



THE REVOLUTION OF LIBYAN WOMEN: ONE YEAR LATER

REPORTAGE PIERRE-YVES GINET

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The Libyan revolution occurred one year ago. Today, women have assumed a more prominent position. In particular, they are the keystone of social welfare and are at the head of multiple aid organizations working with the underprivileged, victims and exiles of the conflict. Their groups make it possible for a large number of children to stay in school and provide the necessary allowances for the widows and orphans of fallen combatants. Some of them, in the east of the country, support refugees from the Tawergha minority, who have been driven from their region and accused of having been active members of Gaddafi's militia.

But the streets still belong to men. As a general rule, the mixing of the sexes – which was so necessary and so effective a few short months ago – is now nothing more than a fond memory. Women's rights continue to be ignored, domestic violence and rape are often settled by agreements between families, and honor crimes remain widespread. In late January 2012, Salafist groups, very much in the minority but previously non-existent in the landscape as organizations, even went so far as to knock on the doors of certain universities to demand that headscarves be required, in a country in which 98% of women go about covered up.

Despite this, there was hope. Because everyone in Libya acknowledges the vital role played by women in Gaddafi's fall. Hana el-Gallal, a revolutionary from the very outset and Director of the Libyan Center for Development and Human Rights, recalls the months of struggle with emotion: *"Women and men were together; all cultural and religious obstacles had disappeared. We were just a united group. We stuck together to save ourselves from the massacre and to move forward: men and women, young and old, rich and poor, and so on. This harmony was extraordinary and unique, and that is what gave us the strength to achieve the impossible."*

Although they received less media coverage than the Tunisian and Egyptian women – the armed conflict having monopolized the stage – the involvement of Libyan women was a decisive factor. From the very beginning. On

February 15, 2011, as they had been doing for the past three years, the families of the victims of Abu Salim Prison demonstrated in Benghazi. In 2008, these women and men had learned of the massacre of their relatives, among the 1,270 political prisoners who were executed over the course of two hours on June 29, 1996. Since the announcement of their deaths, the families had taken over the sidewalks of the major port city of eastern Libya each week, to demand justice. The mothers, sisters, wives and daughters of the dead accounted for the majority of these protesters. Without them, the movement would have been crushed or would simply have run out steam. For years, this handful of people shouted the same slogans, criticized the regime, filed complaints against the murderers, with the rest of the population being too afraid to support them. But on that night in February 2011, thanks to the impetus of the nearby revolutions, the voices of the women of Abu Salim yelling, "*Wake up! Wake up, Benghazi!*" in front of police headquarters made their way around the city in the space of a few hours, thanks to the Internet. And their cries were finally heard. That night came the first clashes between youths and Gaddafi's forces. The next day, things heated up even more. Then, on February 17, the population of Benghazi took to the streets, and thousands of demonstrators overran the city courthouse, the symbolic site of the Libyan uprising. During the ensuing months of war, men held the front line. But women were the ones who, from the beginning, managed the communication of information to the local populace and the international media, guides for journalists, the safety of foreign nationals and sometimes even that of their own neighborhoods in the absence of the police, most treatments of the injured in hospitals, supplies for combatants and, in general, the lives of the civilian populations. Some of these women worked to found new institutions, first the Benghazi Council, then the National Transitional Council (NTC), which runs the country today. The participation of women was crucial to the revolution. Libyans are unanimous on this point.

Yet, despite this recognition, women quickly became disenchanted. On Sunday, October 23, 2011, Mustafa Abdul Jalil, Chairman of the NTC, proclaimed the complete liberation of the country. The population was glued to television screens, on which they followed the ceremony that was to bring all citizens together in a historic moment for which they had been waiting 42 years. But the event bottomed out: after briefly saluting the combatants, as well as all of the countries and international organizations that had contributed to the fall of Gaddafi's regime, the new top man in Libya declared that Sharia would be the primary source of inspiration for the country's legislation. Going into further

detail, Mustafa Abdul Jalil considered it would be appropriate to make use of the celebration to announce that polygamy would once again be legalized. Salwa Bugaighis, attorney and former representative of the Coalition of the February 17 Revolution, the first decision-making body created in Benghazi after the uprising, is still seething: *“What a blow! That day should have been a time of jubilation for all of Libya... It was neither the time nor the place to address these issues or for that type of remark. I was aware of his mentality, but I was still not expecting that. I was so disappointed. And what right did he have to make such a proclamation? He doesn’t have the power; he doesn’t have the authority. Our constitution has not yet been established.”*

