

Illusive revolutions? Elusive social movements? The Arab Spring, democracy, and some possible lessons from Libya

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“The Arab world has shaken itself out of its lethargy after decades of apparent resignation and silence. But the uprisings do not yet amount to a revolution” (Tariq Ramadan, “Waiting for an Arab Spring of ideas,” *NYT*, 30 Sep 2012).

The peaceful demonstrations with which [the Arab Spring] began, the lofty values that inspired them, become distant memories. Elections are festive occasions where political visions are an afterthought. The only consistent program is religious and is stirred by the past. A scramble for power is unleashed, without clear rules, values, or endpoint. It will not stop with regime change or survival. History does not move forward. It slips sideways” (Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, *NYRB*, 8 Nov 2012).

Were these revolutions? Or were the events of the last two years in the Middle East and North Africa simply regime changes, where the old order was partly replaced by some

new elites, without leaving the essential structures of power unaltered and, consequently, the social contract untouched?

98 The easy answer is of course the old chestnut attributed to either Mao ZseTung or Zhou Enlai when questioned about the french revolution—"it's too early to tell." While countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Barhain, and particularly Libya have gone through considerable social turmoil, starting in December 2011, social and political groups and factions in each country have only started to grapple with some of the changes brought about by the replacement of dictatorships in each country. More important, however, some observers have argued that this new wave of political energy is worthy of the name "revolution," is indeed of "world historical importance," much like the great world revolutions in 1789, 1848, 1905, 1917, 1968, and 1989.¹ Yet others, including those cited above, have argued with equal fervor that the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa were precisely that—and no more.

In the defense of their case each side uses definitions of revolution that show considerable variance with each other. Although I have invariably been quite sceptical of labeling the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa revolutions, the case with which I am most familiar—Libya—probably comes closest to having witnessed a revolution:

1 See in particular John Foran, "Taking power, re-making power: the threads of the cultures of resistance behind the Arab Spring," in Mehran Kamarava and Zahra Babar, eds., *The evolving ruling bargain in the Middle East*, Columbia University Press and Hurst Publishers, forthcoming, 2013.

both the political and social basis of the old regime have been discarded, and there is the actual prospect that the old structures of power that sustained the Qadhafi regime may be replaced by a more democratic form of government that promises a more economically egalitarian society. In other words, in the language I use throughout this paper, that a new social contract/ruling bargain may be constructed between the state and society in Libya—the sign of a true social, political, and economic revolution.

This, of course, is a hard target to meet and, in the Libyan case, much of this is frankly counter-intuitive. Libya hardly seemed a good candidate for a thorough revolution. First of all, few observers in the days following the start of the uprising on 17 February 2011 predicted that the country's citizens would prove capable and willing to stand up against a regime whose mechanisms of repression had been an inextricable part of the divide-and-rule policies of its 42-year long, almost totalitarian rule.

99

Observers had long noted the severe deficiencies in the development of social and political institutions during the Qadhafi years, predicting both long-term chaos and enormous difficulties in reconstructing (or perhaps more accurately, constructing for the first time) a modern state in Libya. Despite this, during the first real test of trying to create a first step toward building that new state, national elections went forward without major incidents.² Re-

2 For background on Libya and the problems associated with oil-led development, see Dirk Vandewalle, *Libya since independence: oil and State-building*, Cornell University Press, 1998. For an

100 regardless of enormous difficulties, and despite having a low sense of national identity, the 7 July 2011 elections, barely 17 months after the uprising against the Qadhafi regime had started, took place in an almost euphoric atmosphere. It quickly became clear that Libya—even though its provisional government and the National Transitional Council (NTC) that had guided the country during the civil war faced enormous challenges—would not implode as many had feared. Furthermore, the country's Islamists—that emerged in all other Middle Eastern and North African countries as powerful intermediaries or principal actors—were routed by a coalition of non-Islamic parties assembled under the umbrella of Mahmoud Jibril's National Forces Alliance (NFA).

