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# THE ONLY ALTERNATIVE TO GLOBAL TERROR

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## Father, Son and Holy War

My apologies to Anand Patwardhan, but I can't resist the temptation to borrow the title of his film as an apt description of what is happening in the world right now (i.e. October 2001, the month after the terrorist attacks in the USA). Whether the father is Saudi billionaire Mohammed bin Laden, with his close ties to the Saudi royal family, the son is his estranged offspring Osama, who is enraged every time he thinks of infidel American troops stationed on the holy soil of Saudi Arabia, and the holy war is the *jihād* which the latter has declared against America and Americans; or the father is George Bush Sr. who started it all with his war to defeat Saddam Hussein by gradually exterminating the people of Iraq, the son is George Jr., who has trouble opening his mouth without putting his foot in it, and the holy war is the crusade the latter has declared against, well, let us say vaguely specified enemies who happen to be Muslims—in both cases, the themes of religious communalism, militarism and machismo are inextricably intertwined.

There is even an uncanny similarity in the ways that the two sons think, if we ignore the cowboy rhetoric of one ("wanted - dead or alive," "smoke 'em outa their holes," etc.) and the pious expressions of the other ("may God mete them the punishment they deserve," etc.). Bush tells us, "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (statement of 20/9/01); Osama tells us the entire world is divided into "two regions—one of faith...and another of infidelity" (statement of 7/10/01). In other words, they both want us to believe that the population of the world is divided into two camps, one headed by Bush, the other by bin Laden.

If this is true, then we are heading into an epoch of unlimited violence and terror. South Asia is right at the centre of the conflict, and could suffer the most from it. For example, if the war goes on much longer, General Musharraf could be overthrown by even more extremist communal forces in Pakistan, who would then have nuclear weapons in their hands. On the other side of the border, there could well be a hidden agenda behind the BJP-led government's enthusiastic support for the US war. What do they hope to gain from it? Not US mediation in Kashmir to put pressure on Pakistan to stop cross-border terrorism—Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh made it very clear that mediation would not be welcome. Belligerent speeches by Kashmir's Chief Minister Farouq Abdullah and Home Minister L.K. Advani, as well as aggressive firing across the border the same day that corruption-tainted Defence Minister George Fernandes regained his ministry, suggest that what they want is the US go-ahead to do exactly what Big

Brother is doing: i.e. to bomb Pakistan as the US is bombing Afghanistan, on the same pretext of "a war against those who harbour terrorists". That could be the prelude to a nuclear war.

For those of us who are opposed to both camps, the only way to avert such a catastrophe is to build a viable third alternative—a new non-aligned movement for human rights and democracy—at top speed. This will become obvious when we take a closer look at the two camps which have already constituted themselves. But first we need to be clear what we are talking about when we refer to 'terrorism'.

## What do we mean by 'terrorism'?

The first kind of definition of terrorism is lack of definition. Eqbal Ahmad, after going through at least twenty US documents on terrorism, came up with a surprising (or perhaps not so surprising) discovery: not once was terrorism defined. And he concluded that this was quite deliberate: "If you're not going to be consistent, you're not going to define" ("Terrorism: Theirs and Ours", Alternative Radio programme). Since September 11, we find the definition chopping and changing, according to expediency. First it is made clear that only acts of violence against US citizens are acts of terrorism; the same acts against citizens of other countries don't count. When some governments whose support the US wishes to retain question this, the definition is expanded slightly. At no point are similar acts of violence committed or supported by the US defined as terrorist.

Ranged against this are counter-definitions by anti-globalisers like Vandana Shiva, who classify hunger, poverty, unemployment and environmental degradation as terrorism; we can call this an economic reductionist type of definition. One problem is that it is so wide that it becomes impossible to define a strategy to fight it; it is a bit like trying to make tables, chairs, beds, windows and doors with a tool-kit consisting entirely and solely of a hammer: you end up unable to make any of them. Another problem is that terrorism as political violence is nowhere acknowledged, so that it becomes possible to join hands, as Vandana Shiva has done, with terrorists of the Sangh Parivar in the struggle against globalisation. I would say that even disasters like Bhopal and Chernobyl, which kill and injure tens of thousands of victims, should not be classified as terrorism, because they occur in the pursuit of economic gain and therefore require different remedies (e.g. health and safety and environmental legislation which makes them impossible).

