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An Indian Kristallnacht in the Making

Sidharth Bhatia

Over the last few years, the brutal years of Hitler’s reign have often been invoked to compare the situation in India now with Nazi Germany in the 1930s and ’40s. Memes showing Narendra Modi as Hitler and the RSS as modern day Nazis are popular and were seen on many placards during the anti Citizenship (Amendment) Act–National Register of Citizens protests these past few days.

Such comparisons are always simplistic, to say the least, and while the early RSS leaders were greatly inspired by Hitler and, less known, by the Mussolini brand of fascism, we need to also acknowledge that the contexts are vastly different. Hitler was a product of his time in a particular social environment, while Modi and his party as well as the larger organisation behind them are peculiar to India.

The parallels are there, of course, but throwaway references to fascism lose their potency and become facile, which is of little help while studying a particular phenomenon. The Hindutva brigade may have learnt from the Nazi playbook, but they bring to it their own, homegrown band of fanaticism, laced with deep rooted prejudice and deadly intent.

Even so, reading and knowing history can be a great help in understanding what is going on and how things could unfold in the future. The rise of Hitler shows us how democracy can be subverted from within, using all the levers of democratic processes. All over the world, the new despots were elected by their people who turned towards them for guidance and leadership. And, while these leaders—Donald Trump, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Rodrigo Duterte and in India, Modi—unleash some of the most anti-democratic forces on their respective countries, they are cheered on by their supporters.

“There was much that impressed, puzzled and troubled a foreign observer about the new Germany. The overwhelming majority of Germans did not seem to mind that their personal freedom had been taken away, that so much of their culture had been destroyed and replaced with a mindless barbarism, or that their life and work had become regimented to a degree never before experienced even by a people accustomed for generations to a great deal of regimentation,” William Shirer, who came to work as a correspondent in Germany in 1934.
wrote later in his monumental book  
_The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich_.

Nazi ideology was already spreading and was to reach its full bloom a few years later, when new history books were introduced in school, youth groups were formed and a massive exercise of purging any renegade intellectual, artist or academic was under way. Jews were being demonised and laws were being enacted to exclude them from public and economic life. The Nuremberg laws of 1935 deprived them of citizenship, turning them into citizenship. It forbade marriage between Jews and ‘Aryans’. By 1936, “when the Germany which was host to the Olympic games was enchanting the visitors from the West, the Jews had been excluded either by law or by Nazi terror—the latter often preceded the former—from public and private employment to such an extent that at least one half of them were without means of livelihood,” Shirer writes.

These policies came to a head in November 1938, when the Nazis unleashed waves of violence against Jews all over Germany and recently annexed territories in Austria and Czechoslovakia. Triggered ostensibly by the assassination of a German diplomat in Paris by a Polish Jew—whose parents were among the many Polish Jews expelled from their longtime homes in Germany—the violence was led by Nazi storm troopers and Hitler Youth.

Over two days, the storm troopers, wearing civilian clothes, destroyed businesses and homes owned by Jews, burnt down synagogues. Jews were attacked in their homes and humiliated. Over 90 people were killed, hundreds were injured, and 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and put in detention centres. It was the first time Jews were incarcerated on such a massive, organised scale. Insurance payouts to the Jews were confiscated and Hermann Göring blamed the Jews themselves for the violence and imposed a massive fine on the community.

The pogrom, which came to be known as Kristallnacht (night of broken glass), because of the shattered shards on the street, made headlines around the world. Countries and leaders which had largely ignored the rise of Nazism in Germany, were jolted into action. US President Franklin D Roosevelt denounced the attacks on Jews and recalled its ambassador.

Kristallnacht was the first step that led to the Holocaust and the Final Solution. A combination of laws, terror, social ostracisation and economic boycott ensured that the Jews were not just reduced to second class status, but were simply eliminated. By the time the war was over, six million Jews were killed in the concentration camps, mainly in the gas chambers that were set up.

Germans went about their daily routine, many of them supportive of Hitler’s policies, others keeping their heads down, and still others preferring not to speak up. Many (non-Jew) Germans fled to other countries, mainly the US—a few died on the way. There was no active resistance to Nazi terror, and many perfectly ordinary and decent citizens were ready to do the state’s bidding—they were ‘just following orders’.

Echoes of that horrible past are now being heard in our own country. Prejudice at the ground level against Muslims is common and in the aftermath of the mass killings in Gujarat in 2002, the more rabid Hindutva organisations openly called for not selling property to Muslims. Narendra Modi, during his election campaigns in the state used to make several snide references to Muslims and has continued the tradition during his prime ministership, unmindful of his constitutional duty to be secular. His colleagues in the BJP are more direct, declaring that they will drive away Muslims from the country. And now the CAA–NRC will institutionalise that process.

What should immediately concern us is the events in the last few days in Uttar Pradesh where Muslims are being targeted by the forces of the Adityanath government. Adityanath is one of the most rabid and polarising figures in the Hindutva pantheon, and undoubtedly elevated to the chief ministership for those very traits. Since he has assumed office, he has systematically gone about not just marginalising Muslims but also initiating a number of symbolic gestures—renaming towns with Hinduised names—to show Muslims their place. The idea is to beat them into submission and at the same time hope they retaliate, which will give the perfect excuse to go after them even more violently.

The anti-CAA–NRC protests have given him the opportunity to unleash his forces on Muslims. People (in some case not even protestors), have been beaten up, Muslim properties have been destroyed, and at least 18 people, including an eight-year-old boy have been killed. Eyewitnesses have said that not just the police, many in plain clothes too participated in the violence and looting. Adityanath’s government has ‘auctioned’
properties of those who took part in the protests. A systematic plan is in motion to terrorise the Muslims of UP.

This has to be seen in the wider background of the CAA-NRC which will effectively marginalise Indian Muslims. Those who will not be called ‘ghuspetiyas’ (infiltrators)—and that could be anybody—will find themselves reduced to second class citizens. Debating whether Narendra Modi contradicted his home minister Amit Shah on the roll out of the NRC is a pointless distraction. The government is merely buying time. The construction of the detention centres is already underway.

The massive protests all over the country are heartening and show that the secular conscience of this country is still a living, breathing thing—it has not been deadened even by the hate mongering of the past few years. Indeed, this hate may have even breathed new life into it. The blatantly communal CAA–NRC exercise may have been the trigger, but the protestors who came out on the streets were expressing their pent up anger at the Modi dispensation and all that it has brought with it—bigotry, intolerance and narrow-mindedness. All this and poor economic management too.

The government may not admit it, but this upsurge of collective fury is a sign that the Hindutva project has gone too far. With a combination of repression, double speak and propaganda, the Modi government may think it will ride out this storm, but it will not have it easy from now on. And that is an encouraging sign.

