

Erdogan: the new Malcolm X or fascist demagogue?

by Marcel Cartier - 13/11/2018 14:53



"U.S. sanctions on Iran are wrong. For us, they are steps aimed at unbalancing the world; we don't want to live in an imperialist world."

With these words, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan proclaimed that he would refuse to follow the demands of Donald Trump's administration for countries to stop doing business with Iran after he re-imposed sanctions against the government in Tehran. The U.S. decision was effectively designed to be the nail in the coffin of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or Iran Nuclear Deal.

That Erdogan would object to a U.S. demand that his government stop conducting trade with Iran could hardly be taken as a surprise. After all, Turkey views its neighbour as its go-to source for high-quality crude oil.

What was a bit more surprising was to hear Erdogan use the word "imperialist" to describe the actions of the U.S. government. This is the kind of language more often employed not by a far-right, ultra-conservative politician such as Erdogan, but by

socialists. Radical leftists and revolutionaries would no doubt not only agree with the assertion that the United States is an imperialist country, but that it is the primary one in existence today.

So, what should one make of Erdogan's statement? Do his words mean that he has adopted a worldview more in line with the oppressed countries of the world rather than the leader of NATO's second largest army? Is this an outgrowth of his increasingly "anti-western" statements with an aim at fostering multi-polarity in the world instead of a unipolar world only dominated by U.S. diktat? Even more significantly, does this mean Erdogan is some sort of – dare I say it – anti-imperialist? Or do his words, as well as actions, mask what's really going on behind the stage?

Erdogan: The New Malcolm X?

This is not the first time that Erdogan has dared to defy or provoke his NATO ally, at least through his statements.

The news from last month that Erdogan was pushing ahead with the renaming of the street in Turkey's capital Ankara where the U.S. Embassy is located to "Malcolm X Avenue" was met across the internet with laughs from those who loathe the racist government of Donald Trump. Memes popped up all over the web calling Erdogan the ultimate "troll", and no lack of anti-racist campaigners and activists saluted Turkey for the move.

The decision to rename the street came in the aftermath of Erdogan meeting Ilyasah Shabazz, one of Malcolm X's daughters. The two came face to face in New York in September when Erdogan was visiting the U.S. for the United Nations General Assembly.

Shabazz spoke with Turkey's state-run news agency Anadolu after their meeting and lavished praise on Erdogan, saying "it was my great honour to meet with such a leader, especially in the name of human dignity, compassion and social justice." Anadolu also reported that Shabazz said her meeting with Erdogan and his wife was "particularly meaningful because they "represent" the legacy of Malcolm X."

It may be important at this time to pause and reflect upon what the actual legacy the radical, anti-capitalist Malcolm X left the world was, and how bewildering it is that one of his daughters would declare someone like Erdogan to be the one carrying on his work.

It's not just that Erdogan can't possibly step into the shoes of the man known as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. It's that in a staunchly profound way the two are polar

opposites; on so many fundamental issues, the two are actually diametrically opposed.

One of the statements attributed to Shabazz by Anadolu after the New York meeting is that she apparently said that “the Turkish people are really polite. They don't care about people's colour, gender or anything else. My father's legacy points to the humanity of each individual. We are all brothers in the sight of Allah. Therefore, he doesn't go on about religion, colour, race. He talks about dividing the wrong from the right. When we see something wrong, we should do something to change it.”

There is much to be unpacked in these words. For one, it's a bit unclear what the Turkish people being “really polite” has to do with Erdogan in particular. It isn't as if he is the embodiment of the Turkish people as a whole.

For Shabazz to say that “they don't care about people's colour, gender or anything else” shows she is embarrassingly unfamiliar with reality on the ground in Turkey. There is undoubtedly significant opposition within Turkey to racism and sexism. However, the government that Erdogan represents is actually the vehicle for *facilitating* national oppression within Turkey's borders (as well as regionally).

Erdogan has been at a forefront of the ethnic cleansing of predominately Kurdish villages in Turkey's southeast (what Kurds call “Bakur”, or northern Kurdistan) in recent years. Particularly in late 2015 and early 2016, the genocidal conquests waged by the Turkish military showed what little regard Erdogan really has for the Kurdish nation, which continues to face cultural, linguistic, and political oppression.

The country's Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) has hundreds of its leaders and cadres locked in prison under phoney charges of “terrorism”, a term that Erdogan's Justice & Development Party (AKP) increasingly uses as a synonym for anyone espousing self-determination, equal rights and justice for the Kurdish population.

