

African dissent on no-fly zone counts

By [M. K. Bhadrakumar](#)

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“Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence when it helps us to see the enemy’s point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For, from his view we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition.” – “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence” speech by Martin Luther King Jr, April 4, 1967, New York

At the height of the Egyptian uprising, well-known American investigative journalist Seymour Hersh said in an interview with al-Jazeera that the United States had a “Plan B” in the event of Hosni Mubarak stepping down. According to Hersh, it was none other than Amr Moussa – “whether he knows or not”. There is nothing so far to show Moussa doesn’t know.

He’s far too well connected not to know – career diplomat and foreign minister for over 45 years and secretary general of Arab League (AL) since 2001. He hopes to succeed Mubarak as Egypt’s next president.

Moussa delivers ... Moussa’s bid got great fillip by the AL decision Saturday to recommend imposition of a no-fly zone over Libya. His star has risen far above Mohammed ElBaradei’s. Two major Arab countries opposed the AL statement – Syria and Algeria – but Moussa rammed it through, thanks to the AL heavyweights clamoring for democracy to succeed and autocracy to end – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan.

What bizarre drama! The plain truth is that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) commanded AL to speak since they need a fig leaf to approach the United Nations Security Council.

The EU foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, was in Cairo on Saturday by Moussa’s side to ensure America’s “Plan B” delivered. And he did. Promptly, the US, Britain, France and Canada “welcomed” the AL statement. NATO will meet on Tuesday to tone up its stance on Libya.

Britain and France, who spearhead the breathtaking campaign to mobilize Arab “support” for NATO intervention in Libya, have had a dream run. British Prime Minister David Cameron and newly-appointed French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe visited Cairo to explore how far the military junta could take charge of the oil-rich eastern Libyan province of Cyrenica.

... but Africa dissents The Western powers had earlier mentioned the AL and African Union (AU) in the same breath as representing “regional opinion”. Now it seems the AU isn’t so important – it has become an embarrassment. African leaders are proving to be tough nuts

to crack compared to Arab playboy-rulers.

Unsurprisingly, there is a virtual media blackout on the AU's activities on Libya. It is, therefore, useful to recapitulate. "The [AU] council reaffirms its firm commitment to the respect of the unity and territorial integrity of Libya, as well as its rejection of any form of foreign intervention in Libya," Ramtane Lamamra, AU commissioner for peace and security stated in Addis Abbaba. The AU's 15-member peace and security council decided to "put in place a high-level ad-hoc committee" to monitor the Libyan crisis.

The leaders of South Africa, Uganda, Mauritania, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Mali would form the ad-hoc committee. "The ad hoc committee was set up ... to engage with all parties in Libya, facilitate an inclusive dialogue among them, and engage the African Union partners ... for the speedy resolution of the crisis in Libya," the bloc said. Lamamra said events in Libya needed "urgent African action" to bring about an end to the hostilities.

Most important, the AU "took note of the readiness of the government of Libya to engage in the path of political reforms. The council expressed the solidarity of the AU with Libya, and stressed the legitimacy of the aspirations of the Libyan peoples for democracy, political reforms, justice, peace and security as well as economic and social development".

Specter of disintegration The paradox is, if you accept the principle of ascertaining the "regional opinion", then the AU's opinion becomes, arguably, more important to know than the AL's. Libya is as much an African country as an Arab country - if not more. The narrative of Libyan developments as a template of "Arab awakening" overlooks that reverberations and after-shocks of what happens are going to be felt deep inside Africa. As prominent Russian scholar on the region Yevgeny Satanovsky recently said: It [unrest] won't be limited to the Middle East and North Africa ... The region will go through what Europe experienced in 1914-18. These processes always take a long time ... In Europe, the shooting started in 1914 and didn't stop until 1945 ... We have not seen what would happen to the other Gulf monarchies. We have not yet seen the end of the unrest that has gripped North Africa and the Middle East.

Algeria could still follow Libya's suit and Morocco might do the same. In January we saw Sudan split peacefully, but separatist elements have not been extinguished there. Former colonies tied together in unnatural conglomerates in the past by the English or the French never became integrated states. If this is so, we may still see disintegration of Nigeria, Kenya and other African countries. Therefore, the British Foreign Office is opportunistic when it says the AL statement "is very significant and provides important regional support" for the idea of a no-fly zone. Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz of Saudi Arabia, Hamad ibn Isa Al Khalifa of Bahrain, Qaboos Bin Al Said of Oman, Abdullah II of Jordan - these autocrats cannot be hailed as stakeholders in Libya's march to democracy.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) regimes are tottering on the abyss and themselves hoping NATO will salvage them. Their rulers keep their personal wealth of tens or hundreds of billions of dollars hoarded in Western banks and the umbilical cord cannot easily be broken.

Scarred memories But, how is it that African states are different? First, when they hear Cameron or French President Nikolas Sarkozy or NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen speak of military intervention in North Africa, it rings a bell in their collective

consciousness – of scarred memories of imperial domination, the horrendous crimes that the British, French or Dutch perpetrated on African people. They know how difficult it will be to get a NATO army to vacate its occupation of Africa. (Afghan President Hamid Karzai said on Saturday: “I would like to ask NATO and the US with honor and humbleness and not with arrogance to stop their operations in our land. We are a very tolerant people but now our tolerance has run out.”)

Africans know NATO will eventually slither its way into the heart of their resource-rich continent from the North African beachhead. So, the AU faces an existential problem – unlike the GGC client states or Jordan, which have no conception of national liberation. The only “Arab revolt” Abdullah or Abdullah II ever knew is what British intelligence and Lawrence of Arabia financed in the debris of the Ottoman Empire a hundred years ago.

Besides, what dreads the AU countries is that Libya has a history of disunity. It was only in 1951 that King Idris unified the three autonomous provinces of Tripolitania, Fezzan and Cyrenica. In the wake of the current strife, centrifugal tendencies have quickly resurfaced. Libya has dozens of tribes and Muammar Gaddafi knit together a tenuous alliance of some tribes but tribal feuds are common. The African countries share similar experience.

To be sure, Western intervention in Libya will necessitate at some stage involvement in “nation-building” – interference in the domestic affairs in the post-Gaddafi period. The native peoples will resent this involvement. And in the fullness of time, only the Islamist forces stand to gain. The stunning political reality of Libya is that Islam is the only unifying factor for the tribes and provinces of that fragile nation.

African leaders are genuinely nervous that the US is being myopic about the complexities involved. President Barack Obama should get to know them better, call them up from the Oval Office, reach out to them and consult them and ascertain whether they will accept NATO intervention in Libya. They are the real “stakeholders” – not the playboy kings, sheikhs or sultans from the bleached Arabian deserts. King would be pleased.

Ambassador M K Bhadrakumar was a career diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service. His assignments included the Soviet Union, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Germany, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Kuwait and Turkey.

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