

Insurgency and Transformation: How Libyans Conquered the Street

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Abstract

When Libya joined the Arab Spring in 2011 it did so in reaction to the success of Tunisia and Egypt in ousting their leaders. However, Libya's foray into revolution was different in that the Libyan people had spent 42 years under the frightening rule of Gaddafi, in an era rife with the fear of who was watching and reporting, and a consensus that to speak out was to accept the fate of imprisonment or death. Due to the years of repression, the Libyans did not put themselves into situations, like Tahrir Square, wherein they knew they would be slaughtered. Instead, they organized themselves and in short, order seemed to have developed a military mentality in order to survive. Their struggle was enabled, in part, by NATO strikes. But another difference from the other two rebellions was how the Libyan revolution blended the old with the new. Technology and modernity did play a role in the ability of the uprising to take hold, but the icons which were chosen to help rally the masses included the old flag and Omar Mukhtar's photograph. Both of these harkened back to the Libyan's earlier revolt against the Italians and their hard-won independence in 1951. Both looked to a pre-Gaddafi era in the country's past. This article looks at how the Libyan uprising differed from that of Tunisia and Egypt, and how this particular rebellion was a revolution. Furthermore, it discusses the catalysts for the uprising and the role of the "Arab street" in giving the masses a place to express their rage against the Gaddafi regime.

Keywords: Libya, Gaddafi, uprisings, revolutions, social media.

Introduction

In February 2011 as unrest and upheavals spread throughout the Arab world, the Libyan people finally arose. Put under enormous pressure by 42 years of extreme suffering and inescapable hardship, the masses poured into the streets of Benghazi in the eastern region of the country and a revolution was born. The protests rapidly spread throughout the country and were responded to by Colonel Gaddafi's security forces with brutal force and violence. Those who watched the horrors unfold on television screens could hardly believe the power and focused intent of the Libyan people. After so many years of abuse and terror, they stood up to the dictator and his malicious supporters in a bid to take back their country and their dignity and reassert their rights as citizens of a free Libya.

When we talk about mobs and people's mentality at the time, we wonder what the impetus was, and what finally drove them to arise. This article attempts to delve into that problem in the Libyan situation and gain an understanding of why, after 42 years of near inertia, save for a few attempts which ended in bloodshed and failure – what changed? The following will address this question and further will examine the Libyan uprising in the context of revolutions and what made this particular mass movement an actual revolution. It puts into perspective the Libyan revolution as compared to those in Tunisia and Egypt and endeavors to understand the catalysts which led to this specific situation. Finally, the importance of the place of the Arab street is looked at as a central space for the revolution to have taken root.

How the Libyan uprising was different

Although the Libyan uprising against Colonel Gaddafi's 42-year-old regime occurred immediately following the Tunisian and Egyptian events, it was different in many ways. Despite the initial impetus coming from seeing their compatriots on the western and eastern borders shrugging off tyrants, the Libyan people's revolution very early took on a more militaristic tone. While Tunisians and Egyptians took to the streets in mass protests against their governments, the Libyans did not maintain that position very long. What started in the eastern city of Benghazi could have been crushed had the masses not mobilized so quickly. Their ability to adapt to the situation, while maintaining unity and effective organization aided them in assembling a very ragtag fighting force early on, which was completely in contrast to their counterparts in the other two North African nations, who were able to topple their leaders solely through street gatherings.

Part of the rationale for the differences in Libya was that any decision to congregate in large groups would most probably have ended in mass deaths and executions. Unlike the Egyptian army, which showed some restraint in Tahrir Square, in Libya Gaddafi's forces were never known to restrain themselves. This was well-known to the people of Libya who had spent four decades in terror. Libyans knew not to discuss the problems of their country, they knew never to denigrate their leader and essentially had become adept at voicing no public opinion. Up until 2003, Libyans were insulated from the outside world and Gaddafi treated people as he wished with impunity. In fact, the Libyan people had no real "street" savvy. They had lived through too many visions of public executions on state-run television to even dream of arising. They felt the world was not watching and did not care.

