



Washington's Wars and Occupations Month in Review #51

by Max Elbaum, War Times/Tiempo de Guerras

July 31, 2009

SHIFT OPINION, BUILD CLOUT, CHANGE POLICY

It's been a rocky month for peace, democracy and an end to U.S. global bullying.

In Honduras the perpetrators of the end-of-June military coup remain in power. They are buoyed by Washington's "it's-unconstitutional-but-we-need-to-compromise-with-these-legitimate-leaders" wink-and-nod stance.

In Afghanistan more than 30 U.S. troops were killed, making July the deadliest one for Washington's army since the 2001 invasion. Afghan and Pakistani civilians died in much greater numbers, as the U.S. escalates its involvement and top Commander Adm. Michael Mullen admits he has "no idea" how long it will take for "security to improve" in the country.

The hard-line government of Binyamin Netanyahu restated its commitment to further colonialism, proclaiming it will continue to expand Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and that the "Separation Fence" (that is, Apartheid Wall) will not come down. And settlement growth continues on the ground in defiance of Obama administration insistence (not yet backed by the threat of consequences) that it is opposed to these illegal actions.

In Iran repression by the increasingly powerful security apparatus has suppressed for at least the time being the democracy movement, leaving many casualties and a divided Iranian elite in its wake. Neocon hawks and the Israeli leadership have jumped on these events to ramp up their crusade for war, though the Obama administration has so far reiterated its stress on diplomatic engagement rather than military force to resolve U.S.-Iranian differences.

Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, visiting Asia, heightened her already hawkish rhetoric regarding North Korea, repeating the "we-give-nothing-until-they-give-everything" stance that makes an otherwise possible negotiated settlement impossible. Vice-President Joseph Biden, visiting the Ukraine and Georgia, aggressively restated support for these states joining NATO (though apparently heading off a Georgian request for more arms); provoking Russia just two weeks after the Obama-Medvedev summit promised a reduction of tensions and took a welcome step toward nuclear arms reduction.

And on his first visit to Africa as President, Barack Obama gave arguably the least progressive speeches and interviews of his young administration. The President consistently glossed over the West's role in perpetuating deep structural obstacles to Africa's development, placing virtually all blame on shortcomings of the African states themselves.

DEEP STRUCTURES, PRAGMATIC ADJUSTMENTS

There are interconnections here. Underlying week-to-week events are structures and patterns of imperial practice built up over decades. These were reinforced and intensified by the Bush

Month in Review #51 — July 31, 2009 / 1

presidency in its post-9/11 "war on terror" crusade. The Neocon militarists who drove that bid for unilateral global domination were set back by results in Iraq that were the opposite of a "cakewalk" and (partly reflecting that debacle) by their defeat in the 2008 elections. But they are far from knocked out. They retain significant institutional and political strength; still occupy key posts within the national security apparatus (military, CIA, State Department, etc.); and are working overtime to fan right-wing populism and expand their social base. They continue to think and plan in long-range terms.

The foreign policy team that came to power with Obama's election believes U.S. interests are better served by a different mix of force and diplomacy, of unilateral action and multi-lateral cooperation. They "get it" that global power relations have changed. They want to update and adjust the structures and patterns they inherited to be effective under new conditions. They too have a long range vision: a world order where the U.S. concedes ground to other powers and values stability over a little bigger piece of the pie but is still "number one." In getting there, they are far more pragmatic and less ideologically driven than their immediate predecessors.

As a consequence Obama's team is susceptible to pressures both global and domestic. Here the U.S. peace movement has to face an unpleasant truth. Globally, the shifting balance of forces is throwing up ever-greater obstacles to Washington's capacity to bully and make war. But domestically, since November 4, Obama has faced more and better organized pressure from the militarist right than from proponents of peace and an end to U.S. empire building.

