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Debate: Libya, the resistance, the no-fly zone

The Arab revolution must stay in Arab hands - a reply to Gilbert Achcar

- Debate - Problems of the Arab and Middle East regions -

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The Arab revolution has widened the left's horizons. In the region itself there is now a historic possibility of a new radical politics: successful resistance to the hegemonic Western powers and to Israel fused with the movement of the young and propertyless masses against the corrupt and complicit elites.

The fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak shattered decades of Western policy, rocking them onto the back foot. They are now moving onto the front foot, as the regional despots raid their political and military arsenals to cling on.

Thus the developing Arab movements and the left face new political challenges and strategic choices. That is the context of the legitimate debate Gilbert Achcar has framed over the Western military intervention in Libya.

Gilbert outlines a case for qualified political support for the soon to be Nato-commanded air and naval operations in Libya (no one on the international left is in a position to do anything materially/militarily themselves).

He writes as a well known Marxist and opponent of the Afghan and Iraq wars, a supporter of the Palestinian struggle and a genuine friend of the most radical edge of the Arab revolutions.

Gilbert Achcar is no part of the liberal attack pack, who in natural alliance with the neoconservatives brought us the disasters of Afghanistan and Iraq. But he argues that over Libya the left should support the action of powers who occupy those two countries, albeit with many caveats and with vigilant suspicion.

It is a badly mistaken position over Libya. When its logic is generalised - as Gilbert does - it plays dangerously into the hands of the reactionary forces which he and the left hope the Arab revolutions will eventually eradicate.

Western intervention across the region

Gilbert introduces two analogies to make the point that socialist principles are not articles of religious faith and are no substitute for providing concrete answers based on a "factual assessment" of concrete situations.

The point is helpful: the analogies, not. As he acknowledges, proceeding by analogy tends to generate confusing polemics over what is common between unique events, each of which is itself the subject of considerable controversy and of radically different factual assessments.

The Rwandan genocide, one of his examples, is arguably (at the very least) more a horrific lesson in the consequences of actual Western intervention, in its totality up to and including the eve of the slaughter, than it is a counter-example for those Gilbert takes to task for a "religious" opposition to all Western military action.

In any case, even the Western leaders who have driven the Libya bombing have not suggested that the events they say they forestalled were analogous to the Holocaust or the Rwandan genocide - though the most rabid tabloids and the bomberatti have. It is self-defeating for the left to insert those connotations ourselves. It is even more damaging if we at the same time fail to foreground the most salient and distinctive feature of which the uprising in Libya is an

expression - the wider Arab revolutionary upheaval.

That regional process, and what it means both for the Western powers and for those who have risen up in Libya, barely features in Gilbert's analysis. Instead, he largely accepts the question as Nicolas Sarkozy, David Cameron and Barack Obama frame it: a particular, Libyan moral dilemma confronting their publics and states, whose wider actions are cropped out.

But their military action is not some singular response to a potential humanitarian crisis. It is more even than the latest chapter in a history of wars attended by specious humanitarian claims. That said, history alone - recent and ongoing in Iraq and Afghanistan - should cause anyone who hopes for a progressive outcome to this bombing or who invests it with moral worth to pause and reflect.

The bloody past and present also contribute to the rational underpinning of a far from "religious" anti-war sentiment, which goes beyond the left to embrace an unprecedentedly large section of public opinion - a testament to the international movement against the Iraq war.

The context, however, is not merely historical. The same actors who are launching missile strikes over Libya are intervening at the same time and with the same objectives across the rest of the same region. (Unless we are unfeasibly to imagine that their motives, interests and aims are fundamentally different in Libya and in the Gulf - an unsustainable moral-political atomism, certainly for a Marxist.)

The same European Union mandarin - civilising-colonialist Robert Cooper - is briefing about bringing democracy to Libya and also writing apologies for the Saudi-orchestrated murder of democrats in Bahrain.

The same President Obama who said that attacks on hospitals were a *casus belli* against Tripoli is standing by his allies in Riyadh and Manama, who spent many days... attacking hospitals under the noses of the US Fifth Fleet.

The same Treasury revenue going up in smoke as missiles explode in Libya is subsidising Israel's missiles blowing up people in Gaza - not two years ago, but today, now, with the threat of much more imminently.

