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"Liberal Democracy and Capitalism in Late Neocolonialism"

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EDITORIAL

Liberal Democracy and Capitalism in Late Neocolonialism

The Global South finds itself in an unprecedented political, economic and social crisis characterised by wars, rise of neo-fascism and a decline in the standard of living among the labouring masses. This comes amidst denialism by hegemonic forces in the Global North that bourgeois democracy and neoliberal capitalism are now moribund. Attempts by progressive forces in the Global South to offer a prognosis often flounder, largely because their analysis and activism tend to adopt a narrow focus that ignores the bigger elephant in the room: neoliberal capitalism and bourgeois democracy. Indeed, while it is true that crises such as wealth inequalities, climate catastrophe, patriarchy and a rise in political authoritarianism are part of the global challenges, it is equally important to locate these ills to the inherent decadence of capitalism and bourgeois democracy. As the Agrarian South Network (ASN), we believe that any solution to the current global challenges must be rooted in commitment to confront capitalism in all its facets. This special issue of the ASN extends its analysis to the limitations of liberal democracy and capitalism in delivering a free, fair, just and equitable world with a specific focus on the Global South. The special issue features four pieces from a group of committed scholars and political activists based in the Global South. The first is an interview with Professor **Prabhat Patnaik** who unpacks trends in global inequalities and shows their origins while also calling for the agency of the working class for true democracy to take root. **Kofi Takyi Asante** follows with a discussion on liberal democracy and its interplay with the challenges of development and self-determination in the context of late neo-colonialism. The piece argues that liberal democracy is an illusion in a geopolitical reality where western-controlled multilateral institutions impose policies and conditionalities on the Global South, often against the expressed democratic preferences of national populations. **Paris Yeros** provides an analysis of the Mozambican pre- and post-election political crises, highlighting how imperialism increasingly exploits liberal democracy to promote anarchy and under-development in the Global South, with a particular focus on undermining liberation movements in Southern Africa. Lastly, **Haithem Gasmi** examines the Tunisian case, highlighting the public's growing disillusionment with parliamentary democracy alongside the increasing fragmentation of social classes in the country.

Inequality in Global South in the Era of Neoliberalism: An Interview with Prof Prabhat Patnaik

Interviewer: Umesh Kumar Yadav[1]

Question: *Many studies have been highlighting the alarming increase in inequality at the global level. What are the major contemporary reasons driving the wealth and income inequality?*

Answer: The fact that income and wealth inequalities have increased dramatically in the period of neoliberalism is not in doubt. In fact, there is an overwhelming body of evidence that establishes this point. For instance, the World Inequality Database's estimates of income distribution find that the top 1 percent of the population in India had six percent of the total national income in 1982. In 2022-23, it had 22.6 percent, which is the highest percentage over the entire last century. There has been a dramatic increase in income inequality. This is true of other countries too. Similarly, there has been a dramatic increase in wealth inequality. The top one percent of the Indian population owns 40 percent of the total wealth of the country. Such gross inequality is fundamentally anti-democratic.

What is more, the crisis of neo-liberalism is a direct result of this rise in income inequality. When you shift $1 from the poor to the rich, it reduces consumption since the poor have a higher propensity to consume than the rich. You find therefore that every such rise in income inequality creates a tendency towards overproduction, which is what you find today in the world economy.

This increase in inequality is immanent in neo-liberalism. The opening up of the possibility of relocating capital from the advanced countries to the Third World has greatly reduced trade union strength in the former. If workers go on a strike, then capital would shift out and this fact acts as a deterrent against working class action. Effectively, in short, workers in the advanced countries are forced under neoliberalism to compete against workers in the Third World countries whose wages are much lower; and this keeps down the wages in the advanced countries.

Joseph Stiglitz has shown that the real wage of an average male American worker has not increased between 1968 and 2011; on the contrary, it has marginally fallen. A similar

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picture holds in other advanced capitalist countries. Wages in short have not been rising in the advanced economies.

In the Third World, wages have remained tied to a certain subsistence level because of the existence of vast labour reserves. If these labour reserves could get used up, then you could find a tendency for Third World wages to rise. But the labour reserves are not being used up under the neo-liberal regime; on the contrary, there is an increase in the size of labour reserves relative to the labour force.

This is so for several reasons. The first is that the neoliberal regime entails a withdrawal of the government from protecting petty production and peasant agriculture, and opening up these sectors for encroachment by big capital. Such withdrawal subjects these sectors to the stress induced by the market. In India, for instance, price support by the government for cash crops was withdrawn some time earlier though there is still price-support for foodgrains.

Cash crop price fluctuations are very large in the international market. Earlier the government protected the cash-crop-growing peasantry from such fluctuations by providing price-support and sustaining this support through adjustments in tariffs and quantitative trade restrictions. But that is no longer the case. Therefore, the domestic prices move synchronously with world prices; and since world prices fluctuate wildly so do the domestic prices and the peasantry is adversely affected, which is an important reason behind the spate of suicides that one finds of late among Indian peasants. In the case of food grains in India, however, the government continues to intervene through price support. It wanted to get rid of such support, but a year-long peasant agitation prevented it from doing so.

But the government has kept the minimum support price for foodgrains fairly low, so that its intervention does not give the peasants an adequately remunerative price. Because of this, there is a reduction not just in the relative incomes of the peasantry and agricultural labourers compared to the average per capita income of the country, but in the absolute real income per person of the agriculture-dependent population.

This fact of absolute impoverishment manifests itself in consumption data. In India, the proportion of the rural population that consumes less than 2200 calories per day, which the Planning Commission had taken as the norm for defining rural poverty, has been increasing: from 58 percent in 1993-94 to 68 percent in 2011-12. In 2017-18, it increased to a level even above 80 percent, because of which the government withdrew the data from the public domain and changed the method of data collection. The subsequent figures are not

comparable with those for earlier years.

There has in short been a general impoverishment of peasant agriculture and petty production. This has been compounded by additional factors, like the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax, and the demonetisation of currency notes, which incidentally are also in keeping with the neoliberal agenda. This adverse movement in the real income of the agriculture-dependent (and petty-production-dependent) population also affects the general level of real wages: when this happens, a number of persons who were earlier engaged in agriculture join the ranks of those looking for jobs outside this sector, which leads to a swelling of labour reserves.

To sum up therefore, the first reason for wages not rising in Third world economies is the assault on petty production under neoliberalism.

The second reason is that neoliberalism opens up the economy to competition from other economies, and therefore domestic producers are forced to introduce more rapid technological change. To withstand competition, you have to introduce newer techniques and undertake changes in the pattern of production. A case in point is the construction of malls. Since a mall employs much fewer people than the innumerable small-scale shops that it replaces, its construction is employment-destroying, but unavoidable under neoliberalism. Hence, there is a change in the product mix, as well as in the technology mix, which is invariably employment-saving or labour-productivity enhancing. Even in economies in which GDP growth rate is higher under neo-liberalism compared to the earlier period, the observed labour productivity growth is so great that employment growth falls even below the rate of population growth. So, the second reason for real wages not rising in Third World countries in the neo-liberal era is technological change; and now with artificial intelligence, that's going to become even more serious.

The third reason is the following. If for reasons mentioned above, real wages do not rise, even while labour productivity is rising, the share of economic surplus in total production rises. Now, those living off the economic surplus, typically well-to-do people, generally have a pattern of consumption that is much less employment-intensive than the poorer people. The latter would generally be consuming goods which are produced in the petty production sector, and are more employment-intensive compared to the consumption of the well-to-do. An increase in income inequality, it follows, has a self-aggravating effect.

For all these reasons, there has been a rise in income inequality under neoliberalism. In the

advanced countries, the real wages don't rise because the workers there compete against the workers in the Third World countries; in the Third World on the other hand real wages don't rise because no dent is made in the size of the labour reserves relative to the labour force. So, all over the world, you find that real wages are virtually stagnant. China constitutes an exception to this, but the increase in real wages in China is an administered increase and cannot be emulated elsewhere. In short, the rise in real wages all over the world is paltry, while labour productivity is rising everywhere, which is why the share of surplus rises, and this manifest itself as an increase in income inequality. Neoliberalism thus unleashes tendencies that increase income inequality, and lead to a state of stagnation and growing unemployment.

Question*: The reasons you have listed out as the reasons behind the rise in inequality are extremely crucial in the context of Global South. Most of the countries of the Global South have high levels of engagement in agriculture and the presence of vast reserve armies of labour. This brings us to the issue of export-led growth that has for long been touted as solution to the problem of transferring the labour from agriculture to secondary and tertiary sectors. How relevant is the argument for export-led growth in the context of Global South?*

Answer: The entire argument for export-led growth, in my view, is fallacious. Any proposition that says that if a country increases its exports it can pull labour from primary to secondary and tertiary sectors over time assumes that there is no demand constraint in the world economy., that a country can export as much as it likes; but that's not true. In fact, all arguments for free trade assume Say's Law: Ricardo had assumed Say's Law, and neoclassical economics also assumed Say's Law; their assumption has been that no matter how much you produce, you can always export. So, all these arguments that say "free trade is better than no trade" or "free trade is better than restricted trade": all of them assume that all resources are fully utilised before and after trade; this is wrong, because it believes that in the world economy there is no demand constraint.

There may of course be periods in which demand may be very high in the world economy, but essentially capitalism is a demand-constrained system; hence if you take the world economy where there is no world government doing Keynesian demand management, there is a constraint on demand. This means that one country pursuing export-led growth will have a high growth rate only if some other country has a low growth rate, that the countries are competing against one another.

The OECD volumes of the late 60s, which constituted the first major intellectual attack on

the earlier import-substituting model of industrialisation, practised this deception. Countries such as South Korea were presented as success stories and it was argued that other countries could be as successful if they pursued a similar strategy. But this was a flawed argument: South Korea was successful because other countries were not doing what it was doing. If every country did what South Korea did, then they wouldn't be as successful as South Korea had been. So, the argument for export-led growth is a fallacious argument because there's no control on the level of demand in the world economy.

