



Libyan Elections 2021: Scenarios and Fallout

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Libyan Elections 2021: Scenarios and Fallout

- As the legal framework for their administration remains contested, the possibility of Libya's parliamentary or presidential elections being held as planned on 24 December 2021 is questionable.
- Irrespective of whether the Government of National Unity (GNU) achieves its mission, further polarisation is on the horizon. If the GNU fails and is afforded more time, its legitimacy will be challenged, most prominently by the Libyan National Army (LNA). If it succeeds, the result will almost certainly be contested by those disadvantaged by the process and/or its outcome.
- Rival power brokers seeking to oppose change or promote their preferred candidates continue to interfere in the country's legislature and impede the mandate of the interim government (GNU) to deliver on the United Nations Support Mission in Libya's (UNSMIL's) roadmap.
- Violence is a strong possibility, and while this may not always reflect the kind of divisions inherited from prior conflicts given the fluidity and opportunism of pre-election deal-making, enduring fault lines remain.
- Local solidarities are likely to come to the fore and shape the resulting alliances and patterns of violence arising from political competition linked to the transitional process.
- Elections are not a panacea — whether or not an election takes place, international stakeholders should anticipate a continued need to adapt to a volatile operating environment, evolving lines of confrontation and grievance, and (potentially) even more entrenched political rivalries.

Executive Summary

All prior attempts to finalise Libya's transition from conflict and establish a nationally recognised executive authority since the killing of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 have failed. A decade on, the Government of National Unity (GNU) is the latest in a series of interim polities charged with consolidating the country's state institutions, embracing democracy, and laying the foundations for the kind of peace to which Libya's newest generation is largely unaccustomed. Much like its predecessors, however, the GNU's ability to execute this mandate has been thoroughly tested by domestic political and military rivalries, with key waypoints in the political road-map producing paralysing and potentially destabilising forms of competition and conflict.

It was hoped that parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for December 2021 might enable Libya to break from a cycle of violence and ill-fated provisional governments. Hostility to change is pronounced in some quarters, however, and has already caused the postponement of Libya's legislative elections until the new year, obstacles to the performance of parliamentary elections, and complications arising from lack of acceptance of the legal framework for presidential elections. If, like its predecessors, the GNU fails to reach consensus on the distribution of power in an acceptable time frame, its fragile legitimacy is unlikely to survive the challenges of those that would seek alternative forms of governance. Public disaffection with the transition will grow, political differences will almost certainly deepen, and violence may once again erupt in various forms and locations (see Section 2, 'Fault lines and Fallout').

Even if the GNU somehow marries the disparate interests of Libya's power brokers ahead of a presidential vote, conflict appears unavoidable. An untested transition is highly improbable given Libya's

frayed socio-political tapestry, and it is likely the elections will be cast as illegitimate by power holders which consider themselves disadvantaged by the process and/or its result. There are a mass of individual power holders, groups, and shifting alliances which will decisively shape the conflicts which arise in response to any attempt to establish an executive Libyan authority – whether by elections in 2022, or beyond.

Besides a review of the complexities affecting the administration of the elections, it is the probable contours of their seemingly inevitable fallout that is the focus of this report. Ultimately, in times of relative peace, we find that political deal-making, power-sharing, and alliance-building has proven fluid and opportunistic, for instance, in the lead up to the current elections. However, when tensions mount, these relationships contract quickly in favour of highly localised allegiances. Discord produced by the political process (or failure thereof) is therefore likely to follow a similar pattern, re-energising fault lines, tensions, and grievances scattered throughout Libya, with higher levels of conflict bringing greater entrenchment and division at both national and local levels.

For international stakeholders, such a conclusion is of critical importance. In the near term, it alludes not only to a more insecure operating environment, but to the disruption of existing working parameters for aid, development, and stabilisation assistance. Over the longer term, it promises an even more challenging context in which to achieve Libya's war to peace transition. In presenting the most prominent features of the most probable rivalries and fallouts, we highlight the features that will demand increased attention for those seeking to stave off Libya's likely descent into further instability.

