

Separatism and Empire Building in the 21st Century

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Introduction: The Historical Context

Throughout modern imperial history, 'Divide and Conquer' has been the essential ingredient in allowing relatively small and resource-poor European countries to conquer nations vastly larger in size and populations and richer in natural resources. It is said that for every British officer in India, there were fifty Sikhs, Gurkhas, Muslims and Hindus in the British Colonial Army. The European conquest of Africa and Asia was directed by white officers, fought by black, brown and yellow soldiers so that white capital could exploit colored workers and peasants. Regional, ethnic, religious, clan, tribal, community, village and other differences were politicized and exploited allowing imperial armies to conquer warring peoples. In recent decades, the US empire builders have become the grand masters of 'divide and conquer' strategies throughout the world. By the 1970's, the CIA made a turn from promoting the dubious virtues of capitalism and democracy, to linking up with, financing and directing, religious, ethnic and regional elites against national regimes, independent or hostile to US world empire building.

The key to US military empire building follows two principles: direct military invasions and fomenting separatist movements, which can lead to military confrontation.

Twenty-first century empire building has seen the extended practice of both principles in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Lebanon, China (Tibet), Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Somalia, Sudan, Burma and Palestine – any country in which the US cannot secure a stable client regime, it resorts to financing and promoting separatist organizations and leaders using ethnic, religious and regional pretexts.

Consistent with traditional empire building principles, Washington only supports separatists in countries that refuse to submit to imperial domination and opposes separatists who resist the empire and its allies. In other words, imperial ideologues are neither 'hypocrites' nor resort to 'double standards' (as they are accused by liberal critics) – they publicly uphold the 'Empire first' principle as their defining criteria for evaluating separatist movements and granting or denying support. In contrast, many seemingly progressive critics of empire make universal statements in favor of the 'right to self-determination' and even extend it to the most rancid, reactionary, imperial-sponsored 'separatist groups' with catastrophic results. Independent nations and their people, who oppose US-backed separatists, are bombed to oblivion and charged with 'war crimes'. People, who oppose the separatists and who reside in the 'new state', are killed or driven into exile. The 'liberated people' suffer from the tyranny and impoverishment induced by the US-backed separatists and many are forced to

immigrate to other countries for economic survival.

Few if any of the progressive critics of the USSR and supporters of the separatist republics have ever publicly expressed second thoughts, let alone engaged in self-critical reflections, even in the face of decades long socio-economic and political catastrophes in the secessionist states. Yet it was and is the case that these self-same progressives today, who continue to preach high moral principles to those who question and reject some separatist movements because they originate and grow out of efforts to extend the US empire.

Washington 's success in co-opting so-called progressive liberals in support of separatist movements soon to be new imperial clients in recent decades is long and the consequences for human rights are ugly.

Most European and US progressives supported the following:

1. US-backed Bosnian fundamentalists, Croatian neo-fascists and Kosova-Albanian terrorists, leading to ethnic cleansing and the conversion of their once sovereign states into US military bases, client regimes and economic basket cases – totally destroying the multinational Yugoslavian welfare state.
2. The US funded and armed overseas Afghan Islamic fundamentalists who destroyed a secular, reformist, gender-equal Afghan regime, carrying out vast anti-feudal campaigns involving both men and women, a comprehensive agrarian reform and constructing extensive health and educational programs. As a result of US-Islamic tribal military successes, millions were killed, displaced and dispossessed and fanatical medieval anti-Communist tribal warlords destroyed the unity of the country.
3. The US invasion destroyed Iraq 's modern, secular, nationalist state and advanced socio-economic system. During the occupation, US backing of rival religious, tribal, clan and ethnic separatist movements and regimes led to the expulsion of over 90% of its modern scientific and professional class and the killing of over 1 million Iraqis...all in the name of ousting a repressive regime and above all in destroying a state opposed to Israeli oppression of Palestinians.

