

Editorial

On the Independence of Kosovo

On February 17, 2008 the Assembly of Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia. Both before and after this declaration massive amounts of misinformation and disinformation have been circulated on the issue. On the one hand there are the absurd claims of the U.S. and European imperialists that they stand for the right to self-determination of small nations. On the other hand the Russians and their Serb allies are busy defending the principle of the territorial integrity of countries. In fact, the truth is that neither side cares in the least about either principle and both sides are using the tragedy of the people of the Balkans to push their own imperialist interests in the region. Further complicating matters is the fact that many progressive analysts seem to have difficulty

distinguishing between the machinations of the imperialists and the legitimate aspirations of peoples.

The source of the problem is the tension between two competing rights that were recognized by the victorious powers at the end of the Second World War when they established the United Nations. On the one hand, the UN recognized the right of states to territorial integrity as a means to prevent further wars over territorial disputes between states. (This principle has been routinely violated by the big powers ever since.) The second principle is the right of oppressed nations to self-determination, a right that, on occasion, may contradict the right of states to territorial integrity. In other words, this is a tension

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Commentary

Fidel Castro's Retirement - a Sign of the Strength, not Weakness, of the Cuban Revolution

Last week, Fidel Castro put an end to months of speculation, announcing that he would not be seeking re-election as Cuban president. U.S. President George W. Bush immediately called the announcement a victory for "democracy" in Cuba and implied that it is only a matter of time before Cuba capitulates and surrenders its sovereignty to the U.S.

However, far from being a sign that socialism in Cuba is weak and on its last legs, Fidel's retirement from active duty signifies the strength of the Cuban system and its ability to survive the departure of its main leader. There is no doubt that the leadership of Fidel has been crucial to the victory and defence of the Cuban revolution. At the same time, it is a

mistake to attribute everything – accomplishments or failures – to an individual leader. Movements and countries create the leaders that they need to achieve their aims. If their aims are imperialist domination, they create leaders like George Bush; if their aim is independence and socialism, they create leaders like Fidel Castro.

There is a myth created by the bourgeoisie and imperialism that a revolution cannot survive the loss of its leader. This lie has been repeated so often that it has taken on the aura of truth. But the reality is that this myth is just one more ideological attack on revolution and socialism, an attempt to portray human progress as futile. In reality, Fidel is just one reason among many that Cuba has withstood almost 50

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between the rights of states and the rights of peoples. Of course, in reality the right to self-determination has also never actually been recognized by the big powers. Rather, they have routinely opposed the right to self-determination of nations within their sphere of influence, while “supporting” that right within their competitors’ spheres of influence.

Do the Albanians in Kosovo deserve the right to self-determination? Of course they do. Can the Serbs claim that their right to territorial integrity trumps the right of Albanians to self-determination? Absolutely not. It has always been a basic principle of democracy that the rights of the people take precedence over the rights of the state. In this case, Kosovo has been part of the homeland of the Albanian people for thousands of years. This is not a case of a settler population serving as a beachhead for the colonial schemes of a great power. The fact that there are conflicting claims to this piece of land is a reflection of the complex history of the region and an argument in favour of a multi-ethnic state based on equality and fraternity. It cannot be used to support the claims of a larger state to dominate the peoples of a small nation.

Historically, Serbia has been both an oppressed nation and an oppressor nation, while the Albanian nation has almost always been an oppressed nation and has never been an oppressor nation. The principles of proletarian internationalism dictate that in these circumstances the Serbian nation must respect the right to self-determination of the smaller Albanian nation. For its part, the Albanian nation has a duty to respect the rights of the Serb and other national minorities within Kosovo and Albania. Both sides have a duty to promote peace and fraternity between their respective peoples. Of course, because neither the Serbs nor the Albanians are presently being guided by the principles of proletarian internationalism, both sides have been violating the rights of the other on a routine basis.