The US is not the only state whose definition of terrorism shifts according to who is the perpetrator and who is the victim. In Sri Lanka, the UNP and its supporters defined the JVP and Tamil militant groups as 'terrorist' when these groups committed admittedly horrific acts of indiscriminate violence, but even more violent responses by the state and state-sponsored paramilitaries were, supposedly, not terrorism. The militants, on the other hand, denounce state terrorism, but would not call their own actions terrorist. In Kashmir, violence against civilians by militants from Pakistan are called terrorism by the Indian state, which does not, however, give the same name to its own violence against Kashmiri civilians; conversely, the Pakistani state refers to the militants as 'freedom fighters', and denounces Indian state terrorism. It is not possible to fight something without knowing what it is.

Against this miasma of rhetoric, and taking off from dictionary definitions of 'terrorism', I would say that acts of terrorism are acts or threats of violence against ordinary, unarmed civilians carried out in the pursuit of a political objective. It should be irrelevant whether the perpetrators are state parties or non-state parties, and other characteristics (like skin colour, ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, disability, social origin or anything else) of the perpetrators and victims should likewise be irrelevant. Further, the stated political objective should not come into the picture either, whether it is a religion, nationalism, national interest, national security, national liberation, democracy, socialism, communism, infinite justice or enduring freedom. A murderer's claimed motive does not change the fact of a murder.

In this connection, we need to dispense with another term: 'collateral damage'. In the context of terrorism as defined above, it makes no sense, because the purpose of terrorism is not to kill or injure people, that is merely a means to some political end. For example, in the case of the 11 September attacks, we cannot know for sure the motives of the hijackers because they are all dead, but if we assume for the sake of argument that they were in some way connected to Osama bin Laden, then the demands are very clear: the US must stop supporting Israeli aggression against the Palestinians, stop the bombing of Iraq and lift the sanctions against that country, stop supporting corrupt regimes in the Middle East, and move their armed forces out of Saudi Arabia. The purpose was not to kill all those people in the aeroplanes, the World Trade Centre and Pentagon; they were merely collateral damage.

Does that sound outrageous? Of course it does. Because we are not used to hearing dead Americans referred to as 'collateral damage'. But shouldn't it sound equally outrageous when Bush, Blair and their cohorts justify the killing of Afghani civilians in the bombing as 'collateral damage'? According to Michael Tonry, "Professor of Law at the University of Minnesota, "In the criminal law, purpose and knowledge are equally culpable states of mind. An action taken with a purpose to kill is no more culpable than an action taken with some other purpose in mind but with knowledge that a death will probably result. Blowing up an airplane to kill a passenger is equivalent to blowing up an airplane to destroy a fake

painting and thereby to defraud an insurance company, knowing that the passenger will be killed. Both are murder. Most people would find the latter killing more despicable" (*Malign Neglect*, p. 32)" (A.J.Chien, "The Civilian Toll", Institute for Health and Social Justice, October 11). So let us forget about collateral damage. Murder is murder, and mass murder is mass murder. Terrorist acts which result in mass murder can additionally be defined as crimes against humanity.

It seems to me that this could be a functional definition of terrorism or acts of terrorism, which can be agreed upon by pacifists as well as those who believe that armed resistance to armed aggression is justified. Fighting between combatants would not count as terrorism. Only minimal grey areas are left; for example, those cases where settlers on land seized from others by acts of terrorism either defend their gains with arms or are defended by armed forces, as in the case of the Israeli settlers in the occupied territories of Palestine, whom Nigel Harris graphically describes as "Jewish Taliban and Zionist Red Necks" ("Collapse of the Peace Process", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15/9/01). In such cases, I would say that adult settlers cannot be regarded as innocent unarmed civilians, whereas children can. Another problematic case would be one where a politician who advocates and promotes the transfer of populations (a crime against humanity according to the Nuremberg Principles articulated to prosecute Nazi war criminals), such as Israeli Minister Rehavam Ze'evi, is assassinated. All one can say is that if that is terrorism, so was the attempted assassination of Hitler.

