

Dangerous times: authoritarianism and crisis

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Introduction

Globally and in South Africa, the capitalist system is becoming more and more unstable. Over the last period, the responses of the ruling classes in many parts of the world to this growing crisis has been a turn to authoritarianism. This has been done to hold onto power and to increase their control over wealth. Factions within ruling classes, in countries such as South Africa, are also engaged in a battle over shrinking opportunities to accumulate wealth. Competition between factions within ruling classes is, therefore, also intensifying. This too is feeding into an intensification of imperialist rivalries. The consequences are that over the last few months the threat of large scale war globally, as part of a show down between imperialist powers, has become an awful possibility.

The only force capable of changing this situation is the working class locally and internationally. Yet to do so, struggles need to come together, new forms appropriate to combating a rampant and growing authoritarian form of neoliberalism are needed; and such struggles need to be infused with a revolutionary progressive politics. While struggles are taking place in different parts of the world, none as yet have come to hold these three ingredients on a large scale.

The rise and rise of authoritarianism internationally

Since the beginning of the year, the rise of the authoritarian right has continued. Along with Trump taking office, the far right-wing have gained support, taken power or have come close to taking power in a number of states. In fact, support for the likes of Marine Le Pen in France and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands has increased – even though they may not be in a position to take state power at this point. Likewise, strongmen such as Recep Erdogan in Turkey, Narendra Modi in India, and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines have further centralised power as a means to shore-up the rule of sections of the dominant classes in these states.

The rise of these politicians is a symptom of sections of the ruling classes shifting away from the façade of liberal democracy to authoritarianism to maintain and entrench the class war against the working class. They are also shoring up their power against competing sections of the ruling class as a means to out compete for shrinking opportunities to accumulate wealth and loot. In fact, it is an attempt to enforce ‘stability’ on a system marked by profound inequalities and instability; while at the same time scapegoating immigrants to camouflage the class nature of the crisis.

At the vanguard of this reaction has been Trump, and his cohorts in terms of sections of finance capital that now directly head the US state.

Vanguard of the Right

From the very onset of taking office in January, the Trump administration has implemented policies to boost finance capital, attack the working class, and repress immigrants. In fact, the administration is packed with representatives of finance capital, and it has a profound anti-working class and aggressive imperialist character: building on and adapting the policies and practices of the Obama administration in the process.

While Trump was driven into office by the Alt-Right, he has largely begun to distance himself from its leading elements. Even Steve Bannon has been side-lined over the last few weeks within the White House. Even so, the policies of the Trump regime are reactionary and racist.

As a matter of fact, Trump – despite claiming to be the man of the white working class in the US – has unleashed a plethora of policies and actions against the working class. This has seen the Trump administration slash the Federal budgets for housing by 13%, public transport by 12%, health by 16%, education by 13%, and environmental protection by 31%. The consequences are going to be devastating as the number of Americans living below the poverty line (43 million people) will increase.

Trump has also staffed the Department of Labour with reactionary elements and has already embarked on rolling back the already limited rights of workers. For example, the Trump regime has revoked legislation that required companies bidding for contracts from the state to adhere to fair labour practices and workplace safety standards. Surveillance and oppression by the state against sections of the working class has also been expanded.

While simultaneously attacking the working class, the administration has assisted finance capital by revoking the legislation that had been put in place to try and mitigate another crisis as erupted in 2008. In the process, the regime is moving towards implementing an authoritarian version of neoliberalism domestically – even though it has not done away with elections.

The Trump administration has also been using a strategy of diverting attention away from its anti-working class and pro finance actions and policies, by making one outlandish statement after another. The pretence is, therefore, given that at a domestic level the administration is directionless and erratic, when in fact it has been conducting a systematic attack on the working class.

The Trump regime has also been quick to back up its racist rhetoric by increasing spending aimed at repressing immigrants. As part of this, US \$ 1.5 billion was set aside to expand the detention and removal of “illegal” immigrants from the US. Likewise, Trump has made moves to prevent citizens of seven Middle Eastern states from entering into the US under a travel ban order.

