

# NATO-installed regime seeks “democratic” cover in Libyan elections

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Libya goes to the polls today to choose a 200-seat General National Congress to replace the National Transitional Council (NTC).

The NTC, the country’s interim legislative body, was installed by the NATO-led military force last year in its war to depose Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

The Congress is tasked with appointing a new prime minister within 30 days of its first session. But the elections in this war-torn country have been a fraud from the start. They are an attempt on the part of Libya’s ruling clique grouped in the NTC to give itself some legitimacy after the NATO war for regime change.

The US and European powers aimed to install a pliant administration to secure control of the country’s lucrative oil reserves, bolster their geostrategic position in North Africa and increase their penetration of Africa. This in turn implied creating the conditions for the possible break-up of the country into three or more cantons that would facilitate more easily the untrammelled rule of Western corporations and banks.

While the new congress’s main task was to draft a new constitution, just two days ago the NTC decreed this would now be carried out by a panel directly elected by voters. This is widely seen as indicating that the NTC, and its backers in Washington, favour a federal constitution, if not the outright division of the country into semi-autonomous units—something the NTC had previously rejected.

The NTC introduced electoral legislation to prohibit people nominating themselves as candidates for the congress, allowing only those with a “professional qualification” to stand as a candidate and making it impossible for workers to stand. It barred almost everyone who worked at any level of Gaddafi’s former government. Under new laws, it is a criminal offence to glorify the former regime, or to “insult the aims of the February 17 revolution”.

Taken together, the NTC has ensured that candidacy was restricted to a relatively small layer. And even this was subject to approval from the electoral commission, which has registered only 80 percent of the estimated 3.4 million eligible to vote.

There are some 4,000 individual candidates running in different constituencies, most of them “independents”, while about 400 represent political parties. Some of the parties are contesting several constituencies, with most fielding several candidates in each constituency contested. Leading members of the NTC are standing as independents, or as members of parties established solely as their political vehicles.

Most of the parties are Islamist.

The former Tripoli Military Council chief Abdul Hakim Belhaj is standing in a Tripoli constituency for the Al-Watan (Nation) Party. Belhaj was one of the “rebel” commanders. A former jihadist who once fought the Russians in Afghanistan, he returned to Libya in 1992, setting up the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group in opposition to Gaddafi. He vowed in 1996 to fight “all the deviant groups that call for democracy or fight for the sake of it.”

He returned to Afghanistan to support the Taliban and was later captured and returned to Libya, courtesy of the CIA and MI5, where he was jailed and tortured.

The Muslim Brotherhood, banned under the Gaddafi regime, is mounting a well-funded campaign and fielding candidates under the banner of the Justice and Construction Party. Latterly, it forged close ties to the Gaddafi regime and allied itself with his son and heir apparent, Seif al-Islam.

Mahmoud Jibril is standing as a candidate for the Alliance of National Forces. Part of the old regime, having served as head of the National Economic Development Board where he was responsible for the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, he defected to the

NTC.

Other parties include the National Front Party, formerly the opposition National Front for the Salvation of Libya, which organised several assassination attempts against Gaddafi, and the Union for the Homeland Party, led by Abdulrahman al-Suwayhili, who began his opposition to Gaddafi as early as the 1970s.

Islamic hardliners in Ansar al-Sharia, a small militia, denounced the elections on television, prompting fears that polling stations may be targeted. Other groups have opposed the elections as giving too much power to Tripoli at the expense of other regions.

With the likelihood of intimidation, it is expected that many candidates will appeal the outcome of a vote that goes contrary to their wishes. The NTC said that it will deploy 30,000 to 40,000 security troops to police the polling stations.

The new congress will take over from a venal regime whose authority over the country is tenuous and is comprised of ex-Gaddafi regime figures, Islamists, CIA assets and tribal leaders. Self-appointed and operating in secret, corruption is rampant. No one knows how the estimated monthly oil revenues of \$5 billion or the \$200 billion of Libyan investments, which the NTC controls, are dispersed.

In May, an assassination attempt was made on the interim prime minister, Abdurrahim al-Keib, apparently because monthly payments, made to all militiamen who served as ground forces during the NATO campaign, had been cancelled. These payments totalled more than \$2 billion.

In April, the previous oil minister and Prime Minister Shokri Ghanem was found dead in the River Danube in Vienna.

The elections, originally scheduled for June 19, were postponed due to ongoing militia clashes, kidnappings, arrests, detentions, ethnic cleansing and human rights abuses. The country is subject to the unrestrained tyranny of more than 500 “rebel” armed mafia-type outfits that fought Gaddafi’s forces and now rule over their fiefdoms by terror and extortion.

The interim government’s forces, in no way fundamentally different to the private militia, have been powerless to assert their control, with the result that Libya has become a patchwork of semi-autonomous entities.

The militias are reportedly holding more than 7,000 detainees. International human rights groups have accused some of them of gross human rights abuses against prisoners. A United Nations report in March concluded

that the militias had “committed serious violations”, including war crimes and breaches of international rights law.

Last Sunday, an armed demonstration in Benghazi, where the rebellion against Gaddafi started, called for more autonomy for the country’s eastern region. The election commission in the city was stormed and ransacked. Last month, militiamen attempted to assassinate the British ambassador with rocket-propelled grenades. The UN diplomatic convoy was also attacked, as were the offices of the Red Cross, and the US and Tunisian consulates. Gangs of Islamists have desecrated the World War II graves of British and Commonwealth troops in Benghazi. Last month, armed militia briefly took control of Benghazi’s international airport, which was only brought under the control of the interim government in April.

More than 100 people have been killed in clashes between fighters from the Zintani and al-Mashashia tribes which did not support the NATO intervention, while in the south there have been repeated clashes between Arab ex-rebels and non-Arab Tibu tribes.

It took the NTC four weeks to secure the release of the four lawyers from the International Criminal Court (ICC) who had gone to Zintan to speak to Seif al-Islam, Gaddafi’s son, who has been indicted by the ICC and held captive there by Zintan’s military council.

The situation in Libya exposes the cynical justification for the NATO war—that it would bring “liberation”, democracy and human rights. Rather than heading towards democracy, Libya faces the threat of a violent breakup, tribal and communal strife and civil war.

A country that once had the highest standard of living in Africa is now the scene of widespread poverty, social misery and dislocation.

The results are no different from the 2001 NATO-led war against the Taliban regime and ongoing war and occupation of Afghanistan, and the US-led war against Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist regime. And the outcome of the arming, training and funding of the Syrian rebels by the Gulf monarchs, Turkey and the US will be the same.



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