The death of Colonel Muammar Ghaddhafi in his hometown of Sirte has been hailed by world leaders and observers as the “end of an era.” The National Transitional Council (NTC), in announcing the death of the old leader, gave the impression of having accomplished something major, as though Libya’s journey into the future could not properly start while Ghaddhafi was alive. In truth, however, once the first round of enthusiasm fades in a day or two, the NTC would be confronted with the far more serious question of “what happens next?”

Unlike any of the other countries that have been affected by the mood for change that we call the Arab Spring, Libya is the only country whose continued unity cannot be taken for granted. Brought into being only during the first half of the twentieth century, Libya comprised of three distinct regions on the margins of the Ottoman Turkish Empire – Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and Fezzan. While Cyrenaica and Tripolitania on the Mediterranean coast were occupied by the Italians for less than half a century since 1911, the Fezzan region adjoining the Sahara was under French occupation, till the three regions were united in 1951 under the leadership of King Idris I. But far more important than the regions themselves were the various tribes that came together behind Idris – these were the commercially influential Misurata (dominating the region’s commerce from around Benghazi), the Warfalla, Ghaddhafa and Magraha (all of which were inducted into the military by the Italian colonial rulers).

The unification of the country had been carried out driven largely by the interests of the commercial elite, based around Benghazi, with heavy representation from the Misurata tribe. But the discovery of petroleum and the consequent surge in resources of the state encouraged the military to capture power in 1969 under the leadership of Colonel Ghaddhafi. Inspired by the example of Nasser in Egypt, Ghaddhafi came to power with the agenda to use the resources of the state to modernise and benefit the country as a whole. Although the tribal coalition he led to power put members of the relatively smaller tribe of the Ghaddhafa in most of the major positions of power in the state, the largest tribe of the Warfallas, and the Magrahas also benefitted from the process. However, in the four decades that have followed, the proceeds of the wealth of the Libyan state have not been equitably distributed, causing much disaffection to grow.

Mindful of this discontent, Ghaddhafi had even tried to break the normal tribal institutions and bonds, to weaken the lines along which discontent might surface. Hence, he dismantled all the regional and tribal political apparatus and repeatedly divided and sub-divided the country up into small districts or shabiyah (of which presently there are twenty-two), experimenting officially with direct democracy, but actually controlling all state operations from the top.

When the present round of discontent surfaced in the background of the change of regimes in Tunisia and Egypt early this year, it began in the eastern part of the country, around Benghazi where the Misurata tribe had nursed historic discontent against the Ghaddhafi regime, as it had done earlier in the 1990s as well. What tipped the scale in favour of the rebels this time around was the Warfalla tribe going over to the ranks of the rebels, splitting the Libyan military right down the middle.
The crucial development to watch out for would now be the manner in which the NTC holds the tribal formations together, and whether or not they reorganise the administrative divisions of the country. The NTC has been constituted very deliberately in a manner that allows all the major regions of the country be represented, although the weightage in terms of the tribal composition has not been that well balanced. If the NTC continues to pursue a region-based approach to nation-building, the manner in which it is able to satisfy the various tribal confederations and their interests would ultimately determine whether Libya enters into a period of stability. If they fail, then the attempt to control the immense oil wealth of Libya (possessing Africa’s largest oil reserve) could push the country towards a more prolonged civil war, and may even result in the country breaking up.

The Government of India had always enjoyed good relations with the Ghaddhafi regime, and thus remained aloof from the civil war that was waging all this while. As Libya enters a period of uncertainty, countries like India, which purchase quite a large quantity of Libyan crude, would do better to become involved with the process of transition into the new order. Given India’s own experience of developing a democratic order embracing people of far greater diversity than Libya, India could help in the eventual stabilisation of the country – and in so doing can continue to nurture the economic ties that we have come to develop.

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