

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Libyan Studies Centre
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LIBYA: THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION PART SIX: CELEBRATING THE REVOLUTION - II

Mr. Peter Martin
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Dear Peter;

It is perhaps instructive to recall where the Libyan revolution has been before speculating on where it can now go. To those who ever studied Egyptian politics, there is an element of deja vu to the ongoing Libyan debacle. Qaddafi grew up during the heady decade of the 1950s when a score of Third World nations met at Bandung to create the non-aligned movement. It was a period marked by growing discontent with colonial and neo-colonial arrangements. Nationalism bubbled across the Arab countries, with Nasser temporarily as its undisputed leader. The Egyptian leader had nationalized the Suez canal; the revolutionaries in Syria and Iraq would soon take over their countries' governments. In Yemen's civil war, conservative Saudi Arabia and progressive Egypt confronted each other. There was a feeling of ebullience and of eminent change, of a renewed possibility of Arab grandeur.

To Qadhafi Nasser has always symbolized all that had been lost to the Arabs during the colonial period: courage, vision, a promise for the future of the Arab world. By the time the young revolutionaries in Libya came to power in 1969 much of the hope for Arab unity had been lost - even though Qadhafi has never acknowledged that fact. In his speeches, carefully assembled in thick yearly volumes, he never seriously addressed the squabbling that took place among those contending for supremacy in the Arab world during the 1960s. He has steadfastly ignored that Nasser was forced to compromise with Saudi Arabia in the wake of the Arab defeat in the 1967 Six-day War. He still insists that the possibility of grandeur has not been exhausted. His dislike for the West and dreams of an Arab renewal have provided the ideological fuel of his revolution and even now explain much of his behavior. Twenty years after his initial meeting with Nasser, one of the most prominent pictures in Libya remains that of a young, deliriously happy Qaddafi walking arm in arm with the former Egyptian leader.

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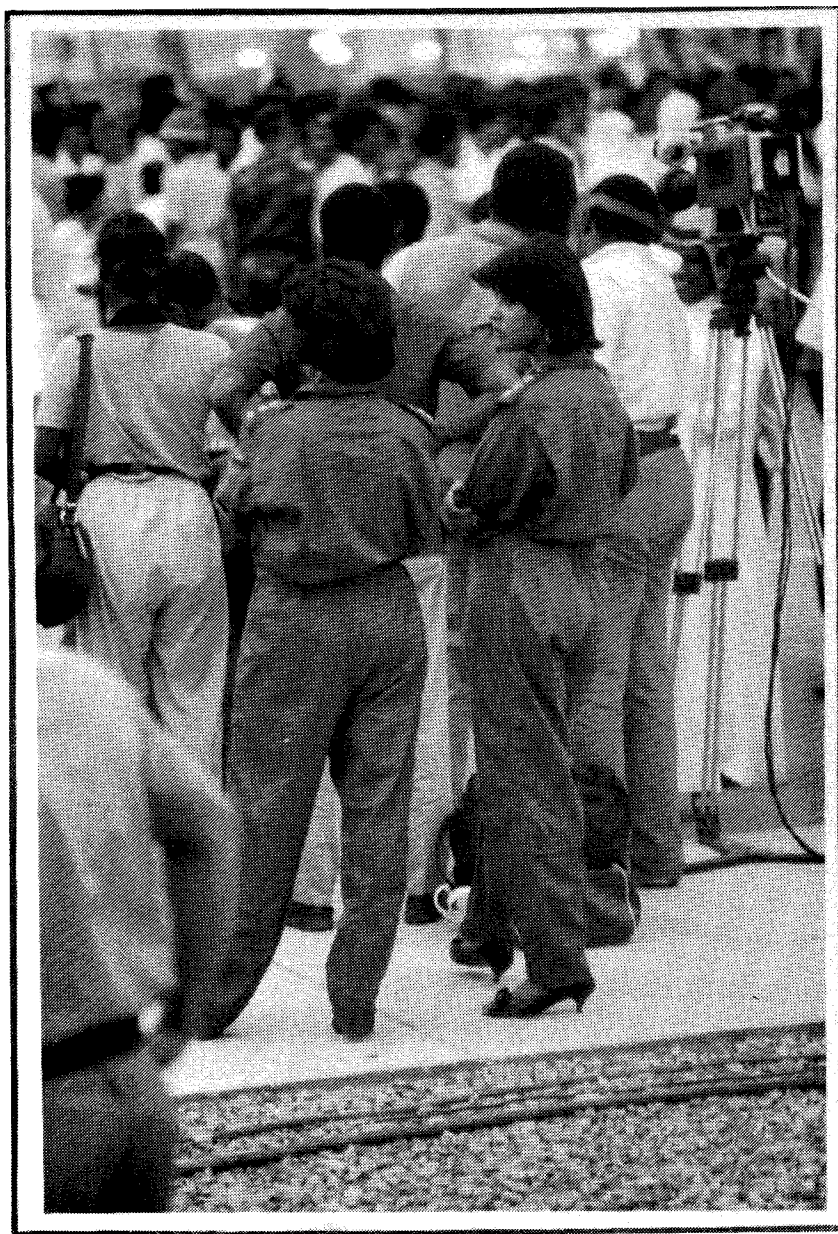
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There has been another dimension to the Libyan revolution as well. When the coup took place on 1 September 1969, the young Libyan officers lacked a vision for the future of their country. They only possessed some rudimentary notions of socialism and Arab nationalism that had blown in from the east. A year later the Egyptian president was dead; the oracle would not speak again. The revolutionaries had very few concrete ideas, but were firmly convinced of the value of those they touted: "socialism, pan-Arabism and Islam." Beyond this and a clear anti-West conviction, however, there was a glaring absence of a clear program and of a unifying issue that could galvanize the Libyan population. There had not been in Libya - as in neighboring Algeria - the struggle, persecution and conspiratorial circumstances that forged a clear political agenda in the minds of its leaders. There had been no political compromises and no internal struggles. When the kingdom collapsed, it did so without much fanfare. The monarchy had at best been an unhappy compromise among the different provinces - particularly Cyrenaica and Tripolitania - that shared little historical vision. The coup had been bloodless. The king had been surprisingly lax and lenient with whatever opposition existed: despite his known political convictions Qaddafi had been admitted to the Military College and later became a captain.

