LIBYA IN CRISIS… WHAT'S NEXT?
By Dana Moss

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Following in the footsteps of the revolutions first in Tunisia and then in Egypt, the protests currently taking place in Libya have entered their second week, casting doubt on the continuation of Qaddafi's rule. While reports coming out Libya are conflicting—and a partial media blackout is in effect—it appears that the eastern part of the country has fallen into the hands of protesters while Qaddafi has maintained control of Tripoli.

For Libya, the size of these protests is unprecedented. In order to decipher the direction in which Libya is heading, it is important to examine both the origins of the protests and the regime's response. Libya is very different from both Tunisia and Egypt, with geographical and tribal divisions overlaying the country and indeed encouraged by Qaddafi, and with the Great Leader holding near-absolute power, providing for a dearth of other political players. This has impacted both the nature of the uprising and the reaction of the regime. What is clear is that Qaddafi is more than willing to put up a very violent fight to retain control of the country, and that unfortunately, the West and the international community are unlikely to do much to stop him.

BEGINNINGS OF PROTESTS

Libya had experienced mounting political activities by activists planning a "day of Rage" on February 17, the anniversary of a 2006 protest in Benghazi. Exiled opposition groups and activists built on cyber-activism within Libya to get the word out, with Facebook groups such as "the Day of Anger in Libya against Corruption and Nepotism." The protests actually began two days earlier, sparked by the arrest of Fathi Tarbel, a lawyer for the families of prisoners killed in the 1996 massacre in Tripoli's Abu Slim prison. These families held a sit-in in front of the police headquarters in Benghazi and drew strength from Benghazi residents, with reports of over a thousand demonstrators.

From the outset, the protests have appeared not to have a united leadership, a massive youth led-presence, or a specific political platform. Libya does not have an independent civil society, strictly speaking, as all existing non-governmental organizations are headed by those close to the regime. No real unified opposition exists in the country, as political parties and movements are banned. Moreover, Libya itself is an artificial construct, where, partly as a result of Qaddafi's policies over years, tribal and provincial identity has trumped nationalism and a sense of citizenship, with consequent implications for the end result of these protests.

REGIME RESPONSE

From the beginning of the revolts in the Arab world, Qaddafi threw his lot in with Ben Ali, announcing that he was the "best person who could rule Tunisia," thereby indicating some concern about the prospect of Libyan unrest on the heels of the events in Tunisia. Nevertheless, it is clear that Qaddafi did not seem to have envisaged the extent of the opposition in Libya or the potential for events to unravel as they have.

Prior to the outbreak of protests, the regime had taken various preventative measures, including the outlawing of soccer matches. (In previous years, these matches, particularly in the East, had turned into opportunities for protesting the regime, on occasion.) Apparently, as reported on Libya al Youm, an opposition website, such action was matched by outreach to imams, to ensure that they warned against demonstrations during Friday prayers.

Such preventative measures came hand in hand with financial inducements and cooptation, targeting the specific needs of the Libyan population and weaknesses in the Libyan system—primarily in the lack of public housing. As Turkish companies were unexpectedly placed under heavy pressure to complete housing projects, Qaddafi, on state television, asked Libyans to claim rights to public housing, reportedly leading thousands to rush into the as yet uncompleted housing units.[1]

Qaddafi also activated the pre-existing tribal structures in the country, apparently holding meetings with—and offering incentives to—the members of the "People's Social Leadership Committee," a grouping of tribal leaders that forms a backbone structure to Qaddafi's regime, to prevent the "Day of Rage" from taking place. Meetings were also reportedly held with journalists and media figures to ensure damage limitation on the media front. Some personnel changes were also made to mollify potential protestors, such as the replacement of the Dean of Qar Younis University.

Meanwhile, even before the protests began, repression appeared—as always in Libya—a key factor in Qaddafi's reaction to opposition. Before the protests, such repression remained under the cover of the legal system—not just Terbil's arrest but also human rights activist Jamal al Hajji's detainment, in early February. Though he was accused of hitting a man with his car, the probable reason for his arrest was his call for peaceful protests, and the arresting officers are assumed to be members of the internal security agency. [2]

PROTESTS SPREAD

The February 15 demonstrators were met with rubber bullets and water cannons. Over the next few days, the numbers of protesters grew, with concomitant numbers of deaths. By February 18, over 40 people had been reported killed and that number has risen to over 300. Some victims were reported to have been shot dead during funerals and marches for those killed in anti-government demonstrations by security personnel. Meanwhile, the uprising spread to cities such as Bayda, Derna, Toburk and Misrata. Reports have been sketchy and witness accounts difficult to verify as a result of the media lockdown on Bengazi and the rest of the country, with conflicting accounts given by opposition activists. By February 20, it appeared that much of the East had fallen to the opposition, with army officers and police reportedly siding with people in the street and al Jazeera reporting that a group of army officers, and figures such as Major General Suleiman Mahmoud had reportedly issued a statement vowing their support for the protesters.

