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Report

Abushagur's Leadership amidst Division



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Six weeks after the launch of the Libyan National Congress (which had elected 200 people on 7 July 2012), it witnessed fierce competition for the first time in over four decades between the three candidates that were given approval to run for the position of prime minister. The election was conducted in a smooth and transparent manner with no hints of fraud, and all the candidates received equal and fair opportunities to present their programmes to the delegates. Despite strong regional and tribal affiliations in the society, the competition between the newly formed political forces surprisingly was on a political – rather than tribal or regional – basis; and this is a matter that should be observed, analysed, and fixed.

An Islamist but not a candidate of the Islamist trend

Mustafa Abushagur was elected prime minister, beating Mahmoud Jibril – who represented the Nationalist Forces Alliance (NFA), the largest bloc in the General National Congress – with only a few votes. Many in the general public as well as a number of intellectuals consider Abushagur a candidate of the Islamist trend and a representative of the Muslim Brotherhood or the Justice and Construction Party that is regarded by many NFA supporters as a group with little popular appeal but that is still able to manipulate the political game through its dominance in official institutions and control of important levers of power in the country. This belief was widespread in the first transitional phase and lives on in the current phase.

Nonetheless, there is no clear evidence that Abushagur was a candidate of the Islamist trend. In fact, the Islamist coordinating body – which includes the Justice and Construction Party, the Ummah Party, the Homeland Party, and several independent parties – had agreed to support another candidate, Awad Al-Baraasi. Several of the coordinating body's supporters and some of its members in the National Congress proposed that Abushagur should be backed instead as he was perceived as more propitious considering he is from the western region that had yet to be represented in the National Congress's more important posts. The leaders of the coordinating body still insisted on backing Al-Baraasi for two reasons:

1. In terms of administration, it was held that Al-Baraasi was more capable of making difficult decisions and managing state affairs in a manner that would be more efficient and structured. Furthermore, Abushagur was regarded as having been a key partner in the administration of interim prime minister Abdurrahim El Keib and as being just as responsible as El Keib for its failures.
2. A dispute had erupted between the Justice and Construction Party (JCP) and the National Front for the Salvation of Libya (NFSL) that nominated Abushagur. The JCP alleged that the NFSL was responsible for violating an agreement supporting Mohammed Maqrif as president of the National Congress in return for the NFSL's support of the JCP's candidate for prime minister. Since the JCP holds the NFSL responsible for breaking the agreement, the JCP refused to support the NFSL's candidate and Abushagur was thus not the first choice of the JCP, but was regarded as a negotiated candidate. Thus, the forty-one votes that Al-Baraasi won in the first round of voting went to Abushagur in the second round. In addition, in an interview with Al-Sharq al-Awsat on 14 September 2012, Abushagur himself denied being a candidate of the Islamist trend but stated that this did not negate his Islamist dispositions.

The problem with electing Abushagur as president

1. Jibril lost the election even though his party had gained a huge popular mandate in the National Congress elections. An opinion poll carried out by the Libyan Centre for Research and Development showed that 81% of those who voted for the NFA in July 2012 (when it acquired 63% of the votes) did so because he was its leader. The contradictory results of the National Congress and premiership elections show what some people regard as a problem of representation in the National Congress. In other words, the congress that is supposed to be an expression of the will of the people has ruled out a candidate that garnered the

majority of votes. This situation will make Abushagur's task difficult and could easily cause the outbreak of a political crisis.

2. Many Nationalist Forces Alliance supporters believe that holding elections for the position of prime minister before investigating the appeals of seven of the National Congress's NFA-affiliated members (that were banned from participation because the Transparency and Integrity Authority had reservations about their qualification) as a major injustice to the NFA, especially because the difference between Jibril and Abushagur was only two votes. A massive controversy will erupt if judges rule in favour of at least two appellants.
3. Abushagur was a candidate of the National Front for the Salvation of Libya, which had won only three out of eighty seats in the National Congress while the Nationalist Forces Alliance won 39 and the Justice and Construction Party won 17. Despite the number of seats the NFSL holds, its members now head the National Congress and the government. The apparent discrepancy was neither pointed out in public opinion nor contested or debated among activists or on Facebook (which has become a prominent way of influencing public opinion and even decision-making). It is, however, a source of anxiety for a number of political forces and the intellectual elite and is regarded as a threat to the new political process in Libya.