Since they were well aware of the repercussions of any actions counter to the regime, they also knew that any organized movement would be immediately crushed. It is for this reason that they went on the defensive as soon as they could. Gaddafi's forces were certainly ready to enter Benghazi and ensure a bloodbath, and they would have succeeded had NATO not interfered. That support combined with the Libyan's movement towards an armed struggle in short order developed into the "rebel" forces. Furthermore, in the case of Libya, according to Lacher (2011) "political mobilization and organization largely occurred along tribal or local lines" (p. 140). However, Lacher stresses this did not mean the conflict was a tribal civil war, just that those loyalties were key. The ability of tribes to rally their own was not found in the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, and the power of tribal loyalties in Libya ensured that the masses became organized quite rapidly.

Those involved in the earliest days of the uprising were mainly young men who needed jobs and whose "education level and access to information technologies were substantially below those of their Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts" (Lacher, 2011, p. 141). Additionally, in Libya, there was an almost total absence of organized movements and institutions as Lacher argues, more so than either of the other two revolutions. In Colonel Gaddafi's regime, he had kept all state institutions deliberately weak and that is what led them to collapse so rapidly. The army especially was kept weak in order to avoid an overthrow of his regime, insists Lacher (2011). All of these details ensured that Libya's struggle to depose a dictator was very unlike its neighbors.

The Libyan people's road from the street to deposing a tyrant was decidedly different from Egypt's and Tunisia's versions. Unlike Ben Ali and Mubarak, Gaddafi was never going to leave without a fight and his megalomaniac tendencies made him willing to fight to the death; which he did.

Libya's Uprising, was it a Revolution?

Many have called the Libyan uprising a revolution. Although it would seem to come under this category, it is essential to clarify if this moniker actually fits the particular context. It is important at this juncture to determine how Libya's situation fits into a definition or theory of revolutions.

Kroeber (1996) defines revolution as a term that signifies all "demands, suggestions, and attempts at radical change" (p. 25). For Bayat (2007), "revolutions signify extraordinary change par excellence, rare moments of utopian visions and extreme measures, followed by contestation and compromise to merge utopian ideals with hard realities, thus leading to surging dissent from both the revolutionary ranks and opponents" (p. 192). In all cases, revolutions follow a similar pattern in that the people of a nation rise in mass in order to foment change. The result is not guaranteed, but the need to have a voice and be heard becomes the overwhelming desire and it overrides any rational thought of possible outcomes. But, despite all the discussions of theories of revolutions, Kroeber (1996) alleges that so far no "comprehensive, general theory of revolution has emerged" (p. 21).

In the past, the seminal work on revolutions was Skocpol's (1979) *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China*. However, since that time many scholars have taken issue with her discussion of revolutions. Foran (1997), for example,

suggests that social revolutions described by Skocpol are actually quite rare. A major cause for revolutions according to Skocpol is a breakdown of the state; however, this was not the case with Libya. She also overlooks some parts of society in her theory and does not appreciate the influence of “cultural and ideological factors” (Kroeber, 1996, p. 23). Since Skocpol’s 1979 publication, the study of revolutions has taken a huge leap forward according to Foran (1997).

Sociologist Charles Kurzman writes that “revolutions are inherently unpredictable. They involve massive disobedience, huge numbers of people breaking from their normal patterns of behavior, highly risky confrontations with security forces - - the sorts of activities that people are loath to engage in and usually don’t, until they think that other folks may join them” (Kurzman cited in Hounshell, 2011). These uprisings, as viewed by Kurzman, point to the importance of the “street” in urging people to action. Believing that others will join in, gives revolutionaries a feeling of hope and power. Since the street is definitely an unpredictable place, especially in Libya, it is clear that this particular revolution was probably not planned and did not “result from prior schemes” (Bayat, 2010, p. 2). However, what held the rebels together following the initial uprisings was the fact that all the members of the group shared the same feelings of dissatisfaction and had a common revolutionary goal (DeFronzo, 2007; Gurr, 1970). The population was frustrated with the regime and their lives under its rule, leading to what Greene (1990) terms the “frustration-aggression theory” of revolution (cited in DeFronzo, 2007) wherein the magnitude of the people’s frustration is seen as a central rationale for mass mobilization leading to revolution. Greene also refers to the broad hatred of a dictator as a factor in encouraging participation in a revolutionary movement that covers all classes and is a mass movement. This was certainly the situation leading up to the Libyan revolution.

