

The Emirate of Afghanistan



THE CATASTROPHE IN KABUL has revealed much about the sentiments which guide a great swathe of the British left regarding America, Islamism and bourgeois democracy. Tariq Ali, the fiery youth leader of the late sixties, now a widely respected man of letters, has predictably welcomed the “major political and ideological defeat” suffered by “the American Empire”. His lyricism knows no bounds as he enthuses that “The flag of the revived Emirate is now fluttering over” Kabul’s “Presidential palace”. The victory of the Islamists is akin to that of “nineteenth-century Sudan, when the forces of the Mahdi swept into Khartoum and martyred General Gordon.” Ali’s historical reference is sanctified with the observation that William Morris, the decorative artist, printer, and Marxist, “celebrated the Mahdi’s victory as a setback for the British Empire.”

So, Tariq Ali is in good company. He is, of course, not unaware of the downside of the Islamist victory:

However one regards the Taliban's policies – I have been a stern critic for many years – their achievement cannot be denied.

(‘Debate in Afghanistan’, *Sidecar* at newleftreview.org, 21/08/21)

Indeed, he has always opposed what he has often described as Islamism's “social policies”. In 2008 when talking of the first period of Taliban rule in Kabul he explained:

Though rape and heroin production had been curtailed under their rule, warlords kept at bay and order largely restored in a country that had been racked by foreign and civil wars since 1979, the end result had been a ruthless social dictatorship with a level of control over the everyday lives of ordinary people that made the clerical regime in Iran appear an island of enlightenment.

(‘Afghanistan: Mirage of the Good War’, *New Left Review*, 50 March/April 2008)

Clearly Tariq Ali knows a great deal about Afghanistan and can carefully explain the errors and criminal ignorance of Washington's planners and advisors. He's also good at explaining why (‘Islamist social policies’ to one side), he welcomes the Taliban's victory as he broadens out his recent analysis:

Meanwhile, a high-powered Taliban delegation visited China last July, pledging that their country would never again be used as a launch pad for attacks on other states. Cordial discussions were held with the Chinese Foreign Minister, reportedly covering trade and economic ties. [. . .] But now, with NATO in retreat, the key players are China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan (which has undoubtedly provided strategic assistance to the Taliban, and for whom this is a huge politico-

military triumph). None of them wants a new civil war, in polar contrast to the US and its allies after the Soviet withdrawal. China's close relations with Tehran and Moscow might enable it to work towards securing some fragile peace for the citizens of this traumatised country, aided by continuing Russian influence in the north.

[‘Debacle in Afghanistan’, *Sidecar* at newleftreview.org, 21/08/21]

So, there we have it. The answer is an alliance of dictatorships, elective and otherwise, in which the left is placing its hopes for a better future. Tariq Ali, as a matter of course, is echoed by Aaron Bastani of Novara Media, who recently tweeted that the idea of not working “with the Russians, Chinese or Iranians (all regimes we would also like to change)”, is “Childishly delusional.” [19th August 2021]

Yes, perhaps it is, but it is not nearly as “delusional”, childish or otherwise, to imagine that the dictators in Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, (and the uncontrollable military intelligence authorities in Islamabad), hold the keys to a happy and progressive future for anybody on earth. Bastani's parenthesis – “all regimes we would also like to change” – is akin to Tariq Ali's dislike of Islamist ‘social policies’, a nod towards what this branch of the left is presenting as a sensible attitude to the realities on the ground – it is *socialist realpolitik* for a wicked world.

It is a world in which, unaccountably, the left always ends up supporting dictators and tyrants against the forces of the bourgeois democracies. This has a complex history tied up with a quiet hankering for the *realpolitik* and reassuring certainties of old-style Stalinism, and the need for domestic alliances in Britain with Islamist ‘community’ leaders. It is this which explains the ‘realism’ which saturates so much of left-wing thought regarding the fight against US ‘imperialism’. Indeed, the *politik* is so *real* that Beijing's deployment of state-directed investments and loans in Africa and elsewhere eludes the ‘imperialist’ epithet entirely. The annexations, racism, and prison camps of

America's enemies pass almost without notice; the 're-education' of China's Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, Moscow's annexation of Crimea, its 'low intensity' operations against Ukraine, Minsk's renditions, or Islamabad's blasphemy laws, barely rate a mention in these left-wing circles.

This is of a piece with the welcome extended by Tariq Ali and others to the installation of Hibatullah Akhundzada as Supreme Commander of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. It is thought that the Taliban have, unlike the leopard, changed their cultural skin. They will be moderate regarding the Islamist 'social policies' that trouble many on the left. After all, they've assured the dictators in Beijing's Forbidden City of their intentions to behave well in the future. Who could doubt such an authoritative recommendation?

Of course, the Emirate of Afghanistan will be led by Hibatullah Akhundzada, Emir-al-Mumineen, the Commander of the Faithful. Sharia Law will be at the heart of its constitution and its practice, but we should not view this without nuance. After all, the Sharia, like the *Quran* and the *Hadith* is open to manifold interpretations, which are often aimed at the achievement of the best interests of the people: justice, wisdom, and the public good. Above all, the pursuit of justice, the maintenance of 'appropriate' gender roles within conventional family life, and the preservation of society's wealth, are what guides Muslim scholars in their struggle to realise the Divine Law.

Now, the moderate intentions, or otherwise, of Islamists is not my concern here. What worries me is a socialist movement and left-wing that cannot distinguish between dictatorships and bourgeois democracies, on the one hand, and government by religious authority on the other.

The criminal irresponsibility of the NATO powers regarding their failure to build and rebuild the state in Kabul, Baghdad, and Tripoli is not in dispute, but it is the idea that communist and post-communist dictators, and those who seek an enlightened

interpretation of ninth-century religious texts offer a brighter future, most certainly is. It is astonishing to me that anybody who thinks of themselves as socialist or left-wing can countenance, for a moment, the idea that religious authorities should be allowed to govern states and determine their policies. Surely, opposition to theocratic rule, however moderate, should be at the heart of any socialist programme.

Not least because the secular nature of the bourgeois democratic state is, in our present circumstances, the best assurance that we could have for freedom of speech and religion.

This is why I can only think of a left which advocates and supports collaboration with dictators and Islamists as an *ersatz left*. A left in which political bankruptcy has corroded the sense it has of itself, and narrowed its ambition. This is signalled by its *de facto* alignment with authoritarian rulers and religious scholars, rather than the overriding struggle of real socialists and communists for democracy and the emancipation of humanity from the whims of tyrants, and the commercial imperatives of capitalism.