

Libya's General National Council passes Political Isolation Law

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Libya is in the midst of a standoff in the capital Tripoli between the shaky government of Western-backed Prime Minister Ali Zeidan and armed militias that fought in the NATO-led war to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi.

A recent attack on the French Embassy, and bombings in the port city of Benghazi targeting police stations and a hospital all point to an escalating crisis of the government. Hundreds of different armed militias, some linked to Al Qaeda, are seeking to hold on to their local fiefdoms by force of arms.

Armed Islamist militias linked to elements in the Interior Ministry seized control of the Foreign and Justice Ministries, briefly occupied the Finance Ministry, and surrounded the highly unpopular parliament, the General National Congress (GNC). They left after two weeks, when the government agreed to their key demands.

The armed gangs under the Supreme Security Council (SSC)—an umbrella group of former fighters under the command of the Interior Ministry—proved more powerful than the government. The militias were demanding the GNC pass a Political Isolation Law, outlawing officials who worked for Gaddafi from holding office in the new government.

The Isolation Law has dominated and polarised political life in Libya in recent months. It is so wide-ranging that it targets all officials who had ever worked for the former regime in any capacity since 1969, including those who lived in exile for decades.

As such, it prevents leading politicians from seeking office for 10 years—including Zeidan, current president of the GNC Mohamed Magariaf, vice-president of the GNC Jomaa Atiga, former interim Prime Minister Mahmoud Jibril, Chairman of the National Transitional Council Mustafa Abdul Jalil, and other leading figures

who jumped ship during the NATO intervention.

At least four ministers and 15 legislators are affected. If ratified, it will also affect their families. Jibril said it could affect half a million of Libya's six million citizens.

The Isolation Law thus threatens the already tenuous position of the new regime. It is designed to exclude as many prominent opponents of the SCC as possible. It is widely seen as bolstering the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties outlawed under Gaddafi.

The government's own security forces, which are not much more than an amalgamation of militias, are weak and riven with dissent. Officers in eastern Libya demanded the sacking of Chief of Staff Youssef Mangoush, due to his inability to reform the armed forces and enforce security. The Southern Military Governor, appointed to secure the south against the armed militias and criminal gangs, has stated publicly that it was impossible to carry out his remit.

The government sought to rally its supporters in a pro-government demonstration against the armed militias surrounding parliament and the ministries. But only hundreds participated, denouncing the militias' use of violence and accusing the Muslim Brotherhood of trying to seize power by force, leading to violent clashes. Parliament was forced to pass the law at gunpoint, further emboldening the militias who demanded the prime minister and government's resignation, the freezing of the recently announced budget, and the right to form a committee to control the Foreign Ministry.

Zeidan backed down. He defended the armed groups, saying that they had a right to express their views as they saw fit. He added, "We don't have militias in Libya, we have revolutionaries."

He promised to enforce the law and announce a

cabinet reshuffle in a matter of days. There were local media reports that several ministers and the army chief of staff had resigned but these were later denied.

Under the law, to take effect on June 6, runner-up candidates in last July's GNC elections will replace the "isolated" representatives that ran as independents, while candidates who ran for a political party will be replaced by the next candidate on the list.

The new law will also affect the 60-member Constituent Assembly, which is to draft the country's new constitution and is due to be elected later this year. The GNC was originally tasked with selecting the membership of the Constituent Assembly and drawing up a new constitution. But those seeking greater regional autonomy and a federal form of government for Libya, particularly in the oil-rich eastern province of Cyrenaica who declared semi-autonomy in March last year, demanded and won the direct election of the Assembly.

This made it more likely that a federal constitution would be passed, provoking further discord between the disparate forces opposed to Gaddafi. But the NATO-backed Transitional National Council was forced to concede in order to enable elections to go ahead and legitimise a neo-colonial government. The emboldened Islamists are now expected to push for the selection of a Constituent Assembly to draft a constitution in their interests, tantamount to a political coup. The success of the armed standoff will also give a green light to others. As well as the Islamists and those seeking a federation in Cyrenaica, the Berbers or Amazigh are likely to push for greater autonomy. Their leader Fathi Khalifa's Facebook page says they are preparing their first military parade in Libya.

The stage looks set for a civil war for control of Libya and its vast resources. The NATO war, far from bringing democracy and human rights to Libya, has brought economic devastation and social hardship to the country that—notwithstanding social inequality and massive corruption—once had the highest standard of living on the African continent. With the median age at just 24, most of Libya's young people are now without work.

Libya's descent into civil war and its potential break-up into local fiefdoms—as in Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq, all victims of similar imperialist wars—threaten war across North Africa and the Sahel, as the Mali war

and growing violence in Algeria and Tunisia show.

The country has become a major source of weapons and jihadists fighting overseas. According to the BBC, some members of the Martyrs of 17 February Brigade, the biggest and best armed militia in eastern Libya which is financed by the Libyan defence ministry, are believed to be fighting with opposition forces backed by Washington, Riyadh and Doha, in Syria.

Libya is also providing a flow of arms and fighters for its southern neighbours. A recent report from the French Ministry of Defence's Directorate of Military Intelligence stated that Qatar, with whom it collaborated closely in the war against Gaddafi and is continuing to work with in Syria to topple the Assad regime, was funding armed groups that are moving into the Sahel. It claimed Qatari Special Forces were supporting certain insurgent factions in northern Mali, including Ansar Dine.

Libya is also destabilising its eastern neighbour, Egypt, which has seen the inflow of heavy weapons across its borders, fuelling the Salafist Jihadi Movement in the Sinai Peninsula. A few days ago, three Egyptian policemen and four soldiers were kidnapped in Sinai in an ambush by gunmen believed to belong to Al-Qaeda linked Salafist gangs. Cairo announced that it had arrested three suspected terrorists tied to Al-Qaeda for plotting attacks.



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