A few weeks later, the Chairman of the transitional government was invited to a first conference of Libyan women. Salmin Jowarhie, involved in the uprising from the outset and now a women’s and children’s rights activist, was present in the room: *“He told us that women played an incredible role during the revolution, but that there would be no real place for us in politics. It’s depressing. How can he say that to women who have given so much? We were all flabbergasted.”*

Finally, in early January 2012, the NTC unveiled its draft electoral law for the designation of the new National Congress in June: For this major election day, Libyan leaders only set aside 10% of seats for women. Nasiha Turke, a doctor of political science and Professor at Benghazi University, shared her bitter assessment: *“The NTC is stealing our revolution.”*

These stances with regard to women came on top of other controversies, concerning international diplomacy, the use of public finances, the opacity of government action and, over and over again, this electoral law that is the subject of much heated debate. Since November, protests against the NTC and its leader have been increasing throughout the country. The legitimacy of Mustafa Abdul Jalil has been called into question. In particular, the people in the streets criticize him, and other members of his team, for his past participation in the government under Gaddafi’s regime. The people want to turn the page on those dark years. They are hungry for democracy, justice and transparency. And they are very impatient.

Once again, the winds of unrest are blowing hardest in Benghazi. The rebellious city, which was the stage for the

revolts of 1974, 1980, 1996 and 2006 (all of which were crushed in bloodshed), and was the birthplace of the 2011 revolution. For many observers, it is in this great eastern port city that the country's stability will be decided. Since December, downtown Benghazi has been a hive of activity. In Maydan al-Shajara (Tree Square), banners hostile to the NTC are hung alongside political demands. Every night, from 5 to midnight, hundreds of people come to this meeting place, to talk about the news of the day and to debate the options decided on by the government and the possible alternatives. One speaker follows another. At times, it gets heated and fights break out, but these are rapidly quelled by the crowd. Here, negative opinion of the NTC is unanimous. The grievances are the same as elsewhere, although the inhabitants of Benghazi also criticize Tripoli's centralism and its deaf ear to the expectations of the nation's youth. And this fringe of the population, often at the forefront during combats, refuses to accept this position. Most of the Maydan al-Shajara demonstrators are members of a political organization, a citizens' movement or a human rights association. These more or less official groups have proliferated in Benghazi over the past few months, albeit in dispersed ranks and with a terrible need for coordination. The protesters work constantly to develop counter-projects, to list their complaints and to share these with the NTC and the rest of the population. The media are used prodigiously: social networks, of course, as always, but also radio stations, online television programs, new newspapers, and associations' magazines. Pamphlets produced by emerging political parties are distributed. During the day, various national and international NGOs offer a multitude of training and workshops on democracy, justice, human rights, youth and personal responsibility. Being aware of their lack of experience in these domains, and of the need to acquire practical references that may be a far cry from the theory taught at universities, thousands of Benghazi residents regularly attend these meetings. Although the more working-class segments of the population have yet to join in, a large proportion of the city is now bathing in this civic effervescence. Youths are the spearhead and the heart of most initiatives. But many women have not given up and are refusing to return to the household. Of all ages and origins, they occupy all fields. What they lack in numbers in the movement, they make up for with unflagging determination and energy. Maydan al-Shajara is now a public venue for the intermingling of the sexes, where it is accepted by all. The only place in Benghazi. Every day, dozens of female activists come to contribute to the dialogue and to defend their ideas. Some women who actively fought in the revolution have been there every night for months now, like Najah Abdelkader Bodajaja and Tahini al-Sharif. The rights of Libyan women is one of the

most common subjects of conversation. And their political representation gives rise to impassioned debates.