As part of an increasing shift to authoritarianism, the Trump administration has also boosted the military. The conventional and the nuclear armouries and forces have already been increased. This is part of a strategy to try and maintain the dominance of the US globally. For several decades the US has been in decline and economically its share of global GDP and trade has been shrinking. Successive US administrations have used various strategies to try and stem the decline, which have included shows of force through imperialist wars. Under Obama, this began to extend to brinkmanship with rivals such as Russia, specifically over the Ukraine and the expansion of NATO. Nonetheless, successive regimes also used multilateral institutions, such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), to facilitate trade and investment deals that would be in the interest of the US ruling class.

The Trump administration, as part of its attempt to stem the decline of the US globally, has upped its militaristic imperialism. This has seen the US state extend the presence of US troops in several countries and conflict areas, including Afghanistan and Somalia. In the last month, the US has also dropped its largest non-nuclear bomb in Afghanistan, undertaken a missile attack on Syria and threatened military action against North Korea.

In the case of North Korea, the US’s threatened military action is a message to China, but also Russia – the US is attempting to send a signal to these powers that it will not accept rivals globally.

Linked to this, the US and Japan have also been holding exercises in close proximity to Chinese air force bases in the South China Sea. Such actions are threatening to erupt into a war. What is concerning is that top US strategists in the Trump regime believe the US can win a nuclear war with China and Russia and survive in the case of a first strike.

In terms of Russia, initially Trump appeared to want to patch up relations. This was part of the agenda of the Alt-Right who were pro-isolationist. This, however, was not the agenda of those within finance capital that had backed Trump' nor the security and military establishment within the state. Under pressure from these sections of the ruling class, Trump has shifted his initial position on Russia. The recent strike on Syria, the only client state of Russia in the Middle East, was a clear message to Russia not to challenge the US in this sphere. More provocatively, NATO has been holding extensive military manoeuvres on the border of Russia. Such militaristic displays are intended to cower Russia into accepting the US as a sole world power.

While shifting from the position of isolationism pushed by the Alt-Right, the Trump regime has been far more critical of multilateral trade and investment agreements and arrangements than its predecessors, including the WTO and NAFTA. Yet this should not be mistaken for the Trump administration being isolationist. What is rather taking place is that the US state is shifting away from multilateral agreements in favour of bilateral agreements, in which it feels it has greater power over individual states in order to best push through trade and investment deals that favour it.

As with the domestic level, the Trump regime, however, deliberately presents itself as being volatile and unpredictable – essentially using the “madman” theory in an attempt to cower rival imperialist powers by seeming to be out of control and capable of almost any irrational action. This, however, is an extremely dangerous game and could lead to large scale war. It is for this reason, along with the danger of runaway climate change, that the Doomsday Clock has been reset to two and a half minutes to midnight – its ‘highest’ level since the height of the Cold War.

Friction within the US ruling class

Yet the Trump aligned section of the ruling class have faced resistance. Some of this resistance, but by no means all, has ironically come from a competing sections of the ruling class aligned with the Democratic Party. This section, along with the media, have made much about Russia seemingly interfering in the Presidential Election process in favour of Trump. Earlier in the year, it even seemed possible that this section of the ruling class would attempt to impeach Trump on the basis of his alleged connections to Russia.

The friction between different factions of the US ruling class, however, is about competition over control of the state. As part of this, it is also about how to conduct US imperialism and trade and investment relations. As such, both factions are imperialistic, all they differ on are the details of carrying it out. In terms of attitudes to the working class, both factions too are hostile. In fact, it must be remembered that the imperialist actions of the US state became even more confrontational under Obama, and so did the states repressive arms – the Trump administration is simply carrying out the intensification of this as it is its answer to the symptoms the capitalist crisis is throwing up.

Sections of the working class have, however, been involved in mobilising against Trump. This has specifically been around Trump's racist and sexist attitudes. Nonetheless, despite this, the

working class has not become an independent force within these protests; rather many still remain tethered to the Democratic Party, which only offers more neoliberalism. If the working class in the US is to stem the attack it is under it needs to become an independent force that acts in the interests of its class.

