

Anarchist Responses When Elected Governments are Overturned

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Firmness in Principles, Flexibility in Tactics

What should revolutionary anarchists do when an elected government is overturned by a right-wing coup? I am thinking, for example, of the 2002 coup in Venezuela against President Hugo Chavez. This was carried out by a section of the military forces together with most of the capitalist class. It was backed by the U.S. government and other U.S. institutions. Some of the U.S. support was overt (immediate recognition of the new regime) and some covert (channeling money to the plotters beforehand). However the coup was soon reversed due to several factors: pressure from Venezuelan workers and the poor, support for Chavez by many lower-level military, and international pressure by other South American governments. Chavez was helped by the knowledge of many governments and businesspeople that he was not really anti-capitalist, despite his radical rhetoric.

Another recent example was the 2005 coup in Nepal, where King Gyanendra dismissed the elected government and ruled directly, relying mainly on his military forces (parliament having been suspended three years earlier). He was opposed by very widespread street demonstrations and strikes, organized into a Popular Front of bourgeois parties, other popular organizations, and the Maoist forces in the countryside. In April, this coup, too, was reversed. The king turned power over to the elected parliament. The Maoists had gained a lot of popular credit for their participation in the struggle. They have just signed a peace agreement with the reform government and are posed to run their leader in the next elections.

Very many other examples could be recalled. It is typical of capitalism that its gains of political democracy are shaky at best. Countries go through cycles of democracy and dictatorship and back again. I need only mention the history of European fascism. Even, for example, in the U.S.A., the current administration stole the 2000 election. Since then it has been steadily curtailing political liberties.

How should anarchists deal with such situations? The issue points to a historic weakness in anarchism. Despite its excellent goals and great ideas, anarchism has repeatedly been defeated, crushed by fascist or Leninist forces, or merely marginalized. A major reason for this, I strongly believe, has been its rigidity and its tactical and strategic clumsiness. The anarchist movement has consistently failed to maneuver tactically in an effective fashion. This was, I believe, the cause for its disastrous failure in the Spanish revolution of the 1930s. Instead, our approach should be FIRMNESS IN PRINCIPLES, FLEXIBILITY IN TACTICS.

Anarchist Views on Elections

As a general principle, anarchists have opposed participation in elections. Under capitalism, for all its promises of democracy and freedom, in fact a minority of the population, the capitalist class, rules the economy, and therefore the state. This is the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, whether or not in an overtly democratic form. Anarchists do not seek to manage the capitalist state nor to elect people to do so. That is not what we are about. Instead, we seek to organize labor unions, community associations, antiwar movements, and so on. We engage in militant nonelectoral action from below against the state and the capitalist class.

Anarchists do not believe in choosing leaders to be political in our place, for us, as our representatives. The interests, opinions, and desires of tens of millions of citizens cannot be packaged

into two parties or embodied by two candidates. “Mass democracy” is a contradiction in terms. We want direct, face-to-face, democracy, in workplace and community assemblies, in a cooperative economy (libertarian socialism). We want as much participatory democracy as possible and only as much representation and delegation as is minimally necessary for federation.

The issue of electoralism was the main practical issue in the original split between Karl Marx and the anarchists. Marx advocated the formation of working class political parties which would, he hoped, break the workers from reliance on capitalist parties. History has not supported his electoralist strategy, if we consider the dismal record of the Social Democratic or Communist Parties or even the recent Green Parties. In any case, Marx was completely against voting for capitalist parties or politicians. (Today in the U.S., most so-called socialists are either for voting for the capitalist Democratic Party or for liberal, capitalist, third parties such as the Green Party or Nader’s operations. They reject both anarchist and Marxist principles.)

While rejecting participation in elections, anarchists have usually believed that capitalist democracies are better for the workers and other oppressed people than are capitalist political dictatorships (military juntas, police states, monarchies, fascisms, etc.) It is not that we think that the workers could control the state through elections — the myth of bourgeois democracy. But it is easier for workers to organize unions, for oppressed peoples to organize popular resistance, and for radicals to publish political literature, to hold meetings, and to spread their ideas. There is repression, but not the same as in a totalitarian state. A popular sentiment arises in favor of free speech and freedom of association, which anarchists use to protect ourselves from government repression. The capitalists do not want to give us these rights, but they must if they are to have them for themselves, let alone to give the workers the (false) impression that the people rule.

Errico Malatesta, the Italian anarchist, wrote, “...*The worst of democracies is always preferable, if only from an educational point of view, [to] the best of dictatorships... Democracy is a lie, it is...government by the few to the advantage of a privileged class. But we can still fight it in the name of freedom and equality...*” (1995. *The Anarchist Revolution*; p. 77) That is, bourgeois democracies claim to stand for “freedom and equality” and therefore can be challenged to live up to their claims.

