The Libyan Revolution : Establishing a New Political System and The Transition to Statehood

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Writing an analysis on Libya is not an easy thing to do. It is difficult to study and analyse a political scene still under construction, in a country that Muammar Gaddafi ruled for 42 years without a clear political system or a state structure. What we have instead is a political wilderness without the slightest hint of political experience or expertise. However, since the February 17, 2011 Revolution, and in a bid to forge a new state, Libya has undergone several revolutionary, political, and social stages, accompanied by a process of strategic transformation. The General National Congress elections that took place in July 2012 and the impressive democratic performance of the Libyan people are the most significant of these stages.

Historical background of the political climate

Libya achieved its independence in tandem with the announcement of the Constitution of 1951; the country, which adopted the name, "The United Kingdom of Libya," had a federal system comprising three provinces: Tripoli, Burqa, and Fazan. In 1963, the Constitution was amended and the federal system terminated, turning Libya into a unified country under the new name, "The Kingdom of Libya." In September 1969, Gaddafi came to power through a military coup, an event he insisted on calling a revolution. He suspended the Constitution and disbanded parliament, leaving Libya with neither a constitution nor a parliament for the entire period of his rule, a period characterised by a series of exceptional social, political, and economic changes. In 1972, Gaddafi forbade political parties, under the penalty of death for those who defied order, and, in 1975, led what he chose to call a "popular revolution" aimed at dismantling the state and its institutions. Later on, he published his "Green Book" through which he ruled Libya and managed all social, political, and economic activities in the country. In 1977, he announced the establishment of the so-called "people's sovereignty" and renamed the country the "Libyan Jamahiriya". In 2003, the regime launched a slow political reform process (the Libya of tomorrow) guided and

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managed by Gaddafi's son Seif al-Islam. The process elicited a series of reactions from the Libyan people, and this, coupled with political and military resistance activities, eventually culminated in the February 17, 2011 Revolution that brought down Gaddafi and his regime. The Revolution elevated Libya to an entirely new stage in its history, the most important features of which are freedom and a process of democratic transformation on the road to a democratic civil state.

Particularities of the Libyan Revolution

Gaddafi disapproved of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions and did not hesitate in his speeches to lament the demise of Zine El-Abidine bin Ali and Hosni Mubarak, because he knew that the political and social climate in Libya was ripe for revolution. He decided to prevent the Arab Spring from coming to his country and provoking a revolutionary summer in Libya, but the Libyan people did not give him the opportunity to do that and, on February 16-17, 2011, rose up in an all-out revolt.

The Libyan Revolution started in a fashion similar to the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions. It began with the mobilisation of large crowds via the internet, social media sites, tribal communication avenues and peaceful demonstrations calling for political and constitutional reform. The revolution ignited on February 16, 17 and 18, 2011, first in Benghazi, Al-Beida, most eastern cities and in Zintan in the west. Gaddafi had already prepared different scenarios to deal with attempts to emulate the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, a fact confirmed in his and his son Seif's speeches on February 21 and 22. Gaddafi's defiant attitude to the Arab Spring revolutions gave the Libyan Revolution a character of its own, namely that of an armed popular revolution aimed at removing Muammar Gaddafi from power.

The Libyan Revolution found itself in a political vacuum. The country had neither a constitution nor a parliamentary, presidential or ministerial political system to rely on when the semblance of the state, that Gaddafi had maintained to protect and lengthen his rule, fell. Nor was there an army that could have eventually adopted a patriotic stance when the country reached a political and security crisis point. Gaddafi had dismantled the Libyan Army and formed security brigades that professed absolute loyalty to him, under the command of his sons and relatives. These brigades played a central role in confronting and suppressing the revolution, using reviled and reprehensible methods, including rape, detentions, torture and mass murder.

With Gaddafi's excessive killing and repression, the Security Council of the United Nations issued Resolution 1973, on March 17, 2011, which imposed an air embargo on the country and allowed the use of force to protect civilians. The International Criminal Court had its say as well by pursuing the criminal aspect of the regime's violations, and by issuing detention orders against Gaddafi, his son Seif Al-Islam, the head of the regime's intelligence service and other officials. These developments were key factors in changing the course of the Libyan Revolution, by giving it a particular character and an international dimension. On August 20, 2011, the Libyan revolutionaries succeeded in liberating the capital, Tripoli, and on October 23 of the same year, completed the liberation of the entire country.

