

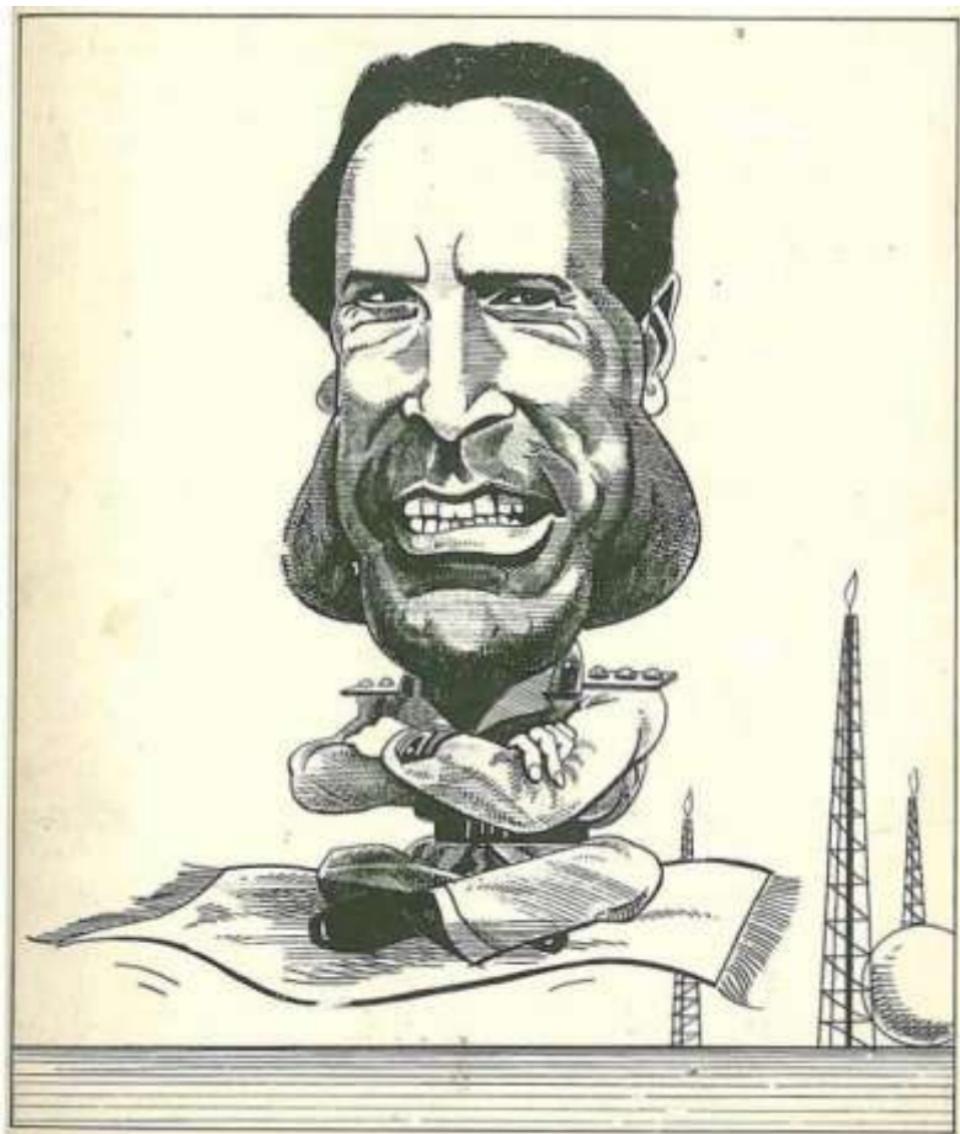
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# Libya

The Elusive Revolution

Ruth First



## Published by Penguin Books

'By God I am confused'. exclaimed Colonel Gadaffi at one Libyan popular conference. Where Libya is concerned, who isn't?

Ruth First's main emphasis falls on the causes and consequences of the 1969 revolution, in which a group of young officers ousted the monarchy. This thorough survey provides a wealth of information about the religious, economic and social springs of Libyan politics, the sudden explosion of oil revenues and the fanatical—often naïve—pursuit of Arab unity. She introduces the reader to a twentieth-century social revolution based on the Koran ; to an oil-rich state determined not to copy Kuwait; to a new centre of pan-Arabism which has almost invited the hostility of other Arab states ; and to a regime which exhorts the people to embrace its historic role but suffocates all independent action.

Nevertheless this nation of under two million inhabitants has struck giant postures in recent years. Its strengths and weaknesses become clearer in the light of Ruth First's able study.

Cover illustration by Peter Fluck

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*Edited by Ronald Segal*

## Libya

RUTH FIRST

Ruth First was born and educated in South Africa. She took up research in sociology but abandoned this work at the time of the strike of the African miners to become a journalist and editor on newspapers and journals identified with the African national struggle in South Africa. She was a prominent member of the opposition under constant fire from the South African Government. In 1956 she was arrested along with 156 others and was involved in the subsequent prolonged treason trial. In 1963 she was again arrested and held in solitary confinement for 17 days under the notorious 'runery-day' law. The following year she went into political exile and has since lived in London, writing on South Africa and independent Africa. Her previous books are *South West Africa* (Penguin Books, 1963) *117 Days* and *The Barrel of a Gun*, a study of coups d'état in Africa; also published in Penguins; she has edited *No Easy Wall to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela, and with Ronald Segal, *South West Africa: Travesty of Trust*. She is also co-author of *The South African Connection*, published by Penguins in 1973.



