

# Democracy Canadian-Style - “Liberating” Libya and the Mali Adventure

## Part I: Abroad

By [Eric Walberg](#)

Region: [Canada](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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Canada’s role in the postmodern imperial world is as a poster child for promoting formal electoral democracy — at home and abroad. Internationally, instead of offering peacekeeping troops to the UN, as in days of yore, and promoting grassroots development in the third world, it takes orders directly from its US-Euro masters, helping them invade countries if necessary to set up the mechanisms for elections, and ignoring for the most part the real problems that the poor of the world face. It uses its foreign diplomatic service not to promote peace and social justice, but to support the needs of Canadian corporations abroad and facilitate their quest for profits.

This has been the strategy in Afghanistan, Libya and now Mali, the latter in cooperation with France, with Canada providing air transport of French military equipment. It is the mirror image of its treatment of Canada’s native people, who are force-fed a similar formal role in Canada’s political system, where formal equality — as exemplified in Bill C-45 — is touted in order to mask the real problems natives face, and — as if by coincidence — at the same time pave the way to take control of the natural resources that are the natives’ heritage.

### **Liberating Libya**

Canada actively participated in the overthrow of Gaddafi, who admittedly had treated Canadian businesses cavalierly. In 2009, he nationalized the Libyan operations of the Canadian oil company Verenex and cut Suncor’s production quota by 50%. In 2011, 12 Canadian companies had offices in Libya, and they were well served by government policy. The Royal Canadian Air Force bombed Libya and the Canadian navy helped blockade the country to overthrow the legitimate president. Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird visited Benghazi in June and Tripoli in October 2011, accompanied by a delegation of Canadian businessmen, including from Suncor, to meet with National Transitional Council members. In January 2012, Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Asia-Pacific Gateway Edward Fast also travelled to Tripoli with a large business delegation to further promote Canada-Libya trade and investment.

Officially the Canadian policy is democracy promotion, though that claim is undermined by the governing Conservatives’ actual policies. They have disbanded or drastically reduced the power of government agencies that once had the responsibility of promoting democracy at the global level, including the Office of Democratic Governance, the Democracy Unit and the Forum of Federations. Then there is the wholesale government slashing of funding of NGOs involved in democracy promotion and human rights, such as the International Center for Human Rights and Democratic Development, the Canadian Human Rights Commission, Kairos, Status of Women Canada and the Court Challenges Program — affecting tens of

thousands of Canadians and victims of violence around the world.

If Canada is serious about helping to establish democracy in Libya, then encouraging a company like Suncor to participate in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) would be a good sign. But is the role of the Canadian government to make sure Canadian companies are responsible corporate citizens at home and around the world? Or is it just to promote those companies, come hell or high water? Apparently, the latter, and the modus operandi is to call up the minister of defence and have him 'send in the troops'.

### **The Mali adventure**

The recent French military intervention in Mali also focuses on "restoring democracy", without any consideration for the political and economic problems that caused the Malian government's collapse. Mali's colonial era borders were fashioned by the French, lumping the desert north (sparsely populated by light-skinned nomadic Arab-Berber and Tuareg), and the more fecund south populated by dozens of darker, sub-Saharan tribes. The French tried to impose le français as the lingua franca, but most Malians were not interested, and Bambara is spoken by 80% of Malians (the Bambara constitute almost 40% of the population). This is hardly surprising, as almost 70% of Malians are illiterate and 50% live in poverty.

The idea of the invasion is to 'defeat the terrorists' in the north and push Mali back into its pre-2011 shaky electoral democracy. There is no chance that any duly elected government will survive, given the pressing social problems and the impossible ethnic stand-off which led to the collapse of the previous government, led by retired general president Amadou Toure. He was deposed in March 2012 by another military officer Amadou Sanogo, as the Tuareg were declaring their independent state of Azawad. Under French pressure, civilian centrist Dioncounda Traoré was declared interim president in April 2012, and already plans to hold the elections so precious to the West in July 2013 — as if they will make any difference.

Mali is Africa's third largest producer of gold, a sector dominated by foreign firms, including the Canadian IAMGOLD and Avion. It is also a major uranium and cotton producer. These industries are entirely devoted to export and based in the south. Government revenue relies mostly on their crumbs and of course international aid. Despite its relatively small population of 15.8m, Mali is the fourth largest recipient in Africa of Canada's foreign aid, mostly to promote food security and improve health standards in the south. Aid payments (which largely went to the government) were suspended after the March 2012 coup, and the Canadian military assisted the French in the invasion of the north in January.

