

THE POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION OF LIBYA UNDER QADHAFI

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CURRENT RESEARCH INTEREST: political systems in the Third  
World

SUMMARY

In the Third World, the function of political leadership is more pivotal than in western countries. The subjective factor of Qadhafi has vital bearing on developments in Libya. There was no historical necessity for Libya to have developed along the revolutionary path that it has. The formation of the Arab Socialist Union, the Popular Revolution, the creation of the Jamahiriya, the inauguration of the Revolutionary Committee movement and the programme of militarisation - all these issues are a result of Qadhafi's wish to "revolutionarize" Libyan society.

His ultimate aim was to eliminate all intermediaries between the people and the political power. In practice, real power remained in the hands of Qadhafi and the Revolutionary Committees. A drastic fall in oil revenues and the arrogance and arbitrariness of Qadhafi's revolutionary zealots led to growing discontent among the Libyan population.

The American raid on Tripoli and Benghazi in April 1986 was meant to precipitate Qadhafi's downfall. But his regime was not overthrown and the Libyan leader proved to be a master of political survival. A (temporary) political and economic

liberalisation has boosted his popularity. On the eve of the twentieth anniversary of the Libyan revolution, his position still seems to be secure.

KEYWORDS : Qadhafi, Libya, Islamic state

## 1. THE 1969 COUP

King Idris, who was in power since Libya's independence in 1951, was dethroned on September 1, 1969 by members of a so-called "Free Unionist Officer Movement". These young officers were disenchanted with the corruption surrounding the aging king, the prominence of foreigners in the Libyan economy, and Idris's pro-Western foreign policy. The coup d'état was led by a 27-year old officer, Mu'Ammar al Qadhafi (1), who became chairman of a twelve-member Revolutionary Command Council (RCC).

The RCC announced on December 11, 1969 that the country's 1951 independence constitution had been cancelled. In a new provisional constitution Islam was proclaimed the state religion and Arabic its official language. Moreover, the state aimed at the realization of socialism through the enforcement of social justice.

The RCC was the highest authority in the Libyan Arab Republic. It exercised supreme sovereignty and legislative power and set up the general policy of the state. To implement the state's general policy, the RCC appointed a Council of Ministers, which was responsible in its functions to the RCC and whose members might be dismissed by the RCC (2).

A ban on political parties was maintained. A largely civilian cabinet was appointed, although it functioned under close military supervision. The principal force underlying the regime's policies was undoubtedly Arab nationalism (3).

