

CPD Statement on Libya

April 7, 2011

The Campaign for Peace and Democracy has issued a statement "We Support the Libyan Democratic Revolution and Oppose Western Military Intervention and Domination." Please circulate it widely.

We Support the Libyan Democratic Revolution and Oppose Western Military Intervention and Domination

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The Campaign for Peace and Democracy stands in solidarity with the Libyan revolution. Even the brutal Qaddafi regime, bloated with oil wealth, defended by thousands of mercenaries, and ruling over a hollowed-out civil society, could not prevent a challenge from below. As is the case with all the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, the Libyan revolt holds the promise not only of democracy but also, along with political freedom, the emergence of a new left and labor movement that can offer an alternative to today's violent, exploitative and unequal world order.

At first, Libyans protested peacefully against Qaddafi's regime. Then, in the face of a vicious attack, they defended themselves with their own arms, helped by numerous defectors from the Libyan army. As the Qaddafi forces reached the outskirts of Benghazi, the U.S. decided to support the calls from the rebels - and the British and French - for a no-fly zone. At that point, the Libyan Transitional National Council's request was for a strictly limited intervention, explicitly excluding ground forces and aimed only at neutralizing Qaddafi's air force. Since the Libyans believed they faced the threat of an imminent massacre, their appeal was totally understandable. Likewise, it was understandable that many progressive, normally anti-interventionist, supporters of the Libyan revolution throughout the world called for a no-fly zone as well, especially because the Libyans themselves had asked for it.

While respecting the impulse behind this position, however, we do not support U.S. and European air and naval operations in Libya. UN Security Council resolution 1973 provided for a no-fly zone, but military intervention by the U.S. and Europe was much more than that right from the beginning, as was predictable given their history, relationship to North Africa and the Middle East, and imperial appetites. The operation, which is now under NATO command, immediately became a campaign to oust Qaddafi on behalf of western interests.

NATO bombing is now forecast to continue for at least three more months, and an eventual invasion and occupation are possible if the situation isn't resolved to the satisfaction of the western powers. U.S. and British secret service agents have been in eastern Libya for weeks, and appear to be assuming a growing role in military training, directing NATO air strikes, and perhaps political guidance for the National Council. Intervention may have prevented a massacre in Benghazi, but at the same time it has inserted NATO's power into Libya, at the heart of a region in democratic turmoil, and dangerously compromised the political independence of the Libyan revolution.

A "surgical" strike, limited to protecting civilians in Benghazi, was never a real possibility; the U.S. and Europe are not available for one-shot genuinely humanitarian intervention in a major oil-producing region. Libya's revolution needs to remain in Libyan hands; western military intervention directly contravenes that goal and paves the way for western domination of all or part of Libya.

In fact, NATO's attack on Libya may well end up strengthening the hand of Qaddafi and other regional dictators by allowing them to pose as defenders of national self-determination, especially if air strikes end up maiming and killing large numbers of civilians, as they have in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In his relations with the west, Qaddafi went from pariah to partner, but Libya under his rule was never a dependable partner, like Saudi Arabia or Mubarak's Egypt. There is no evidence that the United States or the European powers planned Qaddafi's overthrow or even expected it before February 2011. But when the Libyan revolution broke out, after hesitating for a couple of weeks, they decided to intervene, reportedly working furiously behind the scenes to obtain Arab League support to legitimize their intervention - support which, incidentally, almost instantly evaporated once Operation Odyssey Dawn had begun. The western powers might well have been willing to deal with Qaddafi in power indefinitely, since he had granted plenty of access to Libya's oil, collaborated in the sordid "rendition" program, and helped prevent African refugees from getting to Europe. However, once the situation became unstable they sought to assert more reliable control over Libya and its resources. With France and Britain pressing strongly for a no-fly zone, the United States may have felt that it was politically impossible to remain on the sidelines, both because Washington did not want to have its leadership position in NATO compromised by sitting this one out and because it wanted to assure that the U.S. would be in a position to reap the greatest gains in the aftermath of the conflict.

The United States and Europe both want to prevent the coming to power of a government that uses Libya's oil revenues to satisfy domestic popular needs, not to enrich itself and western corporations. The intervention was an opportunity to try to gain enough influence over the revolution to steer it in a direction favorable to western interests. This is all the more important because western powers have suffered a major setback with the ouster of friendly dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, as a result of which their power in North Africa and the Middle East is shakier than ever. It is especially true for the United States, which has also bungled its attempt to establish stable, cooperative client states in Iraq and Afghanistan, and whose credibility will likely suffer further as newly democratized Tunisia and Egypt, under the pressure of public opinion, reassess their relations with Washington's foremost regional client, Israel.

