

Defeating The Fascists Is The First Order Of Business



C.J. Polychroniou

08-21-2024 ~ *In the moral and political struggle to create a future with alternative possibilities, we need to build a united front. Radicalism can co-exist with pragmatic progressivism.*

As we approach the 2024 presidential election, we are constantly told that this election is pivotal for the future of democracy. This may be so because a second Trump presidency would most likely be far more dangerous than the first. It would be foolish indeed not to take seriously when Trump says things like ["We will root out the communists, Marxists, fascists and the radical left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country."](#) And we already know what he plans to do with the [administrative state](#): demolish it and replace it with MAGA loyalists. As for his energy policies, ways to cut grocery and mortgage costs, and his strategy to deal with the climate crisis, they can all be summarized with one simple slogan: ["Drill, baby, drill."](#) Consequently, it is imperative that we defeat Trump in November. But as [Bernie Sanders](#) said just last week, ["it is not the only task for our progressive movement."](#)

Indeed, there are so many things that need to be done in the hope that we can end predatory plutocracy, lessen the inequities of 21st century capitalism, counter militarism, and reinvent U.S. democracy. On the first day of the National Democratic Convention, all the speakers highlighted with passion the need to

defeat Trump in order to protect democracy and the interests of average people. Joe Biden himself told the crowd that democracy prevailed under his watch and now must be preserved.

However, as one would expect from a mainstream political party, the Harris-Walz campaign is not offering an alternative vision for the future, one that would recapture the true essence of democracy. There is a lot of rhetoric about “joy,” “freedom,” and “a better future,” but Harris’s economic plan mirrors many of Biden’s economic initiatives though in an expanded format, such as her ideas for addressing the [housing crisis](#).

Still, this is a step forward as [Bidenomics](#) undoubtedly represented “[some of the most progressive domestic policies to have come out of the White House](#).” But let’s focus here on the big subject itself, which is democracy. Indeed, this may be the most propitious time to ask ourselves this: Is the U.S. even an actual democracy? There is plenty of evidence to contend that it is not; in fact, the U.S. was never designed to be democratic, so the obsession of the country’s political leaders, past and present, to portray the nation as the “world’s greatest democracy” should provoke laughter instead of elicit pride. For many years now, the U.S. has been rated by the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) as a “flawed democracy,” while in 2022 the international democracy watchdog *Freedom House* ranked the U.S. 62nd in the world, “[below every major Western European nation... and about even with Panama, Romania and South Korea](#).”

And how could it be otherwise? First, the U.S. president is not even elected by the popular vote. According to the Constitution—now more than 235 years old and terribly out of touch with contemporary society—members of the electoral college elect the president. Leaving aside the question of the history and [evolution](#) of the electoral college, the fundamental truth about the method used to elect the president is that it subverts the will of the people by allowing presidential candidates to win an election without securing more popular votes. In other words, it is possible for a candidate to win a majority of votes nationally but still lose the election because he/she lost the electoral vote.

We saw such outcomes in the presidential elections of 2000 and 2016 respectively. In 2000, Al Gore won the most votes, a half million more than George W. Bush, but lost the presidency in the electoral vote. Likewise, in 2016, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote comfortably, receiving nearly 3 million more

votes than [Donald Trump](#), but lost the election because Trump clinched more electoral votes. These outcomes should not be seen as paradoxes in a perverse political system, but rather as outright scandals. They speak volumes of the [anti-democratic nature](#) of the electoral college and, surely enough, of the [undemocratic nature](#) of the sacred text itself, i.e., the Constitution.

The United States has an even bigger democracy problem with the Senate, “[an irredeemable institution](#)” that disproportionately benefits small states, which are overwhelmingly rural, white and conservative, and is thus “racist by proxy.” The one state, two-Senators rule is nothing short of a recipe for minority domination.

Moreover, in U.S. elections, the political currency that carries greater weight is not votes, but money. The candidate who spends more money usually wins, and running for president is a terribly expansive undertaking. It costs billions of dollars. The [2020](#) election totaled \$14.4 billion. The [2024](#) election is on track to be the most expensive of all time, expected to reach nearly \$16 billion. What’s more, a handful of wealthy special interests dominate political funding, especially since rulings like [Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission](#) struck down spending limits as unconstitutional violations of free speech. Of course, the public is not happy with this state of affairs, as [polls](#) have repeatedly shown that the overwhelming majority of citizens believe that there should be spending limits for political campaigns. But what the public thinks and wants matters very little in U.S. politics. Scores of [empirical studies](#) have shown that U.S. politics is heavily tilted in favor of the rich and that political decisions systematically ignore the preferences of the poor and the working and middle classes.

So, what is to be done? How do we move forward towards ending plutocracy and unleashing the transformative potential of economic democracy? Is the undemocratic nature of the U.S. political system an unalterable state of affairs?

Real change is possible and so is a future with alternative possibilities. But change doesn’t happen overnight, and, in politics, it takes winning many different battles for a war to be won. Hence, we shouldn’t reject reform on account of ideological purity or avoid making some compromises because of deep moral convictions if, doing so, means that we fail to take any step forward. “Two steps forward, one step back” is a tactic that often pays dividends in the politics of radical social change.

We need to recognize that the two-party system isn't about to change anytime soon. But this doesn't mean that all is lost when it comes to making progress on the social and economic fronts. As experience has shown, serious and committed work at the community level can result in making a real impact on the national stage. The real fight for progressive power starts in local communities, one neighborhood at a time. This is because the only way we can sidestep the power of special interests is through solidarity mobilization and citizen participation.

There is a rich history of [claiming citizenship](#) not only in the U.S. but across the globe. We should study closely this history while also seeking ways to deepen democracy through citizen action that unites rather than divides progressives and moderates. As progressives, we need alliances. Reaching out to people with different political views from ours should be encouraged rather than discouraged. And we should all be united in combating the surge of neo-fascism or proto-fascism manifested in the MAGA movement. We must not allow anger over specific issues and concerns to derail us from the immediate goal, which is to keep the reactionary forces at bay. Sometimes we can only win one battle at a time. We should oppose U.S. imperialism and war at every turn while realizing that we can't dismantle the imperial state with one shot.

In the moral and political struggle to create a future with alternative possibilities, we need to build a united front. Radicalism can co-exist with pragmatic progressivism. We have a world to win, to be sure, but we must first defeat today's neofascists.

Source: <https://www.commondreams.org/opinion/defeating-fascism-trump-2024>

Our work is licensed under Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0). Feel free to republish and share widely.

C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His latest books are *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic and the Urgent Need for Social Change* (A collection of interviews with Noam Chomsky; Haymarket Books, 2021), and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (Verso, 2021).

The Status Of Europe's Autonomous Movements



*John P. Ruehl - Source:
Independent Media
Institute*

08-20-2024 ~ While the EU plays a dominant role in managing autonomous and separatist movements in member states, non-EU countries have their own rules, and can be more vulnerable to outside interference.

Spanish officials reassuringly heralded a “new era” for the country after May 2024 elections. Catalanian pro-independence parties had [lost the parliamentary majority](#) that had enabled them to govern their region since 2015, and for the first time in decades, had failed to secure a majority of seats in regional parliament. Spain’s ruling Socialists meanwhile managed to emerge as Catalonia’s largest party.

