

## War in Libya: Motives and Dynamics

Maidul Islam

The NATO bombings in Libya with the combined airforces of United States and some European countries including UK and France must be seen from the perspective of the motives of American expansinism. In order to do such an exercise, a quick view of the inconsistent relationship between Libya and the West in the past four decades would be helpful to comprehensively understand the dynamics of the Lybian war of 2011. After the military coup d'etat in 1969, by which Muammar Gaddafi came to power in Libya, the US government felt that Gaddafi was sufficiently anti-Marxist to be worth protecting. However, after the 1969 coup, Gaddafi closed American and British bases and partially nationalized foreign oil and commercial interests in Libya. In this respect, Fidel Castro recently reminded the world that :*"In March 1970, in the wake of mass nationalist protests, he (Gaddafi) achieved the evacuation of British soldiers from the country and, in June, the United States vacated the large airbase close to Tripoli, which was handed over to military instructors from Egypt, a country allied with Libya. In 1970, a number of Western oil companies and banking societies with the participation of foreign capital were affected by the Revolution. At the end of 1971, the same fate befell the famous British Petroleum. In the agricultural sector all Italian assets were confiscated, and the colonialists and their descendants were expelled from Libya. State intervention was directed toward the control of the large companies. Production in that country grew to become one of the highest in the Arab world."* (*Granma International*, 10th March, 2011).

It is in this backdrop of Gaddafi's policy of economic nationalism that Libya soured its relations with the western advanced capitalist countries. During the three successive decades of 1970s, 80s and 90s, allegations were made by the western media against Libya for possessing weapons of mass destruction, aggressive anti-Americanism in the form of assassination threats to former US President Ronald Reagan, alliances with Anti-American regimes, supporting international terrorist groups and political repression within Libya etc. Despite several economic sanctions by the Western imperial powers, Libya continued to be a healthy and wealthy economy primarily depending on oil revenues which constitute substantial export earnings and about 25% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). By 1980s, Libya was transformed from a poor country to the then Africa's richest.

The Wikipedia presents the following information about Libyan economy: *"According to World Bank, Libya is an 'Upper Middle Income Economy', along with only seven other African countries. In the early 1980s, Libya was one of the wealthiest countries in the world; its per capita GDP was higher than that of developed countries such as Italy, Singapore, South Korea, Spain and New Zealand. Today, high oil revenues and a small population give Libya one of the highest GDPs per capita in Africa and have allowed the Libyan state to provide an extensive level of social security, particularly in the fields of housing and education. However, the main problem with the current Libyan economy is high degree of unemployment with 21% according to the latest census figures. Libya's population includes 1.7 million students, over 270,000 students at the tertiary level. Basic education in Libya is free for all citizens, and compulsory till secondary level. The literacy rate is the highest in North Africa; over 82% of the population can read and write. Compared to its neighbors, Libya enjoys a low level of both absolute and relative poverty."*

Without contesting such facts, recently, Fidel Castro pointed out the current socio-economic and political situation in Libya in following words: *"In contrast with what is happening in Egypt and Tunisia, Libya occupies the first spot on the Human Development*

Index for Africa and it has the highest life expectancy in the continent. Education and health receive special attention from the State. The cultural level of its population is without a doubt the highest. Its problems are of a different sort. The population wasn't lacking food and essential social services. The country needed an abundant foreign labour force to carry out ambitious plans for production and social development... Without any doubt, the faces of the young people who were protesting in Benghazi, men, and women wearing the veil or without the veil, were expressing genuine indignation... We see clearly that the basic concern of the United States and NATO is not Libya, but the revolutionary wave being unleashed in the Arab world, something they would like to prevent at any cost. It is an irrefutable fact that relations between the US and its NATO allies with Libya in recent years were excellent, before the rebellions loomed up in Egypt and Tunisia." (*Granma International*, 3rd March, 2011).

