

NATO AND THE LIBYAN CRISIS: A LOOMING CASE OF NEO-DICTATORSHIP

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Abstract

This paper attempts to look at the Libyan crisis and the looming form of NATO's neo-dictatorship. Recent uprisings in the Maghreb and the Middle East have been attributed to the "Iron Fist" policy or "lack of economic opportunity" in the region without recourse to foreign policies which shored up those regimes. This mono-causal and on the face value interpretation of the revolutionary eruptions in the regions is not only distorting and misleading but grossly inadequate to explain the phenomenon which has remote causes in the policies of the super powers during the cold war years. The paper maintains that an understanding of earlier super power policies will not only discredit NATO involvement in the Maghreb but concludes that NATO intervention is aimed to clot up the revolutionary momentum of social forces and to replace the autocratic regimes with a new form of dictatorship pliable to Western imperial hegemony. It recommends that to avoid the imposition of a puppet regime under the Western powers, the Libyan people should overthrow their dictator without the manipulations of the imperial NATO.

INTRODUCTION

On December, 2010, a 26 year Tunisian, Mohammed Bouazizi, an unemployed graduate and fruit vendor set himself on fire in protest of being mal-treated by local authorities. The immolation of Mohammed was taken up by an outraged public which eventually sacked the president, Ben Ali, the twenty-three years dictator, and set in motion the revolutionary eruptions which engulfed states of North Africa and the Middle East. Until his sack on January, 14, 2011, Ben Ali enjoyed enormous support and assistance from the US. Throughout the Maghreb, and the Middle East, uprisings occurred in Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Yemen with different intensity. Noticeable features of these protest movements are that there are mass movements of the poor, unemployed and workers, and their protest is directed against their leaders, the ruling class some of who are corrupt, illegitimate, repressive and unwanted. Most of the movements are not only asking for regime change but structural change.

It is equally important to note anti-western slogans in some of the protest movements (Libya, Jordan, Saudi Arabia etc). Interestingly, states experiencing these eruptions derive enormous support and assistance from the US and the West (Ohanwe, 2011). US policy in those regions has been based on maintaining dictatorial regimes headed by puppets of the US in a bid to achieve their objectives in the region irrespective of the domestic policies of such regimes. Now that those regimes are under flames, the US and the West have attributed the protest movements in the Maghreb and Middle East to the lack of "economic opportunities", "tight fist" and or "sit-tight" policy of their governments (Webber & Smith, 2002). This interpretation is not only misleading but distorts the historical antecedents of Western involvement in those regions.

Theoretical Background

This work borrows its theoretical framework from Karl Marx postulations of Marxism which is a theory based on dialectical materialism, in which the system of economic production determines the institutional and ideological structure of society (Wetter, 1963). Central to the Marxist theory of imperialism and war is the assumption that all international issues are reducible to issues of economic gains rather than political power. It considers that all histories are history of class struggle between the ruling class and the opposing group, from which comes a new economic, political, and social system.

Marx analysis contains a thesis; ruling class, and an antithesis; opposing group, which clash and produce a synthesis; a new economic, political, and social system (Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 1997). Applying this postulation to our discourse, following the internal revolutions in Libya, the U.S through the instrument of NATO is fashioning out a response to give her a strategic and economic grip of Libya.

The Maghreb in US Foreign Policy Calculations

An understanding of the recent uprisings in the Maghreb can be enhanced by putting the region in proper historical perspective. It is pertinent to state that the US was never a “scrambling power” in Africa. In strict observance of the Munroe Doctrine of 1823, the US has maintained a policy of isolation from the rest of the world (Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 1997), until developments in the international arena exploded this policy during the world wars. Development after the Second World War exposed the geostrategic and economic importance of Africa to US national interest. The earliest involvement of the US in Africa was in the Maghreb when in 1789, it check-mated the Barbary states of pirates who operated from bases in the coast of North Africa. The post second world war era revealed the importance of the Maghreb states of North Africa-Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya, as bulwark states against the Soviet Union. Until then, US policy remained passive and deferred to the Metropolitan powers on issues concerning Africa. The British and French positions in the region could not be undermined; thus, reforms which threatened French interest in Morocco and Tunisia and Britain in Egypt were not tolerated by the U.S whose main interest hitherto was to checkmate communist insurgency which also became synonymous with preventing radical nationalist regimes from coming to power.

