What Keeps the Political Situation in Libya So Fragile?

As is well known, under the agreements reached at the Forum of the Libyan Political Dialogue in Tunisia, the first presidential election in the history of Libya will be held on December 24, 2021. However, so far, the development of the situation has followed a pattern similar to that of Afghanistan. There are many groups vying for influence, not necessarily ethnically based, but with different interests. Over the past decades, Libyans have experienced the horrors of the civil war and the consequences of Western intervention, so today they are trying to overcome these consequences and come to a unified existence, even if this process is not welcomed by everyone.

The country still does not have a constitutional basis for the process of electing a president; the power structures of the east and west are still divided, leaving the elections open to question.

Libyan Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh noted that while preparations for the presidential election are important, with no budget in place, the Cabinet is left powerless. In response, members of the House of Representatives condemned the unjustified spending of budget funds amid the deteriorating socioeconomic situation in the state. They noted that the transitional Government of National Unity (GNU) “has become a burden for Libyan citizens due to its excessive costs.” Deputies pointed to the lack of coordination and management that has been required of the GNU since its formation. This, they believe, proves the inability of the Cabinet to manage the state and solve problems with the provision of basic services to the population. In this regard, parliamentarians criticized the statements and actions of Prime Minister Dbeibeh, calling them “irresponsible” and some of his actions threatening the security and civil peace in Libya. In addition, they noticed clear interference in the work of state institutions and encroachment on the authority and efforts of the Joint Military 5+5 Committee. The deputies
concluded that all of the above reasons were sufficient to revoke the vote of confidence in the GNU, stating that its work only “widens the gap between Libyans and sows hatred.”

Under these circumstances, the members of the House of Representatives from the Cyrenaica region proposed to withdraw the vote of confidence from the GNU. A statement signed by 29 deputies said that the government led by Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh did not follow the roadmap provided for in the political agreement. The prime minister was also accused of bias against the eastern region.

In his defense, Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh accused the Libyan National Army commanders of blocking the process, although in fact Benghazi is ready for compromises as soon as Tripoli stops cooperating with radicals. There have also been accusations of links between armed formations supported by the GNU and international terrorist organizations. “There are groups that are involved in smuggling, there are also radical groups. The 99% of regular military personnel in Tripoli do nothing but sit around the house and get their paychecks. Armed groups do not allow them to engage in professional activities, they are not given access to weapons. Behind all the problems in Libya, we believe, are these groups and those who control them from the Muslim Brotherhood (banned in Russia) and a number of states, including Turkey and Qatar,” said Khaled Mahjoub, head of the Libyan National Army Morale Maintenance Directorate.

However, it is not only radical groups that hinder the unification of the Libyan National Army and militias, which are subordinate to Tripoli. Observers point out that there is too much Turkish influence in the west of the country. Ankara does not intend to withdraw its contingent and pro-Turkish radicals from Libya, and the withdrawal of foreign troops is one of the main conditions of the unification process.

Continuing its efforts to hold ground in western Libya, Turkey welcomed the appointment of Salah al-Namroush, former defense minister of the disbanded Government of National Accord (GNA), as head of the new West Coast Military District. Ankara, according to Africa Intelligence, is counting on the support of the general to strengthen its position in the region, especially taking into account the fact that the Al-Watiya base under the control of the Turkish military is located in the territory under his jurisdiction. Salah al-Namroush comes from the city of al-Zawiya and is close to the chairman of the Supreme Council of State (SCS), Khaled al-Mishri, as well as the deputy head of the Presidential Council, Abdullah al-Lafi. The publication believes that he could be a valuable ally for Ankara as its relations with Tripoli continue to deteriorate.

Recall that in mid-August the joint military 5+5 committee once again called on Turkey to withdraw its troops from Libya, pointing to the illegality of their presence in the west of the country. Ankara continues to insist on the legitimacy of the military presence, citing a memorandum of understanding with the former GNA, officially suspended in accordance with the Geneva Treaty of 2020, which provides for a peaceful solution to the situation in Libya and the return of all foreign troops to their homeland. Under these circumstances, according to Africa Intelligence, it is possible that Turkey intends to use Salah al-Namroush to make a new agreement with the Transitional Government of National Unity headed by Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, with his help, against the background of the approaching presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for December 24.

In the face of recent intensified internal strife and political struggle, this North African country intends to convene an international conference involving the UN and several neighboring countries in support of peace and security in Libya, although the exact date and venue have not yet been specified. According to a statement from the Libyan Foreign Ministry, the summit will focus on the initiative for stability in the region, launched by the Government of National Unity in June 2021, and the participants will also discuss “the creation of practical mechanisms for the implementation of the provisions of the first and second Berlin conferences.”

To prepare for the conference, GNU Foreign Minister Najla Mangoush met with UN Secretary General’s Special Envoy to Libya Jan Kubiš on August 23. The parties emphasized the need to move forward with the implementation of the results of the Political Dialogue Forum and to work in support of the Joint Military Committee 5+5 efforts to strengthen the ceasefire and unify the defense establishment. They also discussed preparations for general elections and the measures taken by the government in this regard.

Najla Mangoush paid an official visit to Moscow on August 19, thanking the Russian leadership for its consistent efforts to promote the political process in this North African country. During a joint press conference after a meeting in Moscow with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Mangoush stressed Moscow’s readiness to assist in the withdrawal of foreign armed units from the territory of an African state and the unification of its power structures. Foreign forces and mercenaries must necessarily be withdrawn from Libya, said Foreign Minister Mangoush, stressing that such decisions should not lead to “a repetition of negative lessons of some of our neighbors,” that is,
“an ill-conceived withdrawal of troops and rolling the country into chaos” should not be allowed. According to the head of the Libyan Foreign Ministry, the withdrawal of foreign forces from the republic should be “gradual and synchronous.”

Russian Minister Lavrov also outlined his vision of the situation in Libya: “When the hostilities were still raging, one side, the government in Tripoli, requested military assistance in one part of the region. The second, no less legitimate party, the parliament in Tobruk, requested military assistance from other sources. It was because of the balance of military efforts on the ground, including the efforts of the parties themselves and those who assisted them, that it was possible to reach a cease-fire.” Now, according to the head of the Russian Foreign Ministry, the withdrawal of troops must be carried out in such a way that at no stage would any party gain an advantage. Sergey Lavrov emphasized: “That’s what’s important, and not the attempts to sidetrack the discussion into legitimacy debates.” In summary, Russia is ready to fully support the withdrawal of foreign forces from Libya, but all forces must do so simultaneously and with the current situation in mind. No one wants a repeat of the chaos of Afghanistan.

Valery Kulikov, political expert, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”. 