Libya's Uncertain Post-Electoral Direction

by Barak Barfi **(/experts/barak-barfi)**

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Brief Analysis

The impressive electoral performance of nominally liberal parties in Libya is being widely portrayed as a setback to Islamist political momentum in North Africa, but the reality is more complicated.

Following Libya's first free parliamentary elections since 1965, 60 percent of the members who won seats allocated to individuals rather than parties have yet to declare their party affiliation in the legislature. In a country historically riven by geographical divisions, Libyans voted for regional parties and candidates they knew rather than backing unfamiliar national factions with hastily conceived platforms. In response, Washington has characterized the elections as an "important step" in Libya's "democratic transition," but such optimism may be premature.

BACKGROUND

Libya's new General National Congress consists of 200 seats, 80 elected by party-list balloting and 120 allocated to individual candidates. During the July 7 contest -- in which 62 percent of registered voters participated -- 374 parties vied for the 80 dedicated seats, while 2,639 candidates competed for the individual slots. The National Forces Alliance (NFA), a coalition of about 60 parties, emerged with 39 seats, while the Muslim Brotherhood's Justice and Building Party finished a distant second with 17. The National Front, a group led by Libya's leading exiled opposition party, took 3 seats, and the Union for Homeland Party (UH) -- a regional faction based in Libya's third-largest city, Misratah -- captured 2.

NATIONAL FORCES ALLIANCE

The NFA is led by Mahmoud Jibril, a former University of Pittsburgh professor who ran the National Economic Development Board (NEDB), a think tank sponsored by Muammar Qadhafi's son Saif al-Islam. An early defector, he was subsequently named the opposition's prime minister, responsible for mobilizing foreign support. Despite garnering praise abroad, however, he won fewer accolades at home. Not only was he reluctant to visit the rebel

capital of Benghazi due to fears of loyalist reprisals, he also proved unable to work in team settings and was criticized for being indecisive. As one former NEDB colleague quipped, "He was a good chairman but not a good CEO."

Initially, Jibril's shortcomings were easy prey for his adversaries. Following the fall of Tripoli, he tussled with rebels from Misratah, compelling him to resign. Tensions between Jibril and Misratah go beyond politics and are tinged with a tribal hue. In 1920, Jibril's Warfallah tribe, allied with the Italian forces occupying Libya, killed a Misratan sheikh who had been leading the resistance. The Warfallah and other Misratan tribes have been bitter rivals ever since. Following an abortive 1975 coup led by Misratan officers, Qadhafi purged the city's military leaders and replaced them with Warfallans who went on to become pillars of his regime.

Despite Jibril's shortcomings, he helped the NFA prevail. His name recognition (cultivated through his ubiquitous presence on Arabic satellite television), skillful campaigning (he cut deals to put local leaders on his party lists), and deft political messaging were crucial to the coalition’s success.

WHITHER THE ISLAMISTS?

The Muslim Brotherhood received approximately a quarter as many votes as the NFA, and many Western commentators attributed its poor performance to Qadhafi's repression of Islamists. But the Brotherhood has always had a presence in Libya. The pre-Qadhafi monarchy welcomed Brotherhood leaders chased from Egypt, and many of Libya's teachers after independence were Egyptians. More recently, between 750,000 and 1,000,000 Egyptian expatriate laborers resided in Libya before last year's revolution, and these guest workers propagated Brotherhood thought. Many middle-class Libyans were also exposed to the organization's ideas while studying at Egyptian universities. At a time when the mosque was the only alternative to Qadhafi's *Green Book* theories, the Brotherhood was a potent opposition force. But today, when Libyans have hundreds of parties to choose from, its platform is less appealing.

In addition, the Brotherhood does not have the socioeconomic raison d'etre in Libya that has made Islamists so appealing in Egypt and Tunisia. In an oil-rich country where the government provides cradle-to-grave services, Libyans have little need for the type of social-welfare networks the Brotherhood provides to impoverished Egyptians. Ample oil revenues underwrite government employment of approximately 60 percent of the workforce. Likewise, cars are so heavily subsidized that they cost less in Tripoli than in dealerships within view of the Detroit assembly lines where they are manufactured.

