

Report

Libya: The Politics of Revenge

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26 August 2014





Libya has been mired in turmoil since the ouster of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 [Reuters]

Abstract

Libya's troubled transition has taken another turn for the worse with serious and sustained violence blighting both Tripoli and Benghazi. Although the battle has been raging in the east since May 2014 when renegade General, Khalifa Haftar, launched an assault on Islamist militants in Benghazi, it is the conflict in the capital that has all but brought the country to its knees. This conflict that has pitted forces from Zintan against those from Misrata alongside their Islamist allies erupted in July 2014 after a number of Misratan and Islamist brigades moved to wrestle control of key strategic targets including Tripoli airport from the Zintanis. The fighting soon spread to other areas of the capital and beyond and as different forces and towns have been sucked into the battle the threat of full scale civil war looms larger than ever. Foreign Minister, Mohamed Abdulaziz, warned in August that the country was at serious risk of becoming a "failed state." (1)

Introduction

Although Tripolitarians had been bracing themselves for a battle between these two opposing forces for some time, many Libyans believe that this latest conflict is being driven by the Islamists. The Islamists suffered a major defeat in the elections to the new House of Representatives in June 2014, marking the end of their dominance of the political landscape. Thus, many Libyan commentators have asserted that the attacks by Islamist and Misratan forces against those from Zintan are a deliberate ploy by the

Islamist current to derail the handover to the new ruling body in a bid to cling onto power.

While there may be an element of truth in these allegations, they by no means represent the full story. The conflict that has unfolded in Libya is far more complex and is related to an array of factors that came together at the same time to ignite a battle that had long been in the making. This report will argue, therefore, that while the Islamists' loss of power in the June elections was a contributory factor to the current conflict, it is not sufficient to explain the depth of the crisis that the country is in. It will demonstrate that there are other dynamics at play, most notably the fact that despite being three years on from the toppling of the former regime, Libya is still in a revolutionary rather than a post-revolutionary phase and neither side has been able to transcend the politics of revenge.

Islamists lose out

Despite predictions of a poor showing in the polls, the extent of the Islamists' defeat at the June elections still came as a shock. Although it is still impossible to tell exactly how many seats they won as candidates were only permitted to stand as individuals and not as political parties, by most accounts the Islamists took no more than 23-25 seats in the 200 seat house. (2) This includes candidates who belong to the Muslim Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party (JCP) as well as other political Islamist groupings including the Al-Wafa for Martyrs' bloc, which is close to former jihadist elements. This result is a sobering indictment on the Islamists' performance in the political arena and reflects the belief among many Libyans that the Islamist parties are responsible for the chaos the country is in.

The liberals, meanwhile, who comprise the National Forces Alliance (NFA) among other groupings, secured a major victory taking somewhere in the region of 50 seats. (3) They did especially well in the west of the country and in Tripoli in particular although notably, the candidate with the highest number of votes was Mustafa Abu Shagur, who failed to become Prime Minister in 2012 when he couldn't get his government approved by the congress. Abu Shagur, who won a seat in Tripoli's Souq Al-Juma district, is broadly Islamist in orientation although is not close to the Muslim Brotherhood. Well-known Salafist, Ali Sibai, also won a seat in Tripoli's Hay Al-Andalous neighbourhood. Thus, although Tripoli's representatives in the new House are for the most part from the liberal current or are independents, there are still some key Islamist figures among them.

The liberals also failed to take any seats in Misrata where the winning candidates were mostly revolutionary leaders, including Suleiman Al-Fakieh, the head of the Misrata Shura council and Fathi Bashagha, a member of the Misrata military council.

The elections also saw a surprise result for the federalist current, that has taken around 25-28 seats. (4) This is the first time the federalists have had a formal role in the political arena, having boycotted the 2012 elections. Their success reflects both their ability to mobilise their supporters and the growing disillusion in the east with the ongoing dominance of Tripoli.

The remainder of the seats in the new body have gone to independents whose orientation will only become clear once blocs are formed and key issues debated. However, it is already apparent that many of these independents are tribal leaders and other local notables who have no ideological affiliation and who are unlikely to side with the Islamists. It is clear, therefore, that the liberals are very much in the driving seat.

Liberals forge ahead

These liberal elements have already pressed ahead and held sessions of the new House of Representatives despite objections from the Islamist camp who are insisting that there has been no formal transfer of power away from the congress. Both Islamists and Misratan representatives boycotted the first session in Tobruk on 4th August. The JCP issued a statement denouncing the session as illegal. Similar sentiments were expressed by the head of the congress, Nouri Abu Sahmaine and by Libya's Grand Mufti. (5) Although the Islamists based their objections on the fact that the session had taken place in Tobruk not Benghazi, this was clearly an attempt to undermine the new house before it had even begun.