1. Delivering December elections

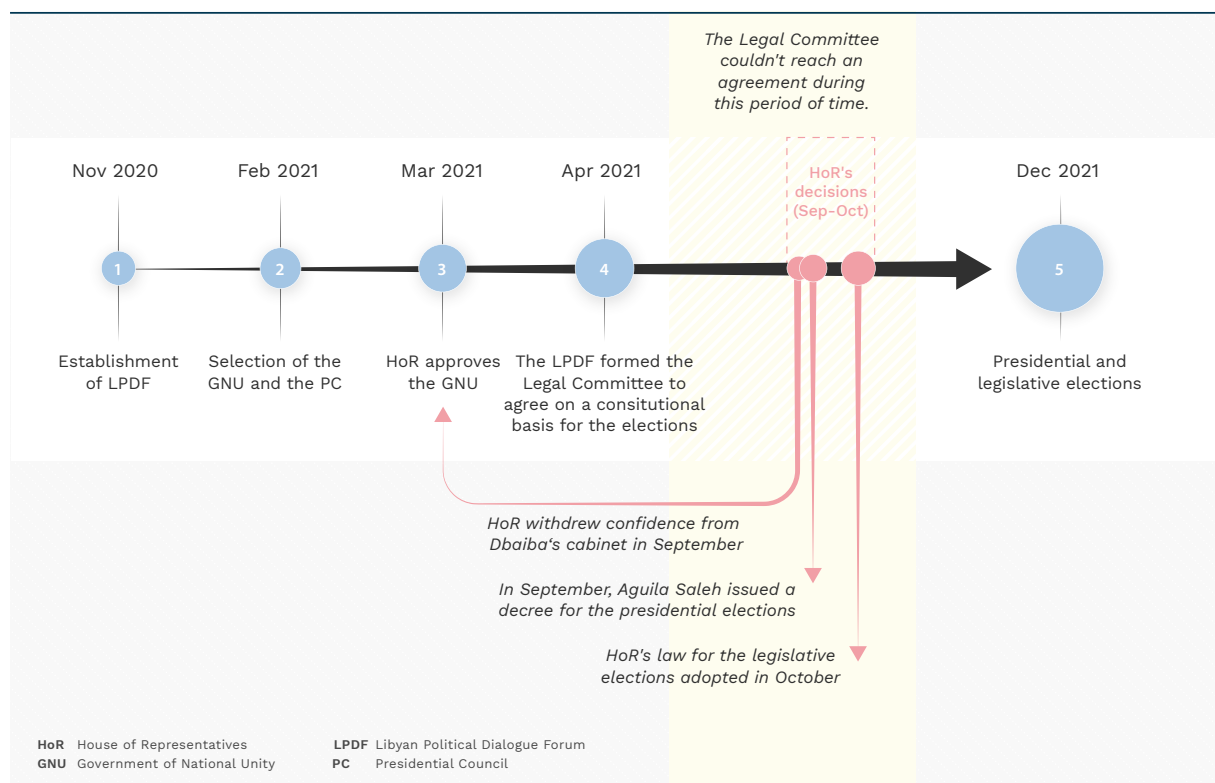
1.1. Background

Following the Tripoli War (May 2019–June 2020), the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) established the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF)¹ to support the country's political and constitutional process. In effect, the LPDF circumvented the mandates of pre-existing state institutions which had failed to satisfactorily accelerate Libya's political transition; namely, the House of Representatives (HoR) and the High State Council (HSC). Tasked with establishing a unified governance framework and a platform for a formal election process, the LPDF determined the membership of a new Government of National Unity (GNU) and a Presidential Council in early 2021. Abdulhamid Dbeibah was selected as GNU Prime Minister, with his Presidential Council comprising three members: Mohamed al-Minfi, Musa al-Koni, and Abdullah

al-Lafi. These individuals were favoured over a rival coalition featuring several notable political figures including Fathi Bashagha, Osama al-Juwili, and serving Speaker of the HoR, Aguila Saleh.

Upon coming into power, Dbeibah's cabinet was tasked with leading the country through yet another transitional period, bringing an end to its ongoing state of conflict, and reunifying divided state institutions to pave the way for general elections in December 2021. It was hoped that these elections would bring an end to an era of provisional governments, restore Libya's sovereignty, and buttress the legitimacy of state institutions. Eight months later, however, these aspirations now appear overambitious. With no approved budget and numerous actors challenging its authority, Dbeibah's cabinet has exercised only limited competence over nationwide governance. Many state institutions gathered under

The key steps of the UNSMIL-backed political roadmap



¹ The LPDF is a legislative body composed of 75 representatives. An attempt was made to select members from across Libya's socio-political and geographical spectra.

the GNU remain fragmented and beyond governmental control. And, perhaps most worryingly for the integrity of the Libyan state, the military remains split between factions allied under LNA Commander Khalifa Haftar in the east and south, and an incohesive constellation of rival forces in the west.

Rather than address such polarising rifts, Dbeibah has instead sought to increase public acceptance of his leadership by means of soft politics, appealing to the Libyan population through initiatives which do not fundamentally disturb the country's most pressing governance problems. Presidential elections remain scheduled for December this year, however, and it is becoming increasingly clear that the impotence of the GNU has invited forms of pre-election political manoeuvring which may not only undermine the objectives of the LPDF, but may in fact inflame conflict and a return to violence.

1.2. Election frameworks: Obstacles and opposition

In the absence of a constitution, Libya's legislative authorities, the HoR and the HSC, have issued a panoply of disjointed, disputed, and incoherent electoral laws. They have continued to do so throughout the tenure of the GNU, subsequently becoming the target of accusations that they have hijacked the country's institutions without delivering tangible improvements to the processes initiated by the LPDF.²

Although designed to bypass the obstacles produced by the HoR and the HSC, the LPDF has so far failed to mediate competing elements within these institutions and deliver on its mission to establish constitutional frameworks for parliamentary and presidential elections. Initially, Libya's presidential and parliamentary elections were to be held concurrently but independently; last month, however, it was decided (albeit controversially) that the parliamentary elections would only occur after the presidential election — effectively linking the two together.³ Despite assurances from the HoR that the presidential elections remain a priority,⁴ there is rising concern that the requisite provisions will

not be established in time for December and that the presidential elections will be rescheduled or postponed until further notice, all but ensuring the parliamentary elections will also suffer further delays. Blame for the legislative stalemate not only lies at the feet of the HoR and the HSC.

The LPDF has itself proven divided owing to a combination of domestic political pressures and the disparate loyalties of its membership. Key points of discord include the organisation of a constitutional referendum prior to the general elections; whether the vote should be a universal referendum or decided through a vote at the HoR; and questions regarding the candidacy of dual nationals and military officials, and particularly that of the ever conspicuous LNA General Khalifa Haftar. Motions against the latter are indicative of the disputes the LPDF has little hope of resolving in a consensual manner given Libya's fragmented politico-military landscape and point to the kind of dynamics which might ultimately confound the ambitions of the LPDF.

In mid-September, Aguila Saleh, Speaker of the HoR, issued Law No. 1/2021 to serve as the legal basis for the presidential elections. Law 1/2021 was never taken to a vote by the HoR but was instead issued by decree by Saleh in his capacity as Speaker of the House. To many, Saleh's decree appears tailored to Khalifa Haftar's candidacy as it neither prevents citizens holding dual citizenship nor military officers from running for office. Indeed, soon after Law 1/2021 was issued, General Haftar resumed his public (yet unofficial) political campaign.⁵ In accordance with a three-month buffer stipulated in Saleh's law, Haftar also resigned (temporarily) from his position as LNA General Commander on 22 September.

Reaction to Saleh's decree in the international domain has been mixed. Pro-LNA powers including France and the UAE sided with UNSMIL in applauding the measure as the long-awaited legal basis for the electoral process. The U.S. was rather more circumspect, choosing to neither endorse nor reject the decision and instead call for improved electoral law grounded in stronger constitutional foundations. On the domestic front, potential candidates

