

# Going, going...

## The fall of Muammar Qaddafi will transform Libya, the Middle East and NATO



THE climax of Libya's six-month-old revolt was not only televised via satellite but also text-messaged. Shortly after armed rebels captured the state telecoms company during their entry into the capital, Tripoli, on August 21st they sent a note to millions of mobile-phone users saying "Long live free Libya". Then they added the equivalent of \$40 to all accounts and restored the country's internet connection, which had been cut at the start of the rebellion.

Earlier in the day, thousands of fighters had rushed from the west and south into the surprisingly lightly defended city, accompanied by television crews and cheered on by dancing crowds. They were aided by rebels hiding in suburbs, troops arriving by sea and NATO aircraft. In Green Square, previously the scene of countless stage-managed rallies in support of the old regime, Tripolitans tore down pictures of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, their ruler for the last 42 years and the world's longest-reigning dictator. Benghazi, the rebel capital at the other end of the country's coastline, was illuminated by fireworks as hundreds of thousands of people celebrated in the streets (see pages 20-22).

But the fight is not quite over. As *The Economist* went to press, troops loyal to the dictator still resisted fiercely, using heavy weapons inside Tripoli. They appear to be well-organised, even claiming that letting the rebels into the city was a ploy. That seems unlikely. The rebels now control large parts of the capital. The colonel is hemmed in. His rule has undoubtedly ended. Men loyal to him control only a few towns across the sparsely populated country. Aided by NATO, the rebels should be able to rout them or negotiate a surrender.

### The meaning of victory

The toppling of Colonel Qaddafi—no matter whether he is eventually tried, killed or exiled—will be a boon to the Middle East and Western powers that supported the rebels. The implications for Libya itself are less clear and in part depend on whether Qaddafi loyalists will disperse and keep their weapons or agree to disarm. To become a rule-based democracy—the stated goal of all the various rebel groups—Libya must avoid an Iraqi-style insurgency, as well as disputes among the new rulers.

Helpfully, Libya has no sectarian divide. Its society is relatively homogeneous but grievances abound after four decades of oppression. Revenge killings loom, as well as tribal conflicts and large-scale looting, given the lack of physical security at the moment. The fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan showed that a temporary power vacuum can lead to long-term instability and undermine the formation of a functioning state.

The impact of Libya's liberation on the rest of the Arab world looks clearer. What counts there is the dethronement of a tyrant. It will lift spirits in Syria, where another reformist revolt is under way. It will also give renewed drive to Egyptians

and Tunisians who toppled their dictators several months ago but have since been grappling with constitutional change. Libya will inject new momentum into the Arab spring—raising hopes that decades of stagnation and repression can be ended.

Libya will have an impact on NATO too. The military alliance that faced down the Red Army might have been expected to crush the clumsy forces of Colonel Qaddafi in days. Instead it took five months of fighting and 17,000 air sorties. An embarrassment for NATO? Not at all. The alliance has had a good war so far (who said "stalemate" not long ago?) and is winning the best kind of victory given the circumstances: one achieved mostly by Libyans themselves. Rebels entered the capital without a single Western soldier visible on the ground (though there were some special forces), NATO air attacks, as well as weapons supplied by friendly Gulf states, aided the rebels. But they alone manned trenches, which will give them added legitimacy in months to come.

### War with restraint

The surprising length of the Libya campaign is a result of tactics employed on both sides. The colonel managed to hold out until now because he fights without restraint. This contrasts markedly with NATO. Its pilots have bombed selectively, keeping collateral damage to a minimum. Despite what pro-regime propagandists say, few civilians have been killed from the air. British and French generals, who led the campaign, rightly paid much attention to the interception of supplies to pro-Qaddafi forces, successfully weakening them over time.

Most important, NATO avoided "mission creep", the dread of modern military forces. There is no sign so far that alliance ground troops will follow in the path of pilots as they did in Afghanistan, where a 2001 air campaign against the Taliban allowed a weak and divided opposition to take over, only later to need rescuing. Libya may still require peacekeepers but nobody is yet volunteering NATO for the task.

The moral and legal case for a limited intervention in Libya has not come undone as many critics predicted, though that may change if the country implodes under rebel control and the West is forced to deploy troops. In March, when pro-Qaddafi forces threatened to annihilate Benghazi, Western powers built a broad coalition to save it. Some squabbling inevitably followed, but Americans, north Europeans, Turks and Gulf Arabs did not fall out, as the colonel had hoped (and as they did over Iraq). Instead NATO developed a new—and desperately needed—modus operandi.

Libya is the first alliance campaign where America took a back seat. Europeans—with some shameful exceptions—carried most of the burden. This division of labour, in select circumstances, could be a template for future operations. But this does not mark the return of liberal interventionism. The bitter lessons of Kabul and Baghdad will be remembered far longer than any triumph in Tripoli.

What comes next? Many hands toppled Libya's bombastic colonel. Even more will be needed to clean up after him. The West has much technical expertise to offer—for example to restore the country's battered oil infrastructure. The United Na- ••

• tions could send peace monitors to reassure Qaddafi supporters. If needed, other Arab states should provide peacekeepers. In the meantime, **NATO** might conduct a public investigation into the air campaign to show its bombs killed few civilians.

As during the revolt, most heavy lifting now will be done by Libyans. The first priority of the rebels-turned-rulers must be physical security to stave off anarchy and looting. Next ought to come the formation of a truly representative government, starting perhaps with a national forum of community leaders from all regions to show inclusiveness. The rebels have

said all the right things about reconciliation. To show they mean it and to lessen the chance of a pro-Qaddafi revolt, they should invite a few loyalists to join their government.

At the same time, justice needs to be seen to be done to avoid disaffection among rebel fighters who sacrificed much and will soon be asked to give up cherished weapons. If caught alive, Colonel Qaddafi must be tried, either in Libya or at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. On balance, the first would be preferable: the more responsibility Libyans take for their future, the better. •

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