

Libya's Floundering Transition

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Feb 21, 2012

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Brief Analysis

Washington should help improve conditions on the ground in Libya before the upcoming parliamentary elections, supporting civil society organizations that include rebels and prodding the interim government toward greater transparency.

February 17 marked the one-year anniversary of the Libyan revolution, yet the country's transition toward democracy has floundered due to mismanagement by the interim government. Plans to hold parliamentary elections by June 23 are under way regardless of the domestic situation -- or how many rebels remain armed. In response, Washington should do what it can to encourage a more amicable electoral environment, one that includes rebels as stakeholders.

Governing by Crisis

Since Muammar Qadhafi's fall, both Mustafa Abdul Jalil's National Transitional Council (NTC) and Prime Minister Abdul Rahim al-Keib's interim cabinet have been unable to exert authority evenly throughout Libya. As a result, the security situation has deteriorated, and public confidence in the transition has plummeted.

Today, the interim government makes its presence felt only at times of crisis, intervening to stem intra-rebel fighting, human-rights abuses, protests against the national leadership, and rebel attempts to impose control over pro-Qadhafi towns. Top officials have been dispatched to mediate such crises, from Abdul Jalil and al-Keib to Defense Minister Osama Juwaili and Sheikh Sadiq al-Ghiryani, the country's leading religious figure. And embarrassing reports of widespread torture in rebel-administered detention facilities (which hold an estimated 8,500 people) prompted the government to transfer seven of fifty-three such prisons to the Ministry of Justice and set target dates for handing over the others. This reactionary approach to governing is inefficient and distracts from the larger task of preparing the country for elections.

Consequences of Paralysis

eter Bouckaert, the emergencies director at Human Rights Watch, described the NTC as operating in "a state of

P relative paralysis." This has resulted in problems on several fronts:

- *Slow rebel integration.* The interim government has plans to integrate 75,000 fighters out of an estimated 120,000 in need of demobilization, but only around 15,000 have signed up so far. Many rebels appear intent on waiting to see the results of the political process before disarming. Yet integration becomes more difficult the longer militias operate independently and develop their own local political and economic cultures. Furthermore, militias may resort to illicit activities to pay their fighters. Rebels from at least two brigades in Sirte were recently arrested for kidnapping and car theft, and in an interview with the pan-Arab daily al-Quds al-Arabi, former Libyan security official Nasr al-Muqatel accused rebels from Zintan of "selling weapons as well as intelligence."
- *Popular protests.* The failure to manage post-transition expectations, along with opaque national-level decisionmaking, has fueled protests against the interim government as part of a "course correction movement." Demonstrators are angry over unpaid salaries, a lack of economic opportunities, poor working conditions, rebel lawlessness, calls both for and against a religious state, and the presence of Qadhafi regime officials in government. Their rallies have occasionally turned violent, with potentially destabilizing effects: on January 19, for example, angry demonstrators accosted NTC vice chairman and spokesman Abdul Hafiz Ghoga and his bodyguard, while on January 21, a mob stormed the NTC's headquarters in Benghazi, blowing up the front gates with grenades and trapping Abdul Jalil for hours.
- *Poor finances.* Despite the unexpectedly fast resumption of oil production and the unfreezing of over \$100 billion in liquid assets, the interim government posted a \$10 billion deficit for the 2012 budget, and the central bank has been wracked with illiquidity. One explanation for this paradox is that the transitional authorities requested not to receive all of the funds at once due to uncertainty regarding oversight, management, and corruption. This point is all the more relevant in light of recent estimates that only 10-15 percent of those treated overseas as part of an \$800 million program for the war wounded were actually eligible (i.e., many local authorities exploited the program on behalf of friends and family, obtaining frivolous treatments, free travel, and other inappropriate benefits). The unfrozen \$100 billion announced on February 16 should help -- if it is properly managed.

Glimmers of Hope

Despite being in dire straits, the transitional authorities still hold strong national legitimacy for two reasons: their ability to successfully mediate conflicts and their role in overseeing the country's purse strings.

The interim government is the only player that has been able to intervene and mediate clashes, illustrating both the need for a central authority and some acceptance of this authority. The national army has successfully interposed itself between clashing parties and is making strides in reactivation following the nomination of Yousef al-Mangoush as armed forces chief of staff. Many rebel groups and most local and military councils have welcomed his appointment, although national army officers are still viewed with distrust.

Libyans also recognize that only a national government can legitimately access the billions in assets frozen during the war. Once sequestered by Qadhafi and narrowly spent to build loyalty among select constituents, these assets can now be spent more broadly to rebuild Libya and compensate for decades of underinvestment.

In addition, Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC) recently reported that production has reached 1.3 million barrels per day (bpd) and climbing; prewar production was 1.6 million bpd, a figure the NOC said will be reached by this summer. Because its oil infrastructure remains secure, the country could undergo an oil wealth transformation similar to that of the United Arab Emirates. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, Libya has an estimated 46.4 billion barrels -- the largest proven oil reserves in Africa and the ninth largest in the world. And even

this figure is considered conservative because the country's hydrocarbon resources are still vastly underexplored.

Moreover, Libya is teeming with new political parties, civil society organizations, and media outlets, all preparing for this summer's elections. In short, the people appear intent on facilitating the transition despite the transitional government's problems.

U.S Policy Options

The upcoming elections will be held in a politically charged and heavily armed environment. Accordingly, Washington should take a two-pronged approach to decrease the chances of conflict.

First, a bottom-up approach -- pairing rebels, local councils, and military councils on the one hand with growing civil society organizations on the other -- could help ensure that those who have the most potential to determine the transition's outcome do so favorably. Libya's newly established elections monitoring organizations and neophyte media, which have no experience after four decades of Qadhafi rule, are particularly in need of professional guidance.

Second, a top-down approach focusing on the interim government could help improve transparency in decisionmaking, finances, and accountability. The government's skill in mediating clashes could impart more legitimacy if applied on a broader scale, such as national reconciliation, but the central authorities lack the institutional capacity and knowledge to oversee such a large endeavor. This will doubtlessly remain the case whichever leaders come to power next.

Part of President Obama's just-announced \$800 million in economic aid for Arab Spring countries should be directed toward such bottom-up and top-down projects. The work done so far by the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Transition Initiatives is a great beginning but should be expanded -- at the moment, its efforts in Libya are limited by a \$5 million budget. The Obama administration should also remind the interim government that U.S. organizations have been waiting on their Libyan visas while the country suffers from a dearth of skilled development professionals. Washington's current approach is to wait to be asked for assistance. Other countries seeking influence in Libya have not been as coy, however, and the clock is ticking as elections approach.

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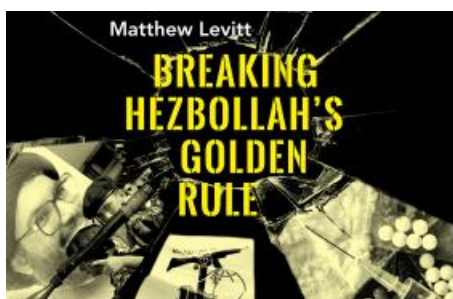
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