

Recalling First's Gaddafi and Libya insights

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RUTH First, a South African liberation fighter and Pan-African intellectual activist, was killed 29 years ago today in Mozambique by a letter bomb sent by the apartheid regime. One of her most important books was 1974's *Libya: The Elusive Revolution*, based on field interviews, including with Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. Four years earlier, she published *The Barrel of A Gun*, a tour de force on military rule in postcolonial Africa. With the regime of the Libyan strongman facing its most serious challenge in its 42 years, it is interesting to recall First's prescient analysis of Gaddafi's rule.

First's book on Libya provides a historical background of European colonial rule followed by a western-controlled puppet monarchy. It seeks to untangle the contradictions of Gaddafi's "perverse" revolution of September 1969, following an act of regicide against King Idris. An oil-rich state wished to avoid becoming a conservative sheikhdom; Gaddafi simultaneously pursued a social revolution and a revival of Islamic fundamentalism; power was held by 11 young soldiers yet the regime claimed to represent a mass-based popular revolution; it launched a cultural revolution against the bureaucracy while stalling any nonstate political action; the putschists condemned the corruption of the monarchical ancien regime while cutting deals with global oil cartels to create a new ruling elite; Gaddafi pursued Pan-Arab unity even as he became diplomatically isolated.

In short, First describes the remarkably durable, eccentric rule of Gaddafi, who modelled his rule on that of Egypt's charismatic Gamal Abdel Nasser. She shows how, despite the radical rhetoric, Gaddafi's authoritarian rule actually comes to resemble the monarchical rule he has displaced, running an oil-dependent rentier state. Her concluding point is that one has first to understand the idiosyncratic Gaddafi in order to explain the Libyan revolution, but that understanding him alone is insufficient to explain Libyan history and society.

Gaddafi's traditional, religious approach led him to live in a Bedouin tent and to criticise the decadent West, even as he relied on its technology and companies to finance his domestic revolution and foreign adventures. First elegantly summarised this style of rule: "From him comes an inexhaustible flow; didactic, at times incoherent; peppered with snatches of half-formed opinions, cryptic self-spun philosophy, inaccurate or partial information; admonitions; confidences; some sound common sense, and as much prejudice. Few of his speeches do not contain the germ of at least one sound idea.... For Gaddafi's view of the world is uncomplicated by any real knowledge of it."

Despite its insights, First's work on Libya was not always nuanced. She noted that "Gaddafi's view of religion as politics meant that setbacks to the Arab cause were attributable to human corruptibility, to a failure of true belief, to a departure from the moral principles of Islam." This was a caricature, since Gaddafi has clearly been a shrewd, ruthless, calculating politician who has sought to maintain his own survival by tying his rule to the most fundamental beliefs of his people.

First later criticised her own analysis of Libya for framing the key issue as "national development" in a vague populist manner. She also rejected her earlier Marxist class analysis of the "petite bourgeoisie" as having been inappropriate to understanding Libyan politics.

One wonders what First would have made of Gaddafi's harebrained suggestion, in April last year, for the dismembering of Nigeria into two independent states: one Muslim and one Christian. She had written intelligently about the Nigerian military and its role in the country's civil war of 1967-70. Gaddafi supported dissident groups against "neocolonial" regimes in Africa, from Chad to Liberia. He controversially became chairman of the African Union in 2009-10, spending lavishly to win political support. After the eruption of the "Arab Spring" at the beginning of this year, Libya was poised to become the next autocratic domino to fall after Egypt and Tunisia. Gaddafi has, however, clung on tenaciously, despite frequent North Atlantic Treaty Organisation bombings that have clearly gone beyond the actions mandated by the United Nations. Libya is now partitioned between Tripoli and the rebel-controlled Benghazi, even as fighting continues. Were she alive today, the fiercely independent First would surely have written eloquently about the strange demise of Libya's self-proclaimed "King of Kings".

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