

tives have antagonised could be appeased by skilful political management. But once a government starts dancing to tunes played by its opponents it may suffer further damage to its own standing and credibility. Who will believe a Tory party led by Margaret Thatcher and Norman Tebbit proclaiming the need for higher public spending?

The government would do better to stick to its tax cuts and hope that a consumer boom will rekindle loyalty in its heartlands in the South and South-East. The problem for the Thatcherites in the government is whether they can muster sufficient support in the cabinet and the party to continue the Thatcherite strategy. In the face of mounting electoral pressures and few signs that the Thatcherite programme for economic recovery has succeeded, Thatcher knows that she is in danger of losing the political initiative and shipwrecking her party and many of her achievements.

She has to hope events will rescue her as they have so often in the past. Declarations of political will are not enough to save her.

Andrew Gamble

Gadafy rules the roost

A month after the US raid on Tripoli, the political scene in Libya seems remarkably little changed. Despite media rumour and American expectations, Colonel Gadafy is still in charge and the 'junta' that was supposed to have reined him in at the end of April has turned out to be no more than a journalistic mirage.

Downtown areas of Tripoli and Benghazi,

it is true, have been battered by US bombs, Libyan diplomatic representation abroad has been severely cut, the revolutionary rhetoric that customarily emerges from what has now become the Great Libyan Jamahiriya after its baptism by fire in mid-April has been cut back and Western leaders have returned from Tokyo warmed by the knowledge that they have taken a resolute and united stand on terrorism, as the Reagan administration had required.

Yet Libyans themselves seem to have accepted recent events with an apathetic tolerance after a short-lived outburst of panic and anger at the raids and the loss of life they caused. There seems to be a torpid indifference, compounded by a weary resignation over the failure of the Arab world to support Libya in its hour of need and by the pragmatic awareness that life goes on.

And life in the *jamahiriya* – the 'state of the masses', that unique construct of direct popular democracy and radical coercion that Colonel Gadafy wishes to become his political legacy to the Third World – has become very difficult in recent years. Not only has the restructuring of the retail trade in the recent past caused tremendous problems of supply – the local shop has been replaced by vast supermarkets which are usually remote and always suffer from shortages and distribution problems – but consumers have had also to face the consequences of impending economic collapse.

The problem is that Libya, despite all the efforts made during the past two decades to create a viable and differentiated economic base, still depends crucially on imports to satisfy the needs of its burgeoning population which now stands at close to 4m and is growing at over 3% annually – one of the fastest growing populations in the world.

Virtually all the consumer goods it needs and 70% of its food has to be imported. Nor is this situation the fault of the Gadafy regime, although many mistakes have been made.

The simple fact is that, in 1951, when it gained independence, Libya was virtually the poorest country in Africa, bruised by the desert campaigns of the second world war and by the legacy of Italian fascist colonial policy in the wake of a 16 year long war that Italy had undertaken to subdue its Mediterranean colony. To that historical legacy is added a harsh physical environment, for 95% of the country, according to UN definitions, is arid desert.

Oil has, since 1963, bought a release from this inherent poverty and the Gadafy regime since 1969 has, for all its faults and brutality, made sure that oil revenues have filtered down to every facet of Libyan society. Conspicuous examples of corruption and wealth are not unknown in the *jamahiriya*, particularly amongst those who control economic and political life, but the vast majority of Libyans have benefited from the country's enormous oil reserves.

Indeed, Libya today is really a consumer society on which a radical egalitarianism has been imposed so that acquisitive individualism is supposed to be subordinated to the collective imperative, but which ultimately depends on its access to the markets of the developed world for its economic survival. This inherent contradiction, that generates the political apathy which enrages the Colonel and persists despite the spur of the revolutionary committee movement, has been intensified since 1980 by the collapse of Libya's oil revenues – from \$22bn in 1980, \$15bn in 1981, \$14bn in 1982, \$11bn in 1983, \$9bn in 1984, \$8.5bn in 1985 to perhaps as little as \$4-6bn in 1986.

The collapse translates itself into shortages, frustration and anger. Most people in the cities – and most people now live in the cities – have become increasingly obsessed with their worsening economic circumstances and have had less and less time for the radicalism of their government, both at home and abroad.

In any case, Colonel Gadafy's egalitarian vision does not correspond to the social reality. Libya is a divided society in which old ethnic tensions and historical differences mirror chronological and ideological discontinuities. Tribalism is still strong – indeed, the regime makes use of it itself, since most of the Colonel's close collaborators come from his tribal group, the Qadhafha, while the urban Tripolitarians and the Cyrenaicans



Libyans take to the streets after the American bombing.

with their traditions of supporting the Sanusi religious order in colonial times and the monarchy thereafter view each other with mutual suspicion.

Even youth, the group on which the Gadafy regime has placed an almost Jesuitical trust, is divided. Arrayed against the radicals of the revolutionary committee movement are students who resent the militarisation of Libyan society, in which every able-bodied person is obliged to be ready for service in the popular militia, and who recall the brutal suppression of student protest in Benghazi in April 1976 when three students were publicly hanged.

On the eve of the US raid on Tripoli, then, the strained economic circumstances had added to the inherent strains in Libya and the disenchantment of most people with radical politics to generate a powerful sense of distaste for the Gadafy regime. The sentiment was inchoate and lacked a focus because the regime had destroyed opposition groups inside Libya in the wake of the unsuccessful May 1984 coup attempt, in a campaign that had been capped in June 1984 by a series of public trials that were little more than lynchings.

Nonetheless, most Libyans felt that the time was fast approaching when the regime would fall under its own weight, drowned, as it were, in a flood of underpriced oil and trade debt. Colonel Gadafy was, furthermore, the victim of growing isolation in the Arab world – treated with indifference by radicals and with dislike by moderates, some of whom were quite prepared to discreetly help in his regime's demise.

The raids have changed all that. Libyans have been horrified by the casual brutality of the raids and resent the racist connotations of Western claims that Libya 'masterminds' terrorism. They cannot forget that, while Libya has been publicly pilloried for the policies of its idiosyncratic ruler, the wider failure of the West to contribute towards a solution to the problems of the Middle East – which most people in Libya would argue were largely a Western creation – is passed over in silence or camouflaged by pious statements condemning violence with no consideration of its causes.

Ironically the US raids have, in effect, drawn the Libyan people and their regime closer together in the face of what they see as an unwarranted aggression against themselves. The Reagan administration has, in short, helped the Gadafy regime to survive a little longer.

George Henderson