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Anarchism in the Libyan Revolution

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Retrieved on 6th March 2021 from ngann1.wordpress.com

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One of the principle holdings of anarchism is that all forms of government rely on violence and the threat of violence to establish an arbitrary authority, and are therefore both invalid and unnecessary. (Goldman 1) This principle can be clearly evidenced by the current conflict in Libya. A brutal dictator, Mu'ammr Gaddafi has for decades held onto power by isolating his people from the rest of the world through media censorship and banning the teaching of foreign languages. An elderly resident of Tobruk said of Gaddafi's censorship, "none of us can speak English or French... He kept us ignorant and blindfolded."¹ In addition, at the early outset of peaceful protests in February 2011, Gaddafi reportedly threatened activists, journalists, and media personalities, saying they would be held responsible for inciting any chaos or violence.² As a ruler, Gaddafi demanded complete surrender from his people, complete

¹ "The Liberated East: Building a New Libya." *The Economist*. 24 Feb. 2011. Web. <www.economist.com>.

² Mahmoud, Khaled. "Gaddafi Ready for Libya's "Day of Rage"." *Big Blue Marble*. 9 Feb. 2011. Web. <ecofrenglobal.blog.com>.

and total submission to his authority. This reflects the anarchist argument that “the keynote of government is injustice... for the corruptive, tyrannical, and oppressive methods it employs to serve its purposes.” (Goldman 4) This belief is clearly exemplified by a speech on March 17 in which Gaddafi himself said of his opposition, “We will show no mercy and no pity to them.”³

In the face of such a brutally oppressive and disastrously corrupted government, the people of Libya have risen up and launched a violent revolution against Gaddafi’s tyranny. What began in February with the repression of peaceful protests has grown into a full-scale revolutionary war between the corrupt power of the state and the anarchistic rebellion of a long oppressed people, propelled forward by hopes of true freedom. It is true that the rebels are fighting to establish a parliamentary democracy⁴, not an anarchist state, so we cannot truly call them anarchists, but though the rebels may not be fighting *for* anarchy, they are fighting *with* anarchy.

In a discussion on the anarchist’s view of a decentralized society, Zach Babineau argued that, “some anarchists believe that people would organize themselves into small, self-sustainable communities, and be able to network with other surrounding communities.”⁵ In many ways, this organizational structure has been adopted by the Libyan rebellion. While it is true that they are in the process of establishing a temporary leadership of defected military officials and political figures in Benghazi, they refer to it as an “executive council, one of several governing structures that the rebels refuse

³ Heneghan, Tom. “Gaddafi Tells Rebel City, Benghazi, ‘We Will Show No Mercy’” *The Huffingtonpost*. 17 Mar. 2011. Web. <www.huffingtonpost.com>.

⁴ Hubbard, Ben. “Official: Libyan Rebels Seek Democracy.” *Washington Times*. 3 Apr. 2011. Web. <www.washingtontimes.com>.

⁵ Babineau, Zack. “Why Does Something So Awesome Suck So Bad?” Comment to blog post by Nick Gann. 19 Apr. 2011. Web. <ideasandideologies1.wordpress.com>.

to call a government”⁶; in reality the rebellion’s central leadership is still in its infancy, and is plagued with infighting and division.⁷ At this point, the true leadership of the rebellion exists on the local level, in many cities like Benghazi, Tobruk, Misurata, and Ajdabia. The real day-to-day operations of the rebellion are coordinated by local councils in each city⁸, each facing a different situation. They follow the anarchist societal structure of “decentralization, voluntary association, mutual aid, the network model.” (Graeber 1) While they are all united in their opposition to the Gaddafi regime and in their desire for a free, democratic Libya, the rebel forces are separated and isolated, and therefore each outpost is forced to regulate its own existence, while coordinating with the other groups to form the greater revolution.

The most significant anarchist idea employed by the Libyan rebellion is the notion of pre-figurative politics; the practice of not just thinking about a better future, but living in a way that produces that better future. (Graeber 2) With the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in the rebel-controlled cities, the rebels have been forced to take responsibility for maintaining their individual societies. Many basic services that were previously provided by the government have been taken over by the people, in sometimes surprising ways. Youth groups have picked up much of the slack, forming cleanup crews to keep their city clean⁹, and even taking the role of traffic officers, directing traffic through the city’s busy intersections.¹⁰ Volunteers have taken on a number of roles, including soliciting blood donations, setting up food banks,

⁶ Fahim, Kareem. “Infighting Hinders Libya Rebel Leadership.” *Boston.com*. 04 Apr. 2011. Web. <articles.boston.com>. p. 3

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “Introducing the Council.” *The Interim Transitional National Council*. Web. <ntclibya.org>.

⁹ “Young volunteers keep Benghazi Clean.” *Reuters.co.uk*. 7 Apr. 2011. Web video. <uk.reuters.com>.

¹⁰ “11 year old boy assisting traffic officers (Benghazi, Libya – 2011).” *YouTube.com*. 4 Mar. 2011. Web video. <www.youtube.com>.

collecting clothing, weapons and ammunition, and guarding checkpoints around towns and protecting the ports.¹¹ Most impressive, and significantly anarchistic, is that most of these efforts have been for little or no pay¹², yet the people are freely working together, supporting each other through this tumultuous time. This represents a key principle of anarchism, this idea of equitable cooperation. (Hahnel 3) Seeing the shared need and the mutual benefits to society, many in Libya have forgotten the old capitalist system and the past that it represents; an oppressed existence under the weight of a tyrannical regime. Instead, they've taken it upon themselves to do what was necessary for society to continue with no incentive other than that itself. The Libyan people see a better future ahead of them, and rather than just thinking about it, wishing it would come, they are living it, and fighting and dieing to keep it.

Even though the Libyan Rebellion is waging an anarchist revolution against the oppressive Gaddafi regime, they are no anarchists. They are fighting to overthrow a dictatorship and replace it with representative democracy. Even so, it is hard to argue against the fact that they currently exist in a state of anarchy; a functional, coordinated anarchy, but anarchy nonetheless. As such, I would like to coin a new term for this type of anarchism. I believe an appropriate term would be 'transitional anarchism'; the use of anarchy to destabilize and overthrow the current regime, in this case an oppressive dictatorship, with the goal of instituting a new system of government, in this case an open, free democracy. Arguably, this is the only true form of anarchy, after which some system of governance eventually takes hold: even true anarchism eventually evolves into a sort of free communism. (Goldman 3) As CrimethInc., the worldwide anarchist collective, put it, "Freedom only ex-

¹¹ "The Liberated East: Building a New Libya." *The Economist*. 24 Feb. 2011. Web. <www.economist.com>.

¹² Goma, Emma. "Libya's rebel council says gets \$177 million from Kuwait." *Reuters*. 24 Apr. 2011. Web. <www.reuters.com>.

ists in the moment of revolution... The question is simply whether you take responsibility for your part in the ongoing transformation of the cosmos, acting deliberately and with a sense of your own power—or frame your actions as reactions, participating in unfolding events accidentally, randomly, involuntarily, as if you were purely a victim of circumstance."¹³ It is quite clear that the Libyan Rebellion has chosen the former.

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¹³ "Indulge...& Undermine." *CrimethInc.* Selected Primary Texts. <www.crimethinc.com>.