which shows the majority will to decide on the form of the state, the legitimacy crisis suffered by the monarchy among the general public, especially youth, and, again, in the Autonomous Communities, is undeniable. The monarchy is perceived as “an institution from another era” by 47.9 per cent of the population, who disapprove of Juan Carlos I (a rating of 3.3 out of 10), demand that he be tried for his actions and that the inviolability of the institution be ended, and see Felipe VI as a right-wing king who knew and benefitted from his father’s financial operations. [19]

This confirms the failure of the attempts to disassociate the current king from the figure of his father, these have not prevented the shadow of corruption from emerging over a reign without its own history beyond *Juancarlismo*. Despite interventions such as the speech of 3 October, after the brutal repression against the referendum of 1 October, 2017, intended to reinforce the profile of Felipe VI, the disaffection of a part of society towards the monarchy has increased, not only in Catalonia, linking it emotionally and symbolically with the most reactionary sectors.

It is true that there are other responses showing that there is still a significant percentage (with a score of 6.4) that believe in the myth built around the role of the monarchy emeritus during 23F. [20] 40.1 per cent believe that the monarchy plays a role as guarantor of “order and stability”. However, there is still a response close to a dead heat in relation to “satisfaction” (4.6) or “trust” (4.3) in this institution and a low percentage (27.7 per cent) who believe that the Infanta Leonor will become queen, while there is a division of opinion regarding whether “the tensions with nationalisms (Catalan, Basque ...)” would get worse with or without the monarchy. In short, it seems undeniable that the anti-monarchical and anti-Bourbon sentiment with a long tradition in the history of our peoples is resurfacing at rates that may accelerate in the coming times. Because, as Benito Pérez Galdós already wrote, and despite what the Juan Carlists have wanted us to believe subsequently, “Bourbonism does not have two phases, as superficial historians believe... Here and there, in war and in peace, it is always the same, an arbitrary power that couples the Throne and the Altar, to oppress this unhappy people and keep them in poverty and ignorance”.

It is also true that disparities appear around what type of republic is preferred, with 48.5 per cent leaning towards a presidentialist type, compared to 29.3 per cent who would opt for another based on their election by parliament and with few powers. This shows that an elitist conception of democracy still weighs heavily on the majority of citizens and that much work will be necessary to help (re) generate a political culture that is republican in its deepest sense, that is, participatory, deliberative and free from all kinds of despotisms so that it culminates in constituent processes.

So, in the framework of the multiple

crises that we are experiencing, these results convey a clear tendency to the erosion of a fundamental institution of the 1978 regime, with more than 70 per cent of the population believing a constitutional reform is necessary. A demand that continues to clash with the fear of the establishment that a Pandora’s box will be opened around which aspects of the constitutional text should be reformed, with the consequent polarization between a reactionary monarchical bloc and the potential republican, (con) federal and plurinational bloc that we have to build in the new scenario in which we are entering.

Because, as we wrote in the prologue to the forthcoming collective book, *¡Abajo el rey! Repúblicas* (“Down with the King! Republics”) (Sylone/Viento Sur), “although there may be different nuances about the degree or the advancement of the regime crisis in which we find ourselves, no one can ignore the profound changes that are taking place in the Spanish political system. Changes that everything indicates will worsen in the coming years, as a result of the multidimensional and systemic crisis that we are going through. This is even acknowledged by spokespersons for the regime who contemplate the future with horror as a time of decadence, which has its greatest expression in the ruin of *Marca España*, with its top representative fleeing to a luxury resort in the United Arab Emirates. [21] However, it would be premature to announce its final decline... In the framework of this new period, which we can define as a chronic global emergency, we want to address this crisis of the regime and, in particular, that which in recent times manifests itself in the institution that is key within it, the monarchy, whose degree of impunity, corruption and parasitism allowed by the Constitution itself have provoked the legitimate indignation of the great majority of the citizenry. A whole myth built since the Immaculate Transition

has collapsed and, with it, the political, economic and media elites that praised it; something that, by the way, the journalist Iñaki Gabilondo has come to recognize in a clear demonstration of sincerity: "All of this has opened a chapter of shame that has publicly degraded my generation. It has been degraded, those of us who supported the process have degraded ourselves. We have been stripped naked and I feel ashamed".

Although the spokespersons of the regime contemplate with horror the threat of an era of decadence, it would be premature to announce its

definitive failure . We cannot underestimate the ability of the elites to recompose, since the plural social block that can undertake a new phase of regime replacement is still weak. We can find ourselves faced with an equivalence of weaknesses, with a catastrophic, but socially and territorially asymmetric stalemate for those of us who want to overturn this status quo, with which the monarchical institution could continue to be maintained not so much because of its successes but because of our lack of capacity to finish it off.

Therefore, much remains to be done to reach the republican moment we are betting on, but polls like this one and failures as strident as that of the "¡Viva el Rey!" advertising campaign, recently promoted by the platform *Libre*, and also that of the Trump supporter Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo, give us more reasons to believe that we will continue to advance until we can build a broad movement that makes the slogan "Down with the king!" a proposal for the future.

13 October 2020

Source [viento sur](#).

# The Scorched Earth Tactic and the Hong Kong Resistance

21 November 2020, by **Au Loong-Yu**

We are on the verge of a great purge. One sector after another, from oppositionists, young demonstrators, to academics, teachers, civil servants, all have been victimized for the silliest charges and framed up. We have no way to launch any protest because the government, with the help of the pandemic, has forbidden all public gatherings and with good reason.

In response to mounting attacks, many people, especially the young, once again turn to the "scorched earth tactic" of last year, symbolized by the slogan "if we burn you burn with us". In August when the government extended the last term of the legislature, the opposition lawmakers wanted to accept it. Two law-makers announced that their mandate came from the voters, not from the government, hence they quit. Most stayed on however and were continuously under attack from the radicals. This is the chief reason why this time they finally quit when four of their colleagues were kicked out – the

pan-democrats had long lost their credibility and they had to save the last bit of it when their colleagues were kicked out.

But people who uphold the "scorched earth tactic" have not offered any alternative to the following doubts:

"Without any sizable opposition in the legislature, the government can pass any reactionary law it likes. How are we going to stop it or at least vote against it and show the world we are the people's voice, not Beijing?"

"The status of lawmakers grants them certain privileges to monitor the executive branch and its various departments. In the present crack-down this is an important tool to protect the resistance. With all oppositionists gone, how are we going to defend our brothers and sisters?"

It is the great enthusiasm to defend Hong Kong's autonomy which has driven the resistance since last year. However this passionate movement

has been driven by a people who have little political experiences in fighting despotism; for years we had been quite relaxed as we strongly, but wrongly, believed that "we are the golden egg laying goose and so Beijing will treat us well". When catastrophe stormed over their heads they thought their only tactic was the "scorched earth tactic". The downside of this tactic now is that it often allows no space for proper debate, a phenomenon already quite visible in last year's revolt. The sad thing is that, even with the best tactic and strategy, Hong Kong people are doomed in the short run anyway --- the relationship of forces is simply too asymmetrical.

There is one benefit of the resignation of nearly all pan-democrat law-makers though – it draws worldwide attention and support. Even if Hong Kong is soon to be finished off by Beijing at least it has sung its swan song.

14 November 2020

# Bolsonaro defeated, the left remains alive

20 November 2020, by **Ana C. Carvalhaes**

Although traditionally fast and efficient, the electronic vote counting for these elections was delayed for more than three and a half hours. The scare did not prevent the general trends of the electorate from becoming clear before midnight. We are witnessing the most important thermometer of the popular mood since the tragic 2018 election, which brought Bolsonaro to power.

The biggest loser of the day, with no doubts even among his followers, was President Bolsonaro and the far right; something that could already be foreseen by the growth of the rejection of his government by the population of the big cities. Seven mayors of capital cities were elected in the first round: in Florianópolis and Curitiba, in the South; Belo Horizonte, in the Southeast; Salvador and Natal, in the Northeast; Campo Grande and Palmas, in the Centre-West. All came from parties and had personal profiles quite to the right, but none of them were supported directly by the president and his children.