The peace movement can take substantial credit for contributing to the shift in public opinion away from support for the Iraq war and related policies of aggression and bravado. In contrast to the period from 9/11 through 2006 or 2007, majority opinion has become skeptical of wars in the Middle East producing any positive result, and also less vulnerable to being stampeded by terrorism fear-mongering. Significant constituencies, in which the peace movement is most embedded, are now outright opposed to U.S. military intervention in the Middle East.

But, both because the balance of forces going into 2001–2003 was so against us, and because most of the antiwar movement felt (for many good reasons) it had to operate for the last eight years in constant "emergency mode," this sentiment has not yet been consolidated into an institutionalized and powerful peace bloc. It is likely that the reach of amorphous peace sentiment exceeds that of the hard right militarists. But our side nowhere near matches our most dangerous opponents in resources, institutional strength, strategic unity, long-term planning and other factors that translate into direct political clout.

So, tired as folks may be from years of demanding work, it's time to breathe deep, look reality in the face, and dig in again for a very long haul. To set our sights on broadening and consolidating the gains made in public opinion; turning sentiment into political muscle; and – based on such gains and in sync with a global movement – changing U.S. policy.

In other words, intensify the battle over ideas. And make long range plans with the goal of accumulating some political power.

THE BATTLE FOR OPINION

On the level of battling for opinion, our side has several things going for us. First is the reality that U.S. invasions and wars in the Middle East did not succeed and are not succeeding, whether success is defined as "making us safer" or as bettering the lives of the people of the region. Neocons still sputter that in Iraq The-Mission-Was-Accomplished. But the majority doesn't believe it. And more people each week don't believe "success" will be achieved in Afghanistan either.

This sentiment is ripe for expansion and consolidation. And for talking to ever-larger numbers of people about the connections between these failed wars and corporate lust for profits, the politics of oil and an economy based on fossil fuels, and more.

The second thing is the shift in tone coming from the nation's highest office. Our critiques of Obama's policies are sharp in many instances. But in setting a tone of intellectual seriousness rather than pandering to people's worst instincts; in speaking of Arabs and Muslims with respect rather than racist fear-mongering; and in acknowledging many past injustices perpetrated by the U.S. (the 1953 coup in Iran, for instance), Obama is shifting the national conversation in ways that work immensely to the peace movement's advantage. This is precisely what makes the far right so furious, leading to their fuming denunciations of him as an America-hating false prophet and the rising threats of armed violence against him as an illegitimate usurper who must be "taken down."

The far right understands the threat posed to imperial ideology by a changed discourse where other peoples in the world are viewed as partners rather than dehumanized adversaries. It is up to the peace movement to take that new discourse and run further with it, both in terms of ideas and, going where Obama does not (yet?) go, in terms of how they point to drastically changed U.S. policies.

PIVOTAL POLICY FIGHTS

But the battle of ideas is not fought only "in general." It pivots around specific policies and issues. And these, besides shaping and reshaping opinion, have outcomes which are crucial in and of themselves.

Right now, three such pivotal battles stand out.

Honduras: The first concerns the coup in Honduras. Much is at stake not just for that country, but for all Latin America. The entire region is moving leftward, it is the center of gravity of the most diverse and dynamic grassroots-driven radical efforts in the world today. Right wingers and oligarchs – and their backers in Washington – have been on the defensive and trying to figure out a way to reverse the tide. Economic levers for many do not seem to be enough; they want to return to the days of naked military force. The stakes in Honduras thus go even beyond the fate of the Honduran people. If the coup stands, the reactionaries will be emboldened and – as movements and governments throughout Latin America are saying – the question will be where military coup-makers strike next. If on the other hand the coup is reversed, popular movements will be strengthened and the progressive wave will gain even more momentum.

