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The Anti-Imperialist Left Confronted with Islam

29 March 2006, by **Tariq Ali**

Grenzeloos: It is of course the assassination of the film-maker Theo van Gogh and the threats made against the liberal member of parliament Ayaan Hirsi Ali which have particularly drawn attention to Islam in the Netherlands. Like her, you are an unbeliever who comes from the Muslim world. Have you already felt threatened?

Tariq Ali: No, never. I travel a lot both in the Muslim world and in the rest of the world, but I have never yet felt threatened. Why is that? It is no doubt because people who don't agree with me about religion know that I am an enemy of imperialism. I unceasingly criticize imperialism and all its works, more than the believers do. Whereas Hirsi Ali and people like her in the United States and in Europe make a profession out of attacking Islam. There are other important questions in the world.



Why do these people concentrate endlessly on Islam? In the way that they attack Islam, they go along with existing prejudices. And for that they are hated. There is no excuse or justification for acts of violence against these people. It is necessary to

discuss with them. But these acts are a sign of despair: people are so much at the end of their tether that they have recourse to violence.

Don't you think that the violence and threats against these people also represent a threat to all those of Muslim origin who do not correspond to the norm? To the unbelievers, the feminists, the homosexuals?

Certainly. But you have to understand that the Muslim community is very diversified. People are very uninformed about the Muslim world. The image that they have of it comes to a large extent through the immigrant communities in Europe, who are, besides, very different from each other. Life in the Muslim world is not monolithic: there are believers, unbelievers, atheists.

Whether the unbelievers can freely express themselves is obviously another question. Often they can't, but that doesn't mean that they don't exist. As is the case here, religion is not the central element in the life of Muslims. People work, eat, make love, build families. Some go to the mosque, others don't. Exactly like in other parts of the world. The difference lies only in the fact that in some countries it is forbidden to criticize Islam. But that is not the case for example in

Turkey. In other countries where it was also possible it has become more difficult today.

Religion is taking on much more importance. For young Muslims in the West, Islam is to a large extent a question of identity.

I think so too. It is a product of different factors, but above all of the vacuum of present day capitalism. There is no real alternative. Many people feel this and turn towards religion, not only Muslims. For the last 20 or 30 years, people who wouldn't have considered themselves to be particularly religious have been turning towards Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, etc. Why? Because capitalism flattens everything like a steamroller and human beings want to find a refuge for themselves. Because many of them no longer see any socio-economic alternative, they go back to religion. That is why in the immigrant communities there are people who consider their identity from a purely religious point of view, and I don't expect anything good to come from that. But I also think that all that will change with the coming generation. Today people are not all religious with the same degree of intensity, we can see different variations. I don't think that the return to religion is universal.

One aspect of the orientalist

representation of Muslims that is dominant today is that they are portrayed as people who can only behave in an uncritical and dogmatic way in relation to the Koran, whereas other believers, above all Christians, are reputed to be capable of producing a modern interpretation of their holy book.

This is in fact a mistaken representation, although it is very widespread. That is why I insist on the diversity of the Muslim world. In Poland the Church played at one time a significant role in the struggle against the Stalinist regime. In the West its role was greeted with enthusiasm. Why do we have this double standard?

Many people in the Muslim world consider an attack against Islam as unacceptable. Many of them, without being at all religious - I know some of them - say: "Yes I am a Muslim". That is a result of the fact that the US has made it from a certain point of view unacceptable to be a Muslim. You are living in a country (the Netherlands) in which religion occupied a dominant position in an extreme way.

Protestant fundamentalism is one of the worst forms of fundamentalism. Protestant fundamentalism, of English or Dutch origin, was responsible for a genocide in North America; it wiped out the indigenous population in the name of progress - something that Muslims have not yet done.

Wherever we see this religious revival of which you speak - among Muslims in the West, among Christians in the United States... - we can see that conservative representations of sexuality play a big role.

That has always been the case. I don't think capitalism absolutely wants human beings to have conservative representations of sexuality, but capitalism does want them to be brought up in nuclear families, isolated from each other.

When religion occupies a central place in a person's identity, then that person seeks to distinguish him or herself from those around them; he or she defends morality and takes a position

against homosexuality, at the same time affirming that women have an inferior value.

In the formation of the identity of each person, the question of sexuality plays a big role. Human beings are constantly looking for differences and they find them most easily in religion.

Is there a future for the feminist movement in the Muslim world and in the Muslim societies here in the west?

Of course. There was for example a very effective movement in Pakistan against the Islamic legislation that was introduced during the dictatorship, in 1977. All over the country women organized, demonstrated, and criticized the sharia. Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria and Tunisia have seen feminist movements.

The state authorities reacted to this challenge either by themselves creating fundamentalist movements, as in Pakistan, or by collaborating with them, as in Egypt. In exchange for a policy that was conservative and hostile to women on the part of the authorities, the fundamentalists undertook to no longer attack the state.

In the West, in the future, feminist movements will have to develop which are at the same time explicitly anti-imperialist. Then it would be possible to win young Muslim women to feminism. Unfortunately in the West feminism has little existence as a political current.

In the framework of your insistence on the differences, you speak in the "Clash of Fundamentalisms" of an official multiculturalism.

Yes, there lies the cause of the search for differences. When you look at Britain, you can see that religion has been supported there - by the government and above all by Blair. Even after September 11, the foundation of religious institutions, for example religious schools, was encouraged. Within official multiculturalism the differences between people are seen as a good

thing.

In part that is really the case - people are different. But as a socialist I also know how difficult it is to forge unity. I think that among young people there are more points of convergence than there are differences. I am an optimist: the importance of religious dividing lines will not last long in Europe, perhaps 30 or 40 years.

Why?

To put it cynically: because capitalism is blind as far as sex, skin colour or religion are concerned. Insofar as it expands and extends it sets aside all the particularities of human beings. That is what has always happened.

Is the Left capable of showing that there is an alternative?

A: The Left is at present very weak. As far as the radical Left is concerned I am not optimistic. In Britain I am not a member of Respect. I disagree with them on some points. The way things are happening in Respect is pure opportunism. Obviously I am in favour of working with Muslim groups, but socialists the goal must be to win followers of religion to our own point of view, not to leave them in their entrenched positions.

So we should work together in a less uncritical way?

Of course. The way Respect is doing it won't lead to anything. We have to find a neutral terrain which can offer a space for discussion. We must not conceal our own point of view by hiding it under the table. Many of the (Muslim) groups with which Respect has developed collaboration have very conservative and reactionary roots. In the countries from which they come, like for example Egypt or Indonesia, they have always been the enemies of the Left.

This is one of the problems that anti-racists and socialists come up against. On the one hand we want to develop solidarity with minorities who suffer discrimination, while on the other hand we have to maintain a critical position in relation to the conservative ways of thinking that

are partly dominant among these minorities.



Muslim women in Mumbai demonstrate against the war

For socialists the task is clear: the Muslim communities must be defended against being made scapegoats, against repression, against the very widespread representation that terrorism is proper to Islam. All that must be energetically fought. But at the same time we must not close our eyes to the social conservatism which reigns in these communities, nor hide it. We have to try to win this people to our

own ideas.

I would like to give an example: the last chapter of my book is an open letter to a young Muslim. After having written this letter, nearly a year later, I received a reply from some young Muslims. They thought that my letter was talking about them because they found in it remarks that they had made themselves. They were surprised to be taken so seriously and they had also discussed a lot among themselves. The result was that two of them joined the Scottish Socialist Party.

Our aim must be to reinforce the position of the youngest ones, who are turning in the direction of a progressive and secular perspective.

That is very important. There are a lot of progressive people who can be found in the Muslim communities, but because of the atmosphere that reigns there, they can obviously not assert themselves openly. It is these people who can build secular forces and it is them that we must support. And it is above all among the young women that we will find such resources.

We can win over many of them if we don't ignore them, which the far Left in France tends to do. The French far Left is the mirror image of British opportunism. It has practically no contact with the Muslim community and doesn't consider that as a priority. Both attitudes are mistaken - we have to find a middle way.



Tsunami, Katrina, Kashmir: Element of political reflection on a series of natural disasters

27 March 2006, by **Pierre Rousset**

I. The framework of the debate

First we will stress five points which serve as the framework for this report.

1. It was originally conceived as an element of the discussion on the world situation, and not as a point "in itself" on the agenda of this meeting. The international situation has been marked by the succession, within one year, of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and then the earthquake in Kashmir and Pakistan. The impact of these catastrophes is such that it has become a political fact which deserves to be treated as such. All the more so in that it poses questions of orientation linked to an activist area of intervention.



It is fairly unusual to introduce such a question in the framework of a discussion on the world situation. But it's a good innovation. In particular it allows us to reflect on the spot on the basis of effective actions. It also contributes to the integration of the "ecological" as a component of a reflection of a general character (and not as a chapter which is artificially "adjusted" to a traditional agenda).

2. I use here the term "natural disasters" without prejudging their origins (natural or human). That seems to me legitimate; these are indeed disasters which occur under the impact of natural elements (earthquakes, floods and so on.) and it is this which constitutes their

specificity. In the same way, we can speak of health crises without prejudging their origins (which can also be 100% human: see mad cow disease).

On the origin of natural disasters, we can at least discuss three hypothetical cases:

- An origin which is 100% natural. This is generally the case with earthquakes. I can perfectly well conceive that the unleashing of a given earthquake can be precipitated by a human action (like a subterranean explosion?). However, neither the most vulgar nor the subtlest Marxist can show that globalised capitalism influences plate tectonics.

- An origin which is 100% human. This is for example the case with destructive floods (they can lead to

thousands of deaths) brought about by the deforestation of mountainous slopes.

- A mixed origin - or an indirect human origin. It is here that I would be tempted to place Katrina according to the hypothesis under which the climatic disturbance brought about by greenhouse gases is already beginning to have effects on the frequency and violence of tropical hurricanes.

3. Is it possible to discuss various types of natural disaster together, whatever their origins? I think so, to a certain extent at least, because they raise many similar political problems. The tsunami, Katrina and the Kashmir earthquake are brought together here in an accidental fashion, because they happened recently and are topical. They operate on very different levels: the impact of an undersea earthquake on the surface of the oceans and coastal zones; the formation of tropical hurricanes; an earthquake in mountainous country. But all raise common socio-political problems and involve tasks which are to some extent common.

4. To this general theme of natural disasters we will add a specific point concerning climate in this discussion. As the British comrades have correctly stressed, we need to take into account the importance (properly historic) of the question and the actuality of the international campaigns undertaken in this area. Here it is necessary to integrate the scientific side of the question: the human impact on the biosphere. It's not my place to do that! That will be the subject of a separate contribution by a more competent comrade.

After having raised the similarities between all the types of natural disaster, we now touch on a significant difference, according to "origin". It can be interesting to explain the plate tectonics but that has only a limited impact on our tasks (where and how is the question of prevention posed?); there is no need to go into details because nothing can be changed here. On the other hand, the problem is to change the human impact on the dynamic of the climate. We cannot do this without reviewing the existing scientific knowledge in this area.

5. The current evolution of the climate is one of the main symptoms indicating the breadth of qualitative change which has taken place in recent decades in the dynamic of ecological crises. There have certainly been ecological crises in the past, but they remained local or regional. The novelty in the final third of the 20th century is that contemporary capitalism (post-1960s) has opened an ecological crisis of human origin with a global dynamic.

For some time now we have understood the importance and gravity of this turning point; but this judgement is today confirmed with the climatic crisis in formation.

If we speak of crisis, it is obviously from a human viewpoint. The biosphere is indifferent to its evolutions. That is not the case for us, for it is the conditions of existence of the human race which are worsening and are imperilled.

In the rest of this report, we will approach a certain number of problems which have been posed to us, passing from the more specific to the more general and starting from the events from the end of 2004 to the end of 2005.

II. Anti-capitalist agitation and concrete struggles

A. The iniquity and negligence of the dominant system laid bare

The tsunami of the end of 2004 generated shock waves in consciousness on a rare scale at the international level, for multiple reasons (media coverage, identification facilitated by the presence of numerous Western tourists and so on). The impact of hurricane Katrina has also been profound because this time the catastrophe happened in the most powerful country in the world... and the same iniquity, the same negligence was shown. As to the earthquake which struck Kashmir and Pakistan, it is a reminder of the extent to which solidarity for the victims can be forgotten.



Aftermath in New Orleans

The succession of these catastrophes has a great demonstrative power. The critique of actually existing capitalism (and in particular capitalism at a time of neoliberal globalisation) has become apparent to many with the strength of an obvious fact. Indeed, negligence was on display at all stages of the drama.

- Background: blind and destructive logic of profit. Because they work via natural elements, the disasters of which we are speaking here pose the ecological question sharply. The impact of the logic of profit appears at every level. In the detail, with the destruction of natural protections like the humid zones (marshes and so on) or the coastal vegetation (mangrove forests and so on). At a global scale with the greenhouse gases.

- Inequalities in prevention, bellicose priorities. Examples abound. Anti-tsunami warning systems were set up in the Pacific Ocean to protect the coasts of Japan and the USA but not in the Indian Ocean, funds intended for the maintenance of the levees in New Orleans were diverted for Iraq war expenditure; in Pakistan the administration and the (omnipresent) army were not prepared to intervene during a (foreseeable) earthquake in Kashmir.

- Inequality in the face of emergency. In a general fashion, the official emergency services (national then international) were slow to arrive. Then, emergency aid was affected in a very unequal fashion, with striking phenomena of "invisibility" of the poor and of the most oppressed sectors of the population (dalit in India, Tamil in Sri Lanka, rural mountain dwellers in Pakistan, black people in the US and so on). The aid circuits have in most cases reflected the relations of domination (class, caste, gender), of political and religious clientelism, of corruption.

- Geostrategic dependency. International aid from states was modulated according to geostrategic interests which had very little to do

with humanitarian needs. This is one of the reasons it takes a military form. That was particularly clear in the Indian Ocean with the sending (albeit late) of the French or US naval forces in a key sector (the oil route between Indian and Pacific oceans) of conflict zones (Aceh, Sri Lanka) while carrying out avowed propaganda operations ("rectifying" the USA's poor image among Muslims).

- Reconstruction. Disasters are often perceived by the wealthy as very good opportunities to be seized. This was for example the case during the financial crises of 1998: a social catastrophe in many Asian countries but the opportunity for the Western and Japanese multinationals to buy up the companies of the region for a song. It is again the case today. The tsunami cleansed the coasts, destroying the fishing villages, and Katrina cleansed the poorest neighbourhoods of New Orleans. For the official reconstruction policies, the poorest once again become "invisible". Priority is given (in the name of the "security" of course) to the tourist industry on the coasts of the Indian Ocean and to the better off people in Louisiana.

When we study what happened before, during and after the catastrophe in a given place, like Tamil Nadu, the lessons are revealing. We see concretely how all the relations of domination (world, local) turn the most oppressed and exploited into victims repeatedly. We see also how these relations of domination are exacerbated at a time of imperialist globalisation.

Natural disasters thus represent a major social experience. A complex experience also, in which the political, the humanitarian, the social, gender relations and the ecological are inextricably intertwined.

B. A field of action and the politics of aid

Beyond the force of demonstration on the iniquity of the imperialist system, natural disasters pose us numerous political questions. They form a major test for the popular organisations of the disaster-stricken regions and for international solidarity. Indeed, we

cannot confine ourselves to anti-capitalist agitation alone. It is necessary to act. It is a question of responsibility, faced with the distress of the affected populations.

We approach here the question of the politics of aid. I will not attempt to deal with it in its global aspects. It is indeed a question of multiple facets because it includes very diverse types of intervention, with specific political problems on each occasion. The emergency aid associations, for example, only intervene punctually. In this area, one of the main political questions posed to them is that of independence in relation to governments, at the time moreover where armies intervene on the same terrain (and at a time of "humanitarian wars").

I do not seek to oppose a "good" terrain of aid to others. The intervention of emergency aid associations has its legitimacy. I would like to open a reflection on the terrain which is more specifically "ours", taking account of our (modest) means and of our commitment.

Let us say in a formula that our privileged field of action - on which our responsibility is directly engaged - is that of direct solidarity "from people to people", assured by organisations "on the ground", progressive, political, associative and trade union.

There is here a political choice: to draw together and strengthen the links between revolutionary and popular organisations at local, national and international level. Such is not only the case for reasons of programme or of general orientation (our activist commitments). It is also the case for reasons of effectiveness. For all the experience of the past year confirms the effectiveness, which is specific and irreplaceable, of this field of action. I would like to stress the above, because it goes against "common sense" for which the mega-interventions of the states or the big humanitarian organisations are necessarily more effective.

This specific effectiveness also manifests itself at each stage:-

- An alternative to the logic of profit.

We have noted in the preceding point the destructive character of the logic of profit at work via the domination of the capitalist mode de production. Let's mention here for the sake of memory (we will come back to the question of the climate) the fact that the popular, progressive organisations fight for another overall logic which starts from social needs and the ecological situation.

They attack the root of the problem and not merely its consequences. It is essential for the full development of egalitarian policies of prevention in the area of natural disasters. But it is also this which explains practical effectiveness on the ground.

- Effectiveness in emergencies. In many cases, initial aid has been provided by popular organisations coming from neighbouring villages or regions. It is particularly clear in the case of the tsunami where only a coastal strip was devastated: the local popular organisations were the first to react. Beyond the tourist and urban zones, notably, official aid took several days to arrive - and still longer in the case of international aid.

The case of Kashmir is interesting. The aid organised by the Labour Relief Campaign came from quite far away (Lahore notably). A certain time was needed for the organisation and transportation of the aid. Nonetheless, it was the first in position in the zone chosen for its action; the first also to begin to build around a hundred durable rustic houses instead of being content to erect tents which were incapable of offering shelter during the mountain winter.

- Solidarity from "poor to poor". Thus emergency aid provided by the popular organisations represents a solidarity from "poor to poor", often implemented under the leadership of women. It ensures a social priority in favour of the more needy, contrary to the action of the administrations.

- Thrifty solidarity. Solidarity provided by the popular organisations is not costly, because it is activist-based and is based on local resources.

- Knowledge of the social terrain. Organisations from the neighbouring

area have an intimate knowledge of the local social realities which all aid policies should take into account. We give some examples to illustrate this. The psychological shock to the fishing communities struck by the tsunami has been very deep. Death and destruction came from the nourishing sea, without any warning. All was normal and five minutes later, all was destroyed. To be effective, it is necessary to understand this very specific trauma. It is also necessary in Tamil Nadu to be familiar with caste relations - between fishers and dalits (the "Untouchables") notably - and inter-religious relations.

A last example: the European Union sent fishing boats to Sri Lanka which were too big. Unusable. The boats built locally respond on the other hand to local needs.

Any aid policy should fully take into account the specific conditions proper not only to the type of natural disaster but also to the region affected.

- Long term presence - what reconstruction? The popular organisations can provide a presence in the long term and consciously make the link between emergency policies and reconstruction policies. Better, they can do it through a socially solidarity-based approach.

To illustrate what I want to say here, I take an example drawn from Tamil Nadu: it is not only about overcoming caste antagonisms (including between poor: fishers and dalits) and avoiding the eviction of the coastal villages to the benefit of the tourist industry. Reconstruction policies can (should) also allow the initiation of processes of social transformation. Have the (hired) boats been destroyed by the tsunami? In the example that I evoke, the choice has been made of new boats which have been built thanks to international aid and are henceforth owned in cooperative form by the women of the village. Or a progressive modification of the relations of ownership and gender.

- A socially solidarity-based approach. The organisations of which we speak here are not popular only from the fact of their implantation. From Tamil Nadu to Kashmir, numerous

"sectarian" organisations (generally religious, xenophobic and so on) with a very real social implantation have rapidly involved themselves in aid, but with an approach which is not solidarity-based: playing their caste against the others as a politician favours their clientele; or building their church as a multinational captures market shares.

Popular takes on here a political meaning: socially solidarity-based. It amounts obviously, but not only, to defending the most exploited and oppressed faced with the power of money, states and armies. It is also about affirming an alternative to the "casteist", racist, xenophobic and fundamentalist movements. It is a daily struggle in a good number of regions affected by the tsunami and in Pakistan/Kashmir. The forms are different according to the cases. In India violence is inter-caste (against dalits above all) and inter-religious (against Muslims and Christians above all). In Pakistan, this type of violence opposes Muslim sects against each other.

If the forms of intolerance vary, the basic problem remains. Indeed, an aid policy faced with a natural catastrophe is an opportunity par excellence to affirm a solidarity-based project in the strong sense of the term. The notion of "people to people" solidarity is the point of departure, the angle of approach which allows us to broach this question.

- An approach which is challenging and fundamental. Of course, the "people to people" or "poor to poor" solidarity cannot do everything. It cannot provide the helicopters necessary for aid in the high mountains of Kashmir! But it is effective, and not simply "politically correct".

Let us say, to conclude this point, that in the area of aid as others, we need to act jointly on two levels. A "demand-based" level which faces states with their responsibilities (note here that it was under the pressure of public opinion, after the tsunami, that the western governments had to increase their financial commitments, which were at the beginning rightly ridiculed). A more fundamental level: to lay out our own policy on this

terrain - and then to think it.

We still lack experience and reflection on this question. Or at least, the experiences gone through in various countries have not been collectivised at the international level. Let's look then at a certain number of initiatives which were taken at the end of 2004 and in 2005.

C. Elements of reflection around three types of initiative

Concretely, the question of aid is posed in very different terms according to the case, from the end of 2004 to today. The tsunami generated an immense spontaneous sentiment of solidarity (a groundswell!) and a multiplication of initiatives. That was not at all the case with the earthquake in Pakistan and Kashmir; this time, solidarity initiatives were taken up in a voluntarist fashion. Finally, Katrina represented a real political shock (a disaster of this type in the USA) but to my knowledge, has not led to public international campaigns: is it necessary to send aid to the richest country in the world?

Faced with the torrent of initiatives launched following the tsunami, we had to respond to the question: to whom should aid be addressed? In France, we first echoed the appeals launched by the humanitarian organisations or emergency aid bodies independent of the states (Secours populaire, Médecins sans frontières and so on), then we concentrated on campaigns of two types.

