June 1, 2011

Restoration of a lost identity

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In these glorious days in which the Libyan people are courageously restoring their national identity and enthusiastically reshaping their future, calamities seem a trivial price to pay compared to what they expect to gain. Despite the souring of their agony to unprecedented levels, their morale remains very high as they fervently resort to a bygone era for inspiration and hope.

For one hundred days, the world at large has witnessed the sufferings of a distressful nation climb to unprecedented levels. Lives threatened, horrendous atrocities committed, families displaced, children horrified, youths abducted, farms pillaged, livestock annihilated, and cities besieged and savagely bombarded to the point that some of them has turned into ghost towns.

Mercenaries brought in from Africa bring to mind a similar evil deed undertaken by the Italians in the 1930’s to crush Libyan resistance. At that time, Libyans were frightened by the so-called mssawa (Arabic: مصؤوَع), in reference to the port city of the same name which was part of Ethiopia when it was under Italian rule. Their modern counterparts whom Gaddafi recruited from several African countries were known simply by the term 'those of the yellow caps' when they first appeared on the streets of Benghazi and al-Beida at the outset of February Revolution. Fearful and utterly stressful citizens fled their own country and became refugees, a kind of 21-century sequel to yet another exodus their great grandfathers experienced a century earlier.

In the 1930’s, the fascist Italians were determined to end once and for all the Libyan resistance and, hence, some of the earliest, and ugliest, extermination camps the modern world has ever heard of were erected. Gaddafi, on the other hand, was determined to wipe out everything Libyans cherished and fought for including their very history, identity, and pride.

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Neither the Italians nor Gaddafi succeeded in their mischievous attempts. Perhaps the main difference between the two episodes was the indiscriminate killings and utter atrocities now exercised by a lunatic dictator for the sake of a fake personal image that has been ridiculed by everyone for the last four decades.

What happened during the earlier period of subjugation was aptly described in the timely epic poem "ма بي مرض"، ‘no illness but this place’ composed by Rajab Buhwayshe and translated from Arabic by the Libyan poet Khalid Mattawa. This great lyric is in a class by itself, it tells it all: imprisonment, humiliation, degradation, and other forms of adversity. From the translation, I quote these lines:

I have no illness but this place of Egaila, I have no illness except my threadbare state
the imprisonment of my tribe and this unbearable longing
and separation from my kin’s abode. for Aakrama, Adama and Sgaif,

And for the pastures Lafwat, best of places, I long for Aakrama and Sarrati,
which, even when parched I wish I were there now.
bursts grass green for the herds. I’ll be grateful to reach them alive.

When I remember those places I forget my misery- I have no illness but the memory of the sons
of Harabi,
tears fall, the best of friends
storms drenching my beard, raging floods. who keep on striking as bullets rain down.

I have no illness but the loss of good men Bowing like a slave
and all our possessions forgetting my status
and the incarceration of our women and having lived my life untainted, strong,
I stand without vigour, light and useless, a mere factotum carrying on as if healthy, free of disease.

I have no illness except missing loved ones gentle, honorable folk riding sturdy camels, prancing steeds.

I have no illness except this endless aging this loss of sense and dignity loss of good people who were my treasure, who stood firm-chested against scoundrels the blossoms of our houses whose honor will shine despite what the ill-tongued say.

I have no illness except the loss of young men masters of clans plucked out like dates in the daylight

Whips lash us before our women’s eyes rendering us useless degraded, not even a match among us to light a wick.

I have no illness except this long homesickness my arms bound tight my patience withered, no means to make a livelihood.

the lack of those who rule with fairness, justice nonexistent evil dominant, crushing any grain of good.

I have no illness except the breaking of wills my tears pour and drip herds let loose to no one’s care.

Ill-bred imbeciles now rule. How could one sleep with them roaming about?

No illness except shorn honors.

Black guards standing stiff with cruelty, barbed wire looped around
They’ll sell you out for the slightest of cause. poles.

No illness except the bad turn of my stars
the theft of my property
the tight misery of where I lie down to rest.

Every day I rise complaining of subjugation
my spirit disgraced
and like a helpless girl I can’t break my chains.

I have no illness except the bent shape of my life
my limpid, wilted tongue.

Only God is eternal. The guardian of Mjamam is gone-
an oppressive light now shines

I cannot tolerate shame, though now shame has overtaken me.

no daylight is safe from the wicked’s dark.

(For the complete poem, the reader may refer to: http://english.libya.tv/2011/05/19/no-illness-but-this-places%e2%80%99s-national-lyrical-epic/).

The immediate question is what happened to the national identity of the Libyan people during two quite different historical periods of nearly equal duration? A full understanding of the Libyan people's aspirations at both periods is required to answer such a question. Bearing in mind that the earlier period was characterized by mostly rural, nomadic way of life, while the latter was predominantly urban, nevertheless, generating a lost identity and hope for the future were the basic sustaining elements of both.

