

THE RISE OF POPULIST AUTHORITARIANISMS IN ASIA:

Challenges for
Peoples' Movements

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Challenges for Peoples' Movements

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In many countries in Asia, new forms of authoritarianism are on the rise. In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte—a former mayor accused of organizing death squads and who promised to make the fish of Manila Bay grow fat from the bodies of drug dealers—won the presidential elections in 2016. In Thailand in 2014, a general who had favored cracking down on demonstrators led other military leaders in launching a coup against the democratically elected government. In India, a Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), won the elections in 2014, and its leader, Narendra Modi, a member of an extreme right-wing group who incited and condoned riots that killed hundreds of Muslims, became prime minister. In the same year, Prabowo Subianto, a former general under Suharto who also advocates strongman rule, nearly became Indonesia's president. In Cambodia, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) which has been ruling the country for more than three decades has demonstrated its unwillingness to cede or even share power. While the CPP rejects allegations of being authoritarian, it has escalated actions to get rid of its opponents, and has clamped down on any form of popular resistance and dissent that could pose significant challenges to its perpetuity. Hopes for genuine peoples' democracy in Cambodia appear extremely dim at this time.

THE RISE OF POPULIST AUTHORITARIANISM

Unlike in countries that only began to become more closely integrated into the global economy in the early 1990s, and where one-party rule or military dictatorships are still being challenged by nascent pro-democracy forces (such as Cambodia and Myanmar), populist authoritarian, if not altogether fascist, groups and individuals seem to be gaining—or regaining—ground in those countries which also happen to have been more closely connected to the world market and where dictatorships had previously given way to liberal-democratic rule.

Each of these populist authoritarian or fascist forces is of course unique, a product of the particular historical conditions of their own countries. But all seem, in different degrees, to be skeptical of, if not opposed to, liberal democracy: a system in which all citizens regardless of status or religion enjoy certain rights and liberties, such as the right to choose their leaders or representatives in parliament, to organize opposition parties, and so on. All, however, appear to be committed to perpetuating the capitalist economic system: a system in which not all citizens but only a few, namely the capitalists or the large property-owners—the owners of land, factories, machines, and all other things needed for production—enjoy the right to make the most important economic decisions.

How should we respond to the emergence—or re-emergence—of this political force? What can we do to advance our visions under the increasingly difficult conditions that they are putting in place? This paper seeks to catalyze and provoke discussions on these questions by first situating the rise of this political force in its broader historical context, and by making some initial observations about their social bases and projects, largely using the Philippines and India as illustrative examples to invite comparisons with other countries. It must be emphasized here that while many of the countries in South and Southeast Asia have ended up with authoritarian regimes and have had, as a central cause of this the articulation of neoliberal policies with local power structures, the trajectory of each country towards authoritarianism is unique.

THE SOCIAL ORIGINS OF CONTEMPORARY AUTHORITARIANISMS

The emergence of right-wing populist authoritarian, if not fascist, political forces in Asian countries more deeply penetrated by global capital in Asia has its roots in the unique and specific histories of their societies. But in general, the rise of these forces seems to have been a consequence of three inter-related crises: *the crisis of neoliberal capitalism*, *the crisis of liberal democracy*, and *the crisis of the “anti-systemic” or of “leftist,” radical-democratic movements*.

Over the last half century, ruling elites in various countries in Asia have failed to satisfy the needs and meet the aspirations of wider and wider sections of their country’s populations. This failure or inability appears to be rooted, in turn, on these ruling elites’ continued attempts to perpetuate or reproduce the capitalist economic system—a historically-specific way of organizing production that constantly runs into economic crises and systematically breeds poverty, inequality, and ecological degradation, and therefore also systematically prevents wide sections of the population from meeting their needs and fulfilling their dreams.

How ruling elites in the region have sought to reproduce this system in the face of the crises and social problems it engenders has varied historically and spatially, but the results have generally remained the same.

From the 1940s to the early 1970s, many of them opted for state-interventionism or what some have called “embedded liberalism”: in part pushed by ruling elites from the US and other more advanced capitalist countries, governments in the Philippines, India, Thailand, Indonesia, and other countries in Asia and other regions pursued different forms of state-directed “import-substituting industrialization” (ISI), imposed stricter regulations on capital, established relatively more “labor-friendly” policies, attempted to expand social services, and in some cases even pursued limited land and other forms of redistribution so as to achieve “development,” increase employment, promote mass consumption, and reduce poverty.