The emerging political scene

With the fall of Gaddafi after 42 years in power, a new political scene began to emerge in Libya. The cities of Tripoli and Benghazi were the main arenas for a variety of intellectual and political discourses, as well as a series of debates, crises and altercations in reaction to different political events and processes. For many reasons, the birth of the new multi-dimensional political scene was neither easy nor straightforward, due mainly to the lack of experience and of a civil and political culture. Moreover, a number of political groups and currents had seemingly seized the opportunity to prepare themselves, while the revolutionaries were busy fighting, to secure an early foothold and control of the political scene and power structure in Libya after Gaddafi's demise. What further complicated matters was the lack of a clear political vision on the part of the National Transitional Council and its executive body; and even had there been such a vision, it was clear that they had lost the ability to implement it.

Establishing civil society and a new political system

Several factors helped the Libyan people build their civil society organisations and forge a political system from various parties and groups in a relatively short transitional period, barely eight months after the end of the Revolution. Most important among these factors is the spirit of struggle associated with the Libyan Revolution in the public consciousness, and the fact that the blood and sprit of the martyrs acted as a strong national incentive to achieve freedom and build a democratic state.

What became most apparent during this formation period was that Libya is a social entity before being a political one, an entity where tribes, alliances and social relationships play a vital role in maintaining stability and communal peace, and in delineating the features of the new state. The relative length of the revolution (approximately 10 months) helped forge contacts and strong struggle-related relationships, later invested in efforts to reduce tensions between different armed factions.

The Libyan elite were fully aware of the importance of civic and political education through lectures, seminars and civic and political activities. The Libyan people's ability to keep the spirit of the Revolution alive was evident through the spontaneous celebrations held to mark the one-year anniversary of the Revolution, despite the fragility of the security situation. Also evident were the deep commitment of cities like Benghazi and other eastern cities to national unity, and their rejection of the federalist trend opposed to the General National Congress elections.

Aisha and Saidi Gaddafi's statements and calls to their supporters to mount an armed resistance fostered among the majority of Libyans a spirit of revolutionary challenge against the family and the regime, as a whole. Over and above the Libyan people's yearning for a new civil and political life, and eagerness to forge a democratic state, the statements motivated them to speed up the political reconstruction and the transition process to ensure an irrevocable break with the old regime and its symbols, i.e., with prominent members of the Gaddafi family.

The active role played by women in the social and political fields during the transitional period has had a considerable impact on the formation of a new civil and political society. Women established charitable organisations,

became active members of political parties, organised charitable sales events and held a series of relevant seminars and round table discussions. The wide variety of intellectual and political opinion among the Libyan elite, the different trends espoused by political parties and groups, the emergence of prominent personalities in the first few days of the revolution and the debate regarding their political fate under Gaddafi, and after his downfall, injected the Libyan body politic with renewed vigour.

The Libyan people feared an eventual intervention in their affairs by a foreign country, or a political or religious group, and that some of these might affect the makeup of the new political scene; they also feared that some of these would lend political and financial support to Islamist parties. This acted as an incentive for them to take active part in rebuilding the country's civil society and forging new political entities, and the acute local sensitivities to potential interference by foreign agendas in Libya's political culture compelled them to participate in force in the National Congress elections.

The weak performance of the National Transitional Council and Transitional Government after liberation led to a widespread conviction among most revolutionaries, and the public at large, that what the country needed was the right leadership during the transitional period. They also believed that there should be pressure on the government to issue laws that organise political life and the general climate in the country, and speed up the democratic transition and construction of political institutions. Despite the spread of weapons and their use as a security deterrent by different armed factions, Libyans realised that everyone loses when weapons are used for political ends. This became clear on the day

of the General National Congress elections when, astonishingly, almost all armed manifestations disappeared from the streets. This reinforced the Libyan people's trust in the future and in civil action and hastened the formation of political parties and groups.

Building and managing the electoral institution

The Constitutional Declaration issued by the National Transitional Council on August 8, 2011, specified a period of 240 days following the Declaration of Liberation (October 2011) as the date on which elections to the General National Congress would be held. To this end, the National Transitional Council issued Law No. 3 of 2012, establishing the High Commission for Elections as a national body tasked with supervising the General National Congress elections. The National Transitional Council also issued a law regarding the elections of the General National Congress and another delineating the electoral constituencies for these elections and, with that, completed the legal framework of the elections. Among the surprises of the Libyan political scene was the organisation of popular elections at the local council level in some cities, before the National Transitional Council had issued the election law or the national elections had even taken place.

