

Puppets in Revolt: Afghanistan , Iraq , Pakistan and the United States

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Introduction

Empires are built through the promotion and backing of local collaborators who act at the behest of imperial rulers. They are rewarded with the outward symbols of authority and financial handouts, even as it is understood that they hold their position only at the tolerance of their imperial superiors. Imperial collaborators are referred to by the occupied people and the colonial resistance as “puppets” or “traitors”; by western journalists and critics as “clients”; by the imperial scribes and officials as “loyal allies” as long as they remain obedient to their sponsors and paymaster.

Puppet rulers have a long and ignoble history during the 20th century. Subsequent to US invasions in Central America and the Caribbean a whole string of bloody puppet dictators were put in power to implement policies favorable to US corporations and banks and to back US regional dominance. Duvalier (father and son) in Haiti, Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, Batista in Cuba, Somoza (father and son) in Nicaragua and a host of other tyrants served to safeguard imperial military and economic interests, while plundering the economies and ruling with an iron fist.

Rule via puppets is characteristic of most empires. The British excelled in propping up tribal chiefs as tax collectors, backing Indian royalty to muster sepoys to serve under British generals. The French cultivated francophone African elite to provide cannon fodder for its imperial wars in Europe and Africa . “Late” imperial countries like Japan set up puppet regimes in Manchuria and Germany promoted the Vichy puppets in occupied France and the Quisling regime in Norway .

Post-Colonial Rule: Nationalists and Neo-Colonial Puppets

Powerful national liberation, anti-colonial movements following World War II, challenged European and US imperial dominance in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Faced with the enormous costs of reconstruction in Europe and Japan and domestic mass movements opposed to continuing colonial wars, the US and Europe sought to retain their economic holdings, military bases via ‘political collaborators’. They would assume administrative, military and political responsibilities, forging new links between the formally independent country and their old and new imperial masters. The economic and military institutional continuities between colonial and post-colonial regimes were defined as ‘neo-colonialism’.

Foreign aid gave birth to and enriched an ‘indigenous’ kleptocratic bourgeoisie which provided a fig leaf to imperial resource extraction. Military aid, training missions and overseas scholarships trained a new generation of military and civilian bureaucrats

inculcated with imperial-centered 'world views' and loyalties. The military-police-administrative apparatus was perceived by imperial rulers as the best guarantor of the emerging order, given the fragility of neo-colonial rulership, their narrow base of appeal and the demands of the masses for substantive socio-economic structural changes to accompany political independence.

The post-colonial period was riven with long term large-scale anti-imperial social revolutions (China , Indo-China), military coups (throughout the three continents), international civil wars (Korea) and mostly successful nationalist-populist transformations (Iraq , India , Indonesia , Egypt , Algeria , Argentina , Brazil , Ghana , etc.). The latter became the bases for the non-aligned movements. Outright 'colonial settler regimes' (South Africa , Israel/Palestine, Southern Rhodesia/Zimbabwe) were the exception. Complex "associations", depending on the specific power relations between empire and local elites, generally increased income, trade and investments for the decolonized newly independent countries. Independence created an internal dynamic based on large scale state intervention and a mixed economy.

The post-colonial period of radical nationalist and socialist uprisings, lasted less than a decade in most of the three continents. By the end of the 1970's, imperial backed coups overthrew national-populist and socialist regimes in the Congo , Algeria , Indonesia , Argentina , Brazil , Chile and in numerous other countries. The newly independent radical regimes in the former Portuguese colonies, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau and the nationalist regimes and movements in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Latin America were severely weakened by the collapse of the USSR and China's conversion to capitalism. The US appeared as the sole 'superpower' without a military and economic counterweight. US and European military and economic empire builders saw an opportunity to exploit natural resources, expropriate thousands of public enterprises, build a network of military bases and recruit new mercenary armies to extend imperial dominance.

The question arose as to the form the new US empire would take: the means through which the remaining nationalist rulers would be ousted. Equally important: with the demise of the USSR and China/Indo-China's conversion to capitalism, what ideology or even 'argument' would serve to justify the powerful thrust of post-colonial, empire building?

Washington's New World Order: Colonial Revivalism and Contemporary Puppetry:

Western imperialism's recovery from the defeats during the national independence struggles (1945-1970's) included the massive rebuilding of a new imperial order. With the collapse of the USSR , the incorporation of Eastern Europe as imperial satellites and the subsequent conversion of radical nationalists (Angola , Mozambique etc.) to kleptocrat free marketers, a powerful thrust was given to White House visions of unlimited dominance, based on projections of uncontested unilateral military power.

