

Libya's Elections Need More U.S. Support

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Brief Analysis

Despite trepidation over Libya's upcoming elections, they offer the best way to solve the country's legitimacy crisis, and Washington should tailor its assistance accordingly.

Conventional wisdom maintains that holding parliamentary elections in Libya without disarming the rebels will further destabilize the country. Yet the current instability results from a crisis in political legitimacy that only elections can ameliorate. Any election in a transition from dictatorship to democracy is risky, but perpetuating the status quo does not ensure increased rebel integration. Instead, it could mean more deadly clashes like those seen recently in Kufra, Sebha, and around Zuwarah -- and more political momentum for those demanding the country's dismemberment.

STATE OF STASIS

Libya's interim authorities, comprising Mustafa Abdul Jalil's National Transitional Council (NTC) and Prime Minister Abdul Rahim al-Keib's interim cabinet, have proved unable to govern effectively. Believing it lacks legitimacy, the unelected leadership has made slow progress in affirming existing business contracts, signing new oil and gas agreements, and granting visas and entry permits for skilled laborers and heavy machinery. Meanwhile, trash is piling up in Tripoli, and other basic services have deteriorated. On April 20, an interim government source told the pan-Arab daily al-Sharq al-Awsat that "the NTC is looking for a scapegoat...for successive failures in achieving stability and security," and that it is pinning the blame on Keib's leadership. Two days later, however, Abdul Jalil denied rumors that there would be a government shakeup before elections.

The authorities have also made only halting progress in absorbing rebels into state institutions. The Defense and Interior Ministries have integrated roughly 13,000 out of an estimated 125,000 rebels in need of demobilization. The national army has a little over 8,000 soldiers, resources are scarce, and morale is low. Armed forces chief of staff Yousef al-Mangoush said his units can only respond to crises, as opposed to preventing them in the first place, while interim government spokesman Nasr al-Manaa admitted that recent clashes have stretched these forces thin.

As a result, the rebels at best loosely collaborate with -- or, at worst, operate entirely independent of -- state

institutions. Although the transitional leadership has made gains in exerting control over significant infrastructure, this has increased the need to garrison government forces to secure these sites, reducing usable force size. At the same time, it has freed up rebels from local protection duties, effectively increasing rebel force size. Opposing militia groups are still unable to deal each other a decisive blow, however, and maintain an uneasy balance despite sporadic low-level clashes.

LEGITIMACY CHALLENGES

By mismanaging the transition, the interim government has provided ample ammunition to both political challengers and rebels who do not wish to disarm. The most publicized political contender is the rival Cyrenaica Council in Benghazi, which promotes a federal system that would give the historical states of Tripolitania, Fezzan, and Cyrenaica executive authority over their internal affairs. Full-fledged federalism is controversial and unlikely to succeed; compromise is more conceivable because the interim government has promised to decentralize authority, which differs from federalism only in degree. Yet continued clashes could make political alternatives more palatable.

For example, after clashing with Arab tribesmen in Kufra in February, Tabu tribesmen at first affirmed their commitment to Libya's territorial integrity and the revolution. But after further clashes rocked Sebha, Tabu tribal leader Issa Abdul Majid Mansour -- who has a warrant for his arrest as of today for his alleged role in renewed strife in Kufra -- threatened to reactivate the Tabu Front for the Salvation of Libya and, if necessary "work toward the creation of a state, as in South Sudan." On March 13, Qatrun local council leader Yusuf Hasan Muhammad told the Libyan daily Brnieq that federalism would best empower the Tabu, who might boycott the elections and the writing of a new constitution.

Other rebels are purportedly waiting for the interim government's mandate to expire rather than actively challenging the state. On March 2, UN Special Representative for Libya Ian Martin stated, "Although brigades seek guarantees that the transformation for which they have fought is securely on track, there is little indication that they wish to perpetuate an existence outside state authority." Even so, rebels continue to solidify their own areas of control. In a March 19 interview with the Libyan daily al-Qurina al-Jadida, Cyrenaica Council chairman Ahmed al-Senussi stated, "Misratah can forbid the entry of anyone into Misratah...and al-Zintan controls...things that give it state-like status."

POSTPONEMENT NOT THE ANSWER

Some analysts have called for postponing the vote, viewing security and rebel disarmament as prerequisites to viable elections. But this is impractical: any significant delay will only prolong Libya's state of stasis, further exposing the interim government's weaknesses and benefiting political challengers. Instability will also continue to frighten away foreign direct investment, which is critical to creating a modern economy and capitalizing on restored oil production. Moreover, full rebel integration requires a level of legitimacy that only elections can confer.

Interim officials are acutely aware of this problem and have made clear that parliamentary elections will take place on June 19 as scheduled. On April 3, Deputy Prime Minister Mustafa Abu Shagour told the website Libya al-Mostakbal that "fifty political parties have been founded...and approximately three million voters will cast ballots." In his view, holding elections on time "is tough, but possible," and he is "very anxious to hand over office to an elected official." Similarly, Mustafa Abdul Jalil stated that the NTC "will not continue, because everyone wants an elected council," hinting that he could resign in the event of a delay. And Prime Minister Keib has said that a postponement "is not possible." In short, the main transitional leaders clearly want out and are working to make that a reality before Ramadan begins in July, which Libyan officials say could create at least a three-month delay.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Although expectations for flawless elections are unrealistic, the United States should nevertheless offer assistance aimed at making the June 19 voting as transparent, effective, and inclusive as possible. Such an offer would have more impact if it were made in coordination with both the UN and those NATO states involved in the intervention. This would signal that military action was not the end of their commitment to a democratic Libya. Other states that did not intervene but that are friendly to the revolution should be included as well. For example, neighboring Tunisia conducted the first successful democratic election following the Arab uprisings, yet the two countries have yet to discuss lessons learned from that experience. U.S. leadership could help facilitate this exchange.

Washington should be forthright and persistent in offering legal, technical, and logistical support. Examples include partnering with civic actors, providing election monitoring trainers, setting up electoral dispute mechanisms, and offering much-needed equipment for election security (e.g., wireless radios). NGOs such as the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, the National Democratic Institute, and the International Republican Institute are well placed to provide expert, nonpartisan assistance. The State Department recently dedicated a relatively small amount of money for election assistance, but the approved programs are neither commensurate with the administration's objective of a successful democratic transition nor sufficiently funded. For example, election management and administration support, arguably the most important program, received only \$2 million. This is the same amount earmarked for youth-focused voter education -- an important program, but one that would be rather ineffective if the election itself is mismanaged.

Andrew Engel, a former research assistant at The Washington Institute, is a master's candidate at Georgetown University. He traveled across Libya immediately after its official liberation. ❖

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