

The Eighteenth Newsletter (2018): Refugees and Strongmen



Dear Friends,

Greetings from the desk of the **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**. We have been running for almost six months. Our team is hard at work across the world to do the kind of research we promised. Please have a look at our new staff **page**, where you can see the people involved in our offices from Buenos Aires to New Delhi. Each office has set its agenda and our staff are working hard in the field to build up movement-driven research. They are in the countryside of Haryana and the favelas of Brazil, building knowledge about working-class and peasant life in our times as well as about the structure of exploitation and oppression. We look forward to presenting this work as it is elaborated and polished. Meanwhile, also have a look at our dossiers (on Korea, on water, on Venezuela and on Brazil) as well as at our Working Document (on globalisation). We welcome your constructive thoughts.



A group of migrants on the way to Libia from the city go Agadéz, Niger.

Just past us is World Refugee Day. To highlight the day, the United Nations Refugees Agency (UNHCR) has produced a great deal of documentation about the refugee crisis. It is, as you would expect, quite dramatic. There are now as many refugees as there are people in Thailand. More than half the refugees are children.

Attention remains focused on the US-Mexico border, largely because of the inhumane actions of the administration of US President Donald Trump. But the crisis is wider and deeper. Less attention is paid to the camps in Bangladesh and the detention centre in Nauru. At *Salon*, I have an essay that reflects on the UN data and on my own reporting from the planet of refugees. The essay opens, ‘Your mind is fixated on the US-Mexico border. You are watching the images of the children, arrested by the US Border Patrol and taken into detention. You have seen a picture of car seats to cart babies to prison. You are heartsick’. The rest can be read [here](#).

The impact of Trump’s policies and his general attitude towards Mexico and Central America as well as on the adverse agenda of the Mexican ruling class leads us towards a possible victory for the Left in Sunday’s election in Mexico. The candidate of the Left – Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) – is leading in the polls and is likely to win the elections. This would not be his first victory. He has won the elections before, but the people have been denied their victory by fraud. At Estadio Azteca, in Mexico City, AMLO said, ‘We’re about to carry out a transformation without spilling blood. But nobody should be confused. Because it is peaceful does not mean that the change will not be deep. It will be radical, and no-one should be afraid’.

Earlier, AMLO had called Trump's immigration policies 'racist and inhumane'. But he is not alone. Even Mexico's Foreign Minister Luis Videgaray of the PRI called Trump's anti-immigration policies 'cruel and inhumane'. Across the spectrum in Latin America, there is dismay and anger at the harsh policies being followed in North America. When the presidential spokesman in Guatemala – for a decidedly right-wing government – said a few tepid words in support of the Trump policies, he was hastily dismissed. In both Guatemala and Mexico, the security services operate with the *mano dura*, the iron fist. These are not liberal regimes. Nonetheless, their leadership is trapped by a public awakened by the contempt towards them from the ruling class of the United States.



The Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi with the President of United States of America (USA), Mr. Donald Trump and the first lady of USA, Melania Trump, at White House, in Washington DC, USA on June 26, 2017.

Strongmen, such as Trump, have been eager to make the case that they will revive their countries by any means necessary – including harsh anti-immigration policies. Humanitarian values are irrelevant to them. They stand where they stand, and others have to take it. There is bravado in this posture. It is what allows Trump to remain popular amongst a seam of American voters who believe – correctly – that they have been

ignored by the ruling class (where they are wrong is to believe that Trump actually stands with them).

Trump's Turkish mirror is Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who – along with his AKP party – triumphed in the presidential and parliamentary elections last Sunday. Erdoğan has suffocated the few institutions of Turkish democracy that were carefully won by popular pressure after the military dictatorship ended in his country. Enormous expectation that he would be defeated or at least forced to a second round by the unity of the opposition did not pan out.

Erdoğan, like the other strongmen of our time, is the master of grievances. He can reach into the anxiety of the poor – particularly the pious amongst them – and offer the solace of his personal commitment to their problems. But this is not sufficient. Turkey, like other middle-income countries (Argentina and Mexico), suffers from the lingering effects of the 2008 credit crisis. It has not been able to create an exit from bad international economic policies. Each of these countries has returned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), begging for better terms from international bureaucrats who are more interested in macroeconomic indicators than on the suffering of the people. Erdoğan, with Macri of Argentina and Duterte of the Philippines, is the mirror of these IMF economists. None of them have an agenda to alleviate suffering.

