

Libya: Now the Hard Part Begins

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Last Thursday morning, the inevitable end came to the power struggle in Libya . While the exact details remain disputed, what is known is that deposed Libyan President Moamar Gadhafi was apprehended alive by rebel fighters and executed in cold blood in the streets of Sirte.

This coastal town was one of the last Gadhafi loyalist strongholds, and it had been under constant siege since rebels captured Tripoli on August 20. For the past two months, loyalist fighters had held out against ferocious NATO airstrikes and tentative attacks by the rebel forces. Utilities had been shut off within the besieged city, resupply of food and ammunition was impossible, and the main hospital had been put out of commission by an airstrike early on during the fighting. For those civilians trapped inside the cauldron, the raging combat became a living hell.

Over one month ago, the loyalist forces ran out of artillery ammunition and heavy Grad rockets. Against the uncontested might of the NATO air alliance and the encroaching rebel forces, Gadhafi supporters had only small arms with which to continue fighting in the rubble of Sirte's battered streets. Images of the battlefield are reminiscent of the World War II street fighting scenes in Stalingrad , Russia . Several times last week, the rebel forces reported they had subdued all resistance, only to be driven back by loyalist counter attacks.

Since the fall of Tripoli , everyone wondered as to where the deposed President had fled. The consensus had been that he was in hiding, in a southern Libyan Saharan village, and this theory was supported by the newly installed National Transitional Council.

Thus, it was with some surprise that Gadhafi was captured and executed amidst the battle wreckage rubble of his former hometown. True to his vow, Gadhafi did not seek sanctuary or flee into exile, though that route was obviously open to him. Gadhafi's wife and many family members had safely transited to Algeria in late August.

Despite his advanced age of sixty-nine years, and the fact that his international funds were frozen, his loyalists were subject to an arms embargo and the reality that they had no defence against NATO airstrikes. Gadhafi chose to stay and fight. As any soldier will understand, it takes a fervent loyalty to fight for such a doomed cause. There was no chance of ultimate victory, and certainly no hope of any relief column of cavalry arriving to lift the siege.

While initial accounts differ wildly, it seems that Gadhafi was among the last band of fighters in Sirte, either nabbed in a convoy attempting to flee, or captured while sleeping in a sewer pipe. The video footage released makes it clear the he was very much alive at the time of

apprehension, and the NTC does not deny that he was subsequently shot, 'execution style,' by his captors.

Apparently the Geneva Conventions does not apply to Libyan rebels, pro-democracy fighters, former rebel forces, or New Government troops (or whatever moniker the western media has labelled them now), as there was absolutely no international condemnation of this public - and unnecessary - murder.

In Canada we disciplined Captain Robert Semrau for dispatching a severely wounded Taliban fighter. Even though the Afghan was dying, the Canadian Military court ruled that battlefield executions of unarmed prisoners are not permissible under any circumstances.

That is of course, unless the subject is a potentially embarrassing political leader, whose arrest and subsequent trial might jeopardize the moral authority of not only the NTC, but also those NATO leaders who backed them.

Among the fractious elements that constitute the NTC are not only Islamic fundamentalists but also a handful of former Gadhafi cabinet ministers. One of the most high profile of these defectors was General Abdul Fatah Younis, Gadhafi's former minister of the Interior - or head of the Libyan Secret Police. Younis was one of the most effective of the rebel leaders, until he was executed in August by an Islamic fundamentalist faction of the NTC that still harboured a grudge.

As Western leaders lined up at the podium to herald the death of Gadhafi, a standard comment was that his continued presence had been the last obstacle to ushering in a new era for Libya .

Opposition to Gadhafi was the only thing uniting the disparate ideals and tribal allegiances of the rebels. His death may in fact be the undoing of the NTC.

Despite the clever branding of these Libyan fighters as "pro-democracy forces," there is nothing democratic about seizing power at gunpoint. In Libya 's case, this seemed to be achieved by bolting heavy machine guns to the back of Toyota pickup trucks and relying on NATO airpower to carry the fight.

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