

Libya

So far, so pretty good

Amid trepidation, the new regime is making a remarkably hopeful start

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IN THE evening cool at a fairground on the Tripoli waterfront, giggling children chant as they spin on a merry-go-round. But theirs is no childish rhyme. Their joyful cry is the revolutionary mantra that has been echoing across the Arab world: “The people demand the fall of the regime!”

A fortnight after its mercifully quick delivery from six months of harsh lock-down under the dying regime of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, the Libyan capital is slowly coming back to life, if not yet to full normality. Most Libyans see the 42 years of the colonel’s rule as an ordeal to be erased from memory. They are now entering something completely new, and facing it with the

mixed trepidation and wonder of someone waking from a nightmare. It is hard to move through Tripoli without being stopped and regaled with stories of the horrors of the colonel's rule.

Much of this city of 2m still feels half empty, with most shops shuttered. This reflects not only lingering fears of a pro-Qaddafi fifth column, but continued shortages and the exodus of foreign workers. Petrol queues in some areas stretch for a kilometer. Crowds throng bakeries, where bread is scarce not for lack of flour but because the Egyptians who ran them are gone. "Libyans expect to work behind a desk in air-conditioning, not in a hot oven," shrugs a weary customer.

There is not yet much sign of government in Tripoli. Some ministers have come over from Benghazi, the rebels' base in the east. The National Transitional Council (NTC), a body of 40-odd people that sets general policy, is meant to relocate soon. Meanwhile the capital is run by groups of volunteers and policed in random fashion by cheerful bands of bearded fighters who cruise around in pickups mounted with heavy guns and lounge at checkpoints. Tripolitanians seem happy to see them, despite their nerve-jangling bursts of celebratory gunfire. But the NTC, wary of alienating Tripoli's citizens, is urging fighters to return to their native regions, and is taking steps to register and collect guns.



First, the rebel forces must finish the fighting. It seems to be going well. Only three isolated pockets within Libya's vast expanse remain in loyalist hands. In two of them, the colonel's home town of Sirte, along the main coast road, and Bani Walid, 160km (100 miles) south-east of Tripoli, tribal elders seem keen to capitulate but plead for more time to persuade the colonel's diehard supporters to give up. "They still believe the rebels are rapists and looters," says Muftah Rabbani, a leader of the Warfallah tribe in Bani Walid, during a pause in talks held at a roadside mosque on the front-line. "Propaganda is Qaddafi's last weapon," he adds, "but even that is almost gone."

To help persuade doubters of their good intent, rebel commanders have put local brigades at the spearhead of the assault, repeating a tactic that has helped promote speedy resolutions elsewhere.

Mr. Rabbani says most loyalist forces have already slipped out of Bani Walid, a town of 60,000 whose capture would place the whole of the country's fertile coastal zone, which contains around 95% of Libya's 6m people, under the control of the new authorities. Colonel Qaddafi, perhaps with the three of his seven sons who have not been killed by NATO air strikes or taken asylum in Algeria, is presumed to be heading farther south across the desert with his closest comrades. The Algerian authorities, criticised for previously letting in other members of the colonel's family, say they have turned back convoys of fleeing loyalists. But others have crossed the unguarded border into Niger.

This suggests they do not feel safe in the last loyalist stronghold, the oasis of Sebha. Some of the tribes there have a history of hostility to the colonel, while the rugged Tuareg people who populate a swathe of the Sahara desert from Libya to Mali, and were long favored by the Libyan leader with jobs and guns, seem to be abandoning him. Tuareg elders in Mali and Niger, fearing an influx of armed brethren, are telling the colonel's soldiers to stay in Libya and join the new regime's forces.

NATO aircraft are continuing their patrols but are less needed, since the rebels now far outgun Colonel Qaddafi's forces. Western aircraft have refrained from targeting fleeing loyalists. This would fall outside their UN mandate to protect civilians, which in any case ends on September 27th. Libyans largely praise NATO pilots for their accuracy, dismissing tales of civilian casualties as propaganda. Yet government officials say they do not want Libya now to be overrun by foreign do-gooders. They want to rebuild the country by themselves.

The NTC has provisional plans to elect a "national congress" within eight months and draft a constitution in its first 60 days. This process, Libyans recognize, is fraught with obstacles. The country has little experience of democracy, no political parties, a fragile justice system and fledgling free media. The rebel army, made up of some 50 regionally based *katibas* (brigades) with remnants of the professional armed forces, is loosely organized and ill-disciplined. Weapons proliferate, including explosives and rockets in unguarded piles. Decades of shambolic administration have left a legacy of shoddy infrastructure, tangled bureaucracy and administrative incompetence. Tensions persist between regions, between Islamists and secularists, and between those demanding a purge of former officials and those counselling pragmatic accommodation.

So far, pragmatism and dialogue seem to have prevailed. Mainstream Islamists, such as the economy minister, Abdullah Shamia, speak not of imposing Islamic law but of respecting contracts with foreign oil companies, diversifying the economy away from oil dependence, wooing investment, and regulating the labor market to block a new influx of migrant workers seeking passage to Europe. Most Libyans scoff at the notion that al-Qaeda may gain a foothold. Libyan society is already conservative and tradition-bound, they note, as well as religiously uniform, observing just one of the four accepted Sunni rites.

Abdel Hakim Belhaj, Tripoli's new military commander, a veteran of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group denounced by Western governments for having links to al-Qaeda, is widely respected. Despite his arrest in Malaysia back in 2004, his alleged torture by the CIA and his dispatch to a Libyan prison, he now categorically denies having any ties to al-Qaeda or animosity to the West. "We want a civil state that respects the law and rights, a state that applies justice," he told *Le Monde*, a French newspaper. "We will give back our weapons; we are not here to establish a Taliban-like regime through a coup."

Libya has a lot going for it. Even if, as some experts suggest, it takes many months to restore oil production to pre-revolution levels, the country may draw on a stash of sovereign foreign assets estimated by Mr. Shamia at more than \$170 billion. Libya's large and talented exile community, which contributed greatly to the revolution, is eager to return and invest. In the eyes of Libyans

emerging from their long trauma, the future looks far brighter for them than for other Arab neighbors after their revolutions.