Out of 27 capital cities (25, leaving out Brasília, Federal District, which does not have a mayor; and the Amazonian Macapá, subject to an energy supply crisis for the past 20 days), only 18 capitals are going to have a second ballot. And in them, there are only three with a similar profile or directly identified with the political ambit of the neo-fascist president: in Fortaleza (Ceará, Northeast: Capitão Wagner), in Vitória (Espírito Santo, Southeast: Delegado Pazolini) and in Rio de Janeiro, where the current mayor Marcelo Crivella, who is a bishop of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, is trying to get re-elected. The betting, based on the performance of the candidates in yesterday's election, indicates that the only one with a chance is Pazolini.

As soon as the final numbers emerged from the Higher Electoral Court

computers, journalists, scientists, and politicians were already debating the main messages from the polls. The most reasonable observation is that in the conflict which opened in March between Bolsonaro and governors and mayors regarding the treatment of the pandemic - which has already killed 165,000 Brazilians and infected more than five million - the federal government has been beaten. It can be said that Brazil realigned itself from the extreme right to a more traditional right, and that the left, although divided, showed that it is very much alive and with a future.

The right-wing figures who were re-elected or went through to the second round had a pro-science policy, with some measures to close activities, such as schools and gymnasiums (Brazil was not locked down at anytime, anywhere), masks and social distancing; measures against which the president fought hard, with threats of prosecution, fake news, resignation of ministers and much low-level discourse.

## The opposition and the left

If the political-institutional scenario does not change radically, everything indicates that the municipal parliamentary groups of the most radical Bolsonaro supporters will be diminished. In addition, the parties opposing *Bolsonarismo* achieved a good result in general. We should in any case stress the very reactionary political situation, the survival of a deeply rooted anti-leftism among middle-class property owner sectors (affected by the discourse of corruption in the PT years) and among the poorest, under the influence of the neo-Pentecostal churches friendly to the president.

In nine of the 18 capitals balloting, an

opposition candidate is competing. Three from the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB, which is a bourgeois-oligarchic party more to the centre than to the left), in Recife and Maceió (NE) and Rio Branco (North, Amazonia). In two important capitals, the PSOL has reached the second round (São Paulo and the Amazon Belém); two are from the PT, in Vitória (Espírito Santo) and Recife; two are from the Partido Democrático Trabalhista (PDT, founded by the nationalist Leonel Brizola and today led by former minister Ciro Gomes), in Fortaleza and Aracaju (Northeast). In Porto Alegre, the young PCdoB candidate Manuela D'Ávila is on the ballot.

In the 25 largest cities (of the 55 that will have a ballot), the PT has elected 48 councillors, of which 22 are women. The PCdoB obtained councillors in six cities. The PSOL has elected councillors in 12 of the 25 largest cities, with a total of 33 elected, including 17 women, mostly black - including the first two transgender councillors: the most voted-for candidate from Aracaju, Linda Brasil, and the black trans Beny, from Niterói (RJ) - as well as two openly eco-socialist councillors. The PSOL also elected five mayors of small cities: Ribas do Rio Pardo (MS), Potengi (CE), Jandaí (RN) and Marabá Paulista (SP).

But what was most "surprising" for the corporate media and the bourgeoisie was the success of the PSOL in the largest city in the country. After entering the party in 2018, to compete for president, the activist and leader of the Movement of the Homeless (MTST) Guilherme Boulos, accompanied by the former mayor Luíza Erundina, started with just over 4% of voting intentions in September to reach more than 20% and get to the second round; in which he will face the current mayor Bruno Covas (PSDB), close to the right-wing

governor João Doria. In the capital, the PSOL parliamentary group jumped from two to seven councillors.

Unfortunately for the PSOL and for the entire left, Rio de Janeiro, the second capital of the country, experienced a quite different electoral scenario and will have to choose between the Bolsonarista and neo-Pentecostal mayor, Marcelo Crivella, and the former mayor of the old and corrupt MDB, Eduardo Paz. Although enjoying a broad and traditional political space in the city, the PSOL could not count on the candidacy of federal deputy Marcelo Freixo, who gave up running in May, on the grounds that, faced with the impossibility of uniting all the opposition under his name in a single front, it would not be possible to win. Still, the young black state (provincial) deputy Renata Souza eagerly represented the party and helped secure the seven councillors the party elected or re-elected.

## Will there be a left front in 2022?

The idea of diversifying political representation has gained traction on the left. And the PSOL was the biggest beneficiary of this. As BBC Brazil pointed out, there was a general search for renewal in all senses. Boulos, 38, and Manuela, 39, are the maximum expression of the phenomenon.

In fact, the left in a less broad sense (without the bourgeois centre-left of the PDT and PSB) has regressed a bit in parliamentary representation (due to the numerical fall of the councillors of the PT and PCdoB, see the table below). The PSOL is the party that has advanced the most. Lessons will have to be learned from that.

The most probable thing is that the so-called progressive electorate, with social, environmental, anti-racist and feminist concerns, will coalesce in the next few years around a frontally anti-Bolsanaro identity and pressure the left (PSOL, PT, Pcdob) to seriously attempt viable electoral alliances to defeat the right. The absence of the

left in Rio's second round reinforces this thesis. But it will be necessary to overcome the most difficult obstacle: the refusal of Lula and a large part of the PT leadership to negotiate alliances without their hegemony (now quite contested).

However, it is equally or more important that the big and small successes and victories of this difficult campaign are, for the left and activism in Brazil, like raindrops that fertilize the earth, reviving people for struggles of resistance to the plans of Bolsonaro and of governors and mayors of the neoliberal right wing. And that the pressure for unity of the left comes mainly from below, in the social movements and communities, so that we achieve the unity necessary to defeat the genocide in the streets.



16 November 2020

*Translated by International Viewpoint from [Jacobin América Latina](#).*

# Trump's slow coup? The crisis of bourgeois democracy

19 November 2020, by **Malik Miah**

Tens of thousands of Donald Trump supporters rallied in Washington, DC on November 14.

President Trump drove his motorcade through the marchers, expressing his support, on his way to Trump National golf course to play a round.

The mainly white crowd waved flags, sang the national anthem and called Democrat Joseph Biden's election to the presidency a "theft". Prominent signs read: "Stop the steal".

The march began at Freedom Plaza then headed towards the US Supreme Court. The protesters attacked "big

media" for calling state elections for Biden. When a reporter pointed out to a demonstrator that the media called North Carolina for Trump, the reply was "that's different".

Welcomed by the crowd was domestic fascist group the Proud Boys and other white supremacists. A separate march by "Women for America First" also took place.

The protests were built on right-wing social media and by Fox News commentators. The theme was the "Million MAGA [Make America Great Again] March".

Trump has never accepted the rules, norms and traditions of office. The "Imperial Presidency" Richard Nixon sought but didn't attain in the 1970s is what Trump also seeks.

He continues to refuse to accept the results of the November 3 election. He says the popular vote and his apparent Electoral College loss to Biden and his running mate Kamala Harris, the first woman and Black person to win that position, was rigged.

The electoral system in the US is far from fully democratic, from the Electoral College down to the fact that

there is no federal provision for how elections are conducted. These are left to the states, including who gets the right to vote. Each state has its own laws, which are set up to be dominated by politicians, who gerrymander electoral districts in their favour.

An international ranking of how democratic the 47 countries considered to be “democracies” are, puts the US at 46, just ahead of Albania.

The Constitution was written to keep power in the hands of the wealthy property owners and out of the hands of the common people.

The ruling class, nevertheless, understands that to rule the country means convincing working people they actually have the power, even if it is not true.

Pressuring the states

Every time the people rise up demanding change, the norm has been that a legal relief valve must be opened without threatening the rule of wealthy property owners.

Trump rejects that approach to ruling. He openly declares the only “real Americans” are those who support him.

Trump is using his mass base to pressure Republican state legislators, where they have the majority, not to approve certification of state electoral results.

Another path he is pursuing is legal challenges to the voting results in certain states. So far, not a single state court has upheld his bogus challenges. All 50 state electoral officials have declared the elections fair and no fraud has been found.