In *The Hindu*, E. Ahmet Tonak and I have a short report on the Turkish elections. You can read it [here](#). At the LeftWord Books [blog](#), the Turkish novelist Burhan Sönmez offers his thoughts on the elections. The point he makes about the character of Turkish society and the limitations of the opposition is worth close consideration, 'Anti-Erdoğan initiatives are strong; they got mobilised well. But they are not capable of entering in the public spheres where Erdoğan gets his support. The problem in Turkey is that our society is now divided with high walls. It is so difficult to cross these walls. One half does not have influence on the other half. The opposition may well be organised, that is one thing, but now one more thing is needed that is to explore the public fields where Erdoğan gets fed' – namely, where is able to derive his ideological and institutional strength.

Burhan has an essay in a book I edited earlier this year called *Strongmen*. It has essays by Eve Ensler on Trump, Danish Husain on Modi, Ninotschka Rosca on Duterte and – in the American edition – Lara Vapnyar on Putin. Eve Ensler recently gave an interview to the *Mumbai Mirror* about strongmen – you can read it [here](#). The American edition will be out soon and is available for pre-order [here](#); the edition for the rest of the world from LeftWord Books is available [here](#).

But these strongmen are not that strong. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi claims that he will put India first – that he will create a policy of 'Make in India' and ensure that India is not subordinate to external powers. When Trump said he would end the Iran deal, India first said that it would nonetheless continue to buy oil from Iran. India's economy relies upon Iranian oil. It would be anti-national, as it were, to stop buying Iranian oil. Yet, when Trump's envoy – US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley – met Modi, she convinced him to change his mind. Haley told Michelle Nichols of Reuters that Modi 'very much understood where we are with Iran. He did not question it. He did not criticize it. He understood it and also understands that [India's] relations with the US is strong and important and needs to stay that way' (for more on this see Gautam Navlakha's essay at *Newslick*). In other words, India should remain a subordinate ally of the United States. Modi, the strongman, ends up being – like so many of these strongmen – a paper tiger.

We, at **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**, are going to be doing a series of studies on what Burhan notes – how the strongmen get fed. We will be looking at the relationship between capital and

identity (with an emphasis on religion and ethnicity) as well as between capital and ideology (with an emphasis on the media). We are as interested in what feeds the strongmen as what might feed popular movements to overcome them.



This newsletter is written from Tokyo. Here, I have been fortunate to visit the Maruki Gallery to see the Hiroshima Panels. I will soon travel to Nagasaki to see the last of the Panels – the one called Nagasaki. Japan, the only country that has experienced nuclear attacks, has struggled with this legacy and with its own wars of aggression in East and South-East Asia. Memory of horror is not easy to retain. These Panels, these paintings are the work of the Japanese peace movement. It is a movement that draws people of great sensitivity and courage. You can read my report from Tokyo [here](#).

People of sensitivity and courage continue to try and undo the world of war and strongmen. People such as Kathy Kelly, whose [article](#) from Kabul is a heart-breaking report of the social detritus in Afghanistan and the hopes of Afghan children such as young Miriam from the Street Kids' School. People such as those who have taken to the streets of Morocco to protest adverse decisions against the protests in the Rif (for more, read this [article](#) by Ghassan Koumiya and this [article](#) from Ihlem Rachidi). People such as those who participated in massive demonstrations in Argentina against the IMF agenda and for the abortion law. People such as Femke Halsema – the Groenlinks (Green-Left) leader who will be the first woman mayor of Amsterdam, such as Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez – the Democratic Socialist who will likely be the next Congresswoman from Queens (New York), A. R. Sindhu – the trade union leader who has been elected to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Manuela D'Avila – the Communist leader in Brazil who is running for the presidency and yet has put her energy towards getting Lula out of prison. We, at **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**, put such initiatives and such people at the centre of our work.

Warmly,

Vijay.