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The Ballot or The Bullet?

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin

There are no fair elections in America, certainly when the questions of race and political power are evident. It's interesting therefore to look at the presidential election of the year 2000. Many things have not been widely reported, which shows that this electoral race has come so close to political violence, if not outright fascism. The right-wing, including paramilitary militias in Florida and other states, have been planning for a civil war for quite some time. Now they have a genuine "excuse" for political violence.

For instance, shortly after the first recounts began in Florida, the most extreme elements of the Republicans, bolstered by gunmen began talking about "blood in the streets." Even the USA Today began to write articles about the high "state of tension" over the elections and threats of violence in Florida. After it seemed that Bush would lose because of ballots not counted in Palm Beach and other Democratic counties, they began to talk about the possibility of a civil war. For instance, U.S. Congressman Ron Paul (R-Texas) stated on a Dallas-Fort Worth radio talk show if he thought all the Gore legal maneuvers were a plot so that Pres. Clinton could remain in power replied that "...The people would come out and there would be total violence." In addition to this, there have been reports of

accelerated widespread ammunition and arms sales in White suburban areas all over Florida.

These white Republicans had alleged widespread "voter fraud" by Democrats against their man George W. Bush, until it became clear that the Republican establishment had enough power to stave off Gore's legal and electoral challenges. It seems (as I'm writing this) that Bush has captured Florida, and overtaken Gore in electoral votes, if not the national vote total. (Hey, his brother is the Governor [!], who believes that that does not count for something? All the electoral and political officials in the State of Florida report to Jeb Bush.)

Although the white conservatives claimed "fraud" for mere tactical advantage. It really does appear that there has been widespread fraud against Black people in Florida and other Southern states. They have been disallowed the right to vote in thousands of cases, especially in those Southern counties where they have substantial numbers. In Florida, they voted in record numbers only to have their ballots massively disallowed. Even before the election, thousands of Black people in Florida, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, and other Southern states were purged from the voter rolls without even so much of a notice of the action. Many Black people arrived at their voting precinct office to find it had "moved" or that they no longer qualified to vote. This interference by white racist voting registrars is the very sort of stuff that the Voting Rights Act of 1964 was designed to prevent.

There is no question that we are seeing a resurgence of the very sort of illegal racist activity which has always gone on down South, especially in many small towns and mid-sized cities. When Black people started to make inroads in the electoral arena, after the Civil War displaced the plantation owners and dismantled the slave system, they were subjected to poll taxes, literacy tests, and other illegal methods to deny them access to the right to vote. Now we are seeing the revival of these methods in the 2000 elections. No doubt racist vigilantism is only a step away!

Most Black people understand that a Bush electoral victory means an outright hostile federal government to the national Black community. Possibly a government more hostile than the Reagan administration of the 1980's, who took actions that we are still suffering from. It is pointless to argue to them about the backwardness and treachery of the Democrats, who do not have our best interests at heart either. The 100,000 new cops beating down our community were hired by Clinton, the 2 million Black and poor prisoners were jailed by Clinton, the massive new poverty of millions was because Clinton signed legislation to destroy welfare, and you could point to other inimical actions. But the Democratic "fox" (in sheep's clothing) is preferable to the Republican "wolf", even though both are eating us alive.

At times like this, it's important to think about Malcolm X's famous "Ballot or the Bullet" speech, given in Cleveland (OH.) over 36 years ago. Brother Malcolm talked about the American two party system as "a giant con game", and that both the Democrats and Republican were working together to oppress Black people in this country. He talked about Southern racists (Dixiecrats) and Northern Liberals (Demorats) controlling the political system of the day, and tricking Black folks out of their vote. He said if Black people could freely vote in the South then many of the racist segregationists would lose their seats in Congress, which has been somewhat true. That was in 1964, well now the right-wingers have regrouped into the Republican Party. They are supported by the most reactionary wing of finance capital, under the guise of Christianity, which elected Reagan in 1980 and now Bush in 2000. Some diehard racists like Strom Thurmond, Jessie Helms and others from the 1960's who opposed the civil right laws, are still in office, even to this day. How much political progress has truly been made by Black people in all this time? Our democratic rights which have been won with so much sacrifice are now being taken away.

The most important thing here is that we need to organize in the streets, not just for civil rights or American citizenship rights,

but total political independence in whatever form that takes. We need to use whatever means of resistance is necessary to secure our freedom, and not be trapped into thinking that our entire future is bound up in the current fate of Al Gore. Whether he wins or loses, we will still be Black and have to deal with racism in the United States.