In his 1997 article, Foran argues for five interrelated causal factors in order for a revolution to occur. There are three which are particularly relevant to the situation in Libya and will be discussed here. The factor Foran terms a “repressive, exclusionary, personalist state” is the one most relevant (p. 792). According to Foran, it is dictators who remain in power for exceptionally long periods who “epitomize this personalist type of rule” (p. 793). Because of their overall treatment of the population, dictators tend to “fuel grievances” which then alienate the upper classes leading to social movements from below. Due to this situation, people from all walks of life are able to come together in an alliance against the regime. Foran’s theory is similar to Greene’s (1990 as cited in DeFronzo, 2007) discussion of a broad hatred of the dictator. This feature is clearly applicable to Libya and the role Colonel Gaddafi played in alienating all classes.

Another cause that assists the opposition in uniting is for the people within it to have something they can rally around; this can be, according to Foran (1997), formal ideologies, folk traditions, or others. For the Libyans, the rebels in Benghazi quite early on took up the mantle of the old freedom fighter Omar Mukhtar, who had contested the Italian occupation. Those rebels then declared themselves his grandsons. At the same time, they co-opted the “old” Libyan flag which had first appeared after independence from the Italians in 1951. These two items, which will be discussed further in this article, went a long way in helping the rebels attract more people to their oppositional force. They were perhaps most influential

in bringing in the elderly contingent of the revolution, who still had memories of a life before Gaddafi.

A final reason given by Foran for why a revolution occurs is the lessening effect of outside control. Although this issue has not been discussed much in the case of the Arab Spring's events, there have been those who have viewed the United States' withdrawal from the region (see Dyer, 2011) as an opening for the Arabs to arise. The presence of the US in the Arab world was fairly consistent over the decades following the end of Arab nationalism and the arrival of the dictators. However, in early 2011, the US appears to have become less willing to interfere in Arab countries. After the debacle of Iraq and the continued upheaval in Afghanistan, the US seemed to have lost its willingness to protect its autocratic 'friendships' in the region and the people were able to use that to their advantage (Dyer, 2011). Although Libyans were probably unsure of how much the US helped Gaddafi remain in power, they were certainly able to see the US relinquishing its hold in Iraq and struggling with the Afghan situation. It could very well have been that it was that slight impetus that gave the Arab street the ability to arise and overcome.

In conclusion, it can be said that the Libyan uprising was, in fact, a revolution, because it was the people of Libya battling against the regime (Ignatieff, 2011). Furthermore, Lacher (2011) asserts that in the case of Libya, there was no constitution or any state institutions which could be counted upon to provide any sense of permanence and, therefore the events in Libya "can be described as a revolution" (p. 148).

Catalysts for the Uprising

As mentioned, the Libyan people were extremely leery of any gatherings or protests that would attract the attention of Gaddafi's security forces. A nation living under fear for 42 years certainly would have a difficult time exposing itself to what it knew would be immediate arrest or imprisonment. The continual stories of disappearances and family members being arrested for trivial infractions all served to instill in the population an unimaginable fear, which served Gaddafi's regime well in keeping the populace under control. As Fandy (2007) observes, "in an authoritarian setting, it is very difficult to speak or write freely about the maladies of a particular government or society; the price paid by those who violate the heavy regulations of the state and government ranges from imprisonment to kidnapping or disappearance, to in many instances death" (p. 6).

Yet, on February 17, 2011, the Libyans decisively arose. There are several reasons for their willingness to finally reveal their dissatisfaction with their tyrannical leader. Much of their drive came from watching their North African brothers and sisters rise and confront their unpopular leaders. Until that point, it was always viewed as an impossible situation because of the years of brutality and the history of violence against any of those brave enough to confront the regimes. However, they were certainly motivated by what they saw.