Do the Albanians of Kosovo and Albania have a right to reunite their nation? Yes, just as all divided nations have the right to reunite within one state, if they so desire. This again is a basic democratic principle. Those who accuse the Albanians of wanting to establish a Greater Albania neither understand the

basic rights of nations nor the concept of a “Greater Nation”. Historically, this concept has been a device used by big powers to seize territories from their neighbours after exporting settlers into their neighbours’ land. The U.S., Britain, Germany, France and many other states, including Serbia, can legitimately be accused of using such tactics. However, it is completely illegitimate to accuse a small nation of such tactics when all it seeks is reunification of the nation. Albanians have historically never occupied the lands of other nations. Rather, it has been their lands that have been occupied and annexed by others.

Based on the principles of proletarian internationalism, it cannot be said that the Kosovar Albanians do not have the right to self-determination, nor can it be said that their declaration of independence is illegitimate. At the same time, it cannot be said that they have actually achieved independence. They may have achieved independence from Serbia, but in reality that was accomplished with the military defeat of Yugoslavia by NATO in 1999 and, since then, there has never really been any possibility that Kosovo would return to Serbian control. However, Kosovo has been converted into a dependency and a military outpost of U.S. imperialism. Like all of the other countries of the region, an “independent” Kosovo, whether it remains separate or joins Albania, will be independent in name only and a colony of U.S. imperialism for all intents and purposes.

All of the smaller nations of the Balkans, including both the Albanians and the Serbs, have spent virtually their entire history as the vassals of bigger powers. The only possibility for them to achieve real and lasting independence is to put aside their ancient feuds and ethnic differences and agree to share the region as fraternal peoples, united against the big powers. The Yugoslav communists, under the leadership of Broz Tito, had an opportunity to do just this, but they chose instead to abandon proletarian internationalism in favour of narrow nationalism and collaboration with imperialism. The ongoing tragedies of the peoples of the Balkans are rooted in that historical betrayal and can only be ended with the overthrow of imperialism and the adoption of the principles of proletarian internationalism.

For Your Information

A Brief History of the Dispute Over Kosovo

The Albanians are one of the smallest and most ancient nations in Europe. They are the descendents of the Illyrians, who, along with the Greeks, constitute one of the original peoples of the Balkans. During the period of decline of the Roman Empire Slavic tribes began to migrate into the region, eventually becoming the Serb, Croat and Slovenian nations. As the Slavs advanced, the Albanians were gradually driven back into what are present-day Albania and Kosovo.

In the fourteenth century the Ottoman Turks began expanding into Europe and defeated the Serbs at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. During the next few decades, Serbia was greatly weakened as the Ottoman Empire consolidated its control over the region. In the mid-fifteenth century the Albanians, under the legendary leader Skanderbeg, defeated the Turks and established an independent Albanian state. That state, which lasted for about half a century, included the territory of Kosovo and Albania. However, the Ottomans eventually subjugated the region which remained under Turkish control until the early twentieth century, when an independent Albanian state was again established in what are now Kosovo and Albania.

As the power of the Austro-Hungarian Empire declined in the early twentieth century, competing nationalisms swept through the Balkans. Serbia launched attacks on all of its neighbours in an attempt to establish a Greater Serbia in the entire northern Balkans region. One of the regions seized by the Serbian armies was Kosovo. These Balkan Wars led directly to the First World War, following which the Great Powers divided up Europe in such a way as to maximize the potential for future conflict.

In the Balkans arbitrary borders were drawn and many nations found themselves divided. Half of the former independent country of Albania (Kosovo) was handed over to Serbia and Serb chauvinists conducted pogroms and ethnic cleansing in an attempt to drive Albanians out of Kosovo and replace them with Serbs. When Italy invaded Albania

and Yugoslavia in 1939, it conducted its own ethnic cleansing, driving out Serbs and returning large sections of the region to ethnic Albanians who had been driven out by the Serbs during and after the Balkan Wars.

