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Populism, Marxism, Nationalism, and Tiersmondism in the Political Thought of Moammar El Khadafi

by
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This essay does not have the pretension of examining the political thought of Moammar El Khadafi in all its aspects and its complexity. The intent here is to zero in on the notion of political party as expressed by the author of the Green Book, also known as the Third Universal Theory.

For our purpose, we will in the first instance attempt to (1) show the rather narrow perspective from which the theory tries to apprehend the complex concept and the socio-political reality that constitute a political party; (2) to delineate the extent to which this theory, contrary to the author's claims is far from being an original and unique theory but rather a theoretical potpourri of a kind which combines the virtues of a left wing populism and the advantages of a nationalism with a marxist inclination propelled by the political and economic reality of the Third World today.

Before entering into the heart of the matter it seems more than appropriate to underscore the common features which characterize these perspectives namely, Marxism, Populism, and the Third Universal Theory. All three are strong advocates of popular democracy in so far as they consider the will of the people and the idea of direct and full participation of the masses in the exercise of power as a *sine qua non* condition to the democratic process. Indeed to a greater or lesser degree, one can observe the following principles in all three:

- (1) a quasi-religious belief in the virtue of the common man who is healthy and uncontaminated by the city, its temptations and its more or less corrupt leaders; (2) an incoercible mistrust of those who hold the monopoly of power and display that "sacrosanct technicity"; (3) contempt for the politician and the civil servant."¹

In an attempt to contrast Marxism to Populism, Maxime Rodinson noted that:

Marxism is the ideology of a society divided by class antagonisms, while populism is one of a society unified by the general will in conflict with other societies that it accuses

of domination. Populism offers "nationalism with Marxist tendencies" as a symbolic framework for an alliance between nationalists (whose anti-imperialism brings them closer to Marxism as an analytical economic method) and Marxists who after having experienced the force of nationalism have approached it without subscribing to its cultural myths and religious ideology.²

While we cannot accept this view of populism in toto (suffice it to note that the United States, a society divided by class antagonisms knew a strong populist movement between 1896 and 1908), it more or less depicts the socio-political reality in Muslim countries including Libya. Hence the Third Universal Theory is essentially a populist response tailored to the needs of a struggle for national liberation. It must be pointed out that as used here, populism is regarded as "a syndrome rather than a 'doctrine' [which] evolves on a continuum ranging from a 'left wing' defined by an anarchist ideal of political self determination at the grassroots level, to a 'right wing' that is characterized by mass political noninvolvement."³

Needless to say, the political thought of Moammar Kadhafi, with its Marxist inclination, is unmistakably a left wing populism. It is in this context that we examine the contradictions that mark its internal and external dynamism. According to the Green Book, those who form a party do so

to achieve their ends, impose their outlook or extend the hold of their belief on the society as a whole. A party's aim is to achieve power under the pretext of carrying out its programme. . . the party is a dictatorial instrument of governing that enables those with one outlook and a common interest to rule the people as a whole. Compared with the people, the party is a minority.⁴

In this respect, the Green Book opens no new path to our understanding of political parties for, in more than one way, this view is in complete agreement with many other schools of thought ranging from the most conservative to the most radical. Thus, structuralists, behavioralists, functionalists and systemists will find very little to disagree with insofar as they all tend to define the party as "an association that activates and mobilizes the people, represents interests, provides for compromise among competing points of view, and becomes the proving ground for leadership. . . ."⁵

Although narrow in terms of the meaning and the role of a political party, Kadhafi--like the structuralists, the functionalists and the systemists--will also find some points of agreement with radicals such as Joseph Stalin, V.I. Lenin, Mao Tse Tung to name just a few. In the words of Joseph Stalin,

The party must be, first of all the vanguard of the working class. The party must absorb all the best elements of the working class, their revolutionary theory, with a knowledge of the laws of the revolution. Without this it will be incapable of directing the struggle of the proletariat, of leading the proletariat. The party cannot be a real party if it limits itself to registering what the masses of the working class feel and think, if it follows in the tail of spontaneous movement, if it is unable to overcome the inertness and the political indifference of the spontaneous movement, if it is unable to rise above the momentary interest of the proletariat, if it is unable to elevate the masses to the level of the class interest of the proletariat: The party is the political leader of the working class.⁶

Hence, Kadhafi is not mistaken when he condemns the political party as an instrument of dictatorship by the class(es) in power. Indeed, unlike the conservatives who deny such a role, Marxists of all tendencies strongly subscribe to this view. In their eyes,

the party is not only the highest form of class association of the proletarians, it is at the same time an instrument in the hands of the proletariat for achieving the dictatorship where that has not been achieved and for consolidating and expanding the dictatorship where it has already been achieved. . . but the proletariat needs the party not only to achieve the dictatorship, but also to consolidate and expand it in order to achieve the complete victory of socialism.⁷

Despite areas of agreement between the Third Universal Theory and the conservative and radical schools of thought, one should not overlook the numerous points of divergence for, in the final analysis, they are the ones that will shed the light on the populist character of Kadhafi's political thought. It is to these differences that we shall now turn our attention. For Kadhafi, political parties are "machines" of domination which hinder the workings of the democratic process and which must be abolished.

