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A New Interim Government Elected in Libya:

Background and Prospects

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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Introduction

On Friday, 5 February, the Libyan Dialogue Forum finished off the final round of a voting process that elected Mohamed al-Menfi as the head of a three-man presidential council with Musa al-Koni and Abdullah al-Lafi as deputies and Abdul Hamid Dbeibah as prime minister.⁽¹⁾ The forum is considered the most important political initiative to end the political and institutional division in Libya besides the Skhirat agreement but the results took many by surprise and there is an expectation that the new team, unsupported by any significant political forces, will face great challenges ahead.

From Dialogue to Election

The first round of the Libyan Dialogue Forum, under the supervision of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya, was launched in Tunis, on the 9th of last November, with the participation of 75 persons, including 13 members of the House of Representatives, 13 members of the Supreme State Council, and other figures from across the tribal and political spectrum.⁽²⁾ Despite the many reservations about its representative ability, the forum managed, within five days, to come up with a road map for a transitional phase. This includes the consolidation of executive power, divided since 2014, and the implementation of a package of security, military, economic and political measures. The transition is set to end with parliamentary and presidential elections that lead to the establishment of permanent governing institutions during 2021.⁽³⁾

Following the first round in Tunis, the Libyan forum continued virtually, during which the participants agreed after deliberation on the criteria for selecting the leadership positions in the new government; the President, two deputies, and the Prime Minister. The participants travelled to Geneva on 1 February to attend the last round of the forum, where the candidates gave their campaign speeches and the new team that will lead the transitional phase until country-wide elections are held was chosen.

The Electoral Mechanism

The United Nations Support Mission in Libya, in conjunction with the Forum's Advisory Committee, decided on a relatively complex mechanism for nomination and election, hoping to avoid a failure to elect leadership for the transitional phase, or to elect a team that does not meet the conditions agreed upon by the members of the forum in the Tunis round. This meant that the President should represent the east of the country with a deputy from both the west and south, and a Prime Minister from the west. According to this mechanism, all candidates for the Presidency failed to obtain the

1 "Libyan Politicians Welcome the Agreement to Form the Government, but Challenges Looming," *Reuters*, 6/2/2021, accessed on 8/2/2021, at: <https://reut.rs/3p7vN1L>.

2 Walid Al-Talili, "The Libyan Dialogue in Tunisia: 75 Personalities Try to Agree on the Executive Authority," *The New Arab*, 11/9/2020, accessed on 8/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2MBScaG>.

3 "The Libyan Forum Sets December 2021 as Election Date," *Reuters*, 13/11/2020, accessed on 8/2/2021, at: <https://reut.rs/3cLftRE>.



required number of votes in the first round of voting, which took place on the third of this month, despite the Head of the House of Representatives, Aguila Saleh, leading in the eastern region and Head of the Supreme Council of State, Khalid al-Mishri, leading in the west and Abdul-Majid Saif Al-Nasr leading the southern regions.

As was expected, the failure of voting for individuals to settle the race led to the need to vote on joint tickets instead, as the mechanism approved by the UN mission stipulated that each list should include four candidates of the agreed upon compositions. Recommendations and alliances resulted in the submission of four lists to compete in the voting round that took place on 5 February. The second round saw the withdrawal of Khalid Al-Mishri, from the race despite topping the rankings among the western candidates in the first round, and Aguila Saleh uniting with three important political and military figures in one list; the Minister of Interior in the Government of National Accord, Fathi Bashagha, the commander of the Western Military Zone, Osama al-Juwaili, and the southern politician, Abdul-Majid Saif Al-Nasr.

None of the four candidate lists managed to garner 60 percent of the vote; the proportion required to win in the first stage of voting on the lists, Aguila Saleh's list came in first, followed by Mohamed al-Menfi's list, which would go on to win the second round.

