The Libyan Revolution and the Rise of Local Power Centres

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Among the Arab Spring's diverse developments, the Libyan revolution took a singular course. No other country in the region saw the state apparatus split and a rebel leadership emerge that successfully laid claim to representing the State. The complete breakdown of the Libyan regime is unique in the context of the Arab Spring. Contrary to developments in neighbouring States, there is almost no continuity between the regime's executive institutions and those of the transitional authorities.

A defining aspect of the Libyan revolution was the emergence of local power centres in the wake of the State's collapse. As Libya moves towards elections to a General Assembly, scheduled for June 2012, cities, tribes and militias are vying for influence at the local and national levels. Broader, nationwide coalitions and forces have yet to emerge. The National Transitional Council (NTC) and its government are facing a crisis of legitimacy: they are largely detached from the local forces shaping events on the ground and unable to control them. The challenges facing Libya are more fundamental than in most other countries of the region: as elsewhere, both the domestic balance of power and the rules of the game are being renegotiated. But in Libya, the additional challenge amounts to nothing less than building an entirely new State.

The NTC and the Revolutionary Forces

The "17 February Revolution" was triggered primarily by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. On 15 February 2011, a small group of protesters in Benghazi demanded justice for the victims of a 1996 prison massacre. The same day, youth in the towns of Bayda and Darna (Green Mountains) and Zintan (Nafusa Mountains) set government buildings on fire and called for the regime's demise. Within days, the unrest also spread to the capital Tripoli and other cities in the north-west.

Two developments were decisive for the revolt to escalate into a revolution. The first was the regime's violent response to the protests. The more protesters were killed by the security forces, the more quickly political, military and tribal leaders joined the revolt to protect their families and cities. Whatever initial demands protesters may have had, they became irrelevant once regime forces had killed hundreds of people. Civilians armed themselves, and whole army units defected. The reason for this development lay in the strength of local, family and tribal loyalties, as well as the weakness of state institutions. As a result, the country found itself in a state of civil war within two weeks of the protests erupting. The second key development was the establishment of the NTC in Benghazi in early March. With the NTC, an elitist leadership comprising a coalition of regime defectors and dissidents placed itself at the head of an initially unorganised uprising.

From the outset, the political leadership and the forces that led the revolution on the ground were united only by their goal to topple the regime. Within the NTC, its Executive Office and its diplomatic representatives abroad, the clearest divide ran between former senior regime officials and longstanding members of the exiled opposition. But neither camp was by any means homogenous. The former included close Gaddafi aides and senior military officers, former Gaddafi confidants who had seen exile or imprisonment, and technocrats and reformers who had only briefly occupied top positions (such as NTC

chairman Mustafa Abdul Jalil or the head of its Executive Office, Mahmoud Jibril).

Long-time members of the exiled opposition dominated the other main group in the NTC. They included many representatives of the aristocratic and bourgeois families who played a leading role under the monarchy, but were marginalised under Gaddafi (Lacher, 2011). They were joined by former members of the exiled opposition from less prominent backgrounds (such as Oil and Finance Minister Ali Tarhouni), as well as representatives of the educated elite – university professors and lawyers – who had remained in Libya throughout Gaddafi's rule, such as NTC vice-chairman Abdel Hafiz Ghoga. Across all social divides, Libyans from the north-east were strongly overrepresented in the NTC and its Executive Office until the fall of Tripoli in August 2011.

The most significant rift, however, emerged between this elitist leadership and the forces leading the revolutionary struggle on the ground. The NTC largely (and successfully) focused on obtaining international recognition, while investing much less effort in coordinating and supporting local revolutionary forces. In the Cyrenaica, the eastern Oases, the Nafusa Mountains and Misrata, a growing number of revolutionary brigades formed on the basis of individual tribes or cities. In Misrata and Benghazi, dozens of different groups emerged. Led by tribal notables, businessmen or defected army officers, the revolutionary brigades were mainly recruited among civilians. The initial goal of most brigades that formed outside the Cyrenaica was to protect their cities. The loyalties of these brigades lay first and foremost with their own tribes and cities. Several brigades that fought on the eastern front were recruited from people close to the defunct Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), which had led an insurgency against the regime during the 1990s and had a strong local base in the north-eastern cities of Darnah and Bayda. As the conflict evolved, local military councils emerged to coordinate this plethora of militias, with varying degrees of success.

