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Reports

The Libyan National Transitional Council: Social Bases, Membership and Political Trends

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The aim of this essay is to examine the historical bases of the opposition forces behind the making of the revolutionary coalition in Libya, which led the struggle and defeated the dictatorship of Muammar Qaddafi on 21st October 2011. The current reporting and commentary on Libya's democratic uprising is framed by three myths: the focus on Qaddafi, that Libya's colonial brutal experience is similar to that of Egypt and Tunisia, and the view of Libyan society through the ideology of tribalism. The Libyan people suffered from one of the most brutal colonial powers in Africa, and half a million people died during the colonial period between 1922-1943, including 60,000 in Italian concentration camps before the holocaust. The trauma and the scars of colonialism were silenced during the Sanusi monarchy between 1951-69. One can make the argument that Qaddafi's early anti-colonial populism was not an obsession, but rooted in the modern colonial experience of the Libyan people who felt that their suffering had not been recognized. There are two phases to the old regime: a populist and modernising nationalist regime between 1969 and 1980, and a police state led by a demagoguery and a cult of personality using larger oil revenues of a rentier economy and Arab and foreign labor to assert its autonomy from society.

The main thesis here is that the inability of the Qaddafi regime to make serious political reforms appropriate to the changes in the economy, education, and society inevitably led to conflict between social structure and the rigid political system. This inhibited new social forces, especially unemployed youth, from addressing social demands and grievances. Such a gap between Libyan youth and the ruling elite undermined all the gains of the regime in the 1970s and led to the formation of a revolutionary coalition that became alienated from the regime. Had Colonel Qaddafi responded with readiness to the calls for reform and not overreacted to the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, the urban elite might have been placated, and the violent rebellion avoided. He blew it. Once his army and police shot at protesters, the pent-up disaffection of Libyan society was unleashed, and it was too late for the regime to bottle it up. In recent weeks the revolutionary forces liberated the southern region of Fezzan which historically was a pro-Qaddafi rural populace, and only two cities remained under his troops' control, his home city of Sirte, and the loyal city of Bani Walid. The regime lost the moral, diplomatic, and now the military battles, and eventually the war when Qaddafi, his son Mu'tassim and his Defense Minister General Abu Bakr Younis Jabir were killed outside of his home town Sirte. A key question is why did this regime fall?

Despite the regime's success to rehabilitate its image by 2003, resolving the sanctions and the Lockerbie crisis to the point Qaddafi was invited to visit Rome, Paris, and even the UN in New York City, he failed domestically. The regime had weapons, tanks and planes but lost the allegiance of even those elements of Libyan society that had once been willing to wait and hope for political reform. His last base of support was only diehard allies and foreign mercenaries in two central cities of Sirte and Bani Walid.

The uprisings in neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt were precipitating events, but the resistance has drawn its core motivation from Libya's brutal experience of colonialism. What is most striking about the rhetoric of the revolution is how the anti-colonialist theme that Colonel Qaddafi once deployed has now been turned against him and is being used in text messages, websites, television stations, and Facebook. Even as they are assaulted by Colonel Qaddafi's forces, the revolutionary forces have resisted calling for forceful Western intervention, though they support the imposition of a no-fly zone. Libya's history explains why: the struggle has been over Libyan national symbols as well. Colonel Qaddafi's early nationalist populism stemmed from the traumas of the colonial era that were papered over during the modernising but oblivious monarchy that ruled from 1951 to 1969. The processes of modernisation, urbanisation and especially education started as early as independence in 1951 with the help of the United Nations.

In 1954, a new Libyan university with two campuses in Benghazi and Tripoli provided educational opportunities, starting the expansion of colleges and universities all over the country. New educational policies led to the rise of a new salaried middle class, a student movement, a small working class, trade unions and modern intellectuals by the late 1960s. For example, the number of students increased from 33,000 in 1952 to 300,000 in 1970. Fawzia Gharur was the first Libyan woman to graduate from the

University of Libya in 1958, followed by Fathia Mazig the daughter of Prime Minister Hussain Mazig in 1961. In 1965, the Libyan Women's Union was formed and its influential magazine Al-Mar'ah ("Woman") published its first issue. The Libyan women who participated in the revolution today belong to a third women's movement that relied on the gains of earlier generations such as the right to free education for women, suffrage, and employment. One has to remember that the 17th February revolution was pioneered by active protests of mothers, sisters, wives and daughters of the Abusalim massacre's victims on 15th February 2011 in Benghazi.

Today, there are more women in Libyan higher education than men; and in the humanities and social sciences departments in Libyan universities, female students make up 80% of the total schooled population. Women are pilots, officers, judges, physicians, teachers, and ministers. This progress was not given, but fought for by leaders of women activist groups. Some of which were educated in exile in Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt and supported by the modernist policies of post-independent regimes since 1951. It is not surprising that early Libyan women rights activists such as Hamida al-Inizi, Salha al-Madnai, Khadija Abdulqadir, and Khadija al-Jahmi concentrated their efforts on the single issue of women education since the turn of the twentieth century. The second generation of Libyan women activists while combining gender and nationalism stressed new issues of career, family and critiques of Libyan patriarchal family. They expressed their views in the press and the literary genres of short stories and novels.