In these modern times, a Holocaust may not be possible, but that’s no reason to be complacent. The world’s knowledge of the horrors of Nazism did not prevent the killings in Cambodia or Rwanda. Other massacres have happened before the global community has stepped in. India still evokes respect for its democratic traditions—besides, the lure of business opportunities always trumps human rights concerns. Nor can we simply wish away the vocal—and silent—support this government may have. The world will move on to other things and protestors too will get busy with their lives. The international outrage over Kristallnacht in 1938 did not stop the Nazis from achieving their evil goals. An Adityanath cares not a whit about what anyone thinks, and his bosses like him for that. The next phase of achieving Hindu rashtra has begun and only sustained resistance can stop it.

(Sidharth Bhatia is a journalist and writer based in Mumbai and is a Founding Editor of The Wire.)

With CAA, India Mirrors Israel

On Monday, 9th December, around midnight, the Lok Sabha passed the Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2019, and two days later, the Rajya Sabha too gave its approval, setting into action the Sangh Parivar vision of apartheid. This bill fundamentally changes the Citizenship Act 1955 to expedite the process of naturalisation for non-Muslim “minorities” from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan i.e. “Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians”. The exclusion of Muslims from this along with simultaneous plans of extending the National Register Citizenship to all of India forebodes the realisation of this regime’s ideology, built upon overturning the constitutional values of equality and secularism. The only parallel to such a supremacist definition of citizenship is Israel.

In 2018, Israel passed the Nation State Law, a Basic Law with constitutional status, which pronounces that “Israel is the historic homeland of the Jewish people and they have an exclusive right to national self-determination in it”. Anybody belonging to the Jewish faith can become a citizen of Israel, while Christian and Muslim Palestinians as well as other non-Jewish minorities in Israel have a second-class status. This goes along with the occupation and colonisation of occupied Palestinian territories. Palestinians and their descendants who were forcibly displaced to establish the state on Israel in 1948 are denied their fundamental right of return.

India’s proximity to Israel does not only translate into trade and arms deals, but in mirroring Israel’s policies and methodologies. We saw this earlier this year in Kashmir, with the removal of Article 370, and now in the Citizenship Amendment Bill. As people rise up in protest and are being met with state’s might, we share here a part of the dissent note of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) to the bill, submitted by Lok Sabha Member of Parliament, Mohd. Salim on January 3, 2019, when it was first put up for debate and was stopped in Rajya Sabha even though it was cleared in Lok Sabha.

Point Five: Regime Unhappy with Rejection of India's Rejection
The proposed Amendments will do nothing short of foment Political, Religion, Linguistic and Ethnic Divisions. Those of this dominating persuasion are unhappy with the Indian Constitution’s unequivocal rejection of the two-nation theory. Today, based on the fundamentals of equality and non-discrimination within the constitution, Indian law cannot distinguish between Hindu and Muslim arrivals from Pakistan and Bangladesh. The real purpose of the citizenship amendment bill seems to be to introduce this distinction into India’s citizenship laws.

The BJP’s 2014 manifesto rather crudely states that “India shall remain a natural home for persecuted Hindus and they shall be welcome to seek refuge here.” Such a statement mimics the policy of only one other country, Israel—which sees itself as a sanctuary for Jews who are given an automatic right to enter the country and earn citizenship.

In February 2014, Prime Minister Modi (then on an election campaign) infamously said, “We have a responsibility towards Hindus who are harassed and suffer in other countries. India is the only place for them.” Israel, it is well known, has a dismal track record not just on the human rights of other peoples in general but of the Palestinians at the West Bank, in particular.

On December 22, PM Narendra Modi, addressing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) election rally in Delhi, stated that there has been no discussion around the word NRC ever since the formation of his government in 2014. As per records, this again isn’t true. “We did not make it, it hasn’t been tabled in Parliament, it hasn’t been discussed in the Cabinet, no laws have been formed. Would we come up with a communal and divisive law when we have rolled out development projects which do not ask for the religious identities of the beneficiaries?” he asked, feigning innocence.

After a Cabinet Meeting on December 24, Prakash Javadekar stated in a Press Conference that the National Population Register (NPR) is only a population register and not a citizens’ register, and that the NPR has nothing to do with NRC.

Modi and Javdekar are lying. According to the revisions made in the Citizenship Act in 2003, the NRC process begins with the compilation of the National Population Register (NPR). The NPR is, indeed, the first stage of the NRC. This has been admitted in Parliament by Kiren Rijiju when he was Minister of State for Home Affairs. Replying to B.K. Hariprasad in Rajya Sabha on 23 July 2014, he said, “The government has now decided to create the National Register of Indian Citizens (NRIC) based on the information collected under the scheme of NPR by verifying the citizenship status of all individuals in the country.” He again reiterated this in Rajya Sabha in response to a question by Dr T.N. Seema on 26 November 2014: “The NPR is the first step towards creation of National Register of Indian Citizens (NRIC) by verifying the citizenship status of every usual resident.”

The Gazette notification to prepare and update the NPR was issued by the Registrar General of Citizen Registration on July 31, 2019. The Census organisation has already stated on its website that house to house enumeration will be conducted throughout the country (except in Assam) for “collection of information relating to all persons who are usually residing within the jurisdiction of the Local Registrar”. This enumeration will be undertaken between the first day of April 2020 and September 30, 2020.

Based on articles by Prabir Purkayastha, Sushovan Sircar and Yogesh S.
According to Javadekar, the NPR is a part of the Census. The Census authorities undertake both the Census enumeration and the NPR. The NPR is being updated along with the Census enumeration for 2021. They are, nevertheless, two separate things.

It is obvious from the Rules framed by the Home Ministry in 2003 that the NPR is directly linked to the NRC. Section 3 of the Notification on 10th December 2003 called The Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and Issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003 details the National Register of Indian Citizens. It states, in Clause (5):

“The Local Register of Indian citizens shall contain details of persons after due verification made from the Population Register.”

It also states in Section 4, Clause (3):

“For the purposes of preparation and inclusion in the Local Register of Indian Citizens, the particulars collected of every family and individual in the Population Register shall be verified and scrutinized by the Local Registrar, who may be assisted by one or more persons as specified by the Registrar General of Citizen Registration.”

In other words, the Local Population Register is incorporated into the NRC. It gets its data from the Population Register. These Rules make it clear that the NPR is indeed the first step towards the NRC. The house-to-house enumeration for the National Population Register is indeed the first step towards NRC.

Residents will be asked 15 questions in the NPR survey. These include questions on the place of birth, the date of birth, and the name of the father and mother and the details of Aadhaar. This information will then be crosschecked with the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) to verify the individual’s biometrics.

The Rules quoted above also have a clause to identify doubtful citizenship from the Population Register. This is in Section 3, Clause 4:

“During the verification process, particulars of such individuals, whose Citizenship is doubtful, shall be entered by the Local Registrar with appropriate remark in the Population Register for further enquiry and in case of doubtful Citizenship, the individual or the family shall be informed in a specified proforma immediately after the verification process is over.”

The only question in the Rules related to citizenship is one on the nationality of the resident. No other question or proof of citizenship is asked in the NPR enumeration. But though no documents regarding citizenship will be asked during the enumeration and the verification process, particulars of such individuals whose citizenship is deemed to be “doubtful” will be entered by the local Registrar with appropriate remarks in the Population Register for further enquiry. The Rules do not say on what basis “doubtful” citizenship can be deduced during a process of enumeration that has no provision to examine any document related to a resident’s citizenship.