Meanwhile, in recent days protests had taken a new turn and begun to cross over to Tripoli, a very different landscape.

TRENDS BOTH OLD AND NEW

That the protests began in Benghazi is no surprise. The Eastern part of Libya had been affiliated with the monarchy and traditionally opposed to Qaddafi's regime. Although initially Qaddafi and the Revolutionary Command Council were in theory opposed to the predominance of tribes and tribal affiliation in Libya, over time Qaddafi came to rely on the tribal system to safeguard his revolution in the face of political opposition. The tribes Qaddafi relied on were not those from the East, but rather his own tribe—the Qaddadfa—from the Sirt region, as well as the Maqraha tribe from the Fezzan and the Warfalla tribe from West Tripolitania. These were promoted to positions of political power to the exclusion of tribes from Cyrenaica, previously affiliated with the monarchy. To this political exclusion has been added economic woes, with rife unemployment and underemployment and ever-erratic economic policies issued by Qaddafi, which—especially against the backdrop of the relative hydrocarbon riches of the country—created a sense of instability and resentment.

These troubles reached a head in the mid-1990s when an Islamist uprising originated from the East, with gun clashes between Islamists and security services in the streets of Benghazi. In reaction to political opponents, especially since facing the Islamist opposition, Qaddafi began relying more narrowly on his own tribal community. Sensitive positions—therefore political power and financial incentives—were given to members of his own tribe, to the exclusion of other tribal allies, rendering the regime more stable in some ways, but also narrowing the basis of its support.

This may have led to the Warfallah tribe—which holds a blood tie to Qaddafi's own tribe—declaring on al Jazeera that they now side with the protestors. Assuming this is a clear decision, it is a new and unexpected development that adds to the regime's woes.

In addition, in recent days there have seen a spate of resignations by relatively high-level representatives of the regime leading to speculation that Qaddafi's days are numbered. As well as Ambassador Ali Aujali, Libya's Ambassador to the U.S.—a crucial posting—Libyan Ambassadors from Poland to Belgium left their posts, with others—such as deputy UN Ambassador Ibrahim Dabbashi, the deputy UN Ambassador, accusing Qaddafi of carrying out a "genocide" against his own people.

These diplomatic figures were joined by Justice Minister Mustafa Mohamed Abud al Jaleil, who opposed the "excessive use of

[1] http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=libya-urges-turkish-companies-to-finish-projects-quickly-2011-02-02
[2] http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/libyan-writer-detained-following-protest-call-2011-02-08

violence." Increasingly, reports came in of the resignation of military figures, particularly in the East of the country. Most significantly, General Abdul Fatah Younis—a former secretary of the General People's Committee for Public Security, effectively Libya's interior minister—delivered his resignation on February 22, claiming in an interview with al Arabiyya that he had "begged Qaddafi not to send in planes" (against the protestors).

In all likelihood, these figures are driven not by ideological opposition to the regime, but by calculating that the regime is teetering on the brink of a fall and that it is best to leave this sinking ship. Yet it is unclear to what extent their abandoning the regime is likely to impact its stability. After all, the majority of these people are not part of Qaddafi's inner circle nor are they crucial for the security of the regime. Heads of the various security elements have made little public pronouncement, leading to the assumption that, for the moment, they are sticking with the regime, while pro-regime sources—by no means objective informants—have indicated to media outlets that allied tribes are also holding steadfast to Qaddafi.[3] However, should some of these people reach decide that Qaddafi's regime has reached a tipping point, they too may be tempted to turn on the Great Leader in order to save their own skin, if indeed that is still possible.

REGIME REACTION POST BEGINNING OF PROTESTS

As the protests continued and grew in strength, the earlier regime response intensified. More emphasis was placed on repression, with the subsequent death toll mounting to over 300. There have been reports of sniper shootings and airstrikes by war planes and helicopters. Meanwhile, rumours of repressive action against those political power holders who have tried to break with regime are emerging, with reports that General Abdul Fatah Younis had been kidnapped.

