

Letter from Libya: Circle of Fire

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Here's a story they tell in Libya. Three contestants are in a race to run five hundred metres carrying a bag of rats. The first sets off at a good pace, but after a hundred metres the rats have chewed through the bag and spill onto the course. The second contestant gets to a hundred and fifty metres, and the same thing happens. The third contestant shakes the bag so vigorously as he runs that the rats are constantly tumbling and cannot chew on anything, and he takes the prize. That third contestant is Libya's leader, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, the permanent revolutionary.

Libya is about the size of Germany, France, Italy, and Spain, combined, but its population, just under six million, is roughly the same as Denmark's. Oil revenues make Libya, per capita, one of the wealthiest countries in Africa, and yet malnutrition and anemia are among its most prevalent health problems. It is an Islamic country where alcohol is illegal and most married women wear the *hijab*; it is a secular country where women are legally allowed to wear bikinis and Qaddafi is protected by a phalanx of gun-toting female bodyguards. The version of socialism promulgated in the mid-nineteen-seventies by Qaddafi's political manifesto, "The Green Book," is honored; the country is in the throes of capitalist reform. The head of the Libyan Publishers' League says that the books most often requested in his store are the Koran and Bill Clinton's "My Life." Then, of course, there's the official line that the country is ruled by its citizens, through Basic People's Congresses, and the practical reality that it is ruled by Qaddafi. Libyan officials must far outstrip the Red Queen in her habit of believing six impossible things before breakfast.

For Americans, there's an even more salient contradiction. A regime led by a man President Reagan dubbed "the mad dog of the Middle East"—a regime that, throughout the nineteen-eighties, sponsored such groups as the I.R.A., the Abu Nidal Organization, and the Basque ETA, and was blamed for the explosion that, in 1988, downed Pan Am Flight 103, over Lockerbie, Scotland—is now an acknowledged ally in America's war on terror. Libya's governing circles are beset by infighting between those who think that this alliance is a good thing and hope for closer ties to the West and those who regard the West with truculent suspicion.

Qaddafi came to power in 1969, at the age of twenty-seven, when, as a junior military officer, he helped stage a bloodless coup against the pro-Western King Idris, who had been installed by the Allies after the Second World War. Now Qaddafi claims that he has no formal role in Libya and is simply an avuncular figure dispensing wisdom when asked. Yet Libyans are afraid to say his name, except in official contexts, where it meets with predictable cheering. The general euphemism is "the Leader." Informally, people refer to Qaddafi as the Big Guy or the One, or just point an index finger straight up. Saying "Qaddafi" aloud is thought to invite trouble. So is questioning his sometimes absurd policy proposals. He once insisted that families should use only one bar of soap a week. On another occasion, he proposed that currency be eliminated in favor of barter. "He believes in desert culture, even though the desert has no culture," one cosmopolitan resident of Libya's capital, Tripoli, told me. "He is trying to take life to its childhood."

The name of Qaddafi's second-oldest son and possible successor, Seif el-Islam al-Qaddafi, is seldom spoken, either. The inner circle refers to Seif, who is one of eight children, as the Principal, but he is also called the Son, the Brave Young Man, Our Young Friend, and the Engineer. The relationship between father and son is a topic of constant speculation. The Principal holds no title and, in keeping

with his father's decree, maintains that the position of Leader is not hereditary. He does, however, sit comfortably close to power. The Leader, for all his opposition to royalty, looks a lot like a king, and the Principal is his crown prince.

Seif's role is to be the face of reform, "to polish his father's picture," as one prominent Libyan writer suggested to me. His academic papers at the London School of Economics, where he is pursuing a doctorate in political philosophy, are said to show a solid grasp of Hobbes and Locke. He founded the Qaddafi International Foundation for Charity Associations, which fights torture at home and abroad and works to promote human rights. He appears to be committed to high principles, even though real democratic change might put him out of the political picture. One of Seif's advisers told me that Seif would rather be the first elected head of the Libyan state than the second unelected leader of the revolution, but that he could go either way.

"Qaddafi claims that he is not the Leader, and Seif claims that he is the opposition, and they are both liars," Maitre Saad Djebbar, an Algerian lawyer who has worked on Libyan affairs for many years, said. Others see a personal agenda. "The Leader is a Bedouin from the desert and simply wants power and control—he is content to rule a wrecked country," the expatriate poet Khaled Mattawa told me. "But his sons are urban; they have travelled, studied abroad, learned sophistication. They go falconing in the Gulf states with the princes of royal families. They want to drive BMWs and rule a country that is accepted in the panoply of nations."

Seif's office is in Tripoli's tallest and fanciest tower—a hulking glass building topped by a gigantic circular apparatus that was intended as a revolving restaurant but neither revolves nor serves food. The foundation's suite is modest and sparsely furnished, and its staff members appear to be the busiest people in Libya, bent over computers, talking simultaneously on several phones, surrounded by papers. The walls are covered with posters for Seif's causes: one shows a man with his face wrapped in barbed wire, with the caption "International Campaign Against Torture: Middle East Area: Libya the First Station."

Seif, however, is usually elsewhere, and I met him last fall in Montreal, where he was opening an exhibition of his own paintings. These are rendered with expressionist enthusiasm in a variety of familiar styles and may feature images of horses, desert skies, the face of the Leader, or one of Seif's beloved pet Bengal tigers. Seif has bestowed his pictures on urban centers from Paris to Tokyo, where they have been received as documentary curiosities, like the personal effects of the last tsarina. Whether the primary function of these exhibitions is political, social, or artistic is never discussed.

We met at the Sofitel, which had given over the top floor to Seif and his entourage. Various deputies and advisers had gathered there in a large, nondescript suite. When he came in, everyone sat up straighter. Though Seif tries to be intimate and casual, his presence, even his name, makes other people formal. He wore a well-cut suit, and moved with grace. At thirty-three, he is good-looking and hip, with a shaved head, and he speaks intelligently, though with the vagueness about self and reality that afflicts royalty and child stars, and that comes from never having seen oneself accurately reflected in the eyes of others. He has more than a trace of the paternal charisma, but it has yet to harden into genius, incoherence, or his father's trademark combination of the two.

When I asked why Libya was not proceeding more rapidly toward democratic reform, Seif said, "In the last fifty years, we have moved from being a tribal society to being a colony to being a kingdom to being a revolutionary republic. Be patient." (After centuries of Ottoman rule, Libya was occupied by Italy between 1912 and 1943.) But, like his father, Seif relishes extravagant pronouncements, and soon proposed that Libya give up its entire military.

"The whole faith and strategy has changed," he said, looking to his courtiers for nods of agreement. "Why should we have an army? If Egypt invades Libya, the Americans are going to stop it." During the Reagan years, he said, Libya was "expecting America to attack us anytime—our whole defensive strategy was how to deal with the Americans. We used terrorism and violence because these are the weapons of the weak against the strong. I don't have missiles to hit your cities, so I send someone to attack your interests. Now that we have peace with America, there is no need for terrorism, no need for nuclear bombs." Seif dismissed any comparison between the terrorism that Libya had sponsored in the past and the kind associated with Al Qaeda. "We used terrorism as tactics, for bargaining," he told me. "Mr. bin Laden uses it for strategy. We wanted to gain more leverage. He wants to kill people. Fundamentalism in Libya—it's always there, though not so strong as before, in the nineteen-nineties." Seif did not mention that in the nineteen-nineties his father's security forces routinely imprisoned fundamentalists.

Religious extremists had "created a lot of problems in Libya," Seif said. "They tried to destabilize the whole society. But not anymore. Now they are weak. But the threat is there, the potential is there." Seif noted that three Libyans had been involved in suicide bombings in Iraq last year. "They are being recruited by Zarqawi," he said, "who wants to create cells and attack American interests in Libya—oil companies, American schools, and so on. It's a disaster for us, because we want the American presence. There aren't so many of these extremists, several dozen, but even that in a country like Libya is a big headache." As for American security interests, he said, "We are already on your side, helping the American war on terror. It's happening, and it's going to happen."

