

Libya's revolution: A troubling legacy of violence

Even as we celebrate the victory of the Libyan people we might note that violence invariably taints a revolution, and the bill of the carnage is yet to be paid

Chibli Mallat, Tuesday 30 Aug 2011

One hesitates to congratulate our Libyan colleagues on the success of their Revolution. This is not to dampen the joy - theirs and ours - of getting rid of the longest serving dictator in the world, or to deny the immense sacrifices they have incurred over the past six months. In fact, the relatively disproportionate sacrifices in Libyan lives raise one of the central questions of the revolution. The sacrifice in terms of people killed in Libya is significantly higher than that of the ongoing revolutions elsewhere in the region that to date successfully drove out the dictators of Egypt and Tunisia, that seem on the verge of success in Syria and Yemen, and that are till now unsuccessful in Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Jordan.

Killings by Gaddafi's forces, by the rebels and in NATO bombings are by any account to be measured in thousands - and this in a country of six million. In Tunisia, the toll of the victims of the regime is about 300; in Egypt, approximately a thousand, also overwhelmingly civilians. In the very long nonviolent revolution of Yemen that started at around the same time as Libya's, and where families and tribes have access to hundreds of weapons, the toll is also amazingly low - far less than a thousand civilian casualties. The story is the same in tiny Bahrain, and in blood-soaked Syria, where in a population of some 22 million people, 'only' about 2,400 have been killed so far. In Libya, reports in March mentioned 15,000 deaths. In mid-August, before the final push in Tripoli, the Libyan representative of the rebel Transitional National Council estimated that 35,000 Libyans had been killed.

The question is whether it could have been otherwise. Was it a mistake for the Libyan revolutionaries to take up arms? Like elsewhere, the trigger for the revolution was a combination of the domino effect of Bouazizi's death, the fall of Mubarak and a homegrown human rights event: on 15 February, henchmen of the regime tried to arrest Libyan lawyer Fathi Terbil in Benghazi. A renowned human rights lawyer in Libya, Terbil stood up for the families of 1,300 prisoners, killed by Gaddafi in a bout of fury in their prison of Busalim in 1996. A commotion resulted over the attempt by the men of Libyan secret service head Abdullah Senusi to arrest him, and the whole of Benghazi rose. By 20 February, the second city of Libya was free, and the revolution had spread everywhere, including to Tripoli. In the near aftermath of the Terbil incident, the Libyan rebels took up arms in Benghazi. Like Saleh, Al-Assad, Mubarak and the kings of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, Gaddafi unleashed the troops loyal to him, but in contrast to the nonviolent revolution that remained and endured in all these countries, the battle for Libya turned overnight into an armed rebellion.

Could it have been otherwise? It is not sufficient to argue that Gaddafi is, by nature, more brutal than other dictators in the region. Maybe this is correct, but looking at some of the early scenes in Tunisia and Egypt, and at the brutal killings by Saleh and Al-Assad's men, or at the invasion by Saudi Arabia of tiny Bahrain in March, the argument that the difference between the Mideast rulers is one of nature is unconvincing. The real difference is that despite the horrors meted on unarmed demonstrators across the Middle East, the people refused to take up arms. Libya is the exception.

I supported the application of the Right to Protect doctrine in Libya. Once Gaddafi was at the doors of Benghazi in the frenzy of revenge, someone - anyone - should have intervened. It may be also the case in Syria today, or in Bahrain. But is it necessary to reach the point that arms are engaged? Is it not wiser, albeit perhaps more frustrating, to keep the revolution pure in the tenacity of its nonviolence, rather than lose the absolute moral superiority against violent rulers? More importantly, is it not more efficient for the revolution itself, both for the nature of its success and for the day after the dictator?

A revolution is tragically tainted by arms, and the dominantly nonviolent revolts across the region since the Cedar Revolution in 2005 herald a unique moment in world history, precisely because of the nonviolence they have blessed with the most brutal region of the planet.

Libya excepted. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have admonished them time and again for their wanton use of violence. Even in the very early days, black Africans were killed in cold blood by the rebels. Soon thereafter, we have witnessed the descent into chaos of the Libyan rebels amongst themselves. And there are serious questions on how Abdel Fattah Yunes, the head of the rebels, was assassinated on 28 July. The days of mayhem that Tripoli has recorded in the last week are of the same ilk. This has not been the case in Tunisia and Egypt, nor in Bahrain and Syria despite the latter's revolution's immense frustrations.

Then there is the day after. This is where the nonviolent character of the ongoing Middle East revolution is the most alluring. We all know how fragile our societies are after so many decades of a total absence of the rule of law, the routine use of torture, the everyday humiliations forced on the people by kings, other despots and their hirelings. Our societies need years to erase these wounds, and the reincarnation of the brutality in rebels taking up arms renders it far easier for a new form of authoritarianism to emerge. Witness Tunisia in 1987, when bin Ali with all forms of flowery promises took power by forcefully evicting the old Bourguiba. It is much harder for the 2011 Tunisian Revolution to take this ugly turn as it was not a coup d'état, but a human rights, nonviolent revolution that removed the dictator.

Perhaps congratulations are in order for the Libyans. Getting rid of Gaddafi is no mean feat. What is less certain is that we should congratulate the rebels' leadership. We shall watch closely how they behave in the coming days and weeks to fulfill the original human rights, nonviolent calls of 15 February.

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