In his words, "the party is not a democratic instrument at all because it is composed of people who have common interests, a common outlook or a common culture, or who belong to the same locality or have the same belief."⁸

Whereas this view is partially true, it fails to come to grips with the liberating role of political parties and/or similar institutions in countries struggling against colonialism, apartheid and other forms of imperialism and domination whether foreign or domestic. As Amilcar Cabral pointedly noted:

For the struggle against colonialism means are also required. In the first place one must create an instrument of struggle. Our party is that instrument. You might say that the Party is a base instrument, the mother instrument. Or if we like, the principal means which creates other means linked to it. It is the root and the trunk which produce other branches for the development of our struggle.⁹

Another revolutionary veteran, Joseph Stalin, looked upon the party as the soul of any proletarian revolution, insisting that "only the revolutionary party is an army without a general staff. The party is the general staff. The party is an inseparable part of the working class."¹⁰ M. Madeira Keita, then Interior Minister of Sudan seems to share this view in his plea for a strong one-party state in peripheral countries. In his own words,

At present, since our objectives are common, since we are all in agreement as to the methods, we must form a single party. We must form a single party to be effective, to clean up the situation, to give no handle to the adversary, that is to say to colonialism, anonymous, but which has so far had its spokesmen of division in our countries. We must form a unified party to limit opportunism, for all that constitutes a danger menacing African formations and actions of governments and assemblies.¹¹

Thus, in the eyes of Marxists and Third World freedom fighters, the party constitutes an indispensable weapon without which the liberation and the uplifting of the masses are impossible. Indeed, beyond the seizure of the state political power by the colonized and/or oppressed, the process of decolonization and the establishment of a people's democracy entail the politicization and the education of the masses in an effort to achieve self-reliance. As Mao Tse Tung pointedly remarked:

The people's state protects the people. Only when the people have such a state can they educate and remold themselves by democratic methods on a country-wide scale, with everyone taking part, and shake off the influence of domestic and foreign reactionaries (which is still very strong, will survive for a long time and cannot be quickly destroyed), rid themselves of the bad habits and ideas acquired in the old society, not allow themselves to be led astray by the reactionaries, and continue to advance toward a socialist and communist society.¹²

Functionalists for their part defend political parties as an essential ingredient of bourgeois democracies. By and large, Western scholars of this tendency assign the following functions to political parties: a) the structuring of the vote; b) the integration and mobilization of the mass public; c) the recruitment of political leaders; d) the organization of government; e) the formation of public policy; and f) the aggregation of interests.

Noting the ambivalent and yet indispensable role of political parties in the so-called representative democracies, Franz Neumann writes:

The single most important instrument for the translation of social power into political power is the political party. The reason for the supreme position of the party lies in the very nature of democracy. The party permits the presentation of particularly, and quite frequently, very egoistic interest as national interests. At the same time however, it presents the total domination of the national interest by particular interest. The function of the political party is thus ambiguous. The democratic process compels each social group to strive for mass support. Each group, therefore, must present its egoistic interest as universal. Politics in a democracy, the struggle for political power, thus becomes far more ideological than in any previous period in history. What was obvious for the ancients, and clear to the feudal systems, becomes hidden in the democratic process. But the valuable side of this process must not equally be forgotten. The very need to appeal to social groups larger than the immediate interest groups compels adjustment of various interests. Politics becomes more democratic.¹³

Regardless of one's position on political parties vis-a-vis one or another school of thought, the point being made here is that, from the extreme right to the extreme left, scholars and students of political science, save for Kadhafi, share the view that political parties are not only necessary but also indispensable weapons in the seizure, the exercise, and maintaining of state political power.

Unlike Marxist and bourgeois theoreticians and politicians who recognize the party as "a mal necessaire" with a positive and negative side, the author of the Third Universal Theory completely rejects the party's constructive role in a democratic society. According to him,

Whatever their number, political parties always constitute the basis of every dictatorship. Better still the existence of several parties exacerbates the struggle for power. . . which ends up in the destruction of whatever the people have accomplished, and sabotages every attempt to develop the society. It is this destruction that justifies the efforts deployed by the rival party to replace the party in power. The struggle between parties, if it does not lead to an armed struggle, which is rare, takes the form of mutual criticism and denigration. It is a struggle that, of necessity, works to the detriment of the vital and supreme interests of the society.¹⁴

In another passage no less significant than the one mentioned above, the Green Book rejects the notion of "loyal opposition" as an index of democracy when it states:

The opposition party as a government apparatus striving to win power must necessarily destroy the apparatus in place; to do so it must destroy the accomplishments of the latter and denigrate its projects, even if such projects were beneficial to society. Hence the interests of the society and its projects fall victim to this struggle. To be sure, the conflict born from the multiplicity of parties generates an intense political activity; the fact remains that such conflict is politically destructive, socially and economically it ends up in the victory of one party over the other. But it is always the people who are defeated and that is the defeat of democracy. Furthermore, parties can be bought or corrupted from within and from without.¹⁵

Finally, equating the party system with tribal and sectarian rule, the Green Book offers the following prescription.