Limited options for a difficult phase

Critics of the new prime minister argue that during his tenure as deputy to Prime Minister Abdurrahim El Keib, Abushagur did not show any signs of ability to lead the second transitional phase, and that he is partially responsible for the failure of El Keib's administration. Several observers believe that Abushagur's political performance, media appearances and agenda as candidate for premiership were not the reasons behind the confidence of members of the National Congress in him. Most agree that the members did not have much choice when choosing a suitable candidate that could take on difficult tasks. Jibril was opposed by numerous members because of his secularism while others saw his candidacy as an extension of the failed experiment of the transitional phase, especially his leadership of the executive board. He is also blamed for the failure to secure the capital after its liberation. Others criticise him for not rejecting the "Libya of Tomorrow" project that had been backed by Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. Furthermore, Jibril's political platform for the premiership elections was very similar to the reform programme he had presented in 2008 under Gaddafi's patronage.

With the exception of Al-Baraasi, the candidates running for prime minister were academics with no previous experience in managing large dynamic institutions. Nonetheless, Al-Baraasi was criticised for his lack of political experience and lack of familiarity with the complexities of the country's situation because he had left the country after graduation in 1989.

Opportunities amidst challenges

Many of those that voted for Abushagur are aware of the need for a balance between the country's different regions, considering that regions that encompass over half of the population have not been represented adequately in the National Congress. They and many others consider Abushagur's previous position as deputy prime minister as a continuation of an administration that was not given an opportunity to be efficient because of its short life. Also, they believe that electing him will save time that could be wasted if a prime minister from outside the current administration was elected, perhaps needing several months in an already short interim period to understand its complexities. Abushagur's allies argue that he has a clear vision of how to deal with the problems of the country and is qualified to make difficult decisions, but was not given the opportunity to implement his ideas during the El Keib period. In addition, Abushagur is almost entirely free to choose the members of his administration, as opposed to El Keib who was forced by the National Transitional Council to appoint several ministers,

which was the case for ministers who found themselves facing bureaucrats they had no authority over.

As a result, the new prime minister faces serious challenges. The security situation is more complex than it was during El Keib's premiership. The storming of the U.S. consulate and the killing of Ambassador Chris Stevens demonstrates a growing insurrection of armed groups and their lack of recognition of government authority. In addition, the previous administration's failure to confront these groups firmly has expanded the security vacuum and undermined the state's standing and the government's authority. This is what El Keib alluded to in the "clarification" session of the National Congress when he said, "There is an authority above the authority of the government."

Moreover, the negative environment and the disappointment of many Libyans are due to the increase of security violations and the delays in improving the economic situation, causing impatience among the masses and the demand for the implementation of fundamental security and economic changes within a maximum of 15 months, the time given to the second transitional phase according to the constitutional declaration.

The El Keib administration has been criticised for its failure to use a preventative security strategy, for not acting immediately to contain the sharp crises caused by armed confrontations in the west and the south, and for not relying on well-thought out plans for dealing with the roots of the crises.

Abushagur's options: The possible and the impossible

Abushagur has made no secret of his intention to form a national coalition government that includes various parts of the country's political spectrum. This move is necessary for the establishment of a consensus that facilitates the confrontation of the country's problems. Pleasing all political factions, however, will not be easy. The NFA will not participate in the new government unless it is given several important portfolios, which the NFSL, Abushagur's main supporter, will not accept. Allocating critical portfolios to the NFA will also displease the JCP, without whose support Abushagur would not have become prime minister. Also, elections for the presidency of the National Congress and the premiership have shown that the JCP is a tough competitor and a party that cannot be ignored. These parties could choose to form an opposition, which to them may be the less costly choice. If this happens, Abushagur and his government will be isolated.

The fact that the competition for the position of head of the highest executive political authority took place between political forces and not between traditionally-entrenched entities within the society does not negate the matter of satisfying the main regions of the country and regional participation. Balanced regional distribution of ministerial portfolios reduces the opportunity of choosing the most capable and deserving persons for these positions. Areas like Misrata and Zintan that have gained some advantage in the war and have come to possess huge arsenals of weaponry and large numbers of fighters, and are a source of concern if they are denied important ministries. In addition, the call for federalism also casts a shadow over the scenario. All of this will influence the selection of ministers that possess the experience and capacity needed to confront major challenges not only for the ministries of interior and defence but also for those of health, education and finance. There are also the challenges of repatriating money from abroad, transitional justice, national reconciliation, the question of injured and lost persons, and the issue of the 220,000 'revolutionaries' (according to statistics from the Fighters Commission) that await work or study abroad opportunities. Dealing with all of this requires a large budget that cannot be sustained by the resources of the country. Ignoring them, however, will lead to the revival of tension that will impede the process of democratic transition and make the new prime minister's task even more difficult.

The possibilities of a solution

Libya's problems are extremely complex and widespread and confronting them requires a national consensus between the political blocs and the overcoming of scepticism and

distrust among political groups. This can be achieved through new communication channels between the Nationalist Forces Alliance, the Justice and Construction Party, the National Front for the Salvation of Libya and all the other parties so as to reach a settlement that will decrease the current tension and lead to the formation of a strong government capable of confronting the present challenges.

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