In addition to the obvious signs of apparent success from the Tunisians and Egyptians, the media and social media can also be noted as affecting the Libyan people. Although Libya had been privy to media for years, it was in this particular situation that the media's role became paramount. In recent years, the opinions of the Arab people began to emerge and "Arab satellite television became a player to contend with in shaping what Arabs think"

(Zayani, 2008, p. 59). Much like the people of the Soviet Union in 1989, who suddenly saw their compatriots in Eastern Europe arising, the same occurred with Libya. The Soviets had been shielded from knowing the truth beyond their borders; however, by 1989 they could no longer be kept blindfolded due to the spread of technology and the global media. This was similar to Libya, which had not seen any Arabs actually rebel and have any hope of success until the Arab Spring.

The two Arabic satellite channels - Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya - had continual 24-hour coverage of both Tunisia and Egypt. Zayani (2005) maintains that to “some extent, Al Jazeera fills not only a media void but also a political void. In the absence of political will and political pluralism in the Arab world, Al Jazeera serves as a de facto pan-Arab opposition and a forum for resistance. It provides a voice for Arab opposing views and a high-profile platform for political dissidents, many of whom live abroad” (p. 2). In fact, El Oifi (2005) views Al Jazeera as “contributing to the reconfiguration of the political system in the Middle East region, by giving rise to a new ‘Arab voice’” (pp. 66-67). Even though Al Jazeera has been around since 1996, its ability to help the Libyans rebel had to wait many years. As discussed in the section on revolutions, several factors must coalesce in order for a revolution to take off, Al Jazeera was but one of those items that helped give the revolution some impetus.

In addition to the continual news broadcasts, social media may have also helped raise awareness and encourage people to meet, march, or attack. However, in the case of Libya, unlike Tunisia and Egypt, it was perhaps mobile phone technology and messaging that was more important than Facebook or Twitter. The use of cell phones in the Arab world is quite extensive and nearly everyone, rich, poor, young, and old has at least one. Therefore by being able to rapidly transmit both messages and video footage of events, the Libyans were able to rally support from both within and outside the country. YouTube certainly allowed the Libyans to maintain a forum for their postings of the dreadfulness occurring within, especially when journalists were unable to be in locations early on. Cell phones were probably more useful in Libya where there are about 5 million users out of a population of 6 million according to Charlton (2011). According to a report published by the Dubai School of Government, in Libya, there are 5.51 internet users for every 100 persons and only 3.74 Facebook users for every 100 (see Charlton, 2011). Therefore, the numbers that would be required to have made the use of such social media a “phenomenon” appear to be missing in the case of Libya.

Despite the many claims that the Arab Spring relied greatly on social media in order to succeed, this is just not a fact. With regard to Libya, it is even more unlikely that social media was that important as the number of users of Facebook in the country is limited. Additionally, the Gaddafi regime ensured that most internet sites were blocked as the uprising began. Many journalists and scholars have reviewed the issue and the facts and the information just do not add up to any of these revolutions either being started by social media or especially not “won” by these efforts (see for example Charlton, 2011; Hill, 2011; Hirst, 2012; Hounshell, 2011b; Moore, 2011). And as Lindgren (2013) firmly argues, “there are of course no social media revolutions” (p. 217). Furthermore, he points to the fact that just because “activist tweeting occurs, this does not automatically mean that tweets contribute to social change” (p. 217). However, there are those on the other side of this issue who continue to claim that in some

way social media was a chief factor in each of the Arab Spring uprisings (see Beaumont, 2011; O'Neill, 2011).

Essentially from the beginning of the uprisings in the Arab Spring, the west began touting social media as an important factor in the change in the Arab world (Hill, 2011). However, "this was largely not true" according to Hill since the usual societal practices such as meeting at mosques after Friday prayer never needed Facebook or Twitter in order to organize. The same is true of groups of men meeting up following funerals, especially after attacks on civilians. Furthermore, in Egypt, the regime was extremely successful in shutting down all internet activity, yet the people still gathered and protested (Charlton, 2011).

