

Libya

From all-seeing eye to the evil eye of chaos

by Hamid Lellou

***"Libya is made up of tribes and clans and loyalties," he [Kaddafi's son, Seif] warned, "There will be civil war."*¹**

In 1969, Muammar Kaddafi took office in a bloodless military coup against the royal Sanuci ruling family. Then Captain of the Military, Kaddafi's motto was "Libya from the Libyans and for the Libyans." He affirmed that the time of tribes intermingling in politics was over and henceforth the voice was given to popular participation.

Coming from the small and weak tribe of Kdadfa, and inheriting a political system where Sanuci's tribal allegiance was rampant, Col Kaddafi had to unlock those locks. He had a genius idea of dismantling the existing tribal power system and replacing it with a core of close military officers originating from tribes that allied themselves with the Kdadfa. Think of this as a game where your chances of winning are greater if you deceive your adversary by claiming that you will change the rules of the game. From the outside, Libya was seen as being ruled by a military dictator. But in reality, that same dictator feared those who helped him get into the office. Therefore, for more than 42 years, he played tribes against each other by rewarding those who supported him and sanctioning those who opposed him. He basically played the same game but slightly changed some roles. To sanction those officers who tried to topple him in different military coup attempts, he not only purged them from the military, but he also sanctioned their tribes, mostly the Warfallah, the largest Libyan tribe.²

But when Kaddafi's reign ended, so did the game. Three years later, Libya



Muammar Kaddafi. (Photo by P02 Jesse Await.)

is exactly where Seif had predicted it would be. The United States and her allies chose to accompany the revolutionaries in their struggle to topple Kaddafi, assuming that after his end everything would be fine and all Libyans would go about their original occupations. But this action told Libyans and the rest of the region one of two things: either we

do not care or we do not understand and remember our recent history in the region.

Like Saddam Hussein's regime and other regimes in the region, Libya was sometimes ruled by an iron fist and sometimes by a generous hand. Therefore, the relationship between the ruled and their rulers doesn't follow the same principles that govern the relationship between elected executives and their citizens. After four decades of life shaped by the desires and wishes of Kaddafi, Libyans have suddenly found themselves orphans of a person who, whether we like it or not, was capable of aligning the ranks. Although people throughout the world deserve to live their lives with dignity and respect, democracy is not a product that you can buy from the shelves or acquire with borrowed bullets.

Most anthropological literature still refers to Libya as a makeup of tribes such as Warfallah, Magarha, Zintan, Obeidat, Zawiya, Kdadfa, and so forth. However, it is misleading to look at the Libyan social structure as a melting pot of tribes. Although most Libyans may still refer to their tribe of origin, the most important identifying criteria is the region where they were born. An inhabitant of the capital city of Tripoli who has lived and worked there for more than 15 years still identifies himself as a Libyan, but native of Sirte and perceiving Tripolitains as the vice holders and responsible for Libya's decadence.³ The same thing can be said about Benghazi people, who claimed to be the bravest people in Libya because of their historical opposition to the ruling regimes in Tripoli (Italian occupiers and then Kaddafi). And most recently, the people of the city of Misratah who believe that they are the legitimate sons of the revolution after having undergone and bravely resisted months of Kaddafi's

>Mr. Lellou is a Middle East and Africa operational culture analyst.

siege. Although European colonization, Kaddafi's social manipulation and political games, and increased urbanization have dramatically weakened tribes' weight, they haven't been completely eliminated. Since the fall of Kaddafi, tribes have been regaining their prestige of yesteryear. Charismatic and legitimate tribal leaders are known for their negotiation and conflict resolution skills. Usually, elected officials and/or the leaders of armed groups appreciate, to a certain extent, listening to tribal leaders at a local level.