Clearly US military intervention promotes separatism as a means of establishing a regional 'base of support'. Separatism facilitates setting up a minority puppet regime and works to counter neighboring countries opposed to the depredations of empire. In the case of Iraq , US-backed Kurdish separatism preceded the imperial campaign to isolate an adversary, create international coalitions to pressure and weaken the central government. Washington highlights regime atrocities as human rights cases to feed global propaganda campaigns. More recently this is evident in the US-financed 'Tibetan' theocratic protests at China .

Separatists are backed as potential terrorist shock troops in attacking strategic economic sectors and providing real or fabricated 'intelligence' as is the case in Iran among the Kurds and other ethnic minority groups.

Why Separatism?

Empire builders do not always resort to separatist groups, especially when they have clients at the national levels in control of the state. It is only when their power is limited to groups, territorially or ethnically concentrated, that the intelligence operatives resort to and

promote 'separatist' movements. US backed separatist movements follow a step-by-step process, beginning with calls for 'greater autonomy' and 'decentralization', essentially tactical moves to gain a local political power base, accumulate economic revenues, repress anti-separatist groups and local ethnic/religious, political minorities with ties to the central government (as in the oppression of the Christian communities in northern Iraq repressed by the Kurdish separatists for their long ties with the Central Baath Party or the Roma of Kosova expelled and killed by the Kosova Albanians because of their support of the Yugoslav federal system). The attempt to forcibly usurp local resources and the ousting of local allies of the central government results in confrontations and conflict with the legitimate power of the central government. It is at this point that external (imperial) support is crucial in mobilizing the mass media to denounce repression of 'peaceful national movements' merely 'exercising their right to self-determination'. Once the imperial mass media propaganda machine touches the noble rhetoric of 'self-determination' and 'autonomy', 'decentralization' and 'home rule', the great majority of US and European funded NGO's jump on board, selectively attacking the government's effort to maintain a stable unified nation-state. In the name of 'diversity' and a 'pluri-ethnic state', the Western-bankrolled NGO's provide a moralist ideological cover to the pro-imperialist separatists. When the separatists succeed and murder and ethnically cleanse the ethnic and religious minorities linked to the former central state, the NGO's are remarkably silent or even complicit in justifying the massacres as 'understandable over-reaction to previous repression'. The propaganda machine of the West, even gloats over the separatist state expulsion of hundreds of thousands of ethnic minorities - as in the case of the Serbs and Roma from Kosova and the Krijina region of Croatia...with headlines blasting - "Serbs on the Run: Serves Them Right!" followed by photos of NATO troops overseeing the 'transfer' of destitute families from their ancestral villages and towns to squalid camps in a bombed out Serbia. And the triumphant Western politicians mouthing pieties at the massacres of Serb civilians by the KLA, as when former German Foreign Minister "Joschka" Fischer (Green Party) mourned, "I understand your (the KLA's) pain, but you shouldn't throw grenades at (ethnic Serb) school children."

The shift from 'autonomy' within a federal state to an 'independent state' is based on the aid channeled and administered by the imperial state to the 'autonomous region', thus strengthening its 'de facto' existence as a separate state. This has clearly occurred in the Kurdish run northern Iraq 'no fly zone' and now 'autonomous region' from 1991 to the present.

The same principle of self-determination demanded by the US and its separatist client is denied to 'minorities' within the realm. Instead, the US propaganda media refer to them as 'agents' or 'trojan horses' of the central government.

Strengthened by imperial 'foreign aid', and business links with US and EU MNCs, backed by local para-military and quasi-military police forces (as well as organized criminal gangs), the autonomous regime declares its 'independence'. Shortly thereafter it is recognized by its imperial patrons. After 'independence', the separatist regime grants territorial concessions and building sites for US military bases. Investment privileges are granted to the imperial patron, severely compromising 'national' sovereignty.

The army of local and international NGO's rarely raise any objections to this process of incorporating the separatist entity into the empire, even when the 'liberated' people object. In most cases the degree of 'local governance' and freedom of action of the 'independent' regime is less than it was when it was an autonomous or federal region in the previous

unified nationalist state.

Not infrequently 'separatist' regimes are part of irredentist movements linked to counterparts in other states. When cross national irredentist movements challenge neighboring states which are also targets of the US empire builders, they serve as launching pads for US low intensity military assaults and Special Forces terrorist activities.