The same Qatar that is belatedly providing air support for the attacks in Libya is simultaneously sending troops to attack democrats in the Persian Gulf.

For sure, there are great fractures and differences of emphasis as the US with its European and Arab allies seeks to cohere a response to the challenge posed by the Arab revolutions.

The US would like more palliative reforms from the Kings of Arabia; the Saudis want to give none. Hillary Clinton has cleaved as long as possible to the autocrat in Yemen; Alain Juppe, stung by the political crisis wrought by his predecessors' intense relationship with Ben Ali, called earlier for Ali Abdullah Saleh to go.

But the overall aim is the same: to corral the revolutionary process and ensure it is steered along a path which is stable and compatible with the interests of the Western powers and whichever safe pairs of hands they can identify in each state.

Oil and Western policy

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Those interests do ultimately come down to the control of Middle Eastern and North African hydrocarbons. Is the West's policy about oil? On one level it is always about oil. When Silvio Berlusconi and Sarkozy embraced Muammar Gaddafi, the unspoken interest was oil. When they find themselves intervening to overthrow him, the underlying interest remains oil - just as it was when the West supported Saddam Hussein in his attack on revolutionary Iran and then, a decade later, drove him out of Kuwait, embargoed Iraq for 12 years, finally invading a second time and executing him.

The same imperial, capitalist objectives in the region can be served by different politiques d'Etat; to paraphrase Lord Palmerston, imperial chancelleries have no eternal friends and no eternal enemies, only eternal interests - as Hosni Mubarak discovered at the eleventh hour.

So why the change in policy towards Gaddafi? There are those who serially tell us that this time it's different, this time the Western governments are subordinating self-interest to humanitarianism. Gilbert is not one of them. But his argument lends them credibility - and if adopted by the left would encourage them to go further.

Gaddafi managed neither to fall on his sword, like Mubarak, nor to crush the opposition, like the Al Khalifa kleptocrats in Bahrain - but only after the intervention of the US's oldest ally in the region, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

He did succeed through vicious repression and playing on sectional divisions in Libyan society in displacing the dynamic of the youth-led revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt (which has also been central in Sanaa, Yemen, for six weeks) with an armed conflict more resembling a civil war.

In those circumstances he became a liability for the West. On the eve of the bombing campaign Obama said that the instability in Libya threatened "vital US allies in the region".

Gaddafi himself had already proven that he had no intention of posing such a threat. Those who think that he is some kind of anti-imperialist now would do well to reflect that even as he denounced the Western bombardment as "crusader aggression" he was proclaiming himself as the only possible Libyan leader to maintain peace with Israel and to prevent African migrants from entering Europe.

It is preposterous, as Gilbert says, to claim that Gaddafi has been hostile to Western interests over the last decade and that that is why the West want to topple him. But equally, it is evident over two last weeks that the flaking-rule of this recently acquired, flakey ally no longer served them well.

The wrangling in Western capitals over how to respond and bring a return to stability more plausibly reflects the uncertainty that has beset their attempts to rally a riposte to the Arab revolution than it does some dawning recognition of a hitherto absent moral sensibility. Unlike in Egypt, there was no army high command to switch allegiance to smoothly and safely.

The same hesitancy marked the Arab despots. They want an end to the revolutionary wave, but they have no loyalty to, still less liking for, Gaddafi - or necessarily for each other; the Qataris long campaigned for the toppling of Mubarak. The West's actions are a single axe to fell a two-headed monster, they hope.

Gilbert says we should not "dismiss the weight of public opinion on Western governments" in deciding their actions, justified as preventing a slaughter in Benghazi.

Now, only the self-appointed and deluded leaders of "global civil society" would claim that public opinion in Europe

and north America is what drove the decision to go to war. Britain and the US went to war on Iraq despite public opinion.

There is little enthusiasm for this war - that much is clear from the conflicting opinion polls. So we are left with the observation that public outrage at a predicted massacre was just one factor among many in Sarkozy's and Cameron's drive to get the missiles launched and bombs dropped.

Morality and Western bombs

Let us put to one side that it was the dire warnings of the very politicians who pushed for bombing - Juppe and William Hague preeminently - which informed the public discussion about a possible slaughter. Let us also return shortly to whether their warnings were right and what might have been done.

