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Libya: The Revolution of Four Days

Ibrahim Y. Shebani
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An excerpt from Revolution by Love, a collection of personal narratives from activists involved in the Arab Spring: http://revolutionbylove.com
Seven months after the beginning of the uprising in Libya, more than 40,000 of Libya's youth went missing. 30,000 were martyred. Horrific stories of rape and torture circulated throughout Libyan households, spreading fear and anger.

February 12th

I woke to find an invitation on Facebook to join a group calling for an uprising in Libya inspired by the huge success of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions. This is a joke, I thought, as I went about randomly inviting friends to join. As word of mouth was circulating, the Facebook page and the possibility of an uprising were the core conversation in every café and gathering in Libya.

February 15th

At a dear friend's birthday dinner, I received a phone call from my friend Ahmed in Benghazi. He said Benghazi has awakened. Everybody was chanting, “Wake up! Wake up! Benghazi, the day you have long awaited has come!” I had mixed emotions: worry for friends and family in Benghazi and happiness that the dormant people of Libya had taken action. Soon the birthday dinner became a debate between those that were pro-peace and those that were anti-Gadhafi. There were doubts: would Libyans overpower Gadhafi? What is going to happen exactly?

I arrived home from the birthday party and signed onto Facebook where videos of the first protest were uploaded. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. I shared the videos on my Facebook page and received an enormous amount of phone calls from friends telling me to remove the videos. I knew if I got caught I would be facing real troubles but after thinking about it, I concluded that what I was doing wasn’t really dangerous. If the government wanted to end a revolution, they would have so many other things to take care of rather than spying on people’s Facebook accounts. Back then, I never thought I would have friends who would take Gadhafi’s side.

February 16th

I arrived in Benghazi on an 8:00 p.m. flight. My friends Ahmed and Suliman, picked me up from the airport. We went straight downtown where many young Libyans already started protesting and had clashes with police forces loyal to Gadhafi.

As we got close enough to see what was happening, walking through the dark alleys of downtown Benghazi, we encountered police forces and armed men. They told us to keep our distance or the consequences would be severe. Some of the men didn’t care and started to scream and curse Gadhafi.

It was impossible for us to join the protestors from this side of the city. We drove the car through alleys to find a way to join them. We got very close to the action, but were scared to join. All I could see were security forces trying to clamp down on the protestors, while angry protestors shouted: “Down! Down, Gadhafi,” “The police’s duty is to serve and protect the civilians!” and, “The people want the downfall of the regime!”

It all took me by surprise; adrenaline rushed through my veins. I wanted to join the front line of the protestors and shout the many things I dreamed of saying ever since we came back to live in Libya from exile back in the early 1990s. I turned on the video camera on my mobile phone and held it over my head, my hoodie pulled up and my sunglasses on.

I joined the protestors and I couldn’t stop screaming, “The people want the downfall of the regime!” As I arrived to the front, I saw security forces blocking the Tree Square and a cameraman working for the regime trying to film the protestors. That was one of the Gadhafi regime’s dirty games; it only meant that they would pick up these protestors in
their homes later. As I was safe in a sweatshirt, sunglasses, and a beard, I figured they would never be able to identify me.

Then, all of a sudden, I saw Mr. M.B., whom I knew worked for the government. I went to school with his daughter, and his other daughter was one of my sister’s best friends. They lived next to my aunt’s house. I knew his whole family! Why is he doing this? I thought. Why is he here to harm young protestors? As I saw him I got scared, thinking, What if he recognizes me? I ran back to join my friends at the end of the street.

We decided to leave and as we got close to the car, the security forces started chasing the protestors, capturing as many as possible. As they were chasing us, I looked to my right and saw Suliman running next to me. “Where is Ahmed?” I asked our other friend. Ahmed weighs over 110 kilograms and had several operations on both of his legs after a car accident a few years ago. We couldn’t find him behind us. We stopped, but they were getting closer. We started shouting, “Ahmed!” And there he was, running faster than both Suliman and me. After what he saw the night before, he was scared of being captured, and I guess the adrenaline boost helped him. That was the joke we talked about all night.

When I went to my bed that night, all I could think of was what would happen next. Is it worth it? I wondered. I came from a well-off family, lived in a villa, had my own business and car, and often travelled. Why am I putting myself in this situation? Yes, I do agree that we live like cattle: we have no rights, no freedom of speech, and no freedom of press. The country was messed up, but I always had contacts and knew someone who knew someone to get through all the obstacles of living in Libya.

