

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Libyan Studies Centre
Box 5040
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LIBYA: THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION PART FIVE: CELEBRATING THE REVOLUTION - I

Mr. Peter Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter;

I returned in early August to witness the golden anniversary of Qadhafi's revolution on 1 September. For several months crews of foreign laborers had been systematically painting all public buildings in Tripoli white and green. Private families had been urged at the Popular Committee meetings to participate in the get-Tripoli-clean campaign; everywhere I went I encountered ladders and pails of paint and small groups of Libyans discussing the upcoming events. Everyone was gearing up for what they called, among themselves, the "hafla kabira" - the big party - but what the official program referred to, in more distinguished terms, as the "ihtifalaat" - the festivities.

The planned celebrations were a blessing for thousands of Moroccans, Tunisians and sub-Saharan Africans who had cashed in on Qadhafi's invitation to help prepare for the event. Truckloads of workers from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger were brought to the coast. For weeks on end I watched them driving dumptrucks and cherrypickers across Green Square. Thin young men in ragged clothes - more often than not supervised by a beefy eastern european who stood silently smoking in the shade - restored cracked sidewalks. They replaced the sagging lampposts in the square and in the surrounding streets with graceful white clusters of Italian lamps. The huge picture of Qadhafi near the Jamahiriya museum was carefully taken down one morning and replaced by three even more prominent billboards that touted - in a mixture of soft pastel colors and graceful calligraphy - the accomplishments of the Enduring Revolution.

In the sidestreets leading to the square, Moroccan artisans constructed graceful arches that glittered at night with thousands of tiny colored bulbs. Entire streets were repaved, despite the suffocating heat of summer and a couple of ghibliis (sandstorms) that roared in from the desert. Trucks appeared in the public parks, selling softdrinks and mineral water. (Unfortunately no one had seemingly thought of garbage cans; at night fresh crews were dispatched to pick up heaps of litter, and attempted to straighten out trampled seedlings that had been planted only a few days before.)

Dirk Vandewalle was the North Africa Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs from 1986 until the end of 1988. He is currently teaching in the Department of Government at Dartmouth College.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

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One night I paid a visit to some friends who are the caretakers of the (now deserted) American chancellery near the former royal palace. The view from their balcony, they assured me, was spectacular. It was an odd sensation to wander through this dusty and unkempt piece of Americana in the middle of Tripoli. In one room dozens of typewriters had been thrown helter-skelter on the floor; the remnants of a communication system took up the entire wall of another. The view from the balcony was indeed marvelous: across the deserted square, lit up by klieglights, hung a sixty foot high portrait of Qadhafi framed by yard after yard of green neon lightstrips that stretched across the facades of the surrounding houses.

In the dilapidated garden near the Libyan Studies Center a small restaurant unexpectedly opened up. For several weeks I bought hamburger-and-egg sandwiches and icecold bottles of Ain Ghashir mineral water for fifty cents. On Umar Mukhtar a zeppelin had been strung across the street, its sides ornamented with the ubiquitous slogans of the revolution. Huge golden balloons with more slogans filled hotel courtyards; metal detectors were installed in the lobbies to check suitcases. All guests were forced to leave their rooms in preparation of the official delegations' arrivals. One of the first groups to show up belonged to Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam. Some were dressed in military-style suits. They swaggered across the lobby of the Bab al-Medina hotel; they had brought the most recent issue of their newspaper with them that declared on the frontpage that Qadhafi was "A True Hero."

I moved in with a Libyan family I had known for some time. Their house was in one of the poorer suburbs of Tripoli. Every morning and evening I squeezed myself into a communal taxi, careful to mumble the obligatory "as-salamu alaykum" - peace upon you - as I clambered into the back seat. Living with a family in the city, away from the hotel, provided a unique chance to chat leisurely about events in Libya. As many Libyans, Mariam and Youssef were largely apolitical but strongly defended Qadhafi's stance against the United States. The US bombing had frightened them; at one point, when there were rumors of more attacks, they had fled Tripoli with their young daughter. Mariam's black humor provided a welcome relief from the heat and the dust and the thousand inconveniences of living in Tripoli. As almost all Libyans I met she had a strange fascination with US intelligence gathering facilities. Each time she made couscous she carried the big pan into the little courtyard of the house, held it out before her - "so the American big bird out there can see it" - looked at the sky and yelled, "America, today we are eating lamb couscous."

My fellow passengers in the taxi seemed delighted with the noise and excitement in the city. They took to the parks and streets with unaccustomed energy, and lingered there far into the night. One evening we drove passed the fairground where an enormous hot air balloon was slowly rising. It was almost dark. A burst of gas suddenly lit up the inside of the silk envelope like a huge multi-colored paper lantern. As if it were a giant slide, a thirty foot silkscreened portrait of Qadhafi appeared on the balloon's curving side. Unfortunately the portrait's nose was centered on one of the balloon's seams. On either side of the seam the fabric billowed outward - making the intrepid leader of Libya, the Guide of the Revolution, look decidedly cross-eyed. The taxi shook with laughter.

I enclose, as my final observations on Libya, a more in-depth analysis of what I consider to be the accomplishments and failures of Colonel Qadhafi's experiments. Although my sojourns in the country have made me grudgingly admire some aspects of that revolution - or at least given me a greater sensitivity to how Libyans perceive it - I remain somewhat pessimistic about the long-term effects or lasting value of Qadhafi's political and economic experiments. I argue below that one of the unintended effects of Qadhafi's rule these last twenty years may well have been the slow institutionalization of Libya's political system. If I am right it means that the Libyan revolution has been much less intrusive on people's lives than its leader wanted it to be - making speculation about Libya's future even more difficult.



Preparing for the anniversary on Umar Mukhtar street.