In my opinion, an anarchist set of tactics for dealing with right-wing coups is based on this evaluation of bourgeois democracy as more useful for the working and oppressed population. If this is rejected, then my argument falls down. (I am not discussing the issue of coups by the authoritarian left; this has differences which I will not go into here.)

There is another issue. Most situations in which antidemocratic coups take place are in oppressed nations — the so-called Third World. The coup-makers are often backed by foreign imperialists, as the U.S. backed the Venezuelan forces. This raises the question of the right of the oppressed nation to self-determination, of its people to determine their own future and their own government — or nongovernment — without imperialist domination. This is also one of my premises, although it is not essential to the argument.

The fundamental principle is FREEDOM. Working people should have the freedom to choose their system of governance and to choose who to have as their leader, if they want a leader. People have the right to be wrong. In fact, a class or a nation only learns by making mistakes. Anarchists are the strongest supporters of freedom. We should always support the right of the people to make their own decisions, even when we disagree with what they decide. Of course, we must never give up our right to raise our politics and to patiently explain our opinions. This is part of the process of their learning by experience.

A Lesson from the Russian Revolution

When a coup happens or is threatened and masses of people are in the streets in protest, it is the task of anarchists to find their way to the people. We must find a way to participate in the popular struggle, without for a moment giving up our anarchist principles. We cannot endorse the government nor vote for even the best of presidents (let alone authoritarian bourgeois politicians). Anarchists can give absolutely no political support to bourgeois politicians or the state. These are principled positions. However, anarchists can join in opposing the coup. In doing this, we are supporting the people, not the state. Within the popular movement, anarchists can cooperate practically and concretely with the bourgeois politicians and Stalinist forces, agreeing on immediate, short-term goals, without any agreement on long-term goals.

In the popular movement, anarchists warn the people that they cannot rely on the bourgeois politicians. Anarchists can call for councils to be formed in neighborhoods and in workplaces in order to out-organize the coup. Anarchists should demand distribution of arms to the working class, rather than reliance on the military. An armed, self-organized, people is the most effective way to smash a coup — and, we argue, go further than the limits of bourgeois democracy.

The approach advocated here has been learned from the experiences of the Russian and Spanish revolutions, among other experiences. During the Russian revolution, there was a not-very liberal Provisional Government, headed by Kerensky. This government was persecuting the left, anarchists and Bolsheviks, jailing as many as it could. However an even more right-wing force was led by the Cossack general Kornilov. He sought to overturn the liberal regime, smash the workers' and peasants' councils (soviets), and wipe out all the socialist parties, even the most moderate. In short, Kornilov intended to be a proto-fascist dictator and advanced on the capital to carry out this program.

What should the Bolsheviks do? (I do not know about discussions among the anarchists at this time.) A group of sailors visited Trotsky and other Bolsheviks in their prison and asked, "Isn't it time to arrest the government?" "No, not yet," was the answer. "Use Kerensky as a gun-rest to shoot Kornilov. Afterward we will settle with Kerensky." (Trotsky, 1967, *History of the Russian Revolution*, vol. II, p. 227)

Bolsheviks and anarchists, along with activists from other socialist parties worked with rank-and-file workers to set up large numbers of committees for defense of the revolution. These spread throughout the Russian empire. They distributed arms among the workers, mobilized reliable military forces, and organized workers to sabotage the advancing Kornilov forces (so that railroad troop trains got thoroughly lost and telegraph messages never got through). Workers and soldiers from Petrograd were sent out to meet the advancing forces, to talk to them and persuade them to turn around. These methods were highly successful. The military advance dissipated like water poured on hot sand, almost nonviolently (some officers were shot). This led to a big upswing in the influence of the far left and a discrediting of the moderate socialists. It was only a matter of time until the Kerensky regime was overthrown by a coalition of the Bolsheviks, Left Social Revolutionaries (peasant-populists) and anarchists.

