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When Good Dictators Go Bad
Examining the "Transformation" of Colonel Gaddafi

SALLY TOTMAN AND MAT HARDY
When Good Dictators Go Bad: Examining the "Transformation" of Colonel Gaddafi

Sally Totman, Deakin University, Australia
Mat Hardy, Deakin University, Australia

Abstract: On October 20, 2011, the 42 year rule of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi came to a violent end after months of intense and brutal fighting. The violence in which Gaddafi died and the ensuing abuse of his dead body by his killers was captured on film and broadcast around the world. This gruesome end was the antithesis to his rise to power in 1969, where he was welcomed as a savior and a hero. Until his death, Gaddafi was the longest-serving non-monarchical Head of State and was considered by most scholars more likely to die of natural causes than be overthrown by his people. So what happened in those 42 years that caused Gaddafi to go from beloved liberator to hated oppressor? And what is his lasting legacy for the country he ruled for over four decades?

Keywords: Political Science, Interdisciplinarity

Muammar Gaddafi came to power in Libya on 1 September 1969 as part of a military coup against the unpopular and corrupt King Idris. The then-Captain Gaddafi was celebrated as a liberator and revolutionary who would build a new and better life for all Libyans.

Starting Strong

Gaddafi’s background as a Bedouin gave him some credibility as a ‘man of the people’ and his moderate self-promotion from Captain to Colonel post-revolution provided further basis to this perceived humility.

Gaddafi and his co-revolutionaries who formed the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) set about modernizing and reforming the country during the 1970s. Significant changes to the health and education systems meant that Libyans now had the benefit of free education, including tertiary education and a universal health system which provided first-class free medical care. As a result, diseases such as typhoid and cholera which has previously been quite common in Libya, were eradicated.¹

Gaddafi and the RCC made significant economic reforms especially in regard to the oil industry, which led to an estimated additional $1 billion in revenues in the first year alone.² This money was then used to support building programs and social reforms by the new government for the people. This was popular with Libyans, who for the first time were seeing the benefit of the country’s oil wealth. The nationalization of the oil industry in 1973, four years after the revolution, made a substantial difference to the economy of the country with GDP increasing from $3.8 billion in 1969 to $13.7 billion by 1974 and by the tenth anniversary of Gaddafi coming to power in 1979 the GDP was $24.5 billion.³ As a result the per capita income went from $40 in 1951 to $8,170 in 1979, which was well above that of the United Kingdom and Italy.⁴

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⁴ Ibid. p. 107
Whilst some autocrats have a penchant for advanced military toys or solid gold statues, Gaddafi's taste was for grandiose political philosophy. He formalized his thoughts in 1975 by writing a guide outlining his unique ideology. The result was *The Green Book*, which was a three volume exposition on Gaddafi's thoughts on everything from the role of women in society to the appropriate use of sporting stadiums. It also outlined his Third Universal Theory, on which the post-1969 Libyan society was to be based. The new system was portrayed as an alternative to both capitalism and communism and styled as a potent mix of Islam, socialism, direct democracy and nationalism. Gaddafi coined the term *Jamahiriya* to describe his vision, a neologism roughly meaning "a state of the masses". The implication was that would be a state like no other: one controlled directly by the will of its people.

**Stumbling**

Despite the progressive and revolutionary ideologies, by the end of the 1970s Gaddafi's rule became increasingly autocratic. This came about chiefly through establishing a convoluted series of governance structures that made it extremely difficult for any other individual to accumulate enough power to challenge the "Brother Leader". The 12-member RCC was disbanded in 1977, with five of its members then forming the General Secretariat of the new General People's Congress.\(^5\) This latter body was formed of delegates elected by hundreds of municipal Basic People's Committees, as well as members of the Arab Socialist Union, the sole legal political party in Libya. A network of ideological Revolutionary Committees operated within these administrative bodies, as well as other units of Libyan society, such as schools, workplaces and the military. These committees reported directly to the leadership and comprised the revolutionary zealots. Their role was to ensure the party line was held at all levels of society, and they developed powers of arrest and trial in the name of perpetuating the revolution.\(^6\)

Whilst nominally purporting to offer ordinary Libyans a voice in government, this complex hierarchy of representative bodies overseen by non-elected cronies and filtered by revolutionary fanatics simply served to remove all potential avenues of challenge to Gaddafi. The reliance on geographic districts as the form of representation also meant that Libyans living in one location would have little knowledge of the delegates originating from elsewhere. Regional and ethnic identities were also exacerbated by Gaddafi to foster distrust amongst the citizenry and stop them coalescing around some non-local figure. There were simply no political identities or 'personas' visible to Libyans except that of Gaddafi himself. The accompanying cult of personality meant that no matter how ordinary citizens might disapprove of Gaddafi, there was no-one else to focus their political ambitions upon.