If the tribal system is shameful and rejected, the same should apply to party system, insofar as both follow the same path and lead to the same result. For society, the effect of struggle among parties is as inauspicious nefast and destructive as that of tribal or sectarian struggle.¹⁶

In light of the fact that many Third World leaders including the author of the Green Book rose to power through the undemocratic path of coup d'etat, one can aptly argue in favor of the elimination of political parties and all other institutions related to the system. However, the same does not apply when the same military authorities who loudly condemn civilian politicians and the existing political institutions cannot maintain themselves in power without a party. In this regard, Africa offers the most eloquent examples that may substantiate our contention.

Despite claims to the contrary, every military regime on the continent, whether "leftist, moderate or conservative" has put in place a machinery, an organization which allows it to mobilize and effectively control the population to the effect of clinging to power. Tactically or deceitfully, such organizations are never officially recognized for what they are, namely, political parties. Some more appealing names are used to camouflage the reality: Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, Popular Committees, Popular Congresses, etc. The fact remains that these organizations and the functions they assume in a given structural context constitute the pivot of the state political power to the same degree and sometimes more effectively than the previous political parties. Thanks to these new structural arrangements, the opposition is silenced, people are tortured and killed, important policy decisions are made and the politicization of the masses is ensured. In short an organization is not called a party because of its name, but rather because of its structure, objectives and functions.

The contradictions of the populist anti-state and party system become obvious when one takes a closer look into the political life of a country like Libya. Internally, the new structure is designed to transform a politically dormant and economically underdeveloped and exploited society into one that is sovereign and democratic in every respect. Externally, the country is pursuing an aggressive policy that, despite its flaws, is geared toward the protection of the interests of the exploited, oppressed and dominated Third World.

Because of this double mission, the country has become the target of imperialist aggression.

Despite external attacks, the country, thanks to the new political and economic structures, continues to strive for a better society. Thanks to the Basic Popular Congresses, the Popular Committees, the General Popular Congress and the professional Trade Unions, a strong state and a highly politicized and mobilized people have emerged. Could this have been possible in the absence of a party? Definitely not. For us, the discrepancy between the theory outlined in the Green Book and the political reality on the ground is symptomatic of the populist syndrome for, as Jean Leca put it:

Populism reinforces the state in yet another way. Given that it represents the reaction of an outlying "province" against the center (the periphery being the whole of the underdeveloped world, and the center the industrialized capitalist world), the underdeveloped country's state appears as a workers' international. Anti-imperialism is not only a political platform of foreign affairs but also a powerful element of unification rallying around the state the different sectors of society. The leaders, whatever their former socialization, have conditioned anti-imperialist reflexes as a result of the liberation war when they thought that the Algerian nation could only realize itself at the expense of an opposition toward the whole of the West.¹⁷

Mutatis mutandis, these words apply to the situation under study as well.

¹Jean Leca. "Algerian Socialism." in H. Desfosses and J. Levesque (eds.), Socialism in the Third World (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), pp. 121-160.

²Maxime Rodinson, "Les ideologies revolutionnaires dans le Tiers Monde, Dynamique Interne or Dynamique Globale? L'exemple des Pays Musulmans", in Marxisme et Monde Musulman (Paris: Le Seuil, 1972), pp. 266-277 quoted in Jean Leca, pp. 122-123.

³Peter Worsley, "The Concept of Populism," in Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, eds., Populism (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), p. 245 quoted in Jean Leca, pp. 122-123.

⁴Moammar EL Kadhafi, The Green Book: The Solution of the Problem of Democracy. The Authority of the People, p. 10.

⁵Roy C. Macridis, in Macridis, ed., Political Parties: Contemporary Trends and Ideas (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1976), pp.cited by A. King, "The

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- Comparative Study of Political Parties: Political Parties in Western Democracies," in Louis J. Cantori, ed., Comparative Political Party System (New York: Hollbrook Press, Inc., 1974), pp. 296-323.
- ⁶Joseph Stalin, Foundations of Leninism (New York: International Publishers, 1977), p. 109.
- ⁷Ibid., p. 119.
- ⁸Kadhafi, p. 10.
- ⁹Amilcar Cabral, Unity and Struggle. With an introduction by Basil Davidson and Biographical Notes by Mario de Andrade. Translated by Michael Wolfers. (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1979), p. 85.
- ¹⁰Stalin, pp.110-111.
- ¹¹Madeire Keita, Presence Africaine 1 (June-July, 1969), pp. 20-35.
- ¹²Mao Tse Tung, Selected works, Vol. 4, pp. 418-420.
- ¹³Franz Neumann, "Approaches to the Study of Political Parties" in Lindenfeld (ed.), Reader in Political Sociology (New York: Funk and Wagnalls., 1968), p. 38.
- ¹⁴Kadhafi, Le Livre Vert, pp. 13-14.
- ¹⁵Ibid., pp. 14-15.
- ¹⁶Ibid., pp. 16-17.
- ¹⁷Jean Leca, pp. 123-124.