

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DJV-36

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

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Dear Peter;

Whither the Libyan revolution? The answer is again a little more subtle than we would anticipate. One obvious observation is that, as opposed to all other Maghrebi countries, popular unrest in Libya has not yet led to widespread rioting. This has not only to do with actual repression; Algeria before the October 1988 riots and Tunisia before the removal of Bourguiba were in several ways as efficient and ruthless in dealing with real and potential opposition as Qadhafi has been.

A crucial element in any answer to the question lies in the traditional and relative ease with which Libyans have been able to escape the harsher aspects of the revolution. Although several of these escape routes were more difficult to take as the revolution intensified and economic hardship appeared in the 1980s, there are still enough left to make Libyans prefer to opt out rather than to confront the regime. The revolutionary government has in some sense been saved by not having a true revolution. The pull-back from Chad, the economic liberalization and the recent freedom of Libyans to travel did not come totally unexpected; the Libyan regime has always been good at taking the pulse of its people.

The traditional escape routes in Libya have been the family and tribe. Despite Qadhafi's attempt to cut administrative, social and political boundaries across traditional geographical ones, the lingering impact of family and tribe remains an important aspect of daily life in Libya. A careful look at Qadhafi's inner circle and those that report to them reveals that in addition to the military, a careful distribution of elites from old bourgeois families, major tribes and from Libya's three provinces persists under the Qadhafi regime. Even the leader himself has been forced to select much of the security personnel around him from his own tribe.

It is also worth noting that Qadhafi retains a substantial measure of genuine appeal to many of his people; anyone who has spent a few months in Libya would be hard pressed to conclude otherwise. From a Libyan point of view it is hard not to have some respect and admiration for what Qadhafi has done. He has given Libyans a sense of self-respect and identity, and has provided housing and free education for all. After 1969 the number of *muhadhafeen* (dispossessed) in the country decreased rapidly as a result of the oil boom and the distributive policies of the new government. Most Libyans

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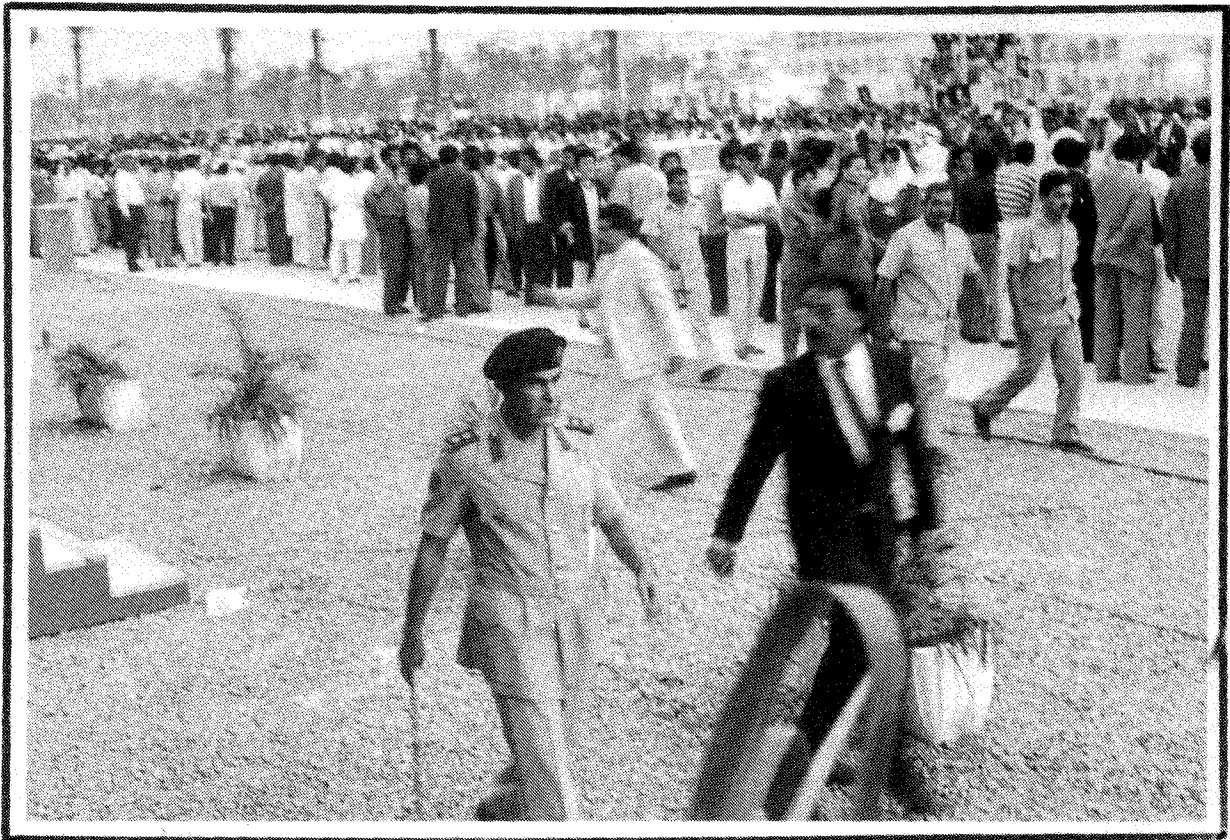
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Reaction to one of Qadhafi's revolutionary speeches: The leader's voice on the radio says "Brothers... the Revolution means Work... Revolution means Building and Struggling... the period of sloth and passivity is over!" Ath-Thawra, 1970.