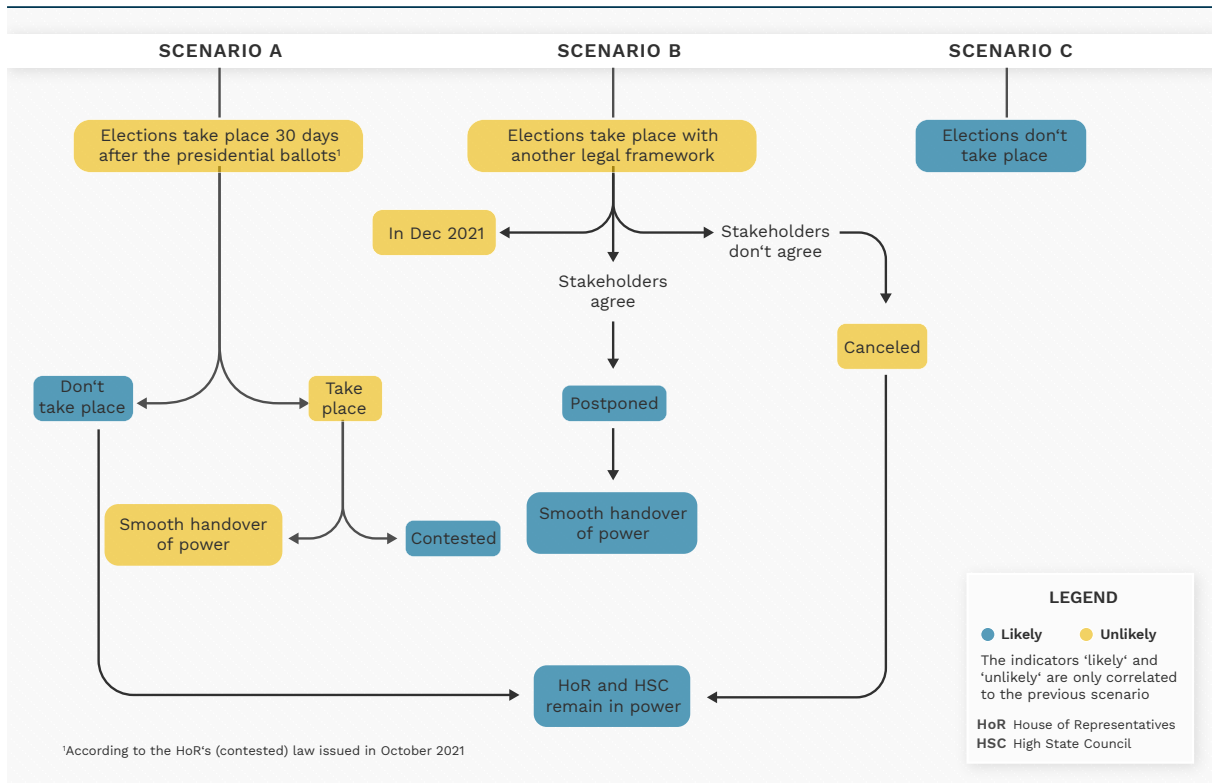
² LPDF representatives were engaged by UNSMIL to form a legal committee in charge of determining a constitutional basis for December's presidential and legislative elections.

³ Legislative elections in Libya concern the selection of HoR representatives.

⁴ Al Jazeera (2021) [Libyan legislative elections delayed until January](#).

⁵ His first steps were to call on members of the LNA General Command, such as the LNA-aligned Tuareg tribal council, to run for election. Khalifa Haftar also appeared in a suit at a sports event in Benghazi.

Scenarios: Legislative elections



including Ahmed Maiteeq and Aref Ali Nayed welcomed the move as a necessary last-ditch effort. Optimism in some quarters does little to diminish doubts elsewhere over its legal and practical viability, however. That Saleh's law was imposed unilaterally will almost certainly mean it faces robust opposition from many, including forces which seek to prevent a Haftar presidency and others which seek to sustain the country's messy status quo to preserve their status.⁶

The main opponents of Saleh's law include the Head of the HSC, Khaled al-Mishri, and LPDF representative Abdel Razzaq al-Aradi, both former members of the Muslim Brotherhood, each of whom have fiercely rejected Saleh's law and are opposed to any legislation which sanctions Haftar's candidacy. In their view, a law of such critical importance requires ratification from the HoR before it can be approved by the HSC. They add that the manner in which Law 1/2021 was imposed prevents the LPDF legal com-

mittee from formally adopting it in the event that it receives the requisite endorsement. Inevitably, the HSC has since unilaterally issued a legally dubious law pertaining to the election of the legislature and may plan to present its own proposal for the presidential election process.

In all likelihood, forthcoming HSC legislation will be designed to prevent Haftar from running for office. In countering Saleh, it will also mark yet another episode in the standoff between the HoR and the HSC as to how Libyan electoral law is determined. This may in turn open the floodgates to even more legislation, a prohibitively complicated electoral process, and prolonged institutional gridlock. With no clear framework for resolving such issues, a series of tit-for-tat decrees and proposals is likely to follow, sustaining a political status quo which the HoR, the HSC, and their various supporters arguably intend to uphold.

⁶ Supreme Court activities regarding the constitutionality of such laws have been frozen since 2014, and there are currently no formal procedures to appeal Saleh's law. The HSC has called for the Supreme Court to convene in order to assess it.

1.3. Pre-election power-sharing

Even if the politically-driven legal issues and other technical matters that stand in the way of the electoral process are resolved, a raft of concerns threaten their integrity. First and foremost, Libya's enduring politico-military power struggles and continued state of insecurity are not conducive to free and fair elections. Moreover, there are no guarantees that the main power brokers with forces on the ground, some of whom are expected to run for president, will allow them to take place if they believe they will either lose or be sidelined by the result.

Conditions of this kind are of course nothing new to Libya, and they have not prevented deal-making between rivals at opposite ends of the politico-military spectrum ahead of the planned December vote. Indeed, in the absence of active conflict, some actors are open to 'cross-line' talks with a view to the formation of workable alternative governance structures. Prominent local-level figures have been instrumental in these discussions, working to capitalise on their status as community representatives in order to broker deals with national-level counterparts which broadly align with their political ambitions and often share a common geographic heritage. Interest-based power-sharing of this kind has been a persistent feature of the Libyan political economy in times of national political uncertainty, recently having emerged most prominently in the aftermath of the Tripoli War and continuing throughout the GNU. With the election process and its outcome still undecided, it is not only likely to continue, but may have a defining impact over Libya's near- to medium-term future.

Perhaps the most notable example of this phenomenon is found in a powerful Misrata-based faction led by Fathi Bashagha. Indeed, a recent deal between the Commanders of the 166th Battalion and the LNA's Tariq Ibn Ziyad Brigade (TBZ) suggests Bashagha is intent on forging some kind pow-

er-sharing arrangement with rival power brokers in the east, namely LNA Commander Khalifa Haftar and the Speaker of the House Aguila Saleh.⁷

The entente between the Misratan, Fathi Bashagha, and LNA General Command, shows how east-west power sharing can mirror military collaboration on the ground.