RUTH FIRST

# Libya

The Elusive Revolution

## Preface and Part I: A Perverse Revolution

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## Preface

This book is based on four visits to Libya in the years since 1969 when the Revolutionary Command Council under Colonel Mu'ammar Gadaffi came to power, and a country previously unknown and obscure thrust itself on world attention.

I have concentrated on the period since 1969, on revolution or coup? – on oil and on Arab unity, for these are the themes of the new regime. The pre-revolution chapters are brief and selective, for they are intended to emphasize those issues which bear most directly on the causes of the change in the country's political system, and the direction the country has taken since the toppling of the monarchy. There is some fairly considerable material on economics, because the politics of Libya get extensive if often superficial coverage, but the economics of this oil-rich rentier state are far less well understood.

Scholars may shudder at my rendering of Arabic names, but I have used a transliteration most easily recognizable to non-Arabic readers; it is inconsistent here and there, as when there are quotations from sources using a different form.

My indebtedness to sources and to informants will show in the footnotes and references. There are Libyans to whom I am deeply indebted, not necessarily because they agreed with me or I with them, but because they talked about their country and their problems in ways which helped me understand them. Official Libya, though it gave me generous assistance, was apprehensive: 'What will you write?' they asked. 'We have had so many bad experiences.' Some may think the criticism in this book springs from malice and arrogance of the kind they have come to take for granted from 'foreigners'. I can only say that I tried to understand Libya in its own context, not Europe's, and that I tried to measure its achievements against the need for revolutionary

## Preface

change in Africa and the Middle East, which is the cause Libya so vocally espouses.