Developments in Libya thus present us with a number of intellectual challenges that go to the heart of how the academic community and policy circles have studied and described both the durability of political regimes in the Middle East and North Africa and, more generally, revolutions. There is now some hope that Libya may well become the country that proves to be the exception to the widely accepted notion that all oil exporters in the Middle East and North Africa region are invariably highly authoritarian and deny

update of events, including the country's civil war in 2011, see Dirk Vandewalle, *A history of modern Libya*, Cambridge University Press, second edition, 2012. Consult also Alison Pargeter, *Libya: the rise and fall of Qaddafi*, Yale University Press, 2012, and Ethan Chorin, *Exit the colonel: the hidden history of the Libyan revolution*, Public Affairs, 2012.

their population a political voice. If indeed a more democratic system takes hold, the notion that oil countries tend to be less or non-democratic may also be proven wrong—a claim that has often been made by the so-called rentier literature.³

In light of what happened in Libya since early 2011, the literature on the resilience of authoritarianism, once one of the main areas of academic inquiry, now looks somewhat tarnished. The arguments “rentier state” theorists have made about the immutability of institutions, about the immobility imposed by one-sided social contracts, and about the resultant difficulties in constructing state institutions over relatively short periods of time, appear equally suspect.

We may have been right in predicting that Libya would face lingering problems of state- and nation-building as a result of its oil-led development and because of the neglect of the state as a focus of identity that goes back to the cre-

101

3 Among the enormous volume of work on the rentier state that argues along this argument, see, for example, Jill Crystal, *Oil and politics in the Gulf: rulers and merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995; Kiren Aziz Chaudhry, *The price of wealth: economies and institutions in the Middle East*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1997, and Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995; Gregory Gause, *Oil monarchies: domestic and security challenges in the Arab Gulf States*, New York, Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1994; Dirk Vandewalle, *Libya since independence: oil and State-building*, Cornell University Press, 1998. While much has been amended to the rentier literature in recent years, the overall link between oil-led development and authoritarianism remains a disputed part of that literature. See in particular Michael Ross, “The political economy of the resource curse,” *World Politics*, n. 51, January 1999, p. 297-322.

ation of the country in 1951. But we certainly did not envision the relative success the country has experienced so far, overcoming what once seemed insurmountable social, political, and institutional problems. Indeed, as events have unfolded until now, it looks as if Libya may have been relatively well served by the fact that many of the state institutions it now increasingly relies upon had to be built almost *ex nihilo*, so that Libya did not have to experience the difficult removal of the “deep state” Egypt and Tunisia had to pass through—state structures that more often than not make the transition toward a revolution difficult, if not impossible.

102

There are, however, important caveats that must be taken into account. Libya’s move toward implementing its “revolution” is only a few months old when this is written. Many of the seemingly startling developments may well be halted or even reversed as the country now finds its way in a post-election world.

And there are lingering problems that go to the heart of the question, *i.e.*, whether Libya’s uprising will, in the end, turn out to be a true revolution. One of these—and perhaps the most crucial in terms of considering Libya a successful revolution or not—is whether the relationship between the state and its citizens, and the social contract that underpins this relationship, can be altered sufficiently to lead to structural and longlasting social, political, and economic changes that would truly characterize a revolution.

So far, many of the problems which are central to the question of how the country's new political community will be constructed, and what the duties and obligations of both the state and local society will be *vis-à-vis* each other, have only been tangentially touched upon in the euphoria and the chaos of the post-revolution period. At the margins of all this activity there has been a still somewhat stilted debate about the role of the state in the new Libya or, in particular, about the relationship between this new state and the country's citizens. There remains a very vaguely defined understanding of how the newly emerging political realities within Libya will be formalized into a new social contract for a country where such a pact was traditionally determined without consultation by the state during the Qadhafi regime.

