

# Third World Revolutionary Projects and the End of the Cold War

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**NOTHING HAS CHANGED FOR THE POOR AND the powerless of the Third World. Increasing poverty merely confirms an age-old condition. The need for revolutionary change has never been greater. But the bi-polar Cold War world of the last three decades is gone and with it the ideological certainties which shaped and guided Third World struggles.**

Journalistic fashion links the retreat of the traditional Marxist-Leninist revolutionary paradigm to the defeat of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and ongoing problems in the heartland of communism, the Soviet Union. These epic changes have profoundly affected the way Third World revolutionaries think. But progressive thought in the Third World has changed tremendously in the past ten years. Third World revolutionaries are not political acolytes looking to the Moscow Vatican for deliverance. The motive power for these changes has been revolutionary practice in the Third World.

More than anything else, developments in the USSR and Eastern Europe have capped a process of change in the revolutionary paradigm that started after the victory of the Nicaraguan revolution. Many of the ideas that today are seen as brazen "radicalism" in the hands of Gorbachev have been discussed for over a decade in Third World progressive circles. Soviet ideological influence among Third World revolutionaries has in fact been declining since the 1960s. Paradoxically, perestroika could bring the Soviet Union back into Marxist discourse with Third World progressives.

On the other hand, there is a risk that active discourse between progressives in advanced capitalist countries and in the Third World will be disrupted or even broken in the wake of the massive wave of political self-denial and general disorientation in progressive ranks in Europe and North America. Leftists are meekly following conventional media in pushing the Third World and especially national liberation movements out of their consciousness. What attention is grudgingly offered often takes the form of incredulity at the persistence of these struggles.

Third World liberation movements are very much alive. These struggles are in fact intensifying as political and economic conditions deteriorate. While the decade of the '80s did not produce as many successful revolutions as the '70s, the victory in Namibia and advances in the struggles in South Africa and El Salvador provide a sense of continuing forward movement. These movements are still mainly Marxist in orientation. Marxism remains the preferred tool of political and economic analysis. But the alternative futures proffered and the strategy and tactics applied are very diverse. They range from the mass movement-based, electoral tactics of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (the PT or Workers' Party) of Brazil to the underground guerilla strategy of the National Democratic Front (NDF) in the Philippines. Intense debate within these movements provide the base for this creative and dynamic diversity.

### Crisis in the Third World

The Third World is deep in crisis. Economic conditions for the poor majorities in Latin America, Asia, and Africa are worse today than a decade ago. In 1988 and 1989 alone, debt service payments from the Third World were so heavy that the net outflow of financial resources to the developed countries was close to US\$100 billion. Financial problems

deriving from debt payments have been compounded by deteriorating terms of trade. The developed world's preferred solution to these problems, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank structural adjustment programs, mandate austerity for the Third World's poor. By increasing hidden subsidies to the rich, the same programs have widened income disparities to scandalous proportions.

Economic crisis has been accompanied by a crisis of governance. The "re-democratization" process that began in the '70s is exhausted. In countries where hopes for democracy were stirred by the end of dictatorships, ruling regimes have failed to end human rights violations, implement social reforms, or control their militaries. Instead of democracy, countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, Philippines, and Pakistan have elite democracies coexisting with *de facto* military dictatorships. This form of democratic reform has been so discredited that Third World intellectuals now associate it with counterinsurgency and have taken to calling it "low intensity democracy."

Objectively then, a lot has changed in the Third World. The resulting popular mood, however, is irritation and increasing anger. For the more things change, the more they remain the same. These political and economic changes have generated struggle at many levels. What gives these struggles revolutionary impetus is the sense that the economic and political tinkering of the decade of the '80s has only made things worse. The imperative for radical change is now more widely accepted. There is increasing recognition of the need for changing not just policies, not just regimes, not even political structures but whole societies.

This ferment is occurring within the context of the widespread questioning of Marxism-Leninism, the main ideological framework for revolutionary change in this century. Far from resulting in the triumph of liberal democracy, much less the "end of history," this ferment has led to a reaffirmation of revolution. The emerging revolutionary paradigm is fully cognizant of the errors of "actually existing socialism" and incorporates issues and concerns from social movements. More than at any other time in the past, Third World progressives are grappling with the need to incorporate democratic practice and the building of communities into the revolutionary process.

What then has been lost to Third World revolutionary movements?

At the level of conceptions of alternative societies, it is clear that Soviet-style, centrally planned economies is out. The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China, and Vietnam have all abandoned this framework. The most recently victorious liberation movements, from Namibia, back in time to Zimbabwe, Nicaragua, Angola, and Mozambique, have never seriously tried to implement this model or just did not have the capacity to do so. The most advanced liberation movements, among them the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, the Democratic Revolutionary Front-Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation (FDR-FMLN) in El

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Salvador, and the NDF in the Philippines have programmatically affirmed mixed economies.

