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Introduction

In any list of dictators and antagonists of the West the name of Libya’s Colonel Muammar Qaddafi will always rank highly as one of the most memorable, colourful and mercurial. The roles he played to his fellow Libyans, to regional groupings, to revolutionaries and to the West were complex and nuanced. These various roles developed over time but were all grounded in his self-belief as a messianic revolutionary figure. More importantly, these roles and behaviours that stemmed from them were instrumental in preserving Qaddafi’s rule and thwarting challenges to it.

These facets of Qaddafi’s public self accord with the model of “persona” described by Marshall. Whilst the nature of political persona and celebrity in the Western world has been explored by several scholars (for example Street; Wilson), little work has been conducted on the use of persona by non-democratic leaders. This paper examines the aspects of persona exhibited by Colonel Qaddafi and applied during his tenure. In constructing his role as a revolutionary leader, Qaddafi was engaging in a form of public performance aimed at delivering himself to a wider audience. Whether at home or abroad, this persona served the purpose of helping the Libyan leader consolidate his power, stymie political opposition and export his revolutionary ideals. The trajectory of his persona begins in the early days of his coming to power as a charismatic leader during a “time of distress” (Weber) and culminates in his bloody end next to a roadside drainage culvert. In between these points Qaddafi’s persona underwent refinement and reinvention. Coupled with the legacy he left on the Libyan political system, the journey of Muammar Qaddafi’s personas demonstrate how political personality can be the salvation or damnation of an entire state.

Qaddafi: The Brotherly Revolutionary

Captain Muammar Qaddafi came to power in Libya in 1969 at the age of just 27. He was the leader of a group of military officers who overthrew King Idris in a popular and relatively bloodless coup founded on an ideology of post-colonial Arab nationalism and a doing away with the endemic corruption and nepotism that were the hallmarks of the monarchy. With this revolutionary cause in mind and in an early indication that he recognised the power of political image, Qaddafi showed restraint in adopting the trappings of office. His modest promotion to the rank of Colonel was an obvious example of this, and despite the fact that in practical terms he was the supreme commander of Libya’s armed forces, he resisted the temptation to formally aggrandize himself with military titles for the ensuing 42 years of his rule.

High military rank was in a way irrelevant to a man moving to change his persona from army officer to messianic national leader. Switching away from a reliance on military hierarchy as a basis for his authority allowed Qaddafi to re-cast himself as a leader with a broader mission. He began to utilise titles such as “Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council” (RCC) and “Brotherly Leader and Guide of the Revolution.” The persona on display here was one of detached impartiality and almost reluctant leadership. There was the suggestion that Qaddafi was not really acting as a head of state, but merely an ordinary Libyan who, through popular acclaim, was being begged to lead his people. The attraction of this persona remained until the bitter end for Qaddafi, with his professed inability to step aside from a leadership role he insisted he did not formally occupy. This accords with the contention of Weber, who describes how an individual favoured with charisma can step forward at a time of crisis to complete a “mission.” Once in a position of authority, perpetuating that role of leadership and
acclamation can become the mission itself:

The holder, of charisma seizes the task that is adequate for him and demands obedience and a following by virtue of his mission. His success determines whether he finds them. His charismatic claim breaks down if his mission is not recognized by those to whom he feels he has been sent. If they recognize him, he is their master—so long as he knows how to maintain recognition through ‘proving’ himself. But he does not derive his ‘right’ from their will, in the manner of an election. Rather, the reverse holds: it is the duty of those to whom he addresses his mission to recognize him as their charismatically qualified leader. (Weber 266-7)

As his rule extended across the decades, Qaddafi fostered his revolutionary credentials via a typical cult of personality approach. His image appeared on everything from postage stamps to watches, bags, posters and billboards. Quotations from the Brother Leader were set to music and broadcast as pop songs. “Spontaneous” rallies of support would occur when crowds of loyalists would congregate to hear the Brotherly Leader speak. Although Qaddafi publicly claimed he did not like this level of public adoration he accepted it because the people wanted to adore him. It was widely known however that many of these crowds were paid to attend these rallies (Blundy and Lycett 16).