By the start of the new millennium, Gaddafi gradually sought more benign relations with the West, resulting in the lifting of UN sanctions in September 2003, and by December 2003, Libya announced that it would abandon programmes to build weapons of mass destruction. As the process of destroying the weapons of mass destruction continued following the tragic fate of Iraq, Libya improved its cooperation with international monitoring regimes to the extent that, by March 2006, France was able to conclude an agreement with Libya to develop a significant nuclear power programme. In May 2006, the US State Department announced that it would restore full diplomatic relations with Libya, once Gaddafi decided to abandon Libya's weapons of mass destruction programme. The State Department was also in favour of removing Libya from the list of nations supporting terrorism, an allegation that was continuously made against this North-African country. However, this improvement of relations between the West and Libya was not accidental but conditional. After the fall of Soviet Union and East European socialism by early 1990s and the destruction of Iraq in 2003 by the US invasion, Libya adopted a strategy to become close to the western imperial powers. This strategy was clearly reflected in the recent past to carry out neoliberal economic reforms as part of a broader campaign to reintegrate the country into the global capitalist economy with the policies of liberalization, privatization and globalization. Thus, it was on IMF-World Bank's conditions that the Libyan economy has been recently restructured resulting into improvement of Libyan relationship with the West. Libya's recent adoption of market-oriented reforms like cuts in subsidies, large scale privatization, opening up the economy to foreign companies and applying for WTO membership created major problems within Libya, particularly increasing the levels of unemployment.

In early February 2011, major political protests, inspired by recent pro-democracy uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and other parts of the Arab world, broke out in Libya against Gaddafi's government. There is no denying the fact that the grievances of unemployed youth against an autocratic government run by a one-man dictatorship in Gaddafi and greater control over certain sectors of Libyan economy by Gaddafi's family and relatives are genuine. It is in the midst of Libya's popular uprising against the authoritarian government of Gaddafi that the NATO has hurriedly initiated a military offensive. It is debatable whether the Libyan people have actually asked for western intervention or whether a section among the rebels (not all the rebels) are backed and funded by the Western powers. Given the relatively better socio-economic conditions in Libya, it is hard to believe that the West needs intervention to significantly improve the lives of common Libyan people.

It is an important question to pose that why no military intervention was carried out in Egypt and Tunisia but has been carried out in Libya? The excuse given by the western imperial powers is regime change like in Iraq and Afghanistan in past to 'help and support' the popular uprising against the 'Human Rights Violator' Gaddafi and to establish 'peace' and 'democracy' in Libya. However, the main motive of this NATO war in Libya is surely oil. Libya is among the top oil exporters in the world and the US-UK-France are among the top oil

consumers in the world. Libya is a better investment for oil cartels for its oil resources than Egypt and Tunisia.

Secondly, if 'Democracy' is the justification for NATO strikes in Libya, then Anglo-American-French governments should first question the legitimacy of monarchical regimes in Saudi Arabia and Jordan both of which are the faithful allies of the West. One cannot possibly think of US supporting a popular revolt against the Saudi monarchy despite the fact that such structural conditions of a revolt exist in that country with high degree of exploitation of the foreign-expatriate working class and inhuman working conditions. This only shows the hypocrisy of western powers.

Thirdly, the NATO strikes cannot be described as 'help' to 'popular revolution' in Libya. Rather, it would help to divert the anti-authoritarian thrust of the popular outbursts in Libya. Moreover it would only ensure an opportunity for the authoritarian Libyan government to renew its legitimacy under a NATO offensive by appealing to the Libyan people to fight against western aggression. The aggressive western intervention is counter-productive since it has the potentiality to divert the real democratic assertion of the Libyan people against authoritarianism. The NATO has time and again given this justification of 'help' to export democracy whereas everybody knows that it is simply doing business to capture oil fields as was the case in Iraq.

Fourthly, the motive behind the current intervention by NATO is possibly to settle scores with Gaddafi, a dissenting voice in the past who dared to drive out the Anglo-Americans and other Europeans from the Libyan soil. Therefore it is now apt time to take western revenge against the person, whom former US President, Ronald Raegan once described as 'Mad dog of Middle-East'. The NATO is thus sending signals to 'other' dissenters, possibly the 'axis of evil', Cuba and Venezuela about such a fate if they do not fall in line.

