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Constructing a New Libya After Colonel Gadhafi Is Gone

By Omar Ashour

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Middle Eastern autocrats routinely warn their people of rivers of blood, Western occupation, poverty, chaos and al-Qaida if their regimes are toppled. Those threats were heard in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and — rendered in black-comedy style — in Libya. But there is a strong belief across the region that the costs of removing autocracies, as high as they might be, are low compared with the damage inflicted by the current rulers. In short, freedom is worth the price.

In Libya, four scenarios may negatively affect prospects for democratization: civil and tribal war, military rule, becoming "stuck in transition," and partition. Given the high price Libyans have paid, those scenarios should be prevented rather than cured.

The civil/tribal war scenario is the worst risk. Egypt's revolutionaries understood this. When sectarian violence erupted there following the removal of Hosni Mubarak, the revolutionary coalitions adopted the slogan, "You won't gloat over this, Mubarak." Repressive dictatorships

cannot win free and fair elections. But they can use extreme violence to consolidate their control over the state, its people and its institutions.

So, to win, Libya's Moammar Gadhafi has deliberately and successfully turned a civil-resistance campaign into an armed conflict. That will have ramifications in the post-authoritarian context. A study published by Columbia University on civil resistance has shown that the probability of a country relapsing into civil war following a successful anti-dictatorship armed campaign is 43 percent, versus 28 percent when the campaign is unarmed.

According to the same study, which was based on 323 cases of armed and unarmed opposition campaigns between 1900 and 2006, the likelihood of democratic transition within five years following a successful armed opposition campaign is only 3 percent, compared with 51 percent when campaigns were unarmed.

Libya, of course, can survive the gloomy prospect of post-authoritarian civil war. But this requires containing tribal and regional polarization, as well as the rivalries between the Interim National Council and the Military Council, and between senior military commanders. Violent polarization has developed not only between eastern and western tribes, but also between some of the western tribes.

Last month, for example, armed clashes erupted between rebels in al-Zintan and the villagers of al-Rayyaniya, 15 kilometers away. Six people were killed — a reminder of what can happen if violent polarization continues between neighboring towns and villages. Vendetta politics is not unknown in Libya, and, in an armed society comprising more than 120 tribes — including about 30 with significant numbers and resources — it can become extremely dangerous.

Another negative scenario is military rule. Several figures from the "free officers" — the group that plotted the 1969 coup against the monarchy — are leading the Interim National Council. Those figures hold a mix of historical legitimacy, for participating in the 1969 coup, and current legitimacy, for helping the Feb. 17 revolution. They also belong to several large tribes, guaranteeing wide tribal representation if a military council were to take power, as in Egypt.

Unlike Egypt, however, whoever takes power in Libya will not necessarily inherit poor economic conditions that could threaten their legitimacy and undermine their popularity. This might lead a group of senior officers to rule directly, especially if victory in Libya comes militarily. A move by army officers in Tripoli against Gadhafi and his sons might end the conflict, with military commanders getting the credit — and the political capital.

But four decades of military-based dictatorship may be enough for Libyans, a majority of whom never really benefited from their country's wealth or potential. When it comes to producing terrorists and undocumented immigrants — two critical issues for Europe — Arab military dictators have an inglorious record. Algeria in the 1990s is a potent reminder of this, and Western governments do not want the vicious cycle of repressive autocrats producing violent theocrats and refugees to restart.

Getting "stuck in transition" is a third possible scenario, with Libya remaining in a "gray zone" — neither a fully fledged democracy nor a dictatorship, but "semi-free." This means regular elections, a democratic constitution and civil society, coupled with electoral fraud,

skewed representation, human rights violations and restrictions on civil liberties. Getting stuck in transition usually kills the momentum for democratic change, and widespread corruption, weak state institutions and lack of security serve to reinforce a myth of the "just autocrat." Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's rule illustrates this outcome.

Unfortunately, a study published in the Journal of Democracy showed that out of the 100 countries that were designated "in transition" between 1970 and 2000, only 20 nations became fully democratic — for example, Chile, Argentina, Poland and Taiwan. Five relapsed into brutal dictatorships — including Uzbekistan, Algeria, Turkmenistan and Belarus — while the rest were stuck somewhere in transition.

Given Libya's lack of democratic experience, some view this as a likely outcome in the post-Gadhafi era. But Libya is not the only country that has tried to move from dictatorship to democracy with weak institutions and strong tribal identities. Albania, Mongolia and India successfully passed more complicated tests — and offer some useful lessons in democratic transitions under unfavorable conditions.

The fourth scenario is partition, with the old three-province, Ottoman-style setup commonly mentioned: Cyrenaica (east), Fezzan (south), and Tripolitania (west). Cyrenaica is Gadhafi-free, Tripolitania is not, and Fezzan did not fully join the revolution. But the administrative borders of these districts were never fully established, and they have changed at least eight times since 1951. In 2007, Libya had 22 administrative districts, not three.

All of these scenarios will be affected by outcomes in Egypt and Tunisia. In the case of transitions to democracy, a success nearby often helps at home. Either country — or both — could offer Libya successful transition models, erecting an important obstacle to military dictatorship or civil war.

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