From 1954, the US increased her activities in the region by supporting more self government in Morocco and Tunisia within the framework of French hegemony, (Kolko; 1988). It sort to increase her prestige in the third World by intensifying and maintaining friendly relations with despotic regimes in some North Africa states and those of the Middle East which are now experiencing revolutionary eruptions. In North Africa, US allies include Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco used as bulwark states against soviet Communism and also as check on Libya which was the Soviet Union anchor point in the region. The fear of Soviet arms stationed in Libya, “Possibly” against the US and her NATO allies in the region and the Middle East became obvious when Col. Maumar Gadhaffi came to power in 1969. The Libyan strongman expelled the British and American forces and closed their bases. This radical gesture is said to be responsible for reshaping US foreign policy towards Africa and the Middle East in response to the activities of the USSR (Kolka, 1998). Thus, states in the North African sub-region and the Middle East which are passing through revolutionary upheavals were allies of the super powers during the cold war years. In spite of their undemocratic and corrupt leadership styles, these regimes were condoned by their international god fathers.

Egypt for instance, was the most important cold war ally of the US in North Africa. It receives one million dollars annually from the US in terms of its wars against Islamic organizations (Ohanwe, 2011). Egypt geostrategic position and cultural endowments could not be resisted hence successive regimes in the US have maintained cordial relations with Egypt to the eve of the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak. The importance of Egypt can also be appreciated as the gateway to the most important waterway where vessels transport oil and other resources essential to the World capitalist markets. Policies of the super-powers in North Africa and the Middle East were determined by the advantage or otherwise they brought to the US or USSR and not how these policies affected the welfare of the citizens of those regions. It was this ideological rivalry between the super powers that sowed the seeds of recent uprisings in the Maghreb. The super powers were handy to help their satellite states to suppress internal uprisings or popular demand for good governance in order to prevent each other from exploiting such uprisings to its advantage. These regimes maintained their legitimacy and longevity to a manner prescribed by their international allies than responding to the needs of their people. The allies on the other hand maintained a blind eye to the domestic excesses of their satellite states in order to achieve their objectives. What these tyrannical regimes did to their citizens was therefore inconsequential. It is from this background that recent eruptions in North Africa and the Middle East can be understood.

North Africa crises & NATO INTERVENTION

It is tempting and simplistic to swallow line and sinker the notion held by the West that North Africa uprisings are a product of “tight fist” or “sit tight” policy of the autocrats in the region. On a general note, they are part of a global financial crisis and its consequences on human and material development, increasing cost of food prices, unemployment, poverty, and the inability of government to proffer solutions to these challenges have created discontent.

Western European countries like, Greece, Portugal, Spain and America are in recent times undergoing pressures and crisis arising from global financial meltdown. Specific local issues are also important and combine with global financial pressures to bubble to the surface having been suppressed for a long time by their authoritarian regimes. Unemployment, misrule, the rise of a large population of educated and semi-educated unemployed youths have combined to provide objective conditions for mass uprisings in the region. Tunisia set the pace in North Africa uprisings, when in November 2010, Mohammed Buazizi set himself on fire. The event as stated earlier not only culminated to the ousting of Ben Ali- Tunisian president but also spread to Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Algeria and so on. It is interesting to note that the states experiencing these eruptions are satellite states of the US and the West. US policy on those regions has been based on maintaining a number of autocratic regimes which guarantees its interest. Now that these regimes are under fire from the people who have chosen to take their destiny in their hands, the US is describing them as “tight fist” or “sit tight”. In most states in the regions, protests carry anti-western slogans (e.g Libya, Saudi Arabia). What this suggests is that their demand for change may not be to Western type democracy or the type dictated by the US.