Seif's rhetoric may beguile his Western admirers, but to the hard-liners in Libya's government it remains anathema. Seif, for his part, refused to acknowledge the substantial Libyan opposition to reform: "Maybe there are three or four citizens like this. Not more."

That was the most outlandish of his declarations. An American congressional aide who has worked closely with Seif accurately described him as "eighty per cent sophisticated." Seif's prospects, of course, will depend not upon his profile abroad but upon his ability to orchestrate support at home. Despite his political presence in Libya, his father's legacy will not be easily assumed; there are too many competitors for the next generation of power. But Seif is a canny fellow. "The Principal knows that one secret of leadership is to see where the parade is headed," one of his advisers told me, "and rush in front of it before it gets there."

In 2004, two decades of American sanctions came to an end, after Libya had agreed to pay compensation for the victims of Lockerbie and renounced weapons of mass destruction. (Seif, who has spent a good deal of energy trying to rehabilitate Libya's image in the world, was involved in both negotiations.) Since then, the great question in Tripoli has been how deeply reform will penetrate a country that has been largely isolated for decades. Within the government, the fighting is bitter. The National Oil Company (reformist) and the Department of Energy (hard-line) are in constant conflict, as are the Ministry of Economics (reformist) and the Libyan Central Bank (hard-line). Since Qaddafi makes the ultimate ideological decisions, the spectacle calls to mind the worst aspects of multiparty democracy, albeit without parties or democracy.

According to Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, a Libyan expatriate who chairs the political-science department at the University of New England, in Maine, Qaddafi "plays his biological son Seif el-Islam against his ideological son Ahmed Ibrahim." Ibrahim is the deputy speaker of the General People's Congress, and the most public of an influential conservative triumvirate that also includes Musa Kusa, the head of Libyan intelligence, and Abdallah Senoussi, who oversees internal security. (About a year ago, Ibrahim declared that the United States, under orders from President Bush, was "forging the Koran and distributing the false copies among Americans in order to tarnish the image of Muslims and Islam.")

The infighting helps Qaddafi moderate the pace of change. "He thinks reform should come 'like a thief in the night,' so that it is hardly noticed," one family friend said. In some areas—notably with respect to civil liberties and economic restructuring—the rate of change is glacial. "What's the hurry?" A. M. Zlitni, the country's chief economic planner, asked when we spoke, with the careful blandness that Libyan officials affect in order to avoid affiliation with either camp. "We are not desperate." In other areas, change has occurred with startling speed. Although the country is still afflicted with the legacies of its two colonial powers—Byzantine corruption and Italian bureaucracy—it has opened up to international trade with dispatch: there are foreign goods for sale, even if few Libyans can afford them. You can buy Adidas sneakers and Italian shoes, along with local knockoffs like a brand of toothpaste called Crust. In bookstores once devoid of English-language titles, you can find editions of "Billy Budd," "Invisible Man," and the works of Congreve. The private sector is back in force. Hundreds of channels are available on satellite TV, and Internet cafés are crowded. One senior official said, "A year ago, it was a sin to mention the World Trade Organization. Now we want to become a member." The editor of Al Shams (the Sun), a leading state-owned paper, described a newsroom policy shift from "expressing struggle against the West to advocating working with foreign countries."

"Qaddafi understands the tribal structure and has the ability to play one person against another, one group against another," one Libyan official explained. "He's a strategic genius. He is doing with the reformers and hard-liners what he has done with these tribes, playing the pro-Western element against the anti-Western element."

For a foreigner, there's no better illustration of the push-me, pull-you quality of the new Libya than the process of getting in. An application for a journalist's visa that I submitted last year went nowhere, although the Libyan representative to the United States assured me steadily for five months that the visa was nearly ready. (When I met with Seif in Montreal, he volunteered to take care of it, with no evident results.) Next, I joined an international party of archeologists who had been promised entry—but as we were waiting to board a Libyan Arab Airlines flight in Rome we were abruptly denied access to the plane. One source in the Libyan government told us that the Ministry of Immigration had moved recently and our papers had been mislaid. Another said that the head of the visa section had sabotaged files during the move. A third said that the story about the move had been floated as an alibi; the Leader had decided not to let in any Americans. Indeed, a tour group from the Metropolitan Museum arrived by ship in Tripoli in October and was not allowed to dock; the next month, five other ships met the same fate.

As a dual national, I applied using my British passport, again as a member of the archeologists' delegation, and, as advised, wrote on the form that I was Anglican. Finally, I received a document marked "sixty-day invitation," though no one knew whether that was sixty days from the date of the letter, sixty days from the date the visa was stamped in my passport, or sixty days from the date I entered the country. I called the Libyan consulate in London every day about my visa. In the morning, there was no answer. In the afternoon, someone answered and said that consular services were available only in the morning. I flew to London, where the consular officer explained that I could enter Libya anytime in the next forty-five days for a stay of up to ninety days. I arrived at Tripoli airport in mid-November. Through a Libyan travel agency, I had arranged for a car at the airport, and, just as I'd joined a nearly motionless line for immigration, a man from the agency came by with my name on a placard, and walked me straight through; the immigration officer never even looked to see whether I matched my passport. "Your visa expired—you were supposed to enter within thirty days," the man said. "Fortunately, the guy at immigration is a friend, so it wasn't a problem."

It was an apt introduction to a country where the law is always open to interpretation and personal connections are the principal currency. I was in as a British Christian archeologist rather than as an

American Jewish journalist, but I was in. I promptly went to the International Press Office, where I declared my journalistic purpose, and where the man in charge lectured me for thirty minutes about why Libyan democracy was better than American, the terrible untruths that American journalists had heaped on Libya, and America's imperialist tendencies. Then he volunteered that the officials I'd wanted to speak to would be too busy for me, and that I shouldn't have come.

This was standard procedure. Last April, after months of planning, the Council on Foreign Relations, in New York, sent an august delegation—including David Rockefeller, Peter G. Peterson, Alan Patricof, and Leonard Lauder—to Libya, with appointments to meet both Muammar and Seif Qaddafi. After they arrived, they were told that the Leader was unavailable and that the Principal had made a scheduling error and was on his way to Japan.

Officials in Libya seldom say no and seldom say yes. Libyans use a popular Arab term: I.B.M., which stands for *Inshallah, bokra, mounken*, or "With the will of God, tomorrow, maybe." All plans are provisional, even at the highest levels of government. You can see the head of the National Oil Company with an hour's notice; you can also spend weeks preparing for an appointment that never materializes.

I requested a meeting with the Prime Minister, Shukri Ghanem, before I went to Libya and every day for three weeks while I was in Tripoli. On my last day, I was in the middle of a meeting when my cell phone rang. "The Prime Minister will see you," someone said. I said that I hoped he could see me before I had to leave. "The Prime Minister will see you *now*," he replied. "Oh, O.K., I'll get my tape recorder—" I began. "He will see you *right now*," the voice interrupted. "Where are you?" I gave the address. "A car will pick you up in three minutes."

The drive to the Prime Minister's office was terrifying, as most Libyan driving is. Tripolitans seem to think that traffic lights are just festive bits of colored glass strewn randomly along the roads, and they rebel against tightly regulated lives by ignoring all driving rules, blithely heading into opposing traffic on the far side of a two-way road, turning abruptly across five lanes of streaming cars. "No shortage of organs for transplant here!" a Libyan acquaintance remarked during one excursion. The driver dropped me at the wrong building. It took two hours of calls and confusion to reach my destination.

Dr. Shukri, as he is called by those close to him and by those who pretend to be close to him—he has a Ph.D. in international relations from the Fletcher School, at Tufts—has a certain portly grandeur. With a neat mustache and a well-tailored suit, he exuded an effortless cosmopolitanism that seemed more conducive to facilitating Libya's reentry into the world than to winning over the hard-line elements at home. When I arrived, he was sitting on a gilded sofa in a room furnished with Arabic reimaginings of Louis XVI furniture, before many trays of pastries and glasses of the inevitable mint tea. In the Libyan empire of obliquity, his clarity was refreshing, and his teasing irony seemed to acknowledge the absurdity of Libyan doubletalk.

