Somalia, Kenya and the instability of some modern African nations

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Contents

A question on Somalia 3
Somalia 5
Conclusion 5

A question on Somalia

It is a grave error for anarchists to fall into the trap of attributing the chaos and instability of some modern African nations as being due to the weakness of the state. In fact I would tend to see the exact opposite as being more true, the imposition of artificial states which coresponded to no conceivable 'nation' and which were based on no strong local bourgeois and no large middle class (the layer of workers ideologically aligned with the bourgeois) meant that these states could never have been stable bourgeois democracies. The rulers of Western states can't operate without the support of a significant proportion of these classes and this puts a considerable check on their ability to act and is one of the reasons whey we can't 'elect socialism'. In Africa these classes are small and weak. Most of the countries' surpluses are appropriated by the ruling classes of the imperialist countries, thus the remaining surplus is too small to allow the development of a strong local bourgeois or civil society.

Most pre-colonial African societies were far from being absolutist. Power, although almost always being personified in a chief or king, was constrained by a multitude of checks and balances. Councils of 'kingmakers' who could 'destool' chiefs, age-grade groups, councils of elders and other institutions existed which limited the power of the ruler. These institutions corresponded to the balance of forces between the classes in the various societies. The modern nation states imposed by the departing colonial powers lacked any such means of balancing the ruler's power. Certainly, there were model constitutions with clearly divided executive, legislative and judicial powers. But thise balances existed only on paper, they had no relation to the class compositions of the societies and as we should know, this is the important thing.

In effect, without a strong bourgeois, there is effectively no local control over the actions of the rulers of most modern African nations. They merely require the connivance of the imperialist power (UK, US or France) in whose sphere of influence they find themselves, and the support of the security services. The imperialist powers care about nothing other than the supply of cheap raw materials to their transnational corporations and will support any ruler no matter how despotic and brutal, as long as he ensures a regular supply. The 35 post-independance military interventions of France in Africa have shown this very clearly. They have saved such demons as Mobutu (several times), Bokassa and Eyadema and tried their best to save the genocidal regime in Rwanda until the end. The US for its part has provided military support for such infamous murderers as Jonas Savimbi in Angola.

Since most of the ruling class of Africa (defined as those who appropriate the workers' surplus) are in effect the shareholders of transnational corporations residing in London, Paris and New York, there is very limited scope for locals to gain power and wealth. In fact in most modern African nations, control of state power is the only available route to power and wealth and since only a small fraction of the appropriated surplus remains in Africa, this power and wealth is available only to a small number of individuals at the heart of the regime. Thus the history of post-colonial Africa has seem tremendous battles between small cliques to gain control of this vital resource. Mercenary invasions, coups, ethnic rebellions and civil wars have raged across the continent as ambitious 'big men' have fought amongst themselves for the vital state power. Every ruler knows that as soon as the profit margin of the transnational giants starts to fall, an ambitious army officer or chief of some oppressed tribe will be found to replace them. Thus they are driven to ever greater excesses of brutatlity to ensure the constant supply of profits.

Things get worse still when the imperial powers compete amongst themselves for control over state power. The bloody carnage which has raged across central Africa in the 1990´s, reaching its worst in Rwanda and Congo-Zaire, is portrayed by the media as another example of the collapse of weak states into savagery. This is an imperialist lie. The situation in central Africa owes much to the battle between US and French multinationals for control over the region's vast mineral wealth. Elf-Total to name but one of the villians, maintains private armies and secret services in its central african domain. Again the recent tumult in Cote D'Ivoire becomes much easier to understand when one realises that Ouattara, the Washington based ex-IMF official is supported by the US, while Gbagbo is Paris's man (as was Bedie and Houphouet-Boigny before him). In fact this is part of a process that is happening all over French Africa. The US is attempting to muscle in on France's terrain by promoting the graduates of the Washington based International Financial Institutions instead of the traditional elite trained in Paris's ENA and other top institutions. The long suffering people of Africa are the inevitable losers of this game of imperialists.

Taking this analysis of class and imperialism into account, it becomes clear that the situation in Kenya, the 'chaos on the streets', is not a case of "the chaos of a weak state", rather it is really the "chaos of a despotic state, underwritten by imperialism". President Moi is a gangster, leading a government of thugs. The chaos on the streets of Nairobi, where there are frequent riots, is not caused by some sort of absence of state power. It is caused by an extremely present and vicious repressive state power which violently supresses all opposition. The people of Kenya are very angry and are increasingly determined to stand up to Moi'd corrupt and repressive regime. Every time they try to protest or demonstrate their opposition, they are violently attacked by the security services and the gangs of hired thugs in Moi's KANU party. For an anarchist to look at this situation and suggest that there may not be enough state power is criminal and hardly likely to support for our ideas among the radical Kenyan students, whose politics are apparently quite close to anarchism, and who are heroically refusing to be intimidated by this repression and continue to demonstrate despite it.

