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# BRIEFING

## Tribes in Libya: From Social Organization to Political Power

**Haala Hweio**

*ABSTRACT: The war in Libya is currently one of the major issues in news and political analyses. A main topic arises when considering the Libyan revolution against Muammar Qaddafi's regime is the role of tribes in this revolution. Many analysts consider the tribes to be central actors in either activating the revolution or suppressing it. In this context, some questions could be raised about the real weight of tribes in Libya, and how and why the tribes transformed from being traditional social organizations to becoming central political actors? Will the tribal system have a political role in Libya after Qaddafi? This paper seeks to examine the position of tribes in the social and political structures of the Libyan State and thereby shed light on some aspects of the current Libyan war.*

*KEY WORDS: Libya, Qaddafi, tribes, authoritarian rule, politics*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Tribes are an important component in the social fabric of the Arab societies in the Middle East and North Africa. The social structure of many Arab societies rests to a great extent on tribal affiliations. Tribe generally means “social or societal units with an authority structure and shared or common identity in a society” (Viotti and Kauppi 2001:

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512). One important property of the tribal and clan identity is that “informal identity networks [are] based on kin or fictive kin bonds” (Collins 2004: 224). It is important to stress that the original role of the tribes in Arab societies was a social one. However, the coexistence of tribes and states over time raises the question of the role of tribes in state formation and the degree of tribal contribution in the state political structure. This issue clearly appears in Libya, which has witnessed an increasing importance in the political role of tribes as informal organizations in the Libyan society to the degree that tribal identity has distended in the last few decades to become the primary association in the country. Tribal networks have not only endured but have taken new and varied forms. This huge transition in the role of the tribes in Libya, from an informal social organization to a central player in the economic and political arenas, is the focus of this study.

This study addresses the question of why tribal identity became stronger in the past forty years in Libya. To answer this question, this study makes two propositions to explain this transition. First, tribes in Libya have been strengthened by the Libyan authoritarian government as part of a broad strategic plan to assure control over the country. The second proposition is based on the assumption that as a result of the Libyan government’s failure in building strong institutions, the tribal affiliations rose up as an alternative to cover the gap caused by the weak institutions. The two propositions will be considered in the context of the Libyan case under the rule of Muammar Qaddafi’s regime, which overthrew the monarchy on September 1, 1969, and installed an authoritarian regime that lasted for 42 years.

Qaddafi’s regime was ended through a social uprising that started on February 17, 2011, as peaceful protests against the regime in several cities, especially in the eastern part of the country. The immediate demands of the opposition were improvement in economic and social conditions of the people, political reforms, and the creation of a democratic system. Qaddafi responded to the uprising with a huge amount of violence, which led to the death of many young people. The regime’s violent responses took the uprising to a completely new level, as it became an armed rebellion—supported by Western powers and some Arab countries—against Qaddafi’s regime. The armed opposition quickly formed the Transitional National Council (TNC), which served as the political body to legitimately represent the people of Libyan. The TNC promised Libyans and the international community to lead the country to democracy. The war against Qaddafi’s regime ended when Qaddafi was captured in his tribal

homeland of Sirt and killed by the opposition fighters on October 20, 2011. Sirt and Beni Waleed, the last two cities captured by opposition fighters, are the homelands of many of the tribes that have been historically loyal to Qaddafi. The TNC issued a declaration of Liberation on October 23, 2011, and formed the Transitional Executive Council, which would be responsible for preparing the country for the first free elections in Libya. The election is expected to be held within eight months after the declaration of Liberty.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The role of tribes in modern states has been the subject of several studies, most notably in political science, sociology, anthropology, and history. Although the relationship between tribes and states has been the main focus of some of the studies, there is no adequate theory that connects tribes to political development or a theory that could be used to explain the superiority of tribal identity over other formal and informal organizations in Libya. One significant attempt, however, is a study by Lisa Anderson (1990) that examines various factors that contributed to the formation of the modern Libyan state including the role of tribes. The importance of this article is that it uses a historical perspective to explain the continuity of the tribal role in Libya and the times of its rise and decline.

Faleh Abdul-Jabar and Hosham Dawod (2003) compiled different empirical case studies that cover various groups of people in the Middle East (Iraq, Kurds, Morocco, Arabia, and Iran). While these cases can help in terms of their contributions to the study of tribe-state relations in general, their usefulness to the study of the Libyan case is rather limited. Unlike the studied countries, the Libyan case does not have as much diversity in its demographic structure. Libya is largely a homogeneous Sunni Muslim Arab society, with only 5% Berbers, 3% other Africans, and 1% Tuareg (Najm 2008).