In Libya no disenfranchised class rose up against the local bourgeoisie. Although Cyrenaicans and Tripolitarians knew they had little in common, no one felt the need or inclination to resolve this antagonism by shedding blood. A large part of the population undoubtedly sighed in relief when the kingdom suddenly collapsed for corruption and nepotism reached unprecedented heights after the discovery of oil in 1959. More important, however, was the fact that an overwhelming majority of Libyans remained politically apathetic and indifferent to the new regime in Tripoli. With virtually no history of political organization and disenfranchised under the kingdom, Libyans retreated to family and tribe, the two social institutions that had provided continuity and support when all else failed. The relief felt over the disappearance of the king and the removal of the British and American military bases shortly afterwards never translated into much actual support for the new rulers among the country's tribal elders or the population at large. It was an auspicious way to start a revolution: a small core of revolutionaries with ill-defined ideas and a population that demanded in essence only to share in the increasing riches of an oil state.

No one has been more aware of this contradiction than Libya's Revolutionary Command Council members. Qadhafi's speeches are laced with denunciations of the political apathy and the rampant consumerism that marked Libya until the economic downturn in the early 1980s. Abdussalam Jallud admitted in an interview to *Le Monde* in 1980 that the political mobilization efforts of the previous decade had backfired. In personal conversations Libyans often compare the 1969 coup to the Chinese revolution of 1949. While the comparison is perhaps naive, it is also instructive. It shows the weak spots in the strategy the Qadhafi government has followed. Like their Chinese counterparts, Libyans were subjected in the 1970s to a number of political campaigns aimed at removing the local bourgeoisie. By 1980 this local bourgeoisie had easily been shackled. Private retail trade had been largely abolished - even if it never extended completely to basic foods as most Western analysts had erroneously assumed. Huge state supermarkets, built at the edges of each city or town, stocked goods imported through government-run monopolies. The government waged a vigorous campaign to prevent any family from owning more than one house. It provided temporary relief from the crushing housing crisis created by an urbanization process that had started even before Qadhafi came to power. Self-management programs at the country's public companies slowly spread throughout the country.

While the bourgeoisie lost a substantial part of their property in these campaigns, the uprooting of an entire class never took place. A certain number joined the new regime, cashing in on connections to army officers, the country's



Two of Qadhafi's female bodyguards watching the celebration.

latest elite. Some left the country. Many more who had lost their property quietly withdrew from economic and public life, waiting for a recall of the measures that had dispossessed them. As a result the Libyans earmarked for an increasingly radical

revolutionary indoctrination were urban middle class laborers. But unlike the dispossessed peasantry in China, this middle class never served as a backbone for a revolution. Qadhafi's attempts to inculcate them with his revolutionary message backfired. When he attempted massive mobilization - the equivalent of Mao's "countryside versus the cities campaign" - by creating the Popular Committees, many Libyans simply withdrew to their families and tribes, much like the businessmen had earlier retired. The ordinary Libyan, while grateful for the new wealth distributed by the new regime, has shown little interest in revolutionary politics. By nature, and because of their historical development, Libyans are very suspicious of central authority but evade it rather than confront it.