are well informed and perfectly aware of the negative aspects of their government's foreign policy. Many simply don't care - as least not as long as they remain untouched by its effects. When the economic conditions at home got worse in the mid-1980s, popular opposition to some of Qadhafi's foreign and internal policies - guardedly expressed through the Popular Committee system but more accurately garnered and relayed to the top leadership through a well-oiled internal intelligence service - contributed to the March 1987 liberalization measures.

Perhaps the major factor in retaining support has been Qadhafi's skillful use of anti-Western feelings that has reinforced Libyans' traditional distrust of outsiders. The showdown with the United States above all has provided Qadhafi a stature and a platform he would not have had otherwise. In Libya most grumblings about the regime disappear as soon as the United States is mentioned. This takes place even in circles of the country's leading intellectuals, many of whom defend - with passion and persuasion - their government and the experiments Libya has gone through since 1969. A majority of them are convinced that American antagonism overwhelmingly rose out of the frustration encountered during the early nationalist phase of the Qadhafi regime that affected US economic interests in the country. When both the US and the Libyan

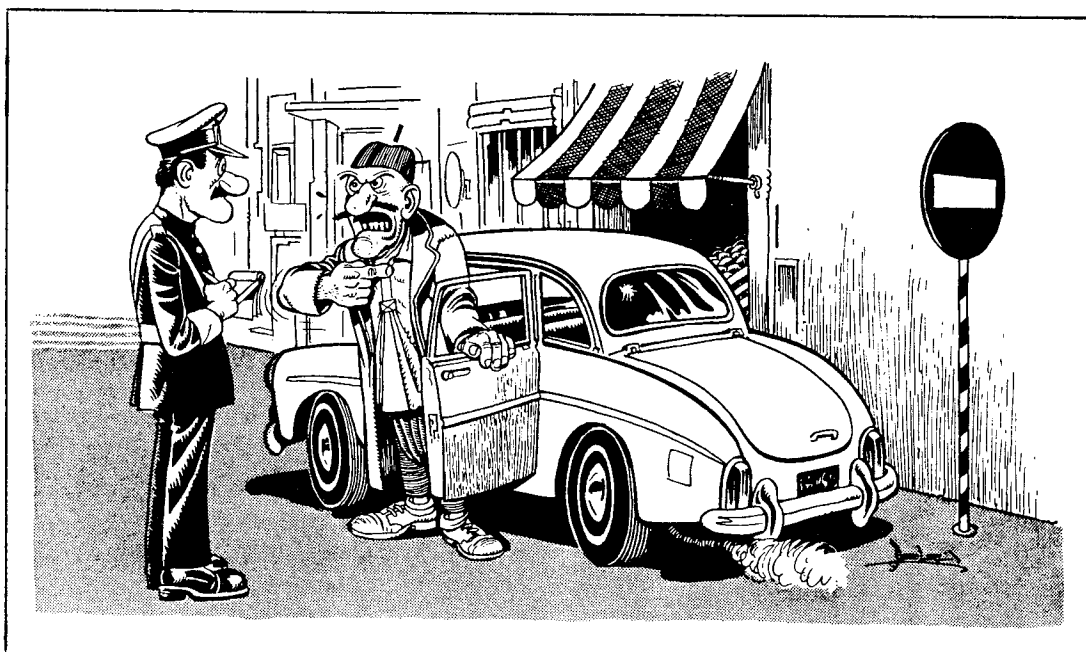


Khweldi Hamidi, one of the original RCC members at the celebrations.

government exploited this mutual antagonism for political reasons - by an American administration who painted Qadhafi as "the mad dog of the Middle East" and a Libyan government adept at exploiting its standing as a young nation kicking the shins of a superpower - the results can be disastrous to both sides' interests.

Libya after twenty years of Qadhafi's rule is in some aspects dramatically different from the country the Free Officers encountered when they staged their revolution. In other areas it has preserved some of the timelessness and traditionalism that marked the country prior to 1969. It is this bifurcation that perhaps provides the best clue to the future of the country, a future that will be marked by greater competition for declining economic resources. If Qadhafi left the political scene it would add the additional hardship of devising a new political system: it seems highly unlikely that the Popular Committee system, will outlive its creator.

The political experiments of the 1970s have been much less successful than the Libyan leadership anticipated, despite the rhetoric to the contrary. Participation in the popular committee system remains lukewarm although there are indications that it has worked well on several occasions and has been able to halt some of the more radical



About People's Power and its various interpretations: the policeman is giving the driver a ticket for driving into a one-way street. The driver responds: "By God, I drive correctly. I am one of the People of whom Muammar al-Qadhafi has said that we are the masters. How can you fine me?... the people don't make mistakes!!" - ath-Thawra, 1974.

proposals of Qadhafi. These included, among others, the leader's plan to shift the nation's capital away from Tripoli. At the same time a new generation of leadership that now increasingly insists on rational management of the country's resources has slowly emerged. Many are, in Libyan parlance, committed revolutionaries. Several privately profess little affection for a system where difficult economic decisions are often vitiated by political considerations. One clear example has been agriculture where data collection was severely disrupted on at least two occasions when the Ministry of Agriculture was abolished and then reorganized. Researchers in reclamation projects were often left without badly needed information. It is this primacy of politics over economic considerations that led to the first attempted coup against the Qadhafi regime in 1975.

