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After Qaddafi

The Surprising Success of the New Libya

Dirk Vandemalle

The September 11 killing of the U.S. ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, and three other Americans during an attack by an angry mob on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi has concentrated the world's attention on the problems of post-Qaddafi Libya. The riots showcased both the power of radical Islamist militias and the inability of the government in Tripoli to provide security and maintain order across the country. Lawlessness and corruption are pervasive, and fundamental questions about the structure and operation of Libyan political and economic institutions remain unanswered. None of this, however, should obscure the fact that the larger story about the new Libya is surprisingly positive. The worst-case scenarios commonly predicted a year ago have not emerged, and there are actually grounds for guarded optimism about the future.

A year and a half ago, Libya seemed as though it would be the country where the Arab Spring came to an end. After popular uprisings peacefully unseated dictators in neighboring Tunisia and

Egypt, the Libyan revolution turned into a protracted, bloody civil war. Even when the rebels, with Western assistance, finally toppled the regime of Muammar al-Qaddafi in August 2011, many obstacles lay ahead. Libyans had little sense of national identity and no experience with democracy. The country was led by a transitional government that did not have a monopoly on the use of force. To build a functional state, Libya would have to overcome the legacy of over four decades of dictatorial rule, during which Qaddafi had prevented the development of real national institutions.

Now, however, defying expectations, Libya stands out as one of the most successful countries to emerge from the uprisings that have rocked the Arab world over the past two years. On July 7, with little fanfare but great determination, Libya held its first national elections since Qaddafi's fall, in which the country's citizens peacefully voted in the new 200-member General National Congress. A month later, the National Transitional Council, which had emerged as the

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REUTERS / ESAM AL-FETORI

*Free at least: celebrating the first anniversary of Qaddafi's fall,
Benghazi, February 17, 2012*

opposition's political leadership during the early days of the civil war, formally transferred its powers to the General National Congress. A commission will now draft the country's constitution, which will be put before the people in a popular referendum. All these developments have followed the schedule that the NTC outlined in the depths of the war. Great difficulties lie ahead, but the unexpected smoothness of Libya's political transition thus far represents a singular achievement for a country still reeling from decades of dictatorship.

What explains Libya's relative success? Many scholars saw the country's lack of institutional development as a bad sign for its future as a democracy. Yet the past year seems to suggest that Libya has actually benefited from having

to virtually start from scratch in building a functioning state. Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, where deeply entrenched institutions, such as the military and powerful bureaucracies, have proved so resistant to reform, Tripoli's new leaders have not needed to dismantle large institutional remnants of the old order.

Libya's recent accomplishments mark only the beginning of what promises to be a long and difficult process of repairing a war-torn country. But if the July elections are any indication, most Libyans are determined to build a political community that respects differences of opinion and resolves disputes through democratic processes—something they have never before enjoyed.

TAKE THE BAD WITH THE GOOD

Following Qaddafi's fall, few observers

predicted that Libya, with its troubled history, would emerge as a successful state. The Libyan monarchy, which ruled from 1951 to 1969, did little to smooth over the mutual suspicions that still divide Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan, the country's three historical provinces, which formed the kingdom of Libya. King Idris also failed to create any national institutions beyond the most basic machinery of a modern state, as hefty oil wealth came to dominate the country's economy and politics. When Qaddafi ousted Idris in 1969, he consolidated power and eviscerated the few national institutions, such as the country's weak army, that the kingdom had managed to nurture.

During the recent civil war, events such as the July 2011 assassination of one of the rebels' main military commanders, Abdul Fattah Younes, by an anti-Qaddafi militia, and the resulting chaos within the opposition, seemed to demonstrate that the NTC would also prove incapable of mending these historical fractures. Even after the rebels' victory, scores of powerful militias—some consisting of genuine revolutionary fighters, others simply of armed thugs—threatened the transitional government's control over the country. So pervasive was the pessimism about Libya's future that a number of international and local media outlets, including the *Libya Herald*, the country's flagship English-language newspaper, regularly suggested that Libya would become the world's next failed state, torn asunder by its tribal and regional rivalries and corrupted by both oil money and the same divide-and-rule politics that had kept the previous regime entrenched for over four decades.

Although Libya has not imploded,

lawlessness—as Stevens' killing suggests—and corruption persist. *Thuwar* (revolutionaries) are still taking the law into their own hands. Members of rogue militias have tortured and abused detainees they arrested during the civil war. The cities are still plagued by banditry and Mafia-like protection schemes. In the southern part of the country, local Libyan tribes are fighting against Tubu groups over control of the lucrative cross-border trafficking of goods, which the government seems unable to contain. Alarming, much of this smuggling involves weapons, including heat-seeking missiles and rocket-propelled grenades, looted from Qaddafi-era depots.

