

Obama: Human Rights Disaster

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IN THE PAST five years, two million people have been deported from the United States, a staggering number in itself that barely begins to reflect the human toll in broken families and misery. This period covers the final year of the George W. Bush presidency as well as the first Obama term, but that's precisely part of the bigger pattern we want to explore here: The presidency of Barack Obama has continued, consolidated and institutionalized the human rights catastrophe of its predecessor. It's frankly impossible to look at the string of atrocities without becoming enraged, and rage is imperative, but it's also critical to understand why they're happening.

Does the left have legitimate cause to be disillusioned by this president, who after all is what he told us he was — a thoroughly pro-corporate centrist Democrat trying to be “post-partisan,” and fully committed to U.S. global power? Disillusioned no; but sickened, absolutely yes, as any supporter of human rights and plain decency must be.

President Barack Obama came into office promising to close the Guantanamo prison. Today, over a hundred detainees held for over a decade without charge or trial, mostly actually cleared for release, are on hunger strike and subjected to a gruesome form of torture called forced feeding as well as repeated painful and humiliating body cavity searches every time a prisoner meets with his lawyer [1]. The CIA's network of “black sites” in Eastern Europe have been closed — as far as is publicly known — but a new “Bagram Theater Internment Facility” was opened at the U.S. Bagram base in Afghanistan, expressly designed to be beyond judicial oversight, where hideous abuses would continue [2].

The repeated Democratic and liberal excuse of course has been that president Obama is “hamstrung” on Guantanamo, immigration reform and everything else by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives and the filibuster-deadlocked Senate. That argument has some validity regarding semi-automatic weapons, banking regulations and economic stimulus programs, but it's entirely fraudulent where it comes to issues where the president could lead by executive order. In his recent War College address, calculated to get another free ride from most liberals, the president once again “droned on” about closing Guantanamo. Believe it when and if you see it.

In the absence of real immigration reform legislation, the president could order a suspension of all deportations, and release from detention undocumented immigrants not held for serious violent felonies. He could order the release of all those Guantanamo prisoners who are held without charge (and inform Congress that unless federal civilian trials are authorized, the rest would go free too). He could end the vicious prosecution of Bradley Manning and the grotesque “espionage” trials of whistleblowing heroes.

There are plenty of long overdue actions to be taken. Leonard Peltier has been in prison for 37 years

on a murder conviction which the government itself admitted long ago it doesn't know he committed. Attorney Lynne Stewart, now battling advanced cancer, has been imprisoned since November 2009 for violating Special Administrative Measures in her representation of Omar Abdel-Rahman, and will die in prison unless clemency is granted immediately [3]. Officers of Muslim charities convicted for "sending funds to Hamas" (social welfare programs in Gaza) during the George W. Bush dark ages remain incarcerated serving terms of up to 65 years, after the Supreme Court rejected the Holy Land Fund's appeals for retrials in October 2012.

The Obama Doctrine

Barack Obama's unforgivable inaction on cases of such flagrant injustice demonstrate that his "change you can believe in" presidency has turned out to be as cynical and vicious as all the rest. The big difference between Bush and Obama on human rights is that W, who wasn't a Constitutional lawyer, needed accomplices like John Yoo to write legal memos for torture. The current president can creatively construct his own doctrine: Notably, the Obama administration now justifies secret drone warfare, as a method of assassination, citing the "legal" precedent of the criminal Richard Nixon's bombing of Cambodia in 1970.

The number of targeted drone killings is a state secret, but includes teenager Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, a U.S. citizen never accused of anything, apparently in a followup liquidation weeks after the killing of his father Anwar al-Awlaki. The number of un-targeted civilians killed in the process of these "surgical" strikes is believed to be in thousands from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Yemen and places we don't know.

But wait, some will argue, isn't there at least an important counterexample — the advances during these years for lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) struggles, at least in the important end of "don't ask don't tell," marriage equality for same-sex couples, and the administration's refusal to defend the obnoxious Defense of Marriage Act?

That's true and important, but it confirms more than undercuts the pattern of Bush-to-Obama continuity. The too often overlooked fact is that LGBT rights also progressed during the Bush years — then as now, above all because of an active and dynamic movement that won't go back into the shadows. Even before the Obama ascendancy, most politicians of both capitalist parties outside the religious far right figured out that anti-gay campaigning is losers' politics — and rightwing conservatives have as many LGBT family members as do progressive liberals, and know that their own loved ones aren't Satan incarnate.

It's also too easy to forget that the destructive "don't ask don't tell" doctrine, and the toxic DOMA, were signed by the same president Bill Clinton who presided over the Effective Death Penalty Act and the destruction of federal welfare benefits. LGBT people's rights, at least in the sphere of personal liberties, have been gaining for decades now, and the best that can be said for Barack Obama is that he's been the first president to openly endorse them. That stance deserves some credit, but hardly attains the level of heroism worthy of nomination for a Nobel Peace Prize — oh, wait.

Why It's Happening Now

The disastrous decline of human rights principles in the Obama era runs deeper than this president's lukewarm, at best, commitment to defend them and his overall lack of political courage — significant

but secondary deficiencies.