As Prakash Karat has pointed out, “It is at the verification stage that communal profiling will take place, in line with what the Home Minister had declared—the purpose of the NRC is to eliminate ‘infiltrators’ as against the Hindu refugees who will become eligible for citizenship under the CAA.

Those summoned as ‘doubtful citizens’ will have to go through the tortuous process of submitting proof of their citizenship.”

Former Supreme Court Judge Madan Lokur has said the proviso to the definition of illegal immigrant in the amended citizenship act is unconstitutional. There is a twin requirement of a rational and a reasonable nexus to pass the test of Article 14 in defining who is an illegal immigrant. According Justice Lokur, the amended act does not pass the test that all persons have to be treated equally before law.

The “doubtful citizens” in the NPR–NRC to the illegal immigrant in the CAA 2019, is a quick hop, skip and jump. The three are tied together with an umbilical chord. We already know of detention camps and 19 lakh citizens who have been left out of the NRC in Assam. How many are going to be excluded from an all India Register?
India's Muslims are Asserting their Citizenship

Apoorvanand

‘The protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act at Jamia Millia Islamia and Aligarh Muslim University have given the Bharatiya Janata Party something it always wanted. Now it has become easier for them to term the opposition to the Act as sectarian, communal and essentially Muslim.’ This is the lament of many well-wishers of Muslims and critics of the CAA. Their fear is that the protests will now become a prisoner of the Hindu–Muslim binary, thereby doing a disservice to the cause itself.

The prime minister is at his vicious worst. First he said that the protestors can be identified by their clothes and then dared the Congress to declare that it would give citizenship to all Pakistanis. As happens in India, the Muslims can get easily dubbed Pakistanis and that is sufficient to delegitimise anything they say or do.

What do Muslims do then? Should Jamia and AMU have kept silent, or the protestors of Seelampur or Purnia kept themselves confined to their daily chores since their ‘visibility’ would weaken the argument against the CAA? Whenever the ‘Muslimness’ of the protest gets pronounced, a fear grips their well-wishers that the movement will ultimately fall in the hands of the orthodox, retrograde Muslim leadership and get ghettoised.

There were stray instances of violence. But we witnessed violence in Assam too. Why is it that the Assam violence, even if unacceptable, does not arouse as much concern? Why is it that a senior central minister immediately invoked the spectre of Jihad after the protest at Jamia and AMU?

Who would deny that the Muslims have genuine anxieties after the enaction of the CAA. It isolates them by omitting their religion from the text of the Act. It is only for the Muslims to feel this loneliness.

When they come out on the streets, they lay their claim over their nation, India. They act as citizens. They are not making any sectarian demand. They are only emphasising that they have equal rights in India. Not only that but also that Muslimness is as naturally Indian as Hinduness. The CAA makes a contrary argument. If non-Muslims have a right to enter and enjoy the hospitality of India, Muslims also have the same rights. The Muslims of India are making this point by criticising the Act though their protests.

Muslims are often advised to be secular and work under secular leadership. This is a strange argument. No secular party thought it necessary (if you leave the Trinamool Congress, which is treated as more Muslim than Muslims themselves, aside) to mobilise people or public opinion against the Act. The students of these two universities came out and they included non-Muslims as well.

Muslims waited for the secular parties to take a stand on the injustice inbuilt in the Ayodhya judgment. They were disappointed. The secular parties vied with each other to look more Hindu. The outcome of the case was not seen as communal or sectarian but an ‘acknowledgment of the sentiments of the people of India’.

The Ayodhya judgment was a precursor to the CAA. Treating the Hindu claim, even if without any evidence, as weightier than the Muslim claim created a hierarchy in which Muslims were inferior. The CAA does the same. Are Muslims wrong in feeling that this is an attempt to further marginalise them in the project of nation making?

If the secular political class is reluctant to give voice to this anxiety of Muslims, what are they supposed to do? They did not come out when individual Muslims were being killed. They did not come out when the top leadership of the country was demonising them. No secular party spoke out firmly against the vilification of Jamia and the AMU in these past six years. No secular party spoke out when Muslims were pushed out of the mixed localities by the use of the Disturbed Areas Act in Baroda.

It did not disturb the political class when the Muslimness of India was being erased bit by bit. The process started long back. As early as 1949, Indira Gandhi had noticed it when she wrote to Nehru:

“I hope Farrukhabad was not too dusty and tiring. I hear Tandonji wants to change its name and that of every town which ends in ‘bad’ into ‘nagar’. If this sort of thing goes on much longer I shall be provoked into calling myself ‘Zohra Begum’ or some such thing!”

That sort of clarity and resolve have gone, even in her party. The Hinduisation of India is seen as natural.
The Muslims have long borne the burden of partition. Seventy years have passed and new generations of Muslims are still asked to account for it. They are reminded of the wounds that the Hindus and Sikhs carry, displaced from their homes, but we never talk about the massacre of Muslims in what is now India! Do Muslims who decided to live in India despite witnessing this atrocity still need to give repeated tests of loyalty to India?

Muslims tied their fate with the secular polity of India. But they were never accepted as worthy of representing the collective will of India. Muslim leaders are destined to remain only Muslim leaders, like the dalit leaders who are never recognised as universal voices.

It is not for the Muslims to ensure that they do not get ghettoised. As it is not for dalits to not be special. Remember, the April 2 protest called by them in 2018 did not see the participation of the Caste Hindus. The dalit anxiety was not imaginary. But it was not shared by the non-dalits.

Dalits are in a far better situation than the Muslims because they are never called sectarian when they protest as dalits. Political parties compete with each other to be on their side. Muslims have no such luck.

This time, Muslims have decided to say that they reject their marginalisation. That their language should be considered as representative and as democratic and as Indian as any other.

Muslims have nothing to prove to India. This time it is for the rest of us non-Muslims to stand by India’s Muslims and prove to them that we qualify as co-citizens. After all what is a citizen if not the Vaishnav Jan of the old man? And how can one be a Vaishnav Jan without sharing and knowing the pain of others? The Muslims’ pain must be allowed the dignity of speaking for itself; others should prove their humanity by walking alongside them.

(The writer teaches at Delhi University.)

Kakori Martyrs Also Symbols of Communal Harmony

Bharat Dogra

The week December 16–22 has a very special significance in the history of the freedom movement in India. During this week in 1927, four extremely brave and exceptionally talented revolutionary freedom fighters were executed by the colonial government.

Ramprasad Bismil was hanged in Gorakhpur, Ashfaqullah Khan in Faizabad, Rajindernath Lahiri in Gonda and Roshan Singh in Allahabad. All of these places are in the eastern part of present-day Uttar Pradesh. All four of them were accused in the Kakori case in which a government treasure box being carried in a train was plundered at Kakori, a station near Lucknow, in August 1924 to raise badly needed resources for the activities of revolutionary freedom fighters.

The Kakori case and freedom fighters involved in this deserve much wider recognition than they have received so far. This is a good time to recall their contribution.