Although social media cannot be rewarded for actually starting any of the Arab Spring upheavals, one way in which Hounshell (2011b) sees its input, especially in terms of Twitter was as a "platform for outsiders to discuss big breaking news" such as Mubarak's resignation (p. 20). Therefore, although it was not actually helping the rebellion; it was one way for news to get out and spread the stories of what was happening in a way that may not have made it through mainstream media (Beaumont, 2011; Moore, 2011). Certainly, YouTube was an up-to-the-minute forum for the horrors that were emerging, but again, it was mobile phone technology that initially was responsible for getting the footage. The people on the ground in Libya were on the streets, and at times it was unlikely that they had to get to a location to log on to a site. In fact, many of them just smuggled their sim cards out of the country with the videos on them (O'Neill, 2011). The idea of the revolutions spreading due to social media does not really add up to the reality of history wherein there has always been some sort of media available during various revolutions. During the French and American revolutions there were pamphlets, Khomeini's message to Iranians was through tapes, and today there is social media (Hirshberg cited in Moore, 2011).

When it comes to spreading any message in the Arab world it is Al Jazeera excels. It reaches a "global audience, and populations Facebook cannot: the poor, the less educated, the older" (Pollock, 2011, p. 77), and therefore the regular media, found in Al Jazeera was probably more of an instigator and information sharer for the masses than any social media. In the end, social media for many of these rebels was just a place to talk about what was happening.

The uniqueness of the Arab Spring, as a revolutionary movement, will in many ways be associated with the technology that brought it out to the world. Not only did the media share the daily awfulness with the world, but it further allowed Libyans to realize that they were not alone in their fight and that the world was behind them. This was visible through the NATO airstrikes but also manifested itself in other ways through foreign aid from Arab countries, both military and humanitarian. In addition, returning Libyan exiles and occasionally outside supporters appeared in the country compelled by their need to join the cause.

But it was in the street that reality occurred and therefore the street resonates with these young fighters as they were forced to witness the atrocities inflicted on their friends and families as they grappled for control over their own lives. The street has started becoming a major factor in the Arab world only recently and part of the rationale behind this was the emergence of satellite television, as suddenly the Arab rulers lost their monopoly on

information and could no longer shape opinion, according to Fawaz Gerges, a professor of Middle East studies at Sarah Lawrence College (cited in Kifner, 2001).

The Arab Street

Throughout recent history, the Arab street has seen some rioting, but none as consistent and as powerful as the Arab Spring. Many scholars point to the last time that the Arab world actually saw any passion in the Arab street and all concur it was during the years of Arab nationalism, when Nasser ruled Egypt and the Arabs felt a sense of pride in themselves and their nations. When Arab nationalism was on the rise, the Arab street “became synonymous with mass public opinion” (Zayani, 2008, p. 46). But over time the dictators appropriated nations and their wealth and in the modern Arab states, people were only allowed to use public space passively, that is for “walking, driving, or watching” (Bayat, 2010, p. 11). However, “any active use of public space infuriates officials” because these excursions into the public sphere represent a “challenge to state prerogatives and may encounter reprisal” (Bayat, 2010, pp. 11-12). The street was the main place for Arabs to give expression to their collective voice, especially as long as their regimes ignored their needs. However, except for being allowed a voice to support Palestine, the Arab street was usually closed to most internal matters (Bayat, 2003). Arab demonstrators always had to get permits in order to protest, if allowed. In addition, there was always a police presence, often in larger numbers than the protestors (Schanzer, 2003). Essentially the street was controlled by the regimes.

When we view the notion of the ‘street’ it is the final frontier to “communicate discontent” (Bayat, 2010, p. 11). Street politics has several dimensions according to Bayat. The street is not just a place where authorities and informal groups might disagree on control of the space. Streets “as spaces of flow and movement” are not solely locations for people to vent their frustrations, but they are places where people can enlarge their social circle, build new identities, share their aspirations with others, and “*extend* their protest beyond their immediate circles to include the unknown, the strangers” (Bayat, 2010, p. 12). The street then becomes the forum for establishing communication with others sharing the same interests and sentiments. It is in this arena that demonstrations, which begin relatively small, expand to become enormous “exhibitions of solidarity” and it is for this reason that most revolutions find their voice in the “urban streets” (Bayat, 2010, p. 12). The urban streets are not exclusively physical spaces where conflicts can occur, but they are the locale where bonds are formed contends Bayat. These urban streets “also signify a crucial symbolic utterance, one that goes beyond the physicality of streets to convey collective sentiments of a nation or a community” (p. 13).