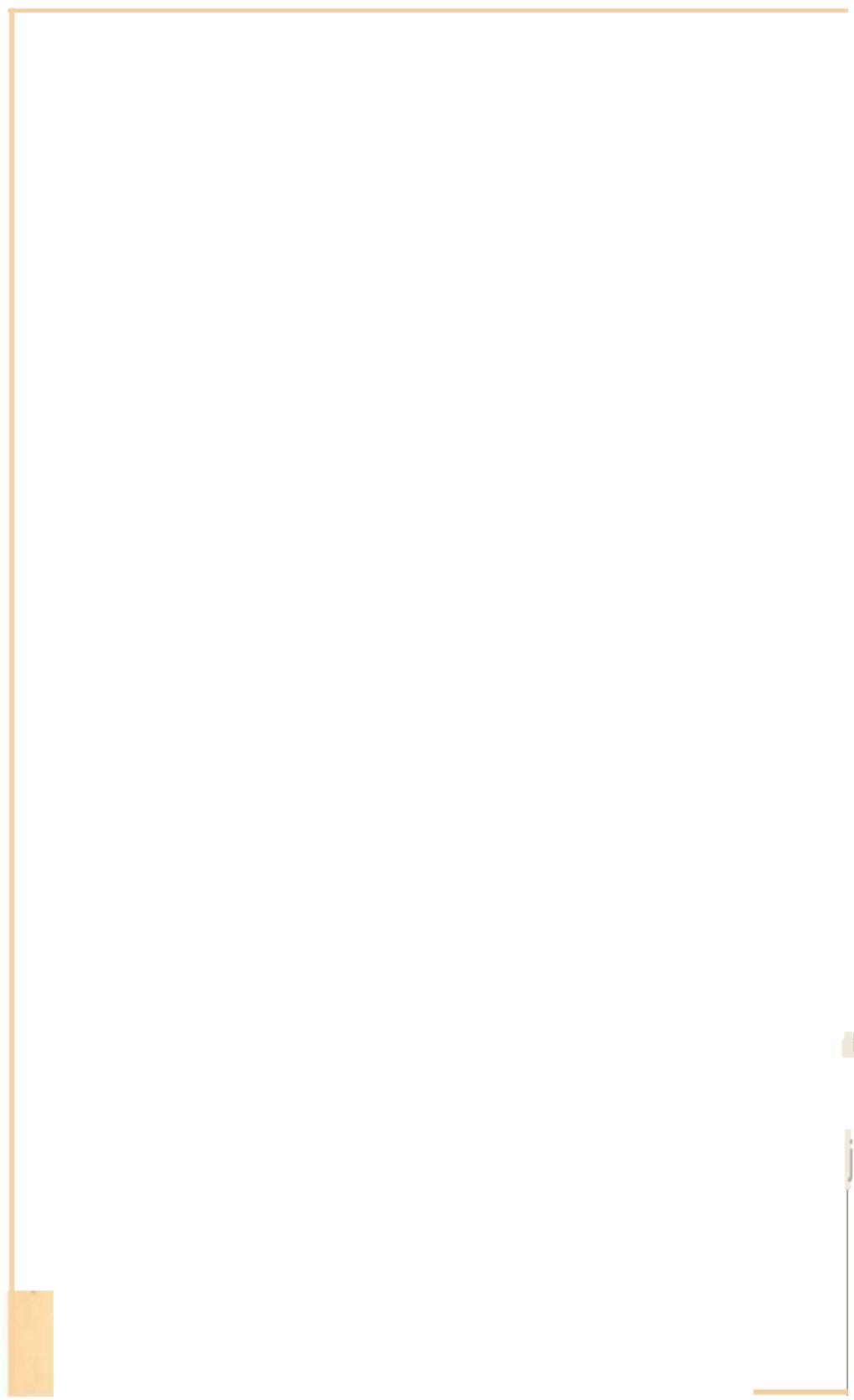
### Note

The Libyan pound was re-named the Libyan dinar in 1969. There was no change of value. Numerous devaluations of international currencies have enhanced the value of the Libyan dinar (£L).

Until November 1967 when the pound sterling was devalued, the Libyan pound was equivalent. Thereafter the Libyan pound was equivalent to £1.4. Parity was maintained against the dollar, with the Libyan pound equivalent to US \$2.8 until the dollar was devalued in 1972. The Libyan pound/dinar equivalents have moved as follows:

|      | US dollar | pound sterling |
|------|-----------|----------------|
| 1951 | z.8       | 1.0            |
| 1967 | z.8       | 1.14           |
| 1972 | 3.04      | 1.20           |
| 1974 | 3.36      | 1.40           |

## Part I : A Perverse Revolution



## A Perverse Revolution

At first sight – as at last – there is no revolution more contradictory and perverse than the Libyan. It enjoys the vast wealth of the oil-producing states in the Middle East, yet is determined to be another Kuwait or Saudi Arabia. It claims a social revolution that will bring Libya into the company of the great twentieth-century revolutions for social liberation, yet it zealously pursues a revival of Islamic fundamentalism. It was a rebellion of young army men against the monarchical head of a religious order, yet the cast of its own political thinking is not secular but religious. It is a regime under which power is vested in eleven young soldiers, yet it boasts of having shepherded a popular revolution more mass-based than even China's. It has promoted a cultural revolution against bureaucracy and called on the popular masses to rise to their historic role, yet it suffocates any political action or thought not initiated by the state. It reviles the ancien regime for the corruption of the privileged classes that grew in the shadow of oil, and sees Libya today as a society without classes or social distinction, in which any tendencies towards inequality will be combated by a return to the true ethic of Islam. Yet even in rejecting the concept of class and class struggle as alien to Arab or Libyan socialism, it confronts the monopoly bastions of the capitalist world, the oil cartels. It is dedicated to pan-Arabism, yet has prompted the resentment, even the enmity, of Arab states, from the conservative shaikhdoms to the radicals, which it has reviled for their disparate approach to Arab unity. It buys Mirages from France for use in the 'national battle' for the liberation of Palestine, yet its leader Colonel Gadaffi explains setbacl{S in this struggle and future tactics by passages in the Koran. Undaunted by the failure of previous attempts at unity between Arab states, it is seeking to

## A Perverse Revolution

hectored a combined state of Libya and Egypt to its feet, despite the seemingly insuperable problems of federating two countries of such diverse domestic cast and such contradictory diplomatic postures on the very issue supposed to weld their unity, the battle for Palestine.

Libya boasts a tiny population of under two million, so remote from the Middle East battlelines as to offer only a marginal contribution; yet she pursues a recklessly activist policy from Malta to Ulster, from Uganda to Ethiopia and the Yemen. When Britain connived at the handing over to Iran of two small islands in the Persian Gulf, Libya promptly nationalized the local holdings of British Petroleum, Britain's principal oil interest there, as a reprisal. She has intervened in the internal politics of both Uganda and the Sudan, flying plane-loads of troops and arms into Uganda on the strength of General Amin's false representation of an invasion; and masterminding the forcing down of a plane carrying Sudanese revolutionaries, and a Libyan-Egyptian intervention in the Sudan to mount a counter-revolution. Some of her foreign policy initiatives have been on the strength of provocative miscalculations: the fulsome welcome to the army coupmakers in Morocco was broadcast round the world even as the coup against the King was failing. She has attacked enemies and allies with equal sense of righteousness, clearly disconcerting her closest partners as much as her antagonists. Thus, though combined with Egypt and Syria in a Federation, she has publicly pilloried their governments for betraying the *fedayin* cause. Ignoring the judgement of friends and the strengths of the enemy, Libya has courted a policy of confrontation with Israel which, taking into account the objective strengths and weaknesses of the two sides, is in danger of substituting rhetoric for purpose.