I mentioned that many of his colleagues saw no need to hasten the pace of reform. This was clearly not his view. "Sometimes you have to be hard on those you love," he said. "You wake your sleeping child so that he can get to school. Being a little harsh, not seeking too much popularity, is a better way." He spoke of the need for pro-business measures that would reduce bureaucratic impediments and rampant corruption. "The corruption is tied to shortages, inefficiency, and unemployment," the Prime Minister said. "Cutting red tape—there is resistance to it. There is some resistance in good faith and some in bad faith."

Nor was he inclined to defer to the regime's egalitarian rhetoric. "Those who can excel should get more—having a few rich people can build a whole country," he said. Qaddafi's "Green Book" decreed

that people should be “partners, not wage workers,” but it is not easy to make everyone a partner, the Prime Minister observed. “People don’t want to find jobs. They want the government to find them jobs. It’s not viable.”

The civil service, which employs about twenty per cent of Libyans, is vastly oversubscribed; the National Oil Company, with a staff of forty thousand, has perhaps twice the employees it needs. Though salaries are capped, many people are paid for multiple jobs, and, if those jobs are overseen by members of their tribe, failure to show up is never questioned. On the other hand, because food is heavily subsidized, people can get by on very little money, enabling them to refuse jobs they consider beneath them. Heavy labor is done by sub-Saharan Africans, and slightly more skilled work by Egyptians.

“We have a paradoxical economy, in which we have many unemployed Libyans”—the official unemployment rate is almost thirty per cent—“and two million foreigners working,” Ghanem said. “This mismatch is catastrophic.” The combination of an imported workforce with high domestic unemployment is typical of oil-rich nations, but the problem is especially urgent in Libya because its population is growing rapidly—it is not unusual to meet people with fourteen children in a single marriage. Roughly half the population is under the age of fifteen.

On the subject of Islamic militants, the Prime Minister’s views were close to those expressed by both the Leader and the Principal. “Radical fundamentalism is like cancer,” he said. “It can strike anyplace, anytime, and you can’t predict it, and, by the time you discover it, it has usually spread too far to be contained. Is there such fundamentalism here? I honestly don’t think so. But it could be hatching quietly, unseen by us all.”

The predominant form of Islam in Libya is Sunni Maliki, a relatively supple creed that is remote from the fundamentalisms espoused by the jihadis. Some Libyans, though, have pointed out that conditions that seem to have bred terrorism elsewhere—prosperity without employment and a large population of young people with no sense of purpose—currently prevail in the country.

The Prime Minister was more circumspect on the prospects for U.S.-Libyan diplomacy. “We would like a relationship, yes, but we do not want to get into bed with an elephant,” he said, laughing, and spreading his hands wide in a gesture of innocence. “It could roll over in the night and crush us.”

I mentioned public statements he’d made about being unable to bring about reform when he had to work with a Cabinet assembled by Qaddafi, and asked about the constraints on his authority. Ghanem assumed the air of one confiding a great personal truth. “My ministers are like my brothers,” he said, wrapping his hands around his knee. “I didn’t choose them.” He paused and added with a smile, “My father chose them.”

At the center of Tripoli lies Green Square. Now mostly a parking lot, it’s one of those vast anonymous spaces which military regimes favor. East of Green Square lie the surviving Italian colonial buildings. To the west is the old city, a warren of tiny streets and shops, crowned by the ancient Red Castle, which houses a distinguished archeological museum. In front is an esplanade beside the sea. The modern city stretches out in all other directions, with some neighborhoods of private villas, and many of Soviet-style housing developments; it reflects both the optimism and the shoddiness of more recent Libyan history.

I was invited, one day, to the opening of a special exhibition on volunteerism, in a tent in Green Square. Addressing a gathering of a hundred or so people, an official said that tribute had to be paid to the greatest volunteer of all: Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, who, unlike the American President, does not draw a salary but out of “love and honesty” graciously consents to rule. “There is one God,

and Muhammad is his prophet, and Qaddafi is his modern incarnation!" someone in the crowd cried. Such public avowals are of a piece with the billboards you find throughout Libya, showing a beaming Qaddafi, as triumphant and windswept as Clark Gable. Those billboards are the first thing a visitor notices; the second is the ubiquity of litter. Wherever you go—including even the spectacular ruins of the Hellenistic and Roman cities of Cyrene, Sabratha, and Leptis Magna—you see plastic bottles, bags, paper, chicken bones, cans: a film covering the landscape. "It's how the people of Libya piss on the system," one Libyan academic told me. "The Leader doesn't actually care about this country. Why should we keep it beautiful for him?" It is the most arresting of the country's many paradoxes: Libyans who hate the regime but love Libya cannot tell where one ends and the other begins. You can take this as a tribute, by way of inversion, to the state ideology.

In the early seventies, the Leader, disappointed by his countrymen's lack of revolutionary fervor, withdrew to the desert to write "The Green Book," in which he advanced his Third Universal Theory as superior to capitalism and Communism. Individuals were to own their homes; other land was to be held in common. In 1977, he issued a Declaration of the Establishment of the People's Authority, launching the Jamahiriya, or "state of the masses," and the Libyan system of "direct democracy," in which the country is "ruled" by the People's Congresses: what "The Green Book" calls the "supervision of the government by the people." The Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya—memorably abbreviated as "the Great SPLAJ"—was born. "The Green Book" proposes that, to avoid internal disputes, every nation should have one religion, but it makes no mention of Islam.

Qaddafi claimed that his manifesto enshrined the basic tenets of the Koran (freely equating, for instance, the Koranic notion of alms-giving with his redistributive social-welfare policies), and that it therefore had the status of Sharia. His relation to Islam has two aspects: he draws upon it to buttress his authority, but he is hostile to the Islamists because he will countenance no rivals to that authority.

The two radical decades that ensued—televised public hangings, burnings of Western books and musical instruments, the sudden prohibition of private enterprise, intense anti-Zionism, official solidarity with terrorist and guerrilla groups—met with sharp international disapprobation. Libya's rogue status allowed Qaddafi to consolidate power and play protector of his besieged population, a role in which he excels.

One Libyan in early middle age who had lived in the United States until September 11th, and who missed America, spoke of what was wrong with Qaddafi's Libya, and then said, "But I wouldn't be where I am without the revolution. They paid for my education, sent me to America, and gave me a life I wouldn't have dreamed of without them."

In part, that's a reflection of the fact that pre-revolutionary Libya was poor. The Jamahiriya benefitted from the dramatic increase in petroleum prices that began in the seventies, and from the more aggressive revenue-sharing deals it imposed on foreign oil companies, so that oil earnings in the mid-seventies were roughly ten times what they had been in the mid-sixties. Oil money made possible major investments in education and infrastructure. The literacy rate in Libya has risen from about twenty per cent, before Qaddafi came to power, to eighty-two per cent. The average life expectancy has risen from forty-four to seventy-four. More than eighty thousand kilometres of roads have been built. Electricity has become nearly universal.

And Qaddafi has become, for most Libyans, simply a fact of life. Of Libya's nearly six million citizens, more than seventy per cent have been born since he came to power. During that period, the cult of personality has sparked and dimmed, in a way that has a certain congruence with the phases of Soviet leadership: a heady moment of Leninist-style revolution when many people believed in the

ideals; a Stalinist period of cruel repression and deliberate violence; a long Khrushchev period of mild thaw; and now a Brezhnev-style period of corruption, chaos, and factionalism. Many of Seif Qaddafi's admirers hope that he will prove to be the reforming Gorbachev of the story.

The fact that an essentially repressive society can be characterized as being in the midst of reform reflects just how grim things used to be there. In Tripoli, I heard stories about life inside prison from many people whose only offense against the Jamahiriya was to be critical of it. In 2002, a former government official who publicly called for free elections and a free press was jailed; he was released in early 2004—only to be sent back to prison two weeks later for criticizing the regime to foreign reporters. There is no opposition press; an Internet journalist who had published stories critical of the government spent several months in prison last year on trumped-up charges. There are “social rehabilitation” facilities—effectively, detention centers—supposedly for the protection of women who have broken the laws against adultery and fornication, some of whom are in fact rape victims rejected by their families. A woman in these compounds can leave only if a male relative or fiancé takes her into his custody.