Compare it to a situation where a country is—let us assume for argument's sake—an autarkic economy. This country could grow entirely on the basis of its own home market. In that case, the government can intervene in such a country and give rise to a level of demand that is much higher; therefore, its growth rate then becomes subject to its own policy decisions and is no longer dependent on the world economy. True, such a country in reality may not be able to produce all the goods it needs, but arranging for the import of such goods is not synonymous with export-led growth.

Now one may think: "Even if a country is relying on the world economy, its government can still intervene to boost demand." But this is not so. If a country has an open economy, then it will also have to be open to free flows of finance to meet current deficits; and finance demands a control on the size of the fiscal deficit. Except for the US, every country now has fiscal responsibility legislation. Likewise, it cannot increase taxes on the rich: indeed, when the Joe Biden administration suggested an international agreement on minimum corporate tax rates, the only agreement that could be reached was for 15 percent, which is lower than the existing rate in most countries! Since taxing working people who consume the bulk of their income and spending the proceeds, does not raise aggregate demand, a government that cannot raise taxes on the rich or the fiscal deficit, cannot do so.

Thus, a typical Third World country that exposes itself to export-led growth would have to tie the hands of the government in the matter of intervention in the economy. This incidentally was not the case with South Korea, and other such countries where the government intervened heavily. Those countries had a certain special relationship with the US having fought in the Vietnam War, and enjoyed a certain leeway.

Hence in one case the rate of growth of your economy depends on your policy measures. In the other case, the rate of growth of your economy depends on the rate of growth of the world market over which you have no control. So obviously a situation wherein domestic growth is occurring on the basis of a domestic

market, where the economy is not subject to the pressures of globalised finance is one where there is an autonomy of policy making. And it is of course one in which there can be interventions by the government to enlarge the level of employment.

Question: *The few examples of the so-called Asian Tigers are projected as the products of export-led growth that managed to attain very high levels of growth and per capita income over decades. However, internationally, it seems that countries are marching back from the domain of free trade. For example, countries such USA are engaging in tariff wars, imposing restrictions on free trade. In this context, why are the policy makers in the Global South still drumming the same beat of export-led growth?*

Answer: I don't think it is only a matter of the Global South being, as it were, silly, or the Global South not being sensitive to the changing situations. The very same countries that are imposing tariffs would tomorrow prevent the Global South from imposing tariffs. I mean, the US is saying, "Look, if you de-dollarize, I'll raise the tariff rate. You want to impose tariffs on our goods, then I'm going to raise it even further." In other words, they want you to pursue a policy of relatively free trade—tariff-free, while they themselves go on imposing tariffs. So really, it's a case of the imposition of a beggar-thy-neighbour policy on the Global South, a means of exporting unemployment from the Global North to the Global South, which the latter wants to pre-empt by insisting on *status quo ante*.

Question: *You mentioned that growing income inequality and wealth concentration militate against the ideals of democracy. What is peculiar with the kind of democratic framework we inherited post-independence that has paved the way for wealth and income inequality to grow?*

Answer: It is not anything wrong with the democratic framework. What is wrong is capitalism. There was an assumption made at the time of independence, that we're going to build a socialist society but not with complete social ownership; instead we shall have a mixed economy. We will even have big capitalists, but we'll be able to control them. What has been called the *quota-license-permit raj* was actually meant to be a way of checking the growth of big capital. And democracy was visualised in the context of such an economic regime. But two basic shifts occurred over time.

The first was a shift in the international arena. Earlier, there was Keynesian demand management leading to a state of near-full employment in most advanced capitalist countries. But over time large concentrations of finance occurred in big banks, which wanted to go global. The globalisation of finance subverted Keynesian demand management.

Keynesian demand management presupposes autonomy on the part of the state to pursue whatever policy it wishes to. This is not possible in an economy that is open to free financial flows, for in such an economy if the state does something that finance doesn't like, then finance moves out *en masse* causing a crisis. Keynesian demand management in short is possible only with capital controls; the removal of such controls to enable finance to be globalised foreclosed the possibility of Keynesian demand management.

This became evident for the first time in France. President Mitterrand came to power promising to get rid of unemployment, and started pursuing Keynesian policies. But France had opened up its borders for financial flows, which allowed an outflow of finance following Mitterand's Keynesianism. The franc fell, there was a rise in inflation in France, and Mitterrand pulled back from his Keynesian policies. The adoption of Keynesian policies is thus incompatible with opening the economy to free flows of globalised finance; and because finance became powerful and globalised during the period that Keynesian policies were being pursued, these policies were subverted.

That's at the world level. The second basic shift which was at the domestic level in countries like India was the following. Beyond a point big capital found that the domestic economy was too small for its ambitions; it wanted to go global. It wanted to invest in other countries, to expand its reach. Besides, it was not only the big capital, but also a segment of the upper middle-class professionals that wanted to go global.

A number of technical and professional institutions such as IITs and IIMs were established after independence which produced highly skilled personnel. The country itself did not generate enough jobs to absorb them, so they wanted to go out; and some of them did.

When they did go out, they put pressure for the economy to open up so that capital could come into the country and people of their class could have larger job opportunities, even though unrestricted capital inflow would be at the expense of petty production and therefore a lot of poor people would become unemployed. There was thus pressure from big capital as well as from a segment of the upper middle class to open up the economy and go neoliberal. The class alliance which had fought or supported the anti-colonial struggle and which had also sustained the whole Nehruvian phase that followed from the anti-colonial struggle, got ruptured. A segment of that class alliance wanted to go global; and once you go global, democracy gets attenuated.

Democracy in India in other words had rested on the fact that there was a certain class alliance which had fought colonialism, and which could

be kept together only within a democratic framework. When we talk about the basic features of the Constitution—democracy, secularism, federalism and so on—these were ways of keeping the country together, and the class alliance together. The rupturing of this alliance threatens democracy and the basic features of the Constitution. But this alliance gets ruptured because of the inevitable tendencies unleashed by capitalist development. People like Nehru had thought that these tendencies could be controlled, but this is not so. Capitalism has a spontaneity, a dynamic of its own which ruptures the class alliance and subverts democracy.

Question: *After the class rupture in the post-independent era, what factors enabled the tiny section of upper middle class and the domestic capitalistic class to dominate? What prevented the people at the lower rungs from revolting against them?*

Answer: I'm not saying that it is their domination that gave rise to the class rupture. I'm saying that there was a growth in their strength. In other words, I would see it as a tendency of capitalism. The Indian bourgeoisie as it was in 1947 was not the Indian bourgeoisie as it was in 1991. They became much more powerful. And how did they become powerful? I think that has to do with the very dynamics of capitalism. The presumption that you could control big business through licensing was wrong.

I think that is true elsewhere too. Michal Kalecki has an interesting article on intermediate regimes. He thought that in countries of the Third World, newly liberated from colonialism, the middle class and the rich peasantry together would have a dominating position, and that it was a durable situation. Not only however did they not have a dominating position, but whatever position they had got ruptured because the urban middle class opted out of it for reasons I've been talking about.

In fact, look at South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Can you imagine any serious argument that says that India can follow a Hong Kong-style of development? It's ridiculous but symptomatic of the ideological onslaught that was made. This onslaught was led by the World Bank and OECD, that is, by imperialist institutions. But it found an echo within India and within the Global South owing to the changed situation of the urban middle class.

You ask: why didn't the poor resist this? Because after all, they have suffered from it. But I think they did not resist it because nobody knew at that time what it would give rise to. A resistance is building up only now. The whole peasant struggle in India is a reflection of this. Everybody knows that the peasants and workers and petty producers have suffered greatly. Everybody can now see that

income inequalities have increased greatly, but not in 1991. I mean 1991 in India's case, but other dates in other cases.

There is an intense class struggle at the international level. At that time, the attempt was by imperialism to reassert its hegemony with the support of domestic big capital. Take Africa. In country after country, what did the World Bank do? Obviously, these Third World countries had trade deficits. India still has trade deficits. So, you would need to get some support. In India, we used to get support from the Aid India Consortium, in which the World Bank was represented. The World Bank said: since a current account deficit arises because of excessive domestic absorption, such absorption must be controlled. So, it appointed its people in finance ministries all over Africa. The same thing happened in India later, around 1973-74 or 74-75. Elsewhere, it began earlier.

So, you have World Bank nominees in finance ministries everywhere. When they're in the finance ministries, they say the Finance Ministry must keep an eye on the other spending ministries. Therefore, the World Bank acquires a hegemony over the spending policy of the government via the Finance Ministry. Very slowly, very quietly and very subtly, the World Bank takes over the government.

This has happened all over the Global South. When it happens, it creates a lobby within the country for subverting the *dirigiste* regime which succeeds in a situation where you already have enormous international pressure. And of course, the collapse of the Soviet Union played a major role in effecting a transition to neoliberalism because the Soviet Union had acted as a counterweight earlier against such World Bank lobbies.

Question: *There seems to be a retreat from the earlier model of free trade wherein even the leading light of modern capitalism, the USA, is posturing in a way that seems to signal the end of the open world economy as we know it.*

Answer: I would like to mention that the US and all these countries have moved away from free trade, or relatively free trade, but they have not moved away from relatively free capital movements. They have not introduced capital controls. As long as you don't introduce capital controls, your policies remain subject to the whims and caprices of international finance capital. And that way neoliberalism still rules the world, in the sense that international finance capital still determines what happens. The whims and caprices of international finance capital determine what happens to a particular economy. Take the case of Liz Truss. Britain's ex-PM. She proposed to increase the fiscal deficit for making transfers to the rich; and yet finance capital objected to a larger fiscal deficit and Liz Truss had to resign.

It is true that because of the US and other countries moving away from free trade, there has been a spanner in the works of neoliberalism, but neoliberalism is not abandoned. In fact, US protectionism had the immediate effect of strengthening the dollar *vis-à-vis* other currencies. Tomorrow if India introduces protectionism, then you will find it will weaken the rupee. Because finance thinks of the US and India differently. So, in that sense, we have not moved away from neoliberalism. When I talk about moving away from neoliberalism, I mean reacquiring the autonomy of the nation state. That has not happened.