Fifthly, America and its western allies are today using factional feuds in an overwhelmingly tribal population of Libya. These factional fights have always helped imperial interests like the Shia-Sunni-Kurdish rift in Iraq and Pashto and non-Pashto antagonism in Afghanistan. They have always used such time tested strategy of divide and rule by fanning divisive tendencies among a given population to frustrate any scope of united resistance to foreign domination.

Sixthly, the West is giving a faulty logic that without military intervention, there is no alternative to Gaddafi. The motive of such a faulty logic of the western media is to create a world of false binaries: Gaddafi vs West or Saddam vs Bush or Bush vs Osama etc. by trying to hide the real antagonism between the 'people' and Anglo-American hegemonism. This kind of binary logic is a construction of the imperial establishments and western media over the years to justify the American and western penetration in the Muslim world in recent past. This logic only attempts to snuff out any other democratic space which can at the same time be critical and opposed to both western hegemony and third world dictatorships. There are numerous people in Libya who do not subscribe to such binary traps and are against both NATO and authoritarianism for a progressive and democratic Libya.

Seventhly, this war is also a result of the domestic political dynamics of western powers and an attempt to resolve the emerging political contradictions within US-UK-France. The bottom-line of this NATO intervention is not only oil in Libya but also to get the reconstruction deal for Anglo-American-French companies just like it happened for Iraq and Afghanistan in the past after it carried out the destruction, ravagery and savagery of war. Therefore, this aggression in Libya is clearly aimed to manage western financial crisis by getting hold of the oil resources in Libya (and hence some more money) in the hands of the Anglo-American-French governments. Similarly, during the reconstruction process in future, Libya would create some employment for the Western youth who are jobless in the wake of massive

economic recession. Moreover, when the western governments are increasingly becoming unpopular due to massive cuts in public spending owing to the financial crunch, a war in the name of 'exporting democracy' with a jingoistic appeal to 'civilize' the 'brown/black population' can create a nationalist frenzy in UK-US-France and thus can make these same governments to divert the real economic issues in their own countries and in fact can re-legitimize their rule which is under threat from popular outbursts against corporate bail-outs and budget cuts in social welfare sectors.

Eighthly, this is an unjust war which has also exposed the so-called 'humanitarian' President Obama. Those who had illusions that the call of 'change' by Obama is a significant shift in the affairs of US foreign policy, might today notice that there is no fundamental 'change' between Bush and Obama's policy of aggressive war in the Middle-East. In the midst of a popular revolt in Libya one cannot possibly condone Gaddafi. But at the same time, it would be grossly unjust to militarily intervene in Libya by seeking to resolve West's unemployment problem by waging war and creating demand in the economy and by putting a future 'puppet' government in Libya as was the case in Iraq and Afghanistan. On a lighter note, if Libyan sky has been declared as No-Fly-Zone then NATO planes should also free the Libyan air-space! There has been no international consensus on this issue of air-raids in Libya. Even if such an international consensus was reached it would still have been unjust to militarily intervene in the internal matters of any country rather than democratic dialogue. Democratic dialogue instead of brute force is always helpful for resolving such a crisis like the Libyan one. If the NATO had good intentions, it could have asked Gaddafi to sit on the negotiating table or politically support the popular uprising in Libya but in no way can they use force to resolve the internal matters within Libya.

Finally, this war serves the strategic interests of global financial players and has longterm strategic implications. When the Obama administration is calling for periodic withdrawal of forces from Iraq, it is at the same time finding a new territory in the Middle-East to maintain its military presence. Thus, its motive is to get out of Iraq and move to Libya to stay long. It is in fact, now making a cast by bombing Libya in the name of ideological masks like 'peace' and 'democracy' in order to prepare a ground for a future military base in Libya just it happened previously in Iraq and Afghanistan. All these old ideological garbs of 'peace' and 'democracy' were also used in both Iraq and Afghanistan. What happened there? Millions of lives have been affected in both these countries due to such military intervention. In both Iraq and Afghanistan US air-forces carried out bombings in 1990s followed by the occupation in the new millennium. Possibly such grand American game-plan is waiting for Libya. □□□