103

Until the country's constitution is written and adopted, many of those details will remain murky. Oil countries, and particularly Libya with its checkered history of state-building (or, perhaps better, state avoidance) during the Qadhafi regime, tend to rely on highly skewed and imposed ruling bargains that leave citizens simply as bystanders. The Libyan elections were of course all about making citizens active participants in the country's political future—an untested feature in the country's history. But in Libya oil and the way the old social contract was implemented have left some debilitating legacies: among them a profound sense of political atomization that was partly reflected in the outcome of the elections, the fact that the state continues to be

seen as an indispensable provider, the lack of interpersonal trust and, most importantly, the use of extensive patronage via oil-fueled revenues that traditionally kept the ruling bargain in place.

104 The questions I want to address in the remainder of this paper focus on how Libya's new leaders will be able to reshape or in part create *ex nihilo* a new ruling bargain when faced with some of these structural legacies of the past. To what extent can it change the role of the state as providential provider in light of the relatively low capacity it possesses and in light of popular expectations? Can the government avoid the kind of long-term patronage that in an oil exporter makes governing easier in the short term, but imposes long-term political and economic consequences on the government? Will this "shadow of the past" continue to loom over Libya, or can a future government move beyond these structural impediments and bring about a true revolution? And what does Libya tell us more generally about the Arab Uprisings and about whether those can be seen as true revolutions?

Libya's social contract under Qadhafi

As defined in this paper, ruling bargains are implicitly or explicitly defined rules and arrangements that delineate the political and economic rights, duties and obligations between those in charge of the state and individuals within the state subject to their governance. They are the most visible—but sometimes least formally institutionalized—of all institutions that mediate between the state and soci-

ety. They formally or informally describe and prescribe, in Douglass North's classic definition, the rules of the game between ruler and ruled.⁴ These rules may be made explicit or left deliberately opaque; they can develop through custom, or they may simply be imposed single-handedly by the ruler. No matter how they historically emerge, however, they tend to become rules or norms that, particularly in authoritarian states like Libya under Qadhafi, clearly limit the political voice of a country's citizens while essentially leaving them depoliticized.

In the traditional European context, as a result of long periods of strife and compromises during the state-building process that sometimes lasted centuries, ruling bargains became carefully calibrated, under most circumstances minutely defined, and backed by guarantees and legal review. They became intricately woven into the fabric of local societies, often becoming part and parcel of a cultural and religious identity. They remain until today jealously defended by both organized and non-organized groups that benefit from their content.

105

Historically speaking, ruling bargains in Europe as well as in Latin America have become highly politicized. As a result, they are most often modified through the political process, requiring a high degree of transparency by a number

4 Douglass C. North, *Institutions, institutional change and economic performance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, and Douglass C. North and Robert P. Thomas, *The rise of the Western world: a new economic history*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973.

of regulatory and legal institutions that provide predictability to both sides. They are furthermore constantly subject to often acrimonious review and adjustment, particularly during periods of economic retrenchment and reform when the state and its “social partners” need to recalibrate their previous positions to achieve a common goal.

106 In Libya, as in many other oil exporters in the Middle East and North Africa, social contracts are essentially of a different nature. Citizens were seldom consulted as they emerged, a result of a much more problematic process of state-building which made systematic exclusion, or minimal inclusion, of some groups of citizens possible. Libya once more has been an extreme example of this, based in part on Qadhafi’s notion of the *jamahiriyya* that essentially denied that modern (western) state institutions could be a guideline for the country. This formative process in Libya—both during the monarchy (1951-1969) and during the Qadhafi period—stood in dramatic contrast to the dynamic process of creating and maintaining social contracts in western political systems. The distinction is important not only for gauging the strength and shape of ruling bargains in oil exporters, but also for measuring the maneuvering room they now provide to governments to actually reform their political and economic systems.

