

SUBSIDIZING QADDAFI'S UTOPIA

by Lisa Anderson

How has the government of Mu'ammār al-Qaddafi, so often described as a madman, survived the denunciations of Western powers, the insults of Arab leaders, and the opposition of Libyan dissidents for almost fifteen years? What are his goals, his sources of support, and the prospects for his country? The answers to these questions lie in the personality of Qaddafi himself, the history of the country he leads, the nature of the regime he has imposed, and the international system in which he operates.

Mu'ammār al-Qaddafi is, by his own admission—indeed, at his own insistence—a revolutionary. He prides himself on being considered an outlaw in a world where, as he sees it, the law itself is unjust. From the beginning of his political activity as a student, when he was expelled from secondary school after a fracas with a scion of one of the monarchy's most powerful families, he has been an uncompromising opponent of what he views as injustice and exploitation in the world. Since September 1, 1969, when he and his Free Officer colleagues overthrew the monarchy to launch their revolution, he has been remarkably flexible in adjusting his tactics, but he has never abandoned his ultimate vision of an equitable and righteous society in Libya and beyond. His personal and political incorruptibility, which initially won him widespread respect, is increasingly perceived as unreasonableness. For his part, Qaddafi views himself as having the courage of his convictions, however unpopular.

The willingness of many observers, including most Americans, to accept Anwar al-Sadat's assessment of Qaddafi as "100 per cent sick and possessed by the Devil" has repeatedly led to underestimations of Qaddafi's intelligence, his perseverance, and his capacity for generating loyal admirers. Branding him mercurial and speculating about his mental health or possible drug addiction, the Western media's portrayal of Qaddafi has served only to obscure the fact that he has outlasted many of his opponents—including Sadat—and deflects attention from his seriousness of purpose and his shrewd use of the international economy's continued support of the regime.

Lisa Anderson is Assistant Professor of Government and Social Studies, and Director of Student Programs at the Center for International Affairs, Harvard University. A specialist in Libyan and North African affairs, she is now completing a work on the modern history of Libya, to be published by Werdenfeld and Nicolson.

Qaddafi's vision of a just society is simple, radical, and utopian. It is laid out succinctly in his *Green Book*, a short philosophy of the revolution too widely dismissed and too rarely read by those who claim to understand the Libyan leader. Although Qaddafi completed secondary school and graduated from the Libyan Military Academy—credentials that make him fairly well educated by the standards of his generation in Libya, if not by international norms—he is essentially an autodidact: His philosophy reflects a superficial and eclectic reading of modern classics from Rousseau to Marx, familiarity with the debates in Arab nationalist circles, deep personal attachment to Islam, and a profound if informal education in modern Libyan history. For Qaddafi, all forms of representative rule are perversions of true direct democracy, and all forms of capitalist, or even commercial, relations carry the seeds of exploitation. No individual should be beholden to another for his basic needs, which include housing, transportation, medical care, and education. As a diplomat stationed in Tripoli is said to have remarked recently, Qaddafi is "creating a society where the very concepts of profit and private property are synonymous with theft."

The primacy of individual or household self-sufficiency and the distrust of delegated authority in this vision of the virtuous society may well have roots in Qaddafi's psyche. Certainly, however, it draws as well upon modern Libyan history, and that is what has given it such currency within the general population. Libya's experience of Western rule, from which the perceptions of capitalism and democracy originally derived, was a virtually unalloyed disaster. Almost half the Libyan population—including most of the educated elite—was killed or exiled during the Italian colonial tenure between 1911 and 1943. Italian military superiority was not matched by any efforts to provide genuine economic or educational benefits for the Libyans, and this experience—combined with the subsequent, very destructive campaigns of World War II—left Libyans with a bitter view of the West, despite their admiration for Western technology.

