

# Agrarian South Network Research Bulletin

April — May 2021

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**EDITORIAL*****Reclaiming the Nation***

In the seminal edited volume from which this issue borrows its thematic title, Moyo and Yeros (2011) turned to “the task of bringing the national question back to life as a specifically *economic* question.” Through a focus on the internal dynamics of states, they summed up the imperative of the national question as a movement towards reclaiming natural resources, namely land, energy and mineral deposits, and restructuring of the apparatus of the state in the name of the oppressed. They also rightly highlighted the fact that

*beyond the economic dimension of the national question, there are states and peoples still struggling to maintain their territorial integrity or obtain political independence, long after the formal end of empire. These struggles are not only inseparable from the others, they are of a higher global priority, requiring unalloyed, principled solidarity. They are the ‘fractured’ states – not exactly ‘failed’, as the pundits would have it – those that succumb to the disintegrating forces of peripheral capitalism and external interference (Sudan), as well as the unresolved cases of colonised/occupied peoples (Palestine), who have now been joined by the newly invaded and re-colonised, for whom imperialist strategy has found no other way, once again, but to extinguish their sovereignty altogether (Reclaiming the Nation, 2011: ix).*

This issue of the Research Bulletin directs its focus to various expressions of these questions in the context of ongoing political strife in Palestine, Ethiopia, and

Colombia. The worsening of armed conflicts and the military response of the States in these countries reveal the persistence of an international permanent state of war, where the only victims are the working people of the South. A double face of the local elites, where all diplomacy, peace and coexistence agreements are broken. And at the centre of the scene, the historic struggle for access to land and for a dignified life for the oppressed, all in the context of the anguishing situation of Covid-19 pandemic. On the Palestinian Question, the contributors examine recent events as an expression of a reconstituting national consciousness, and point us to the material aspects of Palestinian national liberation by highlighting the agrarian basis of the resistance there. In Ethiopia, a reactionary ethno-nationalism which does not answer the question of how inequalities are reproduced has taken root, and precipitated a crisis whose ongoing violent expression conceals a struggle for sovereignty amidst imperialist pushback. Our attention drawn, for instance, to the significance of the present crisis ‘arising precisely at the historical moment when Ethiopia is on the verge of achieving food sovereignty in wheat production.’ In Colombia, the ongoing mass mobilization and general strike has shifted the popular

base of resistance and forged solidarity between the rural and indigenous historical protagonists of liberation and urban proletariats ‘in the struggle for land, the struggle for territory, for the constitution of peasant reserve areas, and for peace agreements.’ The present struggles, as the powerful contributions in this issue remind us, from Colombia to Ethiopia, Palestine to

the rest of the decolonizing world, restate the centrality of national sovereignty as the basis for liberation.

As always, we welcome enquiries and responses, which may be submitted to the editors at:

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## AN INTERVIEW BY EGYPTIAN COMMUNIST PARTY WITH MAX AJL<sup>1</sup> ON “PALESTINE’S MOUNTING RESISTANCE”

### *1. What do you think of the revolutionary movement that is taking place now in Palestine?*

The current movement has broadened out from several long-standing flashpoints in the struggle between Israeli settler-colonialism and the Palestinian people. First, the ongoing colonization of Palestinian homes in Sheikh Jarrah through evictions of Palestinian families, and then the Israeli blockade of one of the entrances to the Old City. Then, there were what the Palestinian writer Ahmed Abu Artema calls “a series of provocations,” including attacking people on May 7 during the prayers at Al-Aqsa. We should neither undermine nor overstate the importance of Al-Aqsa. This was an attack on a critical Palestinian-Muslim holy site. Palestinian national-revolutionary mobilization, from the 1920s to the present, has very often had a religious or millenarian edge, especially, of course, Muslim. Yet at the same time, we should not overstate: the attacks on Al-Aqsa are not merely understood as an affront to Muslims. They are broader. They reflect and are understood as insulting a Palestinian holy site, part-and-parcel of a set of attacks and

humiliations at a variety of holy sites.<sup>ii</sup> They mean to enforce fear, repression, terror, and obeisance amongst the Palestinian people – which for the overwhelming majority of their history, and until today, included a kaleidoscope of religions and sects. However, Israeli repression, instead of drowning mobilization, has watered it. As the Israelis tried to enforce their theft of the homes in Sheikh Jarrah, the mobilization broadened, and kept broadening.

We have seen a beautiful and dazzling synergy, at first amongst the Palestinian “sectors” living within historical Palestine, or what is more commonly called Israel and the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and broadening out to Palestinians and non-Palestinians living in Jordan, Lebanon, and elsewhere including Europe and the US.

To discuss this potentially revolutionary spiral, we have to clarify the antecedents and preconditions enabling this upwards trajectory of resistance. The first is Palestinian armed resistance capacity. It is important to not be distracted by scarecrow words like “indiscriminate terror” or “useless” rockets,

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<sup>1</sup> Max Ajl is at Wageningen University.

and to make the basic point that resistance to (colonial) oppression is almost a law of biology and an internationally-recognized right. The UN General Assembly has affirmed “the legitimacy of the peoples’ struggle for liberation from colonial and foreign domination and alien subjugation by all available means, including armed struggle,” and went further and called on “all States” to give “all peoples subject to colonial and foreign domination and alien subjugation...moral, material and other forms of assistance.”<sup>iii</sup> This is important, and was echoed elsewhere at the time: in the call for a New International Economic Order,<sup>iv</sup> for example. It was absolutely understood and could be defended that anti-colonial struggle had the right to tactical diversity. I will have more to say on this, but keep in mind it is currently illegal in the United States to offer any material support to Palestinian nationalist parties on the “terror lists.” Second, the element of force – historically, an element of anti-colonial struggle, from Algeria to Zimbabwe to Tunisia to South Africa – is incubated through political and social struggle. In the words of the Palestinian writer Moe Jamil, “it is not that the contents of this arsenal and its use are subject to a Palestinian consensus, but when you build an armed resistance system, you cannot control all of its dynamics, the trajectories of constructing it, and its elements, especially in

its foundational moments,” keeping in mind this infrastructure “ended the possibility of a ground invasion of Gaza,” and is the “result of an ascending path, baptized with suffering and unimaginable sacrifices.”

Amidst the Israeli escalation and counter-insurgency in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip was able to enter the fray. Remember that the 1<sup>st</sup> intifada started in the Gaza Strip, and this tiny piece of land contains the poorest portion of the Palestinian people, the most land deprived, indeed by now the most energy-deprived and the most aid dependent. The Strip also has been the home base for what has in many ways been the main repository of Palestinian nationalism over the last 15 years, Hamas, and its people have paid the price of siege and penury for their decision to defend national aspirations. And now the Gaza Strip is again paying an enormous price for its decision to reject the Israeli-imposed political and geographical fragmentation of the Palestinian cause, and the Israeli/Western attempt to monopolize violence. The rockets brought the Gaza Strip into the Palestinian “spiral,” followed very shortly by widespread protests in Lydd and elsewhere in the Palestinian “1948” territories, or the legal state of Israel, which is over 20 percent Palestinian.

This move is important on multiple fronts. The Israelis have long attempted to alchemize

the Palestinians living in Israel into “Israeli Arabs,” to sever them from the Palestinian cause and thereby suppress Palestinian national consciousness. In general, this project has had some fleeting success in legally and violently suppressing expressions of national and anti-colonial politics within this sector. What is historic in the current moment is that we have seen a sort of ping-pong effect, as the intifada in Sheikh Jarrah led to resistance in the Gaza Strip, which has led to resistance amongst the Israeli Palestinian sector, including the 18 May general strike.

The geographical spread to ‘48 Palestine is important because that sector is a keystone: although brutalized and economically repressed, it is, relatively speaking, wealthier and cannot easily be repressed in precisely the same way that Israel represses Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Furthermore, those Palestinian are woven into critical economic infrastructure, and accordingly have enormous disruptive capacity, especially by withdrawing their labor. Like most settler-capitalist entities, Israel is tremendously powerful in its capacity to inflict violence, but far more vulnerable when it comes to resisting or enduring violence, infrastructural destruction, civil resistance, or labor unrest. Settler-capitalism requires a more or less internally stable socio-political

landscape for its citizens to work, go to school, move around, labor at arms factories and Intel. In that way, the presence of the “Israeli”-Palestinian sector is extremely important, because it can directly disrupt that activity through mass labor action.

A fourth “sector” is the refugee population, above all in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, but also further abroad. Palestinians in Jordan and Jordanians themselves crossed over the border fence separating Jordan from the Jordan Valley and entered historic Palestine. There were attempts at crossing from Lebanon.

A fifth “sector,” extremely important, is the “diaspora” within Europe and North America. This part of the Palestinian national movement, at least its youth sector, is more organized than it has been for some time and has been at the heart and soul of the historic demonstrations in the US –1000-20,000, some are saying up to 50,000, in the major cities, like New York, the direct child of organizing by exiled Palestinian-led formations.<sup>v</sup> All of this is momentous, in size, speed, the dynamism of the interactions, shared movement between all parts of the Palestinian population, and an erasure of the discourse of defeat through popular mobilization. Furthermore, so far, the Israeli repression and counter-insurgency, which aims to re-instill a sense of defeat

amongst the Palestinian population, to re-impose a sense of helplessness, especially in the Gaza Strip, is failing. So long as that failure continues, what we are seeing is a breakdown of the Israeli-imposed separation of the Palestinian people into politically, economically, and geographically isolated fragments, and in that unity is, of course, the greatest strength.