Qaddafi: The Philosopher

In developing his persona as a guide and a man who was sharing his natural gifts with the people, Qaddafi developed a post-colonial philosophy he called “Third Universal Theory.” This was published in volumes collectively known as The Green Book. This was mandatory reading for every Libyan and contained a distillation of Qaddafi’s thoughts and opinions on everything from sports to politics to religion to the differences between men and women. Whilst it may be tempting for outsiders to dismiss these writings as the scribbling of a dictator, the legacy of Qaddafi’s persona as political philosopher is worthy of some examination. For in offering his revelations to the Libyan people, Qaddafi extended his mandate beyond leader of a revolution and into the territory of “messianic reformer of a nation.”

The Green Book was a three-part series. The first instalment was written in 1975 and focuses on the “problem of democracy” where Qaddafi proposes direct democracy as the best option for a progressive nation. The second instalment, published in 1977, focuses on economics and expounds socialism as the solution to all fiscal woes. (Direct popular action here was evidenced in the RCC making rental of real estate illegal, meaning that all tenants in the country suddenly found themselves granted ownership of the property they were occupying!) The final chapter, published in 1981, proposes the Third Universal Theory where Qaddafi outlines his unique solution for implementing direct democracy and socialism. Qaddafi coined a new term for his Islamically-inspired socialist utopia: Jamahiriya. This was defined as being a “state of the masses” and formed the blueprint for Libyan society which Qaddafi subsequently imposed.

This model of direct democracy was part of the charismatic conceit Qaddafi cultivated: that the Libyan people were their own leaders and his role was merely as a benevolent agent acceding to their wishes. However the implementation of the Jamahiriya was anything but benevolent and its legacy has crippled post-Qaddafi Libya. Under this system, Libyans did have some control over their affairs at a very local level. Beyond this, an increasingly complex series of committees and regional groupings, over which the RCC had the right of veto, diluted the participation of ordinary citizens and their ability to coalesce around any individual leader. The banning of standard avenues of political organisation, such as parties and unions, coupled with a ruthless police state that detained and executed anyone offering even a hint of political dissent served to snuff out any opposition before it had a chance to
gather pace. The result was that there were no Libyans with enough leadership experience or public profile to take over when Qaddafi was ousted in 2011.

**Qaddafi: The Liberator**

In a further plank of his revolutionary persona Qaddafi turned to the world beyond Libya to offer his brotherly guidance. This saw him champion any cause that claimed to be a liberation or resistance movement struggling against the shackles of colonialism. He tended to favour groups that had ideologies aligned with his own, namely Arab unity and the elimination of Israel, but ultimately was not consistent in this regard. Aside from Palestinian nationalists, financial support was offered to groups such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army, the Moro National Liberation Front (Philippines), Umkhonto we Sizwe (South Africa), ETA (Spain), the Polisario Front (Western Sahara), and even separatist indigenous Australians. This policy of backing revolutionary groups was certainly a projection of his persona as a charismatic enabler of the revolutionary mission. However, the reception of this mission in the wider world formed the basis for the image that Qaddafi most commonly occupied in Western eyes.

In 1979 the ongoing Libyan support for groups pursuing violent action against Israel and the West saw the country designated a State-Sponsor of Terror by the US Department of State. Diplomatic relations between the two nations were severed and did not resume until 2004. At this point Qaddafi seemed to adopt a persona of “opponent of the West,” ostensibly on behalf of the world’s downtrodden colonial peoples. The support for revolutionary groups was changing to a more active use of them to strike at Western interests. At the same time Qaddafi stepped up his rhetoric against America and Britain, positioning himself as a champion of the Arab world, as the one leader who had the courage of his convictions and the only one who was squarely on the side of the ordinary citizenry (in contrast to other, more compliant Arab rulers). Here again there is evidence of the charismatic revolutionary persona, reluctantly taking up the burden of leadership on behalf of his brothers.