Because of all these attempts to pursue “development” or achieve “national industrialization” largely through Keynesian or ISI-oriented strategies, many home-grown industries began to develop, many economies grew faster, and larger sections of their populations benefited from what some have called the “Golden Age of Capitalism.” Despite this, however, the working classes, landless farmers, and other oppressed groups remained restive. They continued to demand more radical equity measures such as land reform, higher wages, more social spending—demands which many ruling elites could not entirely ignore for fear of driving people to support the increasingly powerful “anti-systemic” or leftist movements threatening their rule.

But as ruling elites tried to keep the economy growing while giving limited concessions to pacify the lower classes, global market competition also gradually intensified, profits started to shrink or failed to grow faster, trade deficits widened, debts ballooned, and ecological degradation intensified, preventing ruling classes in many countries from significantly reducing unemployment, increasing incomes, and improving people’s well-being. This enabled radical “anti-systemic” leftists to attract more adherents and pose a stronger threat to the ruling elites. In the Philippines, for example, attempts at import-substituting industrialization faltered as protected industries failed to take off and become more competitive, the gap between imports and exports grew, current account deficits soared, debts mounted, and the country began to head towards a debt crisis and a severe economic recession during the late 1970s. Militant organizations of workers, peasants, and other economically-marginalized groups also became stronger than ever.

Faced with this combined economic and political crisis, many ruling elites in various countries in Asia gradually started resorting to more repressive measures to carry out “structural adjustment” and to crack down on communist or other radical forces. They turned away from more liberal democratic rule and embraced dictatorships. But they also began abandoning “embedded neoliberalism” and started embracing varieties of “neoliberalism” instead: forced to pay off their debts and to attract more capital into their economies, they started pursuing “export-oriented development,” loosened restrictions on businesses, stepped up their attacks on labor and other working-class organizations, rolled back social spending, and backed off from land and other forms of redistribution. Some, like the Philippines and India,

also began pursuing a “labor export” policy, marketing and sending thousands of workers abroad.

All these measures carried out by state officials and dominant classes in response to crises soon began to weaken or undermine radical forces without destroying them altogether: Communists and other militant forces were put on the defensive not only because they were subjected to increased repression, but also because policies aimed at “labor flexibilization” and promoting “export labor” started to destroy unions and made it harder to organize workers and other oppressed groups. In the Philippines, for example, Ferdinand Marcos’ imposition of dictatorship and pursuit of neoliberalism led not only to the arrest of hundreds of militant workers and farmers. It would also pave the way for the gradual disintegration of working-class organization.

But still faced with discontent from below, and concerned that repression could only strengthen the radicals and further radicalize the lower classes, many ruling elites in Asia—backed by the United States—gradually shifted away from authoritarianism towards the restoration of liberal democracy beginning in the late 1980s. But they still did not abandon neoliberalism. On the contrary, even as they restored civil liberties and representative institutions, they also stepped up their pursuit of “export-oriented development,” further loosened restrictions on businesses, accelerated their attacks on labor and other working-class organizations, further rolled back social spending, and continued resisting land and other forms of redistribution. In the Philippines, for example, Marcos was deposed and more liberal elites took over, but they too continued to pursue much of the policies the dictator had put in place.

As a result of their efforts to open up their economies and to suppress working-class demands for redistribution, some sectors of the economy of many Asian countries did indeed start booming, and certain sections of the working-, middle-, and upper classes saw their incomes grow as export-oriented industries flourished, or as workers found employment abroad, and as capital from the US and other developed countries, as well as from emerging powers such as China, moved to many countries in Asia in search of new markets and cheaper labor. But many domestic businesses also closed or moved abroad, social spending shrank, land grabs and other forms of dispossession intensified, and environmental exploitation accelerated, thus further clipping elites’ ability to expand employment, increase the incomes, and improve the well-being of other sections of the population.

In recent years, some elites have been pushing for a revised or “softer” version of neoliberalism—for “inclusive growth” or for “globalization with a human face”—to at least mitigate some of neoliberalism’s

worst effects. But, faced with even more intense market competition in the context of continuing global economic stagnation, they have still failed to create more secure jobs, to boost people’s purchasing power, and enhance people’s well-being.

