**Feed and let others feed’: Libya’s recipe for lack of progress**

One shining spring day three years ago, on my way home from work, I found a bulldozer, a couple of African workers and a makeshift construction bureau parked on my street. The time had finally come for new asphalt, pavement and lighting.

I asked the project manager how long it would take to finish the work. He said no more than two months. The street, just outside the city centre, is less than 1.5 kilometres long, and it is the main mobile phone market in Tripoli.

Well, the manager was wrong, and I am sure he knows why. The bulldozer, the workers and the bureau have long since disappeared, but the job is still unfinished. The street now is much worse than it was three years ago. The old lights are gone and it’s been dug up on both sides and in the middle as well. With the rainy season starting in earnest, we are bracing for some long, very muddy walks ahead.

Welcome to infrastructure development, the Libyan way.

The idea is simple: nothing is supposed to finish, and if it ever does, it should neither be on time nor budget.

A few months after the asphalting stopped, a utility company came along with a new project to revamp the water and sewage networks. They dug up whatever remained of the street, buried some pipes, and, by the end of summer, they left.

A couple of days later I spotted water coming up from the ground at three different locations. Like a good citizen, I notified the construction manager. It took them almost two weeks to revisit the leaking pipes and fix them. Again, they did not finish the job, but at least the leak stopped.

After the “water people”, as the street children nicknamed them, disappeared, others came along. The time it was the turn of the national electricity company, which was supposed to connect to local electricity grids. They started digging very quickly, and in less than two weeks, the street was entirely dug up again.

This time around I decided to talk to the workers daily and follow their progress. The supervisor, who happened to be from my hometown, was an easygoing person.

Again I asked the obvious question: when will you finish? His answer was much more detailed and articulate than his colleague’s from the asphalting company. He said: “By God’s will, co-operation of good people like you, and the help of the owner of the project, we’ll finish in three months time. We cannot go on any longer as we’ll start losing money instead of making it.”

Seven months later, and he is still supervising the diggers part of the day, and the workers laying cable during the rest.

When I asked him about the company in charge, he described a chain from the national utility to contractors to subcontractors and the company he works for, which, incidentally, is owned by a relative of a former public utility chief executive. I mentioned the idea of conflict of interest, but it did not seem to make much sense to him.

He replied by using a very popular Libyan slang term used to explain and justify corruption: you have to “feed and let others feed”. He went on to say: “If we have no connections, do not feed others and try to be honest and clean, we will always be clean out of money as well.”

That is the situation in almost every single project in the country. Corruption is so widespread that it’s being institutionalized. People, including officials, not only accept it, practice it and try to justify it; they actually see nothing wrong with it, even in religious terms despite Islam’s ban on corruption.

The problem has become so bad, my neighbor told me while we watched the workers in their interminable digging, that only the Chinese solution will work: publicly execute a couple of big fish so the smaller ones stay clean.

Apart from the banking crisis in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which saw many heads roll, Libya has not seen a single major corruption case against a high-ranking official, even though the country has one of the strictest anti-corruption laws.

Back in the late 1970s, state utility companies and contractors used to put up billboards apologizing to people for disrupting their daily routine. With an almost non-existent infrastructure, Libya was then spending billions of dollars on roads, street lights, fresh water supplies and sewage in the remotest corners of the country.

Unfortunately, three decades later, with many foreign policy mishaps along the way, the infrastructure is in dire need of a total revamp. Now that the country has returned to its place among the international community, people are hoping it is time to work on the national infrastructure.

Three years ago, under the watchful eye of Saif al Islam, the son of Muammar Qadafi, the country put aside nearly US$40 billion (Dh147 billion) for infrastructure, with more funds alloted for housing, telecommunications and medical facilities.

However, the only projects making progress are in the housing, telecoms and oil sectors. Libya has made a big leap ahead in telecoms: local landline calls are free, internet connections are widely available and mobile phone networks provide 90 per cent coverage.

The other two sectors, oil and construction, have one thing in common: they are at least partly owned by private companies. Foreign oil giants like Shell and Mobile and the local construction companies keep corruption to a minimum.

But in the projects where one company is always feeding the other, workers seem to be just digging up the same ground over and over again. Billboard apologies are rare now, but nobody would bother to read them anyway