

# Libyan Re-independence and Reclaiming the Revolution

It was the fuzzy images that we saw from amateur mobile phone video clips that the Libyan popular uprising was broadcast all over the world and broke the wall of silence and fear in a country besieged for decades by a feudal regime, that had attempted for many years to wipe out the Libyan identity and replace it with the image of the 'Brother Leader'.

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century, and became independent in 1951. It had scarce means to support itself as a country, let alone forge a new identity of nationhood, in an era when Pan-Arab nationalism was the major ideological and political driving force in the region.

By the late 1960s the country, driven by its newly discovered oil wealth, was transformed in many aspects, especially on the social and political levels. A tribal rural country, began to resemble a more modern urban society, which allowed for more political debates and the newly educated middle class became politically active and worked towards modernizing the country and achieving further basic rights.

## From Revolution to Dictatorship

The Gaddafi regime that came into power through a bloodless coup in 1969, found a nation ready for change and revolution, the same revolutionary wave that engulfed the Arab world, beginning with Egypt in 1952. Many Libyans from different classes and backgrounds welcomed the revolution branded military coup, and believed that they could work from within the new political structures to achieve a more modern society. Democracy and human rights, as we know it today, were not a priority at that time, as there was more focus on achieving more socio-economic equality and ridding the country of the remnants of the colonial era. But once those goals were moderately achieved, the calls from a new generation of Libyans towards a democratic, liberal political system became a challenge for a regime that had begun to use its huge amount of oil revenues to export its definition of liberation and rebellion in many countries.

Faced with new challenges of reform in Libya, the Gaddafi regime began to build its political structure, which was akin to a secret feudal system with tribal elements aimed at ruling and controlling a small population scattered over a large geographic area that had historically manifested its resistance to any central government. Over the years it became apparent that the regime had become similar in structure and characteristics to organized crime groups, dependent on secrecy and close loyalties in decision-making and crushing the opposition.

The Gaddafi regime ruled through the power of fear and paranoia, the fear of unlimited brutality in a society that was still recovering

from the horrific years of its colonial heritage. Collective punishment and publicly televised executions as well as a campaign of intimidation and persecution became the cornerstone of an attempt to transform the Libyan people into functional entities, concerned solely with the daily question of survival and preservation, paving the way for frustration, despair and in most cases passive civil disobedience by avoiding participation in regimes activities and political organizations.

Gaddafi used other tactics to divide and rule, by invoking a traditional tribal power structure in a country that had begun to resemble a more modern society, where tribal ties were

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becoming less apparent and the old division between the main three Libyan provinces was fading away as people moved and built new social ties based on nationhood and mutual interests.

### Facelifts and Sham Reforms

After years of international isolation, a new reality dawned on the regime, especially with the introduction of the internet and new media into the country, and with a growing young population. The regime decided on a facelift to avoid alienating itself from the changing demographics in the country, as the majority of Libyans lived in cities and urban centres. All of this combined with other factors, made the reform project driven by Saif al-Islam Gaddafi a possible initiative to prevent any chaos or infighting in a country that lacks a constitution and any civil society.

The reform project, named Libya al-Ghad

(Libya Tomorrow) attracted many young active Libyans inside and outside Libya, as well as many Libyan intellectuals and academics, all driven by the prospect of rehabilitating and reforming the regime from within and prevent any political vacuum and infighting in the event of Gaddafi's demise.

After nearly five years since Saif al-Islam Gaddafi launched his reform project, it was apparent that the project was not intended to change the status quo in Libya but rather to give it more legitimacy and also contain all elements of the Libyan society that might challenge the regime's rule over the country. It was Saif al-Islam's speech a few days after the Libyan uprising had begun that made it clear that his reform stunt was dead and that the possibility of rehabilitating the regime had become a laughable matter.

Libyans suffered in silence for decades, and as the Gaddafi regime tightened its iron grip on the people, they also suffered from being marginalized and abandoned in some cases by their Arab neighbors and many countries in the region. For many years Libyans were associated with Gaddafi and his eccentric, clownish and brutal image. Libya became a box of secrets and sand, its culture and history descending every day into oblivion, and under pressure, many Libyans fled Libya and found refuge in other countries, adopting new identities and distancing themselves from a Libya that had become synonymous with a brutal and mad dictator.