1. Aid to "sister organisations". It amounted in the event to the aid brought to the NSSP of Sri Lanka. But it more generally it amounts to support addressed in emergency to the "sister organisations" of the affected zones: from party to party, union to union and so on. This aid is legitimate, necessary. It can be very important for the organisation which receives it, strengthening its ability to act in times of emergency. But it usually only mobilises the militants and sympathisers of the movements concerned (for example, the sections of the Fourth International or the partners of Frères des Hommes).

This type of aid has obvious limits. It

addresses itself to narrow milieus and networks, without responding to the question "What is to be done?" in broader milieus. It does not dynamise the social movement.

2. Support for collective campaigns initiated by the social movements. We have moreover actively supported collective campaigns originating from the movement for global justice. In this case appeals launched by Via Campesina and relayed by a good number of the organisations which participate in the process of the social forum. Via Campesina had organisations in several of the countries affected (Sri Lanka, Indonesia...).

In this framework, "people to people" aid (from social movement to social movement, but collectively) takes form. The financial campaign can gain in breadth. The multiple links of solidarity which are drawn up in the framework of the movement for global justice are strengthened.

The conditions necessary to this type of campaign are not always met. It is necessary that the political impact of the catastrophe is sufficient and that at least a "recognised" organisation inside the movement (trade union, global justice movement and so on.) can offer national or local relays.

3. Building a solidarity initiative. In the case of Pakistan/Kashmir, things present themselves very differently: these conditions were not met. No collective initiative came from the social movement, as had been the case for the tsunami. On the one hand, there was no spontaneous mobilisation of consciousness (and thus no political pressure to act - neither on the governments nor on the movements!). On the other hand, neither Via Campesina nor the French trade unions had any sister organisations in the areas directly concerned (the mountains of Kashmir).

In a general fashion, Franco-Pakistani links of solidarity are moreover tenuous, confined primarily to some NGOs

Financial appeals were also launched after the earthquake, but they primarily illustrated the first hypothesis mentioned here (the "sister organisations"): western NGOs

collecting funds for their Pakistani partners; political currents doing the same. But at the level of "broad" solidarity, compared to the post-tsunami period, it was a situation of a flat electro-encephalogram whereas the situation of the peoples affected was really dramatic! In this context, Europe solidaire sans frontières (ESSF) took a proactive initiative which has yielded results which, while modest, are nonetheless more than anticipated. The experience is, it seems to me, interesting.

ESSF is a small association which contributes notably to strengthening the European-Asian solidarity inside the global justice movement. It responded to the appeal launched in Pakistan by the Labour Education Foundation (LEF), which initiated the Labour Relief Campaign (LRC). This choice was natural enough, given the pre-existing links with the Labour Party Pakistan (LPP), itself a participant in the LRC. The choice was also to support the popular Pakistani organisations "on the ground" (rather than the NGOs), independent of the military regime and the fundamentalist movements, working in a socially solidarity-based perspective - namely inter-community, secular (in this case, referring to the values of the workers' movement). The LRC includes a trade union component and a women's network, which should help to broaden the financial campaign.

The campaign was led with limited means (articles in the militant press, the Internet site of the ESSF, messages on e-mail lists...). The appeal was relayed (jointly with two others) by a trade union (on the Internet de Sud site). An important point: information coming directly from Pakistan (transportation of aid lorries, construction of houses and so on) helped build the campaign in Europe. 16,500 euros were sent to the Labour Relief Campaign; in addition to France, donations came from Catalonia, Germany, Switzerland, Greece and Denmark.

It was the first time that the ESSF took such an initiative directly. The association benefited from its previous involvement in Euro-Asiatic solidarity and a very "natural" partnership with the Labour Relief Campaign. There

again, such conditions are not always met. But this initiative, taken up "on the spot" and on a small scale, allows us to reflect on the specific role of associations like ESSF in the development of an aid policy.

Concrete political problems

In intervening on the terrain of aid, we are obviously faced with political problems. We have already mentioned a whole series of them, at a general level: guaranteeing the independence of the campaigns in relation to states, criteria of choice of partners, the very conception of solidarity. Many other problems emerge when we find ourselves faced with concrete situations. The impact of a natural disaster in a civil war zone can, for example, be very different: unblocking of peace negotiations in Aceh, in the Indonesian archipelago, but not in Sri Lanka.

I will content myself here to give another example. Kashmir cruelly lacked helicopters for emergency aid in high mountains whereas there was a plethora in neighbouring Afghanistan. We denounced - rightly - the passivity of the western powers. At the same time - and also rightly - we rejected the intervention under humanitarian guise of NATO armies in Kashmir (as well as in Sri Lanka or in Indonesia). How do we go beyond this paradox?

Having learnt that the UN emergency intervention programme was to hire (very expensively) the helicopters necessary to their action (and that they lacked funds), I wrote that the armies should lend their machines for free so that they could be used in the framework of a civilian intervention.

Was this the correct response? In any case, it remained confidential, for a limited audience. Indeed, we should be capable of discussing political problems which are posed to us "on the spot", to find the right responses and genuinely campaign.

There are comrades from New Orleans, Sri Lanka and Pakistan here who could say much more on the concrete experience they have lived through.

D. By way of a conclusion on aid

Situations of disaster are common in the world, even if we have only evoked three here. For the organisations of the most affected regions, it is a constant preoccupation. The same should be true for international solidarity.

It is obviously impossible for us to respond to every appeal. But it is necessary, more than in the past, to consider the terrain of aid as a field of intervention, as a durable component of an internationalist politics.

It is all the more true if we fear that big natural disasters will be more rather than less frequent in the future. That's a useful basis to move towards the question of climate.

III. The question of climate change: the telescoping of transitional demands?

In the fight against climate change, the same demand that is raised in relation to the aid question is relevant. Combining anti-capitalist agitation faced with the inability of governments to take necessary measures and campaigns on concrete objectives. But this dual demand is posed here in fairly different terms.

Faced with the danger of tsunamis and earthquakes, we can make a list of simple, precise measures: placing tsunami detectors in the Indian Ocean, improving the international alert system, redeveloping natural protections like coastal vegetation (mangrove, marsh and so on), ensure a public health service, build according to anti-seismic standards and so on.

These measures have nothing "revolutionary" in themselves. The scandal, is that they have not been implemented whereas many of them are both effective and elementary. Of course, the underlying, more profound questions are posed and will be posed: the weight of social inequality or of gender, the logic of capitalist profit which is opposed to the deployment of

public policies of prevention and so on. But the fight can begin by orienting around simple demands. The difference, so far as climate change is concerned, is that to be minimally effective, the measures immediately affect the organisation of production. They cannot content themselves with being "elementary".

For example, reducing greenhouse gas emissions significantly implies a reorganisation of the energy sector, but also that of transport - and then that of world trade - and then that of agriculture (more "peasant" and less industrial) - and then that of urban policy and of land development. It does not amount to an artificial or "maximalist" linking.

We cannot radically change energy consumption in the sense demanded without also tackling the question of transport (of commodities, of persons between housing and workplace), then, to the localisation of production and modes of consumption (with the accompanying cultural revolution). The emergency measures (I stress: emergency) imply a logic which breaks with that of capitalism. It is one of the specificities of the climate question which is linked to its global character (as much in the origin as in the consequences).

Given the gravity of the climate crisis (for the human race), the breadth and nature of the problem posed, it is as if the "maximum programme" became the "minimum programme", telescoping the transitional dynamic which normally allows the making of a link between the two in struggle.

The break with capitalism appears completely logically as the "elementary" response to the question posed. The contradiction to which we are confronted, is that the socialist perspective does not always appear as a palpable alternative. There is then a specific tension between the concrete demands (it is vital to act now) and the credibility of real solutions.

That complicates certain debates. The Kyoto protocol, for example, is both very insufficient and perverse (commodity approach). But the fact of not signing it, on the part particularly of the US, still deserves to be

denounced.

One can nonetheless begin to get out of this contradiction. Indeed, there is a beginning of a meeting between the global justice movement and the ecological tradition which is taking place in particular on the field of "climate" mobilisation (there are other, linked for example to the echo of the struggles of indigenous peoples).

It is only a beginning and that remains very unequally true according to the country. But at least, this allows action. There is here a major responsibility: accelerate and amplify this meeting in putting more resources into the "climate" campaigns (see the contribution of the British comrades).

One obviously meets limits. "Numerical" (the forces available). But also political. The perception of the problem varies and there are few places of collectivisation of experiences and reflection. Indeed, the climate crisis obliges us to integrate the ecological question more completely than in the past, whatever the progress already made in this area. Indeed, that is not self-evident. It is the final point of my introduction.

IV. Ecology, militant culture and political programme

We cannot integrate the ecological question without taking fully into account nature - which is not simple at all and which, moreover, is generally foreign enough to the militant culture of the workers' movement and the anti-capitalist organisations.

Certainly, there is no longer (or nearly) any "virgin" nature. Nature has a history interlinked with human history, and this has been true for a very long time (since the Neolithic revolution?). We are today confronted with the impact of human activities on the biosphere. We follow closely the rate of production of carbon dioxide - which has the advantage of being measurable.

But it is not only about the greenhouse effect gases. Before being modified by social production, the biosphere is made up of ecosystems and is their product. We cannot define scientifically the ideal composition (for the human race) of the biosphere and reproduce it artificially! We can on the contrary note (it's a good reference point) that the previous state of things has been very favourable to us and that one of the means of preserving it is to preserve the ecosystems which correspond to it. The transformation of productive (and consumer) logic should not only allow the reduction of the production of carbon dioxide, it is necessary to modify radically the relationship between nature and human society.

It is not about abstractly opposing human activities and natural spaces. Many rich milieus depend on a specific social production (hay field, enclosure and so on). All the same, many natural milieus serve better human needs than costly artificial solutions (see the multiple roles of humid zones, from protection against floods to the purification of polluted waters passing by the maintenance of biodiversity). But capitalism has its reasons that socio-ecological reason ignores: it imposes in the name of the progress productive modes which are irrational as much from the social as the ecological point of view... but which are very rational from the point of view of the search for profit and power.

The global ecological crisis (from the human point of view) opened by the development of capitalism after the second world war does not only concern the climate, but the whole of society/nature relations. The intervention on the question of climate change can help to integrate more intimately to our programme this dimension. It obliges us notably to study (without pretension) natural mechanisms on which to base our political action, which is very much too rarely the case. But we will encounter several difficulties.

First type of difficulty: it is not easy to popularise and politically assimilate scientific knowledge. Additional difficulty: we also come up against, which simplifies nothing, the limits of

this knowledge in relation to very complex systems: to what point do climatologists and oceanologists know the biosphere, the oceans and the dynamic of the climate?

Second type of difficulty: we come up against "common sense" on questions where the critical tradition is much less anchored in our militant milieus than on the directly social terrain. It seemed, for example, that with technical progress it was possible to free ourselves quasi-totally of natural constraints (see the extreme model of off ground agriculture). The boomerang effect of climate change shows that the process is much more contradictory.

Additional difficulty: for Marxists, the society/nature relationship is not understood without the mediation of social relations inside societies: one cannot qualitatively change the society/nature relationship without modifying social relations. Marxists are as it happens right, even if many non-socialist ecologists prefer to ignore it. But it is not necessary to conclude that it suffices to tackle the question of social relations, without analysing more specifically the human impact on nature and the natural mechanisms.

Let us pose the question: what has the new sharpness of the ecological question changed about our approach? If the response is "nothing" (since everything comes back to the social), there is a problem! Indeed, one still senses much reticence in integrating completely the ecological question (and then the nature: knowledge of ecosystems, climatic mechanisms and so on).

Third type of difficulty: the coherence and articulation of the proposals. We need to take account of the entire ecological question. For example, we struggle jointly for the reduction of greenhouse emissions (and against the dictatorship of the oil lobby) and against nuclear energy (and the dictatorship of the atomic lobby). We are for policies of reforestation, but not any ones; the wood industry favours modes of reforestation (according to criteria of profitability) which have disastrous socio-ecological effects. Rendering coherency to the

programme of action that we present in the various areas demands much attention.

That is to say that it is necessary to retake the collective reflection on technological choices (centrality of solar power and so on), who had been engaged during the 1970s but that has not been pursued in the 1980s. To oppose an alternative "modernisation" to that which the multinationals impose on us.

All this is very fragmentary and seeks only to reintroduce a debate. It is necessary to give us the means of collectivising experiences, knowledge and reflection (proposal for seminar, use of Internet sites and so on). But there is no need to await the response to everything to pursue activism and to participate in unitary campaigns. With the notable objective of making the link between different areas: structure of classes and mode of production, cultures and militant traditions, nature, technologies and so on.

After the debate: return on seven questions

I will come back here only on some elements of the discussion.

1. Humanism and nature. I have been asked to be more precise on my positions, after my references to nature. I repeat: the notion of ecological crisis is a human notion. The biosphere is indifferent to the power and frequency of hurricanes, to the arrival of an ice age or a torrid age, to biodiversity. Not us.

I have always found that a humanism respectful of life was richer than a humanism indifferent to the animal and vegetable kingdom. I think that there is no need of utilitarian "justification" to protect threatened species. But, if that I does not convince, let us stress that in a time of global ecological crisis, this

preference is no longer only a "political-cultural" choice, but a condition of effectiveness.

Like all the species I imagine (but to a higher degree of tension), humanity undertakes a dual relationship of opposition and belonging with nature. But beware: the relationship of opposition works inside the relationship of belonging. That's very much what the climatic crisis reminds us of!

2. Thinking aid policies. The approach introduced here should be enlarged. We have only started with the response to natural disasters. We find similar questions in the emergency aid to populations displaced by military combat, our comrades from Mindanao can talk about it! And it would be interesting to return to the history (because there is a history) of "material" solidarity (financial, medical aid and so on) in the internationalist tradition. The subject is vast.

3. How far does the dynamic of the climate crisis go? The biosphere is a very complex system in dynamic equilibrium. Some quantitative modifications can lead to the "sectoral" (change of route followed by marine currents and so on) or global ruptures of equilibrium. It is impossible to predict where the points of rupture are situated. A global rupture of equilibrium should open a long chaotic period before leading to a new dynamic equilibrium, which is also unpredictable. That is to state the breadth of the problem posed!

4. Is it possible to transform rapidly an entire sector of production? It is possible. A good example was provided in France by the transformation of electric production with the nuclear choice. In a decade, electricity of nuclear origin went from 0% to 80% of production. Of course, on this occasion, there was a massive concerted action by the state (including armies: link between civilian and military nuclear choices)

and of the private sector in the framework of an active planning (state capitalism). This concerted effort took place for political reasons (France as nuclear power) which does not reduce itself to the search for profit (the technological choices of the bourgeois states and the big capitalist firms respond also to the logic of power).

The problem, today, is not essentially "technical". It is political and social. Some very powerful interests are opposed to the necessary transformation of the sectors of energy, transport, trade and so on.

5. Again a word on the basic approach. I evoked in my introduction to the debate the necessity of ensuring the coherence of ecological demands (so that the measures advocated, for example, to reduce the production carbon dioxide, do not endanger biodiversity). It is necessary obviously also to ensure the coherence of social and environmental approaches.

The environmental measures that we advocate should not increase social inequalities (or international inequalities). That would be unjust; and there is enough injustice in the world without adding to it! That would also be ineffective. Without proper support, the battle for ecological reforms (which are opposed to the logic of capital) will not be won. It is necessary to create a social relationship of forces, which demands an egalitarian approach.

It is by taking account of this that we can approach the question of the "right price" of energy or of "ecological" taxes. Access to energy is a fundamental right for which we fight. One can undermine this combat by axising the ecological battle on a massive rise in energy prices in the name of true costs and the restructuring of consumption (of which the non-rich will bear the cost). In the same way, an environmental tax should be effective ET to be implemented in a socially egalitarian

fashion to be progressive: this is not very frequently the case.

The reciprocal is true: one can no longer, in the name of social emergency, advance measures which would have as their consequence the worsening of the ecological crisis. The environmental emergency is not indeed least.

To say otherwise: one cannot have two parallel programmes, which ignore each other: the first social and the second environmental (as is often the case among the Green parties). One of the main demands to which we are faced is to link them to each other.

6. Horizon and transition.

A politics of energy revolution should have a horizon (decentralisation, adaptability, importance of solar power, priority to renewable and efficiency and so on), but also to deal with the transition between the current system and this horizon. We must work on transitional technologies, which can possibly include fossil fuels ("clean" techniques of coal treatment?). We stress again that nuclear power is not an acceptable transitional technology: it opposes the logic of reform (it is the very example of a source of energy demanding a hyper-centralisation and a maximal production which can not be put under democratic control), it cannot resolve the question of the greenhouse effect, it leads to growing risks with its dissemination and leaves as its heritage radioactive waste for human eternity.

7. Collective work. Let us repeat and underline it: we cannot render coherent the approach in the various environmental areas, as well as the ecological and social approaches, without collective work. A collective work which is, at the same, indispensable in order to integrate to a critical political thought the question of technological choices (what modernisation?) and of ecosystems (nature). This collective work is the urgency of the hour.

Crisis in the 'Land of the Smile'

26 March 2006, by **Danielle Sabai and Jean Sanuk**

Thaksin Shinawatra, Prime Minister of Thailand and one of the country's most important businessmen, is at the centre of the storm. Having come to power with his new party Thai Rak Thai (TRT, which means "Thais Love Thais") in the elections that followed the major economic crisis of 1997, Thaksin returned to the tradition of a strong state, no longer governed by the army, but directly by the economic elites who were determined to control the levers of power without hiding behind any straw men.



Fanning people's distrust of globalization and democracy, both of which were held responsible for the economic and financial crisis, Thaksin played on nationalist reflexes to weld behind himself a unity that enabled him to win the elections.

Accusing his predecessors in power of having sold the country cheap to foreigners during the crisis of 1997-98, in particular the IMF, he was able to seduce by demagogic promises many small peasants in the North and East of Thailand, who have traditionally been treated with contempt by the rich and educated Bangkok elites. He did this to such an extent that he gained the support of a certain number of associations of poor peasants, and not the least important of them, for example the "Assembly of the Poor" which had led courageous and important struggles against preceding governments.

Promising to fight corruption and the drug trade, he also won the support of many ordinary workers in the cities and won the January 2001 elections with ease. Having established a populist regime, combining the brutal use of police repression (with several thousand dead and disappeared, often innocent, in the fight against the drug

trade) and some social measures (health, education) he used the media that he owned to orchestrate a permanent propaganda campaign.

Alongside him, Berlusconi, to whom he is often compared, is a bumbling amateur. In Thailand, one of the television chains that Thaksin owns broadcasts programmes, 24 hours a day, where his smallest actions and gestures are commented on by attractive female presenters. It outdoes even reality shows. The Thais thus have the pleasure of being able to observe the Prime Minister camping for five days in a village where he wanted to show the villagers how to escape from poverty.

A Country "Managed by a Boss"

Under his and the TRT's authority, the big businessmen of the capital succeeded in dominating the political life of the country, running it in the service of their economic interests, favouring corruption, nepotism, and clientelism. By an irony of history, Thaksin was able to take advantage of a new constitution adopted after the 1997 crisis, whose principal aim was to prevent it being possible for one party to dominate parliament.

In this way, the powers of the prime minister were strengthened, with the aim of establishing a government that would be stronger and long-lasting. He was able to neutralize all the power mechanisms that had been put in place as counterweights to the role of the executive, placing his allies in all the key jobs and exercising close control over the media.

His five years in power were largely utilized to enrich himself and favour friendly businesses, to such an extent

that one university study demonstrated that on the Bangkok Stock Exchange the shares of companies considered to be close to the government had increased by more than the average, because all the speculators anticipated that they were going to win all the public contracts.

It is in this context of corruption and repeated scandals that Thaksin decided at the beginning of 2006 to sell his industrial empire Shin Corp. to the telecommunications holding company Temasek. Supposedly to put an end to possible "conflicts of interest" between his role as Prime Minister and his financial and economic interests, the sale turned out to be a juicy affair, but also particularly disastrous for Thaksin.

Shin Corp, valued at 73 billion bahts (1.5 billion euros) comprises among things several television channels and the leading mobile telephone company in Thailand, the satellite operator iTV. This sale, which was to the advantage of the Temasek company, controlled by the state of Singapore, was immediately seen as "selling the nation". To this should be added the fact that through the intermediary of a fictitious company clandestinely set up in a tax haven, Thaksin managed to get round the Thai tax authorities and not pay a single baht in taxes!

Considering the gigantic sums involved, the Thai population, which had, however, seen other such affairs, was justifiably shocked. This brought together against him intellectuals, the political opposition and civil society, who were united by a common desire to kick him out. The protest has been so strong and ongoing (a mass rally every week since the middle of January in the centre of Bangkok) that Thaksin decided to dissolve the assembly and call fresh elections on April 2nd.

His intention is clearly to counter-pose

to his critics the legitimacy of the ballot box and to keep his position as Prime Minister.

A Snowballing Crisis

This crisis illustrates the quintessence of political life in Thailand. Democracy, which has existed since the last military coup d'état in 1992, is very fragile, and although the masses are now called on to vote, the political elites expect them to remain submissive and outside political life. Politics is a much too serious affair to be shared with the people. Furthermore, it is significant that to be eligible to be elected to parliament you have to have a higher education diploma!

Thaksin is nevertheless the first party political leader to have organized electoral campaigns based on a political programme. His simple ideas go down well with the relatively uneducated rural population. They view democracy in a somewhat circumspect way, and are not far from thinking that if the Prime Minister has been able to enrich himself during his term of office, that just shows that he deserves to govern.

Thaksin has furthermore been able to win the support of a mass of electors by his personal handouts (distribution of bank notes to the poor during his campaign trips), giving every village a million bahts, offering to cancel the debt of the small peasants and developing a policy of access to health care for 30 bahts (65 euro cents) a consultation, a measure which practically caused the Thai health system to explode, since it was absolutely not equipped to respond to the demand which followed.

These promises, which are not always put into practice, such as the cancellation of the peasant debt, clearly show the extent of unsatisfied social needs, the lack of resources of the public services and the non-existence of social protection (for example there are no retirement pensions).

When cheap dental care was

introduced, the demand was such that there were waiting lists of several months. Private clinics, not wanting to make their own patients discontented, withdrew from the programme, thus increasing the burden on the public hospitals, which were not able to handle it. This situation is not new. The Democratic Party, today in opposition, did nothing to improve things when it was in power.

