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Gaddafi celebrates 40 years at Libya's helm; forty years after the revolutionary coup that brought him to power on 1 September 1969, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi is thriving

Comments

Gone is the youthful, handsome appearance of a dashing army officer. Designer stubble and a moustache are now in vogue although the flamboyant clothes, including a selection of African outfits, are still there. When Gaddafi makes an entrance, heads turn. And they certainly turned in the international arena in 2009.

The return of the so-called Lockerbie bomber to Libya on 20 August once again brought Gaddafi into the international spotlight. There is an increasing cloud of doubt over Megrahi's guilt, which was eloquently echoed by veteran Scottish politician, Tam Dalyell.

When he heard that British foreign secretary David Miliband had imposed a public interest immunity certificate on the Lockerbie papers, meaning they can never be published, Dalyell said: "What Miliband does not want revealed is the calculated wickedness of the US government and the collusion of certain parts of Whitehall in scapegoating Libya and Mr Megrahi for the heinous crime of bringing an airliner down over Lockerbie. There is a danger now that we will never know the truth.

What is known," Mr Dalyell went on, "is that the Iranians paid \$10m to a Palestinian group on 23 December 1988.

The Iranian interior minister was quoted as promising that the sky would 'rain with blood' after the shooting down of a passenger airplane by the US navy. There will always be the suspicion that the US made a Faustian pact with Iran."

As Miliband was noting that, "the sight of Megrahi getting a hero's welcome in Tripoli is deeply upsetting", Colonel Gaddafi basked in glory. He was elected Chairman of the African Union on 3 February and chaired an AU summit for conflict resolution on 31 August. Libya is a rotating member of the United Nations Security Council; Gaddafi has attended the G8 summit, the UN General Assembly, spoken to Barack Obama and Gordon Brown, made a state visit to Italy and extracted reparations for the forcible deportation of Libyans during the colonial era.

On 1 September, the celebrations of the anniversary of the revolution were lavish. Gaddafi laid on a party fit for kings (he did in fact get himself proclaimed King of Africa's King's (traditional rulers). Guests were welcomed at the new international airport and accommodated in new hotels built to house would-be investors and tourists. But there was no annual speech in his trademark rambling style. Instead Gaddafi made a clear and concise statement to the AU summit proposing a move that conflicts be made a permanent item on the AU agenda. The proposal was duly endorsed and the African leaders took part in the festivities.

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But apart from the prime minister of Malta, Western European heads of government stayed away, angry at the welcome the so-called bomber Megrahi received on his return. Nevertheless, Tripoli was given a facelift, thousands of palm trees were planted along the seafront and the Brother Leader smiled benevolently from hundreds of posters.

The celebrations continued for four days with singing, marching, brilliant fireworks and feats of horsemanship.

Gaddafi's steps towards rehabilitation have been as regular and well paced as his speeches and numerous off-the-cuff addresses. He became an international pariah during the 1980s when he was supporting every 'liberation' movement under the sun (including the IRA). The Lockerbie bombing in 1988 resulted in the imposition of economic sanctions in 1992 when Libya refused to surrender the two suspects. The country was stuck in a time warp of 1970s architecture and technology until the Brother Leader decided it was time to break the international isolation.

Things started moving in this direction in 1999 with the extradition of Megrahi and Fahema to stand trial before a Scottish court in the Netherlands. Compensation of almost 1.7bn [pounds sterling] was paid to the Lockerbie victims' families and the regime disclosed its entire inventory of weapons of mass destruction to the UK and USp. In 2001 the Colonel renounced terrorism and Libya became the first country to call for an international arrest warrant for Osama bin Laden and to join the war on terror. The Islamic Fighting Group came close to assassinating Gaddafi and he had no desire to see a repeat performance. Today the Islamists have renounced violence.

Also in 2001, Britain and Libya restored diplomatic relations, which were severed after WPC Yvonne Fletcher was shot dead outside Libya's London embassy in 1984 and, as in the case of other western countries, business concerns have been paramount.

Libya hopes to invest billions--its foreign currency reserves are estimated at 82bn [pounds sterling]--in British businesses. BP has signed a \$900m joint venture with Libya. But the 150 British companies now active in Libya are not all from the energy sector. Rentokil recently won a 24m [pounds sterling] rat-catching contract for several Libyan cities.

But has Libya really changed? The liberalisation of its economy and opening up to foreign investment is slowly bringing prosperity. But his policies are far from clear.

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Howard Gooder, Head of Project Finance at the Europe Arab Bank, pointed out that there have recently been a lot of conflicting announcements.

"In January there was talk of replacing international oil companies despite all the new licences that had been granted over the past few years. In February there was talk of banning of engineering work being done overseas despite a lot of contracts being awarded on that basis. There was also talk of renegotiation of production sharing agreements, the abolition of some ministries, and ideas about distributing the state budget directly to individual citizens. These maybe just ideas but they do not aid in creating the stable environment conducive to a long term partnership with the Libyan public sector".

Yet despite the usual rhetoric about how the people rule themselves by themselves through General People's Committees, Gaddafi's regime remains authoritarian. There are concerns about Libya's alleged collusion with Italy in the mistreatment of economic migrants and asylum seekers.

He is the longest-serving African and Arab leader and, for the foreseeable future will continue doing what he does best--staying in power, ruling Libya with an iron fist and basking in the international spotlight as he tries to convert African countries into the United States of Africa.

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