INTERNATIONAL VIEWPOINT

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USA

In the Aftermath of the Elections: First Thoughts

David Finkel

Nancy Pelosi

It's clear that the November 2006 election was a national referendum on the Iraq war and the Bush regime. Although Green Party candidates ran as antiwar candidates there was no "major" antiwar party. Nonetheless, voters made it clear that they repudiate the war and Bush's leadership, which also means revulsion over the corruption and sex scandals that came from those who aimed to be so moral.

This should create an opening for the antiwar movement to organize and speak as the voice of a popular majority. In addition to pushing the argument for immediate withdrawal, the antiwar movement needs to put the issues of permanent detention and torture on the movement's agenda.

Will the Bush/neoncon gang proceed on track toward war with Iran? It looks like the neocons have been isolated on this war drive. Even though Bush had "made up his mind" to take on Iran, his mind will be unmade. Given that "victory" in Iraq is clearly impossible, the only way out of this debacle is by way of some kind of "grand bargain" with Iran and Syria. This requires backing off the war drive and involving Europe as well as Russia and China in a deal that implicitly accepts the possibility of Iran developing nuclear weapons capability sometime down the road. In this scenario, the U.S. would continue its espionage and low-level destabilization efforts in Iran, but give up the neocons' "liberation through regime change" fantasy.

The spectacle of people like Richard Perle, David Frum and Kenneth Adelman distancing themselves from Bush signals that they know their project is pretty much dead. Even Bush realized he had to sacrifice Donald Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense, replacing him with Robert Gates, a junior associate on his dad's foreign policy team.

Bush had already dropped his "stay the course" line. Even the administration realized the growing chaos in Iraq means that it's impossible to hang on at current troop levels and hope for the best. The new policy will require bipartisan support. Thus Bush new hope is the bipartisan Iraq Study Group, headed by James Baker (Bush the First's Secretary of State) and. Their task is to put together an exit strategy. Chances are that the proposals they will submit in December will call for intensive regional diplomacy and plans for "redeploying" some troops.

The Democrats are certainly willing to hoist up the bipartisan flag. Even if they won the majority in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, they have little strategy beyond holding the Administration accountable for war profiteering and gross mismanagement. They have no notion of how to bring "stability" to Iraq, and they certainly don't want to be blamed for high-tailing it out of the country.

The Democrats will agree not to rock the administration's boat regarding the new/old quagmire in Afghanistan. From a betting perspective, it looks like the "over-under" on the length of the NATO commitment in Afghanistan is about ten years. And that's another reason why it makes no rational sense to push an unwinnable confrontation with Iran. Recent events in Pakistan - the madrassa bombing (whether by the Pakistani or U.S. air force) and suicide-bomb killing of dozens of soldier recruits in training - point to the real possibility of that country unraveling in chaos.

In brief, a "rational" imperialist strategy with respect to Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan etc. consists of damage control as opposed to a lunatic charge for "victory." This illustrates why the ruling class needs two parties firmly committed to imperialism, but capable of switching tactics when one option has proven to be bankrupt. Tragically, liberal illusions to the contrary notwithstanding, this switch in parties will have little to offer on the unfolding Palestinian catastrophe. The political consensus of the two parties (and the corporate interests behind them) is still committed to crushing the Palestinian nation through overwhelming force.

Last summer, when Bush blocked the international community's attempt to impose a cease fire on Israel's brutal bombing of Lebanon; Democrats rushed to pass a resolution commending Bush and claiming that Israel's action were legitimate self-defense. The resolution was authored by Representative Tom Lantos and Senator Joe Biden, who will be the party spokesmen on foreign policy. Nancy Pelosi is another prominent defender of Israeli policies. She and other Democratic leaders went out of their way to condemn former president Jimmy Carter's new book, Palestine-Peace or Apartheid?, for using the word apartheid to describe the systematic discrimination against the Palestinians.

The Democrats deliberately ran "moderate" candidates in the recent election, including anti-abortion candidates so whether on foreign or domestic policy there's little prospect for much reform. The Democrats' partisan interests, if nothing else, should lead to a thorough Congressional investigation of the substantial evidence of a coordinated rightwing conspiracy to steal elections through vote suppression and rigged electronic voting machines. This is a much more significant

question than sideshow rhetoric about impeachment. But the Democrats have little interest in electoral reform.

True, they will not allow John Bolton to remain U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations and will block the judicial appointments of the most rightwing and incompetent. But these are relatively superficial: they are not interested in reversing the noxious Patriot Act or stopping wholesale attacks on Muslim charities. Much depends on whether popular movements for the restoration of basic democratic rights can be mounted from below.

Nancy Polosi, projected Speaker of the House, announced a short program for the first hours of the new session in January. The agenda included scrapping the current restriction that the government cannot negotiate with drug companies over the price of prescription drugs. Raising the minimum wage is another action item. The current minimum, in effect for the past decade, stands at $5.15 an hour. Given that CEO benefits are now more than 400 times the wage of the average American, doubling or tripling the minimum wage would definitely be in order. Instead, the tepid proposal being floated will raise the minimum to $7.25, probably in two stages.

Does the repudiation of the Bush gang point to a political opening for the left? Possibly - the only way to find out is to push. Conventional politics are so straitjacketed that the results can present only a distorted and partial reflection of what people actually want. A number of referendums on the state and local ballots indicated some issues on people's minds. Most importantly, in South Dakota voters opposed the state government's passage of a ban on abortion. Millions of voters passed antiwar or impeachment resolutions.

Right-wingers put referendums outlawing same-sex marriage on the ballot in eight states. Interestingly enough, Arizona voted the referendum down, and in the other seven states 38% of the voters opposed the ban (up from a 31% vote against same-sex marriage in the last election). Most disappointedly was the passage of the Michigan referendum voting affirmative action down by 58%. Perhaps such a vote isn't surprising in a state that has lost millions of jobs. When voters are feeling insecure, it's easier to believe that discrimination is a thing of the past and that we are "all in the same sinking boat."

In America, politics is typically a politics of resentment not a politics of solidarity. That's why the existence of an independent antiwar movement — in which military families march against the war and counter recruiters meet up with youth to confront the myth of the military - is so important in the months ahead.

David Finkel is an editor of Against the Current, published by the US socialist organization Solidarity.

Venezuela

If we were Venezuelan we would vote for Chavez!

International appeal

Venezuela is going to the polls again on December 3. For the twelfth time in a row, the Venezuelan people face the challenge of defeating their country's right wing, which acts as the electoral arm of imperialism and is trying to destabilise the process underway. In spite of the maintenance of a state structure based on bourgeois democracy, Hugo Chavez continues to represent a decisive factor for the triumph of the revolutionary process.

Manuel Rosales, governor of Zulia, is the candidate of a right obsessed by destroying everything that the revolutionary process has achieved since 1998. For this right-wing, the democratic conquests that the Venezuelan people has obtained through its fight - defeating the coup d'etat of 2002, the bosses' lockout in winter 2002-03, the multiple attempts at armed and economic destabilization - would immediately have to be swept away to return to a situation in which the State would be strictly at the service of the possessing classes.

The positions taken by the Venezuelan government, their line of opposition without concessions to the government of the United States, their repeated opposition to imperialist wars, the withdrawal of the Venezuelan ambassador to Israel in protest at the war in Lebanon, the denunciation of the armed intervention in Haiti, the unreserved condemnation of the policy of Tony Blair towards the Middle East, the open support for the Latin American left, the diplomatic activism unfolding in Africa, have made of Chávez one of the most outstanding figures of the anti-imperialist struggle at a world-wide level, in spite of the limits and contradictions of his government's policies.

A big victory for Chávez and the Venezuelan people will act as a call to struggle across the Latin American continent and will constitute a new reason for hope for the working class and the oppressed peoples of the entire world. We are sure that on December 3 the Venezuelan people will celebrate a new victory that will allow it to continue constructing a freer and more just society, and to deepen the revolutionary process. It is for that reason that we reaffirm: IF WE WERE VENEZUELAN, WE WOULD VOTE FOR HUGO CHÁVEZ ON DECEMBER 3.

Signed by:

Monif Albadil...

...Antonello Zecca

and over 300 others

Belgium

Left electoral alliance projects new left party

David Dessers

On Saturday 28 October 650 people, coming from different political and social movements of Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia, decided together to stand in the federal Belgian elections of May 2007. This new left movement is the political expression of workers' struggle against the neoliberal attacks by the government on pensions and social security in the last year. The movement has the support of three former leading figures of social-democracy and the socialist trade-union movement. One of them is George Debunne, former president of ETUC.

October 28 2005 demonstration

On 28 October 2005 more than 100,000 trade-unionists demonstrated in the streets of Brussels against a governmental plan called "the generation pact". Directed by the Lisbon strategy, the Belgian government, a coalition of social-democrats and liberals, opened an attack against pensions and other social achievements of the working class. This social movement ended in a defeat, given the fact that not one political party represented in the Belgian parliament was ready to defend this movement on the political level.

In the summer of 2005, the former social-democratic members of parliament Jef Sleeckx and Lode Van Outrive, together with the former ETUC-president George Debunne, organised a campaign and a petition against the European Constitution and for a democratic consultation of the population in Belgium. When the movement against the "generation pact" rose up in the autumn of 2005, these three former leaders of the socialist movement in Belgium chose the side of the trade-unions against the social-democratic parties SP.A (Flanders) and PS (Wallonia).

On 15 October 2005, Jef Sleeckx gathered with 150 trade unionists at the doors of the congress of the SP.A. They carried banners with the slogan "We turn our backs on the SP.A." This was literally a turning point. From that moment on, trade-unionists and political organisations invited Jef Sleeckx all the time to explain his position in meetings throughout the country.

More and more Jef Sleeckx became clear about what he wanted: the creation of a new left party in Belgium to defend the workers movement and to stop neoliberal policies. He created "the committee for other politics" (Comité voor een Andere Politiek, CAP), a Flemish committee that wanted to prepare a leftist political alternative on the national level for the federal elections of 2007.

Simultaneously in Wallonia a similar movement developed, which is called 'Une Autre Gauche' (Another Left). This movement was the result of an appeal that appeared in a newspaper in which a group of leftist people put forward the need for a new political force, on the left of the PS and the Greens. The PS was and is still in the grip of a long series of corruption scandals and was as a governmental party, just like the Flemish SP.A, co-responsible for the neoliberal policy and the attacks against the workers' movement.

In the spring of 2006 both initiatives were launched. More and more they started to collaborate. The CAP in Flanders had the support of the SAP-POS, section of the FI, the LSP, section of the CWI, and parts of the CP. Une Autre Gauche in Brussels and Wallonia had the support of the SAP-POS, section of the FI and other political groups. In June 2006 CAP and Une Autre Gauche decided to organise together a political conference to bring together all the people who want to build a political alternative for the federal elections of 2007.

This is the conference that took place on Saturday 28th October. With the participation of 650 militants of the anticapitalist left, of the trade-unions, of the social movements, it became a big success. In the afternoon the participants prepared a future program for the movement in twelve different workshops (jobs, public services, protection of trade-unionists, ecology, international solidarity, women etc.). In the evening the conference adopted by a large majority a short resolution in favour of a participation in the federal elections of May 2007.

The conference became one of the most important events for the anti-neoliberal and anticapitalist left in Belgium for many years. The preparation of the electoral campaign starts today!

David Dessers is a member of the Socialistische Arbeiderspartij/Parti ouvrier socialiste, Belgian section of the Fourth International,.

Jef Sleeckx at POS/SAP meeting

Mexico

Oaxaca, solitary and in flames

Party of Democratic Revolution won't defend Oaxaca

Adolfo Gilly

After a long hot summer of struggle in Mexico, the outgoing Fox government has sent paramilitaries and regular troops to crush the near-insurrectionary Oaxaca movement. Adolfo Gilly here slams the centre-left PRD leadership for failing to defend Oaxaca.

Introduction by International Viewpoint

In 2006 Mexico has been wracked by huge popular protests, which in turn have been met by brutal repression. The signal for the confrontation was the 'Other Campaign' waged by Subcommandante Marcos and the Zapatista leadership. Launched in 2005, the campaign aims to unify Mexico's disparate popular, indigenous and left wing movements in a struggle to reconstruct Mexico from below. This was an immensely positive and daring move by the EZLN to break their isolation in the Chiapas mountains and start to give leadership on an all-Mexico basis.

In May, following a visit by Marcos to the radical community of San Salvador Atenco in Mexico State, the Fox government staged a police provocation which led to a massive attack on the town, resulting in two dead, dozens badly hurt and more than 40 women raped or otherwise sexually abused. This in turn led to nationwide and international protests.

Meanwhile, a mass movement led by the teachers union in the southern Pacific state of Oaxaca became a rallying point for a massive movement calling for the ousting of Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, the ultra-corrupt governor of Oaxaca state and a member of the right wing PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). While the teachers and the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) brought the state capital (also called Oaxaca) to a standstill and occupied the central square and main government buildings, Ruiz Ortiz replied by using gangs of hired thugs to beat and assassinate protestors. A brutal attempt by paramilitary police in August to clear the centre of the city was eventually defeated, with an unknown number of deaths.

Simultaneous with the Oaxaca movement however was the drama of June's presidential election, 'won' by rightwing PAN candidate Felipe Calderón through massive electoral fraud, thus 'defeating' the centre-left candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the centre left PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution). For more than a month after the fraudulent election, PRD supporters and sympathizers blockaded huge areas of Mexico City with a massive encampment, a huge embarrassment to the PAN government. Eventually however the PRD called off the protests. The PAN government colluded with the PRI to use its now more secure position to step up violence against the popular movement in Oaxaca. At least 15 have been killed.

On October 29 thugs hired by killed two protestors and Brad Will, an American film-maker affiliated to New York Indymedia. Fox used this violence to send 3,500 police and troops to Oaxaca to crush the movement by force. Here we publish an article by Adolfo Gilly, published in the centre-left daily La Jornada on November 1, which is a stinging rebuke to the leadership of the PRD - of which he is a prominent member - for failing to defend Oaxaca from state violence.

Paramilitary police and soldiers attack Oaxaca protestors

The Democratic Revolution Party Isn't Willing, Nor can it Mobilize, to Defend the Popular Movement in Oaxaca

Adolfo Gilly, La Jornada, November 1.

The entire structure of political organizations and institutionalized labor unions are, in spite of their differences, leaving Oaxaca in solitude during these crucial moments. No great social mobilizations have sprung up, like the ones that were started to stop the war against zapatismo in 1994, not like the mobilizations that arose against the Acteal massacre. The electoral routine, that is, the logic of the existing institutions, has taken over every social mobilization. There are a few declarations and a few protests, but no great mobilization of forces like the one organized in the electoral dispute.

The Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) is absorbed in the congressional aspect of the dispute. In Congress, the PRD voted in favor of the disappearance of power in Oaxaca and asked for a political trial. If that didn't work, too bad, we saved our honor and we're off for the extended weekend. All of the governors chosen by the PRD, including the one from the Federal District, signed next to Ulises Ruíz during the Conago (National Conference of Governors). The CND (the National Democratic Convention organized by Andrés Manuel López Obrador), a motive for so many illusions and bewilderments, has demonstrated its inexistence for all practical effects, except the vote recount.

The old pact between the PAN (National Action Party) and the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) has now mobilized in support of Ulises Ruíz and against the people of Oaxaca, making them responsible for fifteen deaths in Oaxaca so far. This has to uphold a repudiated governor and oppose a legitimate social movement of the people of Oaxaca. Now, they have imposed the PFP (Federal Preventive Police) and military soldiers dressed as PFP, another sign of their

impotency and discredit, all to achieve political solutions as they were often achieved in the past.

The PRI-PAN pact is no novelty. It comes from the PAN's foundation in 1939, as the legal inheritor of sinarquismo (a largely religious social movement in the 1920s and 1930s against what would later become the PRI) and of the political voice of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and of Mexican conservatives. This pact always came into action during crucial moments: the repression of the rail workers' strike in 1959, the student movement of 1968, the dirty war of the 1970s, the neo-liberal restructuring begun in 1982, the 1988 voting fraud (with its sequel of hundreds of PRD members killed as well as others, since political resistance then was no joke), the burning of the certificates of the election in 1991, the disappearance of articles 27 and 130 of the constitution, the signing of NAFTA, the repression in Chiapas since 1994, the rupture of the San Andrés accords and the vote against the Cocopa law, the Fobaproa (the agreement to absorb the private bankers' debt into public debt), the pact of buffoons where 360 congressmen of both parties voted in favor of stripping Andrés Manuel López Obrador of his political rights to become a presidential candidate (an initiative that didn't prosper because of massive popular discontent), the refusal of recounting the votes in the 2006 election. The list is endless and without significant exceptions.

Today, the PRD, with both of its masks, the institutional one called the "Front to Extend Progress" and the pseudo-institutional mask called the "Democratic National Convention" isn't willing, nor can it mobilize the popular forces that it assembled in the capital's main square in September against the electoral fraud, to support Oaxaca and to repudiate the repression of the federal government. Fortunately, La Jornada and several other medias (including Indymedia, that already paid with the life of one of its reporters), in addition to the innumerable individual voices, preserve information, protest and create indignation (cheers Blanche, always there!). But their task isn't, and can't be, the organization of the movement. The task applies to those that were given fifteen million votes in July and that hold, as was confirmed, the right apparatus. But nothing is coming from that way. They simply repeat the same things they said about the Atenco repression.

The letter written by Andrés Manuel López Obrador, published Sunday October 29th in La Jornada, isn't acceptable. He limits himself to denounce the actions of the police, the pact between the PAN and the PRI, and the "sinister and repressive" government of Ulises Ruíz. He declares that the governor's resignation is the only possible solution and he reminds the readers that in the July election most oaxaqueños voted for him. That is it.