Elham Alkotrani is a regular fixture on the square. The young 30-year-old is, in fact, at the head of a vast movement, Shabab Benghazi (Citizens of Benghazi), which, in just a few weeks, gathered the opinions of more than 16,000 people on the NTC's policies. This daughter of a revolutionary hero openly shatters many of the established codes. Her commitment, her personality and her popularity are troublesome. She has received death threats in the double digits, just since the start of the year: letters left on her car, telephone messages, and so on. All of them anonymous. But popular enthusiasm for Shabab Benghazi's actions and her hunger for democracy drive Elham Alkotrani to carry on: *"We are a citizens' movement and democratic watchdog. The NTC has changed the rules without any legitimate authority for its decisions. This is why we are mobilizing. And then, there is the fact that NTC is a boys' club. We also need to change that."*

On January 21, 2012, Mustafa Abdul Jalil, on an official visit to the city, was confronted by demonstrators and compelled to retreat into the Council's head offices. The enraged crowd entered the premises and laid waste to the government's offices. The next day, the Libyan leader announced the withdrawal of his electoral law. The 10% quota was done away with at the same time. Women were absent from the skirmishes. Most of them condemned the violence, although they could understand it. But all were happy to see that the NTC had finally heard their demands and the voice of the populace. Hana el-Gallal, the organizer of many people's workshops, appreciated the turn of events: *"This is a victory for civil society. International pressure did have an effect, but it was, above all, the weight of the people that came to bear. In Benghazi, more than 20 workshops were held on the electoral law; no fewer than three on the first day of its publication. The people and the different groups expressed themselves, and I think we sent a clear message: we are watching you, we understand, and we will not blindly accept just anything. Here we gave so much that they will not pass a law without consulting with us first."* Salwa Bugaighis, a founding member of the NTC, resigned from her position after three months, considering that the Council respected neither the rights nor the ideas of women: *"The end to that 10% quota is obviously a good thing. But we do need a quota. Without a share of seats reserved for women, we will not be represented. This question is not only relevant to Libyan women;*

it is also very important across all of this part of the world.”

It will be a long path for Libyan revolutionary women. They know that the work is vast and that it goes far beyond simple political rights. But because the question of their representation at the National Congress is at the heart of current events, they are fighting not to lose this potentially decisive battle. They will make sure that Mustafa Abdul Jalil and his team, or their successors, will have no other choice but to listen to them, and that the future Libyan constitution will not overlook them. Before moving on to gradually communicate their demands for equality and freedom, step by step and year by year. *“We know that the road will be long and difficult. But we have taken the first steps and we are determined not to stop,”* stresses Hana el-Gallal, the mentor of many young activist women in Benghazi. Salmin Jowharie, with her 22 years of experience, has a clear and determined view of the meaning behind her struggles of the past year: *“Being a mother is a great responsibility for women, and it isn’t an easy one. But if women want to be something other than a mother, we must give them that possibility, so that each of us can choose what she wants. There should no longer be a single path, without any other options. The revolution – our revolution – that’s what it was all about! We had no choice: there was only Gaddafi. So why make that same mistake again, when it comes to women? We will not allow it.”*

Reportage Pierre-Yves Ginet – Libya – January–February 2012

The coastal road, by the Benghazi courthouse. In the city, advertisements are rare. Available billboards are chiefly covered with posters representing the recently won freedom or with photo montages with the names and portraits of martyrs to the revolution.

January 29, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Faiza Ahmad Zubie organizes the arrival of her friends, family members of the victims of Abu Salim Prison.

In 2008, information about the deaths of 1,270 political prisoners, executed over the course of two hours on June 29, 1996, was revealed. Since that announcement, the families of the departed in Benghazi demonstrated each week, most often here, in front of the courthouse, to demand justice and to shout out their hatred of Gaddafi's regime. It was after their demonstration on February 15, 2011, that the first clashes broke out, leading to the city's uprising two days later.

Here, the women of Abu Salim gather to go to the courthouse together, to the room dedicated to the victims of the massacre. Faiza Ahmad Zubie, the group's leader, lost her brother in the prison. Since 2004, she has been publishing articles on the Internet, relating the events at Abu Salim and criticizing the Libyan government. Today, she is involved with two other movements. The first addresses the taboo issue of women raped by Gaddafi's militiamen. The second, the February 17 Organization for Social Services and Education, is a watchdog for the decisions made by the National Transitional Council: "We must remain vigilant. We cannot give them free rein to do whatever they want. We won our freedom, we are watching them and, when necessary, we will speak out and take action."

January 29, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Ghalia Mohamed Buzahkuk, in the halls of the Benghazi courthouse, which has become a veritable mausoleum in honor of the victims of the 2011 revolution.

