

AJISS-Commentary

The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies

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Institute for International
Policy Studies

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The Japan Institute of
International Affairs

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Research Institute for
Peace and Security

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No.125. 21 June 2011

JAPAN SHOULD SEEK TRUST OF A POST-QADDAFI LIBYA

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Structural Change in the Middle East

Nearly a quarter century has passed since the surge of revolutions in East Europe that witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Now the world appears to have entered into another time of drastic change, starting in the Middle East and North Africa. The sense of distance in communication at the individual, national and regional levels has disappeared with the information age.

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The nature of politics is being redefined in every corner of the world. Leaders of all states must recognize anew that states consist of citizens and must address their requests seriously. We no longer live in an age where citizens can be controlled merely by police and military power. Regimes unable to read such trends and adopt a political system that reflects public opinion seem destined to collapse, engulfed by waves of uprising.

Today, information technology develops and spreads at a speed far greater than expected. This has enabled latent discontent among people united instantly to form a surge of anti-regime movements, resulting in the abrupt breakdown of long-standing dictatorial regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. The energy of popular movements has linked up beyond borders, now putting the regimes of Libya and Yemen on the brink of collapse.

A political system that incorporates public opinion is not a matter of form but of substance. States differ in their cultural and historical backgrounds. Accordingly, it is natural that each state's political system is different from others. Since the start of the war on Iraq in 2003, the United States has collaborated with other countries in making efforts to help Middle Eastern states move toward democracy. No concrete results have yet been seen, however. A democratic system based on Western values has often been considered the most desirable polity, but I think it is not the only one. We should tolerate political systems that reflect the will of the people according to the situation of each state.

Qaddafi's Challenge and the International Response

Libya has been under the authoritarian rule of Muammar Qaddafi for a good 41 years. There was no one in the country more able than Qaddafi to speak to its people in an orderly manner about a vision for the country based on a firm political philosophy. Calling himself a revolutionary leader, Qaddafi advocated the Third World Theory, which was neither capitalism nor socialism, and attempted statecraft based on a form of direct democracy (Jamahiriya) that envisions neither a head of state nor a government and a parliament. Being idiosyncratic, however, his vision was never fully understood by his people. It is unlikely that Qaddafi's authoritarian charisma, sustained by abundant oil

revenues, will hold against the waves of popular uprising that keep rolling on like a tsunami.

Anti-regime demonstrations broke out in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi on February 15, five days after the fall of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, spreading all over the country in the following few days. Many observers, including this author, assumed that Qaddafi's regime would succumb to the popular uprising in a matter of several weeks. At the time of this writing in early June, with more than 15 weeks (nearly four months) having passed since then, it is yet unclear where Libya is heading.

With two sanction resolutions by the UN Security Council and air strikes by NATO, the international community is closing in on Qaddafi. Why, then, is his regime holding out so long against speculation? Behind this lie 1) insufficient preparation and lack of experience on the part of the protesters, 2) the half-baked response of the international community advocating for democratization and the respect of human rights and 3) downplaying by both the international community and the Libyan protesters of Qaddafi's personal resources underpinned by his experience of various tough spots and difficulties during his 41-year rule.

Qaddafi was aiming to achieve a new world order to replace the existing one. Believing that the current prosperity of Western countries stands upon the exploitation of the raw materials and labor of colonial Asia and Africa, he envisioned a world where all peoples would be free from colonial dominance, and big and small nations would equally coexist.

In order to realize this ideal, Qaddafi supported and assisted nationalist and anti-regime movements around the world from the latter half of the 1970s, making the most of Libya's abundant oil revenues. His support and assistance were extended to the Palestinian liberation movement, the transition to black rule in South Africa, the establishment of the revolutionary regime in Nicaragua, etc. It is also an open secret that he provided assistance to the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland and the Moro Liberation Front in the Philippines. As is well known, such acts by Qaddafi escalated the rift with the West, leading to US

economic sanctions (1986-2004), US air strikes on Tripoli and Benghazi (1986) and UN-led sanctions (1992-1999).

Qaddafi has already experienced military offensives by the West, while the Western countries have undergone generational changes in leadership since then. None of the leaders involved in the current operation has any experience of the previous air strikes and sanctions against Libya. This is all the more reason that the international community should have more carefully examined Qaddafi's previous tactics and strategies before it planned and carried out military and economic sanctions.

When I served in Libya, I heard Qaddafi say, "Christ had no one to understand him in life." His forces are now being surrounded by the rebels in the capital Tripoli, but I do not suppose Qaddafi will ever change his beliefs. The recent manner he shoots killing opposing citizens indiscriminately in an agitated state of mind reveals defects in his ideals.