One could argue that, strictly speaking, it is erroneous to refer to the social, economic and political arrangements that have emerged in countries like Libya as ruling bargains. They never were bargains in the sense of involving two negotiating sides that achieve mutually acceptable or

agreed-upon arrangements. Rather than giving voice and access to diverse groups within society, they have more often than not led to a striking political silence. As a result then of how ruling bargains developed in oil exporters, and particularly in Libya, these bargains were often not strictly viewed as contractual obligations by either side. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics is their above mentioned informality, due to the fact that they were most often viewed as implicit understandings, at least during the early mobilizational years of Qadhafi's rule. Institutionally speaking, the ruling bargain in Libya under Qadhafi therefore was of low quality: bureaucratically inefficient, riddled with corruption and patronage, and often operating in the absence of clear rules of law.⁵

107

In all developing countries, the colonial powers' bureaucratic legacies did matter significantly for local institutional development, and hence for how states constructed themselves and their ruling bargains. Where local populations had been introduced to and incorporated (even at low levels) into bureaucratic mechanisms during the colonial period, and where the hinterland had been incorporated into a unified economy that made extraction possible, the seeds were sown for political, charity, and civil society organizations that would eventually serve as the torchbearers not only for independence movements but

⁵ For indicators of high quality institutions, see Alberto Alesina, "The political economy of high and low growth," *Annual World Bank Conference on Development Economics 1997*, Washington; the World Bank, 1998, p. 217-36.

for articulated regulatory, extractive, and coercive organizations that legitimated the state as the meta-institution for the territory. Where the colonial powers had been content to create settler, landlord economies or had few economic incentives to incorporate local populations into economic frameworks, the notions of state and of the possibility of articulated institutions remained unknown. In Libya, the most extreme example of exclusionary politics during the Italian occupation, the notion of statehood would remain suspect and contested both during the monarchy and after the 1969 Qadhafi coup.⁶

108 In addition, oil has played an important role in how the ruling bargain emerged and took shape in Libya. When the rapid inflows of oil revenues shifted the function of the state almost exclusively toward the distributive (and the coercive), it also eroded the need for clearly articulated institutional development. It obliterated the usual bargaining between ruled and ruler that had marked state-building processes elsewhere into unilateral decisions by a ruler bent on perpetuating a stateless society, a *jamahiriyya*. That this process could be so contracted and provoke so little local reaction attests to the profound de-politicization that takes place in oil exporters, and to the fact that the emergence of rent in Libya preceded state-building.

One result is that the embryonic state institutions that emerged in Libya first during the monarchy and then during

6 See Lisa Anderson, "The State in the Middle East and North Africa," *Comparative Politics*, v. 20, n. 3, October 1987, p. 1-18.

the Qadhafi years, became intricate channels for economic largesse and distributive purposes. Meanwhile their regulatory and legal capacities—already weak because of the initial state-building process described above—remained inefficient and underdeveloped.⁷ Wholesale management, through a tightly controlled network of expatriate technocrats and elites close to the regime, was similarly an expression of the inability to regulate—a political and economic shortcut.⁸

An important corollary for the debate on ruling bargains concerns the kind of political community that is created under these conditions, and how this influences the ability for further reform in the post-civil war period in Libya. Although observers have often invoked—somewhat rashly—the “no taxation, therefore no representation” principle as the rationale for the exclusionary nature of politics in the region, there is little doubt that Libyans have endured a long process of political disenfranchisement that essentially consisted of gaining relative wealth at the ex-

109

7 This is a highly truncated and somewhat arbitrary categorization made for the purpose of this chapter, derived from an enormous amount of earlier literature. See Vandewalle (1998) and Chaudhry (1997) for more detailed discussions of the emergence, nature and differentiation of institutions.