## ***2. What is your opinion of the position of the western left on the Palestinian issue?***

In terms of the United States, the Western left's support base for Palestine, much like the diaspora Palestinian national movement itself, was essentially dismantled<sup>vi</sup> after the Oslo surrender accords imposed on Palestine in 1993. The major step towards "recuperation" of US left support for Palestine came with the 2<sup>nd</sup> intifada. I want to say, we have to be careful with terminology. This upsurge was primarily driven by Palestinian and more broadly Arab-American radical students alongside elements of the global justice movement and more traditional Marxist parties. And it is complicated to assimilate the Palestinian exile sector to the Western left. In fact, if organized as such, Palestinian exiles are a segment of the Palestinian national movement. With that caveat, this sector was a major element of support for the broader upsurge, shifting the

consciousness of broad sectors of the western left in favor of Palestine and away from the illusions of the "peace camp."

Since then, we have seen a complex process, covered with lights and shadows. First, much of the US left, although anti-Zionist ideologically, is politically constrained either by NGO-led<sup>vii</sup> counter-insurgency operations, or by enfoldment into the Democratic Party.

A second constraint: the Palestinian political parties, including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Islamic Jihad, and Hamas, are essentially illegalized, and listed as "Foreign Terrorist Organizations."<sup>viii</sup> Although it is perfectly legal to read their literature, part of the Israeli propaganda campaigns have been to aggressively demonize the anti-Zionist parties, on the one hand. Because of the liberal orientation of large portions of the pro-Palestinian movement and the fact that NGOs and publications funded by the Rockefeller Brothers, even the Jewish Communal Fund, set the agenda, there is a hesitance to even acknowledge the radical nationalist elements. As a result, there is very little knowledge of, and basically 0 interaction between, the Palestinian anti-colonial national movement and the western left, especially in the United States.

In Europe, the dynamic is more complicated, with a greater history of interaction between the European left and the Palestinian left, on the one hand, and on the other, currently, more advanced forms of illegalization of support for the Palestinian struggle – France and the anti-Semitic German regime, for example, are barring pro-Palestinian protests. Of course, Europe is internally varied as well: countries colonized or on the European periphery like Ireland or Greece have long and amazing histories of support for Palestine, and even in Germany, a “new wave” of exiles from Palestine are driving the current mobilization.

A third constraint: NGO-ification has created a substantial layer of voices which are simultaneously pro-Palestinian and pro-imperialist, or at least which disdain anti-imperialist and pan-Arab politics. These elements, whatever their national origins, bolster the sentiments of the western left towards rejection of the national question. Thus, the western left is anti-Zionist on human rights or so-called “de-colonial” grounds while advocating for the overthrow of the regional sovereign states and popular movements which support Palestine, such as Iran and Syria. This contradiction is superable. But in the words of James Baldwin, “Not everything that

is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

***3. Is there complicity from the international community? What are its causes? What do you think of the weak position of the United Nations?***

Israel is a major element of a world-wide process of polarized accumulation, and its ruling class, organically woven into western imperialism, has always been willing to offer specialized services in counter-insurgency, social control, and colonial violence to the western states: first England, then France, then the United States. It received support as part of the ruling-class project of the British Empire to have a rear base near the Suez Canal, to divide the Arab world, and for the broader European ruling class desire to “export” and rid itself of the “internal” contradiction of poor and often communist Eastern European Jews. Later, and more recently, “the Israeli factor alone... [has] engrain[ed] a state of defeat amongst the Arab peoples,” in the words of Ali Kadri. It has shattered Arab Marxist movements root and stem: assassinating Mehdi Ben Barka, assisting the attempted dismantling of the Algerian Revolution, and destroying Palestinian revolutionaries in Jordan and Lebanon.

Israel has also used its expertise acquired through its war against its internal

“Third World” to support sub-fascist, US allied capitalist, and often antisemitic or colonial regimes in Central America, the southern cone of Latin America, South Africa, and elsewhere. More recently, Israel is central to world repression and counter-insurgency. It is a major arms supplier to Modi’s India, Bolsonaro’s Brazil, and to Africa more broadly. Furthermore, Israel is a central agent in undermining Arab and Iranian sovereignty and state strength. As part of the US proxy war against Syria, aimed at the elimination of Arab state structures outside of its security envelope, Israel has illegally bombed Syria hundreds of times. It has also carried out numerous attacks against Iran. Furthermore, Israel diverts Arab productive resources into defensive militarization, and has worked against Arab nationalist aspirations to put Arab oil resources to the use of the Arab working classes. In these ways, Israel has been a keystone of the entire petro-dollar system of US currency seigniorage, a major element of western accumulation.

Israel is also tightly laced into Western accumulation circuits. Consider that Israel is a major base for certain sectors of military-security technology, including drones, optics, and crowd-control measures, all increasing their “market share” as world-wide technological counter-insurgency increases in

sophistication, depth, and breadth. Israel is also the largest arms exporter as a percentage of its GDP. Much of the Israeli industrial plant is also partially owned by US capitalists. Israel is also woven into other elements of Western accumulation, including computers – Intel has a major plant there – and many venture capitalist endeavors, including that favorite of the colonial vegan movement, lab meat. Israel is also a major developer of surveillance technology.

It is only natural that the complicity of the “international community” reflects the interests of its ruling class. The United Nations, similarly, is structurally biased in favor of the western ruling classes, which retain veto power within the Security Council and prevent it from condemning Israel.

***4. There are opinions from the West until now that what is happening is a struggle between two states and not systematic campaigns of ethnic cleansing against a people resisting the occupation, or a war against the Jews and Semites. What do you think of these allegations?***

First, Palestinians do not have a state, and the Israelis have a state, based on colonially-occupied land, and with no declared borders. There is a “conflict” between a colonial project

and the people resisting that colonial project. This is abundantly documented and testified to, not least in the words of the founders of Israeli themselves. Take, for example, David Ben Gurion: “If I were an Arab leader, I would never sign an agreement with Israel. It is normal; we have taken their country.” Even earlier, in 1927, Haim Arlosoroff, a Zionist intellectual, described the Israeli project as “a people engaged in settlement (‘am mityashev) with a European standard of needs,” and stated, “the territory of the state of South Africa, and the labor question there, is almost the only instance with sufficient similarity in objective conditions and problems to allow us to compare.” By the Zionists’ own admissions, they were engaged in a project akin to other European settler-colonial projects in Africa and Asia.

As for the religious dimension of the conflict, the Zionist state is Jewish, but its Jewishness is not the reason for Arab and Palestinian resistance. Historically, Palestine was an ecumenical society, a mosaic of religions, including Palestinian Jews. Furthermore, the Israeli project has generally made Jewish life in the Arab region less rather than more safe. Certainly, the Zionist project is based on a Jewish population, but its essence is one of colonial land theft. Insofar as Palestinians or Arabs name their antagonist as

Jews, this is also normal: they are identifying the specific enemy. This is not a “war against the Jews,” as Jews have historically been and will always be varied politically.

### ***5. Are the Democrats in their position more advanced than the Republicans on the Palestinian issue?***

The Democrats’ and Republicans’ constituencies differ historically, and in the present moment. As of now, the Democrats have a more working-class base, a stronger base amongst liberals and even leftists, a stronger base in the white and other downwardly-mobile petty bourgeoisie sectors, and in the Black community. In all of those places, there is more support for Palestine than there is within the Republican voting base, which is increasingly filled with hard-right evangelicals. For that reason, there are small shifts in the left-wing of the Democratic Party on Palestine and Israel. To be clear, these shifts are actually still catching up with some of the Democratic left-wing positions before the fall of the USSR. Even Bernie Sanders<sup>ix</sup> in 1988 threatened an arms embargo on Israel. Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition<sup>x</sup> was also quite advanced on Palestine, and was built on actually-existing anti-imperialist politics, especially those supporting the revolutionary struggles in El Salvador and Nicaragua.

Now, it is true that some of the so-called “democratic socialist” congress-people like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are criticizing Israel and even using the word “apartheid,” and there is legislation in Congress calling for conditioning aid to Israel. Its sponsors are Democrats. So there are differences between the parties. At the same time, both parties are pro-Israel and imperialist parties. Neither party has a single member endorsing the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement. So the differences are small.

#### ***6. What about the agrarian question in Palestine?***

One of the major elements of the agrarian question, suppressed by Eurocentric social science, has been the national question, and specifically the “agrarian question of liberation.”<sup>xi</sup> Essentially, this refers to who controls the major productive force of any country, the major domestic source of possible accumulation, and the means for having a decent society: the land. This question makes clear that the basic agrarian question of colonized nations, that “question” which must be answered a certain way in order to be able to pose other questions, is shattering racist colonial monopoly control over the land. This does not sidestep other agrarian questions: the gendered breakdown of rural labor and land ownership, or the direction of surplus, whether

for industrialization or feeding, but makes it clear that in situations of clear colonial contradiction, as in Zimbabwe or Algeria, the anterior or foundational agrarian question is national liberation.