The NTC completely failed to control these developments. In the east, the brigades refused to submit to the command structures of the defected army units. Some brigades were loosely tied to the NTC's Defence and Interior Ministries, while others operated entirely independently. In Misrata and the Nafusa Mountains, the NTC had even less influence, provided little support, and only belatedly tried to

establish closer relations (ICG, 2011). Local actors even established separate foreign relations: local brigades in Misrata and the Nafusa Mountains, as well as individual militia leaders such as Abdel Hakim Belhadj (a former LIFG leader), received backing from Qatar. The NTC's loss of control over the military forces leading the revolution was first highlighted by the murder of the defected army units' Chief of Staff, General Abdel Fattah Younes, in July 2011. Although the details remain murky, Younes was apparently assassinated by members of a revolutionary brigade.

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The struggle of individual cities and tribes against the regime gave rise to the dynamics that continue to define the Libyan transition: the emergence of local power centres, tensions between the revolutionary base and the political leadership, as well as rivalries between armed groups from different tribes and cities.

The NTC's Weakness and Growing Rivalries after the Regime's Collapse

After the fall of Tripoli in late August 2011, the defeat of the regime's remnants in Sirte and Bani Walid, and the proclamation of Libya's liberation on 23 October, the NTC entered a crisis of legitimacy. Short of funds, reluctant to press for the release of frozen Libyan assets in the absence of adequate control structures, and having taken over a collapsed state apparatus, the NTC failed to quickly get the administration and economy working again. Militia leaders and the influential cleric Ali Sallabi harshly criticised the role of former regime officials or liberal figures such as Mahmoud Jibril or Ali Tarhouni on the NTC and its Executive Office.

The transitional government formed, after much wrangling, in mid-November 2011 saw the departure of many previously prominent players. Like Prime Min-

ister Abdel Rahim al-Kib, most new ministers were technocrats without a prominent political background. Significantly, though, the influence of local power centres and brigades was reflected in the appointments of Osama al-Juwali and Fawzi Abdel Aal as Defence and Interior Ministers respectively. Both had played a leading role in the struggle in their home towns of Zintan and Misrata, which emerged as military heavyweights during the civil war. Moreover, between August and December 2011, the NTC significantly broadened its membership, asking local councils to name representatives for the NTC based on a formula that sought to ensure that all regions and towns were adequately represented.

Yet, these developments failed to close the gap between the NTC and the revolutionary forces, both civil and military. Suspicion grew of the transitional government's use of public funds. In December, protests erupted in Benghazi, Tripoli and other cities, targeting the NTC and its government as ineffective, opaque and unaccountable. The targets of popular resentment also widened to include some of the local councils, most of which, like the NTC, were self-appointed. In Misrata, local elections were held in February 2012, after the local council had become the target of popular resentment. This triggered similar spontaneous initiatives for local elections in other major cities.

With the fall of the regime, the revolutionary forces attained the goal that had held their heterogeneous coalition together. Power struggles intensified thereafter, in which the main actors were proponents of individual cities or tribes. Militia leaders from Misrata and Zintan began demanding greater political influence soon after Tripoli had fallen (Haimzadeh, 2011). Several tribes and cities protested against their alleged marginalisation in the transitional government. Local power brokers in Benghazi and Misrata began lobbying for the relocation of important ministries and parts of the National Oil Corporation (NOC) to their cities.

In addition, local actors were increasingly using their military weight to exert influence. In Tripoli, dozens of militias from the capital and other cities had been competing with each other since late August 2011. In addition to the Tripoli Military Council headed by Belhadj, militias from Zintan and Misrata kept a strong presence. Repeated clashes in the capital demonstrated the NTC's inability to impose its authority. While some of these clashes had a political dimension, most were spontaneous incidents trig-

gered essentially by indiscipline and hot-headedness among revolutionary brigades. However, militias from Zintan and Misrata also used their presence in the capital to search for people they suspected of having participated in wartime atrocities, leading to cases of torture, disappearances and killings (Amnesty International, 2012).

