

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Editorial: Gadhafi's number may be up

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One of the world's more wretched dictators, Moammar Gadhafi of Libya, appeared to be losing his grip on power after more than 41 years. A British diplomat said Monday that Gadhafi had fled his strife-torn nation and was headed to Venezuela. A spokesman for the regime of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez denied the report.

As in Egypt and Tunisia, which bookend Libya, the social media site Facebook played a key role, allowing protesters to list grievances against the regime and coordinate efforts. Gadhafi railed against the use of Facebook and arrested several Internet activists. It didn't seem to matter. The only way to stop Facebook and other Internet services now is to shut down the Internet entirely, which would mean crippling his country's entire economy; or using sophisticated censorship techniques that even the tech-savvy government of China has difficulty imposing.

As lovers of liberty, we're especially cheered how Facebook, a Silicon Valley company started by some college kids in 2004, continues to be a catalyst for those around the world who yearn to breathe free.

Gadhafi was a particularly nasty dictator. Seizing power in a 1969 military coup against King Idris, Gadhafi declared Libya a socialist republic and branded himself the new "Che Guevara of the age." Guevara helped Fidel Castro impose tyranny on Cuba through mass executions, then fomented revolution in Latin America. Gadhafi also ethnically cleansed Libya's Italian minority.

Gadhafi during the Cold War was a leader of the global "nonaligned movement," along with Yugoslav dictator Josip Broz Tito, which attempted to guide itself between the free world and the communist world. And Gadhafi reportedly sponsored terrorist attacks, including the massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics in Munich, the 1986 bombing of a disco in West Berlin that killed three American soldiers and the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, which killed 270 people.

After the Soviet Union fell in 1991, Gadhafi realized he had to make peace with the America and the rest of the West. He paid reparations to the families of the victims of the terrorist attacks. And, after 9/11, he dismantled his weapons of mass destruction programs. Now 68 and the longest-ruling dictator in the world, he was preparing his son, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, as his successor.

There are differences between the Libyan revolution and those in Tunis and Egypt, Christopher Preble told us; he's director of foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. A major distinction is that, whereas the U.S. had close ties to Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia, it had no such ties to Gadhafi. In Egypt and Tunisia, the U.S. government could be implicated in trying to keep dictators in power, something not the case in Libya.

"Another consideration is: What comes after Gadhafi?" Mr. Preble asked. "It's a bit silly, even irresponsible, to speculate on what comes next. The best thing the United States can do is not get involved. The less the U.S. government is seen involved in these protests, the better. You don't want the Libyan regime to use foreign influence as an excuse for a crackdown."

Across the region, the possible rise of radical clerical regimes is a danger, as happened in Iran in 1979.

But there are differences, too. In 1979, the Soviet Union still existed, fomenting terror and tyranny across the world; the types of Islam differ across the region; and any new regimes will face online scrutiny by their own people.

Despite the dangers, this is a time of hope.

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