It is important to stress that the Libyan popular uprising on 17 February 2011 did not emerge out of a vacuum, as opposition and dissent against the Gaddafi regime had been building up in Libyan society for generations. Although most people kept to themselves and chose passive disobedience when dealing with the regime, and while Gaddafi tried to buy loyalties, rewarding certain individuals, groups, and even tribes, the majority of Libyans exercised their passive opposition at homes and in private gatherings, which had grown in presence during the last few years, and

leading to the human explosion on 17 February 2011, inspired by the influential revolutions in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt.

The Gaddafi regime planned for many decades to overcome any opposition and continued to survive in a surreal, out of time, place in the world. Ironically it was Saif al-Islam

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Gaddafi who summarized the regime's standard threats towards the Libyan people, by invoking the myth of tribal divisions between Libyans, a looming civil war between east and west Libya, and finally brandishing the threat of foreign invasion and intervention due to Libya's oil and gas wealth, thus stressing on deeply seated cultural fears of Libyans towards foreigners and foreign intervention. These tactics combined with the unrestrained use of force and brutality were used by the Gaddafi regime since it came into power four decades ago to maintain its grip on the country.

### Revolutionary Renewal

For many years, Libyans were reduced to being a reflected image of the 'The Guide' and 'The Brother Leader', their history, culture and identity defaced and torn, and replaced by new symbols of fear and terror. The Libyan popular revolution has revived their sense of who they really are, and has given them the historic chance to regain not only the symbols of revolution and freedom, but also their independence and cultural identity. Thus it was not surprising that the flag that was adopted by the Libyan constitution in 1951 which was the symbol of Libyan independence and then

abolished by Gaddafi regime 1969, became the symbol of resistance and the call for freedom and opposition to his rule.

The images of a young Libyan man ripping the Gaddafi green flag in the centre of Tripoli, throwing it into the flames, cursing Gaddafi and shouting "This is not our flag, lets burn it" is a clear indication that the Gaddafi regime failed to brainwash Libyans with its false symbols of revolution, and that generations of Libyans who were deprived from any information about pre-1969 Libya, were not only reclaiming the meaning of revolution, which was tainted by Gaddafi's revolutionary ideology and his notorious revolutionary committees, but also regaining Libya's independence and cultural identity with symbols like the flag, the old Libyan anthem and clear calls for unity and nationhood.

Despite the brutality and terror inflicted on the Libyan people by the Gaddafi regime, the Libyans are living for the first time the freedom and liberation they were denied, and they know that the stakes are high not only for them as a nation, but also for the peoples of a region affected by the regime's ambitions to dominate and intervene in neighboring countries. A peaceful, free and democratic Libya in a region that is changing dramatically every day, will play a pivotal role in maintaining a stable more peaceful Middle East and Africa, which is a region that has suffered the most, after the Libyan people, from Gaddafi's terrorist adventures.

The wall of fear has been razed to the ground and Gaddafi's regime will try to survive as long as it can, but with its legitimacy to govern and rule inside and outside Libya lost completely. Its only option for rule over the remaining land under its control is through the tactics of occupation, and Libyans will be struggling in a resistance campaign to deny the regime the illusion of normalcy and control that it is trying to invoke through its media propaganda machine.

The path to a new Libya will not be easy, many years of dictatorship and corruption will

not be made to disappear by the magic wand of revolution. The demons of political division, counter-revolution and foreign intervention,

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are some of the threats Libyans face, but it is important to emphasize that all these fears were used by the Gaddafi regime to associate stability with his rule which was prioritized over the limitless possibilities, yet uncertainties, of exercising freedom and the difficulties of implementing democracy in a country that has

never experienced its manifestations. These are some of the challenges Libyans will learn to overcome by themselves, with the help and support of the international community.

Being a Libyan during the last few weeks has been and continues to be an emotional and intimate experience. The Libyan uprising of 're-independence' which purified the meaning of revolution, helped many Libyans regain their confidence in themselves and their ability to change their country, after years of attempts by the regime to kill the true meaning of being a Libyan inside the hearts and minds of generations of Libyans. Never again will it be possible for a tyrannical regime to be allowed to rule over their country.