In a limited sense public compassion was significant. It determined the ideological register in which London, Paris and Washington have chosen to re-legitimise their roles in the Arab region after the battering they have taken from Iraq and the fall of their allies in Tunisia and Egypt.

Gilbert touches on it when he identifies the West's concern to ensure a continued "ability to invoke humanitarian pretexts for further imperialist wars like the ones in the Balkans or Iraq". But that means that giving any credence to their current humanitarian pretext simply makes it easier for them to construct exactly the narrative for more Iraqs.

Emboldened Western powers make further wars more likely. Supporting their military actions contributes to that.

Unless we are to detach Libya from what the Western powers are doing and will do in the region and elsewhere, that consequence surely weighs on one side of the moral balance Gilbert enjoins us to strike: "what is decisive is the comparison between the human cost of this intervention and the cost that would have been incurred had it not happened". The dead in Bahrain and Yemen deserve to be counted too.

The first cost we will come to know as events unfold in North Africa, the Middle East and beyond. The second, we can never know with certainty.

It has become largely accepted that Gaddafi was about to take Benghazi and would have killed thousands. The success and scale of Gaddafi's repression do not for a second decide our opposition to it. But they are crucial to Gilbert's test for whether we should support what the Western powers are doing.

So let's assume that Juppe, Hague and others were right: Gaddafi was about to win and kill thousands. "Can anyone claiming to belong to the left just ignore a popular movement's plea for protection... when the type of protection requested is not one through which control over their country could be exerted?" asks Gilbert.

Up to then, however, the rebels' requests had been ignored, not by the left, but by those to whom they were addressed. They asked the great powers who now pose as their protectors for access to weapons days into the uprising. They were refused.

At the time, Berlusconi's Foreign Minister Franco Frattini voiced most clearly the West's suspicions about the Benghazi rebels: they were an unknown quantity but some were definitely Islamist (he warned ominously of the

proclamation of an "Islamic Emirate" on the southern Mediterranean) and a banner opposing Western interference was prominently displayed.

So intelligence had to be gathered (special forces and spies were dispatched), guarantees had to be sought (commitments to Libya's commercial treaties were swiftly obtained), the picture allowed to clarify and nothing be done which would enable any agency independent from the interests of the Western corporations and states which had got along famously with Gaddafi over the previous 10 years.

The condition that intervention would not amount to exerting control over the country was breached before the words in the UN resolution ruling out an occupation were typed up. What else might Sarkozy and Clinton in Paris three days before the UN vote have bargained over from a position of strength with the former regime figures who they plucked as representatives of the Benghazi opposition?

Gilbert does not address the baleful effects of the West's embrace on the opposition itself. Nor does he consider how intervention led by the former North African colonial powers allows Gaddafi, of all people, to wrap himself in the shroud of Omar Mukhtar, the hero of the devastating Libyan war of independence against fascist Italy, thus giving him another weapon to shore up support.

The opposition may well have started as an admixture of forces comparable with the Tunisian and Egyptian movements. But the former regime elements, appointing themselves as leaders, and reliably pro-Western figures have unsurprisingly been promoted as the rebellion becomes more dependent on Western military force.

If war is an extension of political conflict by other means, then military conflict extends its own political logic. In a position of military weakness the Benghazi council has called for greater and greater Western military action.

Rebels complained early on that they were not in a position to call in Western air strikes. They may want US, French and British planes to be the opposition air arm, but they are under US/Nato command. It calls the shots. It isn't the rebels' airforce; they are now more Nato's ground force.

The Benghazi council has not yet called for ground troops - which are not ruled out by the UN resolution - but if a stalemate sets in... what then? Perhaps some more on-the-ground "specialists" to guide in the missiles or some more "advisors" (special forces, ie highly trained killers, are already there)?

Should the left ignore the call for further help, even if a "popular movement" warns of massacres and, as the Pentagon has said, air action alone is not certain to achieve victory on the ground? Shouldn't we support steps to make the missile strikes more accurate, to reduce "collateral damage"? Wouldn't it be immoral not to?

Should we seek to expose the insincerity of the West by demanding more military action on behalf of the rebels if they don't succeed quickly? Should we greet any move towards de facto partition with demands that the West "finishes the job" and removes the butcher Gaddafi?

