



THE MIDDLE EAST SYNOD

THE LIBYAN EXPERIENCE

Jasmine flower, you have reminded us of his smile and days from our past

An old Libyan tune by Nuri Kamal, a blind singer from Tripoli

The suddenness with which events move at times in the MENA region was brought home to me again last weekend when the rebels fighting on behalf of the National Transitional Council (NTC) morphed into real-time revolutionaries as they conquered the Libyan capital Tripoli and swiftly overran Colonel Qadhafi's own Bastille - his 'impregnable' bastion of Bab al-Aziziya.

Indeed, only nine months into the first MENA uprisings in Tunisia and six months into the 17th February rebellion in Libya, we are witnessing the closure of yet another authoritarian political era. In fact, Qadhafi's forty-two-year rule over this oil-rich country has for all intents and purposes already collapsed, and the disparate factions from the east and west of Libya are now writing the last chapters of their quest for freedom. Green Square, Colonel Qadhafi's showpiece, has already been re-named Freedom Square, and everyone agrees that - barring a spectacular reversal of fortunes - we have clearly attained the tipping point. In fact, we are now heading toward the endgame once Sirte that houses the Qadhadhfa tribe - an Arabised Berber tribe - and a few other parts of Libya such as Sabha call it a day too. But what is the endgame in the Libyan context?

This is a home-grown revolution, but it is clear that Libyans will not have managed to secure such success had it not been for Operation Odyssey Dawn by NATO that emerged from UNSCR 1973 (2011). Nor would it have been feasible were it not for French, British, Qatari, UAE and US assistance in terms of arms, intelligence and logistical support as well as training. So Libyans owe their 'friends' a lot in terms of overturning their course of history, but this definitively does not mean that the West should now dictate all the terms of a post-Qadhafi Libya or draw up the minutiae of a transition roadmap for them. In fact, the 'rebels' who are no longer 'rebels' even though Colonel Qadhafi has not yet been located, own this revolution and so it follows that they should sit in the political cockpit. And in this sense, they have their work cut out for them in the weeks and months ahead.

Mind you, what happens to Colonel Qadhafi and all ten (two of them adopted) children is almost a moot point for me at this stage. The Hague-based ICC has already indicted Colonel Qadhafi and his son Seif el-Islam for those crimes perpetrated over the past six months and both father and son should face international justice.

However, Colonel Qadhafi has ruled over four decades of alleged crimes, the sponsorship of international terrorism and vile oppression. Let us not forget the Lebanese Shi'i leader Imam Moussa al-Sadr and his two companions who disappeared in August 1978 during a visit to Libya. Let us not also forget the atrocious massacres at Abu Salim jail in June 1996 when 1200 inmates were killed in cold blood - a macabre event that served as one trigger for the '17th February revolution' in Benghazi. Besides, what about the murder of Daif Abdulkareem al-Ghazal, a journalist who was part of the Libyan inner circle but fell out with it whilst working on Libya al Yawm and was killed in June 2005? What about the explosion aboard the French UTA Flight 172 over the Niger in September 1989 that resulted in charges brought against six Libyans - including Abdullah Senoussi, Qadhafi's brother-in-law and the then deputy head of the Libyan intelligence - and was perceived as Libyan revenge against France for its support of Chad in the conflict with Libya? One cannot

of course overlook the Lockerbie bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 in December 1988 and the controversial release of Abdel-Baset Ali al-Megrahi from a Scottish prison in August 2009 (reportedly comatose today). I need not remind readers of WPC Yvonne Joyce Fletcher who was fatally shot during a protest outside the Libyan embassy in April 1984, nor as the Brazilian lyricist and novelist Paulo Coelho asked on his blog, on the whereabouts of Jaballa Matar (a prominent Libyan political dissident) who was arrested in 1990? These are some jigsaw pieces of a one-man rule that warrant a trial so that due process and retribution can take place.

