

The Seventeenth Newsletter (2018): American Power and the Time of the Soft Coup



Dear Friends,

The United States government has withdrawn from the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC). Much has been made of this move, although to be fair the United States has not played a productive role in the HRC since its creation in 2006. It has tried to bully the HRC to avoid any criticism of Israel and it has chafed at any negative words from the HRC about the grammar of the US war on terror or on the archipelago of prisons that litters the landscape of the United States. Despite repeatedly winning a seat on the Council, the United States has not been a part of it - helping in a democratic way to shape its direction. Instead, it has tried to bully the Council by threats of withdrawal. Now, those ultimatums have borne fruit. To read more about this withdrawal, see my report at *Alternet* [here](#).

The immediate spur for the US to leave the Council was a report being prepared about violations by firms - many from the United States - that have been doing business in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Israel has been repeatedly sanctioned by the United Nations - including recently by the UN Security Council - for its illegal settlement activity. The HRC has prepared a database of all firms that have violated UN resolutions and have operated in the illegal settlements. When this report is finally released under the seal of the United Nations, it will give the Boycott-Divestment-Sanctions (BDS) movement a boost. With this report, the BDS movement will have moral authority to target these businesses and call for them to be sanctioned. This was intolerable to the United States. It is willing to push for a financial embargo of states that it sees as an adversary (such as Venezuela, whose government has recently produced an important report - which you can download [here](#) - on the costs of the financial embargo on that country).

The withdrawal has raised eyebrows around the world. But it is not the first such retreat. The US has left many multilateral bodies, from the Rome Statute to set up the International Criminal Court to the Paris Climate Treaty to the Iran nuclear deal. Caprice is part of the system, not just a problem posed by Trump's mercurial personality. Trump's behavior at the G7 meeting is indicative of this long-term problem. He walked away in a huff, but his attitude does not define the problem. That is defined by a long-term crisis in the economy of the United States (for more on this, see my report from the G7 in *Frontline* [here](#)). Coming up in a few months, a dossier from **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research** will be on the 'trade wars' and the ongoing capitalist crisis (an interview with Professor Prabhat Patnaik).

Meanwhile, Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif published an article this week on 'US Foreign Policy in Crisis'. It has received almost no attention outside Iran (please see my assessment of it at *Newslick* [here](#)). Zarif points out that the problem is not so much Trump, although he is a problem, but that it is that US power over global matters has declined. He suggests that it is time for the reinvigoration of regional bodies to manage matters of security and development. These are sensible suggestions.

The picture above, from the Collection de l'Art Brut (Lausanne, Switzerland), is by Carlo Zinelli (1916-1974).



Pictures of crying children – particularly one two-year-old child from Honduras – picked up by the US border patrol, separated from their parents and held in prisons, have hurt the hearts of people across the world. Trump’s ‘zero tolerance’ policy has been rescinded. This does not mean that the children’s fate is much easier. They will now be united with their parents – in prison. It is telling that this child is from Honduras, where the United States helped engineer a coup in 2009. A combination of political instability as well as economic suffering (some of it driven by climate change) has put a great deal of pressure on Central America. US policy on trade and climate as well as on regime change has created instability in the American isthmus. You create problems, then people march for safety towards you and then you imprison them. This is the formula of the crisis.

Nicaragua was one of the few countries which did not export its population northwards. After sixteen years of neoliberal rule, the country re-elected the old Sandinista – Daniel Ortega. Ortega’s government, pushed by popular movements, tried to settle problems that have plagued Central America. Investments in education and in infrastructure have helped undermine the drug economy and stem the tide of state failure. Power cuts had been a frequent problem in Nicaragua as a result of mis-management by the neoliberal governments. Ortega’s government pushed for an increase of renewable energy sources – biomass, geothermal, hydro, solar and wind – to both solve the energy crisis but also to move Nicaragua away from reliance upon oil.

Across the world, public finances have been in disarray. No different in Nicaragua. Here, the Ortega government had to tackle the problem of pensions. Last year, the IMF called for urgent reform of the INSS – the state’s social security system. The deficit on these payments is about \$75 million per year or about 0.5% of GDP – not a major problem, but a problem nonetheless. The employers’ association – COSEP – and the government have been in long-term negotiations around this problem. When COSEP left the negotiation table, the government – on April 16 – published its proposal, namely to raise employer contributions. COSEP, on the other hand, favours the IMF proposal, namely to slash pensions and raise the retirement age. COSEP called for an all-out war in Nicaragua. Ortega withdrew his proposal. It was too late. The right-wing opposition – backed fully by the oligarchy and the United States – smelt blood. It wanted Ortega to go.

