Growing Discontent with GNA’s Policies in Libya Reaches Critical Levels

In recent days, a protest movement in Libya has been growing, and with each passing day, it has been spreading to an ever increasing number of towns and cities in this country, devastated by the ongoing civil war.

Nine years since the overthrow of former Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi, which Western powers, including the US, were actively involved in, a growing number of demonstrators have been calling on the Government of National Accord (GNA), currently led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, to step down, while he is being presented to the international community as the representative of the Libyan people. Protesters are demanding real improvements to living conditions in the country, and an end to corruption and unlawful actions taken by numerous militias and thousands of foreign mercenaries operating in and around the capital and other regions of Libya. They are also voicing their discontent about growing prices, lack of water, power outages, unemployment and lack of necessary support in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic.

The August 16, mass protests against the GNA in the capital of the country, Tripoli, have already resulted in violent clashes. “Unidentified armed men wearing military-style camouflage clothes opened fire on some demonstrators” in Martyrs Square and other nearby areas of the capital. As a result, several protesters were wounded. Amnesty International reported that unidentified gunmen abducted “at least six peaceful protesters”. According to the Sky News Arabia TV channel and the Libya Review newspaper, a number of demonstrators are currently in custody of Al-Radaa and Al-Nawasi militias, the latter is “nominally operating under the Ministry of Interior of the UN-recognized” GNA.

Libyan media outlets have reported that activists held “Fayez Al-Sarraj and Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha” (a number of militias are loyal to him) responsible for the safety of the demonstrators and, therefore, blamed them for failing to protect protesters against violence and abduction. According to the Arab Weekly, at the behest of Fayez al-Sarraj, the Turkish Intelligence Division stationed in Tripoli instructed leaders of armed groups to infiltrate the movement and “change the course of its political and social demands”.

Activists, who are seeking the Prime Minister’s resignation, “urged the United Nations Support Mission to Libya (UNSMIL), to carry out an immediate investigation into the violations committed against protesters”.

In response, on August 17, Fayez al-Sarraj blamed a group of infiltrators for the chaos that ensued during the protests. In addition, Fathi Bashagha was temporarily suspended from his post so that an investigation into his role in the violence could be conducted. The Prime Minister also announced “his intention to carry out an urgent cabinet reshuffle,” and “said that the selection of the new ministers would be based on competence, capabilities and clean hands”. He “renewed his call for general elections” to be held next March. After all, the absence of central government has probably exacerbated the problems with electricity, food and water supplies.

According to local media sources, Fayez al-Sarraj together with his armed entourage had to flee his residence in the Libyan capital, seeking refuge at the Mitiga airbase, currently occupied by the Turkish military. In turn, GNA’s Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha fled to Turkey because of the ongoing mass protests, clearly trying to distance himself from the ongoing protests and the violent suppression of those by GNA forces.

In response, the representative of the east of the country - the speaker of the House of Representatives Aguila Saleh criticized authorities in Tripoli for using violence against the demonstrators.
The current unrest in Libya has had a negative impact on the mood of the Libyan diaspora. A number of Libyans living abroad have expressed their support for a military resolution to the conflict in their homeland. On August 27, various media outlets reported that an unidentified group of about 30 supporters of the GNA “attempted to break into the Libyan Embassy in Minsk and capture it”. Those attackers broke through the front door, gutted the building and demanded Libyan diplomats to leave. Among the attackers witnesses saw GNA’s current Chargé d’Affaires along with his predecessor and the bookkeeper of GNA's diplomatic mission to Belarus. Reportedly, the embassy staff handled the situation on their own, but Muhammad Istaita, that occupies the position of Charge d’Affaires of the Libyan National Army was beaten up.

In such a climate, similar incidents may occur in Libyan diplomatic missions in other countries.

The growing unrest in Libya could invariably lead to a redistribution of power in the nation, since protests have also spread from Libya’s western parts to its southern and eastern towns in LNA-ruled territories, the situation could spiral out of control in both regions of the country and interfere with plans of international mediators striving to reconcile the warring sides.

As evidenced by the recent events in Libya, the Government of National Accord (GNA) and its head Fayez al-Sarraj, as well as external forces supporting them, are losing the respect of the people and their legitimacy with each passing day. Nowadays, these developments are playing an increasingly important role because of how critical they are not only for Turkey but also for most of the global community, including the UN, which chose to recognize the GNA “as the sole legitimate executive authority in Libya” and to support it in any upcoming negotiations. According to the UNSMIL statement on the latest developments in Libya issued on August 24, “given the continuing immiseration of the Libyan people and the ever-present threat of renewed conflict, it is past time for Libyan leaders to put aside their differences and engage in a fully inclusive political dialogue as outlined by GNA President Sarraj and House of Representatives Speaker Saleh in their declarations” the previous week.

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