A vacuum had arisen in the country after the sudden withdrawal of the non-cooperation movement by Mahatma Gandhi following violence at Chauri Chaura. Taking advantage of this, communal forces, aided and abetted by the colonial government were spreading rapidly. It is at this critical juncture that some revolutionaries decided to attract the youth with their courageous activities and in the process also helped to check the drift towards communalism.

In particular, the legendary friendship of Ram Prasad Bismil and Ashfaqullah Khan became an important rallying point for the forces of communal harmony. They were the closest of friends and planned several daring ventures till they were arrested in the Kakori case.

Both of them were also poets of very high calibre and their poems and songs remained popular with freedom fighters for a long time. The fact that these poems are still quoted and these songs are still sung testifies to their enduring appeal. In fact, all the Kakori martyrs had very strong and attractive personalities.

Bhagat Singh, who as a 19-year-old youth was fast emerging as a leading revolutionary at the time of the execution of the four Kakori revolutionaries, paid rich tributes to them in his articles he wrote at the time.

Rajindernath Lahiri was a very brave M.A. student who had been imprisoned in another freedom movement case too and showed exceptional courage in facing the death sentence. Similar was the case with Roshan Singh, who had also
worked in the farmers’ movement. Bhagat Singh describes Ashfaqullah Khan as an exceptionally handsome poet who behaved very well and spoke words of great courage till his last day in the death cell. Ram Prasad is described by Bhagat Singh as the leader of this group of revolutionaries, a potential commander-in-chief, and a great poet at the same time.

It is important to recall what these fighters left behind as their last message to their country and its people they loved so dearly. Ram Prasad Bismil said in his last message, “My request to people of my country is that if they really want to pay homage to us then somehow establish Hindi–Muslim unity—this is our last will and this is how you should preserve our memory.”

Ashfaqulaah Khan said in his last message, “Hindustani brothers, no matter what religion you belong to, please be one in the country’s work and do not fight.”

Ram Prasad and Ashfaqullah Khan were both devoted to their own religions but also worked and pleaded very hard for unity and harmony of these two communities.

Ram Prasad was very devoted to his mother and after his death sentence was announced she came out very bravely to stand by him and his principles. In earlier days Ram Prasad had given her a pledge that he would never kill anyone. As the leader of the revolutionary group which executed the Kakori train robbery of government treasure, he had given strict instructions not to kill any passenger but one passenger got caught in accidental fire and died.

There was hardly any case for awarding death sentences to four youths of outstanding character. The trial was badly manipulated as the colonial government was bent on giving death sentences. To bring out the injustice of the legal system, the accused petitioned at high levels and they made written statements explaining that the reason was to expose the hollowness of the system.

Within jail, they also observed prolonged protest fasts to improve conditions of political prisoners and oppose various injustices. When the death sentence was passed against four of them and even before, there was a surge of public sympathy. As one example of this, Sushila Didi, a young girl who was to later emerge as an important comrade of Bhagat Singh, had given away the jewellery left by her mother for her wedding, as a contribution for their legal expenses. If the Congress had started a big movement against this death sentence (and more generally against death sentence for any freedom fighter), this would have strengthened the freedom movement as well as communal harmony.

(Bharat Dogra is a freelance journalist who has been involved with several social movements.)

**I Will Give My Blood**

**Chandrasekhar Azad Ravan**

“Jai Bhim! This is a bigger fight. CAA and NRC will break this country and we are standing with this nation. This fight is not just of the Muslims, this is a fight for everyone, and we will not let it weaken. I’m surrendering to the government, but I say this, the government will have to repeal this Act. I request my friends and comrades, don’t let this revolution weaken, make it grow. Because we are the biggest democracy in the world and that should never weaken.

Our unity is our strength. Protest peacefully, do not give them an opportunity to use their guns and lathis. With non-violence, we will be able to defeat the enemy. I firmly say this to my fellow Indians, come out onto the streets, this is not just a matter of religion or faith, it is a matter of the entire nation.

There seems to be a conspiracy to destroy our country. There seem to be preparations to take away the rights of Dalits, Adivasis and the oppressed, the meaning of their votes, reservation, government benefits, savings. I understood their game, I was fighting but... He who’s sitting there, Amit Shah, I want to tell him that if he wants Chandrasekhar at any cost, then I will go to him myself. But remember this, Ambedkarites do not back down. I’m Babasaheb’s son, I will give my life but I will not go back on my word that if the sweat of our Muslim brothers fall, I will give my blood. For that I’m ready to sacrifice anything. Thank you my friends. Keep this revolution alive after I go to jail. Jai Bhim!”

(Chandrasekhar Azad Ravan is Bhim Army chief.)
2019 Latin America in Review: Year of the Revolt of the Dispossessed

Roger Harris

A year ago, John Bolton, Trump’s short-lived national security advisor, invoked the 1823 Monroe Doctrine making explicit what has long been painfully implicit: the dominions south of the Rio Grande are the empire’s “backyard.” Yet 2019 was a year best characterized as the revolt of the dispossessed for a better world against the barbarism of neoliberalism. As Rafael Correa points out, Latin America today is in dispute. What follows is a briefing on this crossroads.

Andean Nations

Venezuela, the leader for regional integration and 21st century socialism, continued to be ground zero in the clash between the empire and those nations pursuing post-neoliberal alternatives and a multipolar world. On the evening of January 22, trained US security asset and head of the suspended Venezuelan National Assembly Juan Guaidó received a call from US Vice President Pence, giving Guaidó the green light to declare himself president of Venezuela. The next day, Guaidó proclaimed his presidency on a Caracas street corner. Within minutes Trump recognized the self-appointment, later followed by some fifty US allies. Still most nations in the world did not recognize Guaidó, and the United Nations continues to recognize Maduro as the constitutional president of Venezuela.

Guaidó called for harsher US sanctions on his own people and even the US “military option.” Gone was the pretext that sanctions targeted only the government. The former US Ambassador to Venezuela William Brownfield boasted that these measures “would have an impact on everyone… to accelerate the collapse.” From President Barack Obama’s sanctions in 2015, Trump progressively ratcheted up the pain to the current blockade. This illegal collective punishment had already caused over 40,000 deaths by the beginning of the year according to the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR), in a war by economic means, denying the Venezuelan people vital food and medicine.

Yet Guaidó failed to come to power. His publicity stunt on February 23 to bring “humanitarian aid” from Colombia fizzled. To make things worse, envoys of Guaidó in Colombia were caught embezzling some of the very funds slated for humanitarian assistance. Soon after this debacle, a staged coup on April 30 by Guaidó and a few military officers on an overpass in eastern Caracas aborted. In November, Guaidó made an even more pathetic coup attempt. His ability to garner support atrophied, drawing the ire even of some hardline opposition who formerly backed him, while the Maduro government continued to rally substantial popular demonstrations and signed a peaceful coexistence agreement with some moderate opposition parties in September.