In the Philippines, for example, luxury condominiums, shopping malls, and “call center” offices have sprouted like mushrooms in Manila even as squalid urban-poor communities have also flourished in their shadow—just as in other Asian cities such as Bangkok, Bengaluru, Gurgaon, Mumbai and Jakarta. Between 1978 and 2013, the Philippines’ gross domestic product, or the amount of all goods and services produced in the country, nearly quadrupled but average real wages remained virtually flat throughout this period as inflation ate up limited increases in nominal wages. Last year alone, nearly one in four adults in the labor force was unemployed and over ten percent of households experienced severe or moderate hunger.

As a result, even as certain sections of the working and middle-classes have seen their incomes increase, growing numbers of people—including from sections of the ruling class itself—have continued to find it difficult, or even more difficult, to satisfy their needs and achieve their aspirations in recent years. Despite the downfall of dictatorships and the restoration of liberal democracy, many have not experienced significant improvements in their lives—and some even feel their lives were better under authoritarian rule.

Though there are no statistics to support the following observations, it is likely, based on the political opinions expressed by different groups of people in informal interviews and in the press, that more and more people now also feel even more insecure and anxious about the future: dispossessed peasants and unemployed workers worry about their ability to survive from day to day. Workers, a growing number of whom have become “contractual” workers with no security of tenure, worry about keeping their jobs. Their hopes are stoked by the apparent prosperity around them, but their fears also fanned by the continuing misery around them. Middle-class professionals aim higher and strive harder, but they too constantly worry about their ability to keep moving up—or at least not slide down the economic and social ladder. Even capitalists, exposed to more volatility and competition, worry about their ability to earn enough profits and keep their heads above water.

Frustrated by their inability to move up or at least stay in place, more and more people appear to have become more disillusioned with the existing order and disenchanted with their leaders or representatives. Threatened with the possibility of losing what they have been working so hard to secure, more and more people

seem to have become increasingly angry, ready or desperate to blame and lash out at others for their condition. And exposed to more instability as a result of the fluctuations and the volatility of the economy and as a result of the various social conflicts that have erupted in their wake, more and more people—especially, but not exclusively those from the middle classes—seem to have become even more desperate for order.

This anxiety, anger, and desperation could have resulted in something very different: more and more people could also have blamed the ruling elites for their condition, and supported or pushed for systemic alternatives to neoliberal capitalism. In other words, the crisis of neoliberal capitalism and liberal democracy could have led to the rise of more democratic, or even more radical democratic forces. But it did not, in large part because of another crisis: the crisis of the “anti-systemic” or of “leftist,” radical-democratic movements.

THE CRISIS OF THE LEFT TRANSLATES INTO OPPORTUNITY FOR POPULIST AUTHORITARIANISM

This crisis has been the result of at least two interacting factors: the onslaught of neoliberalism itself, but also the anti-systemic movements’ response to this onslaught.

Over the last twenty or so years, ruling elites’ attempts to entice capital and to implement so many anti-worker laws or directives had resulted in the gradual weakening, if not decimation, of labor and other working-class organizations. In the Philippines, for example, around 30% of all workers belonged to a union or a labor organization in the early 1980s; in 2014, as so many factories in the Philippines closed, and as the government adopted new laws that made it harder to organize, less than 10% of workers now belonged to unions. This has meant a decline in the financial resources needed for leftist or more militant organizations to thrive, and their consequent dependence on outside funding (from moderate or liberal foundations, NGOs, or parties) to sustain their operations and campaigns. It has also meant that there have been fewer militant activists or organizers who could do the difficult work of organizing in the factories or in the grassroots to educate people about the root causes of their difficulties or suffering.

But the response of movements struggling for systemic changes to the neoliberal offensive also arguably contributed to their own marginalization. In many countries over the last twenty to thirty years, many leftist parties moved to ally with sections of the ruling elites bent on pursuing neoliberalism in an attempt to overcome their growing weakness. In the Philippines, for example, the two largest leftist forces in the country forged alliances with two competing sections of the ruling class during the recent elections—both espousing different versions of neoliberalism—in the hope of enhancing their chances in the country’s elections. Though neither completely abandoned their platforms, they were still forced to tone down their criticism of their allies and they consequently failed to highlight just how different their programs and visions were from their elite allies. Other organizations and social movements continued to resist neoliberalism. But dependent on funding from elite benefactors (or from NGOs and foundations), and dismissive of the possible resurgence of authoritarian populism or fascism, many chose to focus more on “single issues” and to desist from offering more encompassing critiques of, and alternatives to, capitalist democracy or capitalist dictatorship.