The Stalinist political framework which includes a one-party state, the incorporation of people's organization into the state apparatus, the suppression of those that try to maintain their independence, has also been discredited. There is less unity in practice on abandoning this framework because of fears among ruling communist parties that they will be swept away as in Eastern Europe. Ruling regimes in countries as diverse as those of China, Vietnam, North Korea, Cuba, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique are trying to control the process of political change with varying degrees of success.

At the same time, it is clear that the direc-

tion of change is away from the Stalinist model and towards more democratic socialist frameworks. In China, change will be determined by actuarial tables. Similar problems exist in Vietnam even though most senior leaders have died or been removed from official positions in the party and state. The question of generational change in leadership among socialist countries is not just one of age, but of moving away from ways of thinking sanctified by victorious liberation struggles and personified by "Great Leaders of the Revolution."

One disturbing trend is Chinese and Vietnamese attraction to the Asian newly industrializing countries (NICs) model, particularly that of South Korea and Taiwan. The pattern of change in China and Vietnam where economic liberalization is accompanied by continuing authoritarian political structures is, in fact, already an approximation of the Asian NICs model. The resulting structures, what might be called "NIC socialism," could end up with the worst of both capitalism and socialism.

### Ends and Means

For leaders of Third World national liberation movements, the theoretical problem is compounded by the complex connection between changing ideas on an alternative socialist society and the strategy and tactics for achieving this end. While some senior national liberation movement leaders still hold on to old Stalinist political ideas, they now do so hesitantly. Debate is mostly premised, therefore, on an acceptance of the critique of the old Soviet model and on how to change strategy accordingly.

At the center of the debate, the revolutionary strategy of outright military victory is being challenged. Few are calling for dropping military

struggle altogether. The demand is more to reorient armed struggle towards achieving a level of military power necessary to force negotiations. The character of negotiations, in turn, changes from that of negotiating an orderly retreat for the enemy to negotiating a political settlement where the political and economic framework is worked out together with power sharing.

The impetus for this trend derives from a reevaluation of the political, economic, and social costs of war from the vantage point of new ideas on socialist ends. Political polarization, a necessary ingredient for advancing people's war, for example, looks different when seen from the vantage point of a socialist future without a repressive one-party state. If you have to continue to negotiate political consensus even after victory, it does not make sense to polarize politics to a point where the only choice for competing groups is extinction or a fight to the end.

Another Marxist-Leninist formulation, "smashing the bourgeois state" as a necessary goal of revolution is also being reevaluated. What is at issue here is not just the practical problem of dealing with a pre-revolutionary government apparatus, but the more important one of the legal system and the issue of democratic rights under socialism. There is increasing recognition in national liberation movements, for example, of the need to retain constitutionally enshrined democratic rights. These rights are seen no longer as "bourgeois rights" but as the result of class struggle throughout the world.

If you do not posit a one-party state as an ideal, the question of democratic rights then extends to that of the requirements of free competition. The right to organize, to popularize ideas through the media, and to compete in elections then become imperative requirements for a socialist state. The relationship between a victorious Marxist-Leninist party and the state also changes once the possibility of defeat in an election is accepted.

For Sandinista militants, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) defeat in the February 1990 election cannot but be depressing. For other Third World revolutionaries, the defeat offers many lessons. To sustain a party's or a front's electoral chances, mass organizations have to be sustained as dynamic people's organizations and not turned into bureaucratic adjuncts of the state. The Sandinistas are generating lessons on how to sustain a revolution even after such an electoral defeat. These are important lessons that have to be learned if revolutionaries everywhere are to take democracy, and therefore elections, seriously.

For national liberation movements, these are not theoretical questions whose resolution can be relegated to the future. One of the most damning aspects of the experience of "actually existing socialism" has been the incorporation of mass organizations into the state and the demobilization of the population. This can only be prevented in the future if during the struggle, mass organizations establish their independence from political

parties within a framework of broad political agreement and tactical coordination.

This new perspective should also affect relations with allies. In the past, struggles over tactics among groups who shared programmatic goals tended to be more intense and at times even bloodier than struggles with enemy groups. If we do not work to isolate or eliminate groups with whom we have tactical disagreements, we have to become less sectarian and allot more energy and time to resolving tactical differences. This is, of course, easier said than done especially in conditions of clandestinity and armed struggle. But if the orientation in united front work is different, practice should slowly change.