Madrid’s political focus on Catalonia has intensified since 2017. After holding what was deemed by Spanish authorities an illegal independence referendum, Catalonia’s president and other officials fled to Belgium, [prompting a diplomatic crisis](#). Spain then imposed direct rule over the region, with the EU backing the decision and citing the need for constitutional approval for referendums. In the aftermath, local support for Catalonia’s independence [declined](#), offering Madrid a way in.

Spain's [separatist](#) and autonomous movements are among Europe's most well-known, and its management of them is watched closely across the continent. [Many other European nations, particularly in larger countries, have autonomous movements](#) seeking devolution, self-government, or outright independence. The [perceived failure of the EU](#), international diplomacy, and integration efforts to resolve these issues has led countries to maintain their own policies. Although few movements are considered serious threats, attempts to assert themselves often provoke direct interventions by national governments—when these governments have the capacity to do so.

Many of Europe's once-distinct regional identities have only waned in recent times. [The rise of nationalism in Europe in the 1800s](#) led to unitary states that integrated peripheral regions with the capitals, a trend known as “capital magnetism.” [Additionally, increasing urbanization](#) in other large cities weakened [traditional ties to local communities](#) and support systems.

Integration and assimilation pressure was also exerted on regional identities to create more national identities. At the time of Italy's unification in 1861, for example, [less than 10 percent](#) of Italians spoke the Tuscan dialect which began to be [promoted as standard Italian](#). Steadily, its use in public and administrative life, mass media, and other methods led to a decline in the use of other regional dialects and languages. Similarly, French policies promoted the Parisian dialect as standard French, and the German Empire promoted High German.

Modern EU states face greater limitations on language suppression. The framework provided by the EU's “post-sovereign” system implores member states to uphold [minority language protections](#) and other rights. Nonetheless, national governments have modernized their approaches to establishing national uniformity. Proficiency in majority languages is often a prerequisite for education, media, and employment opportunities, while immigration favors majority language learners. As a result, dozens of minority European languages are on the [brink of extinction](#).

Nonetheless, autonomous movements in Europe do wield political power. Political networks like the [European Free Alliance](#), a group of pro-independence political parties, operate in the EU parliament and serve as political outlets for separatist movements, using democratic processes.

Italy is constantly attempting to more effectively tie to itself its autonomous regions of Sicily, Sardinia, and several northern regions. The transformation of the regional political party Lega Nord [into a national one, Lega](#) in 2018, demonstrated some success. The autonomy movements, however, are similarly adaptive. Other northern Italian parties recently rallied to vote to approve legislation approving them greater autonomy [in June 2024](#). South Tyrol, Italy's German-speaking region, brings the added challenge of receiving support from Austria. Austrian leaders have repeatedly proposed [granting Austrian passports to German speakers](#), and, in January 2024, voiced [support for further autonomy reforms](#), drawing a reflexive rebuke from Rome.

Hungary's disputes with its neighbors are even more notable. The 1920 breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire left significant Hungarian communities across [Romania](#), [Slovakia](#), and [Ukraine](#). Today, the Hungarian government supports these communities by funding cultural institutions, providing financial aid, and fostering solidarity, which has sparked tensions with these countries. However, as a smaller nation, Hungary struggles to exert significant influence, especially in EU member states like Romania and Slovakia, and has also found limited success in Ukraine.

Nonetheless, EU countries generally tend to avoid interfering in others' separatist movements. This has helped France to consolidate its rule over its mainland territory. However, it hasn't yet done so over the Mediterranean island of Corsica, purchased by the French in [1768](#). The rollback of the French Empire after World War II reignited historical tensions, further inflamed by the arrival of many French people and Europeans in [Algeria to Corsica in the 1960s](#). Though violence largely subsided in Corsica after the 1970s, a ceasefire was not reached [until 2014](#), and pro-separatist riots in 2022 show the situation [remains tense](#).

[Following the unrest](#), French President Macron raised the possibility of granting Corsica greater autonomy. Previously, [in 2017](#), as tensions were building in neighboring Spain over Basque separatism, France raised the administrative autonomy of its own Basque territory by granting it single community status, unifying several local councils under one regional authority. Contrastingly, the merger of the region of Alsace [in 2016](#) with two other French areas reduced its autonomy and integrated it more into the national apparatus. The different approaches demonstrate the diverse policies used by national governments to manage their regions.

Germany, the most populous country in the EU, administers several regions with aspirations for greater autonomy. However, [its federal system](#), which grants states greater authority over areas such as education and language, has helped temper separatist sentiment and reduced the need for management from Berlin.

A federal system has not resolved the challenges faced by Belgium. The country's [Flemish-speaking](#) and French-speaking regions have sought greater autonomy, with some advocating for unification with a greater Dutch or French-speaking state. While increasing regional autonomy has been part of the solution, the regions remain interconnected through the capital, Brussels, and its wider role as the capital of the EU.

That has not deterred breakup advocates from proposing a similar "[Velvet Divorce](#)" between Belgium's regions, like the peaceful split between the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1992. [Polls indicated](#) a victory in June 2024 for Vlaams Belang, a party whose leader ran on reaching an agreement to dissolve the country or declaring Flanders's independence. But their shock defeat ensured Belgium's continuity and thus the stability of the EU.

Outside the EU, Europe's autonomy issues are also in flux. [In the late 1990s](#), the UK granted greater autonomy to Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales. Scottish independence efforts were then disrupted after a failed 2014 referendum and the UK's subsequent EU departure two years later. The Scottish National Party established a Brussels office to maintain EU connections, as did the European Friends of Scotland Group, [founded in 2020](#). The Scottish Independence Convention plans to hold a convention in [Edinburgh in October 2024 featuring more than a dozen European groups to coordinate their independence initiatives](#), though the participation of separatist movements within EU countries may limit the extent of EU involvement.

Brexit also reignited secessionist sentiment across the UK, particularly [in Northern Ireland](#), but also in Wales. Even in England, regional parties like CumbriaFirst, the East Devon Alliance, [and Mebyon Kernow advocate for their own regions' autonomy](#), and devolution within England has been increasingly discussed [in recent years](#). While London has struggled to counter these movements since Brexit, it has succeeded in preventing a resurgence in paramilitary activity since it ended it in Northern Ireland in the 1990s.

Western Europe's relative success in reducing armed conflicts over the last few decades contrasts with its resurgence in Eastern Europe. The region's fragile borders and the emergence of weak states in the wake of the collapse of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union have seen separatist movements gain increasing power.

The EU and NATO played a pivotal role in the collapse of Yugoslavia and the emergence of new states, often at the expense of Serbia. In response, ethnic Serbian separatism has surged across [Bosnia](#) and [Kosovo](#), with supporters citing the EU's and NATO's support for separatist movements in the 1990s as justification for their actions.

Russia has also inflamed separatism in parts of the former [Yugoslavia](#) and the former Soviet Union to counter EU and NATO expansion or to incorporate these regions into it. Beyond supporting Serbian interests in the Balkans, Russia has utilized, to varying degrees, separatist movements in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan to advance its interests.