One would expect that the sequel to these affirmations would be to call for a large mobilization in the Federal District and in other places of the country in support of the oaxaqueño movement, against the murders of Ulises Ruíz's paramilitaries and against the repression of the federal government. A call like this one, coming from a man that got fifteen million votes, would overfill the capital's mains square and many other plazas around the country. A mere late accusation, as is written in his letter, is useless.

As I write these lines, Oaxaca is being occupied by federal forces that the PAN government has launched in defense of the murderous governor of the PRI. Today two more people have been killed. I don't ask the leaders of the CND to mobilize their forces in the public squares and in the places of work and study of the country, first of all because I know they won't, and secondly because they don't have the influence to mobilize these forces. Neither do I ask the leader of the opposition, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, since his letter states that he doesn't have the intention of doing so.

In the presence of the indignation and astonishment of the Mexican people, who once more contemplate how the repressive forces of the federal government attack a massive and legitimate popular movement and try to corner it and drive it to extremes and misbehavior; in the presence of protests, denunciations, mobilizations of popular support, human rights and other organizations - those not counted as major forces - the silence and the passivity of the large organizations leave Oaxaca standing alone, with its own forces, its own courage, its own ability to mobilize and its own and ancient organizational framework.

As in the unforgettable verse of the poet of Muerte sin fin (Death without end), Oaxaca is now the "solitude in flames." The people of Oaxaca will leave this trial beaten up, but possibly more organized. Meanwhile, the vote collectors will have new occasions to remember other verses: "We are the ones who carry and we ride on the path / and everyone will get what they deserve."

October 30 2006

Adolfo Gilly is the author of the most famous book on the Mexican revolution from a Marxist perspective. Formerly a member of the Trotskyist PRT, he is now a well-known member of the PRD.

Mexico

Oaxaca: final crisis of the "old order"

Manuel Aguilar Mora

On December 1st the Mexican federal government will hold its traditional inauguration ceremony in which the outgoing president takes off the tricolour ribbon and hands it over to his successor. In this case president Vicente Fox will give it to Felipe Calderón, the president elect of his own party, the PAN (Party of National Action). It is the ceremony of presidential changeover, which for eighty years has never been interrupted, nor threatened with suspension.

For the first time in that long trajectory of political stability, on which the Mexican bourgeoisie has always prided itself, for the first time since the Mexican revolution of 1910-1919, clouds threaten this rite which is fundamental to the continuity and legitimacy of the bourgeois state in Mexico.

This situation is explained not only by the fact that for the first time in decades there seem to be irremediable ruptures at the summit of the Mexican bourgeois regime and the struggles between the three governing parties have deepened, as very evidently could be appreciated during the great fraud committed in the presidential elections against Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) last July 2.

The political confrontation which has broken out explains why the PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution) is preparing an alternative ceremony on November 20 (date of celebration of the beginning of the Mexican revolution) and that for the first time President Fox has cancelled his official celebration in the Zocalo in Mexico City so that AMLO is invested by the Democratic National Convention as "legitimate president" in the same place, the political heart of republic. This ceremony will be the counterpart of the investiture of Calderón in the Legislative Palace eleven days later.

"A bourgeois dual power"? Not really, more prosaically a forceful demonstration of a major political crisis of the "Mexican democracy" inaugurated in 2000 with the victory of Fox. The official world and its media spokespersons declared that the replacement in the presidency of the republic of the decadent PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) by PAN was proof of the political maturity of a supposedly renewed political system and threw their hats in the air. Mexico, they said, was in a new stage, with the old regime superseded, and had joined the select club of authentic "democracies". It is ever more obvious that all that was a fraud, a simulation, a pact at the top so that the important things would stay the same... or get worse.

Oaxaca burns

The clouds of uncertainty that hangs over the new government which Calderón is already preparing, is a consequence fundamentally of an impressive popular discontent throughout the republic which in the last six months has expressed itself in diverse forms, from occupations of an avenue by children of eight to ten years protesting against the dismissal of their teacher (as happened a few days ago in Mexico City) to the popular rebellion that has led to the emergence of a real embryo of dual power (a Commune) in the city of Oaxaca and surrounding municipalities.

The APPO (Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca) emerged in June, after the savage repression by the police force of the PRI governor of the state of Oaxaca, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz (URO), of striking teachers from section XXII of the SNTE (National Union of Education Workers), backbone of the CNTE (National Coordination of Education Workers), the democratic current inside union. This occurred at the height of the electoral process and its destiny became linked to the struggle against the neoliberal policy of the Foxista government that has expanded since, with ebbs and flows depending on the particular situation of the states and the levels of popular organization, throughout the country.

For five months the local and increasingly the federal governments have tried everything to divide and to repress the movement. The firmness and strength of the teaching and popular rank and files overcame these obstacles. The Secretary of the Interior tried to take advantage of the months the teachers had gone without pay to divide their ranks. He obtained a small victory with the decision of the secretary of section XXII, Rueda Pacheco, to try to end the teaching strike and return to classes, an agreement followed only by a minority. And to the extent that the conflict has extended for almost half a year, politicisation and radicalisation have also been deepened. Since URO's PRI group did not cease its provocations, it was finally impossible even for those who followed the already mentioned leader to return to classes normally.

Counter-productive provocation

It was one of these provocations, perpetrated by URO's minions on October 26 and 27 in one of the towns bordering the city, that detonated the major provocation of the occupation of the federal forces. Of the three deaths, the first was that of a US Indymedia journalist and anarchist activist, Bradley Will, so the press of the neighbouring northern country began to take an interest in the subject. For Bush, it was obvious that the life of one of his citizens was more valuable than those of the more than ten Mexican dead who had been victims of the murderous repression. In the same way that the 2,500 US soldiers killed in Iraq have more press coverage than the 600,000 Iraqis who have died as a result of Bush's occupation.

From October 27 to 29, the federal government used 5,000 federal police to take the city of Oaxaca, accompanied by judicial minions, paramilitary PRI members, federal agents of investigation and policemen supplied with light tanks, helicopters and all the equipment typical of these events.

After five months of confrontations with URO's police, more than ten dead and tens of wounded, occupations with barricades, meetings and marches, in Oaxaca, Mexico City and across the nation, a period of emancipatory potentialities but also of ominous reactionary dangers has opened.

Manuel Aguilar Mora was a leader of the 1968 Mexico City student revolt, then a long-time leader of the PRT (Revolutionary Workers Party); he is now a leading member of the LUS (United Socialist league).

Lebanon

Hezbollah and Resistance

The viewpoint of the Lebanese Communist Party

Marie Nassif-Debs

Question: The Lebanese Communist Party is a secular party, engaged in the national resistance. What have been its relations with the Hezbollah?

Marie Nassif-Debs: There have been big changes in this relation over the last 20 years. Twenty years ago the Hezbollah began by waging a merciless war against communists. I think that the Islamic fundamentalist tendency, which was especially represented by the Da'wa - an Islamic fundamentalist party which had backing from Iraq and in Iran, made up not only of Shi'ites, but with a majority of Shi'ites - saw in the PCL a party that was opposed to it on everything. It wanted to suppress any idea of secularism, openness, different philosophy, and so on.

Relations began to be very tense and the Hezbollah went so far as to kill several of our comrades, especially intellectuals, cadres from the universities. For example, they killed Mahdi Amil, who had worked on the problems on colonialism and of religion and who was a very great intellectual, a very great philosopher.

And there was also Hassan Mroue, a great philosopher who wrote a very important book, which has been translated into French, and whose title is "The Materialist Tendencies of Islam". He had begun by being a sheikh, he wanted to study in Najaf in Iraq. There he discovered that it wasn't what he was looking for and he became a communist. He wrote many books.

There were small scale combats, in Beirut, in the western Bekaa, in several regions, in places where there was a relationship of forces such that one side could suppress the other. That also helped the Syrian tendency to eliminate communists from the national resistance.

There was a certain understanding between the Syrian forces and the Hezbollah, and also other forces. We were hunted, there were comrades who went to carry out resistance operations and they were killed - they had been shot in the back.

After that relations evolved in a positive way. In the Israeli prisons and camps, the communists and Hezbollah were side by side. A majority of communists and fewer Hezbollah. They got to know each other there and that created relations between the cadres of the two organizations. And after they were released the relations more or less evolved.

Furthermore, on the level of its thinking, the Hezbollah has evolved, especially after the election of Hassan Nasrallah to the position of general secretary. Because - this is a point of view that many comrades share with me - he is much more Arab than Muslim, in other words, he looks at things through the eyes of an Arab: he doesn't want to liberate Jerusalem because it iss one of Islam's holy places, but because the Palestinians have to go back to the land of their ancestors, have to have their own state... He has a vision that is different from that of his predecessors. Then we had relations that were more or less mitigated, sometimes good, sometimes bad.

And now?

Our relations have especially evolved since the last Israeli aggression, where we ourselves called for the formation of a national resistance front and formed militias which opposed the entry of Israel into several villages, including certain attempts by Israeli commandos to enter them - in the Bekaa, near Baalbeck, where we stopped the commando which wanted to move into Jameliyyah, a village with a communist majority. We had three comrades killed there.

We are still a little bit skeptical in our relations with the Hezbollah, because up to now there are points of dispute between us. For example as concerns the elimination of the confessional regime [1], they don't have a very clear position, although they have evolved.

We had a difference with them in the summer of 2005, after the withdrawal of Syrian forces. During the legislative elections the Hezbollah felt it necessary, to protect itself from Resolution 1559 [2], to make an alliance with those who awere pro-Syrian and who subsequently became transformed into pro-Americans, i.e. the Lebanese Forces, Hariri (Mustaqbal) and Joumblatt's PSP. It is thanks to this alliance that the March 14 forces [3] - Hassan Nasrallah admits it - won a majority and were able to form a government. Because if the Hezbollah had made an alliance with the communists and with certain Aounists [4], that majority wouldn't have existed.

So we consider the Hezbollah as a party of resistance, which is part of a movement of national liberation on the national and Arab level, but we have differences with it on how to resolve the political and economic situation in Lebanon. But on these questions also it has evolved, especially over the last four months: it took part in a very real way in the demonstration on May 10. However, up to now they have not taken a position on many problems. They have two ministers including the Minister of Energy. At the moment they are talking about privatizing electricity in Lebanon, and he is a bit lukewarm, he is not combative.

The second problem is that the Hezbollah has not taken a position on the question of the regime, of political reforms that go into the direction of secularism and modernization. These are two essential points of dispute. And we have a third one: we were against the re-election of the President of the Republic, Emile Lahoud, in 2004 and the Hezbollah supported Lahoud.

Do you see possibilities for a further evolution of the Hezbollah?

They are more or less grouped into two big tendencies. The tendency of the Da'wa, i.e. the one that just wants Islam. And the other tendency, the one which has evolved, which talks about sharing power, which talks about an alternative, and so on. I don't think that they have any choice but to continue evolving; we are going to continue the discussion with them and we think that if they don't evolve they will lose the fruits of victory, for the second time ... because what happened in July and August, I call that a victory. We stood up to Israel, the strongest power in the region...

We think that if the Hezbollah wants to take advantage of the victory, if it wants the Lebanese to take advantage of the victory, it has to evolve, otherwise we will go back to the same point as in 2000. In 2000 it was thanks to the Islamic resistance that our country was liberated, for the first time in Arab history. But the victory was devoured by confessionalism. I think that some of Hezbollah cadres understood that. And we hope - because there is a continual battle inside their party - that they will not lose again, by once again adopting confessional positions.

Is the national resistance front which was established during the war going to continue?

We are continuing to discuss an alliance on the political front with the Hezbollah and with the Aounists. Many of their cadres see in Aoun someone who has opposed the Christian fascists. There is a strong d Aounist groundswell among young people, especially in the universities. To start with it was a movement for freedom from Syrian control, but it is being carried along by a wave of Arab sentiment. It is which is really posing the problems that are essential for Lebanon, and also the question of reform.

It goes further than the struggle against corruption, there is also a demand for real secular changes. That creates a possibility for a real coming together. The former Prime Minister, Sclim Hoss, is also very open, with a very Arab outlook, and she sees the essential points in this way: we are working towards a regroupment so as to establish a government of national alliance and to force fresh legislative elections, on the basis of an electoral law that would be proportional and secular, in order to subsequently elect the President of the Republic, amending the Constitution so as to suppress political and administrative confessionalism.

And you are discussing all that with the Hezbollah?

Yes! Of course we are discussing that. Because we said to them - and I think they have really understood this - that a great personality like Nasrallah, such a charismatic personality, can be an emblem for the whole Middle East (and not only for the Arab Middle East), but he can't become President of the Republic in Lebanon. If we want people to be able to occupy the essential posts in the state, then we have to suppress confessionalism. Because now, if he stood in the elections, although he would be supported by almost all the Shi'ites and although there are many Christians who like him, so even if he can have the majority with him, he cannot become President!

You can be very big on the international level but very small and very restricted on the national level with this confessional regime. Of the 128 members of the Parliament, half are Muslims and within this half there a third of Shi'ites. So the Muslims cannot increase the number of their members of Parliament, they cannot increase the number of their representatives in the government, because there are quotas.

So either we suppress the quotas and then everyone can compete in the elections on the basis of programmes that are well defined on the social, economic, and political level, and so on, making real alliances, or else it's the quota system. There are many people who are starting to think about this impasse ...Apart from the Communist Party and some left groups, all the political parties are confessional: the Hezbollah and Amal are Shi'ites, the Lebanese Forces are Maronite (there are also a few Greek Orthodox among them), the PSP is Druze, Hariri's Party of the Future is Sunni', and so on. We have a system which reproduces itself because we always have members of tparliament who are elected on a confessional basis and who make laws in such a way as to preserve their interests.

There have been civil wars and they were based on religion. Although there were fundamental problems on the social, economic, and political level, these problems were swept aside.

This interview was conducted on 21st September 2006 in Paris by Mireille Court and Nicolas Qualander.

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NOTES

[1] This refers to the system whereby posts in the government and administration are attributed according to quotas for each religious group, i.e. the President of the Republic must be a Maronite Christian, the Prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and so on.

[2] A 2004 Security Council resolution which demanded among other things, that all Lebanese militias should be disarmed and disbanded.

[3] Name given to the coalition of anti-Syrian forces.

[4] Followers of the retired Christian general Michel Aoun.

Hezbollah Debate

“The Savage Anomaly” of the Islamic Movement

Niciolas Qualander

Islam is no more incapable than any other ideology of adapting, or of being adapted to, new realities. The Muslim peoples, with or without Islam, can progress or go backwards, their governments can be totalitarian or liberal, their masses can be open to multiple currents of thought or fanatically attached to conformism towards ancient or new dogmas. That will depend on many factors, of which the Muslim cultural heritage, much more varied than people think, is only one element, and one which is far from being the strongest. The game has not been played, it is not lost in advance.” [1]

The Tendency is Reversed

The events of July and August 2006, which saw the Israeli project of taming the Lebanese resistance fail, represent a political earthquake. It will require considerable time to measure how much the historical frameworks of political references have been overturned by this 33-day war. Israel is today suffering from a political, military, moral, and symbolic crisis: for the first time, the Israeli army has suffered a major defeat. However, it remained one of the political foundations of the country’s power, and occupied up until then a central place in the very organization of the society.

The military failure was combined with a definite political defeat: the defeat of Israel, of course, which was unable to liquidate the political-military apparatus of the Hezbollah (Party of God), but also the defeat of the United States, which was unable to impose on the international community and the Lebanese government the deployment of NATO troops, whose mandate would have been to disarm the Shiite popular militia. Resolution 1701, which is nevertheless heavy with danger for the Lebanese resistance, comes across as a minimum framework for the Western powers, including France.

Lebanon has found itself since autumn 2004 at the heart of the Western colonial redeployment: Resolution 1559, demanding Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and the disarming of all the Lebanese militias, which was jointly edited by France and the United States, considerably divided the Lebanese political class and created new divisions between the communities. The Forces of March 14, essentially made up of the Lebanese Forces of Samir Geagea, Christian, of the Progressive Socialist Party of Walid Joumblatt, Druse, of the Current of the Future of Saad Hariri, Sunni, but also of the Movement of the Democratic Left, a split from the Lebanese Communist Party, have found themselves over the last two years the main support of the Western political offensive in Lebanon: demanding the withdrawal of Syrian troops, they also argued in favour of the disarmament of the Lebanese Resistance in the south, thus indirectly satisfying Israeli demands.

The Coalition of March 8, led by the Hezbollah, and which finds most of its social base in the Shiite community, but is also supported by pro-Syrian forces who draw their support from part of the Sunni and Christian communities, responded to this offensive by re-affirming the Arab dimension of Lebanon and the need to preserve a political line opposed to American-Israeli interests in the region. For them that also meant keeping intact Hezbollah’s strategic partnership with Iran and Syria. For two years, the Lebanese Communist Party tried to find a balanced anti-imperialist political line, clearly supporting the Islamic resistance in Southern Lebanon, arguing for this resistance to keep its weapons, but nevertheless demanding the total withdrawal of Syrian troops and not keeping quiet about its criticisms of the dictatorial nature of the Baathist regime.

It is on this bipolarisation of the Lebanese political scene that the Americans, the French, and the Israelis were counting in order to weaken the Shiite organization, which has become, since 2000 and the unilateral withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon, the nerve centre of popular Arab aspirations to a consistent anti-colonial resistance. The ambition of crushing the Lebanese resistance, over and above the fact that it would certainly have been the prelude to a generalised attack against Iran and Syria, also corresponded to a desire to finish for a long time with any perspective of real opposition to the American plans for the greater Middle East and to Israeli expansionist aims.

