

The world watches as Libya wakes to challenges

Paul McGeough August 27, 2011

The new guard in Tripoli will be so flush with funds that they could rightly tell the world to go away - leave it to the Libyans to chart their own exciting future.

How flush are they? Think \$100 billion in frozen assets already being thawed for repatriation by Western capitals. Look at the quality of Libya's prestigious European investment portfolio - it includes chunks of London's Oxford Street, the *Financial Times* and the Fiat motor company. And don't forget the country's revenue stream from the world's ninth-largest oil reserves.

It is hard not to share in the euphoria, especially in the Arab street, kindled by this week's fall of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. But world leaders would do well to proceed more cautiously than they did in the Afghanistan and Iraq ventures, despite the infectious excitement of the early days of liberated Kabul and Baghdad.

Remember: what started in Libya as the humanitarian defence of the population of the eastern city of Benghazi became a full-blooded push for regime change. Now, with as many unknowns in Libya as there are stars in the North African sky, the country is the world's newest nation-building operation. For all the global determination to stand back, mission creep is upon us - even Julia Gillard wants to help.

So the new Libya has become a series of tests, for players and pundits, from Tripoli to Paris, from London to Washington.

GLOBAL REACTION

Next week, the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, will host a gathering of Libyan and international officials in one of Paris' gilded conference rooms. The French leader's diplomacy will be measured by the extent to which all the Libyan wealth in the West and any further help that might be on offer can be leveraged to hold the former Libyan rebels to their democratic undertakings - without foreign governments taking ownership of the new Libya and its inevitable problems.

The rebel National Transitional Council's acting Prime Minister Mahmoud Jibril has already seemingly tried to head off any such effort to straitjacket himself and his colleagues. He warned on Thursday while visiting Rome that Libya would descend into chaos if the funds were not released immediately. He said security might unravel if government workers, especially the police, were not paid quickly.

"We are here for an urgent call," Jibril said.

In Istanbul, a council delegation laid out a "stabilisation plan" for senior diplomats. The delegation reportedly said the plan had been drawn up with help from US, British, Canadian and United Nations experts to "incorporate lessons and best practices from Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo and Bosnia".

THE REBELS

Some analysts believe there are sufficient "losers" and weapons in post-Gaddafi Libya to stand an insurgency. This could become more than an irritant in the event the rebels mismanage their first days in power.

For this reason, the rebels have insisted - and NATO happily agrees - that there be no foreign troops to become targets for any resistance fighters. The rebels also insist there will be no repetition of what American analyst Kenneth Pollack describes as "a set of horrific circumstances created by an almost inconceivable parade of American mistakes" in Iraq.

The rebels have pointedly ruled out a repeat of the first days of the occupation of Iraq, when Washington's proconsul, Paul Bremer, sacked hundreds of thousands of soldiers, policemen and civil service managers and technicians, leaving the country with no one to run utilities and creating a festering pool from which many of the well-trained insurgents emerged to taunt the Americans for years.

With reports of execution-type killings by both sides in recent days, the rebels will also need to be held to their promise that there will be no revenge campaigns against Gaddafi loyalists. Again, Baghdad memories send a chill down the spine: the Iraqi Interior Ministry was used as a cover for Shiite death squads that liquidated thousands of the Iraqi Sunnis who had prospered under Saddam Hussein.

Amid fears Libyans will seek vengeance on their former tormenters, the rebels have opted for a South Africa-style truce and reconciliation process as a balm for old wounds.

For now, all the promises are just words on paper. And there are good reasons for the jury staying out on the rebel leadership's ability to hold the people to them - such as the historic animosity between provinces, tribal jealousies, religious uncertainties and murderous divisions within the rebel leadership.

Middle East Institute scholar Daniel Serwer observes in *The Washington Post*: "Little is known outside Libya about political, tribal, ethnic and regional fault lines, and Gaddafi-era institutions are so confused that it is difficult to see how they can provide a framework to limit competition to non-violent politics."

The Brookings Institution's Shadi Hamid says that, as hated as he was, Gaddafi had succeeded in uniting his opponents. "Without Gaddafi, though," he writes, "the various elements within the TNC will turn its attention elsewhere - and perhaps towards each other."

There is another uncertainty that only time will prove or disprove: that is, the extent to which the international help essential in dislodging Gaddafi is the same kiss of death for a "happy ever after" future brought on by the more full-throated, boots-on-the-ground foreign invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Lebanese columnist Sateh Nouredine claims: "[NATO's support] will not be for free - Libya will pay for it."