But if state-building is what we all aspire for as the endgame, alongside the establishment of those fundamental freedoms that have been absent from most of the region and need to be re-introduced in a culturally-sensitive manner, the disparate forces that drove the regime out still have to reach some consensus on their objectives. At the moment, the recently-expanded 40-member TNC leadership is nothing more than a heterodox mix of recent defectors and their former long-time foes along a whole range of competing ethnic, tribal and ideological baselines. After all, Mahmoud Jibril, the head of the interim assembly is a liberal politician open to the West whilst Abdel Hakim Belhadj, chief of the Tripoli Military Council who led the fight to overtake Qadhafi's military barracks, is reputedly an Islamist who once was part of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Party and a veteran of the Afghan-Soviet war. So perhaps as the Human Rights Watch director in Washington DC stated only a few days ago, 'everyone should be ready for the prospect of a very quick, chaotic transition,' but the key question is to keep a watchful eye on the manner in which those former militias turn into political parties.

But the crimes of one man, however heinous, should not be the sole focus for Libya now. Rather, the focus should be forward-looking in terms of re-building the country and helping it back on its feet. To do that, it is helpful to realise that there are some 140 tribes and clans in Libya - not least the largest ones that include the Warfalla tribe with roughly one million members across Libya and the Magariha tribe with its strong allegiance to Qadhafi. So those revolutionaries fighting the remnants of Qadhafi's supporters should try to put their ideological, political, religious and (equally importantly) personal differences aside - not least given the historical antipathy between Benghazi and Tripoli - and strive to converge on a set of basic points that would strengthen ab initio the political process. For instance, those in Misrata who are distrustful of some members of the NTC leadership in Benghazi should combine their efforts at this stage so that the chaos that Seif el-Islam predicted six months ago does not come to haunt Libya and destroy its future. After all, the NTC includes outstanding and independent figures the likes of Abdel Hafidh Ghoga, its Vice Chairman and a leading Benghazi lawyer who represented families of prisoners killed at Abu Salim prison, and Fathi Terbil, who also legally represented the families of prisoners killed in Qaddafi prisons over many past years.

But state-building, itself clearly an overriding necessity, is also a process that involves much more than elections and governments. So let me start by reminding readers that the NTC has already begun its homework (with some help from its allies) and come up with a 37-point "constitutional declaration" that would provide a legal framework for the political transition. Under this plan, and once this vast country have been stabilised, elections will be held within eight months for a constitutional assembly that would in turn appoint a new interim government and write a constitution to be put to a national referendum. Direct elections for a properly elected government would then take place within twenty months.

As such, whilst those 37 points are gradually incorporated into the broader political process of a re-emerging country, there are immediate measures that need to be considered and implemented by Libyans:

- Security, civil peace or law and order should be the foremost priorities irrespective of any cleavages among the interim rulers so that they take the first tentative steps toward stability and also avoid witnessing the kind of chaos that happened in Iraq after the quick takeover of Baghdad in 2003. This would also imply that there will be no rash and ill-thought dismantling of all the institutions and services that worked under Qadhafi. Any attempt at a Libyan-style 'de-Ba'athification' should be avoided since a more representative, inclusive and experienced leadership are also vital.

- Basic services - namely food, water, electricity, medicines or hospital facilities - are a top priority. The pictures we see of hospitals that are severely under-resourced and filled with the horrible stench of death must be dealt with by importing supplies from Tunisia across the recently captured Ras Adjir primary border crossing. The same logic applies for Libyan refugees who either fled the country or have lived abroad as they should be welcomed back in order to help build the new state too.
- There should be a serious effort at institution-building since Libyan civil society is weak. But it is vital to avoid any extrajudicial killings or revenge attacks against Qadhafi's supporters. Even though both the erstwhile Libyan leader and his heir-apparent described the rebels as cockroaches and rats simply because they opposed them - equivalent to the regime of President Bashar el-Assad of Syria accusing all Syrian demonstrators of being criminals, conspirators or terrorists let alone allegedly colluding in the killing of the likes of the singer Ibrahim Qashoush in Hama or the assault on the caricaturist Ali Farzat in Damascus - it is important to avoid any kind of vengefulness that could easily descend into tit-for-tat violence, pit the various tribes with their diverse loyalties against each other in sectarian confrontations and lead to an implosion in the country that would end the initial hopes for a better future.
- Libyan oil (that is of light quality, easier to refine into diesel and accounting for over 90% of domestic GDP) as well as all its five refineries should be brought back on line, and the necessary assets should be unfrozen (initially US\$ 2.5 billion) to allow the payment of salaries and the implementation of those seminal steps. All this should be done by the Libyans themselves, in a coherent roadmap, and assisted by the West only when required or else requested by the new interim assembly.
- Although the overwhelming majority of Libyans are Sunnis, it is equally important to ensure that there are no attacks against men and women of other faiths - particularly since there are different and largely expatriate Christian denominations that have their own churches in Tripoli and Benghazi.

