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Insane my Arse, Muammar Gaddafi - a Historical Sketch of his National Project

Already during his lifetime public opinion in the West had been in agreement about the deceased Libyan dictator: “insane” was the most frequent description of him. However, putting aside fashion faux-pas and focussing instead on his political career, the former ruler shows up in a rather different light. So who was Muammar Gaddafi?

A nation-builder with Western education

Gaddafi belonged to a generation of Arabic military officers much dissatisfied with the circumstances in which the newly established nation states found themselves at the end of colonial rule. Many of those military officers had been educated in former colonial powers (Gaddafi spent a few months in Great Britain to receive military training). There they were able to observe the way successful world powers work: i.e., as nation states, with a people interested in and devoted to the state. At home in the Middle East, however, monarchs who had been appointed by colonisers reigned over clans and tribal communities that were much more important to its members than the nation state as a whole. The monarchs contented themselves with the clan leaders’ loyalty and left the extraction of raw materials to the former colonisers for money that served their personal enrichment.

Those military officers who brought down the first and only King Idris I of Libya in September 1969 aimed at turning Libyan subjects into patriotic citizens. They closed Western military bases, disenfranchised Italian landowners and began to nationalise the oil production and its export. Having been the basis of foreign influence in Libya, oil was now to become the means of national independence.

For a start, the Libyan population had to learn that it now actually existed as a single body in which each and every clan was part of a whole: the nation. The success of state propaganda and government policy – aimed at establishing the new nation state – required a massive expansion of the educational system, as well as intensive literacy campaigns. Revenues from oil export were diverted to this end by the new powers in the country. Indeed, in comparison with other African states Libya showed up in a positively favourable light: it had the highest per capita income on the continent, and health care and education were available to a good deal of the population. This form of relation between a state and its citizens was something new in Africa. Elsewhere on the continent the various state apparatuses considered their people barely useful and did not bank on their loyalty.

An idealist of democracy *and* a dictator

Gaddafi assumed power together with other military officers but in the course of the 1970s he ousted other military leaders and became the de facto autocrat. At the same time he became detached from his earlier role model Nasser, the president of Egypt, and began to create his own

“concept of socialism”. This included the idea of the immediate “people’s authority” which was to replace political parties (actually, there had been only one party before) and the military regime. These ideas resulted from his analysis of other forms of government: in the Colonel’s opinion parliamentary democracy was a scam and he criticised parties and parliaments for manipulating the “true will of the people”. The Soviet system, on the contrary, did not find his approval because of its “one-class-dictatorship”.

The Libyan alternative was the Jamahiriya, the authority of the masses. A “true” democracy could only be a direct one, was the new slogan. With his pompous indictments of parliamentary representatives, and their alleged ineptitude in divining the real desires of the people, Gaddafi was able to touch the hearts of a great many left-wingers. His idea that a truly unified people would have one uniform will that a determined leadership would simply have to put into practice pointed to the Fascist aspect of the nation state in the concept of Jamahiriya.

Left and right-wing pilgrims alike enthusiastically spread the word about the unity that existed between the people and the Leader of the Revolution. In practice, political decisions were still taken by delegates. But all decisions of the “people’s committees” could be quashed by the “revolutionary leadership” (i.e., by Gaddafi) and were, on top of that, subject to the close scrutiny of “revolutionary committees” comprised of loyal subjects.

Gaddafi managed to paint any kind of politics that he did not agree with as “undemocratic” similar to how the “free West” does it. As a critic of every form of representation and delegation, he claimed to perceive and channel the unified voice of the people. It was this voice that over the years was the mainstay and validation of his benevolent reign.

Despite all ideological ideas of “one people” however, political and economic conflicts of interest were continuously produced and reproduced among the Libyan population so that the state again and again felt compelled to enforce the purported interests of the people.

A butcher of communists *and* a partner of the Eastern Bloc

At first, Gaddafi was rather hostile to communism and the Eastern Bloc. As late as 1971 he lent Numairi, the Sudanese dictator, a hand with eliminating one of the biggest communist parties in Africa and the Middle East the Sudanese Communist Party. However, from the late 1970s Libya and the USSR found common ground in a shared enmity towards the NATO and Israel. Since Ronald Reagan had become president of the US Gaddafi was considered a de-facto communist and named alongside Fidel Castro and Kim Il-Sung in the West.

