Self-determination and Democracy in the Iraqi Conflict

written by Barry Finger | March 31, 2010

THE DEMAND FOR NATIONAL LIBERATION, for the right of self-determination of a people, is understood by socialists to be a demand for radical, consistent democracy. This at once separates us from those who, such as the Buchananite paleocons, place the inviolability of the national principle above all other considerations and who may consistently oppose imperial interventions on that basis. Yet, this demand on the part of socialists for the right to self-determination may even seem self-contradictory insofar as the final aim of socialism is an international political and economic order that aims to inspire the peoples of the world with the understanding that the highest order of collective human devotion is a devotion to the human race at large. National sentiment itself, like religious ideologies, or ethnic chauvinisms, that contrast and raise the well being of a fragment of humanity above the well being of the human race as a whole are obstacles to socialist goals.

Socialists, however, are not blind to reality. We do not believe that national sentiment can be uprooted by decree or by propaganda, much less by force. We do not advocate national sentiment, but we assay a working arrangement with it wherever possible. Where the struggle against national oppression exists, we seek to solidarize with those who would merge the particular struggle against oppression with the general struggle against all oppressors, that is, into a revolutionary socialist channel.

Socialists champion self-determination because imperial oppression is an artificial unifier of diverse national classes and political ideologies. Foreign domination concentrates the passions and energies of resistance and struggle against the outside enemy, retarding the evolution of a separate and independent strain of working class consciousness and politics that we look to as the key to social progress. The release of a nation from the grip of national oppression can unleash, at least in part, the latent tendencies for class conflict and social struggle, which are the animating forces of democracy.

Where the imperialist oppressor is a democratic capitalist country, the continued presence of foreign domination cannot but have the effect of tainting and distorting the social content of democracy in the eyes of the oppressed. This is especially true where democracy is first introduced by means of an imperial invasion. A nation that is politically oppressed so that it may be economically exploited, necessarily alights on the not unreasonable suspicion that "democracy" is nothing but a cultural and administrative tool in the arsenal of domination. For that is precisely the social program which it bears in that context and equally why "democratic" imperialism is so particularly pernicious. As socialists, we, especially, should harbor no illusions that the cause of democracy can be advanced by such means. Democrats, trade unionists, feminists, etc. who seek cover under a "democratic" imperialist umbrella, who moreover take responsibility for the politics of imperial intervention, dishonor their ideals insofar as they come to be perceived, justifiably or not, as agents of foreign collaboration.

This lesson applies with equal validity and for analogous reasons to the behavior of democrats and socialists within the bastions of democratic imperialism. When Stalinism was a force in the world, independent socialists distinguished themselves from liberals, social democrats, and pro-western socialists, not so much in seeing in Communism a greater evil to democratic capitalism. This we were often willing to concede. Where we parted company was in our adamant refusal to lend

critical support to capitalism as a bulwark of democracy against totalitarian movements. We explained that Stalinism fed on the fundamental inability of capitalism to solve the profound social problems afflicting society. That being so, it would be utterly senseless and suicidal to follow cold war liberals and their cothinkers in their stubborn delusion that the very same system, with the very same predatory appetites that gave rise, sustained, and multiplied these brutalities and which thereby recruited its own enemies could be successfully leveraged as a means of advancing democracy and defeating Stalinism. The futility of lending critical support to capitalist imperialist interventionism became a cardinal lesson of that era.

It is a lesson whose principles have outlived the historical circumstances through which they were derived. In these principles a broad consistency emerges that the democratic proposition requires socialists and their allies on either side of an imperial intervention — even against an authoritarian movement or regime — to break with capitalism, its parties, its politics, and its wars. The price that is paid for failing to do so is an endless loop of barbarism, inhumanity, and social stagnation and regression.

For paleocons (and, perhaps, for anti-imperialist liberals of the Michael Lind stripe) the condition of self- determination is satisfied simply with the removal of external political restraints. As long as the government of the once foreign dominated nation is now composed of personnel who share the cultural, linguistic and ethnic background of the governed, the nation can be said to be, in their terms, liberated. Socialists, on the other hand, measure national self-determination by the yardstick of democracy. The absence of imperial encumbrances is therefore endorsed as a necessary, but not sufficient precondition of self-determination and national liberation. That socialists support self-determination as a democratic demand, by no means obliges us to support any or all movements or organizations struggling for that demand. We chose to support only those movements as against the imperialist power that we realistically believe can pave the way for further and expanded struggle in the direction of socialism and popular control from below, and resolutely oppose those whose victory would be an impediment to such further developments.

The Arab world is increasingly being convulsed by a civil war, where the United States, patron of the status quo, would necessarily be mired, even absent a 9-11. Nasserism and Baathism, the contemporary conduits of Arab nationalism, have failed to address the fundamental issues of modernization and democracy. As such, they are powerless as a viable safeguard against the rising tide of Islamic fascism. No reorientation of American policy towards this option is possible, although America toyed with that alternative in supporting Saddam against the Iranians in the 1980s. The traditional client system, whereby Saudi Arabia most prominently policed the Gulf to maintain American interests, is in a shambles. The American ruling class has now seized on vassalizing Iraq, of turning it into a regional platform for the projection of U.S. power in securing the Gulf oil and of installing a demonstration regime, which it hopes to export regionally as its next line of defense.