8 In regard to the management of Libya's economy, I have often described the country during the Qadhafi years as being a “centrally unplanned economy”—i.e. the state reserved unto itself all economic decisions but without any sense of discrimination as to priorities or to the process of creating an integrated planning mechanism, adding to the sense of institutional disaggregation Libya's new rulers must now deal with.

pense of formal political voice.⁹ As long as external rents can be generated, there is little need for individuals to influence public agencies and to help shape public policy to their material advantage. There is little incentive to actively engage the state to determine the contours of the ruling bargain. Government bureaucrats simply turn into a rentier class. And because Libyans did not contribute to the creation of wealth, they were hard pressed to argue for either a greater share of the state's distributive largesse or for reform. The atomistic tendency of this type of development in Libya, particularly at the popular level, was to create personal rather than group interests.

110 Furthermore, social stratification in an oil state like Libya resulted overwhelmingly from the distributive and spending patterns of the state. This stratification was linked to the need of the regime to create (admittedly small) coalitions of support among the population. Although data are

9 There are two principal objections to this longstanding claim. The first has been succinctly elaborated by John Waterbury, "The State and economic transition in the Middle East and North Africa," in Nemat Shafiq, ed., *Prospects for Middle Eastern and North African economies: from boom to bust and back?*, London, MacMillan Press Ltd., 1998, p. 159-77, who not only questions the assertion that MENA economies are under-taxed, but also rebuts the more general assertion that taxation in MENA has "evoked demands that governments account for their use of tax monies..." He adds furthermore that "there has been no translation of tax burden into pressures for democratization." The second is that popular demands for some sort of representation often derives from entitlements based either physically on earlier distributive largesse by governments during boom times, or are based on shared (often international) norms about what constitutes good governance.

exceedingly difficult to obtain, one remarkable social and economic phenomenon in Libya has been the absence of a distinct middle class with its own goals, tactics and methods that could function as the catalyst for political and economic change. It was virtually impossible to discern during the Qadhafi period distinct class preferences and clearly articulated class goals—in part because the combination of welfare politics and weak institutions atomized populations. In a process familiar to institutional economists, the way to advance in a country like Libya was never to articulate interests in a common setting, but to pursue them individually.

In summary, oil wealth in Libya allowed for the creation of extensive patronage systems that vitiated pressures for political liberalization and fostered the creation of one-sided, top-down ruling bargains. In this peculiar set-up, the Qadhafi regime could survive for a very long time by relying on relatively small coalitions. Libya under Qadhafi demonstrated that the state in oil economies can easily prevent the consolidation of social groups that, in the European context, were a prelude to democracy.¹⁰ Or, in Putnam's

111

10 For applications to the MENA region, see Hootan Shambayati, Shambayati, Hootan. "The rentier State, interest groups, and the paradox of autonomy: State and business in Turkey and Iran," *Comparative Politics*, April 1994, on Iran; Jill Crystal, "Approaches to the study of civil society in the Gulf," in Richard Augustus Norton, *Civil Society in the Middle East*, v. 2, New York, Brill, 1996, p. 260-85, on Kuwait and Qatar; John Entelis, "Oil wealth and the prospects for democratization in the Arabian Peninsula: the case of Saudi Arabia," in Maiem A. Sherbiny and Mark A. Tessler, eds., *Arab oil: impact on the Arab countries and global implications*, New York, Praeger, 1976.

formulation, these states can prevent the accretion of social capital that would give impulse to collective action.¹¹ Whether or not these are explicit policies or simply side-effects of rentier-type development is not always clear, but I have certainly viewed them as deliberately meant to depoliticize citizens in the Libyan case.

Libya's 2011 revolution and the new social contract

112 If the Libyan revolution that started in 2011 has made one thing explicitly clear, it is that the country's citizens were no longer willing to be subjected to the very one-sided ruling bargain that had increasingly created a visible bifurcation between regime elites and the general population during the latter years of the regime. Indeed, they proved willing to sacrifice an estimated 30,000 individuals to escape from what they collectively judged as a ruling bargain imposed upon them that was no longer acceptable.