### Mixed Economy

The implications of adopting a mixed economy alternative should also change relations between revolutionary groups and the middle and upper classes. If the bourgeoisie is to play a role in constructing a mixed economy, they have to be assured of a place during the struggle itself. The damage to domestic trade and to medical, educational, and administrative services caused by the massive outflow of "boat people" from Vietnam is instructive. Middle classes may vacillate on revolution, but their concerns cannot be disregarded without damage to vital national services and functions.

Rapid economic growth in the first decades of socialist countries such as the Soviet Union was possible only by organizing, and at times, forcing the population into frenetic economic activity. This form of "primitive socialist accumulation" was accomplished at tremendous cost to the population and to the environment. Among progressive economists in the Third World, this model of socialist construction has generally been abandoned in favor of a strategy of slower growth that balances the requirements of agriculture and industry, and gives due consideration to consumer goods production and ecological balance.

These trends in Third World progressive thinking by and large coincide with progressive trends in the West. There is a strong divergence, however, on the issue of the role of the state. Western progressives have been overwhelmed by the Eastern European and Soviet critique of the Stalinist state and forced into a tentative acceptance of liberal conceptions of the state. Third World progressives, on the other hand, believe that the state remains the key instrument for redressing economic inequalities within their societies and for forging a stronger negotiating position vis-a-vis powerful international economic actors.

The Reaganite ideological offensive for privatization and a weak state is seen as poor cover for using the state to provide even more hidden subsidies to big business. The state, in fact, is a powerful economic actor in advanced capitalist countries. Keynesian fiscal and monetary instruments, the state's regulatory role, its function as employer and consumer

make Western governments more powerful in their economies than most Third World governments. For Third World progressives, the key question is not whether the state should play a major economic role, but it is how to organize this role in such a way as to promote economic activity by individuals, cooperatives, and public and private corporations.

A more important prior question is in whose interest the state's economic power is being exercised. In many Third World countries, the economic interests of ruling groups depend on their economic connection with the West. In negotiations, they often act more in the interest of their business partners than of their countries. These people have to be replaced with those who can and will act for the nation. Another important economic goal, the redistribution of land and other economic assets cannot be accomplished unless the state is taken out of the hands of landlord and big business interests.

Third World progressives are fully aware of the stifling of private economic activity under Stalinist socialist states and support the redefinition of the state's economic role in the Soviet Union. At the same time, they are unwilling to surrender the principle that the state is responsible for the basic economic well-being of the population. They are therefore nervous about the rapid dismantling of social services in Eastern Europe and the similar, if slower, process in Western Europe.

Orientation towards power in general is another point of divergence between Western and Third World progressives. The tendency to divorce social movements from the struggle for control of state and other forms of power—towards, at its worst, "lifestyle politics"—has been strengthened in the wake of the disillusionment and disorientation of the left in the West. Social movements in the Third World, in particular, the women's and ecological movements, have radically changed perspectives. Yet, in contrast to the West, these movements still see themselves as part of larger national liberation movements with clearcut power agendas.

These changes in revolutionary perspective have not occurred uniformly throughout the Third World. The Central American revolutionaries have undertaken the most comprehensive and well thought out changes.

While the South African context is quite different, similar shifts have occurred in the South African Communist Party

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and the ANC. In the Philippines, the debate within the NDF has not resulted in decisive modifications in strategy and tactics. The direction of change throughout the Third World, however, is clearly away from hardline models towards more imaginative strategies.

These new ideas have not brought national liberation movements closer to victory. There is no substitute to the careful and painstaking mobilization of poor majorities and, where appropriate, the building of guerilla armies. But they do bring revolutionary theory more into line with the international realities. The emphasis on political settlement as the endgame enforces greater self-reliance and places international solidarity on a more realistic perspective.

The world does not look as bleak from the vantage point of Third World progressives as it does to progressives in advanced capitalist countries. At the same time, there is no denying the fact that the collapse of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe constitutes a massive defeat for socialists everywhere. Continuing problems in the implementation of perestroika

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and the defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua mean that there are no socialist states today that progressives can look to as a place where socialism is being implemented with a reasonable degree of success.

#### A Post-Cold War World

There is also great uncertainty among Third World revolutionaries about what the post-Cold war world will mean for them and their political projects. Some commentators say that the politico-military alliance between the USSR and national liberation movements

is now over – that without military support from the Soviet Union and its allies, national liberation movements cannot possibly win. Apart from those who interpret "proletarian internationalism" as automatic support for liberation movements, only rightwing anti-communists who proclaim that all revolutionary activity is orchestrated from the Soviet Union believe this.