Her son Fatih, an 18-year-old high school student, was the youngest prisoner at Abu Salim. He died with the 1,270 political prisoners massacred by Muammar Gaddafi's regime on June 29, 1996. After the executions were revealed in 2008, the families demonstrated each week in Benghazi, demanding justice.

After nightfall on February 15, 2011, the families of the victims had gathered in front of police headquarters. One member of the group used his telephone to film the women of Abu Salim, crying out in anger and calling for the city to rise up. A few minutes later, the voice of Ghalia Mohamed Buzahkuk, shouting "Wake up! Wake up, Benghazi!" in front of Gaddafi's forces, was posted online and quickly made the rounds of social networks. An hour later, the first rallies began to erupt in the city. All the revolutionaries present at the beginning recall those poor-quality images and that tortured voice.

January 29, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



The women of Abu Salim go to the Benghazi courthouse together, to the room dedicated to the victims of the massacre.

On June 29, 1996, soldiers from Tripoli, following the orders of the Libyan leader, executed 1,270 political prisoners from Abu Salim Prison in the space of two hours. Information about their deaths was only divulged in 2008. The families had not had any news of their relatives in 12 years. A few months later, the families of the dead gathered in Benghazi and decided to demonstrate each Saturday, on the day of the killings, to demand justice. The mothers, sisters, wives and daughters of the victims accounted for the majority of these protesters. Without them, it is recognized by all that the movement would have been crushed or would simply have run out steam. Confronted by the forces of law and order on multiple occasions, who came to break off their gatherings – sometimes violently –, the women of Abu Salim always intervened and stood strong.

After three years of demonstrations, on February 15, 2011, their slogans calling for the city to rise up against Gaddafi's regime were finally heard by the rest of the population.

January 29, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Sabria Khamis Zidahie, age 32, is one of the women of Abu Salim. Her brother was among the 1,270 political prisoners who were executed during two hours on June 29, 1996, in the Tripoli prison. Since the announcement of their death in 2008, she has been demonstrating weekly to demand justice, along with other family members of the dead. Sabria Khamis Zidahie was present for the rally on February 15, 2011, in front of the Benghazi police headquarters – the event that truly launched the Libyan revolution. Combat would then rage until October, when the dictator was killed, with thousands of casualties in between. Sabria's husband was one of the revolutionaries that fell on the battlefield, arms in hand.

Here she is at the Benghazi courthouse, the symbolic site of the Libyan uprising, now a veritable mausoleum in honor of the martyrs to the revolution. In recognition of the crucial role played by the families of the Abu Salim victims, the population dedicated an entire room in the courthouse to the political prisoners executed in Tripoli in 1996. January 29, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Across from the Benghazi courthouse, an Abu Salim mother waits for her friends in front of a portrait of her son, executed with 1,270 political prisoners on June 29, 1996. Since 2008, the families of the victims of Abu Salim had demonstrated each week, most often in front of this courthouse, to demand justice and call for an uprising against Muammar Gaddafi's regime. It was their demonstration on February 15, 2011, that led to the uprising of the inhabitants of the capital city in eastern Libya. On February 17, this square in Benghazi, across from the courthouse, was overrun by the population, who had already taken control of most of the city. The Libyan revolution was under way.

Faiza Ahmad Zubie, leader of the Abu Salim women, remembers that time: "We had been demonstrating for several years, shouting the same slogans and calling for an uprising against the regime. No one would follow us. But then, after the events in Tunisia and Egypt, the path had been paved for a revolution. And the video of our rally on February 15, 2011, was the match that lit the powder keg."

January 29, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



On one of the shopping streets in Benghazi, a member of the intervention services watches over the population's safety. A year ago, before joining the revolutionary forces to fight Gaddafi's militia, he had been a real estate agent. These men are everywhere in Benghazi. They provide all police services in the city.

Safety is undoubtedly the primary concern of the city's residents. The vast majority of the 2011 combatants have refused to lay down their arms. Most consider that, so long as the National Transitional Council has not established police forces that are working for democracy and for the people, it is their duty to remain vigilant and to be able to defend their people.