But what new ruling bargain will emerge in the light of the removal of the restraints of the Qadhafi regime? According to the pronouncements of the country's interim rulers, Libya will become a more equal, a more transparent country while its leadership will be subject to higher standards of accountability—those are the promises either implicitly or explicitly expressed in the various campaigns of the political parties and individuals who took part in the

11 Robert Putnam, *Making democracy work: civic traditions in modern Italy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993.

elections on 7 July, and certainly those conveyed explicitly by the NTC and the interim government.

We should realize, however, that the ruling bargain and the accompanying patronage patterns that sustain them in oil exporters are most often very tenacious and difficult to remove, even if one political system is replaced with another. Particularly the entitlement aspects linked to both prove very hard to reform, and patronage patterns often reestablish themselves in post-revolutionary situations, manipulated by new elites who take over access points from their previous occupants. Moreover, as elaborated above, ruling bargains develop over relatively long periods of time, reflecting the compromises those in charge of the state are willing to make to implement each ruler's vision of what a particular political community should look like. Even if these bargains prove minimal in what they provide—as one could argue in Libya—they are deeply ingrained, turned into sets of entitlements citizens come to take for granted in lieu of more tangible political representation. As we know from riots throughout the region, even small adjustments (or announcements of potential adjustments) to these entitlements can be highly dangerous, and governments are loathe to tinker with ruling bargains until pushed to the wall. Libya, even under the highly authoritarian rule of Qadhafi, proved no exception, as a history of its attempts at economic reform prove.¹² 113

12 Libya attempted to reform its economy during at least three distinctive phases: in 1987, in the 1990s, and after 2003, the latter in part guided by Saif al-Islam al-Qadhafi who, in cooperation

An even more important aspect is that ruling bargains in authoritarian countries like Libya since 1969—as opposed to modern democracies where they developed in a reciprocal fashion that reflected the changing power of the state and groups within society over time—are rarely codified or formalized. Instead, as in Libya during the Qadhafi period, they consist of an implicit understanding of the rules of the game by those subjected to them, backed up by the coercive institutions at the disposal of those in charge of the state. Particularly in oil states where state-building often proceeds precariously and in a lop-sided fashion, informal ruling bargains often substitute for more formalized institutions.

114 What then happens to such an implicit bargain when a revolution takes place that promises to replace its informally understood rules with a more normal, more durable state that relies on formalized, explicitly formulated rules? Although one would expect that citizens would want to trade up for more formal rules in order to enjoy greater security and predictability, the knowledge that entitlement arrangements may be altered often muddies the waters. And since particularly during the political uncertainty that follows the overthrow of regimes there are few rules to go by, instinctively protecting one's own (or one's own group) entitlement at the expense of the overall community usually prevails initially.

with the then Prime Minister Shukri Ghanem, brought in western expertise to help design the necessary reforms for the country's highly inefficient economy.

It is therefore worth taking a closer look at entitlements and their role in politically authoritarian and exclusionary political systems like Libya. One of the most striking features of the Middle East and North Africa's oil exporters, has been the extraordinary economic largesse bestowed by states upon their citizens. As mentioned previously, this largesse left both state and society, implicitly or explicitly, with a set of expectations embodied in vaguely defined ruling bargains. Of these expectations, job creation for local citizens and subsidies of a variety of goods have often been the most visible tip of an iceberg of entitlements and privileges that necessitated a whole range of public policies pursued by the region's governments.

In Libya in particular, these policies have normally 115 included, in addition to employment, the cultivation of a dominating public sector that did not restrict itself to traditional government activities but also infiltrated private commercial activities; the provision of a whole array of welfare programs ranging from education to housing to health care; and the creation of a host of economic strictures, such as import bans and extensive licensing systems, which in effect insulated local enterprises and elite coalitions from exposure to world competition. In most cases in MENA, but particularly in Libya with its fractured sense of identity, private elite concerns (rather than social ones) fueled the construction of ruling bargains. In effect, in Libya the social contract became a powerful political instrument that through economic patronage was meant to ensure regime survival.

