

5 luglio 2012

Libya's elections: current environment and perspectives

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By any measure, the last 16 months have been extraordinary in Libya, and by the time this commentary is issued, they will have held their first real elections since the early 1960's when all the candidates had to run as independents. Unlike the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, Libya's required a protracted and bloody civil war between Gheddafi loyalists and the rest of the country, the interventions of the UN and NATO, and the military involvement of several nations. With the possible exception of Qatar, every single country that got involved in Libya's civil war was torn between supporters and detractors of the intervention.

Again, unlike Tunisia and Egypt, the outcome of the revolution and of the upcoming elections has a far greater immediate impact on outside nations for two prime reasons:

1. Libya is an important regular supplier of oil and gas to many countries.
2. With this income, Libya imports many products and services supplied by countries with large investments, infrastructure and liabilities in Libya.

Hence, there is a vested interest outside Libya for some sort of gauge of the possible outcomes and likely scenarios following the elections of 7th July.

After getting rid of one of the most despotic and murderous tyrants in modern history, Libya found itself without practically any of the institutions normally present in a functioning state: Gheddafi had systematically destroyed them - even the post office was inoperative. So, nobody should be surprised that it is turning out to be so difficult to rebuild the state, hold elections and write a constitution, but fortunately petroleum money is flowing in.

The first thing that strikes everyone about these elections, both inside and outside Libya, is the utter lack of reliable information about them, the options, the candidates and the parties, besides their raw numbers. An English-language online daily newspaper¹ in Tripoli is bravely trying to shed some light on the elections with a series of articles about them and the main parties participating. However, in the absence of a track record, except for the National Front Party, or of reliable polls of any kind, most conclusions and predictions have to be inferred indirectly, extrapolating past events as pointers to indicate likely outcomes.

¹ <http://www.libyaherald.com/>

Issues

Given the current composition and structure of Libyan society and its brief history since independence, the two principal issues at stake turn out to be federalism and religion.

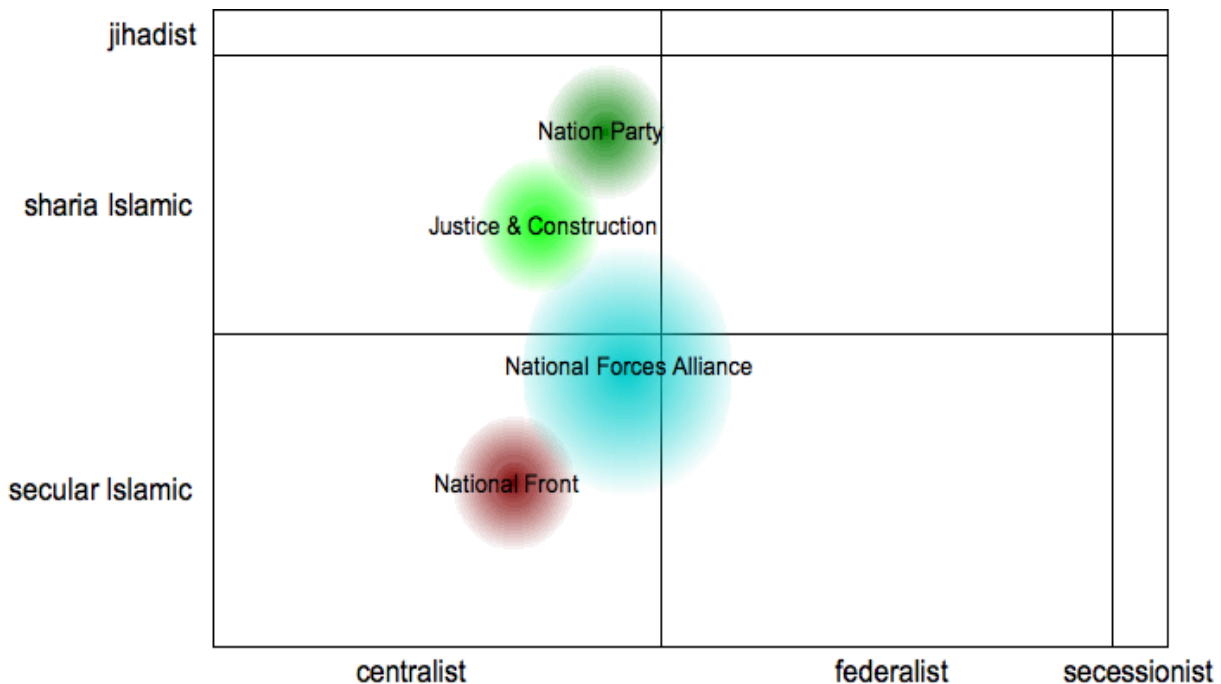
From independence in 1951 Libya was a federal "United Libyan Kingdom" and then it was centralized as the Kingdom of Libya in 1963. For the upcoming elections, the 2500+ independent candidates and 1200+ candidates fielded by 140+ parties range from centralists, to federalists to secessionists and everything in between. In a symbolic gesture on the 3rd of July, the city of Zawiyah offered its 8 seats in the future National Conference to the city of Benghazi to appease their secessionist aspirations.

