Can Municipal Polls Help Break Libya's Political Deadlock?

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Articles & Testimony

Although top-down change seems increasingly unlikely, elected Libyans may stand a better chance of challenging the national status quo by pushing from the local level.

Elections in post-Gaddafi Libya have always been fraught, beginning with the first national balloting in July 2012—nearly a year and a half after the initial uprisings that toppled the long-time leader. At the time, the idea of holding national elections so early in the country's transition was the subject of significant debate.

Ultimately, the National Transitional Council (NTC)—the interim body representing the transitional leadership—decided the best path forward was to elect a General National Congress (GNC) to organise future elections for a constituent committee. The transition from the NTC to the GNC marked the first and only instance in Libyan history where a governing body voluntarily relinquished power.

Despite a high turnout (more than 60% of eligible voters) and a technically organised voting process, the confusing electoral system and limited voter education during the GNC elections led to mixed outcomes. The victory of a so-called non-Islamist coalition took many by surprise, especially as Islamist parties and candidates won post-dictatorship elections in neighbouring countries.

However, Libyan Islamist-oriented militias soon surrounded the parliament and forced through a political "lustration" law forbidding Gaddafi-era officials from serving in new official capacities. That step illustrated the

difficulty of navigating post-revolutionary Libya. The limited effectiveness of the early government and the contested results of a 2014 parliamentary election laid the ground for the split between western and eastern governments that defines the country's political dynamics today.

Since then, Libya's leaders have been selected through UN-led processes where successive transitional leaders have become permanent fixtures. Aguila Saleh, for example, was elected to the House of Representatives in 2014 with fewer than 1,000 votes from his small constituency and subsequently became its speaker. Eleven years later, he officially remains the most senior political leader in the east, even though Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar holds the real authority in that region.

In the West, businessman Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh was elected as prime minister in 2020 after securing 39 votes in the 75-member Libyan Political Dialogue Forum. He has remained in power since then, despite the original one-year mandate for his Government of National Unity (GNU). And while neither Saleh, Dbeibeh, nor Haftar can claim any form of popular legitimacy, all three cling to power through a combination of corruption schemes, targeted applications of force, and selective use of foreign backers.

Ultimate Challenge

The ultimate challenge for Libya is to move from the status quo of entrenched elites—who have the power to influence any election process—to a form of legitimate, publicly-endorsed leadership. Local elections could be key to unlocking this dilemma.

After the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, transitional and elected authorities adopted a legal framework (the Local Administration Law 59/2012) establishing municipal and provincial councils. Some ad-hoc municipal voting took place from 2012 to 2014, but paused after armed attacks caused the nationally elected parliament to split into rival eastern and western authorities.

In 2018, the process resumed, only to be once again thwarted by eastern-led forces' attacks against Tripoli in 2019, and continuing only haltingly thereafter. International donors such as the United States (until its international development agency, USAID, was dismantled), the European Union, and United Nations agencies have supported electoral activities and capacity building for elected municipal councils.

Prior to the national-level split, authorities established two election management bodies: a High National Elections Commission (HNEC) to oversee national elections and a Central Committee for Municipal Council Elections (CCMCE) to oversee local elections. In 2022, a law passed by the parliament based in the east transferred responsibility for municipal elections from the CCMCE to the HNEC.

With this change, the municipal elections resumed in full, with the first "cluster" of elections eventually taking place in November 2024 (for security and logistical reasons, election managers had decided that local elections should occur in phases).

That month, voting took place in 58 municipalities around the country, bringing 426 local representatives into office, including Libya's first female mayor. According to the HNEC's official statement, 77% of registered voters participated in the election. Despite a few reports of violations (notably in the municipality of al Shawarif), the process overall was smooth, with UNSMIL commending a "peaceful and transparent electoral process."

Last month, after months of delay, elections took place in the second cluster of 63 municipalities. However, only 34 ended up voting—all of whom were located in Libya's west. In July, HNEC suspended voting in 11 municipalities in the east and south (including two in the west) due to "disruptions" over the distribution of voter cards in those areas.

