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Libya welcomes banned books

Article

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By Mitch Potter Washington Bureau

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TRIPOLI—Libya marked the end of the Gadhafi-era blacklist Monday with a ceremonial unbanning of books in the former regime's most storied public library.

Many of Libya's emerging political hopefuls joined militia leaders and returning expat exiles at the Italianate Royal Palace for a sunset event that was equal parts a celebration of free thought and bitter lament for its cost.



"This is a major moment for us because this is where we reclaim our intellectual freedom," former exiled journalist and human rights activist Hassan al-Amin told the Star.

MITCH POTTER/TORONTO STAR

With a fanfare of Libyan bagpipers in full ceremonial flourish, the VIP crowd made its way to the top for of the palace, heaped with table upon table of books deemed unreadable during Moammar Gadhafi's 42-year rule.

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There, Arabic titles including *The Secret Life of Saddam Hussein* and *The CIA Files of Arab Rulers* sat alongside censored troves of Islamic literature, theology and philosophy. Books about Israel, Hezbollah, books by Salman Rushdie. One slim volume was titled *Sex In The Arab World*.

The palace, converted to a library and museum during Gadhafi's post-royalist rule, grew quiet as half dozen speakers took turns remembering the dead and wounded that sacrificed for this day.

"Here in this historic place, knowledge was banned. The previous regime called it a national library, but it was more like an indoctrination centre to control our thinking," said Dr. Salah Abdallah Rajeb al-Aghab, a senior official with the Libyan government archeology section.

"This place was used to distort culture. It was used to terrorize. And so this is the proper place to say Libya now is ready to embrace knowledge and thought without limits."

The palace ground floor, meanwhile, was lined with books as well — hundreds of new titles spanning the fields of math, science, faith, philosophy and politics, including an Arabic translation of Barack Obama's *Dreams From My Father* and works by anti-religionist Richard Dawkins.

Those titles, which Gadhafi's censors will never have the chance to rule on, are to be on offer for the next four days during a public book fair sponsored by the newly formed Society For New Libyan Horizons and the Tripoli Revolutionary Brigade.

Among the attendees was journalist and human rights activist Hassan al-Amin, one of the Gadhafi regime's sharpest critics during his years of exile in London, who shared a bittersweet swirl of emotions as the books were revealed.

"This is a major moment for us because this is where we reclaim our intellectual freedom. We say goodbye to an era where free thinking was forbidden, where ideas were dangerous," Amin told the *Star*.

"And what I am seeing now is how very quickly our people are mounting events in the spirit of this day. From lectures to exhibitions, we are seeing the roots of civil society beginning to form, despite what was done to this country. This will not stop because the Libyan people are so hungry for it."

Though Libyan political circles remain riven with suspicions of outside interference as the seeds of new parties begin to be sown in advance of June elections, Monday's ceremony came as a lone moment of clear unity — and a strikingly cerebral counterpoint to the video images that little doubt about the grisly manner of the late Gadhafi's death.

Said Abdullah al-Harati, a senior Tripoli Revolutionary Brigade leader: "Our struggle is not just military, but intellectual. Gadhafi fought science, he fought knowledge.

"And so we are now looking forward to a state founded on the knowledge he wanted to deny."

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