## 2. THE ARAB SOCIALIST UNION AND THE POPULAR REVOLUTION

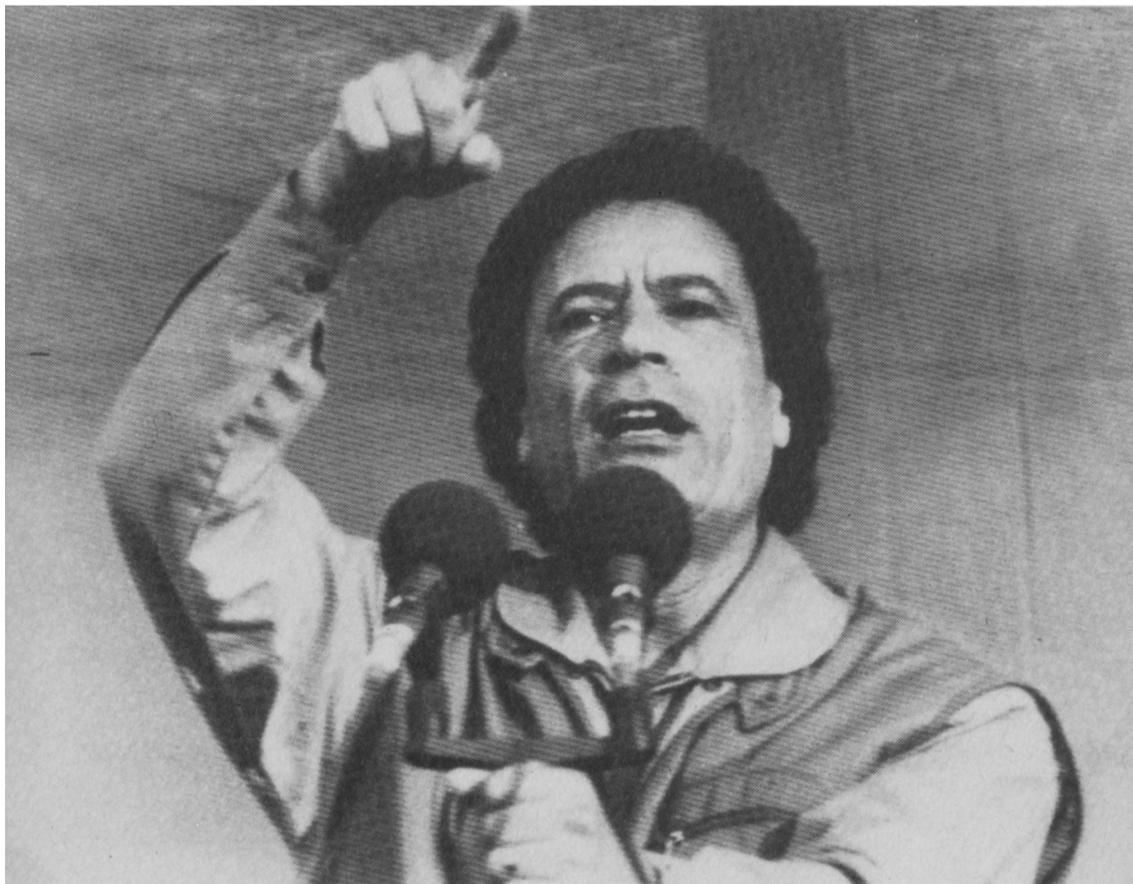
In June 1971 Qadhafi announced that an Arab Socialist Union (ASU) would be formed to constitute the country's single party. The main purpose of the ASU was "to eliminate class distinction, foster democracy and prevent the domination of any one class or person".

Its organizational structure provided for a local conference and committee as its basic unit, a provincial conference and committee at the next level, and a General National Congress and the RCC at the apex of the pyramid (4). In a broader perspective, the Libyan ASU aimed at the unification of the Arab political institutions. It was consequently a copy of the Egyptian model (5). Furthermore, its formation nearly coincided with the creation of the Federation of Arab Republics (FAR) between Libya, Egypt, and Syria. The FAR constitution was approved by referendum in September 1971 (6).

The Libyan ASU performed as disappointingly as its Egyptian equivalent and did not succeed in stimulating Libyan political life. To counter the political lethargy of the Libyan population, the popular or cultural revolution was launched on April 15, 1973 at a public meeting in Zwara (7).

On April 16, Qadhafi announced the formation of popular committees throughout the country and in all its institutions. Their role, he explained, was to ensure the control of the revolution from below. Their decisions, once approved by the RCC, would be given legal character. By 15 August -the RCC deadline- more than 2200 committees had been formed in villages, cities, educational institutions, business-enterprises, etc. (8).

Despite the disorder bordering on chaos in some institutions, the RCC never lost control of the situation. Qadhafi's political purpose was achieved: the committees ferreted out and caused the dismissal of a number of actual or potential critics of the regime (9). But on the whole the episode of the popular revolution ended undecisively. Many of the new ac-



Colonel Muammar al Qadhafi, 'Leader of the Revolution'.  
(Archives 'Het Volk')

tivists who had "seized" power in the popular committees, proved to be opportunists after personal power or to be as negligent and even more incompetent than the bureaucrats they were supposed to control. Ultimately, the popular revolution was not enough to definitively shift the balance of political power between Qadhafi and his rivals, and the conflict had to be decided in an outbreak of intra-elite violence at the apex of the state (10).

### 3. THE ELABORATION OF THE SECOND INSTITUTIONAL SYSTEM

#### 3.1 The break up of the Revolutionary Command Council (1974-1975)

On April 5, 1974 the RCC decreed that Qadhafi be relieved of his political, administrative, and traditional duties so as to devote himself to ideological matters and mass organization. Major Jalloud (11), Qadhafi's right hand, took over his functions. However, Qadhafi remained Head of State and Commander of the Armed Forces (12).