Surely it would be immoral, having prevented the fall of Benghazi, to watch the fighting drag on and Gaddafi remain in control of most of the country? It is the rebels' requests, after all, which authenticate the moral case for supporting the bombing, according to Gilbert. And they want more bombing.

The war has already gone further than the restricted no-fly-zone Gilbert says it would be immoral to oppose. The UN resolution went well beyond that. The opening attacks were not against aircraft but on ground forces and Gaddafi's

compound - they had the coordinates from Ronald Reagan's assassination attempt in 1986. Given the results of every other Western air war, is there any doubt that the cruise missiles and "smart bombs" have caused civilian casualties? (At the time of writing Western warplanes are fully engaged in bombing Ajdabiya so the rebels can take it.)

Herein lies the essential unreality of Gilbert's position. He wants to scalpel out from the UN resolution and Nato bombing a humanitarian kernel that we must support. We should oppose the rest. We should monitor the course of an inherently chaotic war to ensure that military action doesn't go beyond the humanitarian aims we have imputed.

But means and ends were always wider. That's why the vaunted international consensus collapsed within 24 hours. There was no actual demarcation between a supposed humanitarian mission and the wider objectives of the belligerents - especially of Sarkozy and Cameron, who openly proclaimed a doctrine of regime change.

The political futility of Gilbert's position is apparent when he writes, "... we should definitely demand that bombings stop after Gaddafi's air means have been neutralised". The Pentagon declared them neutralised the day before his article appeared, but the bombing continued.

Alternatives to Nato action

So what is left of the argument that we should have supported a no-fly-zone which was superseded before the Security Council vote? Only that Benghazi was about to fall, there would be a massacre and there was no alternative to supporting Western action which, whatever its wider ambitions and methods, did prevent it. Let's accept the claim of an imminent massacre and look at whether there was any alternative.

Gilbert dismisses the idea of the rebels arming as impractical: there were only "24 hours" for them to get the weapons and learn to use them. But any impracticality is a result of the political priorities of the Western powers.

For two weeks they refused weapons and imposed an embargo to stop any shipment while they sought guarantees that the Benghazi rebels would not use them against their vested interests in Libya, established under Gaddafi over the last decade. They blackmailed the genuinely revolutionary elements and suborned others of the Benghazi leadership as Gaddafi's armour moved in. The left everywhere should say so clearly, not accept the fait accompli of coercion.

Gilbert argues that the left could oppose war against Serbia and Iraq because we were able to point to diplomatic alternatives, but that over Libya there were none. Now, I don't know how realistic Vladimir Putin's diplomacy was in relation to Slobodan Milosevic or how credible was Saddam Hussein's offer to withdraw from Kuwait. But neither do I remember those being necessary conditions for the movements against the wars of 1991 and 1999.

Following Gilbert's thesis nonetheless, there was a high level African Union delegation on its way to Tripoli to seek a diplomatic settlement when the Western bombing started. Gilbert suggests that Gaddafi is too irrational to be a party to a mediated solution. But we were told that Milosevic and Saddam were also mad dogs, genocidal dictators who would never accept a mediated solution. These are hardly strong grounds for opposing the Balkan and Iraq wars yet giving the West the benefit of the doubt over Libya.

Gilbert argues that any Arab-organised intervention would cause just as many civilian casualties and lead to just as much imperialist influence over Libya. He cites Saudi Arabia and Egypt as two possible interveners. A few moments'

factual assessment shows that such an intervention would likely open up very different possibilities.

It was almost certainly impossible for Saudi Arabia to lead an intervention perceived as supporting the Arab revolution. It was leading the suppression of the revolution in Bahrain at the same time. It is the most brittle and ancient of ancient regimes, which has rejected all calls for it to broaden its social base through serious reform. The tensions would have exposed it utterly and opened a breach for the Saudi opposition movement - much more so than in tiny Qatar. That's why the House of Saud voted for the West to do it.

Egypt is different. Mubarak is gone. The army remains. But it presides over a society in which an actual revolution is still being fought out. It's currently Washington's biggest regional concern. An intervention led by Egypt would not have simply been a cat's paw of London, Paris and Washington. Its reflex within Egypt would not have been of the "bomb the new Hitler" variety that is dredged up on these occasions in the imperialist countries. It would have been conditioned by the new found activism of the Egyptian people.

