

# LIBYA'S LEADERSHIP CHAOS: ABOUT FAILED ELECTIONS AND SHIFTING ALLIANCES

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15 MARCH 2022

2021 Oct 21  
Libya Stabilization  
Conference

مؤتمر دعم  
استقرار ليبيا  
21 أكتوبر 2021



**Abstract:** While the established conflict lines in Libya between the Western-based forces in Tripoli and the Eastern-based forces in Benghazi and Tobruk persist, recent developments have put their relevance for Libya's future into question. Analysts are still trying to understand the implications not just nationally, but also with regard to the plethora of external actors with interests in the country. This brief aims to provide general insights on the Libyan developments, offering an overview of the key Libyan actors based on their bids for presidency, and weaving in the implications for foreign countries as well as international bodies, such as the United Nations (UN). It argues that the long-term consequences of the recent shifts in alliances are unclear at this moment in time, however the immediate political impact is clear: the Libyan population is once again caught up in a power play of an increasingly self-focused political elite.

One year ago, Libya seemed to be potentially headed towards a procedural democracy as a United Nations-led negotiation process (LPDF) had produced a government nominally representing all parts of the country. This Government of National Unity (GNU) headed by Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah was designed to be a transition government that would be replaced after elections to grant electoral legitimacy for new representatives and institutions.

Following these tentative steps towards unity, the country is once again experiencing internal power plays, with two rival prime ministers claiming power.<sup>1</sup> However, the alliances are reconfiguring themselves and the previously simplistic division of Western Libya against Eastern Libya is losing relevance. This is because Libya's de-facto power broker of the East, General Khalifa Haftar, is now backing Fathi Bashagha, the interior minister of the former government, the Government of National Accord (GNA), and a prominent politician from Misrata, one of Libya's most powerful cities in the West.<sup>2</sup> With this move, Haftar might be hoping to break the western front against him, which is crucial for his ambitions. Furthermore, Misrata's militias played a key role in eventually fending off Haftar's latest offensive on Libya's capital, Tripoli, in 2020. Still, this alignment is far from stable as it relies on the commitment of militias in both Misrata and Tripoli who often follow local incentives.

The first signs of serious trouble for Libya emerged late last year, when the presidential elections scheduled for 24 December 2021, the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its independence from Italy, were postponed indefinitely. Underlying the delay was a disagreement over eligible candidates and the ground rules for holding the vote. National and international observers were disappointed by the lack of willingness to provide the High Commission for National Elections (HNEC) with a legal framework to prepare the process. Another missed deadline left most of the presidential candidates in limbo and the possibility for a return of violence seemed to be slowly rising.

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Stephanie Williams, the current United Nations Special Adviser on Libya and previously the Deputy Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), has emphasised in the past that the Libyan “political class should stop conducting musical chairs to stay in power and focus instead on preparing for nationwide elections to be held.”<sup>3</sup> She even warned that the confusion caused by two governments in Libya, including potential security vacuums, might lead to a resurgence of the Islamic State in Libya (ISIL). The latter statement seems to be directed more towards international policy makers to take the Libyan developments seriously than based on a comprehensive, long-term assessment of ISIL activity in the country since ISIL has been regularly attacking, taking hostages, and killing LNA fighters in Libya’s south regularly. They have even managed some high-profile attacks, such as on the HNEC in 2018 as part of their strategy to always portray themselves as “remaining and expanding.”<sup>4</sup> The former is a poignant reminder of Libya’s legacy of elite mistakes. Williams was adamant in her conviction that the eastern-based parliament, the House of Representatives (HoR), needed to set out a credible political process to put elections back on track to happen, ideally soon. The current developments are a major setback in this regard. In addition, her own future as special adviser has been in question as Russia has been interfering (again) with mandate renewals.<sup>5</sup>

Confirming Williams’ fears, on 10 February, the eastern-based parliament (HoR) appointed Fathi Bashagha to form a new government and proposed that elections should be held within 14 months. The reason for Bashagha’s appointment and Dbeibah’s simultaneous deposing was that the latter had exhausted his time in office as prime minister, which was supposed to only last until the elections in December 2021. However, national as well as international politicians are divided over the legality as well as practicality of this development. On the one hand, Dbeiba’s government isn’t set to step down until June 2022, as per the rules stated by the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) and he is now arguing that his mandate should last until a newly elected government is formed.<sup>6</sup>

This situation confronts foreign actors with a new reality. While some speculate that the Bashagha-Haftar alliance can count on Haftar’s established backers (United Arab Emirates, Egypt and France),<sup>7</sup> others argue for a potential reshuffle that sees Qatar joining this camp, but the UAE switching support to Dbeibah, thereby siding with countries such as the US, Italy, and the United Kingdom.<sup>8</sup> Turkey’s president Erdogan is treading a fine line as he has worked with Bashagha in the past and is supposedly fond of the politician. Bashagha has cultivated close links with Turkey especially during his tenure as interior

