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Debate: Libya, Syria

The Arab revolutions and campist politics

- Debate - Problems of the Arab and Middle East regions -

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Whether they are fake republics, oil theocracies or pseudo-parliamentary monarchies and independently of their social and economic profile, all the countries of the Arab world share - or shared before January 14 - a common feature: they are all subjected to ferocious dictatorships run by small oligarchies who maintain themselves in power by Mafia-style practices and police repression, generating in the majority of the cases elevated and scandalous levels of poverty for the majority of their population.

All these governments were and are faithful allies of the West and of its interests in the region: gas, oil, migration policy, support for Israel. None of them constitutes an obstacle for imperialist control of the region, as was shown by the hesitations of the United States and the EU before abandoning Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. Or as is also demonstrated by the unconditional support for the Khalifa family in Bahrain, for president Saleh in Yemen, King Abdullah of Jordan and Mohammed VI and Bouteflika in Morocco and in Algeria, countries where demonstrations were repressed amidst widespread silence by the media and Western governments. Not to mention, of course, Saudi Arabia, property of the Saud family, whose soldiers are present in Bahrain to repress the legitimate popular demands that endanger the oil monarchies of the Gulf, which are fundamental allies of the United States.

The case of Libya is not an exception in this tableau, although, without any doubt, it very much complicates things and blurs analyses, especially in the camp of the anti-imperialist left. Gaddafi is a no less sinister dictator than his colleagues and his people have no less reason to contest his power.

On February 17, when the massacre took place in Benghazi, the Libyan regime did not represent any threat for imperialism. Quite the contrary, Gaddafi was an obliging ally in the “war against terrorism”; in the “structural genocide” - as Hinkelammert calls it - of European migration policies; and in supplying oil and gas to Europe and the United States through juicy contracts with ENI, Shell, BP and Repsol. The West forgave him all his extravagances and his crimes years ago. He was received by Sarkozy, embraced by Berlusconi and Zapatero and complimented by Condoleezza Rice. Livingstone and Monitors, two American public relations companies, were hired to improve his image in the United States.

Moreover, in January 2011, scarcely a month before the popular revolt, the International Monetary Fund, in the person of its president, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, had congratulated Gaddafi and his government for the economic reforms undertaken in Libya over the last few years.

Why, then, intervene against such a friend? Why the attacks of NATO? Is there no difference between Tunisia and Libya? Yes, there is, but it has nothing to do with the “tribal” composition, the “presence of Al Qaeda” or a per capita GDP higher than elsewhere. The difference is oil. Libya has oil, Tunisia does not. And with an international energy crisis, worsened by the Japanese nuclear disaster, it is absolutely necessary to guarantee access to Libyan fuel sources.

But wasn't this oil already “ours”? Wasn't it in the hands of the multinationals? Yes, indeed, and so it should be clearly understood that the revolution that began on January 14 in Tunisia then in Egypt gave pleasure neither to Gaddafi, nor to France, Britain, the United States, Italy and Spain. Until February 25, Western governments were so timorous in their condemnations of the repression that several media on the left underlined the hypocrisy of “encouraging protests in Iran while de-legitimising those in Libya and Bahrain”.

Berlusconi, for his part, initially defended without any ambiguity his friend Gaddafi, with whom he had close ties. But

since it was difficult to continue to publicly support a dictator after the revolutions in Tunisia and in Egypt and since, in addition, the Libyan revolutionaries were at the time advancing victoriously towards Tripoli - everything seemed to indicate an imminent fall of the regime - the Western powers started to lean in favour of the virtual winners.

When deliveries of arms from Algeria and Syria, as well as the intensive recruitment of mercenaries upset, in an unexpected way, the military relationship of forces on the ground, it was too late to change course. It was necessary to fight Gaddafi by all means and in an urgent way, since he was about to besiege Benghazi, the last bastion of the rebels. The NATO campaign, naturally, was prepared and accompanied by a media diabolisation of the Libyan ex-friend, a diabolisation which, although it is based on reality, is no less ignoble and dishonest, if we take account of who is conducting it and with what aim.

The problem is that part of the anti-imperialist left, including some Latin-American governments from whom we could have expected more solidarity faced with a popular revolt, interpreted the intervention and the media diabolisation as an infallible criterion, to draw, by a pure effect of inverted mirror, erroneous conclusions. Instead of denouncing the military intervention as a criminal improvisation, a source of many conflicts among the attackers themselves, they adopted mechanical conclusions, specific to the framework of the Cold War, leading to the reproduction of the same double language and the same manipulations which are justly reproached to the imperialist enemy.

If there is intervention, they say, it shows that the revolt was neither legitimate, nor just, nor spontaneous, nor popular. Against all evidence and with contempt for the sacrifice of hundreds of young people, you decide in an arbitrary fashion and without much knowledge of the region, that the Tunisian and Egyptian people (and undoubtedly those of Yemen, Bahrain or Morocco) have the right to revolt, but not the Libyan people. The logical consequence of this mechanical reasoning, in the face of the media diabolisation of the Libyan dictator, is to arrive at the absurd conclusion that Gaddafi is actually a socialist, an anti-imperialist and a democrat, an exemplary third-worldist leader who has saved his people from poverty and superstition, thus representing an obstacle for the colonial powers.

But this counter-diabolisation requires lying as much, if not more, and manipulating in the same way in which the media prepared the aggression. In order to oppose, rightly, the intervention of NATO, some people have committed the double injustice of treating a people with contempt and flattering a dictator. Exactly as the imperialists and their media have done and still do.

The Great Arab Revolt especially puts in difficulty the imperialists, the governments in the region that are friendly to it being threatened by the popular revolts. All the dictators, I said, are their allies. But that is not completely true. There is an exception: Bashir Al-Assad in Syria, who does indeed constitute a thorn in the side of the EU, the United States and Israel. Although the Syrian regime does indeed represent an obstacle for their plans in the Middle East, it remains nonetheless true that we can say the same thing about it as about all the others: it has asphyxiated the political, social and economic life of its people, especially of young people.

The revolts, which began on March 15 and which have caused the deaths of at least 56 people, are legitimate, as in any other country of the region. But, contrary to the case of Libya with Gaddafi, they can indeed threaten the unstable equilibrium in the Middle East. Allied with Iran and with Hezbollah in Lebanon and thus an enemy of Israel, the Syrian regime has quite a few adversaries who are interested in destabilizing or overthrowing it. But does that mean we have to transform Al-Assad into a "socialist", "humanist" and "revolutionary leader"?

The old politics of blocs no longer functions. The un hoped-for democratic impulse in the Arab world changes the scenario and puts everyone under pressure. In the beginning, it was only the imperialists who had the most to lose. Curiously, part of the left, the most influential and powerful part, has left the road open for imperialism: instead of supporting with all its authority and prestige the Arab popular revolts, it has devoted itself to defending two tyrants, Gaddafi and Al-Assad, while the EU and the United States wisely abandoned theirs in order to try to infiltrate and

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control the post-revolutionary processes in Egypt and Tunisia, to control the Libyan rebellion militarily and to operate in a selective way in Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Yemen and Bahrain in order to limit the damage as much as possible.

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