

Libya: The Seeding of a New Democracy

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The Revolution

Revolutions rarely serve as panaceas for all societies' ills, and in this vein the Libyan revolution is not an exception. The February 2011 revolution spawned by the city of Benghazi, the capital of the eastern province of Cyrenaica, spread like wildfire, engulfing the North African country and toppling the regime of Colonel Gaddafi. Until then, only the Castro brothers in Cuba surpassed the Libyan regime's longevity.

Like other revolutions in the so-called "Arab Spring," the Libyan revolution had no leaders, organisation, or pre-planning. It was a spontaneous revolution undertaken by a city that had been used and abused by a corrupt dictatorship for four decades. Cyrenaica produces 70% of Libya's oil and is the source of much of the country's water resources. Yet the region had the poorest living conditions in the country, made worse by a dilapidated infrastructure, corruption, graft, and a perpetual decay in the quality of life and societal norms.

After forty years of suppressing its people, the Gaddafi regime was unable to contain the anger that arose from a peaceful protest over the whereabouts of Libya's "Disappeared." The regime responded by arresting and imprisoning a number of individuals it blamed for organising the demonstration. The response to a second peaceful demonstration, demanding the release of those arrested, was met with bullets killing 253 unarmed civilians.

Removing the regime from Benghazi and Cyrenaica as well as establishing a safe haven for the insur-

gency and a spearhead for the revolution was almost instantaneous, and within days the regime's forces were pushed out of the province westwards towards Sirte, Gaddafi's birthplace and stronghold.

Gaddafi's one-man rule had weak institutions, which over the years had become very brittle. When called upon to meet the challenges posed by the events of 2011, they failed miserably. This, along with a lack of communication, discipline and organisation among the regime's supporters, can initially be credited with the success of the revolution, more than any military threat posed by unarmed civilians in Benghazi. Indeed, the regime's military response was brutal and would have been genocidal were it not for the military intervention by NATO forces. Gaddafi sent his son, Mutassim, to Benghazi at the head of a huge armoured column with instructions to decimate the city. Although the defenders thwarted two attempts to penetrate their city with improvised weapons, explosives and acts of sacrifice and heroism, they would certainly not have been able to survive such an attack for long. It was the French and American fighter planes that destroyed the column before a third attempt was made, inflicting heavy losses in men and equipment. After the liberation of Benghazi, it was evident that it was only a matter of time before the regime crumbled and Libya would be free from the Gaddafi nightmare.

In less than a year the dictatorship had fallen and the National Transitional Council (NTC) assumed power. They arranged elections for a 200-seat caretaker Parliament entrusted with selecting a new government and writing a new constitution that would be put to the vote in a public referendum. In 2012, Libya celebrated its first free and democratic elections. The secular coalition garnered 40% of the vote and, contrary to the trend of new elections in North Africa, the main religious party received less than 7%. Oth-

er small parties of different orientations also got small numbers of representatives but many of the seats were secured by independents. Women made up 39% of the representatives in the new Libyan Parliament, which is a first in the Middle East, if not in much of the world.

However, setting up interim institutions was the easy part. These institutions are now up and running, but the obstacles to their efficient running are huge. After several attempts, Parliament was able to ratify an interim Prime Minister and a new government, yet it has been paralysed into inaction by the problems it is facing. The government has no army or security force to insure the implementation of its policies. The religious parties, although small in representation, wield a great deal of power through some of the heavily armed religious militias, and they are not interested in democracy or democratic institutions. Until a shift in public opinion takes place, the status quo is optimal for the religious parties, given that there is so much popular opposition to them. But this paralysis is preventing policies from being formulated and implemented. The government is training new recruits, but not fast enough. Moreover, it is not willing to confront this lawlessness with the forces it has for fear of appearing dictatorial.

The difficulty in dealing with Libya today is a miserably divisive and destructive Gaddafi legacy that still has the potential of destroying the little that has thus far been achieved. There are many countries in the democratic world that want to see the Libyan revolution succeed and are willing to offer aid and expertise to help Libyans find the path to democracy. However, the major hindrance to achieving that goal are segments of Libyan society that for a variety of reasons, lack the ability to see themselves surviving or coping in a free democratic milieu structured by democratic institutions to the benefit of all Libyans. This is very evident on the ground and has far-reaching implications for the country's security, economy, politics, and psychology.