### **The Bin Laden-Taliban Camp: Communalist Terrorism**

I prefer the term 'communalism', as used in South Asia, to the more commonly-used 'fundamentalism', for two reasons. (1) Communalism, meaning an adoption of identity based overwhelmingly on membership of a community, with corresponding isolation from or hostility to others—ranging from opposition to intermarriage with them to genocidal massacres of them—is a much broader term. It can encompass identities based not only on different religions, but on different ethnic groups, and on sects within the same religion (Shia and Sunni, Protestant and Catholic, etc.) (2) Claims of fundamentalists that they are defending the 'fundamentals' of their religion have convincingly been contested by theologians of those same religions; it is therefore a misleading term, suggesting that more humane interpretations are somehow less authentic.

Attacks like those of 11 September were unprecedented in the US, but not in our countries. Indeed, almost nine years earlier we felt the same horror and fear when a terrorist attack brought down the Babri Mosque, accompanied and followed by anti-Muslim riots which took a death toll similar to that of the US attacks. So unlike several consecutive US administrations which have supported and still continue to support communal forces in our countries (more

about this later), many of us, especially women, have long recognised the dire danger posed to women's rights in particular, and human rights and democracy in general, by communal terrorism, and have been battling against it for decades.

The hell that women have gone through under the Taliban—girls and women denied education, women not allowed to earn a living, even if the only alternative for them and their children is death by starvation, not allowed to go out except covered from head to foot by a *burqa* and accompanied by a male relative, brutal punishments including stoning to death or being buried alive if they break any of the draconian rules imposed on them—these are only the most extreme examples of the violation of women's rights which is much more widespread. And while patriarchal authority in its Islamic form receives the widest publicity, let us remember that other forms—like the common practice of female infanticide in India, bride-burning, ill-treatment of widows, and the lynching of young people who have out-of-caste relationships—can be just as barbaric. Other forms of communal terrorism may provide more space for women, and the LTTE even encourages them to become suicide bombers, but all this is premised on blind support for the supreme leader. The penalty for independent thought, expression or action, as Rajani Thiranyagama and Sarojini Yogeshwaran found out to their cost, is death.

The suppression of women's rights goes along with a more general authoritarian control over what members of the religious or ethnic community may or may not say and do. Depending on the degree of power the communal group enjoys, punishments for those who refuse to abandon the struggle for human rights and democracy can vary from social boycott, to beatings (e.g. Asghar Ali Engineer), to death (notably Neelan Thiruchelvam). But the greatest violence is directed outward, towards other ethnic/religious communities. Massacres of the type that the Taliban inflicted on non-Pashtun tribes in Afghanistan (and which warlords of those tribes also carried out when they were in a position to do so) are familiar in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh. They have been carried out in the name of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sinhala, Tamil and a whole number of other ethnic nationalisms. The victims, starting from the Partition riots, add up to millions dead, apart from massive displacement and destruction of livelihoods.

Nor is this kind of terrorism confined to South Asia. Rwanda, East Timor and the Balkans have recently seen horrific communal killings. They can even be seen as genocidal, if genocide is seen not as an attempt to exterminate a people from the whole face of the earth but, rather, to clear them out of the territory controlled by a particular ethnic or religious group. How can we explain such terrorism? This is important if we wish to combat it. One popular explanation is that terrorism is a response to oppression, but I am not happy with this. If this is true, why is it that millions of exploited and oppressed people throughout the world never become terrorists? Why is it that women, who are the most oppressed of the oppressed, rarely go down this path, since it is not biologically impossible, as the female fighters of the LTTE show?

Secondly, there is a fine line between explanation and justification, and I fear that this explanation slips over the line into justification. Thus, for example, Steve Cohen, who correctly makes a clear distinction between Jews and Zionists, actually blurs the distinction when he goes on to explain Zionism as a response to anti-semitism (That's Funny, You Don't Look Anti-Semitic). That, I feel, is an insult to all those Jewish people who suffer anti-semitism without endorsing ethnic cleansing. It is entirely legitimate and understandable for people who suffer constant persecution and regular pogroms to wish for a place where they can live in security and dignity. It is quite something else to create this place by clearing out the majority of the indigenous population by murderous terror. The same goes for Sri Lanka Tamils: the craving for a homeland where one can be safe and enjoy equal rights is absolutely justified; trying to create it by driving out and killing ordinary Sinhalese and Muslims is not justifiable, as all my research suggests that the majority of Tamil people would agree.