The government’s own security officials released a report challenging Trump’s charge of fraudulent election results. The New York Times reported: “A group of federal, state and local officials working with a Department of Homeland Security agency declared flatly that the election was the most secure in the nation’s history.”

The November 12 official statement of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure

Security Agency (CISA) said: “When states have close elections, many will recount ballots. All of the states with close results in the 2020 presidential race have paper records of each vote, allowing the ability to go back and count each ballot if necessary.

“This is an added benefit for security and resilience. This process allows for the identification and correction of any mistakes or errors. There is no evidence that any voting system deleted or lost votes, changed votes, or was in any way compromised.

“Other security measures like pre-election testing, state certification of voting equipment, and the US Election Assistance Commission’s (EAC) certification of voting equipment help to build additional confidence in the voting systems used in 2020.”

[Update: Trump sacked CISA Director Christopher Krebs via Twitter on November 17.]

Trump still hopes one of his legal challenges gets approved and finds its way to the Supreme Court. He has said that his most recent appointee to the court, Amy Coney Barrett, will move to get him elected.

## Soft coup?

Either legal path — having state legislatures overturn their state’s election results and appoint enough Trump electors, or election by the Supreme Court — would amount to a legal coup.

Those who believe Trump will eventually recognise that Biden won have not been watching his career and his presidency.

Some left commentators are calling Trump’s declarations and actions a “slow coup”. This is not far-fetched. Almost all Republican Senators continue to back up Trump’s claims that the election was stolen from him. The same is true of the members of his cabinet.

Tens of millions of his followers, backed up by more than 70 million votes, believe that the election was stolen from Trump. This puts great pressure on Republican politicians to

back him.

A test for them will come if the states confirm the results and then the Electoral College, which will vote on December 14, votes to elect Biden.

As long as Trump continues to refuse to accept the results, the danger of a coup, legal or not, remains.

Another danger is that Biden becomes president, but Trump continues to not recognise the election. He has continued to play to his base, whose members feel stabbed in the back by “the establishment” and are enraged. He may remain in politics as the leader of this base, and use their grievances to move further to the right, in preparation for a future move.

Bourgeois democracy is much weaker than many believed. The facts — Biden has a majority of popular and electoral votes — are irrelevant to Trump.

The current system is facing deep fissures. It is too soon to know whether it will move toward open authoritarian rule or a new type of bourgeois democracy. Those who say everything will go back to the way it was are really just hoping it will.

Trump is serious about staying in or regaining power by any means necessary.

## Mass response needed

There must be a mass response to stop him, whether he is in or out of office. As a beginning, that would mean a remobilisation of Black Lives Matter, Latinx, climate activists, women, and, hopefully, the labour movements.

They will face an obstacle in the Biden administration. The establishments of both capitalist parties fear mass actions, and seek to blunt them and/or use repression. Right now, that is evident in a fierce attack by the Democratic establishment against the progressive wing of the party, whose most public representatives have been Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

In particular, they say the latter's support for the demands of the BLM movement, such as defunding the police, cost establishment Democrats in losses in both the Senate and

House. However, the opposite is true.

Sanders has noted that all but one progressive won re-election across the country and demands like Medicare for all are supported by a majority of

voters.

16 November 2020

Source: [Green Left](#).

# After 2019 Uprising, a new socialist formation and new political party, change the electoral game

18 November 2020, by **Democracia Socialista (PR)**

While acknowledging these limitations, we must also acknowledge that electoral politics and the electoral process attract considerable attention and that laws affecting the lives of the working-class majority are debated and adopted by the insular legislature. In addition, an important part of the colonial impositions (such as the Fiscal Control Board itself and its austerity measures) are enabled by the parties that have dominated island politics, and have not been challenged in the only representative political space that the existing colonial status allows. Undoubtedly, we cannot be indifferent to the electoral process. Thus, it is a terrain of struggle in which the socialists can intervene, if they deem it opportune, a space through which a considerable part of the population could be reached. In what follows, we explain why [Democracia Socialista](#) chose to call for a vote for [Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana](#) in the 2020 elections.

The current historical context of Puerto Rico is that of a deep economic and structural crisis that began in 2006. This collapse, which represents the crisis of the existing Commonwealth status and its weak economic foundations, has also led to the crisis of the ruling traditional parties, the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD) and the Partido Nuevo Progresista (PNP). Although it is true that there are differences between them, they can be described as representatives of the same

interests and the same ideology: both parties, since the second half of the 1980s, have internalized and represent the policies of the neoliberal capitalism, that is, policies that privilege the market, privatization, the downsizing of the public structures and the reduction of state intervention in the economy.

This neoliberal process in Puerto Rico is part of the worldwide reconfiguration of capitalism. The processes of privatization and elimination of labor and social rights are not exclusive to Puerto Rico. However, the colonial condition of the island magnifies them. When the United States or Europe catch a cold, the poor, exploited and colonized countries get pneumonia.

With neoliberalism as an ideological justification, important services in the country have been privatized, more than 30,000 public employees have been fired, bosses have dealt heavy blows against the rights acquired by the working class, all of this not to revive the economy, but rather to weaken the working class in the correlation of forces, favoring capital and its profits in an overwhelming way.

The neoliberal model deepened the crisis in Puerto Rico: it implies an increase in the profits of some corporations and the accelerated impoverishment of the majority of the population. The contradictions

resulting from the crisis have not gone unobserved by the majority in the island. Every year, the two dominant parties lose support, votes, and affiliates. In this sense, there is a space for an alternative movement that participates in the elections but is not limited to them, a movement that positions itself against the neoliberal ideology and encourages the struggle in the street. There is, therefore, the possibility of having an effective socialist intervention in the electoral process.

But what does socialist intervention in the elections mean? The question cannot be answered out of context. At different times in the history of Puerto Rico, there have been socialist parties or parties that proclaimed themselves socialist, such as the Socialist Party of the first half of the 20th century and the Puerto Rican Socialist Party that participated twice in the electoral process (although their history and activities went beyond the electoral arena). At one point, the Puerto Rican Independence Party also adopted a socialist discourse. Socialist discourse is not a new phenomenon for electoral politics in Puerto Rico.

The need for a transitional program is among the programmatic principles of [Democracia Socialista](#): "We cannot settle for reforms to the existing society, on the one hand, nor for abstract revolutionary statements, on the other. The vast majority learn to question the existing society and

discover their ability to transform it through experience and their own practice. To guide such experiences, a transition program needs to be elaborated and disseminated, which must be accessible of the great majority with their current level of consciousness, but which allows them to discover the limits that capitalism places on their aspirations for well-being."

It is of little use to shout in favor of the overthrow of the capitalist state while one is unable to mobilize the majority. But it would be even more dangerous to fall into reformist positions, which are satisfied with slight changes in society. Herein lies the importance of the socialist organization and the transition program, which always must be articulated and promoted with the revolutionary objective as a compass.

We recognize that some people will opt for the electoral boycott. The electoral boycott could be a collective expression of discontent and a rejection of the two dominant parties and the neoliberal policies that they promote. It could also be a rejection of the colonial government structure as a whole. However, our goal, as revolutionaries, is not to put our rejection of existing institutions on record. Our goal is to attract ever wider sectors to question and reject these institutions. As Lenin suggested, as long as we cannot replace these institutions with more democratic ones, we must use them to present, promote and disseminate our ideas and program. A substantial part of our people, and of the working people in particular, participates in one way or another in the electoral process. Therefore, it must also be a field in which we present our proposals and it must be an objective to elect socialists to elective positions, from which, in constant contact with the struggles outside the legislature, they can contribute to the socialist project. We consider electoral participation, rather than boycott, to be the most appropriate form of participation at the present time. We add that the electoral boycott campaigns in Puerto Rico have been ineffective. A boycott requires real organizing work. Only rarely have massive boycott campaigns been organized. Many

times, the boycott becomes an individual act on election day. Nothing indicates that the 2020 elections will be different. The scope of a boycott in this context, therefore, is limited. Accordingly, we discard it as an option to follow.

