

Libya - a revolutionary civil war

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As the fighting rages in Libya sinister forces in the western world gather, writes Simon Hardy

Like a cornered rat Muammar Gaddafi is getting ever more vicious in his attempts to survive. The death toll is mounting as his fighter bombers attack rebel-held areas; tanks and fighters loyal to him have besieged and bombarded towns and cities whose population rose up to put an end to his rule. The numbers of casualties are uncounted but likely to be huge.

Clearly the forward impetus of the revolutionary wave in the Arab world and wider Middle East is at stake - if Gaddafi can drown the Libyan resistance in blood then it will be a major set back to all those in the region who are struggling for more democratic rights. It would encourage the counter-revolutionary generals who still hold the reins of power in Cairo and Tripoli. It would strengthen and bolster the arch reactionaries in countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Nevertheless all talk of a NATO imposed no fly zone is reactionary and should be opposed by all friends and allies of the Arab revolutions. Robert M. Gates Obama's defence secretary, a Republican carried over from the Bush Administration, has himself stated "Let's just call a spade a spade. A no-fly zone begins with an attack on Libya to destroy the air defenses. That's the way you do a no-fly zone. And then you can fly planes around the country and not worry about our guys being shot down. But that's the way it starts."

In short it is the beginning of a war and could lead on to invasion and occupation by Nato forces as it has done in Afghanistan and Iraq. Imperialists do not do ?humanitarian interventions? for free - they will expect even bigger cuts of the country?s oil wealth than they got out of Gaddafi.

The situation in Libya

The revolutionary struggle in Libya has taken a different form than it did in Tunisia and Egypt for several reasons. Firstly the nature of Libya itself. It is a large country with a small population (around 6 million), with a working class that is mostly imported from abroad, mainly from Tunisia, Egypt and the Indian sub-continent. Over 50 per cent of its population lives in and around Tripoli and nearby Zawiyah, with towns like Benghazi and Tubruk in the east, and several smaller Bedouin nomadic communities scattered across the large desert areas.

Libya is a rentier state, its wealth comes mainly from oil profits, in this respect it is similar to Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies. This makes the economy incredibly one-sided and concentrates incredible wealth in the hands of a very small number of people. Foreign workers are easier to discipline because they can simply be expelled if there is trouble.

With oil money and a tiny population Gaddafi has fostered the survival of tribal institutions and exploited their divisions. He developed a complex system of favouritism and clientalism that tightly-bound some

tribes to his regime and excluded others. He poured money into development in Tripoli whilst putting the east of the country on rations. The armed strength of his regime, unlike Mubarak's in Egypt, came not from the traditional military but from the so-called revolutionary committees, thugs personally loyal to him, and security forces commanded by his sons, all paid for and trained outside of the normal state structures.

Because of this, unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, the resistance to Gaddafi did not start in the capital city, but instead in the more deprived cities in the east where animosity and hatred of his regime had built up over years. This created a totally different dynamic to the revolution.

In Tunisia and Egypt the revolution came from youth in the capital city, Alexandria and soon spread to the working class areas in the industrial cities of the Nile Delta and then the rest of the country. It was in many ways the model of a classical "peoples revolution" (Lenin's phrase). The protests were demanding the right to vote, to fully constitute a democratic society in their country, which was why seizing the capital city was both an essential and a natural part of that process.

Things turned out differently in Libya, though the opposition may well have initially wanted to imitate the success of the other revolutions, they were blocked from this course of action, instead forced onto the path of civil war to remove the regime. The attempted mass demonstrations in Tripoli were suppressed by Gaddafi's forces with the utmost brutality and there was no wavering from these loyalists, unlike the crisis that gripped the army in Egypt.

The nature of the Gaddafi regime and the particular mode of development of Libya meant that the struggle quickly fractured along geographical and tribal lines - the 'colour revolution' model of a camp in the city centre was simply inoperable. This shows that it is an utterly useless method when dealing with the kind of violence that the Gaddafi regime is willing and able to inflict.

In addition the working class, which played a crucial role toppling the dictators in Tunisia and Egypt with strikes and the threat of general strikes, were limited in their role in Libya, because such a large proportion were foreign workers. Just like in Saudi Arabia where most of the working class is imported this disrupts and can ameliorate the working classes generally positive attitude to the political struggle and leave them feeling alienated from the central political question of who rules the country. Indeed, many of these workers have tried to flee the country, leading to scenes of humanitarian disaster at the border with Tunisia as refugee try and go back home. The lack of a revolutionary working class is a central factor why Libya was different to the other countries.