As of this writing the outcome is in doubt. A great deal depends on what pressures can be mounted here in the U.S. So far the Obama administration has played a mixed but principally negative role, and there are signs of division in the highest echelons of D.C. Evidence is overwhelming that the golpistas had the blessing of U.S. operatives carried over from the Bush years (for example, Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Llorens, who was Bush's top Venezuela advisor at the time of the failed 2002 coup). Obama at first denounced the coup, but since then Washington has orchestrated talks in a way that treats the coup-makers as legitimate leaders and supports anti-democratic conditions on any prospective return of ousted President Manuel Zelaya. Washington has refused to cut off military aid to the generals or take other steps that would make it all but impossible for the coup to stand. The right (aided by power-brokers close to Hillary Clinton) have been engaged in an all-out media campaign to legitimize the coup. Counter-pressure from our side is an urgent priority with so much at stake for Honduras, for Latin America, and for the coming years' posture of the Obama administration.

Iran and Israel/Palestine: Then there is the U.S. policy toward Iran. Again, the future of an entire region is at stake. An escalation of tensions can lead to a regional war, with a trigger-happy Israeli government eager to bomb away. On the other hand, serious negotiations could lead to U.S.-Iranian normalization and a big reduction of tensions. That in turn could open the door to new momentum both in Iran and the entire region for democratic, grassroots-based movements in which the left can play a role, weakening the appeal of socially reactionary theocratic perspectives that right now play the contradictory role of opposing U.S. domination while limiting, or in some cases outright opposing (as with Ahmadinejad), emancipatory and internationalist movements.

The election and subsequent protest in Iran has affected the U.S. public in complicated ways. The right-wing drumbeat about the alleged "danger from Iran" has been unceasing. But for millions images from Iran have humanized the long-demonized-by-Washington Iranian people, as well as spurred new thinking about how complex a society Iran is today. This is a situation where peace activists can reach large numbers with the message that human solidarity is imperative and that a key component of it is opposition to any military attack against Iran.

Closely related is the issue of U.S. policy toward Israel/Palestine. Again, there are huge stakes – for the long-suffering Palestinian people, for the region and for the world. The Israeli government and its extension in the U.S., the Israel Lobby, are not only promoters of land-grabbing in historic Palestine. They are a major force advocating a permanent use of force strategy and racist stance toward the entire Arab and Muslim world, exerting a constant backward pull throughout the U.S. political system. Israel's standing in U.S. public opinion has taken a hit since its Lebanon and Gaza wars. But it is still not clear if this shift will be sufficient not just to shore up Obama's opposition to further Israeli settlement-building, but to transform this fight with Tel Aviv into a real turning point for U.S.-Israeli-Palestinian relations. If that uphill task can be achieved, it will be a major contribution to the Palestinian cause and, by administering a defeat to the Israel Lobby, a contribution to regional and global peace as well.

LONG WAR, LONG PEACE MOVEMENT

Waging these fights effectively requires, among other things, a strong antiwar apparatus that can respond to rapidly changing events while digging in for a very long haul. Tom Hayden's recent article, "Long War Needs Long Peace Movement," while focusing on Afghanistan and Pakistan, offers a perspective and orientation that applies to all fronts of the peace movement: www.huffingtonpost.com/tom-hayden/long-war-needs-long-peace_b_224154.html

And we build a "long peace movement" under unprecedented conditions: a changing distribution of world power, a global economic crisis and a species-threatening ecological crisis. Right now within the U.S. the movements fighting around economic and environmental issues have more dynamism and breadth than the antiwar movement. Renewing the antiwar movement requires supporting and to a degree meshing with these movements, even while taking on distinct peace movement tasks.

Well, no one promised us it would be easy.

Join the **War Times/Tiempo de Guerras** e-mail Announcement List!
You'll receive 2-4 messages per month, including the 'Month in Review'
Sign up at www.war-times.org.

War Times/Tiempo de Guerras is a fiscally sponsored project of the Center for Third World Organizing. Donations to War Times are tax-deductible; you can donate online at www.war-times.org or send a check to War Times, c/o P.O. Box 22748, Oakland, CA 94609.

Month in Review #51 – July 31, 2009 / 4