We are supporters of independence and socialists. As a new socialist organization, we try to recruit people who agree with our General Declaration that are willing to organize according to our norms. However, we understand that, at the present time, there is an increasingly broad sector in Puerto Rico that is abandoning the traditional parties of the bourgeoisie (the PPD and the PNP). They lose faith, respect, and loyalty for those parties. They question their styles and many of their policies. Many take or sympathize with progressive positions on environmental protection, the right to health and education, and other issues. They are open and looking for new political alternatives. However, at this time, the vast majority will not join socialist or pro-independence organizations. To promote our ideas, we have to transparently, openly and loyally state that together with these sectors we are willing to build a new political movement, with electoral projection, with a clearly defined program, committed to working people, to the fight against all forms of oppression, to environmental protection and decolonization. Building such a movement would be an extraordinary step forward in the political development of our people.

We recognize that the Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (PIP) has many good candidates. Furthermore, its program also has many points of contact with proposals that we consider should be promoted. They represent a rejection of the two dominant parties and of neoliberal policies. We understand why progressive and socialist people will support, with good reason, the PIP and its candidacies. The PIP plays a creditable and important role in representing the perspective of independence in the electoral process. As supporters of independence we recognize this. But the PIP, due to its closed and often sectarian policies, has been unable to incorporate the

majority of the independence movement in Puerto Rico. More importantly, the PIP exerts little attraction on the increasingly large sectors that are abandoning the PPD and the PNP, who seek new options, but which at this time do not identify as pro-independence. In several consecutive elections, this historic party has failed to maintain its electoral franchise through the support received by its candidates for governor. It has largely succeeded in getting some of its legislative candidates elected. In 2020, at most, it will be able to elect a Senator and a Representative. We believe it can achieve this, and we want them to. But this alone is insufficient to begin to change the political game in Puerto Rico.

Most members of the Democracia Socialista militancy (prior to its creation) supported the founding of the Partido del Pueblo Trabajador in 2010 and called on people to join it and support it in the 2012 and 2016 elections. The PPT functioned as a broad political movement that, while participating in the elections, was not limited to them. Under the slogan "in the streets and at the polls," it adopted a program that promoted working class consciousness, militancy, and struggles, feminist and LGBT + struggles, and the environmental struggle. Without being a revolutionary party, it was a progressive party, which, in practice, stood for a transitional program. However, after two elections, and although it contributed to the public discussion on a number of important issues, it was clear that it had not been able to bring together a considerable part of the real and growing discontent against the two dominant parties and neoliberal policies. The electoral results were a reflection of the social isolation in a broad sense of the revolutionary left, on the one hand, and of the particular logic of electoral competition, on the other, in which factors such as the "usefulness" or "lesser evilism" of the vote are decisive.

Recognizing these limitations, and after a series of discussions and assemblies, the PPT decided to pursue the creation of a new broader movement, with various sectors and

individuals, with a program similar to the PPT. This process went through several stages, different names and the participation and withdrawal of several groups and organizations, but ultimately led to the creation of the Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana (MVC).

Victoria Ciudadana included people with different perspectives, status preferences and experiences of struggles that have come together on the basis of a minimal program, known as the Urgent Agenda (Agenda Urgente). Although the Urgent Agenda has not yet been developed as a government program, it coincides with the fundamental ideas of the PPT's program.

Some of the elements of this agenda are:

combat austerity policies promoted by both the PNP-PPD governments and the Fiscal Control Board.

challenge the Fiscal Control Board and PROMESA

fight to audit and cancel Puerto Rico's debt

defend pensions

defend the budget of the University of Puerto Rico and the public-school system

fight for sustainable economic development that includes the development of agroecology

stop and reverse the privatization of essential services such as education and energy production

move immediately to renewable energy sources

attack corruption head-on by banning the "revolving door," fighting impunity, eliminating private financing of political campaigns, among other measures

promote an electoral reform that democratizes our political system

(second round, proportionality, allowing alliances, among others) implement a labor reform that restores and expands rights to the working class, both in the public and private sectors

promote the organization of workers in the public and private sectors

develop a true process of decolonization that is transparent, binding and fair, through the mechanism of the Constitutional Status Assembly

It is worth highlighting the double aspect of this program: it allows us to seek the support of broad sectors of our people, beyond the pro-independence and socialist sectors, at the same time that it constitutes a radical challenge to the dominant policies in Puerto Rico. Generalizing this program and implementing it would be an extraordinary step forward in our political development. For example: putting into practice the provision of the Urgent Agenda that proposes ending the financing by the people of Puerto Rico of the federal Fiscal Control Board would imply a confrontation with that body and with PROMESA.

In this sense, we believe that, in the electoral field, Victoria Ciudadana is the project that has the capacity to challenge the current state of politics in Puerto Rico, given that there is no other option in these elections that could attract a significant number of people under a program against neoliberal policies and capable of delivering a distinct blow to the corrupt and colonial two-party system.

We recognize the challenges and weaknesses of this movement. As an organization, it has not had the participation that it should in the various struggles in the island (which is not to deny the participation of its

most progressive militants, many of whom are already well-known figures). On the other hand, it is a heterogeneous movement, in which, despite its Urgent Agenda, disparate and sometimes contradictory ideological visions coexist. But that heterogeneity and breadth are also its merit. Victoria Ciudadana has a large number of candidates with a recognized trajectory and militancy, and many young people or people new to politics who are on the right path of struggle and challenge of existing society. In all the districts, progressive people can be identified who are capable of challenging neoliberal politics and are contributing to the development of a resistance that favors changes in the correlation of forces. As socialists, we consider it important to strengthen ties and bond with these people, without renouncing our ideas, nor imposing them.

For all these reasons, Democracia Socialista favored supporting Victoria Ciudadana in the 2020 elections. Recognizing its limitations, we understand that Victoria Ciudadana is the project that, at the present time, best allows us to promote our ideas and, together with people from different backgrounds, reject the two dominant parties and neoliberalism. It is a space in which we can advance our program and our ideas, get in contact with different people, make our voices heard and promote our candidates. We call on all to join the regional committees of the MVC or its thematic networks, like the Diaspora Network MVC Diaspora Network Public Group, to strengthen the movement and defend the principles outlined in the MVC's Urgent Agenda.

17 November 2020

Source [\*New Politics\*](#).

## Trump Lost the Election, But What is the Future of Trump and Trumpism?

## 17 November 2020, by **Dan La Botz**

Meanwhile, Trump's lawsuits in several battleground states—Arizona, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Georgia—have been thrown out of court, mostly for lack of evidence of fraud or mishandling of the vote. His failure to win the lawsuits has made nearly impossible a second, higher stage of a political challenge, the attempt to get state legislatures to override the vote and send Trump delegates to the Electoral College on December 14. All of this had led some Republican leaders to begin to abandon Trump and recognize the Biden victory. The collapse of this legal strategy and the decline of support from his party therefore makes it impossible for Trump to stage some sort of coup.

Having lost the election, what is Trump's future? At the top of his agenda is arranging a pardon for himself, a pardon for crimes of which he has not been convicted. He might try to use the presidential pardon to pardon himself, which would almost surely end up in the Supreme Court. Some think he will resign before January 20, so that Vice-President Michael Pence can assume the presidency and pardon him. The precedent for this is the unconditional

pardon of President Richard Nixon for any crimes that he might have committed by his vice-president and successor President Gerald Ford in 1978. Such a pardon, however, would only cover federal crimes, and New York State prosecutors are ready to indict him for financial and election related crimes.

Trump has suggested that upon leaving the White House he might start a new TV program, since he has become furious with Fox News, which for years supported and promoted him but which early on recognized Biden's victory. He could find a network for a TV show with himself as star, the income from which would be important, especially as he has some \$900 million in debts coming due soon.

Trump has also talked about running for president again in 2024. If he does begin to campaign for the election in four years, it would cause difficulties for the Republican Party whose leaders might like to free themselves from their vassalage to him. Some close to Trump think he would not run for fear of losing, and if Trump decides not to run, Pence or some other less flamboyant but equally

rightwing Republican will run.

