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Dirk Vandewalle

Excerpt

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## *Introduction: Libya, the enigmatic oil state*

The history of Libya in the twentieth century represents, even by Middle Eastern standards, an extraordinary odyssey: from Ottoman backwater to Italian colony; from conservative monarchy to revolutionary regime; from rags to riches; and from brinkmanship to a grudging and still unfolding statesmanship. For most of the century, the inhabitants of the three provinces that became incorporated into the United Kingdom of Libya in 1951 – Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fazzan – stood on the sidelines as a succession of foreign and local rulers and interests shaped their country. Excluded from involvement with the colonial machinery during the Italian occupation (1911–1942), marginalized politically during the monarchy (1951–1969), and subject to a homegrown version of socialism after the military coup in 1969, Libyans share a tumultuous history of state-building that continues to leave them perplexed even today.

Perhaps it is more accurate to observe that the people of Libya became witnesses to a political and economic phenomenon that has often been observed in oil exporters throughout the Middle East: the attempt by their rulers, with the aid of extensive oil revenues, to avoid the process of state-building that normally includes the steady expansion of the administrative reach of the state, as well as a growing incorporation of local citizens in that process. Indeed, in Libya even today, it remains problematic to consider its people truly as citizens. Despite his rhetoric to the contrary, their current ruler continues to view them more or less as his personal subjects, and he has done little to help create confidence in the more impersonal institutions of a modern state. To that extent, the Qadhafi regime shows a remarkable continuity with the monarchy that preceded it, and has created a political system that will face considerable challenges in the future.

How, and why, Libya's rulers chose to pursue what I refer to in this book as statelessness – the avoidance of creating a modern state – forms its intellectual Leitmotiv. In order to address its multiple dimensions, I raise a number of more fundamental questions that throw light on the

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political, social, and economic history of modern Libya: about the role of oil in the development of the country, and about the weight and legacies of history in the relationships between the local population and its rulers. Simultaneously, I attempt to trace the impact of Arab nationalism and Islam on Libya's development, to discern the precise impact of petroleum revenues on social stratification and on development, and to gauge the changing roles of individuals and primordial loyalties in a society that became rapidly and inexorably incorporated within the global economy. Finally, I also investigate the interaction between a traditional society and an incomplete state whose survival and economic fortunes are overwhelmingly determined by unimpeded access to the global economy.

The two central features in the development of Libya after its independence in 1951 have been oil, and the revenues its sales generated. It freed first the monarchy, and then the Qadhafi regime, from many of the burdens other countries faced during their state-building history – burdens that, in all countries, shape the political, economic, and social relationships between rulers and ruled. Perhaps the most important freedom is that in an oil exporter like Libya, rulers face few burdens of taxation or accountability that can limit their actions. Libya's rulers, starting very soon after independence, seemingly had the luxury to construct the contours of their political community without undue political or economic constraints. What truly makes Libya a political anomaly, however, is that it chose to follow a path – at first, during the monarchy as a policy of benign neglect, then in a more deliberate fashion after the 1969 coup – that systematically reduced and severely limited the construction of a modern state and its institutions.

In a century when the growing power of the state has constituted one of the few shared political traits across the world, Libya's rulers questioned its validity – and then acted upon that conviction to circumscribe its influence. The idea that oil riches can be used to transform rapidly and irrevocably – or, in this case, halt or reverse – the social and political structures of local societies is of course not unique to the Libyan leadership. For a variety of reasons, at least rhetorical lip service to the “ethos of the tribe” as an alternative to modern state institutions has lingered on far into the twentieth century within several oil exporters in the Middle East. What has been unique once more in Libya after independence in 1951 has been the attempt to extend on a national scale – but very selectively – the kind of primordial structures and relationships that had not really been present in the country since it became exposed to the wider world during the Italian colonial period.

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It is important to understand that, from the creation of the monarchy onward, there existed in Libya a tension between the pursuit and maintenance of an earlier form of political community – based on family and tribe – and the exigencies of a modern state that could potentially obliterate the relevance of such primordial ties in favor of the more impersonal relations of modern economic life. Particularly after 1969, the rhetoric and flamboyance of the regime obscured a more profound and unique process by which it attempted to avoid the burdens of extending the mechanisms of a modern state. Instead, it enunciated a vision of statelessness that was carefully wrapped in a cloak of nostalgia for earlier times when family and tribe provided solidarity, equity, and egalitarianism. In the end, of course, the pursuit of that vision proved contradictory and impossible. Much of Libya's current attempt to reintegrate itself into the international community proves how futile and costly those attempts at trying to avoid modern state structures have been.