More widely covered is the case of five Bulgarian nurses who were accused in 1999 of deliberately infecting four hundred and twenty-six children in a Benghazi hospital with H.I.V. The nurses were tortured until they confessed, and were sentenced to death in May, 2004. Among people outside Libya, the accusations seem bizarre and concocted; among most Libyans, it's taken for granted that the children were deliberately infected and that the Bulgarians are the likeliest culprits. (Whereas Western investigators have blamed the infections on poor sanitation, a Libyan doctor close to the case maintains that only children on the ward where the convicted nurses worked were infected, and that, when the Bulgarians left, the infections ceased, despite the fact that sanitary conditions, in all the wards, remain far from ideal.) Seif has said that the convictions were unjust, a brave stand given how important it is that he not appear to be capitulating to Western pressure. “Sure, the Big Guy let Seif say the nurses were innocent—to see how it would play,” a junior government official explained. “And it played badly.” A few months later, Qaddafi reaffirmed the hard line, declaring that the infections were caused by “an organization aiming to destroy Libya.” Negotiations with the Bulgarians are ongoing, however, and Libya's supreme court has granted the defendants a new trial, which is to begin in May.

Qaddafi is no Saddam Hussein or Idi Amin. He has been brutal and capricious, but he has not killed a large part of his own population. It is illegal to slander the Leader, and Law 71 makes a capital offense of any group activity opposed to the revolution, but this has been less strictly enforced lately. Libya has signed the U.N. Convention Against Torture, and the Minister of Justice has said that he will bring Libyan law in line with international human-rights standards. Some of this is window dressing. “They closed the People's Prisons, where all our political prisoners were,” one Tripolitan lawyer told me. “And what happened? The political prisoners got reassigned to other prisons.” The Foreign Minister, Abdurrahman Shalgham, told me with pride that four hundred policemen had been arrested for human-rights abuses—then admitted that none have been found guilty.

Last year, Omar Alkikli, a highly regarded fiction writer who was a political prisoner for ten years in the seventies and early eighties, sued the Libyan government for excluding former prisoners from the Libyan Writers' League. “I lost, and I knew I would lose,” he said. “But I made my point.” A medical student at Tripoli's Al-Fateh University told me, “O.K., they've fixed maybe four per cent of our serious problems, but I guess it's something.” An official in Benghazi said, “The laws that were made of stone are now made of wood.”

Few Libyans are inclined to test what civil liberties they may have. Giumma Attiga, a human-rights lawyer and one of the founders of Seif's Qaddafi Foundation, said, “The fear is very intense, very deeply ingrained. The highest official could tell people to speak freely and openly, with every

guarantee that it was safe to do so, and the words would stick in their throats.” In fact, it is a felony entailing a three-year prison sentence to discuss national policy with a foreigner, and, although such offenses have been less frequently prosecuted recently, most Libyans speak of such matters anxiously. The atmosphere is late Soviet: forbidding, secretive, careful, albeit not generally lethal. I was asked not to mention names on the phone or in e-mail. Several people asked me not to write down their phone numbers, lest my notebook be “lost.” “I am speaking from my heart,” an outspoken woman told me. “Carry it in your head.”

Surveillance is pervasive in Libya. I was warned that the cabdriver who had been helping me get around was reporting to the security services, and I understood that my cell-phone conversations were not to be considered private. All the same, I was surprised when a press officer questioned me about shades of meaning in a personal e-mail I had written home a few days earlier. Someone from Seif’s office called me indignantly one day and said, “You were heard in the hotel unfairly saying that you were unhappy with the help we’ve given you.”

One night, I had dinner with a bureaucrat who complained about local politics. He told me that he had been questioned at length after a recent conversation with a foreigner. “Our interrogators were trained in brutality, cruelty, and sneakiness by the best—people from Cuba, East Germany, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt,” he explained.

When we had finished our meal, the waiter cleared all our dishes, then came back and redeposited the sugar bowl.

“What’s with the sugar?” I asked the bureaucrat.

He gave me a bleakly mischievous look. “The other one ran out of tape,” he replied.

For the most part, when Libyans talk of democratization they envision not elections but more personal privacy, greater educational opportunities, and expanded freedom of speech. “ ‘Democracy’ here is a word that means the Leadership considers, discusses, and sometimes accepts other people’s ideas,” Zlitni, the chief economic planner, said.

Qaddafi views electoral democracy as the tyranny of fifty-one per cent—he has memorably written that citizens of Western-style democracies “move silently toward the ballot box, like the beads in a rosary, to cast their votes in the same way that they throw rubbish in dustbins”—and recently announced, not for the first time, that Western democracy was “farcical” and “fake.” “There is no state with a democracy except Libya on the whole planet,” he declared. “Countries like the United States, India, China, the Russian Federation are in bad need of this Jamahiriya system.” For most Libyan pragmatists, political reform is about changing the mechanisms of Qaddafi’s control, not about relaxing it. One government minister told me, “In most European countries, there are many parties, and in the U.S. only two. So here it is only one! It’s not such a big difference.” Even reformers seldom express much enthusiasm for electoral democracy. Most aspire to a sort of modernizing autocracy: their ideal is closer to Atatürk or the Shah of Iran than to Václav Havel. “There are no democracies in the Arab world,” said Ahmed Swehli, a young businessman who had recently moved back to Libya from England, where he was educated. “We aren’t going to go first. What we need is a really good dictator, and I think Seif al-Islam might be just that. And maybe he’ll be that and be elected, too, though I can’t think why he’d bother.” Others are less cynical about electoral democracy as an ideal, but no more hopeful about its implementation.

One reason that many Libyans are leery of elections is their fear that, in a highly tribal society, the larger tribes would win control and everyone else would be squeezed out. Less intimate and specific than families, tribes are a second layer of identity, stronger for some people than for others.

Especially among the less well educated, groups based on kinship and descent—tribes and their various subsets (subtribes, clans)—provide both a social network and a safety net: members of your group will get you a job or help you if you have money problems or mourn you when you die even if they didn't like you much while you were alive. "Better Qaddafi, a tough leader from a minor tribe, than one who represents his own tribe a hundred per cent," one Libyan intellectual said.

Meanwhile, the Basic People's Congresses provide at least a theatre of political participation. They are open to any Libyan over eighteen, and meet for a week or two, four times a year. In principle, you can discuss anything at a Congress, though an agenda is set from above. There are four hundred and sixty-eight Basic People's Congresses, and, when in session, they meet daily. Afterward, a brief report is sent from each Congress to a Central Committee. (Libya is committee heaven—there is even a National Committee for Committees.) A typical Congress includes about three hundred members; most educated people who are not trying to climb the political ladder do not go. The format is town hall with touches of Quaker meeting and Alcoholics Anonymous.

The Basic People's Congresses were in session while I was in Libya, and I repeatedly asked, in vain, to visit one. Then, by chance, I mentioned my interest during an interview with the director of the National Supply Corporation (NASCO), which administers the subsidies that are a mainstay of the Libyan economy; he said that there would be a meeting at its offices at noon and invited me to attend.

I had hoped to sit quietly in a corner; instead, I was escorted to the front row, and someone scurried in to serve me tea. A voluble woman made an impassioned speech asking why Libya imported tomato paste when there was enough water to grow tomatoes. A discussion of tomatoes ensued. The officials introduced issues of economic reform. My interest was more in the session's dynamic than in its content, so I was paying scant attention when my translator shifted from phrases such as "openly traded equities" and "reallocation of subsidy funds" to something about how "we are lucky to host a prominent American journalist"; and just as I was registering this new topic he said, "who will now address the Congress on the future of the U.S.-Libya relationship," and I was handed a microphone.

