

The Twenty-first Newsletter (2018): Where Do You Get Your News?



Dear Friends,

Greetings from the desk of the **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**.

US President Donald Trump met with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Twice, in two days, Trump made statements to the press that he would later recant. When Trump was asked if Russia had meddled in the US elections, he answered, 'I don't see any reason why it would be' Russia. Later, he modified his statement, saying that when he said 'would', he meant 'wouldn't'. This, and the other equally strange correction, suggest a novel way to keep the news cycle focused on Trump's antics and on the bizarre focus on Russian interference in the US presidential election. No consideration here that the United States routinely interferes in the political process of countries around the world (from direct coups against governments to infusions of cash for US allies). None either on the geo-political games afoot around Eurasia: the expansion of NATO

into Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the US-driven embargo on Iran, and the growth of the Belt and Road Initiative from China to Turkey as well as the String of Pearls from the South China Sea to Port Sudan. You want to read about these developments in Asia or about the challenges in South America? Where do you go?

Media corporations, owned by monopoly firms and in close contact with powerful states, replicate in full measure the ideology of the powerful. Reading a story on Syria in a Western paper, for instance, is an exercise in disbelief. The sources are repetitive – US official says, US military official says, US military official in an unnamed Middle Eastern country says. It is as if the reporter has become merely a stenographer for the powerful. At *Frontline*, I have a **review** of Seymour Hersh's memoir about being a reporter for the past fifty years within the United States. In his book, Hersh says of the reporting of the US war on Vietnam, 'If you supported the war, you were objective; if you were against it, you were a lefty and not trustworthy'.

Hersh was talking about the days of the Vietnam War. Matters are murkier now. In a new book, *Democracy in Chains*, the historian Nancy Maclean tells the story of a diabolical project by some plutocrats to have a total victory in the battle of ideas. Nancy **tells** P. Ambedkar from the New Delhi office of the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, about the right-wing plan to control the intellectual landscape – not only the media, but also the other culture-producing industries (including the academy). One of the features that must not be ignored is the global footprint of this project. Nancy points us to the Atlas Group, which takes the ideas of 'free enterprise' and 'individual freedom' – classic features of right-wing libertarianism – into countries across the world. It is worthwhile to visit the Atlas Group **website** and study the list of groups that are putting democracy in chains. For a short example of what this project is doing in Latin America, see Lee Fang's **story** in *The Intercept*.

So, it begs the question again: where do you go to get the news and analysis? A few years ago, the social and political movements of Latin America developed a media outlet called *The Dawn*. Today, *The Dawn* is reborn as the **People's Dispatch**. Based in New Delhi, with correspondents across the world – from South America to North Africa, from Eastern Europe to South-Eastern Asia – the *People's Dispatch* will be both a news wire as well as a home for the most thorough movement-driven analysis of the news. It launched today, the birthday of Frantz Fanon – who played an important role as a journalist of the Algerian Revolution. At the website, I have a short **essay** on the voice of the people – on the need for such a media platform. Please visit the **People's Dispatch** to get a full sense of what is available there.

The picture above is by João Silva, the remarkable Portugal-born South African photo-journalist.



The Iranian photo-journalist Hengameh Golestan took the picture above. She remains one of the best chroniclers of the Iranian revolution, not only of the demonstrations against the Shah of Iran but also of the struggles within the new Iran around issues of social life. Her most captivating series is about the protests around the hijab law. On March 8, 1979, international women’s day, the streets of Tehran were filled with people who opposed the mandatory hijab law. The Iranian Revolution, Golestan remembered, had taught people to take to the streets if they wanted to say something. But, the protestors failed to push back against the clerics. The law remained. Nonetheless, the sensibility of protest and possibility has not gone away. It asserts itself every once in a while.

Iran is portrayed in a way that flattens its own complexities. There have been considerable improvements for the lives of the Iranian people since the overthrow of the Shah, but also significant limitations. One measure that is often on the table is of the status of women in Iran. Certainly, the State puts restrictions on women’s entry into many areas of public life – including in the higher reaches of political power (women are routinely disqualified from the presidential election as well as the election to the Assembly of Experts). But, on the other hand, women’s literacy is now universal (from being at 35% in 1976) and the percentage of women in the professions has steadily increased (over a third of doctors are women, over sixty percent of civil servants are women). Protests are a constant feature of Iranian life – the demonstrations in December-January 2017-18 an illustrative example.

The flatter the picture of Iran, the easier it is for the United States to sell the view that a homeopathic sanctions regime or a bombing raid can somehow usher in emancipation. This is the kind of thinking that drove the US war on Iraq in 2003. It is a messianic world view that see the world as somehow needing US

bombs as a catalyst for change. We are led to believe that no change can come from within a society and that only engineered starvation (by sanctions) or massive bombardment can do the job. It is a dangerous view replicated in less sensational terms by the international media.

Meanwhile, the threat of sanctions has already begun to damage the Iranian economy. Focus within Iran is not on how to effectively expand the realm of freedom within the country, but how to survive the vindictive policies of the West. To get a sense of the policies used to strangle Iran, have a look at Paul Cochrane's **report** on the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force's plots and plans against Iran. One of the demands made on the Iranian government by this mysterious task force is that it amends article 154 of its Constitution ('While it completely abstains from any kind of intervention in the internal affairs of other nations, it supports the struggles of the oppressed for their rights against the oppressors anywhere in the world'). This generic anti-colonial statement – along the grain of UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 of 1960 – is an abomination to this Western agency that has the ability to ruin the Iranian economy's ability to function.

Plainly, this is political pressure of the worst kind. And, as I show in my **column** this week, if the Trump administration gets its way with renewed sanctions by November 4, oil prices might skyrocket from \$70/barrel to \$250/barrel with every expectation that a small or big war with Iran could result. Terrible, terrifying possibilities.



Political polarization seems the mood of our times. But this polarization is not necessarily along lines that are productive – on how to tackle the perils of hunger, for instance. They are most often on lines that are bewildering – the question of Russian interference in the US elections, for instance.

In São Paulo (Brazil), what struck me was that for both sides of the political divide, Lula is the object: whether on the left, for his release and his entry fully into the presidential campaign, or on the right, for his

continued incarceration and a blanket denial for him to re-enter electoral politics. Lula is mythic – the hopes for democracy and the emblem of anti-democracy. At least in Brazil, unlike the United States (Russian interference) or Europe (Brexit), the issue of Lula is the actual, central political issue that divides the country. Lula is the battlefield of a heightened class struggle. The fight over his body represents the fight over who should have the authority to drive an agenda over the largest country in Latin America. For my **report** in *The Hindu*, I spoke to Neuri Rossetto of the MST and Valter Pomar of the PT, among others, to orient me towards this crisis of the institutions in Brazil and what this will come to mean for the country in the months ahead (please **read** the dossier on Brazil from **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**).

About twenty-five years ago, Lula – along with Fidel Castro – formed the Forum of São Paulo. At its 24th meeting last week in Havana (Cuba), the forum gathered together 400 delegates from various social and political movements. The head of the forum – Mónica Valente of the Workers’ Party of Brazil – laid out the contradictions of the moment and described honestly the failures of the left in the recent period. It is not enough, she **said**, to lash out. In politics, one has to resist with intelligence and with determination.

And one has to read. So, off you go to have a look at the *People’s Dispatch*.

Warmly,
Vijay.