In India, organized left and socialist formations were crucial forces in mobilizing resistance to the state of Emergency

(1975-1977) imposed by the Congress party led by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. With its persistent poverty, entrenched social discrimination and massive inequalities, India is fertile ground for grassroots organizing by the left. However, despite important strides in a few states, the left has not consolidated into a nation-wide anti-systemic force powerful enough to effectively confront the BJP-led communal, fascist regime.

In Kerala, the Communist Party of India (CPI) formed the first democratically elected communist government in India in 1957. Since then, despite intermittent periods in office, the left maintained a strong presence in the state and embedded its social reform programs in local structures and culture, and autonomous peoples' movements and struggles. This contributed significantly to the left's staying power in Kerala. Unfortunately, this is not the story elsewhere.

In West Bengal, the Left Front led by the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPM) won every election in West Bengal from 1977 till 2011, when it lost ground to a party that portrays itself as "new left" despite its long association with the BJP. In the early years, the Left Front in Bengal instituted crucial reforms that cemented its base among rural and urban masses, such as land redistribution, increased bargaining power for sharecroppers and workers, decentralized governance through panchayats (village councils) and local political devolution through grassroots participation. Although initially critical of the economic liberalization reforms adopted by the Congress regime in 1991, the Left Front leadership in Bengal adopted a pro-capitalist development strategy by the late 1990s in a bid to attract corporate investment (domestic and foreign). The central piece of this strategy was Special Economic Zones (SEZs) for manufacturing, agro-processing and chemical production, for which the state attempted to compulsorily acquire land from rural communities without adequate consultation and appropriate compensation. In and around the state capital Calcutta, slums started to be forcibly cleared and street vendors evicted, as shopping malls, Internet Technology (IT) Parks and new property developments cropped up to attract high-end businesses. The Left Front faced its worst political crises from 2006-2011 in Singur, Nandigram and Lalgarh, which resulted in devastating electoral defeats. The violence triggered by governmental plans for land acquisition and top-down, unequal industrial development created fertile ground for opportunistic alliances among the radical armed left, socialist and center-right groups to mobilize rural populations against the Left Front. These disasters came on top of growing dissatisfaction and anger among both urban and rural poor against exclusionary and rent seeking practices of local party structures that more or less controlled access to critical social services, employment, and even justice.

The West Bengal debacle proved extremely costly to the left not only in Bengal but across the country. Today, the left is fragmented, with a shrinking support base, unable to expand its ranks especially among the youth, and alienated from the very populations that most need the left's support. Grassroots struggles against projects, policies and laws that destroy livelihoods, displace and dispossess local populations, and discriminate against particular communities continue. Many of these however, remain single issue or limited time campaigns, and invoke cultures and traditions that can be easily manipulated by communal and fascist forces.

Consequently, the political and ideological field in many countries was all but left open—or abandoned—to another political force: the populist authoritarian or fascist forces. Unlike the anti-systemic forces, these forces had many more resources at their disposal, thanks to the support of other elite factions who were also relatively marginalized in, and who therefore had an interest in rearranging, the existing dispensation. And unlike the anti-systemic forces, they were much more uninhibited in attacking and denouncing the existing elites.

In the Philippines, while the dominant left parties were driven to hold back on their criticisms of, if not to defend, the candidates of the sections of the ruling elite they were allied with, Duterte and his supporters went all out in attacking them and in exposing the failures of the incumbent administration and the limits of the established elite opposition. Echoing people's inchoate anti-systemic and anti-elite sentiments, he railed against the "oligarchy" and portrayed himself as an "outsider" even as he surrounded himself with, and received money from, oligarchs. He voiced support for "radical" or "progressive" reforms even as he appealed to and instrumentalized conservative or traditional prejudices—against women, LGBTs, and the poor—that underpin existing hierarchies. He even professed to be a "socialist" while simultaneously committing himself to perpetuating the neoliberal capitalist and patriarchal order.