Thirdly, this explanation ignores terrorist movements within Europe and the US, like those who were responsible for the Oklahoma bombing and are now suspected of spreading anthrax. This newspaper report is highly revealing:

The FBI's domestic terrorism unit is investigating the possible role of illegal militia groups in the spate of anthrax outbreaks in Florida and New York. Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma bomber who killed 168 people when he blew up a federal building in 1995, was a supporter of one such group, the National Alliance.

Others have threatened to use biological weapons, including anthrax, botulism, and ricin, in their struggle against what they see as a global conspiracy between the US administration and the United Nations to disarm and enslave them. Every state has its own "patriot" group of disaffected right-wing Christian radicals opposed to central government and federal regulations. Most are organised along paramilitary lines. The FBI estimates their numbers at up to 40,000, with the larger militias in backwoods country areas. They claim they are mobilising to fight the "New World Order".

In places like Idaho, Texas, Montana and West Virginia, they wear army surplus camouflage uniforms and train with assault rifles and explosives against the day when they might have to defend themselves against direct interference from the federal authorities. They range in outlook from Pat Robertson, a failed 1988 presidential candidate, with his vision of a "Christian America" to the sinister Posse Comitatus, Aryan Nations and Minnesota Patriots' Council, who favour armed insurrection...

Most of the militias' philosophy is based on white-supremacist principles, looking down on blacks as "mud

people" and Jews as instigators of the global plot against them and manipulators of the world economy for their own benefit. Despite their redneck reputation, they have developed a sophisticated communications network using computer e-mail, shortwave radio, and fax. The North American Patriots, a group with members from California to Kansas, publish a newsletter entitled *Firearms and Freedom*. . . In January 1999, police and security forces responded to 30 anthrax hoaxes in southern California alone. Since then, there have been thousands of false alarms across the country. Many aimed at government buildings, including deliveries of envelopes containing suspicious white powder, were militia inspired. (Ian Bruce, *The Herald*, 16/10/2001).

These people, who bomb Black churches, synagogues, abortion clinics and gay bars, are clearly not reacting to oppression, but, on the contrary, to what they see as unwarranted restrictions on their 'right' to oppress.

When capitalism develops, it produces, broadly speaking, three types of social forces: the old dominant elites, the bourgeoisie, and the working classes. In colonies, the bourgeoisie is further split into the imperialist ruling class and the nascent local capitalist class. Each of these forces is pitched against all the others, but in specific conjunctures, depending on who is perceived as the greatest enemy, they may make pragmatic alliances. My own feeling is that communal terrorism represents a resistance to social change from traditional dominant groups whose power is undermined by the development of what has been called bourgeois democracy or modernity. Patriarchy, clerical power, monarchy in some countries, hierarchical caste domination in India: these are the values they uphold. But they are internally divided, into those who seek an accommodation with modernity while preserving traditional values, and those who represent all-out rejection of modernity and everything that goes with it. The governments of India, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are examples of the former variant, hence their ability—even obscene eagerness in the case of India—to join the US-led alliance. The RSS, VHP, *jihadi* groups in Pakistan, Osama bin Laden and the Taliban are examples of the latter. They are certainly not seeking to put an end to oppression: far from it. The whole basis of the way of life they seek to perpetuate is that all human beings are not born equal, are not entitled to equal respect as persons.

And yet, their resistance to a certain type of oppression, usually associated with foreigners and especially the West, provides them with an appeal for oppressed people who do not see effective resistance to their oppression coming from anywhere else. This is clearly the reason why Osama bin Laden has become an icon to so many. What does he protest against in public? US support for Israel's murderous occupation of Palestine, where Palestinians who were driven out decades ago are barred from returning while more land is occupied (in clear violation of several UN resolutions) and more Palestinians are being killed every day; the bombing of Iraq, which