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Outside Tripoli, serious conflicts developed between armed local actors. Between November 2011 and March 2012, heavy fighting erupted in several regions, including between Warshefana and Zawiya militias, between Mashashiya and Zintan, between Asabea and Gharyan, between Tobu and Zuwayya militias in Kufra, and between a revolutionary brigade and the tribal establishment in Bani Walid. Among the most common triggers for such conflicts were attempts by one group to arrest or disarm members of another community. Many of these conflicts were therefore directly related to the NTC's slowness in advancing transitional justice. Another common feature was attempts by one party to label their adversaries as "Gaddafi loyalists," which often occurred when the conflict involved tribal constituencies that had played a key role in the former regime's security apparatus. Resentment also grew among the inhabitants of Sirte and Bani Walid – mainly Warfalla and Gaddadfa – whose cities had been severely destroyed and ransacked during their capture by revolutionary brigades from Misrata and Tripoli. Since both tribes had dominated Gaddafi's security apparatus, many of their members had been captured by revolutionary forces. In sum, the civil war had laid the groundwork for new conflicts that the NTC was unable to contain.

Outlook: Local Power Centres and National Political Forces

According to the NTC's Constitutional Declaration of August 2011, which lays out the timetable for the transition, elections to a General Assembly are to

take place within eight months of Libya's declaration of liberation, i.e. by 23 June 2012. The assembly is to appoint a provisional government and a constituent committee, which will have four months to produce a draft constitution, according to an amended timeframe adopted in March 2012. New elections are to be held seven months after the constitution has been adopted by referendum.

The NTC and its government are in a position of weakness, raising serious questions about their ability to tackle the acute challenges facing the country: the disarmament and demobilisation of revolutionary brigades and other armed groups, the establishment of a new army and security apparatus, and advancing transitional justice. There is much to suggest that local actors will continue to play a key role during the transition and will be reluctant to relinquish their newly acquired power to the central government (Hüsken, 2012). Many revolutionary brigades refuse to hand in their weapons before national institutions can provide security and a fully legitimate government has taken office. But even once these conditions have been met, some cities or tribes – or individual players in local power centres – could maintain their militias, in order to exert political influence when needed.

The transitional process could also provide opportunities for local actors to transform their military weight into political power. According to the electoral law adopted in early February 2012, three-fifths of the General Assembly's 200 representatives are to be elected on the basis of local constituencies, while the remainder will enter the assembly through national party lists. Local and tribal interests will therefore feature strongly in both electoral campaigning and post-election politics. The transition is set to proceed under a loose, fractious coalition of competing local interests rather than a coherent central leadership. Local actors could also seek to push through a decentralised model of governance and budget allocation in the constitution-making process, in order to cement their power.

The dominance of local power centres means that initiatives for autonomy in Libya's north-east, and for a federal political system, are unlikely to gain traction. Participants at a conference in Benghazi in March 2012 decided to establish a regional council that would govern the Cyrenaica autonomously. However, the conference triggered a major backlash from key actors in the north-east, including local councils, militias, tribal leaders and political parties, all of whom refused to recognise the new council. The autonomy initiative therefore has little chance of succeeding.

As of March 2012, nationwide political forces are only beginning to organise. Even the various Islamist currents, which have the greatest potential to emerge as national forces, have yet to develop into well-defined parties; the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood co-founded a party in early March. However, the transformation of Libya's political landscape has only just begun. The weak central government is less likely than newly emerging national political forces to challenge local actors' power. The backroom politics of local tribal elites could quickly end up frustrating the predominantly young members of revolutionary brigades, who could represent an important constituency for national movements.

In the meantime, however, the predominance of local power centres also prevents conflicts and power struggles from widening into larger-scale confrontations. To date, the parties to local conflicts have not attempted to form regional or national coalitions. Interests and patterns of mobilisation rooted in the local level are likely to prevent Libya from descending into another civil war.

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