Perhaps the more important question, however, is what made the very notion of statelessness so attractive in a country that was willy-nilly being rapidly dragged into the global economy? To most readers, this wish to maintain a stateless, essentially pre-bureaucratic society will strike them as archaic and naive – particularly in light of a hydrocarbon state's intimate reliance on exposure to the international economy. What then explains its continued pursuit in the country's political life since independence? To understand this anomaly, one must understand how – starting with the retreat of the Ottoman Empire from the country in the early part of the twentieth century – a multilayered set of factors promoted the idea among Libya's rulers that statelessness was both possible and desirable, while oil created the permissive and enabling environment to act upon that conviction.

One reason the nostalgia for a pre-bureaucratic community resonated so strongly throughout Libya's modern history was undoubtedly the memories of the country's first traumatic encounter with the notion of modern statehood during the Italian colonial period, described in Chapter 2. The construction of what the Italians referred to as their "Fourth Shore" left a heavy legacy of political exclusion and brutal subjugation of the local population that, until today, continues to provide a focus for the country's collective memories. The uprising against the Italians collapsed in 1931 when Umar al-Mukhtar, a Cyrenaican *shaykh* and Libya's enduring national hero, was captured and hanged by the fascists. Libya's first exposure to modern statehood under the Italians had been uniformly deleterious, and left few of its future leaders with a taste for a unified, strong state.

Italy's defeat in World War II effectively put an end to further Italian ambitions for its Libyan territories. In the aftermath of the war – which had destroyed a substantial part of the country's existing infrastructure – the Great Powers at the United Nations, after considerable wrangling, decided to create the United Kingdom of Libya in 1951. As king of the new nation, they settled upon Idris al-Sanusi, the heir to a religious movement in Cyrenaica that had provided much of the resistance against the Italians. As described in Chapter 3, the newly created kingdom faced a number of complex challenges. The United Kingdom of Libya in 1951 presented – as had once been argued about Italy itself during the nineteenth century – little more than a geographical expression. The three provinces that made up the newly created country lacked most of the ingredients necessary for the creation of modern statehood: its citizens possessed no sense of national identity, and the newly created state barely managed to raise enough revenues to maintain even the most rudimentary state institutions, or – the *sine qua non* of modern states – the monopoly of coercive power. Citizens from Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fazzan reluctantly agreed to the creation of the Sanusi monarchy out of fear of the imposition of United Nations' trusteeships that would have meant further foreign tutelage.

The country and its new ruler thus faced the simultaneous challenges of creating a political community and a modern state. This difficult task – headed by a monarch who himself showed no real interest in ruling the three provinces as a unified political community – was exacerbated from the start by the inflows of capital that Great Britain and the United States extended in return for the rent of military bases. It allowed the king to avoid flexing the young state's institutional muscles and to postpone the process of building a state that could attract the attention of its newly minted citizens across the three provinces. Indeed, in 1952 he summarily – allegedly on British advice – canceled the first and only multi-party elections the country has known until today.

The discovery of oil in 1959 further and forever changed the country's fortunes, but in highly unexpected and unforeseen ways. It provided Idris al-Sanusi with an even greater and inordinate power to shape the country's political and economic life – or, as it happened, to avoid doing so. The relative wealth now in the country's coffers could seemingly help compensate for the weaknesses of the state. It could be used for strengthening family and tribal alliances in support of the monarchy while leaving most of the state's underdeveloped economic and political structures unattended. Since existing social groups had weakly developed collective interests, the king found it easy to obliterate their collective identities by means of spending

oil revenues. The power of the purse, and the emergence of a patrimonial political system, allowed Idris al-Sanusi to further weaken the few organized groups that existed within the country's civil society. The monarchy thus started Libya on the road of political exclusion of its citizens, and of a profound de-politicization, that continue to characterize it today.

My central argument, traced throughout Libya's emergence as an independent country in the twentieth century, is that a number of interlocking factors extended this lopsided and incomplete nature of local state-building: the legacy of the Italian period; the sudden arrival of enormous revenues that accrued directly to the country's rulers without, in the process, creating adequate checks and balances; the political exclusion of the Libyan population; the lingering attraction of tribe and family that seemingly provided acceptable alternatives to the notion of state; and the eagerness of the country's rulers not to perfect that state for their own ideological and often predatory purposes. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the emergence of some of these factors during the Italian colonial period and during the monarchy, while the subsequent chapters concentrate on the years since 1969 when the military coup took place. The years covered in Chapters 2 and 3 deserve closer attention in understanding Libya's modern history, not only because they have been relatively uninvestigated but also because they set in motion the processes of political exclusion and suspicion of the structures of the modern state that then informed, and were extended, by the revolutionary government.

To many readers of this book, Libya will primarily be identified with the regime of Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi, and with the decades of spectacular internal and foreign policies his self-styled revolutionary regime pursued. The inordinate attention that has been lavished on the current Libyan leader, and on his actions since 1969, is perhaps unavoidable. He has dominated the country's political life for three-and-a-half decades, and for the largest part of the country's existence as an independent nation. Yet many of the current regime's past actions – its insistence on self-reliance, its pursuit of statelessness that seemed so hopelessly anachronistic, its antagonism to the West, and the use of terrorism as a foreign policy tool – must be understood against the backdrop of the earlier chapters.