Ndiaga Loum, professor of law and human rights at the University of Québec, told Think Africa Press: "It's not enough to have ministers dressed in business suits and not military uniforms to say it's a democratic model. The error analysts make is to confuse a country in a democratic transition with a truly democratic state." The military intervention to prop up the brittle neocolonial regime will - the imperialists hope - prop up similarly dysfunctional pseudo-democracies in Mali's neighbors Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Niger. Now, buttressed by AFRICOM, the US military command in Africa, which Niger has tentatively agreed to host. (Niger has given permission for US surveillance drones to be stationed on its territory to improve intelligence on al-Qaeda-linked Islamist fighters in northern Mali and the wider Sahara.)

With no sustained literacy or industrialization campaigns in any of these countries since independence, it is hard to imagine this reversion to old-style imperialism to deal with Malian-type crises will be successful. Only disinterested regional efforts to address the region's instability and dire poverty can possibly help. Bilateral aid address to neocolonial elites has little positive effect on the daily lives of the common people, who are divided into a complex array of tribes, with no relationship to colonial culture or borders. Mali merely is an extreme case, where the north must be addressed in the context of the Saharan Berbers, who inhabit the north Africa states as well as Mali and its Sahelian neighbors.

### **Old script updated**

But it is wrong to think that this neocolonial policy of continuing to prop up the old colonial system, now via local elites, is some kind of terrible mistake. It is a calculated one and very clever (if sticking a finger in the dyke can be considered a clever way to stop a flood). R2P (right to protect), the ideology behind it, justifies invading countries and killing hundreds/thousands (who-knows?) of anti-imperialist rebels as 'terrorists', in the process terrorizing the locals into 'welcoming' the invaders as liberators (Nazi invaders were similarly welcomed in WWII). Embedded western media sweep in on the coattails of the invaders, to record the 'liberation'. This scenario was scripted in Libya in 2011. In the case of the French invasion of Mali, 'Socialist' President Francois Hollande himself piggy-backed in with the invaders, like a latter-day Napoleon.

Scripting this rousing scenario is vital, as it distracts one and all from the real problem behind the collapse of governments across the neocolonial world. Where countries - for example, Tunisia - have tried to shake off this neocolonial paternalism, their governments are vilified by the West and often undermined. Poor Tunisia, where the Muslim Brotherhood formed a government after decades of western-backed suppression by a corrupt secular regime, now faces subversion, most recently the assassination of secular opposition leader Chokri Belaid. Instead of trying to help the new popular but inexperienced leaders, French Interior Minister Manuel Valls declared that Tunisia was not a model for the Arab Spring because of its "Islamic fascist dictatorship", thereby lumping all Islamists together as potential terrorists threatening France. At least Canadian officials are slightly more discrete in their comments.

The staunchly secular Tunisian Francophone elite, who have done everything possible to undermine the popular government, is subservient to France politically and culturally to such an extent that some of its members have demanded direct French intervention to rescue the country, looking over their shoulders at Tunisia and Mali as the new model. This scenario is repeated in Egypt, where the militant secularist opposition is also frantically cooperating with the old guard, directly in league with the West's postmodern agenda.

The fallout from this Machiavellian strategy - the destabilization of the entire Sahara region, possibly all of north Africa - apparently is worth the price. In Mali, the return home of disgruntled jobless mercenaries from Libya upset the fragile neocolonial equilibrium, requiring mopping up by the previous colonial power France. Regional Islamist movements, unimpressed by the NATO 'shock and awe' that toppled Gaddafi, felt they could now achieve in the Sahel what they had failed to in Algeria twenty years ago: an Islamic state, but this time based on a narrower and more intolerant interpretation of sharia law.

The invasion of northern Mali was purportedly another R2P venture, to avenge the lopping off of a few dozen sinners' hands or heads, but this is a pretext only. Already, the French

have killed hundreds of rebels ('good' or 'bad') and hundreds of innocents as 'collateral damage'. A life is a life, and a death — a death. The imperialists are the masters at killing and terrorism. The US cynically ignores (if not actively promotes) genuine terrorism which does not 'qualify' by its definition. *Inter alia*, it just blocked a Russian-proposed UN Security Council resolution which condemned the terrorist attack in Damascus 21 February which killed 53.

While it is the 'big guns' of the US, France, et al that initiate these invasions and/or arm the appropriate insurgents (note, in the above instances, all the victims are Muslims), Canada dutifully follows in their wake. There is no role for the UN in this postmodern imperialism (where 'imperialism' is just a word, signifying nothing, as the exploitation is completely hidden behind the 'market' and US dollar/ military hegemony). It is not surprising that Canada under its oxymoronic neoliberal neoconservatives has decided to dispense with its neutral do-good image there (however little it actually corresponded to reality) in favor of direct support for the empire. After all, it is the empire that controls (or has pretenses to control) the world, so why bother with pretenses to the contrary?

A version of this appeared at <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/02/25/290714/canadas-direct-support-for-imperialism/>

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Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the Cape radio. Eric Walberg was a moderator and speaker at the Leaders for Change Summit in Istanbul in 2011.

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