Rivalry between Qadhafi and Jalloud did not appear to be a factor for the changes. There were, nevertheless, signs of serious discontent among more moderate members of the RCC, who had affinities with dissatisfied army officers and middle class elements in Libyan society. These tensions culminated in an abortive coup in the middle of 1975 by Qadhafi's main opponents in the RCC. With the breakdown of collegial decision-making through the RCC, Qadhafi's personal leadership was decisively established, and only five of the original twelve members of the RCC remained.

#### 3.2 The reorganization of the Arab Socialist Union

The ultimate aim of the elaboration of the second institutional system was to eliminate all intermediaries between the

people and the political power.

For that reason, Qadhafi announced on April 27, 1975 fundamental changes in the structure of the ASU. A system of direct democracy was worked out: the new structure allowed the people to exercise its authority through the Basic People's Congresses (BPC), the People's Committees, syndicates, trade unions, and the General People's Congress (GPC). Membership was now open to all Arabs inside and outside Libya (13).

The first General Popular Congress was held from January 5 to 18, 1976. Prime Minister Jalloud was unanimously elected Secretary-General of the Congress. The GPC also decided that the RCC (General Secretariat of the Congress) would continue to legislate in accordance with the powers given by the Constitutional Declaration of 1969 (14).

Meanwhile, the first part of Qadhafi's Green Book: "The Solution of the Problem of Democracy: the Authority of the People" had been published at the end of 1975. In this work Qadhafi set out to give a theoretical basis for his experiment in direct participatory democracy in Libya (15).

### 3.3 The Declaration on the Establishment of the People's Authority (March 1977)

An extraordinary GPC, held in Sebha (February 28 - March 2, 1977), issued a four-point Declaration on the Establishment of the People's Authority. Four decrees that changed the Libyan institutions were added to the Declaration. The most important stipulations were: 1) the official name of the Libyan Arab Republic is the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya (16); 2) the Holy Koran is the law of the Society; 3) the popular direct authority is the basis of the political system; 4) the defence of the homeland is the responsibility of every male and female citizen.

The RCC was maintained but its name was changed to General Secretariat, in spite of the opposition of Qadhafi, who advo-

cated its disappearance. Qadhafi was chosen as Secretary General of the GPC. A General People's Committee was formed to carry out the tasks of the various former ministries. The title of "Minister" was replaced by that of "Secretary", and Jalloud's post of Prime Minister was replaced by that of Chairman of the Popular Committee, now held by a civilian (17).

The Declaration of March 2, 1977 only casted Qadhafi's speech of April 27, 1975 in an adequate juridical form and did not change the Libyan institutional system perceptibly. Qadhafi rejects all constitutions as man-made laws (18). Although no official Libyan source uses the term "constitution" for the Declaration of the Establishment of the People's Authority, this text can be considered a "constitutional document", i.e. a fundamental document that establishes the basis for the Libyan political and juridical structure.

Libya's new political system of the Jamahiriya did not live up to Qadhafi's expectations. On the one hand, conflicts arose between the different tiers of the hierarchical system, resulting in the isolation of higher political levels from the base and the inevitable creation of small, personal sectors of power. Furthermore, Qadhafi was dissatisfied with the level of public participation in politics, absenteeism in the BPCs being considerable (19).

#### 3.4 The revolutionary committees and the Green Book (part II)

From 1978 on, "revolutionary committees" formed "spontaneously" within the BPCs. Although not mentioned in the Green Book (Part I), Qadhafi assigned the revolutionary committees the task of encouraging participation and guiding the congresses according to the precepts of the Green Book (20). The real function of Libyan "red guards" was ideological surveillance. They were, in reality, a political police.

The revolutionary committees played an important role in the implementation of the principles outlined in the second part

of Qadhafi's Green Book, "The Solution of the Economic Problem: Socialism", published early in 1978 (21). The main themes were "partners, not wage earners", "the house belongs to its occupant", and "land is no one's property". Workers committees began to take over the management of their enterprises and houses were redistributed on a large scale. These measures obviously posed a serious threat to the middle class, the traditional opponents to Qadhafi's regime.