Such links reveal the kind of calculations being made at the top end of LNA and Misrata-based leadership. In pulling the rug out from under the feet of other powerful western actors, however, (most notably the Tripolitan 444th Fighting Brigade),⁸ they have not been without consequence. Fathi Bashagha has already been criticised by western figures for making a devil's bargain when he attempted to form an ultimately unsuccessful alliance with Aguila Saleh during the LPDF's GNU cabinet selection process. Bashagha and the LNA share some common interests, for instance, a desire for expedient elections, and the end of the GNU's mandate.⁹ Bashagha is not alone in his endeavour. Ali Buzriba, a prominent tribal leader and politician from Zawia, is also reportedly in contact with the eastern camp to pressure the GNU into organising the elections.¹⁰ Buzriba has been running his own political campaign, including in areas far beyond the region of Zawia where he holds sway.

At present, any power-sharing deal between the LNA, the ruling party in the east, and Misrata, the most powerful faction in the west, will be contingent on each side agreeing to manage its own region without interfering in the affairs of the other. Prior arrangements of this kind have not been resilient to overreach by the parties involved, and it is highly unlikely that the Misratan brokers would be able to prevent their fellow western factions, including Misrata, from mobilising in the event of serious conflict.¹¹ Fear of being sidelined or depicted as traitors would compel brokers on both sides to return to their domestic constituencies, and any

7 The arrangement was to establish joint patrols in the desert regions of Ash Shwayrif, around the buffer zone and the frontiers of the GNU/western camp's and the LNA's territories. Note, TBZ is under the influence of Khalifa Haftar's son, Saddam.

8 The Tripoli Military Region, together with the Misratans — and their (reported) foreign backing — attacked the 444th Brigade in early September. The event led to the 444th Brigade's "official" dissolution by the Presidential Council; however, in reality, the group remains active in the Takbali camp of Tripoli.

9 Bashagha and the LNA both seek to relocate state institutions from Tripoli to Sirte.

10 Ali Buzriba is a congressman from Zawia and co-leader of the Abu Surra Martyrs Battalion in the Stabilization Support Apparatus (SSA).

11 In many respects, these kinds of power plays are reminiscent of the pre-Tripoli War period, when the Misratans (through Bashagha) had a tacit accord with the LNA. However, when the LNA launched its offensive on the capital, Misratans opted to defend Tripoli frontlines when countered for their choice in western Libya. In essence, it was the LNA's brutal offensive that disrupted the prospects of a smooth power-sharing deal.

agreement would inevitably dissolve. If an accord between the LNA and Misrata were struck, however, it would empower the country's two strongest factions at the expense of all others, particularly in Libya's fragmented west. Naturally, those at risk of marginalisation by the LNA and Misrata can be expected to double their efforts to prevent any such arrangement.

1.4. The GNU: An inauspicious future

In late September, the HoR held a vote of no confidence in Dbeibah's GNU cabinet. Led by Aguila Saleh and several other HoR members, the motion was a concerted attempt to reduce Dbeibah's leverage over Libya's immediate future and prevent an extension of his mandate beyond December 2021.¹² Irrespective of whether the elections take place, the move sends a strong message. Leading HoR congressmen clearly intend for the existing GNU cabinet to serve in a caretaker capacity until a new president is selected by the electorate or until the HoR can replace Dbeibah with a preferred candidate to support its plan to unite with the LNA, most likely the Misratan, Fathi Bashagha.

Rescheduled or postponed elections will encourage rivals to exploit the GNU's weakness, potentially undermining its work and refusing to recognise its authority altogether.

It remains an open question as to whether the HoR will get its wish. Despite poor domestic support, Dbeibah's cabinet expressed from an early stage that it sought to extend its mandate beyond 24 December 2021 and may be afforded more time to lay the groundwork for the elections if current legislative and political manoeuvring results in their postponement or cancellation. Certainly, some foreign chancelleries have acknowledged that the GNU roadmap is likely too ambitious for the relatively short time frame, accepting that postponement of the elections would allow the GNU more time to achieve its mandate. Were the GNU to fail in its mission to deliver a presidential election, it is likely that the Presidential Council and the GNU would be extended temporarily due to the absence of a viable

alternative transitional process. While in this case, the international community and UNSMIL might task the LPDF with designing a legal framework to sustain the GNU, it is not certain such an exercise would even be necessary, as the GNU would likely remain in power by default.