However, this was to underestimate Hezbollah’s capacity to ensure the link between the building of a strong military resistance and the development of broad political alliances, capable of going beyond the logic of political and confessional bipolarisation. The building of a national consensus is a leitmotiv for Hezbollah. The 33-day war saw the combination of the politico-military resistance of Hezbollah, a broad political front in support of the resistance and a social resistance which did not have its base only in the Shiite community.

Since February 2006 Hezbollah has been engaged in a logic of political partnership with the Free Patriotic Current of General Aoun, a Christian organization which was originally fiercely anti-Syrian, and is today allied with Hezbollah to constitute a counterweight to the Hariri bloc whose rival it is, and which is now opposed to a line of political collaboration with the west. The support of part of the Christian community during the conflict turned out to be central, the strategic objective being to avoid any polarization on a confessional basis which would have weakened the capacities of the resistance in the south.

Secondly, a National Resistance Front was rapidly put in place in July 2006: it brought together the Hezbollah, the Lebanese Communist Party, which in its appeal of July 29 called to "take up arms again", the People's Party of Najih Wakim, which is a left wing Arab nationalist organization the majority of whose members are Greek Orthodox Christians, the Third Force of former Prime Minister Selim Hoss, and other smaller Arab nationalist or left-wing forces.

So there was the constitution of a political front that went beyond just the pro-Syrian parties: Aoun's current persevered with its policy of solidarity with Hezbollah, while a military coordination was established in the South and in Baalbeck in the East of the country, between the Islamic Resistance and the armed groups linked to the Communist Party and to Amal. Finally, a broad multi-confessional network of non-governmental organizations, with its base particularly among the young generation, regrouped for example in a structure called as-Samidoum, directed itself towards social work in solidarity with the Lebanese refugees on a political line of support to the resistance.

So there was an interaction between on the one hand the Hezbollah society of popular resistance made up of its political, military (the Islamic Resistance) and social (the network of foundations destined for the Martyrs, the wounded and the refugees) branches, and on the other hand a broad social and political resistance going beyond the divisions between communities and involving in particular Sunnis and Christians. It contributed to the failure of the American-Israeli plan, which was unable to find in Lebanon itself the political support that it needed to break the resistance. That represents a break with the situation of the 1970s and 1980s where Israel was able to have the support of part of the Maronite Christian community to intervene in Lebanon.

So the tendency has been reversed, and the long succession of Arab defeats, "which bends spirits and hearts" [2] Georges Corm, interviewd by Youssef Ait Akdim, Tel Quel online, September 24, 2006., seems to have been able to be broken. The events of July and August 2006 have furthermore revealed the contradictions and the singularities of the Hezbollah, which now stands out from the whole of the Islamist galaxy: its capacity for developing broad alliances, on a long term basis, with secular political structures and for overcoming certain confessional divisions that are specific to the Lebanese nation, are obliging it to make large-scale strategic readjustments. As the Lebanese historian and economist Georges Corm has stressed, "the patriotic and nationalist discourse of this Lebanese resistance should in the long term influence the different Islamist rhetorical discourses, taking them away from their delirious aspect and bringing them into the different national, local, and pan-Arab realities." [3]

A Plural History

Hezbollah was from the beginning a movement at the crossroads: its long gestation, from 1982 to the publication of the Appeal to the Disinherited in 1985, was the combined effect of three central events in the Middle East, which telescoped.

First of all, the invasion of Lebanon by Israel in 1982 and the occupation of southern Lebanon from 1979 onwards. Secondly, the effects of the Iranian revolution of 1979 on the Arab political landscape. Thirdly, the political affirmation of the Shiite communities in the course of the 1960s and 1970s, whether in Lebanon with the Movement of the Disinherited of the Imam Mussa Sadr or in Iraq with the Islamist Shiite party ad-Dawa of Muhammad Baqir as-Sadr. After the historical failure of Nasserite and Baathist Arab nationalism, symbolized by the Arab defeat by Israel in 1967 and by the alignment of Egyptian President Anwar as-Sadat on the Americans and the Israelis, the Iranian revolution of 1979 served as a symbol for the Arab world: combining anti-imperialist and Third Worldist rhetoric with the "statisation" of an Islam that was interpreted in a fundamentalist manner, the Iranian revolution made many young left-wing or nationalist militants turn towards Islamism.

So it was that a good number of Maoist cadres, in particular those of a left wing of the Palestinian Fatah, the Katiba at-Tullabiya (the Student Brigade), little by little passed over to Islam and in part to the Hezbollah. These same student brigades suffered, by the way, from the confessionalisation of the Lebanese civil war which also affected the Left. Thus they refused to take part in the massacres and the looting of the Christian village of Damour in 1978, which was partly organized by the Progressive Socialist Party: "A Marxist current close to Maoism, regrouping mainly Palestinian and Lebanese militants, it distinguished itself by its feats of arms against the Israeli army in southern Lebanon from 1976 onwards, but especially during the first Israeli invasion in 1978. This current was also characterised by a certain intellectual vivacity, by an abundance of debates and questioning. Searching for a revolutionary theory that was adapted to the context of Arab-Muslim civilization, these militants would be led towards a rediscovery of Islam." [4]

Beyond the Maoist and leftist fringe, many currents took part in the formation of the Hezbollah: the Lebanese members of the Iraqi Islamist Dawa Party in exile, who favour building an Islamic state by taking power; groups like the Lebanese Union of Muslim Students or the Rally of the Ulemas of the Bekaa; or the supporters of Imam Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, a particularly popular Shiite religious figure who preached in the southern suburbs of Beirut and whose theses are at the crossroads between Islamic revivalism and a form of social Third Worldism. It was Fadlallah who, in 1988, was one of the first to theorise the practical impossibility of an Islamic state in Lebanon, and who put forward at that time the concept of the Dawlat al-Insan, the "humanist state", based on the de-confessionalisation of the Lebanese political system.

Lastly, the creation of Hezbollah is organically linked to the split that affected the Shiite movement Amal. Amal, which is an acronym for the Detachment of the Lebanese Resistance, was the armed wing of the Movement of the Disinherited of the Imam Moussa Sadr, who died in 1978. Originally, in 1974, the Movement of the Disinherited saw itself as the party of the affirmation of the Shiites as a political community. The Shiites are in fact one of the poorest confessional groups in Lebanon.

They are politically under-represented, grouped mainly in the South of Lebanon, but also in the East, around the town of Baalbeck, and in the southern suburbs of Beirut. There is no clear ideological orientation in Amal, which regroups Shiites without distinction, from the most conservative Right to the far Left. However in 1982, nearly 500 militants grouped around Hussein al-Mussawi left Amal and created Islamic Amal,

which would constitute one of the backbones of the Hezbollah. They contested both the secular line of the new leader of Amal, Nabih Berri, and his turning against the Palestinian and Lebanese resistance from 1982 onwards.

The new formation then benefited from the military training and the political cooperation of the Iranian Guards of the Islamic Revolution, mainly installed in the plain of the Bekaa. From here comes the profoundly hybrid nature of the Hezbollah, resting on the two bases of Shiite Islamism and the national question: it has inherited political cadres who do not all come from the Islamic matrix, but who turned towards a political reading of Islam after the failure of the Left and of nationalism, and towards the re-appropriation of a Shiite cultural grounding which they consider as perfectly capable of being mobilised in the struggle against the occupation.

The proclamation of the Appeal to the Disinherited, in the Bir al'abd mosque in the south of Beirut on February 16, 1985 thus bears witness to this double nature of the Hezbollah: while it is a party working for the liberation of the territories occupied by Israel, it also recognises its political and ideological affiliation to Khomeini and to Iran, which gave its approval to the text. The Appeal argued for an Islamic state on the Iranian model but nevertheless renounced "imposing it by force". It thus called to "preserve Lebanon from any dependency on East or West", to "defeat the Zionist occupier" and to establish "a political system emanating from free popular choice".

At that time it attacked militants of the Lebanese Communist Party who were engaged in the National Front of the Lebanese Resistance, and was probably responsible for the death of two of its most brilliant intellectuals: Hussein Mroue and Mahdi Amil. At the same time it found itself opposed to Syria and to its main ally Amal, when the latter took part in the War of the Camps against the PLO in 1985. It then explicitly took a position in favour of the rights of the Palestinian in Lebanon, at the risk of provoking the hostility of the regime in Damascus.

It was only little by little that the nationalist profile of Hezbollah came to dominate its fundamentalist aspect: its integration into the Lebanese parliamentary system following the Taef peace agreement in 1990 was one of the major signs of this. As the only political party authorised to keep its weapons, it de facto took the political and military leadership of the resistance in the occupied South: that is why it felt at that point the need to come to terms with the rest of the Lebanese political spectrum, the building of a national consensus to protect the resistance being a condition sine qua non for its existence as a politico-military organization.

It was in the course of the 1990s that its new general secretary, Hassan Nasrallah, pushed forward a more open line and officially abandoned the perspective of an Islamic state in Lebanon. So there is a close relationship between the Hezbollah's progressive opening up to other Lebanese political and social forces and it being propelled to the title of first party of the resistance.

Relations with the left-wing and nationalist organisations started up again at this time and Hezbollah called a Conference of Support for the Resistance in the Bristol Hotel in Beirut on August 18, 1997, which brought together 27 left-wing and nationalist organisations. In the military domain, the creation of the Lebanese Brigade of Resistance to the Occupation made it possible from 1996 onwards for young militants of other religions or other political orientation to take part in resistance activities in the South alongside the Islamic Resistance, the military wing of the Hezbollah.

Comprising more than 2,000 members, the Brigades were then composed of 38% Sunnis, 25% Shiites, 17% Christians, and 20% Druses, whereas the composition of the Hezbollah remains exclusively Shiite. Lastly, the Hezbollah took part in 1994 in the creation of the Nationalist and Islamic Conference, a pan-Arab structure bringing together Islamist, nationalist and left-wing organisations with the aim of finding points of tactical and programmatic agreement between different groups who had previously been opposed to each other. It still meets every four years. When in May 2000 Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak took the decision to unilaterally withdraw his troops from South Lebanon, the Hezbollah drew the political dividends from it: a large part of the Lebanese people considered then that without the resistance of the Hezbollah the Israeli withdrawal would never happened.

Finally, like other Islamic movements, the Hezbollah progressively built a hegemony within the Lebanese population, which made it a social as well as political actor. Its work was in reality oriented towards four domains: political, military, social and cultural. Its political leadership involves a complex structure, composed of three organs; a Political Bureau, an Executive Committee and a Majlis ash-Shoura (Consultative Assembly), in addition to which there are several local commands. The Islamic Resistance, its military wing, comprises between 3,000 and 15,000 militia fighters, according to various estimates, to which should be added its own intelligence networks. It looks like a guerrilla movement, but the operations in July and August 2006 showed that it also acted as the embryo of a regular army, and that it was capable of sustaining prolonged ground combats. [5]

The society of resistance is also backed up by both a media apparatus, - the al-Manar television channel and an-Nour Radio - and a whole series of social and charitable institutions which make up for the failings of the Lebanese state, and which the Hezbollah itself in fact describes as "public services": the Jihad al-Binaa, whose role is the rebuilding of destroyed villages and neighbourhoods and supplying water to the southern suburbs of Beirut; the Islamic Health Organisation runs several dozen dispensaries; the ash-Shahid Institution takes charge of families who have lost members in combat or as result of the air raids, etc.

This political, social and cultural hegemony of the Hezbollah in Lebanese society is paradoxically a hegemony without domination, insofar as it seems to me no longer to form part of a strategy of taking power and crushing political forces which are opposed to it. The development of the society of resistance is, besides, indissociable from the financial aid brought by Iran to Hezbollah, the total amount of which is not known, but is estimated at several tens of millions of dollars per year.

However, the Shiite organizsation has its own autonomous financial resources, which come essentially from its fund-raising campaigns aimed at Lebanese and foreign donors, coming in particular from the Gulf and the Lebanese diaspora in Africa, from the annual collection of the Zakat (alms), as

well as from revenue generated by its investments in construction projects.

Contradictions and points of convergence

For Ali Fayyed, member of the Political Bureau of Hezbollah, who is in charge of the Consultative Centre for Study and Research, the Lebanese movement's think tank, "Hezbollah has national, pan-Arab and Islamic dimensions. The fourth dimension is a Shiite dimension. This dimension is a purely doctrinal and ideological dimension. These dimensions are illustrated at different levels. Its national dimension is illustrated by its relations with other Lebanese forces. Its Arab dimension is illustrated by its relations with Syria and other Arab political forces. Its Islamic dimension is illustrated by its relations with Iran. The points of convergence with the other forces are essentially the Palestinian cause and the struggle against American imperialism". [6]

However the plurality of political identities that the Hezbollah itself affirms raise some questions, because it engenders a certain number of contradictions, which are characteristic of Islamo-nationalist organizations:

The Hezbollah has made the tasks of national liberation its principal leitmotiv: still today, its obstinate and legitimate attachment to the question of the territories occupied by Israel, namely the Shebaa Farms and the Kfar Chiouba Hills, and its defence of the rights of the Palestinians, make it one of the principal Middle Eastern organisations that has a political practice that is entirely oriented towards national and anti-colonial objectives: nevertheless, the Hezbollah remains a Shiite confessional organisation.

So it has to defend the fact that its social and militant base remains exclusively Shiite, and that a non-Shiite cannot join the Hezbollah. Certainly, there exist circles of sympathisers which are close to the Hezbollah: the Lebanese Brigades of Resistance to the Occupation were one example. Its parliamentary group includes Christians and Sunnites. But that remains limited. So the Hezbollah finds itself symbolically propelled, in the popular and political imagination, to the rank of premier Arab resistance organisation; its popularity goes far beyond the religious and political divisions that are characteristic of the Arab world, whereas its structure and its composition remain purely Shiite.

The Hezbollah officially advocates the abolition of the Lebanese confessional and communitarist system, and has done so since it first took part in parliamentary elections. Already in 1992, its electoral programme posed as a double priority 'the liberation of Lebanon from the Zionist occupation and the abolition of political confessionalism". Demanding the creation of "a single electoral district in Lebanon", the electoral programme of 1992 also demanded "the abolition, on the administrative level, of recruitment based on a sectarian or confessional level". It is this system which in part encourages clientelism and corruption, the whole of Lebanese political and social life being based on a mechanism of sharing out posts of responsibility and elected positions on the basis of confessional quotas.

Now, once again, the paradox is as follows: the Hezbollah, which has made the abolition of the Lebanese communitarist system one of the key points of its political programme, nevertheless remains one of the main beneficiaries of this system. So it has not engaged in a frontal battle against political communitarism, not hesitating to re-elect or to call for a vote for the defenders of confessional sectarianism, particularly during the last Lebanese legislative elections in spring 2005. That is again one of the main reproaches that the Lebanese Communist Party, which has moved closer to it on many other questions, addresses to the Hezbollah. For Khaled Hadadé, general secretary of the PCL, the relationship with the Hezbollah is ambiguous, because "the Hezbollah has two faces: a positive face which is the resistance and another face which is that of its religious and Islamic confessional affiliation. If today the Hezbollah is defeated, it would be the resistance of Hezbollah which is defeated.

The confessional dimension will remain intact and that will be a pole of attraction for the reconstruction of Lebanon on confessional lines. We were worried before, but we are less so now, because the fact that the Hezbollah is resisting and maintaining itself will make it evolve towards a greater openness in internal Lebanese questions. We have not yet been able to work out with the Hezbollah a common vision of Lebanese society. At the last election they allied themselves with Walid Joumblatt's party, with Hariri's party and the present majority and with the Lebanese Forces. The only party that stood against these parties in the south was the Communist Party. But I think and I hope that the present situation will lead the Hezbollah to evolve, including in its vision of the internal organization of Lebanese society and in the direction of a reform of institutions". [7]

Its socio-economic orientation oscillates between several tendencies. On the one hand, it went into the Siniora government in 2005, whereas this government situated itself in the neo-liberal continuity of the period of Hariri, the former Lebanese prime minister who was assassinated, and who systematically subbordinated Lebanon to the dictates of the IMF and the World Bank. On the other hand it committed its forces to the demonstration in defence of public services on May 10, 2006, alongside the Free Patriotic Current of General Michel Aoun and the Lebanese Communist Party, and contributed to the success of the mobilization, which involved for the first time several hundred thousand people. Basing itself on a poor social base, it stands officially on the line of a strong social state, of a Keynesian type, and of general policies of redistributing national wealth. For Ali Fayyad, "the state should have a role in the protection of the popular classes. Islamic economic thought does not accept the market economy without any constraints.

"Nor is it favourable to the statist economy such as we saw it in the countries of the Eastern bloc. Let us say that the spirit of the Welfare State is closest to the spirit of the Islamic model, it is the idea of a strong social state and a regulated market. Of the three phases of capitalism: liberalism, the Welfare State and unrestrained neo-liberalism, the phase of the Welfare State is the closest to ours. (...) We want a state which takes the side of the poor, against the multi-nationals, against the international economic institutions, against the logic of unlimited productivist and capitalist accumulation". [8].

According to Ali Fayyad, the Hezbollah thus seeks to identify with a certain form of anti neo-liberalism. It is furthermore the only Islamic movement to have taken part in the World Social Forums since 2003 and to have translated and circulated the

documents of the WSF to its leadership. Its research centre has furthermore had translated into Arabic the writings of Latin American liberation theology. It does not however hesitate to collaborate with political forces which are opposed to it on everything, whether it is on the question of the occupation or on the question of the political and social reform of the Lebanese state.