Question: *In terms of policy prescriptions, the World Bank and other institutions are singing the same old tune. Now on the surface of it, it seems that some crack has developed between the position of the leading capitalist countries such as US and World Bank-IMF. Is it really the case or something else explains it?*

Answer: No, you see, World Bank, IMF etc.—none of them really would be able to tell the US what to do. They are dominated by the US. Even if they make some statements, there's nothing they can do as far as the US is concerned. As I said, international finance capital itself believes that the US protecting itself makes it an even more attractive place for finance to come to; already it's quite attractive, but it would become even more so.

But it is not only a question of policy. It is a question of the autonomy of the state vis-à-vis globalised finance. The neoliberal regime, in the sense of a regime that prevents the autonomy of the state *vis-à-vis* globalised finance, is now being additionally protected by a move towards neo-fascism.

So, the whole idea is that your policies remain more or less the same, but those policies are now protected by governments which are neo-fascist, which invoke hatred against some hapless minority, divert attention away from issues of material life, introduce a discordant discourse, and use repression to stifle dissent. The autonomy of the nation-state in the Global South cannot be revived without a class struggle, a class struggle that would be politically against neo-fascism and economically against neo-liberalism.

Question: *In the era of disarticulated production and technological disruption, an ever-increasing number of people work in silos, in isolated frameworks, technological interfaces are separating labourers from labourers and labourers from consumers. In this context, aren't labour movements and trade unionism losing steam in the face of these new forms of challenges?*

Answer: Yes, it's losing steam, but still, the working class exists, and the working class will play a leading role. But that is where I believe the role of the peasantry becomes even more

serious. It's even more serious today than it was earlier for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is hit very hard by neoliberalism. Look at the peasant suicides: suicides on such a large scale have not occurred since independence.

Secondly, I believe within the peasantry there is still a sense of community which has not been entirely destroyed. It is not a sense of community in the sense that Marx had talked about, namely as a class, pure and simple. I know for instance that the *Jats* are different from other groups within the peasantry, but within each such segment there remains a sense of community. Even though each segment is different, they can come together on occasions, which is what enabled them to carry on a year-long struggle against India's neo-fascist government. This is an encouraging situation.

I think the emerging conjuncture has to be understood. US protectionism is inaugurating a new phase of protectionism. Why is this happening? In a situation where governments cannot do Keynesian demand management for reasons we have already discussed, protectionism, which amounts to a *beggar-thy-neighbour* policy, becomes a means of enlarging domestic employment by snatching it from others. US protectionism worsens the crisis in Europe or in the Third World. Therefore, these countries in turn have a choice: either they become protectionist, or they simply adjust to a worse crisis. But if they become protectionist, then the US does not succeed in snatching employment from them. These in short are manoeuvres within a situation of crisis.

These manoeuvres would not overcome the crisis, because of which even segments of the middle class would break away from neoliberalism. In other words, the crisis would have a radicalising effect and hence it will be possible through class struggle to change this conjuncture.

Question: *Elections, especially in democratic setups, are one major way through which periodic attempts are made to harness the class solidarities and achieve some kind of change. Why doesn't the plight of the suffering masses in the crisis set the agenda of the elections in the Third World countries?*

Answer: Elections of course do not necessarily reflect the popular mood. They can be rigged; enormous amounts of money are spent, and so on. That is a hallmark of bourgeois democracy. This democracy does not necessarily reflect the popular will. But it is also true that in some countries—France is one of them—even within the framework of bourgeois democracy, the Left has managed to come up.

The Bolshevik revolution, we must remember, had happened in a period in which there was inter-imperialist rivalry. Now, of course, the imperialist countries are united. Maybe the trade wars between them might give rise to

greater disunity, but not as yet. Look at the two major wars which are going on—Ukraine and Gaza. And in both these, imperialist countries are completely united. So, there is imperialist unity on one hand; but on the other hand, there is also a voice rising against imperialism, a voice which also occasionally comes to the fore through the electoral process. Sri Lanka is an obvious case in our neighbourhood; France was another case, and examples exist in some other countries too.

Of course, if a left-wing government comes to power through the electoral process, it will not have an easy task. On the contrary, there would be coup d'état attempts, there would be murders, there would be "colour revolutions", organised by imperialism. But then a revolution was never easy, not a "dinner party". The point however is that historical possibilities are opening up.

Even the trade war itself is a symptom of the fact that the world is not what it used to be. It's a reflection of the crisis where there is a feeling that something must be done. Even neo-fascism is a reflection of the crisis. The point is that neoliberal capitalism is at a dead-end, which is why all these things are happening.

Everybody is looking for alternatives. The ruling classes are thinking in terms of strengthening their position through neo-fascism, but neo-fascism itself is not enough unless you can raise employment, which is why there is a simultaneous emergence of *beggar-thy-neighbour* policies. Even that however is no good; it doesn't improve anything. And as far as the poor and the potentially revolutionary classes are concerned, the Left has an enormous responsibility to unite them and fight.

Question: *Periodic elections have failed to deliver, or at least there is a sense that they are not functioning the way they were supposed to. How can we present an alternate democratic framework and development path that could address the problems of the present?*

Answer: You see, the problem with bourgeois democracy is that the bourgeoisie subverts democracy. It subverts democracy in peaceful ways; it also subverts democracy in neo-fascist ways. Even neo-fascism today is different from 1930s fascism. Neo-fascism has not given up elections. Noe-fascist formations may rig elections but they fight elections. So, the problem with bourgeois democracy is not with democracy but with the bourgeoisie.

In other words, the preservation and deepening of democracy itself depends on class struggle; we must have class struggle around preventing rigging, and so on. But then you raise the whole question of the agenda.

Take India for example. Almost all political formations, including the fascists, are now talking about transfers to the poor, though the fascists were opposed to it just a few months

ago. But transfers to the poor are an eyewash, because, firstly, they can be withdrawn at any time, as we have seen with the MGNREGS[2]; secondly, such transfers to the poor offend their dignity as citizens. We must on the contrary fight for a set of Constitutionally-guaranteed, fundamental economic rights, which must include the right to employment. Skilling and such like may help employment but do not constitute solutions. Employment must be considered a right, and if you don't get employment, you must still get a wage. We must mobilise people around fighting for a set of rights. We must raise resources, primarily through wealth and inheritance taxation, for implementing these rights and start an alternative trajectory of development.

Inheritance taxation in the form of death duties is generally accepted even in leading capitalist countries. Japan has a 55 percent death duty: when a person dies, 55 percent of his property is transferred to the state. US and UK have 40 percent death duty. In India, however there is none at all. Indeed, all over the Global South, we hardly have any death duty. So, inheritance taxation and wealth taxation are the obvious ways of financing an alternative development trajectory. In fact, the very rise in income and wealth inequality has made it easier to raise resources for an alternative trajectory of development.

Any alternative trajectory of development, where reliance is on the home market and there are capital controls, including controls on financial outflows, would have to depend upon the growth of the agricultural sector, which determines the rate at which the economy can grow. And that is where the participation of the peasantry is very important.

And if we are going to move in the direction of socialism, which we must, because we have to attack all kinds of entrenched interests, including bourgeois interests, then we have to persuade the peasantry to accept voluntarily cooperative forms. Moving to higher forms of property ownership and organisation of production then becomes necessary for achieving faster rates of pro-people development.

Question: *Could you elaborate a bit more on the challenges facing people's resistance and political transformation in the context of late colonialism?*

Answer: Decolonisation occurred in a period of crisis of capitalism. I mean, not crisis in the sense of collapse. It occurred in a period in which capitalism globally was on the retreat. Socialism was on the upswing. The war was

[2] Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) is a constitutional guarantee to give 100 days' work to those who demand.

won by the Soviet Union against fascism. So, the whole balance of world class forces had really shifted.

But subsequently, as I was saying earlier, all over the world there was a regrouping or a refashioning of imperialism, characterised by: the emergence of large concentrations of finance capital, the suppression or muting of inter-imperialist rivalry, the desire of this finance capital to go global, and the emergence of allies for imperialism within the Third World countries themselves in the form of the big bourgeoisie and the comprador classes, and even sections of the urban upper middle class that earlier would have been a prominent part of the anti-colonial struggle. What we have today however is not a recreation of the old imperialism. It does take away the autonomy of the nation-state that had emerged after decolonisation; but it does at the same time entail a shift of a whole range of activities from the Global North to the Global South. It means an enormous enrichment of sections of the Third World population. I mean, who would have thought that there would be so many billionaires from India? But there are.

This entire process has brought the division between the North and the South into the South itself. Put differently, a large part of the South is really a part of the North; and that is a historical shift.

This means of course that the fight against imperialism becomes more difficult, since this fight now is also a fight against your own internal elements aligned with international finance capital. But on the other hand, the crisis also increases the strength of the resistance.

One reason for this is the enormous importance of the peasantry. We must think in terms of the peasantry as a whole, not draw distinctions within the peasantry. We cannot say that only the poor peasantry is a part of the struggle, because if we are fighting imperialism, we cannot afford to do that.

Many people during the anti-farm law agitation used to ask: "Why is the left supporting these people? After all, they have tractors, so they should be the Left's class enemies." That's a completely wrong understanding, derived from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, from a period when imperialism had not made inroads into the economy, and into the agricultural sector, as it has today. At that time, a domestic capitalist agriculture was developing quite independent of imperialism, comprising both peasant capitalism and landlord capitalism. The class struggle against the bourgeois-landlord alliance necessarily had to confront agricultural capitalists as well, and hence a distinction within the peasantry was essential. But the class configuration and hence the nature of class struggle today is entirely different, and the old

agenda has ceased to be relevant.

The question to ask today is not whether the Left should ally itself with people who come to sites of resistance with tractors, but why do people with tractors come there at all?