It is the public spaces, which forge the solidarities, even without organizations or leadership asserts Bayat (2010). He terms these places “passive networks” which include: “neighborhoods, street corners, mosques, workplaces, bus stops, parks, colleges, and more” (Bayat, p. 22). The street, for these people, allows them to share in their commonalities just by noticing one another, and long term Bayat maintains that these groups develop a shared identity of their place as a group in society.

Despite the ability of the Arab street to succeed in toppling dictatorial regimes in the Arab world recently, the “Arab street” and by extension the “Muslim street” has usually been viewed by the west as a place filled with angry and abnormal people. Accordingly, any

actions by Arabs or Muslims are nearly always described in terms of “mobs, riots, revolts” that can suddenly turn into a violent horde (Satlof cited in Bayat, 2003). The west has made exaggerated claims that the Arab street is a horde ready to arise. Zayani (2008) asserts that the Arab street in the western media has been looked at in three ways: something to celebrate due to its liberating powers and as a “harbinger of brewing revolutions;” a submissive and ineffectual space; and something to be dismissed altogether as a myth (p. 50). Essentially, in the view of the western media, the Arab street is either “irrational” and “aggressive” or “apathetic” and “dead” (Bayat, 2003).

The Arab street is believed by some in the west to be always simmering and ready to burst into revolution (Zayani, 2008), but this was never the reality because of the regimes’ authoritarian hold over the populations, especially in Libya. Others view the Arab street as ineffective and non-threatening since traditionally there has been little success in having any effect on Arab politics. In fact, the Arab street’s public opinion is “politically irrelevant” (Zayani, 2008, p. 52). This is because any street demonstrations were rarely tolerated and “dictatorships brook no politics – they brook no public opinion – no freedom of speech, association, the press or anything else” (Murawiec cited in Zayani, 2008, p. 52). The autocratic regime in Libya kept the Arab street silent. The US spent decades assuming Arab public opinion was not significant, so they focused on influencing the Arab governments rather than reaching the masses (Zayani, 2008, p. 56). Since the voices of the street were not encouraged they remained muted by virtue of leaders who tolerated no dissent, especially in Libya. The US had maintained a distance from Gaddafi and his regime for years, but after the reaffirmation of respect in 2003, the US turned a blind eye to his internal viciousness and focused on his apparent renunciation of terrorism and nuclear weapons.

As evidenced by the Arab Spring, although the Arab street appeared for years to be unable to turn “aspirations into actions” it did finally succeed (Zayani, 2008, p. 53). It was that sudden “retaking of public spaces, and the insistence that such belong *to the public*, that began the extraordinarily radical movements in exposing the obviousness of the injustices at work” (Schwedler, 2012). As the people of Libya finally had a glimpse of “freedom and empowerment” they discovered how “utterly intoxicating” it can be (Schwedler, 2012). They realized they could no longer be ignored and it encouraged more of them to join the mobs, the riots, and the protests. As Schwedler (2012) insists “once people realize that it is they who really hold the power, the question is not if the change will come, but when.” In an ironic twist for the Libyan situation, as the people rose up demanding change, the icons they chose as their rallying symbols both came from the distant past.

Symbols of the Past

As noted earlier, Foran (1997) points to a uniting factor for revolutions that the opposition can use to increase support, including formal ideologies and folk traditions. For the Libyans, there were two important historical items that they immediately coopted in their revolutionary fervor: the freedom fighter Omar Mukhtar and the old flag of Libya *following* independence from Italy, but more importantly *before* Colonel Gaddafi.

Some of the fiercest resistance to the Italian occupation came from Cyrenaica, which is the eastern region where the recent Libyan revolution began. The most famous fighter was

Omar Mukhtar, a Quranic teacher who spent almost two decades fomenting revolt and was eventually executed by the Italians in 1931 at the age of 70.

