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We Do Indeed Reap What We Sow

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Abstract

When violence first broke out in Tunisia in January 2011, few observers would have predicted that waves of unrest would engulf North Africa and the Arab world. When demonstrations swiftly spread to Algeria, Sudan, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, and Jordan, observers hastened to place bets on which regime would be the next to fall. That Hosni Mubarak would be felled next came perhaps as no surprise; Egypt had for years been on a knife's edge, liberalizing and modernizing society while closing all space for political and social participation. Most analysts then turned their attention to Sudan, Yemen, and Bahrain, predicting that surely one of these three would be the next to falter. Yet almost no one expected that Muammar Gaddafi's Libya would be the next domino in line. Having ruled the country for forty-one years and destroyed all semblance of a free media, of opposition politics, or of civil society, Libya was assumed to be ruthlessly stable.

Keywords

Human rights, Libya, North Africa, Middle East, United Nations, African Union, Intervention, United States foreign policy

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We Do Indeed Reap What We Sow

by **Walter Lotze**

When violence first broke out in Tunisia in January 2011, few observers would have predicted that waves of unrest would engulf North Africa and the Arab world. When demonstrations swiftly spread to Algeria, Sudan, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, and Jordan, observers hastened to place bets on which regime would be the next to fall. That Hosni Mubarak would be felled next came perhaps as no surprise; Egypt had for years been on a knife's edge, liberalizing and modernizing society while closing all space for political and social participation. Most analysts then turned their attention to Sudan, Yemen, and Bahrain, predicting that surely one of these three would be the next to falter. Yet almost no one expected that Muammar Gaddafi's Libya would be the next domino in line. Having ruled the country for forty-one years and destroyed all semblance of a free media, of opposition politics, or of civil society, Libya was assumed to be ruthlessly stable.

Thus, when on 16 February violence erupted in Tripoli and Benghazi, most observers assumed that the Libyan security forces would react quickly and brutally deal with the demonstrators, as the regime in Algeria was doing. However, what had taken Gaddafi forty-one years of despotic rule to create unravelled within a matter of days. Demonstrations calling for democratic change evolved into bloody street battles, sometimes with the support of and sometimes against the state security apparatus, and confusion turned to chaos. The regime started to crumble as the rats jumped ship, claiming incredulously that it had been Gaddafi alone who had ruled the country with an iron fist for over four decades. The military structures too appeared to be rapidly collapsing.

While the international media and political analysts struggled to make sense of the developing situation, foreign governments fared even worse. The African Union's Peace and Security Council declined to meet on the crisis, prompting the United Nations Security Council to take the lead, decrying the violence and the mounting evidence of the commission of abuses against the civilian population. Reluctantly, the African Union followed suit, but went only as far as to call on the protesters to demonstrate in a peaceful manner. The League of Arab States called on Gaddafi to leave, probably the first time in history that the organization has been united on any matter, yet failed to offer its support to the demonstrators, for fear of inciting further unrest elsewhere.

Initially, it seemed as though Gaddafi was destined to end his days on the rooftop of his palace in Tripoli, and the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America heralded the victory of the demonstrators and the end of the Gaddafi regime. Within days the situation had been reversed, however, with Gaddafi seeming not only to hold on to power, but indeed to be driving back the anti-Gaddafi movement. The international community then performed a remarkable feat: the "pro-democracy demonstrators" were re-branded as "rebels," and the "democratization movement" as a "civil conflict." Shortly before Gaddafi's forces could exact their brutal revenge on the population of Benghazi, a motley coalition of the willing was hastily assembled, and with the passage of Resolution 1973, commenced an aerial bombardment on Gaddafi's forces. While the international community was distracted by Libya, Saudi Arabia assisted the regime in Bahrain to brutally crush the opposition movement there, and security

forces in Yemen and Syria started to gun down protestors there. Yet while we publicly deplore the violence all around, we should not be too quick to forget that we ourselves created this mess.

American support for the Saudi royal family has enabled one of the most repressive regimes to remain in power for decades, while in Bahrain, the home of the American Fifth Fleet, American and Saudi support has kept the ruling monarchy lingering decrepitly on. In Yemen, Western support has been key to ensuring that President Saleh clings to power, in the name of anti-terrorism measures. During Gaddafi's initial rise to power, foreign governments were very happy to supply the regime in Tripoli with support, as long as the oil kept flowing. Following the Lockerbie bombing in 1988, the West imposed sanctions against Gaddafi and vilified Libya internationally, yet the oil kept on flowing. When two decades of sanctions had attained very little other than to exact hardship on the Libyan people, and during the height of the international war on terror, Libya was brought in from the cold by George W. Bush and Tony Blair. The dismantling of the Libyan weapons development programs and cooperation in the intelligence sector were rewarded with weapons sales and access to international financial transactions, allowing Gaddafi's regime to strengthen its position both domestically and internationally. Gaddafi became a regular visitor to Italy, where he was entertained by Silvio Berlusconi and hundreds of hand-picked models at lavish feasts. Libya was elected to the United Nations Human Rights Council, enabling it to deflect criticism from human rights organizations and detractors. And Libya was given a prominent role in the League of Arab States and in the African Union. Indeed, Libya contributes a significant proportion of the annual operating budget of the African Union Commission, and exercises heavy influence over the Peace and Security Directorate of the organization.

The international community is responsible for entrenching the Gaddafi regime both internationally and domestically, allowing it to exercise disproportionate levels of power, and providing it with the weaponry to back this up within its own borders. When the uprising first commenced, foreign governments cheered on the protestors, hoping that they would be able to topple Gaddafi. When it became obvious that this was not possible without external support, they commenced bombing him out. Yet those who now vilify Gaddafi would do well to bear in mind that it was the West that created him and allowed him to remain in power for so long. Sadly, this is a story not quite unfamiliar. Even sadder is the fact that it is the Libyan people who must pay the ultimate price, and must be cut down by weapons paid for by European car owners.

Walter Lotze (South African) is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) in Oslo, Norway. Prior to joining NUPI, Walter worked in the Peace Support Operations Division of the African Union Commission, prior to which he headed the Peacebuilding Division at the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD), a non-governmental organization working in conflict situations across the African continent. Walter recently completed his PhD in International Relations with the University of St Andrews in Scotland.