The parliamentary political opposition really consists of a clique of Bangkok politicians. They are so inconsistent that they decided to boycott the election called for April 2nd and it is not thanks to them that we have seen this big protest movement developing.

So, at the origin of the anti-Thaksin movement, we find Sondhi Limthongkul, a press magnate who was heavily indebted after 1997, a former accomplice and business partner of Thaksin who was abandoned by him in the rout that followed the financial collapse of 1997.

Now one of his most ferocious adversaries, he was able to rally behind him all sorts of discontented people, whose motives were very diverse. First of all, Sundhi was able to mobilize the fairly well-educated, essentially urban middle classes, who were shocked by the scale of corruption and shady deals... and who wanted Thailand to have a more attractive image abroad.

Among the main forces who joined the protest movement there was also the very nationalistic Buddhist monk Luangta Mahabua, who has a reputation for being honest and ascetic and who was at one time a supporter of Thaksin. He gave a moral legitimacy to the movement that Sundhi himself could not bring to it.

This legitimacy was reinforced by a declaration by the senior academics of the University of Thammasat, one of the two most important in the country, who denounced the absence of legitimacy of the Prime Minister. All these anti-Thaksin people have in common a high opinion of themselves...

However, the movement is now so

powerful that people are joining it on all sides and, something that is new and very significant in Thailand, the activists of the social movement have rallied to anti-Thaksin cause.

A Weakened Working Class Movement

This country is not however a major centre of social conflict. The big mobilizations from the 1970s to the early 1990s against the military dictatorships were harshly repressed (thousands of murders and summary arrests of trade unionists, peasant leaders, village mayors and student protesters).

The fragmentation and division in the trade unions which are the norm today are the direct consequence of this massive repression, during and after the Vietnam War, when anti-communist hysteria provided every pretext for political repression.

The Communist Party of Thailand, which at one time organized a peasant guerrilla movement in the border region in the grand Maoist tradition, long ago laid down its arms, and is now content to organize an annual camp to remember those times. There has even been built, with government subsidies, a museum and restaurants in the former guerrilla zone, where they hope to attract tourists to engage in "sustainable development".

An army general whose father was a guerrilla commander, and a minister of Thaksin's government who is a former student who took refuge in the guerrilla zone, have come there to make "moving" speeches.

This political disaster gives you an idea of the state of the Thai workers movement, which no longer has a political party to express and defend its interests. Everything needs to be rebuilt from scratch, starting from the defensive struggles of trade unions and associations (village associations play a very important role).

These struggles exist. but they are fragmented, isolated and do not find expression in the political sphere.

There is no shortage of reasons to struggle in Thailand, although the country is not poor and has not endured policies of structural adjustment for decades, as in Latin America, apart from the brief episode of the 1997-98 crisis.

There is no excessive foreign debt, no unmanageable deficit, a high rate of growth and almost permanent full employment. The per capita income in 2002 was US\$2,034, which is far behind South Korea (US\$10,050), Taiwan (US\$12,503), and Japan (US\$31,207), but also far ahead of its nearest neighbours like Cambodia (US\$265), Laos (US\$366), Burma (US\$187), Vietnam (US\$425), and especially China (US\$978).



All these neighbouring countries have a surplus labour force and engage in intensive competition based on cheap labour in order to attract multinational companies. As a result, although absolute poverty no longer exists and although Thailand does not experience unemployment, does not have gigantic shanty towns and beggars as there are in Jakarta or Mumbai, the standard of living of the population is stagnating at a relatively low level.

The social demands concern essentially wages (the minimum monthly wage is about 500 bahts, the equivalent of 108 euros). To increase their income, workers are forced to accept extraordinarily long working hours, which is completely within the law, because there is no legal limit.

In the factories of the immense industrial zone around Bangkok, it is not unusual for workers, often very young, to work for eight hours, the normal working day, plus two or three extra hours after a minimal pause of 20 minutes. Some of them sleep on the floor between the machines during the pause. The working week is six days, but Sundays can be worked if the companies want them to be. Since the basic wage is so low, the workers want to do overtime, even working up to 60 or 70 hours a week.

Apart from the workers' health,

children are also victims of this super-exploitation. On Saturdays and even on Sundays, it is not unusual to see children accompanying their mothers and playing between the machines or on the building sites! Work flexibility is total, all the more so as the labour legislation places no restrictions on sackings. One of the only limits that enterprises encounter is the fact that there is full employment, which allows discontented workers to vote with their feet by changing employers. In these conditions, the trade union struggle is very difficult, but it exists nevertheless.

Victorious Social Resistance

The political crisis is not however the result of a working class revolt. It is the product of a widespread malaise, which has crystallized around the person of the Prime Minister but whose origins lie in distrust of his policies. Thaksin has had, in the course of the same year, to face numerous challenges to his policies.

Among others:

- An important mobilization against his attempt to privatize EGAT, the Thai public electricity company. Privatization was adjourned because it was judged that the procedure was unconstitutional.

- Teachers in the north of Thailand mobilized very massively against the decentralization reform of education, which would have handed over to local authorities the management of schools. They still remember the disaster that was caused by the same decentralization law 20 which deprived them of the means of doing their job for two years, before the transfer was cancelled and the schools were again administered by the Ministry of Education.

Putting them under local control would also deprive teachers of their status as civil servants. The law was adopted by parliament but the Ministry of Education had to soften it by proposing that its implementation would be on a voluntary basis for a certain time, with all schools having to be under local control by 2009 at the

latest. This measure had the effect of dividing the movement, but the contestation was pursued through the movement to demand the Prime Minister's resignation. Threats of disciplinary measures and of mass dismissals did not have much effect on the teachers.

- Several associations of consumers, of AIDS sufferers, of peasants, of poor people, and also the unions, succeeded in having suspended the bilateral free trade agreements between the US and Thailand that were negotiated at the beginning of January.

The stakes were not insignificant: the right of intellectual property, the possibility of establishing brevets and the length of time of patents on medicines (on this question, the proposals made by the US were inferior to those agreed by the WTO, which directly threatened the survival of AIDS sufferers who could no longer buy their medicines); the liberalization of the agricultural market has led to a further impoverishment of small peasants, who are already affected by the free trade agreement between Thailand and China and the massive imports of Chinese fruits and vegetables; there were special treatments for US investors, concerning in particular public enterprises (electricity, water, agricultural).

Violence in the South

The picture would not be complete if we did not mention the daily murders and massacres which have been regularly taking place in the three Muslim provinces in the South of the country for three years now. This violence has been endemic since the annexation of these provinces, which have a Malay majority, after the Second World War.

Thais of Malay origin are victims of discrimination. They are not really citizens with equal rights, and they are demanding a broad degree of autonomy. Their exasperation led to an attack on an arms depot on January 4th, 2004 and the violence that

followed has since led to thousands of victims.

The response of the Thaksin government was to proclaim a state of emergency and give full powers to the army. The army suffers daily losses of men and equipment and replies by exercising indiscriminate violence against the population that it is supposed to be protecting. Although it is far from the capital, this emergency situation will sooner or later have political consequences for the rest of the country.

It contributes to maintaining the exorbitant power of the army and the police in the whole country. Thus, the spokesperson of the police, a general, found it quite natural to call a press conference where he calmly announced to journalists that he had sent a letter to the Prime Minister asking him to resign in order to restore calm in the country, without that provoking a political scandal or leading to his dismissal.

The violence in the South also illustrates the unenviable fate of

ethnic minorities and immigrant workers in Thailand, but also in many Asian countries where the right of blood is primary, and where it is extremely difficult for a foreigner to become naturalised.

Minorities do not always have citizenship rights and sometimes when they do they can be withdrawn from them. We could say that they are then in a certain sense "wiped off the map", considered as non-existent, undocumented in their own country, and therefore without rights. As in France in the 1960s, immigrant workers, including women (often of Burmese or Laotian origin), come to work in Thailand, most of them without papers, at the demand of Thai employers, to occupy the most hazardous and lowest paid jobs which Thai workers no longer want.

They work in particular on building sites, often seven days a week, even sleeping on the site. So in the general context of shortage of labour, by using immigrant labour the Thai employers can avoid increasing Thai workers' wages. We find the same situation in

South Korea, where however the per capita income is 5 times higher than in Thailand and where the workers movement, much more powerful, is more engaged in solidarity with immigrant workers.

This is not the case in Thailand, where the divisions thus created between workers against a background of latent racism represent an additional obstacle to social progress.

The boycott of the election by the opposition makes it probable that there will be a new electoral victory for Thaksin, which would give him a free hand to continue his policies... unless there is a direct intervention by the king, who is the supreme moral authority in Thailand, asking him to step down.

But the big movement that has been launched to drive him out of office has made possible the convergence of many struggles and the establishment of links between organizations. We can hope that from this will come a re-politicization with positive consequences in the long term.

Aid needed as IV's readership jumps 75%

26 March 2006, by **Duncan Chapel**

All of this reflects the unique quality and quantity of the articles we publish. Since the online magazine has launched last year, internationalviewpoint.org has published more than 1,000 articles. The magazine carries vitally important debates, on topics as important as the crisis of the Brazilian left, the left's approach to Islam and Islamophobia, and solidarity with the Iraqi opposition.

However, some visitors now report that the site is overloaded if they visit it at peak times. We urgently need our readers to donate \$2,000 to fund more powerful computers to serve the growing demand.

Today, internationalviewpoint.org is

caught in scissors: pressure is growing on one side because the number of visitors already exceeds the volume we forecast for October 2006; pressure is growing on the other side because we don't have the resources we planned for, but also because even that amount would have been inadequate to meet the demand we face.

Late November, International Viewpoint put out an emergency appeal for donations to put new technology in place. We needed a further \$3,200 before the end of the year to scale up our infrastructure to support 20,000 visits a month. The response from our readers was rapid, but few of them are rich:

- we raised almost \$1,000, which was doubled to nearly \$2,000 by a supporter.

Our failure to meet our goal has produced serious consequences.

The slowing and overloading of our site has some astonishing symptoms. According to the most widely accepted ranking of web site traffic, in the last three months the reach internationalviewpoint.org has grown 236%. At the same time, the average number of pages read by each visitor has fallen from 3.3 pages to 1. This suggests that, for many readers, the web site is so slow that after reading one page they are unable to access a second, yet along a third.

This astonishing growth reinforces the great opportunities for International Viewpoint. The readership of the site is now similar to that of the website of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, whose readership is also growing.

However, the greater length of International Viewpoint articles and our more extensive use of photography means that the demands placed on our system greatly exceed even those of lcr-rouge.org.

However, unless we are able to rapidly

extend our technical resources we will alienate new visitors and dissuade them from returning to the web site.

We need ~2,000 urgently to strengthen the website. This will allow us to initially make some design changes to the site which will make it use less power to load each page and secondly to increase the power of the computer servers that run the site.

There are three ways you can make a donation.

- Use the button below to make a payment online using Visa,

MasterCard, American Express, Discover or PayPal.



- By bank transfer to Barclays Bank, 876-878 Stockport Road, Manchester M19 3BP, Britain; account number 40259691; sort code 20-26-20. From outside Britain, our IBAN code is: IBAN GB30 BARC 2026 2040 2596 91. Our bank's SWIFTBIC code is: BARCGB22.

- By post to IV, PO Box 112, Manchester M12 5DW, Britain.

New turbulence, new transformations in the Middle East

14 March 2006, by **Gilbert Achcar**

SoN-: With the recent rise in sectarian violence in Iraq, the suspicion that the U.S. is fostering civil strife in order to delay the withdrawal of its troops has gained strength. What is your response to this?

GA: In a sense, this has been the case from the very beginning of the occupation. The United States chose what it thought would be a comfortable position, that of an arbiter between various contending factions and components of the Iraqi population. And this choice translated into the way they formed the institutions, very much based on a distribution of power and seats between the three major components of the population: the Kurds, the Arab Shia and the Arab Sunni.



Hamas fighters burn Israeli flag

The situation in the country has actually worsened very much since last year, when the United States started losing its grip on the local institutions as a result of the January

election. The elected assembly was no longer under full U.S. control and since then we have seen increasingly frenzied attempts by the occupier at using whatever differences and divisions there are among Iraqis. This is the very old imperial recipe of 'divide and rule'.

What do you think this will lead to? Are we talking of the division of the country between the three groups? Or do you think the U.S. is not ready for that alternative at the moment?

That would certainly not be a first option, and I even doubt that it would really be a second best option for the United States, if only for the simple reason that it would lead to some kind of Shia state controlling the bulk of Iraq's oil. Such a state could only be a close ally of Iran and would unleash a dangerous dynamic for the whole area, including the Saudi Kingdom where the main oil producing area is inhabited by a Shia majority.

This is definitely not a scenario that suits Washington's interests. Moreover, it would destabilise the whole area and have very dangerous

consequences for the global economy, as it would of course immediately affect the price of oil which has already started skyrocketing in the last couple of years.

So I don't believe that the partition scenario - although it has been formulated or favoured by some people, especially in some neo-con circles, as a Plan B for Iraq - is something that Washington could seriously consider as representing a favourable outcome for U.S. interests.

How will Hamas be transformed by its electoral victory?

It's quite hard to say because it depends on many factors, including the official reaction of the U.S. and Europe. For the time being they are testing or still pondering the different positions they could take. It also depends on how Israel will behave.

But what I would say is that in light of what Hamas is, the way it has built its own victory, the kind of programme it embodies, I can hardly see as likely the rosy scenario that some people, out of wishful thinking, believe to be possible - that Hamas will just adapt to

what they deem to be the 'reality' and join the so-called 'peace process' in some way. I don't think that it will be the case, because I don't think that Hamas would be willing to just abandon its political identity with such speed and for nothing real in exchange.

And I don't think that the rosy scenario is possible, mainly because there is presently in Israel a very stubborn, very right-wing kind of majority and government and, in reality, Sharon and his followers in power are people who are, at the bottom of it, quite happy with this situation. It provides them with a pretext to go forward with their unilateral moves, shaping the 'final settlement' that suits them.

The U.S., EU and Israeli response to the Hamas victory has been to threaten diplomatic isolation and the cessation of funds for the Palestinian Authority. Iran has reacted by pledging its own financial assistance and calling for other Muslim nations to follow suit. Recent reports in the Arab Press, although denied by Hamas, claim that Iran will give as much as \$250 million to the Hamas-led government. What is the significance of all this?

Well, it just shows that the attempt at isolating Hamas, which actually means not isolating Hamas as such, but the elected government of the Palestinian people, will just backfire. It is obvious that the victory of Hamas in Palestine is also a major victory for Iran, for Syria, for all the adversaries of the United States in that part of the world. They are quite happy with this victory, and Iran has thus been provided with another political card in the area and is already using it.

Iran was actually supporting Hamas long before the last election and Hamas reciprocated by coming out in solidarity with Iran after the recent provocative statements of the Iranian President. A few weeks before the election, Hamas proclaimed its support to the Iranian President and Khaled Meshaal, the Hamas leader who lives in exile in Damascus, went to Tehran to confirm this support.

The Iranian government is saying that it is going to supply Hamas with what the Palestinian people need in terms of financial backing, and that's why even the Arab clients of the United States find themselves put in a corner and compelled to enter into this outbidding with Tehran - because they are very much afraid that Tehran might appear as the only supporter of Hamas.

They feel that they must support Hamas, because they know that the Arab public opinion in this kind of confrontation between Hamas on the one hand and Israel and Europe on the other will, of course, stand fully on the side of Hamas.

The Lebanese organisation Hezbollah is credited with expelling Israel from Lebanon. To what extent can we say that their victory inspired support for Hamas in Palestine?

The impact of the Hezbollah victory is real in the sense that the Hezbollah fight against the occupation definitely played a major role in getting Israel to evacuate southern Lebanon in the year 2000. This victory played a role at the time in enhancing the political appeal of Hamas, especially when contrasted with the dead-end reached by the Oslo process and the great disillusionment about it, as well as about the Arafat leadership that had betted on that process.

The year 2000 was the year when you had the Camp David negotiations with Clinton, Barak and Arafat, the dead-end there on the condition of the final settlement, and then in September of the same year, the provocation by Ariel Sharon in Jerusalem which facilitated his own electoral victory in February 2001. All this precipitated a kind of radicalisation in the stances of both sides; the Israeli side of course and the Palestinian side with the outburst of the 'Second Intifada'.

The victory of Hamas is the direct outcome of this political framework, to which of course should be added factors that have been emphasised by every observer and which are so obvious, especially the deep corruption of the Palestinian Authority

in contrast to the reputation of Hamas as an organisation dedicated to social services and to serving the people.

Yes, very similar to Hezbollah in that sense.

Again yes, very similar to Hezbollah. But all this does not mean, of course, that Hamas owes its victory to the Hezbollah. The Hezbollah factor played a role in enhancing the political appeal of Hamas, but even if you had no Hezbollah at all, I believe that Hamas would have won nevertheless, because of the dynamics on the Palestinian and Israeli scene.

Condoleezza Rice has requested \$75 million this year to fund opposition groups in Iran. She has claimed the U.S. has a "menu of options" for dealing with Iran. What are these options? Which one will the U.S. ultimately take?

My guess is that Washington itself would not be able to tell you which option they will ultimately take, because in a sense all options are quite risky and they have to consider a lot of factors: Iranian factors, Iraqi factors, regional factors beyond Iraq and Iran, and international factors. This issue is very complicated because Iran is a much harder nut to crack than Iraq was, at least with regard to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, which was by far the easiest part of the game.

Overthrowing the Iranian regime is a much more difficult objective, first of all simply because Washington cannot invade Iran: this country is much bigger than Iraq and when we see the quagmire the U.S. is facing already in Iraq, we understand that it is out of the question that it invades Iran on top of it.

Regime change in the Iraqi fashion is therefore practically out of the question for Iran, all the more so because the Iranian regime does indeed have a real social base. The recent elections which led to the victory of Ahmedinejad were not phoney elections, they were not fake or anything of the kind. Of course, it was a confrontation between two pillars of the same regime, and the range of political forces that were

allowed to take part in the political process was strictly limited, but it was a real contest nevertheless.

The outcome reflected the fact that the Iranian regime still had a real social base that could be mobilised by some dose of populism; it is still able to appeal to the nationalist sentiment of the public.

The more Washington attacks the Iranian regime politically, the better it is for it in fact. This explains why Ahmedinejad, who is less crazy than what he is thought to be in the West, keeps provoking the United States and Israel. He knows exactly what he is doing, because this strengthens his hand at home and in the whole Muslim world, where statements of this kind find a wide popular approval.

If Washington were to go beyond threats and strike militarily at Iran, aside from the fact that the military outcome of such strikes would not be guaranteed in any way, it could unleash a strong wave of protest and further radicalisation of the situation in the whole area, not only in Iran. It is therefore a very delicate and dangerous situation for the United States.

But on the other hand, Washington believes that if Iran succeeded in getting the nuclear weapon, it would be a very dangerous development for U.S. interests in the whole area as Iran would be in possession of a much stronger deterrent, and accordingly a much enhanced ability to manoeuvre and act politically in the region.

So I am sure that in Washington they are considering every kind of option, of course, but there is no option in terms of military aggression that they could try light-heartedly. For the time being, they are still trying to use this stick-and-carrot, bad cop, good cop tactic with Europe, Russia and so on in order at least to delay as long as possible whatever efforts the Iranians could be making at the nuclear level, in the hope that the situation might change again internally in Iran and that there could be a renewed rise of some anti-regime opposition in Iran.

That's what Condoleezza Rice's statements were about actually: they

mean that Washington is not able to change the regime from outside as it did in Iraq, so its only option is to try to change it from inside by supporting opposition forces.

But the problem for them is that any opposition that is directly supported by the U.S. is discredited. Whatever changes took place in Iran before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, it is a fact that since then the image of the United States has been deteriorating very rapidly in light of the quagmire in Iraq and the confrontation over the nuclear issue with Tehran.

How would you define the relationship between Iran and Russia?

Iran is an important asset for the Russians: Moscow is left with a much reduced range of allies and client states and has not been paid back by the U.S. with any kind of concessions despite the very cooperative attitude that Putin showed the Bush administration, after 9/11 especially. In light of that, Russia is trying to reassert its own zone of influence and has again tightened its strategic relations with China.

In Central Asia, Russia has again been involved in a direct competition with the United States, trying to contain its influence and roll it back after it entered that part of the world in the wake of 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan. We've seen, for example, how they recently got Uzbekistan to cancel the air base that it had leased to the United States. In that general framework Russia's relationship with Iran is very important.

But on the other hand, Russia is economically very dependent on its relations with Germany, and since Germany is also very concerned about the Iranian issue and exerting pressure, Putin and the Russian government are trying to conciliate all these factors and pressures. But ultimately I think that Iran is of such a strategic importance that Russia won't break with Tehran, especially not in this situation where the wind is blowing in a direction quite contrary to U.S. interests in the Middle East.

A few weeks ago Khaled Meshaal

from Hamas visited Turkey. This was followed by the Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari and in the next few days the Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr will be arriving in Ankara. How do you interpret this busy traffic? What role is Turkey aiming to play in the Middle East?

Well, these three visits, or in other words the Iraqi issue and the Palestinian issue, are not exactly the same. Hamas of course is trying hard to build up some diversified network of international links, which they never cared seriously about before.

Since they are facing a threat of ostracism from Western countries, they are very much trying to build up relations that go beyond those governments with whom they can have 'natural' relations, i.e. governments at odds with the U.S. So the visit to Turkey is important for them since Turkey is a NATO country, an official ally of the United States, and at the same time the ruling party is Islamic.

The Turkish government welcomed Hamas, I am sure, with a green light from Washington, which is mobilising its Muslim allies, the Saudis and the rest, hoping that they persuade Hamas to make the concessions that are required from it in order to enter the political process.

For Iraq the issue is quite different. There is a sharpening confrontation between the Shia and the Kurds. The Kurdish alliance is the main and most reliable ally of Washington in Iraq and recently it has increasingly been confronting the Shia alliance, the majority of which is now composed of the alliance between Moqtada al-Sadr and Jaafari - as you know, Moqtada al-Sadr supported Jaafari in getting the Shia alliance's nomination for the post of prime minister.