By any rational political analysis, the contradictions and mis-judgements of the Libyan revolution should have brought its sallies grinding to a halt; yet its journeys into pan-Arabism and abroad on the African continent continue to show a surprising endurance. Gadaffi's simplistic formula for a united Arab, African, Asian, and Latin American world, together with the reformed young in advanced capitalist society, is based pre-

dominantly on a return to religion and refuses to take into account the wide range of other factors relevant to the debate and to the search within these continents for a new ideology and economic system. Yet in an Arab and African world demoralized by the failure of Third World initiatives, discouraged by the attempts at non-alignment which brought their countries not extra leverage but increased isolation from the world's power centres, Gadaffi's speeches are capable of prompting unexpected attention. True, his solutions are absurdly simple – unity, morality, faith, determination – but perhaps other leaderships have grown too corrupt, obtuse, and sophisticated? There were even students at Paris's rebellious university of Vincennes who hailed Gadaffi as the only Third World leader with any real stomach for struggle.

His speeches run over with smooth fanaticism yet he is capable of speaking painful and unpalatable truths. Arab regimes are rotten; Arab states have betrayed the Palestinian cause. Arab unity is hollow. Arab summit meetings are a waste of time. If you want something to die, he has said, send it to be buried in Arab League files in the skyscraper in Cairo.

There is something riveting about the audacity of his indictment and the simplicity of his solutions. In Cairo intellectuals who read his interviews in *Le Monde* and his speeches in their own newspapers bury their heads in their hands at his naïvete. In the Maghreb cities, Arab but also permeated by French culture, Gadaffi has been seen as a latter-day Asterix absorbed in his picaresque adventures, and cut off from history and the world. What is it about Libya and Gadaffi in the seventies which explains their eccentricities – this blinding gap between Libyan interpretation and Arab and world reality? Most observers are filled with scepticism; yet among some there remains the hope that in his impetuous innocence he will stumble upon some way to break the impasse in the Arab world. Is it to be a case of pristine Bedouin morality, steeped in the fundamentalist morality of the seventh century, riding in from the desert to reform twentieth-century statecraft? Is this possible in our day and age?

For Libya's young army government is pronouncing prescriptions for the Arab world already considered unworkable and outworn. There is an eerie sense of contemporary problems given

## *A Perverse Revolution*

previous solutions; of newcomers rushing in where more experienced partisans have learned not to tread; of policies discovered for the first time in a region where they have already run their course. It is surely this which accounts for the most predominant characteristic of the young Libyan regime: its sense of compelling anachronism, its appearance of being strangely displaced from its time.

Much of the explanation for this phenomenon must be found in the bombardment of Libya and Libyans by the forces of outside history. After Liberia and Ethiopia, she was the third independent state of Africa. But it was an arrested independence, Western-conducted and controlled. Libya came into her Arab own only in 1969, when the Western-supported monarchy was unseated. And this makes Libya nominy one of the first, but virtually the last, independent state of Africa, not counting the unliberated south. By the time she felt the first full flush of modern nationalism in state form, Egypt had already kliown the sensation for the better part of half a century. Libya was the newest Arab state; she emerged as the critic of the oldest Arab states which had been created in the aftermath not of the Second but of the *First* World War. No wonder the experiences that she found so daring were regarded as dated in other parts of the Middle East. But Libya's development had been retarded by both her history and her geography, which had in turn deformed her political experience. In the first half of the twentieth century she experienced rule by the Ottoman empire; then came foreign invasion and conquest, after a prolonged but savagely defeated armed popular resistance. The colonialism which followed was founded on metropolitan peasant settlement in an exclusive enclave economy. This was ended by war between European powers, some of whose most ferocious battles were fought on Libyan soil. It was followed by both the British and the French varieties of military ancolonial caretaker occupation. When independence came in 1951, it was in response not to the internal thrust of Libyan actions but because it suited the strategic purpose of the West.

Less than two decades separated resistance and independence,

but they could not have been more disturbing in their discontinuity. At one moment in time men were in insurrection against authority; at the next they were haphazardly co-opted into it. For the better part of thirty years in parts of Libya, if not the entire country, there had been two perilous options: to persist in what Berque has called a state of armed refusal, or to compromise and through expediency risk corruption by the alien regime in power. The anti-colonial war had prompted very different reactions from Bedouin\* tribesmen and townsmen; from tribes that had allowed themselves to be drawn into the political orbit of the colonial administration; others that had remained aloof but passive; and still others that had resisted bodily to the end; between Cyrenaica where guerrilla bands, however reduced in size and striking power, fought until 1932, and Tripolitania, where active resistance ended before the twenties. Between the last episodes of the resistance and the end of Italian colonization, there was a span of not much more than ten years, but the stand that men had taken, of intransigence or compromise, suddenly became irrelevant. In Algeria, those who had fought the French army for eight years battled their way into control of the commanding heights of the revolutionary regime, and military and political gains were made one. In the parts of Libya where the resistance had been more prolonged if sporadic, it was also more dispersed and therefore localized; while the phase of primary tribal and religious resistance had not been followed by political opposition of the more modern type or the growth of a consistent nationalist ideology and movement which would in time inherit independence. In the rest of the Maghreb armed resistance was ended, but a tumultuous movement of strikes and demonstrations grew in its place; the masses began to take over political action from the tribes.<sup>1</sup> In Libya this did not happen in the same way. The country and a subdued population passed precipitately from colonization to independence, with sovereignty installed by the results of international and United Nations diplomacy. Thus even the coming of independence played its part in shattering what sense of historical and political continuity Libyans had managed to retain, and even the most favourable

\* Bedouin from *badw* in Arabic, meaning nomad.

tum of events played havoc with the moral and ethical issues which preoccupy men in times of social and political disturbance.