The danger for an absolute leader such as Gaddafi is falling victim to a kind of 'Emperor's New Clothes' syndrome. Fearful of falling foul of the leader's displeasure, the close advisors and those with a vested interest do nothing to challenge the status quo. This includes not calling attention to policy failures or dissent amongst the populace. Such isolation from reality and a disconnection from the citizenry meant that even as Tripoli was falling, Gaddafi appeared convinced that his people unreservedly loved him and would die in his defense.

**Sliding**

But how had the initially charismatic leader come to a point where almost the only thing that united his people was their desire to kill him? What had happened to the socio-economic triumphs of the early years that saw the Libyan standard of living rise so dramatically? Whilst centralized economic reforms are somewhat to blame, the root cause was Gaddafi's determination to pursue his personal ideologies and their failure to be questioned at the higher levels of political

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6 Ibid. p. 170
counsel. By discouraging any political challenge, Gaddafi turned Libya into his own ideological experiment, ensuring that his country became a pariah state and an economic basket case despite its hydrocarbon bonanza. For Gaddafi this reaped a whirlwind from the citizens who were impoverished by his tinkering.

One of the most contentious reforms came in 1978 when Gaddafi decided to socialise housing. The goal was to ensure that every Libyan lived in his own home and was not at the mercy of a landlord. To this end families were banned from owning more than the house they lived in. All rental properties were seized and sold to their current tenants at a heavily-subsidised price. Whilst this made many Libyans instant homeowners it greatly angered the nation's narrow middle-class. Inspired by the success of the housing re-distribution project, Gaddafi subsequently decided to eliminate much of the private sector and several hundred companies were seized and transformed into cooperatives. Such experiments had far-reaching implications for Libyans, establishing a pattern of centralised economic lever-pulling that was unable to meet the tests to come.

One of these tests was generated by another example of Gaddafi pursuing his own ideological interests: support for liberation movements and terrorist organisations. Any group who claimed to be throwing off the shackles of oppression was a candidate for Gaddafi’s rhetorical and financial support. This later extended into more physical support through training and manpower.

The eventual repercussion of this revolutionary outreach was military action from the United States and a sanctions regime which lasted for 16 years and cost the country an estimated $900 million in financial losses from the curtailed oil trade. In addition to the lost revenue Libya agreed to pay $2.7 billion in compensation for the victims of Pan Am Flight 107 in 2002 to have the sanctions removed.

The UN sanctions paralyzed the oil and transportation sectors of Libya’s economy and isolated the state economically, diplomatically and physically from the international community. The sanctions had the desired effect with oil production plummeting from 1.82 million barrels per day in 1980 to 1.37 million barrels per day in 1999. Not until the UN sanctions were formally terminated in 2008 did production reach a comparable level to pre-sanctions levels at 1.87 million barrels per day. But in the meantime the Libyan economy had been beggared.

Given that the energy sector is responsible for 95% of Libya's export earnings and 99% of government income, the significant decrease in oil revenues during the sanctions period meant that the country's infrastructure suffered. Previous gains in the areas such as the country's health system were nullified as the government was unable to maintain the previous high-level of spending on technology and equipment. Moreover, none of vague noises made during the rapprochement with the West about improving human rights or increasing democracy had been fulfilled.

9 Totman, Sally and Mat Hardy. “The Rise and Decline of Libya as a Rogue State”. In proceedings of the 2008 Oceanic Conference on International Studies, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Qld. 2008 p 1-25.
10 UN sanctions were officially in place from 1992 to 2008 however the UN sanctions were suspended in 1999. US sanctions remained in place until September 2006.
Such regression in the standard of living coupled with an increasingly paranoid crackdown on dissent meant that Libyans were primed for a change in leadership; they simply had nothing more to lose by rising up against Gaddafi. When the Arab Spring lit the touch paper, Libyans united in their desire for a new revolution.

**Pyramid Power**

The autocratic structure of Gaddafi’s Libya in 2011 typifies that of many Middle East and North Africa states prior to the Arab Spring. This arrangement can be illustrated as a pyramid (see Figure 1 below). As with the pyramids of the ancient world, this edifice is sturdy and enduring. However, as the events in Libya and other Arab Spring states have demonstrated, once the pyramid begins to crumble, it is very difficult to reconstruct a replacement of any stability. In order to explore the consequences of Gaddafi’s removal for today’s Libya, it is therefore important to describe this ‘Modern Middle Eastern Pyramid’.

At the top of the pyramid is the Leader. As with the example of Gaddafi, this leader will probably have been there for decades, or else is the anointed heir to a previous long-term autocrat. This leader will have risen to power during the early part of the Cold War, usually as a military officer undertaking a coup against an incumbent leader. As with Gaddafi, he may even have had legitimate support for his takeover, such as overturning a repressive monarchy. However, as his rule has extended, he has become pharaonic in his power. He will be long out of touch with the realities of ordinary life for his citizens and complacent in his status at the tip of the pyramid.

