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World opinion and Qadhafi's Libya

World opinion, mainly shaped by Western media, is swiftly moving in the direction of an armed international intervention in Libya. All eyes are focused on the United States. In a recent statement, President Barack Obama declared that Libyan strongman Moammar Qadhafi “has lost legitimacy to lead, and he must leave.” While making it clear that the US will act only in concert with the international community, Obama has ordered the US military to prepare itself so that it has “full capacity to act, potentially rapidly.” What we must prevent, he said, was “a situation in which defenseless civilians were finding themselves trapped and in great danger.”

But let us take a close look at the tens of thousands of people who have fled Libya in recent days. They are foreign workers, not Libyan nationals. Most of them are massed up on the Tunisian and Egyptian borders, waiting for repatriation – or for the crisis to end, whichever comes first. They were not forced to come to Libya, nor are they being stopped from leaving. They include a good number of overseas Filipino workers, who, for the last thirty years or more, felt welcome in this oil-rich country.

On whose behalf then will the United States and the rest of the international community intervene in Libya? Libya's present problems appear to be entirely its own. These were not triggered by any hostile act against another nation or a minority ethnic or religious group within the country. That Qadhafi's continued rule is being seriously challenged by a determined sector of the Libyan people is not to be doubted. Qadhafi has reacted by rallying his supporters to defend their government and to crush the growing protest movement. The world's sympathy is clearly on the side of the protesters who demand a shift to a democratic order. But this does

not give the world the right to meddle in the internal affairs of this sovereign nation.

If the West intervenes at this point, either through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or through the US Armed Forces, it could set off a backlash of pan-Arabic nationalism. It could lend credence to the notion that the real object of this region-wide political turmoil is not democracy but oil. The Arab League, the regional association of Arab nations, would have been the ideal mediator for internal conflicts like this. But the present governments that constitute this organization are precisely under siege themselves from their own citizens.

World opinion today therefore finds itself in a real bind in Libya. It can express its moral support for the Libyan people's quest for greater freedom and democracy. It can warn the present dictatorial government against waging war against its own citizens. But it cannot secure democracy for the people. This the Libyans will have to win for themselves through determined and spirited struggle.

For, in truth, Qadhafi's Libya is not exactly the most despotic and corrupt regime in the Arab world. It is a predominantly Muslim society but it is tolerant of other faiths. Christians can go to their churches and openly practice their religions. Despite his eccentricities, Qadhafi sought to develop his people for the long term, knowing that the oil resources of the country would not last more than a generation.

He brought modern education to his people, many of whom were just starting to emerge from the nomadic way of life of desert tribes when he took over. Indeed he styled himself as an Arab intellectual who envisioned a popular socialism based on elected local people's congresses at various levels. In the early '80s, he launched a global public relations campaign to propagate his "green book" as the gospel of an emergent Third World. Outside Libya, very few took his ideas seriously. But the material support he gave to Islamic popular movements all over the world was considerable. This is certainly more than one could say for the Saudi princes and the

despotic rulers of those little oil-rich fiefdoms on the Persian Gulf who were content to wallow in the wealth that belonged to their people.

But much has changed since a young Colonel Qadhafi seized power from a moribund monarchy in 1969. The younger Libyan generation is better educated, thanks largely to Qadhafi's own effort to educate his people. It is no small irony that this generation which has come of age is at the forefront of the democracy movement now sweeping the whole region. They are by no means the poorest of the poor, or the most miserable and exploited in Libyan society. If we are looking for the latter, we will find them among the migrant workers from Bangladesh, Chad, Egypt, and Tunisia who have been suddenly displaced by the political storm.

The Libyan strongman may not go soon, but there is no way Libyan society will remain still. It is just a matter of time. Other regimes in the region, far more tyrannical and profligate, may go sooner. These threatened societies will vary in their capacity to withstand the virus of democracy. Some will implode in the face of the first demonstrations. Others, like Qadhafi's Libya, will mount a fierce defense, until they are trapped in a few strongholds, encircled by a defiant and awakened nation. More astute leaders from the rest of the world, who still preside over anachronistic authoritarianisms, may find themselves responding to these perturbations by paving the way for controlled transitions. If so, world opinion may hail them as nation-builders rather than as tyrants.

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