

Libya forecast: good, enlightenment spreading

Last updated September 14 2011 12:01AM

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The pessimists expect splits and anarchy. The reality is a people pulling together and making their country work

Three weeks ago Tripoli was a battleground. The Libyan capital crackled with gunfire. Armed rebels manned barricades in every street. Decomposing bodies lay amid wrecked tanks, charred cars, spent bullets and other debris of war. There was little electricity and no running water or fresh food. Black market petrol cost \$100 for 20 litres. Of the 400-odd staff of my once luxurious hotel perhaps 20 were working, and breakfast was tinned pears and tuna.

Today you would barely know there had been a war. The barricades have almost all gone. Shops are open and schools will be shortly. The city is clogged with traffic, not stinking mounds of rubbish. Police are back on the streets. Petrol is about \$3 for 40 litres. The hotel has hot running water, maids to make the beds, eggs, fresh fruit and coffee for breakfast. The only obvious vestiges of Muammar Gaddafi's 42-year rule are the tattered portraits laid in doorways so they can be trodden on.

The speed of Tripoli's recovery has been remarkable, as have the things that have not happened. There has been no Baghdad-style looting of banks and businesses — only of bases and buildings linked to the old regime. There have been some cases of revenge killings and reprisals against regime supporters, but no widespread lynchings and no wholesale purge like that of Iraq's Baathists after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Rebel leaders instead preach reconciliation and forgiveness, arguing that only those members of the old regime with blood on their hands should be punished.

"They will get the fair trials their victims were denied," the family of an abducted businessman who perished in a sealed-up cargo container told me proudly. "We want our children to see that that's the way to do things."

Nor, having captured Tripoli, did rebel fighters immediately mount all-out attacks on Sirte, Bani Walid and Sabha. They first sought to negotiate the peaceful surrender of Gaddafi's last bastions to avoid further bloodshed and division.

"New Libya" is off to a good, disciplined start. Indeed, the only real blemish on its record has been the widespread detention of sub-Saharan Africans, many unjustly accused of having fought for the regime.

Cassandras doubt this happy state of affairs will last, however. They argue that Gaddafi suppressed all political opposition and civic activity, so his departure will inevitably lead to chaos. They predict debilitating splits between eastern and western Libya, between Islamists and secularists and between tribes jostling for power and wealth. They fear anarchy in a country now bristling with weapons.

These are legitimate concerns and the coming months will be messy and fractious. There is already a backlash against former regime officials on the National Transitional Council. But if post-revolutionary Libya does not "work", then surely nowhere in the Arab world can.

Its population is small and strikingly homogenous compared with most other Arab countries. There is no Sunni-Shia split, as in Iraq. The importance of the tribes has diminished with Libya's urbanisation. There are no foreign occupying troops against whom Gaddafi might try to foment an insurgency.

The Tuaregs in the desert south may fear for the future, having supported Gaddafi, but Libya's long-repressed Berber minority helped to lead the assault on Tripoli from the western mountains and is already enjoying its emancipation. For the first time ever it is publishing newspapers and broadcasting radio programmes in its native language.

The rivalry between the ancient provinces of Cyrenaica in the east, and Tripolitania in the west, is ancient and real, but in Mustafa Abdul Jalil, head of the National Transitional Council, "New Libya" is fortunate in having a leader who enjoys support from both sides. Mr Jalil is hardly charismatic, but he is a sage man who commands respect, having repeatedly stood up to Gaddafi as a judge and justice minister, and having been the first of his Cabinet to defect.

Libya's Islamists have certainly become a force to be reckoned with. They led the resistance during Gaddafi's long rule and spearheaded this year's uprising. But there is scant evidence that they want to turn Libya into another Iran.

Abdelhakim Belhadj, head of the Tripoli Military Council, is their most prominent representative. He was the leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group that waged guerrilla war against Gaddafi in the early 1990s. In 2004 MI6 colluded with the CIA to have him detained in Bangkok and sent back to Libya where he was imprisoned and tortured for seven years.

Yet he is not obviously a fanatic. In a recent interview with *The Times* he emphasised his support for democracy and desire for good relations with Britain and America. His group sought only to remove Gaddafi, not practise international terrorism, he insisted. "Gaddafi was the terrorist."

“New Libya” has other advantages. It has a well-educated middle class. It has benign neighbours in Egypt and Tunisia. Its economy consists almost entirely of oil and gas and should be swiftly revived. It is already receiving billions of dollars in unfrozen funds, including 260 million newly minted dinars that arrived on a plane with Dominic Asquith, Britain’s special representative. With Gaddafi and his dire offspring no longer hogging and squandering Libya’s riches, the new Government should quickly be able to raise living standards.

Above all, Libya’s rebels have more than proved their mettle over the past seven months. Against all odds and expectations, despite all the reports of splits and stalemates, they and their “ragtag army” have with Nato’s help routed one of the world’s most enduring, vicious and best-armed police states. They are justifiably proud of that astounding victory and will not readily surrender their hard-won freedom to any other form of tyranny.

As Mr Jalil told thousands of cheering compatriots in the renamed Martyrs’ Square in Tripoli on Monday night: “We will not accept any extremist ideology, on the Right or the Left. We are a Muslim people, for a moderate Islam, and will stay on this road.”