

Quick Thought on COP27

Tuesday 8 November 2022, by [HAMOUCHENE Hamza](#), [RABBANI Mouin](#) (Date first published: 4 November 2022).

From 6-18 November 2022, the twenty-seventh United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP27) will convene in Sharm al-Shaikh, Egypt. Typically attended by numerous heads of state and government, these annual conferences are held to address the growing global climate emergency, review progress towards existing commitments, and promote agendas that reduce carbon emissions. These meetings are also increasingly criticized for prioritising the agendas of Western governments and the interests of multinational corporations. Egypt's hosting of this particular meeting has also been a matter of controversy in view of its government's record of repression and efforts to prevent access to the summit by environmental groups and climate activists. To discuss these issues further Mouin Rabbani, Editor of Quick Thoughts and Jadaliyya Co-Editor, interviewed Hamza Hamouchene, North Africa Program Coordinator at the Transnational Institute (TNI)

Mouin Rabbani (MR): What is COP27, what is its significance, and what is expected to result from it?

Hamza Hamouchene (HH): COP27 is the twenty-seventh United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP). It will be convened in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, between 6 and 18 November 2022.

Every year, and for almost thirty years, the world's political leaders, advisers, media and corporate lobbyists have gathered for these climate conferences. But despite the threat facing the planet, governments continue to allow carbon emissions to rise and the crisis to escalate.

After three decades of what the Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg has called "blah blah blah", it has become evident that the climate talks are bankrupt and failing. Instead of forcing industrialized nations and multinational corporations to reduce carbon emissions and leave fossil fuels in the ground, the yearly climate talks have been hijacked by corporate power and private interests to promote false yet profitable solutions, such as carbon trading and so-called "net-zero" and "nature-based solutions".

These fallacious fixes allow large corporations to keep polluting while making ever-greater profits. Carbon trading, for example, misleads many into thinking climate change can be addressed without structural change. We must recognise that market mechanisms cannot and will not sufficiently reduce global emissions and have in fact failed to do so. We also cannot rely on the so-called "green economy", or more accurately green capitalism, for salvation, as it is about the reproduction of the same patterns of privatising the commons and concentration of wealth through dispossession and deepening inequalities. By privatizing and commodifying nature, as these market-based initiatives do, we will only continue its destruction - and ours with it.

COP26, held in Glasgow in 2021, attracted massive media attention but achieved no major breakthroughs in terms of financing climate mitigation and adaptation plans, or the ongoing loss and damage disproportionately affecting the Global South. The Glasgow conference's largest delegation consisted of corporate lobbyists, including those for fossil-fuel companies. It would be fitting to call these events Conferences of Polluters.

The 2022 and 2023 climate talks that will be held in the African and Arab region (COP27 in Egypt and COP28 in the United Arab Emirates) are likewise not expected to achieve much, especially in the context of the intensification of geopolitical rivalries unleashed by the war in Ukraine, a context that is not amenable to cooperation between the major powers. This could be the final nail in the coffin of global climate talks.

MR: What is the significance of COP27 being convened in Egypt, and what does this mean for Egypt and more broadly for the Middle East?

HH: Something needs to be said at the outset about COP27: it is being convened in a country ruled by one of the most ruthless military dictatorships in the world. Egypt's government, led by President Abdel-Fattah Sisi, has enforced a brutal carceral system that has imprisoned tens of thousands of people.

Moreover, COP27 will be the most exclusionary such conference so far, in terms of the absence of serious and independent Egyptian activists, environmental groups, journalists and scholars. The process of selecting Egyptian participants has been very opaque and extremely restrictive. Most of those said to be representing Egyptian civil society at COP27 are co-opted, pro-government figures that have virtually nothing to do with environmental/climate research and activism.

Unlike in previous instances, there unfortunately won't be an independent people's summit outside of the official space of COP27. Usually, these autonomous spaces that are run by independent civil society organisations in the host country and from all over the world are about building power and a counter-movement to the corporate-driven agenda that is leading us to destruction and death. It's about inspiring new activists, about deepening the links between social movements, grassroots organisations, trade unions, and other progressive forces around the world in order to achieve the required transformation in our ways of producing and being. It's also about sharing knowledge and thinking about tactics and strategies.

Add to this the fact that Sharm El-Sheikh, where COP27 will be convened, is a highly securitized tourist resort, Hotels in Sharm El-Sheikh have been allowed to increase their prices to exorbitant levels during the climate summit, which means that attendance will be out of reach for most activists, organisations, and delegates from the Global South, including from Africa and the Arab region.

These elements will make COP27 a significantly diminished space for the activism, dissidence, discussions, debates, new connections, networking, collective strategies, actions, and mobilisations needed to generate pressure on global decision-makers to deliver on their promises and promote real solutions to the unfolding climate emergency. In my view the choice of Egypt as a host this year, and UAE for COP28, is not innocent, and it is becoming clear that the COP process is bankrupt, corporate driven, undemocratic, and exclusionary.

Having said that, some Egyptian environmental groups see COP27 as an opportunity to address their isolation, connect with organisations and activists from other countries and regions, get involved with the global climate justice movement (even in limited ways), and highlight some of the environmental and climate issues their country is facing.

Others, including non-Egyptian environmental organisations and climate activists, see it as an African COP where more pressure needs to be exercised by civil society in the Global South around questions of climate finance, loss and damage, and issues of decarbonisation and just energy transition.

MR: The transition from fossil fuels to clean energy is central to efforts to control climate change. Can meetings like COP27 play a constructive role in such efforts?