The Security Milieu

The biggest and most pressing problem currently facing Libya is the proliferation of arms. Libya is a huge country that is very difficult to shut off, but

since declaring the southern half a arms-free zone, the interim government has been able to substantially reduce all forms of illegal activities. Drones bought from South Africa and Turkey, in conjunction with European training and support, has enabled the country to keep a closer watch on its borders.

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Since 1970, Gaddafi spent untold billions of dollars on the purchase of weapons for a variety of uses. The majority of these arms were Soviet made and seemed to provide the regime with a sense of security, but the arsenal was also used beyond Libya's borders in other parts of Africa and Libyan weapons also found their way into terrorist organisations around the globe. Much of the country's military arsenal, however, was never used and remained crated until the revolution of 2011.

As Gaddafi's soldiers withdrew from areas they occupied, huge caches of military hardware were left behind. In the absence of a central revolutionary army or government to assume responsibility for them, many of the weapons fell into the hands of newly formed militias. Additionally, arms merchants found the situation in Libya perfect for acquiring new weapons systems and light munitions at one tenth of the normal cost.

Libya, in the initial months after Gaddafi's demise, became a huge arms bazaar where one could purchase equipment ranging from tanks to shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles. Many of those weapons found their way south to sub-Saharan Africa carried by soldiers who had served in Gaddafi's "Africa Legion." Disassembled Russian-made helicopters were loaded onto trucks and sent towards Niger, Chad, Mauritania, Mali and other countries of the Sahel. Libyan weapons also found their way to Egypt and Palestine as well as Syria. And, as late as May 2013, weapons were being sold in open-air markets in Benghazi along with extremely destructive plastic explosives.

Libyan militias fall into three categories: bona fide freedom fighters, religious followers, and thugs. The first are genuine militias representing different cities, which have participated in the revolution, maintained security, and expressed a willingness to disband or be incorporated into the State's police force or security apparatus. However, until that happens they continue to exert huge influence on the system. Indeed, to the chagrin of Cyrenaica, the militias from Misrata and Zintan have transformed these two cities into autonomous City-States with their own budgets and military forces. Putting them to the test will be the next challenge for the interim government, but it is highly unlikely that this will happen before enough army recruits are ready to assume their duties.

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The second group of militias has a specific goal. They see themselves as guardians of a future Libya, and it is their duty to promote and prepare for a religious state. They take it upon themselves to make arrests and apply Islamic law if they consider it necessary. In essence, they see themselves as a state within a state. The majority of Libyans oppose these militia groups and their techniques, and on two occasions people in Benghazi have gathered to take action against them. The larger of the two followed the death of the American Ambassador Christopher Stevens. More than 50,000 of the city's inhabitants took to the streets to march against the groups, burning their headquarters and freeing the individuals they detained. Religious militias were also attacked and driven underground in other cities in eastern Libya, but they continue to be a potential headache for any new, fragile secular government. The third group is the most prevalent and its control requires a state with a strong police force and legal institutions. Militias in this group are thugs who dabble in drugs, alcohol, illegal immigrants, arms and

other illegal activities. They are heavily armed and do as they please. Libyans have ignored them on the erroneous assumption that they do not pose an imminent threat to the State and can be dealt with in the future if they are still an issue. Moreover, this group has served as a check on the religious militias. Like the religious militias, however, they have become such a dangerous force that the current government has initiated a programme to confront them and terminate their activities. Dealing with the militias will not be easy, but the government is slowly winning the war, training more security forces with the help of NATO members. People are sick of militias and see them as a destabilising agent and dangerous. Popular demonstrations and attacks on militias throughout the country have strengthened the hand of interim Prime Minister Ali Zaidan in dealing with this problem.

Economic Milieu

Gaddafi's economic policies have been so disorganised, corrupt, and detrimental to the health and welfare of the Libyan economy and people, that forty years of his mismanagement has left the country flirting with economic disaster. Poverty, homelessness, unemployment, misery, and ill health are what Libyans found staring them in the face in 2011. With such high oil revenues and such desperate need, 2011 and 2012 saw greed, graft and opportunism taking hold of Libya's economy. The government of the Transitional Council sought to acquire legitimacy by buying people off. More than 60 billion dollars were wasted on handouts and useless schemes, including five billion on office furniture for non-existent offices. Indeed the major fear today is of inflation and the inability of Libyans to make ends meet. Every other day, one group or another goes on strike and occupies whatever organisation they work in, demanding more money or privileges.

