

The heart of the West's dilemma



Given the public resistance to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the degree of acquiescence in the use of force against Colonel Gaddafi is at first sight surprising. The key difference between the two cases is the fact that the Libyan action is sanctioned by the UN Security Council. The legal distinction between protecting civilians from harm, which the UN has approved, and toppling the dictatorship that is causing that harm, which it has not, is evidently not regarded as a fundamental moral distinction.

But it could become so. That is why Pope Benedict XVI's words last weekend need to be heeded. He said: "I am becoming progressively more concerned about the wellbeing and safety of civilians." He went on to plead for a ceasefire and a negotiated solution to the conflict.

If the aerial bombing of Col Gaddafi's ground forces by Nato warplanes proves insufficient to guarantee victory for the rebels, pressure will grow to help them by supplying weapons and communications equipment. If the material supplied is at all sophisticated, those intending to use it will need training. Next could come the provision of expertise – through military advisers – on how to get the best use out of it on the battlefield. Nato would quickly find itself embroiled in what looks increasingly like a civil war. And the one certainty about a civil war is that whoever wins, civilian populations are the losers.

Civil wars can generate huge flows of refugees, for whom the anxiety associated with staying put has become unbearable. It is clearly these considerations that the Pope has in mind, plus the Vatican's historic memory that many revolutions launched in idealism have ended in bloodshed. France in 1789 and Russia in 1917 are among many examples. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein arguably resulted in as much misery for the Iraqi people as his regime had inflicted – and for Iraqi Christians, rather more.

It is in Col Gaddafi's interests to describe what is happening in Libya as a civil war. The provisional anti-Gaddafi government in Benghazi denies that, depicting it as a spontaneous national revolt against one man and his immediate circle. Though Col Gaddafi is a skilled propagandist, and though the evidence suggests at least a few of those fighting him had earlier fought against the Americans or British in Iraq or Afghanistan, he has failed to convince the outside world that his opponents are all

al-Qaeda jihadists. In other words, he has failed to establish any other reason for the uprising than his cruelty to his own people. But he does have a following.

The Pope's plea for a ceasefire goes to the heart of the West's dilemma. It could thwart the rebellion and leave the tyrant clinging to power in a shrunken Libyan state, with an angry new nation on its doorstep and hostilities between them liable to restart. But if a ceasefire left civilian populations safe, the Security Council mandate would have been fulfilled and the legal basis for more humanitarian intervention would disappear.

In these respects, Pope Benedict's thinking echoes the cautious approach of US President Barack Obama. If further Western involvement in Libya leads to full-scale civil war rather than to Col Gaddafi's rapid overthrow, it could punish the people it is meant to protect. Can that gamble be justified?

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