By 1951 Libya had political sovereignty but little else beside. She was perhaps the poorest country in the world. The battles of the Second World War had devastated what infrastructure had been built and disrupted the economic life of even the Bedouin communities. Italian colonization did not seek to mould an elite, so that there had been virtually no education system capable of preparing men for government and administrative service. Obscure and illiterate men were plucked from their communities to occupy office. For a decade Libya was kept barely alive by American and British aid. The country lived on charity and felt the humiliation of poverty. Suddenly in 1959 oil was discovered; by 1961 crude was being produced and exported; and oil revenues began to course through the economy on a staggering scale from 1963 onwards. Once feeble and unnoticed, this was a country now not only financially self-reliant but wealthy enough to influence others. Independence had been unexpected, without prior indication let alone preparation for its coming. Oil was even more precipitate. It came despite the efforts of Libyans and yet transformed their lives. Humble men could suddenly become not only ministers but millionaires. (Most Libyans can cite you the case of the clerk under the British military administration who became both; or the baker from the Fezzan oasis who today lives in a Swiss chateau with his personal masseur;)

The accidents of history and geography which bestowed first an unexpected independence but even more importantly oil wealth, and the resulting collision of several periods of history—that of a bare subsistence society *with* a vengeful colonizing metropolis and then with the giant oil multi-nationals—have had a bewildering impact on Libyan social life and consciousness. Wealth so effortlessly acquired, solutions which so haphazardly present themselves, have helped to spread an illusion that converges only too easily with the use of Islam by Libya's regime. Opportunity has come in bursts from some external causation; faith, trust, and morality will surely produce solutions, for rationality and planning have indeed had little to do with

Libya's economic bonanzas. If *baraka* (blessing) is the reason, then this is beyond the effort of man. A by-product of blinding faith is a trust in recklessness ; for if the twists in Libyan opportunity have been so unpredictable, and results have been so unaffected by effort, why not hazard more daring claims still and trust once again to belief? It is the sort of all-embracing faith which prompts the Libyan reply to the oil companies: 'We have lived 5,000 years without oil money; we can do it again.' It is as much philosophy as bargaining counter. It is this same hap-hazard experience of an imposed history that makes the timelessness of the Koran seem still more appropriate. To a Bedouin society thrust into the oil technology age, there seems little strange about applying the precepts of seventh century Arabia to modern issues. Economic change has been imposed on the society from outside. Where most skilled manpower and virtually all expertise is imported, local society can absorb the benefits of the oil economy without having to change greatly in itself.

Having been plucked out of their history, Libyans are finding it a painful experience to return to it. Even when, in pre-European-conquest times, political association was achieved between its three spreading provinces, geography and parochial politics and economies made effectively close association difficult. Tripolitania's move towards unity with Cyrenaica had died out in the twenties; the independence Constitution of the fifties conferred national sovereignty but more effective power on the parts than on the centre; it was only the exigencies of the oil economy which achieved a constitutionally unified state. The army revolution of 1969 claimed to restore Libyans to their true identity and destiny; to make the final meaningful break with the colonial and pro-Western past. But Gadaffi, like all fervent Arab nationalists, conceives of the Arab world as a single homogeneous whole and of the Arab people as a single nation bound by the common ties of language, religion, and history: even though the Arab world has not constituted a single political entity since Islam's expansion into an empire during the seventh and eighth centuries. It is a strain of nationalist fervour that ignores the diversity and differentiation

in the Arab world; for Islam is expected to supply the indissoluble core of identity and communal heritage. Gadaffi thus rejects a micro-nationalism, whether of the Libyan or any other strain. Libyans have been told that they are genuinely Libyan for the first time in their history. At the same time a people always overwhelmed by outsiders with superior skills is told that it is Arab above all. It is a bewildering experience to have simultaneously to absorb an immediate and a wider identity. The union with Egypt could not pose this question in a more direct and urgent form.

Yet it is precisely this return to the Arab world that is the pulse of the Libyan army revolution. For as the occupation of Suez and Farouk's enforced submission to Britain was the humiliation that gave Egypt to Nasser, so the occupation of Sinai by Israel after the Six Day War was the catalyst of the Libyan young officers' coup. The foreign policy of the monarchy had positioned Libya not towards Egypt and the Middle East but towards the West. The struggle to break free was thus the struggle to break into the Middle East and to become part of Arab aspirations. This is one reason why Libya, remote from the battlefields of the Middle East, insists on trying to settle the terms of the battle. Her late realization of her own identity is, for her, inseparable from the displacement of the Palestinians.