killed around 200,000 at the time of the war, many of them conscripts massacred while retreating from Kuwait, and sanctions against Iraq which have killed 1.5 million civilians, including some 540,000 children; support for corrupt and undemocratic regimes in West Asia; and now the bombing of Afghanistan. Don't these causes strike a resonance with us? They certainly do with me. I don't have to be the mother of the Palestinian child shot dead while he crouched terrified by his father, the young man conscripted to fight for Saddam Hussein and killed by the US in cold blood, the Iraqi child dying of leukemia from exposure to depleted uranium, I don't even have to be an Arab or a Muslim to feel grief and fury at the cruelty and injustice of it all, at the apparent failure of all legal and democratic attempts to enforce respect for human rights. So is it surprising that people who are not necessarily aware of Osama bin Laden's real agenda regard him as a hero for highlighting these iniquities? Is it surprising if boys and men burning to wipe out the humiliation and in some cases bereavement they have been subjected to are attracted to groups like Al Qa'ida, just as some of the many war-traumatised Tamil children in Sri Lanka might join the LTTE in order take revenge against 'the Sinhalese'? In this more complex sense, perhaps, imperialist oppression legitimises terrorism and provides it with recruits.

For us, however, opposition to communal terrorism is a matter of survival, and this means we have to be equally opposed to the Bush camp. What, after all, do they stand for?

## The Bush Camp

Imperialism—and this means not merely economic exploitation but actual political and/or military subjugation, as even Lenin acknowledged—takes different forms. In South Asia it was relatively mild, certainly using sufficient brutality to subjugate the 'natives', but not clearing them out with wholesale massacres. In the Americas and Australia, by contrast, the indigenous population was virtually wiped out by the European colonisers. Africa was devastated by the slave trade, in which tens of millions of Africans perished, apart from being colonised. Apartheid represents a half-way house between ethnic cleansing of the indigenous population and allowing them to remain where they are: they are herded into Bantustans from where their labour power can be used by the colonisers. Israel initially appeared to adopt the apartheid model, but more recently seems to be attempting to wipe out the Palestinians from Palestine altogether. The colonies of tsarist Russia briefly seemed to be destined for self-determination after the revolution, but Stalinism soon reverted to imperial domination over the Central Asian peoples, some of whom were ruthlessly massacred.

World War II ended with the dropping of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, proving, for those who needed proof, that it was not a war against fascism on the part of the Allies but an inter-imperialist war to re-divide the world between imperialist powers, where this crime against humanity could be justified as a demonstration of naked military might. Post-war, while one colony

after another achieved independence, the Cold War provided the basis for a different type of imperialist strategy. In the name of the struggle against 'communism', the US installed and propped up brutal fascist dictatorships throughout the world, from Latin America to Indonesia. Where these failed to hold up, as in Cuba and Vietnam, it intervened directly. Tens of millions were killed in these actions to stamp out democracy in the name of democracy. This is why, for most people in the world, the US and the 'American way of life' are associated not with democracy and freedom but their very opposite: authoritarian dictatorships, rape, torture, death squads and massacres. The Soviet Union, for its part, mostly restricted its military interventions to the parts of the world that had been awarded to it as the spoils of war—its own empire in Central Asia, now extended by the 'Eastern Bloc' in Eastern and Central Europe—while also attempting to extend its influence elsewhere. One of the few countries outside its own 'sphere' which it invaded and occupied was Afghanistan, in 1979.

Imperialism is premised on racism: the belief that humankind is divided into different 'races', out of whom the European or Caucasian or White or Aryan 'race' is superior to all the rest. Only such a premise can legitimise the wholesale domination, enslavement or extermination of other peoples. Those who understand imperialism purely in terms of monopoly capitalism miss this dimension. No doubt capitalism is brutal and oppressive, and certainly contains an element of what might be called class racism in the way that the lives and health of workers, including child labourers, are treated. Yet the rationale of this is the production of profit and the accumulation of capital. The quest for control over sources of raw materials, markets and labour power is certainly an element in imperialism. Yet if this were its sole rationale, then one would expect populations in the colonies to be treated in the same way as those in the imperialist countries, and this has not been the case.