SCAPEGOATING:

A KEY TACTIC ON THE ROAD TO POWER

While portraying themselves as “anti-systemic,” the authoritarian chieftains pursued a path to power that actually deflected blame from the system of rule. A key element in the authoritarian leaders’ political strategy was scapegoating, that is, identifying one sector of society to focus the blame on for the social crises. Much like Hitler did with the Jews, Duterte has chosen criminals and drug users as the source of all evil, while Modi has scapegoated Muslims. As mayor of the southern Philippine city of Davao, Duterte formed a death squad that was responsible for killing almost 3,000 people. Modi began his political career as a member of the extremist Hindu organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and, as Chief Minister of Gujarat, encouraged the killing of Muslims in the communal riots in Gujarat in 2002. Scapegoating was a “winning” strategy for both. It built a movement around hate, while shifting the focus of people’s anger from the systemic roots of their problems in the neoliberal system.

As a result, not the radical democratic forces but the populist authoritarian forces were the ones who succeeded in tapping people’s anger at, or disillusionment with, the existing order. Backed most strongly by the disgruntled and insecure middle classes but also by large sections of the anxious rich and the desperate lower classes, they were the ones who succeeded in shaping people’s “common sense” and gaining power. The crisis of neoliberal capitalism and liberal democracy led not to the rise of radical democratic forces but to the resurgence and consolidation of populist authoritarian if not altogether fascist forces, and to the establishment of new forms of dictatorial or fascist regimes.

POPULIST AUTHORITARIANISM

IN POWER

After assuming power, these populist, authoritarian ruling-elite factions have sought to retain or build popular support by organizing or sanctioning violence against their chosen scapegoats, by attacking civil liberties or human rights, and by threatening to dismantle—or by actually dismantling—liberal-democratic institutions. They have continued to tighten the longstanding links binding capital, the bureaucracy, and the military. They have specifically targeted cultural and social institutions and spaces, such as social media and the universities. And, even as they have continued to lash out against the “oligarchy” or the “establishment” and to voice support for “radical” or “progressive” proposals, they have also continued to implement and defend the policies and measures put in place by some of the very oligarchs they claim to denounce. Whether in India, Thailand, Cambodia or the Philippines, they have so far continued to pursue “export-oriented development,” loosen restrictions on businesses, attack labor rights, minimize social spending, resist significant land and other forms of redistribution, and roll back electoral, judicial, and other political reforms.

In the Philippines, for example, Duterte has launched a bloody “war on drugs” that has killed up to 13,000 people, allowed the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos to be buried as a “hero,” repeatedly threatened to restore dictatorship, and is now crowding his cabinet with generals. Unlike all previous Presidents, he appointed known leftists, specifically “national democrats,” in his cabinet, and he has continued to give speeches attacking the “oligarchy.” But even though he has taken some apparently “progressive” measures, such as allowing an urban poor group to occupy some public-housing units or permitting his former Agrarian Reform Secretary to move forward in redistributing land owned by the Aquinos, most of these measures either do not affect the business interests of members of his own ruling-class faction—or affect only the interests of their rival ruling-class factions. So far, none of his policies stray very far from the neoliberal policies of the previous governments. None necessarily undermine the interests of the capitalist class as a class. Indeed, he has so far refused to fulfill his promise to prohibit “labor flexibilization”—a promise that practically all

factions of the ruling class oppose. And though he has put leftists in cabinet, he also put avowed neoliberals in more powerful positions.

Despite this, Duterte remains immensely popular and continues to enjoy the strong, even passionate, support of a large section of the Philippine population—especially from the rich and the middle classes. The traditional liberal elite families kicked out of power by Duterte have been scrambling to organize both lower and middle-classes against Duterte in part by trying to highlight their opposition to his ‘war on drugs’ and his support for the Marcoses. But they could not go very far in promising a better alternative because on some of the most crucial questions facing capital—such as on the question of labor flexibilization or on the deregulation of mining—they actually find themselves on the same page.

