

Canada and the supposed struggle for democracy in Afghanistan

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Ottawa's mid-September announcement that "Operation Medusa"—the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) counter-insurgency campaign in the southern Afghanistan district of Panjwai—had ended in a signal victory for those on the side of "freedom" has been contradicted on both counts. There has been a revival of attacks on the CAF personnel serving with the NATO occupation force in southern Afghanistan, and press reports have exposed close links between the Canadian military and criminal elements within the US-installed Afghan government.

A Canadian soldier was killed last Saturday in the Panjwai area, a dozen miles west of Kandahar, when his armored vehicle was struck by an explosive device. His death raises the number of CAF personnel killed in the last 4 months to 24. A few days earlier, on October 3, two Canadian soldiers were killed and five others wounded when they were ambushed by insurgents armed with rifles and grenades. The previous week, another Canadian soldier was blown up when he stepped on a mine, and on September 18, a suicide-attack killed four Canadian troops.

These casualties all occurred in the area of southern Afghanistan that was the target of Operation Medusa. Launched one month ago by NATO occupation forces under the leadership of the CAF's 2,300-strong Afghan contingent, the operation was supposed to have driven the Taliban out of one their key strongholds in the south of the country.

According to a report published in the September 23 issue of the Toronto-based *Globe and Mail*, of the hundreds of insurgents Canadian military spokesmen boast of having killed in the operation, not all were "Taliban fighters", as Afghan victims of NATO operations are invariably labeled by the military and press. A good many were in fact poor villagers who had risen up against exactions committed by local police forces under the eye of NATO forces. These villagers reportedly turned to the Taliban in the hopes of freeing themselves from abuse at the hands of official Afghan government representatives.

The *Globe* quotes Talatbek Masadykov, head of the United Nations mission in South Afghanistan, describing the popular rebellion against the Afghan local authorities. "Maybe half of these so-called anti-government elements acting here in this area of the south," said Masadykov, "had to join this Taliban movement because of the misbehavior of these bad guys."

Many complaints had been made by people living in the Panjwai area against thefts and beatings meted out by the Afghan police. Villagers said that the police, many of whom came from rival tribes, took away their cash, cellular telephones and even watches. Motorbikes and cars were also seized by police patrols.

The *Globe*, a fervent supporter of the counter-insurgency Operation in Afghanistan, laments that the area may be sliding back to the conditions that ignited the villagers' ire in the first place. Its report notes that "gangs of policemen", following in the footsteps of the Canadian troops and their Operation Medusa, have swept into Panjwai where "they have been described ransacking homes, burning shops and conducting shakedowns at checkpoints."

In another story published last Thursday, the *Globe* cites remarks by CAF Colonel Mike Capstick regarding the presence of "some pretty unattractive people in the Afghan parliament."

This former commander of the first Canadian Strategic Advisory Team in Kabul returned from Afghanistan at summer's end and has since been touring the country to boost support for the Canadian military intervention there. Summarizing Capstick's comments, the *Globe* writes that "tribal lords and simple drug criminals" have "finessed their way into positions of power in the new government."

Such an assessment, by someone with first-hand knowledge of the Afghan situation—someone, moreover, who can hardly be suspected of anti-war feelings, says a lot more about the nature of the CAF mission in Afghanistan than the repeated assurances of Conservative and Liberal politicians that Canadian troops have been sent to Afghanistan to promote democracy.

In reality, the CAF are propping up criminal elements and a US-installed government in Kabul that is utterly indifferent to the country's terrible social and economic crisis from the wrath of poor villagers, who are so desperate that they have turned to the Taliban to defend themselves.

The claim that the CAF is acting in support of democracy does not look any better if one considers those with whom Canada is aligned in its Afghan intervention.

There is the president of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf, who recently mocked the "cry and shout" heard in Canada following the loss of "four or five" Canadians in Afghanistan, whereas "we have suffered 500 casualties." Musharraf, who grabbed power in a 1999 coup, was very blunt in an interview with CBC, Canada's public television network. "If you're not prepared to suffer casualties as an army," he said, "then don't participate in any operation."

Such a display of indifference to the fate of rank-and-file soldiers did not disturb Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. When asked to comment on Musharraf's remarks, Harper dodged the question, stressing that Pakistan's military government is an "important ally in the fight against terror."

The Canadian prime minister actually shares the militarist, *realpolitik* outlook that Musharraf expressed so bluntly. In a speech last week in Calgary, Harper was only slightly more subtle, declaring

that the death of Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan is the “price of leadership” in today’s world.

As for Canada’s main ally and the principal sponsor of its Afghan intervention, the Bush administration, its “war on terror” has served as a pretext for a policy of naked military aggression abroad, starting with the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and for an historically unprecedented assault on basic democratic rights at home.

