

BELGIUM

Democracy Without an Elected Government

Farooque Chowdhury

FAILURE TO ACCOMMODATE contending interests has come out starkly in the bourgeois democracy with a crown. "Belgium no longer works. It is a nation that has failed", said Bart De Wever, leader of the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), the party calling for independence for Dutch-speaking Flanders. By securing 27 seats in the 150-seat parliament N-VA appeared as the strongest political party. In Flanders, a region that accounts for almost 60% of the population, 45% voted for the N-VA and other separatists.

Since the June 2010 elections, the ruling classes have produced an unfinished political power equation that consequently generated a world record of a country without an elected government, when economic recovery is fragile, unemployment is hovering around 8.5%, and the euro is in crisis. On May 19, the Chamber of Representatives adopted the 2011 budget submitted by the unelected government. A bourgeois practice by a government without a mandate!

Iraq, a few months back, possessed a record without a full-fledged government for 249 days. For 353 days, between July 17, 2003 and July 15, 2004, Cambodia was without government. In 1977, the Netherlands set the European record of 208 days. Belgium had similar experience in October 1978-April 1979. A caretaker government ruled the country termed as an "accident of history" by Yves Leterme four years ago. After the June 2007 election, it took nine months to produce a coalition government. Yves Leterme now rules Belgium with decrees from the monarch although his Flemish Christian Democrat party was routed in the elections.

There are dictations. Standard & Poor's has threatened that the country's credit rating could be downgraded if a government is not formed within months. Fitch has also issued almost similar threat to the third highest debt burdened country in Europe with public debt 97.2% of annual output in 2010. But, the financial crisis, and the historic political impasse has not deterred the unelected rulers from sending war planes to strike in Libya in the name of "saving" humanity.

Bifurcation of the country, which attracts more than 10% of all logistical foreign investments in Europe (Ernst & Young, *Barometer of Belgian Attractiveness*), into Flanders and Wallonia, which housed 75,600 persons owning more than \$1 million in 2010 of whom 750 to 1,000 were super-rich owning more than \$30 million, a 9.8% increase from previous year, (*World Wealth Report*) is not a contradiction between sunset industries, mainly coal and steel in the south, and sunrise industries, chemicals, high-tech, and services in the north, but the dominant Flemish aspiration, a hunger of a section of a capital. While the world dominating capitals try to trample national borders and finalize its world-winning adventure—globalization—its one part prefers a small corner, a contradiction within itself.

With the shift of economic and political power from Wallonia to Flanders, Flemish separatist sentiment is unwilling to feed the less affluent Wallonia. Actually, the section of the capital prefers to free its hands and feet for greater gain. The Francophone Walloons prefer unity. The French, on the other hand, would embrace Wallonia if it secedes and likes to join France. Capitals have respective equations for further accumulation. The question of dominance by a particular language in the country's socio-cultural life reflects the issue of dominance in an economy that in terms of inward FDI flows was among the top ten ranked countries in 2009.

With one of the most productive workforce per hour worldwide, low real estate costs, tax incentives and a special reduction of 80% in taxation of royalties Belgium, as Denise Rutherford, president of AMCHAM Belgium said, "has become more attractive for US investment". (On the occasion of the release of the organization's 2007 investment report.) The US, the main foreign investor, mostly has poured money in the finance and insurance, and in chemical, automotive assembly, petroleum refining and pharmaceutical sectors. Investment in the service sector has more than tripled since 2000.

Having least contradiction with the Empire in the arena of trade and economy, and a close collaborator in the Empire's activities in Afghanistan, Africa, the Balkans, Iraq and Lebanon the country backs NATO's central and eastern European expansion. Involved with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Belgium contributed AWAC crews for surveillance flights over the US. Other than the NATO and EU headquarters, NATO's military headquarters is also in the country.

Its early occupiers have made the Belgians critical of any form of authority. But capital has made the Belgian workers much efficient, squeezing out their labor power most brutally, raising its industrial productivity much higher than the US, Germany and Japan. US dollar produced per hour per worker in Belgium is 55.9 while it is 51.8 in Ireland, 50.3 in Italy, 45.0 in Germany, 42.0 in the UK, 53.0 in Norway, 37.3 in Japan and 49.6 in the US. On the other hand, International Metalworkers' Federation informs: Belgian worker requires working time to buy beef: 82 minutes, bread: 9 min, chicken: 21 min, fish: 84 min and milk: 4 min. Its principal trade unions either repudiate class struggle or aim to achieve Christian principles or uphold business interests. Its ruling classes have co-opted a section of the labor leadership, and have sent industrial unrest to one of the lowest in the EU.

Now, in the land of "Belgian compromise", ability to contrive complex solutions conciliating competing concerns, a section of capital aspires to proclaim the end of the country with the national motto "Strength Through Unity". "[W]e don't know if it will be possible to reach a compromise between them [the north and the south]", said Marc De Vos, the head of the Itinera Institute, a Brussels-based policy think tank. (*Time*, June 14, 2010)

On January 23, opposing possible collapse of the country, thousands of citizens in Brussels protested against the political anarchy. On February 17, students in Brussels, Antwerp, Liege, Bruges and Ghent tried to resolve unresolved political contradiction by rallying in defense of their country's integrity. They named it "Potato Revolution". A section of people, it seems, stands against a section of capital. There were also other suggestions to protest including denial to shave beard and abstain from making love. But the reality is tough for nourishing love for the European model of federalism, where no "national" party with activity on both sides of the linguistic line exists, where the Christian democrats, socialists, liberals and the Greens are divided along Francophone and Flemish lines. Actually there is no single capital that can dominate the economy, where 73% of the work force is engaged in the service sector and 25% in industry. With a trade union density, as OECD's *Employment Outlook* tells, standing around 54%.

"In Belgium, we have a split in the political system", said Philippe Van Parijs, a philosophy professor at Catholic University of Louvain (*Time*, Jan. 24, 2011) The "split in the political system" of the 20th economy in the world, and the 10th exporter of goods globally, as the WTO informs, has cropped up in the field of an economy of uneven development, one of the attributes of capitalist economy. This feeds a particular form of social psychology. A February report by the US Institute of Peace says that the political elites are now fanning up tensions and exploiting linguistic differences to push a parochial political agenda. "Over the past few years, resentment has only grown between Belgium's Dutch and French speakers. [...] In some Flemish communes ...children are banned from speaking French on the playground, prospective house buyers cannot purchase property if they don't speak Dutch,

and locals are encouraged to report businesses that do not employ Dutch speakers. The Flemish [...] see the French speakers as feckless, inefficient and even corrupt. [...] '[...] Belgium is one state composed of two countries,' says Carl Devos, a political scientist at Ghent University." (*Time*, Jun. 14, 2010)

Time asked: how long can Belgium continue to reconcile its conflicting constituents? (Jun. 30, 2010) Requirement and ability of its corrupt ruling class will produce the answer. Till then, Tintin, fox "Reynard", bear Bruyn, wolf Isengrim and lion-king Nobel, will wander in political wilderness created by the ruling classes of the country once Marx once dubbed "the paradise of Continental Liberalism". The "Flanders' fields" that witnessed many battles is now waiting for another engagement, not less significant than the older ones.

The dominant capital's aspiration, Belgium—bifurcation, will not hurt it. Break-up of densely populated Belgium, "located at the heart of one of the world's most highly industrialized regions and reaching 140 million European consumers within a radius of 300 miles", will not produce an immediate cataclysm, but will create an intra- and inter-capital chain reaction and political implication, and exemplify a dominant capital's hunger and limitation, a dwelling with opposites, in a bourgeois democracy. □□□