

West Africa's Resistance against Imperialism*

Prabhat Patnaik

West Africa, which had been largely under French colonial rule, never saw decolonisation of the sort that India did. For a start, the erstwhile French colonies' currency continued to be linked to the French franc at a fixed exchange rate, which meant that they could not pursue any fiscal and monetary policy of their choice (for that would have threatened the fixed exchange rate). Not only were their foreign exchange reserves kept by France, as had been the case with colonial India where its gold reserves, acquired through enforced borrowing (since all its annual export surplus earnings were taken by Britain) had been kept in London; but France also effectively controlled their fiscal and monetary policy despite formal decolonisation. Control over their natural resources remained with metropolitan corporations. What is more, French troops stayed on in these countries despite decolonisation, initially on the excuse that they are required to guard French property, subsequently on the ground that they have to defend these countries against Islamic militants (who themselves had got strengthened by imperialist destabilisation of the Gaddafi regime in Libya), but in reality to ensure that the newly-independent governments continued to act in conformity with French diktat. Any effort to get rid of these troops was met with a French response that could, as the Burkina Faso episode had shown earlier, even include a coup d'état.

Thomas Sankara, the revolutionary Marxist leader of Burkina Faso and a committed pan-Africanist, who had wanted French troops out of his country, was assassinated in a coup d'état staged by persons belonging to his own Party but generally presumed to have enjoyed French backing. Most of the time however even coups were hardly necessary: the normal electoral politics involving political parties with leaders trained in the metropolis, who keep the issue of the continuing presence of French troops out of their political agendas, has been quite enough to keep the arrangement going and even to give it a democratic façade.

In several West African countries of late however, revolutionary elements within the army have seized power from such elected but spineless governments to build up a wave of anti-imperialist resistance. While the imperialist countries have portrayed such seizure of power as a blow against democracy that should be condemned and opposed, the masses in these countries, ironically, have typically supported these new regimes with enthusiasm despite their having supplanted governments which they themselves had elected "democratically".

Indeed these countries expose a crucial flaw in the functioning of extant electoral democracy. The prettified picture of electoral democracy that we are normally presented with pretends that anyone can form a political party and raise any issue to enter the electoral arena, and that this arena constitutes a level playing field; because of this the people's genuine concerns get invariably reflected in electoral outcomes. In fact however there are what economists call "barriers to entry" into the electoral arena arising from insufficiency of financial resources, which ensures that this arena is not a level playing field. Hence it is perfectly possible to have an apparently well-functioning electoral democracy that does not at the same time address the real issues that agitate the people.

This is precisely what is happening with western democracies at present where despite the apparent smooth functioning of the electoral system, the overwhelming desire for peace that exists among the people gets totally ignored in electoral outcomes; and this is also what characterised the West African democracies where the functioning of the electoral system never brought to the fore the people's overwhelming desire to be free of the presence of foreign troops.

Of late, however, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, each of which is ruled by military leaders that have recently captured power, have asked French troops to leave; and as far as fighting the Islamic militants is concerned, Mali at any rate is relying on Russia's Wagner group which has now been more or less assimilated into the Russian state. These three countries, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, also came together in July 2024 to form a union called the Alliance of Sahel States. The three regimes are committed, as Thomas Sankara had been, to pan-Africanism and anti-imperialism.

Now Burkina Faso has taken its anti-imperialism a step further by nationalising two of its gold mines which had originally been with the Endeavour Mining company of Britain. Burkina Faso is supposed to be the 13th largest gold producer in the world, its annual gold production being 100 tonnes or about 6 billion dollars at current world prices. The gold is produced entirely through European or North American companies who refine it outside the country and retain much of the value of the output; because of this, despite such substantial gold production, its current Gross National Product in 2022 was only 19.37 billion dollars. The present government of Ibrahim Traore has decided not only to nationalise gold production completely but also to set up a local gold refinery for the first time. Even if just 2 billion dollars additional value is retained for the economy, this extra amount comes to over 10 per cent of the GNP that can be used to finance additional government expenditure on education, healthcare and other essential services for the people.

Of all the different kinds of foreign investment, that used for extracting a country's mineral resources is by far the worst, as Joan Robinson the eminent economist had stressed long ago; or, put differently, a country must always develop its mineral resources through its own public sector rather than through multinational corporations. This is because minerals constitute an exhaustible resource that lasts only for a short time for any individual country; and unless the bulk of the value of the mineral resource comes back to the country's exchequer, with the help of which its economy can be suitably diversified in the interim, the country is left high and dry when this resource gets exhausted.

This has happened in our own neighbourhood. Take Myanmar for instance. When it had oil, there was a temporary boom associated with oil extraction in that country, with oil multinationals raking in huge profits. Since these profits were not used for diversifying the economy (which would have been the case if oil development had been in the public sector), once Myanmar's oil reserves got exhausted and the multinationals packed their bags and left, Myanmar was back to square one; it is counted today among what the United Nations calls the "Least Developed Countries".

A country must therefore always have ownership and control over its mineral and other exhaustible resources, and also develop them on its own through its public sector; and Burkina Faso's recognition of this basic principle constitutes a great advance. One must not of course underestimate the immense obstacles that

imperialism will place against the realisation of this objective. There is a long history of imperialist destabilisation of third world regimes that have attempted to acquire control over their own natural resources, starting with the toppling of the government of Mossadegh in Iran. And when despite all this skulduggery, exclusive control over third world mineral resources still eluded imperialism, it trapped the third world within a neo-liberal arrangement, whose primary objective was to roll back the public sector and to re-acquire for western multinational corporations control over its natural resources. The very fact, therefore, that the deviousness of the neo-liberal arrangement is being recognised in West Africa and with it the need for national control over natural resources, is of great significance.

In India, after a successful struggle to win control over our natural resources, a struggle for “economic decolonisation” that was perhaps even more arduous than the struggle for political decolonisation, a struggle that succeeded because of help from the Soviet Union, we are once again surrendering our gains through our embrace of neo-liberalism. The West African endeavour should make our government seriously rethink its current policy of rolling back the public sector, even in the sphere of natural resources.

Domestic private enterprise in this sphere incidentally is hardly any better than multinational corporations; it suffers from exactly the same defects. There is no alternative to the public sector for developing such national resources. To be sure, even with a public sector, this sphere may not contribute much to national development if there is misappropriation or inefficiency; but its development under the public sector still constitutes a necessary condition for national development. Besides, a regime committed to the public sector will also have the ability to rectify its functioning.

* This article was originally published in the [Peoples Democracy](#) on September 29, 2024.