During the Second World War Albanian and Yugoslav partisans fought together to rid the Balkans of Italian fascism and German Nazism. The close cooperation between all of the peoples of the region at this time established a basis for putting an end to ethnic tensions once and for all. In fact, after the war the Albanians were prepared to join Yugoslavia to create a multi-national, socialist federation. Tito had assured them that in this federation all Albanians, including those in Kosovo, would be reunited in a single republic. However, as the war drew toward a close, Tito began to renege on his promises and Albania withdrew from the arrangement.

Following the Second World War, Yugoslavia retained control of Kosovo and made it a province of Serbia. Although Tito and other Yugoslav leaders declared the equality of all nationalities and ethnic groups within Yugoslavia, the reality was something else. Kosovo was deliberately kept as an economically backward region and demands by the Kosovar Albanians for greater autonomy and economic development were met with brute force. On more than one occasion Yugoslav tanks rolled into Prishtina, Albanian-language schools and universities were shut down and hundreds of people were jailed.

As Tito's Yugoslavia drew closer and closer to U.S. imperialism and foreign investments soared, the plight of the Albanians in Kosovo continued to worsen. Tens of thousands were forced to work abroad in order to feed their families. Albanian Kosovars became convinced that the impoverishment of Kosovo was a deliberate policy of the Serbian government aimed at, once again, driving out Albanians and replacing them with Serbs – a form

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of economic ethnic cleansing.

Tensions came to a head in 1989 when Yugoslav leader Milosevic delivered a speech in Prishtina to a million Serbs, mostly imported from Serbia, in which he promised Serbs that Kosovo would never again be an autonomous region. Milosevic rode the resulting wave of Serbian chauvinism to propel him to leadership of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, a move which split the Communist League and eventually led to the secession of Slovenia and Croatia from the Yugoslav Federation. The Yugoslav army was also sent, once again, into Kosovo to suppress the democratic rights of the Kosovar Albanians. Throughout the 1990s tensions in Kosovo remained high.

In 1997 the Albanian state, which had come under the control of the U.S. State Department, collapsed and the Albanian people seized millions of small arms from the state armouries. When the Italian army was

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years of imperialist intrigue and economic embargo. Another reason is the specific historical conditions during which the Cuban revolution was born. But the most important reason is that the Cuban people love independence and do not want to live under the dictate of U.S. imperialism.

Revolutions have historically failed for two reasons: external aggression and internal contradictions. The Cuban revolution has survived nearly 50 years of external aggression, including a surprise attack by those it considered its closest friends. It has done so because the vast majority of the Cuban people have supported the aims of the revolution. Ultimately, the Cuban revolution will survive or fall not because of the presence of Fidel or any other individual leader but because the Cuban people decide so. There is no doubt that, in the coming months and years, both the external and internal pressures against the Cuban revolution will increase. However, the Cuban people have united to resist such pressures in the past and there is every reason to believe that they will continue to do so in the future.

sent in to restore order, rather than hand over their weapons, many Albanians smuggled them across the border into Kosovo and a low-level guerilla campaign there escalated as a result. By early 1998 a virtual civil war was raging across Kosovo, with the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) attacking Yugoslav soldiers and police and the Yugoslav army shelling villages in response.

In this situation, the U.S. saw an opportunity to fish in troubled waters and made a deal with the military wing of the KLA (which the U.S. had earlier labelled a terrorist organization). This essentially brought the KLA under U.S. command. The U.S. then rolled out its propaganda machine to create a pretext for the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia and the invasion and occupation of Kosovo. As a result of that war, the U.S. has been able to establish huge military bases in both Albania and Kosovo, establishing a beachhead in Europe from which it can control access to southern Europe and threaten shipments of oil from the Middle East and Russia.

The U.S. has also used its military position in Albania and Kosovo to blackmail the governments of other countries in the region, such as Macedonia, into making concessions to U.S. corporations.

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