Such a lens helps us to more clearly understand central elements of Palestinian anti-colonial discourse: for example, that communiques used to be signed off with the slogan, “Until liberation and return,” meaning liberation of the land from the colonial power and return of the refugees to the land. It usefully reminds us, as Riyad Mousa,<sup>xii</sup> the Palestinian economist, has pointed out, that on the eve of the great colonial conquest and act of primitive accumulation, the Nakba, despite massive Palestinian semi-proletarianization most Palestinian rural people still held some land, a memory which was central in the transformation “from peasants to revolutionaries,”<sup>xiii</sup> in the words of Rosemary Sayigh. And this helps us understand the centrality of pastoral imaginary in Palestinian resistance poetry: to hold onto the land, could, in Amilcar Cabral’s terms, be part of returning to the source,<sup>xiv</sup> the patterns of life before the catastrophe of 1948. I think the lens of the agrarian question is one of the aspects of the theory of settler-colonialism which helps us understand the material aspects of Palestinian national liberation, and how it differs from the

apartheid discourse which is very often focused on the restitution of liberal rights and erasure of juridical difference rather than getting the land back into the hands of its owners (Indeed, the reverse-coin of this focus is how much land, and proximity to the Nakba, the great land theft, actually determines patterns of wealth amongst the Israeli Jewish population).

**7. In your paper "Does the Arab region have an agrarian question?" You wrote: "Palestine is the quintessential land struggle, yet its specifically national dimension has suffered the inattention of critical agrarian studies." Can you explain the manifestations and causes of this in attention?**

Most European social science denies the salience of the agrarian question of nation, in essence by simply ignoring it. Thus, for example, the de facto academic journal of the Trotskyite publishing house *Verso*, *Historical Materialism*, basically ignored or denigrated the Zimbabwean agrarian reform, the largest white-Black transfer of wealth in the post-Cold War era.

Now, if you do not think national liberation struggles are important, you are unlikely to consider it very important to make legible those struggles which do not use idioms that are entirely legible or consonant with those

of critical agrarian studies, but which are very much related to the land. Thus, too much leftist social science, dominated by Eurocentric preconceptions, has been unable to even conceive of Palestine as a national liberation struggle, woven into a broader Arab national-agrarian question.

Furthermore, in the Palestinian case, in the broadest sense the Palestinian struggle has been epistemologically and legally criminalized. Palestinian national liberation political parties are rendered as "terrorists," and their grievances considered "Islamist." Furthermore, there is a strong presence of Zionists, those who support Israeli land theft, across the US academy, including in critical agrarian studies. Even those who are not Zionists could easily be bullied by them, and this has probably made it more difficult for even sympathetic agrarian studies scholars to focus on the Palestinian struggle. In part but not only for this reason, much Palestinian scholarship has had to adopt and adapt the struggle to legal terrain: the quest for rights, such as return (to a national territory) or the end of military occupation, or full civic equality. It requires some work to see the agrarian dimensions underlying this language of rights. In that way, the process of colonial counter-insurgency has made it ever-more-difficult for the Palestinian struggle to be

perceived as precisely what it is: a national liberation struggle against settler-colonialism.

On the other hand, much western discourse, even of settler-colonialism, frequently only obliquely notes that the fundamental element of settler-colonialism is not what Patrick Wolfe bizarrely called the “logic of elimination” but in fact the theft of

land. If you want to fight settler-colonialism, you need to reverse that process: in the current phrase of the Indigenous struggles of the American continent, Land Back. So there has been a kind of “perfect storm” wherein the agrarian-national dimensions of the Palestinian struggle have often been suppressed or erased in the Western academy.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://electronicintifada.net/content/time-its-different/33006>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/may/17/palestinians-sheikh-jarrah-jerusalem-city-identity>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/C867EE1DBF29A6E5852568C6006B2F0C>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.un-documents.net/s6r3201.htm>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/wolpalestine/?hl=en>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/01/criminalizing-resistance>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://uscpr.org/>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://electronicintifada.net/content/bernie-sanders-and-question-palestine/15581>

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24458800?seq=1>

<sup>xi</sup> [https://econpapers.repec.org/article/saeagspub/v\\_3a2\\_3ay\\_3a2013\\_3ai\\_3a1\\_3ap\\_3a93-119.htm](https://econpapers.repec.org/article/saeagspub/v_3a2_3ay_3a2013_3ai_3a1_3ap_3a93-119.htm)

<sup>xii</sup> [https://books.google.tn/books/about/The\\_Dispossession\\_of\\_the\\_Peasantry.html?id=1B4ZtwAACAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.tn/books/about/The_Dispossession_of_the_Peasantry.html?id=1B4ZtwAACAAJ&redir_esc=y)

<sup>xiii</sup> [https://books.google.tn/books?id=ZfovAQAAIAAJ&q=rosemary+sayigh&dq=rosemary+sayigh&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjFgbqv\\_NfwAhUM\\_KQKHYG1CZkQ6AEwAXoECAsQAg](https://books.google.tn/books?id=ZfovAQAAIAAJ&q=rosemary+sayigh&dq=rosemary+sayigh&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjFgbqv_NfwAhUM_KQKHYG1CZkQ6AEwAXoECAsQAg)

<sup>xiv</sup> [http://abahlali.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/amilcar\\_cabral\\_return\\_to\\_the\\_source-ilovepdf-compressed.pdf](http://abahlali.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/amilcar_cabral_return_to_the_source-ilovepdf-compressed.pdf)

## CONTINUED ISRAELI OCCUPATION OF PALESTINE AND RECENT GAZA OFFENSIVE

Abdul Rahman<sup>1</sup>

A ceasefire has been agreed upon between Israel and Hamas which may end latest round of Israeli aggression against Palestinians in Gaza. However, this ceasefire cannot be a solution to the problem of Palestine. There can never be any real peace between an occupied people and the occupier.

Before the ceasefire was announced, in 11 days of Israeli bombings in Gaza, more than 230 Palestinians including 65 children lost their lives; over 1,900 of them were injured and around 60,000 became displaced.<sup>i</sup> The indiscriminate bombings on a densely populated enclave which is one fourth in size of Delhi, destroyed civilian infrastructure including hospitals, schools, media organisations, water supply stations, power station and disrupted crucial supplies at a time when Palestinians, like most of the world are struggling against the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This inhuman and barbaric attack on Palestinians was not limited to Gaza. Palestinians in other occupied territories (West Bank and Eastern Jerusalem) as well as inside Israel too, face increased violence during this period.

Israel claimed it was bombing Gaza in self defence against a “terrorist” attack from Hamas and Islamic Jihad. This is a simplification and manipulation of the truth. Israel should not be allowed to get away with its repeated violations of basic human rights of Palestinians and occupation by hiding behind untruths. The failure of the international community, including India, to force Israel to end its occupation and adhere to basic human rights and other international laws is the greatest challenge to peace in today’s world.

### **Israel’s bombings in Gaza: blaming the victim**

Israeli air strikes have, once again, targeted civilian residential areas and infrastructure, razing homes and hospitals alike and killing innocent civilians. It has also attacked buildings housing international media organisations and COVID-19 testing laboratories.<sup>ii</sup> The already fragile civilian infrastructure in Gaza has suffered yet another blow. At least 50 school buildings were hit in the airstrikes, impacting close to 42,000 Palestinian children according to Save the Children. The airstrikes have partly or fully

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<sup>1</sup> Abdul Rahman works with Peoples Dispatch, based in India.

destroyed at least 18 hospitals, clinics and another health facilities.

All this was done in the name of “fighting terrorism” and Israel’s “right to self-defence.” Anyone, who has followed the trajectory of Israel-Palestine conflict knows that Israeli claims are simply not true; rather it is a classic instance of “blame the victims,” in this case Palestinians under occupation since decades ago.

To state the fact, Hamas, a group which controls Gaza, fired rockets inside Israel. Most of those primitive rockets were intercepted by Israel’s sophisticated missile defence system called Iron Dome and did negligible if any harm. In 11 days, Hamas’ rockets killed 12 people inside Israel and forced shut its international airport at Tel Aviv. How can we compare it with Israel’s indiscriminate bombings of civilians inside besieged Gaza?