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minister during which Turkey intervened on the side of Tripoli and turned the tide of the conflict against Khalifa Haftar in 2021. However, in 2022, Ankara officially supports Dbeibah as he is considered to be currently the main guardian of Turkey's interests, such as access to lucrative construction contracts.<sup>9</sup> Analysts are divided in their assessments of what these developments mean for the potential eruption of violence in Libya. While some argue that this return to parallel structures increases the possibility of more fighting;<sup>10</sup> others judge the outbreak of violence in the short term to be unlikely due to the alliance building that cut across the previous lines of conflict.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the external support of the Libyan forces is something to watch closely and is currently unclear. The potential impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on shifting geopolitical alliances remains to be seen.<sup>12</sup>

The United Nations was the strongest force in pushing for elections in Libya and is now presented with an unpalatable standoff between two prime ministers. On 24 February, media reports said the UN still saw Dbeibah as Libya's leader, which led to immediate criticism that the UN was unduly interfering in Libya's politics by favouring one man over the other. Following this, Antonio Guterres, the UN Secretary General (UNSG) issued a statement that did not name Dbeibah or Bashagha explicitly but resorted to calling on "all parties to continue to preserve stability in Libya as a top priority" and said it took "note of the vote" by Libya's parliament to appoint Bashagha prime minister.<sup>13</sup>

This expert brief attempts to answer the question of how these developments are reshaping existing coalitions and alliances. Therefore, it also gives an overview of who are the current power brokers who first attempted to run in the presidential elections but are now partially resorting to deal-making in order to claim power and access state resources.

### **Who tried to run for president?**

First, Abdulhamid Dbeibah. Being appointed prime minister of the GNU, high hopes were put into his leadership to pursue the country's transition, especially since he was seen as a political outsider able to bring in a change. Relatively quickly, however, he became mostly renowned for populist, costly actions such as his controversial marriage packages for newlywed couples and overseeing more than 300 infrastructure projects, demonstrating his emphasis on appeasement via money outpouring.<sup>1415</sup> Furthermore, allegations of bribery and corruption already present during his election in the LPDF did not abate, but rather increased.

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Finally, Dbeibah had pledged not to seek out elected office.<sup>16</sup> But when he registered as a presidential candidate in November, an important failsafe for the transitional process went bust. Article 12 of the election law required all candidates to step back from their positions three months prior to the vote, which Dbeibah also ignored.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, while he was formally barred from running for presidency as member of the GNU, he defied these limitations. He publicly declared that he would run for presidency and hence further decreased his legitimacy as prime minister facilitating a process with the aim of replacing him by the House of Representatives (HoR).

With this behaviour, the previous sentiment that the GNU would act as a technocratic, non-partisan broker between Libya's divided factions became a farce.<sup>18</sup> Instead, the GNU, and most prominently Dbeibah, turned into cultivators of patronage networks to capitalise on their access to state resources.<sup>19</sup> Witnessing these developments, some argue that the goal might have long been to prepare for a scenario which demanded the postponement of the scheduled elections and henceforth required the continuation of the GNU.

Second, Khalifa Haftar. The de-facto leader of the Cyrenaica province of Eastern Libya throughout the past years is relentless in his pursuit of influence in post-Qaddafi Libya. As commander of the so-called Libyan National Army (LNA), Haftar has been largely controlled the East through military power rather than popular mandate. Still, analysts assume that Haftar could fare well in the country's east, given the strength of his grip on power and society there.<sup>20</sup> Haftar has been supported by external powers over the last years who have largely hailed him as a potential "strongman" able to "control" Libya. This short-sighted assessment was largely employed by Russia, Egypt and at times France.

Finally, Haftar's bid for the presidency also stands on shaky legal ground. As a decades-long resident of the US, he allegedly carries American citizenship in addition to his Libyan one, which is a breach of the electoral rules. Furthermore, he is accused of war crimes and ongoing cases aim to bring him to judicial justice via courts in the US.<sup>21</sup> Overall, Haftar has alienated large parts of the Libyan population due to his aggressive behaviour over the last years. However, he has proven a successful spoiler before and even a loss in the presidential elections might give him enough leeway to once more manoeuvre himself into a power broker position.

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Third, Fathi Bashagha sets himself apart from most other potential presidential candidates portrayed here as he seemed eligible for presidency. Just like Dbeibah, Bashagha grew up in Misrata, an economic powerhouse on Libya's west coast that played an important role in the 2011 revolution. Bashagha has a military background in the Libyan air force, but largely made a career as a businessman initially importing tyres and construction supplies. Following the removal of the Qaddafi regime, he entered politics and capitalized on his capacity to manoeuvre Libyan politics defined by a blurring of civilian and military support lines. Finally in 2018, Bashagha became interior minister in Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA), the UN-recognised government at the time. He initiated some security reforms and gained a reputation among some Libyans for managing to rein in a few militias.

