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Libya

Saif al-Islam: the Whole (Libyan) World in His Hands?

George Joffe January 13, 2010



The recent granting of a senior government position to Saif al-Islam Qadhafi has attracted relatively little comment, considering the broad implications of this step. Perhaps that is not surprising, as doubt and uncertainty have hovered over the head of Colonel Qadhafi's second eldest son ever since he emerged on Libya's political scene in the mid-1990s.

In the early days Saif al-Islam headed up one of his father's non-governmental organizations, the al-Qadhafi Charitable Foundation, as well as a new private sector conglomerate, One-Nine Holdings, with interests in oil, agriculture and the media. As time went by, he became the acceptable voice of reform and modernization, bringing Shukri Ghanem, his mentor when he was an MBA student in Vienna, into government as a modernizing premier and calling for human rights and constitutionalism in Libya's idiosyncratic *amāhīriya*—the stateless state based on direct popular democracy, albeit disciplined by the revolutionary committee movement which answers only to his father.

By this decade Saif al-Islam had become the darling of Libya's reformist intelligentsia and the target of revolutionary committee paranoia, while also capturing the imagination of Western observers who hoped that Libya's return to the international community presaged radical domestic reform as well. It seems to have been Saif al-Islam who had brought in the Monitor Group to re-plan the Libyan economy and encouraged Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to visit the country. He took a leading role in resolving the Lockerbie compensation issue in 2003 and the Bulgarian nurses affair in 2007, as well as hostage crises in the Sahara and the Philippines. Many began to speak of him as the colonel's designated successor, even though the Libyan leader himself constantly reasserted his own political vision against that of his son.

Yet, despite his radicalism, Saif al-Islam always deferred to his father's prejudices and preferences, moderating his tone in tune with the prevailing political wind, which itself bent to the colonel's wishes. And it is Colonel Qadhafi who still calls the shots in Libya, particularly since he has seen off the Islamist oppositional threat of the late 1990s. Furthermore, Saif al-Islam's leverage against the entrenched order in Libya was profoundly limited by competition from his brothers—first Sa'adi and, more recently, al-Mu'atassim, now in charge of the oil and security sectors—as well as by the fact that he had no official position within the state, depending instead entirely on his father's patronage.

Finally, in August 2008, he seemed to have overstepped the mark. By then a tradition had developed whereby Saif al-Islam gave a speech on August 20 every year, just a few days before the anniversary of the Great September Revolution in 1969 and the biannual meeting of Libya's supreme political institution, the General People's Congress, in which he restated his reformist agenda. On this occasion, however, his attacks on the defects of Libya's normatively ideal (at least, as far as Colonel Qadhafi was concerned) political system seem to have been considered excessive. In the wake of the speech, a satellite television channel Saif al-Islam had just founded was nationalized and criticism of his views in the regime—and revolutionary committee—dominated media reached a crescendo.

Some days later, Saif al-Islam gracefully took the only path open to him and announced that he was to retire from politics. And, indeed, over the past year, he seems to have taken a back seat, despite occasional calls for his return to the political arena. It was difficult to believe, nonetheless, that his enforced retirement was really permanent. It was notable, for example, that he seized the initiative to organize the triumphant return of Abdelbasset al-Maghrahi, the convicted Lockerbie bomber, to Libya after his August 2009 release from prison in Scotland on health grounds.

Some weeks later, it seemed that Saif al-Islam's patience had finally paid off. On October 6, 2009, Colonel Qadhafi, while attending a commemoration for the Union of Free Officers (the movement that planned and executed the 1969 revolution), called on Libyans to create a formal position for his 37 year old son so that he could properly serve them. The next day, the Libyan Socialist Popular Leadership, a body that brings together heads of tribes and social institutions, proposed that he should become coordinator of its organizing committee, a position that made Saif al-Islam the second most powerful person in the Libyan hierarchy after his father. His appointment was confirmed ten days later.

The significance of this appointment cannot be overstated. It is, in effect, the formal endorsement of Colonel Qadhafi's second son as his successor through a process of republican dynasticism, thus ending the speculation of recent years over how the succession process in Libya is to be managed. Yet it is also a mechanism by which Saif al-Islam has been domesticated within the current Libyan political system, despite all his ambitions to reform it profoundly. It remains to be seen how compromised his reform agenda might be in consequence. It is also not clear whether Saif al-Islam has built up all the informal alliances within the power structure, the security forces, and the tribes that will be necessary if he is to preserve the freedom of action he will undoubtedly need to counter pressure from regime radicals (and possibly his brothers too) to displace him.

Yet, observers seem to have overlooked the full import of Colonel Qadhafi's remarks on that fateful day in October. The Libyan leader called for a position for his son, he said, because he wanted to free himself to address a global political agenda. It is true that the colonel has, in recent months, made it clear that he believes that he has an international mission to fulfill and for which he must disembarass himself from the day-to-day problems of domestic Libyan politics. If he really means this and does give Saif al-Islam his head, then the implications for domestic reform in Libya could be profound indeed. One early indication of possible changes to come was the December 12, 2009 launch of a Human Rights Watch report on Libya held in Tripoli itself, an event that would have been unimaginable a few years ago.

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