Unlike in Egypt and Tunisia, the army is relatively unimportant as both a mainstay of the regime and as an institution. Qaddafi does not seem to trust the rank and file of his army, which is criss-crossed and divided by tribal affiliations. Reportedly, foreign mercenaries have been flown in to help quell the uprising. Qaddafi, through his own route into power—through an army coup—is naturally suspicious of power of the army. He has faced coup attempts before, including one in 1975 by the Revolutionary Command Council. In more recent times, an Islamist uprising in Bengazi in the 1990s reportedly evoked sympathy from the conscript army. And in the mid-2000s rumors of coup attempts circulated—a major factor for this is the inlaying of the army by tribal and provincial divisions.

Yet in any case, key players in the Qaddafi regime, including his children, have been placed in charge of special brigades essentially responsible for protecting the regime, such as Khamees, who leads a special forces unit (the 32nd brigade) and had previously requested the purchase of military hardware from the United States. There is also Muatassim, who has functioned as national security advisor. Meanwhile the army's overall importance to regime stability pales beside that of overlapping security services, often headed by Qaddafi's kin and family members. These—from the Jamahiriyya Security Organization (Hai'at amn al-jamahiriya) to the military secret service (*Al-Istikhbarat al-askariya*)—were created in response to threats to the regime to safeguard it and are led by those with a personal tie to Qaddafi. It is likely that these are groups that Qaddafi is relying on regardless of conscript army sympathy with the protestors in the Eastern part of the country. It is these security services that are guarding key installations and sensitive buildings—a central factor in assessing regime longevity.

Indeed, these overlying organizations traditionally have been part of the regime's crucial divide and rule calculus. Part of the assumption for Qaddafi is that they will defend the regime as they are competing for political and economic goods with other groups and should the regime collapse, they will face vicious reprisals by the protestors, leading to a life and death battle for control between pro and anti-regime voices.

Aside from resorting to violence, the regime also imposed a media blackout in the country, initially cutting off citizens' access to Facebook and other Internet websites. Meanwhile, the official regime response has come primarily through two channels—Saif al Islam, Qaddafi's son and the reported "reformer" of the country and Qaddafi himself. These responses have reflected the various tried and tested strategies of the regime: divide and rule, repression, and – primarily in the case of Qaddafi senior—relying on anti-imperialist rhetoric to gain legitimacy. These speeches appeared to be aimed both at an internal Libyan audience and at the international community. Although each of these addresses differed in terms of delivery and tone, much of their underlying message was the same, despite the assumption by many in the West that Saif is the more moderate face of the regime.

Saif's address on state-television took place on February 20. That the "reformist" face of the regime was the one that first captured the media discourse appears to indicate that Qaddafi has seen the need to mollify and respond to protestors' demands. Nevertheless, the speech itself seemed woefully out of touch with Libyans' demands. In it, Saif promised political reforms, including much of the same platform that had been part of Saif's Libya al Ghad (Tomorrow's Libya) program that he has purported to push since about 2005, but which has seen little advancement.

Yet the speech itself provoked more than pacified, as political concessions were just a small part. Saif tried to frame protestors

[3] http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=1&id=24246

as drug addicts, and blamed the presence of outsiders—including Arabs and Africans—that were threatening Libya's unity and aiming to break up the country into small states, as well as using the threat of Islamist radicals. Such a strategy was much in line with JANA news, the official media channel, which argued that "foreign networks" intended to "destabilize Libya's security and national unity." Saif also tried to conjure up the (very real) demon of instability—much as his father had done in the case of Ben Ali. In his speech, he spoke of the threat of "civil war," while JANA news spoke of "attacks aimed at blundering banks and burning of files of criminal cases in courts" in an attempt to convince Libyans of their need for their strong leader. Meanwhile, much like Libya's deputy foreign minister, Khaled al Ghaa'eem, he attempted to frame the deaths of protestors as mistakes on the army and police, as opposed to on the regime's strategies.

Saif al Islam also hinted at the threat of repression, arguing that "We will fight to the last minute, until the last bullet'' to safeguard the regime. Within the speech were allusions to economic repercussions of the current instability, including the loss of foreign investment, perhaps intimating at the use of an economic stick against protestors.

