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Libya at the Crossroads: A MidEast Model or Revolution gone Awry?

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

As rebel forces conquer the capital Tripoli, Libya, the takeover of the country makes the Libyan uprising more a revolution than a revolt. How the rebels handle the transition will determine whether Libya becomes a model for change in the region or another example of a revolution derailed.

Commentary

WITH NATO-backed rebels capturing Tripoli and members of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's family, Libya could emerge as the Middle East and North Africa's first revolution rather than its third successful popular revolt following the toppling earlier this year of autocratic leaders in Tunisia and Egypt. In many ways that could mean that change in Libya could move faster and deeper but also prove to be messier than the transitions in Tunisia and Egypt.

A first litmus test is likely to be the fate of captured members of Gaddafi's family as well as of senior officials of the regime. Rebel forces advancing into Tripoli captured early Monday Gaddafi's most prominent son and one-time heir apparent, Saif al Islam al Gaddafi, while his eldest son and former telecommunications chief, Mohammed al Gaddafi, turned himself in.

A Revolution, not a Revolt

The rebels' response to the demand by the International Criminal Court (ICC) that Saif al Islam be handed over to it will serve as an early indication of what transition in Libya will look like. The court has issued an international arrest warrant for Saif al Islam as well as for his father and Abdullah al Senoussi, the head of Gaddafi's intelligence service, on charges of war crimes.

The court argues that the rebel Transition National Council (TNC) that has been widely recognised by the international community as the legitimate authority in Libya is legally obliged to hand over Saif al Islam. Many rebel leaders feel that this would deprive Libyans of their right to mete out justice, raising the spectre of an orgy of revenge in the wake of the final collapse of the Gaddafi regime. The court's demand was met in the streets of Benghazi with chants of "Martyr's Blood Should Not Be Spent in Vain".

However messy and perhaps violent the transition in Libya proves to be, Libyans, unlike Egyptians and Tunisians, will be in a position to dismantle the former regime's apparatus. After six months of bitter fighting, the rebels are gaining control of all of Libya, having defeated Gaddafi's security and military forces. The building

blocks and assets of the ancien regime, including the intelligence service are being destroyed and weaponry and military equipment are falling into rebel hands.

The destruction of the regime and the takeover of the country rather than the toppling of its head is what mark the Libyan uprising as a revolution as opposed to the revolts in Egypt and Tunisia. The toppling of Hosni Mubarak and Zine El Abedine Ben Ali was relatively quick and peaceful compared to the drawn out and bloody battle that this weekend brought the rebels to Tripoli's symbolic Green Square.

Those revolts left the infrastructure of the regimes in place and, in the case of Egypt, put the military, which has been part of the country's political power structure for the past 60 years, in charge of its transition to democracy. As a result, both Egypt and Tunisia are still struggling with limited success to curtail, if not block, elements of the ancien regime and political forces that operated under it from playing dominant roles in their country's future.

Libya as a Model for Change

Libya distinguishes itself as a revolution rather than a revolt also by the fact that the country's new leadership will control the nation's economic assets and be able to shape economic policies, unlike Egypt and Tunisia. In these two neighbouring states, the former economic players retain their operations while protesters struggle to realise their dream of political freedom and economic opportunity.

For the Libyan rebels, this means, on the one hand, control of the country's oil installations but also the immediate task of having to secure basic services such as food, water and energy; resume oil exports to ensure funding for the new government; and kick start Libya's stagnating economy. The jury is out on whether Libya, with destruction of the regime rather than just the removal of its head, will prove to be a model for what liberated Middle Eastern and North African states will look like, or an example of a revolution gone badly wrong.

The TNC, in a first hopeful sign, last week issued its constitution that lays out in detail its plans to manage the transition to democracy stressing principles such as a multi-party system, equal rights including for women, freedom of expression, independence of the judiciary and governance. The document, in recognition of the country's diversity, would make Libya the first country to describe itself simply as a democratic rather than an Arab state. It defines Islam as the principle source of legislation but guarantees the rights of religious minorities.

A beacon for what?

The challenges facing the rebels are nonetheless daunting. The handling of the ICC's demands, coupled with the need to ensure law and order, can prevent tribal rivalries from escalating into open conflict and descending into mob justice, chaos and anarchy. The TNC's response will be initial indicators of what kind of beacon for the Middle East and North Africa Libya will be.

The rebels shoulder a special responsibility given that they are in charge of managing the transition. This includes the integration of elements of Gaddafi's security forces with their rag-tag army into the country's new force that will have to ensure security and law and order. That is likely to prove to be a painful and difficult process, but one that will determine Libya's future.

With Islamists constituting an important segment of the rebel forces taking control of the country, Libya will also be closely watched as an example of the role of Islamists in countries in the region embarking on transition. Both Egypt and Libya are adjusting to the role of the Muslim Brotherhood and An-Nahda in the societies they are seeking to build.

In the final analysis, the rebels have a model of how not to do it: Iraq in the wake of the US overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Iraq was neither a revolt nor a revolution. It was the US disbanding of Saddam's security forces and the military and the process of de-Baathification. The elimination of the remnants of the Iraqi dictator's Baath Party contributed to the sectarian and terrorist violence that racked Iraq for years. That is one mistake the rebels are determined not to make.

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