LIBYA: FRENCH RECOGNITION OF THE LIBYAN REBELS IS A GAMBLE

By Claude MONIQUET

We don’t know if French President Nicolas Sarkozy is a poker player but he obviously gambled today. By the end of the morning, France has become the first country to recognise the National Libyan Council (NLC) of Benghazi as the only legitimate government of the country.

This decision was unilaterally announced, apparently without any prior contact with France’s European partners. It comes a day after the European Parliament urged the E.U. to recognise the rebels as both NATO and the European Union have important meetings today and tomorrow in Brussels to discuss the situation and try to find a common ground on the crisis. Those meetings will culminate this Friday with a summit of the European Chiefs of States and Prime Ministers.

The French decision is a politically risky one:

- It comes as Europe is divided between those advocating a direct and rapid action (including France and the U.K.) and those who adopted a more cautious stance. The unilateral move of France could, thus, complicate the finding of a political consensus on the level of “interventionism” of the E.U. (and NATO).

- Traditionally, as most of the other powers in the modern world, the European Union recognises states and not governments. Diplomatic links could be cut with a state if it breaks international law and/or oppresses its people, but the recognition of an opposition as being a “legitimate government” is unusual. It creates a dangerous precedent.

- Breaking the diplomatic links with Colonel Gaddafi and opening new relations with the rebels is a “no way out” policy. It deprives Paris of any possibility to discuss with Colonel Gaddafi’s regime and try to exercise an influence on it.

- Nobody knows what the Benghazi-based NLC really is and what forces it exactly covers. The only well-known face is Mr Mustapha Abdeljalil, who was the Justice Minister for Colonel Gaddafi. Despite
the fact some human right organisations had a positive view of its “strong stances against arbitrary arrest”, the man was a close associate of the dictator and can, therefore hardly be described as a democrat. For the rest, the Council is probably backed by tribal leaders, Islamists and, probably, a few genuine democrats even if the last are obviously rare in Libya.

- Currently, the council controls approximately a third of the Libyan territory. The last couple of days it faced a fierce counter-attack of forces loyal to Gaddafi and nobody could assume it will resist this counter-offensive. The rebel forces just retreated from Ras-Lanuf, a very important position. This defeat could announce very difficult moments for the rebels. If, at the end of the day Gaddafi wins, French interests and presence in Libya will be badly damaged and even destroyed.

- The French decision could push Colonel Gaddafi to try to “finish the job” as soon as possible and use any means to crush the opposition, which could end in a bloodbath.

- On the other hand, if the rebels win, there is absolutely no insurance that they will install democracy and stabilise the country. More violence and chaos are to be feared.

For all those reasons, we assess the French decision was clearly premature.

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