

Libya and the bankruptcy of Arab nationalism

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The desperate attempt by the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi to drown the uprising of the Libyan masses in blood constitutes yet another brutal and tragic proof of the bankruptcy of Arab nationalism. It has once again laid bare the inability of any section of the Arab bourgeoisie to realize the aspirations of the masses of the region for genuine liberation from imperialist domination and capitalist oppression.

Gaddafi's evolution over his four-decade-long rule of Libya saw his transformation from the leader of an anti-colonial movement with mass popular support into a butcher of his own people. This did not develop overnight.

While a decade ago, an uprising against Gaddafi would have been celebrated in Washington as a triumph over the "axis of evil," today, Obama remains silent and his secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, treats the wholesale massacres in Tripoli, Benghazi and elsewhere in the nation of six-and-a-half million with the utmost circumspection. Over the past decade Gaddafi has been embraced by Washington as a force for stability—and a guarantor of profits—in the region. Significantly, the uprising against him is the first of the spreading revolutionary developments in the Middle East to trigger a sell-off on Wall Street.

The political path that has ended in Gaddafi calling in airstrikes against unarmed protesters and unleashing heavily armed mercenaries against his own people began in September 1969 with his leadership of a bloodless military coup that toppled the corrupt and servile US-backed monarchy of King Idris.

A 27-year-old army officer from an impoverished Bedouin background, Gaddafi was part of a generation whose political conceptions were heavily influenced by the rise to power of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt through a similar coup against another thoroughly corrupt monarch, King Farouk, in the Egyptian revolution of 1952. Nasser's

nationalization of the Suez Canal, his denunciations of Western imperialism and his calls for Pan-Arab unity struck a powerful chord in Libya, which had suffered under Italian colonial domination from 1911 until 1943, with literally half its population massacred or starved to death by the Italian fascists.

While the powerful anti-imperialist sentiments of the Libyan masses provided a broad base of support for Gaddafi's expulsion of the US military from its strategically vital Wheelus Air Force Base and for his nationalization of US oil firms, the regime's fleeting attempts to forge Pan-Arab unions with Egypt, Syria and Tunisia came to nothing.

Libya, like all of the states of the Middle East to emerge from colonialism, was based upon geographical borders and political constructs imposed to serve the interests of imperialism, not those of the peoples of the region. The rising bourgeoisie within each of these countries, however, remained determined to hold onto these borders and their individual states as the foundations of their class rule.

Gaddafi's regime was one of a number of similar governments that were to come to power in this same period, all proclaiming themselves as revolutionary, advocates of one or another brand of "socialism" and opponents of both Israel and US imperialism. These included the regimes of Hafiz al-Assad in Syria and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, brought to power as a result of coups carried out by factions of the Baathist movement in the late 1960s.

Like Nasser before them, they were able to exploit the cold war tensions between Washington and Moscow to achieve a modicum of independence and—particularly in the cases of Iraq and Libya—to utilize their countries' oil wealth to institute reforms in areas such as health care, education and housing, thereby securing a popular base.

While Gaddafi declared his regime to be the "Socialist

People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya", based on "direct democracy," it maintained its rule through ruthless repression of all political opposition and, in particular, any independent struggles of the working class. Strikes were banned and the country's prisons filled with political detainees.

On the world stage, Gaddafi assumed the role of the most radical of the so-called "rejectionists"—those who opposed the so-called "peace process" promoted by Washington to suppress the Palestinian struggle, give Israel a free hand to wage war and secure US imperialism's own hegemony in the region.

While in practical terms, Gaddafi's support for the Palestinians was mercurial at best, swinging from financial backing for the PLO to mass expulsions of Palestinian refugees from Libya, his opposition to US domination of the region and his support for radical nationalist movements of various stripes earned him the status of a pariah in Washington.

US imperialist hostility to the regime led to armed attacks under the administration of Ronald Reagan, who branded Gaddafi "the mad dog of the Middle East." In 1986, the US Navy was deployed in provocative maneuvers off the country's coast that led to the shooting down of Libyan planes and the sinking of a Libyan ship, killing 35 sailors. These military actions were followed by a massive US bombing raid on Tripoli and Benghazi, in which 60 Libyans were killed and many more wounded. Among the dead was Gaddafi's adopted infant daughter.

It was not so much imperialist threats, however, as sharp changes in the world situation and, above all, internal social and political contradictions within Libya itself, that drove Gaddafi's abandonment of his earlier revolutionary pretensions.

The Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union ended the ability of the Arab nationalist regimes to employ Soviet influence as a counterweight to US domination. In Libya this combined with falling oil prices and the emergence of significant internal opposition to turn the Gaddafi regime sharply to the right and back into the camp of US imperialism.

By the late 1990s, as then-US Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Martin Indyk would later write, Gaddafi was knocking on Washington's door: "Libya's representatives were ready to put everything on the table, saying Mr.

Gaddafi had realized ... that Libya and the US faced a common threat from Islamic fundamentalism. In that context, they said Libya would actively cooperate in the campaign against al-Qaeda and would end all support for Palestinian 'rejectionist' groups, endorse US peace efforts in the Middle East and help in conflict resolution in Africa."

In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, this proposed alliance was consummated, with Gaddafi's secret police being turned into an asset of the US Central Intelligence Agency.

This was combined with domestic "reforms" that entailed sweeping privatizations and the return in force to Libya of major oil companies, the international banks, arms dealers and other transnational corporations.

The result was an intensification of social inequality and official corruption in a country where 35 percent of the population remains in poverty and 30 percent are unemployed. The present uprising is driven by these conditions, drawing its most powerful support from the country's working class and poor.

The evolution of Gaddafi and his counterparts in bourgeois nationalist regimes in the Middle East and throughout the former colonial and oppressed countries serves as a stark vindication of the theory of permanent revolution. This theory, elaborated by Leon Trotsky, established that in these countries, the national bourgeoisie—even its most radical and oil-rich representatives—are organically incapable of leading the masses in overcoming the legacy of colonial oppression and feudal backwardness. It is tied by its class interests to imperialism and fears the internal threat from its own working class. The ongoing massacres in Libya are the inevitable result. Only the independent struggle of the working class, based on a socialist and internationalist program, can provide a way out of this bloody dead-end.

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