Thus although there was intensive bombing of Germany in the final stages of the war, the German people were not chosen as guinea-pigs to test the destructive potential of nuclear weapons. No European country was subjected to the intensive chemical warfare waged against Vietnam, where children were set on fire with napalm and others are still born with birth defects, and land is still unusable as a result of bombardment with Agent Orange. The bombing of Yugoslavia, reprehensible though it was, was not on anything like the same scale as the bombing of Iraq, nor was it followed by sanctions which took a similar toll on civilian life. I still remember how stunned I was to read a report of Madeleine Albright's response in 1996 to an interviewer who pointed out that half a million children had died as a result of sanctions against Iraq, and asked whether she thought it was worth it? She replied that although it was a hard choice, "we think the price is worth it". That's unbelievable, I thought; either this woman is a psychopath who could just as easily round up 500,000 European-American kids and kill them off at a rate of 1000 per week, or she thinks of Iraqis—and probably coloured people in general—as some kind of sub-

human species who can be slaughtered in the pursuit of political gain.

The same kind of racism is apparent in the treatment of Afghanistan, beginning with the Soviet occupation. It is estimated that at least a million Afghans died in the war against the Soviets, who also took the chance to litter the country with millions of anti-personnel landmines during their occupation, as a result of which civilians are still being blown up and crippled or killed every day. And now this new war. Who are being killed in this so-called war against terrorism, despite the blatant lies which White House and Pentagon officials are doubtless paid to put out? Even if we discount reports of hundreds of civilian casualties by the Taliban and Al-Jazeera TV (despite the fact that they are confirmed by lakhs of refugees fleeing the carnage and foreign reporters who were invited in by the Taliban), doesn't it seem strange that one of the earliest strikes was against the UN mine-clearing facility in a civilian area, killing four workers and destroying the building along with the equipment? And this despite the fact that the UN had earlier notified the US of the location of its offices? Why was a Red Cross office with huge stores of food aid bombed, despite the fact that it could be identified by the huge red cross on its roof? There are only two ways these incidents can be explained: either the bombs are falling way off their supposed military targets, and the Pentagon knows it, or civilian facilities and civilians are deliberately being targeted. Take your pick.

However, this is not the only death toll resulting from the bombing. Right from the beginning, aid agencies have been warning that unless massive amounts of food aid are transported to various locations including remote villages before the winter makes roads impassable by mid-November, up to seven-and-a-half million people could starve to death. Every day that bombing continues therefore means that lakhs more people will starve. The same agencies have pointed out that the surreal exercise of dropping food packets during bombing raids could at best keep some tens of thousands of people alive for one more day (after which they will die anyway); at worst it could result in people getting blown up by landmines as they run for the food. This may serve as a justification for people who can't count, or for pilots who would not like to think of themselves as murderers blowing up women with small children, the elderly, the crippled, i.e. those unable to run away from the bombing, but it is no use to the starving people of Afghanistan. Total civilian casualties as a result of the bombing are likely to be several millions. When you look at the NATO alliance backing the war, its racist nature becomes explicable. All the imperialist countries are there, including, this time, Russia, represented by ex-KGB agent Putin, the butcher of Chechnya. Why hasn't anyone suggested bombing the US to get rid of the right-wing militias which are apparently present in every state? What can explain these double standards if not racism?

In other words, this type of terrorism and the kind represented by Al Qa'ida share some basic premises in common: all human beings

are not born equal, and it is justifiable to kill innocent civilians in the pursuit of a political objective. This is what allows them to coexist and collaborate with each other so easily. It is what allowed the US to pour money, arms and training into the Pakistani ISI, and through them to the Taliban, the Northern warlords and Osama bin Laden from 1979 onwards - 'aid' that has had a devastating fallout not only for the women of Afghanistan, but also for those of Pakistan and Kashmir, where for the first time women were recently subjected to acid attacks for not wearing a *burqa*. It is what allows the US to continue to have a close alliance with Saudi Arabia, where women are treated scarcely any better than they are by the Taliban—a cozy relationship best exemplified by the business association of Bush the father with bin Laden the father in the Carlyle Group, whose investments in armaments could mean that both fathers profit from the war declared by their sons! (see *Wall Street Journal* 27/9/2001). It is what allowed the Israeli state to promote Hamas in its effort to undermine the secular elements in the Palestinian liberation struggle. Finally it is also the reason why President Bush can still ally himself with the warlords of the Northern Alliance, none of whom accept voting rights for women, and, as the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) have repeatedly told us, raped, looted and massacred their way through the regions they captured after 1992.