Libya after Qaddafi

The international community, led by Western countries advocating the protection of human rights and democracy, has agreed to remove Qaddafi, though it has adopted contradictory approaches to China's one-party rule and Saudi Arabia's absolute monarchy. This reminds me of the US-led war on Iraq launched in March 2003, aimed at ousting Saddam Hussein. Saddam was captured in December of the same year, and was executed in December 2006 after a trial. It remains uncertain whether Qaddafi will follow in Saddam's footsteps, but the current situation in Libya looks very much akin to the Iraqi situation at that time. As long as the international community is determined to end Qaddafi's regime, it will be realized sooner or later. I cannot think of any other possibility.

With a population of some 6.5 million (one-twentieth of Japan's population), Libya has a land area of 1.76 million square kilometers (4.6 times larger than Japan). The land productivity is very low, however, since more than 95 percent of the territory is desert and only 1.3 percent of land is cultivable. Therefore Libya lives on revenues from underground resources, including oil and

gas. If a certain group attempts to monopolize the unevenly distributed resources, it will enrage the other excluded groups, leading to the fall of all of them together and thus threatening the existence of their state. This seems to be very well understood within the country. Hence, it is unlikely that Libya will become a divided country, even though some groups may compete for power in a post-Qaddafi Libya and there might arise a disparity between a leading group and the others.

Direct democracy (Jamahiriya) as advocated by Qaddafi according to his Third World Theory is something I regard as a premature idea, since no such example has ever been observed in today's world. The longer the current turbulence continues, the greater the number of groups that will demand a share in a new regime. This will complicate the situation further. At the beginning, the popular uprising consisted mainly of technocrats rebelling against Qaddafi's rule, intellectuals and young activists. Under the Qaddafi regime, tribal leaders had been suppressed and not allowed to pursue their individual interests. Now it is said that they have no small influence on developments.

Now that things have come this far, it is improbable that Qaddafi's regime will regain normalcy. It will be only after several trials and errors that Libya will return to being a normal country. Disrupted supplies of oil and gas are a matter of international concern. As was the case with the 1969 revolution, we can only hope for a swift end to the disruption, temporary as it may be.

Japan's Response


The Middle East as a region is currently struggling to grow into a new political and social structure. Japan started afresh as a nation state after bitter experiences of the Pacific war. Taking the current move seriously, we should help the region shape its future on its own. Just by joining in UN sanctions designed to break down problematic regimes, we will not be able to build mid- to long-term relationships with Middle Eastern states. Although ordinary people in the region have only modest interest in Japan and the Japanese people, they nonetheless hold a favorable curiosity in and admiration for Japan's past

remarkable economic development. It would be worthwhile for Japan to offer its wisdom so that they can solve their problems from a broader perspective.

It is often said that Japanese people are too cautious and reserved in the international arena to assert themselves. The Japanese people and Japan, however, are recognized in the Arab world as sincere and persistent implementers of aid projects. This is a fact probably better known in the region than ordinary Japanese may imagine. Libyans still have not forgotten that Japan assisted their nation building efforts in the early revolutionary stage, even though the geographical distance meant the bilateral relationship was not very close. During my tenure of service in Libya, I more often than not came across Libyans who cherished their personal relations with Japan. When I visited a steel plant constructed in 1985 by Kobe Steel, Ltd., in Misurata, 200 kilometers east of Tripoli, I met a Libyan engineer talking proudly about his past experiences in receiving training from Japanese counterparts. A Libyan cabinet member equally reminisced about his visit to Japan in his younger days in order to receive technical training from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).

In 2003, Libya took a sharp turn toward normalizing its relations with the international community, declaring in December that it would abandon its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. As the country suddenly came under the spotlight, leaders around the globe rushed to visit Tripoli in an endless stream. Under such circumstances, Japan dispatched Mr. Ichiro Aisawa, Senior Vice Foreign Minister (currently Diet Affairs Committee Chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party), as the prime minister's special envoy in June 2004. Although Qaddafi was known to meet only heads of state among foreign visitors, he spared a good two hours for Aisawa. Also present at this meeting, I was able to sense Qaddafi's strong interest in Japan and his extraordinarily high expectations of Japan's assistance in human resource development and technical cooperation.

Society rests on individuals, regardless of political philosophy or system. State-level relationships may undergo ups and downs according to the policies taken at the time, but sustainable friendships will not likely be built just by addressing current affairs. In order to forge and strengthen long-term

relationships, it is necessary for Japan to cultivate the trust of foreign societies. Continuous personal exchange at the popular level, technical cooperation and assistance in the education of young people are extremely effective ways to foster trust at the personal level, whose importance a non-assertive Japan should recognize anew. 

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