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France

A weakened but still toxic imperialism

- Features -

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The episode of the Australian submarine contract “lost” by France, the announced ending of Operation Barkhane in the Sahel, the coups d'état hostile to France in Mali and Guinea, the France-Africa summit in Montpellier and the referendum imposed under lockdown in Kanaky are just some of the recent events highlighting the various aspects and avatars of French imperialist policy.

After 1945, imperialism structured itself as a world system under US domination. Thus, and this is true until today, capitalism gave itself a framework for international action, both in the main capitalist countries and in the countries subject to colonial and imperialist domination, particularly British, American and French. The new balance of power revealed the relative weakness of French imperialism, which, from the interwar period, had ceded the dominant place in Europe to Great Britain and Germany.

Faced with this weakening, French political leaders tried to restore the Empire after 1945, maintaining the African and Indochinese “possessions” and the so-called “overseas departments”, not only for their economic weight of captive supply of raw materials and to preserve colonial interests on the ground, but also as elements of an international political and military power with the deployment of armed forces and the maintenance of the export strength of the military-industrial complex. France has tried, on several occasions, to maintain the fiction of an independent imperialism. This was obviously the calling card of Gaullism, but the Socialists tried to play the same game, like Sarkozy and Macron today. However, this claim was totally dispelled with the end of the USSR and the reunification of Germany. Today, French governments navigate on sight between the trivial defence of the interests of French companies, defence of the interests of the neoliberal European Union by delegation, and protection of the most dictatorial and corrupt African leaders to whom they have linked themselves.

A French neo-colonialism with multiple dimensions

Since the 1960s, France has tried to safeguard a neo-colonial system (having “lost” Algeria, Indochina and the governance of Syria and Lebanon) to preserve its African domain. While conceding independence to the countries of the former French Equatorial Africa and the former French West Africa (AEF and AOF), the French authorities imposed agreements (elements of which persist today) limiting the military, economic, monetary and diplomatic prerogatives of these countries and engaged in a systematic war against movements fighting for real independence: thus, contemporary with the Algerian war, the Cameroon war (France still does not recognize its responsibility in this colonial war) between 1954 and 1964 left 120,000 dead. France and its “services” were directly or indirectly behind the assassinations of many leaders or militants seeking to build real national independence or even just questioning allegiance to France: Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso, Félix Moumié and Ruben Um Nyobe, leaders of the UPC in Cameroon, Sylvanus Olympio in Togo, Mehdi Ben Barka in Morocco, Germain M'ba from Gabon, Niger's Hamani Diori, Eloi Machoro in Kanaky, and probably Barthélemy Boganda in the Central African Republic... And behind these names, there lie hundreds of thousands of deaths. In Madagascar, in 1947, the French army killed nearly 80,000 people to prevent accession to independence, inaugurating the practices of “revolutionary war” with torture, burned villages and the assassination of suspects thrown alive from military planes to terrorize the population. The complicity of French imperialism with the genocide of the Tutsis of Rwanda in 1994 is increasingly proven, yet it is denied by French politicians on both the right and the left, and Macron is still trying to mitigate it.

Up to now, France has obtained from its imperialist partners exclusive rights of military intervention in West Africa

and sub-Saharan Africa, despite a political and economic influence that has waned: in value, France has become Africa's third economic partner after China and India (its main customers are the Maghreb countries). Nevertheless, the CFA franc, the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) between the EU and the ACP (Africa-Caribbean-Pacific) countries, in place since the 2000s, with the comprehensive African agreement currently under negotiation, maintain economically neo-colonial ties between European countries, notably France, and the countries of the "global South".

The EPAs and other global agreements with the African continent, Mercosur and the Pacific countries that have been put in place in recent years subject these countries to the interests of big capitalist groups, applying in particular WTO standards that prevent these groups from being prosecuted for non-compliance with local social regulations.

The EPAs, free trade agreements between the EU and the countries concerned, reduce European export taxes to zero and destroy local agricultural production sectors competing with European exports, often subsidised. Nearly fifty countries are affected by these agreements, which have been denounced for years by farmers' organizations, including Via Campesina and many NGOs.

"Our" leaders are fighting to maintain an eminent role for French capitalism in the financial system, by consolidating internationally the major French banks such as BNP-Paribas, Crédit Lyonnais, Société Générale, and often by obtaining leadership of the IMF (just since the 1990s: Michel Camdessus, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, Christine Lagarde). They also set up the highly secretive "Paris Club," an informal but almost unavoidable international body for the governance of state debt, whose secretariat is located at the Directorate General of the French Treasury, in Bercy. The Paris Club's specialty is subjecting indebted countries to the dictates of rich countries in total opacity, whitewashing unworthy and illegitimate debts, perpetuating them while imposing "structural adjustment policies" on poor countries, jointly with the IMF and the World Bank. These policies are nothing more than perpetual fiscal austerity, the destruction of labour rights, local economic fabrics and public services, and rising commodity prices, all in the name of "good governance," selective "transparency" and the "freedom of enterprise" that must override all other freedoms.

