

Libyan regime attempts to crush uprising

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It is reported that at least 20 people have been killed in two days of clashes between protesters and Libyan security forces. Protests took place in at least four cities on Thursday after opponents of the 40-year-long rule of Muammar Gaddafi called for a “day of rage” following protests on Wednesday that saw 11 people killed.

While reports are as yet fragmentary because of the Gaddafi regime’s clamp-down on the media, it is clear that the protests have been widespread and the government’s response brutal in the extreme. Gaddafi, who expressed his support for Egypt’s President Mubarak only days before he was ousted by mass protests and regretted the fall of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, is determined not to go the same way as his neighbours.

Extensive protests began on Thursday following funerals for some of those killed on the previous day. Libya Al Youm, the London-based opposition web site, reported that there were 4,000 demonstrators on the streets of Beyda, Libya’s third largest city. Lawyers were reportedly protesting in the second largest city, Benghazi.

The protests were so widespread that even small towns such as Shahat were swept up in the movement. Marchers chanted, “Free Libya, Gaddafi get out!”

Protests were reported in the city of Zentan, where the crowds were shouting, “Down with Gaddafi. Down with the regime!”

Demonstrations were also reported in Rijban and in Darnah, on the coast, where protesters shouted, “The people want the ouster of the regime!”

“Today the Libyans broke the barrier of fear, it is a new dawn,” exiled oppositionist Faiz Jibril told Associated Press.

Gaddafi’s Internal Security Forces opened fire with live ammunition in the capital Tripoli, in Benghazi, and in the eastern city of Beyda on Thursday. This follows the shooting of demonstrators in Beyda on Wednesday.

While reporters have been excluded, amateur videos showed the crowds scattering as shots rang out and the wounded being carried away.

Hospitals in Beyda have reported a shortage of medical supplies to treat the wounded. Hospital officials say that 70 people have been admitted with gunshot wounds since last night.

Troops have reportedly been drafted into many towns. As night fell over Benghazi, residents able to phone out reported helicopters circling overhead.

Gaddafi has moved quickly to stem the protests by doubling government employees’ salaries. The government employs some 70 percent of the workforce. It is thought that the security forces make up as much as 10 percent of the population.

Libya’s oil wealth gives Gaddafi the means to buy support for his regime. At Darnah, gangs of thugs in plainclothes attacked anti-Gaddafi demonstrators. Like the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes, Gaddafi has used paid gangs of thugs to attack protesters.

The government sent text messages to all mobile phone subscribers in advance of the demonstrations threatening that the security forces would use live ammunition. Coming allegedly from “the youth of Libya”, the message warned Libyans not to cross the “four red lines: Muammar Gaddafi, territorial integrity, Islam and internal security”.

It went on: “We will confront anyone in any square or avenue of our beloved country.”

Access to the Internet and mobile phone networks has been blocked. As in Egypt, protesters have been using social networking sites to organise their demonstrations in Libya and abroad. In London, a demonstration took place outside the Libyan embassy in Knightsbridge, and in Egypt, demonstrators outside the Libyan consulate in Alexandria expressed their solidarity with the Libyans.

In Libya itself, there has been a government blackout

on reporting of the demonstrations. State television has carried reports of pro-government counter-demonstrations while ignoring the anti-Gaddafi protests. Pro-Gaddafi demonstrators are declaring “eternal unity with the brother leader of the revolution”, referring to the so-called Green Revolution that overthrew the Libyan monarchy in 1969 and brought Gaddafi to power.

In an extraordinary move, the regime has freed 110 members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). Gaddafi banned this organisation after it attempted to assassinate him in 1996. It is thought to have worked with the British intelligence agency MI6. Since September 11, 2001, Gaddafi has used his campaign against this group to get closer to Washington. Head of Libyan external security Abu Kusa recently identified exiled members in the US who it was claimed posed a security threat to America.

With mass protests breaking out across the country as the popular uprising that began in Tunisia only weeks ago spreads across the region, Gaddafi has turned to his once bitter opponents for support. Just as the Muslim Brotherhood has been brought into the fold in Egypt, so the LIFG has been found to pose less of a threat to the regime than the enraged masses.

Supporters of the current protests are being rounded up and detained while the Islamists are being released. At least 14 people have been arrested in advance of Thursday’s protests. The protest in Benghazi began yesterday after the arrest of human rights lawyer Fathi Terbil. He has become the representative for the families of those killed in the 1996 Abu Salim prison massacre.

An estimated 2,000 people protested outside the headquarters of the security services following Terbil’s arrest. Initially the demonstration was peaceful. But police attacked it with tear gas, hot water cannon and rubber bullets. The demonstrators responded with stones and petrol bombs.

Journalist Mohamed al-Sareet, who works for the web site Jeel Libya, was arrested at the same time. Terbil has been since been released, but al-Sareet remains in detention.

The writer Idris al-Mismari, who reported Terbil’s arrest, was himself arrested as he spoke live on the phone to Al Jazeera. Another journalist, Mohamed al-Sahim, who posted some of the original video footage

of the protests, has been arrested.

Many of those involved in calling for a peaceful protest on February 17, 2007, were arrested on Wednesday as the regime braced itself for anniversary protests under very different conditions.

The events in Libya are part of the uprising that is engulfing the Middle East and North Africa. The protesters themselves draw a parallel between what is happening in Libya and what has already taken place in Egypt and Tunisia. At Beyda on Wednesday night, they shouted, “Gaddafi, you dictator! The turn has come for you, the turn has come for you!”

Instinctively, Gaddafi recognises the existential nature of the threat he faces. He condemned the uprising in Tunisia, saying last month, “Tunisia now lives in fear...families could be raided and slaughtered in their bedrooms and the citizens in the street killed as if it was the Bolshevik or the American Revolution.”

These words, which followed the flight of Ben Ali with his millions to Saudi Arabia, encapsulate Gaddafi’s attitude toward the new revolutionary period that has begun. He identifies with the rest of the Middle Eastern and North Africa ruling elite who have enriched themselves at the expense of the masses of the region. He is prepared to crush the Libyan population unhesitatingly.

Gaddafi—who used to present himself as the most radical of the pan-Arab leaders, standing in the tradition of Nasser and even as a successor to Che Guevara—demonstrates the reactionary nature of all forms of bourgeois nationalism in the present period.



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