There have been major changes in Soviet foreign policy recently, but from the vantage point of national liberation movements, there has been no radical change from past policy. The Soviet Union has always been selective about its support for national liberation movements. It has encouraged Third World communist parties under its influence to reject armed struggle. But where the USSR has worked with the US to push political solutions to ongoing wars such as in Cambodia, Afghanistan, Namibia, and Angola, progressive forces have not necessarily lost out.

Third World socialist countries such as Cuba and Vietnam, on the other hand, are already suffering serious problems as a result of the withdrawal of Soviet economic support. This will make it even more difficult to sustain socialism in these countries. It will also affect national liberation movements because smaller socialist countries such as Cuba which have supported these movements will now have less resources for doing so. What will happen to international organizations of progressive popular organizations such as the World Federation of Trade Unions or the World Federation of Democratic Youth is not, at this point, certain, but they have already lost the support of Eastern European governments and are likely to receive less Soviet assistance.

For Third World socialist governments, massive cutbacks in Soviet support as a result of the Soviet Union's preoccupation with internal economic and political reform cannot but be a bitter pill to swallow. Massive cutbacks in Soviet economic solidarity have a simple explanation, the Soviet Union just does not have the resources for sustaining such support. But perestroika provides the only chance, no matter how small, for the renewal of socialism as a viable and productive social system in the Soviet Union. As such, it deserves the solidarity of progressives throughout the world.

The direct impact of recent developments in the Soviet Union on its relations with other socialist countries and national liberation movements is likely to be less than the indirect impact of changes in the world as a result of the end of the Cold War. Unfortunately, this is one area where it is very difficult to foresee what the changes will be. Will the end of the Cold War mean more US intervention in the Third World? Is US intervention in the Gulf a harbinger of future, large military intervention in other parts of the Third World? Will the "peace dividend" mean more US military aid to rightwing Third World militaries?

The end of the Cold War means firstly, the end of the bi-polar world. This does not mean that we now have a uni-polar world with the US as the pole, no matter how much President Bush might wish it were so. The decline of American political influence has lagged behind its economic decline mainly because of the US role at the other end of the strategic nuclear stalemate. The unilateral Soviet withdrawal from that game will inevitably lead to a decline in American political influence.

One of the problems in current attempts to foreshadow changes in the post-Cold War world is that progressives are so preoccupied with the crisis of socialism that it is sometimes forgotten that capitalism itself is deep in crisis. The crisis of capitalism in the US, for example, is obvious to everyone except to the American leadership. The Soviet leadership, at least, is doing something to reform the system at its roots even if they do not yet have too many results to show for their efforts.

There is a possibility that the US will continue to stumble along without dealing with its internal crisis, that ruling regimes will use international

activism as a way of diverting attention from internal problems and winning elections. But it is also possible that an alternate American leadership will follow the Gorbachev example and cut its international commitments in order to concentrate on its serious internal problems. While this scenario is less likely than that of continued drift, the massive American military commitment in the Gulf has already placed the issue of America's international commitments unto the center of the political stage.

The American buildup in the Gulf is meant to slow the process of imperial decline through the assertion of conventional American military power. But whatever the outcome of that confrontation, the US has already had to exercise its military power within the context of multiple political centers and with due regard to the United Nations decision-making process. Even if the preponderance of American military forces will automatically mean a larger American role in the event of a war in the Gulf, the US will still have to negotiate a rearrangement of the Middle Eastern political landscape with a number of powers within and outside of the region. The economic havoc that will be an inevitable result of such a war will also work against the US because it has the weakest economy among the major Western powers. A negotiated settlement will mean a diminished American role simply because other powers led by the Soviet Union and France have taken the initiative in pushing such a settlement.

The world of the 1990s, therefore, will increasingly be a multi-polar world economically and politically. Japan and Germany will increasingly assert themselves politically and serve as the fulcrums of regional political and economic dynamics — Japan at the center of the Asian Tigers and would-be Tigers world of Asia and a reunified Germany at the center of a growing Eastern and Western European dynamic. The US will not just disappear from the world scene, but its role will become more circumscribed internationally and be channeled more and more to a North American dynamic.

The Soviet Union, paradoxically, could end up playing a greater international role in the aftermath of its abdication of its superpower status. This role is not likely to be that of an American partner, as distressing as recent US-Soviet cooperation may appear to Third World progressives. As the emerging Soviet role in the Gulf crisis shows, the Soviet leadership continues to have the capability to maneuver independently in an increasingly multi-polar world. The main limitation to an independent Soviet role in the near- to medium-term is its preoccupation with the complex problems of perestroika and its need for Western finances and technology and what this will require in accommodation to Western interests.