At the same time, because these opposing forces are so similar to each other in their propensity to violate human and democratic rights, they also reinforce each other. There is credible evidence that the US was already planning an attack on the Taliban even before the September 11 events, but the terrorist strikes provided an excellent pretext for that attack. Many people who would have objected if the war appeared to be motivated by the desire to build an oil pipeline through Afghanistan, were disarmed by the claim that the purpose was a 'war against terrorism'. Those of us who still object have a much harder task to convince others that this war is a crime against humanity. Unlike the self-immolation of the Buddhist monks in Vietnam to draw the world's attention to the rape of their country, the September 11 gestures could easily be coopted by the imperialist agenda. On the other side, Bush has reacted exactly as bin Laden would have wanted him to; if I were cartoonist, I would draw a picture of the former as a puppet with the latter pulling the strings. Millions of people around the world, some of whom can hardly have heard of Osama bin Laden before, now regard him as a hero; and if the CIA kills him without any convincing proof of his guilt, as they have now apparently been authorised to do, that will elevate him to the status of a martyr, silenced because he spoke up for the oppressed.

So the apparent choice—Bush or bin Laden—is really no choice at all. What alternative do we have?

### **A Worldwide Movement for Human Rights and Democracy**

**F**reedom from forced labour, freedom of expression and association, equal rights and opportunities, the right to elect

one's representatives to government - these are usually referred to as 'bourgeois democracy'. The implication is that these are values upheld by the bourgeoisie, but I disagree. My contention is that these are values fought for spontaneously by working people throughout the world, especially working women, and supported only sporadically by the bourgeoisie, whose only values are the right to property and the freedom to exploit. One indication is provided by the struggle for universal adult suffrage. The original idea was that only males with property would have the right to vote; the dispossessed and women had to fight against these restrictions, and only working class women and those who supported them were steadfastly in favour of universal adult suffrage.

Another indication is the ease with which the bourgeoisie attacks so-called bourgeois democracy, and the fact that fascism too is a form of bourgeois rule, despite its negation of all the rights and freedoms listed earlier. The US, for all its tall claims to be a defender of democracy, has attacked it not only abroad but even at home. The McCarthy years saw a fascistic attack on democratic rights, and many observers have commented that similar forces are at work post-September 11—restrictions on the right to information, freedom of expression and association, the right to privacy, etc. A speaker at a meeting in Bombay who had recently returned from the US said that the ubiquitous Stars and Stripes reminded him of the Swastika displayed everywhere in Nazi Germany. Vicious attacks on dissenters, not only by the state but by other citizens, are evidence of fascism developing as a mass movement. And the fact that Congress, with the sole dissenting voice of Congresswoman Barbara Lee, voted to give unelected President George Bush Jr. almost unlimited powers for military attacks on anyone anywhere in the world, in violation of international law, the UN Charter and the US Constitution, suggests uncomfortable parallels with other regimes of absolute power. Let us be very clear: this may be the American way of life according to George Bush, but it is not democracy.

Both sides in the Cold War propagated the notion that socialism and communism were the opposite of democracy, yet when these ideals were first put forward, they constituted not a negation but a further development of democratic control over spheres from which it is normally excluded even under 'bourgeois democracy', notably production relations and distribution of wealth, the repressive apparatus of the state, and international relations. However, the Soviet Union's use of these terms to describe policies which ruthlessly crushed democratic rights both at home and abroad, all but wiped out the memory of what these ideals had originally meant. If the destruction of Afghanistan is one of the tragic consequences of the Cold War, the destruction of the notions of democracy, socialism and communism are in a different way equally tragic, because they deprive us of a language in which to argue for the interests of the third social force, the working people of the world. Again, I reject the notion that these ideals are 'alien' to us in the Third World. Perhaps they were articulated first by spokespeople like Kant, Marx and Sylvia Pankhurst because capitalism, and

therefore the working class, had developed further in Europe than the rest of the world in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. But ordinary working people anywhere in the world can respond to them if they are explained in a comprehensible manner.

This, I think, is the task that faces us. We need to create a culture where these values are taken for granted, in opposition to the values of both communal and imperialist terrorism, and we need to do it on a global scale. That's a massive task, but let me suggest a few starting points here.

