

Libya 2023: A State of Chronic Impasse

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Over 2023, new chapters were written in the Libyan political scene that, in essence, are no different from those of previous years. New local actors emerged, others fell, and we witnessed a series of highly significant events. Yet the most salient features of the country's inter-elite conflict followed their usual course.

Having adapted to the new circumstances, the rivalry between the dual seats of government in the west, or Tripolitania, based out of the capital city of Tripoli, and in classical Cyrenaica in the east, headquartered in Benghazi, seems to be increasingly entrenched. Relations between the eastern and western halves have undergone moments of great tension over the period, including cross-accusations of betrayal of the Libyan national cause or submission to foreign interests, as the case may be. But the most delicate situation may be that registered within the eastern region, controlled by the Tobruk-based parliament (House of Representatives, HR) and the so-called Government of National Stability.

There, the rift between the speaker of the HR, Aguila Saleh, and General Khalifa Haftar, leader of the like-wise Tobruk-based Libyan National Army, over the Prime Minister of the eastern government, Fathi Bashagha, ended in an apparent victory for the military. Bashagha had been appointed by the HR in March 2022 and tasked with ending the mandate of his "counterpart" in the west, Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, Prime Minister of the Government of National Unity (GNU). In Benghazi's version, Dbeibah's term had expired when the 2021 elections were called off, and he should thus be removed. Bashagha launched a military offensive that surrounded various districts of

Tripoli and even travelled to the city himself with some of his ministers to claim unified command of the country. But pro-Dbeibah militias held off the attack and he was forced to return to Benghazi empty-handed. He soon fell out of favour in the eyes of Haftar, who engineered his downfall despite Saleh's initial efforts to save him. Finally, in May 2023, the HR had to force him out, given the inhibition of Saleh, who skipped the vote of no confidence against his supposed ally. Osama Hammad was elected as the new Prime Minister of the Stability Government – with the telling title of "executive appointed by the House of Representatives" – and was similarly tasked with definitively replacing Dbeibah's Government of National Unity, which, according to Tobruk, was no longer qualified to manage national affairs.

Bashagha's fall took place just one month before the deadline set by the United Nations for the two sides to reach an agreement on the procedures for the presidential and legislative elections scheduled for 2023. As in 2021, the call was ultimately postponed due to the significant differences between the groups in power in the two regions. The obvious tensions within the eastern political elites and rumours of an alleged rapprochement between Haftar and Dbeibah, despite the efforts of other key players on both sides, undoubtedly played an important role in this new postponement.

The Derna Tragedy

The second key event to mark the Libyan political and institutional course was the floods in the coastal city of Derna, in the eastern half of the country. On 11 September, the "medicane" Storm Daniel caused two dams on the Wadi Derna river to collapse, leading to the death and disappearance of more than

twenty thousand people. Around one-quarter of the city's total area is estimated to have been reduced to rubble. Other towns and cities, including Benghazi itself, were also damaged.

The failure of the civil rescue services and authorities in the east to act, coupled with reports that the facilities of the dams in question were badly deteriorated, inflamed the inhabitants of Derna and adjacent areas. Months earlier, local officials had assured them that there was no danger, ruling out the need for any type of improvement works.

Compounding matters, there were numerous complaints about the distribution of humanitarian aid; some associations even claimed that local authorities had hindered victims' access to it. The Public Prosecutor's Office found evidence of negligence on the part of more than 10 local officials, and widespread outrage led to a series of riots, including the burning down of the house of the mayor, who was forced to resign. The mismanagement of the catastrophe damaged the national and international image of the eastern institutions and, moreover, enabled the Prime Minister of the "other" government, Dbeibah, to emerge as the new leader of a *seemingly* unified Libya, capable of providing solutions to these types of national disasters.

Dbeibah or Virtue by Necessity

In the days following the flood, Dbeibah announced a battery of measures to support the victims. They included, among others, payment of an additional month's salary to civil servants in the affected towns and increased aid for families, especially women. A skilled businessman well-acquainted with Libya's social and economic dynamics since the Gaddafi era, Dbeibah understood the opportunity the moment offered and dug deep into the wound of the internal disputes between the centres of power in the east, claiming a legitimacy for his government that had been denied to it for years.