**February 17th**

I woke up early like a little kid on the first day of school. Although I knew that the protest wouldn’t start until 3 p.m., I got ready and waited for my friends to pick me up.

I had no clue what the regime had in mind for the protestors. We arrived at the court where only around five protestors, mainly lawyers, had gathered. I was disappointed. According to the vision I structured in my mind, every Libyan in Benghazi was going to be there. I decided to leave and head back home to Tripoli.

As I was getting close to the airport, my friend Salma called. “Ibrahim, are you in front of the court?” she asked. “No,” I responded. “I went and nothing was happening.” She said, “No, man, I just talked to people and they are arriving to the court from every street in Benghazi. Everybody is marching to the court! Even women are going!” I thought a bit about it and asked Suliman, “What do you think? Should we go?”

We drove back. There weren’t many people out in front of the court, but protestors started chanting, “Constitution, freedom, and equality!” We joined them, waiting for the rest to arrive. Suliman made some phone calls, and everybody we called said they were on their way. Thousands of people were marching from downtown Benghazi and through the western part of the city.

Our numbers were increasing. I couldn’t stop calling family and friends to tell them what I was witnessing. We waited for the marching groups to join us but no one arrived. We received a phone call from our friend, Osama, and he told us his side of the story. Over 10,000 men were marching. He said he went up on a mosque’s roof to see the end of the line, and he said there were men marching as far as he could see. These men went over the bridge crossing the lake of Benghazi and had no clue what was waiting for them—including my friend, Osama. As they were passing the bridge, mercenaries dressed in custodial outfits and yellow helmets were providing support to
the army who were shooting at the unarmed protestors with heavy artillery, anti-aircraft weapons, Kalashnikovs, tear bombs, batons, and machetes.

Chaos broke through. Protestors were being pushed back, and those on the front lines were murdered. Many of them jumped in the lake and many of them were captured. The people gathered in front of the court were receiving phone calls, and many stories were being told and anger was showing on the protestors’ faces. Everybody was shouting, “People want the downfall of Gadhafi.” I saw rage and anger that nothing could stop and people decided to spend the night in front of the court. We decided to leave by 10 p.m. and head over to see what was happening in front of Alfadel Buomar Brigade Compound, which is Gadhafi’s most important site of power in Benghazi. We parked a bit far and as we got closer, we could see the military shooting carelessly at groups of young men.

We ran. Soon, we found Osama and Mohamed, and it was Mohamed’s time to tell us his story. He was marching earlier that day with thousands of men through Jamal Abdul Nasser Street. He told us that women were ululating in balconies and sending off their husbands and sons to join the march. Women were chanting, “See how beautiful my country is! Look at the sons of Libya who would die protecting it!” He said that men were marching with tears flowing from their eyes out of pride and joy, and the sounds of ululating women would echo everywhere. These marching protestors weren’t much luckier. As they approached the court, they were attacked by military and mercenaries/“yellow helmets,” the term used by Benghazi people.

**February 18th**

I woke up early again to go with my friend Ahmed to try to collect money, blankets, pillows, mattresses, and food for the crowd that decided to camp in front of the court. There were still police and military forces in the streets, and we were trying to find our way through the alleys of Benghazi to avoid them.

I was heading downtown, and all I could see were big clouds of smoke coming up from most of the regime’s buildings. The people of Benghazi were fighting without arms; all they had were gas, matches, rage, and will.

As I approached the court, the only thing I could see was a massive independence flag waving from the courthouse! This flag was even forbidden to talk about during the past forty-two years; the majority of Libyans who were born and raised under the Gadhafi regime didn’t even know it existed. In front of the court, there were thousands of protestors. I saw Mohamed. He told me he was going home to bring a satellite Internet system to the court in order to connect to Al Jazeera.

It took almost forty-five minutes to move the heavy satellite dish. As we drove, all I could see was a helicopter flying over Mohamed’s house, and I was concerned they were taking pictures from that helicopter. I thought, What if they have a machine gun over there? As we were driving and getting closer to the court, I was trying to calm myself down, but couldn’t help but worry. What if we were stopped by the police or the army? I told the driver to let me do the talking if we were stopped. We made up a story together and decided we would tell them that this satellite we were carrying was just a normal TV satellite dish and that we are making a delivery. I would tell them I was a technician. After all, they wouldn’t be able to distinguish an Internet satellite dish from a TV satellite dish. How would they know? As we were getting closer to the city, the streets were empty, and the only thing we could see was the smoke of the burning buildings. We arrived safely to the court. That was my mission of the day. People were happy to see the satellite. Finally, the world would witness our happiness, our liberation. I felt so proud to be part of this small mission.