

The criminalization of political dissent in America

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14 May 2013

In a series of prosecutions, precedents are being established for the criminalization of political dissent in America.

Last week, Massachusetts high school student Cameron D'Ambrosio was arrested and charged under “terrorism” laws merely for posting lyrics on Facebook that make reference to the Boston Marathon bombings. He faces 20 years in prison. A string of similar “terror” prosecutions around the country take aim at the First Amendment protection of free speech and political expression.

The authorities have already branded select participants in Occupy Wall Street and anti-NATO protests as “terrorists.” Last year, heavily-armed “domestic terrorism” commandos raided Occupy Wall Street protesters’ homes in Washington and Oregon, using battering rams and stun grenades. The commandos were authorized to seize all “anti-government or anarchist literature or material.”

As with freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, also guaranteed under the First Amendment, has not been officially repealed. The reality, however, is that political assembly is already a semi-criminal activity in America. Political protests are routinely met with vastly disproportionate police mobilizations, confinement to oxymoronic “free speech zones,” “kettling” (in which protesters are surrounded and forcibly moved in one direction or prevented from leaving an area), beatings, tear gas, pepper spray, stun grenades or rubber bullets. The standard government response to a political protest is a massive show of force, complete with police snipers on rooftops.

The drive towards the establishment of an American police state, initiated under the Bush administration, has shifted into high gear under Obama. For nearly twelve years, the phony “war on terror” has been used

as the overarching pretext for illegal imperialist war abroad and a methodical assault on democratic rights at home. The basic structure of authoritarian rule is now emerging into plain view.

Over the recent period, the government has vastly expanded its warrantless surveillance of the population. The Obama administration has constructed a massive data center in Utah big enough to store the contents of every personal computer in the country. Already at a government agent’s fingertips--without a warrant--are all of a person’s Internet browsing activity, telephone conversations, text messages, credit card transactions, mobile phone GPS location data, travel itineraries, Skype and Facebook data, medical records, criminal records, financial records and surveillance camera footage.

Tens of thousands of drones are slated to be launched over the US mainland in the coming years, with thousands already buzzing overhead. These high-tech aircraft are able to monitor meetings and demonstrations, access wireless networks and record the movements of citizens. Obama’s recent appointee for the position of CIA director, John Brennan, expressly refused at his confirmation hearings to rule out the possibility that these drones could be armed and used for carrying out assassinations within the US.

While schools are being shuttered and teachers fired supposedly for lack of money, local police departments are awash in billions of dollars of military hardware and training provided by the Department of Homeland Security. When local police are mobilized to respond to a political protest, they now do so in coordination with the federal military and intelligence agencies. It is not a rarity for armored vehicles, body armor and military equipment to be deployed.

Under the precedent set by the recent events in

Boston, the authorities now have the power to subject an entire city to a military siege, with the population ordered to “shelter in place,” while businesses and transportation are shut down and heavily armed SWAT teams are deployed to conduct warrantless house-to-house searches without regard for basic rights.

The Obama administration, in concert with state and local police departments, has sent untold numbers of “anti-terror” undercover spies into domestic political parties and protest groups. In addition to gathering information, the job of these spies is to divert, disrupt and prevent the emergence of organized social opposition.

A person can be designated a “terrorist” on the secret, unreviewable say-so of the president, without notice and without a trial. Under the “material support” for terrorism laws signed into law as part of the PATRIOT Act of 2001, a person may be jailed simply for offering vaguely-defined “material support” to any person or group labeled as “terrorist.”

Under the National Defense Authorization Acts of 2011 and 2012, as tested in the case of Jose Padilla, the US government asserts the power to subject a designated “terrorist” to arbitrary arrest and detention without trial. In the cases of Padilla and Bradley Manning, and at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp and countless CIA “black sites” around the world, the US government subjects alleged terrorists to torture. Finally, in the cases of Anwar Al-Awlaki, Samir Khan and Abdulrahman Al-Awlaki, the US government tested out its asserted power to murder “terrorists” outright, even if they are US citizens.

Under these precedents, it would not be necessary to officially suspend the Constitution in order for the US government to meet future domestic opposition with military lockdowns, curfews, house-to-house searches, mass arrests, torture and even assassination. With political dissent labeled as “terrorism” or “material support for terrorism,” Congress, the president, the courts, the military, and the so-called “free press” could continue in their present roles.

In the second half of the 20th century, US-backed dictatorships in Argentina and Chile used the supposed struggle against “terrorism” as a political cover for the arrest and murder of tens of thousands of political opponents, youth, workers, intellectuals and other “enemies of the state.” As the *World Socialist Web Site*

warned from the outset, such is the inevitable logic of the American “war on terror.”

Two essential factors are driving the trampling of democratic rights and the shift towards authoritarian rule. The first is the massive growth of social inequality, which in turn is driven by the historic crisis of the world capitalist system. While it robs the population in order to pile up ever greater and more obscene levels of private wealth, the financial aristocracy is terrified of the emergence of social opposition. Not from a position of strength, but out of extreme fear and vulnerability, the billionaires look to police state repression as a means to preserve their status, power and wealth.

Second, just as democracy is incompatible with such levels of social inequality, it is incompatible with imperialist war. The US military and intelligence agencies have for twelve years been wading in blood in a drive to plunder the world's strategic resources. The dead, wounded and displaced number in the millions.

A professional military, divorced from and hostile to the population and resentful of civilian control, has immensely expanded its size, resources and political power, to the point where it and its intelligence counterpart, in league with Wall Street, dominate the workings of the state.

The ruling class is in the advanced stage of preparations for an inevitable confrontation with the working class. Working people must make their own preparations, central to which is the building of a new, revolutionary leadership. Only a conscious political struggle for a workers' government and socialism can avert the threat of dictatorship and establish genuine democracy and social equality.



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