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SOVIET RUSSIA AND YEMEN

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The renewed interest of Russia in the Yemen dates from the early '50s. In 1953 a pamphlet published by the Ministry of Culture of the USSR claimed that Soviet victories and successes of Communist "democracy and socialism" have become an inspiration to that primitive country. Those were still the days of Malenkov and it is he who was quoted for authority in the relevant passage. The pamphlet noted that:

"As a result of the Soviet Army's rout of Hitlerite Germany and imperialist Japan, a new impetus was given to the struggle for national freedom in colonial and dependent countries, and the crisis in the imperialist colonial system was aggravated. The historic victory of the great Chinese people was a heavy blow to the imperialist systems throughout the world.' As a result of the war and the new advance of the struggle for national freedom in colonial and dependent countries, the imperialist colonial system is virtually disintegrating.' (G.M. Malenkov, report to the 19th Party Congress on the work of the Central Committee of the Communist Party; Gospolitizdat, 1952, p. 18). The further weakening of world capitalism in the post-war period and the growth of democracy and socialism are an inspiration to the people of the Yemen, whose struggle against the colonizers is thereby facilitated."

First Contacts

It was only, however, after the protracted preliminaries lasting about a year that (in October 1955) an agreement was concluded for the re-establishment of official relations between Yemen and the USSR. The two countries signed in fact an agreement of this kind as early as 1928, but the 1928 pact fell into abeyance; it was therefore decided to "renew" it.

The following year (March, 1956) a Soviet trade mission appeared in Yemen, and, simultaneously with the ratification of the friendship treaty, the first trade agreement was concluded. It provided for Soviet deliveries of various equipment - such as agricultural machinery and building materials as well as oil products, flour, rice and sugar in return for coffee - the world-famous Mocha or Mokka coffee is the country's principal export crop - and for a few more commodities: dried fruit and raw hides and others.

Three months later (June 1956) Mohammed el-Badr, the Crown Prince and Vice-Premier of the Yemen, visited Moscow. On his way to Russia, he stated in Cairo that the Yemen and Soviet Governments were:

"...discussing the practical means upon which a comprehensive economic cooperation will be set up between the two countries in the light of...the discussions conducted by the Soviet economic mission which visited the Yemen..."

At the same time he stated that he was prepared to accept Soviet military aid. When in Moscow the Crown Prince was entertained, i.e., by various lay and ecclesiastical dignitaries from Soviet Muslim republics. At the end of the visit a joint communique (23 June, 1956) explicitly adopted as a basis of political relations the principles of the Bandung Afro-Asian Conference. The arrangements provided for an exchange of diplomatic representatives: the Soviet ambassador to Cairo serves simultaneously as Minister to the Yemen and the Yemen Minister in Cairo is accredited to the USSR. The economic clauses of the communique mentioned lists of goods agreed on for reciprocal deliveries; and it referred to an agreement reached on the sale of a number of Soviet commodities to Yemen, in exchange for coffee to be sold by the Yemen to the Soviet Union. A passage of the communique foreshadowed the approaching Soviet economic offensive in stating:

"The basic forms of cooperation have been defined with a view to assisting the Yemen in realizing its desire for economic development by carrying out reconstruction projects and obtaining the necessary materials and equipment."

For this purpose, the communique went on to announce, "the Soviet Union will grant the Yemen favorable terms in respect to any orders it may place." The precise nature of either "favorable terms" or the kind of "orders" expected to be placed has not, however, been disclosed at the time.

Development projects

Russian Press comments accompanying the 1956 Yemen visit to Moscow did not conceal the political background of the Soviet readiness to assist Yemen. For example, Komsomolskaya Pravda, (of 10.6.56) stressed that "the peace-loving people of Yemen gave a dignified rebuff to the imperialists' 'overtures'," that the Yemeni Government "is against taking part in any military pacts and against colonialism", that it rejected the "aggressive Baghdad Pact - this new form of colonialism in the Arabian East." Last but not least the Yemeni Government was given credit for readiness to recognize the "Chinese People's Republic."

It soon became evident that the USSR - faithful to its rule of engaging capital where political yields are quick and high - was supplying Yemen with arms and providing technicians and equipment on credit for key branches of the economy.

The economy of Yemen is still very backward. Manufacturing is limited to a few handicrafts and even these have been dislocated when the Yemeni Jews were forced to emigrate to Israel. Recently, one or two small-scale factories (a textile factory, a tannery etc.) were established. Shortly after the signing of the Moscow communique the Yemen Crown Prince announced that the Soviet Union would help in some specific industrial development projects, and that for this purpose a Soviet office would be opened in Yemen; presumably out of respect for the principle of

equality Yemen has been accorded the right of opening a similar development agency in Moscow.

Eye on Natural Resources and Communications

As in other countries where Russia invests money, her eyes are directed in Yemen primarily towards two spheres, i.e., the prospecting of natural resources and communications. Every Soviet comment on Yemeni economy points to her undeveloped natural wealth and her key position on international lines of communications. Thus, for example, the "Agitator's Notebook" (of 18.5.56) referred to "the important geographical situation of Yemen at the entrance to the Red Sea from the Indian Ocean..." "Trud" of 2 January, 1957, recalled that "the wealth of the mineral resources of Yemen as well as the fertility of the land earned the country, in ancient times, the name of "Arabia Felix". Various potential mineral resources have been mentioned on various occasions by the Soviet Press, i.e., oil. (It may be noted that so far surveys made with Western assistance revealed salt, some coal, and limestone; a German survey failed to trace oil, but further drilling for oil is carried out in North Yemen by Americans). According to Arab sources the Soviet Union has, in fact, been given prospecting rights for some minerals by the Yemeni, especially oil and uranium. Early in January, 1958, a Soviet mission of economists and technicians arrived in Yemen to prepare development loans to the tune of 56 million dollars.

Military Aid

At the same time Soviet engineers are to start building a commercial port at Mina el Hamadani. It is also known that Soviet harbour construction extends to military installations. Construction work is planned to turn Hodeida into a naval base and a base for Soviet submarines. Reports have been received in the West of Soviet assisted construction of forts at Sheikh Saeed, overlooking the Strait of Bab el Mandab, (The Times 17.4.58). The 1956 Moscow visit of the Crown Prince was followed within a few months (October 1956) by the first consignment of arms. As in other similar cases these came under Czechoslovak cover; since then several shipments of various arms were reported.

It will be noted that the establishment of political and economic relations with the USSR entailed similar contacts with other Communist countries. As foreshadowed, Yemen also granted recognition to China in return for a pact which brought the Yemenis a pledge of Chinese loans to the amount of 17 1/2 million dollars. (Early this year Mohammed el-Badr went to Peking and on his way back visited Moscow again.)

Top beneficiary.

Altogether the Communist bloc has granted to the small country credits of 80,000,000 dollars and delivered by now 30,000,000 dollars worth of arms. Thus political considerations and strings placed the primitive country, of about 4,000,000 people, among the highest financed (per capita) friends of the "democratic" camp.