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Freedom and its contingencies

Any Filipino politician, or diplomat, or journalist, or academic who claims to have foreseen the rapid deterioration of the political situation in Libya today must indeed have extraordinary perceptual, analytical, and predictive powers. He or she could make billions advising the United Nations, the United States, China, and all the global corporations that control the world's economy today. Not even the US, with its unrivalled intelligence system, has been able to anticipate the complex events that are now swiftly unfolding in North Africa and the Persian Gulf.

For some reason, we Filipinos think we should have known better, and could have acted faster than anybody else in evacuating our overseas workers from war-torn Libya. We think we could have prepared better for contingencies like civil unrest, military coups, and revolutions in those countries to which we send our workers. I can only suppose that this penchant for self-lacerating criticism is drawn from our long experience with indifferent and incompetent governments.

Be that as it may, I think it has to be said that in this ongoing crisis, the Philippine government's performance is at least at par with that of the more powerful countries whose nationals are caught under similar circumstances. It won't be easy to repatriate an estimated thirty thousand Filipinos from Libya; doing so is, by any measure, a logistical nightmare. Many of them may not even want to come back to the Philippines. We can be sure they are hoping that, as in Tunisia and Egypt, Libya will go back to normal as soon as the military defects and the US steps in. In this, they may be miscalculating. Libyais not like Tunisia or Egypt. And Qadhafi has had longer practice in survival than any of his fellow autocrats in the region. Fearing a military challenge, he has systematically weakened his own army. Over the years, he has relied more on militias and mercenaries.

Qadhafi will eventually go, but the civil war may be protracted. What is important is that our OFWs who are caught in this political storm are reasonably safe, that our government knows exactly where they are, and that they have steady access to our consulates and other Filipino communities in the region. Ironically, it is the foreign workers from neighboring Tunisia and Egypt who find themselves in direr straits. The BBC recently showed tens of thousands of Egyptian workers trapped along the Tunisian border, and Tunisian workers stranded in refugee camps on the Egyptian border. The transitional governments installed in both Egypt and Tunisia in the aftermath of their respective revolutions are so besieged by a myriad problems at home that they are in no position to come to the rescue of their own migrant workers.

No one could have guessed that the four-decade-old despotism established by Moammar Gadhafi in Libya would be engulfed by the same crisis that began in Tunisia in December last year and crossed eastward to Egypt in January. People thought the virus of revolution had skipped Libya. Many years before, in the wake of Saddam Hussein's fall, Gadhafi had astutely sought a rapprochement with Europe and the US.

On the premise that the only real threat to his staying in power indefinitely was the United States, Gadhafi gave up the role he actively played in the '70s and the '80s as the patron of Islamic revolutionary movements. By befriending America and Britain, he wrongly thought he had purchased a ticket to political immortality. He did not take into account his own people. It is obvious that Gadhafi is not in touch with the modern reality that is shaping the lives of young people everywhere, including the Arab world.

"My people, they love me all; they would die to protect me," he pathetically insisted in a rare interview with Western journalists a few days ago. He strode to a seat in a Tripoli restaurant, where the interview was held, garbed in a rust-colored gown with matching headgear, and fielded questions with an air of dismissive self-assurance and invincibility.

Ignoring reports that Libyans were rising up everywhere against him, he asked, "Where, where?" Later, he admitted there were isolated disturbances, but that these had been initiated by misguided young people who were fed drugs by the Al-Qaida. Now that the effect of the drugs was wearing off, he said, these young people were laying down their arms and going home.

US Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice promptly labeled the Libyan leader "delusional." He may well be. But Qadhafi seems to know that the West has very limited options at its disposal. Libyan assets abroad have been ordered frozen. Qadhafi insists those are state assets, not his or his family's. Told by the US to resign, he retorts, "From what? I am not prime minister, or president, or king. I have no official title to resign from." More important, in a recent speech, he warned that the disintegration of the Libyan republic that he founded in September 1969 would result in the rise of "15 Islamic fundamentalist emirates." Each one of these, he seemed to imply, could become a troublesome terrorist haven funded by oil money.

No one knows how the Libyan crisis will end, or what new regime it will spawn. But rulers like Qadhafi are finished. This is the era of modern revolutions, and we can only look with awe at the way people everywhere are taking back their lives and reinventing their societies.

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