Southern Africa in a time of strife

Southern Africa has not been spared in the time of crisis. As the capitalist crisis has deepened so too have political and social upheavals in the region. Former liberation movements in some of the countries are now facing their own crisis of legitimacy. Under a deepening political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe, for example, the ruling party is fragmenting. Yet it won't let go of state power easily, as an elite within ZANU derive their wealth from the state. Nonetheless, struggle is again arising in the country for the first time in many years, and prospects of a new movement being born exists, albeit in a harsh and hostile environment. In Mozambique, the ruling party too is clinging on to power. It, however is not being challenged by a progressive force, but rather the regressive RENAMO. Consequently, a low-grade intermittent civil war has erupted in Mozambique on party political lines.

South African ruling class brawl

In South Africa, factions have also formed within the ruling class that are vying for control of the state. One faction of the ruling class are those grouped around Zuma. It is comprised of sections of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) capitalists, top state officials, and politicians aligned to Zuma. The other faction has coalesced around Ramaphosa/Gordhan and is comprised of sections of the ANC leadership such as Ramaphosa and Gordhan, white capital and the South African Communist Party (SACP). In this battle metaphorical blood has been spilled: those of a few Cabinet Ministers, including Pravin Gordhan.

Both factions are also appealing to the working class for their support. This has seen Zuma using the rhetoric of radical economic transformation; while the other faction has been calling on people to mobilise against Zuma's corruption. The question though is: does this battle within the ruling class in South Africa offer anything to the workers and the unemployed of the country?

It is patently obvious that Zuma and his faction are rotten. They have been involved in one corrupt deal after another, and have been brazen when caught out. Zuma's endless giggling over Nkandla is the tip of the iceberg. Over and above this, however, they have also supported and imposed neoliberal policies on the working class in South Africa. Hence, it is clear they offer nothing to the working class (workers and the unemployed).

But does the other faction, the Ramaphosa/Gordhan faction offer the working class anything? One brief glance at the history of some of those in the faction provides a clear answer.

When one looks at the figurehead of the faction, Ramaphosa, one finds endless dirt. Ramaphosa was the BEE man of choice for sections of white capital after apartheid fell. Suddenly the ex-trade unionist became a billionaire overnight. To be sure, white capital was not buying Ramaphosa's business acumen when they provided him shares and board positions in their companies; they were buying the influence he had in the ANC and the state in order to further their own capital accumulation. By 2012, Ramaphosa had his hands in many pies, in

partnership with white and foreign capital. When one of the companies he owned shares in, Lonmin, experienced a wildcat strike at Marikana he made a few phone calls to Ministers and top officials in the police and 34 mine workers were shot dead to end the strike.

Then there is Ramaphosa's political partner Pravin. Year after year, he has been at the head of drawing up one neoliberal budget after another. The consequences have been devastating. Class and race inequalities have continued to grow, with the black working class being the hardest hit. It was also Gordhan who recently dismissed calls for ABSA bank to pay back a corrupt bailout it received from the state during the dying days of apartheid. Gordhan is the prize fighter of established capital in South Africa.

Of course, the majority of white capital are part and parcel of the Ramaphosa/Gordhan faction. To say the least they have a dismal record. Corruption during the apartheid period was central to their operations. Banks belonging to the Banking Association were essential to sanctions busting during apartheid. As for the Chamber of Mines, the wealth of its members comes from the extreme exploitation of black workers – workers that were forced into working on the mines through the colonial states' conquest of land and imposition of the hut and poll taxes. Forced to work in appalling conditions, over 54 000 mine workers have died in workplace accidents in companies that form the Chamber of Mines since 1904. Mining companies in South Africa literally have blood on their hands.

The practices of white capital today continue to be as bad as in the apartheid days. Major banks were recently caught out colluding to fix the Rand in order to make billions; while mining houses continue to exploit black migrant labour to generate huge profits and then use transfer pricing to whisk the money out of the country.

Then there is the 'vanguard' in the form of the SACP – also part and parcel of the Ramaphosa/Gordhan faction. It bemoans state capture and corruption, yet it is mired in corruption and nepotism itself. Top SACP members pack the echelons of the state; many not because of their skills and talents; but because of political connections. The SACP – self avowed anti-capitalists – also have their own investment arm, which too has shares in mining companies. When the SACP head, Blade Nzimande, became Minister of Higher Education, it cannot be an accident that an education institute that is partly owned by the SACP's investment arm received funding of over R 200 million from a Skills Education Training Authority ultimately controlled by the Minister. The SACP has also tried to mobilise COSATU against Zuma, yet COSATU itself is in terminal decline politically and is also far from clean.