Now territorial dual power exists in the country. Much of it has fallen to the provisional government based in Benghazi, made up of a mixture of pro democracy activists and figures from the old regime who have come over to the revolution. Gaddafi - after initially suffering only defeats - has counter attacked, attempting to seize strategic towns and ports linked to the oil industry.

For the Arab revolutions to become truly international mutual assistance is essential ? aiding the Libyan resistance and helping them in any way they can will weaken the counter-revolutionaries in their own countries. Many of the Libyan resistance wanted their struggle to be a solely Libyan affair, an understandable response since revolutions which rely too much on outside help begin to look politically compromised, even 'foreign', which can only consolidate nationalist feeling towards Gaddafi. But the resistance will in fact be strengthened by international solidarity - but only the right kind - revolutionary solidarity.

Imperialism and Libya

After some initial posturing on the part of Obama and Clinton about 'intervention to prevent civilian deaths' they have backtracked, terrified of another Somalia, Afghanistan or Iraq scenario where US troops suffer heavy losses fighting in a hostile environment. Now they have kicked the intervention ball to the UN, where it is clear that Russia will veto any actions being taken on the Security Council.

Still, Britain and France (with big oil interests in Libya) are pressing much harder for a no-fly zone, something that the provisional government in Benghazi is now supporting since it is primarily Gaddafi's air superiority (the rebels have no fighter planes) which prevents them marching on Tripoli without sustaining heavy casualties. The provisional government has promised that whoever assists them in this will be rewarded in any post Gaddafi regime, a very dangerous offer to the imperialist plunderers from Europe who still have blood on their hands from Iraq and Afghanistan (as well as the historical record of slaughter across the world during the days of colonial empire)

Whilst it is tactically understandable that the rebels are pushing for a no fly zone this is utterly wrong and could only lead to a strengthening of the hand of imperialism and create more grounds for a more direct intervention further down the line. Any support for actions by western governments, including trade embargoes, puts more power and responsibility in the hands of the imperialists and takes it away from the actual revolutionaries on the ground who are doing the fighting. The imperialists are greedily eyeing up Libya's oil reserves (the richest in North Africa), and salivate at the prospects of getting their hands directly on the profits.

Whilst Gaddafi has become a much more reliable businessman for the west in the last few years, removing him and replacing him with a pliant pro-western regime would suit them down to the (oil rich) ground. The temptation for the provisional government to find such friends who can ensure their victory could quickly turn the Libyan revolution into a force for creating conservative pro-imperialist regimes across the region - the USA and the EU are constantly looking for ways to maintain their power as they see dictators that they have relied on for generations fall one after the other. A stable pro-business government in Tripoli would set the clock back and begin to undo all the progressive work that has been done so far this year.

The best solidarity the rebels can rely on is their brothers and sisters, the revolutionaries in Egypt and Tunisia, and across the region. Revolutionaries in Egypt should agitate for arms, medical equipment and volunteers to be sent to Libya to assist their brothers and sisters in overthrowing Gaddafi. Soldiers and air crews who support the revolutionary movement should offer their services to the Libyan cause. All international assistance must, however, be put strictly under the control of the Libyan resistance forces. The high command of the Egyptian Army are utterly pro-imperialist and counter-revolutionary to a man and serve those that pay for them and train them - and those people work in Washington.

The struggle in Libya comes from the same desire for freedom as the revolutions that came before it, but the form of that struggle is not the same. All talk of non-violent revolutions are revealed to be hot air, doubly so when it comes to a regime that will simply not budge one inch, not sacrifice even one figurehead to preserve itself. Gaddafi and his sons, increasingly bloodthirsty and protected by people whose entire lives and privileges depend on his rule, will kill as many people as it takes to stay in power. Perhaps if defeat looms, one of Gaddafi's own entourage will turn on him and a palace coup will remove him from power. A number of scenarios are possible - but today solidarity with the Libyan resistance and a clear opposition to any kind of western intervention is crucial to the health and survival of the revolution.

No to a No Fly Zone or any US or Nato intervention on bogus humanitarian grounds

International volunteers to assist the Libyan Revolution

Down with the dictator Gadaffi and his entire regime

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