

THE LIBYAN REVOLUTION: OUTCOME AND PERSPECTIVES – THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

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With the capture and eventual death of Muammar al-Gaddafi and the announcement by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen that NATO aerial operations over Libya would be terminated by the end of October, the war in Libya has finally come to an end. The formal declaration of the “liberation”, followed, almost instantly, by the request by Mustafa Abdel Jalil that the NATO operation be extended, however, signal the end of the “grace period” in which the Feindbild of Gaddafi could conceal the fault lines fragmenting Libyan society.

Libyan society is considered conservative even in Arab terms. It is made up of a mixture of Arab, Arabised Berber and Tuareg tribes, a city-dwelling population with blurred or no tribal identities, the descendents of traders and mercenaries along the trade routes into the Sahara. The society is still patterned along the lines of the traditional patrimonial system, which under the pressure of the colonisers and the third-way ideology offered by Gaddafi developed into a neo-patrimonial society. Political decision-making, accordingly, is performed within the traditional circles of the elite, whose actual power depends on their closeness to the centre, the ruler. This relationship can be best described by the ruler-subjects paradigm. Yet, a parallel structure of – virtual – decision-making has been developed by the elite according to the international norms and expectations, which are, consequently, filled by the elite themselves. In Libya this virtual sphere of decision-making was further transformed by Gaddafi on the basis of his Green Book and the Jamahiriyya theory into a very specific structure, in which in principle all the people would directly participate in the decision-making process. The result was a seemingly “post-democratic” or “post-communist” system, where every brother and sister would be equal and would have an equal share and responsibility. This dual structure of the real and virtual spheres of political decision-making explains how it was possible that Gaddafi could rule the country without having any official “state” position, and why Gaddafi thought it natural to fight the rebels (“traitors, rats, cockroaches”) with any means, even the most brutal force. His war, in fact, was that of a ruler against his disobedient subjects, hence every means of punishment was justified.

The disappearance of Gaddafi from the scene has not changed the pattern. In fact, with the delicate balance held by Gaddafi gone, the political actors would have to find a new balance. To that end

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there seems to be two possible ways: either there is a strong entity (a strongman or the most powerful of the tribes), who is able to convince all others of his superior strength, and then according to the rules of the patrimonial society these accept the new ruler and swear their oath of allegiance to him; or, the battle for power will go on until one actor – or an allied group of actors – come out as the strongest. The National Transitional Council (NTC), especially Mustafa Abdel Jalil and the new interim Prime Minister Abdurrahim al-Keib, may have all the support and recognition from abroad (the US, the EU, the Arab League and the African Union – i.e. in the virtual sphere), if they cannot take power firmly into their hands (i.e. prove themselves in the real sphere of power), further fighting and, eventually, a (new) war may evolve. Warning signals that this may happen have already arisen, for example, in the recent fighting around Zawiyah or Tripoli.

One of the biggest security concerns in the new Libya will be the huge amount of weapons in the hands of not only the fighters, but of the civilian population at large. Although external sources have already offered assistance programmes to the collection of arms, it is not yet clear how it can be carried out. Yet, if the traditional tribal pattern of social organisation is any indication, tribal leaders will be able to manage that within the tribes. (The quiet statement by Prime Minister al-Keib on leaving the arms with the people, who won their liberty with these, points in the same direction.) It is another question if the NTC can control the fighters, not to mention the fact that fighter leaders like Abdel Hakim Belhaj, the military commander of Tripoli, are highly controversial figures for the outside world. From this point of view the “transitional” character of the NTC, while in accordance with the international norms, may be an ambiguous signal. Especially so, as other traditional institutions, like vengeance, may still prevail; for example, as in the suspicious murder of General Abdel Fattah Younes and of Gaddafi himself, or the massacring of Gaddafi’s followers.

But the biggest concern of all may still be the development of the tribal system. While its exact relevance in Libya is not clear, and many think that the tribes have retained social-cultural connotations only, under the new circumstances tribal affiliations may gain a new political meaning and function. This would be especially dangerous if the newly established security forces and army units are organised accordingly. (It is widely acknowledged that there are some 130 tribes and clans in Libya, but at the same time some 15% of the population has no tribal affiliation at all. The Warfalla, with its 1.5 million members the most numerous of all, has traditionally been at the core of power before and after the 1969 Fatah Revolution, and some in the NTC are also affiliated with it.)

The chances of democratisation, under these circumstances, are relatively weak. The driving force of transformation could be a kind of “third class”, the economic and business sphere, independent and strong enough to demand a say in political decision-making. However, private businesses star-

ted to be systematically eliminated in the 1970s. And although in the 2000s Gaddafi launched the economic liberalisation of the country, the government's control remained strong over the economy, and no independent challenger has arisen from this quarter. Taking into consideration the setback caused by the civil war in Libya's foremost source of income, the oil sector, nor can it be expected in the short term. Another indication pointing in that direction is the outside world – including French President Sarkozy, British Prime Minister David Cameron and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – courting the TNC and thus acknowledging its hold over the oil.

In the absence of a force to democratise the country in the European sense, the evolution of a new neo-patrimonial system can be expected, in which the balance of power will be based on the agreement of the traditional actors in society (the tribes and clans) and those segments of the former ruling elites who switched sides “in time”. It is yet to be seen how and if a real national reconciliation takes place, not only if pro-Gaddafi groups would and could be involved, but also taking into account the very different paths outlined in the speeches upon the “liberation” of the country by Abdel Jalil in Benghazi on Islam, Belhaj in Tripoli on nationalism (wataniyya) and military commander Jiha in Misurata on revenge. Yet, under pressure from the Western allies and adapting to the realities of the globalised international system, the political actors of the new Libya will follow the “international norms”: draft constitution, elections in 2012, human rights and so on. While this in itself will be a change compared to the absence of these institutions in the Jamahiriyya, it will not ensure a more than virtual democratic transition. Therefore, the probability is great that, on the one hand, old and even older traditional political actors will rule the real political sphere, some of whom may pursue the most democratic Western ideals personally, but their legitimacy would still derive from their belonging to the ruling tribe(s), e.g. Mustafa Abdel Jalil himself. On the other hand, the formal elements of the Western ideal of a democracy will be established and Libya will – formally – operate and pursue a policy expected by its Western allies. The new Libya will, therefore, most likely be based on its traditional model and retain its neo-patrimonial structure, even if in a “modernised” form.

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