Perhaps most worrisome, the government has taken too few steps toward ensuring transitional justice and reconciliation, an issue that was barely part of the political debate leading up to the July elections. Thousands of suspected Qaddafi loyalists and innocent people, citizens and noncitizens alike, still sit in jails controlled not by the government but by militias or local security groups. Many of their members seem to care more about settling personal scores than meting out justice. In particular, the displacement and mistreatment of the Tawerghans, a minority group that was expelled from its hometown near Misratah on charges of having committed atrocities at the behest of the Qaddafi regime, stands out as a black mark against the new government.

A closer look at what Libya has accomplished, however, yields a more optimistic picture. The NTC's ability to organize national elections and its willingness to hand over power to an elected national congress in August indicate that Libya

has started to construct meaningful political institutions. The elections may not have been perfect in every respect; in the eastern part of the country, there were reports that some ballot boxes had been destroyed. But they were still met with the widespread approval of approximately 27,000 local and international observers. Ultimately, the elections promise to boost the public's confidence in their current leaders, providing the new government with the popular legitimacy that its predecessor lacked.

Slowly but surely, Libya is becoming a more integrated country with a national government able to act effectively. Libya's central authorities have expanded their power at the expense of many of the militias that still dispute Tripoli's control over the country. All of Libya's schools have reopened. Retail business is flourishing as never before; after months of inactivity, Tripoli's souk is once again full of vendors until late in the evening. The new government has begun to reorganize the bureaucracy, which continues to operate even as it struggles to move beyond the mess left by Qaddafi. Courts have started to function more independently; in June, for example, the Supreme Court overturned a landmark law passed by the NTC that seemed aimed at muzzling free expression. Meanwhile, hundreds of new civil-society organizations and media outlets have sprung up. Having been denied a voice for 42 years, Libya's citizens are now claiming, and exercising, their rights to organize and express themselves.

Most important, perhaps, is the fact that Libyans now seem to share the conviction that their country is free and, despite all its internal disagreements, indivisible. Even though the supporters of federalism



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in Cyrenaica continue to push for a degree of autonomy and other groups are arguing for special privileges, their campaigns show no signs of tearing the country apart. The federalist movement in Cyrenaica, now consolidated around a political party, has attracted few supporters and is fragmenting as time passes. And the need to market the country's oil through an integrated physical infrastructure and unified bureaucratic management has, as in the past, tied Libya closer together.

Meanwhile, the power of the country's militias is slowly eroding. Some armed groups have been integrated into national institutions, such as the police and the army, or trained for civilian jobs. According to unofficial estimates in the Libyan media, roughly 250,000 more people will be trained within the next year. Libya's new leaders realize that bringing the militias under control will be a drawn-out process that, for the foreseeable future, will rely on government payoffs as much as on persuasion. As the government doles out financial incentives to the militias, it will need to walk a fine line, ensuring that temporary handouts do not turn into permanent entitlements. Only then can it avoid the kind of patronage politics that became an ingrained feature of life during the Qaddafi years and created entrenched special interests.

WHAT TO EXPECT

WHEN YOU'RE ELECTING

To solidify its gains, and despite the government's still-limited capabilities, Libya must quickly move to further develop its nascent security, political, and economic institutions. As the July elections demonstrated, the country's political system has plenty of growing to do. Parties struggled

to articulate coherent platforms and so came to be defined by individuals rather than ideas. The public seemed to have only a rudimentary understanding of the country's political processes and procedures.

None of these shortcomings were helped by an electoral system that was deliberately designed to ensure that no political group would dominate. Out of the 200 seats in the General National Congress, 80 were filled by proportional representation according to each party's share of the vote, and the rest were given to individuals who won direct elections. In addition, the party candidates, who filled the 80 proportional seats, were elected by a single nontransferable voting system, which tends to favor individual candidates at the expense of party development and coherence. In theory, the presence of a large number of independent legislators could necessitate compromise and the formation of coalitions in the new body. But in light of Libya's history of factionalism, such a system might lead only to gridlock.

In the party vote, the National Forces Alliance, led by the former NTC leader Mahmoud Jibril, routed the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Justice and Development Party. Jibril's prominence, earned during the civil war, gave his coalition a much higher level of visibility, which translated into ready votes. A number of Western commentators quickly began celebrating the defeat of Libya's Islamists by Jibril's allegedly secular coalition. But such celebrations are premature. The truth is that all of Libya's political parties, including Jibril's, maintain Islam as part of their political programs; they differ only on what precise role they assign religion in everyday life.

The Justice and Development Party's weak performance, moreover, had less to do with ideology than with the fact that Qaddafi had effectively eradicated the Brotherhood in Libya, leaving it with few organizational resources in the wake of the civil war.

In future elections, as memories of the NTC and its leaders start to fade and as the Justice and Development Party and other Islamist parties organize themselves better and develop more sophisticated and detailed platforms, Islamists will likely gain ground in Libyan politics. That said, most Libyans seem dedicated to preventing any single party or political movement from dominating their newly democratic government.