Despite attempts by Washington to incite ruptures within the Venezuelan security forces, the “civic-military union” built by Chavez and continued under Maduro held firm, and the ranks of the militias continue to grow. And despite heavy lobbying by the Trump administration, Venezuela was voted onto the UN Human Rights Council on October 27.

In a bid to compensate for the diminished stature of the anti-Venezuela Lima Group, on December 3, Colombia convened a summit for the activation of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR) against Venezuela, to ratchet up sanctions even further and keep the military option on the table. By the end of 2019, even the Wall Street Journal conceded, “Venezuela’s Nicolás Maduro, once thought ripe for ouster, looks firmly in place.”

In Washington, North American solidarity activists defended the Venezuelan embassy from being taken over by Guaidó collaborators (April – May 2019). With the permission of the Venezuelan government and pursuant to international law, the Embassy Protectors held out for 37 days until expelled by the Secret Service. The four last defenders – Margaret Flowers, Kevin Zeese, Adrienne Pine, David Paul – will go to trial, facing possible stiff penalties. On October 25, journalist Max Blumenthal was also arrested and charged (subsequently dropped), as the US government cracks down on dissent both at home and abroad.

Colombia is the chief regional US client state, distinguished by being the largest recipient of US military aid in the hemisphere. Hillary Clinton called Plan Colombia a model for Latin America. Yet this model leads the world in extrajudicial killings of journalists, union
leaders, and environmentalists. Meanwhile, Colombia continues to be the planet’s largest supplier of illicit cocaine.

A 2016 peace agreement saw the guerrilla FARC lay down their arms, but the government has honored the agreement mainly in the breach. Death squad activity continued in 2019, targeting former FARC militants. A faction of the FARC returned to the guerrilla path.

In a sign of growing disaffection with the hardline right-wing influence of former Colombian President Álvaro Uribe and his protégé and current President Iván Duque, the far right suffered significant losses in the October regional and municipal elections. Left-leaning Claudia López became the first woman and first lesbian to be mayor of the capital city of Bogotá. By year-end, Colombia experienced massive general strikes opposed to government austerity policies dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

**Bolivia.** Evo Morales was the first indigenous president of this largely indigenous country. Under the 14 years of his Movement for Socialism party (MAS), Bolivia had the highest economic growth rate and the greatest poverty reduction in the Western Hemisphere. Bolivia became a world champion for indigenous and poor people, aligning with the progressive governments of Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua.

Morales was fairly re-elected president on October 20. Because the US-backed candidate lost, the US called his election “fraudulent.” A compliant Organization of American States (OAS) disseminated misleading information on the validity of the election. Thus, the stage was set for the November 10 coup, when Morales was forced to “resign” by the military.

Thirteen US members of Congress sent a “dear colleague” letter condemning the “Administration’s support for [the] military-backed regime and silence on violent repression [which] contributes to spiraling crisis.” This letter stands in stark contrast to the close association of key figures behind the coup with allies in Washington, the OAS Secretary General’s embrace of coup leader Luis Fernando Camacho, and the endorsement of the coup by the right-wing neighbors. President Trump “applauded” the Bolivian military despite its well documented systematic violations of human rights.

The self-proclaimed President Jeanine Áñez smeared indigenous communities as “satanic” in tweets, later deleted. Morales is now in exile, and the indigenous and other poor continue to protest in the face of lethal, racist repression. At this writing, Morales, the MAS, and most of the popular sectors have agreed to new elections but efforts are underway by backers of the de facto government to disqualify the MAS from participating in an eventual election.

**Ecuador.** Speaking of reversals, Ecuador’s President Lenin Moreno took the prize. Moreno had served as vice president in a previous leftist government headed by Rafael Correa, who had campaigned for Moreno. Upon assuming the presidency in 2017, Moreno inexplicably and unexpectedly betrayed the platform, the voters, and the party that put him in office. He jailed his vice president and later other leaders of his former party and put out an arrest warrant for Correa, who is now in exile. On April 11, Moreno handed Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, who had been in asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy in London, to the British police.

Moreno forgave some $4.5 billion in fines and debt by major corporations and oligarchs and then papered it over by an IMF loan. With the loan came austerity measures, el paquetazo, including removing fuel subsidies. The mass protest of the dispossessed, led by the indigenous CONAIE organization, was so overwhelming that Moreno was temporarily forced to flee the capital city of Quito and rescind some elements of the paquetazo. Moreno continues to push IMF stipulated austerity measures, while repressing his former party’s elected representatives.

**Peru** is in crisis, wracked with corruption scandals. In April 2019, former President Alan García shot himself as the police were preparing to arrest him for corruption, while fellow former President Alberto Fujimori is in jail on corruption accusations and human rights violations. Former President Alejandro Toledo also faces corruption accusations and is fighting against extradition from the US. Pedro Pablo Kuczynski was the last directly elected president of Peru. Formerly a US citizen and an IMF and World Bank official, he was forced to resign for corruption in March 2018 shortly before he was slated to host a meeting of the anti-Venezuela Lima Group to expose Venezuela for corruption.

Ever since, the presidency of
Peru has been disputed. The current moderate-right President Martín Vizcarra dissolved the congress; the congress controlled by the far-right Keiko Fujimori (free after a year in detention for corruption) impeached the executive, although Vizcarra recovered the presidency. In the context of this dog fight among the elites have been massive anti-corruption mobilizations from below.

The Southern Cone

**Brazil.** New Year 2019 marked the inauguration of Jair Bolsonaro as president of Brazil. The election of hard-right Bolsonaro – called the “Trump of Brazil” by friends and foes alike – was a major reversal from the previous left-leaning Workers Party government.

Brazil has by far the biggest economy in Latin America and the eighth in the world and is part of the BRICS bloc including Russia, India, China, and South Africa. With a sycophant of Trump heading Brazil, both hemispheric and world geopolitics suffer the loss of a countervailing element to US hegemony. Brazil voted with the US and Israel for continuing the US blockade on Cuba and against 187 other UN members.

Former left-leaning President Lula da Silva would have easily beaten Bolsonaro, if the polls were any indication, but corrupt judge Sergio Moro sent Lula to prison on evidenceless charges. The judge was rewarded by ironically being made minister of justice in the new Bolsonaro government. Similarly, Dilma Rousseff, who was Lula’s left-leaning successor as president of Brazil, had been deposed on a technicality by the right-leaning congress in what amounted to a parliamentary coup in 2016.

An international campaign to free Lula finally succeeded in November, but far too late for him to run against Bolsonaro. Lula is free and fighting now, but could be incarcerated again.

**Bolsonaro went about dismantling social welfare measures, firing government workers, and rewarding multinational corporations, while the Amazon burned.** Predictably the popular sectors arose leading to an uncertain political situation in Brazil.

**Chile.** The Chilean people launched a general strike against austerity with slogans such as “neoliberalism was born in Chile and will die here.” Reacting to the “privatization of everything,” the uprising this fall has been truly from the grassroots with the established political parties sprinting to catch up with the popular revolt of the dispossessed.