In the late 1970s Qadhafi intensified his campaign by appointing Revolutionary - or "Green" - Guards to act as a vanguard for the revolution. The analogy to Mao's Red Guards is obvious. In China these guardians of the revolution were assigned real authority. Libyans, however, never tolerated the kind of abuse the Chinese underwent at the hands of their Red Guards - who in some instances literally held the power over life and death. In Libya the remnants of the tribal system, the power of its elders and the role of Islam tempered political initiatives and the intrusion of the Revolutionary Guards alike. The tribal system and its elders continued to command a large measure of loyalty, even if its real functions had shifted toward social rather than political objectives. Very few tribal members who became Revolutionary Guards, for example, had the power to impose decisions handed down from Tripoli. They were seen as young upstarts, a situation that improved only marginally when outsiders were assigned. Another lingering impact of the tribal system was the importance of persuasion rather than actual violence to settle disputes and disagreements. The Chinese campaigns in which thousands of "undesirables" were executed during and after the Cultural Revolution simply had no equivalent in Libya. Despite some flagrant abuses that included executions inside and outside Libya - most recently some hangings of students at the university - the preferred control mechanism in Libya has been much more subtle and pervasive. It functions in part through the Popular Committee system and their watchdog revolutionary guards. Even slight infringements can mean, for example, the loss of shopping privileges at the national supermarkets. But when the guards' behavior started to raise intense criticism at the committee meetings in 1987, some of their prerogatives were scaled back as Qadhafi announced a political and economic liberalization on 26 March 1987.

In some crucial ways then the revolution in Libya never took place. Or it remained unfinished, despite Qadhafi's often sincere but draconian attempts to make the Popular Committee system work. The Libyan leader's vision has always been of an exceedingly tall - many would argue an impossible - order. What he demanded was not only a restructuring of the country's economic system and active popular participation in newfangled political arrangements, but a radical social and cultural reform of population and society alike.

It is not surprising that in a country with as weak a political tradition as Libya this transformation has not taken place as completely as Qadhafi would like. Very few, Qadhafi included, dare argue that the revolution has been as thorough as the successive waves of radicalization - embodied in the successive volumes of the Green Book - aimed at. What has promoted this failure has been the increasing bifurcation in Libyan politics between what is public and what is private. While it is relatively easy to ensure public compliance with political directives, it is almost impossible in a deeply traditional society to affect the lasting changes at the personal, family and tribal level that are needed to implement the profound alterations a revolution implies. Libyans, until the mid-1980s paid close attention to public compliance of the regime's political and economic dictates. Non-compliance may have had all sorts of unpleasant, essentially economic consequences. Open opposition has never been tolerated; Qadhafi argues that since the Libyan revolution



Green Square the night before the celebrations.

is a popular one, any attempt to alter it is a crime against the people as a whole. But Libyans could - and did - opt out of the Popular Committee system with relative ease. Until 1982 furthermore, there was so much money available that even after the incredible expenses for military supplies and foreign adventures there remained enough to promise every Libyan a more than adequate share of consumer goods and an ample diet. Even the disenfranchisement of the country's religious leadership did not deeply touch most Libyans; the ulama [learned religious leaders] had in large part been discredited by their sycophant role during the kingdom. As a result Libyan religious and social conservatism remained intact despite the upheavals people saw all around them.

By the mid-1980s several of the traditional escape routes had disappeared. The abolition of private property, the persecution of the Islamists, the economic hardship and the Chad debacle - necessitating for the first time a real financial contribution from the population - turned the tide. For the first time since 1969 apathy threatened to turn into open defiance. The number of real and potential opponents put into jail increased dramatically. The reasons for the discontent were readily visible. The

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general economic downturn in the country and the United States economic boycott after 1980 reduced the country's revenues from \$21 billion in 1981 to \$6 billion by 1986. Particularly the development budgets were affected. The war in Chad had been a steady drain on Libya's economy since it flared up almost a decade ago. No single issue in recent Libyan politics has been as divisive as the conflict over the Aouzou strip. Libya's eventual defeat in northern Chad, the loss of Wadi Doum - its principal airbase in the country - and the Chadian attack on Maaten As-Sara inside Libya was a source of serious friction among the leading members of the country's municipal committees and the secretariats that provide much of the day-to-day leadership. The desertion of several military commanders indicated that loyalty was more of a problem than Qadhafi had anticipated. At the popular level, the repeated appearance of funerary tents in the streets of the major cities provoked popular gossip and major discontent over the relatively large numbers of prisoners and casualties.

The economic crisis furthermore touched the population directly in a number of ways. The supermarket system, one of the cornerstones of Qadhafi's attempts to bring retail trade under state supervision, foundered on problems of distribution and of lingering corruption. On 26 March 1987 Qadhafi announced a liberalization of the Libyan economy, shortly followed by a massive release of political prisoners. Since then the state souks have been dispensing basic items while at their edges small private stores have sprung up overnight, selling - at black market prices - what the official stores don't have. Much of the merchandise for these newly created private stores has been brought in from Tunisia. Prices in these "Tunisian souks" are exorbitant, often above what the average Libyan can afford. A small can of tuna fish may cost as much as \$6; a pound of meat, sometimes available at \$8 in the state supermarkets, may cost twice as much on the free market. Faced with traditionally large families and incomes around \$500-600 per month, Libya's middleclass still has little to cheer about economically after five years of relative hardship and twenty years of revolution.

In my final report from Libya I will look at what all these developments seem likely to mean for the continuation of Qadhafi's political and economic experiments in the years ahead.

All the best,



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