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Libya and Lockerbie

VIEW FROM THE ARAB WORLD

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The families of the Libyan terror victims should be compensated; but who now will compensate the Libyan people for their government's decades of mismanagement? Libya should be a wealthy, advanced country, but it remains an economic mess

Two very different incidents Monday captured the best and worst of the modern Arab world. One was the victory of the Jordanian singer Diana Karzon in the pan-Arab television contest 'Superstar', aired every week for the past few months on the Lebanese-owned Future Television's satellite channel. Nearly five million people throughout the region voted in the final contest between Karzon and the Syrian singer Ruweida Atieh, via Internet, fax, and SMS cell phones.

Two aspects of this event are noteworthy: the mobilisation of millions of Arabs across many borders, and the margin of victory. This was a fascinating example of how the power of technology — in this case satellite television, Internet and cell phones — can tap sentiments throughout this region, and prompt people to action, even a simple act like voting for one's preferred singer. Rarely in recent history — perhaps not since Gamal Abdel Nasser's fiery speeches broadcast on Voice of the Arabs Radio in the 1950s and 1960s — have so many people throughout the Arab region collectively reacted emotionally and acted purposefully.

The more important consequence was that Karzon won by 52 per cent, to Atieh's 48 per cent. This is a striking anomaly in the context of the contemporary Arab world. I do not recall in my happy Arab adult life a national vote that resulted in a 52:48 per cent victory. Most of the 'elections' or 'referenda' that take place in our region usually result in fantastic pre-fixed victories by the incumbent, who often gets well over 90 per cent of the votes cast. In the case of even more ridiculous 'referenda', the victory is usually above 97 per cent. So a 52:48 per cent outcome — even for just a song contest — is a breath of fresh air.

It provides a sign of normalcy for Arabs who have longed for such a clear contrast to the insulting and humiliating legacy of political elections that routinely result in 90+ per cent victories, often by the same incumbent in successive 'elections' every four or five years. Thank you, Future TV, for this entertaining confirmation of our normalcy, and for allowing ordinary Arabs to show that they are not always willing participants in the political freak shows that are the 'official elections' for president and other forms of Great Leader.

The second incident that caught my attention this week was the Libyan government's accepting responsibility for the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am flight over Lockerbie, Scotland, and agreeing to pay the families of the victims a total of $2.7 billion. Libya had previously settled with the victims of a French airliner it had bombed out of the sky over Niger. Libya's willingness to confess and pay cash for its crimes should not be allowed to pass as merely another strange episode in the contorted saga of modern Arab political values.

What the Libyan government has done is a triple crime: first, the crime of using terror against innocent civilians; second, the crime of allowing the Libyan people to suffer the consequences of international sanctions against their country; third, the astounding waste of Libyan national resources in this manner.

The families of the Libyan terror victims should be compensated; but who now will compensate the Libyan people for their government's decades of mismanagement? Libya should be a wealthy, advanced country, but it remains an economic mess. It has a small population of just over five million people and enormous oil income; yet its gross domestic product per capita remains just over $6000. More shockingly, its average annual increase in gross national income in the oil boom years of 1960-90 was just 0.2 per cent. If the Libyan government can conduct terror, lie about it for years, subject its people to terrible life conditions, and then squander their national income by paying for the terror crimes after the fact — and do all this without any accountability or consequences for its incumbency — then the Arab region is in far greater trouble than even its worst pessimists assume.

The ultimate crime would be for the Libyan government to carry out this process, pay, and go on with life as if nothing had happened. If the Libyan leadership truly wishes to show contrition for its past misdeeds and its crimes against innocent civilians abroad and its own people at home, it should be allowed to do so, but it should seriously ponder more severe actions than paying cash.

One option that I would recommend is for the Libyan leadership to ponder a collective resignation, and retirement. It could set a historic and heroic example for other Arab and African leaderships that fail in their responsibilities, as it has failed. Finding a legitimate replacement would be easy. Libya could hire Future TV to run an election for a new leadership.

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