Gaza has a population of over 2 million. Most of its population, around 75%, are refugees of 1948. It is surrounded from three sides by Israel and its forces control the international border with Egypt. Israel has imposed strict control over the movement of population and goods from the territory. After 2006, following the victory of Hamas in Palestinian elections, Israel has not only refused to accept the results of the elections but has also strengthened its control by

implementing strict sea, air and land blockade converting it into what activists and human rights groups have called, “world’s largest open-air prison.” Apart from strictly controlling the movement of goods and people from the enclave to Israel or to other Palestinian territories, Israel often targets Gazans venturing in the sea for their livelihood or trying to “smuggle” essentials from Rafah border on the Egyptian side. In the last 16 years, it has carried out air and artillery strikes on a regular basis inside the territory, killing hundreds of Palestinians. All this has caused massive deterioration in Gazans’ living standard, causing increase in poverty and unemployment.<sup>iii</sup>

Before the current round of air strikes, Israel had carried out major attacks on the enclave in 2008<sup>iv</sup> and in 2014,<sup>v</sup> killing thousands of Palestinians. In 2018, its forces guarding the border fired on protesters on the Gaza side who were demanding their right to return to their homes captured by Israel in 1948, and killed hundreds of them.<sup>vi</sup>

Israel justified each of its air strikes and killings of innocent civilians, claiming them to be in “self-defence” against Hamas’ “terrorism.” The world media carries the news about “Israel-Palestine conflict” when it is more than clear that its not an equal fight. Unlike Israel, Palestinians do not have a

standing army, a war machine. They don't have an independent government which calls for war. Israel is an occupier and Palestinians are fighting against their occupation and are persecuted because of that. The international media's refusal to see this obvious fact is the result of dominant Zionist narrative. As Edward Said had said back in 2003, Israel has mastered "the language of suffering" and hijacked the daily life of Palestinians in order to justify more killings and painstaking torture."<sup>vii</sup>

### **Sheikh Jarrah: Colonial occupation and Palestinian resistance**

Repeated Israeli aggressions inside Gaza and other Palestinian territories is nothing more than an occupier's policy of collective punishment of people resisting the occupation and fighting for right to self-determination. If we forget that crucial context, we will very much miss the larger picture and end up buying the logic of an occupier.

The immediate context of Hamas firing rockets inside Israel was Israeli aggressions in Al-Aqsa compound in occupied East Jerusalem. For long, Israel has attempted to maintain a demographic balance inside the occupied East Jerusalem, claiming it to be its "eternal capital." It has led it to use all means to evict Palestinians living there for generations. Its attempts to create "facts on the

ground" has led to gradual displacement of Palestinians and building of hundreds of illegal Jewish settlements in the occupied territories of East Jerusalem and West Bank. Israel has been doing this since 1967, the year it captured the city along with West Bank and Gaza. In East Jerusalem, by constantly denying Palestinians their rights, treating them as residents and not citizens despite annexing the territory formally in 1980 and forcing them out of their homes, engineering its geographical boundaries, Israel has been able to substantially reduce the Arab population in the city, making them a minority. The process has forced several Palestinians to become refugees all over again."<sup>viii</sup>

Several United Nation reports have noted that the rate of demolition of Palestinian homes and their eviction has not only continued but increased at the time of COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>ix</sup> Israel could have thought that evictions at Sheikh Jarrah ordered by Israeli courts would be a regular affair like all the previous evictions. However, this time Palestinians scaled up their opposition by raising it at multiple levels through protests on the ground and via social media mobilisations.

Thousands of Palestinians gathered at Al-Aqsa compound expressing their opposition to Sheikh Jarrah evictions on the last Friday of Ramadan. They were attacked by

Israeli security forces on May 8, 2021 without any provocation, inviting a larger gathering on vigil. Israeli forces repeated the attacks three days later, apparently to make way for Jewish right-wing celebrations of “Jerusalem Day,” a commemoration of Israel’s capture of the city in the 1967 war. The repeated attacks on Al-Aqsa compound created massive outrage among the Palestinians across the occupied territories and inside Israel.<sup>x</sup>

Hamas is a militant group known for a more radical stance on Israel-Palestine relations than the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) mostly based on the West Bank. It fired several rockets inside Israel in retaliation to Israeli attacks on Al-Aqsa, most of them were intercepted by Israeli Iron dome missile defence system anyway.

The incidents of Sheikh Jarrah and Al-Aqsa are related to Israel’s bombing of Gaza. It is a reaction of the colonial power against the resistance which is the right of every occupied people, not only Palestinians, and cannot be compared with Israeli violence. In fact, as Richard Falk, a former UN special rapporteur on human rights situation in Palestinian territory had said to *Middle East Eye* in 2016, physical resistance to occupation, no matter how ineffective, is “a natural and entirely understandable response to the brutalities and indignities of military occupation, especially if

carried on in violation of international humanitarian law.”<sup>xi</sup>

Palestinian who have faced numerous assaults since the creation of Israel in 1948 under the watchful eyes of the imperialist powers of Britain and the US cannot be expected to face their occupation in silence. The Sheikha Jarrah reminds them of Israeli military’s forced eviction of over 750,000 Palestinians from their homes inside today’s Israel during the time of its creation. The refugees of the *Nakba*, as it is known in Arabic, have grown in number and live all across the world today including in the occupied territories of West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, and like any other refugees, have the right to go back to their homes. Apart from creation of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, the right to return of these refugees, now in millions, is also a central demand of the Palestinian movement which is as old as the history of Israel.

However, instead of looking for ways to address these issues, Israel is expropriating more and more Palestinian land by building settlements inside the occupied territories, a completely illegal act as per the international law of occupation.<sup>xii</sup> Each time it builds a Jewish settlement it displaced scores of Palestinians making them refugees all over again. Palestinians’ refusal to allow the eviction

of Sheikh Jarrah, even at the massive cost of hundreds of lives, should be taken as hint of thinning patience and fresh breaking out of resistance in Palestine.

### **The World must act and now**

The United Nations is a part of the Israel-Palestine conflict since 1947 when it accepted a partition plan, much to the hatred of Palestinians, giving 56% land of mandate Palestine to Zionist groups to create a Jewish national home. The barbaric holocaust by Nazi Germany provided a perfect reason for the world to sympathise with the Jewish cause in Palestine. It was unfair to Palestinians. Still, the world decided and despite initial hiccups and opposition, natural for any people who have been deprived rights over their own land, Palestinians have cooperated and agreed to live side by side to their occupier by accepting a two-state solution.<sup>xiii</sup>

It has been more than four decades since the PLO abandoned its mission to liberate all historic Palestine. It was ready to settle within the 1967 borders, a land smaller than the UN partition plan. And yet, the world community and the UN have failed the two-state solution by allowing Israel to build more and more settlements inside the West Bank, and change the demographic profile of Jerusalem. Today, due to massive alterations done by Israel in the West Bank and East

Jerusalem, illegal Jewish settlements, apartheid or separation wall, settlers only roads, check points and so on, the two-state solution too looks impossible to achieve.<sup>xiv</sup> Today, Israel directly controls 85% of mandate Palestine. Palestinians can see that their struggle for the right to self-determination is at crucial juncture of now or never.

The recent rise in Palestinian anger is a sign that they are losing hope in the international community to do anything. They have realised Israel's impunity is due to its close ties with the US and the West. International responses during Gaza offensive only added to that belief with most of the western players siding with Israel. Due to US' refusal to criticise Israel, the UN Security Council twice failed to issue even a formal statement condemning Israeli aggression despite calling emergent meetings.<sup>xv</sup> The world cannot afford such failures, as the longer the conflict persists, the graver the question marks on the legitimacy of the UN, which claims to stand for peoples "right to self-determination."

In this context, it is also pertinent that countries like India come out of their inaction. Its developing relationship with Israel should not stop it from adhering to its post-colonial national consensus. The Indian government should also realise that mere lip service to the Palestinian cause will not suffice. India, a

former colony who resisted its own colonial occupation, needs to be leading the international campaign to pressurise Israel to end occupation and persecution of Palestinians. India owes at least that to its colonial legacy, irrespective of the ideological hue of the current ruling dispensation in the

country. India should also make sure that no solution in Palestine is imposed on the Palestinians. India cannot be a party to the kind of peace proposals put forward by Donald Trump last year. A real solution to the Palestinian issue can only be achieved with the active and equal participation of Palestinians.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/situation\\_update\\_9\\_-\\_20\\_05\\_21.pdf](https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/situation_update_9_-_20_05_21.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/gaza-covid-ceases-operations-israel-strike>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.oxfam.org/en/timeline-humanitarian-impact-gaza-blockade>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20181227-remembering-israels-2008-war-on-gaza/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180708-remembering-the-2014-israeli-offensive-against-gaza/>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/two-years-on-people-injured-and-traumatized-during-the-great-march-of-return-are-still-struggling/>

<sup>vii</sup> Edward Said on Palestine (2014), New Delhi: Left Word Books, P-40

<sup>viii</sup> Pappé, Ilan (2017), *The Biggest Prison on Earth: A History of Occupied Territories*, London: Oneword Publications

<sup>ix</sup> <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2021/03/18/rate-of-demolition-of-palestinian-homes-has-increased-in-2021-says-new-report/>

<sup>x</sup> <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2021/05/10/over-300-palestinians-injured-in-israeli-attack-on-al-aqsa-mosque-complex/>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/richard-falk-history-side-palestinians>

<sup>xii</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/01/chapter-3-israeli-settlements-and-international-law/>

<sup>xiii</sup> Said, Edward (1992), *The Question of Palestine*, London: Vintage Books

<sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/28/the-two-state-solution-in-the-middle-east-all-you-need-to-know>

<sup>xv</sup> <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2021/05/17/china-blames-us-for-un-failure-to-issue-statement-on-palestine/>

## CONJUNCTURAL AND STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF THE NATIONAL STRIKE IN COLOMBIA<sup>1</sup>

Harold Beruth<sup>2</sup>

There are two general ideas that we as Federación Nacional Sindical Unitaria Agropecuaria (FENSUAGRO) would like to raise. One is the systematic violence of the character of State crimes, which we are currently experiencing, in this cycle of mobilization that began on April 28. Second, that the national strike continues and grows stronger.