Geography and Symbols of Opposition to Dictatorship

The history of Libyan opposition to Qaddafi's regime goes back to at least the early 1970s, and the strongest regional base for opposition could be found in the eastern region of the country. The regime repressed various opposition movements, including the military and student opposition of the 1970s, the exiled opposition of the 1980s, and the Islamist-inspired opposition of the 1990s. During the 1970s, it first retaliated against those who led a failed military coup by executing over 120 junior officers. Then, on April 7, 1976 the regime suppressed the Libyan Student Union at the main university campuses in Tripoli and Benghazi, executing the leaders of the student revolt and torturing and purging dozens of students and faculty. Finance minister Ali Tarhouni and Mahmoud Shamam, now the spokesman for the National Transitional Council, were student activists at the University of Benghazi and leaders of Libyan student unions. Ibrahim Ghnaiwa was expelled from the University of Tripoli in 1976, and went into exile in the United States where he organised one of the most popular internet websites, "Libya, Our Home", in opposition to the regime. During the 1980s, resistance to the regime was led by an opposition group in exile that was called the Libyan Salvation Front, which allied with the governments of Sudan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the United States.

Finally, during the 1990s, a new wave of opposition, namely radicalised Libyan youth who fought in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Iraq and who expressed a more militant form of political Islam, arose. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and other Islamist groups in eastern Libya initiated armed struggle and challenged the regime. For example, Abdul Hakim Belhaj, the head of Tripoli's Military Council, was one of the leaders of LIFG and a war veteran in Afghanistan. The majority of the radical Islamists came from the eastern cities of Ajdabiya, Benghazi, Bayda, Derna, and Tubruq, which also had been the historical geographic base of both the Sanusiyya movement and the Sanussi monarchy. Some residents from this region had viewed Qaddafi's 1969 coup as illegitimate. Nonetheless, by 1998, the regime had managed to crush this armed Islamist insurgency. The consequence was that by 1990 there were approximately 100,000 exiled Libyans living abroad.

In February 2011, Qaddafi regime's brutal reaction to peaceful protests in Benghazi, Bayda, and other eastern Libyan cities led to moral outrage among many people including military officers, diplomats, and even ministers. Minister of Justice Mustafa Abdul Jalil, Minister of Interior General Abdul Fattah Younes, Ambassador to the UN and long time Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdul Rahman Shalqam, and ten other Libyan

ambassadors quickly denounced the regime. Two months later, more members of the elite defected, including long time intelligence chief and Foreign Minister Musa Kusa, former Minister of Energy Fathi Ben Shitwan, Governor of the Central Bank Farhat Ben Gadara, and former Prime Minister and head of the Libyan National Oil Company Shukri Ghanim. In addition, many soldiers and army officers defected not only in the eastern region but also throughout the rest of the country. The sole exception was Libya's southern region where many communities were isolated and without allies in Egypt or Tunisia.

Membership

This combination of opposition forces that arose in the eastern region of the country was subsequently joined by defectors and exile groups, and together they formed the revolution's new leadership: the interim National Transitional Council. The known members of the NTC are:

1. Mustafa Mohamed Abdul Jalil, President of the NTC Abdul Jalil was Qaddafi's Minister of Justice when the uprising began in February, and he defected quickly, becoming the first senior official to abandon Qaddafi. From the eastern Green Mountain town of Bayda, he had a reputation for piety and honesty while serving Qaddafi and tried to bring some independence to Libya's judiciary. One instance he is notorious for is when he resigned in protest when 300 political prisoners were not released despite the fact the court had ruled in their favor in 2007.
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2. Abdul Hafidh Ghoga, Deputy President of the NTC Ghoga has often acted as the chief spokesman of the NTC in Benghazi. As a lawyer and human rights activist, he was among a group of lawyers representing the families of victims of the 1996 Abu Salim massacre in which 1,200 political prisoners were murdered in the Tripoli prison. Demands for justice over that issue helped spark the uprising against Qaddafi in February.
 3. Ahmed al-Zubair al-Sanusi Al-Sanusssi is a grandson of Sayyid Ahmad al-Shareef al-Sanusssi, the third leader of the Sanussiya movement and a cousin of King Muhammad Idris al-Sanusssi. He is a member representing political prisoners.
 4. Othman Megrahi, Tobruk.
 5. Ashour Bourashed, Derna.
 6. Ahmad al-Abbar, a businessman from Benghazi.
 7. General Amr Al Bihairy: Mr. Bihairy is a member for military matters.
 8. Abdullah al-Mayhoub, Qubba.
 9. Salwa El-Dighaily: a constitutional law professor from Benghazi. She is the only women known to be in the council.
 10. Fathi al Ba'ja: a well known academic and anti-Qaddafi activist from Benghazi.
 11. Fathi Turbel: a human rights activist and lawyer from Benghazi. He was briefly detained in Benghazi on 15th February while petitioning the local court on behalf of victims of the Abu Salim massacre. That detention sparked mass demonstrations in Benghazi, the first step of the Libyan revolution.
 12. Suleiman al-Fortia, Misrata.
 13. Abdul Majid Saif al-Nasr, Sabha.
 14. Hassan al-Dirwai, Sirte.
 15. Hassan al-Saghir, Al-Shati.
 16. Farhat El-Sharshare, businessman from Sorman.
 17. Mustafa El-Salhin el-Huni, Jufra.
 18. Ali Qlma Mohamed Ali, Murzuk.
 19. Fawzy Abdel Ali, Misrata.
 20. Abdel Nasser Abu Bakr Na'ama, Tarhouna.

