

THE LIBYAN REVOLUTION: OUTCOME AND PERSPECTIVES

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With the fall of Sirt and the death of the erstwhile Libyan Leader, Mu'ammar Qadhafi, on 20th October 2011, just three days after the other regime stronghold, Bani Walid, had yielded to insurgent forces, the Libyan civil war, which had begun on 20th February 2011, had effectively come to an end. Tripoli had fallen two months before and the National Transitional Council, the titular head of the new government, lost little time in announcing its victory and promising Libyans a hopeful democratic future. The fact that it made its announcement in Benghazi, where the civil war had begun, rather than in the country's capital, Tripoli, inadvertently also highlighted, perhaps, the problems that the future might bring.

The formal plans for the next phase of Libya's revolution are well-known for they had been promulgated long before military victory was achieved. The National Transitional Council is to appoint a provisional government which, over the subsequent eight months, is to administer the country and the process of reconstruction and draw up plans for assembly elections. The assembly, in turn, will prepare a constitutional project to be approved by referendum and then prepare for legislative and presidential elections. Once the new provisional government is in place, the National Transitional Council will dissolve itself, its job having been completed.

Indeed, a new prime minister, Abdurrahim al-Keeb, was selected at the end of October, although he is yet to announce his ministerial team, apparently because of infighting between the various factions that insist on being represented in the provisional government. In fact, infighting has bedevilled the Council for months as some former exiles, such as Ali Issawi, distance themselves from former regime collaborators and question their suitability as future leaders for Libya. Thus, Mahmoud Jibril, the former head of the National Economic Development Board and the original candidate for premier, has been forced to stand down whilst Mustapha Abduljalil, the Council's chair and former justice minister has publicly committed to stand down from his post now that victory has been achieved.

The problem is that the plans for the future can only go forward provided a set of initial conditions, chief amongst them the restoration of security under the Council's control, are satisfied first. As the chaos surrounding the formation of the new government suggests, this is far from the case at

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present. Allied to it is careless talk of the emergence of political parties to give structure and agency to the new 200-member Council that is to draft a new constitution. The fact is that Libya has no experience of political parties – they were banned under pain of death by the Qadhafi regime – and exile groups were committed to getting rid of the regime, not to formulating political programmes. In addition, they have little purchase outside the elites and, for most Libyans, other forms of identity, often linked to a tribal ethos, are more important.¹ It will require considerable time for such traditions to dissipate and until then more traditional forms of collective choice will predominate.

The Security Problem

The basic problem facing the National Transitional Council, however, is that it has not been able to establish unchallenged authority over the militia brigades which, with NATO's help, were able to bring about final victory. Yet, without that authority, it cannot initiate the twin processes of reconciliation and disarmament that will be vital to the success of the provisional government that is to follow it. This problem of authority is not new; it was apparent as long ago as last July when the then commander of the military forces under its banner in Cyrenaica, Abdulfattah Younis al-Abidi (who was also Libya's former interior minister) and two of his aides were killed in a mysterious incident that has still not been fully clarified. That event highlighted the fact that the eighteen militia brigades ostensibly under the Council's control did not necessarily accept the chain of command that it had instituted.

This problem of command-and-control has significantly worsened since the capture of Tripoli.² The forces directly involved in the capture and the uprising inside Tripoli that had paralleled it consisted of the Berbers in the Jabal Nafusa and Arab population of Misurata. Both regions had previously independently resisted lengthy and bloody attempts by the Qadhafi regime to suppress them. As a result, although both had received moral and material support from the National Transitional Council, neither recognised the Council's military command structure. Nor, indeed, do they now, particularly in the wake of the roles both have played in the final victories at Bani Walid and Sirt.

The result is that, even in Tripoli itself, militias are the real authority and have been roaming the city, as they round up and imprison suspected collaborators from the old regime. Each militia has taken over specific parts of the city and, although the majority of its inhabitants continue their lives unmolested, it is clear that the Council's writ does not run unhindered there. There are even disputes at the level of the Tripoli military council under Abdulhakim ben Hadj, a former founder member of the

1. See, for example, A. Obeidi, *Political Culture in Libya* (London, Curzon Press, 2001), and M. al-Werfalli, *Political Alienation in Libya: Assessing Citizens' Political Attitude and Behaviour* (Reading, Ithaca Press, 2011).

Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, which is supposed to coordinate militia activity, for a rival military council has now emerged, challenging his authority. Many of the militia leaders claim that they would be prepared to submit themselves to the Council's control but will not do so until all agree.

The Dangers of Fragmentation

Allied to this problem of undivided authority are two others: reconciliation and disarmament. The resolution of both will be essential for any recognisable form of formal democratic process to emerge in the short term. Yet neither are possible without a clear and recognised hierarchy of control – which, at present, neither the Council nor the provisional government enjoy. The importance of disarmament is underlined by discoveries of a profusion of unguarded weapons dumps left by the Qadhafi regime. Much of their contents are said to have flowed out of Libya and into the hands of dissident groups claiming allegiance to al-Qa'ida in the Sahel and Southern Sahara, much to Algerian disgust and alarm, but much is also in Libyan hands and outside the control of government. And the significance of formal reconciliation between Qadhafi supporters and their victorious opponents – a primary objective of the Council, according to Mr Abdeljalil – has been highlighted by the outbreak of armed clashes in recent weeks, after victory was announced.

Thus, clashes have been reported in the Jabal Nafusa, where Berber tribes have dislodged their Arab neighbours, originally settled there by the Qadhafi regime. In addition, the Jadu and Zintan militia brigades eye each other uneasily for similar reasons. South of Misurata, the Misurata militias have unceremoniously forced out the black population of Tawurga, even firing their houses to ensure they do not return. The ostensible reason is that Tawurgans were regime supporters but, given the racial tensions that are widespread in coastal Tripolitania, other factors have certainly played a part. In the latest outburst of violence, in mid-November, the Zawiya militia spent four days bombarding the neighbouring Warshefana region. The violence was eventually curbed by the intervention of hundreds of fighters from what is claimed to be the Council's new fledgling Libyan army, according to its spokesman, Abdelhafiz Ghoga.³

If indeed the new Libyan army has been capable of quelling the violence, this would be a very hopeful sign that the Council will be able to hand over to the new provisional government an administration that has begun to impose itself successfully on post-war Libya. There are still massive security problems in the South and the danger of a resurgence of violence emanating from Niger but, in the main population centres at least, central government will have been able to ensure that it can control the sequelae of war and initiate processes of reconciliation and disarmament. Then, of course,

2. Guardian, 21st October 2011.

3. AP Tripoli, 15th November 2011.

Libya's leaders will have to turn to the issue of how, in a country bereft of meaningful political life for so long, democratic politics can be put in place. They know that they will need help in doing so and expect the West to provide it, if Western states recognise Libya's ownership of its revolution.

And help is at hand. There is a United Nations post-conflict mission, another from the European Union, advice from America's USAID and diplomatic missions from Britain and France, all eager to contribute to the new Libya that is to emerge. Some countries may have motives not quite as noble as others and already fears are being expressed that commercial reward may be a bigger driver in some cases than disinterested concerns about democratic governance. But, that apart, the bigger danger is that, without coordination, well-meant help might smother a nascent democracy in a plethora of ill-planned initiatives. And the challenge of managing outside advisers to ensure a successful outcome may well be the new government's most important and immediate task!

Simultaneously published as a Focus article at the Observatory of Euro-Mediterranean policies, www.iemed.org