The oral and written history of the Libyan struggle for independence tells us, among other things, that the preserving of national unity was essential to preserving Libyan identity. The cited lyric poem is a classic example depicting misfortunes and miseries Libyans endured under Italian occupation; yet, it also portrays a sense of hope and resilience.

For an understanding of elements of change stirred up by the ongoing revolution, and of identity evolution and development, we should turn to historical continuity with pre-independence and constitutional eras. It is assumed that a sense of historical continuity with the two crucial eras fostered a sense of national identity.
In the first place, Libya’s identity stems largely from a very strong sense of national unity; a unity that is real, not imagined. The human geography of Libya provides the basis of national unity in the first place and derives its strength from two consecutive spatial concepts, i.e., the old mixed agricultural-pastoral economy, and the present functionally interdependent system of cities. In the former system, agricultural pastoralists moved freely throughout the land and recognized no boundaries separating parts of their country. In the latter system cities and towns of different sizes, nested into an orderly hierarchy of central places, proved to be crucial players in the cause of identity generation.

In fact, the Libyan people found the opportunity to express their authentic sense of such unity in several decisive moments over the last hundred years of their history extending from 1911 to 2011. Perceived common destiny amply manifested for nearly four decades of unified struggle, both politically and militarily, to liberate the nation from colonial rule. Fighters came from everywhere: from urban and rural areas along the Mediterranean coast, and especially from nomadic tribes in the interior of the country. These tribes acted as vital sources for supplying men for the cause of liberation.

The declaration of Independence and the establishment of the constitutional monarchy in 1951 ushered in a new era of political, economic and social development. More importantly, national unity has been consolidated and subsequently preserved by astute political awareness on the part of the citizens and a deep sense of common destiny.

Conscious of their identity as an independent political unit, the Libyan people culminated the process of their political development by replacing, in the mid-1960’s, the federal form of governance (which incorporated the former three provinces of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan) by a unitary form of government.

The current revolution speaks for itself. The Libyan people started their quest for freedom, identity restoration, and democracy all over again. Almost instantly, from the start of the glorious February Revolution and continuing throughout the triumphant first one hundred days, an overwhelming craze for the constitutional flag, the symbol of national independence, materialized. The flag sprouted everywhere, no doubt in acknowledgment of a cherished era and the accomplishments of a revered past generation. Certainly, its reappearance and amazing proliferation in great numbers and shapes bear unmistakable witness to the unity of Libya and the identity of its citizens.
For another strong evidence of the resilience of the Libyan people, we turn to the urban scene where notions of national identity have been most evident. One of the remarkable facts about the transformation of Libyan society since independence was the process of rapid urbanization. Libyans oriented themselves overwhelmingly towards the cities, regardless of whether their origins had been urban or rural. This is due mainly to the remarkable social cohesion and solidarity that linked them strongly. No dichotomy existed between city and countryside, and cities were far from being restricted coastal enclaves. In fact, cities and towns remained socially, culturally, and functionally interconnected, thus holding the key to national identity and unity. Indeed, Libya became a true nation of cities.

The traditional urban landscape of Benghazi is a product of a sense of its history and, subsequently, culminates in a sense of identity. It bears witness to periods of prosperity and times of despair and struggle. Therefore, the physical loss of some of its important monuments and urban landmarks during Gaddafi regime, e.g., the awkward displacement of Omar al-Mukhtar monument and shrine, demolition of Suk al-Dhalam (traditional Bazar), and the destruction of some other old city architecture, did not in any way weaken the sense of identity. However, their loss will not be terminal, as they remain deeply ingrained in the collective memory of the people. Their restoration will enhance identity and place making.

I am citing examples from Benghazi but the same thing could be said of other places, as fervent hope for reassertion of a lost national identity was replicated in other urban places throughout Libya, ranging in size from Tripoli, our national capital, to the small desert community of al-Jaghbub near the Egyptian border. The latter town has suffered greatly because of the complete demolition of its famous shrine and renowned religious school. It is worth noting that in the second half of the nineteenth century, al-Jaghbub even rivaled the revered al-Azhar in religious teachings.

Right now, Libyans need, and should declare a new vision. First, the sought vision must be linked with our past initiative for democracy when we, as a nation undertook on the eve of independence and upon which our aspirations were built. However, a nostalgic sense of national identity alone may not be enough. The new vision could also be greatly inspired by a keen sense of place that is readily acquired in the nation's human experience, especially the lost-and found images of our cities. Already, in restoring their identity, cities and towns are in the process of repositioning themselves, searching for previous images and displaying new ones in modern outfits.
What happened over the past four decades reflect neither the values nor the national consciousness of the Libyan people. Indeed, the present events tell us that the nation's spirit was not in any way broken despite the agony of four decades of authoritarian rule, which aimed at destroying our dignity and cast us into a state of anarchy. The infamous decades did not succeed in eradicating our sense of authentic identity.

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Benghazi: May 27, 2011