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## I Will Survive

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## I Will Survive

### Abstract

Academics do not often quote 70s disco tunes. At least not in print. But if there is one thing that has been striking about the events in Libya in recent weeks—and indeed looking back over decades—it is the sheer ability of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi to survive. He is, perhaps with Fidel Castro, the world's greatest survivor. He has indeed learned how to carry on.

### Keywords

Human rights, Libya, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, United States foreign policy, International relations

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## **I Will Survive**

by **Robert Funk**

“But I spent so many nights  
thinking how you did me wrong  
I grew strong  
I learned how to carry on”

- -Gloria Gaynor

Academics do not often quote 70s disco tunes. At least not in print.

But if there is one thing that has been striking about the events in Libya in recent weeks—and indeed looking back over decades—it is the sheer ability of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi to survive. He is, perhaps with Fidel Castro, the world’s greatest survivor. He has indeed learned how to carry on.

There are several reasons for this, both domestic and foreign. Domestically, Gaddafi has set up a remarkable system, far less institutionalized than the one in Egypt. This not only implies that power is far more centralized and personalized than it was in Egypt, it also means that any future transition would be much more difficult. There are simply no institutions in Libya that could carry on with the task of governing, and no constitution to provide a roadmap for transition. Just a little Green Book, a kind maoist-islamic democracy self-help book Gaddafi published in 1975 and which includes phrases like, “The mere existence of parliaments underlies the absence of the people, for democracy can only exist with the presence of the people and not in the presence of representatives of the people.” Power, therefore, rests solely with “The Guide”, one of the colonel’s official titles.

Since (one assumes that) The Guide knows he is mortal, he has charged his sons with a few of the responsibilities of governing, such as heading the security services, running public companies, and putting a smiley, London School of Economics-trained face on foreign affairs. Often this kind of arrangement leads to in-fighting, especially in the face of domestic turmoil. The Gaddafi clan seems to have been able to avoid this.

Third, like Saddam Hussein, Gaddafi has been adept at exploiting his country’s tribal divisions. One of the results is that there appears to be no organized opposition, as any political opposition to the regime would descend into tribal bickering. The apparent military retreat of the rebels in recent days seems to confirm this lack of coordination. Still, the rebel forces are not merely a bunch of disorganized desert tribes: one of their leaders is Gaddafi’s just-resigned interior minister, Abdel Fattah Younis, who surely has some access to supplies, knows where the stockpiles and warehouses are, and has some firsthand knowledge of the regime’s contingency plans for this sort of situation.

The international reasons for Gaddafi’s survival are even more astonishing, as he has transmogrified from romantic 1960’s socialist revolutionary, to funder of anti-West terrorism in

the 1980s, to repentant ally in the struggle against Islamic fundamentalist terrorism in the post 9-11 era. Today, he has returned to the role he plays best: crazy-like-a-fox autocrat.

The final reason that Gaddafi has managed to hold on, where some of his neighbors have not, pertains to Libya's place in the international system. Whereas American aid to Egypt gave the US a good deal of leverage regarding whatever decisions President Mubarak took to deal with the protesters in Tahrir Square, in Libya the US has no such power. The main options available to the US, then, have been to support the rebels more directly, or to make declarations in favor of democracy.

Here President Obama has been reticent, to say the least. He does not wish to see the United States accused of yet another military intervention in a Muslim country. He has been unable to identify a reliable partner to support. He is unclear on what a post-Gaddafi Libya would look like, and how much US tutelage it would need. He is uneager to ask the already battered American taxpayer to foot the bill for this sort of adventure. And finally, besides America's commitment to democracy and an increasing gas bill, there is no clear US interest—to paraphrase Churchill—to risk so much, for so little.

For these reasons, the president has so far declined to offer direct military aid, air cover, or a no-fly zone. As each day passes, it appears that forces loyal to Gaddafi are regaining control.

In the short term, if Muammar Gaddafi manages to hang on, he will be strengthened. In the battles to come, he will have eliminated some or all of his current opponents, and will have identified, through their defections, internal threats like Younis. As it appears, however, that the spirit of the Jasmine Revolution is not yet extinguished, different kinds of experiments in Arab (and, indeed, Persian) democracy may yet emerge. If this occurs, not only will Gaddafi have burnt the bridges he tried for so long to rebuild with the West, he will find himself isolated from the new governments in the neighborhood as well.

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