21. Abdul Raziq Mukhtar, Tripoli.
22. Abdul Razzaq Abdul Salam al-Aradi, a businessman from Tripoli who used to live in Vancouver.
23. El-Sadiq Amr el-Kabir: a banker with ABC Bank from Tripoli who has lived outside Libya.
24. Al-Amin Belhaj: a former leader of Libya's Muslim Brotherhood from Tripoli and a longtime exile in the United Kingdom. His brother is Abdel Hakim Belhaj, the military commander the NTC appointed to run operations in Tripoli.
25. Muhammad Nasr al-Harizi, Tripoli.
26. Khaled Mohamed Nasrat, Zawiya.
27. Emad Nour el-Din Naseer, Zawiya.
28. Salem Qnan, Nalut.
29. Khaled Ali Zakri, Jadu.
30. Ibrahim Bin Ghashir, Misrata.
31. Abdullah el-Turki, Zintan.
32. Ahmed Miftah Hassan el-Zouwi, Kufra.
33. Uthman Bin Sasi: a businessman from Zuwara who has lived in the south of France for decades.
34. Mohamed El-Sa'eh, Zahra.
35. Moussa el-Kuni, Ubari.
36. Taher Salem Theyab, Marj.
37. Muhammad Zein el-Abdeen, Western Jabl.
38. Ali al-Manea, Ghadames.
39. Idris Abu Fayed, Gharyan.
40. Mubarak el-Fatmani, Bani Walid

The current uprising leaders met in Benghazi on 5th March 2011 and created the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC). The council had over 40 members representing all regions of the country. The chair of the council is Judge Mustafa Abdul Jalil, who was the Minister of Justice under the old regime. His deputy is Abdel Hafidh Ghoga, a lawyer and former head of the Libyan Bar Association. The youth were represented by Attorney Fathi Turbel, women by Professor Salwa Deghaily, and political prisoners by Ahmed Zubair al-Sanussi who spent 31 years in a Libyan prison.

The NTC established military and judicial committees, and an executive board chaired by Dr. Mahmoud Jibril, an American educated political scientist who until last year was the head of the Libyan Planning Council. Dr. Ali Tarhouni, an exiled Libyan and a professor of economics at the University of Washington in Seattle, became its finance minister. Mahmoud Shamam, another exiled Libyan who was educated and lived in the United States became the minister of media communications. The NTC has begun functioning as a parliament. It is a coalition of professionals, academics, doctors, lawyers, reformers, defectors, Islamists, and royalists, as well as a few traditional tribal figures from rural areas.

The social base of the uprising was the urban Libyan youth under 30 years of age who joined the rallies and became the voluntary liberation army fighting the regime troops and security brigades. They were trained and led by the defected Libyan soldiers and officers. Women also were active participants in the resistance through many roles such as making films documenting the atrocities of the regimes, taking care of children and the wounded, cooking for the fighters, and sewing the flag of independence.

Revolutionary Symbols

Three symbols were used to mobilise popular support against the regime: 1) the image of anti-colonial resistance Omar al-Mukhtar 2) the old Libyan flag of the monarchy that was adopted and viewed as the flag of independence 3) the old national anthem that was adopted after the name of the king was replaced by the name of the Libyan anti-colonial resistance hero, Omar al-Mukhtar. This is remarkable after four decades of the Qaddafi's regime rituals of presenting itself as the legitimate culmination of the Libyan

anti-colonial movement, especially Omar al-Mukhtar. In other words, the national question linked to the brutal colonialist period is still persistent in Libyan society.

Libya's future is contingent upon whether the leadership can establish stability, restore order, collect the arms in the hands of civilians, and reconcile and unite all Libyans while learning from the mistakes made in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iran. Libya could be a new model for stability and democracy and the revolution may finally facilitate the building of a state with stable strong institutions, and civil associations to include all Libyans. Libya has an educated modern society, and oil and gas revenues can rebuild the country and recover the lost three decades of waste, corruption and dictatorship. The fight now will be over the new order on the role of Islam, the status of women, and the relationship with NATO, the USA and other Arab and African countries.

Let us hope that the courageous young Libyans who have been the driving force for this democratic uprising will learn from the mistakes of both the monarchy and Qaddafi's regime. The challenges of building a stable civil and pluralistic democracy are indeed formidable and much more complex than defeating the Qaddafi's dictatorship.

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