The monarchy that governed upon independence in 1951 was a ward of Britain and the United States. With an estimated annual per capita income of \$25, Libya was the poorest country in the world. Little effort was made to ensure popular participation among a largely illiterate population, and the country's administration was delegated to locally powerful families and intimates of the king. After the coming of oil wealth in the early 1960s, the monarchy

proved unable to meet the dual tasks of answering growing demands for political participation and controlling increasingly serious corruption. Cynicism about parliamentary democracy and the association of capitalism with imperialist exploitation and corruption were widespread on the eve of Qaddafi's coup d'état; and the elite's political and economic links with the West did little to assuage suspicions that the average Libyan was not getting his fair share of political rights and economic resources of the country.

The youth, energy, and apparent honesty of the new regime, as well as its commitment to equitable distribution of the country's rapidly increasing oil revenues, were greeted with enthusiasm. The regime's anti-imperialist and Arab-nationalist stance in foreign policy, which echoed the Arab support of the Libyan resistance to the Italians in the 1920s, also struck a responsive chord. The early domestic and foreign policies of the new government created a broad-based and loyal constituency at home.

RADICAL EGALITARIANISM

By the mid-1970s, Qaddafi had made good his promises—eventually codified in the *Green Book*—to provide all Libyans with free housing, education, medical care, and transportation. He had also faced frustrations: His pan-Arab nationalism had met repeated rebuffs, and his disdain for the bureaucracy had alienated many of the country's technocrats. His vision of a just society accommodated the social strains of genuine economic development very poorly. His emphasis on current consumption (including luxury imports) and his support of foreign revolutions—both of these to the detriment of investment in the country's future—set him at odds with the technocrats in his own government. A 1975 coup attempt by the technocrats failed, its leaders fled into exile, and Qaddafi then launched his revolution in earnest. He disbanded much of the government bureaucracy, replacing it with the popular committees through which Libyans are supposed to rule themselves, and undertook a series of economic reforms designed to ensure that all Libyans had equal assets. The economic measures—nationalization of retail trade, seizure of bank accounts, and the like—accomplished what they were intended to do and, in the process, deeply divided the population. Those who had owned property found themselves

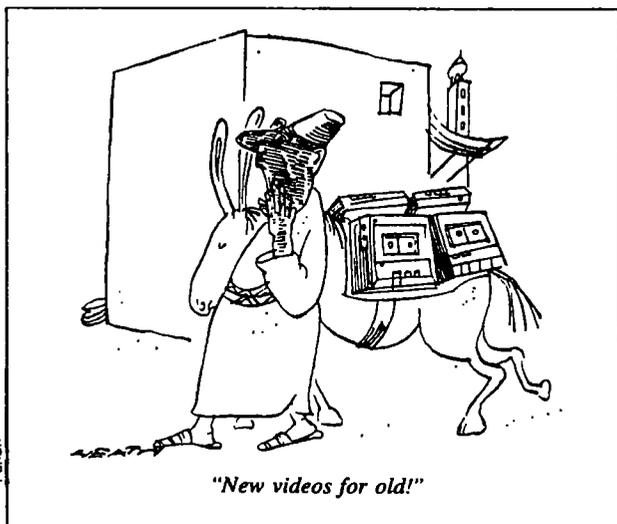
deprived of their shops, their real estate, their savings; those who had been propertyless, including large segments of the youth, found themselves the beneficiaries of the generous welfare policies of the regime. Radical egalitarianism, the Libyans discovered, cuts two ways.

Among the newly dispossessed there is growing disillusion with and disaffection from the Qaddafi regime. These people make up a substantial proportion of the estimated hundred thousand Libyans living abroad, many of whom are active in the six or seven opposition groups.

Qaddafi's is not a voluntary community of like-minded believers. Indeed, this is a revolution designed for export. Qaddafi's well-known support of revolutions and national liberation movements throughout the world reflects his conviction that the international legal system, a product of the Western imperial order, is illegitimate. The domestic opposition, largely exiled but increasingly active underground in Libya, is considered irredeemably reactionary by the regime, actively or unintentionally in league with the imperialistic opponents of the revolution, and therefore a suitable target for its wrath. Revolutionary committees were established in the late 1970s to guarantee popular fervor for the regime's policies and are credited with a campaign of intimidation and harassment of the unenthusiastic both inside and outside the country. Conventional intelligence and security services, set in place with Eastern European aid in the mid-1970s, have proved an efficient adjunct to the revolutionary committees. And what was once known as a flexible and relaxed regime has developed a well-merited reputation for ruthless treatment of its opponents.

