

# Pathways to Solidarity: Struggles against Police Brutality in the U.S., Myanmar, and Iran

June 15, 2021



[On June 6, 2021, I spoke with two amazing women about uprisings against police brutality/mass incarceration in Myanmar/Burma, U.S., Iran & pathways to solidarity. **Romarilyn Ralston** is a prison abolitionist scholar and activist in the United States. **Debbie Stothard** is a Burmese human rights activist.

*This one-hour dialogue delves into the similarities and differences between our struggles, and ways to create collaboration among activists from these countries. If there were any doubts about the urgency of addressing these connections, the latest statement of Michael Flynn, a Trump advisor about the need for a Myanmar style military coup in the U.S., shows that the Republicans are drawing connections between Myanmar and the U.S. for their own fascistic purposes.*

*Click here for video.*

*The video supplements the analysis below, which I wrote two weeks earlier.]*

Why is so little explicit connection being made by activists between the Black Lives Matter uprising in the U.S., the current mass uprising in Myanmar, and the ongoing struggles in Iran? Although located in different geographical locations, with different protagonists and histories, these three movements all confront issues of police brutality, mass incarceration, militarism and authoritarianism. In order to create links of global solidarity and to help all of them move forward, we need to understand their specific facts and then begin to draw out their similarities and differences. Finally, we need to look for ways to create collaboration among activists from these three movements.

## **Obstacles To Ending Police Brutality and Mass Incarceration in the U.S.**

The conviction of police officer Derek Chauvin for his murder/lynching of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 was rare in a country in which the legal system has mostly sided with those who enslave, murder, and imprison Black, Brown and indigenous people. This conviction would not have happened without the powerful Black Lives Matter Movement that rocked the United States after the murder of Floyd.

Shortly before the announcement of the verdict however, MaKhia Bryant, a sixteen-year old Black woman was shot dead by a police officer in Columbus Ohio. Shortly thereafter Andrew Brown, a Black man was shot in the back of the head by the police in Pasquotank, North Carolina. According to the *New York Times*, during the first twenty days in the month of April alone, when the Chauvin trial was in progress, the U.S. police killed 64 people who were disproportionately Black and Latino.

The U.S. prison and jail population continues to be approximately 2.3 million people. It rivals China's official 1.7 million which is more accurately 2.7 million when including the one million incarcerated in China's Xinjiang province.

The incarcerated population in the U.S. continues to disproportionately represent Black and Latinx people. The rate of COVID contraction in U.S. prisons and jails is 34 out of 100 while the rate for the U.S. population as a whole is 9 in 100.

The Black Lives Matter movement which gained world attention in 2014 after the police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri, and became a nationwide multiracial protest of millions in the Summer of 2020 after the police murder of George Floyd, has certainly made an impact. Over fifty percent of U.S. adults currently express some support for this movement, and approximately thirty percent strongly support it. On the other hand, the majority of the white adult population in the U.S. still has a favorable view of the police, and does not support the abolition of the system of mass incarceration.

White supremacist forces who carried on an attempted coup on January 6, 2021 with thousands displaying Confederate and Trump flags taking over the capitol building in Washington D.C. still have a strong base. They represent many of the 74 million who voted for Trump in 2020 and continue to deny the legitimacy of the Biden and Harris election and administration

Although the January 6 coup attempt did not succeed, Republicans are now promoting their extremist agenda by passing legislation in various states to limit voting rights, tamper with vote counts, and they are also attacking progressive anti-racist and feminist education as "brainwashing" of our children and "reverse racism".

Although, the Biden/Harris administration has made some efforts to challenge these moves, they are not able to pass any meaningful legislation concerning police brutality, voting rights or gun violence because several House and Senate Democrats would not vote for the above. Furthermore, while liberal Democrats support better training and more accountability for the police and have been passing city and state bills toward those aims, many do not support the idea of defunding the police (which requires giving a portion of the police budget to social services and counseling) or abolishing the prison system.

This complex reality cannot be faced by limiting the struggle against police brutality/mass incarceration to the United States. We need to have a global view. Toward that aim, let's look at the struggles in Myanmar and Iran.

## **Myanmar's Uprising Against the Military Continues Under Assault**

In Myanmar, since February 1, an uprising has been in progress against a military coup. The military which has been in power since 1948 after independence from Britain, declared the coup to overturn the results of a legitimate election in which the National League for Democracy gained a majority of seats in the parliament. Over 800 protesters have been killed, over 4000 arrested and 20 sentenced to death since February 1. A general strike involving most sectors of the population has been continuing. Women who have been explicitly challenging misogyny and the second-class status of women in Burmese society have come out in support of the uprising. The opposition National Unity Government is now calling for a federalist alternative to the military-civilian government that ruled from 2015 on under Aung San Suu Kyi.