Rafiq al-Hariri's sister Bahia was elected on its electoral list, whereas she is opposed to the Hezbollah both politically and economically and is a typical representative of the Lebanese bourgeoisie. One question remains posed: will the Hezbollah break out of the classical practice of Islamic movements, which only see the social question from the angle of charity work, or will it succeed in having a political practice that is directed towards those that it claims to defend, that is the most disinherited classes, which besides make up its social base? That would then imply for the Hezbollah breaking politically with some of yesterday's allies and defining more distinctly its political alliances.

We also too often forget that throughout the years 2004 and 2005, and following on the assassination of the former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, the confrontation between the Forces of the 14th of March, which are anti-Syrian and pro-Western, and the Hezbollah and its allies, also covered a social cleavage which will continue in the future: "The partisans of the Hariri family regroup today the ultra-liberal branch of Lebanese society, in other words, the world of business, no matter from what community, hostile in principle to any state that is strong and redistributes wealth. On the side of the supporters of the Syrian presence however, it is clearly a state that is strong and that redistributes wealth that is being called for by the Shi'ite parties Hezbollah and Amal and by the secular Baath party which supports Syria". [9] The fault line that was opened up after the death of Rafiq al-Hariri does not therefore involve only the national question, the weapons of the resistance and the role of Syria. It is much broader and covers the social question.

One of the last contradictions certainly remains the question of Hezbollah's foreign supporters: tactically linked to Syria which sees in the Hezbollah a sure means of continuing to exert pressure on Israel and on Western governments, in particular concerning the question of the occupied Golan, the Shiite nationalist organisation also remains politically and ideologically linked to Iran. But there too, things turn out to be more complicated: the Hezbollah maintains relations with all the components of the Iranian regime, from the reformists around Khatami to the most hard-line conservatives.

Above all, the Hezbollah neighbourhoods and villages can in no way be compared to Iran: there is no longer the imposition by the Hezbollah of an Islamic model in the neighbourhoods and you can see in the southern suburbs of Beirut veiled women and non-veiled women mixing together without any problem. Just as it is common in the zones controlled by Hezbollah to be able to express differences: the Lebanese Communist Party and Amal have a recognized political existence in Southern Lebanon. And "Hezbollahland" is in no way a piece of Iranian territory in Lebanon.

Its social and charity institutions are open to all Lebanese communities. The Hezbollah is no longer an anti-democratic party of social repression, and this is because of its pragmatism, which requires that it build a national consensus around it to protect the arms of the resistance. Its political and military collaboration in the south with the Lebanese Communist Party, in the framework of the Resistance Front, in July and August 2006, also demonstrates this.

Officially recognizing the Marja'ya [10] of the Iranian conservative Khameini, it is nevertheless the case that the militants of the Party of God are still close to the more open positions of the Imam Fadlallah, who remains opposed to a number of Iranian theses, notably that of the wilayat al-faquih, the theory of the jurist-guide arbitrarily imposed by Khomeini, which wants to guarantee to the Iranian leadership the political leadership of the whole Shiite world.

So there is a growing gap between the practice of the Hezbollah, its internal profile, and its external, Iranian affiliation. "The Hezbollah officially follows Khameini, in whom it sees the party's Marja'ya, and it has maintained warm relations with Iran since the 1980s, at the time when Iran contributed to arming and training the militia which would become the Hezbollah. It regularly consults with the Iranian leaders (...). Iran has furthermore continued to give military aid to the Islamic Resistance, providing in particular the rockets that it has in its arsenal. However, these relations in no way signify that Iran is in anyway dictating the Hezbollah's policies or the positions that it adopts, nor that it is capable of controlling the party's actions.

Besides, the Iranian efforts to infuse into the Lebanese Shiite milieu an Iran-centred pan Shiite identity have run up against their Arab identity and have only reinforced the Lebanese nationalism of the Hezbollah itself" [11]. The links with Iran seem to be today more practical and strategic that ideological. They are still religious but most certainly political.

Political Recomposition

The 33-day war has confirmed the political centrality of the Hezbollah in the Middle East. This centrality began in 2000 after the withdrawal of Israeli troops and today it has become particularly stark, because it expresses the different kinds of political recomposition in the Middle East.

The Islamist current finds itself today obliged to put on the complex clothing of nationalism, which puts it face to face with real contradictions: by taking over a large part of the historic objectives of movements of national liberation, it is now forced to re-adjust its program, its objectives, and even its programmatic basis. The nationalisation of Islamic movements, or the formation of national movements inspired by religion, has been concretised both by the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian legislative elections of January 2006 and by the symbolic and political victory of the Hezbollah in July and August 2006.

So the comparison with Islamic movements of the 1980s is difficult to maintain: since the 1990s we have seen both an islamisation of the nationalist discourse and a nationalisation and Arabisation of the Islamist discourse; what is more, the frameworks of collaboration between the Left, the nationalists, and the Islamists have multiplied, because of the non-resolution by these three currents of the national question in the Arab world. There is today an increased transversality between these three currents which do not exist in the past. The speeches of Nasrallah during the conflict gave more place to Lebanese and Arab

questions than to those of a hypothetical Muslim Umma.

There is now a dynamic circulation, systematic passages between a new form of anti-colonial pan-Arabism, a territorial nationalism (Palestinian, Lebanese), and a political Islam which is being mobilised as a cultural weapon in the framework of the struggle against the occupation. The Hezbollah itself situates its discourse at the intersection of several identities: confessional-Shiite, national-Lebanese, transnational-Arab, religious-Islamic. The left Nasserite, editor of one of the principal Lebanese dailies, al-Akhbar, Joseph Samaha, considers that "if we look at the situation now, if we look at the state of the Arab world, the Arabs today are expressing a great demand for a national or patriotic current. And after the defeat of the Arab nationalist current, we thought at a certain moment that the left could fill this vacuum.

And it did not do so. It is gradually the Islamists who have filled this vacuum, with all the transformations that they have experienced, in the 1990s, with the end of the Soviet Union, with the end of the war in Afghanistan, with the change in American policies, and with the cadres who came from left-wing movements and from the Arab nationalist movement. (...) Since I know quite well the Hezbollah and its cadres, every time that you discuss with them, you have the impression that they are nationalists, and what is more: that this raw material, that this raw material could have been, that this raw material could be, that of a big movement of the Left". [12]

So it is more a nationalism in the process of being recomposed than the simple rise of Islamism that the Hezbollah is expressing: the new transversality between Islam and nationalism on the one hand, the change in generations symbolized by the death of Yasser Arafat and the rise to power of cadres who are less than 50 years old (the Prime Minister Ismael Hanniya in Palestine, Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon), also mean that the symbolic leadership of Arab nationalism is passing from Sunnism to Shiism, all that expresses a change of period whose consequences have not yet all been drawn.

The qualitative change in Islamist movements that is symbolised by the Hezbollah means that we should not draw excessive analogies with the frameworks of the 1970s and 1980s, in particular with the Iran of Khomeini: whereas the Iranian revolution developed in a country with a Muslim majority, in a period of strong growth of Islamic fundamentalism, the period opened by the 1990s and the 2000 decade marks the rise of Islamism in places where it is obliged to come to terms with a social, political, and confessional context which pushes it to accept a certain democratic consensus and to come to terms with other forces: "In Lebanon and Iraq the Shiites are narrowly in the majority, with an important complex of minorities, and in Palestinian Hamas is only one of the four most important factions.

Hezbollah must share power and come to terms with the Sunnis, the Christians, and the Druses, and in the same logic, in Iraq the Shiites must share power and come to terms with the Sunnis and the Christians; in Palestinian Hamas must share power and come to terms with Fatah, the Islamic Jihad, the FPLP and the FDLP. In this framework, the Islamists in Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq are exactly the opposite of the Islamists in Iran (...). The formidable demographic diversity of Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine works very much in favour of the development of a pluralist society and a cosmopolitan political culture" [13].

Thus it is that the Hezbollah must itself be understood in a framework that is both Lebanese and Arab: because it is the social and multi-confessional reality of Lebanon and the profoundly Arab nature of its popularity that impose on it practical and theoretical aggiornamentos, in the same way that it is the historical, social, democratic, and secularist composition of Palestinian society which is forcing Hamas to integrate into political nationalism in a consensual way. So it is a question of painting the Hezbollah neither in red nor in brown [14] but can be above all the expression of a radicalisation, derailed and deformed, of the national and democratic struggle (...). [15].

The Islamist movements are often understood as having a mass base composed both of the radicalised middle class and petty bourgeois layers and of the most popular and most oppressed classes. With a social base that is made up of the poor rural classes of the South and the East and of the insecure and urbanized social layers of South Beirut, it would be quite difficult to decently argue that Hezbollah represents the interests of the Lebanese elites.

All the more so in that in spite of its colossal fortune, the Shiite movement has rather distinguished itself by the simple and honest way of life of its leaders and by their renunciation of material privileges, a fact which contributes largely to their political credit and which stands out from the endemic corruption of the great Lebanese political families.

That is why the principal criticism from the left that can be addressed to Hezbollah in the present period is to not sufficiently link up the national question and the social question, whereas it claims precisely to be the representative of the disinherited of Lebanon. On two occasions, in 2000 and 2005, it finally held out its hand to the Christian and Sunni Lebanese elites, whereas these people have unceasingly overtime stabbed it in the back and renewed their alliance with the West, demanding that it be disarmed and capitulating totally over Lebanese national demands.

The PCL and the national Left think that the Hezbollah partly dissipated the fruits of victory, following the Israeli withdrawals in 2000 and 2005. They would like to see it taking up the fight once and for all against the Lebanese confessional system, which is part and parcel of the mode of

neo-colonial domination in Lebanon.

The whole question is to know whether a movement like the Hezbollah, as a result of the profound evolutions it has gone through, is capable of that. Because the movement itself is divided between a conservative tendency that comes more or less from the former cadres of the Dawa Party, still attached to a conservative and reactionary view of social relations, and the tendency that is younger and more open, having been formed more in the framework of the struggle against the occupation and of the national question than in the framework of the historical fundamentalist matrix. The speech by Hassan Nasrallah on September 22, 2006 seems in fact to outline a ferocious criticism of the Lebanese government, calling for a new government and for a correlation between a just and protective state and a strong resistance.

The question of the evolution of the Hezbollah is posed by Nasrallah himself: "I imagine that it will be possible on the basis of the experience of this last war to rethink many of the ideas and the programme of the Hezbollah. (...) This new situation will certainly leave a very deep mark on the mentality of the Hezbollah, on its understanding of things, on its functioning, on its action, and on its relations". [16]What is more, since the end of the war the Hezbollah and the forces that have supported the resistance, from Michel Aoun to the PCL, are trying to find a political expression and perspective that is internal to the dynamic of the national resistance, by discussing together a minimum program of transition towards a state that would combine resistance and social development.

Which necessarily supposes, for the PCL, the abolition of the confessional system and of quotas. No one knows yet if these discussions will succeed, but we have to take note of the ability of Hezbollah to allow itself to be questioned on these issues. The war in Lebanon was also deeply revealing of the political and ideological alignment of the bourgeois or aristocratic elites on the projects of the Americans.

The invitation to Tony Blair by the Lebanese government of Fuad Siniora, hardly a month after the end of the conflict, furthermore deeply offended Hezbollah. The breaks that it will or will not be capable of carrying out, the recognition of its real opponents and its real allies, will be decisive tests in the coming months and years. They will also determine the future of Islamo-nationalism and of new forms of Arab nationalism, which now find themselves obliged to define their political, economic, and social content: "the aim of a left wing policy is certainly the neutralisation of the reactionary dynamics which speak in the name of Islam; but it is not only pure denunciation, confrontation, frontal war (...). It is also positive interaction, exchanges back and forth, controversy, reflection, practice. (...) So perhaps there will be born a transversal dynamic of resistance to present modernity, a dynamic which transgresses it and goes beyond it.

A dynamic in which will participate popular currents defending an Islam that breaks with its reactionary interpretations. While it is hypocritical to call on Islam to adapt to the present day it is absolutely necessary to call for a political Islam that is open to the future and that can go beyond its time. But that lesson also applies to the Left." [17] Nonetheless, it will take time to understand what has changed: a symbolic relationship of forces can find a new equilibrium, a pan-Arab nationalism undergoing thorough change, an Arab world which is perhaps regaining confidence in itself, political movements which, whatever they are, from the Left to the Islamists, are now confronted with new questions, new orientations, new strategies. And the rules of the games have perhaps changed: fear has been conquered.

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NOTES

[1] Maxime Rodinson, "Islam, doctrine de progres ou de reaction? » in Marxisme et monde musulman, Editions du Seuil, 1972, p. 129.

[2] Rashad abu Shawar, « Tous les elements de la victoire » (« All the elements of victory »), pan-Arab daily al-Qods al-Arabi, August 9, 2006.

[3] Georges Corm, interviewd by Youssef Ait Akdim, Tel Quel online, September 24, 2006.

[4] Walid Charara and Frederic Dumont, Le Hezbollah, un movement islamo-nationaliste, Editions Fayard, 2004, p. 93.

[5] To this must be added the arsenal of rockets, still estimated at 20,000 according to its general secretary, as well as all the long and medium range missiles provided by Iran, which are not usually part of the "classical" arsenal of guerilla movements.

[6] Ali Fayyed, interview with the author, Consultative Centre for Study and Research, Haret Hareik, Beirut, February 10, 2006.

[7] Khalid Hadadé, interview with the author and with the international delegation in solidarity with Lebanon, Beirut, August 2, 2006.

[8] Ali Fayyed, interview with the author

[9] Charles Abdallah, « Un printemps, oui, mais pour qui? » (« Yes, a spring, but for who ?") in "Ou va le Liban ?" ("Where is Lebanon going?") Revue Confluences Mediterranee, number 56, Winter 2005-2006, L'Harmattan, p 32.

[10] The marja'ya is the Shiite religious leadership. There are several marja'ya among the Shiites, the best known one being that of the Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq. The Hezbollah officially follows that of Iran and of Ayatollah Khameini, although its militants remain close to the Lebanese Imam Fadlallah, one of the theoretical inspirations of the Hezbollah.

[11] Lara Deeb, « Une introduction au Hezbollah » (« An introduction to the Hezbollah »), http:bellaciao.org/fr/article=31950, August 4, 2006.

[12] Joseph Samaha, interview with the author in the headquarters of as-Safia, Hamra, February 17, 2006. Joseph Samaha is an important intellectual personality of the Lebanese nationalist Left and he was for several years in charge of the left-wing daily as-Safia. After a violent political conflict within Safir, throughout the year 2005, he was invited to take over the former daily of the PCL, al-Akhbar, in order to make it the new tribune of left-wing ideas in Lebanon, but also of all the currents attached to the resistance. The first issue of al-Akhbar came out right in the middle of the war.

[13] Hamid Dabashi, "Lessons from Lebanon: rethinking rational liberation movement", al-Ahram weekly, 7th-13th September 2006.

[14] According to the well-known expression of Gilbert Achcar, "neither fascism nor progressive". On condition of also considering, parallel to this, that history remains open to both negative and positive possibilities, depending on the present conjuncture, and of not "essentialising" Islamic or nationalist movements in an eternal medium-term., but of really understanding all of its contradictions and potentialities as a nationalist movement of religious inspiration. Because as Gilbert Achcar writes, "the growth of the fundamentalist current, in many if not most cases, is not primarily the expression of society swinging to the right, as was the rise of fascism in Europe (...)

[15] Gilbert Achcar, L'Orient incandescent. Le Moyen Orient au miroir marxiste. Editions Page Deux, 2003, p 50.

[16] Hassan Nasrallah, interview with Talal Salman, as-Safir daily, September 27, 2006.

[17] Sadri Khiari and Mohamed Cherif-Ferjani, « Trajectoires et paradoxes de l'islam politique. Contre l'orientalisme et l'orientalisme inverse » (« Trajectories and paradoxes of political Islam. Against orientalism and inverted orientalism »). In Contretemps no. 12, February 2005, Editions Textuel, Paris.

Thailand

An unending spiral of coups?

Danielle Sabai and Jean Sanuk

The coup d'etat in Thailand on Tuesday September 19, 2006 put an end to nearly six years of parliamentary democracy, the longest period that Thailand has ever known. It is the latest of a long series. Eighteen such coups have taken place under the reign of King Bhumibol, crowned in 1946, not counting those organised by the royalists in the 1930s when fighting for thee re-establishment of the absolute monarchy.

Development of capitalism without democratic revolution

How can we explain this sad record and shed some light on current events? A glance at the contemporary history of Thailand highlights the ongoing power struggle opposing the monarchy, the army and the state apparatus. In the wings, the mercantile and then industrial bourgeoisie have chosen their best representatives from among them according to the circumstances. As the following article explains, it was only with the coming to power of Thaksin in 2001 that the bourgeoisie decided to directly exercise power. The recent coup in one way sanctions a return to the rules of the Thai political system and puts an end to the illusions according to which economic development and the end of the cold war would naturally lead to the end of dictatorship. This is not about fatalism or cultural particularism: Thaïs, like other peoples, aspire to democracy. The mass mobilisations of the 1970s and 1990s bear witness to that fact. But the repression was brutal, imposing defeat and obliging the popular movement to rebuild itself several times over.

The origin of this quasi-permanent authoritarianism in Thailand's political life is to be found in the formation of the economic and political system. The first structuring factor is the belated character of the industrial revolution. In Thailand as in most of the other countries of Southeast Asia, the industrial revolution only really began in the years 1955-1970, with acceleration in the 1980s and 1990s. Consequently, the working class remained for a long time very much in the minority as compared to the peasantry and did not exist as a major political actor at the time of the formation of the political system. It was only in 2006 that the Thai peasantry passed below 50% of the active population. Visiting the immense industrial zone from the metropolitan region of Bangkok to the southeast in the direction of Cambodia, one can observe an industrial revolution which is still underway and the formation of a working class of several million individuals, very concentrated geographically, little unionised and above all without political adherence. The poor peasantry, notably in the northeast of Thailand, constantly supported the political forces of social democracy or Communism but without succeeding in influencing the government in Bangkok. The urban working class only emerged as a significant social class from the 1960s and 1970s. It was then harshly repressed to the point where the workers' movement, in the classic sense of the term is today practically non-existent, to the great joy of Thai and foreign private enterprise.