January 30, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Maydan al-Shajara (Tree Square), the political heart of Benghazi. Every night, from 5 to midnight, hundreds of people gather here. Men and women, of all ages and social statuses, come to talk about the news of the day and to debate the options decided on by the government and the possible alternatives. The square is predominantly hostile to the National Transitional Council.

January 20, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



At Maydan al-Shajara (Tree Square), a passer-by stops to read a protester's demands for the National Transitional Council to focus its actions on the people, rather than on the wealthy. Men account for the vast majority of people on the square, but each night, a number of women mix with them. The square is the only mixed-gender venue in the city, where the intermingling of the sexes is accepted by all.

January 26, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Elham Alkotrani in an animated debate with several men one evening on Maydan al-Shajara. The disagreement pertains to the possession of arms, the revolutionary combatants having mostly refused to put them down, arguing that the National Transitional Council does not currently provide for the safety conditions needed for them to do so. Although opposed to the government, the young woman still advocates for the laying down of arms.

Threatened on many occasions because of her popularity among youths, her opinions and her unusual personality, Elham Alkotrani leads the citizens' movement, Shabab Benghazi. The goal of her group's actions is to transmit the wishes of the people to the new Libyan leaders and to put pressure on the government to take the voices of the residents of Benghazi into account.

January 27, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Attorney Tahini al-Sharif has been at Maydan al-Shajara every evening since December.

A member of multiple citizens' movements, and hostile to the government in place, she regularly speaks out and distributes photocopies of the demands sent to the National Transitional Council.

Involved since the very beginning of the revolution, she was, in particular, on the first convoy from Benghazi to arrive in Misrata carrying food, weapons and equipment.

January 20, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



الى مجلس المسلمين
بنفازي لم نخدم
ولن نسمع ليخرج به شعار
غير فنواكم المشبه

Fouziha Bouchahallah runs a women's rights association. Because of the new developments linked to the electoral law, the organization arranged lectures, conferences and workshops to encourage women to participate in the political sphere. "We are trying to awaken them to the world of politics, so that they can become active citizens in the new Libya. This is a field that is new to everyone, but even more so for women. Most Libyans consider that politics is not our place."

Fouziha Bouchahallah goes to Maydan al-Shajara every night to convince those present of the need to take women's rights into account. She laments their low turnout on the square, although she is delighted by the energy of those who come regularly to this daily political meeting in Benghazi.

January 26, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Conference organized by Attawasul Association at the Benghazi convention center. This movement, which works in favor of women, children and youths, was created on February 19, 2011, just two days after the political uprising. The organization includes both men and women, although the latter account for the majority of members.

The objective of this meeting was to raise public awareness on the consideration of women's rights in building the new Libya. After a few speeches, tribute was paid to the feminists of Al Narda, presented as members of the first women's organization in Libya. The group, founded in 1954, had to cease its activities in 1971, shortly after Colonel Gaddafi's rise to power.

Many of those present lamented the poor attendance, but above all, the fact that only women and men already won over to the cause were present, Attawasul having difficulties raising awareness outside the usual circles.

January 21, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Ghalia el Houni (left) and Amal El Jhanie (center), recording Attawasul's weekly radio program devoted to women's rights.

Attawasul is an association that was created to promote the rights of women, youth and children. Very active on the Benghazi square, the organization broadcasts its ideas as widely as possible via these radio programs and a monthly magazine. Mainstays of the movement Ghalia el Houni and Amal el Jhanie also organize regular seminars, training and workshops dedicated to women's rights, particularly their political rights, and to violence against women. These sessions are open to the general public, although Attawasul has had difficulty in attracting new audiences from the working classes.

January 26, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



In Benghazi, Jamila Mohamed Fallag is a historical figure in the political opposition to Colonel Gaddafi. While in college, she was arrested by government forces four times between 1982 and 1984, when propaganda and oppression were at their peak, for having written slogans against the regime on the walls of the university and for having produced and distributed pamphlets calling for the students to rise up against Muammar Gaddafi and his clique. At the start of the revolution, several people had warned her of the danger she would be in if she did not leave the country, as her name had been placed on a black list by Libyan domestic policy leaders.

For the past year, the writer and political activist has been penning articles against the policies of Mustafa Abdul Jalil. She also regularly speaks out on the issue of women's rights in her country: "The biggest challenge for us is to change the traditions of Libyan society. This is not about religion; it is our habits that must be overcome. We need to shift from this patriarchal society and this male-dominated culture. I am optimistic, because many women are politically engaged today."

