

Women and Youth Are Shaping Libya's Political Dialogue—but More Progress Is Needed for Inclusivity

by [Ranwa El-Kikhia \(/experts/ranwa-el-kikhia\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Ranwa El-Kikhia \(/experts/ranwa-el-kikhia\)](#)

Ranwa El-Kikhia is originally from Libya and grew up in Jordan. She recently graduated from Minerva Schools at KGI, where she wrote her thesis on women's political participation in post-conflict reconstruction in Africa. El-Kikhia is a research assistant at the Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Libya's political process will require input from all its people, including women, youth, and minorities, to ensure a government that governs the country fairly and legitimately.

The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) invited 75 individuals—17 of whom were women—to participate in the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF). The dialogue commenced virtually on Monday, October 26 and in-person in Tunisia on November 9, with the main objective of reaching a consensus on forming a new transitional unity government until national elections can be held. The LPDF concluded with tangible agreements on a roadmap to increase political legitimacy through national elections on December 24, 2021, the structure and responsibilities of a “Unified Executive Authority” divided between a three-member Presidency Council and a Government of National Unity, and the selection criteria for key executive positions. Despite voting on proposals for a selection mechanism for the executive authority, the LPDF has been unable to escape deadlock due to its **75 percent** (<https://www.libyaherald.com/2020/11/16/dialogue-forum-takes-break-reconvenes-next-week-on-zoom-to-choose-method-to-select-new-presidency-council-and-pm/>) consensus requirement for any decisions to pass.

Members of the LPDF were drawn from different constituencies and diverse geographic, ethnic, political, tribal, and social backgrounds, while the UNSMIL also stressed its **commitment to the meaningful participation** (<https://unsmil.unmissions.org/statement-acting-special-representative-secretary-general-libya-stephanie-williams-first-round>) of Libyan women, youth, and minorities. To advance inclusivity, UNSMIL facilitated additional discussions with women's and youth groups, where inclusivity concerns were aired. The female participants at the LPDF called for increased meaningful women's representation through a minimum of 30 percent women in leadership positions in the unified government and 20 percent youth.

By hearing and considering the recommendations that emerged from consultations with representatives of women and youth groups, the LPDF has at least demonstrated openness to expanding political inclusion of women and youth, and those constituencies have in turn tried to leverage their participation to call for meaningful change.

The LPDF released a roadmap titled “For the Preparatory Phase of a Comprehensive Solution,” which outlines the political and electoral process towards presidential and parliamentary elections. This document emphasizes gender equality and guarantees that women will hold at least 30 percent of leadership positions in the government.

Furthermore, the proposals regarding the selection mechanism of the executive state that out of the Prime Minister and two deputies, one will be of a different gender.

Promoting Inclusivity through Interactive Initiatives

The promotion of inclusivity through interactive online platforms is crucial for the Libyan political dialogue, especially so due to restrictions posed by COVID19. These initiatives allow for Libyans both from across the country and abroad to participate in the dialogue process when in-person meetings are restricted.

To this end, UNSMIL launched “al-Hiwar” (<https://alhiwar.ly/>) in the period leading up to the LPDF. Al-Hiwar is an interactive platform designed to allow for all Libyans—including women and youth—to participate in the LPDF process (<https://unsmil.unmissions.org/acting-special-representative-secretary-general-libya-stephanie-williams-announces-launch-libyan>) through focus groups, questionnaires, and the ability to propose suggestions and express their opinions. The website aims to facilitate transparency and inclusivity in the ongoing political process.

As part of its efforts towards inclusion and political representation, UNSMIL also launched the “Libyan Youth Track” this October, an initiative to incorporate critical recommendations from 40 male and female Libyan participants in the political dialogue. The published list of recommendation (https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/youth_track_final_recommendations_20102020_english.pdf) is comprehensive, with demands for political inclusion, building functioning constitutional, executive, judicial systems, and increased security. Furthermore, ASRSG Stephanie Williams hosted a Digital Dialogue with more than 1,000 young Libyans, between the ages of 18 and 30, 0 who shared their perceptions about the political, economic, and social situation in their country. The recommendations that emerged from the Libyan Youth Track and the Digital Dialogue were presented to the LPDF.