So, First of all, you will have to have the largest possible internal mobilisation against imperialism and its local allies; and second, the crisis itself is creating a situation which I believe would be favourable for revolution.

Question: *In India, over the years, especially the last decade also, even the government data, despite all its limitations, shows that firstly, more and more people are getting into agriculture, and secondly, at the level of household, the employment scenario is getting more and more diversified. So, in one family, say, more and more people are, apart from working as farmers, also working as wage labourers, and from the same set of households, people are going out to cities and other parts of the country to expend their labour to earn some income. Basically, clearly demarcated categories of people are becoming increasing blurry. Doesn't it make the task of alliance or solidarity for the fight to change challenging?*

Answer: I think that makes issues, such as price issues – MSP for instance– very important. Likewise issues of fundamental economic rights, like universal free education, universal free healthcare and employment come to the fore. The peasantry will benefit from these. We must not think of the peasantry as a bunch of fellows always engaged in agriculture. We should rather think of it as citizens entitled to a certain way of life.

Peasant's children must be entitled to free publicly funded quality education, free publicly funded quality healthcare, and so on, because the peasant's economy includes all this too. A peasant is not only a person who grows cotton, or rice, or wheat; a peasant is a citizen too.

When I worked at the Kerala State Planning Board, we brought in a Debt Relief Bill because of peasant suicides. Many people raised the question, "The debt was often incurred by the peasant because his father was ill. So how can you call it an agricultural debt? And why should we give relief to the peasant if his debt is incurred for non-agricultural purposes?"

But they miss the point that the peasant's economy is an integrated one. So, including the peasantry in the struggle does not mean only taking up demands like MSP and so on; there has to be a much wider range of issues.

Question: *You mean more issue-based demands rather than something which is class-based?*

Answer: A peasant's child should not be confined to agriculture. He must have opportunities like others. Hence if you want people to remain in agriculture, it must be made attractive. Living in the village should be

made attractive: health facilities and education facilities should be there in the villages. Why should a person live in a village if he suffers deprivation by doing so? There must be an agenda so that engaging in any form of petty production, and trade becomes an attractive proposition. For that there must be a minimum living standard for everybody, including a minimum set of rights.

Question: *But the present discourse seems to be only promotion of business and entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship and digital ventures are being advertised as solution of problems of lack of employment and low income.*

Answer: In today's newspaper the Prime Minister of India has asked: "Who says technology creates unemployment? Technology doesn't take away jobs." This is completely wrong.

An enormous technological change was brought about with the industrial revolution. The reason you do not have significant unemployment in Europe is: first, quite a lot of the unemployment caused by that technological change was created in the Global South through deindustrialisation; and, second, because of enormous migration that took place from Europe to the "new world". Fifty million people from Europe migrated to the new world during the "long nineteenth century". As a result, you had low levels of unemployment in Europe. Because of this a powerful trade union movement developed there which ensured that whenever technological progress took place, wages rose, leading to better living standards for workers.

The unemployment created by the industrial revolution in Europe is visible here. Where did the massive labour reserves of the Global South come from? They are part of the deindustrialisation that took place in colonial times.

Now, one can't export these workers to some other "new world". And one would not also like to do so. After all, when European migrants went to the "new world" they got rid of the Amerindians, and took over their land. It was settler colonialism which we cannot promote today. Only Israel is doing so and we rightly condemn it.

We must have a development path where we control the rate of technological change. We also must have an economic strategy where unemployment and employment are not two separate categories. Everybody for instance must be employed and the benefits of technological change must entail reduced working hours without reducing the wage-rate per person employed. This is not possible under capitalism which constitutes a powerful argument for going beyond it.

Question: *Technology is seen as inherently benevolent. Technology is not talked about in the context of ownership and its deployment for the purpose of fit.*

Answer: No, it's complete nonsense. I'll give you a very simple example. Suppose we have a technology which implies that one person now does the work that two were doing earlier. Half the workforce will be thrown out of employment; and because this would add to labour reserves, the wages of the other half will not increase. Therefore, the workers who remain employed experience no benefit; and half the earlier workers become unemployed. You have a reduction in the average living standard of the labour force. And that is capitalism.

But if you imagine a socialist economy where new technology enables one person today to do the work of two persons earlier, then you can keep employment and the wage rate the same as before and just reduce the working hours by half. The effect of technology in short depends on the social context.

Question: *There is a trend of conflating the business/profit interests and nationalistic sentiments. For example, advocating for long work hours for the benefit of the nation. How is it even working?*

Answer: This conjuring of the image of a nation which is different from the people is a fascist trait. The notion that the people only make sacrifices for the nation is derived from a bourgeois concept of nationalism which developed in Europe, and reached its culmination under fascism, where the nation got identified with the leader. Hitler was the nation; and he spoke for an abstract entity called the people. Not the real people, but an abstract entity.

Question: *So, is it exactly similar to the pre-Second World War period?*

Answer: It's very similar. What is remarkable is how the same kinds of rhetoric reappear 50, 70 years later.

Liberal democracy and the challenge of development and self-determination in late neocolonialism

Kofi Takyi Asante[1]

Abstract

The reforms prescribed by the liberal orthodoxy as the panacea for political and economic problems of the Global South have failed to prevent the recurrence of crises after over three decades. This paper challenges the liberal orthodoxy as a whitewashed version of the history of European development that overlooks centuries of exploitation, plunder, and violence. Drawing on experiences from Ghana and other developing countries, I show that the multiparty system, the ideal political manifestation of liberal democracy, is antithetical to the pursuit of development due to its preoccupation with elections. The pressure of electoral competition shortens the time horizons of political leaders and undermines long-term development planning. Moreover, liberal democracy is an illusion in a geopolitical reality where western-controlled multilateral institutions impose policies and conditionalities on the Global South, often against the expressed democratic preferences of national populations. The current geopolitical shifts demand a critical re-engagement with the concept and practice of democracy in ways capable of fulfilling the developmental aspirations of the Global South and transcending the thin definitions espoused by the multilateral institutions of the 'international development industry'.

Introduction

For over three decades, African states have been cajoled, convinced, or coerced into adopting multiparty democracy as a panacea for the maelstrom of political and economic crises that engulfed the continent in the 1970s and early 1980s. This was a core part of the consolidation of the liberal international order – or what is called the 'rules-based international order' in Western-dominated multilateral circles – at the end of the Cold War. This period of 'late neocolonialism' has been characterised by the intensification of resource extraction from the Global South by monopoly capital, the 'degeneration of

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nationalism' under the hegemony of neoliberalism, and the 'fraying of the national sovereignty regime' (Yeros & Jha, 2020, p. 87). It has become clear, after decades of escalation of endless wars and interventionism, internal contradictions in the imperial centres in the West, and backlash from dominated countries, that 'the liberal international order is in deep trouble… and little can be done to repair and rescue it' (Mearsheimer, 2019, p. 7). What many international relations scholars have called 'hyper-globalisation' is in fact an attempt to fix this permanent crisis of late neocolonialism, which 'the neoliberal assault of the last half-century has not resolved' (Yeros & Jha, 2020, p. 84).

As the liberal order continues its inevitable downward slide, the hallowed institutions of the West have been recruited to shore up its legitimacy. In 2024, Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel – otherwise known as the Nobel prize in economics – was awarded to Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (AJR for short) for a self-serving theory about the relationship between 'inclusive' institutions and economic development. They describe the 'reversal of fortunes' among European colonies whereby richer pre-colonial societies and civilisations have now ended up poorer than the settler colonise that they called 'Neo-Europes.'

AJR have, of course, been heavily criticised for, among other things, over-simplifying causation, misinterpreting the historical literature, and glossing over the violent history of colonial plunder and enslavement that propelled Europe's rise to world dominance (Austin, 2008; Chandrasekhar, 2024; Greeley, 2024; Sundaram, 2024). For instance, the so-called inclusive institutions of the United States existed in parallel with slavery and the denial of basic humanity to Blacks and other minorities (Greeley, 2024). Tellingly, in their 'Reversal of Fortunes' article, AJR acknowledge in a footnote that their argument is about 'relative incomes across different areas, and does not imply that the initial inhabitants of, for example, New Zealand or North America themselves became relatively rich. In fact, much of the native population of these areas did not survive European colonialism' (Acemoglu et al., 2002, p. 1232).

The emphasis on 'inclusive institutions', thus, indicates an attempt to exonerate the West of this history of violence while blaming internal failures for the challenges of the Global South. Their theory does not even pretend to account for the systemic inequalities that keep the Global South in a subordinate status in the international economic and financial system (Alami et al., 2023). Indeed, AJR claims that the predicament of developing countries should be attributed 'not [to] the "plunder" by Europeans but to the failure of these countries

to overhaul the extractive institutions they inherited at independence' (Acemoglu et al., 2002, p. 1264). This narrative, aptly ridiculed by Greeley (2024) as 'a bedtime story for capitalists', echoes the classical liberal justification of primitive accumulation, which Marx (1887, Vol.1, Part VIII) forcefully critiqued in Capital:

In times long gone by there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent, and, above all, frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living…. Such insipid childishness is every day preached to us in the defence of property.

In this paper, I challenge the assumed correlation between liberal democracy and development by arguing that 'liberal democracy' is neither liberal nor democratic. Under capitalism, only a thin form of democracy is permitted – one in which freedoms are guaranteed only insofar as they do not interfere with capital accumulation or the interest of the ruling elite. I argue that liberal democracy is antithetical to the pursuit of long-term development in the Global South because its central mechanism, multiparty politics, is preoccupied with electoral competition, shortens the time-horizon of political leaders, and undermines development planning. These challenges have intensified amidst escalating geopolitical tensions as the liberal international order comes under increasing strain from the contradictions of late neocolonialism.