Egyptian socialists have issued a statement opposing the West's military action in Libya and agitating for popular pressure to come to the aid of the rebellion in their western neighbour. You only have to picture Egyptian flags, of the kind that fluttered in Tahrir Square, being waved in Benghazi rather than the Tricolor and Union Jack to appreciate what the difference would be.

There were alternatives to supporting the West's bombing. Of course, they were not ones Sarkozy, Cameron and Obama would freely choose. They had to be argued and fought for against the line of the Western governments. In that sense they were not as immediate as the willing decisions of those who control powerful states. But if the left were to accept that the only realistic solutions are those that the US, EU and Nato want to entertain, then we too succumb to blackmail and there seems little point in building an independent left. We face strategic choices.

Democracy and the Islamist scarecrow

The left wing of the Egyptian revolution - the most important in the region thus far - has rejected that blackmail. They are not people who can be dismissed as armchair critics sitting in comfort. And the mass forces that were ranged against Mubarak remain independent of Western tutelage.

Gilbert, however, privileges the Libyan rebels, who are now dependent on Paris and London, acting on Washington's dime - Pentagon spending was 50 percent of the Nato total 10 years ago, now it is 75 percent.

In a deeply worrying aside, he asserts that whatever regime the Libyan rebels might form now would automatically be better than "the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood" playing a "crucial role" in post-Mubarak Egypt. That makes a terrible concession not merely to the Western powers' military action, but to their politics and ideology as they try to reshape the Arab region under rejuvenated hegemony.

They want the public East and West to believe that regimes dependent on Western force of arms and constructed at conferences in Paris or London - like Nouri Al-Maliki's in Iraq - are a priori better than long suppressed Islamic movements playing an independent, prominent role. The Arabs, they maintain, are not ready for unguided democracy. Israel's Tzipi Livni is promulgating bespoke criteria for Arab parties to be admitted to the democratic club; they include recognising Israel.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood does not fit the Islamophobic demonology and in any case is an organic part of

Egyptian society - a vital point for anyone who truly believes in national self-determination. As the political space has opened up so have the divisions in an organisation that was always more of a coalition than a monolithic party. There is a widening crack between a politically conservative old guard and a youth imbued with revolutionary aspirations. In fact, several parties look set to emerge from the Brotherhood's ranks. They include those who emphasise radical democratic and social change as opposed to the imposition of restrictive mores.

The most popular model among the mainstream of the Brotherhood and among many other Islamists in the region is now the AKP government in Turkey. It is far from a socialist administration. But it beggars belief that on account of its Islamic roots it and those who emulate it must be by definition worse than the forces who hope to come to power in Libya under Western bombs and licence.

The Turkish government's position over Libya is to call for Gaddafi to go, to limit action strictly to humanitarian objectives, to criticise military "excesses" and to oppose Western politicking. In those respects, it's a position not unlike Gilbert's. But he cedes the pass to those who are waving the Islamist scarecrow.

Events since the appearance of Gilbert's article have made bald assertions of the superior progressive credentials of the now Western-dependent opposition in Benghazi untenable. Serious media organisations such as the LA Times - not conspiracist supporters of Gaddafi - have carried first hand reports of grizzly treatment of black migrant workers at the hands of Benghazi's new security section. They are also rounding up those they say are "Gaddafi loyalists". What fate lies in store?

We have been here before. We have seen other sectional movements prove incapable of transcending the divisions fostered or exploited by the regime they oppose, and thus failing to unite the bulk of society behind them. We have seen how in a bitter military conflict some have ended up playing on those divisions themselves. Some have even taken a portion of the brutality they have faced and hurled it back in kind.

In Benghazi under Western oversight we are not seeing the kind of sloughing off of the muck of ages that lit up Cairo's Tahrir Square when Muslims and Christians linked arms against divide and rule and pressed the most radical revolutionary path.

For several reasons, among them Gaddafi's repression, that process was marginal to the Libyan uprising. The Western powers certainly do not want to see it emerge now in Benghazi, or in Tripoli if Gaddafi falls. They won't want the voices in Misrata that are skeptical of the West's role to grow louder. And they are now in a stronger position to stop all that happening.