Soon thereafter, the HNEC suspended voting in another 16 municipalities, claiming that "security agencies under the authority of the (eastern-based) Libyan government" had been instructed not to allow voting to go forward. In a

further seven municipalities, mostly around Zawiya, voting was delayed by a week for security reasons but was ultimately completed.

Municipal elections are not officially part of the latest UN-sponsored plan for a peaceful transition of power via national presidential and parliamentary elections processes. After extensive consultations among the population, the latest proposal, put forth by UN Special Representative to the Secretary General Hannah Tetteh—the eighth SRSG in 14 years—includes: a revamped HNEC; an agreement on an amended electoral law; and a vague "structured dialogue… to create a conducive environment for elections."

The overriding challenge, however, remains establishing a new national transitional government. In the past, status quo powers have always managed to kill any initiative for change. Numerous rounds of political negotiations between Saleh's House of Representatives and Western-based political representatives have failed.

The Haftar clan—which is increasingly consolidating power—habitually blocks any political progress. Meanwhile, corruption is the main source of Dbeibeh's power. When he attempted to reshape the militia landscape in May in order to consolidate his own power, the effort ended in a stalemate. Through Turkish mediation following a second round of clashes last month, Dbeibeh strengthened the security elements backing his position and will undoubtedly find a way to compensate (financially and otherwise) his allies on the ground.

Regional actors also prefer the status quo. Egypt has supported Haftar since his initial rise in 2014 because he presented himself as an anti-Islamist champion. Russia has similarly played a significant role in backing Haftar as Moscow uses eastern airfields to supply their so-called Africa Corps in the Sahel and elsewhere.

Turkiye, whose intervention against Haftar's 2019 attack on Tripoli led to a ceasefire, remains a solid backer of the GNU, although it has recently established better relations with authorities in the east. Despite Turkiye's gradual shift away from uniquely supporting Tripoli—largely to pursue business and energy deals—it is difficult to imagine Cairo or Ankara lending support to genuine political change.

Encouraging Sign

Given these constraints, the fact that the second cluster of municipal elections went forward at all is encouraging. In several municipalities where elections have occurred, municipal councils have begun to implement projects, including those funded by the Tripoli government. In other words, significant proportions of Libyans from these areas have participated in selecting their local representatives, who have in turn started delivering services. Theoretically, this represents the start of legitimate, representative governance.

Yet, the municipal elections process is also exhibiting worrying trends. This is exemplified by the increase in violence and suspensions in the second cluster as compared to the first. Another potentially disappointing sign is that between the first and second clusters, the HNEC made a subtle change to its metric for voter participation.

This followed a change in the voter registration process. Whereas in the first cluster, the Commission reported the proportion of eligible voters who participated, in the second cluster, the reporting represented only the proportion of registered voters who had participated. This suggests that turnout was much lower the second time around.

Finally, there could be some concern that active participation at the local level does not necessarily bode well for national unity. Even before the national GNC elections of July 2012, localities were holding ad hoc elections without necessarily adhering to an established legal electoral framework. While this eagerness for local governance is promising, it should complement, rather than replace, the agreement to hold national-level elections.

What Next?

Libya's successful municipal elections in 2024 and 2025 offer some hope in an otherwise bleak context. Yet with this hope must also come caution. The HNEC has announced plans to organise mayoral elections in selected

municipalities, but has not yet announced dates. A third cluster of municipal elections is also scheduled to take place in October or November, although the HNEC is still preparing for these.

As UNSMIL pursues its roadmap toward a new transitional government, candidates have an opportunity to out-compete entrenched elites by trying to gain legitimacy with local communities. Aspirants for the prime minister in a new transitional government should focus on becoming mayors or local representatives first.

As Tetteh works to minimise spoilers and resolve key issues such as the criteria for candidate eligibility, security, and elections monitoring, continuing municipal and mayoral elections could at least demonstrate some progress toward political legitimacy. And where status quo elements prohibit local balloting, they should be called out and shunned diplomatically.

Eventually, with enough elected Libyans at the local level pushing for national-level change, they will stand a better chance of challenging the status quo, as it seems unlikely to come from the top.

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