The second structuring factor relates to the specificity of the history of Thailand in relation to its neighbours. Unlike the other Asiatic countries, Thailand was not colonised directly by the western powers or Japan, even if it has been subjected to their influence. This is one of the reasons for the late maintenance of an absolute monarchy, until 1932. In other Asiatic countries, the monarchy had been suppressed or much marginalized by the colonial powers. The wars of national liberation in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, in China, and in another context, the war in Korea or the landing of Chaing Kai Shek in Taiwan in 1949 radically shook up the history of these countries. This was not the case in Thailand which has never been colonised, nor "punished" by the allies for having collaborated with the Japanese during the war. Consequently, there has not been a bourgeois democratic revolution or a major conflict introducing a rupture in the history of Thailand, but a historic continuity whose origin is to be sought in the creation of a constitutional monarchy in 1932.

From absolute monarchy to dictatorship

In Thailand, a palace revolution, which lasted 3 hours, put an end to the absolute monarchy on June 24, 1932. The "1932 revolution", as it is wrongly known, was led by a group of about 100 people, the "party of the people", composed equally of officers commanded by Phibun and civilians led by Pridi. Trained in Europe, they aspired to exercise the highest responsibilities in the army and in the state apparatus. But they were conscious that the nobles, often ignorant, monopolised the height of the hierarchy. Far from being republicans, they would attempt to convince the king to share power in the framework of a constitutional monarchy where this latter would conserve important powers. The first government was for example led by a representative of the king, who organised in May 1933 a coup against Pridi when the later proposed a plan for "voluntary nationalisation of land" according to which the nobles would agree to sell their land to the state. Pridi was forced into exile, the officers of the party of the people were dispersed to the four corners of the country, and an anti-Communist law was adopted against "any attempt at partial or total abolition of private property". The royalist victory was ephemeral, with the young officers of the "party of the people" succeeding in a counter-coup in June 1933 which brought Pridi to power. In October 1933, the royalists organised a new coup, mobilising troops from the provinces who marched on the capital. The troops in Bangkok, commanded by Phibun and financed by businessmen, won the day but the government of the party of the people did not harshly repress the royalists and invited them to resume negotiations with a view to a political compromise. This political instability is the consequence of the exclusion of the population from power struggles which went on according to the influence of the respective factions inside the army. The constitution of 1932 did not bring real democracy allowing the people to choose its deputies, and where appropriate support them. A parliament was certainly created but only half of its members were elected, the other half being nominated by the king and the government made up of the "party of the people". The formation of political parties was authorised in 1933 and workers obtained the right to create trade unions. But during the first rice mill strike, the union leaders

were arrested and the unions suppressed. Political parties were also banned after the attempt by the royalists to create their own party to win a majority of deputies in the assembly. Political liberties were suppressed and the press muzzled after a few months. The years which followed saw three clans in contention: the royalists who sought to re-establish the absolute monarchy against those who they considered to be "communists" and the two factions of the "party of the people" in government, the civilians and the military. Coups and counter-coups followed in succession, without the people ever rising up in favour of one or another faction. The royalists were the first losers. After the defeat of the 1933 coup, the king and most of the nobles left for Europe. The king abdicated in 1935. If it had had the will, it would have been easy for the "party of the people" at the time to definitively suppress a monarchy which was parasitic, discredited and defeated. But the "revolutionaries" of 1932 did not want a republic which could have led to a democratisation progressively allowing the people to participate in politics. The "voluntary nationalisation" of the lands of the nobility was abandoned, even though voices were raised in favour of the sale of the royal domain to finance reflation of an economy hit by the crisis of 1929. The government preferred to safeguard the monarchy and designated an obscure nephew of the king, then aged 10, as successor. But for 16 years, until 1951, Thailand would remain without a reigning king living on its soil.

The civilians led by Pridi were the second losers. The survival of the government relied on the ability of the officer members of the "party of the people" to oppose the battalions of Bangkok to the provincial battalions led by the royalists. The price to pay would be a rise in power of the army once the royalist danger was sidelined. The numbers of the army were doubled, the military budget increased to 26% of the national budget from 1933 to 1937. The head of the military faction, Phibun, became prime minister in 1938, and combined the posts of defence minister, foreign minister and head of the army. Parliament was subjugated and the army share of the budget boosted to a third. Phibun built alliances with the Japanese government and founded a youth movement with the Hitler Youth as model. Theses affirming the superiority of the "Thai race" emerged as well as a racist campaign against the significant Chinese minority in Bangkok and other ethnic minorities. The army also became a source of industrialisation. The ministry of defence created public enterprises in textiles and oil. In 1941, a "national plan of industrialisation" extended the intervention of the ministry to a whole range of industrial, agricultural and transport activities. The objective was to control, indeed expropriate, the enterprises existing in these areas, whose proprietors were often Chinese, "so as to create a Thai economy for the Thaïs", for whom a whole series of jobs were reserved. A code of nationality was adopted in 1939, obliging ethnic minorities to "become" Thaïs, by learning the language, changing their name and sending their children to Thai schools. Many Chinese entrepreneurs would thus become "Thai" and would direct new public enterprises. Nationalism would thus allow a joining of the industrial and mercantile bourgeoisie with the civil and military political apparatus.

A palace revolution, the establishment of the institutional monarchy would durably affect Thailand. Beyond the numerous coups and countercoups in the following years, all the structural elements described above would endure and determine the current political life of Thailand.

Pridi and the royalists in exile who fought at the side of the allies came back to power at the expense of Phibun in 1944. The royalty was reincorporated by Pridi in political and economic life following the second world war. Then Pridi was again sidelined and forced into exile because he was no longer useful to the royalists or the military. The royalists, who founded the "democrat party" and the army fought for control of the government. The generals accepted the return of the king in 1951 on condition that he accepted a limitation of his powers. Faced with his refusal, they organised a new coup to impose this power sharing on him through a new constitution. Parliament, where the majority of deputies are nominated, is one of the places which embody this power sharing. The second is the government where the military call the shots, which does not stop the king from negotiating the nominations.

The victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, and the wars of independence in the neighbouring countries were a veritable godsend for the generals, the bourgeoisie and the royalists. The US made Thailand a bastion of the anti-Communist struggle. 45,000 US soldiers were stationed in Thailand in 1969. Three quarters of bombs launched on North Vietnam and Laos between 1965-68 came from Thailand. 11,000 Thai soldiers fought in South Vietnam and thousands were enrolled as mercenaries to fight in Laos. From 1953, US military aid represented 2.5 times the budget of the defence of Thailand, which would strengthen the possibility of the military factions who received it mounting a successful coup. New sectors of industry and services developed to supply the US army making the fortune of the Thai bourgeoisie but also the generals who, in continuity with the 1930s, created enterprises to profit directly from the economic boom or took up posts on the boards of directors to enrich themselves indirectly.

The restoration of the monarchy was organised in concert by the US and the military so as to strengthen national unity and political stability. It was pursued actively starting from 1957, by the dictator of the time, Sarit, six years after the return of the new king, Bhumibol, to Thailand; A new ceremonial was created so that the king could claim a convincing moral and political legitimacy. In contrast to the kings of the beginning of the century who sought to incarnate modernity by adopting "western values" and rarely appeared in public, medieval rituals were updated and king Bhumibol made many tours of the provinces, where he sponsored works of charity and agricultural development projects. That allowed him to become popular in a country where social protection was then non-existent and to appear as the defender of poor peasants, left for dead by industrial modernisation. A royalist was nominated as minister of education and new manuals were charged with presenting the king as the father of the nation and the Thaïs as his children. The US made their contribution by

reproducing on a grand scale portraits of the king which were then distributed throughout the country. The general Sarit used the growing popularity of the king to render legitimate the coup he organised in 1957 to overthrow Phibun. He visited the king on the eve and the day of the coup. Sarit undertook to abrogate a law decided by Phibun limiting the concentration of land and which directly threatened the property interests of the royal family. In exchange, on the day of the coup d'État, the king named him "defender of the capital" then sent him a message of encouragement and support. It was on this occasion that a ritual whose objective is to muzzle popular protests against the dictators was introduced. When the king has given his support, his subjects can only obey. In the future, practically all coups would be organised with the benediction of the king, which allows him incidentally to influence the choice of dictators. That also allows the monarchy to accredit the idea that political instability is not due to the coups which re-establish order, but to parliamentary democracy, this foreign body imported wrongly into Thai society. This idea is today again taken up by complacent observers who affirm that democracy is not a universal value but an element of western culture. Thailand and more generally the Asiatic countries having a different culture, it is normal that democratic freedoms and parliamentary democracy are limited, and as needs be, suspended by military coups which "repair" the faults of a system which is not adapted to "Asian values" such as the search for consensus to preserve national unity. These "culturalist" explanations serve as supports to the dictatorships who use them to justify their existence.

Reality is otherwise. From their childhood, young Thais are systematically indoctrinated in school and in families in respecting "the king, religion, and the nation" as it was put by King Chulalongkorn at the beginning of the 20th century. Secularism and the republic are concepts which are unknown and dangerous because they are illegal. This brainwashing which now relies on modern means of communication and on a cult of the royal family renders critical thought and the exercise of democratic liberties impossible. How can equality be conceptualised and demanded when one has to respect the numerous hierarchies existing and when one is a subject of the king and not a citizen?

Despite these supplementary obstacles introduced by the monarchical restoration, it is all the more remarkable that popular mobilisations against poverty and in favour of democracy multiplied throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

Industrial revolution and renewal of social struggles

These popular struggles were the belated consequence of the social upheavals brought about by the industrial revolution which took shape starting from the end of the 1950s. New social layers were strengthened or appeared. The national industrial bourgeoisie expanded and enlarged the initial circle of the traditional Chinese bourgeoisie and the public industrial sector. The Thai government practiced a protectionist policy, classic at this time, allowing the creation of national industrial enterprises, then later encouraged foreign companies, particularly Japanese ones, to set up in Thailand. Industrialisation was concentrated in and around Bangkok then later towards the southeast, along the Gulf of Thailand which offers an opening onto the sea and facilitates exports.

As a consequence, the population of Bangkok went from 780,000 to 2.5 million from 1947 to 1970, or a tripling in 23 years. Between 1960 and 1970, the working class and the "middle class" employed above all in services increased by 49% against an increase in the active population of 22%; between 1970 and 1980 these figures were respectively 85% and 38%. The student population increased from 18,000 in 1961 to 100,000 in 1972. This new worker, student and urban population in rapid growth demonstrated and went on strike. The official statistics, which underestimate the reality, record 34 strikes of an average length of 2.6 days implying 7,603 workers in 1972, at the height of the military dictatorship. In 1973, when there was an uprising in favour of democracy, 501 strikes were recorded involving 178,000 workers but of a lower average length, 1.7 days. 70% of these strikes took place after October 14, 1973 on the day after a demonstration which, at the initiative of students, gathered 500,000 people in Bangkok to demand the reestablishment of the constitution and an elected parliament. A delegation was received by the king. But on the morning of October 14 the army fired on the crowd of demonstrators which had not yet dispersed, killing 77 people and wounding 857. The strikes were clearly political protest strikes. Despite this ferocious repression, the strikes continued from 1974 to 1976, involving more workers and lasting longer. These were years of intense political debates and of radicalisation where Thai students, discovering and importing the ideas developed in the West by the student movement of 1968, discovered revolutionary ideas, elaborating also their own thought starting from an attempted synthesis between the ideals of justice borne by Buddhism and Marxism. Demonstrations were daily and maintained the pressure on the government. But above all, Thai students joined their struggle with that of the workers and then the peasants. In 1974, they supported 6,000 textile workers in a strike which forced the government to increase the minimum wage and introduce better social legislation which legalised trade unions. The peasants, coming mainly form the north came to demonstrate in Bangkok to win an increase in the price of rice. Here again the government retreated. Encouraged, the peasants founded the Federation of Peasants of Thailand (FPT) which rapidly recruited 1.5 million peasants in 41 provinces. Young monks joined their demonstrations.

This ascending cycle of popular struggles was intolerable for the most reactionary wing of the army, the bourgeoisie and the monarchy. Following the victory of the wars of national liberation in Vietnam, Cambodia and nearby Laos where the monarchy was abolished, the elites in power could not accept the unification of the popular movements and their joining with the Communist guerrillas.

Formed in 1930 by Ho chi Minh, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) remained for a long time a rear base for the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists operating from Thailand towards their countries of origin. It had few Thaïs and

repression limited its influence in Thai political life. It was during the war that the CPT emerged from marginality through being a very active branch of the résistance to the Japanese army. It held a new founding congress in 1942 with the goal of anchoring itself in Thai society. At the end of the war and the suppression of the anti-Communist laws, it emerged from clandestinity to contest elections, and engaged in trade union work. It coordinated two large-scale strikes in 1945 and 1947 in the rice mills, and organised mass demonstrations on May 1, 1946 and 1947. From this date the Maoist current was in the majority. The CPT began to debate a turn towards the countryside to organise there a guerrilla movement which would then allow the conquest of the cities. This orientation was implemented in 1961. Some guerrilla foci were organised in the hills of the north, or among the Mong, Yao and Lua minorities, in the northeast, the poorest rural region in Thailand, and in the south with a Malay majority in conjunction with the Communist Party of Malaysia. In 1969, the Thai army estimated that the guerrillas had 8,000 combatants, controlled 412 villages, and that 6,000 others were subject to its influence involving nearly 4 million people. The repression of the army was brutal. Incapable of conquering the guerrillas in the forests, the army bombarded the forests with napalm, massacred blindly the village populations, in particular the ethnic minorities, and razed thousands of hectares of forest to deprive the guerrillas of their natural shelter. But if the guerrillas achieved a localised success, they were incapable of exercising a real influence in the cities. The development of worker and student struggles in Bangkok and in the big cities offered it the opportunity to break this isolation. It is this which the army wished to stop.

From the end of 1974, the army, bourgeoisie and monarchy organised their response, creating fascist militias, the "movement of village scouts" and a movement of "vigilantes" who covered the countryside asking "do you love Thailand? Do you love your king? Do you hate the Communists?" These two movements created by the frontier police and the army units involved in the struggle against the Communist guerrillas moved to the urban areas. There they organised camps which attracted nearly two million people, including company bosses, government officials and their families.

These fascist militias organised a campaign of terror, attacking demonstrations, systematically assassinating peasant leaders, workers, the secretary general of the Socialist party, left deputies, carrying out bomb attacks on the offices of left parties. Calls for murder were launched every day on the radios controlled by the army. "It is not a sin to kill a Communist but a duty for all Thaïs". One of the parties of the dictatorship had as its slogan in the electoral campaign in 1976, "the right kills the left". The dictator responsible for the killings in 1973 returned from exile on September 19 and became a monk in a temple situated immediately adjoining the royal palace. He there received visits from the king and queen. Two days later, workers protesting against his presence were lynched. This campaign of assassination culminated with the massacre of students at the University of Thammasat on October 6, 1976. The "village scouts", the vigilantes and frontier police units attacked the campus with rockets, anti-tank missiles and machine guns. Officially, 43 students are assassinated without counting the wounded, the rapes and burnings alive. 8,000 arrests took place. That night, a new coup was legitimated by the king. The peasant movement was annihilated, and around 3,000 students and workers joined the Communist guerrillas as much by conviction as survival.

Thanks to these reinforcements, guerrilla numbers rose to 10,000 combatants in 1979. The number of confrontations reached a thousand per year between 1977 and 1979. This development nonetheless hid a deep crisis of orientation. The new arrivals, strengthened by their experience of urban struggles, seriously doubted the chances of success in Thailand for the Maoist strategy of conquest of power based on the encirclement of the cities by the countryside. The progressive discovery of the horror of the unprecedented massacres committed by the "Khmers rouges", with whom the CPT had sometimes collaborated, shook a good number of militants starting from 1979. All the more so in that the Khmer refugee camps (which were in fact prisoners of the Khmers rouges) were situated in the CPT's guerrilla zones. The conflict between the "Khmers rouges" and Vietnamese troops as well as the attack by China had a profoundly disorienting and demoralising effect. The CPT split into a pro-Chinese faction and a pro-Vietnamese faction. China was more interested in the reestablishment of political and trade relations with the Thai government and abandoned its support for the CPT. In these conditions, most students and CPT militants accepted surrender in return for an amnesty offered by General Prem Tinsulanonda who as chief of the armed forces became prime minister in 1981. Most CPT units surrendered between 1982 and 1983, the last militants being arrested when trying to hold a congress in 1987.

By the end of the 1980s, the elites in power had achieved their ends. The popular movement was decapitated. There was no longer any centralised workers' trade union organisation, or any united peasant movements of national scope. On the political level, there were no longer any left political parties, whether reformist or revolutionary. The workers' movement has to be rebuilt. Despite all their victory is not total. During the 1980s, new social struggles appeared, of villagers for the preservation of forests, peasants against the construction of dams, workers in the factories for wage increases. But these struggles remained sectoral and scattered. Above all, the aspiration to democracy remained alive. In 1992, new demonstrations took place in Bangkok for the reestablishment of democracy. If the middle class was present in the first demonstrations, it disappeared rapidly after the first violence from the government. The students and workers continued to demonstrate and suffer repression. The army fired again on the streets of Bangkok and the king was sufficiently flexible to project himself as the person who had put an end to the violence. The army and the monarchy make a good mix for the restoration of order. The same would be true in 2006.