The official prison population in Myanmar is 80,000 out of a general population of 54 million. That number is increasing on a daily basis because of mass arrests around the country by the army, raids on homes of protesters and leads from a massive network of government informers. The actual number of incarcerated people should also include the Rohingya Muslim population. Since 2017, the military has forcibly removed 700,000 to one million Rohingya from their homes. These refugees are now living in prison-like refugee camps in Bangladesh. Another 600,000 Rohingya remain inside the country. Indeed the United Nations has characterized the Burmese government's assault on the Rohingya as a genocide. Shamefully, Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the National Democratic League, and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who was involved in a power-sharing government with the military from 2011 until the recent coup, has downplayed and justified the genocidal military assault on the Rohingya.

In contrast, many protesters in the uprising are now acknowledging that what their government has done to the Rohingya and to other ethnic minorities has been unjust. They are now more open to accepting a federalist alternative that recognizes the rights of historically oppressed minorities who constitute one-third of the population.

The Myanmar uprising however faces severe challenges. The military known as Tatmadaw is a cult-like institution with 500,000 troops. It trains soldiers from a young age to see anyone other than the Bamar ethnic majority as criminal and sub-human. The members of the armed forces live a privileged segregated life and are brainwashed with nationalism and Bamar ethnic chauvinism. The military is also a corporation controlling large investments in Burma and elsewhere. It has its own banks, schools, hospitals, and mobile network. In addition, this brutal military regime is supported by China, Russia and India which have investments in Myanmar. These states sell arms to the government and see the continuation of military rule as necessary for their own immediate and strategic interests in the region.

The combined might of the capitalist state-army promoting religious chauvinism-misogyny, and the important strategic role which Myanmar plays for various global powers, makes its military government very powerful. Thus the struggle in Myanmar cannot move forward without global grassroots solidarity to oppose the military government and to give voice to Myanmar women, striking labor activists and ethnic minorities.

In these respects, Myanmar and Iran have much in common.

### **Iran's 2019 Uprising Crushed but Protests Continue**

Iran has experienced three waves of mass protests in the last decade. The 2009 Green Movement against the fraudulent election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was mainly a reformist movement demanding that votes be counted. The 2017 and 2019 wave of popular protests had a mass working-class character and were led by unemployed youth, women, oppressed minorities, labor activists and students. In essence these were protests against religious fundamentalism, state

exploitation, its domestic injustices and its regional imperialist interventions in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. After the 2019 uprising, at least 1500 people were killed by the Iranian regime and over 7000 mostly youth were arrested. Most of those who were arrested are still languishing in prison under horrible conditions. Several including Navid Afkari, a beloved young wrestler have been executed. Many are contracting COVID.

While labor protests and strikes continue around the country, it is the resistance of women and especially women political prisoners that has become a unique symbol of struggles in Iran. Most notable is Nasrin Sotoudeh, a brave feminist human rights attorney who was sentenced to 38 years in prison and 148 lashes for having defended the Girls of Revolution Avenue (women who took off their headscarves in public and refused the compulsory hijab). She has been in and out of prison and on hunger strike multiple times since 2010 and has also contracted COVID. Another feminist political prisoner Narges Mohammadi was serving a long sentence for opposing the death penalty and defending the rights of children. She was recently released and has just published a book in Persian entitled, *White Torture*, which contains interviews with women political prisoners. Zeynab Jalalian, a Kurdish woman political prisoner, is among various Kurdish and Arab women who have been imprisoned for defending the rights of women and national minorities. Sepideh Gholian, a young woman journalist is serving a long sentence for covering and defending the strikes of sugar cane workers in Khuzestan. She continues to write from inside prison walls about the terrible situation of women prisoners from the Arab ethnic minority. There are so many other political prisoners including labor activists, leaders of the teachers' union, environmentalists as well as social prisoners who are suffering under intolerable conditions in a country which has the highest rate of executions after China.

Within the past few years there have been several new waves of mass arrests of Kurdish, Arab and most recently Balouchi activists and intellectuals. Various activists representing these national minorities have been executed. The Iranian regime also murders destitute Kurdish, and Balouch workers who daily cross the border to carry cargo including fuel on their backs in order to earn a meager living. These assaults and murders are further manifestation of a history of oppression of national minorities in Iran. Balouchistan, Khuzestan and Kurdistan are the poorest provinces in the country, the most neglected, the most environmentally damaged, while their labor and natural resources are exploited to promote the Iranian regime's militarism and regional interventions. Khuzestan and Kurdistan were also the provinces that had the strongest participation during the 2017 and 2019 uprisings.