116 This urge to survive largely explains the failed economic liberalization programs Libyan embarked upon in the late 1980s, the 1990s, and then after 2003. For Libya as for other oil exporters in the region, those three decades represented the beginning of a period of difficult adjustments to a number of local, regional and international economic realities that inexorably reshaped the role the Qadhafi regime would play, and, by implication, how the social contract would need to be adapted to new economic circumstances. What needs explaining is precisely why the country avoided, delayed or abrogated these necessary reforms in favor of incremental adjustments or consumer *infitahs* (economic liberalization)—even when Qadhafi seemingly clearly understood the economic difficulties Libya faced, and, at least rhetorically, was willing to implement economic changes.

This conundrum—that a seemingly very powerful state that regulated the minutiae of its citizens' lives could not muster the willingness, strength or capability to successfully implement and sustain economic reforms—hints at the broader social and political structures within which its political economy was embedded, as well as at the future difficulties the country faces.¹³ Libya's ruling bargain was

13 A conundrum Nazih Ayubi brilliantly analyzed in his *Overstating the Arab State: politics and society in the Middle East* (1996), where he distinguished between fierce states—that rely overwhelmingly on coercion—and strong states that have clearly delineated institutions that allow them to take on a number of state tasks.

simply the most visible expression of such structures: they clearly show the compromises Libya's ruler felt he needed to make (or not make), and the dense networks of coalitions he created in pursuit of power and survival. As in few other states in the world, economic reform and change in Libya was inextricably linked to recalibrating political power between ruled and ruler, i.e. to changing existing ruling bargains that had been imposed by the ruler.

But the essential question is whether this conundrum of fierce (i.e. coercively powerful, with low quality social contracts) states incapable of economic reform, even when in relatively dire financial straits, is perhaps a harbinger of things to come in Libya? Beyond the euphoria of the elections, the task of reshaping and creating state institutions that prove capable of greater accountability and the ability to avoid the temptation of solving problems through wholesale patronage (and in the process recreating or maintaining some of the earlier patronage configurations) remains an immensely difficult challenge. 117

Certainly the elections were a first, necessary step in the right direction. After a brief postponement from 19 June to 7 July—due mostly to logistical difficulties, to the extra time needed to register and vet candidates, and in order to give the political parties some additional time to present their programs to the population—the elections took place in an atmosphere that can only be described as electrifying. Despite the protracted period of preparation for the elections—barely 17 months between the start of the uprising on 17 February 2011 and the day of voting—

much thought and intense preparation had gone into preparing the country for the actual event.

It was a singular accomplishment for a country that had barely shrugged off a longstanding dictatorship that had survived precisely because it had destroyed all those interpersonal and group dynamics that were now needed to make this election a success. Of Libya's 3.5 million eligible voters, 2.866 million registered to vote (82% of those eligible). The actual number of voters was 1.7-1.8 million, representing roughly a 62 percent turnout. And while there had been a few incidents of violence and destruction of voting materials in the days leading up to the elections, the overall process on the day proceeded without major incidents.

118 What has irrevocably changed in Libya is how a now politicized society thinks of what the contours of the new social contract should look like. Outlined against the turbulent political history of the country, the Libyan elections have so far made a number of issues clear. Libya has been able to take a major step forward toward the construction of a modern state. The elections may not have been perfect in every aspect, but they were symbolically important in pushing the country as a political community away from the shadows of the Qadhafi regime. They represented a tremendous confidence building measure that will undoubtedly provide a level of legitimacy to the country's future political institutions that was still missing until now. As mentioned above, Libya's lack of institutional development under Qadhafi had always been thought to augur badly for its future social and political development.