The spread of 'free market ideology' between 1980 - 2000, based on the ascendancy of neo-liberal rulers throughout Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America and a large swathe of Asia opened the door for unprecedented pillage, privatizations (mostly the same thing) and the concentration of wealth. Corresponding to the pillage and the concentration of a unipolar military power, a group of ultra-militarists, so-called neo-conservatives ideologue, deeply imbued with the Israeli colonial mentality entered into the strategic decision-making positions in Washington , with tremendous leverage in European spheres of power - especially in England .

History went into reverse. The 1990's were inaugurated with colonial style wars, launched against Iraq and Yugoslavia, leading to the break-up of states and the imposition of puppet regimes in (Northern Iraq) 'Kurdistan', Kosova, Montenegro and Macedonia (former Yugoslavia). Military success, quick and low cost victories, confirmed and hardened the beliefs of the neo-conservative and neo-liberal ideologues that empire building was the inevitable wave of the future. Only an appropriate political trigger was necessary to mobilize the financial and human resources to pursue the new military driven empire.

The events of 9/11/2001 were thoroughly exploited to launch sequential wars of colonial conquest. In the name of a "word wide military crusade against terrorism", plans were made, massive funds were allocated and a mass media propaganda blitz was launched, to justify a series of colonial wars.

The new imperial order began with the invasion of Afghanistan (2001) and the overthrow of the Taliban Islamic-nationalist regime, (which never had anything to do with 9/11). Afghanistan was occupied by the US - NATO - mercenary armies but not conquered. The US invasion and occupation of Iraq led to the regroupment of Islamic, nationalist and trade union anti-colonial forces and prolonged armed and civil resistance movements.

Because of widespread nationalist and anti-Zionist influence within the existing Iraqi civilian, police and military apparatus, neo-conservative ideologues in Washington opted for the total dismantling of the state. They attempted to refashion a colonial state based on sectarian leaders, local tribal chiefdoms, foreign contractors and the appointment and 'clearance' of reliable exile politician as 'presidential or 'prime ministerial' national fig leaves for the colonized state.

Pakistan was a special case of imperial penetration, military intervention and political manipulation, linking large scale military aid, bribes and corruption to establish a puppet regime. The latter sanctioned sustained violations of sovereignty by US warplanes ("drones" and piloted), commando operations and the large scale mobilization of the Pakistan military for US counter-insurgency operations displacing millions of Pakistan 'tribal' peoples.

The Puppet Regime Imperative

Contrary to US and EU propaganda, the invasions and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and the military interventions in Pakistan were never popular. They were actively and passively opposed by the vast majority of the population. No sooner were the colonial civil officials imposed by force of arms and efforts began to administer the country then passive popular and sporadic armed resistance emerged. The colonial officials were seen for what they were: an alien, exploitative, presence. Treasuries were looted, the entire economy was paralyzed, elementary services (water, electricity, sewage systems, etc.) did not function, and millions were uprooted. The wars and occupations radically decimated the pre-colonial society and the colonial officials were hard pressed to create a replacement.

Billions in military spending failed to create a civil service capable of governance. The colonial rulers had severe problems locating willing collaborators with technical or administrative experience. Those willing to serve lacked even a modicum of popular acceptance.

The colonial conquest and occupation eventually settled on establishing a parallel collaborator regime which would be financed and subordinate to the imperial authorities.

Imperial strategists believed they would provide a political façade to ‘legitimate’ and negotiate with the occupation. The enticement to collaborate was the billions of dollars channeled into the colonized state apparatus (and easily plundered through phony ‘reconstruction’ projects) to compensate for the risks of political assassination by nationalist resistance fighters. At the pinnacle of the parallel regimes were the puppet rulers, each certified by the CIA for their loyalty, servility and willingness to sustain imperial supremacy over the occupied people. They obeyed Washington’s demands to privatize public enterprises and supported Pentagon recruitment of a mercenary army under colonial command.

Hamid Karzai was chosen as the puppet ruler in Afghanistan, based merely on his family ties with drug traffickers and compatibility with warlords and elders on the imperial payroll. His isolation was highlighted by the fact that even the presidential guard was made up of US Marines. In Iraq, US colonial officials in consultation with the White House and the CIA chose Nouri al Maliki as the “Prime Minister” based on his zealous “hands on” engagement in torturing resistance fighters suspected of attacking US occupation forces.

In Pakistan the US backed a convicted felon on the lam, Asif Ali Zardari as President. He repeatedly demonstrated his accommodating spirit by approving large scale, long term US aerial and ground operations on the Pakistan side of the Afghan border. Zardari emptied the Pakistani treasury and mobilized millions of soldiers to assault and displace frontier population centers sympathetic to the Afghan resistance.