Democracy: concept and pretext

Democracy is frequently invoked but notoriously difficult to define, making it a politically charged concept. Abraham Lincoln's definition – government of the people, for the people, by the people – is, perhaps, the most widely cited. However, beyond its vague allusion to 'people's government', it offers little clarity. Recent definitional attempts have sought to capture its polysemic nature. Przeworski (2024, p. 5) distinguishes between 'democracy as a method for processing whatever conflicts may arise in a particular society and democracy as an embodiment of values, ideals, or interests' that are considered desirable in a political community. The former is a thin while the latter is a thick conception, but they are often used interchangeably without much clarification.

Debates over the meaning and purpose of democracy have a long history going back over a century in radical thought. In a response to Kautsky who had praised capitalist or bourgeois democracy for being progressive and protecting minorities, Lenin has countered that bourgeois democracy was nothing more than 'liberal twaddle intended to fool the workers' (Lenin, 2002). He further argued that:

Bourgeois democracy, although a great historical advance in comparison with

medievalism, always remains, and under capitalism, is bound to remain, restricted, truncated, false and hypocritical, a paradise for the rich and a snare and deception for the exploited, for the poor (Lenin, 2002)

This assessment of bourgeois democracy is consistent with the theory of the state in socialist thought. Marx famously described the state as 'the executive committee' for managing the affairs of the bourgeoisie, while Engels describes it as 'nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another' (cited in Lenin, 2002). Mikhail Bakunin, for his part, was deeply hostile to the centralised state. He cautioned that, due to its monopoly over the instruments of violence, democracies would ultimately amount to nothing more than systems in which the people are beaten with 'the People's Stick' (Bakunin, 1873).

Indeed, violent repression of minorities and other groups that threaten capitalist interests is a constant thread in the history of the countries that hold themselves up as champions of 'the free world'. This includes the violent repression of trade unionists, the illegal surveillance and assassination of leaders of social movements, the mass incarceration of racial minorities, and persecution of whistleblowers under the pretext of national security. It is for this reason that Samir Amin (2014) rejects the static notion of 'democracy' in favour of 'democratisation', which he describes as 'an unending and unbounded process, the result of popular struggles and popular inventiveness… [that] mobilizes those inventive powers in the perspective of building a more advanced stage of human civilization.'

Politicising and historicising development

After over three decades of liberal democracy in the Global South, the record is one of stagnation and decline. Ghana's experience is illustrative in this regard, as it has been one of the most diligent pupils of the 'international development industry' – an industry akin to the military-industrial complex in that it comprises a loose coalition of actors and institutions with professional and financial interests in the perpetuation of the impoverishment of the Global South. Given Ghana's record as a faithful adherent of market reforms and an exemplar of multiparty politics, the country should be experiencing rapid development as predicted by neo-classical development theorists. Instead, it is grappling with stalled economic transformation, recurrent debt crises, crumbling infrastructure, and growing youth frustration that has in recent times found expression in calls to overturn the Constitution.

Even the romantic narratives about the country's prospects have shifted in recent times. While the first decade of the twenty-first century saw numerous scholarly and popular works celebrating Ghana's economic and

political achievements (Hughes, 2005), a more critical literature has now emerged seeking to explain the persistence of fundamental economic and political problems in spite of the country's much-heralded reforms (Opoku, 2010; Resnick, 2019). Using the political settlements approach, this literature explains how Ghana's Fourth Republic has given rise to 'competitive clientelism', characterised by the coexistence of political corruption and multiparty politics. This reality contradicts theoretical assumptions that multiparty elections would trigger demands for accountability and pressure political leaders to embrace transparency and eschew clientelistic politics (Appiah & Abdulai, 2017; Asante, 2023).

However, to avoid the analytical pitfalls of neopatrimonial discourse on African development, it is necessary to politicise and historicise such analyses. Such analyses must begin with the heavy burden of history, the erosion of national sovereignty, and the continuing reality of imperial extraction. The 'good governance' school, by ignoring this important historical context and fixating on supposed African lack of capacity to build the 'inclusive' institutions that had presumably fuelled the rise of the West, a la AJR, present a whitewashed account of European development and reinforce what Jemima Pierre (2020; see also Kuditchar, 2022; Olukoshi, 1998) call the 'racial vernacular of development' that portrays the former colonies as inherently incapable of administering a modern state.

The entire strategy of the international development industry is to de-politicise the struggle for economic and social development. It does this by smearing the state as the key source of the problem, and thus, hyper-fixating on micro-interventions whose academic expression is the randomised control trials (RCT) movement. These neoliberal solutions are based on valorisation of robust individualism (Stein et al., 2021) and 'resilience' as solution to problems requiring political action (Amo-Agyemang, 2021b, 2021a). The RCT movement – which has also received the imprimatur of the Nobel prize – is based on a simplistic view of development challenges as arising from isolated problems that can be quickly resolved by low-cost interventions: more micro-finance (using digital channels), more information (using digital channels), and more day-old chicks, without having to address structural issues pertaining to power relations between social classes in a country, or the manner of a country's integration into the global economy.

Multiparty elections and the pursuit of development

Multiparty politics under the liberal democratic framework often function to legitimise, rather

than challenge, unequal and oppressive power structures, as these structures are inherently aligned with the interest of capitalist accumulation. Rather than fostering transformational change, liberal elections tend to de-mobilise social movements through processes of cooptation or infiltration (Amin, 2014). In their place, non-governmental and civil society organisations (NGOs and CSOs) emerge to further legitimise the status quo.

This dynamic is often misunderstood, with scholars often attributing the problems of multiparty politics to internal shortcomings of African countries rather than to the system itself. For instance, Caesar Atuire (2020, p. 533) claims that 'Unlike the European tradition in which political parties were traditionally divided along ideological lines, in Africa… partisan divisions often become an obstacle to internal national cohesion'. This flawed assumption of African natural proclivity towards 'tribalism' overlooks evidence of the strength and resilience of national attachment and the overlapping nature of social belonging (Asante, 2020b, 2020a).

The problem of social polarisation and fragmentation must be stated in another form. Multiparty politics, by definition, implies conflicting visions of development. However, under liberal democracy, decisions on the consequential economic policy issues are carved out and delegated to 'policy experts', effectively removing them from democratic debate and scrutiny. With no avenue for citizens to influence economic policy, social issues take centre-stage, with heated debates often encouraged by leading political parties who are essentially aligned on economic policy. In the West, this dynamic has led to increasingly charged public debates on subjects like abortion, immigration, and sexuality, and the visceral hatred felt towards partisans on opposite ends of this debate in the US has recently been described as 'sectarian' (Finkel et al., 2020).

An often-overlooked problem with multiparty politics is its tendency to undermine long-term development planning. Ghana's inability to translate strong economic growth into structural transformation has been attributed to its competitive-clientelist political settlement (Oduro et al., 2014; Whitfield, 2011). To improve their electoral fortunes, governments prioritise policies with highly visible and short-term payoffs (Asante, 2023; Asante & Mullard, 2021). On the other hand, structural changes and policy stances necessary to break the cycle of underdevelopment are avoided. The pressures created by this system is fundamentally at odds with any long-term transformative development strategy requiring that governments consistently pursue a carefully crafted development plan, and to harness – rather than passively submitting to –

the forces of the market.

Liberal democracy and self-determination in the Global South

Beyond internal multiparty dynamics, foreign interference further undermines the democratic agency of citizens who have practically no influence on the policies of their own governments. Thandika Mkandawire (2010, p. 1161) writes that the evangelistic fervour with which donors impose policies on countries 'forecloses disputes, disagreement, and deliberation' in ways that 'constrain democratic institutions in the receiving country'. These unequal relationships accord donors undue influence in national affairs on the policies that have consequential impact on the long-term development prospects of the countries involved. By virtue of being trapped in this unequal relationships, Mkandawire (2010; 1999) describes multiparty politics in Africa as producing 'choiceless democracies'.

Countries that insist on asserting their sovereignty become targets for destabilisation and regime change by the Western powers. In Africa, this is most blatant in the former French colonies, where France, since independence, has continued to dictate policies through its control of the currencies of francophone West and Central Africa and its military bases. Civilians have often come under attack from French forces stationed in these countries, and France has on many occasions used its military presence to intervene in the internal affairs of supposedly independent Francophone countries, to the extent of violently deposing heads of states (Pigeaud & Sylla, 2024). Outside Francophone Africa, Western interference takes a more covert form. In 2009/2010, the US government sanctioned Ghanaian officials who intervened to stop a deal in which Kosmos would have offloaded 25 percent of its shares in a Ghanaian oilfield to Exxon-Mobil without giving the Ghana National Petroleum Corporation (GNPC) the first right of refusal as required by law (Ghana Web, 2010; Neat FM, 2022).

These patterns of interference are not unique to Africa. A recent example of Western interference to depose an inconvenient political leader occurred in Pakistan, where the US pressured the military to remove Imran Khan after the prime minister had refused to heed Western calls to back Ukraine in its war with Russia. An investigative piece by The Intercept reveals that a US diplomat had told his Pakistani counterparts that Western officials were displeased with Pakistan for 'taking such an aggressively neutral position (on Ukraine),' but that 'all will be forgiven in Washington' if Khan was removed in a no-confidence vote' (Grim & Hussain, 2023).

There are many other examples of such Western intrigues against elected governments all over the world who refuse to follow imperial

dictates. In a shockingly candid scene in the documentary The War on Democracy, a former Latin America chief of the CIA declared that 'we'll intervene whenever we decide it's in our national security interest to intervene, and if you don't like it, lump it! Get used to it world. We're not going to put up with nonsense.' In a similar vein, the head of the US Africa Command (or AFRICOM) told a congressional hearing in 2024 that the US was maintaining military bases in Africa in order to fend off geopolitical adversaries of the West and to secure access to mining concessions (Centcom, 2024).

Against this background of blatant violations of sovereignty of nations and the will of their people, in what sense can one meaningfully talk about democracy in the Global South? What is clear is that, even the most minimal definition of democracy – the sanctity of elected governments – is routinely disregarded by the very champions of the rules-based international order. In late neocolonialism, democracy is not a virtue that is embraced by the imperial West but a powerful propaganda tool that is wielded to justify attacks on the 'official adversaries' of the West.