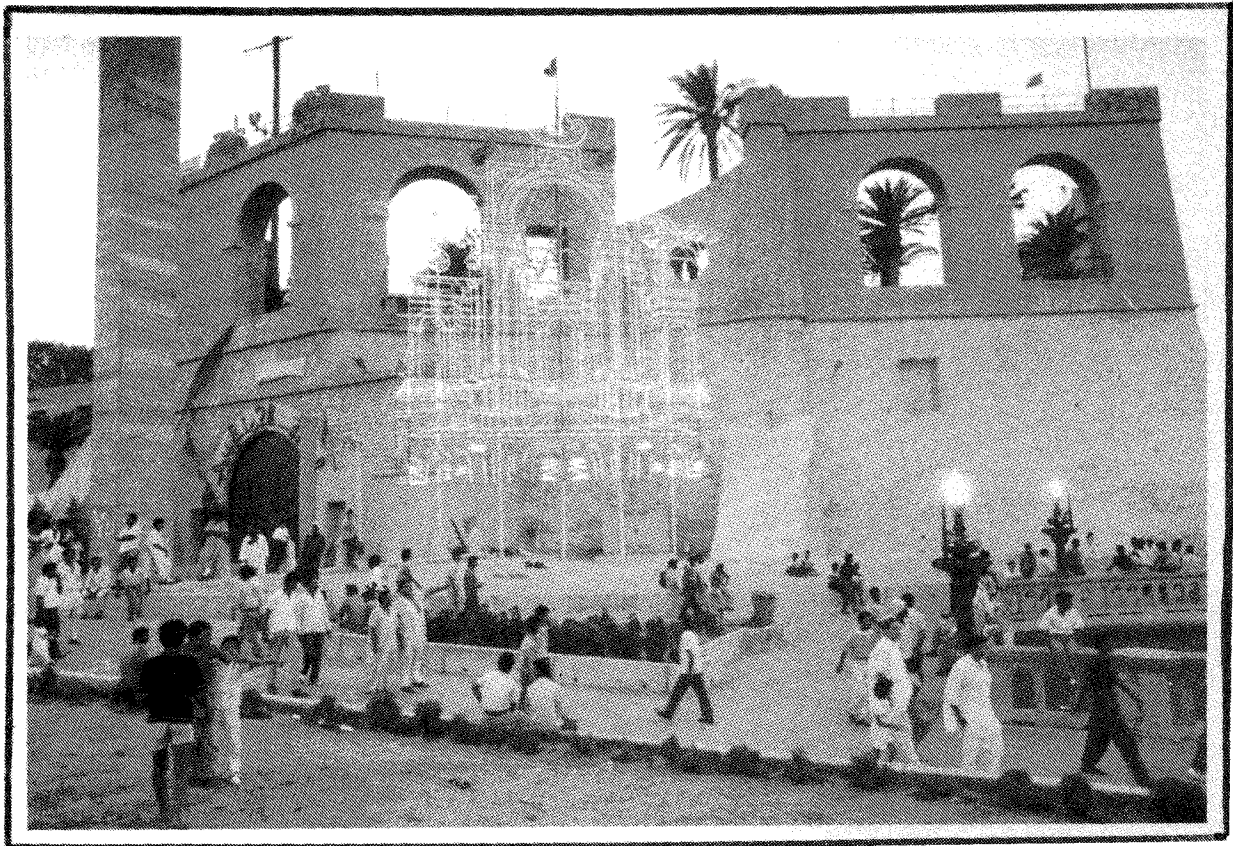
Because of the dearth of good information on Libya, many of these new elite are virtually unknown in the West; even seasoned Libya watchers would be hard pressed to recognize their names and faces. But they have slowly permeated the country's research organizations, its banking system, the bureaucracy and, to a lesser extent, its academic institutions. Although technocrats have periodically been removed from Libya's political life, the economic circumstances of the late 1980s now make this much more difficult. The Qadhafi government simply can no longer make major economic decisions without worrying about their impact on the financial future of the country and the population alike. At the same time a measure of institutionalization has taken place



The reaction of the Libyan people to the announcement of Qadhafi's resignation as leader of the country in 1973: the slogans on the posters read Freedom, Unity, Socialism, Popular Revolution, etc...

in Libya, despite the continuous upheavals of the last two decades. The Popular Committee system and Qadhafi's preoccupation with educating the Libyan people has produced a new generation of leadership that now provides, quite efficiently, for the day-to-day running of the economy. Libya's foreign and diplomatic service has, after a period of intense politicization, reasserted its traditional role and some measure of independence. The power of the Revolutionary Guards has been curtailed. Libya is also starting to show some economic differentiation among the population. High army officers, heads of municipal committees, top diplomatic and bureaucratic personnel and businessmen with links to the military have built expensive houses that raised some questions among the population. In a society where egalitarianism has been a source of pride, an integral part of the revolution and part of its Islamic sensibilities, this is a significant development.

