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Muwatin Institute for Democracy and Human Rights

Concept Note

Muwatin 26th Annual Conference

“When will the Smile Return to Our World?”

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The outbreak of the Corona virus epidemic at the beginning of the year 2020, the floundering of most countries in confronting it, and the confusion surrounding the necessity of choosing between people's life and health or the health of the economy (and perhaps its life as well) revealed the fragility of the world order. The pandemic unveiled many things, and revealed the sham of the neoliberal promise of empowerment, self-realisation, and release of potentials. It became clear that the promised path to empowerment and self-fulfilment depended upon the enslavement of people with chains of debt, consumption, absence of social security, and the lack of security, in addition to a series of economic and political crises. It revealed that governments are capable of intervening and organizing when they so desire. It also revealed that governments' priorities were to invest in security, as the security apparatuses were more prepared for a crisis than the health systems in most countries and at all levels. Successive crises since the turn of the century have led to increased polarization in the world, heralding the end of the "global village", taking with it the promise of a peaceful world that moves steadily towards democracy and celebrates human rights. Polarization has taken the form of glaring differences in wealth, wars, conflicts, struggle for domination, contempt for international law, and the growth of right-wing populism with increasing fascist tendencies. Naturally, this was accompanied by the growth of various forms of resistance to these transformations in a variety of ways.

At the level of international relations, inter-state relations became similar to what they used to be in the nineteenth century; neo-colonialism is using old colonial methods to protect itself since it became threatened and contested. The last quarter of a century (after the end of the cold war, the collapse of the socialist camp, and the disappearance of the "communist threat") witnessed US military operations in Afghanistan, Colombia, Haiti, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, and Yugoslavia. This is in addition to indirect foreign interventions in countries such as Venezuela, and the United States having more than eight hundred military bases on foreign soil. Regional conflicts and increasing proxy wars indicate escalating rivalries between imperial powers for domination. Russia has worked to expand the scope of its hegemony by declaring a confrontation with the West; by militarily supporting the secession of Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia, (re)seizing Crimea, creating a centre of power in eastern Ukraine, and playing a strategic role in Syria and Libya, as well as promoting the escalation of its military power. China, using its "soft power", accompanied by a display of "hard power", has turned into a world power with a stronger position than it had during the Cold War. In 2014, Japan amended its laws to allow the involvement of its military forces in combat outside the country, and this came after a number of amendments that aimed to return Japan to playing military roles starting in 1991.

The "first world" has been the epicentre of economic crises, the strongest of which was the crisis of 2008. It then became the stage of a health disaster during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. These crises soon led to political reactions that culminated in the emergence of new transformations and movements such as the Indignados movement in Spain (which resulted in the Podemos party), the Yellow Vests movement in France, and the Black Lives Matter movement, which spread from the United States to many other countries. In Europe, the discourse regarding the duality of history (histories of liberation and enslavement), which links the well-being of Europe with the plundering of the Third World, is spreading. It culminated recently into symbolic popular actions involving the destruction of the symbols of slavery and exploitation. This comes after a long period where this discourse was confined to the circles of "critical intellectuals." On the other hand, populist tendencies have witnessed remarkable growth in the rich countries, joined by some from Eastern Europe. Right

wing and racist tendencies have become common in the countries of the first world. The discourse of democracy and human rights does not necessarily prevail any more.

The “second world” undertook the endeavour to end the unipolar state of affairs (which formed the essence of the “global village”). Analysts expect that the new balance of powers will lead to a multipolar world rather than a return to a bipolar world.

The third world is witnessing many transformations, such as the people taking to the streets and demanding the restructuring of their political systems. It is also witnessing a new wave of proxy wars, and escalating regional tensions (Egypt, Ethiopia, the Gulf States, India, Iran, Pakistan, South Africa, Sudan, Turkey, Venezuela, West Africa countries, and others). This coincided with the rise of emerging regional powers such as Iran, Brazil, Turkey, South Africa, and India, which increasingly harbour authoritarian forces with right-wing tendencies, some of which are populist in nature. What is new in the third world scene is that it is now divided between those who are satisfied with the status quo and do not see a basis for effecting change, and those who believe that the time has come to reshape the world based on new foundations.

