Libya: Tough Elections During Tough Times

Presidential elections should have been held in Libya on December 24, but now, in a country torn apart by war, acrid feud, and institutional divisions, few believe that the vote will take place at all.

The High National Electoral Commission (HNEC), the body overseeing the vote, stated with great regret that it was unable to announce the final approved candidates due to lingering legal doubts. Since the HNEC opened the door to candidates for the first presidential election in Libya’s history, the process has been undermined by bitter disagreements over the legal basis of the process, its dates and who should be allowed to run, and several controversial figures have stepped forward.

Following the announcement of the Election Commission, the inevitable consequence of the last procedural delay was the postponement of voting day. The first round of the presidential election cannot take place on December 24, as candidates are entitled to two weeks of official campaigning following the publication of the final list of candidates. To complicate matters further, HNEC has yet to set a new date for publishing the final list. The rules governing voting stipulate that the commission must publish the list of candidates two weeks after the relevant judgments and appeals have been issued. On December 2, a Libyan court reinstated Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the son of 40-year-old Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi, as a candidate. His candidacy has become a key source of controversy among Libyans and raised doubts that the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections can help overcome the deep divisions that gripped the country after the violent removal of Gaddafi during the brutal intervention of Western countries led by France in the internal affairs of the Jamahiriya 10 years ago. The International Criminal Court, continuing the Western policy of gross interference in the country’s affairs, reiterated its request to arrest Saif al-Islam for “alleged war crimes”, which he allegedly committed in the fight against Western countries.
However, Saif al-Islam was not the only controversial figure. The current Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, whose office is based in Tripoli and is known for its close ties with Turkey, also sparked controversy when he announced his candidacy. A year ago, Gaddafi promised not to run for this post within the agreements that preceded his appointment as interim prime minister. After nearly seven years of military confrontation between the Tripoli government and the eastern regions controlled by the Libyan National Army, Commander Khalifa Haftar’s decision to run for president also angered some countries in the West. They vowed they would never accept him as president. In connection with these decisive statements, one can ask Western politicians, what about the issues of democracy and what about the Libyan elections? It turns out that the Libyans are obliged to choose not the president who can pull the country out of the dilemma into which the West pushed it, but the one who suits the West. As the saying goes, "we are for democracy, but only for the one that, first of all, suits us."

Analysts warn that conditions have not yet been created for free and fair voting throughout Libya. And despite a year-long ceasefire, several security incidents and force movements have raised fears of renewed conflict. In recent weeks, armed men have blocked access to a court in Sabha, which was considering an appeal against an election commission that rejected Saif al-Islam Gaddafi's claim. In the end, the court reinstated his candidacy, but the incident raised concerns of the interim government and the UN. Interior Minister Khaled Mazen later warned that the interim government could not guarantee security at polling stations. Haftar has been accused of creating a military dictatorship, and few believe that the people of eastern Libya can safely vote against him. “At the moment, there is no minimum threshold for infrastructure and security requirements for free and fair elections,” said Amanda Kadlec, a former member of the UN Panel on Libya. Moreover, the vote has already been clouded by allegations of fraud. Some voters complained on social media that they went to collect their voter registration cards but found that someone had already collected them.

Both the elections of the president and parliament were most of all intended to restore the stability and territorial integrity of Libya. Given the current harsh disagreement over who is eligible to run, there is concern that violence could easily flare up again, whether elections are postponed, or a candidate's victory is ultimately not accepted by an overwhelming majority of Libyans. However, given the renewed commitment of key regional and international actors involved in Libya, postponing the elections for a short period need not necessarily result in renewed hostilities. By the way, this may be because Washington pushed through the appointment of the hardened former American diplomat Stephanie Williams as Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on Libya, who will, first of all, and this is natural, promote the interests of her country. Williams was a key player behind the deal that created a new interim government in Tripoli for the United States and other Western countries. Already, the Western media demagogically declare that there will never be a perfect deal that could make all Libyans happy. Still, if all the key world and regional actors, led by the United States, support Williams in her difficult mission, there is every chance that the elections will nevertheless occur. The leadership that will satisfy the West will be elected.

Parliamentary elections, which were also due to take place on December 24, according to the roadmap agreed by Williams a year ago, have already been postponed and are now scheduled for February. Given that it has been ten years since Libya was practically split in two, if not three, a delay that would have allowed for presidential and parliamentary elections in February is not a bad deal. What matters is a clear commitment by all Libyan parties, especially presidential candidates, to accept the results and work with other parties to reunite the country. Apparently, the United States, after its withdrawal from the Middle East, is very interested in cheap Libyan oil.

Countries in the region and the world that maintain a military presence in Libya to support one rival faction against another must also withdraw their troops from the oil-rich country if Libya's future is to be stable. The claim that Turkey’s military presence, for example, was based on an agreement signed with the previous Libyan government can no longer be sustained. The government in Tripoli, with which Ankara signed a military agreement, was never accepted by all Libyans and approved by their parliament. Therefore, if Turkey is serious about helping Libya and defending its interests with any future government, it, as the Western media teaches Turkish politicians, must withdraw its troops and other mercenaries, whom it has withdrawn from Syria, mostly belonging to the alleged terrorist organizations close to Al-Qaeda and DAESH (both formations are banned in the Russian Federation). And suppose both of these organizations were created, as you know, with the active assistance of the United States. In Libya, these terrorists support Turkey, which, in turn, is not going to concede the positions won by the gentlemen from Washington.

But the most critical issue at present, and many politicians and diplomats agree on this, is that the general impetus for the elections in Libya should not weaken. The most urgent task for Libyan, international and UN officials is to agree to renew the mandate of the current interim government to fill the political vacuum, continue preparing for elections and prevent a return to civil war.
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