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mass movement with a new vision, clear ethics, sound principles and truly democratic practices in South Africa is needed.

Without such a movement we will remain mired in a society defined by exploitation and corruption. To build such a movement will be no easy task, but it is what is needed: What the revolution in northern Syria shows is that it can be done.

Ocalan's analysis that once in state power, former liberation movements become a new elite and new rulers that develop self-serving interests precisely due to their new power and privileged positions they occupy, has proven to be correct. It is exactly why we sit with corruption throughout the state in South Africa as officials abuse the hierarchical power they have to enrich themselves.

Democratic Confederalism, as is shown in Syria, offers another way to run society. Its direct democracy can temper corruption and create greater equality as power cannot be centralised in such a system and wealth cannot be accumulated individually.

Developments in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria also demonstrate how a non-racial society can be built through a radical democracy and that gender relations can be changed through a participatory revolutionary process. This is something that is desperately needed in South Africa where gender-based violence, sexism and racism are everyday occurrences.

In South Africa, we are saddled with one of the most corrupt private sectors in the world. Practices such as price gouging, collusion, transfer pricing and tax evasion/avoidance are prevalent in the private sector.

Working conditions, especially in the agricultural sector, are often harsh and even brutal. Pay is often low, which is one of the reasons we are one of the most unequal societies in the world. Unemployment, too, is rife and precarious work a growing phenomenon.

Past revolutions have shown, however, that nationalisation is often not the answer. Developments in Syria to create a socialised communal economy that is democratic shows another path could be followed.

In order to create a more democratic and egalitarian path (which Democratic Confederalism shows can be done), a new

For the past few years, most people would have come across news stories of how Kurdish fighters in Syria, especially women, have been crucial in battling the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Very few, however, would be aware that in the north and eastern parts of Syria these same Kurdish fighters are part of a revolution as progressive, profound and potentially as far-reaching as any in history.

In the north and eastern parts of Syria, an attempt to create an alternative system to hierarchical states, capitalism and patriarchy is underway and should it fully succeed it holds the potential to inspire the struggle for a better, more egalitarian Middle East, Africa, South Africa and indeed world. As in any revolution it has had its successes and shortcomings, but it is already an experiment worth reflecting on as it shows a far different world could be built to the extremely unequal and increasingly right-wing and authoritarian one that exists today.

The start of Rojava

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring in Syria, most of the country descended into a hellish nightmare as a vicious civil war erupted between the brutal Assad regime and equally reactionary groups claiming to be inspired by Islamic fundamentalism. Compounding this was the intervention of imperialist powers such as the US and Russia, and regional powers such as Turkey, Israel and Iran. One area where there was a difference was the mainly Kurdish enclave in the north of Syria known as Rojava. 1

There, on 19 July 2012, popular protests erupted against the Assad regime. Government buildings were occupied and taken over by the people. Many of the people involved in this had been building a popular movement for almost a decade that had the vision of implementing a radical concept — Democratic Confederalism.

The vision of Democratic Confederalism

Democratic Confederalism was first outlined by Abdullah Ocalan, who began his political life as an adherent of Stalinism and was the head of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PPK) that had been engaged in a guerrilla war for the national liberation of the Kurdish people in Turkey.

In 1999, Ocalan was captured in Kenya — in an incident involving intelligence agencies from Turkey, the US and Greece — and tried for treason by the Turkish state. He was initially sentenced to death, but that was commuted to a life sentence as, at that point, the Turkish state had aspirations of joining the EU.

Since then, he has been held on the prison island of Imrali, often as the only prisoner, and now in total isolation since April 2015 — indeed the right-wing Erdogan regime has even denied visitation by his family members and lawyers (presently hundreds of people across the world are on hunger strike demanding an end to his isolation).

In the early 2000s, Ocalan nonetheless began a process of reflecting on what went wrong with past revolutionary struggles, most notably the Russian Revolution and the communist party's rise to power as head of the Chinese state. During these revolutions, the energy of millions of people was released, a hope of a better future grew, only to flounder on the rise of the totalitarian states that emerged.

At the same time, Ocalan also began reading the works of libertarian socialist and social ecologist Murray Bookchin, as well as studying the experiences of the anarchist-syndicalist inspired Spanish Revolution of 1936 (which was one of the most radical revolutions in terms of worker democracy and control; although it too is not well known).

Ocalan came to the conclusion that the main reason past revolutions had failed is that they did not put an end to the structure of the state. Rather, communist parties entered the state

the most capable in combating ISIS. The US, as always, has only adhered to the tactical military alliance for its own purposes and has categorically refused to politically recognise the existence of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. It recently mooted that its troops would pull out of Syria in a move that will give the Turkish state a free hand to militarily intervene against the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.

In January 2019, the Turkish state in fact began to make plans for the invasion of northern Syria to end the revolution. The Turkish state fears the revolution will spread into Turkey itself and it does not want an experiment in direct democracy, feminism, ecology, anti-statism, and anti-capitalism to succeed.

Already in 2018, the Turkish state invaded part of Rojava, Afrin, and is now unleashing plans to invade the rest of north and eastern Syria. These plans have been condemned by the peoples of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. They have called for a genuine international peacekeeping force to be deployed to prevent the invasion. Indeed, if such an invasion occurs there will be a massive escalation of the war in Syria, which will at the very least lead to thousands more deaths and hundreds of thousands of new refugees. 1

Showing us the potential for a better way

Despite some weaknesses and the threats the revolution faces, it is a beacon of hope. For South Africans, the revolution in northern and eastern Syria holds real lessons and potential hope.