HH: Transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energies is essential and has become inevitable. Humanity's survival depends on not only leaving fossil fuels in the ground but also adapting to an already changing climate while moving towards renewable energies, sustainable levels of energy use, and other social transformations.

The question we need to ask is whether we can make this process just and democratic, and avoid reproducing exclusion, dispossession, and neo-colonial plunder with a green façade. What we have seen thus far from the COP proposals as well as from other actors such as international financial institutions (IFIs) unfortunately doesn't bode well. Their main goal is to protect private interests and allow them to generate greater profits. The vision promoted is of a capitalist and often corporate-led transition, in which economies are subordinated to private profit, including through the further privatization of water, land, resources, energy - and even the atmosphere.

This year, COP27 is embracing the hydrogen hype. It is worth noting that the drive for green hydrogen and the push for a hydrogen economy has already gained support from major European oil and gas companies, which see it as a back door to the continuation of their operations, with hydrogen being extracted from fossil gas (the production of grey and blue hydrogen). It is thus becoming clear that the fossil fuel industry wants to preserve existing natural gas and pipeline infrastructure by any means, including through the climate negotiations.

For the COP process to play a constructive role in the energy transition it would need to be radically transformed and empowered to resolve the climate crisis rather than profit from it. It would need to start enforcing CO₂ emission reductions instead of allowing them to increase through bogus market-based mechanisms such as carbon trading and net-zero pledges that the fossil fuel industry has wholeheartedly embraced. It also needs to be based on legally binding and not voluntary nationally-determined contributions. It must seriously limit corporate lobbying, and break with the business as usual that protects global political and economic elites while excluding and marginalising voices from below. The space needs to be democratised and power imbalances rectified by emphasising the historical responsibility of the industrialised West for causing the climate crisis, and its obligation to pay reparations for this.

The transition that the COP process should be advocating for is one that must be under the control of communities and workers and one that cannot be left to the private sector and corporations. Active participation in the decision-making and shaping of transitions is crucial. And in the case of fossil-fuel rich countries, we need to consciously build alliances between labour movements and other social and environmental justice movements and organisations. We need to find a way of involving workers in the oil industry in discussions around the transition and green jobs. The transition won't take place without them. It is therefore of paramount importance to start engaging trade unions around these issues.

MR: COP 27 is being convened in Egypt, which is seeking to expand its role in global fossil fuel markets. Similarly, no region is more closely identified with fossil fuels than the Persian Gulf, and COP28 will be hosted by the UAE. Does this reflect an effort to bring such governments on board, or does it represent a concession to their existing agendas?

HH: The Persian Gulf and North Africa are nodal points in the global fossil-fuel regime, and play an integral role in keeping fossil capitalism intact. These states, with their national companies alongside the big oil majors, are doing their best to maintain their operations and even expand and profit from the remaining oil they possess. Sisi's Egypt is aspiring to become a major energy hub in the region, exporting its surplus electricity and mobilising various energy sources such as offshore gas, oil, renewable energies and hydrogen to satisfy the European Union's energy needs. And this is of course inextricable from the ongoing political and economic normalisation with the colonial state of Israel.

For the Egyptian regime, COP27 represents a golden opportunity for its greenwashing agenda, as well as its efforts to attract and capture funds and finances for various energy projects and purportedly "green" plans. The debt burden in Egypt is unsustainable, and any opportunity to obtain financing (including climate finance) is seized upon.

The ruling classes in the region have been talking about the "after oil" era for decades, and successive governments have paid lip service to the transition to renewable energies for years without taking any concrete action, apart from grandiose and unrealistic plans and projects such as the proposed Neom city in Saudi Arabia.

The violence of climate change is driven by this choice to keep burning fossil fuels. It is a choice made by corporations and Western governments, together with ruling elites in individual countries, including those in the Arab region. Energy and climate plans are shaped by authoritarian regimes and militaries and their backers in Riyadh, Brussels, and Washington, DC. Wealthy local elites collaborate with multinational corporations, and IFIs such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Despite their many promises the actions of these institutions demonstrate them to be enemies of climate justice and of humanity's survival.

With all the warnings coming from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), new projects for the exploration and exploitation of fossil fuels should be out of the question, but unfortunately this is not what is happening. We are currently witnessing an energy expansion rather than a transition: more exploration and exploitation of fossil fuels in various parts of the world such as the African continent and eastern Mediterranean basin (including for shale resources), and more infrastructure such as pipelines, ports, and offshore drilling sites. And this has been exacerbated by the war in Ukraine and the EU's attempts to end its reliance on Russian gas by shifting to other authoritarian regimes such as Algeria, Egypt, Qatar, Azerbaijan and the settler-colonial apartheid state of Israel.

A serious discussion as well as public debate need to take place to reflect on the transition to renewables and phasing out of fossil fuels. In my view this cannot be disconnected from questions of democratisation, justice, and popular sovereignty over land, water, and other natural resources. In kleptocratic military dictatorships like Egypt, how can people really decide and shape their future without demilitarising and democratising their states and societies?

Ultimately, the fight for climate justice and a just transition needs to take into account the differences in responsibilities and vulnerabilities between North and South. Ecological and climate debt must be paid to countries in the Global South, which happen to be the hardest hit by global warming. In a global context of forced liberalization and the push for unjust trade deals, as well as an imperial scramble for influence and energy resources, the green transition and talk about sustainability must not become a shiny façade for neo-colonial schemes of plunder and domination.

P.S.

• TNI Nov 4, 2022:

<https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/44569>