For over three decades, after its self-proclaimed revolution in 1969, the rhetoric and brinkmanship of the Libyan leadership partly obscured what transpired inside the country. Much of the West's attention, fueled by an inexhaustible media appetite for the Libyan leader's often eccentric behavior, ignored the more profound contradictions and difficulties Qadhafi's attempt at pursuing statelessness engendered. The focus on

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Qadhafi – unfortunately often expressed in a manner that added little to our understanding – was not wholly misplaced however. For the Libyan leader has intimately controlled his country's political system and its interaction with the international community, to a degree only highly authoritarian systems permit.

In addition, Qadhafi's *Jamahiriyya* – his neologism meant to convey statelessness, a system in which the people govern themselves without the apparatuses of a modern state – proved to be full of contradictions. For example, until his conversion to pan-African unity, Qadhafi claimed to represent the future of pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism in the Middle East. Yet Libya remained forever too inconsequential a player on the regional political scene to pursue and implement such ambitions, and the Libyan leader's exhortations for Arab unity were routinely dismissed with derision and scorn in the Arab world and the West alike. In the same vein, although the Libyan leader is an austere and devout Muslim, his vision of Islam is both deeply personal and idiosyncratic. Also, in theory, all power in the *Jamahiriyya* belongs to the people, but organized opposition is expressly forbidden. The *Green Book*, Qadhafi's ideological primer to his self-styled revolution, asserts that the country's citizens directly manage its political and economic life, but Libya even today remains an exclusionary political system whose decision-making process has been restricted to a small cadre of advisors and confidantes, and where economic decisions are similarly outside popular purview or devoid of any means of checks and balances. Finally, Qadhafi, while decrying the structures of modern statehood, has also denounced primordial tribal and family ties as antiquated remnants unsuitable to a *Jamahiriyya*. At the same time, evidence suggests that the Libyan leader increasingly relied on them for his own physical survival as the revolutionary aspects of his rule started to falter by the early to mid-1990s.

For analytical purposes, as his revolution waxed and waned, Qadhafi's years in power can be subdivided into four more or less distinct periods.

The first (Chapter 4) concerns the early years of the revolution, when the regime attempted to consolidate itself, and expended a great amount of political energy to mobilize Libya's society on behalf of its revolution. After imitating the mobilizational efforts of his hero, President Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt, the Libyan leader quickly discovered the limits of political persuasion. The revolutionary regime had to adjust to the fact that, the rhetoric of statelessness notwithstanding, oil exporters have little choice but to rely on active state intervention in their economies – albeit in a unique fashion. The first four years of the regime can thus essentially be

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considered as a period of stocktaking for the young revolutionaries, during which Qadhafi in somewhat gingerly fashion tested the limits of the country's emerging political system.

His disappointment, combined with the inflow of massive oil revenues after 1973, led to the more spectacular economic and political experiments that constitute the focus of Chapter 4. The long decade between 1973 and early 1986 forever became the hallmark of Qadhafi's Libya. In a spectacular set of reforms, based on the philosophy contained in his Green Book, the Libyan leader transformed or obliterated many of the country's economic and political structures. He did so while emphasizing that Libya could do without a set of state structures that, at least in his estimation, prevented citizens from running their daily lives. Simultaneously, however, the Libyan state became even more an overwhelmingly powerful economic agent in the country. Rather than engaging in regulation, however, it engaged in a kind of wholesale management that left little room for fine-tuning its economy. This shortcut hinted at the much more fundamental weaknesses of a state that, at least superficially, looked strong. As part of its efforts at political mobilization, the regime ratcheted up its rhetoric against the West but, temporarily, still refrained from engaging wholesale in terrorist activities.

The political and economic experiments continued until the mid-1980s when a growing combination of economic hardship, confrontation with the West, and inefficient economic management started to take its toll on the country. The outcome of Libya's first attempt to adjust to these challenges, and to reform politically and economically, is described in Chapter 6. It focuses, in part, on what occurs in an oil exporter like Libya after long periods of neglect of the local economy, and after years of unwillingness to regulate and diversify the economy. It details furthermore Libya's inability to reform when the country encountered a financial crisis, and it delineates its leader's impotence to refashion the existing social contracts with his country's citizens that had often grown into extensive entitlements during periods of high oil revenues. In Libya, the economic hardships proved particularly severe because of the constraints upon the country's economy resulting from a combination of US and multilateral sanctions, and because of the growing diplomatic isolation of the country. While the regime managed to postpone meaningful reform for a decade longer and became the last great spender of petrodollars during the decade, there were the first indications that the revolution had reached its limits and that a slow process of institutionalization and bureaucratization was finally starting to take place.