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Thailand

The coup d'etat: a step backwards for Thailand and Southeast Asia

Danielle Sabai and Jean Sanuk

On the evening of Tuesday September 19, benefiting from the absence of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra at the United Nations General Assembly, soldiers led by general Sonthi Boonyaratklin organized a military putsch in Thailand. The junta now in power claimed it had acted to save Thailand from the threat that Thaksin represented for the democracy and stability of the country - the reign of Thaksin will remain in memory as a period of generalized nepotism and corruption. The latter is also accused of sowing national discord and last but not least of having seriously lacked respect for his highness Bumiphol, king of the Thais.

Few voices were raised in the country to denounce the coup; it is not moreover the latter that troubles the Thai political class most but the reproaches of the international political community (although these were muffled enough). To believe Anand Panayarachun, appointed Prime Minister after the military putsch of 1991, "a coup d'etat has a different significance in the Thai context. It is not like a military coup in Africa or Latin America...". [1] It is true that the putsch was carried out without a shot being fired. And if we believe the local press, no less than 83.9% of the population approved of the insurrection. In a country little inclined to quarrels, many Thais think that the putsch will allow alleviation of a political crisis from which nobody here could really see the exit. For sure, today the partisans of Thaksin are being discreet and his principal electorate, the poor peasants, do not have the institutional relays enabling them to make their discontent felt.

There are also many who think that a democratic transition carried out under the guidance of the military is preferable to a situation of continuous demonstrations which has already lasted for nearly a year. The military are moreover stressing that they do not wish to hold power for more than a fortnight to allow them to select an honest interim minister who is above all suspicion. It was in exactly the same terms that the military justified the coup of 1991 that put an end to 3 years of an elected government. They promised to "clean up" the political system by prosecuting the politicians who had grown rich in an "excessive way". The new written constitution made it possible to choose a Prime Minister separately from the Parliament, i.e. a soldier could be selected.

The new Prime Minister appointed by the current junta, Surayud Chulanont, is in fact civilian only in the sense that he retired from the army in 2003. Very much a man of the inner circle, he served under the orders of Prem Tinsulanonda, the King's main adviser and has himself directly commanded the head of the military junta, Sonthi. Among his feats of arms, he directed the armed corps that opened fire on demonstrators during the demonstrations of 1992, although he has always stated that he did not give the order to fire.

Thus, in the name of democracy and the fight against corruption, the putschists overthrew a government that had twice been democratically elected. The first measures taken by the junta were to impose martial law, removing the 1997 constitution whose article 65 states clearly that citizens have the duty to oppose any attempt to overthrow a democratically elected government. Freedom of the press was suspended, the media being responsible for any article, comments, and intervention of listeners hostile to the coup. Gatherings of more than five people are prohibited and trade union and political organizations have been told to cease their militant activities, the junta "directly dealing with" the claims of peasants and workers.

No doubt the difference lies in the fact that the coup has, on the following day, received the support of the king, which smothered doubts and scruples, the king being presented as an emanation of the will of the Thai people.

Fragility of democracy in Southeast Asia

The coup d'etat in Thailand is bad news for the inhabitants of Thailand but also for the whole of the area. The presence of the generals in power is unfortunately not the prerogative of Thailand

Indonesia is led by a former general who won the last elections. The president of the Philippines, Gloria Arroyo, who has survived two coup attempts, relies on the army to apply her state of emergency. Pakistan is led by a putschist, Pervez Muscharaf, who has since received a democratic anointment from the United States, because it was a little awkward that a dictator should take part in the "war on terror". Burma has been led for decades by a bloodthirsty military who are not satisfied with plundering the country, but shamelessly massacre peoples whose survivors will be reduced to slavery. In different historical and political contexts, the army is omnipresent where power and money are concentrated in Laos, Kampuchea, Vietnam and China. The dictators in power can only be comforted by the Thai putsch, and those who dream of using force to attain power will be encouraged.

The putsch returns Thailand to the black years that had been thought to be over. The country, which had not experienced a military coup since 1991, was presented by the international media as a model of democracy in a continent where democracy remains the exception. The bloody repression of 1992 which followed the last coup had opened a new era during which Thailand had engaged in a democratic transition with in particular the drawing up of a new constitution whose basic objectives were to finish with the spiral of recurring coups and authoritarianism as well as putting an end to the corruption which had been an endemic evil in Thai politics.

The bloody repression of 1992 had also led to a reflection on the role and place of the military within society. That had amongst other things led the high command of the army to accept a "depoliticization", at least in appearance, a commitment not to intervene in political debate, the role of the military in the various governments being limited to the direction of the ministry for the army. Sonthi himself affirmed a few weeks before the putsch that the army did not have the legitimacy to intervene in the political crisis in progress.

Reality was however quite different. The army agreed "to be erased" only insofar as in return the civil regime did not introduce any reform calling into question its privileges. However since his election, Thaksin upset this status quo and tried to reorganize the bureaucracy to his profit. As an experienced participant in Thai politics, he understood well that his longevity in power depended, in particular, on his capacity to control the army. The latter remains very linked to the palace.

It is moreover a financial and industrial power. To control the army without being opposed to it frontally, he chose to demolish

the networks systematically established by Prem Tinsulanonda, himself a former general, ex-prime minister and subsequently first adviser of the king, by replacing them with his own networks. Thus between 2002 and 2003, Thaksin named to key positions of the army more than 35 of his relatives and friends, the majority coming from "class 10", from which he himself had emerged. Unlike "class 5" which carried out the coup d'etat of 1991, this generation is not bound by a common ideology. The bond that links them is strictly speaking clientelism and racketeering. Moreover, the majority of its new chiefs do not have experience of high command nor the legitimacy to ensure it. Thus, significant fractures were created within the institution between pro and anti-Thaksin elements. The latter ensured the loyalty of the supreme army head by systematically nominating one of his cronies. He was moreover so convinced of his position that he claimed: "the leaders of the armed forces are very disciplined. They support the government firmly, in particular me". [2]

His brutal repressive policy in the south of Thailand also strongly contributed to relégitimising the interventionist role of the army in political debate. The three Moslem provinces, with Malay majorities, have been the theatre of murder and massacres almost daily for three years now. This violence has been endemic since their incorporation against their will into Thailand shortly after the Second World War. Thais of Malay origin, victims of discrimination, claim a broad autonomy. The resurgence of violence since January 2004 has claimed many victims (more than 1,700 to date). The response of the Thaksin government was to decree a state of emergency and to give full powers to the army, going as far as proposing a law which authorized the payment of a bonus to any soldier killing a "terrorist" or anyone suspected of terrorism (a law which was fortunately not passed). This policy contributed to maintaining the exorbitant power of the army and the police force throughout the country.

The violence in the south had another unexpected consequence for Thaksin. Summoned by the opposition and the king to resolve the crisis, Thaksin last year nominated as head of the army a Moslem general in chief (a first in the history of the Thai army where all the posts with responsibilities are allotted to Buddhists) of whom we would hear again - Sonthi Boonyaratklin.

The irresistible rise of Thaksin

Before being a politician, Thaksin was initially a businessman who primarily owed his wealth to licences and concessions that he obtained from the military and the various governments in the 1990s. The instability of the political and economic situation convinced him of the importance of having a Prime Minister understanding the problems of contractors but also of the need, if he wants to control power, of founding his own party. The economic crisis of 1997 precipitated things. As in all crises, many firms were eliminated while those which survived were strengthened. The latter were essentially in service industries less exposed to international competition and profiting from the protection of a state that sells operating licences only to national companies. The new party Thai Rak Thai founded by Thaksin includes these large families who were convinced by the crisis of the need for reinforcing the links between business and politics.

Between 1998 and his first election in 2001, Thaksin progressively refined a project, working out a political platform taking up multiple and sometimes socially contradictory demands - those of small and medium enterprises, the peasantry but also taking into account the difficulties and needs of the industrial working class. It was undoubtedly the first time in Thai history that a party contested elections with electoral proposals.

After the crisis of 1997 many small and medium-sized Thai companies became either bankrupt or insolvent. The IMF, which supervised the post-crisis policy, did not seek to prevent these mass bankruptcies, the latter having allowed a "regeneration" of the economy through the buying up of these companies at low prices by foreign capital. In the three years that followed the crisis, more capital entered Thailand, mainly to buy up Thai companies, than in the 11 preceding years of economic upturn. As a consequence, the widespread idea that the policy of the then Prime Minister, the democrat Chuan Leekpai, was an abdication before the diktats of the IMF and that the latter was incapable of protecting domestic capital.

Thaksin had the intelligence to present himself as the saviour of the small and medium companies. He developed a nationalist discourse resting on the unpopularity of the economic reforms imposed by the IMF. He elaborated a platform for exit from the crisis, proposing a development of small and medium companies based on the marriage of traditional qualifications and a high level of technological development.

To ensure the support of industry is not however sufficient. Thailand remains a profoundly rural country, the peasantry representing nearly 50% of the active population in 2006. Well before the crisis of 1997, the peasant world was already in the grip of deep crisis. Although Thailand has become one of the principal rice exporters, nearly 40% of the peasantry still live below the poverty line relating to the beginning of 1990s. The demands of the rural world are always taken into account far behind those of the urban middle class and the middle-class which is concentrated in Bangkok.

Thaksin did not hesitate to directly support some of the demands of peasant associations which emerged in the 1990s, and mainly fulfilled his promises in the year which followed his coming to power: quasi-exemption from payment for health, (all medical care is accessible for a sum of 30 baths or around 0.64 euros), an allowance of a million baths (21,275 euros) for the development of each village, a moratorium of several years for indebted peasants.

The direction of his policy towards the poor fits very clearly into a classic populist tradition: to reduce the poverty of the peasants in order to obtain a social support and a political stability necessary to the good functioning of business. He did not hesitate moreover to integrate into his team "Octobrists", former Communist militants of the 1970s. He would achieve his goal and

secured intense support among the peasants and the poor particularly in north and the northeast of the country. That enabled him to be again largely elected in 2005 obtaining 377 of the 500 seats in Parliament, making the TRT the first party to obtain an absolute majority in 73 years and Thaksin the first politician to be elected twice in succession in the entire history of Thailand.

His policy in relation to small and medium-sized companies had less success. In the year which followed his election Thaksin launched a program of micro-credit supported by the creation of a bank for small and medium companies and the project "one district, one product" offering alternative sources of credit for small community companies. But all his measures proved insufficient to compensate for the Malthusian policy of reduction of credit carried by the banks since the crisis.

In addition, even if Thaksin made himself the defender of small and medium companies against foreign capital, he was absolutely not hostile to globalisation, but rather wishes to negotiate it to his profit. He supported the initiative of a bilateral free trade agreement with China and tried to do the same with the United States.

Prime Minister or company head?

During these two terms, Thaksin's businesses did well. The five years of power were largely used to grow rich and enrich his friends so much that a university study has highlighted that on the Bangkok Stock Market, the shares of companies considered as close to the government had increased more than the average, speculators anticipating that they were going to win all the public contracts.

It was in this context of nepotism, corruption and scandal that Thaksin decided in early 2006 to sell his industrial empire "Shin Corp" to the telecommunication holding of Temasek, controlled by the Singaporean State. The sale in itself proved to be a particularly juicy business for Thaksin's family. Estimated at 73 billion baths (1.55 billion euros), Shin Corp includes several TV chains, Thailand's biggest mobile telephony company, and a satellite TV operator. By means of a fictitious company created clandestinely in a tax haven and a financial arrangement making his children owners of all the companies, Thaksin managed to circumvent Thai taxation so as not to pay a single baht in tax! His adversaries seized this opportunity to denounce one scandal too many against Thai interests

Since January mass gatherings of tens of thousands of intellectuals, urban middle class, and members of the Democrat party demonstrated against Thaksin and his policy. The king himself denounced the troublemakers. The elections of April gave a comfortable majority to the TRT (16 million votes against 10 million abstentions) and plunged Thailand into a period without precedent: Parliament could not be convened because some of the seats were not filled. The crisis culminated with a highly unusual televised intervention from the king asking for the invalidation of the elections of April 2 and the convocation of new elections. Initially envisaged on October 15, those were deferred to the beginning of November. The coup d'etat thus took place when the Inhabitants of Thailand could settle the crisis by the way of the ballot boxes. But this prospect was unacceptable, whether Thaksin won the elections or not, because it would demonstrate that the people could resolve the crisis without the intervention of the army and the palace.

The majority of political commentators saw Thaksin as the likely victor in the elections envisaged. It was to risk seeming him return to power again with the legitimacy of the ballot boxes. His great popularity among poor peasants and his recent ambition to create export-oriented industries in the countryside would have enabled him to directly compete with the king, champion of rural development and guarantor of an established nature and tradition.

A defeat at the polls for Thaksin was no more acceptable because it would have been the result of several months of peaceful and democratic demonstrations, which would have been interpreted as a victory for street mobilizations, an intolerable situation for a monarch and army who have never seen the manifestations of democracy in a good light.

A dubious political situation

If the coup d'etat marks a crushing blow to the process of democratisation started in the 1990s, the situation is nonetheless neither fixed, nor given. The lessons of history encourage the generals to prudence. The first measures of the new government appointed by the junta are very symbolic in this respect. To do better than Thaksin, the government decided on total exemption from payment for health care. The new Prime Minister made his first visit to the northeast of the country, where the popularity of Thaksin was strongest. He met former Communist militants there so that they could relay to the population his desire to maintain existing social measures. The new Prime Minister understands that this is a strong demand of the rural and workers' world. The abandonment of these measures could lead to mobilizations that the putschists want to avoid at all costs. Contrary to the largely spread and conveyed images, social struggles do exist in Thailand, antagonisms between capital and labour have not disappeared.

The advances of the 1990s took place mainly thanks to the resistance of workers after the coup d'etat of 1991. Since the 1980s, struggles multiplied on questions of wages and working conditions. Campaigns were carried out against privatisation and for the application of the existing industrial legislation and its improvement. But the social struggles did not lead to the reinforcement of the trade unions, or the rebuilding of left parties making it possible for workers to act independently at elections. In reaction to these struggles, the elites on the contrary accentuated the marginalisation of the participation of the workers in the parliamentary game, by introducing a clause into the constitution of 1997 which limits the right to contest legislative and senatorial elections to university graduates.

If, as in the 1970s, workers and students are able to coordinate with each other and surmount these obstacles, they will be able to resist the coup d'etat and to put an end to the exclusion of workers from the political sphere. It is also up to them to work out a true program of social transformation and mobilize to implement it. A real democratisation of Thailand depends on it.

NOTES

[1] "Newsweek", September 25, 2006

[2] "New Straits Times", July 10, 2003.

Brazil

2006 Elections - a profound political break

João Machado, José Corrêa Leite

In the first round of Brazil's elections on 1st October, a disenchanted electorate was forced to make its choices in the context of an electoral polarisation between the country's two biggest political blocks: one around the PT and another based on the alliance between the PSDB and the PFL . This polarisation became sharpest, in the final weeks, around the presidential contest between Lula and Geraldo Alckmin.

In the first round, Lula won 46.66 million votes, that is 48.61% of the valid votes (excluding blank votes and spoilt ballots). Alckmin got 39.97 million votes, or 41.64%. In third place, the candidate of P-SOL and the Left Front, Heloisa Helena, received 6.575 million votes, or 6.85% of the valid votes. Senator Cristovam Buarque, of the PDT (usually regarded as a left populist party), won 2.54 million votes, or 2.64%. The other candidates got very small votes.

Unlike previous elections, this campaign was marked by a high level of apathy. The superficial explanation for this was that new electoral regulations greatly restricted the propaganda that previously saturated voters for several months. A stronger explanation, however, is to be found in the frustrated hopes of the most politicised sectors after four years of Lula government - frustration revealed in the almost complete absence of the kind of vibrant street activity that charaterized the PT in the past (with activists now replaced by professional politicians) or in the loss of any "vote of conviction" for the PT.

It was predictable that this should happen in the first big electoral battle since the explicit conversion of the Lula group to neo-liberalism (or social-liberalism) and the revelation of deep-rooted corruption within the PT.

A profound break

The widespread disenchantment with politics - and especially with the idea that political power can be a vehicle for social change and emancipation - has deeper roots, however.

Since the return of democracy in the 1980s, many hopes have been frustrated. There was the hope invested in the main party of opposition to the military dictatorship (the PMDB, which was seen as a "democratic front"), the hope generated by the first presidential election after the dictatorship (in 1989), and the even the optimism over the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC) in its early years. The frustration with Lula, and above all with the PT, was therefore the last and most serious in a long line of disappointments.

We also need to take account of the changes in Brazilian society since 1990. The four years of Lula follow on from eight of FHC and five of Collor-Itamar in terms of Brazil's increasingly subordinate insertion into the world market, the neo-liberal reshaping of its productive capacity, economic stagnation, the breaking down of old class relations and identities, the advance of individualism and consumerism, ideological regression and the deterioration of citizens' political activity in general.

A large part of the socialist left - rooted in the working class, organized independently and which founded the PT and the CUT trade union confederation - simply ceased to exist. Autonomous class organisation weakened, workers became socially fragmented and the remaining socialist left has been left divided and on the defensive, suffering a crisis of perspectives. There no longer exists the one thing that distinguised the Brazilian left from that in the rest of Latin America throughout the 1980s and 1990s - mass, socialist, political action, rooted in the organized proletariat and autonomous from the capitalist class.

The same thing has happened to the social movements. If the 80s was a decade of big mobilisations, the 90s saw a decline - throughout the 1990s, the MST (Landless Workers' Movement) was the only social movement capable of mobilizing on a large scale (from the beginning of the Lula government it has been in an impasse).

