

Position Paper

Libya: The growth of conflict on narrow interests threatens the fragile state

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The Libyan scene, far from achieving political consensus, is dominated by political divisions between the Islamists, liberals, and armed forces that represent interregional and specific tribal agendas. Moreover, this situation exists in the context of regional tension and weak transitional governmental institutions. These institutions require political and revolutionary leaders that recognise that the goals of the revolution and ultimately state-building and peace, can only be achieved through consensus.

There has been recurrent news about the deteriorating security situation in Libya, and in the cities of Benghazi and Tripoli in particular. Hardly a day passes without reports of acts of violence or clashes between armed parties, in addition to disappearances and ransom-motivated kidnapping. This has prompted local and international human rights organisations to describe the abuses as violations of human rights. Libyan activists have further stated that the violations are worse than those that prevailed under Muammar Gaddafi, and responsibility for this cannot only be assigned to the so-called 'Gaddafi arrows.'

The current deteriorating situation appears in the context of regional tensions, especially in Egypt and Tunisia, and the escalation of the threat of al-Qa'ida and transnational organised crime. These threats prompted the Libyan authorities to work in coordination with both Tunisia and Algeria to confront these armed groups. These groups have benefited from the lack of stable security, and from weapons that were widely available following the Libyan revolution.

Characteristics of the present situation

The security situation in Libya is deteriorating, with the weakness of transitional governing institutions and the continued struggle between political apparatuses on partisan, tribal or interregional levels. The unlawful departures of the government's ministers and employees are out of its control. Ministers often resign and only then lay charges against their Prime Minister and condemn the positions of the political powers.

Numerous reports point to the rising indicators of corruption, theft of public money, and the waste of resources. They also refer to oil production, the only source of national income, which is being affected at the oil fields, and at the production and export facilities. The latest such incident was highlighted in the discontinuation of the production and export at the fields and ports of the Libyan oil triangle in the east. This was a result of gunmen within the so-called oil installations, who guard oil destined for exportation for their own benefit through piracy operations, with the assistance of external parties.

These developments meant that the government and the National Congress, led by the Islamists, were in trouble. This occurred in the context of public incitement against the transitional institutions in general, and under the purview of Islamist and interregional forces attacking the government and demanding the annulment of the congress, despite them not being party to the conflict. This took place whilst the actual powers that dominate militarily, challenge the government's effectiveness.

In the same vein, dominant powers seek to satisfy their own structures and are running a conflict on the ground rather than engage in the political conflict. This will not only affect their opponents and supporters of the government, but will affect everything.

Is there an appropriate interpretation?

The optimism after the success of the July 2012 election was followed by an opposing phenomenon that reflected the perception in the country. This was due to the deteriorating security situation, the political, tribal and territorial conflict, and the inability of the state's institutions to perform its functions. The revolution that started against Gaddafi spread to the peripheries, until it ended in violence following the liberation of Tripoli. Ultimately, it led to the emergence of zonal and tribal forces, as well as forces with political orientations. These forces were able to build legitimacy in the different bases that were stabilised – supported with weapons.

The powers that were united by the struggle against Gaddafi, after ousting him, have now turned to focus on their own goals, and they no longer care about the importance of

consensus for the success of the transitional phase. The government and the political class are also unable to address the conditions that threaten stability, and to address the refusal by the groups from the minority Amazigh Berbers, the Toubou, and the Tuareg to allow the Constituent Assembly to draft the constitution, which has seen their boycott of the political process.

These developments pose a real threat, especially as the leaders of the Toubou and Tuareg rebels showed their determination to declare Fezzan a federally independent territory on the 14 August, which strengthens claims of federalism in the east. The Cyrenaica Council issued a declaration on the implementation of the region's independence, declaring autonomy. The person who became head of the federal territory of Cyrenaica was the head of the apparatus that guarded the oil installations – the same person that the government in Tripoli accuses of stealing oil and relieving himself of his duties.