Kathleen Collins conducted a study about the political role of clans in the countries of Central Asia. In one of her propositions, Collins challenges the argument that “clans become increasingly important politically within weakening states” (236). Her argument suggests “clans can persist under strong states, especially when they serve as an organization for passive resistance against a state that represses but does not destroy them and allows them access to institutional channels of survival” (2004: 226). Libya’s situation also provides evidence against the weak-state

strong-tribes assumption. However, it points to a different case, which suggests that the strong tribal associations under Qaddafi's regime was part of the regime's strategy to preserve its control and to protect its own existence by controlling the state-tribe relations.

Dirk Vandewalle (1998) analyzes the Libyan state formation from a modernist-economic perspective. By defining Libya as an oil-rich country, he explains the tribe-state relations as part of a bigger developmental process in which the primordial relations were supposedly fading away. In this regard, it could be argued that the case of the transitional role of tribes in Libya and the increasing power of tribal identity set a challenge to the theory of modernization by defying the assumption that modernization destroys traditional authority structures, which must be replaced by one central authoritative body (Huntington 1971). The modernization approach argues "all social change is reduced to the passage from the traditional to the modern, from the simple to the complex, from 'particularism' to 'universalism'" (Abdul-Jaber and Dawod 2003: 9).

The case of Libya goes in the opposite direction of modernization theory: instead of building a central authoritative body or institutions, the Libyan state enforced the traditional tribal authority structure and gave it more power. The restoration of tribal authority and identity in Libya undermines modernization's theory assumptions. As a major oil exporter, Libya did not follow the pattern of modernization in which the oil revenues would weaken primordial loyalty based on family and tribe (Vandewalle 1998: 186). Instead, tribal loyalties grew more and became an essential component of the political structure.

### III. THE INCREASING ROLE OF TRIBES: THE RISE OF TRIBAL IDENTITY

To understand the relationship between tribal identity and national identity in any society, it is useful to consider it as a reflection of the relations between tribes and state. Historically, the existence of tribes precedes the existence of the modern nation state. It is an established fact that tribes are the oldest social entities in the Middle East, which have continuously changed, acting in accordance with and in reacting to the shifting political, military, and economic environments (Abdul-Jabar and Dawod 2003). The reason for the persisting nature of such a primordial organization (i.e., system of tribes) that was supposed to fade with modernity is the late state formation in the Middle East

(Collins 2004), which gave a chance for the tribal identity to survive. During the colonial era, which lasted for decades in the region, informal organizations, especially tribes, were deeply embedded in the social structure of the Middle Eastern countries. However, the political role of these informal entities has not always been strong.

The political history of the Libyan state is rather short and so is the political participation of its people. The political structure of the Libyan state, which began to form during the colonial era and continued after independence on December 24, 1951, reflects the “weakness and ultimate failure of both indigenous and colonial efforts at state building in Libya during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (Anderson 1990: 288). This failure was entrenched in the inability of the state to control tribal affiliations, which were the only reliable organization during the colonial time. Tribal associations remained strong throughout the short time of the Libyan monarchy (Anderson 1990) despite the Libyan monarch’s attempt to ease the power of tribes by building an ideology of legitimacy based on the principle of civic equality (Anderson 1990). The steps taken by King Idris Senusi to promote political and economic developments were simultaneous with his efforts to undermine the traditional social base of the society. This only lasted for a short time, precisely until September 1969, when junior military officers led the successful military coup against King Idris Senusi that brought Qaddafi to power.

The timing of the coup and the personal characteristics of its leader Muammar Qaddafi are two important factors in understanding the political orientation of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), which was established right after the coup. At the time of the coup, the Arab nationalism movement, led by Jamal Abdul Nasser in Egypt who seized power in a similar military coup seventeen years earlier against King Farouq I, was at its peak. Qaddafi and his other coup members, who were from the least noble and smallest Libyan tribes, were captivated by the tide of Arab nationalism and its refusal of and attack on the old social and political structures, including the tribal affiliations.