French domination, the evil genius of sub-Saharan Africa

The CFA franc (the currency of the "French colonies of Africa," modestly renamed the franc of the "African financial community"), established in 1939 in the colonial empire, and maintained to this day, is the currency imposed by France on fourteen countries of West and Central Africa, now subject to the European Central Bank. This currency, which is not directly convertible outside the euro area, prevents any monetary policy by the member states but, because the countries concerned lack their own reserves, nevertheless subjects them to IMF loans and structural adjustment plans. It should start to be replaced in 2022 by a new currency, the "Eco", with the same characteristics.

But, to understand the importance of Africa from an economic point of view, we must take a closer look at groups such as Total, Orano/Areva, Bolloré and so on who are owners and producers in Africa and whose interests are defended by the French army and state.

Africa's natural resources, particularly oil and minerals, were, from the end of the nineteenth century, among the stakes of colonization and the Berlin Conference (1884-1885) which organized, in particular, the division of the Saharan regions between France, Great Britain, Spain and Italy. Several big French groups are now inheriting the work of this colonial division whose weight continued after decolonization.

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Thus, the producer/refiner Total has 25% of its production and 18% of its oil reserves in Africa (Angola and Nigeria primarily, but also Senegal, Gabon, Republic of Congo and Cameroon).

The Bolloré Group owns 42 ports and 17 container terminal concessions on the African coast (Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Gabon, Congo, Togo, Guinea) and 2,700 kilometres of railways. Through the Socfin group, of which it is the main shareholder, it also owns 2,000 km² of cultivated land (oil palm and rubber trees) in Cameroon, Nigeria and Liberia.

Niger is the world's fourth biggest producer of uranium, with exploration and production organized by the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) from the 1950s. The country is one of the two main mining sites for Orano/Areva, which sells half of the uranium needed for nuclear power plants to EDF. In 1974, President Hamani Diory was overthrown and killed in a coup d'état carried out with the blessing of France, while he was seeking to force the AEC to index the price of uranium to that of kWh oil.

In addition, the uranium mining areas are located in the Agadès region of north-western Niger in a Tuareg region. The Tuaregs are excluded from any political sovereignty in their area of life, both in Mali and Niger, and excluded from the mining profits. This is one of the main keys to the conflicts in the Sahel for many years and to Operation Barkhane led by the French army as part of the "global fight against terrorism" and defending "our values of civilization." Here again, the French military presence, which should also refocus in Niger, serves as support for Orano's interests, while the Niger government is putting pressure on the French group from Chinese investors looking for new mining contracts.

These few examples and the number of lawsuits filed in Africa against these three groups or others such as Bouygues or Orange (which benefit from huge contracts thanks to France's military and political weight) illustrate the importance of Africa for the big French capitalists. To defend these interests, 8,200 French soldiers are permanently present on African soil, between the forces of presence (Djibouti, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Gabon) and those of Operation Barkhane.

At the same time, successive French governments have jealously sought to consolidate privileged relations with the autocratic regimes of Tunisia and Morocco. The complicity of French politicians of all stripes with the corrupt and repressive "Makhzen" of the Moroccan monarchy is particularly evaded by the media of our country. The French authorities have also tried to keep Lebanon in the French orbit by sponsoring an institutionalized clan and confessional system.

In addition, France has reproduced these relations of colonial domination in the situation imposed in France on postcolonial populations who suffer discrimination, the racist ideology conveyed for several centuries vis-à-vis populations from Africa or the Middle East. Bolloré, both profiteer in Africa of the neo-colonial system and media proprietor in France (distilling the fear of the "great replacement," with ultra-reactionary editorial lines, illustrated by the promotion of Zemmour) is the embodiment of this balance – imperialism abroad, discrimination, racism and negationism at home – which characterizes a good part of the political leaders, big business and media bosses and the senior military hierarchy.

Beyond this, French imperialism is one of the spearheads of the European policy of criminally closing borders to refugees and all migrants, with ever more military devices around Frontex, causing thousands of drownings in the Mediterranean and enforcing agreements for the outsourcing of refugee camps in the worst conditions, and the forced readmission of those returned from Europe, through all the weapons of economic dependence of the countries of the South.

Decolonization is not over!

Unlike Great Britain, which after 1945 kept only a few “essential” islands in direct administration, France was keen to maintain direct control in the Antilles and the island of Réunion. In 1946, these colonial islands and Guyana were departmentalized. This maintenance within the framework of France is mainly explained by the geopolitical situation of these areas (as well as Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, Kanaky, the Pacific islands). Giscard d'Estaing also detached Mayotte from the Comoros, manipulating the results of the 1974 independence referendum. This area allows France to intervene militarily without delay in Central America as well as in the Pacific or the Indian Ocean with the “forces of sovereignty,” more than 7,000 troops divided between Kanaky, Polynesia, Reunion/Mayotte, the Antilles and Guyana. In addition, all these “possessions” give France the second biggest maritime domain in the world after the USA. Some, even on the left of the political spectrum, pride themselves on this “empire on which the sun never sets,” which even makes it possible to develop France’s space power with the Kourou base in French Guiana, after having transformed the islands of Polynesia into a nuclear test base.