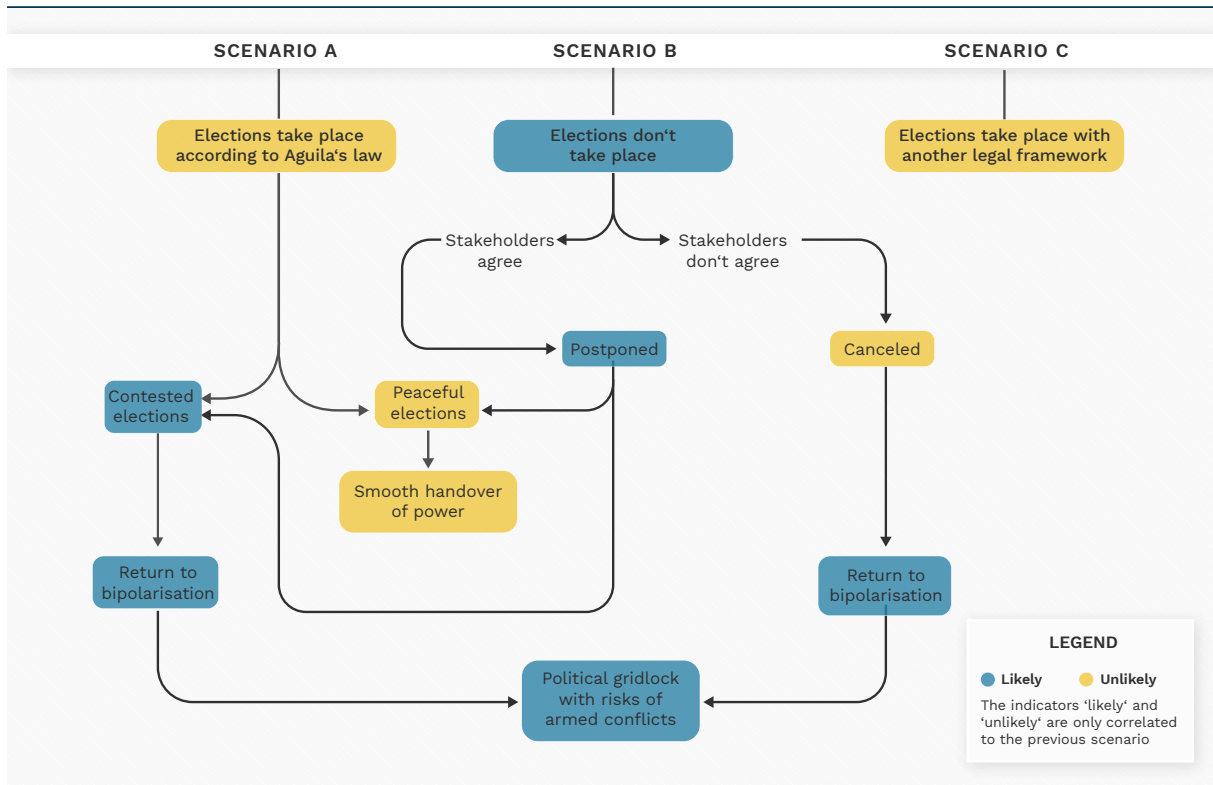
Rescheduled elections can be viewed as a reasonable decision that offers the GNU and its roadmap a lifeline. It could have the opposite effect, however, giving many actors fodder to discredit the GNU and launch a political or military campaign against it. Ultimately, the decision to postpone (or not) the elections will be a domestic one; the only international pressure that might successfully be applied is that which may come from Libyan actors' external backers. Should Libyan actors and their various stakeholders agree on the conditions of the election postponement, it is likely that their rescheduling will be announced before December 2021.

Despite Dbeibah's popularity amongst the public, if the GNU fails to hold presidential elections, the resultant loss of credibility — among the Libyan population and other stakeholders alike — will likely force it to make a slew of concessions. Such a loss of credibility would create an opening through which the GNU could constantly be subjected to extortion, further undermining its already fragile authority, as was the fate of its predecessor, the GNA. The fact that the GNU cannot fully leverage its budget is yet another challenge. Ultimately, it is difficult to discern a positive outcome for the GNU. Like the GNA before it, the GNU is likely to be rendered powerless by competing formal and informal political and military forces beyond its control.

If the various actors are not fully satisfied, they may threaten to form a parallel government under the pretence that the GNU's initial mandate has expired or its extension is legally contested. Conversely, if the GNU satisfies one camp at the expense of others, it may be boycotted and thwarted by the dissatisfied factions. On 10 October, the GNU's Vice Prime Minister for the eastern region, Hussein al-Goarani, met with eastern officials to reconsider their stance vis-à-vis the GNU's cabinet — a warning sign for a collective withdrawal of the eastern representatives from it.

¹² Arguments in favour of the motion included that the GNU has not only failed in its mission to support a political transition, but also to improve the lives of Libyans. (NB: the HoR delayed budget approvals for months). HoR congressmen further claim that Dbeibah has improperly used public funds to support his potential candidacy.

Scenarios: Presidential elections in December 2021



1.5. Election outcomes

If presidential elections are held in December 2021, there are four likely scenarios depending on the legal framework governing the election, the result of the vote, and the response of key actors, particularly Khalifa Haftar. It is worth noting that the Libyans seem to be keen to do away with the current political and military class, and a vote against the present power brokers is plausible. Though it was not a universal referendum, the LPDF vote of February 2021 should serve as a reminder of this possibility.¹³

1. Smooth handover

In the case of a largely uncontested presidential election, there would be a smooth transition of power at the institutional level, as the GNU and the Presidential Council would hand over to the newly elected authority. This scenario is considered unlikely.

2. Restricted candidate lists and institutional schisms

If the constitutional framework and electoral laws ban all military officers including Haftar from running, the LNA and its supporters will likely reject

the elections’ legitimacy, resulting in a political schism on an institutional level.

3. Contested elections

If elections are held, unsuccessful contenders with their own military power or centres of authority would likely contest the election citing procedural complaints and/or ultimate results. For example, if Khalifa Haftar is defeated and receives unsatisfactory assurances regarding his position in the military, he may challenge the new authority.¹⁴

4. Divisive victor

The most unlikely case, should Haftar or any divisive figure win, there is no guarantee that he will be able to govern the whole country from Tripoli or that his fierce opponents in the western region and elsewhere would accept his victory.

Bar a highly unlikely smooth handover, in all of these scenarios there is the potential for increased conflict as the legitimacy of the outcome is rejected. In particular, the election of Haftar, or Seif al-Islam Gaddafi, would likely be rejected by the west, which may pose significant problems for governance, if not armed resistance or rebellion.

13 Unexpectedly, representatives voted in favour of a challenger list composed of ‘new faces’ (Mohamed al-Minfi, Musa al-Koni, and Abdullah al-Lafi) in lieu of Aguila Saleh, Fathi Bashagha, and Osama al-Juwili.

14 Khalifa Haftar publicly called for presidential elections and stated the LNA will only answer to an elected president. He has refused to subordinate the LNA to non-elected civilian authorities and his affiliation with HoR speaker Aguila Saleh is only considered nominal.

2. Fault lines and Fallout

With a smooth transition improbable and persistent competition between rival actors expected, the election process brings Libya's political and military fault lines into sharp relief. Escalation, polarisation, and conflict are therefore on the horizon at both the national and local level, with each potential sphere of contestation feeding a complex overall picture in which the paths to deconfliction will be uncertain.

If armed conflict occurs at the national level, opportunistic politico-military alliances built in the lead-up to the elections are likely to be abandoned, at least temporarily. As in Libya's prior post-Gaddafi conflicts, influential figures will privilege their allegiance to communities of origin, likely breaking the emergent (but by no means universally accepted) bonds forged between erstwhile rivals such as those created between east and west by Haftar and Saleh. Factions anchored in place and tribe are likely to gather behind the GNU in the west, and behind Haftar's LNA in the east, effectively recreating many of the divisions produced throughout the past decade. The two parties remain at odds over the GNU's budget and the role of the military, and latent tensions surrounding these issues may serve as the spark that fuels the fire in the event that (as is likely) the GNU fails to resolve the legislative impasse or deliver a respected election result.