The GNU Prime Minister also had another card to play, of considerable significance in certain Benghazi political circles: the activity of his nephew, Ibrahim Dbeibah, whom some consider the real strong man in the west and who is hostile to any electoral process that would require a change of prime minister in Tripoli. On good terms with Haftar himself,

thanks to his ties to the latter's son, Saddam, Ibrahim has managed, with Egyptian mediation, to carve out a sort of Dbeibah-Haftar third way. This may be of great use to both in their personal disputes with other influential players in their respective areas of influence. It had already been seen, for instance, that the eastern civilian authorities were the main institutional victims of the Derna crisis; Haftar and Dbeibah himself sought to become the temporary solution to a problem caused by the chronic government sclerosis, so well-known and long-suffered by the Libyans.

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For Dbeibah has also had to face internal opposition, led by Khaled al-Mishri, head of the High Council of State (HCS), the highest legislative body in the western region. Al-Mishri had also called for Dbeibah's departure, arguing that the calling off of the 2021 elections disqualified him for the office. Furthermore, he reached an agreement with the Benghazi-based HR to set up the "6+6 committee," in which representatives from both institutions would have to agree on new election regulations. Once again, Dbeibah, this time, with the support of the Presidential Council of Mohammed al-Menfi, in charge of the national reconciliation process, ended up neutralizing the opposition sector in the HCS and sponsored the candidacy of its ally Mohammad Takala, who, in August 2023, defeated al-Mishri in an internal vote. Subsequently, Dbeibah would have to face yet another challenge, this time, in the form of Central Bank Governor Sadiq al Kabir, who favoured a return to a unified national budget for the two regions.

Negotiating Today to Continue Negotiating Tomorrow

In any case, Dbeibah need not have been overly concerned about this "strange" collusion between the

two regions' legislative bodies: aside from their shared hostility towards the GNU Prime Minister, they proved unable, in two years, to lay the groundwork for new elections. Indeed, the parameters of the Libyan crisis largely revolve around the electoral fiasco, whether in 2021 or in 2024 (Casani and Mesa, 2023: 171-172). The proliferation of organizations and institutions on both sides reinforces the institutional schizophrenia, while, at the same time, turning proposed solutions into a convoluted process. The leaders of legislative, executive and advisory bodies from the two sides have held constant meetings in neighbouring countries, under the auspices of the United Nations or regional organizations such as the Arab League. Since 2022, the special representative of the UN Secretary-General for Libya Abdoulaye Bathily has managed only to extract pledges from the parties to keep negotiating and to develop roadmaps that end up as mere empty words. Meanwhile, European and Arab countries with interests in Libya put pressure on their respective local allies to ensure advantageous trade or migration agreements or settle their geostrategic rivalries in Libyan territory. This is the case of the Gulf powers, the United Arab Emirates versus Qatar, or Turkey versus a Euro-Mediterranean alliance led by Greece and, depending on the circumstances, Italy. To increase their chances of remaining in power, the various elites must thus strengthen their organic alliances with large countries, such as Haftar's with Russia or the Tripolitarians' with Turkey. But some alliances appear to be shifting, such as Egypt's with the eastern government – hence, Cairo's rapprochement not long ago with its until recently enemy Dbeibah – or the Americans' with Dbeibah, whom they have reapproached for his ambiguous stance vis-à-vis Moscow and Beijing.

Does Anyone Really Want Elections in Libya?

In conclusion, the prevailing impression is that the local power groups prefer this status quo of “neither elections nor reunification” (Collombier, 48-51). One way or another, the two governments manage to keep the state machinery running in a country in which most nationals work in the civil service and thus continue to collect their salaries, albeit with delays, which account for two-thirds of the national budget. This may be one of the few aspects on which everyone agrees, along

with the distribution of remittances from the National Oil Corporation, further bolstered by the rising international prices of crude oil and gas. Even in the delicate matter of the funds allocated to the Government of National Unity, blocked by the House of Representatives in Tobruk (on which the general budgets depend), the Central Bank has found a solution, namely, generating extra funding with special budget items. There is also the thorny matter of the armed militias, or the military units inherited by Haftar from the former national army, which have become a decisive political actor. These paramilitary groups are actively involved in controlling the internment centres for illegal immigrants and the networks that aim to smuggle them across the Mediterranean. Or they levy “special taxes” on oil installations and trade in goods along the main roads and at border posts. The connivance of foreign countries in what has been called the “state-militia collusion,” especially in the management of the migratory phenomenon, as in the case of Italy, makes it impossible not to question the ethical principles of the international community's approach to Libya (Bish, 2024). A persistent demand of the Libyan population is the precariousness of the infrastructures or the power cuts. Also, the idea that reunification would help mitigate the country's main problems. The problem is that Libya's civilian and paramilitary elites do not seem to have the same opinion.

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