When the liberation movement in South Africa gained state power, it promised to use this to improve people's lives, end racism, address sexism and bring about equality. This has flatly failed to happen.

der parity among delegates. To have a quorum in commune meetings at least 40% of the participants have to be women.

In the process of the revolution, real strides have been made to create a genuinely democratic form of people's power with women playing a central role. As the fighters from Rojava have rolled back ISIS, new areas have joined the system of self-governance based on Democratic Confederalism. Presently 4.6 million people live and participate in this system, now known as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.

On the economic front, there has been an attempt to replace capitalism with a communal economy. At the heart of this experiment are worker self-managed co-operatives that produce not for profits, but to meet peoples' needs. Besides being based on workers' democracy, these co-operatives are also accountable to everyone involved in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria through being answerable to the federated communes.

Large industries, of which oil is the only real one, and ex-state-owned commercial farms have also been socialised — that is, ownership is by all. By some estimates, 70% of economic activity is conducted through co-operatives. Small-sized businesses still do exist, but these are required to be based on meeting peoples' needs and are reportedly accountable to the communes — to temper profit motives and price gouging.

Threats from many sides

Over the course of almost seven years, the people of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria — mainly through democratic militia — have fought off the many dangers that have been posed to the revolution, which have included the forces of the Syrian state, ISIS and the Turkish state.

In the process a tactical military alliance was formed in 2015 with the US — it only arose because the Kurdish forces proved

and through that process, the leaders of these parties became rulers and a new elite within those societies.

In these states figures such as Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao and those loyal to them held real power; not the majority of people. Ocalan, therefore, argued that all states, whether claiming to be revolutionary or not, were hierarchical and subjugated, oppressed and exploited the majority of people.

He also argued states were inherently patriarchal and first arose in societies where a minority became an elite ruling class, but also importantly, in ones in which men began oppressing women and exploiting their labour. He concluded, due to their very structures — which centralised power — states could not escape or be altered to fundamentally shift away from their original purpose: Enabling an elite to hold power and rule over society.

Ocalan maintained that if a revolution was to be achieved, women's liberation would have to be a central component. He also reasoned that capitalism needed to be replaced, but so too did the state. To replace these he argued for a communal economy that was based on the socialisation of the means of production and production for need, not profit.

He also argued such an economy needed to be ecologically sustainable and democratic. To replace the state, he maintained federated assemblies and councils should be created and they should function on the basis of direct democracy.

This, he felt, would prevent the emergence of an elite as within direct democracy there could be no hierarchy as delegates were always subject to the will of assemblies at the base of society. Monopolisation could not take place in a socialised and democratic economy.

By the mid-2000s most people involved in the Kurdish national liberation struggle in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran had come to adopt Democratic Confederalism. With this, they began to attempt to forge a new world in the shell of the old by building a mass movement of community-based councils and

assemblies across southern Turkey, northeastern Syria, northern Iraq and northwestern Iran.

In this, direct democracy, feminism and participatory praxis replaced undemocratic notions of hierarchy and vanguardism as defining features of the Kurdish national liberation struggle.

Implementing Democratic Confederalism

Since 2012, when the Syrian state left the north and eastern parts of the country, people in this area known as Rojava — Kurds, Turks and Arabs — expanded these structures of direct democracy. As part of this, they set up thousands of communes — made up of 60 to 100 households — right across Rojava to run the society from the grassroots on the basis of a radical democracy without a state.

People themselves, through participation in the communes, decide through direct democracy on policies, plans, and how to meet needs in their own communities. They democratically deal with issues such as crime at a local level and use restorative justice as opposed to punitive justice in order to constructively heal communities.

This includes dealing with issues such as gender-based violence. Due to having a history of being involved in a movement based on direct democratic organisations, people were already familiar with such politics and putting such a system fully into practice was not alien.

The communes, in fact, have full autonomy and are where true power resides. Through mass meetings, they are the sole decision-making bodies regarding the economy, services, development, education and defence in the areas they cover. No structure or institution has any right or ability to override decisions made by the communes.

The communes, while being autonomous, are federated into neighbourhood assemblies — in this, the communes send mandated and recallable delegates to neighbourhood assemblies to share their ideas, views and plans to ensure co-ordination from below. Recallable delegates from the neighbourhood assemblies are then sent to City Assemblies. These are all linked through delegates that are sent to a structure that covers the entire region, named the Syrian Democratic Council.

By 2016, a form of representative democracy had also been introduced in the Syrian Democratic Council. Other parties and formations — who were not mandated delegates from the communes and assemblies — also began to participate in the Syrian Democratic Council through an election.

This has proven to be a controversial issue. Some argue that the introduction of a form of representative democracy in the Syrian Democratic Council undermines the direct democracy envisioned in Democratic Confederalism. They contend it introduces practices similar to those of a state. Others argue that it was a necessary step to ensure unity of the people of Rojava in the face of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) attacks and some form of international recognition.

Linked to this argument, its proponents contend that as a minority of parties and organisations had refused to participate in the communes and neighbourhood assemblies some form of representative democracy in the Syrian Democratic Council was necessary to also give such people a say. Those defending this move also point out that the communes remain the real holders of power and the Syrian Democratic Council cannot override their decisions nor impose any policy, practice or law on them.

Ultimately it does seem to be the case that the communes do hold real power, although introducing elements of representative democracy in the Syrian Democratic Council holds the real danger of introducing new hierarchies. An important development, though, is that women play a central role in this system of Democratic Confederalism. Each assembly or council — including the Syrian Democratic Council — have to ensure gen-