While each of my sentences was being translated into Arabic, I had a fortunate pause in which to think of the next, and so I gave a warm and heartfelt speech, saying that I hoped we would soon see full diplomatic relations between our countries, that I had loved meeting the Libyans and hoped they would feel similarly welcome in the United States, and so on. I received a protracted ovation, and thereafter every speaker prefaced his remarks with kind words about me. I was just settling into the comfortable glow of new celebrity when my translator said, "We have to go now," and took me outside, where three journalists from Al Shams wanted to interview me. We wandered through fairly predictable territory and then they asked my opinion of Qaddafi's efforts to broker peace in Darfur. (Qaddafi has publicly met both with rebel leaders and with the Sudanese President, Omar al-Bashir.) I said that anyone working on that situation deserved support. I also said that Qaddafi's opposition to terrorism would appeal to Americans.

The following day, Al Shams ran a nearly full-page story with three large photographs of me at the Congress, under a double-banner headline that said, "THE WORLD NEEDS A MAN LIKE MUAMMAR QADDAFI TO ACHIEVE GLOBAL PEACE," and, below, "THE AMERICAN PEOPLE APPRECIATE MUAMMAR QADDAFI'S ROLE IN EASING THE PAIN INFLICTED BY SEPTEMBER 11TH." The morning that the piece was published, I received my long-awaited invitation to the Qaddafi compound.

A minder from the International Press Office called to tell me that I was in for "a surprise" and that he would pick me up at my hotel at 4 P.M. At the International Press Office, near Green Square, I

joined some twenty other “international” journalists, all from Arab countries, and talked about why Qaddafi might want to see us. I was solemnly told that one never knows what the Leader wants: “One comes when asked.” Finally, at about six-forty-five, a minibus appeared; we drove twenty minutes and then stopped by a vast concrete wall, at the perimeter of Qaddafi’s compound. The car was searched and we were searched, and then we drove through a slalom course of obstacles and another security gantlet before being ushered into an immense tent with a lavish buffet. Within the next half hour, four hundred or so people piled in, many in traditional robes.

One of my new journalist friends said that “the event” was about to start, and so we went over a knoll and into a polygonal structure with exposed rafters, which bore some resemblance to a rec hall at a summer camp. Hanging on the walls were sayings of the Leader’s in huge Arabic and English type (“The United States of Africa is Africa’s Future” and “One African Identity”), flanked by poster-size photographs of Rosa Parks. It was the fiftieth anniversary of her refusal to move to the back of the bus, and that, we finally understood, was the occasion for the gathering. At the front of the room, on a dais, stood a gigantic Naugahyde armchair, with three microphones beside it. A man in medical scrubs came out and swabbed down the chair and the microphones with gauze pads, to protect the Leader from infection.

Some African-Americans were seated in the row in front of us. I introduced myself to one, and he dourly explained that he was Minister Abdul Akbar Muhammad, the international representative of the Reverend Louis Farrakhan, who had been in Tripoli earlier but had returned abruptly to the United States for health reasons. Qaddafi has long been one of the Nation of Islam’s funders.

Then the speeches began. The speakers stood at a lectern off to the side, keeping the dais free for Qaddafi. The first speaker was a former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. “We Libyans cannot accept the prejudice of Americans against Africans,” he began, to applause. “Those who were seven or eight when Rosa Parks was being shoved to the back of the bus are now fifty-seven or fifty-eight, and are leaders of the United States. They still carry this mentality. The new generation inherited this, and it is still going on.” He worked himself up into rhetorical paroxysms, as though Jim Crow laws were still in effect. “We must fight the hatred of America for Africa,” he said.

When he stepped down, Abdul Akbar Muhammad took the lectern to speak about American racial injustice, mentioning that, under segregation, blacks and whites had had to use separate hammams, or public steam baths, a detail previously lost on me. “We cannot count on the Zionist-controlled American media to tell our story,” he said. “Zionists in the U.S. won’t show how the leader of the Al-Fateh revolution is in sympathy with us and us with him.”

The Leader never emerged, apparently having decided that, if Farrakhan wasn’t making an appearance, he wouldn’t, either. Still, the event reflected his fixation on establishing Libya as more an African than an Arab country (even though most Libyans are contemptuous of black people, who do the manual labor that Libyans disdain, and who are blamed for all crime). Qaddafi’s early dream of pan-Arab unity fizzled, and when other Arab nations observed the U.N. sanctions in the nineteen-nineties, while many African countries did not, he turned southward. By African standards, Libya seems wealthy and functional; Arab nations, even North African neighbors, have little affection for Qaddafi. He has backed groups opposed to the Saudi regime, and Libyan agents were implicated in a 2003 plot to assassinate the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. (Seif suggested to me that the Libyans involved were hoping, in his coy phrase, for “regime change” but didn’t necessarily know that the agenda of their Saudi partners included physical attacks on the royal family.)

When Qaddafi went to Algeria recently, a local cartoon showed a tent pitched at the Algiers Sheraton; Qaddafi sleeps in a tent, true to his Bedouin roots. One man is saying, “Let me in, I want to go to the circus!” The other says, “There’s no circus here.” The first rejoins, “But I was told that

there's a clown in that tent!"

For modernizing reformers such as Shukri Ghanem, Libya's major problems are poor management and isolation, and the solutions are better management and global integration. "The world has changed," as Ghanem put it, "and, like other socialist states, we recognized that we had limited means and unlimited needs." The Internet and satellite television—the dishes are so plentiful that landing in Tripoli is like descending on a migrant storm of white moths—have brought further pressure for reform, by making that larger world visible. "The change has been inevitable since Oprah came on our televisions," a leading Libyan poet said to me ruefully. What Libyans mainly relate to, though, is the standard of living in other oil-rich states, as displayed on Al Jazeera and other Arab channels. Libya seems dusty and poor in comparison, and they wonder why.

Earnings from oil exports account for about eighty per cent of the national budget. In the heyday of Libyan oil production, the country produced three million barrels a day. That number has dropped to 1.7 million, but the National Oil Company plans to get it back up by 2010. Libyan oil is of high quality, low in sulfur and easily refined. Libya has proven reserves of about forty billion barrels of oil, the largest in Africa, and may have as much as a hundred billion. Several major oil companies have ranked Libya as the best exploration opportunity in the world; the Libyans have lacked the resources to conduct extensive explorations themselves. In the fifteen years since foreign companies left, Libya's resources have been seriously mismanaged. "If Dr. No were trying to muck up the Libyan oil economy," a British adviser to the Libyan government said, "there is nothing he could think of that hasn't been done."

Still, oil money continues to make possible Libya's subsidy programs—the socialism in the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya concept. NASCO pays twenty-six dinars for a hundred-and-ten-pound bag of flour and sells it to bakers for two dinars; you can buy a loaf of bread for two cents. Rice, sugar, tea, pasta, and gasoline are also sold for a fraction of their cost. Economic reform will involve scaling back these subsidies (which currently amount to about six hundred million dollars a year) without impoverishing or starving people—which is all the more difficult given that wages have been frozen since 1982. Meanwhile, there is little credit available in Libya: no Libyan-issued credit cards can be used internationally; no financial institution meets international banking standards.

"The oil absorbs all the mistakes, of which there have been many," one Libyan official told me. "The oil money means that there is stability, and it makes the country easy to run. It's this little country with all this oil—it's like if you decided you wanted to open a 7-Eleven and you had a billion dollars to back it." The oil is a curse as well as a blessing. The SPLAJ system has produced a population that is unhampered by a work ethic. Libyans work five mornings a week, and that's it—assuming that they have jobs to go to. "If they were willing to take jobs in, say, construction, there would be jobs for them," Zlitni said sternly. "But we're a rich country, so the youngsters don't want to work hard." The fact remains that economies based on resources such as oil generate few jobs unless they diversify. Many university students I spoke to were convinced that, for all the talk of reform, their talents would remain unexploited. "When I finish my M.B.A., chances are that I won't be able to get a job," one complained to me. "The whole country runs on oil, not on employment. The wealth doesn't come out of anything you can get by working hard, which I am prepared to do, but what's the point?"

"If we hadn't had oil, we would have developed," the Minister of Finance, Abdulgader Elkhair, told me. "Frankly, I'd rather we had water."