This complacency is due to his insulation from reality, a state exacerbated by the role of the next layers of the structure. The Inner Circle is made up of the Leader’s most trusted cronies. They are usually close family or clan members, the supreme military commanders, fellow plotters in the original coup or combinations of these. In Libya this stratum was the original coup plotters in the RCC (and later the Secretariat) as well as Gaddafi’s children. This Inner Circle is there to protect the Leader’s status and they are complicit in carrying out his fiats and removing opposition.

Below this is the level of the Elite. These are the upper echelons of society who are complaisant; their eagerness to please the regime is because their fortunes and status are very closely tied to the leadership’s endurance. If the leader goes, they go. Accordingly they use their positions to provide support upwards and pressure downwards. In Libya, as elsewhere in the Arab world, this was the higher officer classes of the military, police and security apparatus, as well the more distant clan and family members who also occupied many of the plum economic roles. The Revolutionary Committees also formed a kind of ideological Elite in Libya, ensuring that any dissent with the status quo was swiftly eradicated. To maximize the support of his Elite, Gaddafi was skilful in keeping them worried about the longevity of their status. Regular purges and shake-ups ensured that everyone kept working hard to prove their loyalty.

The next layer is the Middle Class. In states like Egypt and Iran this is quite large, but in Libya this layer had been thinned out by Gaddafi’s Jamahiriya ideology, as well as the predations of the security services and Revolutionary Committees. The Middle Class can be a danger to some states because they are complainant; aspiring to greater wealth and a better future for their children. They are educated, politically aware and want more freedom. They are more likely to be connected to the outside world and its ideas. It could be expected that a new generation of political leaders may emerge from the Middle Class after a revolution.

The Mob: the vast bulk of urban poor and rural peasantry. These citizens are locked out of the political system, resigned to their fate or at least apathetic. In most states they will have also been ‘bought off’ by the leadership in the form of staple subsidies for basic foods, fuel, housing and so on. This was the case in Gaddafi’s Libya, where the nationalization of housing (q.v.), discounted petrol, foodstuffs and even airline tickets sometimes consumed nearly
half the national budget. The Mob are compliant to the regime, but can cause problems AFTER a revolution when their lives do not improve quickly or even worsen under a new government.

![Modern Middle East Pyramid](image)

**Figure 1: Modern Middle East Pyramid**

Under Gaddafi, Libya exemplified this general pyramid structure. Of importance though is that his particular leadership style, his economic policies and the Jamahiriya system all provided the worst possible foundation for stable governance after the Leader's demise. As described above, the complicated series of locally-based political structures served to fracture Libyan political identity. In Gaddafi's Libya, the Middle Class was largely gone and the Mob base of the pyramid had been deliberately split into thousands of bricks. When it fell, Libya devolved into local groupings and heavily armed gangs.

**Gaddafi’s Legacy**

The removal of Gaddafi from power and his subsequent execution have had critical effects on Libya's stability. Forty years of tyrannical rule meant that not only was there a power vacuum following his demise, but that there were no structures on which to rebuild authority. Unlike neighboring Egypt or Tunisia, where there were some channels of non-government political and ideological activity to coalesce around (even if formerly banned), the new Libya was much more a blank slate. The splintering of Libyan society fostered by the Jamahiriya mechanisms meant no strong and experienced leaders were in place and hundreds of restive local militias ended up looking out for themselves, unwilling to trust any central authority. Geographic, ethnic and religious differences have played out, with the National Transitional Council (NTC) seemingly powerless to exert any legitimate power. Having failed to come up with a post-Jamahiriya constitution, the NTC is in a perpetual state of transition, leaderless and subject to the ochlocracy of the militias.

Libya's oil and gas industry has also been subdued by this vacuum. As the most prized asset in the Libyan economy, control over oilfields and production infrastructure is heavily contested. Despite a rebound to pre-civil war production levels in 2012, the deteriorating security situation
since 2013 has meant that foreign investors have pulled out. Exports are beginning to plummet and this will have a cyclical effect on Libya's economy. Lack of government revenue will make it more and more difficult for the NTC to legitimate itself through providing for Libyan citizens.

It is difficult to be positive about Libya's short and medium term future. The long period of remote and authoritarian leadership descended rapidly into a seemingly irreparable chaos once Gaddafi's pyramid was brought down. Whilst the nation's hydrocarbon assets will continue to guarantee the interest of the wider world, it is hard to see how Libya can be put back together again as a functioning state in the present circumstances. A Balkanization is one possible path but that would not necessarily lead to greater stability for the constituent parts. In any case, territorial control over oil and gas assets would still be hotly contested. Meanwhile, increased activity from radical Islamist groups in the North African region pose a further threat to stability and foreign investment.

Sadly for today's beleaguered Libyan citizens, Gaddafi was Libya's Ozymandias. Since his demise, nothing beside remains.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Sally Totman: Associate Professor, Middle East Studies, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Deakin University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Dr. Mat Hardy: Lecturer, Middle East Studies, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Deakin University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
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