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Libya:

The Other Way or Are Really the Tribes Ruling the Agenda?

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Ever since the first news of the uprising in Libya have come to rule the international agenda, the tribal structure of the Libyan society has become a settled fact, and the question as to what role – if any – Libyan tribes may play in the evolving conflict and civil war has become everybody's guess. Although it cannot be denied that in many aspects the Libyan society is among the most conservative ones in the Arab world, globally relevant developments like urbanization, industrialization, education etc. have left their impact on Libya as well.

Yet, we[1] *claim that these developments have taken place in the "virtual sphere" and the modernization efforts* à l'arabe*, i. e. nationalism, Arabism, Islamism and Arab socialism, have failed so far, because they have been framed – by "globalizing" patrimonial rulers – in the same "virtual sphere", therefore, they have left the "real sphere" of decision-making and social organization undisturbed.*

The basic underlying relationship in the traditional Arab society can be characterized by the 'God–ruler–subject' paradigm. In Libya Qaddafi cut down this relationship to the 'ruler (Leader)–subject' dimension, when he and the Free Officers toppled the monarchy, which derived its legitimacy from its religious affiliation to the Sanusi order. The new revolutionary command substituted the former patrimonial structure by a neo-patrimonial one, the ideology of which is neither socialist, nor capitalist, but claims to create a third world theory, in which Islam (i.e., the regime's interpretation of Islam) plays a constitutive role.

As a result, Libya has acquired a dual structure, where the traditional and tribal organizations and the Western institutions of the state coexist and overlap.

Within this patrimonial structure decision-making is performed within the "real" sphere of politics by the clients whose position and power are first and foremost defined by their closeness to the centre of "real" power, the Leader of the Revolution (the *khassa*, or the privileged). What is happening in the "virtual" sphere of the state is of secondary importance only, as the role of the "virtual" sphere is to realise the internationally "accepted" frameworks of practice – whether imposed from the outside by other players (e.g. the colonialists in the past) or drawn up to accommodate to the trends of international development in the less recent past.

Therefore, the Leader and the clients create (have created) the structures ("parliament", "ministries", "courts"), which in fact have no other role than to serve decision-making in the "real" sphere. When Qaddafi elaborated and introduced his third-way theory, the Great Jamahiriyya and the direct participation of the people in decision-making, in fact he was using the "socialist" terminology – developed further – within the "virtual" sphere. This is why he can rule the country without having any official position (within the "virtual" sphere) and this is why he cannot resign, as state functions and offices belong to the "virtual" sphere, but real power is vested and realized in the "real" sphere, where resignation has no meaning at all.

1 This study has appeared in *Transatlantické listy,* No. 2. (2011). pp. 12–17.

The relationship between the Leader and the subjects in the "real sphere" is based on a kind of a religious–moral contract, which is formally concluded by the *bay'a*, the oath of allegiance, referred to the ruler (Leader) upon officially coming into office. Its underlying principle – not without any religious connotations – is that the ruler provides for the well-being and dignity of his subjects, and generally for the realization of justice *('adala)*. In return, the subjects accept his guidance and rule. Should the ruler become incapable of delivering his part of the social contract, the subjects are not bound to him anymore. Qaddafi, by fighting back not only the rebels, but the Arab League, the international community and the NATO proved that he is still able to perform his tasks, he is still the 'ruler'. Consequently, his behaviour is absolutely rational and logical in this context of the "real" sphere of power.

Libya has a population of some 6.5 million,[2] most of whom are settled along the coast of the Mediterranean (approx. two-thirds in Tripolitania, one-third in Cyrenaica, and around 5% in Fezzan), since only 1% of the total territory of the country is arable. Libyan population – similarly to the Arab standards – is young, but is quickly getting older. The median age is 24.5 years, with 32.8% under the age of 14. While this ratio is relatively high in European standards, it is on the decline.[3] (The ratio of the population above 65 is under 5% only.) On the one hand, life expectancy has considerably increased in the past decades: from the 45–46 years average in 1960 to the 77.65 years of today.