Conclusion

The current historical moment demands a critical re-engagement with democracy, both as concept and as practice. This process of re-imagining must involve a rejection of the narrow conception of democracy promoted by the international development industry – a model that prioritises form over substance and serves the interests of external forces. Instead, it must involve the elaboration of a people-centred democracy that would be capable of fulfilling the developmental aspirations of the Global South. It would also require two-directional development strategy: internally, it would be focused on reclaiming sovereignty and asserting national policy autonomy; and externally, it would emphasise the strengthening of international solidarity in the spirit of Bandung.

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Mozambique in the sights of imperialism

Paris Yeros[1]

The October 2024 elections in Mozambique followed the well-known destabilization script against a party with an anti-imperialist history in power. The script begins with a climate of denunciation of fraud previously cultivated by an "opposition" aligned with imperialism and progresses through an outbreak of violence and murders of unknown authorship across the electoral period, the counting of votes officially and by the opposition on its own account, the rejection by the opposition of the official result, the rejection of the electoral commission and the constitutional court, the call for a post-election protest, the spontaneous taking to the streets of a lumpenised working class, leading to the destruction of properties and public buildings, ending with police repression and more deaths. In the case of Mozambique, it is estimated that around 250 people died in this electoral episode.

FRELIMO, the national liberation party in power since 1975, is no stranger to destabilisation. Its struggle against Portuguese colonialism, which ran parallel to the liberation struggles in Southern Africa against colonialism – in Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) and South Africa – was followed by a devastating civil war against RENAMO, a guerrilla group organised and supported by the segregationist regimes of Rhodesia and South Africa precisely to prevent FRELIMO from consolidating sovereignty in its hands.

The experience of destabilization against liberation movements is etched in the memory of the peoples of the region. The same dynamic convulsed Angola for more than two decades after independence, by means of internal war between the MPLA, the liberation party that took power in 1975, and UNITA, a party transformed into a proxy force in the service of apartheid South Africa and NATO. The same would have happened in Zimbabwe, if ZANU, newly in power in 1980, had not nipped in the bud an armed rebellion in 1983 that threatened its own sovereignty, which nonetheless did not spare the country of a

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traumatic experience right at the beginning of the transition. And it was the same colonial intransigence that plunged South Africa, the epicenter of colonial power in the region, into ferocious violence against the liberation movement led by the ANC, until the final agreement of 1993 and the first elections the following year.

Mozambique, together with the region, travelled a long and arduous path to independence, the scars of which remain open. It is worth noting that the peace agreement in Zimbabwe was signed in 1987 and continues to this day, but the country is under sanctions and constant destabilization due to its land reform and its open confrontation with imperialism. In Mozambique, an agreement signed in 1992 did not maintain the firm adherence of RENAMO, relapsing into bouts of violence until the most recent agreement in 2019. Angola had to wait until 2002 for a peace agreement. Namibia, occupied by apartheid South Africa, gained independence belatedly in 1990, under the leadership of SWAPO, in the final stretch of transition negotiations in South Africa itself. All of these parties travelled this path together and remain in power to this day, and all face interference from imperialism, especially during election times. After all, the exercise of universal suffrage, conquered by the liberation movements themselves against imperialism and colonialism, has today become a weapon in the arsenal of imperialism.

It does not matter that all the national liberation parties in the region fell into the clutches of neoliberalism. In fact, the region's independence itself was conditioned on the acceptance of economic opening, facilitated at that time by the fall of the Soviet Union. The "pact" of neo-colonial transition was a "pact" of neoliberal transition in a phase of general war fatigue and changes in the relation of forces on a global scale. Of course, much can be said about the internal constitution and ideological commitments of the liberation movements, whose official grammar in all these cases was Marxism-Leninism. Embourgeoisement eventually found its way. However, such an analysis cannot ignore imperialism, which mobilized its forces installed in the region to wage a general war lasting thirty years, followed by civil wars. Its objective remains the same today: to remove, one by one, the liberation parties that still have an organic relationship with the liberation struggles and, above all, to dismantle the mutual defence pact established in 2003, which seeks to shield the region (the Southern African Development Community, SADC) from military interference. This is the concrete reality of Southern Africa in the twenty-first

century.

The case of Mozambique has an aggravating factor. Its neocolonial transition, even though it sustained high rates of economic growth on the back of Western investments in mineral and energy resources, did not guarantee national integration, nor even territorial integrity. The recurring regression into internal armed conflict in the central and northern provinces kept alive the threat of a semi-colonial imbroglio, with external intervention in part of the national territory. As if the armed actions of RENAMO elements until 2019 were not enough, another conflict also broke out in the north, in 2017, in the province of Cabo Delgado, now led by Islamic fundamentalist forces inspired by Salafi jihadism. In 2019, they officially allied themselves to ISIS. It is estimated that one million people, almost half of the province's population, had to abandon their homes and dislocate internally and to neighbouring countries. The loss of control over part of the province to salafi-jihadist forces, especially the part linked to the weighty investments of France and the United States in natural gas exploration, exceeded the defence capacities of the Mozambican army. The government belatedly and reluctantly sought military aid from SADC, but also from Rwanda, the former being self-financed and with limited resources, the latter being financed by the European Union.

Mozambique thus succumbed to the general framework of imperialist military interference whose main focus in the region to date has been the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The contradictions continue to widen. It is worth remembering that the DRC was the immediate cause of the construction of a regional mutual defence pact after the attempted seizure of power in Kinshasa by Rwanda and Uganda, in the second civil war in the DRC that began in 1997, with the military, financial and logistical support of the United States. The invasion coming from the eastern border, and aiming to cross the entire country to the Atlantic coast, defined what was at stake in Southern Africa after its liberation: the reestablishment of a client state in the DRC, precisely there where one of the main pillars of the geostrategy of the United States and its European partners had been built during the Cold War. The invasion was seen as an existential threat to the region and was responded to by an ad hoc intervention by the armed forces of Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe to block the advance of US-sponsored troops.

It is worth adding to this regional dynamic that, although Angola had more immediate strategic

interests in the DRC conflict, due to the shared border and the history of cross-border action by armed groups, the ideological driving force at that time for building unity for regional defence was the government of Zimbabwe. The intervention in the Congo came in the wake of Zimbabwe's abandonment of its IMF agreements and became a key element of the re-radicalization of its liberation movement, which culminated in 2000 in the largest agrarian reform in the world in decades, with the expropriation of more than 80% of the agricultural lands still in the hands of Rhodesian settlers. Although the region maintained a higher level of sovereignty in strategic matters, the Zimbabwean rebellion still had further impact on the region's neoliberal and neocolonial pact. The introduction of punitive economic and military sanctions against this country has traversed this entire period and made it difficult for Zimbabwe to maintain a more active role in military matters, including in Mozambique. It was reported in the press that the Mozambican government had expressed a preference for a bilateral agreement with the Zimbabwean government to combat the insurgency in Cabo Delgado. However, whether due to the wear and tear of twenty years of sanctions or the commitment to collective solutions, it was SADC that took the lead, alongside Rwanda, which in turn presents a new complication given its direct involvement in the DRC to date.

One final observation is necessary to understand the challenge posed to Mozambique, as to so many other countries. The massive and bold outpouring of youth onto the streets is an omnipresent, permanent, and uncontrollable reality. In relation to Mozambique specifically, the post-electoral mobilization has been interpreted in at least two ways, both of which are insufficient. One laments the "impatience" of youth with the processes of economic and political development. The other celebrates the "protagonism" of youth in the "class struggle". What has transpired, strictly speaking, is neither impatience nor class struggle. The fact is that contemporary imperialism is marked by the enormous building up of labor reserves that it currently concentrates in the countries of the South. One of its main characteristics is constant insurrectional pressure, which, unlike in previous eras, lacks today the political forces capable of directing it. The labor reserves in Africa also concentrate the bulk of the youth, which already constitutes two-thirds of the continent's population. Thus, it is not just impatience, if by this is meant impatience with the current economic model. Nor is it class struggle: not everything that involves the working people is class struggle, to say the

obvious. The constant insurrections in Mozambique, including those led by RENAMO and the Salafists in Cabo Delgado, and even the current ones in urban areas under the leadership of a pastor-politician who, overnight, became the leader of a rebellion, are the raw material of imperialism. The challenge is to reverse the situation by changing economic course, which, despite everything that has gone on, only the liberation parties and their ideological heirs can still achieve.

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Democracy and the Organisation of the Working People in Late Neocolonialism: A critique of Tunisian democracy

Haithem Gasmi[1]

Introduction

The modern political reforms in Western and Northern Europe, which accompanied the rise of the bourgeois class and the development of the capitalist mode of production, represented a step forward, towards more inclusive participation in politics. Democracy – the political framework built on the premise of popular self-governance – was fundamentally based on the paradigm that *rational individuals* could *freely choose* their representatives. The ideological foundation that underpinned this process was liberalism – a product of bourgeois political and intellectual struggles against absolute monarchy and feudal landlords. Nevertheless, classical liberal thought succumbed to the constraints of maintaining bourgeois class hegemony and the continuous extraction of surplus, by denying the democratic rights of slaves, colonised peoples, and women, while still also justifying oppression against the working people (Losurdo, 2014).

In late neocolonialism, ideologically dominated by neoliberal propaganda, the mass representation of the labouring classes has been severely undermined (Patnaik, 2022). Reduced to mere parliamentarism and elections, the liberal democracies of the 21st century are taking on the image of the capitalist market: the appearance of a just and fair competition between free and rational agents, which conceals unequal opportunities and justifies oppressive measures. Hence, electoral campaigns and programmes have become commodified and spectacularised through marketing techniques, to the largest number of buyers/voters. Despite the apparent benefits for the *consumers*, the essence of ballot democracy seems to serve the interests of the *sellers*, as representative democracy is continuously creating a *professional* class of politicians.