The trade unions long ceased to have any great political impact. In this context, the new generations have no experience of big social mobilisations. The job of dismantling the left political identity built up in Brazil has, to a large extent, already been done. The political cycle of the eighties has come to an end.

What emerged in these elections was a neo-populist PT - an electoral machine based on Lula's own charismatic leadership and on the control of public funds; a machine committed to the stability of the ruling classes, but which presents itself as the champion of the poor against an insensitive elite - thereby ensuring that business continues as usual.

Nonetheless, the national crisis remains open. Neither side of the block in power can assure any progress in the future. Brazil continues to stagnate in a world economy experiencing rapid growth. Regional integration is paralysed. The social crisis is acute, with no hope of a qualitatively better future on offer for the population at large.

Multiple forms of organization spring up, without managing to link up any more ambitious actions - precisely what should be the role of political parties. Brazil is one of the most conflict-ridden societies in the world, in the midst of a Latin America that is coming to the boil, with more radical alternatives gaining ground. New spaces will certainly open up for the left!

The P-SOL, the Left Front and Heloisa Helena's campaign.

In such a context of retreat, the candidacy of Heloisa Helena for the Left Front expressed the resistance to this deformation of the left and was the new element in these elections - even if it was not enough to put an end to the crisis of progressive politics in Brazil.

The most important party of the Left Front, by far, is the P-SOL - which only had its registration approved just over a year ago (in September 2005). The other two, the PSTU (United Socialist Workers Party, inspired by the tradition of Nahuel Moreno) and the PCB (Brazilian Communist Party) have much less political (and especially, electoral) weight.

The P-SOL went into these elections with a few thousand militants, many of them trade unionists, with a significant influence among youth, and with some presence in parliament: one senator, seven federal deputies and four state deputies, as well as few dozen local councillors. In any case, it was a minority force, bringing together only a part of the old PT left and a smaller group of militants from other parties (mainly the PSTU).

In fact the P-SOL played a more significant part in these elections than its fragile organisation and minority social base would have suggested - thanks to the popularity and charisma of Senator Heloisa Helena. In the first months of this year, before the campaign began, the opinion polls gave her somewhere between 4 to 6 % of the vote - and put her in third place in the presidential race.

From July, the media began to give more space to the elections (especially the presidential race). The candidates for president began to have a few minutes a day on the TV networks (especially the biggest network in the country, Rede Globo). The imbalance in media coverage diminished. This gave a big boost to Heloisa Helena's candidacy, which reached 12% in the opinion polls by the middle of August. (That corresponds to 14 or 15 % of the valid votes, if you leave out the 'don't knows' and those who said they would spoil their ballots.)

This can be explained by several different factors, in addition to the greater media exposure: the appeal of a woman recognized by all as a fighter, who'd had the courage to confront the Lula government when it was at the height of its popularity, and who for several weeks came in for little concerted criticism; the worsening image of the Lula government among many opinion-forming sectors; and even the interest of the 'Tucano', or PSDB, opposition (and therefore of a part of the press) in seeing Heloisa rise, in order to force a second round. At that point, the difference between Heloisa and Alckmin narrowed, and it even seemed it might be possible to avoid the election being polarised between Lula and Alckmin.

However, from the moment the official election TV propaganda began (on 15th August) and the big electoral machines moved into action, that relatively favourable situation ceased to exist.

The enormous disproportion in material and organisational resources coming in behind the two main political blocks - that around the Lula and the other around the PSDB-PFL - took on a decisive weight. The Left Front could not compete. This disproportion was amplified by the way the law allocates airtime for party political broadcasts on radio and television. (The time allocated is based on results from the previous elections, in 2002, when the P-SOL did not yet exist.)

On the other hand, the organisational weakness of the P-SOL and the Left Front made it impossible to draw into the campaign all those came closer and wanted to help. Part of the electorate that identified with Heloisa realised that her support was too weak to offer a real alternative. The pressure to vote tactically increased, especially in the final weeks, when the distance between Lula and Alckmin shrank and it began to look as if a second round was possible.

Another difficulty for the Left Front campaign was that its organisational weakness was also a political weakness. It proved impossible to build a unified political leadership for the campaign in most states. Perhaps the most serious consequence of this weakness was the fact that the drawing up of a government programme for the Front was never finished (only a manifesto was distributed), because of internal differences both within the P-SOL and between this and the other parties of the Front.

This does not mean that Heloisa Helena and the other candidates of the P-SOL and the Front did not present programmatic alternatives for the country.

However, the fact that there was no officially approved programmatic document limited the impact that the presentation of these alternatives had, and opened up the candidates of the Left Front to the criticism of their opponents and the press.

Another political limitation of Heloisa's campaign was that she spoke much more in the first person than as the representative of a political project or of a process of social struggles. To some extent, this was inevitable. This was a candidate with a national impact, alongside a political project still in its infancy, which still had not developed a collective leadership, and at a time of little mobilisation. What is more, the logic of presidential contests is precisely this. It is the candidates who are standing, not their parties or fronts.

There is no doubt, however, that this was an important political weakness of the campaign.

Another question that had some negative repercussions for the campaign, although probably little significant impact on the results, was the issue of decriminalising abortion. Although the position of the great majority of P-SOL and of the Left Front is in favour of decriminalisation, Heloisa Helena, for reasons of conscience, is against. The media spotted this discrepancy and persistently asked her about her position on abortion (while none of the other candidates were asked this question).

In any case, to win more than 6.5 million votes, or 6.85% of the valid votes, in the historical context of Brazil (and the world) today, is a very impressive result for a candidate who was always identified as "radical", and who ended her campaign (in the final televised debate between presidential candidates) by saying that the reason she was standing was the need to reassert the commitment to socialism that the PT had abandoned.

The votes obtained by Heloisa - 6,575,393 votes, with 1.56 million in São Paulo, 1.42 million in Rio de Janeiro, 579 thousand in Minas Gerais and 440 thousand in Rio Grande do Sul (the four most industrialised states in Brazil) - were mainly votes for an ethical, anti-neoliberal platform. In the difficult situation of the Brazilian left, they represent a victory, indicating a real relationship with sections of the Church, with public employees, trade unionists and sections of the liberal middle class and the universities.

The significance of the result is even clearer when we recall that she won more than 17% of the vote in the state of Rio de Janeiro - a state usually considered the most politicised in the country - and 25% in her home city of Maceió, even though this is in the Brazilian northeast, the region most benefited by the Lula government's assistentialist programmes, and where he got his biggest votes.

In the vote for president, the left-wing electorate in the broad sense, that was critical of both versions of the neo-liberal model, and which is an important part of Brazilian public opinion, corresponded to about 10% of the total - including a variety of sectors that broke with the PT and voted for Heloisa or Cristovam Buarque .

Brazil

The contest between the PT and the PSDB

The PT and the PSDB had been preparing for this contest since the municipal elections in 2004. Although the results of those elections already revealed how fragile the PT was in the big centres of the Southeast and South, it was only after the cash-for-votes scandal, from June 2005, that the party's situation became seriously compromised. Later, in the first part of 2006, Lula gradually recovered his position in the polls and began the campaign as the clear favourite. The cash-for-votes scandal was buried by others - the "vampires" and the "bloodsuckers" scandals (involving overcharging of blood supplies and ambulances to local health services). The PSDB candidate on the other hand, began the campaign with his party divided. The possibility of a second round looked remote.

All the commentators agree that two factors combined to make Lula's vote in the first round lower than expected, thus meaning that there would be a second round. Firstly, there was the "dossier" scandal . Secondly, there was the fact that Lula didn't turn up to the final TV debate between the main presidential candidates, held three days before the elections on the country's main TV network (in fact Lula never turned up to any of the debates held during the campaign).

The most surprising aspect of the contest between Lula and Alckmin was that the electoral polarisation was expressed in terms of a social indentification of the poor, with Lula, and the rich, with Alckmin, without this implying any polarisation between their respective programmes for the country.

Lula managed to hold onto his identification with the poorest sections of the population and with those living in the most "underdeveloped" regions of the country, through a combination of assistentialist policies and his own charisma. The impact of the Family Grant programme has been sufficient to carry considerable electoral weight, and the symbolism of having someone of humble origins as President of the Republic still plays an important role.

On the other hand, the more affluent and conservative sectors tended naturally to identify with Alckmin, who personifies the stereotype of the meanest kind of neo-liberalism. In addition to this, the "dossiergate", which once again showed the daily recource to mafioso methods by the PT machinery - even putting at risk Lula's own re-election - reinforced the indignation of some sections of the middle class and the bourgeoisie with the PT, increasing the temptation to punish Lula by forcing him into a second round. Even some sectors that had remained neutral ended up in the final stages being won over by a sort of recycled anti-PT sentiment.

Under pressure, Lula and the PT emphasised the identification of Alckmin with the rich and with the policies of the FHC government, and in the second round began to increase their promises to the poor, pointing to a supposed left-wing character of their government, while at the same time giving assurances that they will not change the economic policies and that they will even cut public spending!

Thus the social identification of the poor with Lula does not mean that we had a contest between real alternatives for the country. It is more a question of a state clientele, dependent on the use of public funds for compensatory income-support policies, which have an enormous impact given the extreme poverty of the majority of the population. An Alckmin government would not be the same as a second Lula government, in areas like foreign policy, but there is no reason to think that Lula will break with neo-liberal orthodoxy.

The P-SOL's results

The overall vote for the P-SOL - as well as for the Left Front (the PSTU and the PCB added little in the way of votes) - did not keep pace with Heloisa's, which showed the weakness of the party (and the Front). Where we had candidates for state governorships capable of sustaining a broad political debate, we managed to capitalize on a significant part of Heloisa's vote. This was true in the Federal District (ie Brasilia) and in Para, with candidates like Toninho and Edmilson, who got more than 4% of the valid votes, in Ceara, where Renato Roseno got 2.75% (but over 7% in the state capital, Fortaleza) and in Sao Paulo, with Plinio Sampaio, who won 2.5% (that is half a million votes). But in most states our candidates got barely 1% of the vote, or even less.

The P-SOL's proportional candidates won a total across the country, for federal Members of the National Assembly, of 1.149 million votes, or 1.4% of the valid votes, well short of the 5% threshold (that gives full rights to participate in Congressional committees, etc). We elected three federal Members of the National Assembly (Luciana Genro in Rio Grande do Sul, Ivan Valente in São Paulo and Chico Alencar in Rio de Janeiro) and three Members of State Assemblies (Gianazzi and Raul Marcelo in São Paulo and Marcelo Freixo in Rio de Janeiro). The PSTU and the PCB did not get any of their candidates elected.

If we remember that this was the first time the P-SOL has stood in any election, then these results do not seem so bad. But if we compare the situation the party was in before the elections, there was clearly a setback. The P-SOL comes out of these elections weaker, as a party, than it went into them. This is explained mainly by the small size and extreme fragility of the P-SOL as a party, and by the enormous difficulty of achieving unity in action. The P-SOL was not robust enough or extensive enough to stand candidates in sufficient numbers to have a real presence in key sections of society and regions.

We lost part of the political capital we brought from the PT - the elected positions as National Assembly Members of Orlando Fantazzini in São Paulo, Babá in Rio de Janeiro, Maninha in Brasília and João Alfredo in Ceará, and those of more than four Members of State Assemblies who were not re-elected (although these were partially compensated by the election of three new State Deputies). However it would never have been easy for us to get a better result than we did for our proportional candidates, given the internal political dispersion of the P-SOL. The most we could have hoped for, perhaps, would have been a second Federal Deputy in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, if we had managed a bigger vote for the party slate.

In fact, as has been pointed out above, we didn't have in the campaign even the beginnings of a collective political leadership. The solitary role of Heloisa Helena on so many occasions illustrated the weakness of our political, organisational and financial leadership. Part of the P-SOL leadership, with its roots in the trade unions, proved unfamiliar with organising an electoral campaign. In this sense Heloisa herself played a hugely important part in sustaining the relentless rhythm of the

campaign in a country the size of a continent, without the material resources required.

The results also demonstrate the limitations of the PSTU and the PCB. The former added about 100,000 votes and the second just 40,000 to the Front's total.

The second round

The second round involved several state governor contests as well as the presidential election. The P-SOL decided not to support either of the two candidates for president, even though some in the party were in favour of voting for Lula in order to defeat Alckmin, because he was further to the right, while others put forward the slogan "no vote for Alckmin", leaving open whether people should vote for Lula or spoil their ballot.

There are several reasons why the majority of the party refused to adopt either of these positions. Firstly, Lula led a government that was clearly social-liberal; that is, he followed, on the fundamental economic questions and on social policies, the neo-liberal model. Secondly, he set up an arc of alliances that took in a large part of Brazil's most right-wing parties (like, for example, the PP of Paulo Maluf). It was not therefore a question of a candidate who represented a left block (even though there was as we have already said a social polarization within the electorate).

The sociologist Ricardo Antunes, one of the founders of the P-SOL. explained his reasons for opposing supporting Lula in the second round in an interview with Carta Maior Agency (13/10/2006).

"It is obvious that Lula and Geraldo Alckmin are not the same, but the shape of their economic policies, including the links to finance capital and large-scale industrial capital. While Alckmin is the more traditional candidate of the right, the Lula govenment comes out of the social struggles, but ended up embracing the basic tenets of the right. In this way, Lula effectively demobilises the social struggles.

For years Fernando Henrique Cardoso tried to reform pensions and tax pensioners. But he failed because of the opposition of the social movements. The Lula government proved extremely "competent" in undermining the Brazilian left which was broken up and fragmented. The challenge of the P-SOL and the social movement is to bring those fragments back together again. The confussion generated by Lula is so great that he is seem by the social movements at one moment as an enemy, at another as an allay or as part of a government that is in dispute. Therefore between him and Alckmin I do not know which is worst."

This view was shared by most members of the P-SOL. However the P-SOL did not campaign in favour of casting a blank vote. Its position was a way of respecting the views of those who had voted for Heloisa and now felt inclined to vote for Lula.

What direction for the country?

The P-SOL and the Left Front now need to think carefully about exactly what their political project is. The neoliberal Brazil of today is very different from the developmentalist Brazil of previous years, which still colours our political imagination. Lula displayed great clarity in engaging with this reality, which had already being consolidated under the FHC government - from his pension reform to the Family Grant scheme. This resulted, during his government, in a paradoxical (though minimal) reduction in the concentration of income.

There was a slight rise in income for a large number of poor, a squeaze on the middle classes and better paid workers, while the historical privileges of the 20 thousand families that rule Brazil were preserved - in fact they prospered more than ever before. This is not a viable model for the country, but it is an effective way of maintaining stability in one of the most unequal societies in the world.

Left wing public opinion, the organised and conscious sections of the industrial working class, those layers of the middle class and the inteligentsia that are actively engaged as citizens, all these have lost influence and seen their identity diluted by deepening proletarianisation and job insecurity. These segments - which were the product of a period of national developmentalism, and which according to the schemas of the left should have become the backbone of a new historic block by fusing with the mass of the poor - have been the greatest loosers under the new, Lula-style, regime of accumulation.

Nonetheless it is clear that still exists a real space for the left in Brazil (even though at the moment this is a minority space). However, any project which aims to win hegemony, which seeks a just, sovereign and prosperous nation, and which wants to open the way for a transition to the building of socialism, will have to face two big challenges. Firstly, it will have to reorganise the political intervention of this sector of the population.

This means recovering the aspirations of earlier periods of developmentalism. These can be summarised as growth, jobs and wages, but they also imply a series of things that are not possible in the foreseeable future (a prosperous economy, dynamic trade unions, high-quality public health and education, the possibility of social advancement). But it also means including new issues that increasingly affect these sectors - from ecology to free access to knowledge, from culture to sexuality, from identity politics to anti-globalisation. These are strategic issues, of particular importance to the youth, without which there can be no political recomposition of the left.

Secondly, it will have to recover a vocation for hegemony. This means re-establishing its links with the impoverished masses, with the majority of the population which today backs Lula at the ballot box and which will remain unreceptive to a non-state left that doesn't value income support policies. Lula is neo-populist because he has found a stable formula for addressing these impoverished masses, just as Getulio Vargas, in the 1930's and 40's, offered jobs and social advancement to the working class in the fordist-developmentalist framework of the times.

In the same way that the break with that old-style populism was only possible through the autonomous action of those who had been its target, so a break with Lulism will only be possible when those policies to guarantee income and/or jobs become universal. This is very unlikely in the neo-liberal world, but it is at least a lot closer to the aspirations of the majority of the Brazilian population than the creation of 50 million formal jobs with full rights and benefits.

Beyond these more immediate challenges, of course, and something that needs to be combined with them, is the bigger challenge of rebuilding the international credibility of the socialist project and developing a new transitional programme.

João Machado and José Correa Leite are members of the leadership of P-SOL and of Enlace, a current within P-SOL that includes Heloisa Helena and other members of the Fourth International.

Scotland

Milestone conference for Scottish Socialists

Terry Conway, Alan Thornett

It was a great relief, on arriving at the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) conference in Glasgow on October 7, to participate in an event where the mood was so buoyant and confident. The SSP remains remarkably intact given what it has been through over the last two years - being dragged through the court by Tommy Sheridan's decision to sue the News of the World for defamation after admitting that some of the allegations it made were true. In spite of Sheridan,s walk-out at the end of August, the SSP has retained 80 per cent of the membership, including the whole of the party's youth organisation, the SSY. It has also continued to produce its paper Scottish Socialist Voice on a weekly basis and maintain its offices.

Around 600 members, including both the SWP and CWI [1] platforms, have followed Sheridan to found Solidarity. The SSP had retained the bulk of the members in the central belt between Glasgow and Edinburgh - the most populous part of Scotland. It has been most weakened in southern Scotland and in the Highlands and Islands.

