



131

OCTOBER
2011

LIBYANS TIME FOR UNITY

Juan Garrigues, Research fellow, CIDOB

Gaddafi's death opens a new era for Libya. After eight months of conflict the country has been declared officially "liberated". With Gaddafi at large, serious concern remained about his loyalist forces (up to 12.000 only in Sirte) mounting a guerrilla war that could obstruct the efforts of the National Transitional Council (NTC). With Gaddafi out of the picture and NATO soon to exit, the future of Libya should now depend solely on Libyans capacity to work together.

Many will now rush to take stock on Libya's legacy within the wider framework of the changes taking place in the Arab world. France and the United Kingdom have heralded a brighter future for Libyans in the hope that their leading role within NATO will be remembered positively. But beyond some clear elements for optimism, there are also serious causes for concern in Libya's near future. Before assessing these, it is useful to step back and overview a different debate that took place when Gaddafi's forces abandoned Tripoli only two months ago: the one about the degree of success of the international intervention.

First, there were those who claimed that NATO's action presented a new model of humanitarian intervention. "Leading from behind", as one Obama administration official termed it, was vindicated by some as a new model for the United States to live up to its principles of protecting civilians but without excessive risks (zero casualties for US soldiers) or money spent in places like Libya (estimated cost USD 1 bn), a country considered "not a vital interest", as its Defence Secretary Gates said.

On the other hand, sceptics argued that with well over 30.000 dead the original objective of securing civilians has not been achieved. Moreover, the decision to go far beyond the civilian protection UN mandate agreed upon in favour of an all out aerial campaign to oust Gaddafi's regime would bode negatively in the future. Gaining international support for further missions inspired by the responsibility to protect (R2P) principle will be more difficult in the years to come. Indeed, Russia and China have happily used the overstretched intervention in Libya as an excuse to oppose action in Syria.

The outcome of this debate -as well as to how Libya's revolution will be remembered in the broader Arab framework- will only be satisfactorily resolved once it is clear what or who replaces Gaddafi's regime. Gaddafi's Jamahiriyya ("state of

the masses”) was a despotic and ineffective system that the majority of Libyans are happy to be rid off but, after 42 years, there is concern about how such a large institutional vacuum can be filled. A judiciary system and political parties, among others, will have to be built almost from scratch. Indeed, Libya’s biggest challenge is how to overcome internal divisions and build the legitimate institutions that can enable a common future.

It will prove difficult to forge consensus among factions. The killing of General Abdel Fatah Younis on July 29th was a first disturbing signal. NTC Chairman Mustafa Abdul Jalil had to admit that the assassination had come from within a faction of the rebels. Furthermore, as different factions lobby with increasing vigour for influence within the NTC, Chairman Jalil and Prime Minister Mahmoud Jibril have had to promise to resign as soon as Sirte falls. Strong tribal and regional divisions that Gaddafi himself failed to overcome, today threaten the stability of the NTC. They could now even become more accentuated as individuals rally behind the groups they fought alongside with during the months of conflict.

As has been the case in Tunisia or Egypt, the Islamists appear to be the most unified and best-organised political actor. The Muslim Brotherhood is increasingly active and individuals such as rebel Commander and former emir of the Libya Islamic Fighting Group Abdelhakim Belhadj are influential actors with loyal followers. While so far they are acting as a positive force, some are concerned about their capacity to compromise with liberals and other actors, especially during the Constitutional process that will soon be opened.

Other important challenges also remain: allegations of serious human rights violations on both sides during the conflict, the proliferation of shoulder fired missiles and other weapons, the return of hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced peoples and the demobilization of heavily armed militias (over 120 just in Misrata), amongst others.

With such a scenario it would be easy to be entirely pessimistic over the future of Libya. But there are also some important causes for optimism.

Firstly, is the fact that Libya is a country with a small population (6 million) and huge high quality oil reserves. With the oil sector becoming –in the words of Libya expert Dirk Vandewalle- “the big spoiler” under Gaddafi’s regime, the challenge is now to transform it from the source of a corrupt patronage system to the building block of a privileged Arab Mediterranean country. With a relatively high per capita pre-war level (almost \$15,000 in 2010), it should be possible. The first signs –with oil production moving faster than expected and private initiatives blooming- are positive.

And despite the divisions, the NTC has progressed far beyond the expectations of the international community. Through a 70-person team, a stabilization plan has gone a long way in covering basic needs such as fuel shortages or garbage collection. As UN envoy Ian Martin told the Security Council, Libya is not a typical post-conflict country. It has proved itself “a country with skilled personnel, ready to lead their nation in many fields”.

Libya is also a relatively homogenous country at an ethnic and religious level. As almost entirely Sunni Arabs, unlike countries such as Iraq or Lebanon, Libyans will not have to face divisions easily exacerbated by external actors. If Libyans can overcome internal divisions and create legitimate institutions that unify the country, Libya could indeed become a stable, prosperous country, in a region badly needed of success stories. In any case, it will not be an easy road ahead.