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Did Nato intervene in Libya just to get rid of Gaddafi?

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Libyans do not want revenge; they want justice to be done, former prisoner Ali Elakermi tells the BCC in a moving interview as he walks through the prison in Libya where he was held during the regime of former leader Muammar Gaddafi. He shows journalist Jeremy Bowen the corner of a cell where he spent 11 years of his life. 'Revenge engenders revenge,' says Elakermi, close to tears in a report screened last week.

As Libya lurches from one crisis to the next, with increasing uncertainty about who is in charge in Tripoli following Gaddafi's toppling in 2011, many feel the need for a reminder of the horrors of the Gaddafi regime. Because it was horrible. The former 'Guide of the Revolution', as Gaddafi liked to be called, sponsored terrorism worldwide; in Africa and as far away as Indonesia. There are consistent reports that he financed and supported warlords like Charles Taylor in Liberia and rebel movements in Chad and elsewhere in the Sahel. Political opponents like Elakermi were summarily thrown into jail, often tortured and sometimes killed.

But, says Professor Jean-Emmanuel Pondi from the Cameroon Institute for International Relations and author of a new book on Libya, Western nations were above all vexed with Gaddafi because he refused to 'play the diplomatic game' and sometimes embarrassed them in public. What made matters worse was that they had no control over him because Libya had no debt – not at the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund or anywhere else. 'Gaddafi was a problem for the world because he was economically independent and too outspoken,' Pondi said during a seminar at the Institute for Security Studies on 21 November.

Pondi believes that even two years after Gaddafi's death on 20 October 2011, it is important for Africans to reflect on the events that led up to the Nato intervention in Libya and the killing of Gaddafi. 'We can't let a long-time leader in Africa be killed on the street like a dog and not reflect on it,' he says. To him, there is no doubt that Gaddafi was a dangerous human being and that the Gaddafi regime was a political dictatorship. 'He even called his own people "rats".'

Yet, at the same time, Libyans benefited from free health care and free education; fuel was almost free as well and housing was heavily subsidised. The country had one of the highest per capita incomes in the world and was second only to Mauritius on the Human Development Index for Africa – all things that were left unsaid during the campaign to topple his regime.

Pondi says it is clear that the aim of the Nato intervention, sanctioned by United Nations Resolution 1973, was primarily to get rid of Gaddafi and not to save the lives of civilians. 'As soon as Gaddafi was dead, that was the end of the Nato intervention, even though violence was still ongoing. Civilians were still being killed,' he says. Today, Libya is increasingly chaotic and violent, with more than 1 700 militias operating in various parts of the country – some better armed than the police and the army. Last month Libyan Prime Minister Ali Zeidan was kidnapped and held by gunmen for several hours before being released. Last week more than 40 people were killed and 400 wounded in clashes between rival militias.

On this point one could say that the current violence and absence of any real central power structure is merely another indicator of how Gaddafi ruled Libya with an iron fist for over 40 years, and centred all political power around himself, his family and his clan. In his 2011 book *Au Coeur de la Libye de Khaddafi* (In the heart of Gaddafi's Libya), French specialist Patrick Haimzadeh explains the depth of the 'mafia-like' structure Gaddafi and his sons maintained and how it was kept going through pay-outs from Libya's abundant oil revenues. Haimzadeh warns that any new regime that wants to replace Gaddafi will have to continue with such a system or face collapse. Would the Nato-led regime change be justified under such circumstances?

Clearly, the biggest loser after the death of Gaddafi is Africa, especially the region bordering Libya. The weapons that became freely available during the post-Gaddafi chaos have fallen into the hands of the al-Qaeda-linked groups that have been responsible for the occupation of northern Mali and for spectacular terror activities like the attack on the In Amenas gas facility in Algeria in January this year.

The African Union (AU) also lost a lot of credibility in some quarters because it was completely sidelined during the Libyan crisis. Pondi says it is unfair to say the AU had no plan to solve the stalemate between Gaddafi and the rebels controlling the eastern town of Benghazi at the time. 'The road map was clear, firstly to put a ceasefire in place, secondly to organise a meeting between the protagonists and then to organise elections in Libya. The plan was there, but it wasn't even given a minute at any of the meetings concerning Libya at the time.' He believes an important lesson from the Libyan crisis is that the AU should improve its communications capacity so that its voice can be heard. 'The mass media is dominated by northern countries, which shape the news.'

Gaddafi's demise has been tragic for Africa in other ways as well. Libya provided 15% of the budget of the AU (as did Egypt, Algeria, Nigeria and South Africa). Now both Libya and Egypt's contributions have fallen away and the AU has to rely on European Union funds for much of its programme budget. At times Gaddafi also paid the AU contributions of smaller African states that were in arrears, as he did during the 1999 AU summit in Sirte, his hometown. During his time, Libya also invested heavily in tourism across the continent. Many hotels in the Sahel, but also as far away as South Africa, were built with Libyan funds. The Libyan airline Afriqiyah Airways also operated in several African countries until the 2011 war.

Ultimately the question is whether Libya can get back on its feet without more loss of life and destruction. After all, it has the money to do it. An important meeting on the economic reconstruction of Libya will be held in Benghazi from 14 to 16 December this year. Among the issues on the agenda is 'Defining the identity of the Libyan economy and the limits of the state's role in economic activity' – an interesting topic of debate in a country ruled up to very recently according to the centralised, state-led ideology described in Gaddafi's famous Green Book.

Pondi believes that although many Africans are bitter about the Nato intervention and feel it is the responsibility of Western nations to help rebuild the country, it will ultimately depend on Libyans themselves to re-establish order and stable state institutions. One thing is certain, though. US president Barack Obama's statement at the time of Gaddafi's death that 'the dark shadow of tyranny has been removed ... opening up a democratic era for Libya' seems like wishful thinking at this stage.