

What does Milosevic's downfall portend?

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The Western political and media establishment have proclaimed the crumbling of the Milosevic regime in Yugoslavia as the “October 5th Revolution”. But only in a corrupt and reactionary political climate characterised by a near absence of critical thought could Thursday's events be universally portrayed as the “downfall of communism” and transition to democracy.

Hundreds of thousands of people were involved in the movement against Milosevic, but from the standpoint of its leadership and political perspective the campaign waged by the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) could readily be labelled “made in America”. The downfall of Milosevic's right-wing nationalist regime was inspired, funded and organised by the very imperialist powers that little more than a year ago were systematically bombing the Serbian people. Their aim was then and remains now the assertion of absolute control over the Balkans, through the elimination of what they consider to be a political impediment to their commercial and strategic aims.

Milosevic's downfall is neither a surprise, nor an occasion for regret. That he unwittingly became the focus of Western intrigues does not legitimise his claim to be anti-imperialist. His regime began as a pro-capitalist and nationalist tendency emerging from within the old Titoist bureaucracy, itself largely shaped by the perspective and practices of the Stalinist clique that usurped power in the Soviet Union.

Little more than a decade ago the Western powers considered Milosevic a useful ally, and even as recently as the 1995 Dayton Accords that ended the civil war in Bosnia, Washington granted the Serb leader a key role in upholding the Western-imposed settlement. By then, however, the US and its NATO allies had come to the conclusion that their economic colonisation of the Balkans, launched in earnest with the break-up of the old Federation of Yugoslavia, required the shattering of Serbia. Milosevic was accordingly cast as the latest evil demon on the world scene, and Serbia pilloried as the European equivalent of the Iraqi “rogue state”.

Though there was nothing in principle to distinguish Milosevic's regime from that of Franjo Tudjman in Croatia, Milan Kucan in Slovenia or Alija Izetbegovic in Bosnia, the

latter were portrayed as “fledgling democracies” under attack from an unreconstructed communist state in Serbia.

Today the US and Europe unite with Serbia's opposition parties to attribute all of Yugoslavia's problems to Milosevic. He has no small share of the blame, but the Western powers played the critical role in the break-up of Yugoslavia and the stoking up of national and ethnic conflicts that led to the war in Bosnia and last year's conflict in Kosovo. Much of the suffering of the Yugoslav people is the result of the destruction by NATO bombs of the country's infrastructure, combined with years of punitive sanctions.

No critical and honest observer can believe that the Yugoslav people will achieve real democracy and social justice under the tutelage of the very imperialist forces ultimately responsible for plunging the Yugoslav federation into economic ruin and ethnic violence. Indeed, the Western media's depiction of the Yugoslav events as the final chapter in a series of “people's revolutions” against “communist tyranny” unwittingly gives an indication of what is really in store for the masses in post-Milosevic Serbia.

The world's press compared Thursday's storming of the Federal Parliament building in Belgrade with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the downfall of Romania's Ceausescu—often combined with speculation that Milosevic could meet the same bloody fate as his Romanian counterpart. This presentation is, of course, ideologically loaded in its false portrayal of the Stalinist dictatorships as the embodiment of “communism”. But even if one puts this historical falsification to one side, the question remains: what have these earlier “democratic” revolutions wrought, a decade after the event?

The fall of the despised police state regimes at the end of the 1980s took place under conditions of acute political disorientation within the working class, resulting from the decades-long suppression of genuine Marxism by the Stalinist bureaucracy. This allowed the Western powers to dictate the outcome of events through the medium of those sections of the old governing elites and forces within the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia who came to the head of the newly established capitalist states.

Throughout Eastern Europe and within the Soviet Union itself, “peoples’ power” swiftly gave way to the power of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and international finance capital. The promised renewal of democracy and economic prosperity never materialised. In its place, the working class has suffered the rule of a semi-criminal oligarchy, coupled with a decline in its living standards unprecedented except in times of all-out war.

Consider the fate of the Russian working class under the rule of Gorbachev, Yeltsin and now Putin. Economic output has fallen by between 50 and 60 percent, millions have been thrown into unemployment and the population is set to decline by a third by the year 2050, due to the rampant spread of disease, malnutrition and other social ills.

A similarly horrific picture presents itself in the other “new democracies,” where a handful at the apex of society have grown fabulously rich through the plundering of state resources, while millions have been made destitute. Even the former East Germany, now part of the most powerful national economy in Europe, is gripped by low wages, mass unemployment and social deprivation.

Nothing better can be expected under the rule of Voyislav Kostunica and company. In considering what the future holds for the Yugoslav people, one must bear in mind the old adage: “He who pays the piper calls the tune.” The US and the European Union (EU) together have pumped over \$100 million into securing the victory of the 18-party coalition. In return, the economic program to which it is committed has been modelled on the pro-market “shock therapy” measures pioneered in Poland, and which laid waste to huge swathes of Eastern Europe.

The Kostunica government is seeking the immediate inclusion of Yugoslavia in the EU's Stability Pact for Southeast Europe, as well as membership in the IMF and World Bank, promising to open the country up fully to economic penetration by the major global corporations.

The price tag for this is defined in the programme of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia as “radical economic reforms” and “affirmation of market criteria”, including a substantial reduction in tax rates, legalisation of the “shadow economy” and sweeping reductions in government expenditure through cuts in the military budget and public service provisions. All import and export quotas are to be cancelled.

Yugoslavia's currency is to be floated, and consequently massively devalued, and the German mark is to be legalised for internal circulation as an alternative to the Dinara. The DOS program calls for the “free entry of foreign banks”.

Privatisation of state-owned industry “will be made compulsory” and “predominantly be conducted through the direct sale of state property” to secure “direct foreign

investments”. As in the former USSR and Eastern European Stalinist regimes, large sections of industry will inevitably be scrapped. Price controls on goods will be ended. In the words of the DOS program: “Presently all population categories are being needlessly protected through controlled prices.”

There is no reason to assume that Milosevic's fall will lead to a new era of peaceful relations between the various nationalist cliques that control the Balkans. Throughout much of the twentieth century, this region was a source of explosive conflict between the great powers. The final disintegration of the old Yugoslav federation at the hands of the West will only intensify the scramble between the US and its European rivals for spheres of influence, cheap labour and raw materials throughout the Balkans and the oil-rich regions to the east.

Kostunica, the West's newly crowned “democrat,” provides an instructive example of the cynicism that pervades the policies of the great powers and the propaganda of the Western media. A diehard Serb nationalist, he is a one-time ally of Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic (who, like Milosevic, has been indicted by the Hague war crimes tribunal). His political makeover illustrates the political truth, borne out by such figures as Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Panama's Noriega, that yesterday's ally can rapidly become today's pariah, and vice-versa. Whether a given leader is a “democrat” or “tyrant” is determined above all by the foreign policy needs of Washington.

Up to now Kostunica has sought to distance himself publicly from the US and align himself with Washington's European rivals. This stance is in conflict with forces within the opposition who have long been on the US payroll, a fact that provides fertile ground for new imperialist intrigues and further political convulsions.



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