Russia has long performed outreach to [separatist movements in the West](#), including inviting representatives to conferences like the [Anti-Globalization Movement of Russia](#), though largely consisting of fringe groups. Russia itself has its own separatist and autonomy movements, however, including in Chechnya, Tatarstan, and elsewhere. These have found support from Western actors, including through the launch of the [Free Nations of Post-Russia Forum](#). [Turkey](#) has also supported Russian separatist movements, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan meanwhile [recently celebrated](#) the 50-year anniversary of the Turkish invasion of EU member state Cyprus in 1974 in support of local Turkish separatists.

Most separatist movements in Europe lack the infrastructure to become independent states without external support, but persist in their pursuit of independence, nonetheless. And European countries with territories outside of Europe, such as [France with New Caledonia](#) or [Denmark with Greenland](#), must manage their burgeoning independence movements. Access to the EU may be influential in convincing them to remain, but [external factors](#), such as Azerbaijan's recent support for New Caledonia's independence, could potentially play a stronger role.

A new concern for national governments may emerge closer to home. [In the Baltic States](#), the tension between Russian minorities and national governments remains evident, and the situation faces uncertainty amid the war in Ukraine. The rise of the Alternative für Deutschland political party in East Germany has in turn highlighted the enduring divides within the country less than 40 years after reunification, and how new political entities can emerge to exploit such sentiments.

Yet the most pressing issue appears to be emerging in Western Europe's major cities. French President Emmanuel Macron, aiming to address concerns over what French authorities describe as "parallel societies" of Muslim immigrants and their descendants, proposed a law in 2023 to [disrupt the education, finances, and propaganda networks](#) of radical Islam, often from foreign countries. Macron labeled this phenomenon as "separatism." He was referring to marginalized communities on the outskirts of major French cities in the famed banlieues, which are increasingly beyond state control and driven by domestic grievances and dissatisfaction with French foreign policy. While France's situation appears the most severe, such sentiment is common across Western Europe.

The EU's handling of autonomous and separatist movements has frequently faced criticism from nationalist governments, and balancing separatism with nationalism remains a sensitive challenge. However, major countries like Germany and smaller ones like Denmark demonstrate it is possible to manage these issues within national frameworks. Switzerland, a non-EU state, shows similar success in keeping itself together. Clearly, despite nationalist policies, centuries-old communities are resilient and difficult to absorb and erase, even without outside support. Managing these long-standing issues, as well as emerging movements, will require continual adaptation.

By John P. Ruehl

Author Bio: John P. Ruehl is an Australian-American journalist living in Washington, D.C., and a world affairs correspondent for the [Independent Media Institute](#). He is a contributor to several foreign affairs publications, and his book, [Budget Superpower: How Russia Challenges the West With an Economy Smaller Than Texas](#), was published in December 2022.

Source: Independent Media Institute

Credit Line: This article was produced by [Economy for All](#), a project of the Independent Media Institute.

Capitalism, Mass Anger, And 2024 Elections



Richard D. Wolff

08-14-2024 ~ In the wake of his huge defeat on June 30, 2024, when 80 percent of voters rejected French “centrist” President Emmanuel Macron, he said he understood the French people’s anger. In the UK, Conservative loser Rishi Sunak said the same about the British people’s anger, as Labor leader Starmer now says as the anger explodes. Of course, such phrases from such politicians usually mean little or nothing and accomplish less. Such leaders and their parties just keep calculating how best to regain power when they lose it. In that, they are like the U.S. Democrats after Biden’s performance in his debate with Trump and like the U.S. Republicans after Trump’s loss in 2020. In both parties, a small group of top leaders and top donors made all the key decisions and then organized the political theater to ratify those decisions. Even surprises like Harris replacing Biden are temporary departures from resuming politics as usual.

However, unlike Trump, the others missed opportunities to identify with an

already organized mass base of angry people. Trump stumbled into that identification by saying loudly and crudely what traditional politicians treated as publicly unspeakable about immigrants, women, NATO, and traditional political taboos. That set the tone for Trump then doubling down by insisting he had won the 2020 election but had been cheated out of it. The mass anger of populations feeling victimized in their workaday lives found a spokesperson loudly claiming parallel victimizations. Trump and base grasped that together they might victimize their victimizers.

Whether or not they can politically exploit voters' anger, no mainstream leader in the collective West, including Trump, seems actually to "understand" it. They mostly see only as far as what they can plausibly blame on their opponents in the next election. Biden blamed Trump for a "bad" economy in 2020, while Trump reversed the same blame over the last year and will shortly adjust to blaming Harris. Presidential opponents blame the other for the "immigration crisis," for inadequately protecting U.S. industry from Chinese competition, government budget deficits, and job exports.

No mainstream leader "understands" (or dares to hint or suggest) that mass anger these days might be something more and different from any collection of specific complaints and demands (about guns, abortion, taxes, and wars). Even the demagogues who like to speak about "culture wars" dare not ask why such "wars" are hot now. Angry "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) folks are notably vague and poorly informed as their critics enjoy exposing. Rarely do those critics offer persuasive alternative explanations for MAGA anger (explanations that are neither vague nor poorly informed).

In particular, we ask, might the anger that the MAGA movement enrolls express a genuine mass suffering that has not yet understood its cause? Might that cause be nothing less than the decline of Western capitalism and all it represents? If ideological taboos and blinders preclude admitting it, might that decline's results—anxiety, despair, and anger—focus instead on suitable scapegoats? Are Trump and Biden, Macron and Sunak, and so many others competitively choosing scapegoats to mobilize an anger they misunderstand and dare not explore?

After all, Western capitalism is no longer the world's colonial master. The American empire that succeeded the European empires has now followed them into decline. The next empire will be Chinese or else the era of empires will give

way to genuine global multipolarity. Western capitalism is likewise no longer the world's dynamic growth center as that has moved eastward. Western capitalism is clearly losing its former position as the self-confident, unified, ultimate power behind the World Bank, United Nations, International Monetary Fund, and the U.S. dollar as world currency.

In terms of global economic footprints as measured by national GDPs, the United States and its major allies (G7) comprise a total, aggregated GDP now that is already significantly less than the comparable aggregated GDPs of China and its major allies (BRICS). The footprints of the two global economic power blocs were roughly equal in 2020. The difference between the two footprints has been widening ever since and continues to do so. China and its BRICS allies are increasingly the world economy's richest bloc. Nothing prepared the populations of Western capitalism for this changed reality or its effects. Especially the sections of those populations already forced to absorb the costly burdens of Western capitalism's decline feel betrayed, abandoned, and angry. Elections are merely one way for some of them to express those feelings.

Western capitalism's rich, powerful, and small minority practices a combination of denial and adjustment to its decline. Prevailing politicians, mainstream media, and academics continue to orate, write, and act as if the collective West were still globally dominant. For them and their ways of thinking, their global dominance in the second half of the last century never ended. The wars in Ukraine and Gaza testify to that denial and exemplify the costly strategic mistakes it produces.