Last month at the behest of the Bush administration, the US Congress passed legislation that sets aside key provisions of the Constitution and Bill of Rights to permit the indefinite detention without legal recourse of anyone declared by the president to be an “unlawful enemy combatant.”

It is also instructive to examine the case of bin Laden, reputedly the West’s public enemy number one enemy and the main target of the US and NATO-led military interventions in Afghanistan. Bin Laden began his political career as an asset of the CIA in its decade-long covert war against the pro-Soviet Afghan regime. The US provided up to five billion dollars worth of lethal weaponry and financial assistance to the mujahadeen, the Islamic militia that were partly under bin Laden’s control—thus putting the lie to the claims of Bush and Harper that they are concerned about protecting the democratic rights of Afghans, particularly the Afghan women and children, against Islamic fundamentalists.

A final issue to consider in gauging Canada’s democratic pretenses in Afghanistan is the Harper government’s attitude towards the press and democracy.

Reporters assigned to cover the CAF’s operation in Afghanistan have been placed on a tight leash by the military and government. As for Canada’s corporate media, it has pumped out innumerable articles lauding the courage and altruism of the Canadian troops serving in Afghanistan.

Yet Harper, apprehensive about the widespread public opposition to the Canadian intervention in Afghanistan, is bent on bullying the press into playing an even more open role in disseminating pro-war propaganda.

Speaking at a government-orchestrated “support the troops” rally on Parliament Hill September 22, Harper proclaimed that “No journalist in this country, should ever be afraid or ever be ashamed to defend the Canadian military.” Harper’s remarks were clearly aimed at Canada’s public broadcaster the CBC, which took disciplinary action against a reporter for breaking “journalistic ethics” when, in the middle of a news report, she avowed her enormous pride in and support for the Canadian forces in Afghanistan.

Given that the Conservatives control the CBC’s purse-strings, Harper’s remarks were meant as a warning to Canada’s public broadcaster to be more supportive of the government’s campaign to whip up enthusiasm for the CAF mission.

Harper followed this threat to the CBC with a statement that demonstrates both his contempt for democratic rights and his crass ignorance of the struggles that had to be fought historically—against the rich and powerful, the Crown, and the repressive forces of the state—to win basic democratic rights, including the right of free speech and the right to vote.

“Journalists,” declared the neo-conservative ideologue Harper, “exercise freedom of the press but journalists did not create freedom of the press. That freedom—all of our freedoms—were created by the men and women of this country who in our history were prepared to lay down their lives for those freedoms”—i.e. the military.

The protection of a puppet Afghan regime that preys on the Afghan

people, the turn to international allies who are notorious for trampling upon democratic rights, the readiness to turn its own soldiers into cannon fodder in pursuit of a grander place in world affairs—such is the content of the Canadian ruling class’ Afghan intervention.

That the rhetoric about democracy is but a façade for a mission whose real purpose is to assert the predatory geopolitical interests and ambitions of the Canadian elite was only thinly disguised by Harper in the speech he made in Calgary, as he accepted an award from the Woodrow Wilson International Center, a US-based think-tank.

Harper told his Calgary audience, which included the US ambassador to Canada and many of Alberta’s oil barons, that his government is determined to make Canada “a leader on the international stage,” a country “that punches above its weight.”

“We want to ensure,” said Harper, “that we can preserve our identity and our sovereignty, protect our key interests and defend those values we hold most dear on the international scene.”

However, in order for the Canadian bourgeoisie to lay claim to what it deems its rightful share of the spoils in the intensifying economic and geo-political struggle among the leading capitalist nation-states, it must overcome the latent but deep-rooted popular opposition to militarism and imperialism. Central to this objective is repudiating the semi-pacifist aura Canada surrounded itself with during the Cold War period and an all-out campaign to expand and rearm the CAF and revive Canada’s militarist tradition.

That is why in his Calgary speech, Harper went out of his way to praise the Canadian military’s role at Vimy Ridge, in northern France, “scene of some of the most terrible fighting in the First World War.” It was through such “sacrifices,” Harper insisted, that “this country was built.”

Vimy Ridge was part of an orgy of destruction, in which the Canadian bourgeoisie sacrificed the lives of 60,000 soldiers in pursuit of a leading role in the management of the British Empire, and, when that proved an unobtainable objective, a place at the post-war Paris Peace Conference, where the victors divided the spoils—beginning with the colonial possessions of Germany and the non-Turkish majority parts of the Ottoman Empire.

The Canadian ruling elite views its neo-colonial intervention in Afghanistan as the beginning of a new era in which Canada will take its place alongside the US and other great powers in re-ordering the world. And like 100 years ago, the human cost threatens to be appalling, both from the sons and daughters of working people in Canada deployed thousands of miles away from home to fight under the false banner of democracy, and for the oppressed peoples of Afghanistan and wherever else the Harper government chooses to follow the US to war.



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