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Libya

Impressions of the new Libya

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I was all the more curious to discover the political and social changes that had taken place in Libya after the revolution of February 17, having already spent some months there in 1996. I went there in June this time, going via an Egypt which was itself still in turmoil after its own revolution of January 25 this year. Some Libyan oppositionists I encountered in Cairo facilitated my entry into the country. After 1,300 km and 15 hours by car, we arrived in Benghazi, capital of the Libyan insurrection, having crossed a “border” which seems completely artificial inasmuch as the inhabitants on either side are close in customs, religious traditions and links of family relations and marriage.

Destruction and economic disorganisation

The shops of Benghazi and the markets in the East zone under the control of the National Transitional Council have recovered almost to normal levels of activity. Basic needs are covered by trucks which arrive daily from Egypt. However public services are disorganised since the departure of the immigrants – including nearly 500,000 Egyptians. Despite the efforts of the NGOs to replace them, the piles of rubbish are mounting on Benghazi's street corners. The public buildings are destroyed and traces of fire damage witness to the combat between the regime's troops and demonstrators, particularly around Gaddafi's headquarters and the luxurious dwellings of the notables of the regime. Insurgents insisted on showing me the prisons where numerous opponents were tortured, and reminding me of the number of insurgents who had fallen in order to win these positions.

Vibrancy of associative life

I was also invited to participate in the activities of several associations, whose multiplication in Benghazi since the uprising has been made possible by the very rapid change both in regime and society. In comparison with my previous visit, people now express themselves all the more freely after having been deprived of liberty and means of expression by a dictatorship where denunciation and corruption were generalised. Social and health associations exercise both charity and political functions and their organisers do not try to conceal the fact that they constitute the nuclei of future political organisations. That is what emerges from the request addressed by the newspaper “Al-Shabab” (“The Youth”) to the president of the National Transitional Council to “control the multiplication of charity associations and their manipulation”. According to Ezz-el-Din Al-Sharif, president of the National Alliance Network, which intervenes in the areas of health, social services and culture, and one of whose centres has been destroyed by armed elements identified with the revolutionary regime, post-insurrectional anarchy favoured the development of rival associations, all identifying with the revolution, whose regulation has become necessary.

Political expression at Liberty Square

Liberty Square (Tribunal Square before February 17) has become the forum where different political and social opinions are expressed. After 5 pm, people meet to watch Al-Jazeera television on the giant screen, while participants of all ages offer the public songs, poems and speeches on political or religious themes. Large banners recall the determination of the insurgents to free all of Libya and their rejection of the partition of the country (“no to tribalism”; “neither eastern [region] nor western, nor tribal – national, national”; “Free Tripoli”), as well as graffiti

praising the insurrection and the martyrs. Two posters of Che and Bob Marley adorn the kiosk of two young cigarette sellers, witnessing to the multiple inspirations of this revolution of youth. Paradoxically the flags of the USA and the European Union are also there as a reminder that the freedom of the Libyan people depends in great part on the support of these governments, which have however not supported the popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, or the other dictatorial states of the region. Among the stands of the different organisations one also sees the Palestinian-Libyan Friendship Association, decorated with portraits of the 108 victims of the Israeli air attack on a Libyan Arab Airlines Boeing on February 21, 1973. Elsewhere on the same square there is a large banner saying: "Palestine and Libya: revolution for the Arab nation", as well as numerous banners representing the head of Gaddafi placed between a star of David, symbolising Israel, and a swastika representing Nazism. Whereas under Gaddafi the authorised press was limited to that of the regime, the existence in Benghazi today of more than 65 titles of newspapers, dailies, weeklies or monthlies, constitutes one of the main gains of the revolution.

The role of youth

In Libya as in the other Arab democratic uprisings youth have played a leading role. It was they who launched the first peaceful demonstrations against the Gaddafi regime, involving the students of Benghazi alongside lawyers and human rights activists. On Liberty Square, numerous youth associations distribute their leaflets and sell their publications, which came as a considerable surprise to me having known Libya under the old regime. Other young people flaunt their musical, poetic or artistic gifts. Among them, I met the singer and poet Farès Saber, who had under Gaddafi rejected an offer from the Libyan radio associated with a demand to eulogise the dictator. He founded a rap group who criticise the Libyan situation in their songs and express their hopes for the future. A member of the group as well as Farès's brother fell at the front in the fight against the dictatorship. With an unemployment rate of more than 25% and low incomes (a youth assured me that he had to maintain his family with an average income of 300 dollars per month) youth have more reasons to revolt and thus form the majority of the combatants in the insurrection.

The role and rights of women

The other striking novelty is the participation of women in political activities, in spite of the conservative Muslim character of Libyan society manifested for example in the segregation of Liberty Square in a section for men and another smaller one for women. One can note a rise in demands for the emancipation of women, their participation in political life and the equality of rights and duties between sexes. In an article read in the newspaper "Libya Hurriya" ("Free Libya") entitled "Duties and rights of Libyan women in the revolution", the journalist Rabi'a El Ghouil denounces those who invoke religion to impose male power and restrict the role of women to certain activities, stressing that education and training of girls is the sole guarantee for their future. The author argues that the political, economic and social participation of women in the new Libya is indispensable and that to rule out this participation would reduce by half the potential of the liberation movement.

The purge of the cadres of the old regime

The radicalisation of the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia continues to impact on that of Libya. Five months after the beginning of the Libyan insurrection, Muftah Abdel-Hadi Al-Tayri, writing in the newspaper "Al-Shabab", stressed the importance of the economic, social and political programme and argued that "this battle should be waged sooner or later", like the battle to get rid of "the former leaders of the administrative apparatus".

The foreign military intervention

Most of the insurgents I questioned, notably the youth, continued to count on the NATO intervention to eliminate what remains of the Gaddafi regime and extend the authority of the National Transitional Council to the whole country. When I remarked to them that this was a dangerous gamble, they generally told me that it was about a short term convergence of interests, and that as counterpart to this aid, they had granted no advantages to the Western countries in oil contracts than Gaddafi had already given them. This will remain a big question mark hanging over the political future of Libya, which in any event certainly depends on the development of the situation across the region.

This article was translated from Arabic to French by Françoise Clément, and by *International Viewpoint* to English.