When not denying the new reality, significant portions of Western capitalism's corporate rich and powerful are adjusting their preferred economic policies away from neoliberalism toward economic nationalism. The chief rationale for that adjustment is that it serves "national security" because it may at least slow "China's aggressiveness." Domestically, the rich and powerful in each country use their positions and resources to shift the costs of Western capitalism's decline onto the mass of their middle-income and poorer fellow citizens. They worsen income and wealth inequalities, cut governmental social services, and harden police behaviors and prison conditions.

Denial facilitates the continued decline of Western capitalism. Too little is done too late against problems not yet admitted. Deteriorating social conditions flowing from that decline, especially for the middle income and the poor, provide

opportunities for the usual right-wing demagogues. They proceed to blame the decline on immigrants, foreigners, excessive state power, the Democrats, China, secularism, abortion, and culture war enemies, hoping thereby to assemble a winning electoral constituency. Sadly, left-wing commentary focuses on refuting the right's claims about its chosen scapegoats. While its refutations are often well-documented and effective in media combat against right-wing Republicans, the left too rarely invokes explicit, sustained arguments about mass anger's links to declining capitalism. The left fails sufficiently to stress that government regulators, however well-intentioned, have been captured by and subordinated to specifically private capitalist profiteers.

The mass of people therefore became deeply skeptical about relying on the government to correct or offset the failings of private capitalism. People grasp, often just intuitively, that today's problem is the merger of capitalists and government. Left and right increasingly feel betrayed by all the promises of center-left and center-right politicians. More or less government intervention has changed too little in the trajectory of modern capitalism. To growing numbers, politicians of the center-left and center-right seem equally docile servants of the capitalist-government merger that constitutes modern capitalism with all its failures and flaws. Thus today's right succeeds if, when, and where it can portray itself as *not* centrist, its candidates explicitly anti-centrist. The left is weaker because too many of its programs seem still linked to the idea that government interventions will correct or offset capitalism's shortcomings.

In short, mass anger is disconnected from declining capitalism in part because left, right and center deny, avoid, or neglect their link. Mass anger does not translate into or yet move to explicit anti-capitalist politics in part because too few organized political movements lead in that way.

Thus, Rachel Reeves, the Chancellor of the Exchequer in Britain's new Labour Party government—its top financial officer—blithely announces, "There is not a lot of money there." She prepares the public—and preemptively excuses the new government—for how little the new government will even try to do. She goes further and defines her key goal as "[unlocking private investment](#)." Even the words she chooses mirror what the old Conservatives want to hear and would themselves say. In declining capitalisms, electoral changes can and often do serve to avoid or at least postpone real change.

Chancellor Reeves's words assure major corporations and the 1 percent they enrich that Starmer's Labour Party will not heavily tax them. This matters since it is precisely in [major corporations and the rich](#) that "a lot of money" is located. The wealth of the top 1 percent could easily fund a genuinely democratic rebuilding of a seriously depleted post-2008 UK economy. In stark contrast, the typical Conservative programs prioritizing private investment are what got the UK to its present sad state. They were the problem; they are not the solution.

The Labour Party was once socialist. Socialism once meant a thoroughgoing critique of the capitalist system and advocacy of something totally different. Socialists sought electoral victories to win government power and use it to transition society to a post-capitalist order. But today's Labour Party has thrown that history away. It wants to administer contemporary British capitalism just a bit less harshly than Conservatives do. It works to persuade the British working class that "less harsh" is the best they can hope and vote for. And British Conservatives can indeed smile and condescendingly approve such a Labour Party or else quibble with it over how much harshness today's capitalism "needs."

Macron, also once a socialist, plays a similar role in France. Indeed, so do Biden and Trump in the United States, Justin Trudeau in Canada, and Olaf Scholz in Germany. All offer administrations of their contemporary capitalisms. None have programs aimed at solving modern capitalisms' basic, accumulated, and persistently unsolved problems. Solutions would require first admitting what those problems are: cyclically recurring instability, increasingly unequal distributions of income and wealth, monied corruption of politics, mass media, and culture, and increasingly oppressive foreign policies that fail to offset a declining Western capitalism. Insistent denial across the collective West precludes admitting those problems, let alone fashioning solutions to them woven into programs for real change. Alternative governments administer; they dare not lead. Would a Kamala Harris-Tim Walz regime break with this pattern?

Their administrations will experiment with and perhaps oscillate between free-trade and protectionist policies—as past capitalist governments often did. In the United States, recent GOP and Democrat steps toward economic nationalism remain vote-seeking exceptions to still widespread commitments to neoliberal globalization. Western megacorporations, including many based in the United States, welcome China's new role as the global champion of free trade (even as it retaliates moderately against tariffs and trade wars initiated by the collective

West). Support remains strong for negotiations to shape generally acceptable global divisions of trade and investment flows. The latter are seen as profitable as well as a means to avoid dangerous wars. Elections will continue to include clashes between capitalism's free-trade and protectionist tendencies.

But the more fundamental issue of 2024 elections is mass anger in the collective West aroused by its historic decline and the effects of that decline on the mass of average citizens. How will that anger shape the elections?

The more extreme right wing recognizes and rides the deeper anger without, of course, grasping its relationship to capitalism. Marine Le Pen, Nigel Farage, and Trump are all examples. They all mock and deride the center-left and center-right governments that merely administer what they depict as a sinking ship that needs new, different leadership. But their donor base (capitalist) and long-standing ideology (pro-capitalist) block them from going beyond extreme scapegoating (of immigrants, ethnic minorities, heterodox sexualities, and foreign demons).

The mainstream media likewise cannot grasp the relationship of mass anger to capitalism. Thus they dismiss the anger as irrational or caused by inadequate "messaging" from mainstream influencers. For many months, mainstream economic pundits have bemoaned the "strange" coexistence of a "great economy" and [polls showing mass disappointment](#) at the "bad" economy. By "strange" they mean "stupid" or "ignorant" or "politically-motivated/dishonest": sets of words often condensed into "populist."

The left is jealous of the extreme right's significant mass base now in working-class areas. In most countries, the left has spent the last many decades trying to hold on to its working-class base as the mainstream's center-left movement pulled it away. That meant a greater or lesser shift from communist and anarchist to ever more "moderate" socialist and democratic affiliations. That shift included downplaying the goal of a comprehensively different post-capitalism in favor of the immediate goal of a state-fostered softer, humane capitalism where wages and benefits were greater, taxes more progressive, cycles more regulated, and minorities less oppressed. For that left, what mass anger it could recognize flowed from failures to achieve such a state-fostered softer capitalism, not from Western capitalism's decline.

As capitalism's dynamic center moved to Asia and elsewhere in the global South,

decline set in among its old, more-or-less abandoned centers. Old center capitalists participated in and profited greatly as the system relocated its dynamic center. Capitalists, both state and private, in the new centers profited even more. In the old centers, the rich and powerful shifted the burdens of decline onto the masses. In the new centers, the rich and powerful gathered the new capitalist wealth there mostly into their hands but with enough trickling down to satisfy large portions of their working classes. That's how capitalism works and always has. For the mass of employees, however, the ride upwards when capitalism's dynamic center is where they work and live is far more pleasant and hopeful than when decline sets in. The ride down provokes depression and traumas. When they fester without admission or discussion, they often morph into anger.

