

THE LIBYAN IMBROGLIO GETS MORE COMPLICATED

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India- West Asia

Libyan Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah speaks after submitting his candidacy papers for the presidential election, in Tripoli, Libya. | Photo Credit: Reuters

Libya's deeply divided politics took a turn for the bizarre when, on February 10, it acquired two prime ministers. This marks the culmination of binaries that have defined the country for the last eight years : it has had two centres of power; two armed forces; two central banks – one controlling the treasury, the other printing the currency; and two rival international coalitions that have influenced politics.

In the east there is the House of Representatives (HOR) in Tobruk that is headed by the speaker, Aguila Saleh. It is backed by the Libyan National Army (LNA) under self-styled Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar. In the west, the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli was the executive authority; in February last year, it was replaced by the Government of National Unity (GNU).

The broken country has provided a home for several of the region's disgruntled militants, who have joined its various warring groups. These have included militants who were hostile to Chad's President Idriss Deby. One such group, the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT), on April 11, 2021, crossed over from its base in Libya into Chad and, in the ensuing conflict, the veteran president was killed, signalling prolonged instability in the Sahel region.

Till recently, the GNA in Tripoli, which had some ideological affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood, was backed by a part of the national army and local militia, and was supported by Turkey and Qatar. It controls the northwest of Libya, including Tripoli and Misrata.

The Tobruk administration controls the east, centre and south of the country. It is hostile to the Brotherhood and committed to fighting extremists, particularly those linked to the Islamic State. It thus enjoys the support of the UAE, Egypt, France, the U.S., and Russia. In April 2019, Mr. Haftar, backed by his foreign sponsors and Russian mercenaries from the private Wagner group, had mounted a major military effort to bring the country under his control; by November 2019, he had reached the outskirts of Tripoli. His march was halted by the GNA's agreement with Turkey for military assistance – Turkey then flew in several hundred of its own soldiers and a few thousand militants from Syria and forced Mr. Haftar to retreat. A ceasefire was arranged under UN auspices in October 2020.

In February last year, the UN special envoy for Libya facilitated the setting up of an interim government, the GNU, in Tripoli, headed by Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, that would include members from the east and west. However, contrary to the earlier proposal, instead of finalising a new constitution, the HOR speaker, Mr. Saleh, unilaterally issued a new election law and decreed that only presidential elections would take place on December 24, thus ensuring that the HOR would remain unchanged and he would retain his authority.

The presidential election threw up three principal candidates – Mr. Haftar; Saif al-Islam Qaddafi, the former ruler's son; and Prime Minister Dbeibah himself. All of them were controversial: Mr. Haftar's democratic credentials were doubtful. Mr. Saif al-Islam banked on the nostalgia for the order and security during his father's rule and amnesia about the attendant tyranny. On becoming prime minister, Mr. Dbeibah had assured he would not be a candidate for the presidency; besides this, he also declined to resign from his post three months before the

elections, as required by the electoral decree. None of these candidates enjoyed nationwide support.

Two days before the elections, the election commission declared that, taking into account “technical, judicial and security reports, it would be impossible to hold elections” on the approved date. This has set the stage for the current imbroglio. Mr. Saleh in Tobruk used the impasse to declare that Mr. Dbeibah’s term had ended and, on February 10, announced that the HOR had unanimously elected former interior minister Fathi Bashaga as prime minister. Mr. Dbeibah rejected this appointment and said he would stay in power till elections were held. Mr. Bashaga, who, like Mr. Dbeibah, also belongs to Misrata, said he was proceeding to Tripoli. On February 24, he submitted his cabinet to the HOR for approval.

A complicated set of external developments has led to the ongoing fiasco in Libya – Turkey’s diplomatic outreach to Egypt and the UAE. In May last year, a Turkish delegation was in Cairo, ending the freeze in diplomatic interactions from 2013, when the Brotherhood government of Mohammed Morsi had been overthrown in a military coup.

Then, in August, the UAE’s national security adviser visited Ankara, and was followed in November by the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. The latter promised UAE investments of \$10 billion in Turkey’s beleaguered economy and later placed \$5 billion in Turkey’s central bank in a swap arrangement. The Turkish President visited Abu Dhabi on February 14.

These engagements are the result of several factors. One, with the U.S. apparently increasingly disengaged from West Asian affairs, the regional states are themselves addressing contentious issues. Second, there is a high degree of crisis-fatigue – the long-drawn conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Libya have caused widespread death and destruction and exacerbated regional instability, but yielded no military outcome. Finally, the Gulf nations and Egypt now seem less concerned about the challenge from political Islam, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, given that its internal cohesion and regional influence have significantly abated. These considerations have encouraged regional powers to pursue fresh diplomatic engagements focusing on economic cooperation.

These developments are being reflected in Libya. With the blessings of the UAE, Egypt and Russia, Mr. Saleh has brought about a rapprochement between Mr. Bashaga and Mr. Haftar, with the latter perhaps being promised the post of defence minister in the Bashaga cabinet. Egypt welcomes the Bashaga-Haftar reconciliation as a coalition that would be sensitive to its interests and expand economic links through contracts for its companies and jobs for its citizens. Russia believes that the Saleh-Bashaga-Haftar administration will prioritise its interests over those of western powers and ensure that its bases in the country are not disturbed. Turkey hopes that national unity and stability will enable it to revive its unfinished projects from the Qaddafi era and, with Libyan support, expand its interests in the East Mediterranean.

Libya is once again experiencing the ‘one state, two governments’ situation of earlier times. The reason for optimism is that, for the first time in several years, we could have a government that straddles the east-west divide, with the support of external powers.

But the outlook is uncertain – Mr. Dbeibah shows no sign of going quietly into the sunset. He has announced several populist measures and has set out a detailed plan to take forward a transparent political process. He is also mobilising militants loyal to him and has warned of war if he is forced out of office. The HOR, meanwhile, has said it will meet shortly to approve Mr. Bashaga’s new government. The prospect of renewed conflict cannot be ruled out.

Peace and national unity in Libya require a level of leadership and statesmanship that has not

been apparent in the country for several years.

Talmiz Ahmad served as Indian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UAE

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