All of these matters hint that the revolution has not been as profound as the Libyan government has pretended, nor as stultifying as most Western analysts have claimed. Above all there is the possibility of some major upheaval in Libyan society in



The Saraya al-Hamra (Red Castle) on Green Square, with festivity ornaments.

the years ahead. The fight over diminishing economic resources, the infighting between technocrats and revolutionaries, the acrimony between a younger generation that has been brought up on nothing but economic hand-outs and the regime's slogans and an older generation that has known economic hardship fuels some of the existing tensions. At the same time Libya remains a deeply conservative country. In the last two years Qadhafi has increasingly targeted the Islamists for what he sees as behavior not befitting the revolution. But the Islamists have cleverly exploited the growing gap between what is public - subject to the government's rules - and what is private behavior in Libya. Several of Qadhafi's earlier pronouncements on the rights of women, for example, have had only limited results. Some serve in the country's standing army and have achieved responsible positions within the secretariats and the Popular Committee system. But for the majority of Libyan women change has not been as dramatic as the Libyan leader wanted, a situation he has repeatedly decried. Since dissent is virtually impossible, Islam has provided one of the few mechanisms to express some muted communal dissent. At the Libyan universities the number of women in Islamic dress has increased



The two roads open to the Arabs: The left one leads toward "capitulation... and shame." The right one is the road of "Freedom... and Honor." The Palestinian guerilla says to the Arab leader who is scratching his head: "I wish you didn't have to think so long before deciding which road to take."

dramatically. The leadership of the country's Islamic movement is still fragmented, but Qadhafi's repeated references to them in his speeches indicate that he at least considers them a threat to be dealt with. The Islamic movement in Libya may well form the best articulated and potentially the most powerful opposition in the Jamahiriyah.

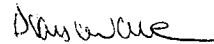
Many of the current problems the regime faces are of its own making. For all its claims of uniqueness and revolutionary ardor, the Libyan Jamahiriyah shows some remarkable continuity with the kingdom that preceded it. During both periods real political contestation has been non-existent. King Idris dismissed the one and only elections that were held in 1952. His royal diwan settled matters of state without regard to popular aspirations. On crucial issues Qadhafi and a small circle of advisors have traditionally taken similar unilateral decisions. Both the present Libyan leader and his predecessor have shown a deep distrust of the state and its machinery that was forged artificially after World War II and that only became truly unitary in 1963 when the exigencies of economic development required it.

DJV-36 - Celebrating the Revolution III

At 47 Muammar al-Qadhafi is one of the youngest and longest-ruling leaders in the Middle East and North Africa. For better or for worse, Libya now enters its third decade under his leadership. There may still be fury and passion in his voice, as there was at the anniversary celebrations, but it is a voice that has almost become inaudible at the end of the 1980s. Hedged in by an economic downturn and by the United States boycott, forced to recall several of his most important internal economic measures, coaxed by his Maghrebi neighbors into reasonable behavior, Qadhafi is now only for all practical purposes only a shadow of the political firebrand and maverick he once was. This does not exclude a repeat of some of the more spectacular incidents that that eventually led to his open confrontation with the West. Members of his close inner circle of advisors in Tripoli, Benghazi and Sebha refuse to condemn many of the actions the West has labeled as terrorist.

But it would be a mistake - one we committed purposely in the last decade, essentially for our own political purposes and at the expense of our other interests in North Africa - to take Qadhafi's recent rhetoric more serious than many Libyans do. The real revolution in Libya has been much quieter and subdued than its leader would like to acknowledge. In many ways it may even have passed him by. That revolution is one of institutionalization and bureaucratization - the archenemies of charismatic leaders like Qadhafi.

All the best,



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