One of the most surprising aspects of the recent uprisings in Libya was the apparently spontaneous emergence of organized political activity inside a state where, for four decades, formal political action outside the repressive confines of Muammar Qadhafi’s *Jamahiriyya* (massocracy) system had simply not existed. In fact, the imposition of the *Jamahiriyya* so fragmented Libyan society that even informal structures, such as Libya’s complex tribal system or institutions linked to Islam, no longer appeared to provide a basis for political coherence. At the same time, however, in the wake of the crisis between Libya and the West, which began in the late 1980s, the innate contradictions within the Libyan state—given the repression inherent in the *Jamahiriyya*’s illusion of “direct democracy”—together with issues of succession and reconciliation with the outside world, began to generate opportunities for precursors to social movements to emerge. These were to seize their moment in early 2011 and provide the momentum needed to destroy the Qadhafi regime. This chapter seeks to uncover the ways in which this occurred after first setting the scene by discussing the political system that Muammar Qadhafi put in place after the “Great September Revolution” in 1969.

**The Jamahiriyya**

Superficially, modern Libya under the *Jamahiriyya* system would appear to have been an idiosyncratic authoritarian state, ruled by a charismatic, mercurial, and unpredictable leader, Muammar Qadhafi, who brought the contemporary state into being through a military coup on 1 September 1969. The Great September Revolution ushered
in a state initially based on Nasserist Arab Nationalism which, within five years, reformulated itself as a Jamahiriyya, in which sovereignty was said to reside in the Libyan people who exercised full authority over the “stateless state” through direct popular democracy. This new Libyan state was “stateless” in the sense that its sources of legitimacy and authority were both dispersed throughout society by the principles of direct democratic action by the population over all aspects of administrative and political behavior and incarnated in the person of its leader, despite the fact that he occupied no formal function within it. This meant that impartial institutions—accountable to a legitimate sovereign authority, itself constitutionally accountable—did not exist but were simply figments of a personalized and unaccountable political imagination. Its economic functioning was predicated on the modernization of Libyan society as a result of its increasing integration into and exposure to the global economy as the new state became an oil producer. This was a process that had begun under the Sanussi Monarchy that had preceded the Qadhafi regime but which, because its own power base had depended on the tribal society of rural Cyrenaica, had been incapable of retaining the support of the new social strata that had emerged from the modernization of Libya’s expanding urban society, particularly in Tripolitania.

A crucial element in the modernization process, alongside the proliferation of new institutions, such as trade unions and other civil society organizations, had been the dramatic growth in education. This progress depended on teachers brought in from Egypt and led to the popularization of the ideology of Arab Nationalism, which in turn provided an alternative to the narrowly based religious tribalism of the monarchy.

The revolution that occurred in 1969 thus initially enjoyed massive popular support. Buoyed up by oil revenues, it enabled the new regime to experiment with its political initiatives in the first few years. Thus, as the single-party system associated with Arab Nationalism failed to retain popular support, it was gradually replaced, between 1973 and 1979, by a “popular committee” system of direct populist control. However, by 1975, as oil revenues unexpectedly declined as oil prices weakened, political opposition to the new regime began to emerge, culminating in an unsuccessful coup from within the regime seeking to end Qadhafi’s ideologically driven foreign and domestic policies. Two years later, 22 of the officers involved were executed, thus rupturing the integrity of the Union of Free Officers, which had carried through the 1969 revolution, and setting the regime at odds with