In February 2022, he was designated by the HoR to form a new government. He pronounced that he was ready to propose a unity cabinet and ensure national elections were held in 14 months' time.<sup>22</sup> He is trying to sell his new alliance as a reconciliation between Eastern and Western Libya and declared at a press conference following his return to Tripoli that "there will be no room for revenge" in a new Libyan government that would "reach out to everyone." This narrative is built to attack the GNU in its core claim to legitimacy, which was that it was the first unity government for Libya after multiple years of divided structures. Bashagha has been aiming for the top spot in Libyan politics for a while. He made a bid for the premiership during the UN-brokered talks (LPDF) that put Dbeibah in power. He has been trying to convince a variety of international backers: Tukey has already been mentioned above but Bashagha also published a piece in the Financial Times welcoming more US support for Libya under the Biden Administration.<sup>23</sup> For example, when it comes to France, Bashagha has proven politically agile. While Bashagha was crucial in organising national and international (mostly Turkish) support to defeat Haftar's attack on Tripoli, during which he accused France of supporting "the criminal Haftar," analysts argue that this animosity has passed, and France is now supporting the new Bashagha-Haftar alliance.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, international media has put a lot of emphasis on the return of Seif al-Islam Gaddafi since he publicly announced his return to the political landscape in July 2021. While his name and the possibility of a renaissance of the Gaddafi dynasty (subsumed under the so-called "Green Movement") seems to be a scenario worth anticipating, it seems unlikely that he will

be the leading figure in the upcoming months. This is partially also because political actors in Libya are reliant on military backers in this insecure environment. While Saif al-Islam's alleged popularity is mostly based on Libya's current dysfunctions, he does not command the loyalty of enough armed groups to take his political ambitions further.<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, it is possible that Seif, while publicly acting rather passively, is already working on another publicity stunt once the political situation further deteriorates. His presidential run was marked by controversies. The International Criminal Court (ICC) has been asking for Seif al-Islam's extradition linked to atrocities committed as part of Muammar Gaddafi's brutal repression of the protests in 2011.<sup>26</sup> In a formal manner, this charge stands between him and running for presidency as Article 9 of the electoral legislation says that no candidate can have outstanding criminal charges.<sup>27</sup> However, his ineligibility was overturned by an appeal in the local court of Sebha where he currently seems to reside.<sup>28</sup>

Other personnel to watch are Aqila Saleh, the Speaker of the HoR, which mostly sided with Haftar's LNA against the previous UN-backed government of the GNA, or Mohammed al-Menfi, previously ambassador to Greece under the GNA and current chairman of Libya's Presidential Council (PC) of the GNU.

### **What are the odds in Spring 2022?**

The implementation of a liberal democracy in Libya faces numerous challenges but among the biggest is the exclusionary and uncompromising behaviour of parts of the country's leadership. The presented overview of current key players only captures these tendencies again. This is counterproductive and ultimately fatal for a political system that is built on cooperation and compromise, such as a democracy. Since 2011, Libya furthermore has gotten little space to develop a broader democratic culture rooted in non-violence. This casts big doubts over upcoming elections, even if a date, constitutional framework and list of candidates can be agreed.<sup>29</sup>

The biggest structural predicament standing in the way of elections is the unresolved constitutional debate. More recently, Dbeibah suggested holding parliamentary elections in June 2022 and to have the legal standing of these elections prepared by a "governmental

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technical committee,” whose laws would ideally be approved by the HoR, but if not, the elections would be undertaken according to existing, old election laws. His plan then also includes postponing the presidential elections until the adoption of a permanent constitution.<sup>30</sup> This is a counteraction to the HoR’s previous plans which called for a referendum on a new constitution before Libya could hold a vote.<sup>31</sup> Before the emergence of the Bashagha-Haftar alliance, national and international observers had hoped an elected president would have the legitimacy to push for a new constitution, amongst other things but this now seems unrealistic.

Overall, the most crucial questions over the past years have been the question of loyalties and connections throughout the conflict. Libya’s alliances internationalised quickly, and external support proved crucial in key moments, such as Turkey’s intervention on behalf of the GNA in 2020. Now, it remains to be seen if Dbeibah adopts an unlikely scenario of acquiescing and allowing Bashaga to enter the capital Tripoli as the only prime minister of Libya. Nonetheless, Dbeibah will have to negotiate, as an armed confrontation is currently not in the interests of Libya’s main players.<sup>32</sup> Much is at stake, however. A great deal of diplomatic energy has been invested into Libya throughout the past two years to create the success story of ending a devastating war. Therefore, it should be the priority of everyone to return to the negotiation table to carve out a solution for a stable Libya with a stable government.

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