There are some remarkable aspects regarding the polarization process: First, there are multiple attempts to build alliances and political movements on a non-national, regional, or ideological basis (such as "BRICS"). Second, conflicts within regional alliances are intensifying. Examples include the European Union's problems and popular scepticism about its usefulness, the Brexit, the division within the Gulf Cooperation Council, the decline of Venezuela's role within the anti-imperialist trend in South America, and so on. Third, internal polarization processes are becoming increasingly populist in character. The ruling elite in Israel is no longer satisfied with fearmongering only about the “Arab danger”, but started recently to include the threat of the "left", and boasts of building alliances with the Arab right. Another example is the unprecedented cleavages between American elites. Fourth, there exist multiple new projects to build international political alliances that transcend national loyalty. Anti-neoliberal activists in France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States believe that they should seek alliances with each other and with movements that adopt similar positions in East Asia, Africa, South America, and the Arab world. It is also noteworthy that some representatives of these movements have accomplished impressive achievements in their campaigns. Some examples are: Bernie Sanders, despite his socialist discourse, obtained a high number of votes in the Democratic Party; the success of the radical left-wing Syriza party in the elections in Greece in 2015; the considerable changes in the policy of the British Labour Party under Corbyn; and the ascension of Catherine Jacobs dotter from the Left-Green Party to the position of prime minister in Iceland.

In short, the world is going through a phase of polarisation and alignment, indicating the existence of a conviction across the world that it is about to enter a new era, and everyone will do all they can to position themselves in a way which will maximize their role in shaping the next order. However, the struggle for the future is, in fact, a struggle between the forces of the present. It is a struggle over the ability to harness the tools of the present in the interest of achieving current and contradictory visions of the future. One of the visions for the future is necessarily the preservation and consolidation of the status quo. Those who presently sit at the top of the status quo's hierarchy, naturally, adopt this vision. On the other hand, there are forces seeking to break out of these crises, realizing the sham of the neoliberal promise, and creating movements that are gaining momentum all over the world.

The results of this battle will determine the future. If the regimes -that can be described as neoliberal securitocracies- are able to suppress change movements and succeed in strengthening the hegemony of their populist right wing, the human condition will worsen, and the world will be on the verge of a third global war or something similar. It is noteworthy that the economic and social crises resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, in a context where the world economy had not yet recovered from the 2008 crisis, can facilitate the likelihood of this possibility, especially in the backdrop of security organs' expanded role during the pandemic.

The second possibility is that fascist forces resort to transforming their battles with the masses in their countries into wars to protect themselves and restore their systems. They will see warfare as an opportunity to cut unemployment, create the need for reconstruction, and silence the opposition. In this case, the world will return to a context similar to that preceding the two world wars. One option is an equivalent of a military division of the world through occupations, mandates, and guardianship utilising contemporary tools. The second option is a “soft” division equivalent to neo-colonialism with contemporary tools – a new iteration of the development theory.

The third possibility is that the world finds itself exhausted and decrepit, and is forced to formulate a new world order that does not depend on the imperialist division of the world, but rather on favouring the wellbeing of people, and limiting the power of the present dominant forces.

The probability of the realisation of any of these possibilities depends on many factors, not the least of which is the ability of the forces that are opposed to the status quo to organize politically in an effective and rational manner. This possibility is a likely one, at least in the longer term. In one situation, it might realise in the medium term. In another, it will become a longer-term possibility. In any case, we do not have the pillars of shaping the new future. We cannot even describe its features, but we know that it will be born from the womb of the present. It will be formed from the components that political movements around the world are creating, and its momentum will be a result of their political organisation.

Conference themes

The 26th Muwatin Annual Conference will discuss these issues on the global and the Arab scales, and present them in three rubrics:

The first rubric: Diagnosing the crisis of the current world order and exploring its depth and consequences. It discusses the nature of the neoliberal era, the decline in the position and role of international institutions, wealth polarisation, succession of crises, the growth of populist and fascist trends, and patterns of domination including securitization, digitisation, juridification, bio-politics, knowledge impoverishment, and their effects on the Arab world.

The second rubric: The mechanisms of transformation and change in the global system. It discusses political movements and their structures and demands, the prospects of international solidarity, revolutions. It also examines the linkage of anti-colonial causes, with those combating pollution, depletion of nature and global warming, the struggle for freedoms, justice and anti-discrimination, and the prospects of their success, their forms of organization (including digitisation), their political action, epistemic tools, and the place of the Arab world and the role of its peoples in the process of change.

The third rubric: The shape of the future in terms of welfare, justice, wealth, work, education, health, and social security, and how the possible transformation will reflect on the Arab world.