On December 24, 2021 Libya will hold general presidential and parliamentary elections. These elections may do a great deal to restoring the authority of the Libyan state, which has been weakened by the tensions that persist despite the attempts to minimize the impact of the conflict, already several years old, between the country’s two main political powers. But both internal divisions and external factors risk impeding the successful conduct of the elections - including the presence of pro-Turkish Syrian mercenaries and militants in the west of the country. For example, on August 9 the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) announced that Turkey is continuing to make a show of withdrawing its mercenaries from the country - while actually bringing a similar number of militants into the country. The SOHR, citing its own sources, claims that although 130 militants from groups sponsored by Ankara have recently returned to their country, another batch of fighters has left areas controlled by extremists in the North of Syria and travelled to Libya, heading for Tripoli. Turkey adopted similar tactics in June, when it mounted a show of withdrawing 150 mercenaries. According to SOHR’s source, in this way Turkey is replacing its militants every fifteen days. Ankara is maintaining a permanent corps of “security staff” at its bases in Libya.

In view of the above situation, it is hard to overstate the importance of the Libyan authorities’ attempts to organize a political dialog and guarantee sufficient stability to allow the elections to go ahead in December. One of the goals of the Forum for Libya, which has been under way since July 28 in Geneva, was to establish a constitutional basis for
the elections, but the delegates have been unable to reach agreement on the key issues, and this failure is undermining the agreed road map for the country’s reconstruction following the end of the civil war. Aguila Saleh Issa, the Speaker of Libya’s House of Representatives, has stated that if the elections do not go ahead in December there is the risk of the west of the country establishing its own government. It is no secret that a number of foreign states are trying to monopolize the Libyan talks, putting pressure on their representatives in Geneva, supporting one or other of the sides in the conflict, and expressing strong views about the holding of the elections and the selection of the candidates. By intervening in the electoral process in this way, these foreign states hope to put their preferred candidates in power and thus promote their own interests during the - potentially very profitable - post-war reconstruction of Libya.

Emad Al-Sayah, Chairman of Libya’s High National Elections Commission (HNEC) has announced that the deadline for registration of candidates is August 17. Arrangements have been made for over 2.3 million voters accredited by the HNEC to check the identity of each voter at the polling stations. He added that a voter verification system was being introduced in order to prevent falsification of the results, or irregularities such the sale of votes by voters registered on the electoral roll. The Chairman of the HNEC added that the introduction of this technology represented a major step forwards in Libya’s electoral history.

Libyan voters have been repeatedly assured that, in addition to introducing the above measures, the HNEC is coordinating its activities with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), an American NGO, which has appointed Ian Smith as its regional director, based in Tripoli. The IFES is trying to intervene in the preparations for December’s elections and aims to develop a body of electoral law and influence citizens’ political involvement by carrying out “educational events” organized by the IFES in partnership with media organizations.

The IFES has already organized elections in Sudan and taken part in training civil servants in Tunisia. In Kyrgyzstan it organizes “democracy camps”, which are, in effect, an attempt to promote US-style democracy in the county.

However, at least three countries have accused the IFES of interfering in their internal affairs. Egypt’s Ministry of Social Solidarity, for example, attempted to put the national branch of the IFES on its list of banned NGOs, citing its lack of transparency in relation to its funding. In November 2019, in Myanmar, 20 parliamentary parties expressed concerns that the involvement of the IFES in the voting process might result in the falsification of the results. And in September 2020 Serbia’s National Assembly cancelled an agreement on cooperation with the IFES following reports that the NGO’s specialists planned to restructure Serbia’s election system so as to exclude candidates not approved by Washington from standing in the 2022 elections.

The IFES was established in 1987 by Frederick Clifton White Sr, a political consultant and campaign manager for Republican candidates. The main goal of the IFES is to promote its vision of democracy by working in partnership with civil society, state bodies and the private sector. It receives funding from the United Kingdom, Canada, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand, as well as from the US. It currently has representative offices in 45 countries.

From its activities, it appears that the IFES, under cover of supporting the holding of democratic elections, has already obtained control over the holding of the constitutional referendum in Libya, in effect appointing itself as a kind of general consultant and gaining full access to all sections of the HNEC, including those dealing with classified matters. However, its attempts to manipulate domestic political processes in Egypt, Myanmar, Serbia and a number of other countries clearly demonstrate that the goal of the IFES is to lobby on behalf of US interests, rather than to promote democracy. It is therefore entirely possible that Washington, acting through the IFES, may exclude from the elections any presidential or parliamentary candidates that do not meet with its approval, just as it tried to do in Serbia.

Given that the situation in Libya has greatly deteriorated over the last decade, the reconstruction of the country will demand a huge amount of resources and effort. During the last ten years Libya has been split up, entire cities and provinces have been left to fend for themselves, and its infrastructure and economical and social ties have collapsed. The government and political forces that insisted on their right to power have done nothing for the people. As a result it has discredited the very idea of a Libyan state. And if the Libyans are able to hold national elections then this will be a great step forwards. But that will only be possible if political forces or NGOs such as the IFES refrain from obstructing the Libyan people’s chosen path towards democracy and imposing solutions that favor the interests of some other country.

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