Qaddafi, meanwhile, made two separate speeches. The first was a brief one, allegedly against the background of the "House of Strength" museum, a former Tripoli residence that was bombed in the U.S. attack in 1986. The speech, with little fanfare, seemed to be primarily aimed at assuring Libyans that, despite rumors, he remained in the country. Framed in the context of Libya's former struggles, the short statement aimed to both invoke the legitimacy of his rule through its struggle against foreign "oppressors" and, in picturing Qaddafi in a car, free of security personnel, to show that his rule was safe and that opposition was limited and non-threatening.

Qaddafi's second speech, an hour long address on state television, reflected many of the usual Qaddafi strategies and again took place against the background of the 1986 bombing. Qaddafi attempted to position himself as separate from the politics of the country, arguing that "I am not a president to step down." Such a tactic in the past allowed him to disassociate from any political and economic crises, in order to cast blame on other actors and manipulate actors from a safe political position.

Ominously threatening is his use of force against protestors, who he called "greasy rats." Qaddafi's discourse had not changed since the 1980s, when he encouraged extra-judicial killings of political opponents, known as "stray dogs." Here, too, Qaddafi called on Libyans to arm themselves to "cleanse Libya house by house." This echoes Qaddafi's strategy in the late 1970s, when facing political opposition, he inaugurated the Revolutionary Committee's structure as a way for out-sourcing ideological compliance with the Jamahiriyya and a means to stabilize his rule.

The appeal to national symbols again reflects Qaddafi's long-term strategy in cloaking himself in an anti-Western and anti-imperialist mantle. In the wake of the brutal colonial occupation of Libya by Italy, such a strategy has in the past found popular appeal and bestowed upon Qaddafi much-needed legitimacy. Indeed, Qaddafi continued in this vein, asking Libyans "do you want America to come and occupy you? Our country will become like Afghanistan. Is that what you want?" Qaddafi has always seen himself as a leader beyond that of the borders of Libya, having viewed himself as the symbol of pan-Arabism and later anointing himself as "King of Kings" of Africa. In his speech, this quest appeared to be a bulwark against his removal from power as "I am the glory that cannot be abandoned by Libya, the Arabs, the United Stated and Latin America."

Lastly, Qaddafi appeared to resort to divide and rule mechanisms, primarily through the use of the Islamist specter. Like Saif, he blamed the uprising on Islamists that wanted to "create another Afghanistan," mistakenly followed by "drugged" youth. To invoke religious legitimacy, as he has tried to do whenever he has faced religious opposition, Qaddafi took to citing the Qur'an, claiming the protestors' acts were punishable by religious edicts.

The one concession Qaddafi seems to have been willing to grant is the formation of a constitution. Long advocated by Saif, the advancement of such as document had been blocked, most likely by Qaddafi, who opposed such an instrument in his Green Book. This, together with Saif's earlier address and Qaddafi's mention of his son during his television address, appears to hint at increasing reliance on the son to ensure stability. It may also be a realization, a little too late, that an earlier adoption of Saif's proposed reforms would have undercut some of the current opposition. Although Saif was rumored to be making a follow-up speech, it has not taken place to date, showing confusion in the upper echelons of the regime as to how to best handle the uprising.

WHAT NEXT FOR LIBYA

The next steps for Libya are as yet unclear. Although Qaddafi seems to have maintained control in Tripoli, the East of the country currently seems beyond his reach. Yet the lack of institutions in the country bodes badly for stability, whatever way the situation pans out. Any number of scenarios could take place:

- A successful crackdown on Tripoli, and the regime later gaining control of the East of the country through economic repression, including perhaps a siege. A subsequent bloodbath may take place, with violent revenge being exacted on regime opponents.

- **Continued chaos and a de-facto separation of the country into smaller states.**

- **A realization by some within Qaddafi's inner circle that to best preserve their power they must jettison the Great Leader, with his subsequent death or departure from the country. This may lead to inter-regime struggles, as well as potential internecine struggles, with increasing violence. Previously documented rivalry between Saif and his brother Muatassim, affiliated with security organizations, may end up playing a role here.**

- **The presence of oil in the Eastern part of the country will no doubt play into Libya's final scenarios, as the hydrocarbon industry functions as the cash cow of the regime. Saif al Islam slyly referenced this in his speech, noting that "Who has the ability to manage oil in Libya? How can we split the oil… there will be major and bloody conflicts over it."**

Either way, as for the past 40 years under Qaddafi, the Libyan people will be the ultimate losers, with stability and a functioning government nowhere in sight. Meanwhile, the West will have its own repercussions, with increased illegal immigration to Europe, higher oil prices, and possibly a freer operating area for terrorists, including al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.