Like Myanmar, the Iranian state needs to be understood as a case of militarized state capitalism promoting religious chauvinism and misogyny. It is also acting as a regional imperialist power in the Middle East. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution however, Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers who established the Islamic Republic, have used an anti-U.S. imperialist discourse to try to destroy and to discredit any progressive and revolutionary opposition to their repression and to co-opt part of the Iranian and global left.

Although Iran is on the verge of economic collapse due to its military spending and also the U.S. sanctions, the Iranian regime has been trying to strengthen itself through economic, military and surveillance ties with China and Russia. Both China and Russia see Iran as important to their strategic interests in the Middle East where they have now become the new dominant global powers replacing the U.S. The U.S. continues to decrease its military presence in the region and focuses on the Pacific as the key site of its competition with China.

Given these complex realities, it is very important for those opposing police brutality and mass

incarceration in the U.S., Myanmar and Iran to come together in solidarity.

## **How Can U.S. Black Lives Matter, Myanmar and Iran Struggles Help Each Other?**

Activists in the U.S. have gained some breathing space after the defeat of the January 6, 2021 fascist-white supremacist coup attempt and with the coming into power of the Biden-Harris administration. However, we need to be fully aware that a scenario like Myanmar or Iran could still be our future. We need to address the global picture.

We are all living in a bipolar world in which U.S. capitalism and its allies are vying with Chinese and Russian capitalism and their allies for global domination. Blocks of state and monopoly capitalism lead each camp. Some blocks are openly drawing on extreme racism, misogyny, xenophobia, mass surveillance, disinformation and authoritarianism to promote this global competition. Other blocks are promoting a more democratic capitalist imperialism. Given that capitalism itself is a system that promotes exploitation, discrimination and monopolization of power however, the more democratic capitalist block has clear limits in terms of what it can offer.

Discussing this global picture can help activists against police brutality and mass incarceration in the U.S., Myanmar and Iran engage in a productive conversation and move forward.

Each country's struggles can also offer unique contributions:

\*The past and present contributions of Abolitionism in the U.S. as a humanist struggle and body of thought and analysis demands serious engagement by all who call themselves abolitionists around the world. U.S. Abolitionism puts the emancipation of the human being at the center of our struggles and promotes transformative justice as the alternative to policing and mass incarceration. According to U.S. human rights attorney, Bryan Stevenson, emancipation begins with confronting the ideology of white supremacy in which a Black person is viewed as a criminal. The goal of Abolitionism is to challenge any form of dehumanizing or demonizing of the Other. Another unique feature of U.S. Abolitionism is that it has developed a rich body of economic and social analyses through the work of socialist feminist thinkers such as Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Beth Richie, Joy James and Mariame Kaba. They address the specificities of U.S. racialized carceral capitalism and restate the original connection between Abolitionism and feminism by addressing gender violence.

\*In Myanmar, the current effort to challenge misogyny and the dehumanization of the ethnic minorities, especially the Rohingya Muslims is a very important development. If the opposition to the military regime really does succeed in working out a federalist alternative that recognizes the right to self-determination of ethnic minorities and also does away with the misogynist rules that dominate Burmese society, that would be a beacon of hope for the region and the world.

\*In Iran, the feminist struggle has been resilient and creative. Women face discrimination, violence and second-class status as daughters, wives, mothers, students, employees, unemployed workers or part-timers, and face even more discrimination if they are members of an oppressed national or religious minority. However, they also represent 60% of university students. They have published a wide variety of novels, and when possible express themselves in blogs and websites, hold study groups, forums, and publish translations of works by international feminists. On March 8, 2021, International Women's Day, women held small gatherings around the country, opposed new legislation which bans birth control, demanded abortion rights, opposed gender violence and femicide, demanded economic, political and social equality, and called for the release of political prisoners. Since the Fall of 2020, we have also seen a budding # Me Too Movement which has targeted artists, writers, academics, army leaders and members of the parliament as well as abusive fathers, uncles, brothers.

Last year, the feminist and human rights struggles inside Iran came together with the U.S. and global struggle against police brutality and mass incarceration through the 2020 Right Livelihood Award. This award was given to Bryan Stevenson, Nasrin Sotoudeh, Belarusian human rights activist, Ales Bialiatski, and Nicaraguan environmental activist, Lottie Cunningham Wren. Recent documentaries about Sotoudeh ( *Nasrin* (2020) ) and about Stevenson ( *True Justice* (2020)) also reveal commonalities between the two as individuals and representatives of a broader struggle.

U.S., Myanmar and Iranian activists against police abuse and carceral capitalism need to have forums that bring these struggles in conversation with each other. We need such an effort as a pathway to reverse the current authoritarian capitalist wave around the world.