Security concerns and the shortage of labour have brought building activity to a standstill. Foreign companies working in the country are in no hurry to return and complete projects they started before the revolution, until a permanent government that can guarantee their security and the security of their workers is in place. Cities, with the exception of Misrata and Zintan, are in desperate need of infrastructure funds

to provide services for their inhabitants. The current government is unable to prevent the interim Parliament from allotting huge sums to pet projects or undertaking unplanned programmes with dubious potential outcomes. Graft, nepotism, and opportunism continue to be rampant at all levels of the economy. Yet, all of these pale in comparison to the administrative vacuum that Libya is currently facing. The Isolation Law of April 2013 has banned all individuals who served during the Gaddafi regime in high and medium-ranking positions from public service for a period of ten years. That excludes approximately 300,000 people from government positions. And while the law seems reasonable, excluding so many at this stage will further increase the negative pressure of the administrative vacuum. The country continues to have an incompetent bureaucratic apparatus with employees who do not know the simplest organisational techniques or how an organisation functions.

Societal Milieu

During the Libyan monarchy the concept of shame forced Libyans to abide by the law and refrain from doing wrong. Gaddafi's regime eradicated that concept and replaced it with fear. Today, Libyans have neither shame nor fear and this can be easily seen in their daily interaction.

Respect for privacy and private property have vanished. In the absence of a police force and a legal system, there are no taboos. Individuals are robbed at gunpoint, homes are burglarised and forging ownership documents or occupying properties are regular occurrences. The art of debate and give and take is lost. People's fuses have become short and fights erupt over the most absurd of issues. Holding up traffic by parking in the middle of the road, double parking, throwing garbage in the street, and not abiding by the simplest decent behaviour is a common day occurrence. Gaddafi's bribe-taking had been frowned upon by society and if it did occur it was usually done in secret. Today it is no longer a hidden exercise and has emerged as a quid pro quo in every activity. Nothing gets done unless someone gets paid. The examples are too many to enumerate but that type of mentality is best exemplified by the anecdote of an airline passenger travelling from Frankfurt to Tripoli. In Germany, he abided by the

"No Smoking" signs in the airport for many hours, but upon arriving in Tripoli the passenger stood under a "No Smoking" sign in the airport and lit a cigarette. Asked why in Tripoli and not in Germany his answer was "Libya is Free."

It is precisely this skewed understanding of freedom, where individuals act with civility and dignity beyond their borders and like savages at home, that is causing the problems Libya is currently facing. The majority of Libyans rebel against this legacy and many yearn to be sent out to Europe and other developed countries at government expense, as students, medical patients or trainees to experience civilised behaviour and respect for human rights. Yet, as though they have been programmed to do so, upon their return most revert to being the same as before they left. This is Gaddafi's legacy, and Libya has a long way to go to overcome it and will certainly not do so in this generation. The best policy a wise government can pursue is to act as a caretaker until the next generation comes through, who will hopefully be more worthy of their country.

Conclusion

Libya and Libyan society have many problems to overcome and it is too early to draw conclusions from the revolution. Revolutions take years to show fruition and Libya will be no exception. The country is free from tyranny and there are positives and negatives in the mix. Foremost among the positives is the commitment to democratic rule and equality among all members of society, irrespective of race or gender. It also has few but highly competent individuals who will undoubtedly leave their impact on the new political structure and economy. Furthermore, more than 400,000 Libyans live in diaspora composing a valuable resource for Libya's transition. Many have already returned and will be able to help the country overcome the Gaddafi legacy and fill part of the political, social, and administrative voids the country is facing. They also carry with them the seeds of civilisation, which given time and proper nurturing will germinate and flourish. Libya is drafting a new constitution to be followed by new elections and a new government. And, while post-Gaddafi Libyans have many shortcomings, their unanimous commitment to democracy and freedom is not one of them.