Despite these objections, the liberals forged ahead, electing a new leader of the house, Aqeela Saleh Issa, who is very close to the NFA. They also issued a number of key decisions including awarding the new house a number of executive powers. It seems, therefore, that the liberals have pulled the rug from under the Islamists' feet and are acting as if the new house is a fait accompli, something given further succour by the fact that the House has been recognised by foreign governments and international organisations that attended the opening session. The Islamists, therefore, look as though they have been completely left behind in the political arena.

It is easy to see, therefore, why many Libyans believe the attacks by the Misratan and Islamist forces, which include the Libya Revolutionaries Operations Chamber as well as brigades from Zawia, Al-Gharyan, Janzour and other Islamist strongholds, are the

Islamists' way of trying to derail the handover of power. As outgoing congress member, Abdullah Gumaty, told Libya Al-Ahrar, "what is happening in Tripoli was pre-planned in order to stop the handover." (6) That is not to say that the Islamist parties and the Islamist brigades on the ground are one and the same thing. While they may support each other, the forces on the ground are independent of the parties and operate according to their own rules. However, the head of the JCP, Mohamed Sawan, did little to dispel such beliefs when he told Associated Press at the end of July that the attacks against the Zintanis were "legitimate." (6)

Survival

While the Islamists may well have been keen to disrupt the handover, the fight in Tripoli is about more than who has the upper hand in the political arena. It is also about their political survival. Given Libya's zero sum style politics, the Islamists fear that a liberal dominated House of Representatives will do its utmost to push them completely out of the picture, systematically purging them from senior positions in the state. There is already talk that the House is intent on replacing the Grand Mufti and other key Islamist-leaning officials in state institutions.

More importantly, the Islamists fear that the new House will move to dissolve those Islamist brigades on the ground that provided protection and support for the Congress. Although the House of Representatives does not have the power to physically eliminate these Islamist brigades, delegitimising them in this way would serve as a serious blow and would threaten their dominance on the ground.

Even more troubling for the Islamists is the prospect that the liberals will move to legitimise Haftar and his Operation Dignity campaign. Although only a handful of liberal elements openly support Haftar, not least because he is working outside of the confines of the state, there is a general sympathy for his efforts to unseat Islamist militants among many liberal MPs. There is a real anxiety, therefore, that the new House will soon morph into 'Haftar's House' and that with backing from Egypt and other regional players could pose a serious challenge to the Islamists' dominance on the ground. It is no coincidence that the attack on Tripoli airport was launched when there were rumours that Haftar was about to shift his battle to the capital. Nor is it by chance that the Misratan and Islamists forces have united under the name Operation Libya Dawn.

It was the combination of the liberals' dominance over the new ruling body and the threat of Haftar, therefore, that pushed the Islamist brigades to move to consolidate their control of the capital by attacking the Zintani brigades.

As for the Misratan brigades, they are also concerned about possible moves by the new ruling body to dismantle them, but their main reason for launching the attack was related to their desire to re-impose themselves on the capital. Misratan forces emerged out of the revolution as perhaps the most powerful in Tripoli. However, they were forced out in disgrace after the Ghargour massacre in November 2013 in which a Misratan militia opened fire on protestors. Since then they have been biding their time, waiting for the chance to return and to re-establish control over the political arena. Indeed, the Misratans are determined to stake their place as a key power in the new Libya.

As such this battle is not only one between Islamist and liberal forces, it has also become one of town against town. It is also now being portrayed, too, as a fight between revolutionaries and the forces of the past. The Misratans and the Islamists are couching their attacks against the Zintanis in a narrative that claims to be defending the gains of the revolution against Azlam Qadhafi (Qadhafi's men). In July, for example, the Misrata Military and Shura councils depicted the fight as "a war to reclaim the gains of 17th February revolution." (7)

This distortive narrative is a reflection of the fact that Libya has failed to move beyond the revolutionary stage. Despite talk of national reconciliation, the politics of revenge still hold sway and the main players are still fighting over the spoils. The country's political leaders have proven utterly incapable of coming together to build a state and Libya's fledgling political institutions have become little more than a vehicle for amassing power. Indeed, the new power brokers that have emerged out of the revolution have dragged the country so far down that recovery looks further away than ever.

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Endnotes

1- *Libya seeks UN help, warns of collapse. AFP. 17 July 2014.*

2- *Al-Tayar Al-Madani bi Libya Yetakadam Alla Islamiyeen fi Intihabat Al-Barlaman. (The 'Civil' Current in Libya Is Ahead of the Islamists in the Parliamentary Elections) Al-Hayat. 21 July 2014.*

3- *Libya Focus. July 2014. Menas Associates.*

4- *Al-Tayar Al-Madani bi Libya Yetakadam Alla Islamiyeen fi Intihabat Al-Barlaman. (The 'Civil' Current in Libya Is Ahead of the Islamists in the Parliamentary Elections) Al-Hayat. 21 July 2014*

5- *Libya P&S. Ibid*

6- *Quoted in Libya Focus. July 2014. Menas Associates.*

7- *Thousands flee to Tunisia to escape Libya fighting. AP 30 July 2014*