For an Arab world plunged into despair after the 1967 defeat, the Libyan coup – and the Sudanese, led by Nimeiry six months earlier – were signs of a possible revival in Arab fortunes. It was *Al Ahram's* Heykal, sent to Libya to conduct the first on-the-spot investigation for Nasser, who pronounced the Libyan coup-makers as a young generation of a distinct quality. They were the post-setback generation, the new hope of the Arab world. Perhaps Egypt's revolution of 1952, which had so changed the face of the Middle East, would have a new beginning in Libya's Nasserite generation? For there was no question but that these were fervent young Nasserites, determined that the army would not only make the revolution but continue to lead it for its own good, and that it was the army-backed State which would

initiate whatever political organization and ideology were judged suitable.

This is not only an essential theory for an army-led regime; it happens to coincide with the Libyan reality. For one of the consequences of Libya's disturbed contemporary experience is that indigenous political groupings, when they were able to form after the colonial conquest, were tiny, short-lived, and uncertain. Political party organization was banned by the monarchy in the first year of independence. The middle class, which informs the dominant politics of the more characteristic Middle East state, failed to gain any real political footing in Libya. This was largely because when money arrived, with the pumping of oil, to produce a small group of middlemen contractors, transporters, and property speculators, they thrived on patronage from unbounded resources, and politics as a means to economic acquisition was unnecessary. In the early sixties, small Arab Nationalist, Baathist, and Marxist groups appeared; but they never really took indigenous root; and, because they were imports, they produced not any application of their policies to Libyan conditions, but the factional disputes which riddled their parent bodies in the Middle East and played such havoc with early attempts at pan-Arab strategies. Gadaffi's standing indictment of the civilians of his generation and earlier ones was that they had been ineffective in opposition under the monarchy. They had failed to make the revolution. From this grew a sharp distaste for all voluntarist initiative and action. All 'factional' politics and all ideology other than the one produced by the state, whether Moslem Brother, Baathist, Marxist, or unlabelled, were declared illegal. Nasserite Egypt had arrived at the same point from a somewhat different national experience.

To Libya's strict adherence to these tenets of the Nasserite model, one must add Gadaffi's own peculiar contribution of Islam as religion but also as politics. While few, if any, other than Beshir Hawady, among his army Revolutionary Command Council share his fanatical religious zeal, the cast and the content of their socialist persuasion is religious, not secular. Setbacks to the Arab cause are attributable, essentially, to human frailty and

corruptibility, to the failure of true belief and a departure from the moral precepts of Islam. It makes for a dedicated but once again a fatalistic view of the world, for it reduces social and political action to the level of spiritual commitment, and the pursuit of policy to a moral crusade.

There is no denying the special cast given the Libyan revolution by the idiosyncratic character of Mu'ammar Gadaffi. Much is impossible to understand without understanding him. The stories about his brushes with other Arab leaders, his intemperate outbursts, are legion. Some have even tried to explain the wild inconsistencies of his policies by the theory that he is an agent for a regime other than his own; I have even heard the notion that he is the most efficient *agent provocateur* that Israel or the United States could recruit. The objective consequence of some of his acts could very well spread despondency and defeat on his own side and satisfaction on the enemy's. But this is to reflect not on the man and his motivation, but on the play of forces in the world in all epoch when every weakness, division, error, and obfuscation among dependent peoples produces corresponding strengths for imperialism.

The obsession with the leader, even when it is the inimitable Gadaffi, is precisely what should be avoided, for the sake of any real perspective. For to explain Libya by the temperament, eccentricity, even instability, of Gadaffi is to make no meaningful explanation in terms of history and Libyan society. There is a rich and fertile source to be tapped in the study of personality. But while this might help in explaining Gadaffi, what explains the Libyan response to him? For all the innovations of policy he has introduced, there is a long continuity between Libya before 1969 and after. Religion has always been an important part of the search for identity and expression. After all, Italy colonized for Christendom as well as for Sicilian settlers, and the resistance wars were fought in the interests of the true faith as part of national emancipation. Embryonic nationalist political expression has always been dominated and subdued by a political-religious state structure. If Gadaffi's activism takes away the breath of Libyans accustomed to being despised or

ignored, they are elated by his sheer bravado. He leaves circles of principally urban opinion as unconvinced in Benghazi and Tripoli as in Cairo and Damascus, but these circles are smaller in Libya than anywhere else; and his pronouncements undoubtedly fall on a receptive interior, and find an answering chord in the large constituency of the newly urbanized still struggling to integrate in a modern economy and a wider world.

