

A Striking Contrast*

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One of the immanent tendencies of capital is to commoditize every sphere of life; and under neo-liberal capitalism where the immanent tendencies of capital are given full play, we find the sway of commoditization reaching into new areas. The commoditization of education which has proceeded apace of late is one instance of this; and now we find commoditization invading the world of politics as never before.

The commoditization of politics has been going on for some time; but the large-scale purchase of legislators that is occurring everywhere, the latest instance being Karnataka, has carried it to a new height. No matter whom the people elect, the political formation with the deepest purse, will eventually form the government; and of course whom the people elect is itself determined, substantially, by which political formation has the deepest purse.

The traditional Marxist understanding has been that a bourgeois State can have a parliamentary form of government, because the institutions of the State, such as the army and the bureaucracy, remain unchanged even if a government responsive to the workers gets elected. When a working class party comes to office, unless it uses its office to smash the bourgeois State, it will perforce have to function within circumscribed limits which do not impinge on the continuation of the capitalist order. Commoditization of politics however seeks also to ensure that a working class party cannot even come to power through parliamentary elections; it simply will not have enough money to do so. Parliamentary democracy thus shades into a regime of direct rule, through a hand-picked political formation, by the corporate-financial oligarchy.

According to the Centre for Media Studies, an NGO based in Delhi, in the recently concluded parliament elections, the BJP spent a whopping Rs.27000 crores, or about Rs.50 crores per constituency. This was 45 percent of the total expenditure by all parties which came to Rs.60000 crores. The overwhelming bulk of these funds came from the corporate sector, with the BJP getting the lion's share of these. According to the Association for Democratic Reforms, another Delhi-based NGO, of the total donations above Rs.20000 in 2017-18, as much as 92 percent went to the BJP.

Two legal loopholes have made such enormous election expenditures possible: one is the system of bonds which political formations are now allowed to float, where the name of the donor is not made public, a scheme that, not surprisingly, was launched by the BJP; and the other is the system of accounting where the expenditure incurred by the party, as distinct from the candidate, is not counted in the latter's election expenditure. A political party with access to funds therefore can spend literally any amount it chooses for fighting elections, which basically means that it is the corporates who fight elections through their nominees.

What is significant is that the commoditization of politics, like the commoditization of education, has gone much further in India than in the advanced capitalist countries, and that too in a much shorter time. The sway of neo-liberal capitalism is mainly responsible for this. But within this general ambience, the BJP has carried the fusion of corporate and State power to a far greater extent than at any time earlier. If the

Rafale deal was one aspect of this fusion, the fact of 92 percent of corporate donations going to the BJP alone is the other aspect.

As against what is happening in India, we have a contrasting picture in Venezuela. U.S. imperialism, together with the Venezuelan elite, has been making frantic efforts to overthrow the government of President Nicholas Maduro, the successor to Hugo Chavez who spearheaded the “Bolivarian Revolution” in that country. In this the U.S. has the support of all the advanced capitalist countries, of all the “liberal” newspapers of the capitalist world, and of the entire Latin American Right, which has grown inter alia because of the successful “parliamentary coups” carried out in Brazil and elsewhere on that continent. It has also tried every weapon in its armoury, from economic warfare to the sabotage of Venezuela’s electricity system, to even an actual coup that tried to put Juan Guaido, the self-proclaimed, elite-backed “President” of the country, in power. And yet, all these efforts have miserably failed.

Not only have the people stood solidly behind the Maduro government, notwithstanding news reports flashed on television screens across the world, including in our own country, about the sufferings of the people under this government; but the Venezuelan armed forces too have backed the Maduro government. In many Latin American countries, the armed forces often have a character somewhat different from what traditional Marxist theory attributes to them. Drawn from the people, they are often politicized and not without sympathy for progressive regimes, though of course the opposite is also true. In fact, Chavez himself came from the armed forces and enjoyed much support among them. The Venezuelan armed forces have by and large continued their support for the Maduro government.

The U.S. administration tried its utmost to “buy” officers in the armed forces into supporting the coup it had engineered, but it failed miserably, which is a clear symptom of the fact that politics in Venezuela has not got commoditized. We thus have a clear contrast: between India where politics is increasingly getting commoditized and Venezuela where commoditization of politics has made little headway despite strenuous efforts being made by U.S. imperialism.

The Venezuelan army is not a revolutionary Red Army; Venezuela has not had a socialist revolution, establishing a workers’ State; Venezuela’s is not a classic tale of a heroic overthrow of the old order. Venezuela’s in fact is a much more low-key transformation as yet, compared to the classic revolutionary transformations of the sort that had electrified the world. What is more, even within this low-key transformation, the person at the helm, Nicholas Maduro, does not have the charisma of a Chavez.

Even so, the Venezuelan armed forces have stood by the government of Maduro which has brought about a significant change in economic policy: away from neo-liberalism and in a pro-people direction. This only suggests that the same people who can become mere “objects” in a world of commoditization of politics, can also assert themselves in a “subject” role when an opportunity arises for doing so, when there is a shift away from neo-liberalism. And when they do assert themselves in this manner, they also exert a pressure on other elements, like the armed forces, which also makes these elements impervious to imperialist blandishments.

Countering the commoditization of politics requires the institution of a whole set of electoral reforms including above all State funding of elections. But these reforms will not come into being unless popular pressure is built up; and any mobilization of the people requires an alternative politics. The shift from their being mere “objects” to playing a “subject” role requires the pursuit of an alternative politics which puts before them an alternative agenda.

The dialectic between the immanent tendencies of capital and the active intervention by workers was explored by Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy*. The immanent tendency of capital is to atomize workers, to recruit them as individuals drawn from divergent backgrounds and detached from one another; but they are put under one factory roof, and to increase their paltry wages they form “combinations”, which, though initially motivated by individual self-interest, represent the first rupture in the atomization effected by capital, and which then grow into a new “community”.

Likewise commoditization of politics which is an immanent tendency of capital in the contemporary epoch, can be broken if the working people are brought together in a new “combination” for a new agenda, different from what neo-liberalism offers to them. While initially they may get drawn to such an agenda by individual self-interest, the very fact of their coming together will unleash a tendency that runs counter to the commoditization of politics. It is only an alternative agenda, around which the working people can come together, giving rise to an alternative politics, which can break the tendency towards commoditization of politics.

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