To analyze what this mobilization has been, which has been going on for more than two weeks, it would be necessary to state that there are indeed more conjunctural elements and structural elements that explain why people have taken to the streets and remain and are willing to remain.

Let us say that on the conjunctural, we could talk about the tax reform, which was accompanied by the health reforms, the pension reform. A tax reform extremely harmful to the living conditions of the majority in Colombia, extremely facilitating and tailored to the economic sectors concentrated in the country.

But for that, it is also necessary to understand that there are structural conditions and that this mobilization is attached to other cycles of previous mobilizations. Among these structural conditions is a whole process that we call “neoliberalism of war”, imposed in this country during the last 30 years by a dominant sector in power, which is Uribe. What Uribismo means in Colombia is: the political vine, the mafia, the landowners, paramilitaries, gangsters, who have been in power for more than 30 years and who have remained in power with the constant use of weapons and state terror. While in Latin America in the last decades in some countries there were transitions between neoliberal governments and governments of the left or “progressive,” as they have been called during all this time, in Colombia what we had was neoliberalism of war, hard and pure and extreme violence and state terror.

Violence is a fundamental element to understand. Violence, dispossession, and impoverishment have been constant. Today we

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<sup>1</sup> Transcript of the presentation made in the talk-debate “National strike, popular revolt and repression in Colombia”, held on May 14, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Militante de la Federación Nacional Sindical Unitaria Agropecuaria - FENSUAGRO Doctorando en Estudios Sociales Agrarios (CEA-UNC).

see and mark racism, classism, and the patriarchal system that dominates this country, we see it clearly. In this, the high level of dispossession in the country has been fundamental to sustain the neoliberal project.

The Colombian rurality has endured a war of more than 60 years. The Peace Accords signed in 2016 were a possibility, a hope for Colombian society, especially for rural societies. What we see today is that the war in the country has intensified, to a point where people can no longer hold out, we no longer want more. The Peace Process has been betrayed by those who govern this country. A peace process which the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army (FARC-EP) ended. A peace process that began, as the peasant rationality in which we live immersed would say, from the bottom up, from point 6 onwards. It began with the abandonment of the use of the weapon by members of the FARC, and the remaining points signed have not been fulfilled. On the contrary, the violence has escalated. These territories here in Cauca, our rural Cauca for example, had a small moment of hope and tranquility after the signing of the peace agreement and what we see now is that the violence worsened and the dead are counted in heaps. Also on November 21 we came from a very strong indignation due to the number of murders of social and popular

leaderships, due to the massacre that had occurred against children by the National Army in a bombing. All this indignation is accumulating, all those levels of fatigue, what there is, is an erosion of the mode of government of this country, a deterioration that is deepening and where people are no longer willing to take it anymore.

The pandemic exacerbated the degrees of pauperization of working people. The economy of the popular sectors of this country collapsed. The impoverishment in this country is dramatic. Half of the population here lives from informal work, from what we know as the informal economy. And with the COVID-19, with the confinements and with the “non-public policy,” with this government’s attitude towards COVID-19, which instead put all the money to improve its image and to strengthen the war apparatus in the midst of the pandemic. All of this also contributed to increasing discontent.

We connect these mobilizations of April 28 with what happened on November 21, 2019, where there was also a very strong uprising. At that time, due to the labor reform, a long mobilization of more than two months was born, which is when the local, departmental, and regional assemblies were built, which even reached national assemblies. These are the bases of the current National

Strike Committee, where there are several sectors that met, which subsequently called for the strike on April 28, 2021.

For us as FENSUAGRO, as a peasant and popular movement, it must be said, we were surprised by the urban mobilization of April 28. We did not think that on April 28 the outbreak that we have today would be generated, because April 28 was planned as a mobilization day where people took to the streets because they were deeply outraged by all the number of elements that we have talked about right now, and tax reform as the spearhead. But the people decided to stay in the streets and remained in the streets and what we saw was that the treatment that the government of Iván Duque gave them (under the direct orders of Álvaro Uribe, he publishes through his twitter, which turns Mr. Uribe's twitter into a weapon of war) because people with those levels of repression, indignation and levels of resistance increased.

We know this type of violence historically, every time we peasants, indigenous people and Afro-Americans go out to block the Pan-American highway, that is the treatment they give us. Stigmatization as subversives, we are enemies, the construction of an internal enemy. For the governments of Colombia, the internal enemy is always the peasantry, the rural people, who are the guerrillas, and therefore it

is valid to assassinate that enemy, to massacre that enemy. But today the internal enemy is in the cities, it is the vandal, it is the hood, it is the one who breaks a glass, the one who breaks the Trasmilenio Stations or the public service, that is the new internal enemy they want to create. Women are also the internal enemy, that is why all this violence based on gender occurs, that is why we have 16 cases of sexual assault violence. That is the national security doctrine of this country. This is how this country has worked for decades and we in rural areas know that war because we have lived it all the time. And that war is the one that is being unleashed today in the cities and that has generated tremendous indignation in the people.

The strike continues, despite the fact that the mass media of this country have wanted to propose that normality return to the country. Normality does not exist. The country is still paralyzed in all its dimensions. Here in southwestern Colombia, for example, by decision of the mobilized organizations and the people at the different roadblock points, we decided to open a 48-hour humanitarian corridor in coordination with the government of Valle del Cauca and 42 municipalities so that food, gasoline, necessary supplies flowed for 48 hours. Why? Because we have to strengthen resistance, because people have to eat, we have to have drink, water, the necessary things

because we know that this strike is going to last and we are willing to continue in it, fighting with what we have and we have covered ourselves also with what we need. Surely the enemy has also taken cover from what he needs and has been doing it for a long time. So this strike continues and normality is not maintained in Colombia.

Recently a note came out from the businessmen of Pereira, there was a meeting in Cauca where the Cauca businesswomen met. Entrepreneurs are drowning because it is 15 days where production in the country has stopped, 15 days where tolls do not work, we have been unemployed for two weeks and normality does not exist. Gasoline began to flow only yesterday, by decision that we also made. But the losses for the business community are enormous as well. Surely there are cities where the intensity of the fight has diminished because it has been a great wear and tear, there are 15 days of fighting, there is a lot of repression. But also in different places more people are coming out to fight every day. We know that for example here in Cauca, more people have been joining the strike and in various rural areas they are joining the strike. So that if what we want to raise, the strike continues and is maintained and we consider that it should be continue and be maintained.

Where is the strike going to go? We do not know yet. In popular peasant wisdom here, a colleague said that we are waiting for the papayas to ripen to know how far this is going. But we believe that the strike continues.

And what is it that as peasants we seek? Well, our historical struggle as FENSUAGRO has been the struggle for land, the struggle for territory, for the constitution of peasant reserve areas, for peace agreements. So that there is peace with social justice in this country. We reached the signing of the peace accords, but our fundamental fight now is for the peace accords to be implemented and fulfilled. We have been threatened with Glyphosate spraying and forced eradication. They poison our territories with Glyphosate sprays, under the pretext of controlling the illicit drug industry. We know that this is nothing more than a pretext to deprive the peasantry of their lands. It is a weapon of war. We fight for that, we fight against Glyphosate, to be poisoned with Glyphosate, we fight against forced eradications. That is what the Coordinator of the Coca and Marijuana Leaf Cultivators is for.

Particularly as peasantry, these are our demands, there are specifications in the country that have been being built, we have the national specifications that the National Strike Committee has been discussing. But there are also other demands that have been gathered

with this mobilization that are adding to that sheet and that we must be very clear on that. The National Strike Committee must understand that there are multiple expressions in struggle and that this statement will have to be reviewed and analyzed.

A final comment, there is much talk of negotiation at this time and we are warning about that. We cannot fall into separate negotiations, we are looking for negotiations by sectors, by cities, by groups. The strategy is one of attrition and demobilization that is being applied by the Duque government, but there is talk of the great dialogue with everyone and with sectors. We have proposed what type of negotiation is being discussed. There can be no negotiations with murderers, it is a simple slogan, we cannot negotiate with people who are massacring, with a government that massacres and that has historically lied to us. So there are fundamental conditions; that the

entire country be demilitarized, because power has been handed over to the military. Whoever is ruling in this country or managing the protest in this country at this moment is the military. That it be demilitarized, that there be guarantees for protest and social and popular mobilization. And another element that there is no impunity, the investigations of all cases of police violence, military violence, all cases of state terrorism, racism and state crimes that we have assisted in this time must begin. We have more than 40 murdered, the injured number in the thousands and the disappeared by hundreds, that cannot go unpunished and we cannot negotiate on those terms. We cannot even speak of negotiations in those terms.

Well, these are the elements that I wanted to raise. We are still here, we continue to fight and with all the disposition and morale. Greetings to all, the people who are in the fields and cities resisting and fighting.