The Brotherhood's social message is equally out of step with Libyan aspirations. In Egypt, Islamist candidates spoke of instituting *halal* tourism, emphasizing Islamic mores. But in Libya, there are no beaches where bikini-clad Western tourists consume alcohol. Indeed, Libya is the most conservative Arab country outside the Persian Gulf.

Given these challenges, the Libyan Brotherhood opted to embrace a more moderate message than its brethren in Egypt, favoring the establishment of a civil state with wide-ranging rights for women. "We believe in political and social pluralism where everyone is equal," party leader Muhammad Sowan told the author in March. To prove his point, he noted that the group had rejected forming a coalition with rehabilitated jihadists who had experience in Afghanistan and demanded a more vigorous application of Islamic law.

REGIONAL PARTIES

The big winners in the elections appear to be regional parties, which won about twenty of the dedicated party seats and stand to gain more after the individual seat holders announce their affiliations. The success of provincial factions with little national reach was to be expected given the constraints facing larger parties. Before Tripoli fell in August 2011, fewer than five parties had been established. After the October liberation declaration, political hopefuls scrambled to organize parties and draft platforms to meet the truncated campaign calendar.

These challenges have proven to be a serious obstacle in a country with little experience in electoral politics. Parties were outlawed in 1952, parliament was dissolved in 1965, and after 1972, political activity contrary to Qadhafi's revolutionary principles was deemed a treasonous offense punished by death. Since his passing, parties have had neither the time nor the political experience necessary to organize informative campaigns, and the lack of rallies was indicative of this problem. In a country where kinship and local loyalties have traditionally trumped fealty toward the state, people were more comfortable voting for familiar local candidates and parties. The UH's results reflected this trend: approximately 47 percent of the party's votes were cast in its hometown of Misratah.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Although the NFA won a plurality of seats, declarations of victory are premature. With 60 percent of the new seats determined by individual voting, Jibril faces the difficult task of cobbling together a broad coalition capable of controlling parliament. In addition to wooing many nonaffiliated legislators, he will have to keep the disparate groups that compose the NFA in check. He also faces a challenge from Misratah, whose militias remain the country's strongest. The NFA did poorly among that city's voters, winning only 8.7 percent. Moreover, UH's leader has already declared that he will not work with Jibril, and Misratah's military leaders are likely to reject NFA decrees. For a nation whose most pressing challenge is disbanding the militias and integrating them into state security services, UH's threats are an ominous sign.

Although the parliament will choose the prime minister, who will then select a cabinet, it has been stripped of its most important task: choosing a committee to write the new constitution. The National Transitional Council (NTC) decided that the sixty-man committee would instead be chosen by direct election. As a result, the current legislature is likely to be a mere caretaker government until elections for a longer-term parliament are held next year. If so, it will likely lack the time necessary to solve the militia quandary, leaving Libyans just as frustrated as they were with an appointed transitional government that has refused to make tough decisions on that issue. Indeed, the NTC has been indecisive in tackling the country's myriad problems, and the secrecy surrounding its meetings and decisions has frustrated Libyans demanding more transparency after four decades of one-man rule.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With Britain and France at the forefront of Libyan security reform, the United States should focus on the less glamorous but equally important task of establishing efficient rule of law. The country's judiciary has proved unable to begin trials for the thousands of loyalists held in rebel jails, and thorough reform is needed for a politicized justice system that the Qadhafi regime used to keep opponents in line.

One key dilemma is Saif al-Islam's impending trial. If the new government cannot respect his rights and offer him a speedy hearing, it will lose some legitimacy in the eyes of Libyans still unsure about the revolution's merits. To shore up these shortcomings, Washington should offer training programs that bring Libyan judges to the United States while sending legal experts to Tripoli. By working to strengthen the country's justice system, Washington can help build a new Libya that is responsive to its citizens' needs.

Barak Barfi, a research fellow at the New America Foundation, spent six months in Libya during the revolution. His publications include the 2012 Washington Institute report **In War's Wake: The Struggle for Post-Qadhafi Libya (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-wars-wake-the-struggle-for-post-qadhafi-libya)** . ❖

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