It is difficult to imagine what “human dignity” was shown by Erdogan toward the population of Afrin that was ethnically cleansed from northern Syria earlier this year when the Turkish army invaded alongside remnants of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. When the Kurdish language was banned from the city's schools and children were forced to salute the flag of an occupying state, was this an act of “social justice”? When journalists and activists are locked up merely for criticizing the occupation of Afrin, is this an act of “compassion”?

The most disappointing evidence of Shabazz's complete lack of understanding of the role of Turkey in Syria's seven-year war comes from her statement about Erdogan's supposed humanitarianism for assisting refugees fleeing that conflict.

The ignorance of her saying that Turkey “has opened its doors to 3.5 million refugees, leaving no room to say anything else, because there are people talking about building walls around the world and those who do not understand mercy” is simply mind-boggling.

Perhaps she doesn't realise that not only are so many political prisoners locked behind actual walls within Turkey, but that Erdogan's government has been among the chief destabilizing forces in Syria since the beginning of the war, funnelling Salafist fighters into the country to join the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, thus helping to create the refugee wave that the world has witnessed over the past few years. Then, of course, there's the small question of the *actual* wall that Erdogan has built on the Syria-Turkey border, which effectively divides the historic Kurdish homeland.

The leader of the “Multi-Polar World”?

It, unfortunately, isn't only one of the descendants of Malcolm X who seems to be confusing Erdogan for a man of the people or one who is serving the best interests of humanity.

It's no secret that the United States government has been increasing its attacks on progressive governments in Latin America, especially Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua, who National Security Advisor John Bolton recently referred to as a “troika of tyranny”.

The act of warfare manifested in the sanctioning of Venezuela by the Trump administration has put the government of President Nicolas Maduro and his United Socialist Party (PSUV) in an extremely precarious situation.

Therefore, it's, of course, natural that Maduro would try to exploit any existing tensions between the United States and countries that have shown a desire to defy Washington's attempts at maintaining its already seriously eroded global hegemony. Thus, trade deals and increasing cooperation between Venezuela and Turkey are not in any way necessarily unusual.

What is, however, both unusual and frankly disappointing is the extent of the warmth shown by Maduro to someone who is violently repressing Turkey's left-wing parties such as the HDP who have a great deal more in common with the vision of grassroots democracy and radical social democracy that Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution has been known for than the far-right government of Erdogan that is much more inclined to fascistic rule.

Not only did Maduro salute Erdogan on his election victory in late June after a

campaign based on spouting genocidal aspirations against the Kurdish nation, he then attended his inauguration and hailed him as a “leader of the new multi-polar world.”

For his part, Erdogan has pledged to stand by Maduro, saying after an assassination attempt against the Venezuelan leader, “in this difficult time, Turkey stands with the brotherly and friendly Venezuelan people and President Maduro, his family and all government officials.”

Venezuela indeed needs friends and crucial solidarity at a time when U.S. regime change operations are firmly on the table. Still, Maduro would be well advised not to throw any semblance of internationalism out of the window in favour of cementing an opportunist alliance with anybody who dares to *sometimes* defy Washington, especially if they are from the far-right of the political spectrum.

How many of the concepts of social justice, national self-determination and solidarity with the world’s oppressed people is Maduro willing to discard in order to appease a government of reactionaries? Shouldn’t Venezuela’s solidarity be with the oppressed Kurdish nation and the masses of labourers and downtrodden in Turkey who are suffering under the boot of AKP fascism, and not with the aspiring Sultan?

Navigating the Contradictions

There is a trap that the anti-imperialist forces of the world who believe in socialism and radical change should be careful not to fall into. The enemy of my enemy is not always my friend – he could actually be a fascist.

In the case of Erdogan, he isn’t even genuinely an enemy of the U.S., even if he often speaks as if he is prepared to break Turkey out of NATO while simultaneously liberating Palestine from the grip of Israeli colonialism. There is a brotherly spat that has been ongoing between Ankara and Washington, but a divorce remains rather unlikely.

One can agree with Erdogan’s logic that the U.S. is “imperialist” without agreeing with or throwing their weight behind his government that has nothing in common with a revolutionary perspective of the world. After all, even a broken clock is correct twice a day.

Erdogan is not a man of compassion, of social justice, or of anything remotely close to what Malcolm X embodied. We should, after all, remember that Malcolm once said: “you can’t have capitalism without racism”. Erdogan is no anti-capitalist or anti-racist. His tenure in office has been marked by wide-scale privatisations and gifts to

big business, on the one hand; and the most brutal campaign of racism and discrimination, on the other.

Honouring the legacy of someone like Malcolm X means standing up for the most marginalized and stigmatized. In Turkey's context, it means standing up for the Kurdish nation and their right to self-determination, as well as the working-class which suffers under the AKP dictatorship.