

Libya's revolution has triumphed, but will democracy?

Gaddafi's death may have secured the rebels' victory – but tyranny cultivates habits that complicate the journey to freedom

Benjamin Barber

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His death was violent and ugly, but it was what the people he ruled over for 42 years with a violent hand wished for. And what he wanted. Muammar Gaddafi died in his home town holding a silver pistol, killed by some combination of a Nato strike that intercepted his caravan and furious fighters from Misrata who became executioners for an angry country. He said he would not flee as Ben Ali had in Tunisia, but would "live and die" in Libya. The Libyan freedom fighters granted him his wish. *Sic semper tyrannis*.

Gaddafi was the last surviving ruler of the nationalist revolutions of the 50s and 60s, a self-proclaimed revolutionary founder on the model of Nasser rather than Mubarak, Castro rather than Assad. He talked direct democracy and people's revolution, but governed as an autocrat. He died as he had lived, by the gun.

He was as capricious as any autocrat, and so was his demise. For Nato too had intervened with a certain capriciousness, choosing to become the insurgents' air force though its mandate was the protection of civilians, and content to ignore 3,000 unarmed civilian deaths in Syria where intervention had costs; and apparently happy to sustain a Salafist monarchy in Saudi Arabia where the despots have more gravitas, and the oil flows freely – and where another deposed tyrant, Tunisia's Ben Ali, lives in the shadows.

The gods are laughing: at our hypocrisies and at Gaddafi's hubris. Five years ago, during the period of reconciliation, Gaddafi had almost begged Hilary Clinton (or Bill) to come to Libya. He much preferred America to neo-colonial Europe and had entrusted his fate to the Americans when he yielded his weapons of mass destruction in 2003 and agreed to pay reparations for Lockerbie.

He even joined President Bush in the war on al-Qaida, imprisoning Abdel Hakim Belhaj who had been arrested by the US in Bangkok but rendered to Libya and imprisoned (it was the same Belhaj, freed from prison before the uprising by Saif Gaddafi, who commanded the militia that took Tripoli during the summer). But for giving up his rogue status, he got not Hillary but only Condi Rice and Tony Blair and lesser Americans like Senator Arlen Specter. Yet here now, on the very day before he died, was Hillary Clinton in Tripoli, congratulating not him but the rebels who had deposed him.

And it was Clinton who wrote Gaddafi's epitaph in Tripoli: "Now comes the hard part." Too true. Gaddafi is gone, but it was enmity to him alone that united the fractious, tribal insurgents. Divided Libya has never before succeeded in forging a unified nation, let alone a democracy. Both Gaddafi and the monarch he overthrew tried, but monarchs and tyrants rarely forge civic unions among the people they abuse.

We know from the vicissitudes of the Arab spring elsewhere that revolution and democracy are two different species. The first can be won in a hurry, if at great cost, with the fleeing of a dictator (like Ben Ali in Tunisia) or the arrest of a dictator (like Mubarak in Egypt), or the killing of the tyrant (Gaddafi's fate). But democracy is another matter altogether, and requires long and patient labour in building civil society, forging a sense of citizenship, broadening education and inculcating habits of tolerance and respect for law that are generally not present in peoples who have lived so long under dictatorship. It is an irony of tyranny that it cultivates bad habits in its victims that can survive the death of tyrants and complicate the journey to freedom. The righteous mob that killed Gaddafi is not a model of justice and the rule of law.

Those who think the writing of a constitution and the holding of elections is all it takes to forge democracy – like so many western heralds of the Arab spring – have not read history. Those who think revolution and democracy are the same thing have forgotten the lessons of 1789 in Paris and 1917 in Russia and 1979 in Tehran. Revolutions more often breed anarchy, rivalry and in time renewed tyranny – Napoleon or Stalin or the rule of the mullahs – than democracy. Even in the United States it took 80 years and a bloody civil war to transform the slave republic into a free republic.

Gaddafi is gone, but the hard journey to democracy has scarcely begun. It will require in Libya that 140 tribes be reconciled, that the 300-year-old quarrel of east and west, Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, be put aside. It will mean getting to the bottom of who among the rebels killed their own chief of army staff Abdul Fatah Younis in Benghazi at the end of July; getting the splintering militias to turn over their arms to a national police force; and assuring that victory over the tyrant does not become a blood feud against his clansmen.

So *sic semper tyrannis* is the powerful lesson of Gaddafi's failed reign and violent death. But "thus always to tyrants" is never the same thing as "life now for democracy". This is "the hard part" for which a successful revolution is no guarantee, though the people of Libya richly deserve the promised democracy for which they have bravely shed so much of their blood.