The same is more or less true in India: Here too, the BJP government speaks the language of populism while simultaneously granting concessions to big and favored corporate elites and hurting the interests of marginalized and low income groups. For example, it pursued and promoted a “demonetization” initiative as an attack on “black money,” which actually ended up destroying small-scale manufacturing, weakening rural and agrarian markets, and harming daily wage laborers, and the informal sector. In addition, the BJP promised “loan waivers” for those suffering from acute agrarian distress, but these promises have remained unfulfilled. The few debt relief measures that have been initiated carry onerous conditions that exclude those who most need the relief. At the same time, the BJP has mounted a concerted cultural offensive: it has taken over crucial educational institutions and research councils (e.g. Indian Council for Social Science Research, and Indian Council for Historical Research), the censor board, and film training institutes by filling them with appointees loyal to the right-wing RSS. In BJP-ruled states, “historical revisionism” is escalating: text books for school children are being rewritten in line with the exclusivist and hate agenda of the RSS. Premier universities that promote heterodox thinking are being targeted as bastions of the “anti-nationals.” The public discourse is being militarized and marked by increasing violence, including hate speech through trolls and murder. Muslims and dalits are being lynched as cow-killers and caste transgressors. In addition, a new “amoralism” in politics is being entrenched—one that shields the powerful from accountability, promotes corruption, and encourages impunity.

In spite of this, the BJP has continued its winning streak in state elections. Meanwhile, the political forces opposed to these populist, authoritarian forces remain extremely weak if not paralyzed altogether. Though they still enjoy support from certain sections of the middle and lower classes, particularly among liberal intellectuals, the other ruling-elite factions the populists displaced are also strongly opposed, if not reviled, by large sections of the middle and lower classes. They appear determined to return to power by riding on the dissatisfaction that is likely to grow as the populist forces fail to deliver. But unable or unwilling to champion a program very different from those they promoted when they were in power—the same ones that the populist forces are now promoting, they find themselves in a bind: on one hand, they oppose or at least do not actively support the populists’ authoritarian measures or tendencies. Many of them still believe that liberal democracy remains the best way to safeguard the interests of property. On the other hand, however, they too largely share the populists’ commitment to neoliberalism, and they too largely share their aversion or hostility towards radical, anti-systemic alternatives.

SYMBIOSIS OF AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

In other countries in Asia, particularly those that have only recently started becoming more closely integrated to the global economy, such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, authoritarian forces still hold power, and more liberal forces are only still struggling to organize and go on the offensive. The established authoritarian forces are, however, looking closely at the success of the populist authoritarians to see what lessons the latter may have to offer them. Thus, Cambodian strongman Hun Sen is said to be particularly interested in Duterte's war on drugs. But it is probably in Myanmar that the established authoritarians are most rapidly learning the lessons of populism. There the military has tied its political fortunes to a strategy of scapegoating the Muslim Rohingya in order to gain legitimacy and regain full control of the state, part of which is now under the tenuous control of the National League for Democracy (NLD). Instead of taking a principled stand and denouncing the hate campaign, the liberal NLD led by Aung Sang Suu Kyi has appeased the anti-Rohingya sentiments among the Buddhist majority and stood by the sidelines as the generals have conducted massive ethnic cleansing in Rakhine state.

Here we must pause and remind ourselves that that even as they end up with authoritarian regimes, and even as they share many of the same social crises spawned by the articulation of neoliberalism with local power structures, the trajectory of each country in the region is unique.

In Thailand, for instance, the civilian elites that came to power in 1992 on the back of a middle-class-led anti-dictatorship movement, saw their legitimacy frittered away by adopting an export-oriented industrialization strategy that deepened the crisis in the countryside and increased inequality. When these elites cooperated with the International Monetary Fund to impose a crushing stabilization program in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, the lower classes became susceptible to the populist appeal of a figure with authoritarian leanings, Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin solidified his base by undertaking programs such as the institution of universal health care. The traditional elites, led by the military and the monarchy, feared that Thaksin had created a permanent electoral majority. With the lower classes, and especially the rural masses, feeling they had gained a voice in Thaksin, the urban middle classes began to worry that the rise of the poor was going to be at their expense. This led to the formation of the elite-middle class alliance that ousted Thaksin from power in 2006 and

his sister Yingluck in 2014 by provoking military coups. The current military regime is enjoying unprecedented stability despite the fact that it is a dictatorship, and the reason for this is that it is supported by the middle class.

