

Libya and the struggle against imperialism

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The fighting in Libya continues to rage as the imperialists attempt to frustrate the revolution whilst isolating Gaddafi.

The NATO no-fly zone over Libya rapidly became a license to deploy the powerful military power of the western governments against Libya. Degrading Gaddafi's military capacity was the watchword for destroying the country's army, all in the name of humanitarianism, to make sure that whatever emerges in Libya after the uprising is suitably weakened and chastened in the face of imperialism.

Certainly for anti-imperialists the 'facts on the ground' present a complicated picture, one where principles seems to cut across each other, apparently forcing impossible choices on us. Do we support the imperialists who are at least defending the rebels and civilians from slaughter? Gilbert Achcar a member of the Fourth International says yes - at least as far as the no-fly aspect goes. Do we support Gaddafi as an anti imperialist fighter against the British and French bombings and US naval bombardments? Yes, says the remnant of the Healyites (WRP Newsline), some Hoxaites (Libyan CP-ML) and John Pilger.

The first thing to say is that the Libyan revolution has to be seen as an integral part of the wider Arab Revolutions. This was not a colour revolution engineered by the CIA in Langley - it was a genuine popular uprising, which was met with live ammunition from day one and then with snipers, tanks and bombs by the Gaddafi loyalist forces. The pro-democracy activists were forced to take up arms or be destroyed - they had little or no heavy military equipment, little military training - and faced being crushed by the overwhelmingly superior forces Gaddafi could deploy. For three months the imperialists have refused to arm the rebels with the necessary anti-tank and anti-aircraft weaponry to defend their territory, a sign that the imperialists are reticent to really arm the people on the ground. They fear that those same weapons would be used against them in the future, which is why they jealously guard their superior military technology.

Why have the imperialist intervened? It is not primarily to get a better grip on Libya's oil, after all they already had their claws sunk into it after Gaddafi 'came in from the cold' in 2006. The reasons are political in the first instance, related to the changing geopolitical situation in the region and secondarily they are concerned to secure their oil companies investments. Thanks to the victories the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions - the imperialist decided to abandon most of their North African dictatorial 'assets' and pretend an enthusiasm for the spread of democracy. They began criticising Gaddafi's repression, this made an appeal by the rebels to 'democratic imperialism' fairly inevitable. It should be noted that it was Britain and France, previously the most fawning friends of Libya and Gaddafi, who pressed hardest for action to assure their investments but also to cover up their prior complicity with the regime

Are the rebels fighting on the ground simply tools of imperialism? No. First as we have said the Nato powers did not give weapons or munitions to the rebels - i.e. they did not enhance the latter's

independent capacity to overthrow Gaddafi. Anders Rasmussen, Nato secretary general, stressed that that the air and sea blockade would be used to stop all arms shipments. "As far as Nato is concerned we will focus on the enforcement of the arms embargo and the clear purpose of an arms embargo is to stop the flow of weapons into the country." Despite having military operations in Libya for three months a direct command structure to liaise between the NATO air force and naval actions and the Benghazi ground forces was only established in early June.

The rebel armed forces thousands strong are nothing like a standing army; they are still largely made up from ad hoc military units composed of civilian volunteers - youth, teachers, workers, as testified to by countless journalists and complained about by Nato experts. Many reports say the rebels do not trust the soldiers who came over to them and the latter ? at least for a long time did little of the fighting. This is and could not be anything other than a popular militia. It could not conceivably be simply or primarily an agency of imperialism. It is clearly the armed people of a popular democratic uprising, albeit one with a pro-imperialist counterrevolutionary leadership - some thing historically many progressive struggles have had (Chiang Kai-Shek in China, the Spanish Republic after 1936, etc)

In Misurata, which saw some of the heaviest and most bitter fighting, the rebel fighters for a long while had very little contact with Benghazi, and were made up largely of squads of men armed with weapons stolen from the Gaddafi forces. In the battle of Misurata NATO took action which objectively sabotaged the resistance fighters, for a long while denying them the air support they had provided elsewhere and even blowing up a rebel ammunition dump.

NATO commanders have kept something of a distance from the Rebel military leaders, not wanting to appear as the air force for the Benghazi government. Clearly they are on the side of the Benghazi led rebels but do not want to be seen as actively promoting regime change too aggressively. They do not want the rebels to seize Tripoli in a revolutionary take over which will no doubt see thousands across the capital coming out onto the streets to join the resistance. Rather they are seeking to force Gaddafi out and engineer some kind of government composed of people from the old regime that they can 'do business with'.

