The so-called political transition in Libya appears to have no end in sight. The political or interim phase seems to have completely diverged from the UN-sponsored roadmap, which was to culminate in parliamentary and presidential elections on December 24, 2021. But they failed because of sharp contradictions over the eligibility of several major candidates. In response, the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HOR) announced on January 31 that it would accept the list of candidates for a new prime minister’s position from February 8 under the recently adopted nomination mechanism. If this process is set in motion, it will, according to political analysts, further confuse Libya’s already complex political reconciliation process.

Libyan government officials speaking to the press in Tripoli said that current Prime Minister Abdul Hamid al-Dbeibeh would only hand over the government to another elected authority. Observers fear that East-West confrontation over the issue could return the country to the intense polarization that prevailed before the current government was formed and would not be conducive to the peace process. For example, militia groups from Misrata and Zawiya have concentrated their forces around the capital Tripoli to heighten internal tensions and score new points in the complex political struggle that has been continuing on Libyan soil for a year. At least for the moment, many are confident that the situation will not escalate into war again, primarily because the problem this time is not linked to a clash between rival chiefs of staff in Tripoli and Benghazi.

Nevertheless, security violations are always possible, given the institutional East-West duality. The situation could become particularly volatile if HOR elects a prime minister from the west, as observers predict. This could lead to an unprecedented problem. Apart from rival governments in the east and west, there will be rival premiers in the west. Anticipating this, HOR spokesperson Aguila Saleh suggested that Sirte should become the new administrative
capital, thereby keeping a new government out of the fighting in Tripoli. It is still unclear whether political forces will support a new government and therefore what grounds for legitimacy it will have beyond HOR. So far, even the east-based General Command of the Libyan National Army (LNA) has not expressed an opinion on the matter, although it is likely to support the action of the House of Representatives.

In early January, there was an unexpected rapprochement between LNA commander Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, based in Benghazi, former Interior Minister Fathi Bashaga and former Vice-Chairman of the Presidential Council Ahmed Maiteeg, who hails from Misrata. These three men are believed to be the most likely candidates to head a new government. At the same time, there is a strained relationship between Haftar and Dbeibeh, but it has not so far been broken by either party. In this context, it is notable that shortly before HOR announced the opening of nominations for a new prime minister, Dbeibeh met with Libyan Central Bank (LCB) Governor Saddek Omar Elkaber and Presidential Council Chairman Mohammed al-Manfi to discuss bank reunification. This suggests that under any new arrangements, the unified LCB will continue to work with the current interim government, and will have no official relationship with a new government formed by the prime minister.

It is doubtful that the new government will receive much support from abroad. The UN has already expressed concern about the establishment of the new government. The United Nations special adviser on Libya, American Stephanie Williams, clearly reflecting the sole position of Washington, believes that steps in this direction run counter to Libya’s priorities, which are to end endless interim phases and establish a stable and accountable government. She said it was still possible to hold general elections in June 2022 under the roadmap mediated by the UN and that the formation of a new government would prevent this. Williams believes that some Libyan officials are maneuvering to stay in power and are therefore jointly endeavoring to obstruct the political process by staging a “game of musical chairs”.

Apart from opposing the direction taken by HOR, she clearly dislikes the new political alliance that has brought former officials in the west (Bashaga and Maiteeg) in line with Haftar and Saleh. But she also does not support Dbeibeh, whom she accused of “violating his moral obligation” when he ran for president in violation of the roadmap and commitments he made when he became prime minister. More generally, she believes that existing government institutions such as HOR and its counterpart in Tripoli, the High Council of State (HCS), need to change.

The establishment of a new government would raise another question, namely what to do with the Presidential Council, which was formed at the same time as the government. Although the Presidential Council did not require a parliamentary vote of confidence, it is still the governing body linked to the current roadmap. Upcoming political developments in Libya will undoubtedly be shaped by reactions to the establishment of a new government intended to replace Dbeibeh’s, if indeed it happens. Some political analysts predict that HOR will not even be able to meet the quorum needed to vote on a new government.

HOR is deeply divided and many MPs are expected to boycott the next session since they support Dbeibeh or favor continuity with the current government and roadmap. It is quite possible that the boycotters will return to convening separate sessions in Tripoli, as they did during the battle for the capital in 2020. On the other hand, Saleh warned at the January 31 meeting that he would dismiss boycotting MPs and those working in embassies and other positions.

According to the Egyptian weekly Al-Ahram, other international participants in the Berlin Process (an international organization whose aim is the peaceful resolution of the Libyan conflict) have not yet announced their official stance on HOR’s decision to form a new government. This silence indicates considerable confusion, even if statements from Washington and European capitals continue to emphasize the need to maintain momentum leading up to the elections as soon as possible, for fear of an indefinite postponement. But according to many political analysts, much of the blame for this uncertainty lies with the United States, whose spokesperson, Stephanie Williams, promotes the interests of American oil companies and the Pentagon’s military in Libya rather than those of the UN. It is her position with commanding overtones that is destabilizing and subversive to the Libyan peace process.

Libya’s neighbors have long been deeply concerned about the dangerous situation there. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and his Algerian counterpart Abdelmajid Tebboune agreed on the need for Libyans to hold parliamentary and presidential elections simultaneously, signaling that the positions of Cairo and Algeria are in line with UN policy. At a joint press conference after the talks in Cairo, al-Sisi said they also agreed on the need to withdraw mercenaries and foreign troops from Libya in order to restore stability in the country. Cairo, for its part, seeks to maintain the progress made in Libya since the October 2020 ceasefire. It was instrumental in preparing the ground for the ceasefire and has since played a key role in helping Libyans consolidate the agreements reached and achieve the goal of lasting stability. In this regard, Bashaga and Saleh visited Cairo in mid-January, but no clear or
convincing plan emerged to contain the crisis, which began after the cancellation of elections in December. And even events following Algerian President Abdelmajid Tebboune’s visit to Cairo on January 24 show that the main Libyan parties are not interested in holding elections in the foreseeable future.

The path that Libya must take is very hazy indeed. Not only is the HOR in the process of launching a new political process, but the roadmap committee, which was formed after December 24, 2021 and is also in favor of amending the constitution and holding a referendum on it before the elections. This process, which will be followed by new election procedures based on new constitutional provisions, will extend the current interim phase to about two years. All this also means that the roadmap committee will effectively replace the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, which formulated the current roadmap, and this will result in more uncertainty, tension and problems. In short, nothing inspires confidence that Libya will find a safe path to stability any time soon.

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