## SOCIAL OUTBREAK IN COLOMBIA: UNFINISHED ARMED CONFLICT, SYSTEMIC CRISIS AND SYMBOLIC REVOLUTION

Juliana Sabogal Aguilar<sup>1</sup> and Roger García Díaz<sup>2</sup>

In the northwest of South America is Colombia, a country that lives an essential paradox: it is immensely rich in biodiversity, water, arable land, ancestral wisdom and community creativity, but remains tied to pseudo-colonial relationships that make a small group of families concentrate political and economic power, today maintaining monetary poverty rates above 42.5%.<sup>i</sup> Alberto Acosta already said it in his book on *The Curse of Abundance* "... *The reality of a primary-exporting economy (...) that is, an exporter of nature (...) results in a limited integration of the export sector with national production (... which) has led to a generalization of poverty, giving way to recurrent economic crises, while consolidating rentier mentalities. All this deepens the weak and scarce institutionalality, encourages corruption and deteriorates the environment?*" (Acosta, 2009, p.27)<sup>ii</sup>.

In Colombia, the land - which for some means possibilities of exploitation, rent and political power, and for others a space and means of life - has remained concentrated since colonial times, this being the origin of the armed conflict

established at the end of the 1950s. The main demand that animated the consolidation of the guerrilla organizations in the country was therefore the agrarian reform. The longest armed conflict in the world without being negotiated, came to an end 4 years ago. Unfortunately, the claim of the right to a vital space where to produce food and reproduce family and community life, failed to be recognized by the State in 60 years of struggle. On the contrary, the State - as an instrument of the historically powerful families and the new elites' product of drug trafficking - perfected a repressive police, military and paramilitary apparatus, which escalated the conflict to the point of leaving nearly 5,000,000 displaced people, 220,000 murdered, 25,000 disappeared and nearly 2,000 registered victims of sexual violence,<sup>iii</sup> among other atrocious figures (CNMH, 2013).

The concentration of land remains unchanged, maintaining 0.5% of owners of large areas of land that monopolize at least 68% of the rural area, of which 1/5

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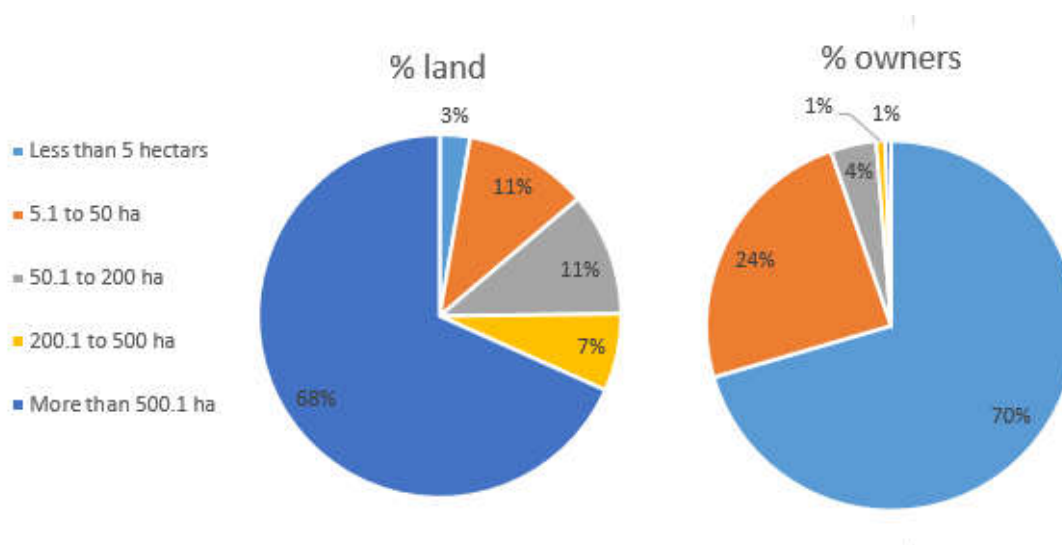
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have farms of more than 2,000 hectares, compared to an overwhelming majority of small producers (70.5% of rural owners)

who only have access to 2.7% of the rural area, according to the latest National Agricultural Census (DANE, 2016)<sup>iv</sup>.

***Relationship between the national rural area and owners, according to the size of properties 2014***



Source: OXFAM (2017)<sup>v</sup> based on data from the Third National Agricultural Census DANE (2016)

This national reality of dramatic social inequity in the countryside has had a strong impact on the composition of the host cities of the population displaced by violence. To this was added in these urban contexts the inequity characteristic of capitalism, which in this neoliberal stage does not consider the State’s responsibility to guarantee the minimum decent living conditions for the population, as long as the labor system does not allow access to these conditions through of the salary and income of workers.

In Colombia, the accumulated disagreement from various sectors had managed to manifest itself in recent history since 2008.<sup>vi</sup> In 2016, the signing of a Peace Agreement was achieved, which meant the hope of gradually solving certain structural problems of the national rurality, especially taking into account those associated with the armed conflict, its victims and the scourge of drug trafficking. However, with the arrival of current President Iván Duque in 2018, commitments to the victims - peasant, indigenous and Afro-descendant families

and communities - were deliberately ignored, generating collective anxiety that, together with growing poverty, caused the social outbreak of 2019.

In 2020, with the arrival of COVID-19, the entire humanity faced an unprecedented turning point in its history. Suddenly, a tiny particle stopped the world and caused a series of profound transformations. After the medical collapse, the collapse of the agri-food system shook the entire human species and demonstrated the structural fragility that capitalism suffers. The agri-food dependence on long-distance transport revealed one Achilles heel, one of the many that the globalized model has as the only rural development strategy. The global pandemic, as part of a preceding planetary crisis, catapults the need for systemic transformations with unpredictable consequences.

In Colombia, the continuation of the armed conflict associated with the intention to control territories and their natural resources, the murder of social leaders who resist, the increase in poverty, corruption scandals, among other historical demands, was added to nonconformity caused by a regressive Tax Reform, a Health Reform and a Pension Reform, which were intended to be approved in the midst of a pandemic to

charge the costs of the crisis to the middle and lower class. This motivated the largest social mobilization in the history of Colombia.

This mobilization, initially called for April 28 of the current year by the workers' centrals to the various social sectors that manifested national unity since 2019, became an unprecedented social outbreak that welcomed the claim of the great impoverished masses in the cities, especially young people from popular neighborhoods who nowadays do not get to eat three times a day, nor access to health, education, work or decent life expectancy.

The response of the government of Iván Duque has exacerbated the spirits, since it repeats the methods of State terrorism so well-known and repudiated in our national history. In less than a month of demonstrations, human rights organizations have registered 955 victims of physical violence, 43 homicides allegedly committed by members of the Public Force, 1,388 arbitrary arrests against protesters, 595 violent interventions in the framework of peaceful protests, 46 victims of eye attacks, 165 cases of firearm shots, 22 victims of sexual violence, and 5 victims of gender-based violence.<sup>viii</sup>

Despite this, the "Great National Strike" is maintained, amplifying its scope to a space of cultural revolution. The pandemic, the months of isolation, but also the exchange of ideas, the disbelief in the civilizational model and its health and food system, seem to motivate a change in the strategies of social struggle. The symbolic framework that supports the technological and epistemic dimensions of culture, as well as its collective memory, is now a scene of dispute.

Various symbols of oppression are under attack. Following the example of the Misak people who by popular mandate knocked down the equestrian statue of Sebastián de Belalcázar in Popayán, erected on a pre-Hispanic pyramid of sacred connotation, on September 16, 2020, those statues that embody the imposition of one social sector over another - especially the statues of Spanish conquerors in indigenous territories - have been demolished, marking the beginning of a conflict against the symbols of the old social order. Within the framework of the National Strike, a dozen statues have been knocked down, and the remembrances of conquerors, politicians and heroes of independence are being re-signified.

Other symbols of repression are under attack, such as those police stations where abuses of authority have been

recorded. The most emblematic and mobilizing case occurred on Wednesday, May 12, where in the midst of clashes between protesters and police in Popayán, Alison, a 17-year-old girl who was passing by the site of the protest, was unjustifiably detained by agents of the Squadron, Mobile Anti Disturbances-ESMAD, who allegedly sexually abused the minor in the facilities of the Immediate Reaction Unit-URI of the police. Alison, who was paradoxically the daughter of a police officer, decided the next day to take her own life, becoming a martyr and symbol of the resistance against police violence in general and against sexual violence in particular, which caused the angry crowd to set fire to the URI.

This symbolic uprising has not focused only on attacking what represents domination and death, but is consolidating new symbols of an emerging culture, through which historical memory is being woven. Names, as primary symbols, signify the territory, enabling new transformation scenarios. Puerto Resistencia and the Loma de la Dignidad in Cali, the Lucas Villa Viaduct in Pereira, Plaza Dylan Cruz in Bogotá, the Resistance Park in Medellín, are manifestations of this symbolic resignification of the territory. In these spaces unprecedented cultural manifestations are brewing, such as the

Community Assemblies where the various social sectors converge in horizontal relationships. In addition, from these territories in resistance, other cultural expressions are woven that reinforce their symbolic character, such as songs, poems and other forms of communication.