The popular interpretation of Gadaffi is a leader flushed with insatiable ambition to govern not only Libya but far beyond it; to establish himself as the new Nasser. It seems important to distinguish between a personal ambition to rule and Gadaffi's conviction that he is more loyal to Nasser's mission than any other Arab leader of his time. He is gripped by a vision of the need to develop his country, transform the society, rediscover the true Islam, regenerate the Arab world, and unite it, and fire his generation with the same compulsions. How better to do this than by the continual example of the leader? Gadaffi has himself shown insight into the personalization of Libyan – or Egyptian, or Arab -politics round the figure of the leader. The September 1969 revolution, he has said, represents principles, values, and ideals. It was trying to make the people sing the praise of facts, not persons, but such talk was considered strange in the Arab homeland. 'Nasser tried hard to make the masses from the Gulf to the Ocean, masses who had no faith in theabilities at the time, believe in themselves and shoulder their responsibilities. But the harder he tried to make them believe in themselves, the more they clung to his person.' Gadaffi's resignation gestures, repeated at moments of frustration arising from the failure of the Libyan people to respond to the challenge, are attempts to break out of this style of personalized politics. Yet in the end Gadaffi, like Nasser, perhaps despite himself but inevitably because of his methods and outlook, will encourage a popular belief in his infallibility. Will he, too, leave demoralization in his wake?

Not that he has not learned and changed. He continues the same bold forays into Arab policy. But the naivete of the early attempts has been tempered by setbacks. Once at the first sound of a crisis, he climbed into his plane and flew from capital to capital urging immediate top-level summity. These days he is

disillusioned with summits. Once he composed a plan for the battle to regain Palestine; totalling the Arab armouries as though the arithmetic would provide the strategy. More recently, when the *fedayin* were under fire in Lebanon, he announced his offer of aid but told the Palestinian organizations that they themselves had to decide how best to deploy it. Recent speeches have shown a sophistication quite absent from earlier attempts, but also an underlying thread of desperation at the enormity of the problems. • Like you,'he told a Libyan popular conference, •I became independent on 1 September after 400 to 500 years of foreign rule ... You go to Algeria, Egypt, Feisal, Kuwait, and Jordan. I have met all these people. By God thoughts are confused. I no longer know the truth in the Arab world. Why? Because everyone gives you his own opinion ... By God I am confused. I cannot tell any more who is right.'

Yet the admission was not the start of some strengthening insight, but only a temporary lapse, for his characteristic style of government has continued uninterrupted: the same cloistered proceedings of the Revolutionary Command Council; the precipitate edict without reference to precedent and without consultation; the word of the speech becoming the letter of the law virtually overnight. (The 'cultural revolution' against the passive and bureaucratic and the agents of 'foreign' ideologies was announced on 16 April 1973; within days there were extensive round-ups of Libyans whose mistaken ideas were to be cured by a spell behind bars.) It is government by demagogic. Libyans agonized by the wilfulness of some decisions have cursed the mass media which give the spoken or written word instant universality and authority.

And yet Gadaffi has infinite patience – and appetite – for prolonged public sessions when he invites the public, however select, to confront him. Though these public sessions are lighly attractive, even exciting, as a form of popular or Bedouin democracy, they can be no substitution for institutionalized forms of paticipatory government. These forms will continue to elude a regime led by a closed army group with an ideology of army-guided government. For, however many committees are

instigated from the top, there remains inertia and passivity at the bottom.

It is during these popular sessions, generally televised for successive days, that Brother Colonel Gadaffi can be seen at his most magnetic, tireless, and obdurate. From him comes an inexhaustible flow; didactic, at times incoherent; peppered with snatches of half-formed opinions, cryptic self-spun philosophy, inaccurate or partial information; admonitions; confidences; some sound common sense, and as much prejudice. Few of his speeches do not contain the germ of at least one sound idea – but often only the germ of the idea, and little of its real development. For Gadaffi's view of the world is uncomplicated by any real knowledge of it.

One of the problems in understanding contemporary Libya is to reconcile the significant and the seemingly absurd which flow from the use of fundamentalist religion to make a social revolution. On women: 'You (in the West) force women to work in factories. This is oppression of women. In Islam we do not sacrifice women for material gain. You have initiated the abortion of pregnant women, you have dispersed the family and broken up society. We have no problems whatsoever. You simply have to apply the Koran for ideal social living.' On the cultural revolution in People's China and Libya: 'In China the cultural revolution was led by the Red Army; in Libya it is the masses that lead. China is searching for an identity, for new principles to be inculcated in the minds of the people; we are consolidating something already in our minds. We need to go back to our origins.' On Sartre and existentialism: 'Sartre is a lost man. We have the answers to all the questions he puts. Why study these issues of existence since they are in the Koran? Only he who has no holy book can ask such questions.'<sup>2</sup> But the use of religion as resistance is nothing new. On the one hand foreign conquest has met with naked revolt. This is Jacques Berque's Islam as Revolution.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, as superior invading forces prevailed, there has been the use of Islam as Refuge, a retreat but one which derived nonetheless from the same basic attitude of refusal. This refusal 'took refuge in a side of life that formed its.

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surest repository, namely religion'. Islam in North Africa withdrew into the 'fatal retreat of the *zawiya* of popular mysticism and xenophobic piety'. In the Maghreb maraboutism and saintly brotherhoods retained their vitality until the thirties: 'For believers [they] raised a rampart against the advance of enlightenment, still identified with that of the foreigner.'<sup>4</sup> Believing that all the guidance a man needs in running a state is to be found exclusively in the Koran, Gadaffi has an essentially religious view of foreign exploitation. His distaste for urban life – because cities, if not creations of the West, are imitations of its culture – is synonymous with his view of corruption. His indictment of the values imposed by the money market – magazine pictures of women, the disturbing influences on young men who study in Europe and the United States – are characteristic of the xenophobic piety of those who needed to use Islam as resistance against foreign conquest. How closely the great majority of his people can approximate to the life-style and goals of their leader zealot is at issue, for his view of true religion as martyrdom for the cause could well be disturbingly alien to the petit-bourgeois yearnings of young Libyans flourishing under an oil economy.