The enthusiasts for regime change rushed in. US government support through the National Endowment for Democracy (as shown by Max Blumenthal [here](#)) and other less public means helped shape the war inside Nicaragua. On April 22, four days after violence erupted across the country, the Ortega government asked the Catholic Church to mediate between the right-wing opposition and the government. The Church agreed, but then showed its hand as a supporter of the opposition. What they wanted was the overthrow of Ortega’s government (which won 72.44% of the popular vote in the general election of 2016). Even the US-dominated Organisation for American States refused to join the ‘soft coup’ against Nicaragua.

On May 22, the Continental Coordination of Social Movements of ALBA (the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America) released a statement that should be read in full:

In the face of the recent events in Nicaragua over the last few weeks, we express our solidarity with the Nicaraguan people who, throughout their historic struggles, have won their right to self-determination, justice, and development. We share the hopes of the vast majority of the Nicaraguan people to live in peace and harmony.

We support the process of the National Dialogue that has been initiated to seek solutions to the differences amongst the Nicaraguan people. We express our hope for a prompt solution to these issues.

We understand the strategic role that the project of the Nicaraguan people plays in our region, which is under siege by organized crime, complicit with some states in the region. For this reason, we reject the misinformation and manipulation of information by corporations and the media that is in opposition to the interests of the Nicaraguan people, and that supports North American interventionism that has intensified its actions against Nicaragua since the approval of the so-called ‘Nica Act’ [the Nicaraguan Investment Conditionality Act of 2017 passed by the US Congress to put pressure on the government and on Nicaraguan society]

There is a long history starting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century of

the United States intervening in Nicaragua, which the people have managed to reject, and which they will reject even now.

We also reject any violent action from any actor involved in the political and social situation that Nicaragua is going through that puts the life and safety of Nicaraguans at risk. We encourage every possible effort to be made to guarantee full respect for the dignity and rights of all those committed to a peaceful solution of the conflict, regardless of their political position.

These are sensible words. They caution people outside Nicaragua not to take the words of the corporate media at face value. As we - at **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research** - have shown in our dossiers on **Venezuela** and **Brazil**, there is mischief afoot in Latin America. On the situation in Brazil, please read **this** report from Celina della Croce, the Coordinator of **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**. Never underestimate the kind of maneuvers produced by the United States and its oligarchic allies to undermine and distort the struggles of the people.

The picture above is from the 1980 edition of *Tricontinental*, an issue that was devoted to the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua.



Today, at the website of the People’s Archive of Rural India, the Senior Fellow of **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research** P. Sainath has published one of his most important columns. As many of you know, Sainath’s reports from rural India shone a spotlight on the devastation wrought by neoliberal policies to peasants and agricultural workers. He turned our attention to the epidemic of farmer suicides – perhaps now half a million dead in the past twenty years. As the countryside is slowly killed off, more and more people begin their long march to the cities – a phenomenon that mirrors the migration routes northward from Central America to North America. Dignity is compromised in both the rural and the urban locations, as these former agriculturalists struggle to make a living.

In his column, which you can read [here](#), Sainath makes the case for a mass march towards Delhi of farmers, agricultural workers and others to occupy the capital. He suggests the itinerary for a special session of the Indian Parliament. On September 5, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, the All-India Kisan Sabha and the All-India Agricultural Workers Union will indeed hold a joint demonstration at Parliament. This Mazdoor-Kisan Sangharsh Rally (Worker-Peasant Struggle Rally) is a significant development. What Sainath proposes is along this grain. We hope that his suggestion for a special session of Parliament is taken seriously – not just in India, but elsewhere.



Finally, two items of interest.

1. From Lebanon comes news of the latest issue of *Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research*. This issue is on the topic of incarceration, surveillance and policing. You can find this web journal (freely downloadable) [here](#).
2. Coming on July 5, the sixth dossier from **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research** on a remarkable development – the creation of workers’ housing in Solapur (Maharashtra). The workers here make Indian cigarettes, or *beedis* (pictured above). Keep an eye out for it.

Warmly, Vijay.