Although more frequent, local level fighting will be minor in terms of scale and consequence. Local clashes rarely involve national forces and seldom spread beyond the territories of direct interest to the parties involved. Importantly, however, national-level conflicts in Libya have typically been shaped by local dynamics and the decisions made by local actors seeking sponsorship and support from national coalitions. While often disconnected from national dynamics, local conflicts can therefore escalate, spilling over into broader forms of violence with potentially nationwide consequences. Libya's eastern, western, and southern regions each contain broadly homogenous conflict dynamics and primary socio-political characteristics and are the focus here in relation to the local consequences of national-level election-related discord.

2.1. National-level conflict

Despite the absence of armed conflict since the 2019–2020 Tripoli War, latent tensions risk being inflamed by the December election issue, as the failure of the political option may lead to a military solution and a repolarisation of the country. A national conflict between the western GNU and the eastern LNA would likely unfold in a few key areas, including the capital Tripoli, strategic areas that house oil refineries, the southern region, and demarcation lines around the territories of armed factions.

A major LNA offensive on the western region on the scale of the failed 2019 operation is unlikely in the short term, but remains a possibility in the more distant future, as it is conditional on support from powerful domestic actors (such as Misrata- or Tripoli-based armed groups) as well as international complacency. At present, the LNA has neither the military and financial capability nor the international backing to support such an enterprise. Furthermore, the rhetoric the LNA employed to mobilise its forces around the Tripoli offensive may have lost its muscle. Indeed, the public may be sceptical of calls to oppose 'rogue militias', corruption, and nepotism within the western region, as they have come to realise these phenomena are just as prevalent under the LNA. A regional war between factions in the west that drives one of the warring parties to solicit outside help is the LNA's only likely pathway to a military comeback in Tripoli.

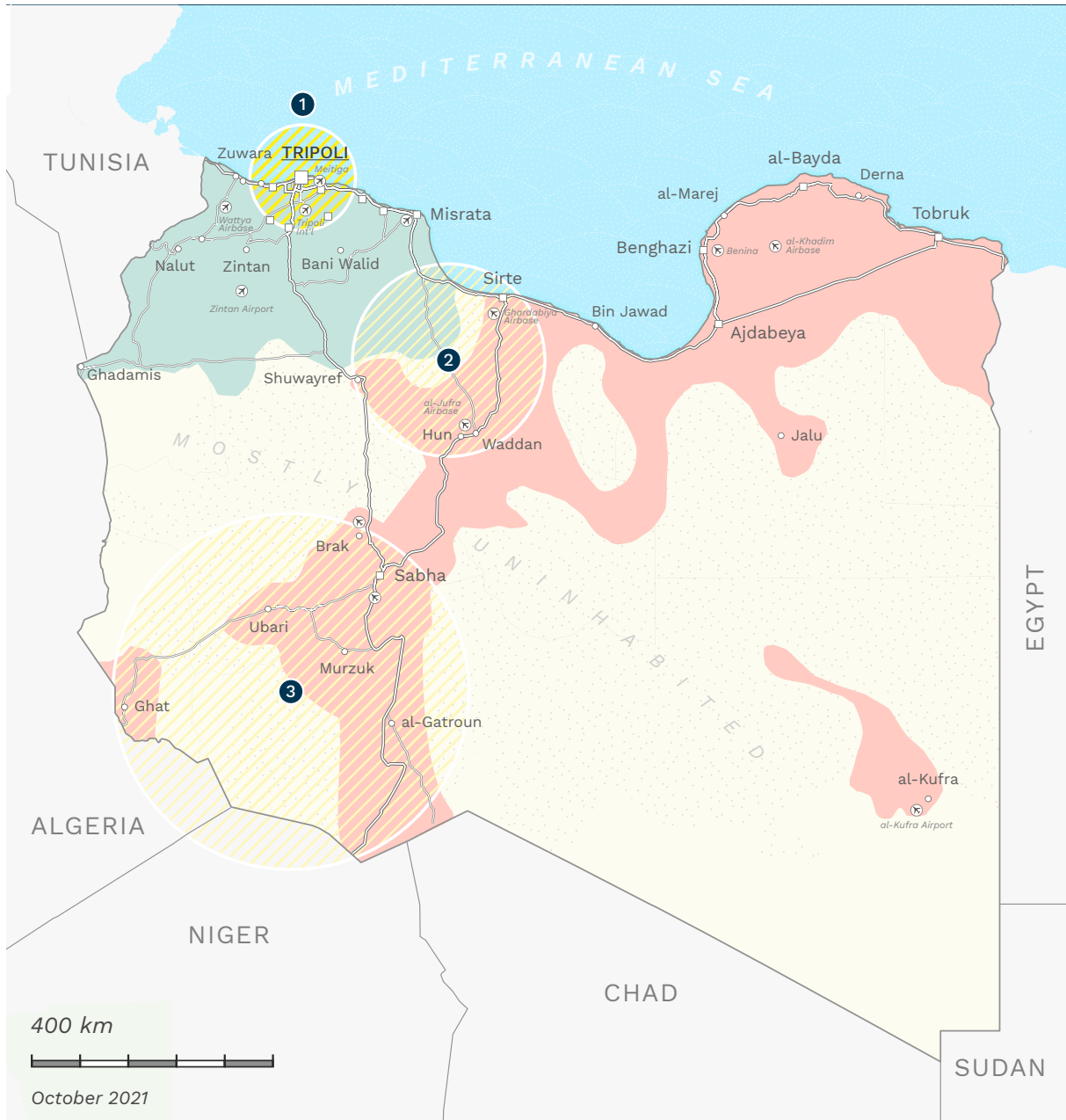
The second most likely national-level flashpoints include Sirte, al-Jufra, and Ash Shwayrif, which sit at the demarcation lines between the two main factions. Tensions and skirmishes in these areas could theoretically trigger larger reactions, building to a wider conflict, however, this is unlikely for several reasons. First, none of the three areas have substantial economic value for the rival parties. Second, the demarcation lines are separated by large buffer zones, meaning that any volleys exchanged will be the result of wider conflict having reached the areas — not a flashpoint in and of itself. The presence of Russian troops in Sirte and al-Jufra (LNA territory) further act as a conflict deterrent, given neither the

LNA nor GNU would eagerly risk damaging Moscow’s strategic base in the region.

