

# LIBYA'S OUTLOOK REMAINS BLEAK

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Libyans gather at the Martyrs' Square in Tripoli on February 17, 2023, as they commemorate the 12th anniversary of the uprising that toppled longtime strongman Muammar Gaddafi. | Photo Credit: AFP

On February 17, Libyans celebrated 12 years of the uprising that finally [ended the rule of Muammar Gaddafi](#). Streets were festooned with flags and lights, with music performances and a military parade in Tripoli reflecting popular joy. Some even believed that the political nightmare engulfing the country for a decade could end this year with national elections.

This could be wishful thinking. Last year, on February 10, Libya had acquired the dubious distinction of having two prime ministers — marking the culmination of binaries that have defined the battle-scarred country since the fall of Gaddafi.

Since 2014, Libya has had two centres of power — the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli that claims executive authority, and the House of Representatives (HOR) in Tobruk that exercises legislative powers. Tripoli controls the north-west of the country, including the towns of Tripoli and Misrata, while Tobruk controls the east and the south.

In February 2022, the HOR declared that the term of the incumbent prime minister, Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, heading a Government of National Unity (GNU), was over and [appointed former Interior Minister Fathi Bashaga](#) in his place. But Mr. Dbeibah refused to give up his position, forcing Mr. Bashaga to function from the town of Sirte. In July and August, a frustrated Mr. Bashaga mounted a military attack on Tripoli to dislodge his rival, but was not successful.

Most Libyan politicians have amassed extraordinary wealth: while the economy, fed by oil revenues, is expected to grow by 18% this year, a third of Libyans live below the poverty line. A former UN special representative had described the situation as “redistributive kleptocracy.”

The ideological competitions around the place of political Islam represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, that occurred in the early days of the Arab Spring, resonated strongly in Libya after Gaddafi's departure. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members Qatar and the UAE backed rival factions in the civil conflict — Qatar supported the Islamist government in Tripoli, while the UAE, backed by Egypt, backed the HOR in Tobruk.

To obtain a military settlement, from 2014, the UAE supported the Libyan strongman, General

Khalifa Haftar, enabling him to bring Libya's eastern and southern territories under his control. From April 2019, he launched a major assault on Tripoli. The UAE backed the offensive with hundreds of drone strikes, weaponry and jet fuel, and funded Sudanese and Russian mercenaries as part of his forces.

This offensive was defeated with the entry of Turkey. In November 2019, Turkey signed an agreement with the beleaguered Tripoli administration and provided it with drones, air defence systems and mercenaries from pro-Turkish militia groups in Syria. Mr. Haftar was forced to retreat back to the east.

A new plan to break the political impasse has emerged recently. On February 28, the UN special representative for Libya, Abdoulaye Bathily, noting the "major legitimacy crisis" in the country and widespread popular frustration, said he would be setting up a "high-level steering panel." This would bring together relevant stakeholders who would adopt a legal framework for elections, address matters relating to code of conduct and election security, and prepare a time-bound road map for elections to be held within this year.

However, there is widespread scepticism about the success of this initiative. The HOR in Tobruk has rejected it on the ground that setting up a dialogue committee is its prerogative and said it will not work with foreign parties. Others have noted that Mr. Bathily has provided no details of the composition of the election panel and that such plans have gone nowhere in the past.

The role of external players is expected to be crucial, though there is much uncertainty about their posture. In a dramatic move, the UAE has abandoned its earlier support for the Tobruk administration and has reached out to Mr. Dbeibah in Tripoli. To ingratiate himself with his new sponsors, Mr. Dbeibah has not included Islamists in his government and has offered the UAE the contracts it had obtained in the Gaddafi period in energy, construction and telecom. The UAE has also built close ties with Mr. Dbeibah's interior minister and even some militant groups.

Qatar on its part has quickly shifted away from Tripoli and made overtures to Tobruk, establishing ties with Mr. Haftar and his sons and other officers from the earlier anti-Gaddafi groups, and members of the HOR. Qatar has also maintained links with Mr. Bashaga, who is being supported by Libya's Islamists. Since October last year, there has been a thaw in Qatar-Egypt ties, with Qatar ironically being viewed in Cairo as an influential player to dilute the Islamist challenge from Tripoli.

Turkey has shed its affiliation with political Islam and built ties with the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt; but it retains an aggressive posture in the East Mediterranean. Russia, with mercenaries from the Wagner Group, remains entrenched in Libya, viewing the oil-rich country as a valuable base to expand its influence in Africa.

Libya's politicians, affiliated with diverse foreign groups, ensure that no initiative emerges that would unify their country and give its people a democratic order and a larger share of the national wealth. There are in fact credible prospects for the revival of military conflict.

***Talmiz Ahmad is a former diplomat***

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