

Libya: A thoroughgoing popular revolution

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A RECENT editorial SocialistWorker.org editorial (“Who really won in Libya”) [1] suggested that it was NATO that, in fact, won the revolution in Libya, not the Libyan people. From here in Tripoli, it seems that that judgment is rushed. There are a number of points that should be understood about the situation on the ground:

1. This has been a thoroughgoing popular revolution. Tripoli was not liberated by outside rebels. Rather, a popular uprising started from within, on August 20, in a number of neighborhoods across the city. By midday on the 21st, the state security apparatus had been defeated completely in a number of neighborhoods, and was crumbling in others. By the evening of the 21st, the first brigades of rebels reached the city, and fought through the remaining strongholds.

The driving force of the revolution in every crucial juncture has been mass participation, whether in the initial uprisings in Benghazi and the western city of Zintan, or in and around Tripoli.

Today, the streets of Tripoli are ruled by ordinary people. Every neighborhood has a popular committee, consisting of armed locals. They control the entry and exit points to their neighborhood, check vehicles, and, in the absence of police forces (who have only just begun to return) act as the de facto authority on the street level.

As one Libyan friend told me, “Everything is upside down now.” Locals have laid bare most of the old centers of ruling class power, from security offices to Qaddafi’s palaces. You can spend afternoons strolling through Qaddafi’s villas and sifting through papers in intelligence headquarters. Locals have taken over some of Qaddafi’s houses and prisons and turned them into museums of sorts. The massive swimming pool in the house of Aisha Qaddafi, built with money that rightfully belongs to ordinary Libyans, has been turned into a public pool. In some neighborhoods, residents have taken over hotels and restaurants, kicking out the pro-Qaddafi owners and running it themselves.

The same sense of empowerment, of imagining the impossible, that pervaded Egypt after its revolution exists here.

2. There are a number of forces vying for leadership of the revolution. These include: 1) Revolutionary leaders in Tripoli who have been directing the movement there since day one, in February, often with little direct contact with NATO; 2) Revolutionaries from Tripoli who have been based outside, in Benghazi, Tunisia or further abroad, and who are returning; 3) Islamist currents, led by prominent clerics; 4) The Benghazi-based, U.S.-backed National Transitional Council (NTC), and particularly the cabinet-like Executive Committee; 5) The Tripoli military forces, themselves split into two factions, one under the command of ex-Islamist Abdel Hakim Belhaj and the other under the control of ex-Qaddafi figures. Belhaj, who was imprisoned and tortured due to the collusion of the U.S. and Qaddafi, has some popular support in eastern Libya, and is believed to be backed by Qatar 6) About 40 rebel kataibas, or brigades, from around the country.

Most of these kataibas are organized based on the town of origin or tribe, and are usually

independently financed. In a number of cases, they are backed by wealthy businessmen from outside the country. The kataibas have mostly resisted coming under the authority of any of the above-mentioned groups—the Misrata brigade, for instance, has taken over some neighborhoods in Tripoli, sparking tensions with locals.

It is entirely unclear which of these forces will win out. The U.S.-backed NTC is quite weak and has limited popular support. Demonstrations against it have already erupted in a number of cities, including Benghazi. As of mid-September, the NTC is still competing with a wide array of rebel groups and political factions for control of the country.

At the same time, despite its cozy relationship with the West, the NTC leadership was forced to come out against a UN security force on the ground, in large measure a nod to the popular pressures that exist.

3. The fractured nature of the rebel forces is a direct consequence of Qaddafi's rule. Buoyed by oil money, Qaddafi was able to maintain power without developing the sorts of political institutions that are common in other states.

There was no ruling party in Libya, a very small bureaucracy and a weak, divided army. Instead, power in Qaddafi's Libya was largely informal and mediated through patronage networks, in which the Brother Leader sat in the middle. The base of the ruling class was extremely narrow—certain tribes, Qaddafi family members and a constellation of security agencies were the main beneficiaries of the oil largesse.

Even when the country took a neoliberal turn after 1999, the opening of the economy only benefited a narrow slice of the ruling class. It is for these reasons that, unlike the revolutions of Egypt, Tunisia and Syria (but somewhat like that of Yemen), a section of the ruling class broke with the state to lead the revolution. But this section of the national bourgeoisie—in particular, ex-generals, ministers and prominent businessmen, together with the middle class (doctors, lawyers and the like)—relies entirely on the popular upsurge beneath them.

That upsurge is also rooted in the specifics of Qaddafi's rule. The economy is extremely un-diversified—even four decades into his rule, oil remains the country's primary economic activity. Aside from a few token development projects, the majority of state spending was on maintaining its patronage networks or on foreign adventures. This has led to an extremely tiny working class—far smaller than the neighbors Egypt and Tunisia. (The oil sector itself is heavily reliant on foreign labor and expertise, and most consumer goods in Libya are imported.)

At the same time, life under Qaddafi grew increasingly difficult. Wages were by and large frozen at 1980s levels, even as rents and food prices skyrocketed; some state subsidies were slashed under neoliberalization; the lingering effects of the UN-backed sanctions regime of the 1990s has left the oil sector in dire need of an upgrade; and the state remained as repressive as ever.

These factors ultimately led to the revolution. But unlike Egypt and Tunisia, the lack of a strong working class (either numerically or politically), the dearth of political parties and the absence civil society led the struggle to become an armed one. It was under the command of a section of the old ruling class, but in a haphazard way—rebellious youth joined revolutionary groups based on their tribe or hometown or whichever businessman could give them guns and vehicles. The political level of the rebels is quite low—hence the vicious racism that plagues the rebel victory.

4. Despite the popular nature of the revolution, the weakness of political structures in Libya means the prospects of a left wing emerging from it are exceedingly dim. However, they were even dimmer

under Qaddafi, and the revolution gives Libyan society the space for such things to develop. It may not come soon—it would require a restructuring of the economy, a growth of the working class and so on—but for the first time in its history, Libya has a chance. For that reason alone, the revolution should be supported. Moreover, the victory has breathed new life into the uprisings throughout the Arab world, particularly in Syria and Yemen.

It is possible, however, that the forces that eventually emerge on top will continue things in the Qaddafi mold. It's far too early to say who will be the ultimate winner of Libya's revolution, but we do know who will attempt to determine the outcome.

The U.S. and its allies continue to try to subordinate the revolution to their interests. They have backed a section of the rebels that seems to lack a national base, in an effort to control the course of the Arab revolutions. They aren't interested in a genuine democracy, but in a limited, managed democracy that is subservient to their needs. The main task for activists in the U.S. is to confront this reality, and help give the Libyan revolution space to grow.

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P.S.

* From SocialistWorker.org (USA).

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 22822): [Who really won in Libya?](#).