January 27, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



In the rooms of a Benghazi municipal building, Judge Nahima has gathered her friends from a group working to expand women's participation in political decisions. Founded in June 2011, the association plays an important role in local political lobbying. She also works to institute educational programs for the general public, namely enlisting teachers and moderate imams who push for gender equality by highlighting certain excerpts from the Koran. These activist women, mostly from the middle to upper classes, stress the need for a large number of female ministers and representatives in the future National Congress. Wafa Bugaighis, one of the movement's figureheads, is categorical: "Culture is an obstacle to our political participation and, in addition, we are not assisted in this by the government, which has marginalized women. There are only two women on the National Transitional Council. Without us, the revolution would not have succeeded. We do not want to lose the rights that we won during that fight. The struggle for an electoral law that does not overlook us will be decisive."

January 24, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Meeting of the Editorial Committee for Attawasul Magazine, produced each month by the organization of the same name. The publication is designed to promote women's rights, the main focus of this group that emerged in the early hours of the revolution, in Benghazi. To attract the general public, Attawasul's leaders have decided to devote a portion of the magazine to lighter topics, with a few pages being dedicated to cooking recipes, regional tourism and fashion. But the core of this monthly periodical is formed of texts and reports on women's rights and Attawasul's actions. Circulation is quite high in the east of the country.

Here, the editors have decided to include a caricature of the reality of the consideration of feminist demands by the National Transitional Council. The drawing depicts a man stopping a female activist from speaking, asserting that he is the one in charge of women's rights.

January 28, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



The leaders of “Women of Benghazi United” meeting with their President, Naziha Turke (left), a doctor of political science. This coordinating body brings together some forty-odd local associations focused on women’s rights and initiatives. Their goal is to help women from all social strata to utilize their full potential in all areas of public life, whether in terms of their working lives or their political activism. Officially, the group is not opposed to the National Transitional Council (NTC) but, in practice, most of the members campaign against the decisions of the government team led by Mustafa Abdul Jalil.

In the words of Naziha Turke, “The NTC is stealing the women’s revolution. The revolution had given us great hope for womankind but, in reality, there is a risk that almost nothing will be gained.”

January 24, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



22-year-old Salmin Jowarhie, Administrator of the Civil Society Resource Center, speaks during a training course on justice and the judiciary, given by USIP (United States Institute of Peace). Some twenty people attended the session. Workshops of this type, talking about the wheels of democracy, have abounded in Benghazi for months now. Women are very active, as both participants and instructors. However, many observers lament that this civic culture is not spreading with the same speed across all of the social strata. Only a minority of working people are benefiting from it, while the vast majority of the population is focused on day-to-day survival. To combat this state of affairs, a number of initiatives have been launched. Salmin Jowarhie and some friends around her age created the association Bokra (Tomorrow) to promote empowerment among youths and attention to their opinions: "People need to be educated about their rights and duties. To expand the circle of people who are aware of the issues, we want to engage in actions in elementary and high schools. We also want to create video clips that are simple and accessible to everyone, which we can broadcast on TV and via cell phones. Because, although the Internet is not necessarily available to all Libyans, everyone has a telephone."

January 25, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Filming of a television show that will be broadcast online. At the initiative of the group Shabab Benghazi, a star presenter from the Libyan small screen will spend two hours interviewing various representatives of civil society and will present the actions undertaken by the citizens' movement. Over the course of several weeks, hundreds of activists – mainly youths – gathered more than 16,000 questionnaires designed to identify the opinions of Benghazi residents on government policy. Their end goal is to transmit a summary of these questionnaires to the Libyan leaders.

The films produced by Shabab Benghazi owe a great deal to Elham Alkotrani, one of the movement's leaders (here, center), whose personality is quite uncommon, upsetting all the codes, particularly as concerns relations between men and women.

January 30, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Hana el-Gallal runs the Libyan Center for Development and Human Rights. Actively involved in the revolution since February 17, 2011, she played a vital role in disseminating information to the international media and in ensuring the safety of foreign nationals. A mainstay in the establishment of the transitional government's institutions, for several months now she has been devoting a large segment of her time to providing training on human rights, international law and justice. The sessions offered by Hana el-Gallal have even been attended by police officers and journalists. But her main focus is on young audiences, like here, at a workshop on justice during the transition period: "Their role is essential. They have given a great deal, and we have so much to learn from them. We need to give them the opportunity to speak – and really listen to them – and to involve them in the decision-making process. Otherwise, their frustrations will continue to intensify, and we will be heading for real trouble."

