Gadafy rules the roost

A month after the US raid on Tripoli, the political scene in Libya seems remarkably little changed. Despite media rumour and American expectations, Colonel Gadafy is still in charge and the 'junta' that was supposed to have reined him in at the end of April has turned out to be no more than a journalistic mirage.

Downtown areas of Tripoli and Benghazi, it is true, have been battered by US bombs, Libyan diplomatic representation abroad has been severely cut, the revolutionary rhetoric that customarily emerges from what has now become the Great Libyan Jamahiriya after its baptism by fire in mid-April has been cut back and Western leaders have returned from Tokyo warned by the knowledge that they have taken a resolute and united stand on terrorism, as the Reagan administration had required.

Yet Libyans themselves seem to have accepted recent events with an apathetic tolerance after a short-lived outburst of panic and anger at the raids and the loss of life they caused. There seems to be a torpid indifference, compounded by a weary resignation over the failure of the Arab world to support Libya in its hour of need and by the pragmatic awareness that life goes on.

And life in the jamahiriya - the 'state of the masses', that unique construct of direct popular democracy and radical coercion that Colonel Gadafy wishes to become his political legacy to the Third World - has become very difficult in recent years. Not only has the restructuring of the retail trade in the recent past caused tremendous problems of supply - the local shop has been replaced by vast hypermarkets which are usually remote and always suffer from shortages and distribution problems - but consumers have had also to face the consequences of impending economic collapse.

The problem is that Libya, despite all the efforts made during the past two decades to create a viable and differentiated economic base, still depends crucially on imports to satisfy the needs of its burgeoning population which now stands at close to 4m and is growing at over 3% annually - one of the fastest growing populations in the world. Virtually all the consumer goods it needs and 70% of its food has to be imported. Nor is this situation the fault of the Gadafy regime, although many mistakes have been made.

The simple fact is that, in 1951, when it gained independence, Libya was virtually the poorest country in Africa, bruised by the desert campaigns of the second world war and by the legacy of Italian fascist colonial policy in the wake of a 16 year long war that Italy had undertaken to subdue its Mediterranean colony. To that historical legacy is added a harsh physical environment, for 95% of the country, according to UN definitions, is an arid desert.

Oil has, since 1963, bought a release from this inherent poverty and the Gadafy regime since 1969 has, for all its faults and brutality, made sure that oil revenues have filtered down to every facet of Libyan society. Conspicuous examples of corruption and wealth are not unknown in the jamahiriya, particularly amongst those who control economic and political life, but the vast majority of Libyans have benefited from the country's enormous oil reserves.

Indeed, Libya today is really a consumer society on which a radical egalitarianism has been imposed so that acquisitive individualism is supposed to be subordinated to the collective imperative, but which ultimately depends on its access to the markets of the developed world for its economic survival. This inherent contradiction, that generates the political apathy which enrages the Colonel and persists despite the spur of the revolutionary committee movement, has been intensified since 1980 by the collapse of Libya's oil revenues - from $22bn in 1980, $15bn in 1981, $14bn in 1982, $11bn in 1983, $9bn in 1984, $8.5bn in 1985 to perhaps as little as $4-6bn in 1986.

The collapse translates itself into shortages, frustration and anger. Most people in the cities - and most people now live in the cities - have become increasingly obsessed with their worsening economic circumstances and have had less and less time for the radicalism of their government, both at home and abroad.

In any case, Colonel Gadafy's egalitarian vision does not correspond to the social reality. Libya is a divided society in which old ethnic tensions and historical differences mirror chronological and ideological discontinuities. Tribalism is still strong - indeed, the regime makes use of it itself, since most of the Colonel's close collaborators come from his tribal group, the Qadhadhfa, while the urban Tripolitanians and the Cyrenaicans
with their traditions of supporting the Sanusi religious order in colonial times and the monarchy thereafter view each other with mutual suspicion.

Even youth, the group on which the Gadaffi regime has placed an almost Jesuitical trust, is divided. Arrayed against the radicals of the revolutionary committee movement are students who resent the militarisation of Libyan society, in which every able-bodied person is obliged to be ready for service in the popular militia, and who recall the brutal suppression of student protest in Benghazi in April 1976 when three students were publicly hanged.