For the second time since the January 2005 election, the Kurdish alliance is trying very hard to impose the participation in the forthcoming government of Allawi, Washington's other key ally and stooge in Iraq, although he is now much weaker than last year. The Kurdish forces are trying that, both against the will of the Shia alliance and against the will of

Tehran, which is very much opposed to Allawi.

All these power games that are going on are linked to the Iraqi visits to Turkey. As everyone knows, Ankara is very concerned about the Kurdish alliance in Iraq: the Shia are therefore trying to get Turkey to exert pressure on the Arab Sunnis in order to disassociate them from the Kurds, because in the confrontation between the Kurds and the Shia, the Arab Sunnis are currently trying to better their own chances and to get a large piece of the cake by allying with the Kurds. This general framework also explains why the Kurdish alliance has reacted so violently to Jaafari's visit to Turkey.

Islamic fundamentalism has become the main form of anti-imperialist resistance in the Middle East. Is there any hope for a left-wing or progressive nationalist anti-imperialist revival in this region?

First of all I wouldn't label Islamic fundamentalism as 'anti-imperialist'. Anti-imperialism is a label that I reserve for forces which think in such categories. But Islamic fundamentalists, if we mean by that the most fanatical brands, the likes of Bin Laden, Zarqawi and the rest, do not use such terms.

They say they are fighting the Crusaders and the Jews, using that kind of vocabulary which reveals a very racist and fanatically religious conception of the world. And although they are fighting the main oppressor of the peoples in that part of the world, they are at the same time, especially with regards to their social programme and views, a very reactionary kind of current.

Iraq is a good illustration of this, because there Zarqawi is not only waging a war against the occupation, which one might consider, at least objectively speaking, a legitimate war, but he is also waging a very murderous, sectarian kind of war,

which by any standard is utterly and extremely reactionary.

Of course, we cannot put this kind of fanatical fundamentalism in the same category as Hamas or Hezbollah or other such organisations with a real mass base. These organisations are really leading the mass struggle of their own national or religious constituencies against their major foreign oppressor, despite their reactionary social and political views that are a calamity for the true long-term interests of the masses. Of course, this is the outcome of the historical bankruptcy of the progressive forces in that part of the world, and at the same time also an outcome of the fact that Islamic fundamentalism has been used so intensively to fight all these progressive currents for many decades, chiefly by the United States itself actually.

Now, how could we get a different kind of situation? Well, first of all one should stress the fact that a progressive struggle against imperialism is still possible on a world level, and Latin America provides the best proof for that.

The fact that it is possible there and not in the Middle East for the time being is probably due to a large extent to the presence of a still widely popular Cuba.

Because of Cuba, the whole idea of revolution and socialism has not been discredited in Latin America in the way that it has been in the rest of the Western world and the East. The fact that the image of Cuba is still overwhelmingly positive for Latin Americans helps to leave real room for a revival of left-wing forces.

As for the Middle East, I am afraid that it will take a long historical period before we can get back to a situation where progressive forces will head the expression of mass resentment and discontent.

This would take the historical reversal of the two processes that I have mentioned, that is, firstly, for the fundamentalist movement to get, in its turn, discredited and reach a state of blatant bankruptcy the way that progressive nationalism and left-wing forces did. For the time being though Islamic fundamentalism is still on the offensive and achieving victories. I am sure that this won't be the case forever, but it may take many years before the trend is reversed.

Secondly, there is a need to build a new credibility for a left-wing alternative. I don't see any possibilities in the foreseeable future for any section of the left in that part of the world to achieve the kind of success that would accomplish that. It might be powerfully enhanced by experiences in other parts of the world, of course. Latin America is important, but it is quite far from the Middle East. I would say that developments in Europe are very important in that sense.

Whatever happens on the political scene in Europe will be very important in shaping the political conditions of the future in the Middle East or the Muslim world. This means that there is a need not only to see an important advance of left-wing forces in Europe, but also of left-wing forces that behave correctly in their relation with the Muslim population of immigrant origin in Europe and fight against Islamophobia, which is developing very rapidly in Western countries.

All this sets a lot of conditions and I'm afraid that, when one looks at all of that, one cannot be terribly optimistic. But I would say, using a very much used and even worn out formula, but one which remains valid, that in that part of the world, the optimism of the will can only be fostered presently by the pessimistic conviction that something worse could still happen and has to be prevented.

This interview was conducted with SoN editor, Cihan Aksan, via telephone in March 2006.

After the State of Emergency

14 March 2006, by **Pierre Rousset**

That tells us how serious a measure it was. It provoked so much opposition that the presidency had to agree to rapidly put an end to it, which did not however mean a return to normal conditions.

The Philippine regime is in chronic crisis. This crisis was opened up more than twenty years ago, in 1984, after the assassination of the principal bourgeois opponent of Marcos.



The overthrow of the dictatorship in 1986 by a combination of military rebellion and popular uprising initiated a process of democratisation which was never completed. Indeed the tendency was reversed: towards the re-establishment of an authoritarian government, against a backdrop of the social violence of neo-liberal policies and the re-militarisation of the country in the name of anti-terrorism.

So the proclamation of the state of emergency was not an isolated act. It is part and parcel of a whole series of measures that are threatening to still further reduce the democratic space that was opened twenty years ago.

However, the re-establishment of an authoritarian state in the Philippines is running up against several obstacles, starting with the divisions within the army itself and those between the provincial political "great families" who hold a large part of real power.

The current president, Gloria Arroyo, is having real difficulty in overcoming these divisions: guilty in the eyes of the population of massive electoral fraud, she has lost all popular legitimacy. It was above all to protect her personal position that she decreed the state of emergency, relying especially on the police in the absence of sufficient backing from the army.



Another obstacle is represented by popular resistance and by the depth of the social crisis. The Left retains a real ability to mobilize, in spite of the degeneration of the Communist Party (Maoist). But weakened by its divisions, it is confronted with a difficult problem. Although it has contributed to overthrowing several presidents, it is the bourgeoisie that has on every occasion imposed its solutions to the crisis.

In reality, Gloria Arroyo decreed the state of emergency through weakness; she had to lift it for the same reason. But that does not mean that the battle has been won. The parties of the radical and democratic Left in the Philippines are very much conscious of this, as their statements show - including the one by the Revolutionary Workers' Party-Mindanao (RPMM), Philippine section of the Fourth International [read it here](#).

Italian feminists defend abortion rights and women's self-determination

9 March 2006, by **Maria Gatti**

In Milan, on 14 January 2006, some 250 000 demonstrators, mainly women, took to the streets, to defend law 194, the 1978 law decriminalising abortion, and the principle of women's reproductive, social and economic self-determination. As the *Rifondazione Comunista* daily *Liberazione* wrote: "The witches have returned, we have 'emerged from the silence' (as the banner opening

the demonstration stated) and have no intention of returning".

The participants included women from towns throughout northern and central-northern Italy, from social centres, the Union of atheists and agnostics which called for an end to clerical interference and for the Church to "get out of our pants".



Some major delegations included *Rifondazione*, DS and a large delegation of CGIL trade-union women from Emilia, Romagna and Tuscany. But most of the demonstrators were women who had shown up by themselves or with friends, and were

thrilled that so many others had the same idea. The general feeling was of power and joy to have emerged from demonstrations that were merely a "tired routine" with thousands of demonstrators continuing to dance for hours in still more photos of the demonstration the chilly evening air.

There was a lively and most varied participation in the demonstration, centred on defending the rights of women against the attempts to shore up the old moral order. It went far beyond the defence of the existing law, standing up for a secular state and society and the need to defend the freedoms of women and all citizens. The two slogans most heard were "nobody will decide in our place any longer" and "siamo uscite dal silenzio - we (women) have emerged from the silence.

Though the demonstrators' ire centred on Berlusconi's rightist coalition government and interference from the

Vatican and the current papacy - reactionary even by Catholic Church standards - there were also many criticisms of the centre-left Union programme viewing women's rights as a simple "issue" among many others and not half the population expressing their collective strength over the years and the current months.

Moreover, they decried "treason" in the Union's backsliding on its earlier commitment to support civil unions for same-sex couples, a step back from secular and democratic Europe and self-determination of human beings, and a sop to the "family-oriented" (familist) tone of social policies, even among the centre-left.

The demonstrators insisted on the right to work, to choice and to health, not only defending Law 194, but the outlook that the right to control one's own body is a material basis for all freedoms and for freedom for all people. The prevailing theme of freedom, "liberty to choose, liberty to

love, this movement won't be halted"; "freedom to live and live together", was accompanied by a call to memory of earlier struggles. "Today's women remember" and for a better future for youth "precarity is the contraceptive of the future" and migrant women. Other demonstrations and actions have taken place in Rome and Naples and more are planned throughout Italy.

LINKS

Site of the coalition in defence of Law 94.

<http://www.usciamodalsilenzio.org/> .

Photos

<http://www.usciamodalsilenzio.org/foto-gallery.php>

<http://www.usciamodalsilenzio.org/foto-gallery-altre.php>

http://www.socialpress.it/article.php3?id_article=1148

Unions lead popular resistance

8 March 2006, by **Danielle Obono**

The latter are today at the heart of a social and political struggle which at the same time brings hope and raises many questions about the old models and the new strategies which the movement needs today.

The "oil curse"

Absurd and paradoxical as it may seem, when the price per barrel of crude oil soars as it did last summer, the inhabitants of Nigeria, Africa's biggest producer, grit their teeth and cry with rage. While government income rises, they have to put up once again with an erosion of their purchasing power.



Prices of necessities go through

the roof

Because of the inadequacies of basic infrastructures like electricity and water, and the lack of an adequate and functional rail network, the country depends enormously on oil products for production and distribution. Higher fuel prices thus lead systematically to higher transport and production costs and then increases in the prices of basic products like services.

This increase, like all the others, was justified by the need to put an end to the subsidising of prices at the pump in the framework of the new policy of deregulation of the oil sector. Nigeria, a big producing and exporting country, is obliged to import the biggest part of the fuel it consumes, largely because of bad management (a

veritable organised pillage in fact) of local refineries.

To sweeten the pill the state has long had to concede public subsidies to stabilise prices. Today the international financial institutions consider this policy incompatible with the reduction of state expenditure. Thus, while they are supposed to be richer thanks to the income of their country, it is still the poorest that pay. The 70% of Nigerians who live on less than 1 dollar a day certainly appreciate the bitter irony of the situation [1].

In the wings the authors of this farce are clearly identifiable. In first place the imperialism of the great powers who wish to assign to the African countries a subordinate role and place in the system of international production.

Once exercised through the Bible and the bayonet, then under the civilizing yoke of colonisation, their domination has adapted to decolonisation and to independence. It has taken the form of a neo-colonialism which is today exercised by a monopolistic appropriation of raw materials and their markets and the implacable workings of the international financial institutions (debts, structural adjustment programmes, and so on) which nothing escapes [2].

Thus in Nigeria, the fifth biggest supplier to the US, Shell and British Petroleum fight it out for oil exploitation rights, still far ahead of the outsider TotalFinaElf, while US-British multinationals largely dominate the main sectors of the economy and the IMF and the World Bank orchestrate the country's permanent insolvency. These are also powerful international political supports who supported for years the authoritarian regimes who maintain order with an iron grip, before welcoming (far too noisily to be taken seriously) Nigeria's return to the "community of nations" during the institutional tidying up which passed for democratisation in 1999.

Their excess of zeal was certainly not unconnected to the strategic importance and continental potential of this country. The second biggest African economic power after South Africa due to its resources and its population, Nigeria, or more exactly its leaders, presents itself as the "giant" of the continent, as well as its policeman, and demands a seat on the Security Council of the United Nations.

The Nigerian ruling class is thus far from being simply a puppet in the hands of the great powers. It certainly occupies a secondary place in the "chain of command" of the world capitalist system, but its choices and actions respond totally to the own well-understood interests. President Obasanjo, a regular guest at various G8 summits, is one of the big promoters of the New Partnership for African Development (a kind of big structural adjustment programme "made in Africa"), and these neoliberal policies allow the continuation and the accentuation of the primitive

accumulation of capital to the benefit of the ruling class it serves.

So when the trade union movement opposes the increases in the prices of domestic oil it comes up against the imperialism of the great powers as well as the interests of its own ruling class

Political opposition

In putting their fingers on the highly sensitive question of the management of Nigeria's oil revenues, the trade unions have become the only real political opposition to the government. They have responded to the incessant increases with general strikes; and sometimes the simple call for a strike has been enough to force a government climb down, as in 2003 when a general strike paralysed nearly all the country for a week, despite severe police repression (eight dead).

It should be said that this was on the eve of George Bush's African tour, which was to begin in Nigeria, and a general strike would have been an embarrassment. The movement nonetheless cost more than 100 billion nairas (636 million euros) [3].

But the strike weapon also perturbs the international financial markets. Thus during the strike of October 2004, in a situation rendered still more sensitive by the damage caused by Hurricane Ivan in the Gulf of Mexico, the nervousness of the traders pushed the price per barrel up over 50 dollars for several days.

If the unions are generally in a situation of having such an impact (and this has been the case one way or the other since 1999) it is less by their size than by their particularly strategic political, social and economic position in the Nigerian context. Certainly, with its three big confederations (the most significant, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) has 29 affiliated unions and 4 million members and is one of the biggest trade union organisations in the continent), the Nigerian union movement is far from being negligible [4].

But what really gives it strength is both its central economic position and its implantation in diverse strata of society. On the one hand the workers in the oil sector, organised either in the blue collar union NUPENG, or the management union PENGASSAN, have their hands on the main tap of the country's economy [5].

They alone can unleash a general strike. On the other there are the multiple links (social, economic, familial, ethnic and so on) which unite wage earners with the rest of the population. Whether through overlapping between formal and informal activities [6], or membership of community groups (religious, ethnic, regional or village networks), workers thus have contacts of solidarity, exchange, mutual aid or dependence with most of the popular layers.

Their collective mobilisation thus concerns and affects in one way or another the whole of the population, which in its majority shares similar difficulties and is, then rather inclined to give them their support.

Trade union mobilisations take on a political character both objectively and subjectively. First, as the state is still the country's main employer, each mobilisation of public sector puts workers in direct confrontation with the government and each struggle thus has a strong political dimension. But the trade union movement has always made more or less explicit political demands. From the outset, the first Nigerian trade unions (which date from the 1910s and which developed first in the public sector) opposed the state politically under conditions of a colonial domination which institutionalised racial discrimination.

The first wage demands targeted systematically the differences in treatment between white and black employees and were a first form of political resistance to the colonial order, even if they were mostly expressed in rather moderate and conciliatory terms. At the same time that economic concessions were made here and there the colonial authorities were often obliged to concede more political freedoms, under pain of

seeing the strike movements take on too radical a turn.

Thus the strike in 1920 of carpenters in the Nigerian Mechanics Union, which extended to the entire protectorate of Lagos, had as direct political consequence the formation of a new legislative council including this time the indigenous delegates. Three years later in 1923 the first Nigerian political party, the Nigerian Democratic Party, was founded.

Starting from 1945, the trade union movement acquired a more distinctly political dimension with the emergence of the anti-colonialist nationalist movement. It was in that year that the first general strike in the country's history took place: for more than six weeks 43,000 workers in "essential" economic and administrative services went on strike for wage increases.

Two years later, the first constitutional reform, establishing the bases of tripartite regionalism which would fundamentally deform the political development of the country, was adopted. But it was some years later, in 1949, following the bloody repression of a miners' strike movement in the east of the country in Enugu, that trade union agitation and anti-colonial politics reached its apogee with the demand for an immediate autonomous government.

After independence, obtained in 1960, the trade unions would again play a prominent role in a certain number of significant political developments. In 1964 for example a new two week general strike won wage revisions and for a time a real inter-ethnic workers' solidarity existed, in a context of growing political and institutional crisis which would lead to civil war in 1967.

For a number of historic reasons no significant left force, which could give a political expression to class cleavages, has ever emerged in Nigeria. The three current main political formations in the country [7], like most of those who existed under the four ephemeral first republics, are only coalitions of various sections of the ruling class, often reflecting ethno-regionalist divisions. This fact,

which explains the place that the unions occupy as sole organised form of the working class on a mass scale, is the result of the specific political conditions which have presided in the development of the country and have strongly influenced the trade union movement.

The trade unions and the nationalist project

To fully appreciate the type of general environment in which the Nigerian trade union movement has been built, it is important to make a rapid review of the political history of the country which throws light on the problematic of the current situation. Nigeria in this sense is not an exception, but rather a typical example of the crisis of the African postcolonial state [8].

Its particularities reside more in the extreme forms that intra- and inter-class cleavages take. The African elites (in this case Nigerian) have inherited a state built by the colonial power with the sole aim of exploiting the country and controlling its people, without challenging its bases.

In fact one ruling class (black, postcolonial) replaced another (white, colonial). But the contradictions of a colonial state built artificially on the arbitrary unification of territories and peoples as diverse as they are varied complicated the nationalist project of the new Nigerian ruling class, as it was unable to maintain within itself the initial consensus. Its different sections tore each other apart in the struggle for control of the state apparatus, the main instrument of political and economic power, which determines the sharing out of the means of primitive accumulation.

This intestine war of the ruling class would virtually lead to the collapse of the object of the conflict, namely the Nigerian entity, through the experience of a long and costly civil war. At this time a new ruling actor appeared: the army, and more specifically the top (initially middle) military hierarchy.

In a process of a Bonapartist type, this new actor "reconciliated" the ruling classes in conflict, refounding the nationalist project. Posing as an arbiter and rallying the support of a majority of the social, political and community groupings of the country, the army would lead and win the war against the Biafran secession and rebuild the state on the basis of a consensus which established the hegemony of the centre (the federal government and the centralised state apparatus) and its control over the oil resources which became the essential and indispensable fuel of state and national development.

But from the mid-1980s, the machine began to seize up. The world crisis struck the dependent countries of the South more harshly and sapped the economic bases of the nationalist project, already deeply damaged by the rapacity of the Nigerian ruling classes. A formidable level of corruption which infected the whole system was for a while contained by the arbitrage of the military, but they quickly got stuck into the process themselves. The nationalist model has failed.

This situation is reflected by a growing dominance of the international institutions which precisely at this period changed their orientation completely with the beginning of the neoliberal "conservative revolution".

This period saw the beginning of the implementation of the first structural adjustment plans, local version, in 1986. The trade union movement was hit hard by this turn of events. If at the political level the alliance with the nationalist leaders quickly turned sour once independence had been obtained, the unions had nonetheless taken part in a certain fashion in the nationalist project by defending the underlying ideological perspectives of development and of the national "interest".

That has not stopped class conflicts with the Nigerian ruling class. On the contrary, the shortcomings of the nationalist model of development adopted after independence only increased tensions. But with a few exceptions, they have most often been

diverted into ethnic or religious cleavages by the elites. Two main tendencies have traditionally disputed the leadership of this movement: a trades unionism of consensus/collaboration affiliated to international bodies of the capitalist bloc, and a more radical and confrontational trades unionism influenced by Stalinism. None of these two orientations questions the fundamental nature of the nationalist project, being either content to quite simply accompany it, or only opposing it in relation to the effects and consequences of its malfunctioning on the living and working conditions of workers.

Democratic engagement

In the 1980s two contradictory tendencies emerged inside the trade union movement. On the one hand the collaboration of the union leaderships, symbolised in the person of Pascal Bafyau, considered certainly as one of the worst presidents of the NLC.

On the other hand, a persistence and strengthening in some sectors of a unionism which was very active at the rank and file, following the example of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). This union of teaching personnel in the universities emerged from the mid-1980s as the spearhead of trade union radicalism, fiercely opposing budget reductions, attacks on the autonomy of the universities and more globally, the privatisation of higher teaching. Showing a principled attachment to the working class, of which it considers itself an integral part as an organisation of intellectual workers [9], the ASUU would become the *bête noire* of the Nigerian regimes.

After the fall of the second civilian government and the return of the military to power, the new head of the regime, Ibrahim Babangida, tried to sell the population the structural adjustment plan demanded by the IMF and the World Bank by organising a kind of great national debate. The ASUU would actively lead a campaign against the draft structural adjustment

plan, circulating analyses challenging the official propaganda on all points. It also supported the student movement against government attacks.

The trade union organisation was then subjected to ferocious repression, along with attempts at internal destabilisation through support to dissident factions. It was then banned for the first time in 1986 and forcibly disaffiliated from the NLC, in particular because of the radical intellectual influence it exerted on the union federation.

Generally speaking, the response of the successive military regimes towards the union movement was a cocktail of cooption and savage repression, notably under the military regime of Sani Abacha [10]. Conflicts with the military twice led to the dissolution of the NLC, then the single official trade union federation, in 1988 and in 1994. Numerous union leaders were arrested and continually harassed; union meetings systematically attacked or banned.

This harsh state strategy did not stop the trade union movement from playing a significant part in the democratic movements which emerged from the 1990s onwards. An alliance of unions with "civil society" (mainly human, civil and democratic rights associations) was forged. Inside (or in collaboration with) broad coalitions - like the Campaign for Democracy (CD) or National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) - unions like the ASUU or the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) would mobilise for the drawing up and implementation of a genuine programme of democratic transition; then, after the cancellation of the electoral process in 1993, for the actualisation of the results and the end of the military regime.

In July 1994 the unions in the oil sector (NUPENG and PENGASSAN) organised one of the most significant strikes of the period against the military regime. The movement, allying explicitly economic demands and political slogans for the withdrawal of the military from power, generalised to all sectors and led to the paralysis of the country for more than a month. The regime would bring

down all its strength against the unions. The presidents of NUPENG and PENGASSAN were imprisoned and their organisations, like the entire NLC, put under the control of single administrators named by the government. A range of draconian measures was taken to totally destructure the apparatuses of the union leaderships and to prevent a coordination of rank and file action. Finally, the government defeated the movement, due notably to the ambiguities and weaknesses of the NLC leadership. Despite actions and movement here and there in the years which followed, it was only starting from 1998, with the death of Sani Abacha and the establishment of the transition, that the unions started to really move again.

New resistance and perspectives

The "democratic" completed from 1999 finally gave the unions freedom of action (at least formally), following the lifting of most of the anti-union military decrees and the liberation of the imprisoned leaders. In that year, as the new civilian regime came to power, the Nigerian unions welcomed a new leadership at the head of the NLC. The new union president, Adams Oshiomole, had campaigned on the theme "Renaissance 99" and the Nigerian workers, like their millions of compatriots, really hoped to see the opening of a new era where they would reap the dividends of democracy.