Puppets in Action: Between Imperial Subservience and Mass Isolation

The three puppet regimes have provided a fig leaf for the imperial savaging of the colonized people of the countries they preside over. Nouri al Maliki has over the past 5 years, not only justified the US occupation but actively promoted the assassination and torture of thousands of anti-colonial activists and resistance fighters. He has sold billion dollar oil and gas concessions to overseas oil companies. He has presided over the theft (‘disappearance’ or “unaccountable”) of billions of dollars in oil revenues and US foreign aid (squeezed from US tax payers). Hamid Karzai, who has rarely ventured out of the presidential compound without his US Marine bodyguards, has been ineffective in gathering even token support except through his extended family. His main prop was narco warlord brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, killed by his CIA certified Chief of Security. Since Karzai’s domestic support is extremely narrow, his main functions include attending external donors meetings, issuing press statements and rubber stamping each increase (“surge”) in US troops. The intensified use of Special Forces death squads and drone warplanes, inflicting high civilian casualties, has further enraged Afghans. The entire civilian and military apparatus nominally under Karzai is unquestionably, penetrated by Taliban and other nationalist groups, making him totally dependent on the US troops and warlords and drug traffickers on the CIA payroll.

The Pakistani puppet Arif Ali Zardari, despite strong resistance from sectors of the military and intelligence agencies, and despite 85% popular hostility to the US, has plunged the country into a series of sustained large scale military offenses against Islamist communities in the Northeast territories, displacing over 4 million refugees. Under orders from the White House to escalate the war against Taliban sanctuaries and their Pakistan armed allies, Zardari has lost all credibility as a ‘national’ politician. He has outraged nationalist loyalties by ‘covertly’ approving US gross violations of sovereignty by allowing US Special Forces to operate from Pakistan bases in their murderous operations against local Islamic militants. The daily US drone bombing of civilians in villages, on highways and in markets has led to a

near universal consensus of his puppet status. While puppet rulers provide a useful façade for external propaganda purposes, their effectiveness diminishes to zero domestically, as their subservience before the imperial slaughter of non-combatants increases. The initial imperial propaganda ploy portraying the puppets as “associate” or “power-sharers” loses credibility as it becomes transparent that the puppet rulers are impotent to rectify imperial abuses. This is especially the case with pervasive human rights violations and the destruction of the economy. Foreign aid is widely perceived as nurturing widespread extortion, corruption and incompetent administration of basic services.

As the domestic resistance grows and as the imperial countries ‘will’ to continue a decade long war and occupation wanes, the puppet rulers, feel intense pressure to make, at least, token expressions of ‘independence’. The puppets begin to “talk back” to the puppet-masters, attempting to play to the vast chorus of mass indignation over the most egregious occupation crimes against humanity. The colonial occupation begins to sink, under the weight of one-billion-dollars-per-week expenditures from depleted treasuries. The token troop withdrawals signal the growing importance and dependence on a highly suspect ‘native’ mercenary force, causing the puppets increasingly to fear for loss of office and life.

Puppet rulers begin to contemplate that it is time to probe the possibilities of making a deal with the resistance; time to voice popular indignation at civilian killings; time to praise the withdrawal of troops, but nothing consequential. No abandoning the protection of the imperial Praetorian Guard or, ‘god forbid’, the latest tranche of foreign aid. It’s an opportune time for Ali Zardari to criticize the US military intrusion, killing Bin Laden; time for Al Maliki to call on the US to “honor” its troop withdrawal in Iraq ; time for Karzai to welcome the Afghan military takeover of a province of least resistance (Bamiyan). Are the puppets in some sort of ‘revolt’ against the puppet master? Washington apparently is annoyed: \$800 million in aid to Pakistan has been held up pending greater military and intelligence collaboration in scouring the countryside and cities in search of Islamic resistance fighters. The Taliban assassination of Karzai’s brother and top political adviser Jan Mohamed Khan, important assets in buttering the puppet regime, signals that the puppet rulers’ occasional critical emotional ejaculations are not resonating with the Taliban “shadow government” which covers the nation and prepares a new military offensive.

The puppet ‘revolts’ neither influence the colonial master nor attract the anti-colonial masses. They signal the demise of a US attempt at colonial revivalism. It spells the end of the illusion of the neo-conservative and neo-liberal ideologists who fervently believed that US military power was capably of invading, occupying and ruling the Islamic world via shadow puppets projected over a mass of submissive peoples. The colonial example of Israel , a narrow strip of arid coastline, remains an anomaly in a sea of independent Islamic and secular states. Efforts by its US advocates to reproduce Israel’s relative consolidation through wars, occupations and puppet regimes has instead led to the bankruptcy of the US and the collapse of the colonial state. Puppets will be in flight; troops are in retreat; flags will be lowered and a period of prolonged civil war is in the offering. Can a democratic social revolution replace puppets and puppet masters? We in the United States live in a time of profound and deepening crises, in which rightwing extremism has penetrated the highest office and has seized the initiative for now but hopefully not forever. The overseas colonial wars are coming to a close, are domestic wars on the horizon?

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