### 3.5 The division between government and revolution

In March 1979, at a special meeting of the GPC, Qadhafi formally relinquished his position as secretary-general of the GPC to devote himself, together with the remaining members of the RCC, exclusively to "perfecting" the revolution. Qadhafi's formal title became "Leader of the Revolution".

Immediately, the functions of the new General Secretariat of the GPC were seriously restricted. The BPCs (and GPC) consequently continued to share political authority with the revolutionary committees and the RCC, which had placed itself above the political process but remained at the heart of the revolution.

## 4. MILITARIZATION, OPPOSITION, AND FALLING OIL REVENUES

The concept of an "armed people" is an essential part of the Libyan revolution. Since 1979, military training has been introduced in universities, schools, and enterprises for both men and women. Qadhafi's ultimate plan is to replace the regular army by a people's army. The creation of a people's army is at the same time used by the Libyan authorities as an occasion to relaunch revolutionary mobilization (22).

It is very difficult to gauge the extent of domestic opposition to Qadhafi's regime. A large part of the population has benefited directly from the revolution. Nevertheless, rumours

of unrest among the middle class (merchants), army officers, religious leaders, and students, have circulated for years and reports of serious incidents emerge from time to time. Although opposition abroad is too divided to be effective, it clearly troubles Qadhafi's regime. In 1980 Qadhafi issued an ultimatum to Libyan exiles abroad to return to Libya or face "physical liquidation" by the revolutionary committees. Since 1980 several Libyans known to be hostile to the regime have been assassinated in Western countries (23).

Falling oil revenues (from \$ 22 billion in 1980 to \$ 5 billion in 1988), due to the world oil glut, have had a serious impact on Libya's political and economic life.

For the first time since 1969, the Libyan population was confronted with economic hardship and a declining standard of living. It is only logical that this economic decline also has political consequences. Because of the important oil revenues during the first decennium of the September revolution, the Libyan political and institutional laboratory was able to function with an apparent consensus. But as oil sales continued to collapse, the Jamahiriyah had, for the first time, to prove the real viability of its political and institutional experiment (24).

The fall in oil earnings coincided with a dramatic escalation of the conflict between Libya and the United States. Since Ronald Reagan took over power at the White House in January 1981, relations between the two countries had constantly deteriorated. Diplomatic relations were broken off and a full trade embargo on Libyan goods was imposed. As these measures proved ineffective to precipitate Qadhafi's downfall, Washington resorted to a policy of military confrontation. Twice the American and Libyan army clashed in the disputed Gulf of Sirte. Against a background of alleged Libyan involvement in "terrorist" activities, the Reagan administration decided for a powerful military assault on the apparatus of the Libyan state. There is even evidence that Qadhafi was himself a target of the operation. The attack was meant to produce tensions within the Libyan armed forces, prompting discon



Libyan demonstrators in the streets of Tripoli after U.S. raid attack on April 15th, 1986.  
(Archives 'Het Volk')

tented officers into an attempted coup d'état (25).

## 5. THE AMERICAN RAID AND ITS AFTERMATH

The bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi on April 15, 1986 did not have the effect Washington had expected. Qadhafi was not killed during the attack and his regime was not overthrown. The American action temporarily boosted the popular appeal of the Libyan colonel as "victim of American imperialism". Moreover it delayed the process, of growing opposition and discontent in Libya, caused by the deep economic malaise afflicting the country after the oil price crash.

Nevertheless, the Libyan leader was emotionally shaken by the events of April 15, 1986. For several months he did not appear in public and for more than a year all political life in Libya was at a standstill.

Early 1988, amid a climate of economic chaos and growing repression by the Revolutionary Committees, Qadhafi returned to the political scene and declared that the Libyan revolution had entered a new phase. He promised that personal freedom would be enhanced, private enterprise encouraged and the power of the feared Revolutionary Committees curbed.

In a speech to the GPC in March 1988, the Colonel announced that all prisoners would be freed (except those accused of "conspiring with foreign circles" and those sentenced for violent crimes). To suit the action to the word, he climbed on to a bulldozer and demolished the gates of Tripoli's central prison. Shortly afterwards, an amnesty for all imprisoned foreigners was declared.