By Richard D. Wolff

Author Bio: Richard D. Wolff is professor of economics emeritus at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and a visiting professor in the Graduate Program in International Affairs of the New School University, in New York. Wolff's weekly show, "Economic Update," is syndicated by more than 100 radio stations and goes to millions via several TV networks and YouTube. His most recent [book with Democracy at Work](#) is *Understanding Capitalism* (2024), which responds to requests from readers of his earlier books: *Understanding Socialism* and *Understanding Marxism*.

Source: Independent Media Institute

Credit Line: This article was produced by [Economy for All](#), a project of the Independent Media Institute.

A Note On Noam Chomsky And Climate Collapse



Noam Chomsky ~ Photo:
en.wikipedia.org

08-13-2024 ~ As Noam once said, *“if you assume there is no hope, you guarantee there will be no hope.”*

In many of his recent writings, [Noam Chomsky](#) has warned that humanity has reached a very [dangerous point](#) because we are now living in a world of cascading crises. Indeed, when we look around us, we see a global web of crises. Economic inequality is destabilizing democracies and making a mockery of the vision of a decent society; armed conflicts continue to mark human existence; and nuclear weapons and global warming threaten humanity’s survival. Meanwhile, we must feel aghast over the fact that cynicism and irrationality continue to define the mindset of the powers that be. This is precisely the reason why Chomsky has always seen activism as our only hope.

What’s happening in [Gaza](#) is an abomination, one that the leaders of this world are watching coldly from a distance. The same can be said about climate collapse, which is as real as the daily slaughtering of scores of innocent women and children in Gaza by Israel’s military. Our global institutions are incapable of doing anything meaningful about these crises. Real power is in the hands of the most powerful nation-states and their leaders have opted to turn a blind eye to both disasters so as not to disrupt business as usual. Profits and geostrategic interests take priority over human lives and the environment. This is as clear as day, and it has always been so since at least the emergence of [capitalism and the rise of the nation-state](#).

The current conflict in Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, and peace remains as elusive as ever. The [U.S.](#) wants peace in Ukraine as much as Netanyahu wants to see a ceasefire deal in Gaza. The continuation of the war in Gaza is vital to the

continuation of Netanyahu's political career. In fact, Netanyahu will most likely celebrate by uncorking a bottle of champagne if an all-out war exploded in the Middle East. He knows he can't possibly lose with the U.S. backing [Israel](#). The cost of an all-out war in terms of human lives, either Israeli or Iranian or Arab lives, is simply irrelevant to him-or to Washington. Or what another war might do to the environment. The war in Gaza is also a war on the environment; in fact, it is "a widespread and deliberate act of ecocide," according to a study by [Forensic Architecture](#).

As Chomsky has pointed out, "[history is all too rich in records of horrendous wars, indescribable torture, massacres and every imaginable abuse of fundamental rights.](#)" But the great man has gone to great lengths to stress that the climate crisis is "unique in human history" and, like nuclear weapons, can destroy organized human life as we know it. Yet, humanity spends annually [trillions of dollars on weapons and the military](#) but finds it economically unrealistic to devote the necessary funds to protect the earth.

So much for rationality.

Indeed, consider the global implications of the melting of the Antarctica sea ice. It may be winter in the Southern Hemisphere, but the Antarctica is experiencing a major heat wave that has made temperatures rise [50 degrees Fahrenheit](#) above normal. This is the second major heat wave in Antarctica in the last two years. The entire planet has experienced [more than 1.5 Celsius of warming](#) in the 12-month period between July 2023 and June 2024, but Antarctica warms twice faster than the rest of the world, [according to latest observations](#). If all the ice vanished, sea levels might rise by more than 150 feet.

It is no longer an issue of if but when [major coastal cities](#) will go under.

We already know that the super-rich and powerful don't care about the rest of us, but it seems they also don't care about the future of their own children and grandchildren. As Chomsky has underscored in some of the email exchanges that we've had, their self-gratification is even greater now that they know that the climate crisis is speeding toward catastrophe.

Indeed, as [Copernicus Climate Change Service Director Carlo Buontempo](#) recently said in connection with the new record set for the daily global mean temperature "we are now in truly uncharted territory..."

And this brings us to the question of activism, which, as already pointed out, Chomsky sees as our only hope to save the planet. It's our only way to stop carnages; our only way to stop the criminal negligence of climate collapse. We need the greatest possible degree of public mobilization for the purpose of exerting influence on policymakers. But without thoughtless methods like destroying works of art that turn the public against climate activism.

Moreover, Chomsky believes that we have the knowledge, money, and technology to transition from fossil fuels to alternative sources of energy that are clean, affordable and sustainable. This is why he feels that the [Green New Deal](#) is exactly the right idea and finds the [Global Green New Deal](#) initiative laid out by the progressive economist Robert Pollin particularly attractive.

As far as the link between capitalism and the climate crisis goes, suffice to say that Chomsky understands better than most the forces behind environmental degradation and climate collapse. The economic system of capitalism, especially during its neoliberal phase, drives climate breakdown. Global temperatures started increasing at an alarming rate after neoliberalism became the dominant economic force. Nonetheless, Chomsky is also fully aware of the fact that time is running out and we cannot wait for the end of capitalism before the planet can be saved. This is why he finds it so vital that we find ways to get the world off fossil fuels quickly and fairly. We must reach carbon neutrality no later than 2050. And do so in a just manner. For Chomsky, a just transition is imperative to building the political power that would bring about a shift from the fossil-fuel economy to a regenerative economy. Because, again, social activism is our only hope, according to what many have described as the "[world's conscience keeper for nearly half a century.](#)"

And, no, hope is not an option. As Noam once said, "if you assume there is no hope, you guarantee there will be no hope."

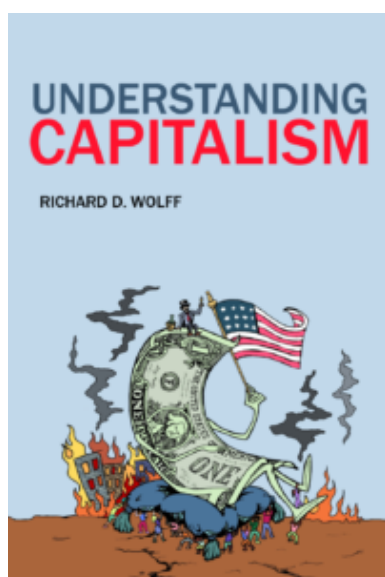
Our work is licensed under Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0). Feel free to republish and share widely.

Source: <https://www.commondreams.org/opinion/noam-chomsky-climate-collapse>

C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His latest books are *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic and the*

Urgent Need for Social Change (A collection of interviews with Noam Chomsky; Haymarket Books, 2021), and Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists (Verso, 2021).

Capitalism's Unequal Distribution Deprives You Of True Freedom



ISBN Paperback:
978-1-7356013-6-6,
eBook:
978-1-7356013-5-9

08-13-2024 ~ As the French economist Thomas Piketty [most recently exposed](#), capitalism, across time and space, has always tended to produce ever-greater economic inequality. Oxfam, a global charity, [reported](#) that 2022's 10 richest men together had six times more wealth than the poorest 3.1 billion people on earth. The lack of democracy inside workplaces or enterprises is both a cause and an effect of capitalism's unequal distribution of income and wealth.