With his accustomed fury and determination Colonel Muammar al-Qadhafi has celebrated his twentieth year in power.¹ Following a period of inactivity and withdrawal in the wake of the April 1986 US bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi, the festivities marked his return to the international political scene. The celebrations were vintage Qadhafi. He reiterated his vision of Arab unity, political neutrality and Islamic solidarity, and repeated his determination to support those "struggling for freedom in Nicaragua, Panama... Palestine... Central America."

If some of his ideas seemed a little hackneyed - Nicaragua may well be off his list once the country's elections take place - and many of his assembled guests only applauded in quiet deference to their guest, Qadhafi seemed unconcerned. Clearly delighted with the large number of official delegations that had made their way to an expensively festooned Tripoli, Qadhafi returned seemingly to the brinkmanship that has characterized most of his years in power. The anniversary celebrations came at the end of a two year diplomatic campaign during which the Libyan leader tried to mend his bridges with North and sub-Saharan Africa and with Europe. Even Egypt, where Libya has not had any official representatives since the protracted border war of 1977, was suddenly wooed by Qadhafi. In a meeting with president Mubarak at Marsa Matruh he sought to put an end to their longstanding feud that focuses on Libya's opposition to the Camp David agreements. The announcement - the very day of the anniversary festivities - of an agreement to settle the Aouzou issue with Chad before the International Court of Justice seemed to indicate a willingness to abide by international norms.² For the United States Qadhafi had only the same scathing remarks during the festivities - remarks that have been his stock-in-trade in most of his speeches these last twenty years.

For the Libyan leader very little has changed these last two decades. Even if the Middle East and North Africa have been altered a great deal since the death of Gamal Abdul Nasser - Egypt's first president and Qadhafi's hero - the Libyan leader's observations on the cause of Arab weakness in confronting the West still closely mirror those of the former Egyptian president. His obsession with the past sins of the western world and the duplicity of his fellow Arabs remains overpowering. Qadhafi, his inner circle of advisors and many Libyans remain traumatized by a historical past that includes a particularly bloody period of colonialism - during which half of the population of the country's eastern province may have died - and a kingdom that was anachronistic and subservient to western interests. If, as a result of his maverick role in the past two decades, the local, regional and global challenges to Qadhafi's rule have narrowed his own political options, he has skillfully managed to paint much of the local opposition as part of a new crusade by the West and its local allies to silence the true voice of the Arab world.

Despite the pomp of the celebrations and the announcement of the Chad-Libya agreement, the golden anniversary of the revolution remained a rather pedestrian affair. At the Kabir and Mehari hotels, high level delegations were entertained in style. My best

¹ A somewhat modified version of the remainder of this report and the next two reports will appear in the Mediterranean Quarterly.

² In effect, the decision to turn over the Aouzou file to the ICJ had been recommended for a while by several of the country's top foreign policy advisors. It provides the country's leadership with a relatively long period of time to decide the direction of future policy concerning the lingering crisis; for now, it does not prejudice the Qadhafi government's case while making Libya appear in a more positive light.



Qadhafi billboard: "The Leader - Without Him, Death."

personal recollections, however, are those of down-at-the-heels delegation members scampering around hotel lobbies, stuffing themselves at the free lunches, bored and sad, pretending to participate in a historical event that never was. At night they drifted off to their rooms early; not many were inclined to venture a walk through Tripoli's marvelous medina or to take a stroll along the beach.

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The celebrations also provided a reasonably clear indication of Libya's international standing. Although all the Maghrebi heads of state, Yasir Arafat, Syria's Assad, Sudan's new ruler Umar Bashir and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega were present, the festivities were a somewhat muted affair. Admiration for the Libyan revolution remains limited to those countries and groups who, for political and economic purposes, need to pay it lip service. The European countries avoided the celebrations en masse. The highest ranking official was Italy's Foreign Minister Gianni de Michelis; his presence was undoubtedly linked more to the important economic ties between the two countries than to any real admiration for the Libyan revolution.

The official slogans one finds in Libya forcefully insist that the revolution goes on forever. That message - "al-Fatah abadan" - is conveyed wherever you are, or travel to. It is stenciled, in graceful calligraphy, on concrete bridges and government offices. It emblazons every book and every piece of official stationery. It is printed on the labels of mineral water bottles from Kufra, embroidered on blankets in Benghazi, woven into carpets in Misrata. But the truth is that the Libyan revolution has come to a halt. The appeal it once held for certain groups has largely dissipated among the population at large. Although Qadhafi retains a large measure of personal support and admiration inside the Jamahiriyah, his appeals for a continuous revolution have floundered in the 1970s and early 1980s. A powerful combination of economic and political factors have slowly replaced the leader's rhetoric with the more mundane concerns over a more efficient management of the country's affairs.

The rhetoric and brinkmanship of Qadhafi's revolution have obscured much of what has happened in Libya these last twenty years. His seemingly effortless success at bringing the local oil industry under national control resulted in a measure of internal support that was only matched a decade later by the open confrontation with the United States. At the same time the inexhaustable media appetite for his seemingly eccentric behavior propelled him to a stature usually denied to rulers of equally small countries. In our obsession with Qadhafi, we have long assumed that Libyan politics equals Qadhafi and vice versa - much like Libyans do not understand the subtleties of our political system and blame the relations between the countries on whoever happens to be president. In reality the formulation and implementation of policies in Libya is somewhat more intricate. As any other country, Libya has - willy-nilly and often in contradiction to Qadhafi's wishes - developed mechanisms that provide some sort of economic and political continuity amidst the chaos that has prevailed for most of the time since 1969. It is the strength of these mechanisms that will determine what the country's politics and economics will look like in the years ahead.

In my next report I will speculate on some likely scenarios.

All the best,



Dirk Vandewalle

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