Imperial hypocrisies

Gilbert, of course, points out US and European hypocrisies. The apparent contradiction on which the hypocrisy rests is not incidental. It is rooted in a consistent set of deep interests which are far from contradictory: their hands on the spigot of the world's energy economy against competitors from without and the mass of the people within.

But with Libya as his point of departure Gilbert's resolution of the seeming inconsistencies of the West takes us in exactly the wrong direction. If followed, it would lead to a strategic divergence on the left and inadvertent relief to the hypocrites.

Gilbert spells out his approach by pondering the prospect of major Israeli air strikes against Gaza and a hypothetical

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call for a Western no-fly-zone in response: "Pickets should be organized at the UN in New York demanding it. We should all be prepared to do so, with now a powerful argument" - the argument that you did it over Libya so do it over Gaza.

In fact, while the deputy prime minister of Israel has mooted an imminent repeat of Operation Cast Lead, more limited air strikes are already happening, and more intensely than at any time in the last two years.

So this isn't a question for the future. It is now. What is the response, and what ought it be?

In the region, the reaction among the left and progressives has been overwhelmingly to point to continuing Western - crucially US - backing for the state of Israel, the latest egregious example being yet another US veto of a Security Council resolution opposing illegal settlement building.

It's been to highlight Tel Aviv's request for a further \$20 billion subvention from Washington. It has been to focus attention on the transitional government in Egypt to demand it reflect popular sentiment, break fully with the Mubarak/Sadat years, open the Rafah border, cut off gas supplies to Israel and declare for the Palestinian struggle. (It has already felt sufficient pressure to caution Israel against an all-out Gaza war.)

Similar arguments are being raised by the radical left and the now considerable pro-Palestinian movement in Europe and the US.

Their direction of travel is not for further Western military engagement in the Middle East following Libya - intervention that may come in Syria if events follow a similar pattern. It is for ending that engagement - direct and through Western support for the military machines of Israel and Saudi Arabia.

It is not to demand European and US diplomats descend in greater number to "help" bring peace and justice. It is to tell the likes of latter day Prince Metternich, the State Department's Jeffrey Feldman, to get back to Washington and take with him his schemes for manipulating opposition forces which he perfected in the sectarian labyrinth of Lebanon.

It is not for the West to do more; it is for them to stop doing what they are doing.

This isn't a semantic game. The movement that emerged in Tunis and Cairo shows the potential for a new agency in the Arab region - a radical force that is independent of elites, big and small, Western and domestic.

Sidi Bouzid and Tahrir Square restored Arabs themselves as the agents of progress in their region after the catastrophe of the neocon experiment with Iraq and all that went before. The West wants to reinsert itself, forcibly if necessary, as the principal actor, the arbiter of progress for the natives.

It might be objected that it is an uphill struggle for popular Arab movements to force a retreat in Western policy, and to frustrate their and the regional rulers' interests. That's true.

But it is far more preferable, and infinitely more realistic, than lobbying for the imperial powers to become something which they cannot be: a force for progress, if only they could be persuaded to resolve their supposed mixed motives and conflicted thinking in the right way.

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This strategic choice is being fought out now in Yemen. The most dynamic elements in the society - the young people who gather outside Sanaa's university - are choosing the Cairo of Tahrir Square over the Benghazi of Western suzerainty. But there are other powerful, sectarian or sectional political actors too. Some toy with Western or Saudi backing to compensate for a failure to pull decisive force behind their own bids to be the replacement for Saleh's regime.

A similar political battle is starting in Syria, where the West does have a vital interest in toppling the regime - but not for one that would be even more of a problem for it and Israel. It doesn't want a Tahrir Square in Damascus; it would like a Benghazi or Baghdad - and it will act accordingly.

The first phase of the Arab rising of 2011 carried echoes of the European revolutions of 1848. They made flesh the truly progressive modern force which Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels identified in the Communist Manifesto published that year as "the independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority".

Such independence in the matured global capitalist system of today depends upon many things. Above all it cannot happen without spurning the embrace of the biggest capitalist powers and consistently opposing their ideologies, their political machinations and their killing machines.