Omar Mukhtar fought the Italian colonizers for decades until he was captured and executed. Many of the Libyans, especially in Benghazi called their uprising the “Revolution of Omar Mukhtar’s grandsons” (Cousins, 2011). His 90-year-old son is still alive and was proud to have the current revolt named after his father. Despite the distance in time from his father’s fight against the Italians to the uprising in Libya, Mukhtar’s son, Haji Mohamed, saw a link between those events and the uprising against Gaddafi. And so too did the young Libyans fighting to throw out the Colonel, they wanted to reconnect with a pre-Gaddafi past and learn more about their original ‘freedom fighter’ (Cousins, 2011). Even as the Libyan rebels were fighting a war for control of their country, “they were also keen to reclaim their national pride and history after more than four decades of submission to Gaddafi’s mercurial vision” (McDonnell, 2011). And even though Mukhtar died long before the new generation of rebels was born, he still became the symbol that the Libyan people could join forces around. Mukhtar was a leader they all could feel proud of, a man who had fought the real enemies of the Libyan people, in opposition to Gaddafi, who spent most of his 42 years disregarding or terrorizing his own people

Almost immediately after the uprisings began in Benghazi, the flag, which had flown prior to Gaddafi’s green rectangle, was hoisted all over town. The original flag which was red, black and green horizontal stripes, with a star and crescent in the center was the flag representing Libya’s independence from Italian colonization. At the time, of 1951, the three provinces of Libya: Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and the Fezzan had just been united under King Idriss Senussi, who came from Cyrenaica. The Senussi family insignia was the crescent and star. The rebels who took up the old flag say that they chose it for the sole reason that it represents a time before Gaddafi. It could also be that the flag represented independence when it was first used and the people of Libya strove to achieve independence from the Colonel and his regime. Therefore in some ways, the flag “appears to symbolize both independence and unity” (Hashim, 2011). Much like the harkening back to Omar Mukhtar as their hero, the flag also represents a look back at the past. A past that those living through the four decades years of incertitude and suffering believed could only have been a better more positive era.

Conclusion

The Libyan revolution was an event that thrust the Libyan people’s struggle against a dictator into the public eye, mainly through television, but also at times through social media. It occurred because many factors finally came together which allowed for a revolution, theoretically, but more importantly, it happened because the Libyans finally took to the street and took back the street from those who had prohibited them from having a place or a voice. They saw their brothers in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt removing the tyrants who had oppressed them for so long and realized their time had also come. The ability to rationalize going into the street and staying there, demanding to be heard and demanding to be seen, suddenly allowed a mob of disorganized frustrated people to band together for a cause, the ultimate cause, which was to regain the street and regain their freedom, no matter what the cost.

Today there is a new Libya, a Libya without Gaddafi. Initially, there was great hope that Libya's future would be peaceful and secure, but unfortunately, the aftermath has proven to be more difficult and divisive than ever anticipated. Currently, the post-revolution governments have been inexperienced both in governing and in knowing how to set up political institutions, and these structural issues are causing major problems, which must be addressed (El-Kikhia, 2014b). Due to the Political Isolation Law (PIL) adopted in 2013, "anyone who was involved with the Gaddafi regime was disqualified from the new administration, armed forces, and other entities" (David & Mzioudet, 2014, p. 1). According to David and Mzioudet, this law is weakening Libya more than offering it any protection and is further undermining any hope for reconciliation among the masses. Sharqieh (2013) is also adamant that Libya needs to "embark on a credible and comprehensive process of national reconciliation" (para. 2). He further argues that the political isolation of former regime officials is detrimental to the country.

Despite the current problems plaguing Libya, El-Kikhia (2014a) still has hope for a positive future for Libya. He notes that in Libya "contrary to the dominating view, democracy has not failed." He believes that Libya is "slowly returning to normalcy after nearly half a century of dictatorship that destroyed it financially, morally, and politically." Although the path ahead remains rocky, and there is no certainty about how this revolution will eventually manifest itself, within the country hopes are high that whatever form the new nation eventually takes there will be a place for all to have a voice and an opinion, a place where the people own the streets and the people can demand equality and justice.

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