For its foreign policy Libya was in constant need of new arms which the West refused to deliver. It thus came in handy that Libya had not only found a new buyer for its oil but also a new source for weapons: the East. Yet, Gaddafi continued to stress the independence of his “third way.” While other left-wing nationalists in the Arab world were from time to time in cahoots with communist parties in order to please Moscow, the author of the “Third Universal Theory” made

sure no communist activities whatsoever could unfold. Libya banned Marx' works and the USSR in turn prohibited every attempt to distribute the "Green Book" by the Leader of the Revolution.

An anti-imperialist *and* a partner of the West

Although Libya constantly emphasised its independence, business was flourishing with the West. As early as 1980 the American-Libyan trade volume reached its peak. Libya's weapons which were bought in bulk from the Eastern Bloc protected it from possible potentially military interventions by its capitalist trading partners. At the same time Gaddafi had to compromise from the very beginning: e.g., expropriated western companies wanted to be compensated; and the close-down of the western military bases happened only because it was guaranteed that no Soviet military bases would come to be established in Libya. This indicates the constant contradiction intrinsic to Gaddafi's national project, which depended on high oil prices and demand in precisely those countries from which Libya wanted to become independent.

This does not mean, however, that the Libyan state did not take its anti-imperialist ambitions seriously. The initial problem had been that the main Western powers albeit from outside of an explicitly colonialist structure were now pulling the strings more than ever on the African continent, and this problem remained. Furthermore, although Libya was now a nation state, internationally it was a rather insignificant one. Yet Colonel Gaddafi had at least learned that this need not go unchallenged and, as such, he quickly adopted an eager interventionist policy, much after the manner of the greater world powers in the West and USSR. Regardless of whether he attempted to unite all Arabs, Muslims or African people under the Libyan roof; whether he supported Palestine factions, African dictators or British Trotskyists sometimes more, sometimes less generously; never did he lose sight of his aim to behave just like those heads of state that were his opponents. Gaddafi's anti-imperialism was an attempt to imitate the foreign politics of his partners as well as of his opponents.

In the 1980s the USA, and later their allies, took revenge by establishing economic embargoes and conducting air strikes. Support for Gaddafi from the Eastern Bloc soon vanished, therefore he had to realign. At first he changed his image from being a terrorist supporter to becoming a peacemaker. Hence, sometimes Western hostages in Islamic countries were freed by means of Libyan mediation, sometimes Gaddafi instigated an African Union (AU) action that very reasonably took care of observing conflicts on the continent and which was, hence, useful to the West.

From 2003 at the latest, the experiments of a socialist welfare state were put to an end for good and the establishment of the "people's capitalism" was announced. What followed was a tsunami of privatisation in Libya. But the leader of the Mediterranean state also came to fulfil a quite important role for the EU: becoming something of a turn-key dignitary, Gaddafi began to intercept African refugees before their Mediterranean voyage and to have them interned in camps. Moreover, post-9/11 the West was much more concerned with Islamism and Libya in turn was in such need of foreign capital that agreements were reached without problems.

The former "bad guy" had barely been rehabilitated before the "Arab spring" began, and Gaddafi, for whom surrender was not an option, was promptly dropped by his recently acquired friends. However much the media might romanticise peaceful revolutions in the region, Gaddafi demonstrated that protests in the street however many people can be perfectly incapable of showing or allowing the state to see the logic of giving in. Gaddafi made use of those means foreseen by every state in the event of massive functional disruption: state of emergency decrees

that allow for the reckless deployment of various means of violence in order that the states monopoly on it may be restored. At this, the international outcry was deafening. Public opinion in the West and beyond, including those democratic countries in which “state of emergency” provisions are written into their constitutions, were filled with indignation that Gaddafi was gunning down his own people. This indicates that it is considered more reprehensible to kill one’s own people, as opposed to foreign people.

Irrespective of the weak protest of some right-wing US-republicans (who considered the Colonel to be a smaller problem compared with that of Islamic radicals) and anti-imperialist leftists (partly still appreciating Gaddafi’s earlier achievements, partly simply considering it unfair when stronger states intervene in affairs of weaker ones), Gaddafi’s Jamahiriya was plastered with NATO bombs.