Throughout the Kornilov affair, the Bolsheviks did not join the Provisional Government (and certainly the anarchists did not). In fact they politically criticized the Kerensky regime for its waffling and weakness in defending democracy. They maintained contact with other parties for purposes of practical coordination only. In later years, Trotsky often cited this incident as a guide to action. Trotsky summarized it, "*Support them technically but not politically.*" (p. 305) Lenin was

even clearer about not supporting the liberal government. At the time, he wrote (“To the Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P.”),

“Even now we must not support Kerensky’s government. This is unprincipled. We may be asked: aren’t we going to fight against Kornilov? Of course we must! But this is not the same thing; there is a dividing line here...We shall fight, we are fighting against Kornilov, just as Kerensky’s troops do, but we do not support Kerensky. On the contrary, we expose his weakness. There is the difference.” (Selected Works, vol. 2, p. 222)

A Lesson from the Spanish Revolution

Similar lessons may be learned from the 1936 to 1939 Spanish revolution. Usually recognized as the two main sides were the legally elected Popular Front government (the “Loyalists” or “Republicans”) versus the fascist military forces which intended to overthrow it (and eventually did, with military aid from Hitler). The Popular Front was a coalition of working class parties (including the Communists and the Socialists), and pro-capitalist parties. The mass of the workers was divided in half between those in the unions affiliated with the Spanish Socialist Party and those in the anarchist-led unions. When the military attempted its coup, the workers beat it back. Voluntary armed forces (militias) were created by the anarchists and various socialists.

Given the outbreak of the civil war, what should revolutionary anarchists and other socialists do? Just like some anarchists today, there were some (Bordigists and others) who thought that revolutionaries should not support either side. As one declared, *“No political or material support to the bourgeois Loyalist government!”* (quoted in Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution*, 1973, Pathfinder, p. 422) After all, the Popular Front republic was a capitalist, imperialist, state, with a colony in Morocco, and which had jailed thousands of workers and leftists. In practice, this was an unrealistic position, since the workers were not ready to overthrow the republic in the face of fascism. The leaders of the Spanish left felt (correctly) that the republic was clearly a lesser evil to the fascists. The leading anarchists, however, drew the conclusion from this that they should enter the Popular Front government, in alliance with the reformist Socialists, Communists, and out-and-out capitalist politicians. They subordinated their struggle to the capitalist state.

There was, however, a third possible position. This was for the anarchist and left socialist militias to focus their forces against the fascists — until they were strong enough to overthrow the Republican state. Until that day, they should give military-technical support to the republic but no political support. Revolutionary workers must not give up their political independence from the class enemy. They should not join the Popular Front government, nor vote for its candidates, nor vote for its programs. The revolutionaries would be in political opposition. They should expose the vacillations and betrayals of the Popular Front (which, in fact, led to the defeat of the Republic). They would persuade the workers, peasants, and little people of the need for a revolution, replacing the bureaucratic-military state with an association of workers’ and popular councils — with internal democracy so that different parties and organizations could compete for influence. In fact, this could have been demonstrated in one region of Spain (Catalonia) where the anarchist unions had the support of the big majority of the local workers.

This approach was raised by a revolutionary minority of anarchists, the Friends of Durruti Group. Fed up with the class compromises of the anarchist union leadership, they called for completing the revolution by overthrowing the republican capitalist state and replacing it with a

national defense committee elected through the mass unions. In their 1938 *Towards a Fresh Revolution*, they denounced the political support of the Popular Front: “*We are opposed to collaboration with bourgeois groups. We do not believe that the class approach can be abandoned. Revolutionary workers must not shoulder official posts, nor establish themselves in the ministries...That would be tantamount to strengthening our enemies and tightening the noose of capitalism.*” (p. 38)

However, the Friends of Durrutti accepted practical, material, cooperation with the bourgeois state, until they were able to overthrow it: “*For as long as the war lasts, collaboration is permissible — on the battlefield, in the trenches, on the parapets, and in productive labor in the rearguard.*” (same) Anarchists could not hope to win over the workers who were fooled by the liberals, the Communist Party, the Socialists, and so on, unless they were willing to engage in practical, concrete, cooperation against fascism. Unfortunately, the Friends of Durruti organized too late to be effective in changing the course of the war.

Even in the U.S.A.

It is not the job of anarchists to find ways of staying out of popular struggles, in order to be pure. Yet we must not surrender our principles in order to be popular for a time (as the Spanish anarchists did when they joined the Popular Front government, or as most of the world’s socialists do when they embrace Hugo Chavez).

For example, right after the 2000 presidential election in the U.S., it became obvious that the election had been full of fraud, trickery, and racism. In particular, African-Americans were furious about many of them being denied the vote, after so many had struggled and died for the right to vote. All this was widely reported, yet no one organized protests about this — not the Democrats nor Nader. I think that anarchists, if at all possible, should have organized mass protests against the fraudulence and racism of the vote counting, explicitly exposing the Democrats as unwilling to defend the people’s rights. This would go side-by-side with our explaining our criticisms of electoralism overall (even when you try to vote, they do not let you!).

Today it is literally a life or death matter for revolutionary anarchists to find ways of participating in popular struggles while sticking to our principles and telling the truth to working people. Given the world’s economic, military, and ecological crises, we simply cannot afford to let anarchism be defeated or marginalized again.

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