On the eve of the US raid on Tripoli, then, the strained economic circumstances had added to the inherent strains in Libya and the disenchantment of most people with radical politics to generate a powerful sense of distaste for the Gadaffi regime. The sentiment was inchoate and lacked a focus because the regime had destroyed opposition groups inside Libya in the wake of the unsuccessful May 1984 coup attempt, in a campaign that had been capped in June 1984 by a series of public trials that were little more than Lynchings.

Nonetheless, most Libyans felt that the time was fast approaching when the regime would fall under its own weight, drowned, as it were, in a flood of underpriced oil and trade debt. Colonel Gadaffi was, furthermore, the victim of growing isolation in the Arab world – treated with indifference by radicals and with dislike by moderates, some of whom were quite prepared to discreetly draw the Libyan people and their regime closer together in the face of what they see as an unwarranted aggression against themselves. The Reagan administration has, in short, helped the Gadaffi regime to survive a little longer.

George Henderson

**Women and unions**

Are Tory trade union laws helping women gain a more equitable share of power at the top of Britain’s trade unions?

To float the notion of Tory legislation in any way advancing the cause of women’s equality may seem bizarre against a backdrop of government inspired measures which threaten to worsen the lot of women workers: reform of the wages councils, the Fowler review and the thrust towards labour market flexibility.

However, the 1984 Trade Union Act stipulation that all voting members on union executives must be chosen through secret, individual membership ballots appears, from evidence so far, to be helping redress the imbalance of years of ingrained male domination.

Changes in election procedures have been foisted on unions which previously adopted a mode other than secret ballots to elect their executives, under threat of legal sanction.

A cursory analysis of recent elections in four unions which have changed their rules to comply with the Act reveals a swing towards increased representation by women.

★ The 77,000 strong National Union of Tailor and Garment Workers now has 11 women members on its 14 strong executive. Turnout at the poll – in a union with around 90% female membership – averaged 75%, far higher than in previous elections.

★ Seven out of 27 seats on the Inland Revenue Staff Federation (IRSF) executive are now held by women. 70% of the 55,000 membership are women. Out of 68 candidates standing for election, only 11 were women, seven of whom were elected.

★ Women’s representation on the 16-strong APEX executive has been boosted from three to five. Women candidates topped the poll in every seat contested. Nearly 55% of the union’s 90,000 members are female.

★ A woman has recently been elected to one of two national seats on the ASTMS executive – confounding insider pundits.

Whether this cluster of results proves to be an aberrant quirk rather than the harbinger of a trend will become clearer when more unions put their newly adopted procedures to the test.

All four elections cited took place after successful ballots on retention (or establishment in the IRSF’s case) of union political funds. The ballot requirement – another measure imposed by the government – is now widely acknowledged as spurring union leaderships to attempt to revitalise union structures and improve communication with members. The link between high election turnouts and the political fund campaigns is not hard to trace.

Secret ballots could well be providing a mechanism for change. But the work of women activists – who have pushed for more representative structures and urged unions to get their houses in order – has prepared the ground. Women, who make up roughly one third of Britain’s 9.5m trade unionists, are grossly under-represented in all strata of trade union hierarchies – from the TUC general council to the workplace branch.

Within trade unions, the reality of advancing the role of women still lags lamentably behind the rhetoric. The TUC’s 10-point charter aimed at progressing the drive towards women’s equality inside unions was published seven years ago. It included an exhortation for unions to look to their structures to see if they hampered women from reaching decision-making bodies and championed the need for union meetings to be held in working time wherever possible, with childcare provisions on hand.

Progress has been made – NUPE’s campaigns for meetings in work time are notable. Many unions have appointed women’s officers and set up women’s committees at national and regional level.

But the gap between policy and practice remains and unions still appear detached and irrelevant to many women members – and potential recruits. A recent MORI survey on attitudes at work found that only 19% of female trade unionists, against 41% of their male counterparts, had voted in a union election. Two per cent had served as union officials compared to 9% of men polled, and 25% of women against 45% of men had been to a union meeting.

If the secret ballot mechanism does prove to help change the complexion of union executives to give women a fairer slice of power it will be a gallling irony for existing leaderships: a measure forced on them by a hostile government.

Unions should now make a renewed drive to translate rostrum resolutions into reality. The recruitment of more women full-time officials – current estimates number them at a shaming five per cent – would be a start.