

Opinion: My 2 Cents – Libya's priorities for the next two years

By Hafeed Al-Ghwell

The last article I published on the Libya Herald addressed the issue of developing a vision for Libya. A narrative that can capture and articulate the kind of future Libyans imagine for themselves and their country.

Today I am hoping to expand on that theme a little more, by outlining what I believe should be Libya's priorities over the next two years, in order to build an inclusive, tolerant, moderate and prosperous country, one that can address all the hopes and dreams of its people now and in the future.

To start with, let me put forward the simple argument that Libya's February 17 uprising against the Qaddafi regime was apart of the larger regional context that involved Libya's Arab neighbours as well and which has Human Rights at its very core. Respect for the dignity, voice, diversity, and citizenship of every man and woman.

Much of the underlying reasons behind the wave of Arab revolts of 2011 were predicated on the modern Arab political and economic historical experience. A post colonial period in which the driving force behind much of the social contract revolved around the question of liberation, independence, and shaking off the yoke of foreign colonial rule by the British and French for about 100 years.

It is within this context that we can understand why the anti-colonial narrative employed by those who have risen to power, in much of the Arab world, found a hospitable environment and popular appeal among the masses. It is also, why the Palestinian issue and demand for liberation and independence echoed widely in the region, and dominated much of the political discourse and public life.

And since most of these post-colonial regimes were led by military officers, there is no surprise that their rhetoric was mostly founded on armed confrontation and military frameworks for both their domestic and foreign policies.

The Arab uprisings of 2011 came as natural result in my view for the failures of the regimes that dominated Arab politics since the independence movements of the last century. Where domestic

politics revolved around the issues of maintaining “political stability” through economic handouts to the population, in exchange for giving up voice and inclusion in politics.

In more specific terms, the tools of governing were entirely based on greed and fear; the formula was simple enough: the government will provide food, shelter, education, health care, and employment to the citizens as long as they stay out of politics, if not, they will face the wrath of the state through the many tools of oppression available to it. On the foreign policy front, on the other hand, the main, if not the only issue, was the Palestinian question.

As any economist would have predicated 50 years ago, this formula is not one that can last indefinitely. It’s really more like a pyramid scheme that can only work for a short period of time, but will eventually collapse on itself. No country can afford to generate the kind of financial resources, not to talk of jobs and opportunities, necessary to keep doing this indefinitely.

Not to mention that government, almost by definition, is the worst possible manager for such things as education and healthcare systems, infrastructure and most other economic activities, simply because these require economic incentives that the government by definition does not have.

This centralized and government dominated style of managing economic life will almost always produce political, financial and administrative corruption, lower quality education and health care systems, less private sector innovation and initiative, and will always distort the political, social, and economic life of the country.

In attempting to start from ground zero and correct the distortions that have plagued Libya since its independence in 1951, Libya needs to build a whole new country and social contract that can unite the country and its people and open up a whole new future for it.

The key in my mind to Libya’s future lies in focusing all our energies and plans on a number of key elements that are directed at building the foundation of a strong State, and not getting side tracked by issues that, pressing as they may be at the moment, will not matter in the long run, and if paid an exaggerated and unwarranted attention will end up fragmenting the efforts of the country to move forward and focus on its future.

These fundamental foundational issues, which I believe must be the main priorities for Libya over the next two years, include the following priorities:

National Reconciliation: Given all the daily news of tensions between different tribal, regional, religious, and political groups, it is hardly controversial to say that the socio-political fabric of Libya today is fragmented, and the divisive political rhetoric is not helping the situation get any better. Every one seems convinced of their own grievances against the other, in most cases, without much evidence or proof.

If we just allow our minds, rather than our emotions and mistrust, and think rationally for a moment, I believe, most Libyans will agree that building any thing on such a fragmented foundation will be, at best unstable, and most probably impossible. Trying to calm both the rhetoric’s and blame-game is, therefore, absolutely essential.

This process of national reconciliation is not necessarily intended to solve all the problems, but if we can just agree on suspending the tensions until there is a constitution, a strong State and a justice system, we would have achieved a great deal in and by itself.

This kind of a process is absolutely necessary to ensure that any future hope for Libya will be built on a reasonably solid and stable social foundation.

Justice System: The simple fact is, no stable state or society can succeed or experience any form of peace or prosperity without a fair, impartial, and credible system to resolve conflict on the bases of the law, and only the law.

Absence of such a mechanism, different groups and individuals within society will resort to violence and force to settle their conflicts, be it social, economic, or political conflicts.

It is therefore imperative that the Libyan society, with all of

Its different ethnic, religious, regional, tribal, and political elements feel secure in the knowledge that there is a fair, efficient, and impartial justice system they can resort to when they have a conflict with anyone else with in the society, including the government.

A Justice system that will guarantee them a fair process, listen to their argument and grievances, and pass its judgment, only on the bases of the law, without any prejudice against them because of their politics, ethnicity, wealth, social status or any other bases.

Economic Inclusion: People, especially the young, need to feel that they all have equal opportunity to participate in the economic life of the country and have a fair share of its wealth and opportunity.

This involves multiple issues that must be addressed as a priority, such as:

1- Providing immediate short term capacity building and training programs to those who have already graduated or have a job, but are not really equipped with the right set of skills because of the bad quality of the existing education system.

2- Improving the education system to ensure that future graduates will be equipped with the necessary skills needed by the private and public sector of the 21th century.

3- Ensuring a fair and transparent procurement process for any new government contracts and projects.

4- Including the Libyan private sector in the implementation of all government projects through Private-Public Partnerships that can stimulate the private sector and generate job creation.

5- Reforming all of Libya's commercial laws and unleashing the potential of private enterprise from the many shackles of Libyan bureaucracy and existing legal burdens.

Strategic Foreign Policy: that should be anchored on Libya's economic interests, rather than the old way of basing Libya's foreign policy and relationships on ideological bases.

Such a policy should build on the existing international community's good will toward Libya and be based on creating a web of strong relationships that can provide critical access to technical assistance, direct foreign investment, and knowledge transfer to Libya over the short and medium terms.

The above 4 priorities will combine to pour energies and attention on the future and rebuilding the country and will form the bases of the most critical need at the moment, namely establishing security.

They will also, I believe, slowly contribute to calming the divisive political rhetoric and blame-game which has been reflected in the often emotional and exaggerated calls for political isolation and the psychology of victors justice, that has characterized the past two years.

It is hardly a revelation to say that as long as Libyans are focusing on the symptoms and not the disease itself, political and social fragmentation will continue, multiply, and maybecome the reality of a future Libya.

The disease Libya must confront is that of a currently fragmented, divided, and blame seeking social and political environment that is growing and drowning more reasonable and rational voices and obscuring the real challenges and opportunities the country is facing.

Libyans either decide to focus on reconciliation, forgiveness, and tolerance and concentrate on building a better future, or we can keep dividing ourselves and blaming each other for the past 42 of tyranny, and missed opportunity.

This is, of course, not easy, nor will it be emotionally satisfying to many, but it is the rational and necessary decision. Everyone was hurt in one way or another by the past, and everyone must decide to dress his or her wounds and move forward. The alternative will be that the whole ship will sink with everyone on board irrespective of who did what to whom and why.

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