

Book review

The Libyan revolution and its aftermath. Edited by Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn. *Hurst Publishers; 320 pages*

Libya's revolution without end

Ashur Shamis

This collection of intelligently sculpted essays, written by academics, journalists and political scientists, describes Libya's descent into chaos after the 2011 uprising that toppled Colonel Muammar Qaddafi.

Collectively, the authors present possibly the most detailed and comprehensive account to date of the events that unfolded in Libya, back to before February 2011, when the armed rebellion broke out. They go about their brief admirably and courageously, drawing on their experiences and knowledge of the country as they attempt to make sense of what seems to be a failed state heading inexorably into chaos.

There is no single Libyan narrative, but rather several threads that weave into a unique, albeit discordant, Libyan story that can be described only as a tragedy, or perhaps as a comedy of errors.

The writers portray the events of 2011 as spontaneous and disconnected, taking place in a political and military vacuum. This resulted in a difficult and complex transition that continues today. Moreover, the Libyan parochial tribal/regional structures, the Qaddafi legacy and NATO's intervention all contributed to throwing the country into a lethal state of chaos and violence.

This is described in the first part of the book, which deals with the "Revolution and its Governance"—the latter referring to how the Libyans handled national affairs once the country was delivered into their hands. They took over what Henry Kissinger, former US secretary of state, described as a "land without a state".

The reader learns about the revolution's "moment of enthusiasm" and the euphoria that engulfed the country. But the weak or non-existent infrastructure had neither the capacity nor the mechanisms to support a new democratic system.

Nor could it deal with the tribal, regional, federalist, social and ideological conflicts that broke out immediately after liberation. A lack of individual and collective leadership added to the problem.

Bickering over the fundamentals of state building and national identity became the order of the day among the naive, shattered political elites, both in the National Transitional Council (NTC) that had attempted to steer the civil war and later the country's first elected governing body, the General National Congress (GNC). The "uncertain revolution"—its status as such remains questionable—thus gave way to an



eviscerating state-building exercise.

The writers set out to illustrate the uncertainty of the revolution itself by detailing how the NTC had conducted its battle for legitimacy and recognition, nationally and internationally. This campaign emerged out of chaotic necessity to manage the “revolution”, its affairs, finances, foreign relations and its most important task, the liberation of the country—a tall order indeed.

A mist of mostly obscure, some irrelevant, events and meetings are documented. A plethora of personalities, which must be confusing to even those

familiar with the intricacies of Libyan society, are presented.

Two plans emerged to secure and manage Tripoli. The military task was to liberate the capital and the logistical approach was to secure the life of its citizens. The reader is informed that both half-baked ideas failed in the face of the chaotic reality. This eventually led to the formation of the infamous Supreme Security Committee.

NATO's role is portrayed as undeniably effective. But the Libyans' reaction to its intervention was ambiguous: they liked its outcome but wished it had not occurred. The writers describe it as an implicit partnership: the Libyans saw NATO and the rebels as more active collaborators than is commonly assumed, with NATO in the air and Libyan fighters on the ground. However, while NATO's officers strongly believed that its troops had a limited role on the ground, namely to secure Libya's borders and conduct an orderly decommissioning of weapons, the Arab League, for example, was vehemently opposed. This continues to be a contentious issue.

The UN's biggest achievement in Libya was its facilitation of the July 2012 election. Despite the novelty of the process, the lack of electoral experience and the short time in which it was completed, it gave Libya its first cleanly elected legislative body in more than 50 years.

Soon, however, typically Libyan factors conspired to make the GNC probably the most disappointing experiment of the transition. It was a hornet's nest of political infighting, with points of contention ranging from the

sublime to the downright dangerous. A picture emerges of people with grudges, vested interests and crooked intentions who had been granted the freedom and the privilege to make laws, with dire consequences. Inexperience and unrealistic expectations turned into anger, frustration and threatened violence.

The same sorry tale repeated itself with respect to justice. High expectations turned into sheer disappointment and bitterness. The charged climate in the wake of the vicious fighting against the Qaddafi forces left no room for forgiveness or reconciliation. Real transitional justice therefore gave way to vengeance, while those with differing political opinions were flushed out, undermined and isolated.

On the subject of the problematic “Islamists”, the reader is presented with insight into the Muslim Brotherhood and the now defunct Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, and their role before and after February 2011. They are portrayed as spending their time looking for their place in the “revolution” and getting into and out of futile coalitions. Their confusion confused others. No one seemed to know what they stood for. The Islamist camp, including the Salafis, Takfiris and jihadists, was and is still fraught with splits and differences.

The rest of the book deals with what is called the “frozen conflict”, with the Federalists, Musratis, Amazigh, Bani Walids, Tebu and Tuareg adding to the Libyan melting pot of violence and confusion.

This is an important reference work

on the phenomenal Libyan uprising and the first three years of its aftermath. The one aspect that is missing is a discussion of the country's legal and constitutional problems, from the August 2011 Constitutional Declaration through to eight amendments to date, which are still at the centre of the Libyan conflict.

Inevitably, the reader is left wondering if democracy was the only choice for Libya—a country without a history of political parties, elections, pluralism or the peaceful transfer of power. Tribal and regional loyalties, mixed with militarisation, dominate its politics. Perhaps a Gulf-state, Moroccan, or Singaporean (soft-totalitarian) model might have worked better. Only time will tell. [GGV](#)