At a time when Social Security is under attack, unionism is on the edge of functional extinction and workers' rights are being shredded, the political and social climate is generally unfavorable to the protection of basic civil liberties (not counting the "freedom" to purchase unlimited quantities of semi-automatic weapons). People's insecurity about their jobs, health care and mortgages tends to merge, not always consciously, with worries about crime or another terrorist attack.

As Malik Miah's column in this issue discusses in detail, austerity "is not colorblind." It takes its greatest toll on African American and Latino communities when industrial jobs disappear, when government employment decreases — Obama's is the first presidency when this has happened in the midst of recession — and when hard times for the entire working class fuel rising white resentment and racism.

The second critical factor is maintenance of empire, and notably the imperial presidency that Barack Obama inherited — and zealously expanded. All that power — to wage secret war, order assassinations, authorize Special Operations, watch the raid on bin Laden in real time from the Situation Room, and so much more — is highly seductive. Even more, it's a trap: Not exercising that power will expose the administration to accusations of "soft on terror," failure to prevent the attacks in Benghazi or Boston or whatever else. And the semi-official doctrine of "permanent war" against terror means that the abuses never end.

The so-called "balance between freedom and security" is no real "balance" at all, because they are ultimately inseparable. The threat of foreign-inspired terror attacks (real, but small) and the growth (real, and monstrous) of the National Security apparatus are mutually reinforcing. What's happening is a turn toward repression, placing under permanent suspicion racial minorities, immigrants and those socially, politically or sexually "different."

Everyone's phone calls and emails are mined and catalogued in massive secret databases. The government has full secrecy, while ordinary folks have no privacy (except when obtaining arsenals of assault weapons...) Racial and social profiling, once discredited, come back into vogue. Under such circumstances the gains, however limited, won by LGBT people and "Dreamer" immigrant youth activists are truly remarkable.

Imperial power also dictates the power and the necessity to degrade governmental discussion of human rights until it becomes meaningless. The U.S. State Department is full of pious pronouncements on abuses it can do nothing about — in Iran, Syria or Cuba for example; carefully measured on human rights issues in (say) China, Burma or certainly Saudi Arabia where political and commercial relations are to be nurtured; and essentially silent, indeed complicit, regarding atrocities the United States actually could stop, committed by strategic allies like Bahrain, Honduras, Guatemala, Colombia and of course Israel.

In the case of Syria, the U.S. president proclaimed that the regime's use of poison gas would be a "red line" and "game changer." The "finding" that the regime has used sarin gas is now given as the reason for sending U.S. arms to rebel forces, who may be Syrian democrats or jihadi fundamentalists — in a horrific war where there appears to be neither a military or political solution — while of course, Israel's use of white phosphorus against Gaza civilians produced barely a shrug.

No government's actions in the Syrian catastrophe — not Beijing's or Moscow's and certainly not Washington's — have anything to do with human rights or democracy. They are, and should be understood to be, strictly motivated by the naked interests of these respective states.

Grasping the Problem

Right here and now, the question is what can social justice movements do? The first thing is to grasp the depth of the problem: President Obama isn't just making tactical compromises to soften the militaristic and anti-democratic offensive from the right wing. He and his administration are part and parcel of the problem, not the solution. He has made most of the Bush gang's abuses permanent — except for those acts of torture which, once revealed, give imperialism really bad PR — and laid the basis for his successor, of either capitalist party, to take them to the next level. And as we've tried to argue here, the roots of the destruction of human rights run way deeper than Bush's cheerful viciousness or Obama's vacuum of principle.

The second necessity is protest and action. The show-trial prosecution of Bradley Manning, after the conditions amounting to torture in which he was held for months, is a calculated vindictive move to terrorize any future individual of conscience from exposing the secrets of the system's dirty wars. It's also necessary to speak up for the latest hero, Edward Snowden, the analyst who's revealed the National Security Agency's secret program of cataloguing every phone call to, from or inside the United States.

In its bloodlust, the government won't accept Private Manning's statement of responsibility for downloading files to Wikileaks exposing him to 20 years in prison, but will press charges of "aiding the enemy," "espionage" and "computer crimes." The facts — that Manning had no contact with "the enemy," didn't spy for anyone and hacked into no government computers — don't matter.

In yet another outrage, the FBI has labeled political refugee Assata Shakur a "fugitive terrorist" (see brief statement on page 42 of this issue).

Third and ultimately most important, the defense of human rights must be connected to the struggles that most immediately impact the lives of the working class majority — the fights against austerity and the destruction of unions, jobs, pensions and social protection. The human rights disaster of the Obama presidency is only one important signpost of the road to reaction.

The Editors, *Against the Current*

The Bradley Manning Support Network is online at www.bradleymanning.org and on Facebook and twitter: savebradley. Send contributions to the Bradley Manning Defense Fund, c/o Courage to Resist, 484 Lake Park Ave #41, Oakland CA 94610-2730. Updates on the emergency campaign for Lynne Stewart are at lynnestewart.org.

P.S.

* From *Against the Current* n° 165, July/August 2013 : <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/3926>

Footnotes

[1] Joe Nocera,
http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/01/opinion/nocera-is-force-feeding-torture.html?_r=0

[2] <http://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/afghans-abused-at-secret-prison-at-bagram-airbase-3694>

[3] lynnestewart.org