How to Save a Revolution

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MARY ELLEN O'CONNELL, MAR 17 2011

The Libyan opposition has shown great courage and serious miscalculation. Principally, they failed to take into account the loyalty, training, and resources of Colonel Ghaddafi's forces. They also failed to realize that revolutions such as theirs depend on non-violence. Influenced perhaps by calls for no-fly zones and other forms of foreign military intervention in Egypt, they have failed to understand both the importance of non-violence and the importance of self-reliance.

The revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt succeeded in part because the opposition employed non-violence. Brave individuals demonstrated peacefully, contrasting their movements with the violence, torture, and suppression of the dictatorial regimes. Egyptians and Tunisians needed no outside military intervention from the West. Such intervention would have called into question the claim to be popular movements. In this, too, the Tunisian and Egyptian opposition distinguished themselves from the dictators. The "strong" men have relied for decades on close ties to Western powers, receiving excessive military assistance.

How could any pro-democracy activist agree to resort to the very means employed by the dictators for decades?

The Libyan opposition did understand–at least at the outset of their struggle–the need to prevent Western military interference in their movement. Voices from the opposition made clear that any outside assistance had to be through the United Nations. Then, in their desperation by mid-March, the opposition seemed to have reversed course, calling for the imposition of a no-fly zone. Proponents of military intervention have grasped these confused and desperate pleas. (See Ramesh Thakur, in e-IR, and Anne-Marie Slaughter, in the New York Times,)

But the Libyan opposition's contradictory calls indicate the critical problem faced by the Libyan rebels—Ghaddafi controls Libya more effectively than his counter-parts did Egypt and Tunisia. Ghaddafi's opponents are too few in number, too disorganized, and have too few links to human rights organizations outside Libya. The young, untrained men who grabbed weapons and hurled themselves against Ghaddafi's trained fighters have revealed much about their movement.

To impose a no-fly zone over this situation would be the height of irresponsibility. Ghaddafi does not need air power to decimate his last opponents.   Recall what happened when the air war began against Slobodan Milosevic's forces during the 1999 Kosovo Crisis. That is exactly when the real killing on the ground began. NATO's intervention removed the last restraints on a cornered dictator. Ghaddafi has been backed into the same corner.

A no-fly zone will not have save the Libyan revolution. It is most unlikely that any military intervention will. There is barely a revolution to support, and what is there cannot survive as a popular movement opposed to a violent dictatorship if it needs foreign military violence to succeed.

The way to save the Libyan revolution is to urge regrouping now.

The remaining fighters should seek asylum immediately in Tunisia and Egypt. The United Nations should move quickly to provide security to asylum seekers. This is the sort of use of force the UN can execute well. See the views of my colleague, Robert Johansen, in the Globalpost.

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Yes, tragically, many are likely to be killed while seeking refuge but many fewer will die if the opposition ends the fighting now. Once out of Libya, the opposition can receive assistance and support toward a peaceful transition of power in Libya. If the opposition does not leave, there is unlikely to be anyone left to build a viable opposition.

Indeed, a well-developed opposition that can negotiate with Ghaddafi for a peaceful transition might even lead to a smoother and more complete change than is occurring in Egypt and Tunisia. The United Nations, the European Union, the African Union, and others have plenty of expertise respecting transition. This could be deployed to great advantage.

Ramesh Thakur supports military intervention in Libya by citing Kofi Annan's assistance in Kenya in the aftermath of election-related civil violence. Thakur says this was a successful exercise of R2P that supports the exercise of R2P in Libya using military force.

Thakur is right about Kenya—Annan's efforts did help. An even better example is Mozambique in the 1990s, which was aided toward peace by Sergio Vieira de Mello. But we called Vieira de Mello's efforts mediation when he was in Mozambique.

R2P, by contrast, is known best for its association with military force. Indeed, one of my major concerns with the R2P since its unveiling in 2001 is that it has helped promote military force as an acceptable approach to extremely serious problems, discouraging thinking about creative, peaceful approaches with a better chance to succeed. Did the rebels in Libya risk an upraising against the country's military because they heard calls for military intervention in Egypt and statements about "nothing off the table?"

If there is no intervention and the Libyan rebels go down to defeat, some will say R2P is vindicated. But the evidence will support a different conclusion and a different lesson: the successful revolutions were non-violent.

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