Over a million protestors have taken to the streets in a country with a population of only 19 million. Many have remained there for weeks despite severe repression by the state, leaving numerous killed by live ammunition and rubber bullets. According to official state data, more than 8,000 have been jailed, almost 3,000 injured, and over 200 suffered ocular damage. Hundreds of lawsuits for police brutality have been filed, including sexual abuses. The right-wing billionaire President Sebastián Piñera suspended some constitutional rights, declaring a “state of emergency” in a country still under the constitution created by the dictator Pinochet.

**Argentina.** After right-wing President Mauricio Macri imposed textbook perfect neoliberal economic reforms, the Argentine economy spectacularly and predictably failed with rampant inflation, food shortages, currency free-fall, and capital flight. Even the middle class protested in the streets in enormous uprisings of the dispossessed.

On October 27, the center-left ticket of Alberto Fernández as president and Cristina Fernández as VP won and announced Argentina will leave the regional anti-Venezuela Lima Group. They will also have to deal with Macri’s record breaking $50.1 billion IMF loan, saddling the people with austerity measures in a country that is broke and again at the edge of default.

**Uruguay.** The ruling left-center Frente Amplio’s candidate, Daniel Martínez, won in the first round of Uruguay’s presidential elections on October 27, but by a too narrow margin to avoid a runoff election. He faced a united right-wing in the November 24 runoff against Luis Lacalle Pou, which ended his party’s 15-year rule.

The Caribbean

**Cuba.** The US embargo of Cuba, initiated by US President Kennedy and now a blockade, along with covert regime-change operations and occupation of Guantánamo have continued in an unbroken policy of aggression through Democratic and Republican administrations alike. Most recently Trump resurrected Title III of the Clinton-era Helms-Burton Act to intensify the blockade. The Cuban people show no sign of capitulating.

Cubans welcomed a new president, as Miguel Díaz-Canel succeeded Raúl Castro. On April 10, they ratified a new constitution, after an extensive consultative process, engaging some 9 million people, 780,000 suggestions, 9,600 proposals, and 133,000 citizen meetings.

**Puerto Rico** and Cuba were the
spoils of the first imperialist war, the 1898 Spanish-American War. Unlike free Cuba, Puerto Rico is still a neglected colonial possession of the US. And that political fact has never been clearer with Puerto Rico still not fully recovered from Hurricane Maria and still not governing itself to solve its own problems.

Puerto Rico experienced mass protests and a general strike in 2019. Governor Ricardo A. Rosselló was forced to resign on July 22. Puerto Rican liberation hero Oscar López Rivera observed: “Even before the governor announced his resignation, the fact is that he was not governing Puerto Rico.”

Haití. After the harsh 29-year US-backed Duvalier dictatorships and the subsequent “military transition,” a brief flourishing of democracy ended in Haiti when the US brazenly kidnapped President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and flew him into exile in 2004. Since then, a series of dubiously elected presidents – some literally installed and all propped up by the US – have produced human rights and social welfare conditions worse than under the dictatorships.

Billions in relief after the 2010 earthquake and in Petrocaribe funds from Venezuela have largely “disappeared” into the pockets of corrupt politicians. In response, the ever-restive Haitian populace has yet intensified the uprising of the dispossessed throughout the country. The newly formed Patriotic Forum united 62 social movements, who call not only for the resignation of President Jovenel Moïse, but a complete dismantling of the “system of exclusion” and for a new republic of justice, transparency, and participation. They demanded chavire chodyè a (overturn the cauldron).

Central America and Mexico

Honduras. The designation of Honduras as a narco-state is supported by the October 18 conviction in US federal court of President Juan Orlando Hernández’s (JOH) brother Tony for cocaine smuggling. JOH, the latest of a line of corrupt presidents since the 2009 US-backed coup, is identified as co-conspirator by the prosecutors. Testimony in the US court revealed that the notorious Mexican drug lord known as El Chapo gave JOH $1 million to help him rig the presidential election in 2013.

The US continued to prop up the tottering JOH regime staggering in the face of huge waves of popular protests including a prolonged national strike this summer. And those not opposing the government in the streets headed for asylum in the US, fleeing from gang violence and government malfeasance.

Guatemala. Right-wing comedian Jimmy Morales became president of Guatemala in August. In response to the revolt of dispossessed against his neoliberal rule, he declared a state of siege in five departments. Tens of thousands marched on Guatemala City, including the indigenous Xinkas, while many more Guatemalans fled the violence and everyday oppression seeking asylum at the US border.

The wounds of the US-backed genocidal dirty war of the 1980s against the largely indigenous population, taking some 200,000 lives, have not been healed but continue to be reinforced by harsh neoliberal measures and a regime of impunity fueling the exodus to the north. While lamenting the plight of these migrants, the corporate press in the US failed to recognize the made-in-America causes of their evacuation.

El Salvador. Likewise, El Salvador, another former victim of the US-backed dirty wars, added to the stream of Honduran and Guatemalan migrants seeking asylum in the US from the conditions created in large part by the country of their intended refuge.

Businessman Nayib Bukele, formerly associated with the left FMLN party and now turned right, was elected under the banner of the right-wing GANA party. He assumed the presidency on June 1, replacing Salvador Sánchez Ceren of the FMLN. Bukele has fallen in line with Washington’s drive to curtail emigration from the Northern Triangle countries (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) and has reversed his nation’s foreign policy to accord with the Lima Group’s drive for regime change in Venezuela.

Nicaragua. 2019 was a year of hopeful recovery in Nicaragua, healing from successfully repulsing a US-backed coup the previous year. The domestic perpetrators were granted amnesty by leftist President Daniel Ortega, and social welfare indices were again on the ascent. Although the poorest country in Central America, Nicaraguans were for the most part not fleeing for the US but were rebuilding their homeland.

Mexico is the second largest economy in Latin American and the eleventh in the world. After decades of right-wing rule, left-of-center Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) assumed the presidency last December and his new MORENA party swept local and regional offices with the expectation that corruption, inequality, and other long festering economic injustices would be addressed. AMLO dissented from the anti-Venezuelan Lima Group
and instituted a series of progressive domestic reforms.

Trump forced AMLO to contain the Central American immigrants massing on the US southern border or face tariff increases and other measures that would wreck the Mexican economy. As nineteenth century Mexican President Porfirio Diaz famously lamented: “Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States.”

A New Year’s message

2019 has not been an entirely bullish year for US imperialism, notwithstanding the hard turns to the right in Brazil, Bolivia, and Ecuador. Powerful winds against neoliberalism are gusting in Brazil, Ecuador, Chile, Peru, Argentina, Haiti, Honduras, Guatemala, and even in the US “Commonwealth” of Puerto Rico. Regime-change operations failed in Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua. US-preferred candidates suffered losses in Mexico, Colombia, and Bolivia (later reversed by a coup). And the hegemon is challenged in its own “backyard” by the increased influence of Russia and especially China, now the second largest trading partner with Latin America and the Caribbean.

Recently Cuban President Diaz-Canel addressed the 120-state Non-aligned Movement (a third of which are sanctioned by Washington) with this perceptive thought for a multipolar world: “There are more of us. Let us do more.”

