

DEADLOCK IN LIBYA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Africa, African Union (AU) and India

Libya's UN-recognised government's decision to launch a peace initiative aimed at stabilising the civil war-stricken country is a welcome move. Prime Minister Fayed al-Sarraj of the Tripoli-based government has proposed setting up a national peace forum with help from the UN, to be followed by simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections. Mr. al-Sarraj made the offer at a time when the rebel army of warlord Khalifa Haftar was fighting the Tripoli government troops on the outskirts of the capital. But an offer for peace alone won't make any difference in the complex, war-torn polity. The country descended into chaos after protests against dictator Muammar Qadhafi in 2011. A NATO invasion helped oust Qadhafi, but neither the foreign powers nor their local allies managed to fill the vacuum left by the regime that had been in power for four decades. Today there are two governments in Libya, one based in Tobruk and the other in the capital Tripoli. The self-styled Libyan National Army, commanded by Mr. Haftar, backs the Tobruk government and has captured huge swathes of territory, while the Tripoli government, which has international recognition, is defended by a host of militias, including Islamist groups. Mr. Haftar claims he is fighting terror groups and wants to unify Libya under his leadership, while Mr. al-Sarraj says his government is legitimate.

The current crisis was triggered when Mr. Haftar moved his troops to Tripoli in April 2019 to oust the government of Mr. al-Sarraj. But in contrast to other battles Mr. Haftar's forces had fought in the east and the south, they were stopped on the outskirts of the capital by forces loyal to the government. Hundreds of people have already been killed, but both sides have refused to agree to a ceasefire despite international calls. The regional dynamics are also at play in the Libyan crisis. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are backing Mr. Haftar's forces, while Turkey and Qatar back the Tripoli government. When Mr. Haftar launched the Tripoli offensive, the U.S. had also taken a favourable view, President Donald Trump having talked to him on the phone. Libya illustrates what regime change wars could do to a country. Changing a regime using force could be easy as the examples of Iraq and Libya suggest, but rebuilding a new state is not, and it can't be done with the aid of military power. All the countries that invaded the oil-rich north African nation and backed its paramilitary groups, including the U.S., Britain and their Gulf allies, should share some responsibility for Libya's crisis today. At least now, they should look beyond their narrow geopolitical interests and use their influence to rein in the militias the war has unleashed and help establish order in the country. Prime Minister al-Sarraj's offer could be a new beginning only if a ceasefire is reached, and respected, by all sides.

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As Prime Minister Modi returns to power, he must swear by the Indian civilisational ethos

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