The problem greater than Trump is Trumpism. Some 70 million people voted for Trump, and perhaps a third of those are the hardcore racists who rallied to the building of the border wall, the Muslim ban, and his call to Make America Great Again. More than half of the white working class supports Trump, which poses an enormous challenge to building a progressive working class movement. If Trump gets his TV show and his "Trump 2024" campaign he will continue to feed his base misinformation, lies, and his racist, sexist, anti-immigrant views through his tweets and his mass rallies. There is also the possibility that some other even more virulent politician, a neo-fascist, rises to challenge him.

In a historic shift, Republicans have become the party of the white working class. The task for the left will be to find a way to build a multi-ethnic working class movement to resist Trump and to pressure the neoliberal Biden.

*15 November 2020*

*Source [New Politics](#).*

## **Spontaneous uprising in Nigeria**

### 16 November 2020, by **Klaus Engert**

#### **The occasion**

In early October, a video from 3 October appeared in the social media documenting the shooting of a youth in the village of Ughelli in the southern Niger Delta by the paramilitary police force SARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad). Although its authenticity was immediately denied by the

government and the author was imprisoned, the video spread throughout the country at lightning speed via the social media. Starting on 8 October, initially peaceful mass protests began across the country under the slogan of the corresponding hashtag, "EndSARS".

SARS was founded in 1984 (not, as propagated by German media and also Wikipedia, in 1992). It makes sense

that the same man was in government at that time Muhammad Buhari - with the difference that he was then the military dictator, but is currently serving his second term as democratically elected president. The police unit was designed to take targeted action against the escalating violent crime, especially in the greater Lagos area, the then capital, and was set up as a special unit of the criminal investigation department under the

leadership of Fulani Kwajafa, a police commissioner at the time. Kwajafa, by the way, has now spoken out, asserting that today's SARS has nothing in common with that of the past and in the same breath expressing his regret at having founded the unit at all. He succinctly noted that it had become a bandit force.

SARS, like the Mobile Police, MOPOL (nicknamed Kill and run), is hated and feared because it steals, kills, imprisons and tortures for no reason. Amnesty International published a report in June listing 82 cases of torture, ill-treatment and extrajudicial executions by unit officers between January 2017 and May 2020. According to Amnesty, the victims are mainly young men between 18 and 25 from the poorer classes. It happens again and again that (civilian-clothed) SARS police officers, for example, pull young men with attractive smartphones into cars on the street, accuse them of theft, rob them, beat them up and then (in the best case) throw them out again.

Whether the case in the Delta was true or not is basically irrelevant: It was believed and thus the trigger for the protests, because everyone believed SARS to be such a disease for good reason and many have their own personal experience with it.

## The reasons

But the causes for the protests that spread like a conflagration within a few days in numerous states - most violently in the 20 million metropolis of Lagos - lie deeper. Due to the effects of the COVID pandemic and the constantly low oil price, the Nigerian economy has suffered severely and the already ridiculously small government aid measures for the poor majority of the population often did not get there (see below).

Nigeria's Naira has lost massively in value since the beginning of the year, and the prices for food, 60 % of which must be imported at world market prices, have soared accordingly, in some cases by as much as 30 %. At the same time, many people lost their income during the nationwide

lockdown in the summer, partly because companies did not continue to pay wages, and partly because the curfews also paralysed the informal sector.

Added to this was the widespread corruption, against which the protests were also directed, and the misappropriation of state funds.

## The protests

Starting on 8 November, mass demonstrations, road and toll blockades under the slogan "End SARS" took place in numerous urban centres, first in Lagos and the Niger Delta, then in the capital Abuja, but also in the north and southeast. The people, mostly younger people from all walks of life, did not let the imposed curfews stop them at first. With increasing duration, the protesters in Lagos, for example, also included the so-called area boys (loose groups of unemployed youths from the poorer quarters) and militancy increased. Road blockades were erected, police stations were razed to the ground, supermarkets were burned down, in Lagos the private house of the provincial governor was set on fire and the palace of the Oba (traditional ruler) of Lagos was stormed. In this context, warehouses were discovered and cleared, in which the food donations, that were actually intended for the poor population affected by the pandemic, were stored, and the contents were distributed in the streets. After the storming of the Oba Palace in Lagos, videos circulated showing that traffic policemen also helped themselves to the supplies taken from there. Of course, criminals also took advantage of the situation and there were numerous lootings, which caused most supermarkets to close down abruptly. In addition, at least two prisons were stormed, the inmates released and an airport blocked.

Interestingly, the demonstrators demanded not only the dissolution of SARS, but also an end to corruption and finally better pay for the police. Because everyone in Nigeria knows that the ordinary police officers are so badly paid that they have little choice but to keep their heads above water

with bribes.

## The reaction of the government

After a few days it was clear that this was a truly spontaneous mass movement that could not be achieved by military means alone. The protests met with unanimous support from the masses of the population. Nigerians from all walks of life expressed their sympathy for the author, especially with regard to the storming of the aforementioned warehouses, but also with regard to the attacks on the police stations. And the uprising was also supported by broad sections of the young people from the middle class, who were shaken by the Corona and economic crisis, which made it impossible for the government to label the whole thing as the action of criminals.

As a result, the ruling class took the initiative and decided to adopt a carrot and stick strategy: on the one hand, strict curfews were imposed in many cities and regions and the military was sent out into the streets, leaving at least 69 dead when the fire was opened on the demonstrators. On the other hand, President Buhari addressed the population in a long speech, announcing that he would meet the movement's essential demands. He said that SARS would be dissolved with immediate effect (while at the same time a new force was set up and SARS members were merely transferred to other areas), a police reform was initiated, including better pay, and a fund was established to support unemployed youth. In addition, the governors of 13 states announced committees of inquiry into police brutality.

## The Achilles' heel of the movement

The protests subsided after a few weeks, for several reasons. For one thing, no one in Nigeria can afford not to make money in any way over a long period of time and instead demonstrate. Secondly, the government's military measures had

an effect. Almost no one else believed the government's promises; they were seen for what they were: delaying tactics.

But the biggest problem was the lack of a political leadership that could have bundled the demands and transformed them into coordinated action. It was an essentially spontaneous and uncoordinated

movement; a political force capable of making it really politically effective does not exist and is not in sight at the moment.

The dissolution of SARS and the undeniable fact that both the central government and the state and local governments have been clearly frightened by the force and suddenness of this outbreak of collective anger remain as a success.

After the uprising is in this case before the uprising, because there was no defeat. The state leadership is also aware of this. The President of the Senate, Dr. Ahmed Lawan, warned in a statement on 11 November: "We have survived this "EndSARS" protest - we might not be able to survive another one".

14 November 2020

## EU SURE initiative: saving jobs or pleasing investors?

15 November 2020, by **Herman Michiel, Klaus Dräger**

On 2 April the EU launched SURE. [22] The idea was that member states could take out cheap loans to financially support temporary short-time work schemes. After all, many companies are much beyond of their former capacity (in some sectors they even lost up to 80 percent of their former business). Without government support, so goes their tale, they would have to shed many employees towards unemployment.

Maybe you say: loans do not really support governments, who can borrow anyway, and borrowing means higher public debt. The fact is, however, that the Commission (EC), as the executive body of the EU, can borrow more cheaply than many member states. Since the financial crisis, we know that this is even true within the euro-zone, where, for example, Greece has to pay much more for a government loan than Germany.

In financial jargon one speaks of the spread, the difference compared to Germany's interest rates for government bonds. It would be different if those member states could borrow directly from the European Central Bank (ECB), which could charge the same low rate for everyone. But the EU treaties explicitly forbid such a thing. Governments therefore have to

borrow from private banks and financial institutions, which charge a 'risk premium' that is all the higher the more difficult a country's economic situation is. If the European Commission now presents its SURE initiative (and other similar loans in the context of the corona recovery policy) as a shining example of European 'solidarity', this is only a very partial correction to a fundamentally non-solidary construction based on market discipline. [23]

### Six months to respond to an emergency situation

Another consequence of the ban on ECB lending to member states is that cumbersome, time-consuming manoeuvres have to be performed now that the EU is (for the first time, and breaking its own rules) taking out loans to pass them on to member states. The ECB can make billions available to banks in a jiffy, as happens with 'QE' (quantitative easing). The SURE initiative, on the other hand, officially launched on 2 April, took until the end of October,

i.e. more than half a year, to pass on the first 'solidarity-based' loans to Italy (10 billion), Spain (6 billion) and Poland (1 billion). So the 'support in an emergency' comes rather late.