Qaddafi's government is not, however, without its supporters. Many Libyans are healthier and better housed, fed, and educated than they would have dreamed possible fifteen years ago. An entire generation of young people has known no other government and is convinced of the morality of the regime's demonstration of egalitarianism and anti-imperialism. Moreover, as Qaddafi well knows, the international condemnation of his regime has yet to be accompanied by any serious economic sanctions. Even in this period of slack markets, oil revenues are estimated at \$10 billion a year (down from a high of \$22 billion in 1980). The multinational corporations and their home countries, including the United States, have yet to forgo the handsome returns on investments in Libya.

It is this support that has been crucial to Qaddafi's political survival. From his abolition of domestic retail trade, which virtually halted productive activity, to his purchase of an estimated \$20 billion of Soviet military equipment in the last decade, Qaddafi's domestic projects and foreign involvements have been entirely subsidized by the international capitalist economy he so despises. Libya's participation in this commerce is rationalized in an interesting way: The profits realized by the country on petroleum sales are portrayed as reparations from the industrialized West for the damage done to Libya during its colonial period. Thus the anticapitalist ideology of the regime remains internally consistent, while the country and its leader continue to benefit from the willingness of foreign multinationals and their home countries to sustain their high levels of investment and provide Libya with the 800,000 foreigners who virtually run the national economy.



THE LEGACY

Despite his successes, Qaddafi's rule is likely to be very damaging to Libya in the long run. Among his legacies will be a profoundly divided people—some his most resolute opponents, others his loyal admirers. His policies have depleted the country's principal natural resource, oil, without providing the economic infrastructure to sustain a fast-growing population in the post-oil era. Qaddafi's failure to appreciate the extent to which his country, like most in the modern world, is beholden to others for many of its basic needs is merely exacerbating that dependence in the future. His oft-repeated claim that, if need be, the country can live without oil, as it did for five thousand years, ignores that fact that (1) the population has tripled, to three million, in the last thirty years and will do so again before the end of the century, and that (2) everyone in Libya has become accustomed to a standard of living unsustainable without oil revenues, given present levels of development. Indeed, the permanent damage in the agricultural sector caused by overmechanization and overuse of fragile ground water resources could return Libya to an even lower standard than was the case at independence if, as some estimates suggest, the country becomes a net importer of oil within the next fifty years.

Qaddafi's view of himself as a modern Robin Hood has made him a source of concern to the industrialized West for more than a decade, just as it has won him the indul-

gence of many in the Third World who resent the domination of the West but feel powerless to confront it. Efforts to deal with Qaddafi on a business-as-usual basis, like those of the Carter administration, failed to prompt any significant change in his policies. Rhetorical accusations that Qaddafi is an outlaw, like those of the Reagan administration, merely confirm what he has long said of the West and, once again, have not substantially altered his policies. Indeed, it might be argued that the media attention which accompanied the Reagan position emboldened Qaddafi rather than intimidated him.

In any event, the contradiction between the rhetorical and symbolic sanctions levied by the Reagan administration and the continued high profile of American companies and their European subsidiaries in the Libyan economy serve only to undermine American credibility without weakening Qaddafi. The American complaint that its European allies and other countries would not cooperate in efforts to impose more serious sanctions, such as a full-scale trade embargo, is undoubtedly accurate; but it is also somewhat self-serving, since such sanctions would be considerably more costly to the Europeans than to the United States. The absence of such a concerted effort, however, gives credence to the claims of the regime's opponents that Qaddafi would not be in power were it not for the tacit acquiescence of the industrialized powers whose laws and norms he so proudly flouts. [WV]

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