Whatever his ideals, the result was that Qaddafi and his state became the focus of increasing Western ire. A series of incidents between the US and Libya in international waters added to the friction, as did Libyan orchestrated terror attacks in Berlin, Rome and Vienna. At the height of this tension in 1986, American aircraft bombed targets in Libya, narrowly missing Qaddafi himself. This role as public enemy of America led to Qaddafi being characterised by President Ronald Reagan (no stranger to the use of persona himself) as the “mad dog of the Middle East” and a “squalid criminal.” The enmity of the West made life difficult for ordinary Libyans dealing with crippling sanctions, but for Qaddafi, it helped bolster his persona as a committed revolutionary.

**Qaddafi: Leader of the Arab and African Worlds**

Related to his early revolutionary ideologies were Qaddafi’s aspirations as a pan-national leader. Inspired by Egypt’s Gamel Abdul Nasser from a young age, the ideals of pan-Arab unity were always a cornerstone of Qaddafi’s beliefs. It is not therefore surprising that he developed ambitions of being the person to bring about and “guide” that unity. Once again the Weberian description of the charismatic leader is relevant, particularly the notion that such leadership does not respect conventional boundaries of functional jurisdictions or local bailiwicks; in this case, state boundaries.

During the 1970s Qaddafi was involved in numerous attempts to broker Arab unions between Libya and states such as Egypt, Syria and Tunisia. All of these failed to materialise once the exact details of the mergers began to be discussed, in particular who would assume the mantle of leadership in these super-states. In line with his persona as the rightly-guided revolutionary, Qaddafi consistently blamed the failure of these unions on the other parties, souring his relationship with his fellow Arab leaders. His hardline stance on Israel also put him at odds with those peers more determined to find a compromise. Following the assassination of Egypt’s Anwar Sadat in 1981 Qaddafi praised the act as justified because of
Sadat’s signing of the Camp David Accords with Israel.

Having given up on the hope of achieving pan-Arab Unity, Qaddafi sought to position himself as a leader of the African bloc. In 2009 he became Chairperson of the African Union and took to having himself introduced as “The King of Kings of Africa.” The level of dysfunction of the African Union was no less than that of the Arab League and Qaddafi’s grandiose plans for becoming the President of the United States of Africa failed to materialise.

In both his pan-Arab and pan-Africa ambitions, we see a persona of Qaddafi that aims at leadership beyond his own state. Whilst there may be delusions of grandeur apparent in the practicalities of these goals, this image was nevertheless something that Qaddafi used to leverage the next phase of his political transformation.

**Qaddafi: The Post-9/11 Statesman**

However much he might be seen as erratic, Qaddafi’s innate intelligence could result in a political astuteness lacking in many of his Arab peers. Following the events of 11 September 2001, Qaddafi was the first international leader to condemn the attacks on America and pledge support in the War on Terror and the extermination of al-Qaeda. Despite his history as a supporter of terrorism overseas, Qaddafi had a long history of repressing it at home, just as with any other form of political opposition. The pan-Islamism of al-Qaeda was anathema to his key ideologies of direct democracy (guided by himself). This meant the United States and Libya were now finally on the same team. As part of this post-9/11 sniffing of the wind, Qaddafi abandoned his fledgling Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) program and finally agreed to pay reparations to the families of the victims of the Pan Am 107 flight downed over Lockerbie in 1987.

This shift in Qaddafi’s policy did not altogether dispel his persona of brotherly leadership amongst African nations. As a bloc leader and an example of the possibility of ‘coming in from the cold’, Qaddafi and Libya were reintegrated into the world community. This included giving a speech at the United Nations in 2009. This event did little to add to his reputation as a statesman in the West. Given a 15-minute slot, the Libyan leader delivered a rambling address over 90 minutes long, which included him tearing up a copy of the UN Charter and turning his back to the audience whilst continuing to speak.