It will be the ongoing developments that will have consequences that threaten the authority of the government in Tripoli, and its sovereignty over oil resources. It already risks financial weakening due to a decline in oil exports, and the possibility of stopping it permanently. The budget is also experiencing a deficit that compelled the government to announce the possibility of delay in its payment of salaries, which raises questions about the fate of Libya's savings and funds. This occurs in relation to the constant deficit in the budgets. An expenditure of 68 billion dinars within the budget of the previous government of Abdurrahim el-Keib has been overlooked, and no investigations have been undertaken on the manner of its disbursement, despite statements by officials of corruption.

While the government of Prime Minister Ali Zeidan continues to request additional allocations, the detection of documents published by the Amazigh, who stormed the headquarters of the National Congress last week, clarified that most of the budget allocations were bonuses and salaries. They were also benefits for groups associated with political forces, or strong areas such as Misratah, justified on the basis of it being compensation for the injustices during the rule of Gaddafi.

Only 19 billion dinars were allocated to basic services and infrastructure. It is difficult for the government to improve these services and infrastructure with a budget that allocates about 3 000 dinars per head of the population. As such, resumption of reconstruction work and the launch of the economy is linked to political consensus. Further, the establishment of security for the return of foreign companies and labour, remains a challenge.

The Regional situation and its implications

The regional situation and the Egyptian crisis has driven the Islamists, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya, to work towards avoiding the recurrence of a similar scenario in Libya. As such, they decided to resort to the same forces that prevented the country from reaching the necessary consensus, fuelling the political, tribal and territorial conflict. These other forces are distinct from the Islamists in general and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, as they aim towards social reconciliation and transitional justice in contrast to the Islamist approach of imposing the law of political isolation. The Islamists also conformed with Misratah by refusing to allow the itinerant Tawergha to return to their homes. Hundreds of thousands of displaced Libyans in the interior and abroad returned home while there was a delay in activating the judicial system and the adoption of transitional justice. The building of the army and the police was also delayed with the excuse of the danger of 'Gaddafi's arrows' in order to hold on to permanent revolutionary legitimacy.

This approach threatens the fragile situation, and affects the popular support base of the Islamists as they suffer from an absence of broad grassroots support, which was made clear in the July 2013 elections.

In this context, in addition to the Misratah Brigades, the Islamists are trying to militarily control Tripoli and its environs using armed battalions, while leaving Benghazi and other areas, including the city of Derna, as a playground for radical currents. These battalions were mandated to maintain security in those areas, not to hold control on Tripoli. This merely reinforces the marginalisation of East Libya and ignores the dangerous situation in the south, which provides fuel to claims of federalism or separation in the provinces of Cyrenaica and Fezzan.

Securing the capital or preparation for the next conflict?

The President of the National Congress, Nouri Abusahmain issued a decision to assign the process of securing the capital, Tripoli, to the Libya Shield Forces. This was a 'temporary' task to protect the camps occupied by armed battalions. These forces were formed in 2012 both from the brigades and militia that participated in the struggle against Gaddafi, and from those who subsequently joined for various reasons. Thousands of fighters joined and were used to suppress certain tribes like the Warfala, or to address the tribal and regional tensions between the cities. These tensions related to the revolution's predicaments, and the division of tribes and cities due to either victory or vanquishment.

The military control of the capital in accordance with the resolution issued at the end of last July by Abusahmain, the President of the National Congress, commissioned the so-called Council of Libyan revolutionaries to protect state institutions without returning to congress. This added another negative factor against the Islamists, who prefer the victory of Abusahmain as Chair of the Congress. The leadership of these groups include Islamist militants and radicals, the most prominent being Salem Derby, who had threatened to wage war on the battalions of Xanthan in Tripoli; and Wissam bin Humaid who is accused of killing demonstrators in Benghazi two months ago. The resolution, as mandated by Abusahmain, calls for the Libyan Shield forces to secure Tripoli and surrounding areas.

In contrast, Libyans are looking forward to building the institutions of the police and national army, and to end the presence of armed entities. Despite having announced their legitimacy, these institutions will be subordinate to their leaders and their political visions only. This decision, entrenched by the decision of the National Congress to grant its President security and military powers this August, came contrary to the temporary constitutional declaration. The President of the Conference and its Islamists and zonal allies have turned to these battalions, which in the past months of May and June have challenged their legitimacy, occupied the ministries, and closed the government institutions until their demands are met.

