THE STATE IN THE THIRD WORLD
by Denis Freney

In the past two decades throughout the "Third World" many governments have come to power which have adopted radical measures, nationalising most if not virtually all of their country's economy, carrying out a radical land reform, breaking with imperialism and proclaiming a socialist objective.

Yet these regimes have not taken power as the result of a socialist revolution or even in most cases through a national liberation revolution. Nor are they led by Communist Parties or parties claiming to be working class or socialist.

As often as not, they have seized power in a military coup, led by left-leaning, nationalist officers sickened by the corruption, subservience and lack of progress of neo-colonial regimes.

While it is difficult to generalise, these developments pose important questions for marxists, and it is necessary to try to situate them within a theoretical framework. Moreover, with Papua-New Guinea moving towards independence, and Indonesia a close neighbour, such problems are not isolated from our day-to-day struggle.

The Nasser 1952 Revolution and its subsequent evolution provides something of a case-history, although it was specific to Egypt in many respects. The present Peruvian, Somali and Congo-Brazzaville governments; the Syrian and Iraki Baathist regimes and the Algerian military government are some of those "Nasser-type" regimes which spring readily to mind. Other variants are the Tanzanian government and the former Jkhrumah regime in Ghana.

In Egypt, Somalia, Peru, etc. (what may be termed the "Nasser model"), progressive officers took power from corrupt bourgeois regimes which, although sometimes preserving the facade of parliamentary democracy, were crudely manipulated by imperialism.

In the "Tanzanian model", governments coming to power after a struggle for independence have gradually progressed to radical economic reform, after internal struggles inside the ruling party.

Attempts so far made to give a theoretical definition to these types of regimes have, in my opinion, failed. This includes descriptions by Soviet and Chinese ideologists. They cannot, of course, consider them to be "socialist", if for no other reason than that this would raise questions as to their own versions of marxist theory. Their definitions have therefore varied, often in response to the needs of diplomacy and foreign policies. Most frequently they have described "Nasser model" regimes as "countries on the non-capitalist road". As that only defines what they are not, it begs the question.

Another common definition speaks of them as countries of "national democracy". But traditionally, "national democracy" is the regime of the national bourgeoisie, while "New Democracy" was the term used to describe China immediately after the revolution. China was then in the process of rapid change to the total overthrow of capitalism, but maintained certain capitalist economic and other vestiges to ease the transition. The countries we are describing fit into neither of these categories.
From other New Left or neo-maoist theoreticians, including the marxist left oppositions in some of these countries (Egypt, Tanzania, etc.) descriptions range from “bureaucratic capitalist” and “state capitalist”, to even the “dictatorship of the petty bourgeoisie”. The third is common though rather crudely summarised above. It is, however, untenable either from the viewpoint of marxist theory or concrete analysis. We will return to the confusion surrounding this “petty bourgeoisie” later.

The first two merit more attention, but both are also greatly confused and mixed up with more traditional descriptions of “state capitalism” from Lenin and Marx, as well as with the “restorationist” maoist thesis that “capitalism” was restored in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev.

The discussion suffers from a number of methodological errors: first, the obsession to fit a definition of a government or state into a few words, be they “socialist countries”, “socialist-based countries”, “degenerated workers’ states”, “state capitalism”, or what you will. Such descriptions are probably necessary for journalistic purposes, but involve the risk of abstract and futile terminological debate.

Second, such terms are used for abuse or praise, depending on political viewpoint.

Third, and most important, they lack the essential historical approach. That is, the evolution of such a regime is not seen in an historical context, but statically, in a sociological view which isolates them in a moment in time.

This is a common structuralist error, infecting the Althusserian marxists as well.

Fourth, the discussion is particularly bedevilled by being abstracted from the international context in which these countries have evolved.

These last two points need elaboration prior to a more detailed examination of the theoretical problems.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Colonial Revolution has been the hallmark of the post-World War II period. The stabilisation of West European capitalism after 1948 and the beginning of the Cold War froze social revolutionary developments in advanced capitalist countries for decades.