Of course, nothing America is willing or able to do addresses the fundamental source of grievances in the Arab world. It is a region deeply divided between haves and have-nots, primarily determined by the ownership of oil and the relative density of populations. The Arab economy is linked by an international division of labor in which poor, population-rich nations provide oil-rich, population- poor nations with a labor force, a rentier economy, and an extravagant, deeply offensive life style. It is this essential injustice and the utter inability of the Arab revolution, stymied and frustrated at every turn by its own antidemocratic proclivities compounded by persistent Western interventions in favor of the existing system, to resolve this that fuels bin Laden's forces.

FOR ALL ITS TALK of exporting democracy, the United States is constitutionally incapable of waging a

democratic war simply because it is of necessity opposed to the only solution which could offer a way out of poverty for the Arab masses: the democratic ownership and control from below in the broader Arab context of the Gulf oil resources. Instead, the immediate problem for American imperialism is to recruit international allies in its war to crush the Iraqi resistance. But since opinion abroad is overwhelmingly opposed to participation in this venture, the United States acts to drive a wedge between the democratic sentiment of its would-be allies and the governments it hopes to enlist. It means extending *cart blanche* to Putin to crush Chechnya, and to Sharon to strangle Palestine. It means deep inroads into civil liberties, burdening the working class with war obligations at the expense of social programs, turning the armed forces into a charnel house for the poor and disenfranchised. It means the atrocities of Abu Ghraib and Fallujah. It means the transfer of sovereignty without the withdrawal or subordination of coalition forces. It means Allawi introducing emergency measures, including the reinstatement of the death penalty, that invest him with broad powers, thus effectively shattering the myth that post-Saddam Iraq, unlike its predecessor, is governed by the rule of law. It means 100,000 Iraqi deaths and counting.

Beyond this, the United States proposes, with the imperial arrogance and tin ear that only the world's greatest stand-pat power could muster, a neocon utopia of even more rampant inequality for Iraq. It proposes permitting 100 percent foreign ownership of Iraqi business and resources, except for the oil industry, the complete repatriation of profits without provision for reinvestment, a flat tax on profits of 15 percent and the suppression of wages to attract foreign investors. In fact, all that remains of Saddam Hussein's economic policies are the laws that suppress trade unions and restrict collective bargaining rights. The sanctions regime that existed after the first Gulf War caused the destruction of the Iraqi middle classes, the collapse of the secular educational system and a renewal of religious obscurantism. Reconstruction funds have been too meager for any meaningful revival of indigenous Iraqi capitalist prospects.

If the United States has its way, superimposed above this foreign dominated economy will be the Allawi regime, now assiduously consolidating its base by rehabilitating former officers, pardoning Baathist penitents, conferring lucrative positions on prospective cronies and combining enormous dosages of corruption with lethal quantities of repression need to catapult themselves into power and preside over the Iraqi state and its vast oilfields. It will be a state-regime unlike other capitalist regimes, because the Iraqi state, through its control of one immensely lucrative commodity, will be self-perpetuating and socially autonomous in ways that no other normally functioning capitalist state would ever be allowed to become. Its sole function, aside from self- enrichment, will be to provide troop and logistical support for the suppression of Muslim insurgencies that threaten Gulf oil, a function that the United States in full confidence can be assured that it will have a career stake in providing. For all its talk of democracy, the American program is remarkable only for the heights of its impudence. Once having exercised the right to vote, no further civic role is envisioned for the Iraqi people. There simply is no place for the organized working class in the new hellhole envisioned by the American architects of reconstruction.

Against this, from what we know, it seems sadly that the present Iraqi insurgency offers no additional avenues for the assertion of Iraqi democracy, and would close down those crevices that presently exist for existing democratic forces to maneuver. It appears to be a political and social deadend promising only the endless regression of society, the virtual enslavement of women, the shackling of the working class and the annihilation of socialists, democrats, and nonbelievers. Socialists can have no truck supporting such a resistance. Its ability to appeal to the Iraqi people as champions of national liberation is the consequence entirely of the reactionary nature of the American intervention. A victory for such a resistance would be completely incompatible with any conceivable socialist understanding of self-determination. Endorsing these forces would be as ill-advised and reactionary as the German Communist support in 1923 of the Nazi sabotage during

French occupation of the Ruhr. We therefore demand an immediate withdrawal of occupation forces not only in compliance with the democratic demands of self-determination, but also in an effort to shakeout and fragment the reactionary forces of the resistance, artificially united in opposition to a common foe.

WE LOOK INSTEAD to the incipient forces of Iraqi democracy, of all third-force groups and elements, to combine, arm, and organize themselves, to break with the occupation forces and establish themselves as an independent coordinate of power. No prospect for the defeat of Islamic fascism nor the forging and defense of Iraqi democracy is possible as long as such forces struggle as subjects and instruments of American imperialism.

Footnotes