(Roger Harris is with the Task Force on the Americas and the Campaign to End US/Canada Sanctions Against Venezuela.)

Assange and Manning Being Persecuted for Speaking Truth to Power

Leonard C. Goodman

The most important stories of the year for those who care about a free press involve the arrest of Julian Assange from the Ecuadorian embassy at the request of the US government, and the rearrest of the whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

Assange is the founder of WikiLeaks, a website that publishes official documents exposing the crimes and lies of world leaders. Before publishing, WikiLeaks verifies that the evidence submitted is authentic. Of the millions of items published by WikiLeaks, not one has been shown to be fraudulent or untruthful.

Chelsea Manning is a former Army intelligence officer who leaked hundreds of thousands of classified documents to WikiLeaks that exposed war crimes and official lies relating to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Manning confessed to her crimes and was sentenced to 35 years of incarceration. But her sentence was commuted after seven years by President Barack Obama, who conceded that she had acted out of a sense of duty to expose wrongdoing.

For at least three decades, our national government has primarily served the interests of the 1 percent—the major donors to the Democratic and Republican parties. To carry on in such an undemocratic fashion in a country that still requires leaders to stand for election, our leaders need to lie with impunity, especially about matters of war. To get away with this, they classify as secret every official document that has the potential to embarrass them or enlighten the people.

Of course, Assange is not the first publisher to expose government crimes. What makes Assange such a threat, and so hated, is that he publishes official government documents in real time that are impossible to dispute or discredit.

To grasp the power of WikiLeaks, imagine it had existed in 2002 during the run-up to the Iraq War. At that time, the administration of George W. Bush was telling the nation that we faced a grave threat from Iraq and its president, Saddam Hussein, who we were told had reconstituted his nuclear weapons program and had amassed large, clandestine stockpiles of deadly VX, sarin, and mustard gas. The situation was said to be so dangerous that we couldn’t even wait a couple of months to allow a team of international weapons inspectors to finish their job. Then-National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice warned that the smoking gun in Iraq may “be a mushroom cloud.”

Of course, our leaders produced no actual evidence to support their claims about Hussein and Iraq. All of the evidence was classified. The American people—who were called upon to pay for the war in blood and treasure—were not entitled to see any of the actual evidence for war. The mainstream press, including the New York Times and NPR, repeated the evidence-free assertions by our public officials as if they were proven fact. The American people were given no choice but to fall in line.

Years later, after it was too late to do any good, the actual intelligence
Probably the passage in the Communist Manifesto most frequently cited these days is a portrayal of the global spread of capitalism:

“All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands. We have universal interdependence of nations.… All nations, on pain of extinction, [are compelled] to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In a word, it creates a world after its own image.”

Certainly, the history of the past half-century has more than confirmed that the trend described 150 years ago is still in operation. There is, however, an integral feature of the capitalist penetration just described that is missing from the Manifesto. While capitalism by its very nature lives by accumulation and geographic expansion, it does so in a most unequal fashion. Even though nothing in economics follows strict mathematical rules, there are notable tendencies that are produced by the inner springs of capitalism. An outstanding example of such a tendency is found in the distinct and marked widening of the gap between a handful of rich nations and the rest of the world. The accelerating globalization of our times demonstrates this polarization in no uncertain terms.

A recent study of the income distribution of the world from 1965 to 1990, summarized in the accompanying table, shows that in our day 20 percent of the world’s population lives in countries that produce and benefit from over 83 percent of the world’s output of

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**A Note on the Communist Manifesto**

**Harry Magdoff**

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A recent study of the income distribution of the world from 1965 to 1990, summarized in the accompanying table, shows that in our day 20 percent of the world’s population lives in countries that produce and benefit from over 83 percent of the world’s output of
Table 1. Shares of the World Income 1965–1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percent of Total World Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poorest 20%</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second 20%</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third 20%</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth 20%</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richest 20%</td>
<td>69.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


goods and services (the share of the top 10 percent of world population came to 56 percent) while the share of global output of the poorest 20 percent of the world’s people is 1.4 percent. Now look at the difference in the trends in income distribution between the 20 percent in the richest countries and the rest of the world. The share of the world’s income in each one of the four lowest (income) groups of countries declined steadily from 1965 to 1990. On the other hand, the share of the richest 20 percent steadily increased from about 70 to over 83 percent. All this took place when, for most of the period, the rich countries were in a stage of stagnation and when evermore capital was flowing from the rich into the poor countries, presumably to develop new industries and develop financial and other services. (An examination of similar data available in World Bank reports for later years indicates that the polarization continued in full force during the 1990s.)

Thus, at the end of centuries of capitalist expansion, here is how things stand: 60 percent of the world’s population has 5.3 percent of the world output and income, while more than 83 percent (see last column of table) is in the hands of the richest 20 percent.

Relevant to this commentary is another oft-cited sentence from the Manifesto: “The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together.” As with so much more in the Manifesto, this point can be made with even more emphasis 150 years later. And yet once again we need to recognize how incredibly uneven is the distribution of the productive forces from region to region. On the one hand, the miracles of electronics; on the other hand, according to the latest United Nations Human Development Report, over a billion people do not have access to safe water. The list of absent productive and collateral forces needed to meet the basic needs of 80 percent of the world’s people is a long and miserable one.

There is much talk these days in radical circles about the need for a socialist vision. Too often that vision is strongly influenced by the material achievements of the rich capitalist nations and the living standards of the advantaged sectors. However, in view of the way capitalism has spread throughout the world as well as in the most advanced nations of the world, it is essential that the vision of socialism focus on a social transformation that will put first and foremost: the empowerment and meeting the basic human needs of the poorest, the most oppressed, and disadvantaged.

(Harry Magdoff was the editor of Monthly Review, the renowned socialist magazine, from 1969 until his death in 2006. This article was first published in Monthly Review, May 1998.)

Commune Pancha Vásquez

Katrina Kozarek

Another issue that the commune must take on is a commerce which is different from capitalist trade, a popular, fair, solidarity commercial activity, one that doesn't rob our neighbours, or the people. Because capitalism is a savage commerce, which inflates everything. No. You have to set a fair, solidarity prices... a new trading system; a new productive system and the means of production or the land, the machinery for the raw material... knowledge in the hands of society, in this case in the hands of the commune.

– Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías, June 11, 2009

The municipality of Rómulo Gallegos in Apure state in Venezuela is home to Elorza, a town famous for its multitudinous festival of traditional Venezuelan music and dance. Chávez is said to have developed his leadership and militancy in Elorza during his early days of political organising.
in the 1980s. Apart from Elorza’s rich history and culture, the rural areas of the Rómulo Gallegos municipality are also some of the leading Venezuelan lands for cattle and dairy production.

In 2014, fourteen communal councils spread along the banks of the Arauca River joined together to form the Pancha Vásquez Commune. This commune has brought together more than 938 families, 900 family owned farms, and extends over more than 100,000 hectares of the Rómulo Gallegos municipality, as well as part of the neighboring municipality of Muñoz.