Why is this? In order to borrow, the Commission first had to provide a 'guarantee'. To this end, all 27 member states had to agree to guarantee a total amount of € 25 billion, in proportion to the national income of each member state. It was only on 22 September that the Commission was able to report that this operation had been completed, although only commitments, not payments, had to be made. With this guarantee in its pocket, the Commission was then able to borrow an amount four times higher (by a so-called leveraging operation). In order to do this, a syndicate of banks had to be called upon to issue bonds, an operation that took place via Barclays, BNP Paribas, Deutsche Bank, Nomura and UniCredit. For future loans (probably one more in 2020, the next in 2021), this procedure will have to be gone through again.

### Selective interests

## from the EU's member states

In a sense, for EU standards, the gathering of the commitments of the 27 member states was a 'success'. Indeed, in countries where fulminating against the 'debt union' is part of the identity of a number of parties, political riots may arise around it. This cape was apparently taken. On 22 September, the Commission rejoiced that "the voluntary commitment of guarantees is an important expression of solidarity in the face of an unprecedented crisis". When, a month later, a bank consortium, for an unknown fee, sold the 'social bonds' in no time and under impetuous enthusiasm from investors, it once again gave rise to enthusiastic statements from the Commission. After all, this enthusiasm proves the great confidence that the markets place in the creditworthiness of the EU...

In the meantime, the Commission published an overview of the loan amounts which could possibly be requested by various countries:



It will be noted that a whole series of countries (Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, Finland, ...) are missing. There is also a good reason for this: they borrow more cheaply on the market. According to the Financial Times (19 October), the Commission lent to approximately minus 0.24%. [24] Belgium seems to be in an intermediate position, hoping to take some advantage of a 'European' loan.

All in all, if we look at the SURE programme globally, there is little reason to speak of a success of 'Europe and its values of solidarity'. First and foremost, it concerns loans, which will be paid for by the national states and therefore largely by the working population. Secondly, as already mentioned, it is at most a correction to the self-imposed ban on direct loans by the ECB to the member states. Furthermore, one cannot speak of an emergency intervention when it takes more than six months to take a

limited initiative in a dramatic context. After all, this is limited in any case: €100 billion, of which only €17 billion are disbursed now, while Europe is plunged into a second corona wave. One hundred billion is ultimately less than 1% of EU GDP.

So we shall see what really will happen. Perhaps the current governments of e.g. Italy, Spain and Portugal have become more desperate because of the second corona lockdown in their respective countries and are now willing to take up the SURE loans (which they did not touch upon before). The situation in Italy is indeed very desperate. [25] Maybe also other poorer countries will apply for these loans (e.g. Romania). However, the European Central Bank may act as a 'counterweight' to 'light Keynesian spending'. [26]

## ... enthusiasm among investors?

If the EU speaks of an enormous success to gather support from financial markets for its SURE loan programme - this is true. Bonds were only offered for €17 billion, but the overwhelming demand amounted to €233 billion... The call was outstripped 13 times, and this at a negative interest rate!

This points to one of the great contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, and of the EU in particular. Since the financial crisis broke out 12 years ago, it has never been overcome. Investments are lagging behind, companies and financial institutions are sitting on a phenomenal mountain of money. But they see too few profit opportunities and an uncertain future. The ECB tried to do something about this by pumping thousands of billions of QE money into the system. [27]

Despite all these central bank 'incentives', companies and investors were building up even larger 'piggy & shadow bank operations'. Instead of investing, they were engaging in further financialization such as share repurchases, financial investments, fat payouts to shareholders - and most notably, hoarding cash. Never before

has the equity of German companies been so large, writes Thomas Fricke in *Wenn Unternehmer zu viel Geld haben*. According to Fricke, 'corporate liquid assets' in Germany rose from some 6 per cent of GDP at the time of German 'reunification' (1990) to some 15 per cent in 2013. The same trend could be observed world wide - also in the U.S., Japan etc. - from the 1990s onwards.



*The increasing amount of cash in the assets of American non-financial firms, 1990-2012. Source: Federal Reserve of St. Louis Compustat Data, 2012.*

Thus one arrives at the absurd situation that now central bank and government money is lent at negative interest rates, that thousands of billions are made available to companies and banks - but these are still hesitant to invest (in particular towards the social and environmental transitions, which are desperately needed). So the 'market engine' does not work, and the ECB does not even manage to reach its target of close to 2% inflation. Instead, the EU economy is very close to a deflationary spiral, with all its negative consequences.

## The benefits of SURE: compassionate neo-liberalism at work

SURE is presented as a social program that allows employees to keep their jobs in spite of the corona crisis. That investors also benefit from it, some will present as a win-win operation. However, the upshot is this: 'tax payers' (that is the 'state') bail out the corporates and provide the monies to them to keep workers financially somehow afloat.

The hope is: when a recovery should

set in, corporations can rely on a qualified workforce that helps them to again boost their business opportunities. This may be also good for the work force – at least they do not immediately become unemployed (as in former times, such as the 1920ies/30ies). But the hardships (of income loss etc.) are imposed on the workforce – whereas the big corporations nearly get any state support which they demand. [28]

So, if one looks at the broader picture, it is again – as was the case during the financial crisis – national governments that have to jump into the breach when the profit prospects of the private sector are threatened. Since national government debts and deficits have not yet recovered at all from the financial crisis, a disaster scenario is being built up here for many decades to come.

Shortfalls in national finances are always paid for by the working class, whether by wage restraint, higher taxes or reduced social security benefits. And this applies not only to the SURE program, but to all corona repair measures taken by the national and European authorities. Taking on more public debt, making wells to fill them, will take revenge on the working class.

## Alternatives?

Monetary financing seems a better idea: the ECB makes loans available to

the member states with zero interest rate and a term of, for example, 1,000 years, which means that they do not have to be repaid. Sovereign debts do not increase. This is the idea behind the ‘perpetual bonds’ or the so-called ‘consols’ that were previously discussed. [29]

Of course this cannot be reconciled with the European treaties, but we are also not looking for a sustainable solution within these treaties, because it cannot be found there. But there is another objection. It is true that public debt does not increase, but once again a public instrument (the monetary power) is used to save the profit prospects of the private sector. This is reprehensible, not only from the point of view of social justice, but also from the point of view of economic efficiency. Why?

After all, apart from more sovereign debt and monetary financing, there is a third possibility: get the money where it is via taxes. This is, of course, more socially just, and it also addresses the concerns expressed now even by the IMF and the World Bank, namely the worldwide formidable inequality, the still growing gap between rich and poor. But as said, such an approach is also economically more efficient.

The aforementioned Thomas Fricke attributes the ‘hoardiness’ of capital owners to tax reforms, among other things, which make such practices

more attractive. The logical consequence is that a heavy tax on the hoarded money of the financial actors will bring that money back into circulation. It will inevitably be invested rather than hoarded. Part of the investment may go to the labour force, a reduction in working hours without loss of wages, an increase in wages, which, unlike speculative investments, will return to the economic circuit in the shortest possible time, and in the long run cause some inflation (which the ECB is so feverishly and vainly looking for). Another part can ensure sustainable development, for example by investing in a fossil-free production apparatus.

The fiscal approach, as opposed to the monetary one, also has the advantage of being able to ensure redistribution. This also meets the objection that not all companies are equal, that some survive with difficulty and others do not know what to do with their money. An appropriate fiscal policy can do a lot about this. It would run counter to the neo-liberal thinking of the EU, but it hasn't been said often enough: exceptional problems require exceptional measures.

So there are indeed alternatives to the EU's market-oriented policy. However, there is no alternative to an intense, protracted, internationalist struggle to push through alternatives. [30]

13 November 2020

Source: [Ander Europe](#).