The fall of the Soviet Union was followed by a series of political regime changes that opted for liberal democratic transitions, in line with Fukuyama's model of the 'end of history' and

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the triumph of Western liberal democracy as the apex model of human governance (Fukuyama, 2012 [1992]). The so-called colour revolutions appear to share common features and values aligned with this model. Even if not directly involved in igniting the uprisings, the US administration opportunistically intervened, through its international foundations and institutes, attempting to dictate the contours of political change and prevent the development of threatening anti-US sentiments and political projects among the tumultuous masses (Golinger, 2010).

In 2010, popular uprisings erupted in Tunisia in response to the protest act of self-immolation committed by Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor of vegetables and fruits, who had been assaulted by a government agent (Fautras, 2015). The protests lasted for less than a month and resulted in the overthrow of the president of the republic, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, on January 14, 2011. Enter the 'Arab Spring'; the popular uprisings that culminated as an outcry against neoliberal policies that had deeply affected the region's labouring classes (Ayeb & Bush, 2019; Kadri, 2014, 2016).

The decade following the 2010-2011 revolts in Tunisia was characterised by electoral and parliamentary multi-party democracy, based on the principles of democratic transition, good governance, transparency, and the establishment of democratic institutions. Nevertheless, social unrest did not cease, and participation in elections gradually declined. Additionally, disdain for political organisation in parties proliferated, and the relationship between the labouring masses and the syndicalist bodies worsened.

This article discusses the post-2011 political development in Tunisia arguing that democracy without the active participation of the organised working class is doomed by political crises.

The decade of liberal democracy

> The specialisation and the centralisation of the capitalist state, its hierarchical-bureaucratic functioning and its elective institutions imply the atomisation and the parcelling out of the political body in what we designate as "individuals", i.e. legal-political persons and subjects of freedom (Poulantzas, 2024 [1978], 106, own translation).

The spark of the uprisings of 2010-2011 was ignited in the most disadvantaged regions of Tunisia (Ayeb, 2018). The triggering event took place in one of the most agrarian regions of Tunisia: Sidi Bouzid. Mohamed Bouazizi was a

young street vendor of vegetables and fruits who had a vending spot in the centre of the city. He turned to vending after losing his family's agricultural land due to debt pressures (Fautras, 2021). Bouazizi conflicted with the municipal authorities that denied his spot in the marketplace. After one sharp quarrel, he set himself on fire, eventually losing his life. Later on, the social unrest spread into semi-rural regions until it reached the peri-urban slums of big cities. The major demands of the uprising revolved around employment and development. These demands reflected the deepening crisis that Tunisia faced during the 2000s, which culminated in the severely-repressed protests for employment in the phosphate sector in 2008 (Gobe, 2011; Mullin, 2018), coupled with the general sentiments of the crisis due to the exponential rise in food prices due to the global financial crash (Akari & Jouili, 2010). As argued by many (Ayeb, 2018; Elloumi, 2013; Gana, 2012), the explosive social upheaval of 2010 in Tunisia was a symptom of an unresolved agrarian question (Ajl, 2018).

The regional chapters of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) reframed the demands into more political formulations, expanding from socioeconomic and political institutional reforms to the toppling of the corrupt and nepotistic Ben Ali regime (Arfaoui, 2020). In fact, the labour union was a refuge for clandestine and underground political parties fleeing the oppression of Tunisia's one-party rule (Chedli, 2023). Therefore, the UGTT was, often, both more than a labour union and yet less than a political party.

During the decade following the 2011 political change, six elections were organised: the first in 2011 electing the representatives who would draft the constitution of the new republic, two legislative and two presidential elections in 2014 and 2019, and one municipal election in 2018. Although the turnout for the presidential elections remained stable at around 3 million voters on both occasions, the turnout for the legislative elections decreased from 4.3 million in 2011 to 3.5 million in 2014, eventually reaching 2.9 million in 2019 (ISIE, different years). These numbers reveal, at first glance, the entrenched ideological dominance of the presidential system, on which the postcolonial Tunisian state was built, and which the new semi-parliamentary system seems to struggle to replace. Nevertheless, on a deeper level of analysis, other factors may help explain this phenomenon.

For instance, the 2011 constituent elections featured 97 electoral lists, either singular or in coalitions, presented by 115 parties, for 217 seats. These seats were distributed among 12

parties, coalitions, and independent lists, spanning an ideological range from communism to economic liberalism, Islamism to secularism, and conservatism to progressivism. One might argue that this is the logical outcome of decades of one-party rule, and that the constitution must represent all the political views of citizens, as expressed by their elected representatives. Still, in 2014 and 2019, 23 and 31 lists, respectively, contested the 217 seats in parliament (TAP, 2019; Webmanagercenter, 2014). Furthermore, the alliances formed after the elections between parties that were ideologically and programmatically different, or even conflicting, sowed mistrust among voters who felt 'betrayed' (Dahmani, 2017). Consequently, the measures taken by the president of the republic in July 2021, namely the dissolution of the 2019 parliament and the political and judicial pressure on several political party leaders, were met with popular approval (MosaiqueFM, 2021).

In parallel, social unease continued to highlight the structural issues that the democratic transition process seemed unable to address. A common thread in the nature of the demands and causes advocated during the protests in the decade following 2011 demonstrates a radicalisation of the class struggle within Tunisian society. Initially, the struggle for civil rights and institutional reforms dominated the political demands. Primarily, the struggle against police oppression was expressed through political campaigns calling for accountability for the agents involved in the killing and wounding of protesters during 2010-2011, reparations for the families of the victims, and the release of those imprisoned on charges related to participation in the revolts (Bribri, 2014; Smith, 2012). Then, after the end of the transitional phase and the implementation of the new 2014 regime, political campaigns opposed attempts to grant amnesty to businesspeople accused of corruption to their ties with the *ancien régime* (Salman & Chomiak, 2016). Later on, social mobilisation addressed the question of natural resource governance, calling for regional development and employment in local facilities (Ajl, 2019; Feltrin, 2018). Finally, in 2021, small-scale farmers revolted in several regions of Tunisia against private monopolies of agricultural inputs and the retreat of the state from its regulatory responsibilities (Gasmi & Dovdar, 2021).

Despite the participation and support of the labour union and several leftist parties in these mobilisations, the organisational forms were either protest campaigns or within NGOs, reflecting a new political 'culture' that moves away from classical partisan organisation

(Desrues & Gobe, 2024). Whereas, in rural agrarian areas, small-scale farmers lost faith in agricultural unions and began to organise in local groups, considering that the unions no longer represent their interests, but rather those of big landowners and agricultural investors (Mornagui & Delpuech, 2021).

The democratisation of Tunisian politics after the implementation of a parliamentary system based on the freedom of political organisation has yielded counterintuitive results. Engagement in so-called classical political organisations—parties and unions—has gradually and noticeably, decreased during the decade following the 2011 political change. In parallel, recourse to protest campaigns and NGOs has increased during this period. In fact, the political change that occurred in 2021, often considered a 'populist' shift (Redissi et.al, 2020), was an expression of the crisis within the Tunisian parliamentary regime (Gobe, 2022). It seems that the failure to address systemic inequalities, combined with the mystified hyper-institutionalisation of social issues and the placebo effect of political representation through recurrent electoral cycles—which bury class struggle under layers of superficial partisan conflicts—are some of the contradictions of liberal democracy that led to the narrowing of political organisation in Tunisia.

In this article, the focus is on the organisation of the Tunisian productive classes in labour and agricultural unions. The issue of organisation within political parties that advocate for labour rights warrants a separate article. The next section, therefore, discusses the crisis of Tunisian syndicalism by examining the historical development of capitalism in a postcolonial periphery.

Tunisian syndicalism

The Tunisian national liberation movement was politically led by the Neo Destour party and the Tunisian General Labour Union, UGTT. Established in 1946, the spread of the UGTT's mobilisation among Tunisian workers was the outcome of the profound historical shifts of the post-war era. Before the foundation of the UGTT, the existing labour union in colonised Tunisia was a chapter of the French CGT, which was criticised by the 'autonomists' for being discriminatory towards Tunisian workers, in addition to its negative stance on the liberation struggle (Ben Hamida, 2000). Second, the international context at the end of World War II, the establishment of the United Nations, the proliferation of national liberation movements across the Third World, and the actual independence of many nations, solidified the Tunisian struggle both on the diplomatic level and in the arenas of armed

resistance. The independence of neighbouring Libya and the established connections between the two peoples' armed resistances further advanced the struggle in Tunisia (Hammas, 2008).

Eventually, the UGTT became the *de facto* leader of the national liberation movement in 1952, the year in which the leader of the Neo Destour was exiled and the armed struggle against French colonial rule was officially declared. The symbiosis between the Neo Destour and the UGTT was based on the party's need for popular support among the labouring classes and the union's necessity for political backing and protection (Yousfi, 2015). The strong relationship between the party and the union continued with the establishment of the ruling coalition of the postcolonial state after Tunisia gained independence from France in 1956. A national front was formed in the parliament, comprising the Neo Destour party, the UGTT, the Union of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts (UTICA), and the Union of Agriculture (UNAT). Later, during the 1960s, the Tunisian leadership built its development model based on the union's social and economic programme drafted in 1955 (Abid, 2002). Additionally, the former secretary general of the UGTT, Ahmed Ben Salah, was appointed to oversee this project, with five ministries under his leadership.

Accordingly, Tunisian syndicalism may offer insight into the process of the development of peripheral capitalism in former colonies. Initially, the foundation of the labour and agricultural unions occurred in the context of national liberation from colonialism. The latter introduced capitalism to Tunisian society in the form of incomplete proletarianisation and a limited capacity for the industrial transformation of raw materials. The nascent capitalist class differentiation in Tunisian society obliged a multi-class approach to national liberation under the leadership of an urban intellectual petty bourgeoisie that developed on the basis of access to modern political knowledge and contact with colonial state institutions and administration. For instance, the UGTT was founded as a labourist nationalist union organising the Tunisian workers in colonial facilities. (Hazbun, 1994). The dominant national character of the organisation of the Tunisian labouring classes was not specific to the UGTT. The agricultural union (now known as UTAP), formed in 1949 amid the intensification of the national liberation struggle, embodied the values of previous agricultural unions, whose primary role was to defend Tunisian agricultural producers against the colonial French authorities (UTAP, 2020)[i]. In sum, the Tunisian national liberation movements elevated the

importance of the national contradiction over the social one, thus the multi-class character of the labour and agriculture unions.