**Qaddafi: The Clown**

From the Western point of view, performances like this painted Qaddafi’s behaviour as increasingly bizarre. Particularly after Libya’s rapprochement with the West, the label of threatening terrorist supporter faded and was replaced with something along the lines of a harmless clown prince. Tales of the Libyan leader’s coterie of virgin female bodyguards were the subject of ridicule, as was his ardour for US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Perhaps this behaviour was indicative of a leader increasingly divorced from reality. Surrounded by sycophants dependent on his regard for their tenure or physical survival, as well as Western leaders eager to contrast his amiability with that of Saddam Hussein, nobody was prepared to draw attention to the emperor’s new clothes.

Indeed, elaborate and outlandish clothing played an increasing role in Qaddafi’s persona as the decades went on. His simple revolutionary fatigues of the early years were superseded by a vast array of military uniforms heavily decorated with medals and emblems; traditional African, Arab or Bedouin robes depending on the occasion; and in later years a penchant for outfits that included images of the African continent or pictures of dead martyrs. (In 2009 *Vanity Fair* did a tongue-in-cheek article on the fashion of Colonel Qaddafi entitled *Dictator Chic: Colonel Qaddafi—A Life in Fashion*. This spawned a number of similar features including one in *TIME Magazine* entitled *Gaddafi Fashion: The Emperor Had Some Crazy Clothes*.)

The Bedouin theme was an aspect of persona that Qaddafi cultivated as an ascetic “man of the people” throughout his leadership. Despite having many palaces available he habitually
slept in an elaborate tent, according once again with Weber’s description of the charismatic leader as one who eschews methodical material gain. This predisposition served him well in the 1986 United States bombing, when his residence in a military barracks was demolished, but Qaddafi escaped unscathed as he was in his tent at the time. He regularly entertained foreign dignitaries in tents when they visited Libya and he took one when travelling abroad, including pitching it in the gardens of a Parisian hotel during a state visit in 2007. (A request to camp in New York’s Central Park for his UN visit in 2009 was denied; “Inside the Tents of Muammar Gaddafi”).

The role of such a clown was unlikely to have been an aim for Qaddafi, but was instead the product of his own increasing isolation. It will likely be his most enduring character in the Western memory of his rule. It should be noted though that clowns and fools do not maintain an iron grip on power for over 40 years.

The Legacy of Qaddafi’s Many Personas

Colonel Muammar Qaddafi was a clever and complex leader who exhibited many variations of persona during his four decades of rule. These personas were generally facets of the same core self-belief of a charismatic leader, but could be conflicting, and often confusing, to observers. His eccentricities often hid a layer of deeper cunning and ambition, but ultimately led to his marginalisation and an impression by world leaders that he was untrustworthy.

His erratic performance at the UN in 2009 perhaps typifies the end stages of Qaddafi’s leadership: a man increasingly disconnected from his people and the realities of what was going on around him. His insistence that the 2011 Libyan revolution was variously a colonial or terrorist inspired piece of theatre belied the deep resentment of his rule. His role as opponent of the Western and Arab worlds alike meant that he was unsupported in his attempts to deal with the uprising. Indeed, the West’s rapid willingness to use their airpower was instrumental in speeding on the rebel forces.

What cannot be disputed is the chaotic legacy this charismatic figure left for his country. Since the uprising climaxed in his on-camera lynching in October 2011, Libya has been plunged in to turmoil and shows no signs of this abating. One of the central reasons for this chaos is that Qaddafi’s supremacy, his political philosophies, and his use of messianic persona left Libya completely unprepared for rule by any other party.

This ensuing chaos has been a cruel, if ironic, proof of Qaddafi’s own conceit: Libya could not survive without him.

References