On the other hand, with the rapidly changing conditions of life, e.g. education or urbanization, women give birth to much fewer children with a total fertility rate expected at 2.96 children born/women (down from an already declining 6.32 in 1995 and 3.71 in 2000). Illiteracy has been practically eliminated, 82.6% of the total population can read and write. Urbanization is at 78% (up from the 27% in 1964 and the 40% in the 1980's) and is growing at an estimated annual 2.1% (as compared to the annual 8% in the mid-1980's).

The Libyan population is composed of Arabs, Berbers, Tuaregs, Tebus and some other black Africans, with an unknown number of foreigners. Berbers, Tuaregs and the sub-Saharan Tebus are considered the ancient inhabitants of the territory, but their numbers were always too low – their ethnic relatives in larger numbers are living outside the borders of Libya – to play a significant political or economic role in the country. Their traditional way of life was a mixture of farming and pasturing.

The Arabs reached Libya in the 7th century, then in a new wave in the 11th century, when the beduin tribes of the Bani Hilal and Bani Salim arrived. The Arabs imposed not only Islam, but their Arabic language and political domination on the Berber and Tuareg population. At the same time they disrupted the living patterns of the Berbers and the Tuaregs, and introduced their own tribal life. Islamization was mostly completed by 1300 with those resisting to it fleeing into the desert. Arabization was a much longer process, but in Libya much more thorough than in the other countries of North Africa, and by the 20th century relatively few Berber-speakers remained in Libya. (In many places where the Berber language was maintained, it was due to the women, who lived in relative seclusion, therefore did not learn Arabic.)

2 6,597,960 (July 2011 est.) includes 166,510 non-nationals.

3 In 2005 it was 33.9%, in 1995 it was 48%.

At the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th centuries there was an Arab immigration from the Iberian peninsula as well, following the successful *reconquista* and Catholicization by the Spanish kings. Thus by the beginning of the 16th century all the main ethnic groups and formative elements were present and gradually the special – ethnical, cultural, linguistic and social – mix that has come to define and characterize the Libyan society of today, developed. Although Ottoman Turkish power officially subdued Libya, its impact on the social context has been rather vague.

Italian colonial rule in the first half of the 20th century could not leave an impact either. In both cases the reason was probably that the territory of the present-day Libya was a kind of "in-between" land, on the border of the Arab Maghreb and Mashreq, between the British and French spheres of colonial interest. The new state, the Kingdom of Libya, when established in 1951, reflected this same "in-between" or "overlapping" character: it comprised of historically Mashreq-related Cyrenaica, Maghreb-linked Tripolitania and sub-Saharan – desert – Fezzan. In a way, these differences are reflected in the events of the day, in spite of all efforts within the frameworks of both the Kingdom and the Jamahiriyya to establish an integrated state and a "nation".

Most of the Libyan society, therefore, is relatively homogenous – Arab–Berber – in character as only some very few numbers stand out distinctively. The Tebus, living mostly in the far south belong to a much darker-skinned African race and to a separate family of languages (the Nilo-Saharan language family, while both the Arabic and the Berber languages belong to the Afro-Asiatic family). There are some other sub-Saharan Africans, most of whom are considered as the descendents of black slaves, but have been integrated into Libyan society for decades or even centuries.

While the Libyan society is considered to look down on darker skinned people, there are indications that they distinguish between the black people of "their own" and the more recent black migrant workers from the neighbouring states, like Mali, Niger, Sudan, etc.[4] The number of foreign workers from other countries – either from the Arab states, Europe or elsewhere – is very difficult to estimate, but they have become a source of concern as the Libyan civil war unfolded: on the one hand, the huge waves of refugees on Libya's (Tunisian and Egyptian) borders included huge numbers of foreigners. On the other hand, there were rumours – denied by the Libyan regime, and by Saif al-Islam Qaddafi[5] – about foreign (African and other) mercenaries fighting in the pay of the regime, yet, figures were varying on a wide range.

