



Developments in Libya (Mar 2011)

by [Mark Iddon](#)

As I write, Sunday 27th February, Colonel Muammer Gaddafi is clinging on to power in Tripoli as it has been reported that 80% of the country is now in the control of opposition forces. He has been in control of Libya with no opposition parties since he emerged as leader in 1969 following an Officer's Coup in which the British backed King Idris was deposed.

The regime was to be a Socialist Peoples Arab Jamahiriha in accordance with his Third Universal Theory and his Little Green Book. Relations between Libya and the West have been uneasy throughout that period but over the last few years, trade relations have developed and Gaddafi's autocratic regime is tolerated as a relatively stable country.

It is now reported that 1000 people have died in clashes with protestors and police / troops amid reports that helicopter gun ships have been ordered to open fire in order to disperse protestors, over a period of 10 days since a 'Day of Rage' demonstration on February 17th. Protests have also taken place in Algeria (Africa), Yemen, Bahrain and Oman (Middle East) and the stories in these countries are yet to unfold.

Gaddafi's reluctance to relinquish control is in contrast to recent uprisings in neighbouring countries Tunisia and Egypt. In mid January this year the Tunisian President Zine Ben-Ali, of 23 years, fled to Saudi Arabia following several days of protests and unrest, but still relatively peacefully. In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak stood down, reluctantly initially, after attempting to negotiate a compromise by promising not to stand for re election in September's forthcoming elections. Protestors were not happy with this and persisted in protest until the president stood down. Similarly, protests in Tunisia have re-ignited as the interim prime minister was not deemed to be sufficient to pacify the people.

Egypt is strategically important to the West because of the control of the Suez Canal, linking the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea via the Red Sea. Also, under Mubarak there was a treaty agreement with Israel in order to maintain stability in the Middle East region.

The Western nations have so far remained as observers of events in Tunisia and Egypt, whilst urging restraint and peaceful transformation on the part of the ruling parties and supporting the notion that the people need to determine their own leaders.

Libya is different to Tunisia and Egypt, as Gaddafi appears to be intent on maintaining control as he uses military force to quell demonstrations and has recently vowed that 'he will die on Libyan soil'. The United States and the UK have been quick to condemn the use of force against the protestors and have called for sanctions to be imposed including the freezing assets, restrictions on trade and travel and revoking diplomatic immunity of Gaddafi and his family. The US has also demanded that he stands down stating that he has lost the legitimacy to rule. Sanctions have now been ratified by the United Nations who voted overwhelmingly to condemn Gaddafi's actions.

The relationship with West has always been uneasy with the US bombing Libya in 1986 and it has never been established if Gaddafi was involved in the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 above Lockerbie in Scotland in 1988. In 2001 Libya handed over Abdelbaset Al-Megrahi who was convicted of the bombing, but was released on compassionate grounds in 2009 as it was reported that he only had 3 months to live due to his cancer. In 2004, Tony Blair announced a new relationship with Libya as he developed trade relationship which is now estimated to be worth 1.5 Billion per annum.

Indeed the morality of the arms trade put Peter Hain in an uncomfortable moment on Question Time this week when Janet Street porter suggested that the arms used to quell demonstrations in Libya were actually manufactured in the UK.

So it seems unlikely that Gaddafi can continue after this and the future is uncertain for Libya. Western governments are anxious at the prospect of the potential political vacuum that could open up. Anti Western / American sentiments amongst the protestors, have been noted for their absence and it does not look like there is a threat of an Islamic state emerging. Another fear of the West is that a new dictator comes to the fore although it appears that the protestors are intent on achieving freedom and democracy.

It remains to be seen whether West will continue to state that the will of the Libyan people should be paramount or whether they will seek to intervene if the people should choose to elect a leader who is not favoured by the West.

An aspect that is a little disingenuous to the people of North Africa is the crediting of social networks such as Twitter and Facebook as a catalyst to protest when the events have been brought about by mobilising the people to make known their aspirations, although I suspect that the social networks were useful in communicating and organising where and when to meet and co-ordinate supplies during the protest period.

It is also of interest as to how this will develop and whether Libya is able to develop beyond the liberal capitalist democratic models of the West or beyond that to a free, progressive humanist society. We can only be inspired that society is not a fixed entity and that it is possible to transform society when people can agree on a cause and mobilise a strategy on the understanding that change is a real possibility.