In fact the 2006 conference had already taken place earlier in the year, before the crisis re-erupted. This was the 2007 conference, brought forward by common consent soon after the special National Council meeting on May 28 (which met whilst Alan McCoombes was in prison for refusing to hand the minutes to the court) at which Tommy Sheridan issued his open letter that effectively split the SSP.

Sheridan, however, walked out in advance of the conference, presumably because he had done his sums and concluded that he would be unlikely to win a majority at it. This meant that, instead of being the final showdown with Sheridan ending in all probability in huge bust-up, this was a conference designed to put the SSP back on the road towards the elections for the Scottish Parliament and local government in May next year.

Some 350 members were in attendance, of whom 230 were delegates. The Sheridan events and the split were dealt with in the first session. The resolution adopted endorsed the way the issue had been dealt with, condemned the breakaway and invited anyone who had followed the split to rejoin. The resolution continued: "Conference reaffirms our founding aims of building a broad, inclusive, united socialist party, based on class struggle politics, which simultaneously stands up against inequality and discrimination on grounds of race, gender, sexual orientation disability or age".

John Milligan of the RMT attempted to sour the tone of conference by making a vitriolic speech blaming the leadership of the SSP for Sheridan,s split. He also said that the RMT was withdrawing its resolutions from the conference and would be consulting its members about whether they should remain affiliated. Those who did not have other sources of information would certainly have thought that he had the authority of the union for all of his speech, which he did not at the time, although sadly the Scottish regional council did decide in a close vote to disaffiliate, and the RMT leadership has endorsed the decision.

Those who responded in the debate, in particular trade-union organiser Richie Venton summing up on the motion, remained calm and dignified in defending the line of the outgoing Executive. In this debate and subsequently, a number also made the point about how much the SSP values the trade union affiliations it has won and will seek to maintain.

Colin Fox gave a confident report as National Convenor, emphasising that there could not now be a single person in the whole of Scotland who had not heard of the SSP. In his written report to conference he had said: "Tommy Sheridan's decision to pursue his court action, against the advice of us all, will go down in history as one of the biggest political follies of our time".

Perhaps the best flavour of the trauma the SSP had been through was reflected in the written report of Barbara Scott, the minutes secretary: "Well....what a roller-coaster ride of half a year this has been for the Minutes Secretary. Never again will taking the minutes be considered a dull and boring job. Who would have thought that I would be catapulted to infamy and daily appearances in the national press because of note-taking!

"I might add I've been accused of fabricating minutes; getting everything wrong; being invisible; in fact anyone would think I was some sort of evil genius. But no, I was just doing the minutes, same as ever, doing my best to preserve accurate records of our party's history".

A second motion was passed which urged SSP members to avoid the use of the courts in such situation and avoid the use of the capitalist media when making allegation against other SSP members, and was aimed at the tape recording of Sheridan that had just been released by George McNeilage.

The mover condemned both the recording of the tape in the way it had been used. The resolution said: "SSP members should not resort to the non-party media when making allegations against other SSP members. Such allegations should be brought initially before the appropriate party body at the level concerned with the right to appeal to a higher level"

After breaking to attend a demonstration in support of migrants and refugees, the conference went on have a day and a half of policy debate on a full range of issues from the war and the international situation, defending the public sector, the Gaelic language, prostitution, childcare, the environment and global warming, trade unions and campaigning priorities. The conference reaffirmed SSP policy for an independent Socialist Scotland.

The conference was extremely open in that everyone who wanted to speak in a discussion was taken ˆ though this did mean that a few resolutions were not reached at all. Important political differences remain inside

the SSP after the split, but these were debated out in a comradely fashion. There were times when the level of the political debate seemed frustrating - for example with the predominance of complacent two-staters in the Palestine discussion - but other times when it was very impressive -for example in the debate on prostitution.

Conference elected a new Executive on which there are a large number of new faces - in particular a significant number who have gained political experience through their leadership of the SSY. A number of those who have been central to the SSP since its inception, e.g. outgoing National Secretary Allan Green, had decided to stand down at this point before the Sheridan crisis. Others may well have been affected by the toll of the last two years.

While it is always a gamble for more experienced activists to stand back and let others take the reins, without being fully sure whether this team is ready for the responsibility, without such wagers the future of organisations cannot be assured. It is not as if the outgoing leadership comrades who did not stand again will not still be active in the party at different levels and available to put forward their ideas if they are asked.

The next big test for the SSP is the elections for the Scottish Parliament next May. It will not be easy to maintain serious representation in the Parliament, but with a big effort nor is it. As Colin Fox noted in his written report: "Many commentators have already written the SSP off for the 2007 elections but the latest System Three Three poll put us back up at 6 per cent and within touching distance of keeping our MSPs".

The task of the left in England is to give them all the support we can muster.

Terry Conway is one of the editors of International Viewpoint and a leading member of the International Socialist Group, British Section of the Fourth International. Alan Thornett is a leading member of the ISG and sits on the Executive Committee of Respect.

NOTES

[1] Committte for a Workers International, the international co-ordination associated with the Socialist Party in England and Wales.

Britain

Membership crisis ignored at Respect conference

Alan Thornett

The Respect conference, held on October 15, brought out both the strengths and the weaknesses of the current stage of development of Respect with some force. Unfortunately there were few decisions taken which will tackle the problems that emerged.

The strength of Respect was that it came out of a genuine mass movement - the anti-war movement. It sought to bring together the best and most radicalised segments of that movement. This included the left, the socialists, radicalising young people, and Muslim anti-war activists who rightly felt that they were being demonised and vilified by the establishment. The catalyst was George Galloway's expulsion from the Labour Party over the war.

In the three short years since then the need for a broad pluralist left alternative to new Labour has become ever more urgent. The space to the left of Labour has widened, the crisis or working class representation has become more acute, and any change within the Labour Party more remote.

Nor is this about to change. The commitment of new Labour to the Bush agenda and the neo-liberal offensive is relentless. Blair will push it to the limit while he remains in office and Brown will continue it when he takes over. Respect has represented the best opportunity yet, in England, to address this situation.

A left alternative like Respect must be a class struggle party based in the campaigns and in the unions. But it cannot be built without electoral success. It cannot tackle the crisis of working class leadership if it does not challenge in the electoral field and if it does not make some breakthroughs in that field. That is what built the SSP in Scotland, the Left Block in Portugal and the Red Green Alliance in Denmark into serious organisations. Fortunately Respect has notched up substantial achievements at the ballot box. The breakthrough into Westminster was an historic achievement (given the first-past-the-post) system and the 16 local government seats won last May were a confirmation that Respect had gained a resonance in a number of deprived working class inner-city migrant communities that no other left party had achieved for over half a century

These achievements were reflected in the conference by the impressive contingent of radical young Muslims from East London and by the role of the new councillors in the proceedings. No wonder the conference took a strong line against the current wave of Islamophobia.

These gains, however, were in sharp contrast to the development of Respect itself, which had declined over the past year both numerically (from just over 3,000 member to just over 2,000 over that period) and - since the loss of membership seems to be heaviest amongst independents - in its plurality.

This is a serious problem. By the time it had existed for six months Respect had reached a membership figure of 5,000 and a target was set of 10,000. Since then the membership has declined, particularly over the past year.

Of course membership figures are not the only criteria by which to judge the development of an organisation like Respect

- votes and mobilisations are other obvious examples. But they are pretty important, and if an organisation cannot win new members in the wake of electoral success when is it likely to do so? The weakness of the Respect office is a factor in this, but in the end the growth or decline of an organisation like Respect is a political issue.

Yet far from using the conference to discuss this sharp contradiction - between electoral success and membership decline - and work out how to tackle it, a carefully worded formula was found which gave the impression that the membership had gone up. The conference was in denial.

George Galloway in his opening speech claimed that everything was going great and that Respect had just recruited 10,000 students! Respect was he said "the fastest growing party in Britain". John Rees insisted that Respect was "bigger this year than last year".

It was smoke and mirrors. But there is a logic to it. If there is no problem no solution is needed and things can go on as before.

The Respect Party Platform (RPP), which Socialist Resistance supports, sought to draw attention of the conference to the decline in membership and discuss what was behind it.

We argued that the loose coalition model for Respect, so strongly defended by the SWP and George Galloway was at the root of the problem and that Respect needed to be organised properly as a party if it was to be successful.

Loose coalitions are normally temporary arrangements. Why would people join such a coalition, what would it offer them in terms of their political activity?

George Galloway's disastrous appearance on Celebrity Big Brother no doubt lost Respect a lot of members but it was not the root cause of the problem.

Democracy is crucial in regenerating Respect, since there is a big section of the left, particularly in the unions, which should be in Respect but will not join because they do not see a democratic space inside in which they could function.

Some think that it is too dominated by the SWP or that George Galloway is unaccountable or both. To bring them into membership Respect has to be seen to be democratic at every level of its functioning.

The conference did adopt a new accountability clause for elected representatives but only time will tell if George Galloway will function in the framework of it.

The Respect trade union conference is a very good initiative to strengthen the links between Respect and the trade union left - but unless those who are impressed by the debates it has also feel that there is a space for them inside Respect then they will not join.

In the same vein the conference was right to support the John McDonnell campaign as a way of standing four-square with the Labour left in their fight against the Brownites. But unless conditions are right inside Respect it will not result in an influx of new members from the Labour left.

Strong local branches are crucial to the development of Respect. The election strategy adopted - of selecting a small number of electoral targets and putting big resources into them - is effective in beating the first-past-the-post system, but it leaves a lot of branches, where there are no campaigns, out in the cold, under resourced, and out of touch with the organisation as a whole.

The RPP supported various resolutions that sought to strengthen and build Respect. We supported the call for the launching of a Respect newspaper which would provide a national profile to Respect, give extra resource the branches, help with recruitment, and get the message across more effectively.

We supported the 20-member resolution calling for the establishment of a delegate based National Council. This would help to reconnect the branches to the leading bodies by involving them more directly in the decision-making processes. It would also reconnect the leading bodies to the work of the branches.

The same resolution also proposed the introduction of an STV system of voting for elections at conference. This would get rid of the slate system - long been perceived as an unchallengeable bulldozer - and make Respect look more attractive and democratic to those considering joining.

These proposals did not pretend to resolve all the problems of Respect but they would have been a step in the right direction. The SWP were strongly against these resolutions and they were both lost. The proposal for a newspaper got about a third of the conference, the proposal for a delegate based National Council a lot less. Voting these resolutions down, however, simply leaves the problems of Respect unresolved. It leaves a situation where there is a question mark is over Respect's longer-term future as a pluralist party.

The conference saw a number of very good debates on issue ranging from the trade unions, students and education, the public sector, the NHS and the environment. But how Respect is perceived by the bulk of the left outside is a serious problem. It would be a disaster for the left and the workers movement if Respect fails, since there is no other broad organisation of the left registering on the radar screen in England.

The fragments of the Socialist Alliance - the Socialist Alliance and the Democratic Socialist Alliance are going nowhere. The Socialist Party's Campaign for a New Workers Party is simply a propaganda campaign by the Socialist Party and proposes an even looser and more federal structure for a future party than the SWP model for Respect. The initiative from the RMT organised conference to launch a shop stewards network has its strengths in trade union terms but it avoids the burning issue of working class political representation.

The fight therefore has to continue to win Respect away from its current course of development and to develop towards being a pluralist party with a transparent and democratic structure along the lines of the SSP in Scotland and similar parties in other parts of Europe. This is not easy, since the SWP is entrenched in the way it sees Respect, but it has to be done if Respect is to face up to the challenge facing it.

Britain

A tale of two conferences

Alan Thornett

Within a fortnight two important meetings of rank and file trade unionists have taken place in London. There were a number of similarities between the conference called by the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) on October 28, which attracted 250 delegates, and the one called by Respect on November 11 attended by 600 delegates.

Both, from different points of view, sought to address the crisis of political representation created by the march to the right of new Labour. Both promoted the Trade Union Freedom Bill - initiated by the Institute of Employment Rights and backed by the TUC.

Both sought to address the situation in the unions since the defeat of the miners and the imposition of the anti-union laws. Both addressed the issue of the neo-liberal offensive and the relentless attack on the public sector. Both elected a steering committee at the end of the day to take their projects forward.

Both, however, were predominantly far left in composition and gave someone like me, who has been around for a long time, the feeling that I knew far too many of those present. Neither drew in any significant new and fresh young forces from the unions - which probably says as much about the current state of the unions than of the conferences themselves.

Why were there were two conferences and not one united event? This was in part at least because these two conferences approached the crisis of political representation in very different ways. In fact they were coming from opposite directions.

The RMT conference, with more than a touch of syndicalism, and heavily influenced by RMT General Secretary Bob Crow who made the keynote speech, proposed the launching, after a conference next year, of a national shop stewards network. This, while useful at the industrial level, avoided the urgent issue of working class electoral representation that presumably would come at a later second stage. The word "Respect" was never mentioned - only indirectly hinted at by a couple of speakers from the floor.

The proposal for a network should be welcomed. The problem it faces, however, is that it is out of kilter with the situation in the unions. There is no radicalisation taking place in the unions themselves on which such a new development can be based.

The massive expansion of the shop stewards movement in the 1960s and 1970s was based on both an industrial and political radicalisation in the unions. Today's conditions impose a material limitation on what it can achieve. The approach of the Respect conference was around the need for a new party to the left of Labour in the here and now and how such a party can help to strengthen the struggle in the unions.

This approach had the strength of being based around a real political radicalisation - one which has taken place against the war and against the betrayals of new labour. The debates now are around the character of such a party, how should be build and developed, and how it can be linked to trade union struggle.

An important (though limited) debate emerged in the first session around the anti union laws. In left-wing lawyer John Hendy's keynote speech on the Trade Union Freedom Bill, he spelled out in the starkest terms the situation of the unions under Thatcherite (now Blairite) anti trade unions laws.

Controversially he argued that these laws effectively ruled out any form of solidarity action and there was nothing the unions could do. His example was the situation of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) at Gate Gourmet - a catering company at Heathrow Airport - which sacked its entire workforce at a minutes notice two years ago. The union failed to defend them and they are still sacked.

Hendy argued that TGWU had had no alternative other than to accept the situation because it had been rendered completely powerless since solidarity action - the only answer - was illegal under the anti-union laws. This concedes the ground to the trade union leaders who avoid confronting the law and ignores the strong position the unions were in at Gate Gourmet when they had BA planes grounded.

Hendy went on, again in the starkest terms, to spell out the wider effects of the anti-union laws not just in terms of the huge decline in trade union membership but in a collapse of those covered by collective agreements. He said that at the time Thatcher came to power 78% of the workforce were covered by collective agreements, this was now down to 33%. This, he said, was the biggest such decline in history. He might have added that the quality of those agreements which are left have suffered a similar decline.

His message was that this shows the crucial importance of the Trade Union Freedom Bill. Indeed it does. But there is a problem. Whilst the Bill is a very good way of raising the issue there is no chance whatever of even its modest proposals being enacted. At lest it would take a mass movement to get any of it enacted and the TUC is not about to organise one.

The only challenge to all this came from Ted Knight (previously the left-wing leader of Lambeth Council) and to a lesser extent from Rob Finlayson a shop steward from Fords in Dagenham. Knight said in effect that there was no Parliamentary answer to the anti-union laws but that they would only be destroyed when they were effectively defied. Rob Finlayson said that we needed to discuss what we would do when the Bill was defeated - since that would be the inevitable outcome.

In the session on Who Speaks for Trade Unionists, Valerie Wise (daughter of the late left Labour MP Valerie Wise) gave a graphic description as to what had led to her recent

decision to leave the Labour Party — she could not stand it any longer. She realised that this posed the issue of whether she should join Respect. It was a decision she was still pondering but had not yet made.

The speech of the day, and the one which most adequately spelt out the task the conference — the indivisibility between the industrial and the political - struggles - was from Mark Serwotka, left-wing General Secretary of the PCS, the government workers union. He explained out the need for a political alternative as a component part of regenerating the unions.

He strongly welcomed the conference, saying that he was pleased that it had been organised on a non-sectarian way and people like Dave Nellist had been invited to speak.

He said he supported all moves towards a new workers party but the importance of Respect was that it existed in the here and now and had won a seat in Westminster and on local Councils. He said it was for this reason that he would urge people who were not members to join.

There were a number of guest speakers in addition to Dave Nellist. Left Labour MP John McDonnell spoke about his current campaign to stand for the leadership of the Labour Party against Brown once Blair resigns - and not in the session on political representation because of his other campaign commitments. Jorge Martin from the Hands of Venezuela campaign - who was invited because one of the practical proposals from the conference is a delegation to Venezuela.

Was it a useful day? Well the speeches from the platform were too long and the opportunity for discussion from the floor was too short. There were a lot of over-optimistic speeches from SWP members (who comprised towards half of the conference) which bore little relation to the actual conditions in the unions.

On the other hand off-message voices were heard - and, unlike at the RMT conference, the proposals at the end were open to amendment and there was a limited debate at least around the issue of affiliation to the Labour Party. And it is always useful for trade unionists to get together and discuss.

The main problem was that having brought 600 trade unionists together, the conference lacked direction. It was focused around a minimal Workers Charter, - which it has to be said was strengthened by the amendments agreed. What it failed to do was get to grips with the real conditions facing activists in the workplaces and how to build a left party as a necessary part of building and strengthening the unions.

It is true that the RMT approach of avoiding the issue of political organisation will not work. But Respect needs to do put a lot more work into building itself in the trade union left - because Respect without a trade union base will not work either. As Mark Serwotka argued the industrial and political arenas are indivisible in today's conditions.