January 31, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



In a classroom at Noor Elmaaref School in Benghazi, Mariam and Hend Elsaiti, 16 and 17 years old, hand out pamphlets encouraging students to join the national federalist bloc. This political movement, begun in Benghazi, has been rocketing upward across the city, with thousands of sympathizers already won over to the cause. Highly critical of the centralist politics of the government in Tripoli, this new party advocates for respect for the many minority groups in Libya. The women in the movement – of all ages and walks of life – are particularly active. Divided into four geographic committees, they share their ideas by approaching people: on the street, in their homes and in schools. The most dedicated attend regular training sessions on democracy and participate in many different meetings.

January 30, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Female activists in the national federalist bloc, a political party opposed to the centralism of the government in Tripoli and advocating for the creation of a federation, hand out their movement's pamphlets in a Tawergha refugee camp on the outskirts of Benghazi. Several thousand Tawerghas, who had been threatened, suffered as the victims of acts of revenge, and been driven from their region in the west of the country on the grounds of having been active members of Gaddafi's militia, have found refuge in eastern Libya, often after months of walking. The national federalist bloc, committed to respecting the many ethnic minorities in Libya, works to promote its ideas as far as the camps themselves. This distribution is carried out exclusively by some of the movement's female sympathizers, who are also volunteers for the NGO LibAid, which is very active in the camps.

January 30, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



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Here we see one of the hallways in the camp, where only Tawergha women live, most of them widowed during the combats or after the fall of the regime, owing to the atrocities committed by certain revolutionaries.

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Salmin Jowarhie, 22-year-old Administrator of the Civil Society Resource Center. The objective of this platform is to provide associations with a venue for organizing civic training and to connect the many NGOs created since the revolution, which often work separately, yet on common goals.

On February 17, 2011, Salmin Jowarhie was at the demonstration in front of the Benghazi courthouse. The dental student spent the following days at the hospital, helping the doctors and nurses there, who were overwhelmed by the influx of people with gunshot wounds, providing first aid and cleaning up operating rooms and ambulances. In early March, she joined a group of young people assigned to media management and the broadcasting of information about the revolution: "We went all over to take pictures and interview people. I answered calls from the BBC and from British and American newspapers, explaining to them what was happening here."

In parallel to her activities at the Civil Society Resource Center, Salmin Jowarhie now campaigns for numerous associations that represent Libyan youth. The young woman also contributes to a magazine: "Now, I can freely share my opinions, comment on the latest events, and raise questions for the government. Not long ago, I wrote a controversial paper on Libyan Jews. Because I am for a Libya for all the people. I believe that anyone who wants to come back should be able to. Jews, Christians, Muslims, it doesn't matter to me."

January 23, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Meeting of the leaders of the humanitarian association Ayadina. The group, formed of 72 women, was created in 2006. It acted in secret for two years, because Gaddafi's government refused to grant its approval, arguing that there were no poor people in Libya. Ayadina now supports close to 250 underprivileged families. In addition to donations of money, goods, food and clothing, disadvantaged young people receive funding for their education, and single mothers have access to the equipment they need to launch a business venture. A large share of the donations go to women widowed by the revolution.

For these humanitarian activists, there is no doubt about the participation of women in the next elections: "Women now know what a congress, democracy and voting mean... And we want more of them," explains Basma Swan, a member of the association.

January 25, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Tawergha is a city in western Libya. The region is primarily populated by black inhabitants. In the minds of many Libyans, particularly the inhabitants of Misrata, the Tawerghas, who remained loyal to Colonel Gaddafi, were the main source of enemy militiamen. They are associated with the worst human rights violations committed during the conflict. Tracked, harassed, threatened and sometimes killed, most Tawerghas fled their region, taking refuge in the camps scattered throughout the country and managed by humanitarian NGOs. Benghazi Region, known for being the least hostile to them, has accommodated thousands of families in recent months. Here, at Sidi Faraj Camp, just a few kilometers from the eastern Libyan capital, Miriam Amami, an activist with the international NGO Mercy Corps, visits families to take stock of their needs. When asked why she has become involved with the Tawerghas, the college student, several of whose friends and relatives fought Gaddafi's forces, simply answers, "We want to build a new Libya, and each of us must lay one brick. Exclusion will not help us to build a solid, peaceful country. They are Libyans, too."