1) Given the present context, we need to take an absolutely clear stand on the politics of both types of terrorism, and explain why it is necessary to do so. We have to insist on secular states in our countries, neither Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, Sinhala or Tamil, because a state that is tied to any particular religious or ethnic group cannot be democratic. In elections—for example, the forthcoming parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka and assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh in India, both of which will be crucially important—the record of every candidate and party in terms of human rights and secularism should be examined, and support extended or withheld accordingly. Sadly, there may be many cases where we have to make do with the lesser of two evils rather than a positive good, but there is always a choice. At the same time, we have to explain to those who have illusions in the US (and that includes the majority of Americans!) why, as Gulf War resistor Jeff Paterson put it, “Now, more than ever, the people of the world are not safe from the U.S., and the people in the U.S. are not safe from the U.S.” (“A Message to Troops, Would-be Troops and Other Youth”, 15/10/01)

2) Wherever there are ongoing conflicts, as in Sri Lanka, Kashmir and many other places in the subcontinent, we must insist that the first priority for any resolution must be to safeguard the human and democratic rights of all those concerned—national minorities as well as local minorities, women, etc.—and this, again, cannot take place except within a genuinely secular state. Some 'peace' campaigners think it is possible to sidestep this issue, but any 'peace accord' which allows for continuing violation of fundamental rights will not last long.

3) Conflicts in other parts of the world affect us, as this latest crisis has shown, and we need to press for a just resolution of them too. In the current situation, the most urgent issues are: (a) Afghanistan: an immediate end to the bombing—since many legal experts have argued that it is illegal according to international law, and the death of civilians as a result of it constitute a crime against humanity—and resumption of food and other aid, protected by UN peace-keepers if necessary; prosecution of those responsible for the terrorist attack of 11 September as well as others who have committed crimes against

humanity in the International Criminal Court. (b) Iraq: an immediate end to the bombing, and lifting of sanctions, so that adequate food, medicines and rebuilding of infrastructure takes place to end the appalling loss of life there. (c) Palestine: Implementation of numerous UN resolutions to bring about an Israeli evacuation (including settlers and the Israeli Defence Forces) from the Occupied Territories and the establishment of a secular, democratic Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, as well as ensuring the right of return of Palestinian refugees to their homeland. This would mean challenging the notion of Israel as a Jewish state. As Israel Shahak, a survivor of the Belsen concentration camp and citizen of Israel, writes, “In my view, Israel as a Jewish state constitutes a danger not only to itself and its inhabitants, but to all Jews and to all other peoples and states in the Middle East and beyond,” just as the self-definition of other states as 'Arab' or 'Muslim' also constitutes a danger. He points out that this communal definition resulted in close relations between Zionists and anti-semites: “Perhaps the most shocking example of this type is the delight with which some Zionist leaders in Germany welcomed Hitler's rise to power, because they shared his belief in the primacy of “race” and his hostility to the assimilation of Jews among “Aryans” (*Shahak, Jewish History, Jewish Religion*, Pluto Press, 1994, pp. 2, 71). So the transformation of Israel into a secular, democratic state would also be required. UN sanctions may be needed to press for these changes.

4) None of this could be achieved without an international movement for human rights and democracy, comprising supporters of these principles in all countries including the USA and Israel. There is also a need for international institutions capable of implementing them. Whether the UN can play this role remains to be seen. Although its role in this war has not been as shameful as in the Gulf War, where it merely rubber-stamped the slaughter of civilians, it has been side-lined completely so far. It seems obvious that so long as permanent members of the Security Council have veto powers, the UN cannot function in a democratic manner; so abolishing those veto powers is one reform which needs to be made in the long term. More immediately, however, the permanent International Criminal Court which was agreed upon in 1998 needs to be set up to deal with crimes against humanity including terrorism, war crimes and genocide. Other machinery is needed to deal with violations of fundamental rights (of women, workers, religious and ethnic minorities, indigenous people, dalits, etc.) where governments persistently fail to do so.

5) Finally, this crisis has shown the need for alternatives to the mainstream media as sources of information and communication. The internet can play such a role, but only if those who have access to it also disseminate the information more widely, which involves translating it into local languages - a laborious task, but one without which a worldwide movement for human rights and democracy cannot grow. ■

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