Unhappily the democratic transition has only really allowed a continuation of the same neoliberal and anti-social policies under a democratic cover [11]. And the workers very quickly returned to the road of mobilisation. The movements which followed the transition fought on a broad spectrum of demands, from wage rises to struggles against dismissals. But the focal point of these movements was really the fight against oil price increases which began from 1999 onwards. It reconstituted the alliance of the unions with the other forces of the social movement and led to the emergence of NLC leader Adams

Oshiomole on the public and national scene. Yet his personality and policies are not without ambiguities and contradictions which could constitute obstacles for the movement.

Elected in 1999 and re-elected in 2002 at the head of the federation, Adams Oshiomole is often presented as the unofficial leader of the opposition particularly since the campaigns against the oil price increases. A charismatic leader, Oshiomole climbed the ranks of the trade union hierarchy during the troubled years of the 1990s. His strength resides in the constant linking of a sometimes very radical rhetoric and an attitude which is in reality much more conciliatory. Thus he has ambiguous relations with the government and Obasanjo.

In 1999 he tempered the ardour of the workers to "preserve" the transition and ended up negotiating a 25% increase in public sector workers' wages with Obasanjo. In 2002 he supported Obasanjo for re-election. But popular and trade union discontent in the face of government counter-reforms have also led him to confrontation with the regime, which is not without risk.

And if he has positioned himself as leader of the campaign against the oil price increases, he also participates in the National Council For Privatisation, the body charged with supervising a number of economic measures of which the oil price increase the unions are fighting is one of the logical

consequences.

All these ambiguities and contradictions mean that when faced with a government totally dedicated to the advancement of its aggressive neoliberal policy the movement has no real strategy. In recent years it has often confined itself to protest against price increases, deregulation and privatisation without challenging the global logic of this policy.

The campaign of 2005 perhaps marked a turning point. Rather than call for a new strike (which may not have been able to maintain itself very long, in particular because of the difficulty faced by small and informal traders in surviving without liquidity), the unions and their allies inside the Labour and Civil Society Coalition (LASCO) developed a new approach.

This involved calling for demonstrations and the holding of big public meetings on the theme of opposition to an increase in prices at the pump, but also against the general policy of the Obasanjo government as the main factor in the impoverishment of the population. These demonstrations, organised across the country, attracted thousands of workers every time, around forthright and political slogans.

They have given expression and form to the politicisation of a broad layer of organised workers, and have radicalised opposition to the

government.

If the concrete results of the movement are unhappily yet to be seen, due to the apathy of the union leaderships which seem to be happy with this first phase, the process, patiently and politically built, could lead to real perspectives of alternatives.

And this is urgent, because: the structural crisis of the Nigerian state has not been resolved with the opening up of the institutions. It seems on the contrary to be continuing, nourished by the transformations wrought by neoliberal policies (the dismantling of the state which had been the means and the site of primitive accumulation). Strong tensions and cleavages could grow, notably with the prospect of presidential elections in 2007.

The battles inside the ruling classes for control of what remains of the state apparatuses, like the attacks to extract still more profits from the rest of the population, could sharpen. In the absence of perspectives for the movement, these developments are already crystallising around other cleavages - regional, ethnic and/or religious - which are the source of violence and division between the exploited and the oppressed. The organisations of the Nigerian workers' movement thus have a heavy responsibility, but also the means, of avoiding new tragedies for the whole of the class, and offering genuine perspectives of emancipation.

Québec Solidaire - the new option in Québec politics

7 March 2006, by **Susan Caldwell**



Amir Khadid and Françoise David

Québec Solidaire is the outcome of a merger between Option citoyenne and

Union des forces progressistes, totalling about 4,000 members, with approximately equal numbers of women and men. [12] Québec Solidaire aims to rally progressive forces across the broad left of the Québec political spectrum, providing a

class alternative to the bourgeois-nationalist PQ - Parti Québécois and the bourgeois federalist PLQ - Parti libéral du Québec (Québec Liberal Party) as well as the right-wing nationalist ADQ - Action démocratique du Québec (Québec Democratic

Action).

The history of the left in Québec over the last 50 years has been marked by the absence of a labour party. The founding of Québec Solidaire represents a politically credible potential mass party. Historically the NDP (New Democratic Party) and the CP (Communist Party), class-based parties that exist in English Canada, have never developed beyond a marginal presence in Québec, due to their lack of understanding or sidelining of the significance of Québec national oppression. This allowed the bourgeois-nationalist Parti Québécois to almost monopolise the progressive political terrain.

Founded in 1968, the PQ was not a social-democratic party based on the trade unions but a nationalist party led by a modernising tendency, with an electoral base in the working and popular classes. Left groups did grow in the 1960s and 1970s; the largest of these, PCO/WCP and En Lutte/In Struggle were Maoist. The Trotskyist groups were smaller but did play a significant role in workers', women's and other social struggles. All of these far-left groups either broke up or went into decline after the first, defeated, referendum on Québec sovereignty held by the PQ in 1980.

Not until the 1990s did political developments lead to pressures for unity of the left to form an alternative to the PQ. With the PQ in power, carrying out neoliberal cutbacks, a series of mass mobilisations took shape. These included the Bread and Roses Women's March in 1995, student mobilisations in 1996 and the nurses' strike in 1999. A second wave of mobilisations began with the global social justice World March of Women Against Poverty and Violence in 2000. This was followed in 2001 by the mass organisation and mobilisation against the Summit of the Americas held in Québec City, with the 60 000 person Peoples' March uniting all the social movements against the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas.

In 1995, NDP-Québec, an organisation of several hundred members, abandoned its federalist outlook and opened its ranks to left-wing organisations. Two groups answered

the appeal - the left-nationalist group around Paul Rose and the revolutionary Marxists in Gauche Socialiste, the section of the Fourth International. [13] Debates in NDP-Q led to the formation of PDS - Parti de la démocratie socialiste, an explicitly anti-capitalist, anti-neoliberal, feminist, internationalist, and pro-independence party in 1996. Judging that this explicitly anti-capitalist stance too extreme as a basis for a mass party, other left-wing supporters of Québec independence sought to rally the social and political left of Québec into RAP (Rassemblement pour une Alternative Politique / Assembly for a Political Alternative) in 1998. RAP attracted significant votes in the 1998 elections but failed to elect a candidate, leading to a call for social movements and progressive forces to unite in a single organisation. The UFP (Union des forces progressistes) was thus founded in 2002 through the merger of PDS (Parti de la démocratie socialiste), RAP (Rassemblement pour l'alternative progressiste), and the PC (Parti communiste du Québec) with the Québec branch of the International Socialists joining later.

In 2003, the Jean Charest-led PLQ won the provincial elections, while the right-wing ADQ got 18% of the vote and 4 deputies. In response, a collective of 22 progressive women and men - including Françoise David, World March of Women spokesperson in 2000 - organised a popular education campaign promoting a critical understanding of the various parties' programmes. This was the beginning of D'abord solidaires - (Solidarity First). In November 2003, D'abord solidaires split into 3 components. The largest of these, led by Françoise David, created a political movement known as Option citoyenne (OC). OC defined itself as - "a movement of Quebecers who have decided to take part in party politics to advocate social justice, sexual equality, environmentally-friendly development and solidarity among peoples. Our goal is to broaden and unite left-wing political forces to field candidates in the next provincial election". [14] The first task was a cross-Quebec tour, meeting all progressive movements to listen to and get a sense of citizen's concerns.

Many World March of Women activists joined OC, convinced of the need to go beyond counting on social movements alone to achieve the demands put forth by the March. At the Option citoyenne convention in Autumn, 2004, the leadership was convinced of the need to unite the left in Québec, making an appeal to the Verts (Green Party) and the UFP. Only the UFP responded.

These UFP-OC negotiations culminated in Québec Solidaire's founding congress, based on a common statement of principles, [15] organisational statutes that include a 50% female leadership at all levels, not just for electoral candidates, and the election of a national coordinating committee - consisting of nine women and seven men. The debate is now open on the new party's programme and electoral platform. This will be determined at the next congress, planned for 2007. Québec Solidaire has two official spokespersons, Françoise David and Amir Khadir, from OC and UFP respectively.

The key debates for the coming year will centre on the national question and how important a role electoralism will play in the new party. While sharing a non-federalist outlook, there is a wide range of views on the importance and strategy for the self-determination of Québec within Québec Solidaire. Without viewing Québec independence as a goal in itself, Québec Solidaire sees sovereignty as a means to achieve its social project. Unlike the PQ, most Québec Solidaire members feel social issues must be dealt with now, not put off until sovereignty is achieved. "It doesn't interest us to transform the G8 in which Canada takes part, into a G9," Khadir said. Sovereignty, for Khadir, is "a means of resistance to the power of corporate globalisation." [16]

With elections coming within a year, the question of an entente with the PQ will certainly come up. The federalist and right-wing Liberals hope the PQ will lose votes on its left to Québec Solidaire. Françoise David said that while QS supporters don't want to see Charest's Liberals form the next government, she had little concern about splitting the sovereigntist vote.

Referring to the PQ's 1976 programme, advocating proportional representation, "The Parti Québécois had 30 years to bring in proportional

voting. So it's a little late to tell us that we're going to divide the vote," she said. "We bring a new alternative. We bring values like solidarity,

ecology, equality between men and women and I think we are the only party that brings that," said Françoise David.

Rough Music

6 March 2006, by Fred Leplat

The actions and words of Blair in his un-ending war against terrorism are scrutinised with a forensic approach, and the hypocrisy the prime minister is laid bare with acerbic wit.



Probably the most interesting part of the book is the description of the unfolding coup by Blair and Campbell against Greg Dyke and the BBC. If virtually all the newspapers supported uncritically Blair's drive for war, the BBC felt it had to follow the unfolding events through the prism of parliamentary politics and divisions in Parliament.

Although Dyke was an enthusiastic Blairite when appointed, "the price of truth had become prohibitive". Tariq writes that "Campbell rang Dyke after the February 15 demonstration to denounce the BBC for accepting that there were a million people out on the streets" and that there was anger at the composition of Question Time

panels.

The successful coup against the BBC means virtually the whole media is a mouthpiece for the government. Although the ownership of the media is independent, its relationship with the government is no better than that owned by Berlusconi in Italy.

The crisis in representation in Britain is commonly accepted on the left in Britain, with the two last general elections having the lowest turn-out in history. But the slavish support for US foreign policy with a fig-leaf of parliamentary democracy topped by the Queen, brings Tariq to describe Britain as being no more than a "banana monarchy".

This image is close to the truth when we remember that Harold Wilson, also an supporter the "special relationship" with the USA, chose that Britain would not be involved in the Vietnam quagmire. Now Iraq seems to be an even greater political crisis on both sides of the Atlantic than foreseen.

Tariq reminds us that Blair's embracing of neo-liberalism in both the economic and military field dates

back a long way. Blair obtained the then Labour Shadow Cabinet unanimous support to Major's and Clinton's air strikes on Iraq. Tariq also quotes Nigel Lawson from a year before the Tory defeat that "Mrs Thatcher's true successor is currently Leader of the Opposition".

The transformation of the Labour into "party who programme was virtually undistinguishable from the Conservatives - and in some respects worse than that of the Major government" and with a PLP that "has, with few exceptions, swallowed every bitter and nauseous pill" from Blair leads to one of the central conclusions of the book that we "need a political movement ... to the left of New Labour built on the best of the socialist and radical traditions.

Tariq's arguments for a "political party that speaks for the poor and underprivileged" are welcome and so is his recent presence on Respect platforms.

Get a copy now.

After the electoral triumph of the MAS

6 March 2006, by Herve do Alto

It was in fact thanks to the massive votes of a majority of them that Evo Morales became their new head of state. The leader of the coca growers of the region of Chapare (the zone of

so-called "illegal" cultivation to the north of Cochabamba), a declared adversary of the United States, who for years have been calling him a "drug trafficker" and an "enemy of

democracy", who in the past worked as a mason, baker, trumpet player, football player, and lama breeder, is today President of the Republic of Bolivia. This Aymara living in Quechua

territory is the first indigenous peasant to occupy this function in the history of this country. [17]

Undoubtedly the victory of the leader of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) is a source of hope for all the popular and social movements who for five years now, have been engaged in a cycle of intense struggle, both against the neo-liberal model which governs the economy and against the discrimination that the "indigenous people" continue to suffer in a country where however they make up the majority. [18]

The overwhelming victory of Morales: the hypothesis of a vote for change

The score obtained by Evo Morales - 53.7%, corresponding to more than a million and a half votes - is quiet simply unprecedented. [19] The candidate of the MAS thus avoided having to negotiate his election in Congress, an exercise that has up till now been forced on anyone seeking to be president because of a system of voting characterized by an indirect second round, which has caused the Bolivian political system to be described as "pact democracy". Favouring consensus and stability according to some, preventing a party from governing alone and applying a clear program for others, this system had in any case the result of guaranteeing, since 1985, the presence at the head of the state of a homogenous group of conservative parties, all partisans of neo-liberalism.

In spite of alliances that were subject to change according to the conjuncture, the period 1985-2002 was certainly characterized by continuity in the public policies that were implemented, particularly on the economic (application of the neo-liberal model characterized by the withdrawal of the state from production) and international (submission to the desiderata of the United States, leading to a consensus on the question of coca) [20] levels and by continuity of political

personnel in the ministerial cabinets. Structured around the three parties, the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR) of Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR) of Jaime Paz Zamora, and Nationalist Democratic Action (ADN) of the ex-dictator Hugo Banzer and Jorge Quiroga, this system of parties [21] had produced up until then a series of "pacts", marked by "turning" alliances that above all demonstrated the very small ideological differences between the parties. The quasi-unanimity that existed on issues such as economic policy, the export of hydrocarbons or the necessity to eradicate coca led under the last two governments to agreements covering almost the entire political spectrum. Thus it was with the "mega-coalition" which allowed Hugo Banzer Suarez to become president from 1997-2002, [22] with the support of more than 70% of members of parliament coming from no less than 7 parties (including the ADN and the MIR), then with the so-called alliance of "national responsibility" that was constituted around the MNR of Sanchez de Lozada and the MIR of Jaime Paz, once again with the support of nearly 70% of the members of Congress.

The high levels of popularity enjoyed by Carlos Mesa, the former fellow traveller of Goni, [23] who became president following the latter's resignation on October 17, 2003, already represented the expression of a rejection of these parties by the majority of the population. This support lasted for a long time, insofar as Mesa presented himself at the beginning as the president who would govern without Congress, therefore without the approval of these parties, as if that in itself was proof of honesty. After the massacre of October 2003 the use of the expression "traditional party", used against the parties who had collaborated with the governments of Sanchez de Lozada, became more and more common, to the point of becoming a way of distinguishing between parties like the MAS and the MIP (Pachakuti Indigenous movement) and these formations who are considered as pillars of "pact democracy".

In this context, the vote in favour of

the MAS can therefore be interpreted as the rejection of a rosca (clique), of a homogenous group that exercised power for 20 years, that applied with a few nuances the same package of policies and did not hesitate to criminalize all the social movements, bloodily repressing them if necessary, as in October 2003. [24]

This rosca appeared all the more real when scarcely a few days before the election, the parliament distinguished itself when a majority voted against a parliamentary inquiry into Gonzales Sanchez de Lozada for his responsibility in the crushing of the police mutiny of February 2003. Among those opposed to the inquiry there were a majority of the members of parliament of the MNR, the MIR, the New Republican Force (NFR), and the ADN, some of whom were even candidates for the coalitions of the Right and Centre-Right in these 2005 elections: PODEMOS (Democratic Social Power) and UN (National Unity). There is no doubt that the declaration of Ivan Morales Nava, MAS member of parliament for La Paz, denouncing the "reconstitution of the mega-coalition" on this occasion met with a certain echo among part of the population.

So, two major factors seem to argue in favour of an interpretation of the vote for the MAS as a vote for change: the rejection of economic and social policies on the one hand, and on the other the fact that people had had enough of a political class that was represented in this election by PODEMOS and UN.

An increasingly massive popular rejection of neo-liberalism

The first element that enables us to understand the victory of the MAS is undoubtedly the growing recognition of the legitimacy of the demands put forward by the social movement since the year 2000, demands that were characterized by a rejection of neo-liberal policies. The effects of the privatisation, begun in 1985, of public

services and of the exploitation of natural resources, which had up to then been state property, seem increasingly to have been seen as negative by a majority of the population. At the source of this evolution there seems to be resentment at the concrete impact of these privatisations on people's daily lives.

An exemplary case is the "water war" which took place in Cochabamba in 2000, against the leasing of the management of water to the United States company, Bechtel. Thus, according to Pablo Solon, coordinator of the Bolivian Movement of Struggle Against ALCA (in English, Free Trade Areas of the Americas, FTAA), "one of the motives for this mobilization was the more than 300% increase in the price of water in the space of few weeks". This is an example that we could compare to the mobilizations led by the FEJUVE (Federation of Neighbourhood Committees) of El Alto against the company Aguas del Illimani (which belongs to the French multinational Suez-Lyonnaise des Eaux) in February 2005, among other reasons because of the absence of connections in the rural zones of the city, or to the spontaneous protest of the inhabitants of La Paz against gas shortages a few weeks before the election. [25] This is a surreal situation in a country which is one of the leading world exporters of gas, and it serves to underline the absence of rationality of an economy that is principally turned towards exports, to the detriment of social needs. There is no doubt that these dysfunctions, which more and more frequently affect daily life, contributed to changing the way in which the question of gas was seen by a majority of the population, including among the better-off layers.

When the first deposits of gas were discovered in Bolivia at the end of the 1990s, the oil industry, which had been affected like the entire public sector by neo-liberal reforms, had already been largely re-organized: the principal state enterprise, YPFB (Fiscal Oil Deposits of Bolivia), found itself deprived of any initiative in this sector, as a result of the laws of "capitalization" and "hydrocarbons" developed by the government of

Sanchez de Lozada in the period 1994-1996. According to Mirko Orgaz Garcia, a journalist who specializes in hydrocarbons, "capitalization reduced the state to being just a colony that exported raw materials". [26]

The discovery of gas under the Banzer-Quiroga administration led to the signing of "shared risk" contracts, [27] which provided for a profit for the state that was reduced to a minimum, only 18% of royalties, one of the lowest rates in the world, while a consortium called Pacific LNG, grouping together the main enterprises of the sector (Shell, BP, Total, Petrobras and Exxon), pocketed 82%. [28]

At the time when Goni was advocating the neo-liberal state as a model "modern" economy, which furthermore was supposedly the only solution for a state considered as "non-viable", there were few people who fought against these reforms. However, this "counter-hegemonic" battle, according to Gramsci's expression, gradually found a stronger and stronger echo in the population: although the mobilizations of 2003 broke out above all because of refusal to export gas to the United States via Chile, [29] the idea of nationalization, initially defended by a minority around the Bolivian Workers' Confederation (COB) of Jaime Soleares, the MIP of Felipe Quispe, and the Coordination in Defence of Water and Gas led by Oscar Olivera, ended by being taken up by the whole of the Left and the indigenous and peasant movements, including the MAS, which was for a long time reticent about it. [30] As a sign of the times, all the candidates for the presidency included the demand for nationalization of gas in their programmes. Even though this position was often, sometimes entirely, deformed by semantic subtleties, [31] this fact demonstrates how far nationalization seems today so legitimate that not to mention it during the campaign would have been too risky.

The Defeat of a

Discredited Political Class

The second factor that enables us to analyse the vote for Evo Morales as a vote for change lies in the nature of the opposition which faced him in the course of these general and prefectural elections. Although they were candidates for new parties, the main adversaries of the MAS had all followed the same trajectory: activists within one of the three "traditional parties", they had also run a ministry in one of the governments of the period 1985-2002. Even while they were seeking to take on board some of the popular demands that had been forcibly expressed since October 2003, such as nationalization of gas or the calling of a constituent assembly, trying also to appear as candidates of "change", Samuel Doria Medina and Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga nevertheless had a hard time appearing credible in the role, which was against their nature, of spokespersons for social demands. [32] All the more so as from the beginning of the campaign, the MAS pointed out the impressive "recycling" of deserters from the "traditional parties" on the lists of the UN of Doria Medina and especially the PODEMOS of Quiroga. Which is hardly astonishing when you take a look at the origin of these two organizations.

National Unity, the party founded by Doria Medina, mainly came from the MIR. A former member of the governmental cabinet of Jaime Paz Zamora (1989-1993), Doria Medina, who is a rich businessman mainly involved in the cement industry, tried to take power within the apparatus of the MIR at the beginning of the 2000 decade. He criticized among other things the way the party was run by Jaime Paz, which was according to him not very democratic. The creation of UN in 2004 was therefore as much the result of the personal ambition of Doria as of the way the MIR was tightly controlled by Paz Zamora.

The political project of Jorge Quiroga, PODEMOS, is on the other hand more clearly linked to Tuto's former party, the ADN, in so far as it is a "political alliance" bringing together parties and "citizens' regroupments", an alliance

of which ADN is part. By its nature PODEMOS was therefore confronted with the problem of considerable heterogeneity in the constitution of its lists, a heterogeneity that was all the more obvious because its candidates often seemed, during the campaign, to be more concerned about getting elected personally than about the implementation of a national political project. [33]

UN and PODEMOS, both by their history and by the presence of the deserters on their lists, could therefore potentially be seen as lists of neo-liberal and pro-United States *continuismo* (continuity). Furthermore, their emergence onto the national political stage coincides with the collapse of the preceding "tripartite" system. ADN and the MIR having been in part "recycled" in UN and PODEMOS, there only remained the MNR in the electoral race. An MNR which, according to statements by one of its leaders, the present President of the Senate, Sandro Giordano, [34] is still led from Washington by Sanchez de Lozada. It was in climate of intense internal struggles that the choice of candidate for president finally fell on Michiaki Nagatani, son of Japanese immigrants, virtually unknown in the political world, who had only just joined the party. The goal assigned to Nagatani by the MNR was double: to clean up the image of a party widely held to be mainly responsible for the October massacres, and to save its legal status, which is required in order to participate in elections, by obtaining more than 3 per cent in the general elections.