One of the very first actions of the RCC in the early 1970s was to eliminate the established elite class, which was comprised mainly of tribal chiefs that the RCC viewed as the main threat to its revolution (El Fathaly and Palmer 1980). The effort to end the domination of the major tribes took the form of establishing administrative units involving sections of several tribes (El Fathaly and Palmer 1980). As El Fathaly and Palmer rightly stated, this process entailed “the dismissal

of all local officials, including governors, mayors, and deputy mayors, most of whom had been tribal sheiks or their relatives; and replacement by a new class of local administrators whose values and social origins were compatible with those of the RCC, that is, educated members of less prestigious tribes with no ties to the old elite structure" (1980: 58). The new RCC state leaders showed in the first few years of their rule a strong ambition to abolish the role of tribes in the Libyan society. They specifically stood against the heads of major tribes who were frequently described as "bourgeois" and viewed as enemies to the new "socialist society." In fact, the regime initially tried to replace tribal affiliation with ideological loyalty (Anderson 1990). However, after one decade in power, the regime started to use the tribal card to consolidate its power (Anderson 1990). This strategy, which was in direct contradiction to the regime's rhetoric of nationalism, socialism, and revolutionary change, became an essential tool for its survival in the years ahead.

#### IV. THE GOVERNMENT STRATEGY TO EMPOWER TRIBE IDENTITY

This paper makes two arguments. The first is that the rise of tribal identity in Libya is a result of a government strategy aimed at strengthening Qaddafi's control over the country. During the short time of the monarchy in Libya, King Idris Senusi tried to moderate the influence of tribes. Hayford argues that "Libya during the monarchy made substantial progress toward nation-building" (quoted in: Vandewalle 1998: 196). These efforts led the majority of the young generation of the Libyan people to begin in the mid-1960s to "hold the government responsible for issues that had thus far been within the jurisdiction of the tribe" (El Kikhia 1997: 36). Though, by the time of the 1969 coup, the tribal structure in Libya was still strong, it was no longer the only source of power (El Kikhia 1997).

During the first few years of Qaddafi's military coup, the regime professed its Arab nationalism ideology, which was viewed by the Libyans, especially the new generation, as a fulfillment of their aspirations. The new generation was moved by the Egyptian revolution and the charismatic personality of its leader Jamal Abdul-Nasser. In addition, the regime made numerous promises to restructure the Libyan social structure by abolishing the role of tribes as informal state institutions and establishing a modern state. Despite Qaddafi's attempts to

present his regime as radical, progressive, and nationalist, there is evidence indicating that Qaddafi did in fact strengthen the role of tribes in Libya (Anderson 1990; El Kikhia 1997; Vandewalle 1998).

In order to preserve his authority and to prevent any potential challenge to it, Gaddafi needed a strategy to control the Libyan society. The high level of homogeneity in the demographic structure of Libya represented a threat to his regime. Clearly, it would be very challenging to create major political divisions in a country with virtually a single national identity and language (Arab and Arabic) and a single religion (Muslim Sunni). The only way to create divisions in this monochromatic setting was by focusing on the tribal construct of the Libyan society and using it as a tool to maintain control. The regime's strategy was to ensure the control of all tribe members by gaining the loyalty of the heads of their tribes, which proved to be a very effective strategy. Qaddafi's use of the tribal card began with giving more power and influence to his own tribe, the Qadadifah, as he surrounded himself with his relatives and appointed them to important government positions (Anderson 1990; El-Kikhia 1997; see Makhoulouf 1993 for a brief list of those relatives). Within a few years of his rule, Qaddafi had already "entrusted a cousin with his personal security, and two brothers, also his cousins, not only served as his personal envoys in sensitive foreign missions but also held important positions in domestic intelligence. Still another cousin was commander of the armed forces of the central region, which included the oil terminals and the disputed Gulf of Sidra" (Anderson 1990: 297-98).

Tribal nepotism led to an increase of tribalism in politics. Elections to the people's committees, which served as administrative units within Libyan ministries and as intermediary bodies between the public and the government, became heavily tribal. It became the norm for candidates to run and get elected by using tribal channels that resulted in "bloody battles between tribes ... over land or political posts" (El-Kikhia 1997: 103). Since Qaddafi came to power, tribal association has become an essential part of the political structure. High-level bureaucratic and political positions, including diplomatic positions, were distributed among the tribes by Qaddafi in a very careful and calculated way. He used political and administrative positions as a tool to reward certain tribes and marginalized others.

Because Qaddafi incorporated tribalism into nearly every political structure in Libya, it is nearly impossible to understand Libyan politics and society without considering the role of tribes. Qaddafi's

politics has shaped tribal identities among Libyans. For many Libyans, tribal affiliations became the only route to getting a job, justice or financial support from the state. In short, tribes have become the safeguards against the chaotic Libyan state. The popular reliance on tribes has in turn increased tribal loyalty, which Qaddafi has been using as a way to maintain his power.