In due course, the postcolonial development of capitalism in Tunisia resulted in deep class differentiation, unveiling the class contradictions that start to manifest in postcolonial states (Shivji, 2024). A clearer illustration of class conflict is found in the agricultural union. The 2021 protests by numerous smallholding farmers in several regions of Tunisia, representing different domains of agricultural production, raised questions about their representation in the UTAP. The main criticism shared by the protesting farmers against the union was its class bias, particularly its defense of the interests of wealthy farmers and private investors, while neglecting the issues of small-scale producers (Mornagui & Delpuech, 2021). Indeed, in 2016, for example, UTAP lobbied parliament deputies to pass a law favouring the rescheduling of debts for private investors exploiting state-owned land—a position considered 'corrupt' and against the national public interest (Gana & Taleb, 2019). Furthermore, even after the democratizing political change of 2011, the UTAP has not gained independence from the ruling parties, as its leadership was determined by political loyalty (Gana, 2013).

On the other hand, the case of the UGTT is somewhat different. The labour union's relationship with the government has often oscillated "between harmony and confrontation" (Haddad, 2010). Despite several clashes between the ruling parties and the union, especially after the abandonment of socialist policies at the dawn of the 1970s and the prosecution of the union's leader, Ahmed Ben Salah, as well as the confrontations in 1978, 1985, and 2012, the UGTT maintained its representation in parliaments and governments. Furthermore, the labour union has never ceased to intervene in extra-labourite political affairs. For instance, the UGTT was part of the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, alongside the employers' union (UTICA), the Human Rights League (LTDH), and the Order of Lawyers. This civil society coalition was formed in 2013, amidst the crisis of the democratic transition, with the goal to mediate political negotiations that culminated in the finalisation of the 2014 constitution. This intervention was crowned by the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize (NobelPrize.org, 2015).

However, the most important issue with Tunisian syndicalism allegedly resides in the specificity of the Capital-Labour contradiction in the Tunisian economy. Postcolonial capitalism was curated by the state through

nationalisations and agrarian reforms. In fact, the joint Neo Destour and UGTT development model of the 1960s relied on the accumulation of capital from agricultural collectivisation and import-substitution industrialisation. Notwithstanding the positive steps towards setting the foundations of a modern state and society, this state-capitalist model resulted in the consolidation of an urban bureaucratic middle class at the expense of peasants and workers (Amin, 1966; Sethom, 1992; Timoumi, 1997). Subsequently, the UGTT became predominantly present in the public sector. This manifested in the crucial role of teachers and lawyers, for instance, during the general strikes in the revolts of 2010-2011 (Yousfi, 2015). By extension, labour demands and actions have often caused popular frustration. Sectorial demands to raise salaries were accused of "egoistic" narrow interests during financial crises and strikes in sectors such as transportation, health, and education faced wide popular criticism. This syndicalist dilemma snowballed to a point where the efficiency of the public sector was questioned, and several calls for the privatisation of sensitive sectors arose—because, put simply: capital coerces workers, ergo the enhancement of services[ii].

Tunisian Democracy

It seems that the issue with the so-called democratic transition in Tunisia is symptomatic of the pathologies of postcolonial state-building in the Arab world (Amin, 1976; Kadri, 2016). The Tunisian bourgeoisie was not revolutionary enough to overthrow the premodern social formations; rather, a significant portion of it actually emerged from the transformation of the old aristocracy into agrarian and merchant bourgeoisies during the implementation of colonial capitalist relations of production. On the other hand, the weakness of economic development in the colony did not create a large working class, either agricultural or industrial, capable of leading the national liberation revolution and replacing the existing political system. This limping class formation paved the way for a Westernized intellectual petty bourgeoisie to impose its views on the organisation of the state and society from above (Duvignaud, 1965).

Modernisation, as understood by the ruling elites, was explicitly inspired by Western models of development. Ahmed Ben Salah, the leader of the labour union and architect of Destourian-Socialism, the development model of the postcolonial state during the 1960s, stated that his political line was drawn from Scandinavian social democracy (Borsali, 2008). President Bourguiba, on the other hand, declared that "the socialist path we are taking is

the efficient path that was taken by the US and Western European states" (cited in Timoumi, 1997). In practice, the agrarian reform of the 1960s, which was based on top-down land collectivisation and the implementation of bureaucratic agricultural cooperatives (Ayeb & Bush, 2019), was following the lines of the Green Revolution's directives (Gasmi, 2024). In sum, the modernisation path adopted by the Tunisian political leadership dismissed local ingenuity in favour of imported and bureaucratic expertise (Ajl, 2018).

Accordingly, the underdevelopment and de-development of the productive forces, caused both by the trajectories taken in the state-capitalist planned economy and the subsequent liberalisation and integration into the global market, consolidated the ideological hegemony of the middle classes: a combination of consumerist and opportunistic lifestyles, disdain for manual work, and the glorification of intellectualism (Amin, 1976; Poulantzas, 1979). Hence, after the toppling of the one-party system and the democratisation of political organisation and participation, imperialist ideological and financial intervention in local politics proliferated, especially among young activists from middle-class backgrounds, who preferred to organise in NGOs.

Disregarding subjectivist accusations, the increasing orientation towards political activism in civil society organisations reveals several underlying issues. On the ideological level, the generation of 'millennials', who came of age in the decade following the political change of 2011, was born and raised in the ebb of socialist leadership of political organisation. In parallel, neoliberal ideology widely permeated the vacant spaces of political engagement. Disenchantment with archaic models of governance, still rooted in nepotistic practices and pre-modern social organisation, made liberal democracy particularly appealing to the new political activists through extensive propaganda and advertisement (Colon, 2019). On the other hand, the ossification of the traditional partisan organisation, due to decades of political persecution, among other reasons, and the decline of labour unions—majorly due to the erosion of the working class in the neoliberal era—repelled a new generation of political activists from classical political organisation, prompting them to turn instead to NGO organising and campaigning. Additionally, NGOs filled a significant employment gap, satisfying the material interests of between 70,000 and 100,000 employees from 2011 to 2022, as the number of civil society organisations grew from 9,600 to 24,632 (Mzalouat & Warda, 2022).

All of the above may explain the spread of the dominant neoliberal ideology diffused by prominent NGOs, which are either directly affiliated with international organisations or funded by non-profit or semi-government institutions, and even embassies. Who pays the piper calls the tune, indeed. US foreign funds, such as the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)[iii], to name just a few, have been financially involved in several NGO projects related to election observation, the fight against corruption, and advocacy for transparency, good governance, and open government, the whole package of neoliberal-encoded politics.

Conclusion

> [...] the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy (Engels & Marx, 2015 [1848], 26)

Parliamentary democracy has become a site of fierce debate among politicians and voters in contemporary times. One camp, ardently defending liberal values, sees it as the apogee of human political achievement. The other, represented by right-wing leaders, exploits the crisis of liberal democracy to preserve the crumbling structure of late capitalism. Both sides are reactionary and scornful of the masses—one attempting to patch up a surgical wound, while the other seeks to stave off the threat to its rule.

Populism is criticised by the Marxist literature for its class-blind politics, which falls in favour of the ruling exploiting classes. Whereas, bourgeois criticism of the populist phenomenon stems from contempt regarding the attempts of the disadvantageous classes to gain authority over their fate. The popular disdain for democracy, that is increasingly reduced to mere elections by ballot, seems to stem from the latent contradiction inherent in equating the right to vote on one hand, with the actual exercise of power, on the other. This contradiction exposes the reality of contemporary democracy, which is often little more than a plutocratic oligarchy. In this system, capitalist states are governed by parliamentarians and cabinet officials—i.e. *professional* politicians who gradually morph into a moneyed oligarchy—rather than by the masses of the poor and dispossessed (Cockshott & Cottrell, 1993).

On the side of the masses, contemporary semi-proletarianisation (Yeros, 2023) and the deep

crisis of social reproduction (Ossome & Naidu, 2021) in the peripheries of global capital, have deeply fragmented the labouring classes, rendering organisation a difficult task. Therefore, it seems that both the urgent political need and mission are the development of the productive forces in a *socialised* manner, in order to recreate the social foundational and potent bloc for radical democracy—rule by the many, that is the creators of social wealth and the practitioners of social life.

The enthusiastic debates and hopes for a multipolar world, as espoused by liberal political sciences, overlook the fundamental elements that constitute these so-called "poles". Geopolitical studies, remaining loyal to their conventional imperialist framework, continue to push for an institutional and transhistorical view on so-called international relations, while neglecting the masses—who not only reproduce the system in which these relations unfold but also possess the power to transcend it. A rather *polycentric* world, with centres that develop sovereignly in line with internal needs and by means of egalitarian social reforms, would alleviate the pressures on a self-destructing global system and unleash human creativity towards not only the liberation of the people, but also the preservation of the reproductive capacity of the planet (Amin, 1990).

Precondition: the intervention of the "Sixth Great Power" (Yeros, 2024).

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[i] For instance, the first organization of farmers dates back to 1920, during French colonisation. The National Chamber of Agriculture of the North of the Kingdom of Tunis was founded by big landowners from the northern regions. This organisation played an advisory role and acted as a mediator between Tunisian farmers and the French authorities (UTAP, 2020).

[ii] These sentiments are widely expressed in regular and social media while also mirrored in different NGOs questioning the efficiency of the public sector in a critique that tends to favour privatisation than radical public reforms. See Alert.com.tn.
For the critique of this discourse, see (Brahim, 2021)

[iii] Cross survey of multiple NGO financial reports