An electoral landslide in favour of the MAS across the whole country

Capitalising on the social discontent and on a deep-seated rejection of the neo-liberal elites, the MAS was able to attract the votes in favour of "change", all the more easily in that the campaign of Felipe Quispe (MIP) occupied a much more marginal place than in 2002, while the most radical

social movements (FEJUVE, COB) seem to have been neutralized by the partial acceptance of their demands, such as the nationalization of gas. This acceptance has no doubt, in the eyes of a part of the middle classes who were, according to many polls, reticent about voting for Evo Morales, been compensated for by the promise of credibility and seriousness brought by the presence of Alvaro Garcia Linera as candidate for vice-president, and of the intellectuals and technicians whom he brought along with him into the MAS campaign team.

The Masista vote, examined department by department in these elections, is marked by its transversal character, inasmuch as the phenomenon appears to concern all layers of the population, and puts into question some prejudices regarding the political panorama of a Bolivia divided between East and West, or between the rural and urban populations. This undoubtedly reinforces the hypothesis of a vote aiming to "prevent the mega [coalition] doing any more harm". "We ourselves were surprised by the scope of our victory", admitted Evo Morales on the evening of his triumph. The MAS in fact notched up impressive results in the Andean part of the country: more than 60 per cent of the vote in La Paz, Cochabamba and Oruro, more than 50 per cent in Potosi and Chuquisaca (which includes the constitutional capital of the country, Sucre), a victory which confirms the foresight Morales showed when said at the end of campaign meetings in these departments: "We have not conducted an intensive campaign in the West of the country, and we present our excuses for that. But the fact is that we know that here, we are going to walk away with the election, and it was more urgent to campaign in the East".

This voluntarist strategy towards those regions that were reputed to be hostile to the MAS seems to have paid off, because Morales's party scored totally unexpected results. It came second with more than 30 per cent in Santa Cruz and Tarija, third by a handful of votes with more than 20 per cent in Pando. Only the results in Beni, the historic bastion of the ADN

and the MNR, where the MAS came in third with 15 per cent of the vote, brought a note of disappointment to the party leadership.

The results of the MAS in the Bolivian Oriente, which were obtained despite a weak organizational presence, profoundly challenge the vision of a Bolivia divided between an Andean part, "prone to contestation and backward-looking" and an Amazonian part, "hard working and looking towards progress", a vision that is mainly promoted by the Pro-Santa Cruz Civic Committee [35] and a part of the Right. [36] The results obtained in some zones confirm the idea of a transversal MAS vote, in particular from what they show about the attractiveness of this vote for the middle classes. Thus, in the department of La Paz, the MAS made a clean sweep of the single-member constituencies, including the constituency that corresponds to the Southern Zone of La Paz, although that is where the local bourgeoisie lives, the same bourgeoisie that in October 2003 organised "self-defence committees" to prepare for the possibility of the "plebs" from El Alto descending on their well-off neighbourhood. In this area, which was historically a bastion of the Right, it was, however, the MAS candidate, the unknown Guillermo Becker, whose ambition during the campaign was to "make the link between the bourgeoisie and the social movements", who won the seat with more than 35 per cent of the vote.

For the "neo-liberal camp", the defeat was severe. Certainly, Jorge Quiroga won 28.6 per cent of the vote, which is much more than the polls were giving him, but was more than 25 points behind Morales. [37] In his case, his political defeat was compounded by a moral defeat, inasmuch as "Tuto"'s campaign was characterised by his involvement in the guerra sucia, a "dirty war" against rivals whom he had no hesitation in constantly slandering, whether it was Evo Morales or Samuel Doria Medina. [38] As for the latter, he took a real hammering: with 7.8 per cent, the UN has become no more than a marginal force in Bolivian politics. Although their political futures are seriously compromised, both of them have

promised to play the role of a “constructive opposition”, no doubt counting, like many other actors in Bolivian politics, on a rapid failure of the future MAS government. Only the MNR really has a reason to be satisfied with its results: with 6.5 per cent, the Nagatani campaign proved to be a success, since the result enabled the party to keep its legal status. This also demonstrates that this historic party still has bastions that it can always count on, such as Beni where it won more than 30 per cent of the vote.

In spite of results which were largely in its favour, the MAS is not, however, guaranteed of governing in complete independence. Although Evo Morales’s party has an absolute majority in the Chamber of Deputies, with 72 out of the 130 seats (43 for PODEMOS, 8 for the UN and 7 for the MNR), [39] it remains in a minority in the Senate with 12 seats (13 for PODEMOS, one each for the UN and the MNR), where it will have to negotiate to have its proposals for legislation approved, as well as in the sessions of the Congress (which brings together deputies and senators) where the approval of certain laws that are called “special”, such as the law convoking the Constituent Assembly, needs a two-thirds majority, which is 105 out of a total of 157, whereas the MAS only has 84). This means that in spite of an overwhelming victory, the MAS will not be able to govern exactly as it would want to, and will have to come to agreements with a Right that is lying in wait, no doubt ready for anything, particularly in the case of PODEMOS, in order to obstruct its action and take advantage of the slightest false step the government makes to come back to centre-stage.

This configuration is reinforced by the results of the prefectural elections, [40] where the MAS only won three of the nine prefectures (Oruro, Potosi and Chuquisaca). Although PODEMOS also won three (La Paz, Beni and Pando), these elections were above all characterized by the “taking refuge on the local level” of celebrated figures in Bolivian political life who were associated with the *rosca*, no doubt convinced both of the probable victory of Morales and of the possibility of wresting away some

of the prerogatives of government to the advantage of the prefects (who now enjoy the legitimacy that comes from universal suffrage).

There are important things at stake, particularly in the regions where oil and gas, the country’s natural wealth, are to be found, regions such as Tarija and Santa Cruz, where some autonomists nurse hopes of being able to be the only ones to benefit from it. That is the significance of the victory of the former president of the Civic Committee, Ruben Costas, in Santa Cruz, and of the former MNR deputy, Mario Cossio, in Tarija. [41]

Parallel to this, these elections also show the continuing influence of clientelism at the local level. In fact, paradoxically, although the victory of the MAS in the general elections is in a certain sense a victory over the clientelism that the “traditional parties” habitually practise, [42] thus consecrating the *voto consciente* (“conscious vote”) advocated by Morales, the results of the prefectural elections illustrate a form of permanency of local loyalties and of “de-ideologised” politics, to the advantage of efficiency in the implementation of local public works. This is the case with Jose Luis “Pepe” Paredes, whose campaign was centred on the projects that he had pushed through as mayor of El Alto, and those that he would carry out as prefect, and who did not hesitate to distance himself from Jorge Quiroga, although he was standing for his party (see note 16). Other examples were Leopoldo Fernandez, known as the *cacique* of Pando, of whom Bolivian political analysts say that “many in Cobija [the capital of the department] owe him their careers”, and Manfred Reyes Villa, former mayor of Cochabamba who was close to the ADN, and who founded his own party, the NFR, for the general elections of 2002, where he ran for president and was for a long time the strong favourite, before ending up in third place.

The challenge

facing the MAS: to articulate governmental action and social mobilization

At first sight, everything would make you think that the situation of the MAS in Bolivia was comparable to that of the Workers’ Party in Brazil after the victory of Lula in 2002: a dazzling electoral victory, which did not however bring freedom of action on the government level. But such a comparison appears as very limited, from several points of view.

First of all, from the point of view of the legitimacy of the government. Although Lula comfortably defeated his rival from the Brazilian Social-Democratic Party (PSDB), Jose Serra, it was only after a second round in which the campaign was marked by horse-trading and last-minute alliances. On the contrary, the victory of Morales, by an absolute majority in the first round, crowned the *cocalero* leader with a social legitimacy that brooked no contestation.

Next, from the programmatic point of view. Although the MAS’s results will no doubt oblige it to agree to make concessions on a one-off basis to temporary allies in the Congress, Evo’s party built its campaign on clear promises such as the nationalization of hydrocarbons, the convocation of a Constituent Assembly and the depenalisation of the cultivation of coca, and maintained real independence from the parties of the Right, in spite of a few gestures towards the UN with a view to a possible alliance if there had been a second round in the Congress. That does not bear much resemblance to the 2002 campaign of the PT, whose slogan was “Little Lula, peace and love”, a PT which had in advance done everything to reassure the IMF on the level of macro-economic policies, and which had concluded alliances with conservative sectors - Lula himself had even imposed a rich neo-liberal businessman as candidate for vice-president.

Finally, the last element of differentiation lies in the state of mobilization of social movements and the nature of the relations of the respective parties with them. Quite obviously, the arrival in power of Lula took place at a moment of reflux of the social movements in Brazil. The electoral victory could be compared to a kind of "compensation" for social mobilizations which were not getting results and were in decline. Another element that should be taken into account is the strong institutionalisation of the PT, whose continuous presence in power structures at the federal, estadual (state) and municipal levels over more than twenty years, has not been without effect on the party, its orientations, its social composition.

In the case of the MAS, it is difficult to talk about institutionalisation, both because of the relative "youth" of the party and because of the way it was formed as a "political instrument" in the service of the peasant-indigenous movement. [43] This has consequences for the relationship of the party to state institutions and to social movements. In the case of the PT, in fact, the relationship to the social movements seems to have drifted towards a relative "instrumentalisation", leading to a weakening of the mobilizing capacity of movements that were already somewhat "voiceless", like for example the United Workers' Confederation (CUT). On the contrary, the growth of the MAS was parallel to that of social movements involved in struggles, whether in defence of the cultivation of coca or the rights of the indigenous peoples for nearly 20 years, or against the neo-liberal economic model for five years. Recently, the MAS demonstrated that it could subordinate the social movements which were loyal to it (such as the coca growers, or the faction of the peasant movement that it leads) to its interests, and oblige them not to resort to mobilization, as during the crisis over the sale of gas to Argentina at a solidarity price by the Mesa government in April 2004. But contrary to the Brazilian situation, the Bolivian social movements, in particular during the crisis of May-June 2005, have also demonstrated a relative autonomy in relation to the

MAS in their actions of contestation and mobilization, as well as a capacity to influence the political orientations of the party. [44]

So it is probable that the MAS government will be subject to a relative "control" by social organizations. The attitude of a leader like Roman Loayza, leader of the faction of the Peasant Confederation of Bolivia (CSUTCB) that is linked to the MAS, illustrates all the ambiguity of many Masistas, who sometimes oscillate between their responsibilities as party leaders and their status as trade union representatives seeking to defend their base: accused of wanting to foment a coup d'état after declaring during the campaign that a government of Jorge Quiroga would not last six months, he announced a few days later that he would only give a government led by Morales three months to respect its promises concerning the nationalization of hydrocarbons and the convocation of a Constituent Assembly. The MAS leadership forced him to retract. On the morrow of the victory, Loayza, who is however a key person in the party, for which he had among other things been a senator, demanded "at least four ministries headed by members of the CSUTCB"!

There is no doubt that this apparent schizophrenia can only be understood in terms of the particular relationship between the MAS and these organizations. Organizations which, though they know how to demonstrate their loyalty to the party, [45] are nonetheless demanding in relation to their leaders, in this way subjecting them to strong pressure. We should however avoid any idealization of the MAS, inasmuch as the demands of the "rank and file", though they can be "political", often come down to the defence of purely sectoral interests, as the case of Loayza illustrates, reproducing in an original fashion practices that could sometimes easily be described as clientelist. [46]

The general assembly comprising the leadership of the MAS, the newly-elected deputies and senators and the leaders of social organizations, which was held in Cochabamba on December 21st, symbolically illustrated what should, in theory, be the relationship

of the elected representatives to the movements: a relationship of subordination and respect. Sitting opposite a platform where there were seated, alongside Morales and Alvaro Garcia Linera, the leaders of the main social organisations - peasant, indigenous, and - a new element - workers' and urban (for example, the sector of retail merchants and the cooperative miners), the deputies and senators heard the new vice-president declare: "You are the soldiers of the social movements, you should always place yourself at the disposal of these organizations, which gave birth to this political instrument of the oppressed". For his part, Evo Morales responded to the preoccupations of many rank-and-file militants in the face of the "invasion" of the working groups entrusted with elaborating the programme by engineers, technicians and other professional people with no history of militant activity, by declaring: "The MAS needs competent people, and room to work will be guaranteed to all those who want to put themselves in the service of the government. However, the posts of ministers and vice-ministers will only be attributed to people who, as well as being competent, have already given proof of their social conscience and their willingness to work for the people".

The risks of the subordination of the social movements to the government are nonetheless real. Few are the leaders who, between unconditional support and threats of radical mobilizations, demonstrate nuances in relation to the MAS. In fact, on the one hand, some leaders have forgotten the differences that in a previous period justified an attitude that made no concessions to Morales. Thus, Abel Mamani, leader of the FEJUVE of El Alto, who had manifested his discontent about the proposals for the candidacies that the MAS proposed to his organization before the elections, and who had adopted an independent profile towards the party during the campaign, concluded an agreement with Morales on December 22nd, stressing that the FEJUVE would not lay down an ultimatum to the future government. As for Alberto Aguilar, leader of the public sector miners, he agreed to join the governmental transition commissions of the MAS, on

the sole condition, however, that the future ministry of mines would not be attributed to the cooperative miners whom his members consider as "traitors". Lastly, Edgar Patana, leader of the Regional Workers' Confederation (COR) of El Alto, declared on December 24th that "the MAS is the land of change" - this however after having announced before the elections that he would not support Morales and that "he and his 'Tuto' would have to prove themselves". [47]

On the other hand, leaders like Felipe Quispe and Jaime Solares (of the COB) are maintaining an intransigent attitude towards the leader of the MAS. Is this the result of strong resentment towards someone whom they have so often labelled an "enemy of the people"? In any case, they have difficulty in not appearing as the "other" losers of December 18th.

For Felipe Quispe, it's a hard blow: with scarcely more than 2 per cent, his party, the MIP, loses its legal status, which will furthermore prevent him from taking the seat in Parliament that he had nevertheless won in a multi-member constituency. Even his bastion of Achacachi, the village in the Aymara Altiplano which was so often the centre of mobilizations of the indigenous peoples, preferred "Evo" to him - the MAS won there with more than 55 per cent, as against 28.5 per cent for the MIP. By all appearances this election campaign was the last one for Quispe, who is 62 years old.

As for Jaime Solares, he has already committed himself to call on his members to mobilize in three months' time, if there is no progress on the government's part on the questions of gas nationalization and wage increases for government employees, following from the conclusions of the National-People's Summit that was held in El Alto at the beginning of December 2005. [48]

Though the autonomy of the trade union movement towards the MAS government is certainly a positive sign, on the other hand the radical nature of the attitude that has been adopted is surprising. It is an attitude that makes one think of the intransigence of the COB at the

beginning of the 1980s, which contributed to fall of the UDP government by breaking off the dialogue with it. Today, the dialogue between Solares and Morales has not been resumed since the rupture in June 2005 of the Pact of Revolutionary Unity, a pact which had, however, made it possible to mobilize together against the Mesa government. As a result Solares risks becoming isolated, whereas his organization no longer has either the prestige or the representative character that it had more than thirty years ago now.

Many expectations from the Masista government

Moving between corporatist loyalty and radical intransigence, the Bolivian social movements still appear to be seeking to define their relations with the government, which is no doubt understandable at this stage. Nevertheless, it is important for these movements to quickly find an adequate attitude, which will enable them to combine a "control" of the government and defence of it against the Right, should that become necessary. That will of course depend in part on the real place that these same movements have in the government, and on the mechanisms that will be set up to enable them to make use of it. The dialectic that will be established between social movements and government will in fact be fundamental, both for the implementation of the programme that was defended during the campaign and for the evolution of the exercise of power in Bolivia towards a form of participatory democracy oriented towards self-organisation. That is perhaps the only condition for the social movements to really become the best defenders of the MAS government.

One of the first tests will be the nationalization of hydrocarbons, which Evo Morales has declared will be the government's first measure. After having been for a long time in favour of sharing profits between the state and the oil companies on the "50-50" principle, the MAS became converted

to nationalization during the crisis of May-June 2005. However, the nationalization envisaged by Evo Morales does not necessarily convince all the social movements, whose most radical leaders, such as Solares and Quispe, suspect the new president of complaisance towards the multinationals. In fact, while the MIP defended during the campaign nationalization without compensation, the MAS, for its part, only demands a "nationalization of hydrocarbons without expropriation".

This formula, at first sight ambiguous, which Morales justified by explaining that it was a question of "nationalizing the hydrocarbons, but not the property of the oil companies", has however a solid juridical basis and a political and practical justification. Juridically, the contracts signed between the Bolivian state and the oil companies at the beginning of the 2000 decade are really tainted with unconstitutionality (see note 10), although this interpretation is contested by the oil companies, who are appealing to international conventions to maintain the status quo. As for the desire not to attack the property of the companies, it is a response to a concrete difficulty, which is to know how to take back ownership of the hydrocarbons without losing the use of know-how in the exploitation of these resources, in a situation where the state enterprise in this sector (YPFB) has been virtually reduced to being an empty shell since "capitalization" in the mid-1990s.

The proposal of the MAS should therefore lead to the setting up of a mixed public/private consortium to exploit the gas, in which the state enterprise (that is, YPFB, which will undergo a "re-founding") would be the majority shareholder. This would make YPFB, from the point of view of the place occupied by the state in the oil sector, the equivalent of the Brazilian Petrobras. The position of the MAS really resembles a balancing act, inasmuch as it is trying to have the sovereignty of the state over its resources respected, and to make possible the concrete establishment of the industrialisation of gas, while avoiding juridically founded reprisals, as well as the loss of the technical

know-how which the multinationals have at their disposal. Through this proposal, judged by some people to be limited because of the important role that the companies will still have, these companies would however lose what was the foundation of their enormous profits in Bolivia: the industrialisation of gas would in fact result in the disappearance of the oil rent that was guaranteed them by the direct export of this resource as a raw material and its industrialisation abroad. [49] This makes foreseeable, in spite of the messages of congratulations addressed to Morales in person after his victory, a possible threat on the part of these companies to the government, whose action could in that case be legitimised by social mobilization.

The other capital theme in these first days of the Masista government will be the convocation of the Constituent Assembly. Demanded for many years now by all the Bolivian social movements, and by the peasant-indigenous movement in particular, the Constituent Assembly could make it possible to put an end to a post-colonial state, cemented by the myth of a unifying republic, which Alvaro Garcia, speaking on this occasion as a sociologist, did not hesitate to describe as “a mono-ethnic or monocultural state, of which we can say that it is, in this sense, exclusionist and racist”. [50]

It remains to be seen what will be the modalities of preparing this Constituent Assembly. So far, there are many scenarios that can be envisaged. Indeed, the Constituent Assembly could very well be confined to a simple institutional artifice whose sole objective would be to consolidate the presence of the MAS at the head of the state purely by modifying the “rules of the game”. On the other hand, this Constituent Assembly could give rise to the launching of a process of democratic self-organisation, by allowing the peasant-indigenous and popular organizations to fully take their place in it. If there are persistent uncertainties concerning the road that the MAS intends to take on this question, it is among other reasons because of the fear provoked by the possibility that the Right might bounce back in the course of an “open”

constituent process. If the catastrophe scenario of a chaotic first few months of government were to become reality, the election of the assembly could then lead to a “protest vote”. In this context, once again, it is important that the social movements are capable of exerting their influence on political life, both to defend the government and to demand that it respect its campaign promises.

A foreign policy that lies between Bolivarian radicalism and international realpolitik

One of the keys concerning the capacity of the Masista government to respond positively to the hopes placed in it will also be the position it will occupy on the international scene, and the allies that it will be capable of attracting. For the moment, the MAS as a whole, and Evo Morales in particular, have adopted an anti-imperialist attitude that makes no concessions to the United States. On the very evening of his victory, the new Bolivian president concluded his speech by the celebrated and radical slogan of the cocalero movement, “Kausachun coca, Aanuchun yankis!” (“Long live coca, Yankees out!”). This was slightly surprising considering the growing insistence on “moderation” in the course of the MAS’s campaign. Subsequently, he made a series of statements in the media explaining that although he did not want to break off relations with the North American neighbour, he would nevertheless not hesitate to envisage doing so if the United States did not resign itself to no longer considering Bolivia as a colony. Juan Ramon Quintana, specialist on questions of national defence within the MAS, on declared his part that “the government is ready to do without the financial aid of the United States if it is made in any way at all conditional”.

Parallel to this approach, Morales has also shown strong signs of his desire

to deepen relations between Bolivia and the Cuba-Venezuela axis. It was to Havana, on December 30th, 2005, that the Bolivian president undertook his first diplomatic visit, signing with Fidel Castro on this occasion an agreement reinforcing cooperation between the two countries. On January 4th, 2006, Morales was in Caracas to meet Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. It was a signal that went in the direction of Bolivia becoming part of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), all the more so as the two leaders expressed the desire to consolidate the “axis of good” that passes through La Paz, Caracas and Havana. It was once again the occasion to sign, there too, an agreement linking Bolivia and Venezuela, an agreement which however assumes particular significance considering the tensions that have recently affected personal relations between Chavez and Morales. Indeed Morales took a dim view of Chavez backing the candidacy of the Chilean Insulza to head the OAS (Organisation of American States), a candidacy against which the entire Bolivian political class had coalesced, and of him replacing the Bolivian soya that Venezuela imported with soya from the United States. That is perhaps why the Bolivian president had not initially intended to stop over in Caracas in the course of his round of international visits. By promising Bolivia 30 million dollars of aid, with no conditions attached, for the year 2006, Hugo Chavez was no doubt forgiven by his new partner for these “strayings”.

One of the challenges facing the future Bolivian government will undoubtedly be to maintain this anti-imperialist attitude beyond the Americas. Although Morales is not backward in commenting on the profits notched up by the European oil companies like the Spanish Repsol or the French Total, he adopts, on the other hand, a much smoother tone towards European heads of state. In this respect the case of French President Jacques Chirac is exemplary. Popular in many countries of the South since his opposition to the war against Iraq, Chirac had already been so in Bolivia, for having flattered Bolivian nationalism during a not very political conflict linked to the

fact that the national football team could continue to play in La Paz, despite the altitude. [51] That allowed him to forge an image as a friend of Bolivia. This partly explains the prestige that he enjoys in La Paz, including with the leaders of the MAS!