We are witnessing an unprecedented social outbreak in Colombia, which gives the appearance of a cultural revolution in a context of metabolic rupture associated with the pandemic, where we witness the irruption of nature in the dynamics of human relationships. This confronts us with an essential dichotomy: nature, which for those who exploit it are natural resources, but which for many communities that inhabit these lands nourished by water and blessed with biodiversity, are common goods that allow human and non-human coexistence in favor of reproduce life. In the words of Michel Serrés in *The Natural Contract*: “the crossroads between death and symbiosis.”<sup>viii</sup> The metabolic imbalance of capitalism and the civilizing model, especially disastrous in Colombia, has been deeply fractured, with the

emergence of new social strategies looming. This historical moment demands all the commitment and creativity to reestablish an ecosystem and community balance that makes life possible, a balance patiently woven into the biocultural memory of ancestral native peoples and peasant communities.

The extreme concentration of land ownership as a pillar of social relations, is a key issue in resolving social demands in Colombia and reducing ecosystem impacts. It is urgent to move from the current situation, which requires the transport of inputs and food over long distances, towards a scenario where autarkic territories flourish that allow supply to a greater proportion of human demands within the framework of ecosystem possibilities. In this transformation, it is necessary to implement agrarian reform, promote agroecological production and territorial autonomy as resilience strategies. Just as it is also necessary to deconstruct the symbols of the old social order and consolidate new symbols that allow the creation of a new eco-social fabric.

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<sup>i</sup> Monetary poverty refers to a person who does not have the necessary income to cover their minimum needs, which in Colombia was calculated as income below US \$ 89 (DANE, 2021).

<sup>ii</sup> Acosta, A. (2009). *La maldición de la abundancia*. Quito: Ediciones Abya-Yala.

<sup>iii</sup> In the case of the paramilitaries, sexual violence was practiced in different contexts with different objectives: 1) to attack women for their leadership status; 2) to destroy the affective circle of those considered as enemies; 3) to “punish” transgressive or ignominious conduct from the perspective of the armed actors; 4)

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sexual violence articulated to cultural practices, and 5) sexual violence aimed at generating cohesion among members of paramilitary groups and the consolidation of their violent identities (CNMH, year, p.82).

<sup>iv</sup> DANE- Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (2016). Resultados del Tercer Censo Nacional Agropecuario. Tomo 2.

<sup>v</sup>OXFAM (2017). Radiografía de la desigualdad: lo que nos dice el último censo agropecuario sobre la distribución de tierra en Colombia.

<sup>vi</sup> In 2008 the "Indigenous Minga" and the peoples of the Pacific coast in the southwestern part of the country; 2009 and 2010 national mobilization of the health sectors (whose system is in crisis) and education against new privatizations; 2011 student strike that managed to withdraw the already approved Educational Reform; 2013 and 2014 great national peasant strike; 2017 new indigenous mobilizations and of the peoples of the Pacific coast to the southwestern part of the country where violence associated with drug trafficking has intensified; 2019 great strike of national unity of the aforementioned sectors and of other dissatisfied such as workers, transporters, among others.

<sup>vii</sup> Statement from the NGO "Temblores", May 25, 2021. Available at:

<https://www.temblores.org/comunicados>. For the statement of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of May 25, 2021, see:

<https://www.oas.org/es/CIDH/jsForm/?File=/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2021/137.asp>

<sup>viii</sup> Serrés, M. (1991). El contrato natural. Valencia: Pretextos.

## ETHIOPIA AT THE CROSSROAD: THE PERILS OF NARROW NATIONALISM<sup>1</sup>

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Global capitalism is undergoing a persistent and deepening crisis of accumulation, with US as a declining superpower that continues to tighten its military geopolitical reigns on the African continent. While the post-independence history in Africa has been marked by attempts to assert autonomy in varied ways, the more recent rise of southern poles of accumulation, have led to the need to re-assert control over natural resources. In these conditions, geopolitical interests of external forces continued to dominate the terrain in which the African states operate. State craft in the African region navigates a very delicate minefield of competing interests that contest the legitimacy of the State, from within the African region which itself remains fragmented.

It is within this broader context that Ethiopia also sits while also injecting into this picture the specificities of its own history of indigenous process of forging a Modern State out of the belly of the thousands of years of history of feudalism. After the overthrow of the military Marxist-Leninist regime in 1991, competing interpretations of the historical legacy of forging the modern state, and

therefore what citizenship can mean in the new Republic has shaped the current crisis facing Ethiopia. So unlike in Ivory Coast, the then shining star of West Africa, was ripped to its core in a civil war over the question: 'Who is an Ivorian?' Ethiopia is confronted with an ethno-nationalist inspired complete rejection of Ethiopia as an idea, and with it the Pan Ethiopia vision. The crisis that Ethiopia faces therefore provides insight into a challenge of state-building, identity making and forging the social contract in Africa.

Prof Patricia McFadden, a leading African feminist intellectual, makes the point that the postcolonial condition<sup>1</sup> in Africa, and the rest of the global South for that matter, has centred on the question of citizenship and entitlements that come with that. Whether it has to do with women's human rights, socio-economic inequalities, inequality on the basis of race, caste, ethnicity, sexuality and ability, contestations arise out of claims to citizenship, and attempts to reconstitute or contest the social contract with the state. Yet Ethiopia is a case of a country that has not been colonised formally, and yet has had to find its place in a world dominated and

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shaped by the conditions created by colonialism.

The battle of Adwa in 1896, of which this year marks 125 years since a world historic triumph over colonialism, decisively ended the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and affirmed the self-worth, dignity, self-reliance, freedom and humanity of the black world by ending the tide of the first scramble for Africa. It was a historical victory of world significance by resoundingly defeating a European force on the African continent in the age of Empire.

Under the astute leadership of Emperor Menelik II and Empress Tayitu, they were able to forge a united front. Notable is General Alula from Tigray who was particularly distinguished in his own right providing world class military leadership. Empress Tayitu, who also had Tigrayan heritage, was a fierce and strategic thinker. Feudal lords across ethnicities united and organised warriors and the peasants to fight for land and freedom for Ethiopia and the black world.

Meanwhile, the Tigrayan elite and people who had historically affirmed their autonomy, and had been a significant force in forging the modern state, began to lose a strong grip on power at the centre of the Empire. It is from this point that there was a sense of marginalisation and brewing

discontent that created fertile conditions for ethnic mobilisation.

These tensions came to the fore after the overthrow of the monarchy in 1974 by revolutionary youth, students and workers. Without a significant political force able to fill the political vacuum, the army stepped in and in the heady days of the Cold War, found support from the then Soviet Union and Cuba. The Marxist-Leninist military regime, known as the Derg, was an authoritarian government against which urban and rural struggles were waged by revolutionaries of various socialist and Marxist tendencies.

By the time the Derg was overthrown in 1991, the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) dominated the new government and rebuilt the state structure under an ethnic federalist system that imposed segregation on ethnic lines. To be fair, the TPLF had had its own debates on what the future of Tigray in Ethiopia could look like. From an emphasis on the rights of Tigrayans in a democratic united Ethiopia to the right to secede entirely, a wide spectrum of views existed. By the time the TPLF had entered the government, the ethno-nationalists had won the debate. Importantly, they also had the support of the United States, where Ambassador Herman Cohen, then appointed to Ethiopia, played a crucial role in negotiating (actually tricking the Derg) for a smooth takeover of Addis Ababa by the TPLF. The new constitution recrafted

regions on the basis of ethnicity, permitted each region to have its own army and militia, while entrenching in the new constitution autonomy and the right to secede. Regional banks were set up on the basis of ethnic groups. National identification cards stated one's ethnicity. An eerie reminder of Rwanda prior to the 1994 genocide.

### **The Ethno-nationalist logic**

So what was the logic behind the radical reforms in the governance system? Underlying this is a thesis that there are various kinds of colonialism, and Ethiopia contained within it a variation of colonialism. I am of the view that this is at best a false equivalency and an over-simplification of state craft. It also ignores the complex intermingling across ethnicity and religion, migration patterns and fluid nature of cultural identities throughout the thousands of years of Ethiopia's history. Instead, there is a drive towards simple narratives, where some are labelled victims and others oppressors who position themselves superior solely on the basis of language/ethnicity. With regards to this, the argument is that people who identify as Amhara, and for that matter, have Amharic as a mother tongue (which even after 1991 remains as a working language for the federal government) were dominant politically and economically at the expense of other ethnic groups. This dominance is asserted socially, politically, and economically especially in landholding

arrangements. This perspective does not necessarily integrate class analysis and by doing so does not enable a deeper analysis of the reproduction of inequality which has political implications which I explain later. It also relies on a rigid and ahistorical readings of three thousand years where class relations shaped the Empire formation in the Horn and North Africa, and for that matter, were shaped.

I argue that for this narrative of positioning some language/cultural groups as oppressors and others as victims to succeed, history itself has to be simplified. Lineages which complicate narratives of ethnically pure identities and relations of domination are erased, ignored or denied. This quest for ethnic purity then takes a sinister form when connected to relationships to land and livelihoods. It becomes permissible to criminalise migration and fluidity of identities arising out of languages and in cultural identities. The result of this in its most horrendous form is to enforce segregation on the basis of ethnicity, for which genocide becomes the ultimate tool. It is an extremist ideology for which the complex reality of identity is forced to fit within its rigid framework which allocates entitlements and privileges to a few. In a word, apartheid.

