

Aug 7 2012

Libya elections: just the beginning

LSE IDEAS

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Libya's journey toward democratic politics has started with promise. The country's first national elections in almost five decades took place weeks ago and the whole affair was deemed largely free and fair, marred only slightly by minor violence at three polling centres in the east of the country.



Western-backed Mahmoud Jibril, [who won the elections](#) with 39 of the 80 seats available to political parties (the rest of the 200 constitution-writing National Congress seats are reserved for individuals), now faces the colossal task of bridging together an array of parties, individuals and interests with conflicting political and ideological visions for the future of post-Gaddafi Libya.

Jibril's victory is important for two principal reasons. Firstly, his diverse [multi-party coalition](#) outperformed the country's Islamists, a blow to one of the most organised and well financed of groupings in Libya, thanks largely to the patronage afforded to them by Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. The Muslim Brotherhood's Justice & Construction Party, for example, took just 17 seats, while Islamist commander [Abdul Hakim Belhaj](#), much to the surprise of many, took none in capital city Tripoli, where he was contesting the elections.

Secondly, Jibril's victory is important because of his previous links with the former regime. That a former senior regime official like Jibril can win the elections lays credence to the electoral process itself. It will also be particularly paramount if reconciliation and, therefore, stability is to be achieved, since divisions persist between former regime groups, or those

backed by the regime, and groups or individuals that form part of the current crop of leaders in the new Libya.

As a recent [Guardian report](#) noted, reconciling these differences will be paramount if stability is to be achieved. Similarly, violence has characterised divisions between federalists in the east and their opponents in the rest of the country. Peace with the federalists will be vital for Jibril if he is to succeed in bringing stability to Libya. In the run-up to the elections, tensions boiled over in the east with anti-election demonstrators burning ballot papers, closing oil refineries and even killing a young volunteer with the elections commission.

The indicators suggesting that differences can be reconciled are there, as the same Guardian report from Bani Walid provides, whilst the leadership of Libya's eastern federalists, the Cyrenaica Transitional Council (CTC), have welcomed Jibril's victory. Jibril's electoral success could, therefore, ensure or, at least, encourage cross-sections of the Libyan society to come forward and play their role in defining the future of their country.

But this is only the beginning. Whilst Jibril and his coalition may have won the elections, Libyan politics faces its ultimate test in the coming months. Jibril was unable to win an outright majority, meaning his coalition must foster a coalition big enough to govern. Coalition politics, however, makes for messy and dysfunctional politics, especially when taking place in a nascent post-conflict democratic state.

Influence will be more important than ideology in the post-election political order; whilst different groups representing different visions and interests dominate the political scene, every group has its price for partnership. Control over the security institutions and influence over the country's riches, including its oil industry, will make the difference between power and survival. For example, although defeated in the elections, Islamist groupings in Libya remain heavily armed and organised. In a recent meeting with a former Libyan jihadist, I was informed that Islamist brigades from the Islamist-stronghold of Derna would not accept Jibril's victory. They still command significant armed groups that can match the state army, disrupt the peace and thus demand the most powerful political positions, which may further compound existing tensions. For example, Abdul Hakim Belhaj, who has led Tripoli's Military Council, failed to win a single seat. Yet, despite this, it is being strongly suggested that he is set to take one of either the interior or defence ministries. Despite faring badly in the elections, influential individuals like Belhaj, although lacking electoral legitimacy, will be guaranteed top positions in the upper echelons of power.

Winning elections is, therefore, not the same as winning power.

It is of little surprise that Jibril, according to the same Libyan, will play a role behind the scenes, as a strategist rather than a politician. The problem in essence continues to be one of stabilization. In the current environment, one in which the state has failed to disarm militia groups, there is little room for politicians who wield limited influence over the major brigades and militias, at least until there is a viable and functioning army.

Nevertheless, it is important to maintain perspective. Libyans who fought in the revolution, comprised of doctors, engineers, mechanics and average laymen, did not become revolutionaries overnight when the uprising began last year in February. Over the course of just a few months, they ended up becoming effective fighting units that toppled their dictator of 42-years, with the help of [NATO forces](#).

Reconstruction, often considered a greater challenge than war itself, will take many years if not decades. Rather than make the same mistake of doubting them – as ceasefire proponents did during last year's uprising – we should give them the benefit of any doubt.

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