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After Qaddafi

Joanne Mariner

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Qaddafi's much-abused body has finally been laid to rest, in an unmarked grave in the desert. His fate has fallen off the front pages of the U.S. news, eclipsed by the European debt crisis, the elections in Tunisia, and the bid by "Joe the Plumber" for a seat in Congress, even as ever more horrific videos emerge of Qaddafi's tormented last minutes alive.

Was it reasonable to expect that the rebel troops who captured Qaddafi would handcuff him and bring him to jail? How much does it matter that he was treated with the most extreme brutality, shoved by the crowd, beaten bloody, and, it now appears, sodomized? Should we care that Qaddafi's death makes Saddam Hussein's last moments on the gallows seem dignified?

Few in Libya seem bothered. "You have to bear in mind that these young man have seen their friends killed in front of them . . . their cities burned . . . their sisters raped. I am amazed at their self-restraint," Libya's interim oil minister reportedly told CBS News, responding to allegations of atrocities.

There was little sign of self-restraint in the fate of Qaddafi, his son Muatassim, the head of the loyalist armed forces, and their bodyguards. Nor is self-restraint the word that comes to mind in reading about the hundreds of putrid bodies being discovered in Sirte, many with their hands tied behind their backs. But at least the oil minister gave fragments of a convincing explanation,

unlike other top Libyan officials, who initially asserted that Qaddafi died in a “crossfire,” and later said that he may have been killed by loyalists who wanted to silence him.

Qaddafi was brutally killed in a display of revenge, hatred, domination, and fury, and his body was displayed for days as a trophy. This, at least, is what the available evidence suggests.

Whether Libya’s interim government wanted Qaddafi dead, or whether they were unable to enforce military discipline among the Misrata troops, is not entirely clear. The latter possibility seems more likely, and is perhaps more worrying. The existence of armed groups that are beyond the law and out of the government’s control bodes poorly for the country’s future stability.

So what is next for Libya, now that the dictator is gone? Sadly, in the wake of Qaddafi’s death, the hopeful words of UN human rights official Philippe Kirsch are harder to credit: “The dawn of a new era provides an opportunity for the NTC and the future interim government in Libya to make a break from [the] past,” he suggested, “by establishing laws and reconstructing state institutions based on respect for human rights and the rule of law.”

Qaddafi is gone but the country’s human rights problems are not. While a genuine and impartial investigation of Qaddafi’s killing would send a strong signal that a new era has arrived, this seems unlikely to happen. One very much hopes that Qaddafi’s grisly demise is not a harbinger of things to come.