Local Initiatives for Youth Participation

In tandem to these UNSMIL efforts, local initiatives such as the Youth Political Consultation (<https://twitter.com/2020LYC>) are working towards echoing the voices of the younger generation in Libya. In response to the LPDF, the Youth Political Consultation conducted a survey (https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1EhClJs49bbJzOtpvdHbDpK_Z3mH7sLmx) and multiple focus groups to collect opinions, concerns, and suggestions from Libya’s youth. The survey reached 1,500 individuals, with the vast majority of respondents between 18 and 34 years old. The geographic distribution included 40 different cities across the country.

The results depict a general skepticism surrounding the feasibility of a political agreement, with one critical conclusion being the view that current political actors are not representative of the Libyan people. Thus, Libya’s youth tend to emphasize a rapid transition towards direct and democratic elections allowing for new political actors as being key any temporary political agreement.

Recent polling also suggests that Libyan youth are generally pessimistic with the state of their country. According to this year's Arab Youth Survey (https://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/pdf/downloadwhitepaper/AYS%202020-WP_ENG_0510_Single-Final.pdf), 63 percent of Libyan youth respondents believe that there is widespread corruption in Libya. Eighty-six percent believe that the country will witness anti-government protests in the next year, while almost 70 percent hope to or are actively trying to emigrate out of the country. Therefore, achieving youth political representation and inclusion is a necessary step towards addressing their frustrations.

Women's Political Participation

Further inclusion of women in the negotiations process is similarly key, especially given their significant role in the Libyan revolution and its aftermath. Women have participated in everything from documenting and organizing demonstrations to providing medical and logistical support to the armed groups fighting against Gaddafi's forces. In the first parliamentary elections after the revolution (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13629387.2014.881736>), more than 600 female candidates ran for seats in the General National Congress, and women won 16.5 percent of the total seats. At that point, Libyan women made up 45 percent of registered voters, thus marking their active participation in the country's political sphere.

Yet despite some achievements, Libyan women have often been excluded from peace talks and the negotiations table. Women's representation and demands were largely omitted from post-2011 political agreements, including the Libyan Political Agreement signed in Skhirat in 2015, the dialogue in Bouznika in September of 2020, and the Libyan (5+5) Joint Military Commission (JMC) talks in Geneva in October 2020.

Female representatives at the LPDF highlighted this issue and spoke out about the need to establish accountability mechanisms to foster gender equality in the professional sphere, reduce gender-based violence and discrimination, and build legal, socioeconomic, and psychological support mechanisms for women who have been affected by the conflict.

During the LPDF, female participants drafted a statement (<https://unsmil.unmissions.org/statement-libyan-women-participating-libyan-political-dialogue-forum>) with their demands in accordance with UNSC Resolution 1325 (<https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>), the 20-year-old resolution on Women, Peace, and Security, which calls on states to "ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms." The statement delivered at the LPDF demands meaningful political representation, with women occupying at least 30 percent of leadership positions, including the position of Deputy Prime Minister. Female representatives also advocated for youth to occupy at least 20 percent of the government's leadership positions.

Criticism of the LPDF List of Participants

In spite of the clear efforts to include these women and youth voices, there have been a number of significant critiques leveled at the LPDF process, including considerable criticism about the opacity of the UNSMIL's criteria and selections process in choosing LPDF participants. For instance, several regional, ethnic, and tribal groups were underrepresented. The Amazigh Supreme Council, representing the Libyan Amazigh ethnic community, and the Social Council of the Tuareg people, representing the Libyan Tuareg minority (<https://minorityrights.org/minorities/tuareg-3/>), have condemned (<https://www.218tv.net/%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%A1->

%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%8F%D8%B9%D8%B6%D9%84/) their exclusion from the LPDF as an act of marginalization and prejudice.

Furthermore, while UNSMIL promised inclusion, transparency, and a rights-based approach, some LPDF participants have not abided by these values in the past. One participant, Ali Ibrahim Dabaiba, is a former senior official under Muammar Gaddafi and the subject of a 2014 Interpol Red Notice

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alleged embezzlement, money laundering, and abuse of power. Individuals like Dabaiba who face major allegations of corruption have a stake in undermining Libya's transition to stability, and thus can be expected to try to obstruct the political process. Similarly, the LPDF's proposed eligibility criteria for positions in the next transitional government only rejects individuals who have been "convicted in a case of financial corruption or violation of human rights or International Humanitarian Law," not those who are under investigation or suspicion of those violations. Given the challenges of prosecuting cases in Libya over the past several years, this omission is particularly concerning.

