

Qadhafi's New Political Order

by [Ray Takeyh \(/experts/ray-takeyh\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Ray Takeyh \(/experts/ray-takeyh\)](#)

Ray Takeyh is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.



Brief Analysis

On March 1, Libyan leader Col. Muammar Qadhafi announced the most sweeping changes in Libya's political structure since the launching of the Jamahiriyya (state of masses) in 1977. In a surprising move, the colonel dismissed his prime minister and foreign minister while abolishing twelve other ministries altogether. Qadhafi insisted that the remaining five ministries--justice, finance, information, African unity, and public affairs--will also soon be eliminated. The functions of all the central ministries are now to be performed by provincial and municipal organizations.

The perennially unpredictable Qadhafi celebrated this latest move by proclaiming to a rally, "you have no government to complain against. Now everything is in your hands and in the future you can complain to yourselves." Libya's media has portrayed the colonel's reorganization plan as just one more attempt by the "Guide of the Revolution" to disperse power to the people and strengthen the pillars of Libya's direct democracy. Far from a democratic gesture, however, a complex set of political and economic issues actually motivated Qadhafi's gambit. The colonel's latest institutional rearrangements reflect his frustration with Libya's recent economic course and his preparation for an unexpected succession crisis.

Libya's Political Structure. The Libyan polity is truly unique as the country lacks a constitution or a formal head of state. During the past three decades, Qadhafi has consistently attempted to reformulate Libya's political society in order to create an ideal revolutionary state. As part of his vision, the colonel has constructed an elaborate legislative system based on local popular committees that in turn elect a General People's Committee that meets annually to discuss national affairs. Alongside the legislative branch are the revolutionary committees designed to mobilize the masses, and the central ministries that manage the day-to-day operation of the state.

In practice, the system that Qadhafi has created is neither democratic nor efficient. The constant conflict between the ministries and the committees--the overlapping responsibilities and constant purges--has created bureaucratic confusion and inertia. Given the lack of administrative guidelines, all key decisions are relayed to Qadhafi and must await his verdict. Despite his claims that Libya enjoys direct democracy, the colonel has succeeded in making himself indispensable to the machinery that he has created. As the revolutionary guide, Qadhafi adheres to no limits and countenances no institutional restraints. In no other regional state is political power so closely intertwined with individual leadership.

Political Factors behind Qadhafi's Decision. As with most developing countries, Libya has witnessed its share of struggles between a technocratic elite and the revolutionary cadre. The technocrats that occupied the ministries

have long been pressing Qadhafi toward a more rational management of Libya's resources and the establishment of a coherent administrative framework. In the past several months, Libya's integration into the international community has boosted the fortunes of the technocrats as they handled most of the tortuous diplomatic negotiations ending Libya's isolation. As an ideologue, Qadhafi has always been suspicious of the bureaucracy and has feared that its initiatives could dilute his revolutionary authority. The enhanced influence of the technocrats must have alarmed not just the colonel but his revolutionary cohorts. But now in a single declaration, Qadhafi has effectively undermined the rising influence of the technocratic sector and shifted power to the provincial committees dominated by his revolutionary allies. The implication of this move is profound, as those pressing for a more pragmatic approach to national and international affairs have been moved to the margins of society.

Beyond the manipulation of Libya's factional politics, Qadhafi's move also reflects his growing concern about his succession. Although in fragile health for the past several years, Qadhafi has not designated a successor and in the past has resisted all moves to establish a formal head of state. In a recent speech in Sebah, the colonel seemingly reversed himself and stressed that "we need him [a formal head of state] in case something happens, like a catastrophe, a war or whatever." Qadhafi's recent reorganization plan is designed to enhance the authority of loyalists as a prelude to the announcement of a prospective head of state. The individuals who stand to benefit most from this move are two of Qadhafi's cousins, Col. Ahmad Qadhaf-al Dam, the military commander of Cyrenaica; and Brig. Gen. Sayyid Muhammad Qadhaf al-Dam, the governor of the Sirte regional administrative district. Both men are in command of critical sectors and have proven themselves as dedicated revolutionaries. In addition, the colonel has begun to groom his eldest son, Seif al-Islam, by dispatching him on high-profile diplomatic missions and appointing him as the head of a national commission responsible for devising state projects.

Through disenfranchisement of the technocrats, Qadhafi has for the first time made a definitive decision about which sector of Libya's body politic is to succeed him. But beyond political considerations, important economic factors also underlay Qadhafi's latest move.

Economic Factors behind Qadhafi's Decision. In the 1990s, Libya's economy suffered a dramatic decline as inflation and unemployment rates remained well over 30 percent. Qadhafi's response to the economic crisis has been to promote foreign investments, particularly in the critical oil sector. The suspension of the Lockerbie sanctions has paved the way for the return of the major European oil companies. But there has been much tension between the oil firms and Libya's Ministry of Energy. In a well-publicized move last spring, Libyan officials pledged to revise the forty-five-year-old Petroleum Law and provide more liberal exploration agreements. All such proposals, however, languished in the Ministry of Energy, causing disquiet among the oil companies. As an oil executive complained, "It's all confusing because what they're saying publicly and what is happening on the ground are two different things." Qadhafi appreciates that a continued stalemate on such issues may lessen foreign enthusiasm for the development of Libya's oil industry and thus imperil his attempt to quickly rehabilitate the economy.

Indeed this latest bureaucratic overhaul is designed to signal to the international petroleum market Libya's seriousness in stabilizing its oil and gas industries. The dissolution of the energy ministry is expected to strengthen the role of the National Oil Company (NOC) and expedite exploration decisions. The constant discord and extra layers of bureaucracy between the NOC and the Ministry of Energy was producing a standstill that aggravated oil executives seeking production agreements. Despite his claims of revolutionary management, Qadhafi has always been very cautious about the operation of the oil industry and has attempted to safeguard it from the chaos that often sweeps over Libyan society.

Conclusion. Colonel Qadhafi has often been willing to destabilize society in order to achieve practical political objectives. The overhaul of Libya's political structure reflects the colonel's impatience with the ministries that were not fully implementing his economic priorities. But far more significantly, the recent changes are a means of

ensuring succession of leaders that are loyal to Qadhafi's ideological postulations. The emergence of provinces as the most important centers of political power will have the effect of empowering the revolutionaries and marginalizing the technocrats. The colonel may be sensing his mortality, but he is not prepared to relieve Libya of his revolutionary vision.

Ray Takeyh is a Soref fellow at The Washington Institute.

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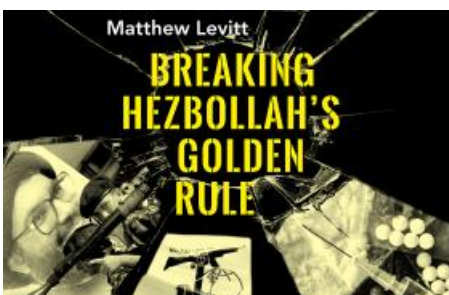
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