In general much of what is presented by the Western media as examples of the senseless chaos of Africa, is anything but, rather it is carefully engineered events with the support of the Western powers. The phrase 'beacon of stability' means 'uninterrupted profits for transnationals'. If it was really a beacon of stability, then what about the rift-valley ethnic massacres of the 1990's? These were in fact engineered by government ministers to cement their hold on power. When an American priest, John Kaiser, recently made this accusation in public, he was promptly assassinated with a bullet in the head. This is the stability of despotism.

In fact Kenya is actually a country where the government has some of the least impunity in Africa. This is due to the significant number of white commercial farmers and the small industrial base around Nairobi. It is a tiny and weak bourgeois by Western standards but it does mean that Moi can't go as far as some other African despots like Bokassa and Mobutu. Also I might as well mention that in my opinion Nairobi is one of the most orderly third world cities I have been in. In fact compared to most African and Asian cities, it appears like New York or London. I suspect when Mathew refers to the 'chaos of Nairobi' he in fact is just expressing culture shock at the poverty of the third world. Try Lagos or Bombay for chaos!

Somalia

Somalia is another case where it would appear that the people are suffering from the lack of a strong state. Yet I believe that the opposite is again the case. The chaos and armed conflict of Somalia in the 1990's is a direct consequence of the totalitarian state power wielded by the late dictator Siad Barre. His demise saw a violent conflict between a multitude of warlords all vying for the golden chalice of state power. Somalia is very unusual in Africa for being a linguistically and ethnically homogenous state, a real 'nation', if the nation state paradigm is to work anywhere in Africa it should be here. Somalian society was traditionally organised into clans who came together in big gatherings called 'shirs' to resolve problems and allow the various elements of society to have their say. These 'shirs' were required before clan chiefs could take any important decisions and provided a means by which their power was controlled by the people. Colonial administration subjugated these shirs to the power of the unitary state which allowed the emergence of despotic, totalitarian rulers like Barre who could never have existed before. The recent chaotic violence can better be understood as a battle between ambitious individuals for absolute state power using their clans as recruiting bases, rather than the continuation of perrenial clan warfare, as it is presented in the Western media.

It is interesting to note that all of the foreign peace deals have focused on coming to an arrangement for power sharing between the various warlords. They have all failed miserably since these warlords are in no way representative of their clans or Somali society. In 1991, the Somali National movement of Northern Somalia who had fought for years against the Barre regime, decided that they couldn't wait for a resolution of the chaos in Moqadisu and decided to go it alone. They called a shir and effectively ditched the concept of the nation state and reverted to a traditional form of administration. This was the creation of what is known in the media as 'the self-declared republic of Somaliland'. In 1998 the neighbouring Majertine clans followed suit and set up an independant administration of 'Puntland'. These 'self declared' entities have been consistently opposed by all the foreign powers, despite the fact that Somaliland has been at peace since 1995 and has had a functionning administration since 1997. So why are these entities opposed, because they contradict the imperial powers' need for states in Africa, centralised institutions which locally police the imperialist capitalism.

The 2000 peace conference in Djibouti was another attempt to impose a unitary state on Somalia, following on such disasters as the US invasion which killed thousands of innocent civilians. The 'government' which this latest conference elected includes not only warlords dripping with blood but many of the old figures of Barre's dictatorship. It was resolutely opposed by Somaliland and Puntland. It's first task upon entering Moqadisu? The recruitment of an army, hitherto its only act. Somalia looks like it will again see another round of bloodshed as a government attempts to impose its will. Somaliland and Puntland could be soon dragged back into the bloody carnage. The foreign powers will not be happy until one man sits on top of the heap, even if the heap consists of nothing but dead bodies.

Conclusion

To sum up, in general what the media presents as the consequence of 'weak government' and irrational violence is anything but. The building of regular bourgeois democracies in Africa as 'an

improvement on the present carnage' is impossible for the simple reason that most of Africa's bourgeois live in the imperialist nations. In Africa a normal bourgeois democracy would be impossible to achieve without overturning the global capitalist imperialist system. When that happens we'll have anarchism and capitalism of any form will be a thing of the past. That's why, as the comrades of the Awareness League point out so well, for Africa anarchism is the only hope.

Yours for Anarchy
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