

The Bang That Ends Qaddafi's Revolution?

The Libyan Labyrinth

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In 1969, Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi (age 27) surprised the aged King Idris, then in Turkey for medical treatment. Inspired by the Free Officers in Egypt, Qaddafi and his fellow Colonels force-marched the fragile Libyan State and even more fragile Libyan society into socialism. Libya's main product was its oil, and by the time Idris was deposed the country exported three million barrels of oil per day. Scandalously, it received the lowest rent per barrel in the world. Idris feasted on the rents, and the people suffered immeasurably. It is the reason why there was barely any opposition to Qaddafi's coup.

Qaddafi's regime pushed forward a series of radical developments to transform Libyan society. Libya had the misfortune of being a distant outpost of both the Ottoman Empire and the Italian colonial adventures. It wanted for the most basic social development. Over the first decade of the Qaddafi regime, the state took charge of the oil fields and raised their rents. That money was then diverted toward social welfare, mainly an increase in housing and health care. Over the second decade (1978-1988), the regime constrained private enterprise and encouraged workers to take over control of about two hundred firms. Redistribution of land on the Jefara plain west of Tripoli was the rural cognate. The State stepped in to manage all macro-economic functions, at the same time as the Central Bank redistributed wealth by putting a ceiling on bank account holdings.

A nationalist in the Nasser vein, Qaddafi nonetheless was not keen on secularism. His Green Book dismissed capitalism and communism in favor of a "Third Universal Theory," to return the Arab world to the fundamentals of Islam in both politics and economics. Expulsion of the Italian residents in Libya followed as much from this Islamic injunction as from nationalism, and so too Qaddafi's fellowship with Islamic revolution from Chad to the Philippines (the instrument for his ambitions was the 1972 created al-Failaka al-Islamiya, the Islamic Legion). The Islamic militant in Qaddafi was only brought to heel when he himself was threatened by an assassination attempt in 1993 and with the rise of militancy in nearby Algeria. Qaddafi's political Islamism was hastily converted into paranoia about al-Qaeda in the Maghreb.

After 9/11, Qaddafi hastily offered his support to the U. S. In October 2002, Foreign Minister Mohammed Abderrahman Chalgam admitted that his government closely consulted with the U. S. on counterterrorism, and a few months later, Qaddafi's heir apparent Saif al-Islam al-Qaddafi warmly spoke of Libya's support for the Bush war on terror. If you went to Qaddafi's website at this time, you'd have read this remarkable statement from the old Colonel, "The phenomenon of terrorism is not a matter of concern to the U. S. alone. It is the concern of the whole world. The U. S. cannot combat it alone. It is logical, reasonable or productive to entrust the task to the U. S. alone." It needed Qaddafi, who was in sheer terror of groups such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. It must have chilled Qaddafi to find that Ibn Sheikh al-Libi's funeral service in May 2009 was attended

by thousands in his town of Ajdabia (al-Libi was arrested in Pakistan in 2001, and he died in U. S. custody. Libya colluded with the U. S. in this and in other cases of Libyan fighters arrested during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan).

The Eastern Question

Ajdabia, al-Libi's hometown, is in the eastern part of Libya, the historical wilayat of Cyrenaica (another town here is Benghazi, which was the flashpoint of the unrest in 2011). Eastern Libya is proud of its long tradition of resistance against foreign authority. Its tribes led the resistance against the Ottomans and then against the Italian occupation. The hero of the fight against the Italians was Omar al-Mukhtar, whose face adorns the Libyan ten dinar bill and whose struggle was made immortal for the worldwide audience by Anthony Quinn in the 1981 film (financed by Qaddafi's government), *The Lion of the Desert*. It is also from the eastern provinces that the Sanussi order of Islam emerged, out of which comes King Idris. The Sanussi order continues to command the loyalty of a third of the Libyan population. Some of them still hold Qaddafi responsible for the removal of their king.

Qaddafi's new regime purportedly attempted to overthrow the supremacy of the tribes. In fact, it strengthened his own tribe, the Qadhadhfa, and personal friends of Qaddafi. The Sa'adi confederation of the East was left out of the new dispensation. The returns of the oil rent and the social wage pledged by the new revolutionary regime offered only parsimonious help to the impoverished East.

Revolution Within the Revolution

Neglect of the East festered, but by the 1980s, Qaddafi's regime turned as well on the rest of the country. Unimaginative use of the oil surplus led to economic stagnation. Qaddafi earned a reprieve when the United States in the Reagan years bombed his compound, killing his daughter Hanna (15 months old). The Libyan people rallied around him and his regime. Anti-Americanism, easy enough with Reagan at the helm in Washington, provided cover for what Qaddafi called the "revolution within the revolution." This was the Libyan phrase to describe the entry of neo-liberalism, or what Qaddafi called "popular capitalism." In 1987, anemic import-substitution policies came to a close and "reforms" in agriculture and industry flooded out of IMF manuals. By September 1988, the government abolished the import and export quotas, allowing retail trade in the new souqs to flourish in the cities.

UN sanctions in 1992 threw the "reforms" into turmoil, and it allowed the old Qaddafi to emerge out of the sarcophagus that he had become. Cracks in the ruling elite at times slowed and at time speeded up the "reforms." The main face of the neo-liberal agenda was Shokri Ghanem, who would be removed as Prime Minister of the cabinet in 2006 for the more important role as head of the National Oil Corporation. Ghanem aggressively pushed for foreign investment into the oil sector, and hastened to implement the Exploration and Production Sharing Agreements with companies that ranged from Occidental Petroleum to China National Petroleum. Britain's Tony Blair and France's Sarkozy went to kiss Ghanem's ring and pledge finance for oil concessions. It is the reason why the British government freed the alleged Lockerbie bomber and that Berlusconi bowed down before Omar al-Mukhtar's son in 2008 and handed over \$5 billion as an apology for Italian colonialism. In his characteristic bluntness, Berlusconi said that he apologized so that Italy would get "less illegal immigrants and more oil."

Alongside Ghanem is Qaddafi's son, Saif, who wrote a dissertation at the London School of Economics in September 2007 on "The Role of Civil Society in the Democratization of Global Decision Making: from "soft" power to collective decision making" (the work was advised remarkably by David Held). Saif argued for the need to give NGOs voting rights at the level of international decision making, where otherwise the United States and its Atlantic allies hold sway. The "essential nature" of NGOs, he argued, is to be "independent critics and advocates of the marginal and vulnerable." To allow NGOs to temper the ambitions of the North is far more "realistic," Saif argued, than to hope to transform international relations. That kind of realism led to his faith in the "reforms" and in his recent call for the harshest armed violence against the protests in Tripoli and Benghazi. "Civil Society," in the language of neo-liberalism, is restricted to the work of establishment NGOs that are loath to revise settled power equations. The ragged on the streets are not part of the "civil society"; they are Unreason afoot.

The Basic People's Congress complained about the "reforms" in September 2000. They did not appreciate the privatization of the state-owned enterprises and the creation of free trade enclaves. Their periodical, al-Zahf al-Akhdar, fulminated against foreign firms and the tourism sector. A section within them was also angry at Qaddafi's political concessions to scale back the UN sanction and to earn favor in European capitals (Libya's end to its nuclear program was part of these concessions). The Congress tried to hold the tempo of "reform" down. Their actions irritated the IMF, whose 2006 report concluded, "Progress in developing a market economy has been slow and discontinuous."

The old republican Qaddafi's tribal loyalties began at home. His son Muatassim was active in the creation of an Export Free Trade Zone near Zuwara. Muatassim, whom the Serbian Ambassador to Tripoli called "a bloody man" and "not terribly bright," has long been angry at his brother Saif, whom many consider to have been scheduled as Qaddafi's successor. Saif, meanwhile, has tried to hasten the pace of reforms via his super-committee of the Economic and Development Board. The brothers have long fought with each other, but on the substance of neo-liberalism, they appear on the same side. It is just that each wants credit for the "reforms" over the other.

Uprisings in the east combined with the neo-liberal efforts from Tripoli have alienated large sections of the population against the Gaddafi regime. Little of the luster of 1969 remains with the old man. He is a caricature of the aged revolutionary. We are far from the "revolutionary instigator" whose watchword was "the masses take command of their destiny and their wealth." The game will be up when the military tilts its support (that two Colonels in their Mirages have sought refuge in Malta rather than fire on the crowds in Tripoli is an early indication of one direction, but on the other are those other pilots who did open fire on the crowd). The issue is not yet settled.

The masses have come out. Old rivalries and new grievances are united. Some of them are for reactionary tribal purposes, and others seek liberation from "reforms." Some cavil that a country of 6 million with such oil wealth does not look like the Emirates, and others simply want to have some more control of their lives. But most want release from the hidden corridors of the Libyan labyrinth.

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P.S.

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