# Dead ends and limits of progressive governments

14 November 2020, by **Franck Gaudichaud**

**What kind of glasses should we wear to properly understand Latin America in recent decades?**

We must be careful not to approach the subcontinent in a uniform manner: we are faced with a very great

diversity of historical, cultural and linguistic experiences... This is obvious. A global analysis can lose sight of these specificities of a continent of more than 600 million inhabitants and 20 countries. In the essay, we tried to navigate between

the two: to offer a fairly generalist view and to rely on specific, more detailed examples. Our focal point is that of popular movements, their mobilizations and class conflicts in the region. From this critical socio-political point of view, we can

determine three periods. The first began at the end of the 1990s with the emergence of a plebeian questioning of the Washington agenda, of neoliberalism, of the oligarchies in place: a very strong moment of overthrow, with great social explosions. The second, from 2002-2003 to 2011, is that of the rise of so-called "progressive" governments.

"Their stated aim was to break with neoliberalism and the Washington consensus, invest in education, literacy, infrastructure, etc., but without breaking with capitalism."

With the election of Chávez and Lula, a political cycle opened, and not only electorally it led to institutional aspects, new parties, deep social and constitutional reforms - while being the result of previous mobilizations. To put it quickly, it was the "golden age" of progressivism. The third period, sometimes called the "end of the cycle", opened in 2011-2012 and is in fact still not over : it is the regressive phase, marked by ever stronger tensions between forms of progressivism and the working classes. as well as with part of the intellectual and critical left. It is also the moment of the economic crisis and of coups d'état -"parliamentary" (Honduras from 2009, Paraguay, Brazil) or military (Venezuela, Bolivia) - with more or less direct support from the United States. In this tense situation, the right and the far right are advancing more and more. We see emerging all the limits of a neo-developmentist and/or neo-extractivist model - the political scientist Jeffreery Webber talks of state capitalism. Bolsonaro in Brazil would be the ultimate point of this regression "at full speed to the right".

**What exactly does the expression "progressive experiences" cover in the Latin American context of the end of the twentieth and early twenty-first century ?**

It is a real problem - not only academic but political - to find a way to characterize this expression. In their early days, all governments of progressive experiments claimed to be in a post-neoliberal stage. As Rafael Correa said, "the region is not living

through not an era of change but a change of era". There would therefore be governments of the " national-popular " type, a great Latin-American tradition [31]: Chávez (Venezuela), Morales (Bolivia), Correa (Ecuador) were the sign of a return of this "radical" national-popular form, accompanied here by defining themselves as anti-imperialist. But progressivism also covered more social-liberal or centre-left experiences, in which we can include Lula's Workers' Party (PT) or the Uruguayan Broad Front - Kirchnerism in Argentina being, for its part, closer to the first by its history and to the second by its economic orientation. These new governments had the common features of emerging on the basis of social movements of the years 1990-2000 or, at least, identifying in part with trade-union movements and the demands of popular movements. Very often, we also find at the centre of the progressive system a charismatic, "hyper-presidential" figure - which poses a real political and democratic problem in the long term. On the other hand, there was often a neo-developmentist aim , of return of the state (more or less marked according to the configurations), and the use of the extractive rent (oil, mining or agro-industrial for example) to redistribute it. within social programmes, reducing poverty and inequalities. Their stated aim was to break with neoliberalism and the Washington consensus, invest in education, literacy, infrastructure, etc., but without breaking with capitalism. The "progressive regimes", in this sense, were not situated in the lineage of the Latin American revolutionary and anti-capitalist lefts of the 1960s and 1970s.

**You also take a critical look at these " progressive regimes ". After the enthusiasm of the early days, a good part of the radical left seems to be looking elsewhere when it comes to drawing a balance sheet: why is that ?**

It is very clear : there is no desire to deepen critical vision and draw a balance sheet of these twenty years of government. In France and in Europe, there was a certain enthusiasm within the social and political left for Latin

America in the 1990s and 2000s. The opening of this great cycle, which has sometimes been called the "turn to the left ", nevertheless gave balm to the heart and pink to the cheeks, and not only in Latin America. Faced with Thatcher's TINA [32] , there were alternatives, including governmental ones; we started to talk of socialism (of the "twenty-first century " or "communitary") and the idea of "living well" [33] became established. A whole part of the left with an institutional aim plunged into this. They saw the possibility of repeating in France what was happening there, at the government level. Faced with popular dynamics, the radical left also followed suit, but with more critical distance and more autonomy. For some of the organizations, we now feel a kind of bad conscience, as if we should not turn the knife in the wound, as if we should avoid discussing collectively what did not work. It is, however, necessary. Not to "give lessons" to the peoples of Latin America, not at all! But because it is precisely these discussions that are being conducted in the field of critical thinking in Latin America today, and in the political spaces of the left. [34]

"To look away would be like saying When you do things we like, we show solidarity, and when things start to go wrong, we are interested in something else."

To look away would be like saying " When you do things that we like, we show solidarity, and when things start to go wrong, we are interested in something else ". There is a real problem here. Today it would be good, including within La France insoumise, for example, for there to be a process of study and critical assessments: that would even be essential. We are sometimes criticized for having supported these processes ourselves for too long. Personally, I defend what we did and I continue to think that the first days of the Chavista experience, or the Bolivian experience, were marked by a massive popular impulse to get out of neoliberalism, a desire to rebuild sovereignty in the face of imperialism, to confront the dominant

classes, and that it was legitimate to support "below, on the left". [35] This does not prevent us from seeing, after twenty years of experience, the obstacles, the limits, the involutions and the strategic impasses, and everything that internally has been an obstacle to self-organization and real democratization.

**Among these limits, you write that "big capital in general knew how to benefit from the progressive golden age": in what way?**

Jeffrey Webber shows that this period was overdetermined by very high commodity prices: their price curves are extremely linked to the rise of progressive regimes. Foreign and international capital has gained market share : there is talk of the "soyatzation" of Argentina under Kirchner, of the consolidation of Monsanto's empire in Brazil under Lula and Rousseff, of the extension of oil concessions in regions of the Orinoco [36] with Maduro , etc. There was a reproduction of the peripheral insertion (unequal and combined) of these countries in the world economy within the international division of labour, with a neocolonial dependence linked to the price of raw materials. The idea of the governments was that faced with the immensity of the social emergency, they had to do everything they could to be able to finance new public policies and conditional cash transfers, which followed market principles and often had an "assistance based" character. [37] But in the absence of structural transformation or a direct drain on high incomes, the real and very rapid (although often unfortunately temporary) improvement of the lot of the poorest layers was also done in parallel with a frenzied extractivism, an openness to foreign capital, and paradoxically the consolidation of certain fractions of the dominant classes. These governments have not practiced any bold tax policies (while taxes on income and wealth are ridiculously low in Latin America) - yet even the social democratic left usually has a progressive tax agenda on capital! Correa was the only one to have tried a little, but he retreated in the face of the mobilization of the employers and the middle classes. More generally, there has been no

transformation of social relations of production: minimum wages have been sharply increased in several countries, but workers' rights have finally been little extended and, above all, wage relations have not been seriously changed. Because of this absence of structural transformations, as soon as the crisis arrived, it was all of these balances between the classes installed by progressivism which collapsed; only the dominant classes are doing well.

**Oil, minerals, wood, bio-fuels: many of these countries have an economic model based on extractivism, the exploitation of land. You mention the strong economic dependence on exports and world prices, but this also poses ecological concerns and has led to conflicts with indigenous peoples ...**

You are right: the questions of "mega-extractivism" [38] are at the basis of the crystallization of tensions between progressives, social-environmental movements and certain indigenous communities. While there was still strong economic capacity (Bolivia was even praised by the World Bank for its results), this "progressive neo-extractivist" [39] model multiplied the "zones of sacrifice", social-environmental conflicts and the rejection of communities defending their territories. The extension of the extractive, agro-industrial, petroleum frontier engulfed millions of square kilometers during those years.

**Where, for example ?**

I'll give you two examples. In Bolivia, during the Tipnis conflict , part of the indigenous movement opposed the construction of a major road that was to cross the Bolivian Amazon from Brazil - Evo Morales found himself in opposition to part of his indigenous base. [81] Around that point, I had less financial burden: I had just finished paying off my apartment after decades and my son had started working. So I made a decision with my family to quit my full-time job and devote more time and energy to the burgeoning social movement.

