

Libya crisis: what role do tribal loyalties play?

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During his speech on Libyan TV on Sunday, Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's son, Saif al-Islam, raised the spectre of civil war in Libya in the event of the anti-regime demonstrations continuing, with members of different tribes "killing each other in the streets".

But how much of this is real and how much is scaremongering? What role do Libyan tribes play in society and how much influence do tribal chiefs carry?

During Muammar Gaddafi's 42-year rule, Libya has made great strides socially and economically thanks to its vast oil income, but tribes and clans continue to be part of the demographic landscape.

Women in Libya are free to work and to dress as they like, subject to family constraints. Life expectancy is in the seventies. And per capita income - while not as high as could be expected given Libya's oil wealth and relatively small population of 6.5m - is estimated at \$12,000 (£9,000), according to the World Bank.

Illiteracy has been almost wiped out, as has homelessness - a chronic problem in the pre-Gaddafi era, where corrugated iron shacks dotted many urban centres around the country.

Tribal identity

However, the tribalism which dogged Libyan society during the monarchy is still very much a reality.

While many see the continued existence of tribalism as an obstacle to social mobility, equal opportunity and the development of civil society, its significance politically is less clear-cut.

Many Libyans continue to identify themselves as belonging to a tribe.

However, in reality tribal kinship has been on the wane due to the growth in education and urbanisation, which separated people from their traditional tribal areas and contributed to weakening their tribal affinity.

Col Gaddafi and his colleagues in the Free Unionist Officers had pledged to eliminate tribalism upon seizing power in 1969.

For the first ten years or so of his rule, tribal identification was officially frowned upon. During this time, Col Gaddafi could count on the support of most of the population.

His political credit was still high and in general, he had the backing of the army.

However, as his popularity diminished and as he began to fall out with his colleagues in the Free Unionist Officers corps - all but a handful of whom have now disappeared from public view - he relied increasingly on tribalism and tribal rivalry in order to consolidate his grip on power.

Tribalism and the armed forces

This has been most pronounced in the armed forces where each of the main tribes is represented.

Fostering rivalries among the various tribes in the army through selective patronage has not only strengthened his control over the military, but has also worked to draw attention away from Col Gaddafi and his regime.

Nowadays, tribal rivalries are evident within the armed forces, where Mr Gaddafi's own tribe, the Qadhadfa, are pitted against Magariha - the tribe of the Lockerbie bomber, Abdelbaset Ali al-Megrahi - which are close to the Warfalla tribe, said to number one million people.

In turn, the Warfalla are close to Al-Zintan who hail from the town of Zintan, 75 miles south of Tripoli - one of the first towns in western Libya to join the present revolt against Mr Gaddafi.

Among the wider population, the importance of tribes and tribal chiefs should not be exaggerated.

To be sure, tribal affiliation can play an important role in securing employment and public services, in much the same way as the "old school tie" and the Oxbridge networks are believed by some people to influence employment and career prospects in the UK.

But in terms of political power, tribes are of limited significance, with many of the pillars of the Gaddafi regime, such as the revolutionary committees and the security services, consisting of people of different tribal affiliations.

Tribal chiefs

The influence of tribal chiefs also should not be overestimated. In the final analysis, people take notice of what tribal chiefs say only if it suits them.

Even in resolving family disputes - an important function of tribal chiefs - the influence of the head of the tribe is limited.

So, what significance ought to be attached to Saif al-Islam Gaddafi's warning of war between Libya's tribes in the event of the regime falling, or to the heads of Libyan tribes reportedly declaring support for the anti-regime protesters, as the head of the Warfalla tribe appears to have done?

And how seriously should we take the eastern Al-Zuwayya tribe's threat to cut off oil exports, as has been reported?

The short answer is that the prospect of civil war will become real only if the regime chooses to fight to the end and continues to remain indifferent to civilian casualties, as it has been doing over the past few days.

In that event, the fight will be between the regime and its supporters on the one hand, and the anti-regime forces on the other, irrespective of tribal affiliation.

As far as the declarations by the tribal chiefs are concerned, the significance of these in terms of raw power - the balance of forces on the ground - is very little.

The fact is that oil workers, members of the armed forces and employees of other state structures with tribal affiliations will make their own decisions, irrespective of whatever the tribal chief says.

However, as far as the morale of the regime and its supporters is concerned, declarations by tribal

chiefs are important - in the public's perception, these could give the impression that power is slipping from the regime and further erode the barrier of fear that has guaranteed the absence of visible opposition to Col Gaddafi for so long.

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P.S.

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