The larger challenge for Libya will be fostering a true political community. Unlike in much of the West, where countries with cogent national identities developed into electoral democracies, Libya will have to construct a national identity out of its newly formed democracy. Central to this effort will be the writing of a constitution, a social contract that can turn the unspecified and informal politics of the Qaddafi period into explicit rules. In the coming months, Libya's constitutional committee, whose members hail equally from the country's three historical provinces, will need to create an institutional design that entices Libya's diverse groups to buy into a truly national project.

A WELL-OILED MACHINE

Libya's new leaders must also find better ways to manage the country's oil resources and its economy. Qaddafi was able to perpetuate his rule by abusing these resources and creating a highly centralized



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but virtually unregulated economy that now suffers from all the consequences of long-term neglect: a lack of entrepreneurship; a bloated public sector that served as the employer of first and last resort and at one time employed up to 80 percent of the active labor force; weak health-care and educational systems; unaddressed environmental problems; and decaying infrastructure, from government-owned housing to roads and oil pipelines.

Libya's economy is also not adequately diversified, and its oil sector cannot begin to create enough jobs to put the country's many unemployed and underemployed youth to work. On paper, the country's short-term economic numbers look good. Oil production has returned, more or less, to where it stood before the civil war, and officials at the National Oil Corporation project that Libya will produce an additional one million barrels per day within two years. According to a report by Business Monitor International, Libya's real GDP is expected to have risen by approximately 59 percent in 2012, after a roughly 49 percent drop in 2011. But these encouraging projections hide the fact that without major economic reforms, Libya will not be able to move beyond its status as a rentier state.

Jump-starting and diversifying the economy will require Tripoli to both promote entrepreneurship through government programs and reverse the effects of decades of oil-based patronage politics. These effects include widespread corruption and a young population with a strong sense of entitlement and a weak work ethic. To tackle these problems, ironically, Libya's new leaders must forcefully intervene in the market now to reduce the state's presence in economic affairs over the

long run. The experiences of other oil-rich countries that have emerged from civil wars, such as Nigeria, demonstrate that unless patterns of patronage are forcefully stamped out early on, they soon reassert themselves. Old elites tend to reconsolidate their power. These patterns can be avoided only by increasing transparency and good governance and by expanding the population's access to the economy.

Fortunately, Libyan policymakers understand the need to move away from the country's previous unproductive development model and to more efficiently manage oil revenues. Even during the civil war, the Dubai-based Libya Stabilization Team, which served as a sort of think tank for the rebellion's leadership, focused on smarter economic planning. And the subject continues to drive Libya's interactions with international financial institutions. Because oil revenues can be easily diverted and used for patronage, however, the government will need to keep a firm hand on the tiller.

A STATE IS BORN

Building a state and fostering a national identity take time and good leadership—bold ideas, initiative, and the willingness to compromise. This especially holds true in Libya, where none of those qualities were much in demand during the past four decades. Perhaps because elite cliques and self-serving strongmen dominated Arab politics for so long, academic and policy circles in the West have tended to disregard the importance of good leadership in the region. Here, too, Libya has proved to be a pleasant exception and surprise.

To be sure, in the months leading up to the elections, the NTC largely failed to pass

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meaningful legislation and implemented somewhat arbitrary decisions. Law 36, for example, which targeted the assets of individuals with ties to Qaddafi, was a rushed, politically expedient measure that eventually had to be amended. At the August transfer of power to the General National Congress, the head of the NTC, Mustafa Abdel Jalil, admitted some of his failures, particularly in restoring security to the country. But he also pointed out that the country's interim authority had governed in "exceptional times." And for that reason, many Libyans, even those who have publicly disagreed with the NTC, share a measure of respect for what its members have accomplished.

The tasks ahead for the Libyan government are as daunting as they are numerous: providing security and order, balancing central and regional power, expanding and strengthening the rule of law, providing for transitional justice, strengthening human rights, and fostering a sense of national identity among all Libyans. In tackling these challenges, Libya will undoubtedly experience setbacks, when even the most optimistic will question what progress has been made. The recent attacks by Islamist groups on Sufi shrines, for example, have demonstrated how profound religious differences in Libya will continue to hamper the creation of a harmonious political community. But the larger picture of the transition should still inspire hope. Just a year after the fall of a dictatorship that deprived Libyans of any political role, a modern state has, against all odds, started to emerge.

If this progress continues to take root, resulting in solid institutions, Libya may well prove to be an important exception to

the so-called resource curse: the seemingly immutable rule that oil-exporting countries are bound for authoritarianism and stagnation. What is more, Libya may also demonstrate the value of starting from scratch when rebuilding a war-torn country. No one could have predicted that out of the bleak ruins of the Qaddafi regime and a bloody civil war, Libya would be able to design an effective and inclusive government—and yet most signs indicate that it is doing so. Libya's leaders have been offered a chance that few successful revolutionaries get: to start anew, with ample financial resources and the freedom to build a state as they see fit.

As the new Libya emerges, the West must continue to play a crucial supporting role, much as it did during the civil war. Stevens' death should not deter the United States from working closely with Tripoli, for the ambassador himself understood that only U.S. engagement can provide the expertise and support Libya needs to solidify its young democracy. 🌐