Although this area is highly productive, the local inhabitants also require access to industrialised products which are produced elsewhere, such as rice, sugar and flour. The proximity of the commune to the Colombian border has contributed to unaffordable prices and scarcity of these basic staples.

The wave of massive speculation, hoarding and smuggling in 2015 had a profound impact on the residents of the Pancha Vásquez Commune. One of the first challenges taken on by the commune was to confront this situation through a network of communally controlled distribution channels.

The experience of the Popular Food Committee strengthened the Pancha Vásquez Commune politically and quickly led to more complex and dynamic experiences of distribution.

The lack of paved roads deeply affects the capacity of the commune’s farmers to distribute their products. This has left them at the mercy of intermediaries who pay extremely low prices, and then re-sell food for huge profits in urban centers.

In order to tackle this problem, the Pancha Vásquez Commune has created a new combined system which guarantees the direct distribution of local in exchange for processed food products. The commune does not possess collective lands as do some other rural communes, but it does have a strong relationship of trust with the farmers in their territory. This relationship has allowed for the exchange of locally produced meat and cheese products for industrialised staples with other communes as well as trade unions and workers in state-owned and mixed companies on a national level.

Not all the farms in the territory of Pancha Vásquez have the conditions to raise cattle, but they are not left out of the distribution system. When the products are exchanged, all families in the communal territory, as well as neighboring communes, have the possibility to purchase them. This expression of solidarity has played an important role in promoting the revolutionary spirit as well as dedication to the commune and popular power as the model of socialist development in the territory.

The Pancha Vásquez Commune has also created other local solutions to the problem of intermediaries. Since 2014, the commune has established a communal open air market for small scale farmers. Every Saturday without fail, the local farmers flock to the market, mostly in canoes on the Arauca River, to sell their products directly to consumers in Elorza.

A council, made up of the local farmers from the Pancha Vásquez Commune and nearby territories, meets on a regular basis to collectively analyse costs in order to guarantee uniform and fair prices for the producers and consumers.

The capacity of the Pancha Vásquez Commune to control the distribution of food in such an important area for agricultural production is no small feat. This has earned them powerful enemies, some even within the state, who have on occasion looked to sabotage their advances.

The commune has not let these obstacles dampen their revolutionary fervor. Spokesperson Juan Fernández recalls that Chávez has warned that this kind of “political pettiness” could occur, but that “the communes cannot be appendices of mayor’s offices or political parties... the communes belong to the people, to the organised popular power...”

The meticulous transparency, extensive solidarity and tireless labor of the Pancha Vásquez Commune has allowed the communards to continue growing despite the odds. They are currently developing projects for paved roads and a communal bank, which instead of lending and saving money, lends farm machinery and agricultural products. They are also preparing to take over nearby unproductive lands in order to consolidate their communal economy with collective agricultural production.

Just five years after taking shape, the Pancha Vásquez Commune has shown to be a true force for the advance of a communal economy and the communal state. It has become a reference point during these times of crisis, showing that the commune is a space of organisation and accountability which can advance at leaps and bounds both in terms of improving living conditions as well as laying the building blocks for the construction of socialism.

(Katrina Kozarek, a documentary maker from the United States, is presently on the staff of Venezuelanalysis, Venezuela’s only independent, 100% reader-funded English media outlet.)
Urban Farming: Cuba’s Response to Climate-Driven Food Crises

Paul Brown

When countries run short of food, they need to find solutions fast, and one answer can be urban farming.

That was the remedy Cuba seized with both hands 30 years ago when it was confronted with the dilemma of an end to its vital food imports. And what worked then for Cuba could have lessons today for the wider world, as it faces growing hunger in the face of the climate crisis.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in the 1990s, most of Cuba’s food supplies went with it. To stave off severe malnutrition the people of the capital, Havana, found an imaginative answer: urban gardening. That’s now seen as a possible blueprint for the survival of city populations in a warming world.

The Rapid Transition Alliance has published a longer account of Cuba’s very fast move towards self-sufficiency as part of its series Stories of Change, which describes cases of large-scale, rapid transformation that can seem difficult to achieve but which have often worked before.

The problem of hunger for the Cubans arose because during the Cold War they had stopped producing food of their own and turned over most of their farmland to sugarcane plantations to supply the Soviet Union. In return for these mountains of sugar Moscow provided Cuba with food, chemical fertilizers and fuel oil for its cars and tractors.

The Soviet collapse brought the breakdown of this trade, and food rationing for city dwellers. And Cuba lost its main food supply while it was still coping with strict US sanctions. Reverting to conventional farming would have taken time and was in any case difficult because the Soviet fertilizers, fuel and pesticides had also dried up.

So the highly-educated urban citizens, faced with rationing which reduced the average Cuban’s daily calorie intake from 2,600 in 1986 to 1,000-1,500 in 1993, organised themselves to grow their own food in improvised urban allotments.

At first, struggling with little know-how and without fertilizers, their yields were low, but by producing compost and other organic growing mediums, plus introducing drip-fed irrigation, they began to see improvements.

Short of chemicals, the gardeners resorted to biological controls like marigolds (where opinions today are mixed) to deter harmful insects.

By 1995 Havana alone had 25,000 allotments tended by families and urban cooperatives. The government, realizing the potential benefits, encouraged the movement.

Soil quality was improved with a mixture of crop residues, household wastes and animal manure to create more compost and soil conditioners. The extra fresh vegetables and fruit this provided quickly improved urban dwellers’ calorie intake and saved many from malnutrition.

In the Cuban climate, with irrigation changes and soils undergoing constant improvement from added organic matter, the allotments could produce vegetables all year round. Lettuce, chard, radish, beans, cucumber, tomatoes, spinach and peppers were grown and traded.

There is evidence as well that the extra exercise which these urban gardeners got from tending their allotments, plus the time they spent outdoors in the open air, benefited their health.

Eventually, realizing that self-sufficiency was the only way to feed the population, the government banned sugarcane growing altogether. Lacking fertilizer, many former plantations were turned over to organic agriculture. The shortage of oil for tractors meant oxen were used for plowing.

Cuba’s experience of urban agriculture inspired many environmentalists to believe that this is at least part of the solution to the food shortages threatened by climate change. By 2008 food gardens, despite their small scale, made up 8% of the land in Havana, and 3.4% of all urban land in Cuba, producing 90% of all the fruit and vegetables consumed.

As a result the calorie intake of the average Cuban quickly rose to match that of Europeans, relying on a diet composed mainly of rice, beans, potatoes and other vegetables – a low-fat diet making obesity rare. Because of the climate, though, wheat does not grow well in Cuba, and the island still has to import large quantities of grain for bread. Meat is in short supply and also has to be mainly imported.

Despite this, Cuba’s experience since the Cold War ended in the 1990s shows that large quantities of fresh food can be grown in cities and that urban agriculture is sustainable over decades.

For other countries vulnerable to sudden loss of food supplies, Cuba’s experience suggests that urban farming can be one way of staving off potential famine when imports are restricted, expensive or simply unobtainable.

(Paul Brown, a founding editor of Climate News Network, is a former environment correspondent of The Guardian newspaper.)
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