

ELECTIONS IN LIBYA

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The election of a new national assembly in Libya is good news in several respects after a decidedly difficult transition from the elation that accompanied the collapse of the Gaddafi regime last October to the realities of reconstructing the Libyan state. Perhaps the first piece of good news is the simple fact that it actually took place and did so in a relatively peaceful atmosphere. Secondly, the electoral process has been judged by outside observers to have been free and fair. And, finally, the outcome seems to have been a victory for moderation, rather than an outright win for Libya's Islamist movements – unlike the situation elsewhere.

The Election Itself

In retrospect, the scepticism and gloom that greeted the postponement of the election from mid-June until early July was clearly excessive. Observers overlooked the fact that local elections had already been successfully carried out in Misurata and in Benghazi, fixating instead on separatist demands in the east of the country. They also failed to give due weight to the enthusiasm with which Libyans registered for a national legislative election – 2.7 million people clamouring to put their names on the new electoral role, despite the fact that there were still arguments taking place about what any new electoral system should contain. And too much weight was given to the possibility that the massive organizational problems that Libya still faces would disrupt any electoral process.

In the event, 1.8 million people turned out to vote in the election on 7th July for a bewildering array of 3,708 candidates, 1,207 of them representing 130 political parties and the balance standing as independents. Their choice was made even more difficult by the fact that each elector, in any of the seventy-three constituencies into which Libya had been divided, was voting both for party candidates and for independents as well – an average of 34 independent candidates to choose from, not to mention the party lists as well! They were to fill the eighty seats reserved for the political parties, along-

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side the 120 seats reserved for independents in the new assembly, and, despite the complexities of the actual process, only 3 percent of the ballots cast were invalid.

The assembly itself, which incidentally will have to make way for new legislative elections after a year in office, has as its primary function the appointment of a new transitional governmental cabinet to take over from the executive council of the National Transitional Council, which has run free Libya ever since last March. Then it will also have to decide whether it should assume the task of drafting Libya's new constitution itself or whether it should appoint a sixty-member committee to do this instead. If it decides on the second alternative it will then have to ensure that all three of Libya's regions are equally represented, for the decision to allocate one hundred assembly seats to Tripolitania, compared with sixty for Benghazi and only forty for the Fezzan, was one of the major bones of contention in the run-up to the election and led to armed clashes with Eastern federalists and the sacking of the electoral commission's offices in Benghazi shortly before the election took place.

Outcomes

Although the results of the election were announced ten days after it had taken place, they were to be formally recognized only a fortnight later, after all disputes about the outcomes had been settled by the courts. Nonetheless, the actual outcome is clear enough for all intents and purposes. To the surprise of most observers, top of the list, with 39 of the party seats, was a liberal-nationalist coalition of 65 parties, the National Forces Alliance, led by Mahmoud Jibril, the first Libyan interim premier appointed by the National Transitional Council after the Libyan civil war broke out in Benghazi in February 2011.

His party had topped the poll in every constituency except Misurata where a local party came first, apparently because Mr Jibril is a member of the Warfalla tribe, much disliked by Misuratans – a testament to the power that tribalism can exert over Libyan politics. Mr Jibril, seen as a charismatic and experienced politician by many, had also been a senior official under the Gaddafi regime, as head of the National Development Board, although he had always been regarded as a reformer and had been close to the Libyan leader's second son, Saif al-Islam. His past, which had also been instrumental in forcing him out of the premiership at the start of this year, will also mean that he is barred from serving in the new assembly.

The result was a surprise because it had generally been expected that, as elsewhere in North Africa, the Muslim Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party would lead in the party stakes. Instead, it only managed to win seventeen seats, coming in second

behind Mahmoud Jibril's National Forces Alliance. The reasons for its disappointment are, apparently, twofold: it had never been able to maintain a clandestine but functioning infrastructure during the Gaddafi years – its members were repeatedly arrested and, in some cases, executed – and its electoral message was considered to be haughty and arrogant, as if it had expected victory by right. Libyans, despite their personal piety, resented this and punished the movement at the poll.

Even in Derna, a famed Islamist stronghold, the party did poorly, as did all other Islamist parties nationally. The party of former founder and leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, Abdelhakim Belhadj, who had also headed up the military council in Tripoli after the city fell to the rebellion, failed to win a single seat, whilst the Qatari-backed National Rally Coalition and the former jihadist Islamic Movement for Change also did poorly, probably for the same reason. In the final analysis, the remaining twenty-four seats were divided between the National Front with three seats, six other parties with two seats each and fifteen parties, each winning a single seat. Nationalism and personal charisma, in short, seemed to have triumphed over Islamic orthodoxy.

In reality, however, it is going to be the independents that determine the real flavour of Libyan politics in the weeks and months to come and here no predictions are of significance. The Justice and Construction Party fondly believes that the majority will support its positions in debate and, more importantly, in drawing up the new constitution. Yet very little is known about the positions the independents will support or about what political factions they will ally with, if any. The one certainty about them is that they will preserve the traditional male dominance within Libyan society, for only one woman has been elected. And, as mentioned above, there are administrative arrangements to be resolved over the drafting of a constitution before political attitudes will play a part, not to mention the separatist demands of Cyrenaican federalists under Abdulhakim al-Sanussi.

But the real problem, perhaps the first that the new assembly will have to tackle in appointing its transitional government, remains that of security. Although the security situation has improved along the coast – where the most dominant of Libya's estimated 350 militias have in part ceded control to government – the southern interior remains chaotic and insecure, riven by tribal feuds and by the overspill from the crisis in Mali. Even amongst the urban settlements of the coast tensions remain, with militias in Zintan in the Jabal Nafusa and Misurata stoutly maintaining their independence, although

the number of political prisoners is estimated to have fallen from 7,000 to 5,000 in recent weeks.

The interim Libyan government has added to the confusion by sidelining the newly reconstituted Libyan army under General Mangoush and creating two new militias of its own, the Libyan Shield under the defence ministry and a new militia answering to the supreme security committee of the interior ministry. That seems to be a recipe for future tension as the three formations are bound to struggle for supremacy as the future security guarantor of the Libyan state now under constitutional construction. Thus, even if oil exports have returned to their former levels and reconstruction begins, alongside the refurbishment of Libya's political future, security remains as the most immediate threat to what Libyans fervently hope will be a prosperous future.