On a more cautionary note in the light of the observation above, the recent elections were only the beginning of what will undoubtedly be a very long, perhaps messy and drawn-out process that involves writing a constitution and creating a new government—and creating a new ruling bargain. For a number of reasons described in this paper, and dating back to the creation of Libya in 1951, this is bound to be a contentious process that will once more bring into focus some of the traditional divisive issues within the country. Violent incidents in eastern Libya, centered around the longstanding issue of the relative power of Cyrenaica versus Tripolitania in the weeks leading up to and immediately preceding the elections indicate that national cohesion and consensus will remain important issues to be dealt with, and that different sides (Tripolitania versus Cyrenaica in particular) have different opinions as to how the new ruling bargain should be constructed.

119

It is important to note that in contrast to much of the West where a gradual build-up of a unified national identity coincided or preceded a move toward electoral democracies, in Libya this process was reversed. The recent elections therefore are only the beginning of a much larger construction project for a new state where Libya's relatively inexperienced new rulers will have to create the political structures and processes needed to make a democratic process find traction within a nation where, according to recent polls, national identity is still weak.

How the country's new rulers design and develop these mechanisms of inclusion and create a consensus to entice

the different groups to “buy into” this national project and into a new social contract is the major challenge ahead—especially so in a country where important issues like the role of government, of regional versus national power, of national identity, and of the role of religion have been held in abeyance during the country’s civil war and during the elections, but will undoubtedly emerge as salient political issues as the country moves on. Certainly the recent elections and the campaigns leading up to them have brought some of these issues into the open, but these were only a prelude to the challenges ahead.

Conclusion: Libya, the Arab Spring, and revolution

120

If Libya contains many of the elements that can potentially turn the upheaval after February 2011 into a true revolution, how likely is it that these can be brought together to create the structural changes necessary for a true revolution to take place? And what does Libya tell us about the so-called other “revolutions” in the Arab world?

What Libya has taught us so far is that a state, and the social contract it creates and nurtures, develop in response to a number of conditions and challenges that vary across the years: physical resources, the initial political, intellectual and social riches states possess or lack, the vision of their leaders, the slow accretion of rules, regulations and reputations that start to permeate the daily lives of the state and society alike and, finally, the real or perceived threats of outside actors. Re-creating or reshaping such social contracts takes enormous energy and time.

Second, neither the importance of creating or implementing the conditions that lead to political reform or to the creation of new institutional arrangements should be underestimated. Much current research about reform and the changing or adjusting of social contracts assumes the existence of some type of “meta-institution” (a coherent state) that can somehow be relied upon to nurture and promote social coalitions and ruling bargains that in turn are able, across relatively long periods of time, to prevent coordination failures—a reality that until now has not been present in Libya, and parts of which may be missing in other regional states.

Third, the notion, as often insisted upon by international political or financial actors, that countries like Lib-
ya—or others throughout the Middle East and North Africa—can simply create or change existing social contracts in limited time and often with limited institutional resources—i.e. to pursue and complete revolutions—understates the complexities of that process, and illustrates that a panoply of technical, social and political obstacles must be addressed in the process that vary from country to country.

121

Fourth, Libya was unique, and its challenges unlike those found in many other countries in the region: the deleterious impact of the relative autonomy the Qadhafi regime was able to purchase during its “institutionalization phase” led to a completely disarticulated state whose profoundly weak structures few other countries have had to face. But this weakness is not necessarily a deterrent to the creation of new social contracts: Libya has also demonstrated so far

that it is often seemingly easier to create new institutions *ex nihilo* than to try and reform existing ones that, as in Tunisia and Egypt, can considerably slow down efforts to institutionally replace the old with the new.

The resilience of old social structures in the region remains a reality all would-be reformers have to deal with. Throughout the Middle East and North Africa in the last two years, the political systems in upheaval are still marked by the dilemma Marx would easily have recognized: much of the old social order has not yet completely been destroyed, and much that is new remains murky and seemingly transitory. Whether that transition can successfully be completed remains for now an unresolved question.