Such an attitude is not however solely dictated by an inordinate love of football, or by unconstrained nationalism. In fact, the leadership of the MAS tends to consider Europe as a partner that could substitute for the United States, in case relations with the White House should rapidly deteriorate. Although the European countries are far from absent from Bolivia, if only on the level of projects of cooperation, there is no doubt at all that they are disposed to occupy an even more important place, particularly on the economic level.

The risk then is to see the Bolivian government adopt a diplomatic posture characterized by the absence of any significant criticism towards its new partners. Such a "realpolitik" can sometimes lead to serious errors of appreciation from a political point of view. Thus, it is quite probable that the friendship of Chavez and Castro for the French president played a considerable role in the unreserved condemnation by the two Latin American heads of state of the riots provoked by youth in the French suburbs in November 2005. What will Morales be like in this domain?

Democratic revolution...or process still to be defined?

Morales's victory has aroused an incredible wave of enthusiasm, both among the indigenous peoples of Bolivia and Latin America and in the Left internationally, which can see in it the sign of a confirmation of a deep-seated movement against neo-liberalism on the scale of the planet. From there, to see in the process that is under way in Bolivia a "rupture" with the "ancien regime", there is only one step, which some commentators and analysts have gaily taken. Among

them is the Mexican-Argentinean historian Adolfo Gilly, who sees no less that the "first revolution of the 21st century", [52] a revolution which he and many others have rushed to describe as "democratic". [53] We can only agree with Gilly when he affirms that the victory of Morales is the expression of a "violent and persistent groundswell against neo-liberal domination in a racist state with a colonial matrix, as the Bolivian state has always been". Where Gilly stands out, on the other hand, is in his readiness to justify the use of the term "revolution". One might have thought up to now that his purpose in using it was purely literary, as it seems to be with so many other writers. Such an analysis deserves to be discussed, from several points of view. First of all, the expression "democratic revolution" in itself poses a problem, because it leads to according legitimacy only to the electoral road as a method of social transformation. Indirectly, it tends to discredit any other form of action which, by the dichotomy that this expression in itself carries, would inevitably be condemned as "anti-democratic", independently of the political and social conditions in which those who had recourse to it were operating.

The use of the term "revolution" itself opens the debate on the reality of the social transformations that the sole victory of the MAS on the electoral level can lead to. By describing this as a "revolution", Gilly lets it be understood that this victory is in itself sufficient. This is, besides, the meaning of the conclusion of his text, when he indicates that after this success, "what happens afterwards, will happen afterwards". Could we not rather consider that it is precisely "what happens afterwards" that will make it possible to characterize the process opened by the electoral victory of December 18th, 2005, and eventually, perhaps, describe it as "revolutionary"?

Certainly, according to Gilly, "revolutions are violent shifts in the relationship of forces - dominant and subaltern - in a given society. These shifts throw into crisis the political form of the existing rule." In this sense, there is no doubt that the cycle of mobilisations that opened in 2000

in Bolivia constitutes a process that is potentially revolutionary, which has made it possible to put into question the existence of the Bolivian colonial state. It remains to be judged whether the "shift in the relationship of forces" really took on a concrete character on December 18th, 2005, or whether it still has to be concretised. An exercise that we can try and begin to undertake by employing the notion of "power".

As Evo Morales himself declared, what is really at stake in the coming months, indeed the coming years, is "not only to manage to constitute a government, but to take power". This affirmation by Morales allows us to pose some questions concerning the nature of what exactly is power. We can certainly reify it, by considering it to be won once the government palace has been occupied. But the challenges and the tensions that the government has immediately been confronted with clearly demonstrate that power, understood as a social relation between two or several individuals, or in this precise case, between the state and society, is not won, it is constructed. It is precisely through the construction of a relationship of forces with the United States embassy, the Pro-Santa Cruz Civic Committee, the army, and to a certain extent, even those who appear today to be its allies, such as the Cuban and Venezuelan governments, that we will really be able to judge the reality of the power that the MAS possesses. Not before. It is also by the modalities of the exercise of this power that will be adopted by this government, in particular through the place that will be conceded to the social movements, that we will be able to judge and to describe this process as "revolutionary"...or not.

The present "power" of Evo Morales appears all the more limited in that his electoral victory, although it will indeed make it possible to renew Bolivia's political personnel from top to bottom, has for the moment concrete effects only in the political sphere. Now, power is not confined to the political sphere, as Gilly so well reminds us by evoking the case of Mexican elected representatives forced to submit to the dictates of the local financial markets by respect for

the Chapultepec Pact, which he describes as a real "Capitalist Manifesto". It is also defined through the relations that the political sphere has with the economic and social spheres.

As to the rupture with the previous neo-liberal policies which Gilly seems to consider as already assured, it is for the moment only an electoral promise, and will remain so as long as the MAS government does not apply certain

measures such as the repeal of decree 21060 (which constitutes the legal framework of the privatisations). The case of Guiterrez in Ecuador shows that sharp turnarounds are possible, over and above speeches and promises.

Facing up to the enormous pressures that Morales will be subjected to, on both local and international levels, will make the task of his government particularly delicate, in spite of a relatively healthy economy and of a

rather favourable international panorama, in particular on the continental level since the last summit of the Americas at Mar del Plata (Argentina, November 3-5, 2005). In this sense, the first months of the MAS at the head of the state, those very months which correspond to the first choices, to the first decisions, these first months will be crucial. Which goes to demonstrate precisely how important will be "what happens afterwards...".

Danish cartoons controversy - documents

5 March 2006

Statement of the International Committee of the FI

1. Writings or cartoons by members of dominant communities vilifying the religion of minority groups that are targets of racism are just a manifestation of oppression and incitation to racial hatred. They should be denounced as such and fought by political and legal means where appropriate.

2. Freedom of expression is primarily involved in cases when writers or artists defy the prohibitions of their own governments or religions. These prohibitions which often take the form of blasphemy laws. Several writers or artists of Muslim origin face governmental coercion and/or oppression and/or threats from fundamentalist forces. Their freedom of expression should be firmly defended.



London demo against cartoons

3. The anti-Muslim Danish newspaper's cartoons, as every manifestation of islamophobia and

imperialist and racist contempt, have been exploited as a pretext by the Muslim counterparts of the Western right and far-right in order to enhance the position of Islamic fundamentalist groups or as a device to disorientate mass discontent against a minor member of the imperialist system.

4. The fight against racism, anti-immigrant policies and imperialist wars should not be counterposed to the fight for democratic rights and freedoms. They should be combined: we oppose racism and imperialism but do not condone anti-democratic currents within this general struggle; we defend freedom of expression but fight against every expression of racism and oppressive ideologies.

Statement by the National Executive of the Red Green Alliance (Enhedslisten),

Denmark

The Cartoons are the last symbolic straw that breaks the camel's back

The widespread protests against Denmark are an unmistakable sign that the political course of Denmark and the West must fundamentally change. The protests are to be seen in the context of the general political atmosphere, as well as of Western policy in the Muslim part of the world. The cartoons are but the last symbolic straw that breaks the camel's back.

During several years xenophobic views have been given more and more space in public debate in Denmark. All around the world, Denmark has become known as a country with very negative attitudes to immigrants and refugees. It is in this context that the publication by Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten of the 12 cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad should be seen - the paper explaining this on the grounds that Muslims should be prepared to put up with "insult, derision and ridicule" (quoted from the article in the paper introducing the cartoons).

Jyllands-Posten expressed this xenophobic line on the pretext of defending the freedom of expression. The publication of the cartoons is of

course within the boundaries of the right to freedom of expression, but Jyllands-Posten mismanages this freedom in a deeply irresponsible way.

The Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen and the Government should have dissociated themselves clearly and unequivocally from the expressed aim of the cartoons - without disputing the unreserved freedom of expression of Jyllands-posten subject to the consequences of the law. This could have averted the crisis.

However, the Prime Minister chose to appeal to xenophobic currents within the Danish population by only defending the freedom of expression of Jyllands-Posten - without in any kind of way addressing the content of the cartoons. As part of this pandering to xenophobic attitudes the Prime Minister chose arrogantly to reject a meeting with the ambassadors from a number of Muslim countries. A rejection that is quite unheard of when the ambassadors of other countries request a meeting.

To explain his rejection the Prime Minister claimed for months that the ambassadors had demanded of him in their letter to intervene with the newspaper. Instead it has turned out that the ambassadors wished to have a dialogue with him against the background of the harsh debate in Denmark on the issue of immigrants and refugees, not least by the rightwing Danish People's Party, and the cartoons were only one of several points mentioned by them in their letter. By rejecting meeting the ambassadors the Prime Minister chose confrontation instead of dialogue and is therefore responsible for deepening the crisis.

The cartoons have become a symbol of how many Muslims see themselves treated in Denmark and in other parts of the world,

- where Muslims are exposed to hatred
- with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan
- with Western countries supporting Israel, whereas Palestinians are humiliated and denied a state of their own.

Western conduct is therefore part of the background for the massive protests among Muslims. These protests have comprised quite legitimate forms of expression, including the boycott of goods, which is annoying, but peaceful and acceptable, contrary to quite unacceptable forms such as threats against persons and the burning of embassies.

In several countries the massive show of protests can as well be seen as a reaction to dictatorial and incompetent regimes, which have often been installed by the West and are allies of the USA or other Western countries.

Resolving this crisis will be a huge task, even when the demonstrations against Denmark have subsided.

Right now the Danish Government must take the consequences of the cartoons being part of failed and humiliating asylum and migration policies. The Government must take steps to promote reconciliation with the minorities in this country affected by these policies, Muslims and others. Such an admission of fact and such an initiative would signal to the rest of the world that we take this problem seriously and that we will do something about it.

The Government must take the initiative in abolishing the discriminatory laws affecting immigrants and asylum seekers, as for example the prohibition of marriage and the introduction of an exceptionally low social security benefit. There is a need as well to legislate to secure equality between all religions.

To be able to ensure such a development the Government will have to distance itself from the policies and rhetoric of the Danish People's Party with regard to immigrants and refugees. At the same time we call upon Muslims to dissociate themselves from extreme fundamentalist Islamic positions. This would be the start of establishing a debate on immigrants and refugees, which would not be restricted to the circles of the most extreme forces on the Danish right wing and among

Muslims.

Globally there is a need for:

- A speedy end to the occupation of Iraq. Denmark must withdraw its troops immediately from Iraq and Afghanistan
- New and efficient steps must be taken to secure the right of the Palestinian people to a state of their own
- World trade must be changed so that the poorest countries, among them some of the Muslim countries, can improve their chances to create an independent economic development
- Increase the support to strengthen the development of democracy in Arab and other countries, as opposed to Western propping up of reactionary regimes as in Saudi Arabia.

The National Executive of Enhedslisten/the Red-Green Alliance, February 12, 2006

Socialist Resistance (England and Wales) statement - Islamophobia and the Cartoons

Piers Mostyn

Cartoons have been published in a number of European papers attacking the Muslim religion and Muslims. Whether dressed up as "criticism", "satire" or "humour" they are undoubtedly provocative - humiliating and offending Muslims through caricatured representations of the Muslim Prophet. Whether or not this was intended or even understood initially is now of little relevance. By the time of their reproduction in several countries it must have been.

Across the globe there have been a storm of protests that have resulted in a number of deaths. Initially debated

as an issue centring on the content of the cartoons and their intent, it has predictably shifted to a focus on "extremism" in the Muslim community.

This is not an abstract question concerning religion and its criticism – reducible to debates over philosophy, theology, secularism or free speech – despite the mainstream media's presentation.

With some exceptions, disputes over religion also tend to have a specific political meaning and dynamic, particular to the period and the place in which they occur. History is littered with examples – from the 15th and 16th century European wars of supremacy in which Catholicism and Protestantism were ideological badges in a struggle for hegemony between nascent imperial powers to the waves of anti-Semitism from the 12th century to the holocaust and so on.

Today the background is one of a febrile global atmosphere of imperialist wars on Muslim countries, Islamophobia stoked up by the media, a wave of physical attacks on the Muslim community, the incessant witch hunting of "extremists" and draconian state assaults on civil liberties directed against that community. Behind this lies a political polarisation in which the far right has gained strength and mainstream political discourse (incorporating social democratic as well as rightist parties) routinely includes xenophobia, repression of migrants and so forth.

In this context the objective dynamic of the cartoons and their continued republication is one of racism against an oppressed community.

There is nothing new about this type of racism. It is more commonly known as bigotry. It has been seen in the North of Ireland where the caricaturing of Catholics in speeches, cartoons and the like as "papists" has to be understood as part of a sectarian ideology underpinning the protestant ascendancy upon which British rule is based. Such an understanding stands irrespective of the fact that Catholicism and in particular it's hierarchy around the pope is

reactionary and oppressive.

Unfortunately there were some who stood to one side – simply denouncing "sectarianism" in all communities in an abstract sense, often in the name of some "pure" form of secular class politics, and failing to defend the community under attack. This ended up, perhaps unwittingly, gutting the issue of it's politics by allowing it to be portrayed as simply a "communal" or "religious" conflict between communities without emphasising the role of the state and imperialism.

In present circumstances the duty of all who oppose the war and racism and stand for civil liberties is to defend the Muslim community. This remains the case irrespective of the fundamentalist character of some of those who have protested against the cartoons or reactionary states that have hijacked the issue – both of which should be denounced.

The current climate is fuelled by right wing, racist elements that have jumped on the bandwagon of Islamophobia and are deliberately using a legitimate "freedom of the press" as a Trojan horse for their own reactionary agenda. The rest of the establishment has either encouraged this or been powerless to confront it – due to it's complicity with or failure to oppose the recent imperialist wars and authoritarian attacks in which precisely the same community has been the prime target.

Part of this rightist agenda that needs to be challenged is the implication that the Muslim communities are in some way responsible for the racist tirade. As though "extremists" can have somehow provoked it. To accept this is to ignore the political context. It is as wrong as to claim that the 9/11 attacks provided some justification for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

It is simultaneously necessary to defend freedom of speech. Again this is not an abstract question and cannot be done outside of an anti-racist perspective that acknowledges the political context. Censorship of the media, particularly by the state, must be opposed.

There has to be freedom of speech on

religion as on all questions of politics, philosophical outlook and morality. This is why it has been necessary to oppose the legislation proposing to criminalise the incitement of "religious hatred" that is currently being debated in the British parliament. This is not the solution. Censorship and criminalisation will only strengthen the very state power responsible for stoking up the Islamophobia in the first place.

The way to combat such racism and bigotry is through mass organisation and united front mobilisation, learning the lessons of the anti-war movement's defence of the Muslim community and civil liberties. This will marginalise and discredit those peddling it.

Mobilisations should be around slogans that will maximise mass support and unite communities – through opposition to racism and Islamophobia, defence of minority communities and linking these questions to opposition to the "war on terror" and attacks on civil liberties of which they form an integral part. Slogans that restrict defence to support for Islam or a particular interpretation of it will exclude all those from other faiths and those with none, as well as ignoring the fact that all faiths and communities comprise many different strands and are not homogenous.

There should be no curb on freedom to criticise Islam (or other religions) including by those within that community. All religions include elements that are reactionary and oppressive – in particular to women and those of different sexual orientation. This needs to be challenged. It is also right to challenge the involvement of religion in the state and in education – to defend secularism.

But it is perfectly possible for such debate to respect the right of all to practice their own religion, to have pride and dignity in their culture, community and identity whilst standing firm against the racist and Islamophobic agenda and defending the Muslim community.

This is the real outrage

Tariq Ali, Monday February 13, 2006, The Guardian UK.

Amid the cartoon furore, Danish imams ignore the tragedies suffered by Muslims across the world.

The latest round of culture wars does neither side any good. The western civilisational fundamentalists insist on seeing Muslims as the other - different, alien and morally evil. Jyllands-Posten published the cartoons in bad faith. Their aim was not to engage in debate but to provoke, and they succeeded. The same newspaper declined to print caricatures of Jesus.

I am an atheist and do not know the meaning of the "religious pain" that is felt by believers of every cast when what they believe in is insulted. I am not insulted by billions of Christians, Muslims and Jews believing there is a God and praying to this nonexistent deity on a regular basis.

But the cartoon depicting Muhammad as a terrorist is a crude racist stereotype. The implication is that every Muslim is a potential terrorist. This is the sort of nonsense that leads to Islamophobia.

Muslims have every right to protest,

but the overreaction was unnecessary. In reality, the number of original demonstrators was tiny: 300 in Pakistan, 400 in Indonesia, 200 in Tripoli, a few hundred in Britain (before Saturday's bigger reconciliation march), and government-organised hoodlums in Damascus burning an embassy. Beirut was a bit larger. Why blow this up and pretend that the protests had entered the subsoil of spontaneous mass anger? They certainly haven't anywhere in the Muslim world, though the European media has been busy fertilising the widespread ignorance that exists in this continent.

How many citizens have any real idea of what the Enlightenment really was? French philosophers did take humanity forward by recognising no external authority of any kind, but there was a darker side. Voltaire: "Blacks are inferior to Europeans, but superior to apes." Hume: "The black might develop certain attributes of human beings, the way the parrot manages to speak a few words." There is much more in a similar vein from their colleagues. It is this aspect of the Enlightenment that appears to be more in tune with some of the generalised anti-Muslim ravings in the media.

What I find interesting is that these demonstrations and embassy-burnings are a response to a tasteless cartoon. Did the Danish imam who travelled round the Muslim world pleading for this show the same anger at Danish troops being sent to Iraq? The

occupation of Iraq has costs tens of thousands of Iraqi lives. Where is the response to that or the tortures in Abu Ghraib? Or the rapes of Iraqi women by occupying soldiers? Where is the response to the daily deaths of Palestinians? These are the issues that anger me. Last year Afghans protested after a US marine in Guantánamo had urinated on the Qur'an. It was a vile act and there was an official inquiry. The marine in question explained that he had been urinating on a prisoner and a few drops had fallen accidentally on the Qur'an - as if pissing on a prisoner (an old imperial habit) was somehow more acceptable.

Yesterday, footage of British soldiers brutalising and abusing civilians in Iraq - beating teenagers with batons until they pass out, posing for the camera as they kick corpses - was made public. No one can seriously imagine these are the isolated incidents the Ministry of Defence claims; they are of course the norm under colonial occupations. Who will protest now - the media pundits defending the Enlightenment or Muslim clerics frothing over the cartoons?

It's strange that the Danish imams and their friends abroad ignore the real tragedy and instead ensure that the cartoons are now being reprinted everywhere. How will it end? Like all these things do, with no gains on either side and a last tango in Copenhagen around a mountain of unused butter. Meanwhile, in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine the occupations continue.

European parliament adopts Bolkestein directive

5 March 2006, by **Patrick Tamerlan**

The President of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, has two reasons to be satisfied, First of all, the project of this poisoned directive on services in the internal market,

introduced in January 2004 by his predecessor, Romano Prodi, and his Commissioner Frits Bolkestein, was adopted by the European Parliament by 394 votes for and 215 against

(basically, the Belgian, Greek and French Socialists, and also the Greens and the Communist members and those close to them).



The proposal to purely and simply reject the Bolkestein directive, submitted by the GUE/NGL [European Unitary Left/Northern Green Left], the Greens and the French Socialist delegation, had obtained 153 votes for (486 against), well above the total of the forces that proposed it. So there was nothing [for the Commission] to celebrate. Nevertheless, the European Commissioner for the internal market, Charlie McCreevy, Bolkestein's successor, welcomed the Parliament's "constructive" vote.

The second reason to be satisfied, for the Barroso Commission, is that, by terminological and juridical manoeuvres, it has finally managed to impose a new "consensual" version of the Bolkestein directive, supported by the conservatives of the European People's Party (EPP) and the European Socialists. Ignoring the hostility of the European unions and social movements, the German Social Democrat, Evelyne Gebhardt, reporter on the document in the European Parliament, even expressed satisfaction, just before the vote, at having "completely changed this

directive" and of having "given it a social dimension".

So, what does it really come down to, apart from simple cosmetic arrangements? The previous directive was based on the suppression of authorisations and requirements that were considered unnecessary, as well as on the principle of the country of origin (PCO). On this last point, the new document no longer in fact mentions the country of origin, nor the country of destination.

The PCO - which means that a provider of services is subject exclusively to the law of the country where it is domiciled and not to the law of the country where it is providing the service - has been replaced by the principle of free circulation of services. So the spirit has replaced the letter, but the illusion is fooling nobody, except the European Socialists...The new directive will put the member states under an obligation to respect the right of the provider to supply services and to guarantee him "free access to service activities and their free exercise on its territory". This guarantee is reinforced by the prohibition of a series of obstacles to the free circulation of services. The

formal disappearance of the PCO does not mean the end of fiscal, social and environmental dumping in the liberalisation of services.

Nevertheless, the adoption of the document by the European Parliament does not mean the promulgation of the directive. In the Eurocratic system, the Parliament does not have the power to pass legislation.

According to the procedure of co-decision, the first reading means that the document of the Commission has been adopted by the European Parliament and that the document that has emerged from this first reading will be communicated in the coming weeks to the European Council of Ministers, before a probable second reading and its coming back before the European Parliament.

After the success of the demonstrations on February 11th and 14th in Strasbourg, the battle for the total rejection of the Bolkestein directive and the demand for a harmonisation of working conditions in all the countries of the European Union, on the basis of the legislation that provides the highest degree of protection for workers, can and must continue.

A revolutionary process that is different

5 March 2006, by **Hugo Blanco**

You felt it on the occasion of the fighting speeches of Evo, who referred to Che and to the expression of Sub-commandant Marcos: "command by obeying". Evo spoke clearly against neo-liberalism. This atmosphere is also reflected in the fact that the Ministry of Justice is headed by a woman domestic servant who suffered physical, psychological and sexual abuse, which are a sort of "custom" in our countries.



It can be seen by the fact that the Ministry of Labour, is occupied by a trade unionist, it is expressed by the fact that a large number of generals have been dismissed, etc.

Here, I want to concentrate on only one aspect: the type of revolution.

Obviously, we greatly respect the Cuban Revolution and its principal instrument, the guerrilla army. In the same way we greatly respect the Venezuelan process. There we had an officer who made a coup d'etat against a corrupt government and who subsequently won against the

bourgeois parties in the elections, faced with these parties that had disgusted people.