The religious issue is about the role of Islam in politics, law and society, and ranges from secular Islam, to sharia Islam to jihadism. Secularism, in the sense of French constitutional *laïcité*, is not tolerated by politicians in most countries, Libya included, so the issue is restricted to the degree of coincidence or separation between mosque and state, but it appears to be of crucial importance.

To get an idea of what is meant by secular Islam, there is an interesting interview² of Ahmed Shabani of the Democratic Party of Libya, which will not be taking part in the elections.

Parties

Of the countless parties which are fielding candidates, the mainstream media think that four are well positioned nationwide; in order of number of candidates fielded: the Justice & Construction Party, the National Forces Alliance, the Nation Party and the National Front. The following chart illustrates the *perceived* position of these parties in a political graph of the two issues mentioned above.



² <http://www.tripolipost.com/article/detail.asp?c=1&i=8673>

Most of the rest of the parties would fall on the left side of the graph, but there is some diversity and even some exotic ones such as the Democracy Party of Benghazi whose website³ until recently, proposed abolishing prisons and reducing all sentences to lashes (<100 !) and reparations to victims. Some parties, notably the Justice and Construction Party, are also fielding their own people⁴ as "independents" in a bid to capture additional seats in the conference.

Threats to stability

Short and medium term stability in Libya will continue to be precarious because these are only interim elections while a constitution is drafted. The resulting administration will have legitimacy and a mandate, but the many dissatisfied sectors will continue to put pressure on the new legislators, possibly by force, to get concessions in the constitution. This is currently happening, for example in Wadi al-Ahmar, where the "Cyrenaica Transitional Council" (CTC) has set up a roadblock on the main east-west highway.

The following table lists some possible threats to short and medium term stability, with an indication of the level – i.e., the likelihood of the threat occurring: 1 = very unlikely; 5 = very likely.

Threat	Level	Pointers
Terrorist attacks around elections	4	Recent and continuing attacks
Widespread electoral fraud	1	Many observers; many players
Widespread rejection of electoral results	2	Dissatisfaction in east and south, and among Tubu & Berber
Increase in armed confrontations	3	Steady increase over last few months in central towns, and in Zwara, Kufra and Sebha
Failure to dissolve militias	5	They have become more assertive and a means to putting pressure; recent skirmishes; takeover of Tripoli airport; CTC roadblocks
Failure to disarm civilians	4	After 42 years of oppression, individuals won't relinquish arms until they perceive long-term stability

The pointers merely list indicators supporting the level assignment.

Conclusions

There will be hiccups and obstacles during and after the elections and the biggest single threat to stability will continue to come from the large number of heavily armed militias which have no place in a functioning state - which should also have functioning police and armed forces. If the new administration manages to dissolve them or absorb them into the new armed forces, then political pressure and disputes will take place in parliament where they belong.

³ <http://hezbollahlibya.webs.com/>

⁴ <http://www.libyaherald.com/independent-individual-candidate-campaigns-with-backing-of-justice-construction-pa>

One can be mildly optimistic using the civil war as a pointer: the liberation forces were always surprisingly cautious with infrastructure (electric power stations, electric grid, oil fields, pipelines, refineries and terminals) i.e., unlike other countries, Libya has too much to lose with descent into chaos. Libya's PCI is the highest in Africa, and well administered and distributed could afford a high standard of living. The majority of Libyans agree on this.

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Le pubblicazioni online dell'ISPI sono realizzate anche grazie al sostegno della Fondazione Cariplo.

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