In Cambodia, the main opposition party – the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) – was dissolved by the Supreme Court in late 2017, one month after the CNRP President Kem Sokha was arrested, jailed, and charged with treason for conspiring with the United States to launch a coup against the ruling regime. The dissolution of the CNRP removed from office its 55 elected members in the National Assembly and more than 400 elected commune (sub-district) chiefs. The commune chiefs were newly elected in June 2017 in local elections that are held one year prior to the national election, expected to be held in mid-2018. The 2017 commune council election results were a historical victory for the CNRP (which had never won so many votes at the sub-national level even if the votes were still fewer than those won by the CPP), and a slap on the CPP. But this exercise of local democratic agency was hardly given a chance. Since the dissolution of the CNRP, many party leaders have fled the country to avoid legal charges, harassment, intimidation, and threats to their lives. Those leaders who have stayed in the country live in fear and maintain low profiles.

A week after the CNRP's dissolution, the National Electoral Committee (NEC) announced that the CNRP's 55 seats in the National Assembly would be distributed among five other parties. Two of these parties refused to take any seats. FUNCINPEC (whose president is Prince Norodom Ranariddh) gets 41 seats, the Cambodian Nationality Party gets two seats, and the Khmer Economic Development Party gets one seat. It is unknown how this vote distribution was decided upon, and whether Cambodian voters had any say in their disenfranchisement. Those who dare challenge the regime's power (regardless of whether they are journalists, peasants, workers, civil society organizations, or elected officials) risk being associated with a "color revolution" or "foreign conspiracy," intended to create social/national instability, and charged with incitement or worse. Prime Minister Hun Sen has declared in one of his many speeches that he will stand as the Prime Ministerial candidate till he is 90-years old and if political power is shifted, it will be for the children of the CPP.

For many middle and upper class Cambodians (including academics), challenging the current regime would result

in losing their economic advantages and opportunities. Those already at the losing end seem hard put to find ways to transform their discouragement into an effective force to change the system.

CHALLENGES FOR THE ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN MOVEMENTS

There are many roads to authoritarianism, but there is only one force that seems capable of leading the fight against authoritarian forces, populist or otherwise, in Asia and beyond: not the liberal forces championing neoliberal capitalism, but those of us who champion systemic alternatives to the present order, those of us who count ourselves as part of the left or anti-systemic movements.

But in order for us to lead and successfully wage this fight, we also first need to overcome our own crisis—the crisis of the left or anti-systemic movements. To do this, we need to rebuild our own ranks. We need to find new ways of fighting back against the liberal and the authoritarian forces' efforts to break up unions and other working-class organizations, and we need to try new ways of drawing un-organized or dis-organized workers and other oppressed group into our campaigns and movements. We need to appeal to all those whom our organizations have neglected or marginalized, particularly women, LGBTs, indigenous peoples, daily wage and informal sector workers, distress migrants, refugees, and so on. We need to build ties and learn to work with autonomous social/peoples' movements and varied social associations.

Only then can we begin to mobilize the resources we need to revive our organizations and carry out our campaigns. And only then can we mobilize more activists or organizers who can once again embark on the difficult but indispensable work of organizing in workplaces and communities, and countering the liberal and authoritarian forces bent on mis-educating people and appealing to their traditional beliefs and prejudices to perpetuate the existing order.

But more than this, we also need to craft a different response to the neoliberal and authoritarian offensive. We need to find ways of overcoming our weaknesses without reinforcing the liberal forces who may be

opposed to the authoritarian forces' strategy but not to their overall goal of defending and perpetuating capitalism. That means we need to spurn any strategic alliances with them and we must defend and assert our autonomy from them at all times—even or especially when we march or strike together against the authoritarian forces. We must avoid toning down our messages and instead strive to highlight how radically different our programs and our visions are from theirs. We need to go beyond our focus on "single issues" and instead offer more encompassing critiques of—and alternatives to—capitalism and liberal democracy. We need to weave together otherwise disparate and isolated struggles into a coherent, viable, and united opposition. And we need to reaffirm our opposition not just to class but also gender, racial and other hierarchies even within our movements, and we need to proclaim our commitment to universal sisterhood and internationalism.

Only then can we counter the liberals' and the authoritarian forces' monopoly of the political and ideological field, and only then can we have a better chance of tapping people's growing anger at the existing order—and directing it towards the radically democratic alternatives we envision.

In order to succeed here, however, we need to capture people's imagination—something we can do by intensifying our efforts to reinvent or renew our movements. This does not mean repudiating everything that the left has been doing or saying. Rather, it requires carefully and painstakingly sifting through its legacies and experiences, its successes and its defeats, so as to replace all that is negative and disempowering while holding on to and building on all that remains uplifting and liberating.