The ethnic composition is coloured by the tribal and clan affiliations, the exact importance of which can only be guessed at. Historically, the tribalism of the ancient Berber population has been re-strengthened by the tribal organization of the Arabs. Yet, when Qaddafi and the Free Officers came into power in 1969, in the vein of modernization

4 These black people of "their own" are the descendents of those black African tribal leaders and/or elders, who gave their sons and daughters to the care and household of the Arab/Berber caravan traders. For example, on the one hand they were part of the black "nobility", and on the other, they came to be members of the Arab/Berber household in the framework of the mawla system.

5 In his interview to *Jazeera* Saif al-Islam Qaddafi said that the dark-skinned soldiers were not mercenaries, but Libyan nationals as well. "Talk to Jazeera – Saif al-Islam Gaddafi". *YouTube*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFigOpOBpxo, 4 March 2011.

they tried to eliminate the tribal system – in many analyses the main reason was the relative inferiority of Qaddafi's own tribe, the Qadadfa as compared to the two biggest tribes of Libya, the Warfalla and the Magariha, but on the other hand it was exactly this inferiority, which brought Qaddafi to power in 1969, when he could play the balancing factor between the two major tribes.

Another factor was the possible resistance of the tribal elites to the change in the political and social structure of the country. By 1979, however, it has become evident that the tribal organization of the society cannot be put away with, therefore, Qaddafi decided rather to rely on and build his power on the tribes.[6] Besides his own tribe, it was especially the two major tribes who received favours and positions, yet when in 1993 some of the Warfalla tried to organize a (failed) coup because of the perceived slight as compared to the Magariha, Qaddafi introduced the so-called Leadership Committees.

These were organized around the tribes and headed by the tribal leaders, who were not only empowered to reward their kinsmen for good services, but were also made responsible for the actual deeds of the tribe. As Qaddafi's regime depended more and more on the tribal leaders, other non-governmental forms of organization were increasingly suppressed, while the tribal character of his rule and guidance increasingly manifested (e.g. the *bay'a*, the pledge of oath by the tribal leaders in a written form on show for everyone to see, his way of living – in a tent, or his way of wearing traditional Libyan clothes, etc).

Libya is considered to be among the most conservative and tribal societies in the Arab world, with the ethical ideals and driving principles of the – centuries-old Arab–Berber–African – desert way of life still strongly prevailing in everyday life. This provides a unique pattern characteristic of the Libyan society only, therefore, incomprehensible for others, while it makes certain reactions within the society predictable within the Libyan context of social thinking. Recent modernization, urbanization (resulting in, among others, a change in marrying customs[7]) and globalization – suspended from time to time by political events – do have an impact and have initiated the transformation of these patterns, yet the depth and the thoroughness of it is at the moment unknown. News and analyses differ along a wide spectrum of understanding as to what role, if any, the tribal structure is still playing in the Libyan events. Some claim that it will be the tribes that will define the final outcome of the Libyan civil war.

Others say that while tribal relations may be important in everyday life, e.g. when someone is applying for a job or some other position, in politics these have no meaningful role whatsoever. While it is often quoted that there are some 140 tribes in Libya which make up about thirty big tribal groupings, in the Istanbul talks of the Libyan opposition some 100 Libyan community and tribal leaders came together – mostly from the Warfalla of Bani Walid, while in the counter-event ("National Conference of the Tribes of Libya") organized by the regime in Tripoli 2000 chiefs from 851 tribes and tribal fractions were present.

These figures reflect the intricate and complicated set of structure of the tribal system. Tribal groupings are a loose – confederation-like – structure of several tribes, sub-tribes,

6 In his *Green Book*, Qaddafi enumerates and sums up the merits of the tribe as a social unit.

7 Endogamy, i.e. marrying within the family, e.g. marrying the paternal uncle's daughter, has sharply declined.

clans and families, each of which has local leaders and local concerns as well as varying degrees of loyalty to the regime. Many people are urban residents, whose family names may reflect tribal affiliation, but this does not necessarily mean that the person receives or accepts the direction of his tribal elders. According to estimates some 15% has no tribal affiliation whatsoever, being descendents of Berbers, Turkish and other communities.