Despite the ferocity of the fighting that we have all seen on our screens at one time or another, I am cautiously optimistic that Libya would manage to avoid repeating the horrible mistakes of Iraq and Afghanistan - mistakes aided and abetted by the West - so long as the interim assembly piloting the country forward sticks to a script that enhances the rule of law and disassociates itself from personal interests, vendettas and corruption.

But let me look at the events in the MENA region in a broader sense. After all, whilst the birth pangs of a free society are beginning to be teased out on Libyan soil, as much as in Tunisia and Egypt, it is clear that the bloody oppression in Syria continues unabated as does the powerlessness of the West to help in any robust way - especially when states such as Russia, Iran, China or even the unrepresentative Arab League are bolstering such regimes out of interest. Or worse when militia movements like Hezbollah that support the concept of al-mouqawama or resistance and people-power hail the revolutions and revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen or Bahrain but suddenly balk when it comes to Syria despite its onslaught on its citizens and their basic freedoms.

Yet, by looking at all the ongoing the tensions in the MENA region, I believe one might draw some lessons from history in the distinct models in which three former Soviet allies responded to the demands of their own people for more rights, dignity and prosperity. The Mikhail Gorbachev model in the Soviet Union that initiated those reforms but in the process of transformation was voted out of office, or the Wojciech Jaruzelski model in Poland where the reforms were forced upon the regime and they accepted it grudgingly, or the Nicolae Ceausescu model in Romania where the president refused to budge from his totalitarian rule and ended up being captured and then executed by the people. So any of the brutal responses today to the popular demonstrations in the MENA countries compare in my mind to the Soviet-era use of tanks, guns, torture chambers and prison camps in Russia, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Romania.

In a nutshell, it seems to me that the Brother Leader (Colonel Qadhafi's name of choice) along with his Green Book of philosophical musings has lost out. After all, 57 states have recognised to date the interim government of Libya, and the inciting or vindictive broadcasts by Colonel Qadhafi from his hideout(s) that are transmitted via a Syrian link on al-Ourouba / al-Ra'i TV stations are merely desperate attempts at sowing discord and unrest. In fact, the green flag is being gradually replaced by the old tri-colour flag that was the symbol of the Libyan monarchy from 1951 till 1969 during the reign of King Idris until he was overthrown by Colonel Qadhafi himself. But a new flag alone does not sustain a new country, and what is required is to consolidate the stability of the country in order to ward off any Iraq-style insurgencies, attrition or fragmentation.

The buzz-words that keep coming back in some form or other for Libya, as much as for the rest of the MENA region, are those of 'national sovereignty', 'legitimacy', 'social justice', 'efficiency' and above all 'dignity' that together will render the countries of this region viable. Yet, the longer-term future alone will tell whether Libya will be a successful experience in democracy, and whether the new leaders - once confirmed - can unearth the secrets of those Libyans who were abducted, detained, arrested, tortured or killed over four decades whilst at the same time serve as a political compass that would incentivise a heretofore grievously wounded people.

Perhaps I can pick one clue from Timothy Garton Ash in his book *Facts are Subversive* where he quotes the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz: Do not feel safe. The poet remembers. You may kill him - another will be born. Deeds and words shall be recorded. A poet does not sleep, does s/he? I believe there is hope that Libyans let alone citizens across the whole MENA region will inexorably self-determine their rights, ensure social justice and secure their fundamental freedoms as much as their sovereign rights as full citizens of their countries.

As I have often suggested in the past, it is so sad that this is happening with so much bloodletting and violence. But given where we are today, it is clear that new seeds are being sown across the region today that will take a long while to put down roots. But what started in Tunisia simply cannot stop in Libya. It should not only grow but also improve incrementally so that we all stop talking romantically about a one-season Arab Spring and think more pragmatically in terms of an Arab Awakening from a long slumber and a stubborn challenge against those rulers or elites who would prefer their co-citizens to remain dormant ... or worse dead.

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