While stalinism and the bureaucratic dictatorship remained virtually unshaken until the mid-fifties in eastern Europe, rapid economic progress occurred, with a corresponding growth in military power, counter-balancing the armed might of imperialism.

The Chinese and Vietnamese Revolutions also set a model for countries in a similar socio-economic situation. They, together with the Korean people, showed how poverty, hunger and oppression could be overcome relatively quickly with a socialised economy and a communist leadership.

Following Stalin’s death, diplomatic overtures from Khrushchev and Chou En-lai, began towards leaders of the newly-independent countries, particularly Sukarno, Nehru and Nasser. These approaches, highlighted by the 1955 Bandung Conference and the development of the “neutralist bloc” were accompanied by often uncritical praise and glorification of such leaders.

But, leaving this aside, the period from 1955 to the present has been marked by a growing influence by both the Soviet Union and China in the “Third World”, a willingness on their part to help with often substantial aid, and the growing attraction of vaguely socialist ideas in general.

The victory of the Cuban Socialist Revolution by 1961 added a new dimension. The success of a national liberation struggle in a small nation under the nose of US imperialism was significant enough: its transformation into a socialist revolution and the failure of attempts by US imperialism to crush it were even more significant.

The continued battle of the Indochinese revolutions, winning victories over the most barbarous aggression by imperialism, increased the stature of socialist revolution in the Third World. Yugoslavia, both socialist and neutralist, presented an increasingly attractive model to revolutionary nationalist forces.

To nationalist leaders, intent on building a strong and independent country, the success of China, Vietnam, North Korea and Cuba, and to a lesser extent (because of its “European” context) the Soviet Union, offered an alternative to the blind alley of dependence on imperialism.

After some time in power, such nationalist leaders saw that the local bourgeoisie - whether “compradore” or “national” - was incapable of effecting any economic advance able to provide the base for a strong army and
state. The success of nationalised, planned economies in China, Cuba, etc. seemed to do so. It would be necessary, of course, to become "socialist" but not "communist". While the more reactionary aspects, for example of Islam, would have to be combatted, the basic allegiance of the masses to such religions could be combined into an "Islamic socialism" or a "Buddhist socialism" etc. Moreover, the competition between the imperialist powers and the Soviet Union and China, and between the latter two as well, could allow these nationalist leaders to play one off against the other, providing a real independence and substantial aid from both blocs.

Lastly, such a balancing act could also provide justification for the regime to crush opposition both from the bourgeoisie and from the working class, contain them and mobilise them around nationalist goals, including the tasks of the nationalised economies.

The ability of nationalist leaderships to exploit the differences between the blocs and take power into their own hands depends, historically, on the weakness of the two major indigenous classes in the colonial or neo-colonial societies - the bourgeoisie, encapsulated in a dependent relationship with imperialism, anxious only for easy, speculative profits as opposed to capital investment in heavy industry, and tied by a thousand threads to the semi-feudal landed class; and the proletariat, weak because of the underdevelopment of industry due to the subservience of the local bourgeoisie to imperialism. In most of the countries concerned, the working class is very small compared with the peasant masses and also unorganised.

The nationalist leaderships therefore balance in a "bonapartist" way between imperialism and the "socialist bloc"; between the Soviet Union and China; between the local bourgeoisie and the working class; between the varying factions of the educated elite.

NATIONALIST LEADERSHIPS: "PETTY BOURGEOIS" OR BUREAUCRACY?

So far, we have spoken rather loosely of "nationalist leaderships". This is clearly insufficient as a precise social definition. What is needed is an analysis of the state in these countries. Here again, confusion reigns. The debate summarised by John S. Paul in the Socialist Register 1974 is witness to this.

This is, in turn, linked with the debate about the role of the "petty bourgeoisie" in these former colonial societies.

The petty bourgeoisie was a term used by Marx and Engels for quite specific social strata. It, above all, referred to the peasantry, both in pre-capitalist and early post-capitalist society. In addition, it covered the small shopkeepers, self-employed professionals and handicraft artisans. "Petty bourgeois socialism" referred to the specific dreams and goals of these layers, particularly the peasantry.

Both Marx and Lenin stressed the inability of the peasantry and other petty bourgeois layers to take power into their own hands, and thus the need for a worker-peasant alliance, under working class leadership. Basically, there is in the debate, a confusion between the petty-bourgeoisie and the state bureaucracy.

Discussion of "the bureaucracy" is forbidden ground for those who draw inspiration from the stalinist tradition. The bureaucracy even in capitalist states can achieve, and does often achieve, an autonomous role. Marx very clearly stated this in the Eighteenth Brumaire and for him the furthest extent of this autonomy was bonapartism in France. In the "asiatic mode of production", and "caesarism", the state had even more autonomy.

Leon Trotsky adapted and developed the marxist thesis on bureaucracy to explain the rise of the stalinist dictatorship. In his major work The Revolution Betrayed this analysis was made subtly with a feel for the nuances of the bureaucracy. In subsequent works it was simplified, then distorted out of recognition by many of his "followers".

What is the difference between the bureaucracy and the petty bourgeoisie? "Petty bourgeoisie" should be strictly used by marxists for the self-employed, those who work themselves, with their families and perhaps a few others. The petty bourgeoisie has the ambition of becoming a fully-fledged bourgeoisie.

Even so, such a definition covers widely disparate layers, with little else in common: from professional lawyers, already close to the bourgeoisie, to poor peasants and even semi-proletarian peasants, to the poverty-stricken cobbler, barely surviving.

Army officers do not form a part of this petty-bourgeoisie, by any strict definition, though
they may have petty bourgeois origins and ideas.

The bureaucracy - the people with decision-making power in the state apparatus (army and police officers, heads of departments, ministers, party officials when the party is identified with the state, technocrats, etc.) - forms a separate social stratum, linked with different, usually ruling, classes, but with its own autonomous existence, privileges and interests.

The bureaucracy, particularly in former colonial countries is not homogeneous, but reflects, often in a distorted manner, the collective needs of different classes. But it has elements and layers who seek to get beyond "narrow class interests" and, within a more general (class) philosophical and nationalist view, develop the total progress of the "nation".

The state in former colonial countries is, for the most part, more "highly developed" than any of the indigenous classes. This derives from the need of the former colonial powers, both before and after "independence" to have a strong state - bureaucracy, including armed forces - to suppress movements for national liberation and class struggle.

Though even this is not always the case. In Tanzania, and particularly Zanzibar, the state was weak, while all classes were also underdeveloped. In Zanzibar, the state consisted of a hundred policemen. Insurgent workers could then seize their arms and make a revolution.

In other countries, such as Egypt, the imperialist need for a strong repressive apparatus was reinforced by the existing "semi-feudal" state, already powerful before the country was conquered.

While the "native" colonial bureaucracy through education and experience, is tied directly to the economic colonial order, it has in-built grievances, particularly due to expatriates holding the top positions under direct colonial rule. Sectors of this "old bureaucracy" may therefore adopt a nationalist stance, and join nationalist movements, seeing themselves as the natural rulers after independence, when the bureaucracy is to be "localised".

Nationalist movements are often led by elements from middle or lower rank cadres of the old bureaucracy, who have been educated abroad and there absorbed from the post-war world context a knowledge of nationalist ideology and practice.

Sometimes the nationalist movement may spring from outside the old bureaucracy - from the merchant class, the professionals (lawyers, etc.) and the minute "national bourgeoisie".

But in that case, the movement is entrapped in the class limits of the local bourgeoisie, which fears the masses whom they must mobilise to some degree if they are to achieve their own goals. Colonialism, realising their inherent weaknesses, will often co-opt this local bourgeoisie into a participatory framework within the colonial system, or in later decolonisation hand power over to them before any real struggle occurs.

Nationalist movements led by younger bureaucrats or by young professionals and ex-students who go almost immediately into virtually full-time political activity, are more capable of mass mobilisation, even if these are loosely organised, and develop an alternative movement structure to the old colonial bureaucracy, ready to take it over. The young professionals and ex-students who join with bureaucrats in such a movement's leadership are not in fact far removed from them: their primary aim is also state power - that is, "parachuting" to the top of the bureaucracy.

But within such movements, left and right wings are always present in nascent form, from the beginning. This results from the differing ambitions of those taking part. The "right" aim to transform themselves rapidly into a true bourgeoisie, through exploitation of future power positions in the state bureaucracy. The other, "left" wing, is concerned with power itself, to develop the "nation", to modernise and build a strong state apparatus and gain real independence. Secondary, although not neglected, is the desire to gain a comfortable life-style.

It is difficult to distinguish between the two trends before independence. Words, after all, are cheap and the temptations once in power, great. The dividing lines between the two are fuzzed: not all the "left" live modestly, and living modestly is not a sign necessarily of radicalism.

But in most cases there has been a decisive clash between the two trends soon after independence, or both co-exist and struggle under a bonapartist chief. The bonapartist chief can also quickly come down on the side of the right: Kenyatta in Kenya, and Banda in Malawi spring readily to mind.
The "left" has the advantage of understanding the problem: in the Third World neo-colonial development offers no "national" solution, although it can of course provide a very lucrative "personal" solution to the elite. The question the "left" must answer - which way forward to escape from neo-colonialism - remains difficult for them to resolve, however.

Thus, the "left" is likely to divide again, into a strictly "Nasserist" wing, which wants to maintain the status quo of a nationalised economy, but envisages no ideological development or real mass mobilisation and organisation, and a "marxist-leninist" wing, which does want to go in this direction.

Such a "marxist-leninist" wing is likely to develop from a recognition of Nasserism's Achilles' heel. Nasserism borrows from the practice of "communist" regimes a nationalised economy and a one-party state, led by a "socialist" party. But it rejects "communism", not because of the bureaucratic dictatorship it has meant in so many countries, but because the Nasserist bureaucracy has still strong ideological and cultural links with traditional and capitalist ideology.

This applies particularly where religion is strong. This "ideological baggage", unless overcome, leads to a continual rebirth of the pro-bourgeois, reactionary wing of the bureaucracy, from within the "Nasserist" wing itself.

Time after time, conspiracies erupt between newly-emerging right wings within the bureaucracy and the dispossessed local bourgeoisie, the old right wing bureaucrats and imperialism. This does not necessarily mean a coup. Often it means a struggle within the bureaucracy for positions of power, to win the bonapartist leader over to the new rightwing.

"To make a revolution" for the mass of peasants and workers is not some sociological "technical means" of replacing one social system by another, but an overwhelming personal and collective involvement for the first time in their lives, in making their own history, of fighting and dying for a cause that is really their own.

In a nationalist revolution which does not have a conscious socialist goal, at least in the long term, the masses sacrifice for an almost mystical ideal, within the framework of old, traditional values, religious or otherwise.

While national revolutions (such as the Algerian) involved the masses to an enormous extent, and there is an instinctive push towards such a revolution "growing over" into a socialist revolution, mass involvement and experience is much less than in a national revolution with socialist goals (as, for example, in Vietnam).

In Cuba, however, a revolutionary nationalist leadership, seizing power from a corrupt neo-colonial puppet regime, speedily advanced from revolutionary nationalism to a marxist-leninist position, shedding each time it confronted imperialism different layers of the bureaucracy, including some of the revolution's main leaders. The refusal of imperialism to accept radical reforms, even though these did not question the total capitalist nature of the state or society, drove the leadership to the left, educating it in the process, to a socialist revolution. The process, involving armed confrontation with imperialism, also deeply involved the masses.

