

11 luglio 2011

Transition toward Democracy in Libya: a Cautionary Tale

Dirk Vandewalle^(*)

As the civil war in Libya continues into its fourth month, a number of national and multilateral organizations in the West have started to think of possible scenarios for post-conflict Libya, eager to provide guidance to whatever type of government succeeds the current Qadhafi regime. Central to almost all of those proposals so far has been an emphasis on some kind of democratic governance for post-Qadhafi Libya. Indeed, even Libya's own Transitional National Council (TNC) that now rules the eastern part of the country very early – on 29 March 2011 – published what it labeled “A Vision of a Democratic Libya”. Not surprising, the document contains all the buzzwords about democratic government and rule of law that appeal to an international community eager to see Qadhafi disappear, and to have any alternative take hold.

The problem of course is that a democracy cannot be created *ex nihilo*. In virtually all countries that are now considered mature democracies, democracy only arrived at the end of an often lengthy process of state-building. This process, over time, created a number of institutional checks and balances between the state and its citizens that are the essence of democratic governance. It is almost needless to say that in Libya this process has not even started. Indeed, both the policies of the Libyan monarchy (1951-1969) but particularly those of the Qadhafi government since 1969 were meant to prevent the emergence of these truly national institutions. Since independence Libyans have never been asked to think of themselves as truly national citizens. All the institutions in civil society that traditionally provide identity to a country's citizens were systematically eviscerated in Libya in the pursuit of Qadhafi's notion of statelessness.

As a result Libya has neither the institutions to create a modern democracy nor the historical imagination or a history of state-society interaction that augurs very well for a move toward a more democratic political system. As in other oil exporters, in Libya the massive revenues that have accrued centrally to those in charge of the state – whether the king or Qadhafi – have allowed them to strategically use those revenues to keep Libyan citizens on the sidelines of whatever political system the country possessed.

Assuming that the outcome of the ongoing civil war in Libya will mean the removal of Qadhafi, the economic, social, and political challenges Libyans will face in its aftermath will be enormous. Libya will confront a simultaneous need to restructure its economy away from excessive reliance on the state and on hydrocarbon revenues. Its new leaders will need to come up with a political formula that is acceptable to a number of different players – including its tribes and provinces – that have traditionally been antagonistic to each other, but that were held together artificially by the authoritarian policies of the Qadhafi government. They will need to create a system of law that serves all its citizens equitably. And they will need to construct a political system that guarantees at least a minimum of checks-and-balances so that Libyan citizens feel empowered and true citizens.

Le opinioni espresse sono strettamente personali e non riflettono necessariamente le posizioni dell'ISPI.

(*) *Dirk Vandewalle, Associate Professor of Government, Dartmouth College, USA, and author of A History of Modern Libya, Cambridge University Press, 2006.*

Furthermore, all of this will need to be done within an oil economy that creates all kind of opportunities for different Libyans players – individuals, families, tribes, and provinces – to pursue their own interests at the expense of whatever kind of new Libya may emerge. This is, needless to say, an enormous set of tasks even more politically advanced nations would find difficult to accomplish. And it is perhaps not surprising that in light of all these difficulties, the Transitional Council has for the time suggested some forms of political consultation through local councils that, while not truly democratic in a western, liberal sense, resonate with local political traditions. Whether Libya will successfully make the transition from these “pro-to-democratic” solutions to a true democracy remains to be seen. The country faces multiple, overlapping challenges that will provide many opportunities for distinct groups to derail a possibly emerging democratic process. Although we cannot know what the outcome will be at this point, we do know that the road ahead, in light of the country’s history of disenfranchising its citizens, will likely be very difficult and uneven.

La ricerca ISPI analizza le dinamiche politiche, strategiche ed economiche del sistema internazionale con il duplice obiettivo di informare e di orientare le scelte di policy.

I risultati della ricerca vengono divulgati attraverso pubblicazioni ed eventi, focalizzati su tematiche di particolare interesse per l’Italia e le sue relazioni internazionali.

Le pubblicazioni online dell’ISPI sono realizzate anche grazie al sostegno della Fondazione Cariplo.

**ISPI
Palazzo Clerici
Via Clerici, 5
I - 20121 Milano
www.ispionline.it**

© ISPI 2011