Of course, inequality predates capitalism. Powerful feudal lords across Europe had blended autocracy with unequal distributions of wealth on their manorial estates. In fact, the largest *and* most powerful among the lords—the one named king—was usually also the richest. Although revolts against monarchy eventually retired most kings and queens (one way or another), similarly rich dictators reemerged inside capitalist enterprises as major shareholders and CEOs. Nowadays, their palaces imitate the grandeur of kings' castles. The fortunes of kings and top CEOs are similarly extreme and attract the same kind of envy, adulation, and reverence. They also draw the same criticism. Inequalities that marked the economy, politics, and culture of European feudalism reappeared in capitalism despite the intentions of many who revolted against feudalism. The problem: the employer/employee relationship is far less a break from the master/slave and lord/serf relations of production than capitalism's champions had hoped for, assumed, and promised in order to secure mass support for their revolutions against slavery and feudalism.

The employer/employee relationship that defines capitalism has created staggering inequality by allowing the employer full control over production's surplus. In the past, inequality provoked references to rich capitalists, variously, as "robber barons" or as "captains of industry" (depending on the public's feelings about them). Today, they're referred to as "the rich" or sometimes "the superrich."

Is it true that everyone is free in a capitalist system? The answer depends on what is meant by "free." Compare the freedom of Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, or other rich capitalists with your freedom. Capitalism distributes some income to you and some to Musk, Bezos, and the other rich capitalists. However, to say that capitalism makes each of you free ignores the reality that capitalism's unequal distribution of wealth makes you unfree relative to Musk, Bezos, and the other rich capitalists.

Freedom was never only about keeping the government from bothering you; it was always also about being able to act, choose, and make a life. To call us all free, to use the same word for everyone, erases the very real differences in our access to resources, opportunities, and choices needed for life. Musk is free to enjoy life, going wherever he likes and doing almost anything you could imagine. He may work but need not. The financial cost of anything he might want or need is totally irrelevant to him. The overwhelming majority of Americans have nothing

remotely like such freedom. To say that in capitalism, all are free, like Mr. Bezos is nonsense. His freedom depends on the resources at his disposal. You lack the freedom to undertake all sorts of actions and choices because those resources are not at your disposal.

The freedom of the rich is not just different; their freedom negates the freedom of others. Unequal income and wealth always provoke anxiety among the rich. They fear the envy their wealth excites and invites. To protect their positions as systemically privileged recipients of income and, thus, accumulators of wealth, the rich seek to control both political and cultural institutions. Their goal is to shape politics and culture, to make them celebrate and justify income and wealth inequalities, not to challenge them. We turn now to how the rich shape culture to their benefit.

Unequal access to culture is a feature of capitalism. Culture concerns how people think about all aspects of life—how we learn, make, and communicate meanings about the world. Our culture shapes what we find acceptable, what we enjoy, and what we come to decide needs changing. In European feudalism, access to culture for most serfs was shaped chiefly by what the church taught. In turn, the church carefully structured its interpretation of the Bible and other texts to reinforce feudal rules and traditions. Lords and serfs funded the church to complete the system. In modern capitalism, secular public schools undertake formal education alongside or instead of churches and other private schools. In today's world, school education celebrates and reinforces capitalism. In turn, the state taxes employers and mostly employees to fund public schools and subsidizes private schools (which also charge students).

Writers like Howard Zinn and Leo Huberman have penned histories of the U.S. showing that much of what standard school U.S. history textbooks lacked were accounts of the many class struggles against capitalism. Instead, rags-to-riches stories about people like Horatio Alger were popularized. Examinations of the roots of revolt and rebellion against low wages, bad working conditions, and all manner of hardship imposed on the workers of America, however, were not.

In capitalism, mainstream media sources are themselves mostly organized as capitalist enterprises. They depend on, understand, and support profit maximization as the driving force of their enterprises. Their CEOs can and do make all sorts of definitive decisions about what is aired, how events are

interpreted, whose careers blossom, and whose end. CEOs hire and fire, promote and demote. On mainstream radio, TV, and film, we almost never see exciting dramas about anti-capitalist revolutionaries who win the day by successfully persuading employees to join them. Rags-to-capitalist-riches dramas are, in comparison, routine storylines in countless mainstream media productions.

In capitalism, culture is constrained to reinforce that system. Even individuals who privately criticize capitalism learn early in their careers to keep such criticisms private. Periodically, ideological battles can and do break out. If and when they coalesce with anti-capitalist upsurges elsewhere in society, cultural criticism of capitalism has been, and can again be, a powerful revolutionary force for systemic change. That is why defenders of the capitalist system instinctually and ceaselessly shape politics, economics, and culture to reinforce that system.

Capitalism has often undermined democracy and equality because doing so has reinforced and actually strengthened the capitalist organization of the economy. As an example of capitalism's corruption of democracy and equality, we consider the mid-American town of Kalamazoo, Michigan.

As in so many other U.S. cities, Kalamazoo's corporations and its rich have used their wealth and power to become richer and more powerful. By donating to politicians, threatening to take their businesses elsewhere, and hiring better lawyers than the city could afford, the rich reduced the amount of taxes they needed to pay to the local government. The rich funded costly, broadly targeted anti-tax campaigns that found a receptive audience among the already-overtaxed average citizens. Once deprived of the tax revenue from the rich, local politicians either (1) shifted more of the tax burden onto average citizens, (2) cut public services in the short run, and/or (3) borrowed money and thereby risked having to cut public services in the longer run to service city debts. Among those they borrowed from were sometimes the same corporations and the rich whose taxes had been reduced after they funded successful anti-tax campaigns.

Eventually, the city saw an accumulation of resident complaints about steadily cut public services (uncollected garbage, neglected streets, and deteriorated schools), alongside rising taxes and government fees. This litany is familiar in many U.S. cities. Eventually, upper- and middle-income residents started to leave. That worsened the existing set of problems, so even more people left. Then, two of Kalamazoo's wealthiest and most powerful capitalists—William U. Parfet and

William D. Johnston—developed a solution they promoted to “save our city.”

Parfet and Johnston established the “Foundation for Excellence in Kalamazoo.” They contributed, according to reports, over \$25 million annually to it. Since such foundations usually qualify for tax-exempt status at federal, state, and local levels of government, the two gentlemen’s contributions lowered their personal tax bills. More importantly, the two could wield outsize local political influence. They would have much to say about how their foundation funded public services in Kalamazoo. In this city, the old democratic notion of everyone paying taxes to share in funding the public well-being was replaced by private charity. Public, reasonably transparent accountability was replaced by the less transparent, murkier foundation activities. Public accountability faded as the private whims of private foundations took over.

What used to be called a “company town” (when a major employer substituted its rule for any democratic town rule) often amounted, in the words of PBS, to “slavery by another name.” In their modern form, they appear as “foundation cities.” Old company towns were rejected nearly everywhere across U.S. history. But, as the Kalamazoo example shows, they have returned with names changed.

