

Obama and the Libyan crisis

Bill Van Auken
24 February 2011

Faced with a popular uprising and mass slaughter in Libya, one of the world's major oil producers, President Barack Obama Wednesday spoke of "freedom," "justice" and "dignity," while warning that his administration is preparing a "full range of options."

As throughout the past month of revolutionary upheavals that have spread from Tunisia to Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and beyond, the response of the Obama administration to the bloody events in Libya has been characterized by hypocrisy, cynicism and cold-blooded calculation.

Behind the rather tepid phrases about the Libyan "suffering and bloodshed" being "outrageous and unacceptable," the aim of Washington is to secure the strategic interests of US imperialism in the region and protect the bottom line of the giant American energy conglomerates that regard Libya as a source of massive profits.

Echoing its previous response in Tunisia and Egypt—and its attitude towards the events in Bahrain and Yemen—the Obama administration's initial take on Libya appeared to be one of banking on the ability of the regime headed by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi to suppress the uprising by force.

Despite Gaddafi's previous revolutionary and even socialist pretensions, for nearly a decade Washington has viewed the Libyan dictator as a force for stability and order in the Middle East. His secret police have collaborated closely with the CIA in the "global war on terror" and he has opened the door to the reentry of US oil companies to pursue lucrative contracts for the exploitation of Libya's proven reserves of 44.3 billion barrels, the largest in Africa and the ninth largest in the world.

Gaddafi has been feted by both the Bush administration, which sent its national security adviser Condoleezza Rice to Tripoli 2008 to embrace the despot, and by Obama, who warmly shook his hand at the G-8 summit in 2009. Gaddafi

went even further in expressing his warmth toward the US administration, proclaiming Obama his "son." On the surface, at least, the days when Ronald Reagan denounced the Libyan leader as the "mad dog of the Middle East" and sent US warplanes to bomb his house seemed long gone.

It is in this context that official Washington continued to hedge its bets while Gaddafi employed fighter jets, anti-aircraft guns and mercenaries to butcher his own people. "This ultimately and fundamentally is an issue between, you know, the Libyan government, its leader, and the Libyan people," State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley declared at a press conference Tuesday. He added, "We want to see the government respond to the aspirations of its people," even as the "response" was pushing the death toll towards 1,000.

Obama's appearance before the television cameras on Wednesday appears to be driven by growing fears in Washington that Gaddafi will not succeed in putting down the uprising. At the same time, US officials are concerned that there is no vetted opposition to take his place and quell the struggle of the masses. They are not sure who will end up in power—and in control of the country's oil wealth. Unlike in Egypt, Washington cannot pull strings in a US-armed and trained military to attempt the reconstitution of a regime capable of defending US imperialist interests.

There was an element in Obama's remarks of treading water, playing for time as events continue to unfold. Noticeably, the US president's remarks included no call for Gaddafi's ouster.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who is being dispatched to Geneva on Monday to discuss Libya with the European powers, said on Tuesday that "everything will be on the table" in terms of the US response to the events in Libya, a phrase that echoed the rhetoric of the Bush administration in its frequent threats of military action against Iran.

The American administration is being pushed towards

some kind of action by critical economic imperatives. Libya has grabbed the attention of Wall Street far more directly than the previous uprisings. The stock market has seen a near-300 point fall over the past two days, and oil prices have risen to over \$100 a barrel.

These concerns found expression Wednesday on the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, which accused the Obama administration of “dithering” and declared that the US was presented with a unique “opportunity,” which included “stopping a bloodbath, preventing a refugee crisis, improving energy security and putting an end to a long-time threat to international law and order.”

In short, the *Wall Street Journal* proposes regime change. The newspaper suggested that an intervention could begin under a humanitarian pretext, bringing in “medical supplies only the West can provide” and threatening to “destroy the Libyan air force.”

Any US military intervention in Libya would not be directed at promoting democracy, defending human rights or liberating the Libyan people. Whatever attempt is made to cloak American action in humanitarian garb, the purpose of the US armed forces is to defend the strategic interests of US imperialism and protect the profits and property of the American ruling elite. Like the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, any incursion into Libya would represent a reassertion of neocolonial domination over an oppressed country.

Whether such an intervention is imminent is impossible to say. What is clear, however, is that Washington is growing increasingly desperate over the unraveling of its position in the Middle East, and particularly the threat of a disruption of oil supplies. Desperate rulers are prone to desperate measures.

Libya has a long and tragic history with colonialism. Italy seized control in 1911, carrying out 30 years of war against a rebellious people. This culminated in the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini employing aerial bombardments, gas, concentration camps and deliberate starvation to wipe out nearly half of the population.

In the aftermath of World War II, Washington attempted to turn the country into its own platform for asserting control over the territories previously dominated by the European colonial powers. It established Wheelus Air Force Base in Libya as one of its key strategic overseas facilities and secured lucrative deals for Standard Oil and other US oil companies to loot the country’s natural resources.

The coming to power of Gaddafi and his Free Officers movement in 1969 overturned this relationship for a period. But, like the bourgeois nationalist movements throughout the Middle East, the Libyan colonel’s “Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya” proved incapable of resolving any of the historic tasks required to overcome the legacy of colonialism and imperialist oppression. After 40 years in power, the US oil companies are back, the Libyan security forces collaborate with the CIA and the “revolutionary” regime has degenerated into a nepotistic kleptocracy that is murdering its own people.

Workers in the United States and Europe must not allow themselves to be drawn in by the attempts of their own ruling elites to exploit outrage over the atrocities carried out by a regime in its death throes to justify military intervention. The watchword must be: the greatest enemies of the people of Libya and the Middle East are the US and European imperialists.

Overthrowing the dictatorship is the task not of imperialism, which is prepared to pursue its domination of Libya with or without Gaddafi, but of the Libyan masses—and they can do it.

The downfall of the regime will constitute the first step in what will prove a protracted struggle. The workers of Libya must establish their political independence from all bourgeois “democratic” and “nationalist” forces and form their own popular organs of power to organize their struggle and replace the Gaddafi regime with a workers’ government. The victory of this revolution can be secured only by unifying Libyan workers with their class brothers and sisters in the neighboring countries of Egypt and Tunisia, across the Middle East, and in the advanced capitalist countries.

This is the internationalist and socialist perspective fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Bill Van Auken



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact