

Supporting The Revolutionary Women Of Afghanistan

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This article will try and sketch out why anarchists should critically support the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) as part of an active anti-war work (as well as part of a larger anti-patriarchal struggle!). RAWA has been on the frontline in radical agitation for women's rights in Afghanistan for over 26 years. They have fought against Soviet occupation in 1979, against the rise of the US-supported fundamentalist reaction which followed, and since 1996, against the similarly misogynist and fundamentalist Taliban. Self-described as "a political/social organization of Afghan women struggling for peace, freedom, democracy and women's rights in fundamentalism-blighted Afghanistan," they are the only grass roots, feminist, secular, and social democratic women's organization on the ground in that country.

Now with the current US war effort, the world's eyes are upon Afghanistan and all its facets, including RAWA. RAWA are freedom fighters who risk their lives educating and providing aid for women and girls in Afghanistan and in surrounding refugee camps. They are raising revolutionaries while running clandestine schools for girls who are otherwise denied education, running secret income-generating workplaces which are the only means for widowed women's survival under a regime that bans a working female population, or distributing medical care, quilts and food to refugee families in Pakistan. At the rise of the Taliban RAWA had to expand their work into neighboring Pakistan, where millions of Afghan refugees are living in deplorable conditions. There, RAWA sends medical teams to women who have sometimes never been able to see a doctor. They established the refugee Malalai hospital in Pakistan for 11 years but were forced to close it recently for lack of funds.

While carrying on this work under such circumstances they have at various times taken up arms. In recent encounters with Taliban supporters in Pakistan, they have had to fight them off with sticks. They have armed guards outside their clandestine schools for girls in some regions. They have just issued a call for an uprising either with or without the tacit support of the UN.

With the seemingly imminent fall of the Taliban as US bombs crash down and Northern Alliance forces push ever forward, we cannot mirror the enthusiasm of mainstream media that now women's problems are solved. In a recent speech Laura Bush has equated the US "military gains" with women's liberation in Afghanistan, in which "women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment."

The fact is that the US has let loose the scourge of the Northern Alliance onto the Afghan masses who endured their fundamentalist and chaotic rule from 1992 until 1996, before being dethroned by the Taliban. The Jehadi and Mujahideen factions that ruled (and are now part of the Northern Alliance) have a well documented list of human rights violations.

The forces of General Dostum, who is now cheered as the protagonist behind various anti-Taliban victories, are accused of regularly abducting and raping women during that period. RAWA states that many women and their families are fleeing the advance of the N.A. forces, well aware of the terror the population endured pre-Taliban, and indicating that it was in many ways worse than the reign of the Taliban. The only thing that changed for women was that the Taliban institutionalized their misogynist decrees.

Rape in a broad sense is part of the class war waged against the potentially powerful. It is a tactic of domination which intends to strip the humanity, and consequently the ability to act as a free person, from its victims. Women as a class, like the poor and oppressed classes as a whole, hold the potential for revolutionary change in their organized struggle to topple domination — a threat to those who hold that power. When asked why the Taliban instituted such draconian laws against women, one RAWA member said it was because they "could smell the feminist

change in the air globally,” and so had to act against it. While it is a growing trend for rape to be carried out as a strategic military weapon in modern warfare, in which terrorizing and humiliating a population becomes the means to the ends of “ethnic cleansing,” it has always been effective in regulating the social behavior of women. It is here where we can see one of the links to women’s oppression around the world with women’s oppression under the Taliban and other fundamentalists.

Supporting RAWA is a beginning, and as anarchists we enthusiastically support their work as tangible weapons against patriarchy and the deadening oppression all Afghans face under the latest of fundamentalists. If we see their politics as “radical liberalism” then we can be in solidarity with the only group that displays potential for anti-authoritarian libertarian politics in Afghanistan. They already exhibit practices of mutual aid, decentralization, and uncompromising practice of anti-patriarchal struggle. We must make the connections between the concentrated patriarchy inherent in the fundamentalist regimes (of all major religions and cultures) and that of the subtly patriarchal Western capitalist democracies.

In addition, the goal of anarchists supporting RAWA would be to publicly advance their opposition to patriarchy and US military aggression, and fundamentalism in all its forms, among the different social struggles in our areas. We can also try to remedy the polarization of the anti-war movement into either pacifism or authoritarian left “anti-imperialism”. We are anti-militaristic and anti-authoritarian; we want feminism and self-determination, social peace and political and economic freedom.

However, since RAWA is an explicitly political group, having declared so once they fought as armed anti-imperialists against the Soviet occupation in the 80s, they have a political program that as anarchists we take great exception to.

THE STATE

Much of RAWA’s literature calls for a secular democratic State with the full participation of all Afghans and women especially (and happily excluding all fundamentalists vehemently). They are not anarchists. They want a State which would ideally extend human rights to all its citizens and guarantees equal participation and representation — a situation much desirable to their current one.

How do we envision our ideal society being organized in a place that could only reach the level of chaos it has through its systematic destruction by competing super-powers and misogynistic warlords? People will use the example of the current state of Afghanistan as the reason why anarchism would not work. We must be prepared to say why this is absolutely false. Instead we can clearly show that it has been the struggle for nation state power that has reduced Afghanistan to its present state. We should put forth a critique of the State as fundamentally based on domination, hierarchy, and power, and so therefore opposed to fundamental freedoms, and provide an alternative vision federated councils where whole communities participate in public life.

ECONOMICS

RAWA seemingly has no economic analysis. If RAWA's "secular democracy" means another capitalist economy dependent on the whims of IMF and World Bank agendas, or if they have in mind a socialist democracy, it is so far unclear. Much of their political agenda is shrouded in the diplomacy that post-September 11th has pressured them to take. It is clear to us that Afghanistan will never be free from any form of imperialism if it adopts a capitalist economy.

Regarding class, and cross-class alliances that we would be opposed to, it's still a question what a discussion on class means in their context (where 80% are unemployed, and those that are employed are very marginally so). What does class mean where the majority of the population is forced into the domestic reproduction of labor tasks only, prohibited access to whatever medical care is available and forced into begging and prostitution (which is also illegal) as their sole method of survival? What does class mean when people sell their fucking children? If there is a class war going on in Afghanistan, it's the women who are fighting back as the oppressed.

THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS

As a solution to the ongoing chaos in Afghanistan, RAWA proposes a UN peacekeeping force which would have the aim of disarming the warring parties. They also have called on the UN to revoke the economic sanctions on their country, which had been merely punishing the poor and awarding more moral power to the Taliban, whose international and criminal connections left them unscathed by the sanctions. Instead, they say, the UN should place diplomatic sanctions on the countries who have been funding the various fundamentalist factions, including France, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United States!

On the other hand, we as anarchists need to strengthen both our critique of the UN and our proposed solutions to the kind of chaos the majority of the world's population lives under. The left has been caught with its pants down, offering no solutions other than reliance on hierarchical global governmental bodies to fix the nastiest of our problems in the world. We are seemingly caught in a "double blackmail": if we oppose US bombing of Afghanistan, we are for the legitimacy of the Taliban; if we oppose the Taliban, we are for US bombs and/or UN "peace keeping" intervention, which paves the way for global capital to rebuild the country.

THE EX-KING

Of other unlikely scenarios RAWA proposes is one in which the 89-year old ex-King Zahir Shah should return to preside over a "transitional" period which would usher in secular representative democracy.

Like other leftwing groups in Afghanistan, RAWA believes that the king is the only symbol of stability that their country has ever known, and though his reign was not ideal, most of the population believes it was certainly better than present times. This nostalgic notion is further complicated by the fact that the Zahir Shah has met with a recently assembled Loya Jirga which was overwhelmingly fundamentalist in tone and had absolutely no pretenses to include feminist or women's voices in general.

RAWA is not monarchist, but they err in using the symbology of the king to unify a secular and anti-fundamentalist political front in that it is nationalistic and hierarchical at its root. The ability of the population to grasp real “democracy,” in the sense of self-rule, through active participation becomes even further from reach. As anarchists we see the latter as the goal in social organization; giving up self-determination, and therefore freedom, through the political system of representation furthers us from the solution to the problem, for domination and hierarchy will always be at the root in an anarchist critique.

That under the king things were better is true in a relative sense, yet this should not forego the fact that there are liberating ways to move forward. The well being of the women of Afghanistan depends on it.

PRACTICAL ACTION

Critical support is not intended to mirror the inactivity of sectarian academics. As organized anarchists, we can publicly advance RAWA’s opposition to patriarchy and military aggressions by the US, not to mention the US support of the Northern Alliance, within the growing anti-war movement in North America. We have a void to fill when absolute pacifism on one side and authoritarian left “anti-imperialism” on the other leaves no room for anti-militarism and anti-authoritarian organizing. It also gives us a forum for illustrating how anarchism is a desirable political philosophy and one that is different from “radical liberalism.”

With this understanding of critical support, the federation of collectives and individuals that is NEFAC are currently organizing RAWA benefit events, will be distributing RAWA literature, and will undertake educational events. What other kind of solidarity could anarchists provide? Demonstrations to stop the US bombing, end UN sanctions, demanding women’s rights/ human rights in Afghanistan. Working with local women’s groups in the US to connect the global issues of women’s rights, capitalist globalization, and nation-states and their wars.

We can do this without compromising our principles. Further, this kind of activism gives us a chance to not only put a portion of them in action but to describe how they are different. Not doing so, we risk being irrelevant.

RAWA is not an anarchist organization. However they have by necessity had to adopt a great number of anti-authoritarian tactics and ideas, such as mutual aid, decentralization and autonomy. Further they are opposed to all of the most likely governments in Afghanistan: a State-Capitalist government (ala Soviet Union; for instance with foreign backing from the Uzbekistan Communist Party), a Taliban government, a Jehadi government, or a government backed by Iran or Pakistan.

They are prepared to renounce the UN and the King; all the while they have pleaded with both to do something different and condemned them often for their actions. They have backed themselves into a political situation where they are unlikely to ever be accepted into the government. That is why they don’t have any friends among other political organizations in Afghanistan. Further, they have called for an uprising... a social revolution... with or without (and I think they realize at this point that it means without) support of any of anyone else but the people. If there is hope for anarchism in Afghanistan... it is there.

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