While capitalism’s general tendency is toward ever-greater inequality, occasional redistributions of wealth have happened. These moments have come to be called “reforms” and include progressive taxation of income and wealth, welfare entitlements, and minimum wage legislation. Redistributive reforms usually occur when middle-income and poor people stop tolerating deepening inequality. The biggest and most important example in U.S. history was the Great Depression of the 1930s. The New Deal policies of the federal government then drastically reduced the inequality of wealth and income distribution. Yet employers and the rich have never ceased their opposition to new redistributions and their efforts to undo old ones. U.S. politicians learn early in their careers what results when they advocate for redistributive reforms: an avalanche of criticism coupled with shifts of donors to their political opponents. Thus, in the U.S., after the end of World War II in 1945, the employer class changed the policies of the federal government. Over the past 80 years, most of what the New Deal won has been undone.

Corporations and the rich hire accountants skilled in hiding money in foreign and domestic places that evade reporting to the U.S. Internal Revenue Service. Called

“tax havens,” those hiding places keep funds that remain untouched by tax collectors. In 2013, Oxfam [published findings](#) that the trillions stashed away in tax havens could end extreme world poverty—twice over. Yet since the revelation of this shocking statistic, the inequality of wealth and income has become more extreme in nearly every nation on earth. Tax havens persist.

Conflicts over income, wealth distribution, and wealth redistribution are thus intrinsic to capitalism and always have been. Occasionally they become violent and socially disruptive. They may trigger demands for system change. They may function as catalysts for revolutions.

No “solution” to struggles over income and wealth redistribution in capitalism was ever found. The reason for that is a system that increasingly enriches a small group. The logical response—proposing that income and wealth be distributed more equally in the first place—was usually taboo. It was thus largely ignored. The French revolutionaries of 1789, who promised “liberty, equality, and fraternity” with the transition from feudalism to capitalism, failed. They got that transition, but not equality. Marx explained the failure to achieve the promised equality resulted from capitalism’s core structure of employer and employee preventing equality. In Marx’s view, inequality is inseparable from capitalism and will persist until the transition to another system.

By Richard D. Wolff

Author Bio: Richard D. Wolff is professor of economics emeritus at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and a visiting professor in the Graduate Program in International Affairs of the New School University, in New York. Wolff’s weekly show, “Economic Update,” is syndicated by more than 100 radio stations and goes to millions via several TV networks and YouTube. His most recent [book with Democracy at Work](#) is *Understanding Capitalism* (2024), which responds to requests from readers of his earlier books: *Understanding Socialism* and *Understanding Marxism*.

Source: Independent Media Institute

Credit Line: This adapted excerpt from Richard D. Wolff’s book [Understanding Capitalism](#) (*Democracy at Work*, 2024) was produced by [Economy for All](#), a project of the Independent Media Institute.

The Conundrums Of Bangladeshi Politics



Bangladesh - Map:
en.wikipedia.org

08-12-2024 ~ On Monday, August 5, former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina boarded a Bangladesh Air Force C-130J military transport in a hurry and fled to Hindon Air Force base, outside Delhi. Her plane was refueled and reports said that she intended to fly on either to the United Kingdom (her niece, Tulip Siddiq is a minister in the new Labor government), Finland (her nephew Radwan Mujib Siddiq is married to a Finnish national), or the United States (her son Sajeeb Wajed Joy is a dual Bangladesh-US national).

Army Chief Waker uz-Zaman, who only became Army Chief six weeks ago and was her relative by marriage, informed her earlier in the day that he was taking charge of the situation and would create an interim government to hold future elections.

Sheikh Hasina was the longest-serving prime minister in Bangladesh's history. She was the prime minister from 1996 to 2001, and then from 2009 to 2024—a total of 20 years. This was a sharp contrast to her father Sheikh Mujib, who was assassinated in 1975 after four years in power, or General Ziaur Rahman who was assassinated in 1981 after six years in power. In a scene reminiscent of the end of Mahinda Rajapaksa's rule in Sri Lanka, jubilant crowds of thousands crashed the gates of Ganabhaban, the official residence of the prime minister, and jubilantly made off with everything they could find.

Tanzim Wahab, photographer and chief curator of the Bengal Foundation, told me, "When [the masses] storm into the palace and make off with pet swans, elliptical machines, and palatial red sofas, you can feel the level of subaltern class fury that built up against a rapacious regime." There was widespread celebration across Bangladesh, along with bursts of attacks against buildings identified with the government—private TV channels, and palatial homes of government ministers were a favored target for arson. Several local-level leaders in Sheikh Hasina's Awami League have already been killed (Mohsin Reza, a local president of the party, was beaten to death in Khulna).

The situation in Bangladesh remains fluid, but it is also settling quickly into a familiar formula of an "interim government" that will hold new elections. Political violence in Bangladesh is not unusual, having been present since the birth of the country in 1971. Indeed, one of the reasons why Sheikh Hasina reacted so strongly to any criticism or protest was her fear that such activity would repeat what she experienced in her youth. Her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920-1975), the founder of Bangladesh, was assassinated in a coup d'état on August 15, 1975, along with most of his family. Sheikh Hasina and her sister survived because they were in Germany at that time—the two sisters fled Bangladesh together on the same helicopter this week. She has been the victim of multiple assassination attempts, including a grenade attack in 2004 that left her with a hearing problem. Fear of such an attempt on her life made Sheikh Hasina deeply concerned about any opposition to her, which is why up to 45 minutes before her departure she wanted the army to again act with force against the gathering crowds.

However, the army read the atmosphere. It was time for her to leave.

A contest has already begun over who will benefit from the removal of Sheikh

Hasina. On the one side are the students, led by the Bangladesh Student Uprising Central Committee of about 158 people and six spokespersons. Lead spokesperson Nahid Islam made the students' views clear: "Any government other than the one we recommended would not be accepted. We won't betray the bloodshed by the martyrs for our cause. We will create a new democratic Bangladesh through our promise of security of life, social justice, and a new political landscape." At the other end are the military and the opposition political forces (including the primary opposition party Bangladesh National Party, the Islamist party Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, and the small left party Ganosamhati Andolan). While the Army's first meetings were with these opposition parties, a public outcry over the erasure of the student movement forced the Army to meet with the Student Central Committee and listen to their primary demands.

There is a habit called *polti khawa* or "changing the team jersey midway through a football match" that prevails in Bangladesh, with the military being the referee in charge at all times. This slogan is being used in public discourse now to draw attention to any attempt by the military to impose a mere change of jersey when the students are demanding a wholesale change of the rules of the game. Aware of this, the military has accepted the student demand that the new government be led by economist Muhammad Yunus, Bangladesh's only Nobel Prize winner. Yunus, as the founder of the microcredit movement and promoter of "social business," used to be seen as primarily a phenomenon in the neoliberal NGO world. However, the Hasina government's relentless political vendetta against him over the last decade, and his decision to speak up for the student movement, have transformed him into an unlikely "guardian" figure for the protesters. The students see him as a figurehead although his neoliberal politics of austerity might be at odds with their key demand, which is for employment.