Chapter 7 provides the capstone to the analysis of Libya's pursuit of statelessness and of Qadhafi's attempts to foment revolutionary upheaval. It analyzes the regime's decision to put an end to its foreign adventures and to attempt to reform its economy once more. Focusing on the remarkable set of adjustments and compromises the Jamahiriyya embarked upon starting in mid-1999, the chapter demonstrates how, even in countries where personal rule and tightly controlled patrimonial systems prevail, their leadership is ultimately subjected to conditions, international developments, and internal adjustments they must, willy-nilly, come to terms with. Eventually, all revolutionary regimes start to institutionalize, and Libya proved no exception. The country's "everlasting revolution" in retrospect has not been unique. It did not escape the inexorable pull toward greater bureaucratization, efficiency, and pragmatism, when faced with the onslaught of internal economic and political difficulties, generational renewal, and fewer international economic and diplomatic options. Careful observers of Libya had noted the beginning of this emerging pragmatism almost a decade before its government announced in December 2003 that it would abandon its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>1</sup> When the announcement came, however, it marked the formal acceptance – commented on by the Libyan leader and his entourage alike – that the country's revolutionary pursuits and methods had become impossible. But it would take the 2011 uprising and the country's subsequent civil war to bring home the message of how impossible Qadhafi's self-styled revolution had become.

In writing the history of an oil exporter, it is always tempting to blame the course of events simply on the pernicious impact of oil on the country's political and economic structures and fate. Certainly, oil in Libya created the permissive environment: the monarchy could never have practiced its policies of benign neglect except for oil revenues, and the Qadhafi government could not have experimented with statelessness without them. Such an analysis, however, reduces or obliterates the impact countless individuals could have – and did have – in determining the outcome of the different layers of state-building (or lack thereof), as described in this book, during crucial turning points in the country's history. While oil may have made political experimentation possible, whatever decisions the country's rulers made were motivated by personal considerations, and tempered by a number of social, cultural, and religious restraints that resonated within Libya at large: codes of conduct, customs, cultural norms, and a collection of traditions that informally helped to determine the behavior of the country's rulers – who very often were anxious to portray their policies as falling within those understood traditions and norms.



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In retrospect, it is perhaps facile to say that Libya until now has not been served well by its leaders – but that is to ignore the difficult circumstances under which they had to take decisions in incremental fashion, often with few alternatives, when faced by an often indifferent or hostile set of superpowers and by an apathetic society, and when trying to survive both physically and politically. Much of what the following chapters portray focuses in part on the struggles both regimes – but particularly the revolutionary one – experienced as they attempted to create and recreate social bases of support for their policies during the country's economic boom-and-bust cycles.

Blaming everything on oil also draws attention away from the often agonizing struggles individuals – leaders as much as ordinary citizens – and social groups in Libya experienced as they tried simultaneously to embark upon (or hold in abeyance) a process of western-inspired modernization while devising ways to hold a weak state together as it was torn between modernity and an often artificially maintained tradition. It is ultimately this struggle in Libya – traditional and often insular internally, but intricately and unavoidably linked to the larger international economy and community – that forms the inevitable backdrop to its history.

While the title of this book is *A History of Modern Libya*, it can perhaps more accurately be described as a social and political economy study of the country. Many of its organizing ideas derive from the institutional literature that sociologists, economists, and political scientists have used since the mid-1980s. In that literature, the attention to individuals and social groups has sometimes been minimized for the sake of discerning broader structural patterns and developments. As previously mentioned, Libya's history, however, cannot be properly understood without careful attention to a collection of individuals, tribes, families, and assorted other social groups that helped to determine the outcome and shape of the country's historical path. Indeed, while in political systems like Libya oil seemingly invokes an uncommon passivity among the population, its rulers nevertheless – very much precisely because of the informal and de-institutionalized form of the country's political life – spend inordinate amounts of time shaping and managing political coalitions they need for their survival. I have attempted, particularly where they constitute a crucial factor, to bring these individuals and groups into focus against the backdrop of the larger history of the country.

It is my hope, as Libya starts to rejoin the international community in the wake of the 2011 civil war, that its own scholars will once more contribute to writing their country's history, unencumbered by the political

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or ideological constraints of the past.<sup>2</sup> Much of what this book analyzes – from Libya’s earlier encounter with the West to its development under the monarchy in particular – remains either terra incognita to the country’s own academic community, or has been left unexplored because its examination proved incompatible with ideological considerations during the Qadhafi period. Until those local voices help to rewrite Libyan history in a more full and comprehensive manner in the wake of the civil war, this book hopefully provides a careful and critical interpretation of the country’s emergence and development in the twentieth century.