For example, almost all of the Kurdish separatist organizations draw a map of 'Greater Kurdistan' which covers a third of Southeastern Turkey, Northern Iraq, a quarter of Iran, parts of Syria and wherever else they can find a Kurdish enclave. US commandos operate along side Kurdish separatists terrorizing Iranian villages (in the name of self-determination; Kurds with powerful US military backing have seized and govern Northern Iraq and provide mercenary Peshmerga troops to massacre Iraqi Arab civilian in cities and towns resisting the US occupation in Central, Western and Southern regions. They have engaged in the forced displacement of non-Kurds (including Arabs, Chaldean Christians, Turkman and others) from so-called Iraqi Kurdistan and the confiscation of their homes, businesses and farms. US-backed Kurdish separatists have created conflicts with the neighboring Turkish government, as Washington tries to retain its Kurdish clients for their utility in Iraq , Iran and Syria without alienating its strategic NATO client, Turkey . Nevertheless Turkish-Kurdish separatist activists in the PKK have lauded the US for, what they term, 'progressive colonialism' in effectively dismembering Iraq and forming the basis for a Kurdish state.

The US decision to collaborate with the Turkish military, or at least tolerate its military attacks on certain sectors of the Iraq-based Kurdish separatists, the PKK, is part of its global policy of prioritizing strategic imperial alliances and allies over and against any separatist movement which threatens them. Hence, while the US supports the Kosova separatists against Serbia , it opposes the separatists in Abkhazia fighting against its client in the Republic of Georgia . While the US supported Chechen separatist against the Moscow government, it opposes Basque and Catalan separatists in their struggle against Washington 's NATO ally, Spain . While Washington has been bankrolling the Bolivian separatists headed by the oligarchs of Santa Cruz against the central government in La Paz , it supports the Chilean government's repression of the Mapuche Indian claims to land and resources in south-central Chile .

Clearly 'self-determination' and 'independence' are not the universal defining principle in US foreign policy, nor has it ever been, as witness the US wars against Indian nations, secessionist southern slaveholders and yearly invasions of independent Latin American, Asian and African states. What guides US policy is the question of whether a separatist movement, its leaders and program furthers empire building or not? The inverse question however is infrequently raised by so-called progressives, leftists or self-described anti-imperialists: Does the separatist or independence movement weaken the empire and strengthen anti-imperialist forces or not? If we accept that the over-riding issue is defeating the multi-million killing machine called US imperialism, then it is legitimate to evaluate and support, as well as reject, some independence movements and not others. There is nothing 'hypocritical' or 'inconvenient' in raising higher principles in making these political choices. Clearly Hitler justified the invasion of Czechoslovakia in the name of defending Sudetenland separatists; just like a series of US Presidents have justified the partition of Iraq in the name of defending the Kurds, or Sunnis or Shia or whatever tribal leaders lend themselves to US empire building.

What defines anti-imperialist politics is not abstract principles about 'self-determination' but defining exactly who is the 'self' – in other words, what political forces linked to what international power configuration are making what political claim for what political purpose. If, as in Bolivia today, a rightwing racist, agro-business oligarchy seizes control of the most fertile and energy rich region, containing 75% of the country's natural resources, in the name of 'self-determination' and autonomy, expelling and brutalizing impoverished Indians in the process – on what basis can the left or anti-imperialist movement oppose it, if not because the class, race and national content of that claim is antithetical to an even more important principle – popular sovereignty based on the democratic principles of majority rule and equal access to public wealth?