One day before the General National Congress elections, most observers of the Libyan national and security scenes, including some Libyans, were sceptical about the elections' chances of success, for many reasons. These included the proliferation of weapons, fear that these weapons would be used for political ends and fear that federalists in the east of the country would halt the elections.

However, not only did the elections take place on the assigned date, but also the turnout was high and the security climate appropriate against all expectations. A total of 2639 candidates (individuals) and 374 political parties and groups (lists) ran in these elections, with 94% of all polling stations opening their doors on July 7, 2012. The remaining polling stations that failed to open on the first day for security reasons opened the next day, thus completing the electoral process throughout the country. A positive and unexpected rate of 62% of all registered voters cast their votes, including 61% for men and 39% for women. Present at the scene was a large contingent of local and foreign observers whose reports testified to the good preparation and execution of the elections, including their fairness, despite a number of marginal remarks.

Given their political importance and the fact that they were the first to be held in the country for over five decades, the elections gave way to celebrations in most Libyan cities. Moreover, the success of elections was tantamount to a democratic lifeline for Libya from the social, political and security crises it was going through, and a bridge towards an entirely new political life.

The success of the elections came as a surprise to Libyans and the world. In their eagerness to exercise their political rights, on July 7, 2012, Libyan men and women formed long lines in front of polling stations, well before opening time. The city of Benghazi resolved a major issue when citizens attacked and removed groups of federalists, opposed to the elections, gathered in front of polling stations, and youths formed human chains around these stations to allow citizens to vote in a secure atmosphere. Moreover, and to the astonishment of observers of the political and security scene in Libya, weapons were nowhere to be seen on the streets.

Review and analysis of the election results

On July 17, 2012, the High Commission for Elections announced the election results and gave those who wanted to challenge them 14 days to do so. The results relevant to the 80 seats reserved for political parties and groups in the General National Congress showed a significant victory for the National Forces Alliance, which won 39 of those seats, meaning that they now controlled half the seats in that category. This came as a big surprise since all predictions pointed to an Islamist victory, as happened in Tunisia and Egypt. This did not happen in Libya, however, despite the aggressive pre-election campaign waged by the Islamists against the National Forces Alliance and its leader, and the huge publicity campaign designed to win public opinion and secure the majority vote.

The National Forces Alliance is a political group described as secular by its adversaries. Its leader, Mahmoud Jibril, who worked for a number of years with the old regime, had broken rank with that regime and joined the revolution in its early beginnings, i.e., in February 2011, and was instrumental in securing international recognition for the revolution and its political leadership.

The Justice and Construction Party, which won 17 seats (21%), is an Islamist party and the main vehicle of the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya, and the National Front Party, which won 3 seats (3.8%), is an offshoot of the National Salvation Front founded in 1981. The Wadi Al-Hayah Party won two seats (2.5%), the Union for the Homeland also won two seats (2.5%), and the remaining political groups won 15 seats together (18.8%).

The above election results raise a number of questions. The most important among these is why did the Islamists fail to win a majority in parliament, as they did in Tunisia and Egypt, and what were the factors that prevented the wave of political Islam that accompanied the Arab Spring from prevailing in Libya? Other questions impose themselves as well including, why did the Islamist parties fail and the National Forces Alliance succeed in winning the electorate's trust, and what impact will this have on the political scene, the transitional process and formation of the state and its institutions? Furthermore, will political parties in Libya, including the Islamists, reconsider their objectives, modus operandi, mobilisation, discourse and organisation, or will they resort to new tactics?

In my opinion, the Islamist parties failed to prevail in Libya because the social and political climate in the country is not amenable to their success, or to the success of their vision and platform, as was the case in Tunisia and Egypt. Libyans are by nature a conservative Muslim society devoted to a moderate form of Islam, meaning that they disapprove of any individual, group or party that displays religion openly, and uses it for political purposes to gain a certain status, position or interest, be it social, economic or political.

Furthermore, some Muslim Brotherhood leaders and Salafi Islamist currents began acting condescendingly after the success of the revolution. Their general discourse, which is familiar to the Libyan people, marginalised and rejected the other and failed to focus on the requirements and priorities of the transitional stage, so important to the Libyan people; what they proposed instead for the new Libya was political-religious in nature. This scared many of an eventual counter-revolution and of a possible plan to implement political Islam with foreign support, in view of controlling decision-making centres in the country. After liberation, many Libyans noticed a certain determination and haste on the part of the Muslim Brotherhood, and other Islamist currents, to control decision-making centres in the National Transitional Council, Transitional Government, security services, state institutions, the media and local municipal councils. This raised fears among the public that a coup was being prepared to usurp the revolution, marginalise the revolutionaries and take control of the country.