In a second address to the GPC, Qadhafi called for the abolition of capital punishment (excluding again the above mentioned categories). At the same time, he demanded the abolition of courts operated by the Revolutionary Committees and asked that all arbitrary arrests should be stopped. Nevertheless, he stressed that the loyalty of the revolutionaries was

still valued and that it was not so much the Committees themselves that needed curbing but their abuses of power.

Economic changes have been no less significant than human rights reforms. In a speech on the economy, Qadhafi called for the abolition of the state control of medium- and small-scale industries such as construction, agriculture and manufacturing. Workers should take responsibility for their own workplaces through cooperatives, as required by the Green Book (Part II) and its ubiquitous slogan: "Partners, not wage earners". Large-scale industries such as steel, petrochemicals and oil would have to remain under state control.

At the same time, the reopening of private shops has sparked a revival in local economic activity. Improvement in regional and international relations has increased the availability of goods for production and consumption (26).

The so-called "spring of Tripoli" created an atmosphere of optimism and enthusiasm, albeit cautious, among Libyans. Qadhafi's position now seems more secure than a few years ago. His sudden embrace of economic and political liberalisation is not to be seen as a break with the past.

Qadhafi is a master of political survival. On September 1, 1989, the twentieth anniversary of his revolution will be celebrated. On the one hand, Qadhafi's legitimacy rests on a record of revolutionary achievement. In only two decades, he has secured a profound political, economic and social transformation of Libyan society. On the other hand, the fact that he has endured is not only a result of his revolutionary and populist policy. In a country that has extensively suffered from foreign domination, Qadhafi's assertion of Libyan pride and identity has proved enduringly popular (27).

## NOTES

- (1) Qadhafi was born somewhere in the Sirte desert in 1942. His parents were nomads from a Berber tribe, the Qadhafah. In 1959 at secondary school in Sebha he founded a secret pro-Nasserist organisation. Together with a few like-minded friends, he decided in 1963 to infiltrate the Libyan Army and create a Free Unionist Officer movement, in the mould of Nasser's organisation in Egypt. Gradually, his movement gained enough support among Libyan officers to organize a coup d'état.
- (2) Text of the Constitutional Proclamation in: ANSELL, M.O. & AL ARIF, I.M., The Libyan Revolution: a Sourcebook of Legal and Historical Documents, Stoughton, Oleander Press, 1972, p. 108-113; see also BAUMANN, H., Die Libysche Verfassung, ihre Grundlagen und Prinzipien, Staat und Recht, 1970, no. 19, p. 1007-1009.
- (3) A decree by the RCC provided for the exclusive use of Arabic in and throughout Libya. Within one year the American and British military bases were evacuated. Most of the European and American specialists were replaced by Arabs and most of the foreign oil companies and banks were nationalized. See The Middle East and North Africa 1984-1985, p. 533-534.
- (4) Text of the establishment of the Libyan Arab Socialist Union, Africa Contemporary Record 1971-1972, p. 136-141.
- (5) BLEUCHOT, H. & MONASTIRI T., Libye: l'évolution des institutions politiques, Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord, 1977, p. 152.
- (6) A recurrent feature of Qadhafi's foreign policy is the announcement of union proposals between Libya and neighbour states. For the sake of completeness the following list is given:
  - 1) Tripoli Charter (December 27, 1969) between Libya, Sudan and U.A.R.;

