

Libya: “The Price of Freedom”

Highest Standard of Living in Africa

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Libya has the highest living standard in Africa. The “United Nations Development Program (UNDP) confirms that the country has excellent prospects for achieving United Nations development goals by 2015. NATO’s war will have already dashed those hopes. A collapse like the one in Iraq now threatens the country.

There has been little reaching the European public in the past few years about Libya, whose relationship with the West had normalized. European leaders met with their Libyan counterpart Muammar al-Gadhafi often and business flourished. In the course of preparation for war, the country was suddenly transformed into the most evil dictatorship. Even many war opponents accepted this characterization as their own and now want to overthrow the “tyrant.”

But if Libyan society can really be reduced to the “revolutionary leader” Gadhafi in Libya, is the situation really worse than in a hundred other countries and are there not many more factors that determine the living conditions of a country, besides Western-style “freedoms”?

For [Richard Falk](#), the UN special rapporteur for human rights in Palestine, the “degree of repression” in Libya is not “more pervasive and severe” than in other authoritarian countries. Even according to Amnesty International’s country reports of human rights conditions, [that of Libya](#) differs little from many other countries; regarding the Arab allies in the NATO war alliance, [such as Saudi Arabia](#), it is even much worse.

The UN Human Rights Council has praised the country in its latest [report on the “universal periodic review” of Libya](#), which was made late last year, even for its progress on human rights. Many countries — including Venezuela and Cuba, but also Australia and Canada — raised in their statements some aspects that still deserve special mention. (See also [UN Praised Libya’s Human Rights Record](#), Mathaba, April 8, 2011)

For the Western media, this report, whose final debate has now been [shifted abruptly from March to June](#), is a scandal (for them it’s the result of there being many “less civilized” members of the Human Rights Council, those from the world’s South). But what these countries did was to view living conditions from a different perspective, one that places a strong emphasis on the realization of social rights, i.e., the satisfaction of basic needs, including adequate income, food, housing, health care and education.

Also in this regard the situation in Libya is, from the point of view of corruption and high youth unemployment, thoroughly unsatisfactory. Compared with other countries, however, the Libyans are still in good shape and have a lot to lose from the NATO intervention. Although the media often refers to youth unemployment of 15 to 30 percent, it does not mention that in Libya, in contrast to other countries, all have their subsistence guaranteed.

The relatively high standard of living also explains why Gadhafi definitely still has support in the country — particularly, [according to Libya expert Andreas Dittmann](#), among the older generations, who remember the old days.

“In Libya, there may be millions who dislike Gaddafi but like much of what he accomplished,” according to the famous Norwegian peace researcher Johan Galtung ([The West’s War Against Gadhafi – Yet another long-lasting, tragic crime against humanity](#), IPS, Global Research , April 6, 2011)

Sanctions and low oil prices slowed development

When in 1969 the U.S. and the British-backed King Idris was overthrown, Libya was still a poor, undeveloped country weighed down by its colonial past despite ongoing oil exports that began in 1961. The gradual nationalization of oil production allowed for accelerated economic development and rapid improvements in living conditions.

With the sharp fall in oil prices 1985-2001, this development came to a standstill. The 1993 UN-imposed sanctions enormously aggravated Libya’s economic difficulties. The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita declined from \$6,600 in 1990 to \$3,600 in 2002 (World Bank, [World Development Indicators](#)) and has grown only after the lifting of UN sanctions in September 2003. (The United States lifted its unilateral sanctions in stages from 2004 until June 2006.)

In 2008, the GDP per capita, expressed in purchasing power, according to [UNDP Database](#), reached \$16,200 U.S. (For comparison, the GDP of Egypt was in the same year \$5,900, that of Algeria and Tunisia \$8,000. Saudi Arabia had a GDP of about \$24,000, Kuwait and Qatar of \$72,000 and \$51,500 dollars respectively.)

The economic sanctions blocked the modernization of Libya’s infrastructure and in especially brought all development plans, besides in the petroleum industry also in others, to a virtual standstill. (Jean-Pierre Sereni, [The subtleties of Libyan crude](#), Le Monde diplomatique, April 8, 2011, free version at [Counterpunch](#))

The economic decline accordingly slowed the development also in social sectors. In the measure of its “[Human Development Index](#)” (HDI), which investigates the root values of some basic indicators such as life expectancy, infant mortality and literacy development to evaluate the living standard of a country, Libya also slumped in the mid-1990s from 67th to 73rd place.

