

Peace & Progress

Briefing paper: Self-determination

An essential component of liberty is the right of an individual, a community, a people, a territory or a nation to make for itself the key decisions which affect and govern its existence. In terms of international law, this is called self-determination.

Throughout history, demands for self-determination have been shaped by conquest, imperialism and colonialism; by nationalism, separatism and irredentism; and by the demand for political power by disenfranchised communities and populations.

Historically, demands for self-determination have been addressed to whichever states or governing authorities hold political power - often empires, nations, or political and economic alliances such as the power blocs of the Cold War period (1945-90). The global power structure today is increasingly complex, transformed by the roles now being played by Russia, China and India, and by transnational bodies such as the European Union. This is also a period of rapid political shifts and repositioning across the Middle East and North Africa, and of significant political developments in Latin America. Summit decisions taken by national groupings such as the G-8 or the G-20 may have serious consequences for non-member states. Self-determination may also be limited or denied by the institutions of globalised finance, such as the IMF (International Monetary Fund), or by transnational corporations.

Issues of self-determination are often the cause of political or armed conflict, and mediation or arbitration may be sought from international treaty organisations such as the United Nations.

The United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966) opens with this declaration:

1.1.i. All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

Under current international law, self-determination remains a general principle. There are no precise definitions of what constitutes a people or a nation, and when it comes to political goals or outcomes, no appropriate territorial status is prescribed. As a valid ideal, self-determination has to be dependent on principles of democracy, justice, equality and international cooperation.

Denial of political and economic self-determination by the imperial powers of the 19th and 20th centuries fomented many of the conflicts and crises which still trouble the world today. For example in 1953 the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammad Mosaddegh, was overthrown by the CIA and MI6, because he was responsible for nationalising the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (the predecessor of BP, then under British state control). This intervention changed the course of Iranian history, perpetuating injustice and harming relations between Iran and the West to this day.

The age of empires was widely believed to have ended with the achievement of independence by former colonies in the second half of the 20th century. In practice, imperialism has continued unabated, albeit in the more informal mode which preceded the foundation of the great empires. Armed drones and missiles are today's equivalent of early Victorian 'gunboat diplomacy'. In the Indian Ocean successive British governments depopulated the Chagos Islands in order to make the way for the US base of Diego Garcia in the 1960s, and to this day blocks all legal attempts to allow islanders to return to their homeland.

Today's military interventions by NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) are often justified in the language of humanitarian and liberal goals, such as the overthrow of despots and the enabling of self-determination for disenfranchised peoples. Admirable aims indeed, but the selective nature of such interventions reveals their true nature. The fact that Iraq has oil, that Libya has oil, is no coincidence. In the winter of 2011, even as Egyptians were calling for their freedom in Tahrir Square, Cairo, British Prime Minister David Cameron was busy encouraging arms sales to repressive governments across the Middle East. Too often, self-determination of peoples is only approved if it supports strategic or economic interests.

Nowhere is this hypocrisy revealed more starkly than in the case of Israel's refusal to allow self-determination for a truly independent Palestinian state. The effective denial, led by the US, of the internationally validated result of the 2006 Palestinian election, showed that democracy is only supported if the electoral outcome is one acceptable to the United States and its allies. The April 2011 proposal for reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas is surely a positive step forward, yet this has not been welcomed by Tony Blair as representative of the so-called Middle East Quartet (which represents the UN, the US, the EU and Russia). Israel is still allowed to flout international law in settling the occupied Palestinian territories, in building the divisive Wall across Palestinian territory, in refusing to allow international inspection of its nuclear arsenal. The atrocities carried out during Israel's Operation Cast Lead against the citizens of Gaza in 2008-09 were not met with calls from the USA and its allies to protect Palestinian civilians, as happened in Libya in 2011. Palestinian self-determination is subordinated to American determination to keep Israel as a heavily armed fortress state at the heart of a potentially hostile region.

The United States and its allies are of course not the only modern powers to oppose self-determination. The Russian Federation has been brutal in its suppression of the Chechen people in the Caucasus, as have past Turkish governments in their treatment of the Kurds. The oppressive Indonesian government has constantly refused self-determination to the peoples of West Papua (Irian Jaya). China keeps a vice-like grip on its ethnic minorities while denying basic rights to the population as a whole. The suppression of dissent by Middle Eastern dictatorships and monarchies - coupled with the rise in food prices caused by international commodity speculation - has been the driving force behind the uprisings of the 2011 Arab Spring.

The ensuing clause of the United Nations ICCPR emphasises the importance of economic self-determination as a human right:

1.1.ii. All people may, for their own ends, freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources without prejudice to any obligations arising out of international economic cooperation, based upon the principle of mutual benefit and

international law. In no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence.

The World Bank and the IMF, created at the Bretton Woods Conference of 1944, dominate the global economy on behalf of neoliberal capitalism. International aid and debt repayment is often contingent on privatisation and the handing over of resources to transnational corporations. The enforced privatisation of water services in Tanzania, carried out under the auspices of the World Bank, led to disastrous mismanagement, massive price rises and finally a legal deadlock as the Tanzanian government battled with the British-led consortium over its own resources. Meanwhile, the desperately poor people of Tanzania suffered.

The so-called free market is a harsh paymaster. How could poor rice farmers in Haiti ever compete against subsidised US rice imports, produced with high-yield technology that they themselves could not afford? Despite gestures towards reform, globalisation has been no respecter of undeveloped economies or the poor. Economic self-determination may be proclaimed in the ICCPR, but as is so often the case, one arm of the United Nations is at odds with the others in implementing policies.

The globalised economy, promoted through its media and advertising interests, is no respecter of cultural and ethnic diversity, or of language rights. It has been estimated that over 6,700 languages are still spoken in the world, but that half of these are in danger of disappearing in the coming century. Each culture and each language has a unique world view and this is as important to the human condition as biological diversity is for the planet. Imperialism in its traditional or modern functions is even more inimical to cultural and language rights, and for thousands of years minority cultures have been suppressed, derided or 'disneyfied' to maintain imperial hegemony. Language vitality and endangerment are recognised as a key element in self-determination by UNESCO.

Self-determination is already a central issue in international politics and economics. What is needed, however, is an end to lip-service and hypocrisy by powerful governments and corporations and acknowledgement that this human right is universal and not relative.

Within one year of the anti-democratic military coup in Honduras in 2009, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was calling for Honduras to be readmitted to the Organisation of American States (OAS). It seemed to be business as usual in America's 'backyard'. However it is in Central and South America over the last decade that politicians have challenged the status quo and placed political and economic self-determination high on their agenda. An example of this is the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA, 2006) whose members include Antigua & Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador, Nicaragua, St Vincent & the Grenadines and Venezuela. These governments share a programme of mutual economic aid and social welfare, rejecting the neoliberal economic model. Latin American nations have also been progressive in foreign policy, recognising Palestine as an independent nation. Shared needs and aims bring together those struggling for self-determination in many parts of the world.

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