No doubt, that attacks by some Islamist groups on a cemeteries and tombs, which they desecrated and bombed, have provoked a negative reaction among the local communities, for whom these sites hold a special religious and moral significance. The fact that these acts were blamed on groups whose political programmes are couched in religious terms might have played a role in channelling votes towards parties and groups that do not adhere to the political Islam line.

On the other hand, the discourse of the National Forces Alliance was in tune with the people's hearts and minds during the transitional stage, and the charisma of its leader, his experience with the institutions of state and his democratic experience in the West endeared him to the Libyan people. We can therefore say that the systematic mistakes committed by the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist currents in Libya, their failure to understand the people's character and views on religion and their dismissal of political opponents, have together contributed to a lack of trust in them by a significant segment of the Libyan population.

Over and above that, many Libyans are apprehensive about foreign support for certain political groups in the country. This gave rise to a conviction among the Libyan public that foreign political financing is being used systematically to bolster Islamist groups and parties. This was reinforced when the voters saw for themselves the significant financial capabilities of certain Islamist parties during the election campaign, especially their posters, prompting many to shift their support to non-Islamist parties and groups. Another way of viewing the situation is that the Libyan people chose the ballot box to send a message and punish certain countries and individuals who, through their money and political clout, have tried to impose a particular political agenda on them, or paint Libya's political scene with the colour of their choice.

Women, most of whom cast their votes in favour of the National Forces Alliance, participated in force in the elections and won 15.5% of the seats in the General National Congress. Many of them found the Islamists' fundamentalist discourse very provocative, especially the establishment by some of "*Al-amr bil-maarouf wal nahi an el-munkar*" committees (enjoin good and forbid evil) and the fact that some of these groups oppose women's participation in public life.

Other factors have undoubtedly contributed to the Islamists' failure to win a landslide victory in the General National Congress elections, though these are too many to address in this paper. Suffice it to say, that the Libyans have brought the wave of political Islam accompanying the Arab Spring revolutions to a halt, and prevented or postponed its arrival in Libya, because some see it as not responding to their political aspirations.

The post-elections scene

The competition is at its height between National and Islamist groups to win the support of independent candidates and other parties and groups. Some accuse certain parties of using financial, material and developmental enticements to win support, prompting a group of independents in the General National Congress to form a bloc to counter-balance other groups. It seems that the process of forming a government will not be easy, for there is no agreement either on a common vision, a national road map for managing the current crisis or the democratic transition.

On August 9, 2012, the National Transitional Council handed power to the elected General National Congress, marking a historic day in Libya's new political history.

However, despite the National Forces' significant victory in the elections, the Alliance failed to properly manage the post-election battle and failed to win the leadership of the General National Congress (parliament). The democratic behind-the-scenes political coup mounted by the Islamist parties against the voters' tendencies and the election results, thwarted the Alliance's candidate, Ali Zeidan's bid to secure the majority vote and win the presidency of Congress. The post went instead to Mohammad al-Mugarief, president of the National Front Party and an opponent of the old regime who, despite being close to the Islamist current, is a moderate Islamist with modern ideas and vision.

On September 12, 2012, Parliament elected the head of the second transitional government. Eight candidates competed for the post and two of them, Mustafa abu Shaghour, deputy prime minister in the outgoing government who is close to the

National Front Party led by Mohammad al-Mugarief, and Mohammad Jibril, President of the National Alliance, reached the final round. The winner was Abu Shaghour who received 96 votes vs. Jibril who received 94. The vote, a secret ballot held in an open and democratic process, was transmitted live on television and watched by a large number of viewers. The prime minister elect is currently holding consultations to form a government.

The Islamist-leaning parties and groups in Libya proved their reluctance to cede power easily. Through exceedingly astute and clever political manoeuvring, they succeeded in rearranging the deck in the National Congress and assuming the post of prime minister. By doing this, they dealt a severe blow to the National Forces Alliance and its leader, Mohammad Jibril, despite the public victory the latter had scored in the elections on July 7, 2012. This very disappointing turn of events for voters who had voted for and put their trust in the National Alliance raises a number of issues. The most important is that the Libyan political scene reflects a hidden struggle over power, namely who will rule Libya after Gaddafi, rather than a democratic competition aimed at enshrining democratic values and practices and a peaceful rotation of power. There is fear among a sizeable section of the Libyan population that Gaddafi's dictatorship would be replaced by a dictatorship of Islamist political groups and currents.