During this period, I met new friends in the movement and this was when I

really first learned about left-wing ideas more rigorously. I met people like Au Loong-yu, who taught me a lot, especially the principle that helping others in politics doesn't have to be separate from helping myself. [82] This echoed something I said to a reporter in 2008 after the Vitasoy strike. She asked me how I viewed the result of the strike, which saw higher wages for my co-workers but me still getting fired. I said that we can't just look at immediate gains and need to look at larger, social, or industry-wide impacts of actions like these. I still worked as a truck driver afterward in the same industry, and since Vitasoy is a large corporation in a small city, our victory was able to set a new industry-wide wage standard. So even though I got fired, by helping other workers raise their wages, I end up indirectly improving conditions for myself too, still working as a truck driver. The important thing is that you never know when engaging in collective organizing would actually end up materially benefiting your own conditions too.

**'I still don't know what we could've done differently then': Reflections on Umbrella**

**PL:** The Umbrella Movement started right around the years Benny Tai's initiatives began taking off in public discourse. What was your participation like during Umbrella, and what are your observations about that movement's political direction and kind of organization? Lastly, how do you interpret Umbrella's failure and the years since, leading up to the protests last year?

**TCK:** So during the Umbrella Movement, I had more time to get involved but struggled with figuring out what the best role is for me in the beginning. I heeded the call to occupy Central, risking arrest to engage in civil disobedience. Only, of course, at that time, no one was arrested indiscriminately like they are now. I wasn't involved in political leadership but I attended the occupation a lot. I was naturally pretty good at de-escalating conflicts, especially when things often got tense between protestors on the ground, and eventually I was looped in to help out by some self-organized groups to

serve as security and de-escalator in the occupying locations. I felt like the role was a good way for me to contribute to the action, though not all the occupation sites welcomed such a role.

At the time, the three main points of occupation—Admiralty, Causeway Bay, and Mong Kok—had very different vibes. Admiralty recognized the leadership of some prominent liberal political figures like Tai, though the situation got pretty muddy toward the end. Mong Kok had more organizations fighting for power and the dynamic was much more combative and territorial between the protestors. Though there was a pretty helpful democratic platform to feature different voices during the occupations, whoever had the loudest voice or most supporters got more of a platform in Mong Kok. I think democracy should entail respectful and accountable processes for dialogue and debate, and this was something eroding from the start.

I really felt the power of state repression for the first time in 2014, when it felt like all the resources and energy spent on the occupation weren't amounting to many positive actions from the government, which continued to operate with impunity. The younger folks were getting agitated by the traditional, pan-democratic leaders' incessant and ineffectual meetings, and wanted to escalate. I can already sense the public opinion shifting rapidly against us as the government was content to let the occupation drag on and let us fizzle out. I asked the pan-democratic leaders how we can continue the momentum and maybe rework the movement so it can be sustained without making it feel like we are retreating or giving up. No one gave an adequate response at the time, and to be honest, I still don't know what we could've done differently then. Of course, the movement faded and Hong Kong social activism ebbed once again.

**'People think they don't have power and abstain from participating in the few venues they have to influence how things around them are run'**

**TCK:** People faulted traditional pan-democratic organizations for the loss, and there was a lot of in-fighting afterward in Hong Kong political circles. One positive thing for me at least during the time after Umbrella is that there was more time to think, self-educate, and process larger political questions. I read and learned more about what it means to be a part of a social movement, and how to think of Hong Kong's struggles alongside other oppressive regimes globally. I learned and read a lot in these years and participated in smaller-scale social activism, building organizations like Voters Rising and [Borderless Movement](#).

Voters Rising was formed to stimulate people to pay attention to electoral politics, not just to center on personalities but to talk about what it means to push for concrete ideological platforms. And if you aren't convinced by certain candidates' platforms, how can you still engage in community activism to change things? I also met Eddie Chu Hoi-dick in 2016 and helped him with his electoral campaign, and deepened my engagement with people in the movement. [83] Borderless is more explicitly left-wing and became a small hub for political education and discussion that continues to this day, and also served as an online publication to stimulate left ideas in political discourse.

I did stuff like that all the way up to the eve of the anti-extradition bill protests in 2018/early 2019. Some Borderless friends and I started Community Self-Organizing, where we'd set up street stands to promote popular education about political theory. Borderless is mainly a publication and discussion space to bring left-wing political ideas and history to a Hong Kong audience. I'm more of a listener than a writer, and I'd try to understand as much as I can and rework these theories in accessible ways for a broader audience.

Many Hongkongers, largely because of the colonial educational system, just think the government is immutable, and that people have no real power and we should just adapt to new laws that are given to us. We would try to

talk to people on the streets about how governments are products of history and can be transformed, and how people can build power and hold them accountable to meet our needs. We noticed that people have a lot of grievances, but have been so engrained in thinking that they have no political power and cannot influence policy. We also ended up producing three short pamphlets, analyzing distinct sectors that we thought would be relevant to everyday people to encourage them to organize and build power where they're at. One pamphlet addressed education, and how both the colonial and CCP regimes reinforced an education system that prioritizes training people as laborers for the market rather than actually developing people's interests and capacity to think independently.

Another Borderless member who studies labor history in his free time wrote one on labor rights, and I wrote one drawing on my experience participating in tenant associations. These associations are really a microcosm of Hong Kong society; people think they don't have power and abstain from participating in the few venues they have to influence how things around them are run. We pay fees to these housing associations, so shouldn't we deserve to have say over the conditions we live in? So by focusing our discussions on education, housing, and labor, we want to show how people can be empowered to change things around them through engaging in very immediate parts of their lives. But this project was difficult to sustain, and while people were interested in listening to us, most ended up just telling us to keep up the work but say they were too busy. And shortly after we took a break, the anti-extradition bill mobilizations began.

### **New foundations and difficulties in the 2019 movement**

**PL:** What is your role and perspective on last year's protests, and how was it similar or different from your experience of Umbrella?

**TCK:** One important thing to note is that the groundwork for the movement actually already started back around February or March of last

year. Though some of these mobilizations were much smaller in scale and have barely caught the public eye yet, we see already what I think is one of the most important and under-discussed elements that kickstarted the larger movement: the role of student organizing. After 2014, many of the student groups imploded in various ways. The Hong Kong Student Union, which played a pivotal role during Umbrella, saw internal splits and were left with only four associated schools at one point.

Most social movement activism between then and the anti-extradition bill protests was mainly held up by a lot of older folks—other long-time activists. May was the breaking point last year but that energy would not have been possible without the initial rise of secondary school students self-organizing “anti-extradition bill concern groups” within their campuses. The youth became stimulated en masse again for the first time in years, and over a thousand local or campus-specific concern groups surfaced before June. This eventually sparked similar concern groups self-organized by parents, by

region, online, and even by certain apartment complexes’ tenant associations. In other words, the massive June 9th march was neither a sudden nor isolated affair.

“Whether this movement is successful or not, the ray of light for me is that my fellow protestors showed me that change is possible.”

So these different groups began from discontent over the specific bill and quickly tackled larger issues about Hong Kong’s political future. This was a huge difference from the years before 2019 and before the Umbrella Movement. As a leftist, I thought it was an important victory already on a basic level that everyday people were energized to collectively determine and work out their own political future.

As I’ve said, I think my values are pretty simple at the end of the day: the ruling class suppresses and

disempowers oppressed and marginalized people at the bottom. Capitalist forces—from the government to real estate moguls—disenfranchise us, and we the exploited must rise up to defend our rights. And this movement showed me that people are learning to organize to take back these things. History and the current situation suggest that we might probably fail this time around again, but we have this record for the future: that Hongkongers tried their best to stand up against their oppressors and we have something to contribute to the history of mass movements, and for our own future movements. Whether this is successful or not, the ray of light for me is that my fellow protestors showed me that change is possible.

This is not to say the situation isn’t grim. Despite loud gestures from world leaders, international support has not been that successful in stopping Beijing’s repression. The US HKHRDA last year, for example, not only does not accomplish much for the Hong Kong people, but if you read the contents of the bill, it’s clear that it’s all about the USA’s own self-interest. [