Another theatre for conflict between the LNA and the western camp is the disputed southern province, the Fezzan. This region lacks a power centre

comparable to the western or the eastern regions, and often falls under the influence of the two rival national factions. A power struggle over the south may play out by proxy as national coalitions look to harness the capacities of local allies to weaken their opponent.

Territorial control and conflictual areas in Libya



TERRITORIAL CONTROL

- Government of National Unity
- Libyan National Army
- Mostly uninhabited
- Potential areas of tensions and/or armed conflicts

CONFLICTUAL AREAS

- 1 Power struggle over/in the capital with serious risks of conflicts involving local and national forces
- 2 Potential flashpoints along the frozen frontlines
- 3 Competition for dominance over/in the southern region

2.2. Regional conflict theatres

2.2.1. WESTERN LIBYA

Despite uniting against the common threat posed by Haftar and the LNA during the Tripoli War, western factions fell once again into rivalry after the cessation of hostilities as they began to pursue their parochial interests. The western region is socio-politically, militarily, and geographically fragmented into different power centres due to the longstanding rivalries between its communities and their elites, with the western region's major power centres located in Misrata, Tripoli, Zintan, and Zawia.

Divisions across these cities are long-standing, and Libya's cyclic conflicts have only fed and exacerbated them. Factions in the western region have witnessed shifting alliances, rivalries, and wars throughout the Libyan crisis from 2011 onward. Although the revolution and its aftermath did produce some fairly consistent local-national alignments, these are not fixed. Local actors typically meet change with pragmatism, and will most often choose paths which fulfil their own localised interests over their allegiance to national coalitions. Ideologies and elites within the western cities have therefore changed over time.

It is within Tripoli and Zawia that divisions are most tense, with serious risks of clashes. Part of the ongoing frictions have to do with the elections and their consequences. Most Tripolitan factions have an interest in preventing the elections from occurring or postponing them indefinitely, given that candidates such as Bashagha and Haftar pose risks to some local armed groups. It is worth recalling that the Tripolitan Stabilization Support Apparatus (SSA) is nothing more than the formalisation of an armed coalition formed against Fathi Bashagha, then the GNA's Minister of Interior.

Today, the SSA represents a large coalition of actors. Although the SSA was supportive of Dbeibah, the GNU Prime Minister did not overtly align himself with the SSA or any other camp, attempting instead to maintain relations with all parties. However, if Dbeibah remains in power after the December elections and manages to weather the attendant challenges, he will likely change tack and focus on consolidating his Misratan base.

The nature of allegiances and competitions across the country are often determined by a small handful of

elites. For instance, a prior alliance between Zawian and Misratan elites is now unravelling due to a long standing personal rivalry between Ali Buzriba and Fathi Bashagha. If the competition intensifies, they may draw their local support bases, and eventually their whole communities, into conflict. Currently, the ruling parties in Zawia and Misrata are entertaining relations with each other's local rivals: Bashagha's enemies, Abdulghani al-Kikli (aka 'Ghneiwa') and Ali Buzriba set up an SSA branch in Misrata, while the Misratans are attempting to empower Buzriba's local rival in Zawia, Mohamed Bahroon (aka 'al-Far').

The Zintanis, meanwhile, may have an interest in recalibrating their existing alliances. In the wake of the Tripoli War, the Zintanis have lost some of their sway in the capital and the western region more broadly to the benefit of local factions. Although internally divided, Misratan, Tripolitan, and Zawian factions that receive foreign support are currently the most powerful forces on the ground. The division in August 2021 of the Osama al-Juwili-led western military zone (encompassing the entire province) has also contributed to the attenuation of the Zintanis' power. Realising their weakness, the Zintanis may be tempted to re-establish ties with the LNA. LNA vehicles and air defence systems have reportedly been deployed nearby in recent months – a possible indication of an attempt at rapprochement.

2.2.2. EASTERN LIBYA

Although more homogenous and socio-politically stable when it comes to national politics due to Khalifa Haftar's political hegemony, and relatively high levels of intertribal solidarity, the eastern region is rife with internal rivalries at the provincial level. Shifting allegiances are the most likely source of conflict; jostling for political advantage could change the dynamics between and among the various groups and could also alter their relationships with the GNU and LNA leadership.

Following the military defeat in Tripoli, in which many easterners died, the region witnessed unprecedented defiance against the LNA leadership, actioned via tribal channels. A few months later, in the period of the GNU's formation, non-LNA-sponsored eastern figures emerged from the LPDF, challenging the LNA's dominance. Moreover, the deterioration of security in Benghazi circa 2020–2021, and the conspicuous corruption of senior figures, led to the rise of dissident voices, notably among the Awaqir

tribe. Nevertheless, the LNA has largely succeeded in riding out the wave of dissatisfaction, and has remained the de facto authority in the east.

The eastern constituencies missed a window of opportunity to challenge the LNA. The region lacks a clear alternative in terms of political representation or security protection. Despite its relative popularity among the eastern population, the GNU failed to convert this into a foothold in the region. The GNU's efforts to co-opt the major local tribes (e.g., the Awaqir and Obeidat) have so far been unsuccessful in undermining the LNA's grip on the region. Ultimately, however, any organised mobilisation against the ruling parties in the east would almost certainly originate from within the region's tribes, most notably the Awaqir in the Benghazi area, the Obeidat in Tobruk (Aguila Saleh's tribe), and the Magharba in the Oil Crescent.

The Awaqir are being increasingly empowered by the Dbeibah cabinet. Nevertheless, a major conflict with the LNA is only likely if 1) all Awaqir key figures and its grassroots coalesce against the LNA leadership; 2) other eastern constituencies join the effort; and/or 3) additional assistance is provided from the western camp and anti-LNA foreign powers. Such a conflict would likely occur in Benghazi, the seat of both the LNA and Awaqir leadership.

The Obeidat of the Tobruk region are less co-opted by the GNU and are internally divided with regards to national alignments. Nevertheless, they have incentives to seek an alternative to the LNA given their long-standing grievances with the local rival tribe of al-Gut'an, backed by al-Rajma. Their potential opposition to the LNA would likely centre on the Tobruk region and its surrounding areas, if supported by either Dbeibah or even Aguila Saleh. Obeidat and Amnafa tribal figures issued a statement opposing the HoR's vote of no confidence in the Dbeibah cabinet in September 2021. Saleh is less likely to support the Obeidat against the LNA, given his reconciliation with Haftar in the early summer.

