Arab Spring, summer harvest: Looking beyond the Fall of Gaddafi

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Western leaders have breathed sighs of relief and contentment at the unexpectedly swift breakthrough of rebel forces in Western Libya, which was a prelude to their march into Tripoli. At long last, the NATO-backed Libyan National Transitional Council has found a way of breaking Gaddafi's stranglehold. Yet, achieving military victory is relatively easy when compared to building peace after decades of authoritarian rule. The coming months will be decisive, not only in Libya where a new state will have to emerge on the ruins of long-derelict institutions, but also everywhere in the MENA region, as former dictators are put on trial in Tunisia (in absentia) and in Egypt and autocrats desperately cling to power in Syria and Yemen (where echoes from Tripoli might not stay unheard – whether they follow in the footsteps of Libya remains to be seen).

The Arab Spring now has to turn into a summer harvest. In every country where a revolution has succeeded, new leaders face three challenges. Firstly, they need to liquidate the old regimes efficiently but fairly too. Trying deposed dictators can be an easy expedient, but societies want more than a scapegoat: they expect the whole regime to be put to trial for its past mismanagement, and with it habits and networks of corruption and nepotism that may sneak through the transition. They also need to foster the reconciliation of the population and the reinsertion of minor collaborators to the defunct regimes.

Secondly, they need to create a political environment that will allow for all political tendencies to be expressed as part of the building of civil society. Freedom of the press and the legalization of parties, but also fair elections, have to fill the political vacuum that contains the seeds of instability. In Libya, National Transitional Council (NTC) chairman Mustafa Abdel Jalil sacked the entire executive committee on 8 August, as a collective punishment following the abduction and assassination of General Abdel Fatah Yunes by an unknown armed group. Since then, the committee has not been officially replaced. Beyond the euphoria of victory, the NTC will have to prepare the ground for a genuine democratic life (which has never existed in the country), in line with the promise made in its 'vision of a democratic Libya' (made public in March). This will also mean that the temptation of religious politics, prevalent among at least some rebel groups, will have to be checked tactfully. The NTC has given every assurance that Islamic fundamentalism was not the fuel of the rebellion, but Islamist unrest in eastern Libya in the mid-1990 calls for a careful appraisal of the way in which post-Gaddafi politics will take shape.

Thirdly, and crucially, transitional governments will have to find a way of delivering to populations the change that they expect most (together with freedom): more jobs and a better life. At a time when Europe struggles to find a new economic model in the face of Chinese competition, these countries need to break the spiral of economic under-performance in which they have been trapped. It has been partially compensated by oil revenue in some cases, but even then, the economic landscape failed to offer a meaningful future to the majority of the population. Foreign investment needs to be forthcoming, and this means restoring law and order. New regimes in Tunisia and Egypt can be more vulnerable to paramilitary groups: a skirmish with an Al-Qaeda-affiliated cell has just been reported in the heart of the Tunisian Sahara, shortly after events alongside the Israeli–Egyptian border threaten the stability of the whole Middle-East. Libya is a country which is reputedly difficult to govern due to tribal allegiances and its sheer size (seven times the size of the UK). The number of factions fighting under the umbrella of the NTC also bears the germs of post-victory discord. The road to democracy and economic well-being is enthusing but hazardous.

The battle of Tripoli may give new impetus to an Arab Spring which had been bogged down in the Libyan sands. Yet, the task ahead for the NTC will undoubtedly be even more challenging than ousting Gaddafi from power. Reconstruction and human and economic development do not follow the same timescale as military battles, and they will be the ultimate gauge against which the success of the Arab Spring will be judged Â in Libya and elsewhere.

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