Separatism in Latin America: Bolivia, Venezuela and Ecuador

In recent years the US backed candidates have won and lost national election in Latin America . Clearly the US has retained hegemony over the governing elites in Mexico , Colombia , Central America , Peru , Chile , Uruguay and some of the Caribbean island states. In states where the electorate has backed opponents of US dominance, such as Venezuela , Ecuador , Bolivia and Nicaragua , Washington 's influence is dependent on regional, provincial and locally elected officials. It is premature to state, as the Council for Foreign Relations claims, that ' US hegemony in Latin America is a thing of the past.' One only has to read the economic and political record of the close and growing military and economic ties between Washington and the Calderon regime in Mexico , the Garcia regime in Peru , Bachelet in Chile and Uribe in Colombia to register the fact that US hegemony still prevails in important regions of Latin America . If we look beyond the national governmental level, even in the non-hegemonized states, US influence still is a potent factor shaping the political behavior of powerful right-wing business, financial and regional political elites in Venezuela , Ecuador , Bolivia and Argentina . By the end of May 2008, US backed regionalist movements were on the offensive, establishing a de facto secessionist regime in Santa Cruz in Bolivia . In Argentina , the agro-business elite has organized a successful nationwide production and distribution lockout, backed by the big industrial, financial and commercial confederations, against an export tax promoted by the 'center-left' Kirchner government. In Colombia, the US is negotiating with the paramilitary President Uribe over the site of a military base on the frontier with Venezuela's oil rich state of Zulia, which happens to be ruled by the only anti-Chavez governor in power, a strong promoter of 'autonomy' or secession. In Ecuador , the Mayor of Guayaquil, backed by the right wing mass media and the discredited traditional political parties have proposed 'autonomy' from the central government of President Rafael Correa. The process of imperial driven nation dismemberment is very uneven because of the different degrees of political power relations between the central government and the regional secessionists. The right wing secessionists in Bolivia have advanced the furthest – actually organizing and winning a referendum and declaring themselves an independent governing unit with the power to collect taxes, formulate foreign economic policy and create its own police force.

The success of the Santa Cruz secessionist is due to the political incapacity and total incompetence of the Evo Morales-Garcia Linera regime which promoted 'autonomy' for the scores of impoverished Indian 'nations' (or indianismo) and ended up laying the groundwork for the white racist oligarchs to seize the opportunity to establish their own 'separatist' power base. As the separatist gained control over the local population, they intimidated the 'indians' and trade union supporters of the Morales regime, violently sabotaged the constitutional assembly, rejected the constitution, while constantly extracting concession for

the flaccid and conciliatory central government of the Evo Morales. While the separatists trashed the constitution and used their control over the major means of production and exports to recruit five other provinces, forming a geographic arc of six provinces, and influence in two others in their drive to degrade the national government. The Morales-Garcia Linera 'indianista' regime, largely made up of mestizos formerly employed in NGOs funded from abroad, never used its formal constitutional power and monopoly of legitimate force to enforce constitutional order and outlaw and prosecute the secessionists' violation of national integrity and rejection of the democratic order.

Morales never mobilized the country, the majority of popular organizations in civil society, or even called on the military to put down the secessionists. Instead he continued to make impotent appeals for 'dialog', for compromises in which his concessions to oligarch self-rule only confirmed their drive for regional power. As a case study of failed governance, in the face of a reactionary separatist threat to the nation, the Morales-Garcia Linera regime represents an abject failure to defend popular sovereignty and the integrity of the nation.

The lessons of failed governance in Bolivia stand as a grim reminder to Chavez in Venezuela and Correa in Ecuador : Unless they act with full force of the constitution to crush the embryonic separatist movements before they gain a power base, they will also face the break-up of their countries. The biggest threat is in Venezuela, where the US and Colombian militaries have built bases on the frontier bordering the Venezuelan state of Zulia, infiltrated commandos and paramilitary forces into the province, and see the takeover of the oil-rich province as a beach-head to deprive the central government of its vital oil revenues and destabilize the central government.

Several years into a Washington-backed and financed separatist movement in Bolivia , a few progressive academics and pundits have taken notice and published critical commentaries. Unfortunately these articles lack any explanatory context, and offer little understanding of how Latin American 'separatism' fits into long-term, large-scale US empire building strategy over the past quarter of a century.