Idahosa and Vincent (2014)<sup>ii</sup> in a paper on xenophobia in access to healthcare in South Africa cites Giorgio Agamben and his conception of power and sovereignty. For

Agamben, the state, by in actions or omissions, can relegate some to ‘bare life,’ a condition where whether they live or die or are killed, has no consequence. For instance, the murder of Baraka Nafari, a PhD student from Tanzania studying in South Africa. He was deliberately run over by a taxi driver close to the University of Johannesburg on 25 February 2018. The justification is that he was ‘kwerekwere’ a derogatory term for African foreigners. The taxi driver was initially charged for driving without a license. This not only a horrific affirmation of impunity but also Baraka’s relegation to ‘bare life’.

Is there a progressive case for ethno-nationalism? My reference point here is Walleigne Mekonnen on the question of nationalities in Ethiopia,<sup>iii</sup> writing in 1969 when the monarchy under Haile Selassie was still intact. Walleign argues: “The revolution can start *anywhere*. It can even be secessionist to begin with, *as long as* led by the progressive forces—the peasants and the workers, and has the final aim the *liberation of the Ethiopian Mass* with due consideration to the economic and cultural independence of all the nationalities. (emphasis added).’ He draws on Lenin in making the case that: ‘People resort to secession only when national oppression and national antagonisms *make joint life absolutely intolerable and hinder any and all economic intercourse*. In that case the interests of the freedom of the class struggle will be best

served by Secession (emphasis added).’ He goes on to refer to the London International Socialist Congress of 1896 where the Bolsheviks attended, “This Congress declares that it stands for the full right of all nations to self-determination and expresses its sympathy for the workers and peasants of every country now suffering under the yoke of military, national or other absolutism.” The extreme authoritarian character of the Military Dictatorship combined with the historical power struggles in principle and spirit was what inspired armed struggle against the Derg regime, which was itself a nationalist Marxist-Leninist military regime.

I argue that what had in effect been done was to impose on the Ethiopian context concepts and categories that had been thought appropriate for the Russian context. Nations and Nationalities are too rigid to capture the complexity of how people actually relate, engage and self-identify. The Medemer<sup>iv</sup> philosophy of PM Dr Abiy Ahmed in part speaks to this, while also integrating among other things, public-private partnerships and rapid privatisation of state-owned enterprises. The breadth of Dr Abiy’s Medemer requires robust and critical engagement on its own terms, especially given that privatisation in its ethos undermines a concept of a collective approach to creating value and distributing resources. There appears to be a tension

between this neoliberal project and mutual interdependence and intermingling, and how these social relations critically shape fluid and evolving identities. In practice, privatisation has been an effective tool of elite wealth accumulation and deepening inequality. The latter, an outcome of these processes, can entrench divisions as it relates to entitlements from the state, and collective forms of natural resource management.

A consequence of applying concepts that do not respond to social relations as they actually are, is that we are left with an ethnonationalist framework that does not answer the question of how inequalities are reproduced. Although regional/provincial disparities do occur, this unevenness is intrinsic to capitalist development with social and economic consequences of which need to be addressed through social investment, especially with healthcare and education investments. All these cannot be achieved outside of improving productivity in a predominantly agrarian society.

For example, on land tenure in Ethiopia, factors which influence smallholder farmers in investing in land has more to do with security of tenure, and the gendered nature of labour segmentation. The role of land grabs by corporate investors in displacing smallholder farmers amplifies these concerns. It is therefore significant that precisely when Ethiopia is on the verge of achieving food sovereignty in wheat

production, it is at this historical moment that crises has arisen on multiple fronts. First, the Tigray crisis. Second, on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Third, on the border with Sudan. Fourth, on armed groups targeting ethnic minorities across the country.

It is also important to consider chapters in Ethiopia's history that did not constitute a crisis. According to the Anuak Genocide Council:<sup>v</sup>

*On December 13, 2003, members of the Ethiopian military and militias formed from non-Anuak minority groups entered Gambella town in southwestern Ethiopia. Over the course of three days, they sought out, tortured and killed 424 men, burned houses, and scattered families. Since that time, the genocide and crimes against humanity have continued, raising the death toll between 1,500 and 2,500, and causing more than 50,000 Anuak to flee... reports from women saying their rapists told them that they hoped to...wipe out the Anuak race...*

During the Looqqe massacre in 2002, 69 civilians were killed with about 250 wounded when Sidama students and elders went on a peaceful protest over their rights to autonomy as a nation, as enshrined in the constitution. These kinds of atrocities which took

place about a decade ago continue today.

In Mai-Kadra,<sup>vi</sup> hundreds were killed in overnight attacks in November 2020 of civilians led by TPLF linked militia and local security. Some of those who were massacred were seasonal farmworkers. In Benshangul-Gumuz, repeated attacks have occurred in spite of attempts to arrest suspected perpetrators. There is no end to the horrors that are being unleashed on civilians, mainly the peasantry, who are mere pawns in a struggle over the state, and control over land.

### **The crisis caused by the ethno-nationalist project**

As mentioned earlier, the ascendance of ethno-nationalism to state power in 1991 was during the transition of power from the Derg to the US backed Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF). An ethno-nationalist driven constitution and governance system reconfigured the state and governance framework on ethnic lines. In the ethno-nationalist lens, the principles of self-reliance, autonomy, pursuit of development can only be achieved on the basis of ethnicity as a fundamental organising principle of society.

The dramatic demise of the TPLF committee which ultimately chose to wage war on the Federal government, lost a role

within the Prosperity Party [formerly the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)], formed out of a merger of the previous ethnic-based coalition (that now included ethnic groups that were labelled 'underdeveloped' that is, Afar, Somalia etc). TPLF rejected the offer to join the new party, and TPLF committee members finding themselves isolated and without the reigns of the federal government, retreated to the Tigray region where they still had control. Attempts to secure conciliation with TPLF, led by elders, religious leaders and diplomats, had failed.

Instead, on the early hours of November 4, we learned, what the TPLF spokesperson later described as a 'lightning strike,' had been unleashed on the Northern Command Federal troops by TPLF troops. The gruesome manner in which generals and soldiers had been executed and left to rot, naked – horrified and angered Ethiopians. Information trickled in slowly as this surprise attack ensued, intended to overtake federal troops, to ultimately ensure a military take-over of Addis Ababa. A repeat of 1991.

To add more grief, the war was waged in harvest time, also harming smallholder farmers who had just contended with a locust invasion and famine. Now in the middle of a war, peasants not only lost their harvest, but also faced the risk of being raped, killed or displaced. Yet there was a deliberate focus on only parts of Tigray, while the massacres of

ethnic minorities occurring in other parts of the country such as in Mai-Kadra, or in Metekel and Benshangul-Gumuz, did not get attention. The Human Rights Commission report on Mai-Kadra<sup>vii</sup> documented the bravery of those not targeted in the pogrom to protect victims, at risk to their own safety, with one retired soldier being the first to be killed, and his home burned down.

While we often compare the gravity of the Ethiopia crisis to that which Rwanda and Burundi faced in 1994, the legacy of which continues to shape politics in the Great Lakes today, the Ethiopia crisis also has its own dynamics due to its location in the geostrategic region of the Horn of Africa. TPLF/EPRDF, in which PM Abiy in Ethiopia also played an important role as part of government then, in the US own interests in Somalia in containing Al-Shabab, its conflict over the Nile with Egypt and Sudan, has pitted it against another ally of the US in the strategic Middle East and North Africa region. Egypt's role as Israel's ally places Ethiopia on a lower scale of priority. A more

sovereign and autonomous Ethiopia, out of the tight grip of US, can potentially light a beacon of hope for the continent that Europe depends upon for 70-80% of its mineral resource needs. It is against this that we have noted consistent US policy across the Republican and Democrat Administrations to support and resurrect the TPLF.

It is also important to remember the 1896 Adwa victory for the black and African world is yet to be firmly secured today since external threats to autonomy and freedom remain entrenched. In contemporary struggles, we have to also contend with the combined crises of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, economic, environmental, climate and deepening inequalities, making struggles over natural resources and livelihoods and struggles over control of the State even more crucial, not for survival alone, but in pursuit of autonomy, self-reliance and self-determination for all under imperialist and capitalist domination.

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<sup>i</sup> Patricia McFadden (2011), "Crafting Inclusive Citizenship for Women in the African Postcolonial Moment," *labrys, études féministes/ estudos feministas*: <https://www.labrys.net.br/labrys19/livre/macffaden.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> Grace Idahosa & Louise D. Vincent (2014) Xenophobia, sovereign power and the limits of citizenship, *Africa Review*, 6:2, 94-104, DOI: 10.1080/09744053.2014.914637

<sup>iii</sup> Walleigne Mekonnen (1969), "On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia," Arts IV, HSIU: <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ethiopia/nationalities.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://medemer.et/>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.anuakjustice.org/genocide.htm>

<sup>vi</sup> EHRC: <https://addisstandard.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Maikadra-Preliminary-Findings-English-Final.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