High standard of living achieved

After government revenue, supported by rising oil prices, richly flowed once more, living conditions have clearly improved. The country now ranks 53rd on the HDI index, better than all other African countries and also better than the richer and Western-backed Saudi Arabia. Using “Government subsidies in health, agriculture and food imports,” along with “a

simultaneous increase in household income,” could “extreme poverty” be virtually eliminated, stated the UNDP in its monitor of the [millennium development goals](#) of the UN. ([Millennium Development Goals: Goal 1 – Goal 8](#), UNDP Libya Office)

The life expectancy rose to 74.5 years and is now the highest in Africa. It is now almost one and a half years higher than in Saudi Arabia, which was the reverse of the situation in 1980 ([UNDP Database](#)) The infant mortality rate declined to 17 deaths per 1,000 births and is not nearly as high as in Algeria (41) and also lower than in Saudi Arabia (21). (WHO, [Global Health Indicators 2010](#)) Libya is also ahead in the care of pregnant women and the reduction of maternal mortality. Malaria was eradicated completely.

According to the UNDP, a lack of human resources in health care still presents a problem, but “the gradual reintegration of the country into the international economy after the lifting of sanctions” is leading “to better availability of health care. The government provides all citizens with free health care and achieved high coverage in the most basic health areas.”

The illiteracy rate dropped to 11.6 percent in Libya, and is well below that of Egypt (33.6 percent), Algeria (27.4 percent), Tunisia (22 percent) and Saudi Arabia (14.5 percent). (See [Human Development Report 2010](#))

The UNDP-calculated [Education Index](#), which in addition to literacy also includes the number of pupils in secondary schools and university students, is even higher than that of small super-rich emirates Kuwait and Qatar, which can hardly be compared with the Arab territorial states. (See UNDP, [Arab Human Development Report 2009](#) and UNDP, [Human Development Report 2009](#))

The UNDP certified that Libya has also made “a significant progress in gender equality,” particularly in the fields of education and health, while there is still much to do regarding representation in politics and the economy. With a relative low “index of gender inequality” the UNDP places the country in the [Human Development Report 2010](#) concerning gender equality at rank 52 and thus also well ahead of Egypt (ranked 108), Algeria (70), Tunisia (56), Saudi Arabia (ranked 128) and Qatar (94). Even Argentina (ranked 60) seems worse in this regard.

In view of these achievements, the positive Human Rights assessment of developments in Libya should hardly be a surprise.

The example of Iraq

In 1980, Iraq also had a relatively high living standard, even higher than that of Libya. This collapsed massively under the murderous UN embargo [1990-2003]. Their “liberation” from Saddam Hussein then toppled Iraqi society completely into the abyss. The collapse is still going on.

Millions of Iraqis are starving, and the lack of food is still increasing. Half of the nearly 30 million people are now living in extreme poverty. Some 55 percent have no clean drinking water, 80 percent are not connected to the sewage system. Electricity is available only an hour here, an hour there; the once good health and education systems are flattened. Had the [development of the conditions in the 1980s](#) continued, the infant mortality rate would now well below 20 per 1000 births. In fact, according to [a study by the aid agency Save the Children](#), by 2005 it had increased to 125. Iraq had been recognized by UNESCO in 1987 for

its education system; illiteracy had been almost eliminated. Now, the illiteracy rate has already increased to over 25 percent in some areas it is already 40-50 percent among women. In general, Iraqi women have lost their once very good position in society. According to UNDP's index, they fell to the level of Saudi Arabia. (See [Iraq – The Forgotten Occupation](#))

There is no reason to assume that a “regime change” in Libya enforced by the NATO states would come out much better for the country (not to mention a long civil war and partition of the country altogether). Finally, the attacking forces and their agenda is almost identical and in many ways the leadership of the insurgency resembles the Iraqis that the U.S. set up in the government there — that is, radical Islamic organizations and pro-Western, neo-liberal advocates of a complete opening to imperialism, and privatization of the economy of the country.

Note

Wikipedia is only partially useful regarding access to statistical data. As soon as it is playing a role in a current political debate, there is a danger of manipulation. After David Rothscum published on Feb. 23, 2011 his article, “[The World Cheers As The CIA Libya Plunges Into Chaos](#)” published in which he and others wrote that living in Libya, a lower percentage of people below the poverty line than in the Netherlands, the information in the Wikipedia article “[List of countries by percentage of population living in poverty](#)” to which Rothscum referred were changed. According to the [Article-History](#) on Feb. 15 a value of 7.4 percent could be found, since March 6 a reference is made in a footnote, without any listing of a source, that “around a third of the Libyans live at or below the national poverty line.”

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