The Plot Twist

Until the results of the final round were announced, expectations remained that Aguila Saleh's list would be victorious, given the political, military and social significance of the candidates. Aguila Saleh hails from the influential Obaidat tribe in the Eastern Province and has held, since 2014, the Presidency of Parliament. Fathi Bashagha, from the city of Misurata, has become one of the leading political and security figures in the in the capital and the western region since his appointment as Minister of Interior in the Government of National Accord, and he has a strong influence on a number of security formations in the capital, while Major General Osama al-Juwaili comes from the city of Zintan, and has headed its military council since the revolution, and is a prominent military figure in the western region who played an important role in leading the GNA forces during the war launched by General Haftar in 2019 and 2020.

al-Menfi's ticket's victory over Saleh's coalition shocked the forum. None of the candidates were dominant personalities in the Libyan political and military scenes, with no direct involvement in the ongoing conflict in the country since 2014. Nor did they have loyalties towards one of the parties to the conflict during the recent war launched by retired Major General, Khalifa Haftar, on Tripoli.

Mohamed Yunus al-Menfi hails from the eastern province Menfah tribe, which also produced the leader of the Libyan resistance against the Italian occupation in Cyrenaica, Omar Al-Mukhtar. He was elected to the General National Congress Party in 2012, before he left to join the National Forces Alliance led by Mahmoud Jibril. Since the political division that followed Haftar's Operation Dignity

in 2014 not much is known about al-Menfi until his appointment as Libya's ambassador to Greece, which saw him expelled following the Libyan-Turkish accord on maritime boundaries. Meanwhile, the new Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah is a businessman from the city of Misrata who assumed several responsibilities in major economic institutions under Muammar Gaddafi's regime without any known direct involvement in political affairs. Although he established a movement called "Libya of the Future" last year, his involvement in political action has remained very limited, and he did not publicly respond to the current events in the country.

The personalities chosen to form the new government in Libya are united by their reluctance to engage in any political and military activity since 2014, and in their lack of direct involvement in the bloody conflict that the country witnessed following Haftar's attack on the western region and the capital in 2019 and 2020. Although some of them assumed official responsibilities, whether through membership of the Presidency Council for a limited period (Musa al-Koni), or by working in the GNA's diplomatic corps (al-Menfi) or membership in the House of Representatives (Abdullah al-Lafi), they are more of a technocratic group than a political government. In addition, the presence of the al-Lafi, who comes from Zawiyah, and Dbeibah, from Misrata, satisfies the two cities, whose military formations had a pivotal role in defeating Haftar's forces from the capital and the western region. The choice of Musa Al-Koni, who is descended from the Tuareg tribes in the south appears to be an implicit message that pushing for national unity by opening up to all components of Libyan society and involving them in governance and responsibilities.

A Welcome Progression

The election of the leadership of the new interim government in Libya was widely welcomed, regionally and internationally, most importantly from the United States, which called to "ensure a smooth and constructive handover of all competences and duties to the new unified executive authority," pledging to "hold to account those who threaten stability or undermine the political process in Libya."⁽⁴⁾ Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan pledged, in two phone calls with al-Menfi and Dbeibah, to continue to provide support for Turkey to preserve the unity of Libya and to contribute to the establishment of stability, peace, security and well-being for its people.⁽⁵⁾ The agreement was also welcomed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the League of Arab States, Qatar, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan.⁽⁶⁾

Internally, the head of the GNA, Fayez al-Sarraj, welcomed the new interim government, expressing his hope that it would provide fertile ground for general elections to be held on time so that the foundation for a democratic civil state may be laid down.⁽⁷⁾ Khalid al-Mishri, head of the Supreme

4 "Joint Statement Welcoming the Agreement Reached by the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum," U.S. *Department of State*, 5/2/2021, accessed on 7/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3rzqVnE>.

5 "Erdogan Congratulates the Newly Elected President and Ministers in Libya," *Anadolu Agency*, 6/2/2021, accessed on 7/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3aGNpMr>.

6 "Arab States Welcome the Election of an Interim Government in Libya," *Anadolu Agency*, 2/5/2021, accessed on 7/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/36SDKBT>; "An International and Local Welcome to the New Government in Libya", *The New Arab*, 5/2/2021, accessed on 7/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3q1q6mX>.