Today the US-promoted separatist movements in Latin American are actively being pursued in at least three Latin American counties. In Bolivia, the 'media luna' or 'half-moon' provinces of Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando and Tarija have successfully convoked provincial 'referendums' for 'autonomy' - code word for secession. On May 4, 2008 the separatists in Santa Cruz succeeded, securing a voter turnout of nearly 50% and winning 80% of the vote. On May 15, the right-wing big business political elite announced the formation of ministries of foreign trade and internal security, assuming the effective powers of a secession state. The US government led by Ambassador Goldberg, provided financial and political support for the right-wing secessionist 'civic' organizations through its \$125 million dollar aid programs via AID, its tens of millions of dollar 'anti-drug' program, and through the NED (National Endowment for Democracy) funded pro-separatist NGOs. At meetings of the Organization of American States and other regional meetings the US refused to condemn the separatist movements.

Because of the total incompetence and lack of national political leadership of President Evo Morales and his Vice President Garcia Linera, the Bolivian State is splintering into a series of 'autonomous' cantons, as several other provincial governments seek to usurp political power and take over economic resources. From the very beginning, the Morales-Garcia regime signed off on a number of political pacts, adopted a whole series of policies and approved a number of concessions to the oligarchic elites in Santa Cruz , which enabled

them to effectively re-build their natural political power base, sabotage an elected Constitutional Assembly and effectively undermine the authority of the central government. Right-wing success took less than 2 ½ years, which is especially amazing considering that in 2005, the country witnessed a major popular uprising which ousted a right-wing president, when millions of workers, miners, peasants and Indians dominated the streets. It is a tribute to the absolute misgovernment of the Morales-Garcia regime, that the country could move so quickly and decisively from a state of insurrectionary popular power to a fragmented and divided country in which a separatist agro-financial elite seizes control of 80% of the productive resources of the country...while the elected central government meekly protests.

The success of the secessionist regional ruling class in Bolivia has encouraged similar 'autonomy movements' in Ecuador and Venezuela, led by the mayor of Guayaquil (Ecuador) and Governor of Zulia (Venezuela). In other words, the US-engineered political debacle of the Morales-Garcia regime in Bolivia has led it to team up with oligarchs in Ecuador and Venezuela to repeat the Santa Cruz experience...in a process of "permanent counter-revolutionary separatism."

Separatism and the Ex-USSR

The defeat of Communism in the USSR had little to do with the 'arms race bankrupting the system', as former US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski has claimed. Up to the end, living standards were relatively stable and welfare programs continued to operate at near optimal levels and scientific and cultural programs retained substantial state expenditures. The ruling elites who replaced the communist system did not respond to US propaganda about the virtues of 'free markets and democracy', as Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton claimed: The proof is evident in the political and economic systems, which they imposed upon taking power and which were neither democratic nor based on competitive markets. These new ethnic-based regimes resembled despotic, predatory, nepotistic monarchies handing over ('privatizing') the public wealth accumulated over the previous 70 years of collective labor and public investment to a handful of oligarchs and foreign monopolies.

The principle ideological driving force for the current policy of 'separatism' is ethnic identity politics, which is fostered and financed by US intelligence and propaganda agencies. Ethnic identity politics, which replaced communism, is based on vertical links between the elite and the masses. The new elites rule through clan-family-religious-gang based nepotism, funded and driven through pillage and privatization of public wealth created under Communism. Once in power, the new political elites 'privatized' public wealth into family riches and converted themselves and their cronies into an oligarchic ruling class. In most cases the ethnic ties between elites and subjects dissolved in the face of the decline of living standards, the deep class inequalities, the crooked vote counts and state repression.

In all of the ex-USSR states, the new ruling classes only claim to mass legitimacy was based on appeals to sharing a common ethnic identity. They trotted out medieval and royalist symbols from the remote past, dredging up absolutist monarchs, parasitical religious hierarchies, pre-capitalist war lords, bloody emperors and 'national' flags from the days of feudal landlords to forge a common history and identity with the 'newly liberated' masses. The repeated appeal to past reactionary symbols was entirely appropriate: The contemporary policies of despotism, pillage and personality cults resonated with past 'historic' warriors, feudal lords and practices.

As the new post-USSR despots lost their ethnic luster as a consequence of public disillusion with local and foreign predatory pillage of the national wealth, the leaders resorted to systematic force.