The mass of the rebel fighters are made up of a mixed coalition of people, overwhelmingly youth, teachers and workers who are fighting to free their country from a dictatorship. They are highly unlikely to be sympathetic to the IMF or World Bank plans to privatise everything and have expressed suspicions of NATO's motives in the conflict. If the uprising had not turned into a civil war then the Libyan people would have had the same attitude as their sisters and brothers in Egypt to the intervention of the west ? namely to get out. As it is the slaughter that was being inflicted on them by Gaddafi forced them out of desperation to appeal for help. The nominal leadership of the rebels in the Transitional National Council (TNC) seems to have very little control on the ground and are in a growing antagonistic relationship to the rebel fighters. Recent attempts to disarm the popular militias in Benghazi and bring back elements of the old police as the sole armed force in the city led to a protest outside the court House (where the TNC meets) and a climbdown by the TNC. When an unpopular oil manager who had decamped from Gaddafi's side was put in charge of the oil companies in the rebel controlled areas the workers met and voted to refuse to accept his placement. These are all healthy signs of the revolutionary spirit of the people fighting Gaddafi.

But there are other contradictions, not just between the leaders and the mass of rebel fighters. Some elements within the resistance movement have carried out racist pogroms against sub-Saharan Africans who many accused of being mercenaries for Gaddafi. These killings of innocent Black immigrants must be condemned and the killers brought to justice. But isolated acts such as these do not change the character of the entire movement, just as isolated pogroms against Jews in Soviet Russia in 1920 by renegade Red

Army units does not render the entire Russian Revolution unsupportable. It is important to protect all ethnic or religious minorities in Libya from attack, the fighting needs to be directed against Gaddafi and his loyalist thugs.

Socialists will always support a genuine mass movement that is fighting for democratic rights against a dictatorship, no matter how ?anti-imperialist? their credentials. It was right to support the Green movement in Iran in 2009, despite the history of their nominal figurehead Moussavi and the reality that many of the more middle class protesters harboured sympathies for an imperialist intervention to overthrow the Islamic regime. Clearly a great majority of the people on the protests were simply fighting for more human and democratic rights ? a progressive struggle despite the leadership.

In Poland in the 1980s it was right for socialists to support Solidarnosc as a mass trade union movement ? again despite the pro capitalist, pro catholic, policies of its leadership. In France in the Second World War Paris was liberated by a Communist Party led resistance movement that was certainly not anti-imperialist in any sense.

The crucial perspective within all these social movements is to fight for a revolution **within** the revolution. Every revolutionary movement carries within it the seeds of a counter-revolution, whether it is the threat of co-option or bureaucratisation. The threat for the Libyan resistance is very real ? the TNC is staffed with ex Gaddafi men, pro-privatisation, pro-imperialism and anti working class. These ministers and generals are steering the rebellion down a dangerous path. By the time they take Tripoli the TNC hopes that they will be in place to carry out their promise to reward their friends in the West for their help.

The forces within the revolutionary movement must fight against the policies of the Benghazi TNC. Being sucked into the imperialist orbit will leave Libya a puppet state of Washington, like the current regimes in Baghdad or Kabul.

It is indicative of Gaddafi?s ?anti-imperialism? and to whom he was appealing that the precedents that he cited as the ones he was intended to imitating were the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre the 2004 US storming of Fallujah and the 2008-9 Israeli onslaught on Gaza. In a speech on 17 March, the day UN resolution 1973 was adopted by the Security Council, he compared his assault on Benghazi to that of Franco?s attack on Madrid, stating that he relied on the emergence of a "fifth column" in the to help him "liberate" it.

It would certainly not be right to support Gaddafi in this fight. His anti-imperialism means the right to rape, torture and kill his way back to Benghazi ? to drown the revolution in blood. Support for the popular uprising against Gaddafi is not in doubt but now the struggle is not just against him and his regime but also against the consolidation of reaction within the revolution.

Does this mean we do not support the rebels unless they overthrow the Benghazi leadership? No, we support the struggle against Gaddafi but make it clear that it will ultimately fail unless the present leadership is overthrown and replaced. However socialists should do not make the removal of the Benghazi leadership a precondition for support.

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