For him, and for aspirants to Libya's emerging private sector, the main outrages are represented by a sclerotic ministerial bureaucracy and its endemic corruption. The nonprofit organization Transparency International gives Libya a Corruption Perceptions Index of 2.5, ranking it lower than Zimbabwe, Vietnam, and Afghanistan. The Heritage Foundation's 2006 Index of Economic Freedom

ranks Libya a hundred and fifty-second out of a hundred and fifty-seven countries evaluated. "You need twenty documents to set up a company," Elkhair told me, "and even if you bribe all the right people it will take six months."

One day, I sat in bumper-to-bumper traffic with a Libyan human-rights activist, who gestured in despair at the roadwork, and said, "They dig it up and close it and dig it up again, for enormous sums of money every time and with no other purpose. This corruption makes me late for my meetings. Necessary things are not done here, and unnecessary things are done over and over." I met the previous head of the National Cancer Institute, described to me by other doctors as the best oncological surgeon in the country, who had been removed from his job to make way for a friend of the Leader's. The displaced doctor is now working at a small clinic, without essential equipment. The administrator who served under him sells fish at a roadside stand nearby.

"Qaddafi is very happy to have corrupt people working for him," a Qaddafi insider said to me. "He'd much rather have people who want money than people who want power, and so he looks the other way and no one threatens his total control of the country." (Tribal loyalties, which intersect with simple cronyism, also play a role here: Qaddafi has filled many high-level military and security posts with members of his Bedouin tribe, the Qathathfa, along with members of a large tribe to which the Qathathfa have long been allied, the Warfala.) A Tripoli lawyer added, "Corruption is a problem, and sometimes a solution."

I attended the opening of a United Arab Emirates trade fair in Tripoli, which was held in a tent and was full of international goods presented with a smile. You could get samples of everything from medication to cookware and industrial equipment, and a select crowd of Libyans passed through with shopping bags. Many business cards were exchanged. "Look, this country is so rich you can't believe it," Ahmed Swehli, the English-educated businessman, told me, glancing around. "Right now, it's like we're the kids of the richest man in the world, and we're in rags. The corruption, the bloat, is impoverishing."

Compounding the problem of graft is a shortage of basic operational competence. I went to a session of a leadership training program in Tripoli, organized by Cambridge Energy Research Associates and the Monitor Group, two American consulting firms that are advising the Libyan government. The foreign organizers had been determined to include the people they thought had the strongest leadership potential, but some local officials wanted to choose on the basis of connections. The compromise was neither wholly meritocratic nor purely corrupt. To some in the group, capitalism was still a novelty; others were ready for corner offices at Morgan Stanley. They role-played. They made speeches through crackly microphones under gigantic portraits of the Leader. Some described sophisticated financial instruments and drew flow charts; there was talk of "leveraged buyouts" and "institutional investors" and "a zero-sum game." On the other hand, one participant, dressed in a shabby suit and a bright tie, was asked how he would fund a construction project, and replied, vaguely, "Don't banks do that?" Another was surprised to learn that international backers usually expect interest or profit-sharing in return for risking their money. Libyan business, it's clear, will be led by people of impressive competence and by people of no competence.

At the end of the conference, the prize for the best presentation went to Abdulmonem M. Sbeta, who runs a private company that provides oil and marine construction services. He was suave and cultivated, with darting, lively eyes. "We need not leaders but opposers," he said to me afterward, over an Italian dinner in the Tripoli suburbs. "Everyone here has had a good model of how to lead. But no one has ever seen how to oppose, and the secret to successful business is opposition. People want prosperity more than emancipation, but, in any case, social reform can be achieved only through economic development."

But does Qaddafi wish to teach his subjects to oppose him? An expat businessman told me, "Qaddafi is afraid that the emergence of a wealthy class might inspire a so-called Second Revolution." Wealth is a relative term; by world standards, the wealthy people in the country are the Qaddafis, and, if anyone else has truly substantial assets, he's smart enough not to show it. In the meantime, the Leader's vagaries have kept Libya's élites off balance, sometimes in almost absurd ways. In 2000, Qaddafi lifted a longtime ban on S.U.V.s, and prosperous Libyans went out and imported Hummers and Range Rovers. Three months later, the Leader decided that he had made a mistake, and he outlawed them again, leaving a large number of privileged Libyans owning vehicles that it was illegal to drive. "You can tell if you've reached the top," a young Libyan told me, "if you listen to a lot of conversation about S.U.V.s rusting in the garage."

"Don't say 'opening,' " the Foreign Minister, Abdurrahman Shalgham, said, waving his hands in protest, when I asked him about the new Libya. "Don't say 'reintegrate.' Libya was never closed to the world; the world was closed to us." But the cost of Libyan paranoia has been an isolation that feeds this paranoia and keeps Libyans in the fold of the Leader. The idea of a world that wants to engage with Libya is dangerous to Qaddafi's hegemony. "America as an enemy would cause him trouble," Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, the political scientist, said. "But he doesn't want America as a friend, either."

Relations between Libya and the United States remain shadowed by history. Qaddafi's most vigorous opponent was President Reagan, who in 1980 closed the Libyan Embassy, then suspended oil imports, then shot down two planes over the Gulf of Sidra, where the U.S. disputed Libya's sovereignty. Ten days after the Libya-linked bombing of a West Berlin night club frequented by American servicemen, in 1986, Reagan bombed Tripoli and Benghazi, dropping ordnance on Qaddafi's compound in an apparent attempt to assassinate him. Qaddafi claims to have lost an adopted daughter in the raid. "His grip on power was sliding and then there was the bombing and it united the Libyans behind him," one Libyan official told me.

The total isolation of Libya began in 1991, when the United States and Britain indicted two Libyans suspected of involvement in the downing of Pan Am Flight 103, and the French indicted four Libyan suspects in the 1989 explosion of the French airliner UTA 772 over the Niger desert. Libya refused to surrender any of the suspects, and, the following year, the United Nations approved economic sanctions. Only in 1999 did Libya allow the Lockerbie suspects to be brought to trial, under Scottish law, in The Hague. (A financial settlement was reached that year with French authorities as well.) The Scottish court convicted one of the suspects and acquitted the other. Libya long denied any wrongdoing but eventually accepted that it had to admit to it, as a pragmatic matter, though Libyan officials see it as a forced confession. Qaddafi never accepted personal guilt.

The Lockerbie question, a closed book to most Americans, was brought up repeatedly while I was in Libya. One official said, "I can't believe the Libyans at that time could have pulled off something that big. Something that stupid—that is completely believable. But not something that big." Western investigators continue to argue whether Libya had direct involvement in the event. Initial inquiries suggested that the bombing was the work of the Syrian-led Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, a terror group funded by Iran, and both a former Scottish police chief and a former C.I.A. officer later submitted statements claiming that the physical evidence inculpatory Libya had been planted. Because of such problems, Robert Black, the Q.C. and Edinburgh law professor who helped set up the trial, told the Scotsman this past November that the Lockerbie verdict was "the most disgraceful miscarriage of justice in Scotland for 100 years," and would "gravely damage" the reputation of the Scottish criminal-justice system. The case is now under consideration by the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission. Because Libya supported foreign terrorist groups, though, the regime could have been implicated even if it was not the main author of the disaster.

In recent years, U.S. diplomatic relations with Libya have thawed to tepid. In 1999, the United States agreed to the suspension of U.N. sanctions, but not its own, which it renewed in August, 2001. Then came 9/11. Qaddafi condemned the attacks, called the Taliban “Godless promoters of political Islam,” and pointed out that six years earlier he had issued a warrant for Osama bin Laden’s arrest. In August, 2003, the Libyan government pledged to deposit \$2.7 billion in the Bank for International Settlements, in Switzerland, to compensate the families of those lost on Pan Am 103. Four months later, after secret negotiations with a British-led team, Libya agreed to renounce its W.M.D. program, and American sanctions were eased.