Another emerging trend is the increasing importance of the United Nations. In the past few years, the United Nations has played an important role in acting as an arbiter to local and regional conflicts. This role has been made possible by detente between the two superpowers and their endorsement of negotiated political settlements of civil wars and other armed conflicts. The UN role is likely to increase in the near- to medium-

term, firstly as an instrument for circumscribing American assertiveness as in the Gulf and to provide a framework for international negotiation and decision-making in an increasingly complex because multi-polar world.

### **Anti-Imperialism in a Multi-Polar World**

In the last four decades, the main Third World progressive framework for understanding the world was anti-imperialism. In this framework, the world was divided into the imperialist camp composed of advanced capitalist countries and Third World client states with the US at its head. The anti-imperialist camp encompassed the Soviet Union and other socialist states, non-aligned countries, national liberation movements and progressive groups in the Third World and advanced capitalist countries. While this framework was never wholly true as a description of reality, it at least provided a vision of how the world should be. It provided a basis for solidarity among diverse governments and movements across the world.

One aspect of the post-Second World War environment that provided some degree of reality to this picture was bi-polarity and superpower competition. This is now gone. On the anti-imperialist side, the Soviet Union has opted out of its role not just as a superpower foil to the United States, but as the center of the anti-imperialist camp. On the other side, the United States is in decline and under increasing challenge from other advanced capitalist countries.

For progressive movements in the Third World, the emerging multi-polar world has brought new uncertainties. But it is not necessarily a world more hostile to liberation than the bi-polar world. The collapse of the anti-imperialist camp is a serious problem, but unity within that camp was often more a matter of hope than reality. The Sino-Soviet dispute in the '60s, followed by the "socialist wars" in Indochina had severely compromised that unity. The emerging multi-polar world, on the other hand, offers an arena with more room to maneuver for liberation movements.

The end of the East-West divide can only mean the "end of history" if we forget that the North-South division not only continues to exist, it is widening. For the peoples of Africa, Latin America, and Asia, the experience of the world is an experience of continuing capitalist exploitation and political and military intervention by governments of advanced capitalist countries. Anti-imperialism continues to have meaning in common Third World struggles against debt, steadily declining terms of trade, IMF-World Bank austerity programs, and political and military intervention.

Today's world, however, makes a reconstruction of a two-camp, "good guys-bad guys" image of the world impossible. Multi-polarity will inevitably produce many differing images. But this does not mean that the task of working towards shared analysis and shared ideals among progressives should be abandoned altogether. Without these commonalities, solidarity is impossible. More than at any time in the past half century, the key task

is a theoretical task: the formulation of a framework for understanding an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world.

If such a framework is to be relevant to the experience of the Third World, it has to be anti-imperialist, to be against the institutions and policies that continue to have prodigious capacities for producing poverty and misery in the Third World. That framework then has to provide alternatives not just for national economies but for a truly new international economic order. But producing such a framework is not going to be an easy task because the collapse of the socialist camp means that, at this time, there is only one world system and it is a capitalist one. Without the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to provide alternative trade and assistance, anti-imperialist countries can only operate within negotiating spaces opened up by inter-capitalist competition.

International political and economic institutions including the United Nations tend to be seen with a great deal of skepticism among Third World progressives. Many of these institutions, especially economic institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, have mainly served the interests of the United States and other advanced capitalist countries. In a situation where there are no existing alternative international institutions with any power, where there is only one international economic system, it might be time for progressives to begin to think in terms of reforming existing institutions. The decline of the US and the uncertainties attendant to the emergence of a multi-polar world may, in fact, provide excellent conditions for pushing changes in international political and economic institutions.

For progressives in the Third World, socialism continues to be an alternative despite its decline as an ideal in the Soviet Union and in Europe, both East and West. Socialism remains an ideal simply because capitalism has created so much misery. It is an ideal that is premised on the negative lessons of "actually existing socialisms" and is still in the process of creation in popular struggles. Within this diversity of socialist interpretation, there are a few certainties. There is already widespread consensus among progressives throughout the world that democracy is a necessary element in radical political change. There is also a widely felt need to find ways to create communities which are ecologically viable and remain humanly accessible and non-alienating. There is therefore more than enough shared concerns for sustaining and energizing solidarity.

There is less pessimism among Third World progressives only because they have no choice but to continue to fight. There may be less generalized misery in advanced capitalist countries, but there is more than enough injustice for renewed political struggle. Active struggle for progressive political projects within each country is what provides the material basis for solidarity. There may be real basis for disillusionment with old progressive paradigms, but there is never any reason for losing hope.