

# Succession Scenarios Still Unclear

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Dec 2, 2008

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In a region rife with authoritarian leaders, Libya's Colonel Muammar Qaddafi has managed to outlast them all. But the 66-year-old "Brother Leader" has now been in power for close to 40 years and questions of succession are coming to the fore. It's likely that a member of Qaddafi's immediate family will assume a leadership position, but what this will entail is unclear, as Qaddafi -- at least in theory -- is merely the "guide of the revolution". Qaddafi himself has not yet articulated his plans, nor does it appear that he has made up his mind. Speculation so far has focused on two of his sons -- Saif al-Islam and Moatessem Billah. Libya watchers note that much that occurs during transition will depend on timing as neither son has established a solid enough base in the various informal networks that make up the Libyan polity to emerge as unquestioned leader.

Saif al-Islam is the most visible of the colonel's sons. He rose to international prominence as something of a diplomat through his position as head of the allegedly independent Qaddafi International Charity and Development Foundation. As head of this organization, he took part in sensitive negotiations, such as the Lockerbie deal and with the Philippines-based Abu Sayaf group. Like his father, Saif has argued that he has no official position while nevertheless playing a substantial political and economic role. Oddly, he withdrew from politics earlier this year, though this November he visited Washington to meet with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and other administration officials. Despite assertions to the contrary, Saif's role appears to be both regime emissary and senior advisor to his father, as well as a messenger through which to float reform plans and government criticism (no doubt approved by Qaddafi) and a friendly face to the business community and the West.

Saif is seen as a reformer in the West, in part because he sees Libya's future as tied to economic reform and engagement with the US and Europe, a vision articulated in his 2006 program "Libya al-Ghad" (tomorrow's Libya). His plans for political reform include his role in developing a constitution for Libya and greater respect for human rights. Last week, he stated in an AP interview that he aims to bring about a federal style government by September, with a "constitution, democracy, elections, like any other country." This, in typical Libyan fashion, has sown confusion, as it conflicts with previous statements, such as when he argued that Libya's political model is Morocco and that, "we are entrenching our existing democratic system but we will implement it in a better and more effective way." A variety of other indicators as to the ultimately conservative nature of his championed political reform have also emerged; in recent interviews, he alleged that there were no political prisoners in the Great Jamahirriya. Likewise his much-vaunted promotion of independent press resulted in the launch of the OEA newspaper -- owned by Saif himself.

In any event, Saif does not have absolute freedom of maneuver -- he is no shoo-in. Although Qaddafi's son doesn't announce projects opposed by his father, Saif must tread carefully to avoid alienating his father and other vested interests. While Saif's promotion of economic reformer Shukri Ghanem to the post of prime minister heralded that his star was on the ascendant, Ghanem's dismissal indicated the reverse. The slow pace of the more specific reforms he has announced, such as creating a constitution -- announced in August 2007, but yet to come to fruition -- may also, in part, be indicative of the limited enthusiasm of Qaddafi the elder, whose Green Book opposes the idea of a constitution. How rapprochement with Europe and the US develops also reflects on Saif and his place in the succession hierarchy: should Libya be disappointed, his stance will be weakened.

There may also be institutional opposition to Saif's ascendance. Indeed, rumors abound that Saif is opposed by some of the old guard members of rijal al-Khaimah (an informal power network advising Colonel Qaddafi) such as Ahmed Ibrahim. Given the advanced age of this cohort, the longer succession takes the fewer of these figures will be around to exercise an influence.

Currently, central figures in the military/security field such as Colonel Abdullah Sanusi, head of military security, are said to be closer to Moatessem Billah, making him a likely candidate. As an advisor to the National Security Council and commander of his own brigade, Moatessem wields some political power though he does not have complete control over the security services. He has also been increasingly participating in high level meetings, accompanying his father to Russia in October and meeting with US officials (including Rice) to discuss security issues in 2007.

Because Moatassem has refrained from Saif-style public pronouncements, it is harder to speculate on his political world-view. Reportedly, Musa Kusa, head of the external security apparatus, serves as his mentor, and he is close to the Old Guard and less economically reformist than his brother.

The departure of Qaddafi the elder will constitute the end of an era and present significant opportunities for Libya. It will bestow greater international legitimacy on the country. The regime will change too -- as a founding father departs, and a new, weaker leader takes his place, greater internal debate and contestation will likely emerge. It's unclear what elements of Libya's quixotic political system will remain, other than an authoritarian nature. Stripped of Colonel Qaddafi's mercurial personality, Libya's foreign relations are likely to abandon the "United States of Africa" idea and refrain from provocative statements and destabilizing actions against other heads of state.

Qaddafi may announce his successor during his lifetime, which will make the transition process easier. The flipside is that the sooner and more suddenly a changeover takes place, the bumpier the process will be. A broad consensus among Libya observers has emerged that neither son has sufficient support from the six tribes of the Qadadfa tribal community, as well as related tribes, not to mention the Revolutionary Committees and rijal al-Khaimah. Nor do they yet have in place the complicated patronage networks necessary to ensure support. Therefore, should a changeover be immediate, speculation rests on two scenarios: The first is that of Syria in the 1970s, where coup follows coup until there is a consolidation of authority. The second is that those figures that have most sway and expertise within the system reach an agreement and govern via a consensus candidate. It is by no means clear who would in the end be the top figure and how much power that person would have. In either case, a post-Qaddafi Libya will in all probability continue to see limited and inconsistent economic reform, as well as closer relations with the US and Europe.

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