In fact, Qaddafi had made similar overtures to both George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton but was spurned—in part, according to Martin Indyk, who was Clinton’s Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, because Libya’s weapons programs were not considered an imminent threat. This has been borne out. Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, described Libya’s nuclear program as “at an early stage of development”—many of the centrifuges had evidently never been uncrated. But John Wolf, who, as George W. Bush’s Assistant Secretary of State for Nonproliferation, played a key role in dismantling Libya’s program, maintains that something of real value was secured—more by way of information and evidence than by the removal of a present threat. “The Libyans had the design of a nuclear weapon, sold by the A. Q. Khan network,” he told me, referring to the former head of Pakistan’s nuclear-weapons program. “Libya’s decision to turn over not only equipment but also the documentation, shipping invoices, plans, et cetera, provided a treasure trove of materials that were instrumental in establishing the credible case that mobilized countries against implicated individuals and companies abroad. We would not have been able to convince many of these countries or the I.A.E.A. of the cancer-like nature of the festering A. Q. Khan network without that documentation. The information that enabled us to break up the network was critical.”

After the 2003 agreement, President Bush said that any nation that gave up W.M.D.s would “find an open path to better relations” with the United States and that “Libya has begun the process of rejoining the community of nations.” By late 2004, the United States had revoked the travel ban, established limited diplomatic relations, and lifted many remaining trade restrictions. What Seif calls “this cocktail of problems and sanctions” had, it seemed, been largely addressed. Certainly the Bush Administration was eager to see American companies compete for oil-exploration rights in Libya, and it has facilitated economic engagement. But issues such as the 2003 anti-Saudi plot and the affair of the Bulgarian nurses have stalled the entente, and Libya remains on the State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism. Until the country is taken off the list, the United States must vote against I.M.F. and World Bank loans to Tripoli, and substantial sanctions remain in place.

“It’s almost the same as during the embargo,” the head of the National Oil Company said. Libyan hard-liners point out that U.S. officials have acknowledged that no act of terrorism has been linked to Libya in years, and they complain that, while Tony Blair, Jacques Chirac, Gerhard Schröder, and Silvio Berlusconi have all visited Tripoli, the United States has sent no one above the under-secretary level. The United States has no official consulate in Libya; Libyans who want visas apply in Tunisia, and the United States does not grant them freely. Libyan reformers who thought that settling Lockerbie and renouncing W.M.D.s would allow the resumption of normal relations talk about “receding goalposts.”

David Mack, a former high-ranking U.S. diplomat who has served in Libya, told me, “It’s been useful to us to be able to engage in intelligence exchanges with Libya; it’s quite clearly been useful to them.” He pointed out that the United States had agreed to list the dissident Libyan Islamic Fighting Group as a terrorist organization, and got it banned from Britain, where some of its members had been based. “Having made all this progress,” Mack said, “if we now just let things drift, inevitably there will be relapses.”

So while the Bush Administration holds up Libya as a role model for disarmament—"If Libya can do it, Iran can do it, too," John Bolton, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, has said—some policy analysts think that the Administration has done too little to promote that example. Ronald Bruce St John, a Libya scholar at the International Relations Center, observes that America's priority has been to control W.M.D.s and get support for the war on terror; Libya's priorities are the rationalization of commercial and diplomatic relations. American goals have been met; Libyan goals have not. In Tripoli, hard-liners seethe that Libya gave away the store, while the reformers feel undermined.

The reformers' own diplomatic efforts have had limited success. Representative Tom Lantos, of California, and Senator Richard Lugar, of Indiana, both have visited Libya, where they met with Seif, Shukri Ghanem, and Qaddafi himself, and have taken an optimistic view. "Qaddafi has clearly made a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn," Lantos said to me, "and we are turning around the aircraft carrier that is U.S. policy." But when Lantos sought a co-sponsor for the United States-Libya Relations Act, which was meant to strengthen bilateral relations, nobody was interested. Mack said, "We need to show the world, particularly governments like Iran and North Korea, that there is an alternative paradigm for dealing with the United States, and much to be gained by having a normal relationship with us," and suggested that American interests would be served by improved relations with an Arab leader who opposes fundamentalism and has substantial oil reserves. "Deep down, the Libyans think the U.S. will not be satisfied with anything short of regime change," one of Seif's advisers said. "And, deep down, the Americans think that, if they normalize relations, Qaddafi will blow something up and make them look like fools."

Everywhere I went in Libya, opposition to U.S. policy was tempered by enthusiasm for individual Americans. Among the older generation of Libyans, the reformers were eager for news of the towns where they had once studied, in Kansas, Texas, Colorado. (Most of the hard-liners I met had never visited the United States.) Many Libyans hoped for improved relations with the outside world simply because the pariah experience has been a lonely one.

I spent a morning with the human-rights lawyer Azza Magour, a striking woman with cascading hair and a warm laugh, who had just returned from a humanitarian conference in Morocco. Her father was an important figure in post-revolutionary Libyan politics, and this has given her leeway; she seemed almost oblivious of the constraints that keep most Libyan women in headscarves and at home. I asked her how she felt about the U.S., and she told me that it was hard for her to be pro-American in the wake of the news reports about Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo. "You cannot imagine how we worshipped the idea of America," she said, and she looked down at the floor, as though she were talking about a relative who had recently died. "We wanted nothing more than to be with you, this rich, fair democracy. But now we ask who is giving us this lesson of freedom? I mean—if you caught your high priest in bed with a prostitute, would you still count on him to get you in the door of heaven?" Magour is still hoping to show her young daughter the United States, though. She said that, at least once a week, her daughter asks how things are going between Libya and America, and Magour says, "It's going, sweetheart." And her daughter wonders, "So can we visit Disneyland yet?" and she has to say, "Not yet, sweetheart, not yet."

For a culture that is politically and socially underdeveloped, Libya has a surprisingly active intelligentsia, who view their own society with tenderness and irony. People I met and liked invited me out over and over and introduced me to friends and family. I went to a birthday party at the house of one Libyan; his wife cooked a feast for us, and I stayed up half the night with them and their children, watching movies. The day before I left, friends took me out for late-night tea and gave me full traditional Libyan dress—a long shirt, an embroidered vest, and a little black hat—as a going-away present.

The social life of Libyans is essentially private. Tripoli is latticed with wide highways; gasoline is subsidized, and, because there are no bars or clubs and few cinemas or theatres, the most popular pastime is driving; people cruise around for hours. The privacy of cars enhances their charm, but mostly the Tripoli highways, busy through the night, provide diversion for citizens desperate for entertainment or novelty. When they aren't driving, most Tripolitans socialize at home rather than in cafés, partly because of the absence of women and alcohol in public places.

I had my first drink in Libya after a friend called an Army colonel and asked, "Do you have any pomegranate seeds?" (It is wise to use euphemisms in police states.) He did, and we drove to the outskirts of a small city, to a large white house with a long veranda, beside a dirt road. In the Libyan way, the house was built of concrete and painted white, but it was beginning to show signs of wear. We sat on a wide, bright-colored banquette under fluorescent lights in an enormous room. The place was decorated with souvenirs from Central Asia, where our host had trained, including many carvings of bears with fishing rods. We listened to a medley of Shirley Bassey hits played on the zither, and took turns smoking from a five-foot-tall hookah. The colonel, a beaming, extroverted Libyan of sub-Saharan ancestry, served the local home brew, eighty proof and rough enough to remove not just fingernail polish but quite possibly fingernails as well, on a table covered with a lavishly embroidered cloth and laden with Fanta and Pringles. The atmosphere was reminiscent of a high-school pot party.

I asked my friend how he would feel about his sons drinking, and he laughed, replying, "It's inevitable." Then I asked about his daughters, and he grew serious: "If my daughters were drinking, I would be very, very upset—furious, in fact. Because, if people found out that they had been drinking, they would think they might also be sexually active, and their marriage prospects would be shattered."

I met a Libyan woman who worked for Alitalia, a job that she loved but that she felt no Libyan husband would tolerate. "I have to choose between a marriage and a life, and I have chosen a life," she said. "Most women here choose a marriage. It's a question of taste." The restrictions are a matter not of laws—on issues like gender equality, the laws are more progressive than in most Arab countries—but of social norms.

