Moammar Gadhafi is dead, and now the hard work begins in Libya.

A country controlled by a strongman for 42 years, a country of tribes and conflicting interests, a country with oil reserves desired by Europeans and Americans is now faced with rebuilding from scratch.

Three Middle East experts at Florida Atlantic University see monumental challenges for Libya after Gadhafi - and some hope.

The chaos of a newly liberated and still unstable country is fertile ground for abuses and criminal acts, said Jeffrey Morton, an FAU professor of political science specializing in international law and U.S. foreign policy.

He found it chilling that 20,000 surface-to-air missiles disappeared last month, while Gadhafi was fighting off the rebels.

"Those missiles can take down a civilian aircraft," Morton said. "They make rocket-propelled grenades look like peashooters. They could be taken south into the (Libyan) desert, then to Alexandria (Egypt) and into Sinai."

Another problem is that after 42 years of authoritarian control, Libya does not have much of a foundation on which to build a new political system, democratic or otherwise.

"Libya does not have a democratic history, it does not have strong functioning state institutions and state traditions," said Mehmet Gurses, an FAU political science professor who studies the democratization process.

There is also a powerful Islamist contingent in Libya to be reckoned with.

"Islamists played a key role in the uprising and they are more organized than the other segments of the population," said Robert Rabil, associate professor of political science and author of three books on the Middle East.

While in power, Gadhafi played tribe against tribe, Rabil said.
"Everyone will be jockeying for power now," he said. "I would like to see the head of the transitional government initiate a process of national reconciliation."

European and American leaders have been in almost constant communication with the transitional government since March, when President Obama approved airstrikes on Libya. On Tuesday, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton swept into Tripoli bearing $11 million in aid for the transitional government, the most recent installment of a total of $135 million.

"They are asking for help and the international community has been helping," Rabil said.

France and Britain have led the line of European countries supporting the transitional government against Gadhafi, he added.

"It's a whole new ball game and they want to be there."

Besides their interest in a stable, democratic government in the big North African country, there is of course the matter of Libya's substantial oil reserves. An existing gas pipeline from Libya to Italy, supplying 10 percent of Italy's natural gas, had to be shut down during the fighting in Libya.

Perhaps most disturbing to Morton are the repercussions for future relations with other so-called rogue nations. He finds it ominous that Europe and the United States decided in March that Gadhafi's time was up, even though for nearly eight years he had been conceding to their demands that he denounce terrorism and allow weapons inspections.

"That sends a very dangerous message to the rest of the world," Morton said. "Here is an example of one (Gadhafi) that did everything we asked. So now North Korea or Iran could say, 'Why should we concede to this?'"

All three professors emphasize that dreams of democracy in Libya or any other country during this Arab Spring must be tempered with realism and patience.

"I am cautiously optimistic, because compared to Iraq and Syria, for example, Libya does not have severe ethnic and religious divisions," Gurses said.

As for the possibility that Islamists will leap into the power vacuum, Gurses said it would be a mistake to think that every Muslim-majority country is ripe for an Islamist takeover.

"The recent rebellions in North Africa and the Middle East are not demanding an Islamic state," Gurses said. "They want jobs, security and education. The overwhelming majority of Muslims are demanding a free and decent life."

It is also important to keep the perspective that those rebellions occurred in "the most authoritarian region in the world."

"These changes are only the beginning," Gurses said. "Think how long democratization took in America, 300 years. Democracy is the most effective way of fighting radicalism."