Therefore, the most we can claim is that while there have been several attempts at "nation-building" (starting with the establishment of the country, then its restructuring to ensure equal distribution of oil incomes, to the attempts by Qaddafi to involve the masses in direct participation in decision-making), the tribes have survived and it is still them who provide the ethical and traditional model of social organization, everything else having failed so far.

The Libyan tribal organization encompass Arab, Berber and African traditions, Islam and the moral law of the desert, and they reject every outside force and model. Only the pattern of their own is credible. And while change due to modernization and globalization is recognized, the basis of legitimacy is still felt to be the Libyan, tribal pattern of social organization. Therefore, both the regime and the opposition are referring to that and are trying to mobilize as much tribal force as possible, even if this may prove of a symbolic relevance only. The decisive question after all will be if urbanization and industrialization have exercised enough power to restructure the society along geographical, urban and professional lines in order to create new identities and loyalties, or rather to break up old tribal structures once and for all.

It is often claimed that Qaddafi behaves like a tribal chief, which raises questions regarding the context in which his power – without holding an official state function or title – is realized. In fact, the Jamahiriyya so far has operated within the tribal framework. The 2011 "revolution" in Libya, therefore, was not (could not be) a real, deep-rooted social initiative, but wanted to challenge the present system of power distribution, and as such can and should be understood as a tribal struggle.

It is about power, and not about social concerns (contrary to what was happening in Tunisia and Egypt). Benghazi, by putting forward its claim to become the new centre,[8] is fighting a regular tribal – patrimonial – war for power. Its policies of alliance are reflecting that, too: the West should provide the opposition with money, arms and protection, and should do it at once. In this context, the demonstrations of the Arab spring, the internet revolution, etc. (in the "virtual sphere") were only providing the opportunity to oust Qaddafi and the old elite from power (in the "real sphere"). The former ministers and other government officials switching sides and joining the opposition tried to grasp and capitalize on the opportunity and (re-) establish the power of their tribes.

By framing their claim in the context of the Arab spring and by having Ahmed al-Zubair Ahmed Sanusi, a descendent of King Idris among their ranks, they ensured international and regional support in the "virtual sphere". Yet, Ahmed al-Zubair Ahmed Sanusi and the opposition's contacts to the – suppressed – religious leaders of the country, provide the necessary religious legitimacy to gain the "real sphere" as well. Should this logic prevail, the Transitional National Council will have successfully completed a coup

8 Benghazi was the centre of the Kingdom and there has been an almost historical rivalry between Tripoli and Benghazi.

d'état (which will probably be called a "revolution" later), and a new tribal leadership/alliance will lead the country and control its oil wealth. This is made even more probable by the lack of a Libyan "middle class". The logic of the patrimonial system cannot allow the emergence of anything independent. Qaddafi's power rested on the strong intelligence and security forces, who were carefully selected from the committed tribes of tribal fractures,[9] who paid to him blind obedience, as such, they – together with a very small group of intelligentsia vocal in his and their praise[10] – constitute the upper echelon of the Libyan society, the *khassa*, or the privileged.

Everybody else belongs to the commoners, the *'amma'*, thus manifesting the traditional "ruler-subject" paradigm. When in the mid-1980s the small private enterprises were finally closed down,[11] they extinguished the financial conditions of a cautiously emerging "middle class", who were, therefore, eliminated once and for all. While data are scarce on the later (again) permitted small trade, we can only suppose that the once terminated economic positions and contacts were later given to those faithful to the regime and to Qaddafi.

Closing and opening the economic enterprises was about the re-distribution of economic contacts, and was, therefore, a classical patrimonial process. As a result, in the absence of a "middle class", the new power centre is going to win. While Tunisia and Egypt are going to organize their future on the basis of new values, Libya will pursue the patterns offered by tribalism further.

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9 E.g. his son, Khamis was heading the Khamis Brigade, the best equipped elite unit of the Libyan Army.

10 In the past decades it was, and still is, a constant, every night program of the Libyan state television to invite poets to the studio, who, while discussing political events, were (are) reciting odes in praise of Qaddafi and the regime.

11 The process, in fact, took several years, as the regime started to eliminate small trade already at the end of the 1970s.