

Washington's "human rights" fraud

Bill Van Auken
27 March 2012

"I do think we are on the right side of history, aligning ourselves with people's aspirations for freedom, democracy, universal human rights," US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in a recent interview with the *Economist* magazine. Describing Washington's role in the world, she added that "we stand up and say we're for all these universal values, they're consonant with American values."

Such conceptions, that the US role in the world is to promote freedom and export "American values" that are, in reality, "universal values" are nothing new. They go all the way back to the advent of American imperialism and the Spanish American War at the close of the 19th century. Then, as now, they have served as the default ideological cover for carrying out wars of conquest, military coups and repression in the interests of US finance capital.

As the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky noted scathingly in 1924, "America is always liberating somebody. That's her profession."

In the past week, the Obama administration has invoked "human rights" as the pretext for stoking a civil war in Syria aimed at bringing about regime-change, as the grounds for preparing war against Iran, and as a justification for ratcheting up military tensions with North Korea and China.

The US government's posturing as the champion of universal human rights is a patent fraud. Its claims of outrage over violations of freedom and democracy in one or another country are steeped in hypocrisy.

Consider the case of Syria. In the drive to oust Assad and install a more pliant, anti-Iranian regime in Damascus, Washington is working closely with Turkey. According to a report in the *New York Times* Monday, the two governments are coordinating the provision of "non-lethal" aid to armed "rebel" groups that have conducted a series of terrorist attacks in the country.

While putting itself forward as the defender of human rights in Syria, Turkey is engaged in a bloody campaign of repression against Turkish Kurds, a minority that makes up over 20 percent of the population. Turkish fighter jets have carried out repeated bombardments of suspected camps of the Kurdish separatist group, the PKK, frequently killing civilians. Mass demonstrations last week marking the start of the Kurdish New Year were met with a harsh crackdown by police employing water cannon, tear gas and truncheons. Some 40,000 people have lost their lives in this conflict since 1984, but Washington has evinced no particular concern for the fate of the Kurds.

The other major US ally in the crusade for human rights in Syria is Saudi Arabia, which together with Qatar is providing money and arms to outfits like the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Council. While deploring repression in Syria, the Saudi absolutist monarchy, a key US strategic ally and the world's top oil producer, is engaged in a ruthless campaign to crush unrest in its predominantly Shia eastern region. The Saudi mufti, the head of the powerful religious establishment, issued a recent fatwa calling for the beheading of anyone opposing the regime. Earlier, he proposed that Shiite rebels be crucified.

In neighboring Bahrain, the home of the US Fifth Fleet, the Saudi regime, backed by Washington, continues to support the violent suppression of a mass movement challenging the dictatorial Sunni monarchy that rules over and harshly discriminates against that country's Shia majority. Needless to say, "universal" American values do not apply here.

Meanwhile, as Egypt's military junta continues brutal crackdowns, Secretary of State Clinton has invoked US national security interests to waive congressional conditions on military aid that require that Egypt demonstrate progress toward democracy. This means

the release of \$1.3 billion in US aid to the country's repressive apparatus. Administration officials candidly admit that the profits of corporations like General Dynamics and Lockheed Martin, into whose coffers the aid ultimately flows, easily trumped "universal" values.

If this commitment to human rights was indeed universal, one would expect that it would find powerful expression near to home. Yet the case of Honduras provides a telling indication of Washington's contempt for basic rights in what it has long regarded as its "own backyard."

Having given its tacit support to the military coup that toppled the elected government of President Manuel Zelaya in 2009, the Obama administration is turning a blind eye to the regime's continuing murder, torture, illegal detention and violent attacks carried out against poor peasants, journalists, human rights activists and workers. Earlier this month, Vice President Joseph Biden was dispatched to Tegucigalpa to assure the government of President Porfirio Lobos, who came to power in an illegitimate election overseen by the coup regime, of continued US support. Washington has dramatically increased spending on military contracts in Honduras and military aid to the country, which hosts the Pentagon's largest base in the region.

Nor, it must said, do the supposedly universal American values invoked to justify wars and destabilization operations abroad apply within the US itself. The Obama administration has claimed the right to sentence US citizens to indefinite military detention without trial and even murder them on the sole say-so of the president that they are "terrorist suspects." Domestic spying has been sharply intensified and the illegal prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba remains open. As the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations showed, public challenges to the rule of the financial oligarchy are met with police violence.

Tired of unending "human rights" attacks from Washington, China has taken to issuing its own annual human rights critique of the United States, pointing to its 2.3 million prison population, the highest rate of incarceration in the world, everyday police killings and brutality, and the denial of elementary social and economic rights of employment, housing and health care to millions of Americans.

"The United States ignores its own serious human

rights problems, but has been keen on advocating the so-called 'human rights diplomacy' to take human rights as a political instrument to defame other nations' image and seek its own strategic interests," the most recent report issued by Beijing states. "These facts fully expose its hypocrisy by exercising double standards on human rights and its malicious design to pursue hegemony under the pretext of human rights."

The crass utilization of "human rights" to cloak predatory US imperialist interests recalls nothing so much as the claims heard in the 1930s from Adolf Hitler that he was acting to stop depredations against German populations, or from Mussolini that he was waging a war against a "savage regime" in Ethiopia.

It is the case today, just as much as it was then, that the hypocritical and selective invocation of human rights is directed not at upholding the genuine rights and interests of working people in Syria, Iran or anywhere else on the planet, but rather at preparing new wars that threatens the lives and welfare of millions.

Bill Van Auken



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact