

## AL-HAYAT: LIBYA: GETTING THE MEASURE OF THE QADDAFI REGIME

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The people of Egypt and Tunisia have much to be proud of for the way they helped to dispose of the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes. But they could not participate in their destruction in quite the same way as the Libyans who were able to enter the hidden sanctuaries of the Qaddafi family, their palaces, their farms, their playgrounds and their prisons, suddenly exposed for all to see.

This is all the more important as, until this joyfully incredulous moment, the Libyan regime existed in a kind of black box, its inner workings hidden from both its people and outside observers for most of the last thirty years of its existence. Not only was it just as secretive as its authoritarian neighbors but also hidden under the smoke screen created by Muammar Qaddafi's peculiar style of rule, part bombast, part so personally bizarre as to distract foreign attention from the brutalities, which had always existed beneath.

Making proper sense of all this will take many years. So, for the time being, our understanding can only be based on a variety of over-simplified approaches concerning the system, the country and

its resources, and the impact of oil-nationalism on a socially diverse population.

To start with the system: this seems best approached as a type of patrimonialism where, in Max Weber's definition, the ruler exerts power on the basis of kin, personal ties, and a form of political clientalism designed not simply to buy allegiance but to create loyalty. Just as in the world of the Mafia, such an informal system creates a climate in which fidelity is rewarded by being allowed access to the ruler, with disobedience branded as treachery and violently punished. This, so it seems to me, best explains a number of significant features of the Qaddafi years, from the highly unequal way that oil-revenues were distributed among different groups of the population to the fierce loyalty with which many Qaddafi followers defended the regime in its dying days.

It also explains why such regimes are so dysfunctional in so many ways, the core members of the elite suspiciously vying with each for the leader's favor, and hence unable to cooperate with another to solve joint problems posed by political and economic crises or the need for a stable succession. No wonder that foreign governments grew to distrust any offer of negotiations made in the name of the Qaddafi clan, unclear as to whether they had the

leader's approval or not. No wonder too that the Benghazi rebels, knowing the nature of the regime so well themselves, saw no point in engaging in any such negotiations whatsoever.

Turning now to the revolt itself, here some knowledge of the country's basic geography is essential. As in the Second World War, the key is provided by military control of the coastal road. It was this that allowed the NATO bombers to defend the revolt in Benghazi so easily by preventing the Qaddafi forces from ascending the mountain passes towards it from the west. Yet, unlike the situation in the early 1940s, when the rival British, Italian and German armies of tanks could roll up and down the same road with some ease, it was the development of a series of now much larger towns and cities along the Mediterranean coast during the Qaddafi period that made the whole process of rebel military advance towards Tripoli much more difficult as such centers could not be so easily by-passed.

Hence the decision, hinted at in London at least as early as late June this year, to attack Tripoli from the Nafusa mountains to the south, driving pell-mell along a road with no large towns along the way. Perhaps also the decision to wage an accompanying propaganda war in which the, probably false, report of the capture

of Saif al-Qaddafi, did so much to demoralize the Qaddafi loyalists as the rebels rushed in.

What about the future? Here I would argue that what matters more than the names of the members of the Transitional National Council – the current obsession of the Western media - is the way in which this moment of national unity against an unpredictable and often brutal tyrant must give way to the creation of the separate parties necessary to participate in an election due to take place within the next eight months. Not only have parties never existed in Libya, with one small exception in Tripoli in 1952, but, as everyone knows, parties have to have programs, and programs have to contain policies, which distinguish one sharply from another.

This presents a formidable challenge. But, if even if only partly met, the result will be a line of three at three democracies at the heart of the Arab world, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, striking alarm into the hearts of the despots in the Arab east while providing succor to the democrats to the west in Algeria and Morocco.

Moreover, as Heba Saleh has wisely suggested, Libya also has the opportunity to mount a particular challenge to the old states of the Gulf if it can replace the old rentier model of oil, no taxes and so

no democracy with one which combines these variables in a more open, representative and publicly accountable way.

Of course there are many, both inside and, more sadly, outside the Arab world who are hoping that this particular experiment, as well that of the whole Arab Spring, will fail. Yet I see no reason at all to suppose that it should. Libya has many special advantages, not just in terms of its oil but also of a long tradition of expert public service, notably in oil and finance, much of which miraculously survived the arbitrary excesses of the Qaddafi regime. Its people also possess a sense of patriotism, of an attachment to Libya and its history, which ignorant talk of its tribal and local particularisms cannot really hide. What it needs most of all is not more nationalism but a new definition of leadership and a set of political structures which really allow government for the people, not just in their name.