7 Muhammad Artima, "Al-Sarraj Praises the Success of Choosing the Government in Libya," *Anadolu Agency*, 5/2/2021, accessed on 7/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3tEMl4i>.

Council of State, described the matter as an important step towards ending the crisis, unifying institutions and ending the division.⁽⁸⁾ Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha, who failed to win the post of prime minister, considered the vote to “embody democracy in its purest form.”⁽⁹⁾ The Tobruk Wing of the House of Representatives, headed by Aguila Saleh, pledged to support the government as soon as it gains confidence in its implementation of the Road Map, especially in preparing for the elections.⁽¹⁰⁾

Obstacles

Despite the messages of support, the new team faces many difficulties. The new Prime Minister, Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, addressed the members of the forum, via video link, pledging to end the conflict, conduct elections based on democratic foundations and work with everyone regardless of ethnicity, sect or region. He also promised to find a solution to electricity and water problems and bring all weapons back under state control, while pursuing education and training as a path to stability, creating jobs for the youth, and improving relations with neighbouring countries.⁽¹¹⁾ The head of the United Nations Mission in Libya, Stephanie Williams, announced that all the candidates signed a pledge in advance to abide by the road map approved by the forum and to hold the parliamentary and presidential elections on 24 December 2021.⁽¹²⁾

Dbeibah’s program appears to pass over the complex crises, confusing the Libyan political, security and social scenes and exceeds, in some aspects, the time limit granted to his government, which is limited to nine months in the event that confidence is granted smoothly. Even then, the primary task of the government is preparing for the elections and maintaining stability. Despite the expected support, choosing the government team will not be an easy task when quotas and political, tribal and regional compromises are the most important factor despite Dbeibah declaring that he would prefer to choose technocrats. Even if he adheres to the three-week deadline granted by the UN mission to form his government, the House of Representatives must grant confidence. This process itself may bear witness to conflicts that lead to a return to the political dialogue forum to ratify the government, as stipulated in the road map. This would cut shorter the government’s already short life.

So far, all internal and external reactions seem to welcome the new executive authority, albeit to varying degrees, but this does not hide the difficulties that awaiting them. It is not yet clear where Haftar stands in the new arrangements, as all members of the new team avoided commenting on this matter despite its importance in determining the outcome of the security and military situation in the country. The fate of Aguila Saleh was also unclear, especially in light of the escalating calls to

8 Facebook, 5/2/2021, accessed on 7/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/36OzaUM>.

9 “Bashagha Congratulates the Winning List Headed by the Government and the Presidential Council,” *Al Wasat*, 5/2/2021, accessed on 7/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2N9D6s7>.

10 “Aguila Saleh: Creating a New Interim Government is a Victory for the Libyan People,” *Al Wasat*, 5/2/2021, seen on 8/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3tAGDAA>.

11 “Who is Dbeibah, Head of the Elected Libyan Government?,” *Al Wasat*, 6/2/2021, accessed on 7/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3pXbKEo>.

12 “Williams: The Candidates Signed a Commitment to Abide By the Road Map, the Election Date and the Election Results,” *Al Wasat*, 3/2/2021, accessed on 7/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/39ZJ7AK>.



grant the position of Head of the House of Representatives to one of the southern representatives now that the presidency has been awarded to a candidate from the east, and the position of Prime Minister to a candidate from the west. It is a matter governed by very complex tribal and regional balances and compromises that will no doubt confound the road map.

Conclusion

Although the selection of a new interim government in Libya was expected given the United Nations mission's insistence, the victory of the Mohamad al-Menfi's joint ticket took the forum and onlookers by surprise. Despite domestic, regional and international praise, the intertwining political, security and economic difficulties, the fragility of tribal and regional balances, the narrow timeframe, and external interference, are potential obstacles and could prevent general elections being held on time. This opens the door to a new extension of the transition phase. The failure to implement the Skhirat Agreement, despite the internal and international support it received, represents an ominous precedent.