Given the corruption and exploitation associated with those in the Ramaphosa/Gordhan faction, it is also clear that this faction offers nothing to workers and the poor. In fact, like the Zuma faction, it has used the working class as a punching bag. Yet both factions are calling on the working class to defend them. There is a danger the working class could get embroiled in these fights between factions of the ruling class. In fact we are already seeing this in KwaZulu Natal and the consequences of this are devastating with political assassination becoming rife. As the intra ruling class battles intensify, there will be more and more killings.

Instead of backing one faction of the ruling class over another; the working class (and the black section in particular) needs to rather step into the ring as an independent force to fight against class rule, capitalism and its state. It is class rule, capitalism and the state that generates exploitation and corruption – the ruling class's actions in South Africa are simply symptoms of the rotten system, even those of the Zuma faction.

Capitalism was born of exploitation, brutality and corruption. It was built on slave labour in the Americas and parts of Asia. In Africa it was built on genocide and conquest. Even in Europe, it was founded on disposition of the land, denying poor people a living and forcing them to work for a pittance in the mines and factories of Europe. Child labour formed part of the horrors of capitalism on that continent too. From the start, capitalism's foundations were brutal and corrupt. It remains so today: workers remain exploited; labour is still abused across the world; imperialism is rife; inequality is at its highest in history; millions of people starve because of the profit motives of food companies; billions of people are now redundant to the system and are mired in unemployment; and most people because of the profit motive in housing live in slums.

Likewise states too have only existed to enforce the rule of an elite minority over a majority. In this the state is always against the working class. In fact, states are central to minority class rule; and ruling classes have always used them to accumulate wealth. The state too can generate a section of the ruling class. In South Africa this is particularly stark as a black elite relies on the state and connections to it, for its wealth. Despite BEE, because of the deal struck in 1994, white capital still largely owns a majority of businesses; hence the state is central to an ANC elites' wealth. This is why factions within the ANC are fighting tooth and nail to gain direct control over it.

The reality is that the Zuma faction and the Ramaphosa/Gordhan faction offer nothing to the working class – both are vile and are fighting for their own paydays. Yet both too are symptoms of history and symptoms of class rule, capitalism and the state; including the forms these took in South Africa. If the working class wants to fight corruption; rather than relying on intra elite battles to do so; workers and the unemployed should fight the system that has led us into the situation we are in. It is the rotten system itself that needs to receive a knockout blow and only the working class can deliver that.

The working class fight

In fact, through so-called service delivery protests the working class has been fighting the impact of corruption and neoliberalism at a local level for years. Since the beginning of the year, there appears to once again be an upswing in such struggles. For example, Abahlali base Freedom Park in Soweto has been involved in a large-scale land occupation involving 5000 people.

On the labour front too, struggles have continued since the beginning of the year, specifically through new forms such as #OutsourcingMustFall and the Simunye Workers' Forum. Much hope, however, has been placed by some in the New Federation, which has officially been launched this month. Yet the majority of the unions involved in the New Federation have not been sites of recent struggles, with one or two exceptions. As such, it still appears that new forms, such as Simunye and #OutSourcingMustFall, are the forms that workers are taking their struggles forward through.

The foundations, in the form of community struggles and the self-organised struggles of workers, around which working class struggles could galvanise into an independent force are, therefore, there. The question through is how to bring these struggles together, how to ensure new forms can be maintained and how to ensure formations come to adopt revolutionary progressive politics; because without this the working class cannot become an independent force that can roll back the attacks it is under.

The challenge, therefore, is to charter a course that can contribute to bringing struggles together, to assist new forms to maintain themselves and strengthen and to also spread progressive revolutionary politics. How to do this, even as a small organisation, needs to be constantly debated and reflected on. Answers need to be developed, found and debated in struggle, there are no set formulas. Nonetheless, we are at a critical point in history. If working class struggles do not become an independent force for change, the future looks bleak and will be defined by intensifying violence, growing authoritarianism, rabid racism if not widespread war.

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