Qaddafi accepts such customs, but he frequently describes his own society as "backward" (his favorite term of disapprobation); one Libyan intellectual complained to me, "If you listen to his words, you will agree that he hates the Libyan people." While Qaddafi represses the democratizing forces from the left, he is far more brutal with the Islamist ones on the right. Indeed, most of the regime's political victims in the past few decades have been members of Islamist groups that he has banned, including the Muslim Brotherhood. Libya's Islamic institutes, almost fifty of them, were shut down in 1988. When clerics protested Qaddafi's "innovative" interpretations of the Koran and his dismissal of all post-Koranic commentary and custom, Qaddafi declared that Islam permitted its followers to speak directly to Allah, and that clergymen were unnecessary intermediaries. A year later, he likened Islamic militants to "a cancer, the black death, and AIDS." As if to vex Hamas, once a beneficiary of his largesse, he has even argued, in recent years, that the Palestinians have no exclusive claim to the land of Israel, and called for a binational state—he dubbed it "Isratine"—that would guarantee the safety of both Palestinians and Jews, who, far from being enemies of the Arab people, were their Biblical kin. ("There may be some objections to the name," he allowed, "but they would be unhelpful, harmful, and superficial.")

"You ask us, 'Why do you oppress the opposition in the Middle East?' " Qaddafi said in March, speaking via satellite link to a conference at Columbia University, dressed in purple robes and seated in front of a map of Africa. "Because, in the Middle East, the opposition is quite different than the opposition in advanced countries. In our countries, the opposition takes the form of explosions, assassinations, killing. . . . This is a manifestation of social backwardness." On this point, at least, the

hard-liners and the reformers tend to converge. Foreign Minister Shalgham told me, "The fundamentalists represent a threat to your security. They represent a threat to our way of life. They are against the future, against science, the arts, women, and freedom. They would drag us back to the Middle Ages. You fear their acts; we fear the ideology behind those acts. O.K., read the Koran for an hour a day, and that's enough; if you don't also study engineering, medicine, business, and mathematics, how can you survive? But people have figured out that, the tougher your Islam, the easier to find followers."

The fear of radical Islam helps explain why authorities cracked down so forcefully when, in February, protests erupted in Benghazi over the Danish cartoons of the prophet Muhammad and the decision of an Italian Cabinet minister to wear a T-shirt featuring the images. Eleven people were killed by the police, and violence spread to at least two other cities in the eastern part of the country, where Qaddafi's hold on power has always been relatively weak. Seif gave local voice to international opinion, saying, "The protest was a mistake, and the police intervention against the demonstrators was an even bigger mistake." His father, too, repudiated the "backwardness" of the police response, but mainly wanted to insist that the riots hadn't arisen from Islamic fervor, much less discontent with his regime; rather, they were spurred by anger at the history of Italian colonialism. (More than a quarter of a million Libyans—perhaps a third of the population—are estimated to have perished as a result of the Italian occupation, many in concentration camps.) "Unfortunately, there could be more Benghazis," or even "attacks in Italy," if Rome didn't offer reparations, Qaddafi warned, saying that he would be mollified if Italy were to build a highway across Libya, for some three billion euros. The Italian Foreign Minister, Gianfranco Fini, said that this was "a not too veiled threat," adding, "We have already said that we want to put the colonial past definitely behind us in our relations with Libya. We maintain this position in a clear and transparent way. We expect a similarly coherent position from the Libyan leader."

When I read this statement to a Libyan acquaintance, he burst out laughing. "Good luck, Mr. Fini!" he said. Expatriate opposition leaders have claimed that Qaddafi staged the riots to extract concessions from Europe, and that they then escalated out of control. In Libya, the issue was widely seen to be economic—a disgruntled population of unemployed youth needed an outlet for their anger.

The most immediate sequel to the riots was the dismissal of Prime Minister Shukri Ghanem. (He was given a post at the National Oil Company.) There were already rumors when I was in Tripoli that Ghanem was going to lose his job in a Cabinet reshuffle; the openness that seemed so refreshing when we met had not pleased the Leader. "He made three basic mistakes," one Qaddafi adviser said to me. "First, he associated reform with his own name and complained publicly about the Leadership. In Libya, if you want to accomplish things you make yourself invisible, you sublimate your ego. Second, he thought that a strong position with the West would guarantee his hold on power and didn't understand that the West counts for very little here. Third, he failed to win over the Libyan people; he never seemed to be concerned about their suffering. . . . In the street, there is relief that he is gone—though there is no affection for the alternative." Ghanem's successor was the taciturn hard-liner Baghdadi al-Mahmoudi. "For the Leadership, it will be easier to make economic adjustments now that the reform will come clearly and directly from the Leadership, and not be seen as admissions that the Leader was wrong, as concessions to some kind of competition."

The change of Prime Ministers was, of course, a reassertion of Qaddafi's power: more tumbling of the rats. Several ministries—including oil and energy—were shaken up, with people removed from jobs they had held for decades. The U.S. State Department's decision, in late March, to keep Libya on its terrorism list both reflects the problem and contributes to it, and has outraged Libyans in and out of power.

Because Ghanem's strong suit was supposed to be his ease with Western powers, his failure to get

Libya removed from the U.S. terrorism list helped insure his replacement by a hard-liner. Baghdadi al-Mahmoudi has been described to me as financially corrupt but wily, calculating, and extremely industrious. He is “a technocrat out of the Revolutionary Committees who works hard to glorify the Leader’s policies,” a Libyan-American academic said. “Will reform slow? Well, Shukri Ghanem talked a good line about reform but accomplished so little that there’s not much backsliding to do. Mahmoudi realizes that economic reform has to move forward and will do that for the Leader. He has absolutely no interest in political or social reform, and he will leave it to the Leader to have a relationship with the West.” It has been suggested that, with the appointment of a hard-liner, some of the infighting will subside.

“Ahmed Ibrahim’s power will wane, too,” one of Seif’s advisers told me hopefully, referring to the deputy speaker of the General People’s Congress. Seif will now be his own man: “He’s old enough to carry that off.”

“We call the world close to the Leader the Circle of Fire,” one Libyan intellectual said. “Get close and it warms you up; get too close and you go down in flames. The Circle of Fire includes both reformers and hard-liners; Qaddafi likes the chaos that creates.” He spoke with irony, almost with disdain, and yet he was not above warming himself at the fire. The class of educated Libyans—a class that includes poets, archeologists, professors, ministers, doctors, businessmen, and civil servants—is tiny. Given the way that tribalism intersects with class alliances and political identities, social relationships exist in Libya among people who in a larger society would probably be kept apart by mutual opposition. Political enmity is often crosshatched with social amity. In Tripoli, I had dinner at the home of an older writer who spoke passionately of the injustices of the Qaddafi regime in both its absolutism and its new capitalism. “He has to go,” he said. “This colonel has eaten the best years of my life, poisoned my soul and my existence, murdered the people I loved. I hate him more than I love my wife. He and his government and everyone who has anything to do with him must go. Enough is enough. We have no souls left. Do not let yourself be fooled by this talk of reform. What kind of reform is it when this man is still sitting in Tripoli? I cannot say it to you enough times. He must go. He must go. He must go.” A few minutes later, when I mentioned a high-ranking member of the regime whom I hoped to interview, he said, “Ah, he was here for dinner earlier this week.” He added, with a shrug, “I don’t agree with him, but I like him.”

The coziness between the authorities and many of those who railed against them continually surprised me. Some of this was simple pragmatism, but not all; it was more intimate than that. A person’s network of loyalties and connections was never predictable. I had a drink (of non-alcoholic beer) in the Tripoli planetarium with a professor who had previously claimed that the Prime Minister and Seif got drunk together and raped the country—and they were the good guys. We had joked about the government’s inefficiencies, and he had said darkly that no one who wasn’t Libyan had any good reason to endure this kind of chaos. He had asked how I could hold on to my sanity when I was dealing with government offices.

Now he was beaming. “Hey, I’ve been given a job with the Ministry,” he said. He raised a hand up over his head in a gesture of pride and triumph.

I said I was surprised that he was so eager to join a regime that he loathed.

“Well,” he replied, “it also happens to be the only game in town.”

Andrew Solomon

P.S.

* From The New Yorker, MAY 8, 2006:

http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/05/08/060508fa_fact_solomon#ixzz1EyR2Ngx1