Vandewalle (1998) presents the modernization theory argument when he claims that it was possible in the Libyan case to prevent the increasing importance of tribal affiliation in the development of the state. Since Libya is a rich oil-exporting state, the assumption was that the huge oil revenues would have “effectively prevent[ed] the maintenance or re-emergence of the more primordial loyalties of family and tribe” (p.186). The reality in Libya contradicts this argument. Tribal loyalty was strengthened. Though this was not an inevitable path for Libya, it became part of the Libyan reality due to the Qaddafi regime’s strategy to maintain power.

## V. TRIBALISM VERSUS INSTITUTIONALISM

The second argument of the paper is that the rise of politicized tribal identities in Libya is a result of weak state institutions. Institutions are the backbone of any political structure. However, their efficiency depends to a great extent on the regime’s strategy of institution building. The relation between regime type and state building is debatable in the existing literature. One argument is that there is a positive relationship between democratization and institutional outcomes (Hoffman and Norberg 1994; Levi 1988). The basic assumption of this argument is that “effective parliamentary checks on executive authority are essential to curb predatory state behavior” (Slater 2008: 255). This theoretical perspective, however, speaks mainly to the Western experiences. Another perspective on institution building that focuses more on less developed countries is presented by Vandewalle, who argues that in rentier states such as Libya, “the central accumulation of revenues [has] made government intervention in planning, financing, and managing economic development unavoidable” (1998: 5).

In the case of Libya, Vandewalle (1998: 9) posits that throughout the long years of his authoritarian rule, Qaddafi managed to establish a distributive state that “[did not] rely on local extraction of revenues and that spend inflows of capital generated by commodity sales as their primary economic activity.” Therefore, the main activity of the

institutions that emerge in such distributive states becomes spending money rather than extracting wealth. This type of regime, with its authoritarian nature, intervenes in every aspect of political and economic life. The two-goals policy of weakening institutional capacity and increasing state intervention marked the Libyan political scene during Qaddafi's military regime.

Another important feature of Libya is that the political structure of the country, including the major institutions, was subject to various ideological experiments by Qaddafi, whose ideology was introduced in his Green Book. He substituted the political institutions established during the monarchy with "experimental and ephemeral institutions" (El-Kikhia 1997: 147) in an attempt to secure the survival of his rule. In reality, Qaddafi succeeded in establishing a stateless society. It has been argued that the establishment of a weak institutional system and the creation of a state of chaos was one of the strategies used by Qaddafi to sustain his regime. This strategy is described by Mansour El-Kikhia as "politics of contradiction":

On the face of it, Libya is much like other developing societies undergoing political and social experimentation. The formal institutions, while appearing to be democratic and novel, are neither. What Qaddafi borrowed from the ideas of thinkers from Plato to Mao, including the Prophet Mohamad and Nasser of Egypt, are evident in these institutions. They include popularly elected representatives, as well as grass roots organizations, ministries, army, police, bureaucracies, and all formal political activity must be conducted within a people's Congress, where all the representatives of the formal institutions meet to develop and approve politics. (1997: 5)

It is important to stress that Qaddafi, not the political institutions of the state, is the principal source for the condition of political chaos in Libya considering the fact that "[p]olitical institutions do not have legitimacy except through his blessing" (El Fathaly and Palmer 1980: 213). With all the political instability that was occurring, the people in Libya were unable to grasp and adapt to the rapid pace of institutional changes (El Fathaly and Palmer 1980). As a result, many Libyans resorted to the sanctity and safety of their tribes, which were seen as stable alternatives to the stateless condition of their country (El-Kikhia 1997).

Typically, tribal loyalty is not considered a legitimate alternative to the bureaucratic state for managing the political and economic affairs of a country. However, in the case of Libya where the political structure was in chaos, seeking the protection of the tribes was the most appropriate option for the Libyans. This trend developed over several decades and contributed to expanding the role of the tribes in the political and economic affairs of the state.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The political significance of tribal affiliation in Libya has increased significantly in the last four decades. Two arguments have been advanced in this paper to explain this reality. Indeed, there is a direct relation between the growth in the role of tribes in Libya and Qaddafi's strategy of self-preservation. In a similar way, there is a direct relation between the regime's strategy of survival and the weakening of Libya's institutions.

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