U.S. and European intervention is part of an emerging counterrevolution that threatens to blunt, or even reverse, the democratic promise of the Arab Spring. Despots in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman and Syria have been increasingly cracking down on popular insurgencies, and in Egypt the military is moving to safeguard its power and curb radical reform, possibly in alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood. The Egyptian military has so far refused to end the state of emergency and has tried, fortunately without much success, to ban strikes and demonstrations. Except in the case of Syria, all of this has almost certainly taken place with the tacit approval, and perhaps the direct connivance, of Washington - and even the repression in Syria has evoked only feeble protests from U.S. officials. In Yemen, Washington is reported to be moving away from support to President Ali Abdullah Saleh in the eleventh hour, as his rule becomes totally unviable, and favoring the transfer of power to a provisional government led by Saleh's vice president, who the U.S. hopes will follow in the compliant footsteps of the present Yemeni government. Political leaders in the United States, and the corporate, military and political elites they serve, have a deep and vested interest in containing the revolutions now sweeping the Arab world. Lending support to their armed incursions would simply facilitate their success in this reactionary endeavor.

The Libyan National Council originally called not only for a no-fly zone, but also for western nations to hand over Qaddafi's frozen assets so they could purchase arms. It is revealing that the U.S. and Europe have so far neither supplied arms directly nor provided an opening for the rebels to acquire the weapons they desperately need. Of course, channeling weaponry to the Libyan National

Council would also be a means of acquiring political leverage for the west, but that could be mitigated by the rebels acquiring weapons from diverse sources. In any event, the Council is not definitively under the control of the west at this point; it still seems to rest on a measure of popular support and to be at least somewhat accountable to Libyans — NATO, obviously is not.

As long as the Libyan revolution expresses the striving of the mass of Libyan people for democracy and social justice, it must command the support of progressives everywhere. But that support cannot extend automatically to every political decision the Libyan rebels make, especially when we have good reason to believe that certain decisions undermine their ability to replace the cruel Qaddafi regime with a system of people's power and enhance the retrograde influence of the western powers throughout the region; this is the great danger of the rebels' willingness to accept NATO as a full partner. There can be little doubt that NATO's increasing role in the struggle against Qaddafi helps promote the most pro-western elements in the National Council - former Qaddafi officials, emigrés with CIA connections, etc. - and strengthens them in relation to more progressive, anti-imperialist forces.

It should be remembered that other oppressed peoples have desperately called for great power intervention on their behalf - with fatal results. In 1994, in the face of ferocious repression, Haitians appealed to the United States to reinstall Bertrand Aristide; the result was an occupation (as in Libya, under the imprimatur of the UN) that persists to this day, a U.S.-sponsored coup that forced Aristide out of the country, a corrupt and undemocratic government, and ongoing desperate poverty arising out of U.S.-imposed economic policies. [Joanne Landy's Op-Ed opposing U.S. intervention in Haiti was published in the August 7, 1994 issue of The New York Times.] Besieged Muslim Bosnians and Kosovar Albanians called for help from NATO; the results were permanent ethnic partition in Bosnia and the creation of a gangster state in Kosovo. Many Iraqis initially greeted U.S. troops as liberators from the hated rule of Saddam Hussein; but Iraq's "liberation" immediately turned into a nightmare of bloody U.S. repression and sectarian strife.

Since the end of the Cold War, military interventions by the United States and its allies have become more and more frequent, with disastrous consequences not only for the populations involved, but also for the left and the antiwar movement globally. To the extent that progressives and antiwar activists defend these interventions, they provide unintentional political cover for what are in fact exercises in imperial aggression - and help justify future bloody interventions.

If our goal is a democratic world of self-determining peoples, free from imperialist domination, then the strategies we support should point with consistency toward the achievement of that goal. As long as the wealthy and powerful have the means to impose their will by force, they will prevent such a world from coming into being. NATO is one of their strongest weapons. We cannot support its incursions, even when they are disguised as efforts to protect civilian lives. This is especially important in North Africa and the Middle East, where western powers have a vital interest in preventing a real seizure of power by the Arab masses. The challenge that faces radical democratic movements around the world today is to find ways of offering meaningful solidarity and support to one another, rather than lending added legitimacy to the very forces that stand in our way. As future crises develop, this challenge will become more and more urgent.

The insurgency in Libya, and democratic movements throughout North Africa and the Middle East will undoubtedly face painful setbacks as well as heartening victories as the revolutionary process unfolds. In Libya, we hope that it's not too late for the popular insurgency to retrieve its independence. Its true friends in the region and around the globe are grassroots movements, unions, peace and human rights activists, with similar democratic goals.

More than any event in decades, the Arab Spring has opened up the prospect of a better world, a

world in which the fate of billions is no longer at the mercy of power-hungry, self-aggrandizing elites. At home, the wave of democratic revolutions offers an opportunity for those of us who have long opposed U.S. foreign policy and its reliance on authoritarian governments, military intervention, and reactionary economic policies to convince ordinary Americans that another road is possible and in their best interests.

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