Libya Amid External and Internal Challenges

As Libya’s first-ever presidential election is approaching on December 24, the situation in that country is becoming increasingly tense.

On September 21, 89 members of Libya’s unicameral parliament passed a vote of no confidence in the Government of National Unity. However, Mohamed al-Raed, a member of the House of Representatives, later said that in his view, the vote of no confidence was not legitimate, as only 89 votes were cast for the vote of no confidence. In contrast, under the rules in force, a minimum of 120 votes is required for such a decision to be passed. Meanwhile, the Libya Observer pointed out that seven MPs had confirmed that the vote of no confidence had been a “fraud by the Parliament Speaker Aguila Saleh.”

On September 21, Libyan Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh called on the people to confront the parliament, expressing no confidence in the government, and came out to the protesters in Martyrs’ Square in downtown Tripoli. However, despite the ruling by parliament, Libya’s National Unity Government of Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh will continue to operate until after the December elections, said Parliamentary spokesman Abdullah Blihaq. “The Cabinet will continue to perform its day-to-day duties as the interim government it originally was,” he said. “Parliament is currently forming a committee to review the work of the cabinet during the previous phase.”

As the advisor to the Libyan Parliament Speaker, Fathi al-Marimi explained, “The continuation of the cabinet as an interim government in the face of a withdrawal of confidence is legal under the internal rules of the House of
Representatives. At the same time, some of its powers are reduced, in particular with regard to international agreements, and its work is limited to internal problems.”

Supporters of the Islamists of the international association Muslim Brotherhood (banned in the Russian Federation) from the Supreme State Council (SSC), which performs consultative functions, attempted to use the controversy between the parliament and the Libyan government. They demanded the postponement of the country’s parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for December. For its part, the House of Representatives Defense and National Security Committee called on the international community to impose sanctions on Khaled al-Mishri, President of the High Council and the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood leader Ali al-Sallabi, accusing the aforementioned individuals of obstructing a peaceful settlement and national referendum. The Committee noted that extremist group representatives and politicians loyal to them increased after adopting the Law on Presidential Elections.

The Muslim Brotherhood’s desire to keep the Turkish contingent and mercenaries on Libyan territory was previously reported, which was confirmed during talks between the President of the High Council and Turkish Minister of National Defense Hulusi Akar in Ankara on September 9. Turkey, for its part, continues to rely on the role of militias in protecting its interests on Libyan territory, seeking to reinvigorate the agreements made in late 2019 with the disbanded Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA). Concerned if the people do not vote for their candidates on December 24, the Muslim Brotherhood and Ankara realize that in this case, they will have to forget about Libya. In order to avoid such a negative outcome, politicians and members of the High Council loyal to them are actively making efforts to preserve the crisis in the country, even going so far as resorting to open threats. For instance, Khalid al-Mishri, Chairman of the High Council of State, had previously threatened to use force if a candidate displeasing the Ikhwan was nominated for the presidency. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood has hinted at its readiness to switch to armed methods of struggle in the country, including the use of external support. The Muslim Brotherhood had already resorted to such a strategy in 2014, plunging the country into a war called Libya Dawn, occupying the capital Tripoli when the people elected the House of Representatives. One of the most prominent leaders of the operation at the time was Fathi Bashagha, the former Interior Minister in the Fayez Sarraj government supported by Turkey.

Meanwhile, the High National Election Commission of Libya has completed the registration of citizens living abroad for the election, and the formation of candidates for the election has entered an active phase. The commander of the Libyan National Army, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, has temporarily resigned and intends to run as a candidate in the presidential elections. Army officials said the widely supported Libyan tribal field marshal intends to pursue his objectives, chief among which is “further cleansing the country of terrorist groups.” According to some regional observers, Haftar’s political ambitions could lead to a new escalation in Libya, up to and including armed confrontation. The Muslim Brotherhood is especially apprehensive about a possible victory of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar in the elections and believes they will be ousted from the political scene if he does. But they are also well aware that the Libyan people will not accept their candidates, knowing that the latter belongs to the Muslim Brotherhood. According to estimates by some Libyan observers, to resolve this dilemma, the organization may resort to declaring its general rejection of any party from participating in the elections, therefore attempting to open the door to supporters of the former regime, with whom the Ikhwan hope to reach a tentative agreement. They will support the election campaign as a unified movement, using slogans in favor of reconciliation, fraternity, and rejection of dictatorship. If they win, they will eventually share power in the country.

Against the backdrop of a shaky and uncertain domestic situation in the country, corrupt practices have intensified. For example, in early September, an employee of the National Oil Corporation (NOC) of Libya published documents on the Web confirming the theft of public money, showing that some of the proceeds were criminally transferred to the accounts of European politicians. The published documents include US Ambassador to Libya Richard Norland, former Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Libya and Head of the United Nations Support Mission Stephanie Williams, top officials of the former Lybian Government of National Accord (GNA) Fayez al-Sarraj and Fathi Bashagha. However, the latter two have been previously repeatedly accused of embezzlement and bribery. According to published data, NOC revenues are supposed to go to the country’s treasury. Still, instead, they are shared among Libyan officials and sent to Europe, the Middle East, and the United States.

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