- 2) Federation of Arab Republics (April 17, 1971) between Libya, Egypt and Syria;
  - 3) Egyptian-Libyan Union;
  - 4) Arab-Islamic Republic (January 12, 1974) between Libya and Tunisia;
  - 5) Libyan-Syrian merger (September 10, 1980);
  - 6) Libyan-Chadian Union (January 6, 1981);
  - 7) Arab-African Union (August 13, 1984) between Libya and Morocco;
  - 8) Libyan-Algerian Union Project (September, 1988);
  - 9) Union of the Arab Maghreb between Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia and Mauretania (February 17, 1989).
- (7) McDERMOTT, A., Qaddafi and Libya, The World Today, 1973, p. 403-404.
  - (8) Libya, in: Africa Contemporary Record, 1973-1974, B 57-58.
  - (9) LENCZOWSKI, C., Popular Revolution in Libya, Current History, 1974, no. 390, p. 59.
  - (10) HINNEBUSCH, R.A., Charisma, Revolution and State Formation: Qaddafi and Libya, Third World Quarterly, 1984, no. 1, p. 64-65.
  - (11) Abdessalam Jalloud was among the first to join Qadhafi's organisation in 1959. He has stayed loyal to Qadhafi ever since. Should the Libyan leader disappear from the political scene, Jalloud is most likely to be his successor.
  - (12) L'éclipse du colonel Kadhafi, Maghreb-Machrek, 1974, no. 63, p. 5-6.
  - (13) BLEUCHOT, H. & MONASTIRI, T., o.c., p. 163-169; HINNEBUSH, R.A., o.c., p. 66; Africa Contemporary Record, 1975-1976, B 60. Decrees of April 3, 1975 en November 9, 1975 on reorganization of the ASU, French translation in Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord, 1975, p. 913-916. Map and list of the administrative divisions (baladiyat) in: Maghreb-Machrek, 1981, no. 93, p. 78-79.

- (14) Text of the resolutions of the first GPC (translated in French) in: BLEUCHOT, H., Chroniques et documents libyens, Paris, CNRS, 1983, p. 211-216.
- (15) AL QATHAFI, M., The Green Book. Part One. The Solution of the Problem of Democracy. "The Authority of the People", Tripoli, Public Establishment for Publishing, no. 48; for a more detailed analysis of the Green Book, see BLEUCHOT, H., Le Livre vert: contexte et signification, Maghreb-Machrek, 1981, no. 93, p. 23-38 and HABIBY, R.N., Qadhafi's Thoughts on True Democracy, in : CURTIS, M., (ed.), Religion and Politics in the Middle East, Boulder (Colorado), Westview Press, 1982, p. 261-271.
- (16) The word jamahiriya is a neologism composed of jamahîr "masses" and a suffix indicating "belonging to". Dissatisfied with the word "republic" (Joumhouriya), Qadhafi himself coined the term Jamahiriya, which is translated as "state of the masses". In Jamahîr there is a connotation of "manifestations".
- (17) Text of Declaration on the Establishment of the People's Authority in: KOUSA MUSA, M., The Political Leader and his Social Background. Muammar Qaddafi, the Libyan Leader, Michigan, Michigan State University, 1978, p. 200. Text of the decrees in HAHN, L., Historical Dictionary of Libya, New Jersey/London, Scarecrow Press, 1981, p. 114-116.
- (18) AL QATHAFI, The Green Book. Part One, o.c., p. 33-38.
- (19) BLEUCHOT, H. & MONASTIRI, T., o.c., p. 178-181.
- (20) BLEUCHOT, H., Chronique politique: La Libye, Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord, 1978, p. 373-374.
- (21) AL QATHAFI M., The Green Book. Part Two. The Solution of the Economic Problem: "Socialism", Tripoli, Public Establishment for Publishing, s.d.; HABIBY R.N., Mu'amar Qadhafi's New Islamic Scientific Socialist Society, in:

CURTIS, M. (ed.), o.c. , p. 247-259; on the originality of the Green Book (Part Two) see HAJJAR, S.G., The Marxist origins of Qadhafi's economic thought, Journal of Modern African Studies, 1982, no. 3, p. 361-375; the third part of Qadhafi's Green Book, covering the social basis of the revolution, was published in June 1979. It contains Qadhafi's views on family and tribal life, the nation, relationship between men and women, on language, education and teaching, sports and the performing arts. AL QATHAFI, M., The Green Book. Part Three. The Social Basis of the Third Universal Theory, Tripoli, Public Establishment for Publishing, s.d.

- (22) MONASTIRI, T., Chronique politique Libye, Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord, 1981, p. 559-562.
- (23) For reports on opposition in Libya and abroad see the annual surveys on Libya in Africa Contemporary Record and excellent "behind the screen"-articles in Africa Confidential.
- (24) BURGAT, F., La Libye à l'heure des comptes, Grand Maghreb, Grenoble, CIGMA, 1985, no. 39, p. 178-181.
- (25) BEARMAN, J., Qadhafi's Libya, London, New Jersey, 1986, pp. 287-288.
- (26) BEARMAN J., o.c., pp. 283.