The Democratic People's Republic of Yemen (Aden) won independence after a guerrilla struggle led by a revolutionary nationalist leadership claiming to be marxist-leninist. It has, from information available, travelled far along the Cuban road.

In Somalia, there was no revolutionary nationalist struggle for independence comparable with that in Yemen or Cuba. A military coup brought to power officers who claimed to be marxist-leninists. They carried through thorough-going nationalisation, and appear in conditions of extreme drought, to be handling the threatened famine well, and at the same time proceeding with a radical cultural revolution.

Similarly, in Algeria, if the leftwing of the FLN had won the post-independence struggle, not only would Algeria have had great claims to be a Cuba in North Africa, but may even have shown an advance in real socialist democracy, compared with existing "socialist countries".

Of course, these few examples serve as a warning against any attempt to apply a cast-iron schema on their origins and evolution. What we are attempting to do here is look at the general trends apparent in all of them, to varying degrees and with different emphases, to place them within a general theoretical framework which can only serve as a rough guide to analyse particular, concrete examples.
Such regimes have emerged in a unique historical situation; unique that is, in the evolution conceived by Marx and Lenin. For the key to world socialism was seen in revolution in Europe and the United States. The expectation was correct; their vision of what success there would mean to the world, even more so. But the revolution, developing in the periphery (Third World) is now returning to the centre (Europe - for example, Portugal).

The delay of the European revolution is of course one of the principal causes for the growth of bureaucratic dictatorship in those countries which have had a socialist revolution. The delay has resulted in the economic-military growth of the Soviet bloc and China.

Imperialism is immensely weakened, and particularly post-Vietnam, is almost paralysed in terms of direct military intervention. It must therefore rely on favouring its stooges and allied classes in the under-developed countries themselves, or more recently, on allies in neighbouring countries. Imperialism has now a strategy of developing powerful military stooges, such as Iran and Brazil, to act as gendarme in their regions.

But once a revolutionary nationalist leadership installs itself in power, even such indirect military intervention is very difficult. If a revolutionary nationalist regime destroys classes allied with imperialism internally and is able to resist any outside intervention from another neighbouring pro-imperialist regime, it is in a good position to survive, although, as already pointed out, within the bureaucracy restorationist tendencies continually arise, posing new threats.

Marxists are, of course, not only concerned about the overthrow of capitalism, but the emergence of socialist democracy based on workers' self-management and avoidance of bureaucratic dictatorship. One party rule, a bonapartist leadership, and the lack of mass participation in a socialist revolution, do not meet the criteria for socialist democracy, if the term is to have any meaning.

American imperialism, moreover, so pressed by other revolutionary "hot spots" must find countries like Somalia and the PDR of Yemen of minor concern, given their underdevelopment, paucity of valuable resources, and small population. This gives these regimes additional opportunities for survival and forward development.

Some traditional communist parties have adopted a strategy of working within the Nasserist regimes. This has not necessarily been with the goal of a socialist revolutionary outcome, but often of an alliance to advance "on the non-capitalist road" or for "truly independent regimes" etc. and often in response to the degree of close diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union and/or China.

In Nasser's Egypt, traditional communists entered the regime, mainly after the "Socialist Laws" in 1961 which nationalised the local and foreign bourgeoisie and carried through a relatively radical land reform

Faced with a choice between imprisonment, exile or the extreme difficulty of building a real mass base among people enthusiastically supporting Nasser, and, on the other hand, working within the regime, communists chose the latter.

In Indonesia, the PKI after the failure of the Madiun uprising, faced a similar quandary. Although having greater possibilities of oppositional organisation, it chose to work within the confines of the Sukarno regime, which in domestic politics was certainly far less radical than Nasser's.