This point has been made more forcefully in the region where Islamic organizations and al-Qaida networks are lambasting states which deviated from Islamic reforms (Ohanwe, 2011). The US is now fashioning out responses necessary to maintain her strategic and economic stronghold in the region especially with the fear that the desired change may transfer the reins of power to Islamic groups or regimes not pliable to US and Western interest. In responding to North Africa uprisings, President Obama declared ‘the democratic uprisings that began this spring in Tunisia... Egypt... are inspirational and rooted in the lack of economic opportunity...’ (Obama in talkpoints, 2011). Obama stated that the US supported the democratic aspiration of the people of Tunisia, even when it has been a solid supporter of President Ben Ali until his sack in January,14, 2011. President Obama announced steps by US to cancel a billion dollars worth of Egyptian and Tunisian debts, establish Egyptian-American private enterprise fund and guarantee up to a million dollars in borrowing through US overseas private investment corporation.

On Libya, Obama reiterated his position that-

The US and its NATO allies were right to intervene militarily to prevent an imminent massacre of thousands of opposition rebels... When Gadhaffi inevitably leaves or is forced from power, decades of provocation will come to an end... (Obama in talkpoints, 2011).

It is a matter for sober reflection that the North African and Middle East uprisings be analyzed on their surface thereby obscuring the antecedents of the revolutionary upsurges in the regions of discourse. US policy has shown clearly that Western type values are inimical to the growth and prosperity of developing nations. It is this type of foreign policy pursuits that has set the US as the target of Islamic militant groups. Little wonder therefore that weaker nations have often defended their position that terrorism is the weapon of the weak in a world which raises national interest to an ideology. Western democratic values have come to be viewed as flagrant hypocrisy, a ploy to make the World safe to new forms of imperialism. The US has been admonished by many to re-examine its foreign policy and make itself a less attractive target of terrorism (Daily Trust, Dec, 30, 2009).

This admonition is noteworthy especially when it is considered against US support for Arab and autocratic regimes that supported US objectives irrespective of whether those objectives represented legitimate aspirations and wishes of the people. The US closes its eyes to the dismal corruption and bad governance of their puppet regimes. This short-sighted strategy of buying stability, while turning a blind eye to repression, according to some observer’s, reveals the hollowness of its democratic values. “Stability”, in the eyes of the West means gaining access to strategic minerals and business opportunities, access to energy sources and markets; this, more than any other reason is plausible *raison d’être* for NATO intervention in the uprisings in Libya in the guise of humanitarianism.

CONCLUSION

The revolutionary eruptions that engulfed the Maghreb states of North Africa beginning from Tunisia in 2010 have both remote and immediate causes. The remote causes can be explained in the policies of the super powers in the region during the cold war years. The self immolation of Mohammed can be seen as the immediate or fuse that lit the spark of revolutionary uprisings in the region. In the past, U.S and indeed the West intervened on grounds of cold war and arms sales in the guise of improving relations.

Now, the fear of Islamic or less favorable regimes, energy sources and business opportunities provide plausible reasons for NATO intervention than the ploy of humanitarianism. Obama's defense of US involvement in Libya as a gesture taken to avoid a bloody massacre of rebels is a ploy by the imperial powers to defend their economic and strategic interest in the region. The argument that the Libyan people are helpless and doomed without hope of defeating Gadhaffi without the intervention of outside forces' is already flawed by the glaring facts in Tunisia and Egypt, that working people can overthrow their dictators without outside assistance from imperial powers.

NATO intervention is likened to a reactionary force which aims to subvert, clot up or hijack the revolutionary momentum of the people towards structural change. NATO intervention aims to reverse the revolutionary process and implant a puppet regime under Western hegemony. To this end, there is a looming danger should the West try to impose a transitional government that does not represent the voice of the people. As it was in the days of Iraq, where the US claimed that- 'the nation of Iraq...is fully capable of moving towards democracy and living in freedom... A new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example...' (Khaldi; 2005:39), so shall it be in Libya with no peace in sight, under the auspices of the West. It is possible that a new form of dictatorship is about to replace the old type autocracy.

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