Students

Even prior to independence and despite the rural character of the region, the epicenter of Bangladeshi politics has been in urban areas, with a focus on Dhaka. Even as other forces entered the political arena, students remain key political actors in Bangladesh. One of the earliest protests in post-colonial Pakistan was the language movement (*bhasha andolan*) that emerged out of Dhaka University, where student leaders were killed during an agitation in 1952 (they are memorialized in the Shaheed Minar, or Martyrs' Pillar, in Dhaka). Students became a key part of the freedom struggle for liberation from Pakistan in 1971,

which is why the Pakistani army targeted the universities in Operation Searchlight which led to massacres of student activists. The political parties that emerged in Bangladesh after 1971 grew largely through their student wings—the Awami League’s Bangladesh Chhatra League, the Bangladesh National Party’s Bangladesh Jatiotabadi Chatradal, and the Jamaat-e-Islami’s Bangladesh Islami Chhatra Shibir.

Over the past decade, students in Bangladesh have been infuriated by the growing lack of employment despite the bustling economy, and by what they perceived as a lack of care from the government. The latter was demonstrated to them by the callous comments made by Shajahan Khan, a minister in Sheikh Hasina’s government, who smirked as he dismissed news that a bus had killed two college students on Airport Road, Dhaka, in July 2019. That event led to a massive protest movement by students of all ages for road safety, to which the government responded with arrests (including incarceration for 107 days of the photojournalist Shahidul Alam).

Behind the road safety protests, which earned greater visibility for the issue, was another key theme. Five years previously, in 2013, students who were denied access to the Bangladesh Civil Service began a protest over restrictive quotas for government jobs. In February 2018, this issue returned through the work of students in the Bangladesh Sadharon Chhatra Odhikar Songrokkhon Parishad (Bangladesh General Students’ Rights Protection Forum). When the road safety protests occurred, the students raised the quota issue (as well as the issue of inflation). By law, the government reserved seats in its employment for people in underdeveloped districts (10 percent), women (10 percent), minorities (5 percent), and the disabled (1 percent) as well as for descendants of freedom fighters (30 percent).

It is the latter quota that has been contested since 2013 and which returned as an emotive issue this year for the student protesters—especially after the prime minister’s incendiary comment at a press conference that those protesting the freedom fighter quotas were “rajakarer natni” (grandchildren of war traitors). British journalist David Bergman, who is married to prominent Bangladeshi activist lawyer Sara Hossain and was hounded into exile by the Hasina government, called this comment the “[terrible error](#)” that ended the government.

Military Islam

In February 2013, Abdul Quader Mollah of the Jamaat-e-Islami was sentenced to life in prison for crimes against humanity during Bangladesh's liberation war (he was known to have killed at least 344 civilians). When he left the court, he made a V sign, whose arrogance inflamed large sections of Bangladesh's society. Many in Dhaka gathered at Shahbag, where they formed a *Gonojagoron Moncho* (Mass Awakening Platform). This protest movement pushed the Supreme Court to reassess the verdict, and Mollah was hanged on December 12. The Shahbag movement brought to the surface a long-term tension in Bangladesh regarding the role of religion in politics.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman initially claimed that Bangladesh would be a socialist and secular country. After his assassination by the military, general Ziaur Rahman took over the country and governed it from 1975 to 1981. During this time, Zia brought religion back into public life, welcomed the Jamaat-e-Islami from banishment (which had been due to its participation in the genocide of 1971), and—in 1978—formed the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) on nationalist lines with a strong critical stance toward India. General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, who took control after his own coup in 1982 and ruled until 1990, went further, declaring that Islam was the state's religion. This provided a political contrast with the views of Mujib, and of his daughter Sheikh Hasina who took the reins of her father's party, the Awami League, in 1981.

The stage was set for a long-term contest between Sheikh Hasina's centrist-secular Awami League and the BNP, which was taken over by Zia's wife Khaleda Zia after the General was assassinated in 1981. Gradually, the military—which had a secular orientation in its early days—began to witness a growing Islamist mood. Political Islam has grown in Bangladesh with the rise of piety in the general population, some of it driven by the Islamization of migrant labor to the Gulf states and to Southeast Asia. The latter has steadily reflected growth in observance of the Islamic faith in the aftermath of the war on terror's many consequences. One should neither exaggerate this threat nor minimize it.

The relationship of the political Islamists, whose popular influence has grown since 2013, with the military is another factor that requires much more clarity. Given the dent in the fortunes of the Jamaat-e-Islami since the War Crimes Tribunal documented how the group was involved on the side of Pakistan during the liberation struggle, it is likely that this formation of political Islam has a threshold in terms of its legitimacy. However, one complicating factor is that the

Hasina government relentlessly used the fear of “political Islam” as a bogeyman to obtain U.S. and Indian silent consent to the two elections in 2018 and 2024. If the interim government holds a fair election on schedule, this will allow Bangladeshi people to find out if political Islam is a dispensation they wish to vote for.

New Cold War

Far away from the captivating issues put forward by the students which led to the ouster of Sheikh Hasina are dangerous currents that are often not discussed during these exciting times. Bangladesh is the eighth-largest country in the world by population, and it has the second highest Gross Domestic Product in South Asia. The role it plays in the region and in the world is not to be discounted.

Over the course of the past decade, South Asia has faced significant challenges as the United States imposed a new cold war against China. Initially, India participated with the United States in the formations around the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy. But, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, India has begun to distance itself from this U.S. initiative and tried to put its own national agenda at the forefront. This meant that India did not condemn Russia but continued to buy Russian oil. At the same time, China had—through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—built infrastructure in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, India’s neighbors.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that four governments in the region that had begun to collaborate with the BRI have fallen, and that their replacements in three of them are eager for better ties with the United States. This includes Shehbaz Sharif, who came to power in Pakistan in April 2022 with the ouster of Imran Khan (now in prison), Ranil Wickremesinghe, who briefly came to power in Sri Lanka in July 2022 after setting aside a mass uprising that had other ideas than the installation of a party with only one member in parliament (Wickremesinghe himself), and KP Sharma Oli, who came to power in July 2024 in Nepal after a parliamentary shuffle that removed the Maoists from power.

What role the removal of Sheikh Hasina will play in the calculations in the region can only be gauged after elections are held under the interim government. But there is little doubt that these decisions in Dhaka are not without their regional and global implications.

The students rely upon the power of the mass demonstrations for their legitimacy. What they do not have is an [agenda](#) for Bangladesh, which is why the old neoliberal technocrats are already swimming like sharks around the interim government. In their ranks are those who favor the BNP and the Islamists. What role they will play is yet to be seen.

If the student committee now formed a bloc with the trade unions, particularly the garment worker unions, there is the possibility that they might indeed form the opening for building a new democratic and people-centered Bangladesh. If they are unable to build this historical bloc, they may be pushed to the side, just like the students and workers in Egypt, and they might have to surrender their efforts to the military and an elite that has merely changed its jersey.

By Vijay Prashad

Author Bio: This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#). Vijay Prashad is an Indian historian, editor, and journalist. He is a writing fellow and chief correspondent at Globetrotter. He is an editor of [LeftWord Books](#) and the director of [Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research](#). He has written more than 20 books, including [The Darker Nations](#) and [The Poorer Nations](#). His latest books are [Struggle Makes Us Human: Learning from Movements for Socialism](#) and (with Noam Chomsky) [The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and the Fragility of U.S. Power](#).

Source: Globetrotter