January 22, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Anaad Abud El Hafid, Director of the Social Welfare Office in charge of women and families, visits Wafa and her children at a camp on the outskirts of Benghazi.

Married against her family's wishes, Wafa returned to them after a disagreement with her husband. The latter, come to find his wife and children, was murdered by Wafa's brother. The killer, considering that the family had been dishonored by the marriage, ordered his sister to return her two children to her in-laws, on pain of death if she did not follow through. In 2006, Wafa fled and found refuge in Benghazi. Her case was taken up by Social Services, who found her housing and who regularly transfer her to new accommodation.

Having only limiting funding available, Anaad Abud El Hafid recognizes that the measures taken are not enough to guarantee the young woman's safety.

January 25, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



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Samira, age 41, in the single room of her “house” at the heart of a makeshift camp on the outskirts of Benghazi. Samira was married. She had two children. In 2010, while pregnant once more, she was found guilty of adultery and sentenced to two years in prison. She lost custody of her two eldest children.

Samira was freed along with all of the other prisoners after the February 17 uprising. Her lover, now her husband, was never given any trouble by the Libyan legal system, which is often the case: most men manage to escape prosecution. Today, the couple lives in this camp, thanks to aid from the Benghazi Social Services. Because she had not completed her sentence, Samira had to answer to soldiers’ questions after the revolution. But the investigation went no further. No legislative changes on this subject appear to be in the works for the months to come.

January 28, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Social Services camp in Benghazi. Before the shocked eyes of Anaad Abud El Hafid, Director of the Social Welfare Office in charge of women and families, a resident threatens Samira and orders her to go home, or else he will force her to do so. The Libyan courts found Samira guilty of adultery and sentenced her to two years in prison. She did not serve her full sentence, having been liberated along with all the other prisoners after the uprising on February 17, 2011. Today, she is the punching-bag of all of the camp's residents, who attribute to her a number of relationship problems among couples living there.

January 28, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Warda Saber, 23-year-old mother of two, in a Social Services camp in Benghazi. She is the second wife of her husband, who has not lived with her since 2009. He only comes to the camp on rare occasions, usually to beat and rape her. The man has not given any money to his family in nearly six months.

The young woman recently went to the courthouse to file a complaint and to petition for divorce. The legal services advised her not to proceed, because Warda is pregnant. Her legal status and the recognition of her unborn child would then be very delicate, indeed.

January 28, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



The management, security and food supply of Sidi Faraj Camp, which accommodates close to 500 Tawerghas, are provided by various national and international NGOs. Rehab is one of the camp's most active members. Here, she speaks with several children, including 12-year-old Mansour (left). All of the men in his family were killed during or after the armed conflict. As the family bread-winner, he works every morning in the Benghazi marketplace to earn a handful of dinars.

Rehab, a 31-year-old divorced mother raising her four children on her own, never stopped helping the most disadvantaged during the revolution, despite having a delicate financial position, herself. A devout believer, she recently compelled the leaders of her religious group to agree to having a woman at the table.

January 22, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Sidi Faraj Camp, on the outskirts of Benghazi, is now home to nearly 500 Tawerghas from western Libya. Under threat because of accusations of having been active members of Gaddafi's militia, these families left their native region in August 2011, arriving at Sidi Faraj in November. Women and children account for most of these displaced people.

LibAid, the major Libyan humanitarian organization, is everywhere, and most of the volunteers at the camp are women. Today, Rehab and Asma, a member of LibAid's "Connecting People" group, are visiting the Tawerghas to find out what they will need for the next major religious holiday. They give special attention to the children, some of whom have already become their families' bread-winners.

January 22, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



Outskirts of Benghazi. All real estate construction projects and worksites have been frozen for the past year. Many public services are no longer running. The state of neglect and filth in certain districts in the city are a source of concern for many inhabitants.

January 23, 2012 – Benghazi – Libya. © Pierre-Yves Ginet



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