Dabaiba's inclusion also highlights how UNSMIL is attempting to facilitate an inclusive political process by inviting and co-opting individuals from the previous regime. Yet these efforts will continue to pose risks and challenges, especially if these individuals see benefits to spoiling the political process rather than acceding to it.

On top of the question of eligibility for the LPDF and the transitional government, a number of Libyan civil society organizations drafted an open letter (<https://www.libyanjustice.org/news/open-letter-to-the-un-and-unsml-on-allegations-of-bribery-at-the-libyan-political-dialogue-forum>) to UN Secretary-General António Guterres and ASRSG Stephanie Williams stating allegations of bribery and voter buying ⁰ at the LPDF. The letter calls for an investigation into "reports of financial bribes offered for the purpose of obtaining political gain" at the dialogue. It additionally emphasized the need to publicly and transparently declare the results of the investigation, and to hold any individuals found guilty accountable in accordance with international and Libyan law.

During her opening remarks at the second round of the LPDF, ASRSG Williams announced that the UN Panel of Experts has opened an investigation into the allegation of bribery—though it's unclear how the panel has either the mandate or capacity to effectively investigate such accusations. If the allegations are substantiated, those found guilty may be subject to sanctions over the obstruction of the political process.

UNSMIL and the LPDF in turn would have greater credibility if it provided more details about its members, their selection criteria, and their commitment towards Libya's stability, especially since the LPDF itself is assigned critical roles in the transition roadmap if other institutions can't reach consensus. To build public trust in the political dialogue process, the Youth Political Consultation (<https://twitter.com/2020LYC>) suggests that dialogue sessions should be broadcasted live, in order to inform the public about the decisions and statements made by the participants.

Gender-based Violence against Libyan Women

While the question of LPDF participants is under discussion, there is also a broader concern for Libyan women who hope to participate in the future of their country: the reality of gender-based violence, especially towards prominent Libyan women. On November 11—as the national dialogue took place—the prominent lawyer and activist Hanan al-

Barassi was **assassinated** (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/11/libya-outspoken-benghazi-lawyer-murdered>) in broad daylight on one of Benghazi's busiest streets. A day before her assassination, al-Barassi had criticized "family rule" in Libya and alleged that relatives of Haftar were implicated in "corruption and abuse of power." She had also reported receiving numerous death threats in the days leading up to her assassination.

Al-Barassi's murder illustrates the violence that Libyan women face for expressing opposition views publicly, and is just one example of the many instances of violence against female activists in Libya. In another prominent case a little more than a year ago, militants—allegedly affiliated with the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF)—forcibly disappeared MP Siham Sergewa after she had spoken out against Haftar's April 2019 military offensive on Tripoli.

The prevalence of violence used to silence and intimidate female activists in Libya is a major obstacle to women's participation in Libya. These attacks are coupled with a near-complete absence of accountability and justice measures for perpetrators. This dangerous reality needs to be clearly addressed as part of the LPDF process and the upcoming transitional government. The LPDF should fulfil its pledge in the agreed roadmap that it will launch "a comprehensive national reconciliation process based on the principles of transitional justice"—ensuring that female participants of this progress are not targeted for their public role.

The LPDF concluded with a timeframe for national elections, the structure of the country's executive authority, eligibility criteria for this role, and a reaffirmed commitment toward women and youth political representation in the transitional political body. But to ensure that this better representation in fact materializes, UNSMIL should act upon the demands already outlined by women and youth in consultations going forward. These groups should also be invited to participate in future LPDF meetings, especially those that relate to the ongoing question of under what constitutional basis new elections will be held. As the LPDF now focuses on the nomination and voting for members of Presidency Council and Prime Minister, the candidates should also take seriously the demands of youth and women. Otherwise, the process will risk alienating key segments of the population ❖

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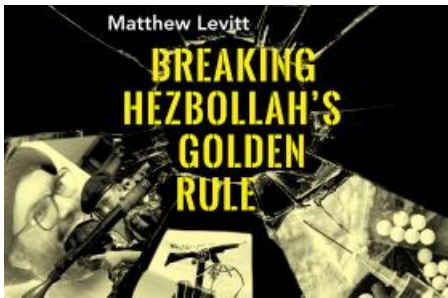
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