In Libya, where state institutions were purposely marginalized for decades, it is difficult to quantify the contributions or importance of the appointed political actors. This situation makes it hard for us to identify legitimate counterparts in our effort to help Libyans build a strong state. To further complicate the situation, Libya is currently ruled by two opposing governments: the internationally recognized one that sits in Tobruk (eastern Libya) and the unrecognized one that sits in Tripoli. Interestingly, neither of these governments is calling for autonomy. On the other hand, there is little support for a federal government with the exception of a few voices (a small minority in Benghazi) that have been vainly advocating for a federal system. Amongst the chaos, it is no surprise that ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) understood Libyans' attachment to their faith and, most importantly, the vulnerability of some of her citizens, which explains their control of northern Libya.⁴ However, presenting the situation as a struggle between Islamists and seculars is misleading. Few Libyans share ISIS' ideology; the majority opposes it, including the Islamist groups in Misratah and the unrecognized government in Tripoli.⁵

So what does everyone in Libya want? Libya is as big as the state of Alaska and under its surface lies a wealth of water and minerals including gas and hydrocarbons. Libya is considered to be one of the tenth biggest oil producing countries in the world. When you look at the economics, the picture becomes clear: a large, dry, sparsely populated, resource rich country with natural resources limited to one area. Thus, it is no surprise

that most of the Libyan people do not want to hear about autonomy or federalism. Whether groups claim to be true revolutionaries (Thuwar) or Islamist, the post-revolutionary chaos—or continuing revolution as some Libyans call it—is no more than a struggle to control resources. Ideology and socio-economic and political agendas are barely on the radar.⁶

Despite their differences and current struggle for peace and stability, most Libyan people still aspire for a united Libya primarily to ensure fair distribution of oil revenue. Although most Libyans would like to keep their country as one, their way of thinking or doing business in general adheres to local considerations. Likewise, the current security and political situation in Libya has become very localized. What is applicable in Benghazi or Misratah is not necessarily true elsewhere.

... Libyan people still aspire for a united Libya primarily to ensure fair distribution of oil revenue.

Strong and influential tribes like we know them in Iraq and Jordan have lost their hegemony in Libya, except by name. In their place, Kaddafi, as the leader of an oil rich rentier state, built and maintained a relationship of "assisted citizenship" for 42 years, giving people less incentive to bear down on the government in order for it to become responsive to their needs.⁷ The way the current government deals with its citizens and militia groups is no different from Kaddafi's strategy.⁸

Western diplomats are accustomed to communicating and dealing with a clear and strong, yet non-legitimate, centralized regime in Tripoli. Given the current political and security situation in Libya, the absence of strong legitimate leadership, and the uncertainty that goes with it, we have no other choice but to adapt our approach by

understanding informal politics and its decision-making process and embracing the idea of a decentralized government in Libya.

Decentralized government instead of federal government: the way Libyans understand federal government is that it gives a great deal of independence for each region including distribution of resource wealth. Decentralized government as perceived by the Libyans as a government that fairly distributes resources to all the regions instead of letting a single region enjoy all the natural wealth.

Notes

1. David D. Kirkpatrick and Mona El Naggar, "Qaddafi's Son Warns of Civil War as Libyan Protests Widen," accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com>, (New York: 21 February 2011).

2. Ali Bensaad, "Changement social et contestations en Lybie," accessed at <http://www.politique-africaine.com>, (November 2014).

3. Luis Martinez, « Libye: transformations socio-economiques et mutations politiques sous l'embargo, » Science de l'Homme et Societe, (CCSD, France : September 2014).

4. *The Guardian*, "US expresses fears as ISIS takes control of northern Libyan town," accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com> (London, 6 December 2014).

5. Emile Combaz, "Key actors, dynamics and issues of Libyan political economy," accessed at <http://www.gsdrc.org> (April 2014).

6. Ibid.

7. ISPI, "The Role of Tribal Dynamics in the Libyan Future," accessed at <http://www.ispi-online.it> (2013).

8. Carlotta Gal, "Show of power by Libya Militia in Kidnapping," accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com>, (11 October 2013).