Here again, this is an element in a policy where the military-industrial complex and French diplomacy have leverage for bilateral agreements, France's participation in multiple regional negotiations and control of many maritime routes.

It is therefore an imperialist policy that opposes the peoples of La Réunion, the Antilles, Kanaky and Guyana, a colonialist maintenance within the French Republic. Kanaky is now led by a coalition government of pro-independence organizations. France wants to try to prevent Kanak independence in this island colonized since 1853. Following the emergence of a powerful independence movement in the 1980s, France tried to stifle this movement on an island that represents 14% of the French maritime area, 20% of the world's nickel reserves... and the largest French military base in the Pacific. Macron claims that France, through its presence in Kanaky (and with French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna) is “a great power in the Indo-Pacific region.” For Macron, this terminology refers to the huge space from Djibouti to French Polynesia, thus trying to give France a key place in limiting Chinese influence in Asia and the Pacific. However, the cancellation of the contract for the sale of submarines to Australia and especially the signing of the AUKUS security partnership (acronym for Australia, United Kingdom and USA) shows the marginality of France in the region from the point of view of Western imperialist forces. This reinforces France’s concern that, if it “lost” Kanaky, it would lose an essential link in its diplomatic and military presence in this immense area (with a military base in 2020 of 1,450 troops in Kanaky, adding to the 1,450 in Djibouti and 900 in Polynesia, plus the naval bases in Djibouti, Abu Dhabi and Noumea).

In the Antilles, white settler descendants and the French high administration retain control over the essential sectors of the island’s economic life, a stranglehold denounced during the massive strikes of 2009, as well as by the struggles against Chlordecone, a toxic and carcinogenic insecticide used by the major banana producers and marketed by the Hayot family, with the approval of the authorities and ministries of Chirac and Cresson in France from 1972 to 1993 (despite its being banned in many countries since 1976) causing widespread pollution and the explosion of cases of prostate cancer.

Even today, in the Mediterranean, France persists in not recognizing the right to self-determination of the Corsican people, whereas the Territorial Assembly is, since 2015, composed mainly of pro-independence parties.

Imperialism in decline but with harmful effects

The relationship of forces of imperialist France has deteriorated considerably in recent decades, accentuated by the growing presence of China and India in Africa. France, the world's 5th biggest exporter — 3.5% of exports in 2017,

far behind China (10.8%), the USA (10.2%) and Germany (7.6%) — is at the same time the European country with the biggest foreign trade deficit (€82.5 billion in 2020), a structural situation which has persisted for nearly 20 years, with France accumulating the choices of deindustrialization, subcontracting of production abroad and massive cuts in research and development.

French imperialism nevertheless still has weight and plays a role of military intervention, of supporting regimes confronted with popular and democratic movements, especially in Africa, while protecting the interests of the big French companies.

The example of Total in Myanmar is indicative of the support of the major imperialist trusts for regimes that allow their presence to be maintained. Since the late 1980s, Total has developed to ensure its investment in a gas field, a financing system for the Tatmadaw (the military junta) through MOGE, a hydrocarbon company controlled by the junta. The trust has also used forced labour by peasants on the construction site of its Myanmar-Thailand gas pipeline, which is at the heart of the diversion of gas profits from the Burmese state to MOGE. After the putsch of February 2021 (precisely when the National League for Democracy, whose civilian government was overthrown by the junta, wanted to question the control of the hydrocarbon sector, the main lever of financing of the army), this arrangement continues and the French government has never ceased to support Total in its policy of support for the dictatorship and to weigh in to reduce the sanctions on Burma in the gas field. Similarly, the Accor Group, which has many interests in luxury hotels in Myanmar, helped in 2018 to build barriers preventing the Rohingya from returning from Bangladesh to their country.

In conclusion, we should emphasize the special place of the nuclear industry and the arms industry, since France is the third biggest arms exporter (after the USA and China), with Egypt and Saudi Arabia as the main customers, the military-industrial complex relying on the presence of the French military in several areas of operations. These exports, to two key countries of pro-imperialist policy in the Middle East, go hand in hand with support for Israel's policy, further reaffirmed by Netanyahu's invitation to France and Emmanuel Macron's assimilation of anti-Zionism to anti-Semitism. Of particular note was the participation of Veolia and Alstom in the construction of the Jerusalem tramway in the 2000s, crossing East Jerusalem and leading to Israeli settlements. The French state, while faithfully following Trump's Israeli policy in recent years, has always supported this participation, even if under pressure from mobilizations Veolia had to withdraw from the extension tranches, but Egis and Alstom continue to collaborate in the maintenance of the network.

In the face of this, anti-capitalists and all democrats in France must develop solidarity in action with those who are oppressed and exploited, in particular by our own imperialism. More than a moral duty, it is an objective necessity because our interests are common with these peoples and not with "our" capitalists; common interests to put an end to injustices, oppressions, corruption, exploitation and productivism, and to lay the foundations for solidaristic societies, giving equal rights to all, satisfying basic human needs, emancipated and protecting their environment.

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