We recognize that what they did is good and that it was the right road to follow.

The Bolivian revolutionary process is completely different. It is marked by a rise of progressive and combative popular struggles, without a centralized organization. Part of the combatants decided to organize in order to conduct the struggle on the enemy's terrain: the elections. This fraction built a party: the Political

instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples (IPSP). Since the government set legal traps against this party being registered, this fraction decided to enter an organization which had a legal status: the MAS. That is why today we refer to the MAS-IPSP.

In the Bolivian revolutionary movement, including in the MAS, there is a great diversity of points of view. It is in a completely natural way that people express differences with Evo. But there are no expulsions, as there are in the PT in Brazil. Evo affirms: "I can make mistakes, but I won't betray". He adds: "If I stop, push me!"

Cuba and Venezuela each have their commander. Not Bolivia. Evo systematically speaks of the re-founding of Bolivia. He mentions that during the first founding of Bolivia, the indigenous populations were excluded from it.

In this re-founding, these populations

will be present. But not only they will be present, the entire Bolivian people will also be present.

Evo reaffirms that on August 6th 2006 the Constituent Assembly will be set up. This Assembly represents the great and ardent desire of the Bolivian people. Everyone is conscious that what they do not want is a Constituent Assembly made up of the traditional parties, as so many others have been.

They know clearly that it must be a Constituent Assembly which brings together the representatives of the indigenous peoples and of all the popular sectors of Bolivia. There is already discussion on the objectives that this Constituent Assembly will have to adopt. People see in the government of Evo a guarantee that this Assembly will come into being. If we want to make a comparison with the Russian Revolution, it will be, as it were, the Congress of Soviets.



Veteran peasant leader Huge Blanco addresses crowds in La Paz

I hope that the absence of the "revolutionary party" is an advantage and not a disadvantage. History will tell us. I don't want to make theories about it. I would simply like to point out that we are in the "Russian February" and that August 6th will be "October". Although, here in February, everyone - the rank and file as well as the leaderships - hopes that in October it won't be necessary to overthrow anyone.

The process that is under way in Peru has analogies with the one in Bolivia - in an embryonic form, certainly. We see appearing there victorious revolts by social movements which are not under the control of any leadership or any party. The Bolivian process will have a great influence on our country. We have an obligation to make it known.

Neoliberal Globalisation vs the Poor

3 March 2006, by Jean Nanga

However, all this generosity seems to have no effect on reality. Sub-Saharan Africa remains subject to the ravaging mechanisms of neoliberal globalisation. We will demonstrate this from the cases of Niger and Mali, two of the poorest countries on the planet, according to the UN Programme for Development.

Niger, the poorest country

During the first half of 2005, three million people of all ages were exposed to famine and abandoned to their fate in Niger. As deaths mounted due to drought and an invasion of locusts that destroyed the fields, the government of this Sahelian country was unable to do anything about the situation and was reluctant even to

accept the reality of it. As for the "international community" it waited months before mobilising, despite the alarm raised by local associations and by a number of observers.



Rice field workers in Mali

The drought and locust invasion have only served to aggravate a situation that was already deplorable due to social-economic policies carried out by the various neo-colonial regimes that have succeeded each other since independence. The passage from the classic neo-colonialism of the first three decades to a neoliberalism that was presented as the solution has in no way produced the effects promised. On the contrary, despite being put under the tutelage of the Bretton

Woods institutions, in the form of structural adjustment programmes, since 1981, Niger is today the poorest country on the planet, according to the Human Development Indicators (HDI) of the UNDP. 63% of the population live below the poverty threshold, around 83% are illiterate and infant mortality is at 121.69.

The burden of the foreign debt, which in 2005 stood at 1.27 billion euros, or 66.3% of the nominal GDP, is one of the reasons for Niger's inability to avoid or escape from this social catastrophe. If it was objectively impossible to make the rains come, at least the struggle against the locust invasion could have been pursued more effectively if Niger had not had as its priority repayment of the debt, which accounted for 22.4% of budgetary receipts in 2004. Involved

in the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, which is supposed to reduce the debt burden, Niger has never in recent years been late in its servicing of the debt (with the exception of the year 2001).

This has been to the detriment of areas like health and education where cutbacks have led to the massive recruitment of untrained and poorly paid volunteers in place of trained and qualified personnel. Responding to the food crisis would have run counter to the demands of the programme for the reduction of poverty and for growth, of which Niger is the “beneficiary”.

Neoliberal humanism

The victims of this famine did not correspond to the profile of the poor sketched by the IMF and the World Bank. So media coverage was necessary to explain the demand for the free distribution of provisions to those affected. A sensible demand which seemed an enormity for the government and its partners in the “international community” (US, EU), who proposed instead the sale of provisions at “moderate” prices or their exchange for work.

Those families who still had some emaciated cattle sold them at derisory prices. Others went into debt, lacking the strength to work. “Trade, not aid” was the principle of the policy of “cooperation” on which USAID is based, supported by the EU and the World Food Programme. The famine presented the opportunity to consolidate commodity relation in Niger’s society, together with the individualism that accompanies them, amplified in the neoliberal era.

It is obvious that this neoliberal humanism can only reduce the breadth of the disaster, not bring about a radical solution. The oft-repeated project of the “international community” is the long term “reduction of poverty”, not its eradication, although the latter is objectively possible. Thus the food crisis persists. “The prices are still very high on the markets, which prevents many families from buying

food, because of the decapitalization suffered during the crisis: to repay the debts contracted, the families tap into the October harvest, while only 2/3 of the land has been able to be cultivated through lack of seeds and labour, which increases their vulnerability and the risk of malnutrition. The effects of the crisis will continue during 2006. [54]

In some regions, the situation for children has even worsened. The “international community” lacks the will to raise the 80 million dollars that the situation demands: only 16 million dollars were raised in the first half of 2005, while the Iraq and Afghanistan wars now cost 5.6 million dollars per month, or, virtually the equivalent of the gross domestic product of Niger in one year.

One is tempted to speak of “neoliberal famine” as the writer Mike Davis speaks of “colonial famines”. Indeed, a famine represents a possible future market for the generous “donors”. In classic fashion, the focus is on changing the dietary habits of the stricken. For example, to a population traditionally consumers of millet, the “donors” offered maize or rice that would thus become subsequently a consumer product to import.

However, more importantly, the famine is seen as an opportunity to boost the profile of genetically modified products. The position of Niger’s government on the question has gone through a fairly rapid change since the official recognition of the food crisis. Whereas the National Biosecurity Framework, drawn up in 2005, expressed a certain prudence, in November 2005, Niamey, the capital of Niger, was the site for a regional seminar on “Media coverage of Agricultural Biotechnology - Constraints and Opportunities for the Press in Western Africa “. This was organised by the International Institute for Research on Cultures in Tropical and Semi-Arid Zones (ICRISAT), the International Service for Acquisition of Agribiotech Applications (ISAAA) and UNESCO.

The ISAAA is a body devoted to the struggle against hunger and poverty in the so-called developing countries, above all through the promotion of

transgenic cultures. Its main financiers are Cargill, Dow AgroSciences, Monsanto, Pioneer Hi-Bred, and Syngenta which are also the main GMO multinationals. During this operation aimed at the indoctrination of journalists, those who attended the seminar visited the ICRISAT research station, some kilometres from Niamey, where experimentation on genetically modified cereals takes place.

Thus, this food crisis will legitimate a process of accentuated food dependence in the area of seeds for Niger’s peasantry; indeed the disappearance of the poorest peasants as small farmers swell the ranks of the lumpen-proletariat.

Meanwhile, France’s Compagnie générale des matières nucléaires (Cogema, from the Areva group), which has been significantly dependent on uranium from Niger, has had its misdeeds publicly exposed thanks to the relative local “democratic opening” and to the development of anti-nuclear consciousness, through the local NGO Agherin’man (“Shield of the soul”), the Commission for Research and Independent Information on Radioactivity (CRIIRAD, France) and the Sherpa Association (lawyers opposed to the impunity enjoyed by the multinationals in the area of the violation of workers’ rights in particular, and human rights and ecology in general)

This exposure of working conditions in the mines (low pay, exposure of workers to radioactivity without any real system of protection and medical control), of pollution with its noxious effects on neighbouring peoples and the environment could lead to a reduction of profits in order to conform with international standards.

Neoliberalism has brought about an unwinding of Franco-African relations. For example, Vivendi has taken control of water distribution. However, the privatisation of Niger’s telecommunications has benefited the Chinese company ZTE, which has an increasing presence on the African market. This despite Niger’s belonging to the monetary zone of the Franc CFA. This competition is being expressed in the future exploitation of

gold, phosphates and oil. Keen on repairing its eroded position, France seemed to accord a great importance to the organisation of the Fifth Games of Francophonie (December 7-17, Niamey). Francophonie is in fact the cultural window of a distinctly political-economic business for the state that represents French capital.

Privatisation in Mali

In the words of a leading figure in "Action Against Hunger": "Mali and Niger are countries forgotten by the international community, which reacts to crises in a punctual rather than a long term manner" [55] Mali was less affected by the locust invasion and low rainfall in the region. Nonetheless, it shares with Niger nearly all the same Human Development Indicators, which make it 174th out of 177 countries. [56]

Which is also explained by their common status as heavily indebted countries obliged to scrupulously respect debt repayment schedules. Thus, the social crisis is also the consequence of the policy of the Malian state during the preceding neo-colonial phase, when it was placed under the heel of the IMF and World Bank. A decade of "democracy" has in no way improved the social situation inherited from the so-called non-democratic period. Much to the contrary.

The succession of elected governments is also the continuity of the state in the area of neoliberal structural adjustment, despite the difference of rhythms concerning privatisation and liberalisation of markets and the other neoliberal precepts of the World Bank and IMF. The current governing team, led by General Amadou Toumani Touré, seems more determined than its predecessor to satisfy the managing institutions of neoliberalism, despite the serious social consequences.

In the framework of this neoliberal turn, the state-owned railway company, Régie des Chemins de Fer du Mali (RCFM) has been privatised. The majority shareholder of the new

Transrail SA company is initially a French-Canadian consortium Canac-Getma. A privatisation which is characteristic enough of imperialist relations of domination - the RCFM, valued at 105 billion FCFA (160 million euros) was sold off at 5 billion (7.622 million euros).

As the new company is bent on maximizing its rate of profit, priority has been given to the transport of commodities rather than travellers. This has led to the closure of 26 of the 36 railway stations around which life has been organized for more than a century. Many of the stations are effectively villages and the inhabitants are thus distraught: the travellers and the rail workers' families constituted the clientele for their products. Transrail has thus contributed to the development of poverty in the rural areas. Moreover, 612 rail workers have been dismissed and workers' social gains, for example retirement pensions paid to widows, have been reduced or suppressed.

All this has led to indignation and a movement for a return of Malian rail to state ownership. A citizen collective for the restitution and integrated development of Malian rail (Cocidirail) has emerged. But repression has not been slow in coming. Its main leader, an engineer named Tiécoura Traoré, was simply dismissed, in flagrant violation of labour legislation. Cocidirail has not however been demobilised.

Agrarian counter-reform

Other significant sectors of the Malian economy have been victims of this neoliberal restructuring, with serious consequences for the lives of the peasant peoples. Such is the case with the Niger Office, a hydro-agricultural project in central Mali, which has been a producer of rice since the colonial period. Nationalised after "independence", it has been subjected to a rampant privatisation since 1984, under the direction of the World Bank, with a compression of the workforce of 70%.

For some time, a land reform has been

mooted which threatens peasants enjoying usufruct rights on Niger Office land, and would put them into competition with big investors. This they have resisted: "They say that we are in a state of law, but we, the cultivators, don't see it. We are considered as slaves. At the Niger Office, only corruption, fiddling and injustice prevail. We have paid the rental charges legally within the time limit fixed by the President of the Republic. And our rice fields are being taken away to be given to new beneficiaries who will harvest our products. We prefer to die rather than lose our fields. If the authorities do not take their responsibilities, anything could happen". [57]

Those peasants who have worked and lived legally on these lands for decades reject being thrown off their lands and replaced by big investors. They are moreover faced with an increase of more than 200% in the cost of agricultural inputs. Only the most comfortable financially will survive in the neoliberal jungle.

This financial reform takes place at a time when a mobilisation of peasant women for access to land is developing. What makes this struggle harder is that the men tend to consider it secondary, instead of supporting it to better advance the common cause.

Along with the Niger Office, the other target of neoliberalism in the agricultural sector is the Compagnie malienne de développement et des textiles (CMDT -Malian Company for Textile Development). This is the cotton company; Mali was the main producer of cotton in the sub-region. Its privatisation is an apple of discord between the Bretton Woods institutions and the Malian government which fears the social and electoral consequences, given the place of the cotton in rural life and beyond. More than a quarter of the Malian population, or around 3.5 million people, live directly and indirectly from cotton. As two sexagenarians put it during the Forum of Peoples in Fana, "If it is necessary to sell our hope by privatising the CMDT, we are truly not agreed". [58]

The everyday life of small peasant

producers of cotton will thus experience the fate of their compatriots in the railway stations and those confronting the Niger Office. It is around the CMDT that social life and infrastructures are organized. But the French partner, Dagrís (currently shareholder at 60 %) is refusing to contribute to financing the deficit of the CMDT, to better accelerate its complete privatisation. Because, if the price of cotton for producers has been falling in recent years, cotton from the FCFA region, of which Mali was the main producer up until 2004, is being absorbed at 60% by the Chinese market. Which is in itself an attraction for any investors who can rid themselves of various social charges, through complete privatisation which is a commitment made by the Malian state in the context of the initiative for debt reduction. The current Malian government has been able to obtain its 2009 report from the World Bank and IMF in 2008, for the year 2007 is an electoral year in Mali. The last mission of the World Bank in Mali developed the modalities of privatisation.

Another aspect of this restructuring of the cotton sector, which is damaging to the small peasantry, is the introduction of genetically modified seeds that the small producers participating in the Forum of the Peoples in Fana vigorously denounced. Indeed, in collaboration with the World Bank, USAID, the multinational producers of genetically modified seeds Dow AgroSciences, Monsanto, Syngenta (Novartis), have initiated a Project COTI-2 of "Development of the culture of genetically modified cotton in Mali". Under pretext of putting technological progress at the service of the poor the dependency and marginalisation of the most deprived or their transformation into a simple agricultural, super-exploited proletariat is in fact being prepared.

Labour legislation in danger

In exchange for debt reduction, including the much-publicized writing off of the multilateral debt, Mali, like Niger, is obliged to improve the conditions of realisation of profit. In

the words of the spokesperson for the Malian government, Ousmane Thiam, during his visit to Paris, in September 2005, Mali is preparing "a simplification of procedures and formalities linked to the creation of companies; the reworking of the Investment Code, which is not only more attractive, but which puts the foreign entrepreneur on the same foot of equality as the "Malian". [59]

It is not just about confronting the Malian small entrepreneur to the multinationals, but also reducing to the minima the social protection of workers. This is quasi-explicitly suggested by the US government, which says that "labour laws are too restrictive in Mali and the difficulty of hiring and firing are supplementary obstacles". [60] The goal is a generalisation of what has happened at the RCFM against workers organised for the defence of their rights.

The criminalisation of the defence of workers' rights is a principle of neoliberalism experienced also by trades unionists at the Société malienne d'exploitation (Somadex). In this gold mining company in Morila, which belongs to Bouygues, the workers are demanding principally the payment of a productivity bonus. Gold is Mali's main export (57% of exports) and the country is the third biggest African producer after South Africa and Ghana. Somadex has produced, in three years, 83 tons of gold instead of the 33 tonnes envisaged by the operating agreement. which also indicates an extensive exploitation of the labour force.

The workers are also demanding the establishment of real labour contracts instead of contracts, and 300 have been dismissed without payment of their fees and indemnities. In July 2005 a strike broke out; the response of the management, with the complicity of certain local authorities, was repression. To legitimise this in the eyes of public opinion, various acts of violence committed in the village have been attributed to striking workers. Thus, about 30 workers have been imprisoned by the police. Around 20 were subsequently released in October 2005, but at the same time the administrative secretary of the

trade union committee, Karim Guindo was arrested.

To escape this repression, the other union leaders, including the general secretary, Amadou Nioutama, have been forced underground.

The arrogance of these companies has ultimately tired even the Malian government whose prospects at the next elections could be jeopardized by the non-respect, by Bouygues, through its subsidiary Saur International, of the contract of partnership with Energie du Mali (EDM) drawn up in 2000. Saur proved itself more interested in short term profits (increased water and electricity rates) than in the investments that it had agreed to make to extend the water and electricity distribution networks.

In October 2005 Mali was obliged to remove it from its status of majority shareholder in EDM, thus violating the sacrosanct neoliberal principle of reducing the economic patrimony of states, while the meeting of finance ministers of the Franc Zone (September 19-20, 2005, in Paris) had just recommended that Mali "pursue the implementation of the economic and financial programme supported by the FRPC, notably the structural reforms in the cotton and electricity sectors".

This electorally motivated act has earned Mali a special mission from the World Bank and the IMF, whose anti-poverty programme does not include the lowering of water and electricity tariffs in favour of the poor, still less by a majority state enterprise.

Inter-imperialist competition

It is also an awkward operation for the Malian government, organiser of the 23rd Africa-France Summit. Above all in a period characterised by a US offensive on the continent, in the oil sector in particular, within the framework of the AGOA. [61] The 4th Africa-US Forum (July 2005 in Dakar) marked one of the phases of the US advance on the continent.

The US Agriculture Secretary, Mike

Johanns, talked there of the community of interests allegedly existing between the USA and sub-Saharan Africa at the WTO, against Europe: "we should close our ranks to say to the Europeans and others that it is time to open their markets to our products. " The promotion of GMOs also takes place in the framework of this common cause against Europe, as little concerned as the US with the fate of the poor and stricken of sub-Saharan Africa. Already in his opening discourse, the Senegalese head of state, neoliberal economist Abdoulaye Wade, said with assurance: "The AGOA symbolises a new vision of international relations (...) the road which leads Africa towards globalisation". [62]

Mali and Niger are among the countries sensitive to the US offensive. As future oil producers, they enter into what Washington considers as the field of national security of the US. Thus, the US government has integrated them, for example through "Operation Flintock 2005" in its programme of "struggle against terrorism". [63] Nonetheless these different aspects of US "cooperation" remain based on respect for the precepts of neoliberalism by the African "partner" states. Submission to the Washington Consensus remains the key condition.

Resistance

The reproduction of poverty is not a necessity. The year just finished has also been a year of resistance to the order being imposed on the peoples by the masters of neoliberal globalisation and their local satraps. To the general indifference of international public opinion, certain organisations in Nigerian civil society have come together to mobilise, despite intimidation and repression, against increases in the cost of living symbolised by the setting of a VAT rate of 19% on basic necessities.

If the current sitting president of the African Union, the head of the Nigerian state, General Olosegun Obasanjo, does not have the cynical frankness of his Senegalese colleague Abdoulaye Wade in expressing his adhesion to the values of US capital,

he is nonetheless a partisan thereof. That much is obvious from his confiding of the department of economy and finance to a World Bank technocrat, as well as his perseverance in the project of increasing the prices of petrol and paraffin.

This, despite the success of appeals for mobilisation, launched through unions allied to the democratic movement, [64] against this measure resulting from an alienation of oil resources to the benefit of the multinationals and some Nigerian private capital and which can only worsen the poverty of the majority of the Nigerian population. As for Thabo Mbeki, his re-election in 2004 did not stop the popular opposition to his social policy, including from the Cosatu trade union federation, allied to the ANC. He has even envisaged sending the police to deal with the social demands of the township, which has brought back memories of the recent past. Thus, behind his nationalist discourse on the "African Renaissance" is revealed a project of integration of a part of the black elite in the circuits of neoliberal capital. [65]

The African governing elites apply the precepts of neoliberalism also for their private interests. They prepare to asphyxiate the small peasantry by articulating neoliberal land reforms and the introduction of GM seeds, which the peasant associations present in the Forum of the Peoples in Fana, an alternative summit to the G7 (June, Mali) have vigorously denounced. Unfortunately, representation from peasant associations in other regions of Africa, beyond West Africa, was weak.

The same goes for the African trade unions and other components of the African Social Forum, which is nonetheless a member of the Forum of Peoples, a forum with a continental emphasis held in the rural zone, which allows peasants from the chosen locality to be present rather than be represented, to exchange with those from elsewhere. Activists in Mali and Niger should consolidate permanent solidarity, to extend throughout the sub-region, where often the same multinationals are involved in water

and electricity distribution, mining operations, or the sale of GMOs.

Thus, for example, solidarity could be built between railworkers in Mali and Senegal against their states and the private purchasers of the national railways. This could take its cue from the way the African dockers' unions, from South Africa to Nigeria, have coordinated the struggle against flags of convenience.

The organisation in Mali of an alternative summit to that of the 23rd France-Africa summit is an initiative that should be pursued. Not only against the summit, but also against the other organisations determined to pauperise the peoples. Against the favourable opinion enjoyed by the AGOA in certain circles, which seems to illustrate the dialogue of the confederation of the NGOs of Senegal (Congad) with the AGOA, it should be remembered that the nature of US capital is no less imperialist or socially criminal than that of French capital. For example, the recent US intervention in Liberia, against the oligarchic regime of warlord Charles Taylor, who benefited from the support of French capital, favoured the operations of Firestone, who exploit a quasi-slave workforce employed in the plantation of hevea, 6,000 of them children. [66]

It is then against the different facets of this order that we need to organise. For another possible world free of exploitation of human beings by other, of all oppression, it is necessary to build permanent solidarity, above all with the poorest, for a radical alternative. A radical African movement for global justice in solidarity with radicalism outside Africa, without the hierarchies inherited from a past of colonialism and slavery. But the alternative to racism cannot be a form of racialism. Thus, a project like that of the African People's Socialist Party, appealing for an African Socialist International seems to us still very marked by the pan-Negroism of Marcus Garvey and could feed racialism, rather than socialism as the democratic alternative to the multidimensional order of Capital. [67]

The organisation of the polycentric

World Social Forum in Bamako, by geographical proximity, is an opportunity to seize, to organise the collective and democratic discussion on permanent solidarity, for a movement for global justice and a radical African alternative.

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