

To What Extent is Britain Post-Colonial?

Written by Hakim Adi

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HAKIM ADI, OCT 3 2012

There certainly appear to be attempts in government circles in Britain to draw a line under the country's colonial past and to claim that British colonialism is ancient history. In 2005, for instance, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, announced that 'the days of Britain having to apologise for its colonial history are over,' (1) while the current Foreign Minister, William Hague, recently expressed his wish to move away from 'post-colonial guilt' and claimed that there is now 'a new and equal partnership' between Britain and former colonial countries. But can it be said that the sun has now set on Britain's imperial ambitions, or are we witnessing a 'new imperialism' and new forms of colonial domination? (2)

It is now nearly sixty years since a British government and its allies failed in their attempts at regime change in Egypt and the resulting 'Suez Crisis' of 1956 exposed their machinations before the world. The Suez Crisis has been viewed as a major blow to Britain's imperial prestige and one of the key events ushering in a new post-colonial Britain. Four years later in 1960, Britain's Conservative Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, made his famous 'wind of change' speech in South Africa, in which he recognised that as a consequence of growing anti-colonial struggles and the changing international situation, Britain would have to relinquish political control over its colonies in Africa.

Thereafter, in the following two decades, British governments granted formal independence to almost all colonies, although Zimbabwe, the former Southern Rhodesia, only gained its independence in 1980 after enduring a war of national liberation lasting many years and Hong Kong only returned to China's sovereignty after lengthy negotiations in 1997. Fourteen former colonies have never become independent countries and are now termed British Overseas Territories. They include six territories in the Caribbean and three in the South Atlantic. The most well known of these are the Falkland Islands, or Malvinas, which lie off the coast of Argentina, a country that still disputes Britain's sovereignty, a circumstance that led to the colonial Falklands War of 1982. Another disputed territory is Gibraltar, which is claimed by Spain, and was first acquired by Britain in 1713. In addition there is continuing British sovereignty of a part of Ireland and the division of the island of Ireland, perhaps the most glaring example of the continuation of Britain's colonial past.

Moreover, even during the period when Britain and the other imperial powers claimed to be decolonising their empires, leaders of newly independent countries, such as Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, were warning of the emergence of neo-colonialism, whereby Britain and the other big powers maintained economic and other forms of domination over nominally independent countries by a variety of means including the power of global institutions such as the IMF and World Bank. (3)

The division of Ireland, the continued dispute over Gibraltar, and that over the Malvinas, which resurfaced again during the summer of 2012, are a stark reminder that Britain is far from being a post-colonial polity and suggest that declarations about guilt and apologies are rather premature. Indeed it is difficult to find examples of government apologies for innumerable colonial crimes and impossible to provide examples of any reparation made for such crimes. Former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, even spoke of the British Empire in glowing terms as 'a remarkable achievement.' Despite the wishes of governments and ministers to sweep things under the carpet, the old colonial Britain keeps raising its head.

One reason is that successive governments are unwilling to take measures to end colonial injustices even when they

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do not require the relinquishing of occupied territory. Examples surfaced during the summer of 2012 in two court cases, one brought by elderly Kenyans demanding redress for torture and other abuses carried out by the British authorities in colonial Kenya in the 1950s, and the other brought by the families of 24 unarmed plantation workers massacred by British troops in Batang Kali in Malaya in 1948. (4)

In the Batang Kali massacre case, the present coalition government publicly opposed the request for an independent enquiry, a position that was upheld by the High Court, despite what was referred to as 'decades of Government-sanctioned deceit.' In this regard the present government is therefore acting no differently from its predecessors that have also sought to cover up the crime, refused to hold a public enquiry and have even intervened in prevent investigations in Malaysia. (5) In the Kenya case, where official documentary evidence exists of the crimes, the current government, again like its predecessors is simply refusing to accept any responsibility for the offences, even going so far as to add insult to injury by claiming that the responsibility for the crimes of colonialism lie not with the British government but with the present government of Kenya. (6)

There might be some justification for considering Britain a post-colonial power if it was simply a matter of addressing the crimes of the past and there was any evidence of Britain's governments taking appropriate measures including making reparation. Unfortunately, there has not only been a continuation of occupation of colonial territory, and unwillingness to right wrongs as mentioned above, but also a continuation of the unequal relationship between Britain and many countries in Africa, Asia and elsewhere, as well as a resurrection of the values of the empire-builders of the nineteenth century who justified their colonial conquests, massacres and plunder with the talk about their 'civilizing mission' and the responsibility of taking up 'the white man's burden.'

At the turn of the century, for example, the New Labour governments of Tony Blair based their foreign policy on the need to establish a 'new kind of imperialism', as Robert Cooper, the government's foreign policy advisor, called it. According to Cooper, this 'post-modern imperialism' takes two main forms: the 'voluntary imperialism of the global economy', allegedly necessary and benign and operated under the auspices of the IMF and World Bank; and 'the imperialism of neighbours', equally necessary Cooper stated when 'instability in your neighbourhood poses threats which no state can ignore'. The notion of 'failed' or 'failing' states, especially in countries that are poor or former colonies was another part of the arsenal of justification for global intervention and new forms of colonialism. Cooper even referred to some states as pre-modern, as the imperialists of the 19th century might have done, and advocated pre-emptive intervention when there were any signs of 'failure' as determined by Britain and the other big powers. (7)

In the last few decades British governments have presented a plethora of justifications for global intervention and neo-colonial domination of countries around the world, from Blair's 'doctrine of international community,' and 'humanitarian intervention,' to the so-called 'responsibility to protect' civilian populations. Armed with such apparently noble aims and defending allegedly 'universal values,' which appear to be those of neo-liberal globalization enshrined in the Paris Charter of 1990, Britain's governments have intervened throughout the world in concert and in contention with the other big powers. In countries such as Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Libya what has been established can only be described as neo-colonial protectorates in what in many cases are former British colonies. Thousands have died, and chaos and instability have ensued. The illegal aim of regime change so clearly exposed and condemned during the Suez Crisis in 1956 has again become the openly admitted aim of Britain's foreign policy in countries such as Iraq, Libya, and Syria. (9)

Even where colonial-style invasion has not taken place every effort is made to impose 'British values,' which it is claimed are universal, and to advance the interests of the major British financial institutions and monopolies. The British Government acted with the World Bank, for example, to promote disastrous water privatization programmes in former colonies such Sierra Leone and Tanzania, exposing how 'aid-funded business' is used in the interests of the multinationals rather than to solve the problems facing impoverished countries. (10) Successive governments and the major political parties have also continually interfered in the internal affairs of Zimbabwe and other countries through such organisations as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, while MPs regularly discuss other countries as if they were still British colonies.

In most cases the vast majority of Britain's citizens oppose the colonialist policies of its governments. The most

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notable example being the mass protests against the invasion of Iraq and the widespread view that such crimes are not carried out in the name of the people of Britain. In this sense we can say that the sentiment of the majority may be described as anti-colonial rather than post-colonial, while the minority who are currently the decision-makers, far from distancing themselves from the colonial era, remain dangerously wedded to its values and appear to believe that with this outlook Britain can be made great again.

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