The principle success of the US strategy of promoting separatism was in destroying the USSR – not in promoting viable independent capitalist democracies. Washington succeeded in exacerbating ethnic conflicts between Russians and other nationalities, by encouraging local communist bosses to split from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and to form ‘independent states’ where the new rulers could share the booty of the local treasury with new Western partners. The US de-stabilization efforts in the Communist countries, especially after the 1970’s did not compete over living standards, greater industrial growth or over more generous welfare programs. Rather, Western propaganda focused on ethnic solidarity, the one issue that undercut class solidarity and loyalty to the communist state and ideology and strengthened pro-Western elites, especially among ‘public intellectuals’ and recycled Communist bosses-turned ‘nationalist saviors.’

The key point of Western strategy was to first and foremost break-up the USSR via separatist movements no matter if they were fanatical religious fundamentalists, gangster-politicians, Western-trained liberal economists or ambitious upwardly mobile warlords. All that mattered was that they carried the Western separatist banner of ‘self-determination’. Subsequently, in the ‘post Soviet period’, the new pro-capitalist ruling elites were recruited to NATO and client state status.

Washington’s post-separatism politics followed a two-step process: In the first phase there was an undifferentiated support for anyone advocating the break-up of the USSR. In the second phase, the US sought to push the most pliable pro-NATO, free market liberals among the lot – the so-called ‘color revolutionaries’, in Georgia and the Ukraine. Separatism was seen as a preliminary step toward an ‘advanced’ stage of re-subordination to the US Empire. The notion of ‘independent states’ is virtually non-existent for US empire builders. At best it exists as a transitional stage from one power constellation to a new US-centered empire.

In the period following the break-up of the USSR, Washington’s subsequent attempts to recruit the new ruling elites to pro-capitalist, client-status was relatively successful. Some countries opened their economies to unregulated exploitation especially of energy resources. Others offered sites for military bases. In many cases local rulers sought to bargain among world powers while enhancing their own private fortune-through-pillage.

None of the ex-Soviet Republics evolved into secular independent democratic republics capable of recovering the living standards, which their people possessed during the Soviet times. Some rulers became theocratic despots where religious notables and dictators mutually supported each other. Others evolved into ugly family-based dictatorships. None of them retained the Soviet era social safety net or high quality educational systems. All the post-Soviet regimes magnified the social inequalities and multiplied the number of criminal-run enterprises. Violent crime grew geometrically increasing citizen insecurity.

The success of US-induced ‘separatism’ did create, in most cases, enormous opportunities for Western and Asian pillage of raw materials, especially petroleum resources. The experience of ‘newly independent states’ was, at best, a transitory illusion, as the ruling elite either passed directly into the orbit of Western sphere of influence or became a ‘fig leaf’ for deep structural subordination to Western-dominated circuits of commodity exports and finance.

Out of the break-up of the USSR , Western states allied with those republics where it suited their interests. In some cases they signed agreements with rulers to establish military base lining the pockets of a dictator through loans. In other cases they secured privileged access to economic resources by forming joint ventures. In others they simply ignored a poorly endowed regime and let it wallow in misery and despotism.

Separatism: Eastern Europe , Balkans and the Baltic Countries

The most striking aspect of the break-up of the Soviet bloc was the rapidity and thoroughness with which the countries passed from the Warsaw Pact to NATO, from Soviet political rule to US/EU economic control over almost all of their major economic sectors. The conversion from one form of political economic and military subordination to another highlights the transitory nature of political independence, the superficiality of its operational meaning and the spectacular hypocrisy of the new ruling elite who blithely denounced 'Soviet domination' while turning over most economic sectors to Western capital, large tracts of territory for NATO bases and providing mercenary military battalions to fight in US imperial wars to a far greater degree than was ever the case during Soviet times.

Separatism in these areas was an ideology to weaken an adversarial hegemonic coalition, all the better to reincorporate its members in a more virulent and aggressive empire building coalition.

