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What does Gaddafi's fall mean for Africa?

As global powers become more interested in Africa, interventions in the continent will likely become more common.

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When the UN Security Council passes resolutions allowing intervention, third parties such as NATO can carry out the interventions without accountability to anyone [EPA]

"Kampala 'mute' as Gaddafi falls," is how the opposition paper summed up the mood of this capital the morning after. Whether they mourn or celebrate, an unmistakable sense of trauma marks the African response to the fall of Gaddafi.

Both in the longevity of his rule and in his style of governance, Gaddafi may have been extreme. But he was not exceptional. The longer they stay in power, the more African presidents seek to personalise power. Their success erodes the institutional basis of the state. The Carribean thinker C L R James once remarked on the contrast between Nyerere and Nkrumah, analysing why the former survived until he resigned but the latter did not: "Dr Julius Nyerere in theory and practice laid the basis of an African state, which Nkrumah failed to do."

The African strongmen are going the way of Nkrumah, and in extreme cases Gaddafi, not Nyerere. The societies they lead are marked by growing internal divisions. In this, too, they are reminiscent of Libya under Gaddafi more than Egypt under Mubarak or Tunisia under Ben Ali.

Whereas the fall of Mubarak and Ben Ali directed our attention to internal social forces, the fall of Gaddafi has brought a new equation to the forefront: the connection between internal opposition and external governments. Even if those who cheer focus on the former and those who mourn are preoccupied with the latter, none can deny that the change in Tripoli would have been unlikely without a confluence of external intervention and internal revolt.

More interventions to come

The conditions making for external intervention in Africa are growing, not diminishing. The continent is today the site of a growing contention between dominant global powers and new challengers. The Chinese role on the continent has grown dramatically. Whether in Sudan and Zimbawe, or in Ethiopia, Kenya and Nigeria, that role is primarily economic, focused on two main activities: building infrastructure and extracting raw materials. For its part, the Indian state is content to support Indian mega-corporations; it has yet to develop a coherent state strategy. But the Indian focus too is mainly economic.

The contrast with Western powers, particularly the US and France, could not be sharper. The cutting edge of Western intervention is military. France's search for opportunities for military intervention, at first in Tunisia, then Cote d'Ivoire, and then Libya, has been above board and the subject of much discussion. Of greater significance is the growth of Africom, the institutional arm of US military intervention on the African continent.

This is the backdrop against which African strongmen and their respective oppositions today make their choices. Unlike in the Cold War, Africa's strongmen are weary of choosing sides in the new contention for Africa. Exemplified by President Museveni of Uganda, they seek to gain from multiple partnerships, welcoming the Chinese and the Indians on the economic plane, while at the same time seeking a strategic military presence with the US as it wages its War on Terror on the African continent.

In contrast, African oppositions tend to look mainly to the West for support, both financial and military. It is no secret that in just about every African country, the opposition is drooling at the prospect of Western intervention in the aftermath of the fall of Gaddafi.

Those with a historical bent may want to think of a time over a century ago, in the decade that followed the Berlin conference, when outside powers sliced up the continent. Our predicament today may give us a more realistic appreciation of the real choices faced and made by the generations that went before us. Could it have been that those who then welcomed external intervention did so because they saw it as the only way of getting rid of domestic oppression?

In the past decade, Western powers have created a political and legal infrastructure for intervention in otherwise independent countries. Key to that infrastructure are two institutions, the United Nations Security Council and the International Criminal Court. Both work politically, that is, selectively. To that extent, neither works in the interest of creating a rule of law.

The Security Council identifies states guilty of committing "crimes against humanity" and sanctions intervention as part of a "responsibility to protect" civilians. Third parties, other states armed to the teeth, are then free to carry out the intervention without accountability to anyone, including the Security Council. The ICC, in toe with the Security Council, targets the leaders of the state in question for criminal investigation and prosecution.

Africans have been complicit in this, even if unintentionally. Sometimes, it is as if we have been a few steps behind in a game of chess. An African Secretary General tabled the proposal that has come to be called R2P, Responsibility to Protect. Without the vote of Nigeria and South Africa, the resolution authorising intervention in Libya would not have passed in the Security Council.

Dark days are ahead. More and more African societies are deeply divided internally. Africans need to reflect on the fall of Gaddafi and, before him, that of Gbagbo in Cote d'Ivoire. Will these events usher in an era of external interventions, each welcomed internally as a mechanism to ensure a change of political leadership in one country after another?

One thing should be clear: those interested in keeping external intervention at bay need to concentrate their attention and energies on internal reform.