Libya is a difficult country to know, let alone analyse. Central to the process of social change and the ideological ferment of Arab cities since the end of the Second World War has been the rise of an urban proletariat and the transformation of the status of women. In Libya the position of women is changing in only barely perceptible fashion. Except for the girls in school class-rooms and the sprinkling at the university, the society is totally segregated. Half the society is accessible only in the home and then only to other women or the closest of masculine kin. The family is closed, private, and conservative. In the streets and public life, women are either not physically present or shrink anonymously behind the voluminous *baracan* which exposes only enough of one eye for the wearer to see where to walk.

If internal conservatism has stopped the emancipation of women, outside forces in the shape of oil have had profound and yet limited effects on the economy and on social formation. The oil industry does not bring the kind of industrialization that

releases an urban working class of any size, for it runs on a tiny labour force that is in part imported. So the towns are swollen, but the urban population consists of a few first-generation workers, pedlars, and small shopkeepers, innumerable government employees, and a thin layer of the new rich. It is a society of social gaps, an unformed society even by the standards of underdeveloped economies, or one fumbling only very slowly.

Male society, which is interchangeable with civic life, is blocked out not into large easily recognizable and well-organized groupings- formal political parties have hardly ever existed-but into innumerable coteries, sometimes as peer groups of school or army class-mates, family or village or work associates, football clubs or circles of friends whose association may endure beyond friendship into some more durable relationship. Not here the seething political parties and working-class movement of the cities of the Maghreb and the Middle East. And in the countryside low population density and the absence of a viable agricultural economy combine to create a similar void in social and political organization.

Jacques Berque has remarked on the backwardness of socio-logical analysis in the Arab world, on the absence of analysis, the irregularity of reactions towards social phenomena, the scarcity of objective documentation.<sup>5</sup> Liberation from the past is making this, if anything, more and not less difficult in Libya. Historians, for instance, have been discouraged from studying the sources of support and weakness of the Sanusi regime and period, for all remnants of the old regime must be obliterated in the interests of the new. Where politics does not block enquiry, convention and Gadaffi's insistence on unswerving adherence to the letter of the Koran invariably do.

There is insistence on the unchanging dogma of Islam. This, among other aspects, recognizes no distinction between the spiritual and the secular,-for Islam in history did not differentiate between religion and state. There is thus the insistence that Moslem religious precepts form an integral part of the law of the state; regardless of the nature of the state. There is the role of orthodoxy in supporting established authority and setting up communal unity as the highest objective of social action.<sup>6</sup> There

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is the use of Islamic education less to instruct the child than to adapt him to the absolute, for 'the Koran is learnt by heart with a superb disregard of intelligibility'.<sup>7</sup>

All this makes Libya's an inarticulate and even a nervous revolution. Except for Gadaffi, none of the coupmakers has said anything illuminating about its origins and meaning; their speeches are poor paraphrases of Gadaffi's. An intellectual whom I tried to engage in a general discussion about pre-coup Libya and the causes behind the change advised: 'When you see Gadaffi you can ask him about the causes of the revolution.' Civil servants - in a system that is a mix of Italian Bourbonic, Egyptian bureaucracy, and the army-induced system of closed hierarchical decision-making - are characteristically cautious; but doubly so under a regime in which no one except the Revolutionary Command Council feels secure enough to interpret policy on minor as much as on major issues. Those who were politically committed under the previous regime and were even persecuted for their opposition are reluctant to speak out. This regime has declared all 'party' politics to be treacherous to the purposes of the army-led State and during 1973 it rounded up and imprisoned persons suspected of political views, lest civilians try to steal or distort the revolution.

Yet, within Libya, many alarmed at the record of other military regimes recognize in the Free Officers the group that alone found the means to displace the monarchy: that transformed Libya from a rubber stamp of Anglo-American policy into a state with an international identity and voice; and that squeezed the oil companies in a masterful series of negotiations which brought benefits not only to Libya but to all Middle East oil producers. For whatever the rational reservations, there have been changes in foreign policy, in oil policy, and in domestic policy. The issue is why the changes have gone so far and no further; to what extent their limits are imposed by the army regime and Gadaffi's singular style; and how much is generic to the Libyan condition. For one must try to guard against a vision of Libya bounded by the end of a European, or expatriate, or diplomatic nose. Much speculation about the Arab world is dominated by European preoccupations and the interpretations of European diplomacy.

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The attempt should be to treat Libya as an intelligible whole. For whether or not Libya's example is relevant to other countries and systems, it has nonetheless to be understood and appreciated for having grown in its own climate.

