ACPP Daily Briefings

Week 09

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North Africa

Libya: The AU almost totally marginalised as Libyan crisis turns into near civil war

The African Union (AU) seems completely helpless in preventing the outbreak of a de facto civil war in Libya. One possible scenario being mooted to help end the conflict is the enforcement of a no-fly zone. A no-fly zone would in essence mean banning military flights by government forces through Libyan airspace. Military flights violating the ban would then risk being shot down by international forces. It is, however, not clear how successful such an intervention would be as it likely to play into Qaddafi’s argument that external actors are supporting insurgents. It is also unclear who would impose such a zone with the only likely possibility being the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Such a move would, however, only be permissible if it is passed by a United Nations (UN) resolution. So far the AU has not played a role in discussions on the issue and its relative inactivity risks its marginalisation in resolving the Libyan crisis. The ineffective Maghreb Union has not helped matters either. The absence of a relatively strong regional organisation, similar to the Southern African Economic Community (SADC) or the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) means that the AU cannot play a complimentary role to a regional body that is probably more nuanced in regional affairs and this further limits AU’s capacity to intervene in North Africa broadly.

What then are the likely implications of the current events in Libya on its relations with Sub Saharan Africa? Under Qaddafi Libya sought to geo-strategically align itself with Sub Saharan Africa. The continued reporting of the involvement of mercenaries from Sub Saharan countries such as Chad and Liberia in the Libyan crisis is, however, likely to test Libya’s ideational ties with Sub-Saharan. Some have argued that with the increase in racism against Black Africans in the Libyan crisis, this polarisation is likely to intensify in the event of Qaddafi is removed from power as Libyan will feel they were undermined by Sub Saharan African countries. In such a case, Libya is likely to remain to detached from the continent and continue orientating itself more towards Europe and the Middle East.

Broadly, however, the issue of the use of mercenaries in African conflicts, whether allegations in Libya are true or not, needs to be seriously considered by AU institutions. Clearly past instruments designed to rid Africa of mercenaries have remained inadequate. The very definition of what constitutes mercenary activity is itself highly debatable and needs clarification based on events in Libya. Indeed, there have been reports of Western countries such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands being directly involved on the ground in attempts to influence the direction of the conflict, with reported capture and arrests of their forces as they attempt to either meet with opposition figures or conduct stealth diplomacy. Their argument has, however, been that they were trying to rescue stranded citizens. Unfortunately such events readily lend credence to Qaddafi’s claims that the opposition to his rule is not simply of a domestic nature. The Libyan situation, in the absence of a prominent AU’s leadership role, is therefore likely to complicated by foreign powers, who undoubtedly will continue to engage in overt and covert activities to safeguard their interests.

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