In Cambodia, Khieu Samphan and his fellow communists chose, at first, a similar route: they worked within the pre-1970 Sihanouk regime. But once they suffered their first (and by other standards, relatively minor) defeat at the hands of Lon Nol and the right within the Sihanouk regime in 1967, they turned to an alternative, and in the long run far more successful political strategy.

In these three countries the local ruling class and the educated elite were relatively strong, entrenched by their role as the pre-colonial ruling class, by a long colonial tutelage and by a history of ruling class political organisation which gave it a strong sense of national self-identity.

In countries such as Somalia, DPR of Yemen and Tanzania, however, where the traditional rulers were weak, social organisation was virtually tribal, and colonialism had done little in the way of economic development or even exploitation, the task of individual marxist-revolutionaries appeared much more difficult, given their smallness in size, lack of an organisation with roots, the popularity of the regime, and its radical measures, with hope of them becoming even more radical. In such a situation, the temptation to work within the
regime as its marxist-leninist left wing is very great.

But such activity is prone to ideological degeneration. For responsibility must be taken for the regime's acts, for compromises made, for a certain isolation from the masses because of holding a position in the bureaucracy, often in the top or middle layers. So much, too, depends on the whims or goodwill of the bonapartist leader who may go along with the left, even become a Castro, but who may equally go with the right.

For these marxist-leninists, it is a constant battle, requiring a strong adherence to principle, but also extreme flexibility. Yet if they refuse to work within the regime, they face isolation, exile, or simply a non-political professional career.

CONCLUSION

For “Nasserist” regimes, therefore, a general definition might be: in Third World countries, where the landlords, local bourgeoisie and imperialism have lost all key posts in the economy, through nationalisation as a result of a coup or evolution of a radical nationalist bureaucracy, the regime which emerges rests power, both politically and economically, in the hands of the state bureaucracy, which however maintains much of its traditional ideological baggage.

This state bureaucracy attempts to develop a modern state by using mechanisms borrowed from the Soviet or China blocs. But within this bureaucracy, ruled by a bonapartist arbiter, a clash emerges between the wing with bourgeois ambitions, and those who seek to carry on the modernising task on the basis of a nationalised economy. If this wing is victorious, it is liable to divide into two groups - one to maintain the purely nationalist “Nasserist” road, and another which sees the weaknesses and failings of such a road, as it breeds constantly new restorationist forces within the bureaucracy who ally themselves with imperialism for counter-revolution.

This second group of the bureaucracy turns to “marxism-leninism” to resolve the problem of mass mobilisation and the severe limitations imposed by traditional ideology. But it remains restricted within the confines of the Nasserist bureaucracy; or if it takes power, still finds itself restricted by its origins, by the continued presence of strictly Nasserist elements, and by the difficulty of mobilising sufficient mass activity and organisation to proceed fully on the “Cuban road”, to a complete socialist transformation of society.

Such “marxist-leninist” groups, however, are exceptions at present, particularly in societies where strong class forces are present.

In general, “Nasserist” bureaucracies are likely to be seen historically as transitory regimes which have gone beyond capitalism but have not the internal dynamic to take them to a fully completed socialist revolution. They are products of the historical delay of the World Revolution in its crucial centres: West Europe and the United States.

For revolutionary marxists, the question of whether to work within such regimes or to organise outside and build a revolutionary marxist-leninist party, is a real and difficult one. It cannot be resolved by some general theoretical formulation, but only by a very concrete, historical analysis of the particular situation, within the world context.

Working within such regimes is full of dangers, particularly when an already prepared cadre force linked with the masses does not exist. If, however, there is no other way, then such an orientation may be valid, provided it keeps always in mind the possibility of the Khieu Samphan alternative: of leaving the regime at a given point, and turning to direct organisation of the party, or revolutionary front, possibly including guerrilla warfare. In other words, work within such regimes must be seen as a tactic within a much broader perspective, and not a total strategy in itself.