In this context, the Libyan Tribes and Cities Forum that was convened in Zintan early last July issued a roadmap, and granted a two month grace. It stressed the rejection of Islam's political and armed current in government and security, as well as Misratah's pursuit to dominate Tripoli and acquire the facilities and resources that it wants. The Islamists regarded this forum and the parties that supported it as a prelude to a coup against the legitimate authority. The attendees expressed that they were the remnants of the former regime who were planning a coup similar to the one in Egypt. The collapsed security situation was ignored in the areas in and around Benghazi, and the control of Tripoli and its environs represented a proactive step to prevent the possibility of Zintan and its allies from taking control of the capital and state institutions. The Islamic movement and the leaders of Misratah do not acknowledge that by such a resolution, they are destroying the consensus between the parties and increasing the failure of the government.

There seems to be complete coordination between the Islamic forces and Misratah, as represented in its armed battalions specifically led by Sowaihili and his allies, in the face of Zintan and its allies. This threatens to leave the fate of the country to this alliance and to the risk of conflict. Furthermore, the leaders of the Islamic movement are ignoring that they risk placing the moderate Islamic trend at the mercy of politically radical, tribal and regional forces. They are of the same forces that violated the legitimacy and the

state institutions, that seized the National Congress and attacked its President and members, and that imposed political isolation through the force of arms.

The current situation risks serious consequences unless the structures of the political class become aware that the conflict, which has characterised the transitional phase, is the cause of the issues. Its core threat is the threat of the remnants of the consensus on the revolution's goals, and depriving the country of the opportunity to rebuild itself.

Consensus and reconciliation is a requirement for stability

The experience of the fragile country since the start of the revolution against Gaddafi stresses the importance of consensus between the forces, all of whom are paying the price of the legacy of Gaddafi who destroyed the capabilities of the state, marginalised its society, and fragmented its structures.

The Libyan scene, which is devoid of consensus, is heavily dominated by armed forces that represent interregional agendas, as in Cyrenaica and the south in Fezzan, and regional tribal forces as in Misratah and Zintan. Libya is also known to be politically divided between Islamists and liberals, and to be proliferated with armed gangs. The lack of consensus between the political forces threaten to slide the country towards a conflict that would destroy national unity, especially as the various forces accuse each other of foreign links and of being subject to foreign agendas. The latter would only deepen the divide between the regions and tribes of Libya that was caused by foreign intervention against Gaddafi.

It is clear that the government faces challenges and that its programmes are foiled. There are numerous interpretations as to the reasons for this, including the resignation of Awad al-Baraasi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, from his post as deputy prime minister, and statements by the resigned Minister of the Interior, Mohamed al-Sheikh against the Muslim Brotherhood. Observers regarded al-Sheik's resignation to be the result of the same campaign as that launched against Prime Minister Ali Zeidan by the Brotherhood, with the aim to remove him from office or to assign someone from affiliates to the premiership in order to ultimately govern the state organs. In the same way, the government's efforts to fight a decisive battle against independent militias were aborted.

It appears that the political class and the military leadership are not aware of the risks involved in the absence of consensus. While Libya may need the assistance of the international community, it also needs to achieve consensus and a peaceful resolution of disputes, which the armed revolution does not seem to help accomplish.

The political and revolutionary leaderships need to realise that the current methods used to achieve the goals of the revolution are carried out through different methods to those that were used to topple Gaddafi. The political parties must also bear the greatest responsibility for the criticisms levelled against it, which have now reached the stage that demands that they step down.

The basic elements of the government's power lie in its disbursement of funds from the public treasury, discontinuing the prevailing distribution pattern, and stopping payment to the militias and armed battalions, unless they are subject to their own sovereignty or authority of the army. The government has the potential to hold another type of power which it has yet to employ; the power of public opinion.

With the exception of frequent press conferences for its president, the government has thus far been unable to steer the significant force of public opinion in favour of stability and state-building. Undoubtedly, the most basic conditions for success lie in informing the public on what is taking place, and revealing the positions of the various forces. This would guarantee the buy-in of Libyans on the street, which during the years of Gaddafi's rule, was eliminated from public affairs. This is where the government needs to recognise its power, instead of providing excuses for what the president said on 14 August.

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