Yugoslavia and Kosova: Forced Separatism

The successful breakup of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact alliance encouraged the US and EU to destroy Yugoslavia , the last remaining independent country outside of US-EU control in West Europe . The break-up of Yugoslavia was initiated by Germany following its annexation and demolition of East Germany 's economy. Subsequently it expanded into the Slovenian and Croatian republics. The US , a relative latecomer in the carving up of the Balkans, targeted Bosnia , Macedonia and Kosova. While Germany expanded via economic conquest, the US , true to its militarist mission, resorted to war in alliance with recognized terrorist Kosova Albanian gangsters organized in the paramilitary KLA. Under the leadership of French Zionist Bernard Kouchner, the NATO forces facilitated the ethnic purging, assassination and disappearances of tens of thousands of Serbs, Roma and dissident non-separatist Kosova Albanians.

The destruction of Yugoslavia is complete: the remaining fractured and battered Serb Republic was now at the mercy of US and its European allies. By 2008 a EU-US backed pro-NATO coalition was elected and the last remnants of ' Yugoslavia ' and its historical legacy of self-managed socialism was obliterated.

Consequences of 'Separatism' in USSR . East Europe and the Balkans

In every region where US sponsored and financed separatism succeeded, living standards plunged, massive pillage of public resources in the name of privatization took place, political corruption reached unprecedented levels. Anywhere between a quarter to a third of the population fled to Western Europe and North America because of hunger, personal insecurity (crime), unemployment and a dubious future.

Politically, gangsterism and extraordinary murder rates drove legitimate businesses to pay exorbitant extortion payments, as a 'new class' of gangsters-turned-businessmen took over

the economy and signed dubious investment agreements and joint ventures with EU , US and Asian MNCs.

Energy-rich ex-Soviet countries in south central Asia were ruled by opulent dictators who accumulated billion dollar fortunes in the course of demolishing egalitarian norms, extensive health, and scientific and cultural institutions. Religious institutions gained power over and against scientific and professional associations, reversing educational progress of the previous seventy years. The logic of separatism spread from the republics to the sub-national level as rival local war lords and ethnic chiefs attempted to carve out their 'autonomous' entity, leading to bloody wars, new rounds of ethnic purges and new refugees fleeing the contested areas.

The US promises of benefits via 'separatism' made to the diverse populations were not in the least fulfilled. At best a small ruling elite and their cronies reaped enormous wealth, power and privilege at the expense of the great majority. Whatever the initial symbolic gratifications, which the underlying population may have experienced from their short-lived independence, new flag and restored religious power was eroded by the grinding poverty and violent internal power struggles that disrupted their lives. The truth of the matter is that millions of people fled from 'their' newly 'independent' states, preferring to become refugees and second-class citizens in foreign states.

Conclusion:

The major fallacy of seemingly progressive liberals and NGOs in their advocacy of 'autonomy', 'decentralization' and 'self-determination' is that these abstract concepts beg the fundamental concrete historical and substantive political question - to what classes, race, political blocs is power being transferred? For over a century in the US the banner of the racist right-wing Southern plantation owners ruling by force and terror over the majority of poor blacks was 'States Rights' - the supremacy of local law and order over the authority of the federal government and the national constitution. The fight between federal versus states rights was between a reactionary Southern oligarchy and a broader based progressive Northern urban coalition of workers and the middle class.

There is a fundamental need to demystify the notion of 'autonomy' by examining the classes which demand it, the consequences of devolving power in terms of the distribution of power, wealth and popular power and the external benefactors of a shift from the national state to regional local power elites.

Likewise, the mindless embrace by some libertarians of each and every claim for 'self-determination' has led to some of the most heinous crimes of the 20-21st centuries - in many cases separatist movements have encouraged or been products of bloody imperialist wars, as was the case in the lead up to and following Nazi annexations, the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan and the savage Israeli invasion of Lebanon and breakup of Palestine.

To make sense of 'autonomy', 'decentralization' and 'self-determination' and to ensure that these devolutions of power move in progressive historic direction, it is essential to pose the prior questions: Do these political changes advance the power and control of the majority of workers and peasants over the means of production? Does it lead to greater popular power in the state and electoral process or does it strengthen demagogic clients advancing the interests of the empire, in which the breakup of an established state leads to the incorporation of the ethnic fragments into a vicious and destructive empire?

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