Can Saif Al-Islam Gaddafi Lead Libya, and in What Direction?

After the events of 2011, when Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was not only overthrown but also brutally murdered, Libya effectively ceased to exist as a single state, continuing to be a tidbit for businesses and outside players. In a struggle between two quasi-states inspired by themselves, these competing outside players have long tried to seize power in the country. Using the supposedly legitimate Government of National Accord, led by Fayez al-Sarraj in the West and the military bloc led by Field Marshal Khalifa Belqasim Haftar in the east of Libya. The fighting has gone on for several years with varying success, and it has shown that neither of these two leaders enjoys the serious support of the majority of the Libyan people.

The internal and internecine tensions between the two camps and the multi-tribal composition of the country’s population have never allowed the Libyan conflict of the past decade to be resolved. Although, against this background, certain outside players still managed to solve some business interests, the volatility of the internal political situation did not allow anyone to gain a guaranteed foothold in the country, which objectively forced the search for an internal political consensus by holding full-scale elections in Libya.

On December 24, the country faces general elections, the first since the civil war that the UN-recognized government in Tripoli is waging against the troops of Libya’s army general Khalifa Haftar. The US and its Western allies, already well acquainted with “color revolutions” and manipulation of electoral processes, are trying in various ways to actively interfere in Libyans’ determination of their political future in the upcoming elections. However, they have not yet managed to propose any “passable candidate” for the leadership of Libya. For ten years of
confrontation, most of the already “illustrious” national leaders have managed to openly tarnish their image with not always decent connections, actions, and decisions, which will be negatively perceived in Libyan society at the December ballot.

Against this frankly bleak background, the candidacy of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s son, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, who miraculously survived the Libyan revolution, has been shining brighter and brighter over the past year. Ten years ago, his convoy was ambushed, and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, who had actively supported his father from the beginning of the uprising, was captured by a small group of rebels in Zintan. Influenced by the ideals of the “Arab Revolution” imposed by the West and then disappointed, they have become his allies. Saif al-Islam Gaddafi was sentenced to death by the authorities in Tripoli in 2015. In May 2016, the International Criminal Court demanded his arrest for investigation.

Saif al-Islam Gaddafi was educated at the University of Tripoli and received a degree. He later became a Ph.D. candidate at the London School of Economics. Under his father’s rule, he was considered a liberal, and some experts attributed to him the leadership of Libya’s economy during the last few years of the Gaddafi regime. Before the Libyan war, the West considered Saif al-Islam Gaddafi the best candidate for liberal reform in Libya, noting his contacts with progressive Western political analysts and his statements about Libya’s need for democratic change.

Today Gaddafi supports his father’s ideas and is not critical of his rule, as his recent interview with the New York Times made clear. Saif al-Islam Gaddafi believes he could unite the country since many in Libya today consider the Arab Spring a failure. There is nostalgia for his father’s era as the best period in the state’s life. A certain image of a great leader who cared about ordinary people is being revived.

Today, Gaddafi’s son is taken seriously in Libya: his supporters participated in negotiations to form a government after the last civil war. Gaddafi’s heir is also supported by certain foreign players who have interests in Libya. However, their attitudes toward him are different, as are Libyans’ attitudes toward several foreign actors. On the one hand, he is educated, trained in Switzerland and England. He has had extensive connections with various political forces, including radicals like the Taliban (a movement banned in Russia). But it is also clear that the coming to power of Gaddafi Jr. will necessarily be associated with a change in the country’s political course, which will undoubtedly be influenced by the events of the last ten years and the role of this or that country in them.

Thus, the return to power of the Gaddafi clan would undoubtedly be a regional disaster for the United States. There is little doubt that neither Saif al-Islam Gaddafi nor ordinary Libyans will long forget Washington’s involvement in the overthrow and assassination of Muammar Gaddafi and the dooming of a formerly prosperous Libya to chaos and civil war. Hence, naturally, the US will oppose the election of Saif al-Islam Gaddafi to power in Libya in all possible ways and any subsequent steps to stabilize the political and economic situation in the country if he wins the December elections.

Neither China nor Russia was involved in any provocative actions against Libya during the Gaddafi Senior’s era or the last ten years of Libyan powerlessness. Moreover, these countries have earned respect and credibility they deserved in their past years of cooperation with the Gaddafi’s Jamahiriya. Hence, these countries will provide unconditional assistance to the new Libya in a wide range of cooperation, primarily in reconstructing the Libyan economy and social infrastructure, which is especially important for Saif al-Islam Gaddafi or any other country’s politicians.

In addition, these two countries, Russia and China, have never based their cooperation with third countries on armed intervention, which has been actively used by the United States and its Western allies in recent decades, both in Libya and in the Middle East. Today, the examples of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria make it clear that it is impossible to reunify Libya militarily. This is confirmed by the failed attempts of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, who rules the eastern part of the country, Cyrenaica, to take Tripoli and bring the western part of the state under his control. And this is not only due to the support provided by various “external players” to the opposing Libyan parties but to the stubbornness of the Libyan tribes themselves.

Therefore, only a popular figure can undoubtedly ensure the unity of the country. And in this sense, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi has no competitors. Today, he might be the only passable political figure in Libya. Still, he does not officially declare his intention to run for leadership positions in this North African nation for specific tactical reasons.

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