The Magharba populating Ajdabiya and the neighbouring Oil Crescent would most likely join any serious attempt to overthrow the LNA due to their deep grievances following the LNA's repression of their fellow tribesmen led by the erstwhile strongman in the Oil Crescent, Ibrahim Jadhraan, who has retained popularity among the Magharba. Although they do not enjoy as strong ties to the GNU as the other tribes, Jadhraan and his allies have retained in-

formal relationships with power brokers in the west, as well as Turkey. Should an opportunity arise, Turkey may draw on Jadhraan's networks to attempt to overthrow Haftar and the LNA, although this could have the effect of pushing the other tribes to close ranks around them.

Ultimately, however, LNA General Command remains the predominant actor and kingmaker in the region. No other actors have sufficient authority or military capacity to challenge the LNA's stance with regards to national politics, nor the political cohesion to act outside the LNA or Saleh's orbit. Furthermore, the LNA's propaganda machine plays an important role in shaping public opinion in the east in favour of or against certain parties.

2.2.3. SOUTHERN LIBYA

Unlike the eastern region, where the LNA has its centre of power, the majority of its fighting force, and no looming challenge to its authority, its control of the southern region is weaker where it rules indirectly through local proxies. The local LNA proxies maintain the LNA's authority over the south simply because they are able to impose themselves in their respective regions as a result of this alliance (e.g., Masoud Jeddi, who was promoted thanks to the LNA). By co-opting key figures from the south, who by virtue of their advancement and social solidarity, foreclose the emergence of other, less friendly figures, the LNA has ruled the Fezzan since early 2019. Using this strategy, the LNA has made alliances with the south's major armed groups, even with those in tension with the LNA and its allies, such as the Tubu. Yet, those alliances remain fragile, including amongst those considered to be the LNA's security cornerstones and partners in the region: forces from the Awlad Suleiman tribe, the Tubu, and the Tuareg.

The Awlad Suleiman represent the most likely party to switch sides in favour of the GNU in a case of repolarisation of the country. Masoud Jeddi, (former) commander of the Sabha-based LNA 116th Battalion who played a central role in swaying his tribe to the LNA side, has reverted to the western camp. The rest of the tribe would only switch, however, should certain key conditions be met: 1) guarantees and a clear position of support from the GNU or power brokers in the west and 2) that such a switch would not result in the empowerment of other rival communities in the south, which may strengthen their links to the LNA. The Awlad Suleiman also hosted another prominent military figure, Ahmed al-At-

taybi, the former commander of the predominantly Awlad Suleiman 6th Brigade, who could be an alternative or ally to Masoud Jeddi in enforcing the GNU's authority against the LNA.

Though the traditional Tubu elite have been close to the LNA, even going so far as to reiterate their allegiance to Haftar following the Tripoli war, the Tubu majority is decidedly less keen on Haftar and his faction. The community at large contains many opponents of the LNA with ties to various national and international parties, with this diversity of political positions being particularly clear amongst the younger generations — a sentiment which clearly emerged following the LNA's support for the Tubu's local rivals including the Zwayya tribe in al-Kufra, the Awlad Suleiman around Sabha, and the Ahali in Murzuq. Given these local rivalries, anti-LNA Tubu elements would be unlikely to join the LNA's efforts, linked as they are to the Awlad Suleiman, particularly Masoud Jeddi, whose rivalry with the Tubu far predates his association with the LNA.

The Tuareg populate the extreme southwest of Libya and are perhaps the most divided and least cohesive southern community in terms of national politics. The most politically influential Tuareg figures endorsed the LNA and supported the Tripoli war,

though following the failed offensive and the deaths of its main LNA supporters, Tuareg figures began renewing contacts with the western camp and sought to replace Ibrahim al-Kuni, a pro-LNA tribal leader who died in 2020, with a GNA-aligned council. Nevertheless, Mabrouka al-Sharif, a Gaddafi-era influential Tuareg figure, has largely succeeded in quelling pro-GNA voices from within the community by forming an LNA-aligned and backed social body that has been working to increase social acceptance and perceptions of legitimacy by providing services and privileges to the Tuareg community.

While the wider southern population generally welcomed the LNA's arrival in 2019 with the aim of improving their socio-economic conditions, they no longer see it as their sole saviour due to its diminished financial capabilities. Should the GNU be willing to provide financial support and fully engage politically, economically, and militarily in the south, the region's population and influential actors might reconsider their alignment with the LNA. The GNU's predecessor, the GNA, squandered its momentum in the region following the LNA's defeat in Tripoli. At best, the GNU is likely to maintain a nominal footprint limited to financial provisions to the region, which would in any case be managed by local LNA-aligned actors.

Conclusion

In all likelihood, Libya's elections will not take place as planned and will result in escalation and (re)polarisation. The country lacks powerful and impartial institutions to monitor the process, and no third parties are accepted by all rival groups. Moreover, there is no mechanism for mitigating pre- or post-election violence, both of which are sadly likely. Libyans seeking an end to the transitional period largely welcome the elections but are on the lookout for elites working against a meaningful process in order to stay in power. Regrettably, they are likely to witness much of the latter. Key electoral rivalries presently revolve around two main camps: those who are hostile to the elections agenda out of fear it will destabilise the status quo, diminish their power, and threaten their interests, and those who favour it, either by conviction, ambition, or simply because they believe the elections are unlikely to undermine their authority.

The consequences of Libya's probable election failure must not be viewed only through the lens of realpolitik but local socio-political dynamics. The kind of power-sharing deals and alliances observed in Libya prior to the elections are opportunistic, fluid, and do not follow the logic of pre-existing conflict and division. Fault lines and grievances remain scattered throughout the country and are prone to escalation. Political contestation causes power-holders to build cross-line alliances only when convenient, and often because local needs and interests are driving such big picture alignments. In times of conflict, local solidarities are likely to take on even greater precedence, with intercommunal differences playing a key role in reshaping alliances and opposition at all levels. It therefore appears the December election fallout will therefore represent yet another phase in the overall struggle for power in Libya. It is not a struggle which has a clear end in sight.



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