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Crisis in Libya and the Latin American Left: the reaction from Cuba and Venezuela

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By Guy Burton

The crisis in Libya appears to have brought out the worst of the Latin American Left. This is apparent in the nature of the statements so far made by Libya's arguably closest allies in the region: Cuba and Venezuela. Following the deaths of protesters by the Libyan government, it appears beyond the capacity of Latin America's two most notable socialist leaderships to commit themselves to greater solidarity with the Libyan people. Instead Fidel Castro in Cuba and the Venezuelan government have limited their statements mainly to the role of foreign powers in the country and the Middle East more generally.

Parallels between Cuba and Libya?

Castro's comments on the Libyan situation are present in his latest reflections in the government mouthpiece, *La Granma*. Castro alleges that the US is unconcerned with peace in Libya and is prepared to use NATO to invade the country, presumably to secure its oil fields.

Castro's focus on the US pays little regard to the domestic origins of the protests themselves. Could this be due to the parallels that exist between his regime and that of Gaddafi's? If so, it would be entirely understandable if Castro wanted to deflect attention away from the internal opposition to Gaddafi and what this might mean for Cuba. After all, both countries are dominated by regimes that have become largely disconnected with their societies. Politically, in both countries the government has tended to clamp down on dissent and imposed various laws and regulations which made the operation of independent organisations subject to close government scrutiny and control. Potential rivals were removed, whether through the Libyan revolutionary committees or through periods when exiles left Cuba after the 1959 revolution.

At the same time, these political constraints were arguably offset by an extensive social security system in both countries. Both Cuba and Libya introduced measures that provided cradle-to-grave benefits and entitlements to their populations, which helped maintain tacit acceptance of the regimes.

However, both countries have struggled economically to sustain the social pact. In Libya the economy has been dominated by the oil and gas sector, which makes up half of GDP and almost all exports. Lower oil prices prior to 2005 put pressure on the government's ability to finance its social security system. Although oil prices began to rise after 2005, the greater wealth failed to filter downwards. Around a third of Libyans are estimated to be in poverty and many others face greater job and income uncertainty in the informal sector. In Cuba the economy has become heavily dependent on tourism and its foreign exchange since the 1990s and the end of Cold War. Generally, the Cuban economy has been relatively too small and underdeveloped to generate the sufficient domestic capital to spur greater growth and finance the state's redistributive policies. Consequently at the end of 2010, the government under Raul Castro (Fidel's brother) has introduced changes that will reduce public sector employment and open up various, small-scale activities to the market.

Venezuelan silence

In Venezuela the Libyan crisis has been met with a noticeable silence on the part of the usually loquacious Venezuelan president, Hugo Chavez. Following the outbreak of the protests there were media reports that suggested that Gaddafi had fled to Venezuela. This prompted Venezuela's foreign minister, Nicolas Maduro, to reject the claims.

That the Libyan leader was alleged to have sought asylum in Venezuela raised questions as to why Gaddafi would choose Venezuela over any other country. The answer may be clear from the growing closeness of the bilateral relationship between Libya and Venezuela over the past decade. The extent of that relationship was apparent in the statement made by Maduro after the first bi-national, mixed commission between the two countries in Caracas in October 2008. Then Maduro urged that the relationship deepen beyond their mutual interest in energy (with both countries being oil producers and members of OPEC) to other areas, including finance and more social-political activity.

The current Libyan-Venezuelan relationship stems from Chavez's election in 1998. In Gaddafi, Chavez not only found a peer who had similarly sought power through a military coup (Gaddafi succeeding in 1969 whereas Chavez failed in 1992,

prompting him to adopt the electoral route thereafter), the two men also showed a similar desire to realise greater autonomy for their respective countries in the international sphere.

For Gaddafi, his 'Third Universal Theory', laid out in his 'Green Book', reflected dissatisfaction with the two superpowers at the time: the US and Soviet Union. As Soviet influence declined in the Arab world, his attention became increasingly focused against American power. Libya was implicated in various terrorist actions from the 1970s, including the 1972 Black September killings of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic Games; the 1984 murder of British police officer Yvonne Fletcher; the bombing of a Berlin nightclub in 1986, and the destruction of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie in 1988. Only in 2004, following Gaddafi's renunciation of his nuclear ambitions and agreement to pay compensation over the Pan Am bombing, did the US and Europe begin to remove trade sanctions against his regime – including on arms sales.

For Chavez, confrontation with the US has similarly been the hallmark of his foreign policy. He has sought closer political and economic ties with governments also wary of Washington, including Cuba, Iran, Russia and Libya. He has cultivated other member countries in OPEC, pushing for higher oil prices in January 2011, a policy shared by Libya and against the objections of the US-supported Saudi and Gulf states.

To date, the Venezuelan government has limited itself to Maduro's statement hoping that Libya finds

"a way of solving their problems peacefully without the interference of imperialist states whose interests in the region had been affected."

As with Castro's words, the Venezuelan statement similarly reflects a focus (and obsession?) with the role of external forces and a disregard for the demands of the local population.

Similar rhetoric was reflected in Chavez's only statement in relation to the Arab uprisings on the Internet to date, in relation to the Egyptian revolution. On his Twitter account he also emphasized concern with the threat that "imperial interests" posed for the Egyptian people, before signing off with "Viva Nasser!" He showed no trace of irony, given that the ousted Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, was the inheritor of the regime established by Gamal Nasser following the 'Free Officers' coup in 1952.

Hiding behind rhetoric

Both the Venezuelan and Cuban responses to the protests in Libya (and Egypt) arguably present a high degree of uncertainty and awkwardness on the part of both Latin American governments. Like everyone else, neither government knows how the current crisis will end. There is presumably some degree of discomfort in Havana and Caracas at the confrontational stance being adopted by Gaddafi and the violent repression of protesters. Neither leadership has made an explicit statement of support for the people or condemned Gaddafi's regime. Indeed, Peru has been the only Latin American country to break its diplomatic relations with Libya so far.

Instead, both the Cuban and Venezuelan leaderships have opted to play the "foreign" card by playing up the threat of the US in the current crisis. This has accordingly obscured the internal dimension of the protests and their domestic origin, thereby reducing the scope for comparison and apparent similarities between the government's treatment of the opposition and failure to provide sufficient social security and economic opportunities in Libya and Cuba on one hand and Chavez's efforts to cultivate a closer relationship with Gaddafi to confront the US on the other.

Yet the US is arguably a straw man in the present conflagration in the Middle East. If anything, the Egyptian revolution only served to show how irrelevant the US has become. Having initially given its backing to Mubarak when the demonstrations began, the US only slowly moved towards greater support for the protesters, only to be caught out by Mubarak's insistence that he was staying put – after which he was forced out by the army. Similarly, after several decades of tension between the US (and Europe) and Libya before finally reconciling with Gaddafi in 2004, it arguably appears to make little sense now for Washington or Brussels to want to see the crisis and violence escalate.

Caracas' and Havana's response to the Libyan crisis – and to a lesser extent, the uprisings in the Arab world more generally – have been largely disingenuous to date. They have failed to acknowledge Arab people's demands and the level of dissatisfaction they feel with their governments. Instead the Cuban and Venezuelan leaderships have distorted reality and credited the US with disproportionately more influence on recent events than it has had. Consequently, by taking this approach, Castro, Maduro and Chavez may believe they are exposing US ambitions in the region, but they do at the risk of discrediting themselves and the socialist movement of which they claim to be a part. As socialists they claim to believe in popular sovereignty. Is it too much to expect them to condemn the Libyan government's violence and to give their explicit support – albeit with symbolic rather than practical implications – to the people?

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