

Libyan military commander calls for Egyptian-style military junta

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22 February 2014

Major General Khalifa Haftar has called for the suspension of the General National Congress (GNC) and the government of Prime Minister Ali Zeidan, and the formation of a presidential committee to govern the country till new elections could be held. He described it as a road map to “rescue” Libya from chaos.

Military officials met earlier to discuss setting up an Egyptian style military council to replace the GNC and the Zeidan government. When the GNC’s president instructed the police to detain those involved, the top Military Police official refused, saying he no longer accepted the legitimacy of the GNC because its term expired on February 7.

A GNC spokesperson, Omar Humaidan, said, “He doesn’t represent the army. He is not even in Tripoli, the capital is secure.”

While the proposed military coup did not materialise, the incident testifies to the exceeding fraught political situation in Libya three years after the first protests in Tripoli against the Gaddafi regime that provided the major powers with an excuse to organise his overthrow. Their aim was to pre-empt a mass movement of the working class by installing a pliant stooge who would open up Libya’s vast energy resources to Western corporations.

The GNC—the legislative body established after the NATO-led war—is little more than a consortium of Islamist forces, ex-Gaddafi regime elements, and criminal gangs, penetrated by the US and its military and intelligence agencies. Only candidates selected by the NATO-installed National Transitional Council were eligible for election.

On February 3, the interim parliament, charged with organising elections before February 7 to a constituent assembly that would draft a new constitution, to be followed by a general election, extended its mandate to

the end of 2014. It set February 20 as the date for the election of the panel to draft the new constitution. Thousands took to the streets of Tripoli and Benghazi to protest, chanting, “No to the extension.” Several members of the Congress resigned.

The US-backed government is in a desperate crisis, facing threats of Islamist militias, demands from workers for better pay and more jobs—the real unemployment rate is believed to be about 30 percent—and cities requiring reconstruction as a result of the devastation caused by the 2011 war. One million people, many of them supporters of the former regime, remain internally displaced.

Following strikes by workers and a blockade of Libya’s oil ports last July by those seeking autonomy for the eastern region of Cyrenaica, oil production fell to an all-time low of 250,000 barrels per day (bpd), as opposed to 1.5 million bpd before the strike. This has risen since the beginning of the year to 570,000 bpd.

Government revenues, 95 percent of which are dependent upon oil, have fallen to the extent that Zeidan has warned that it “could have difficulties paying salaries.”

Zeidan has become increasingly isolated. He faces a hostile GNC, where five members of his coalition government resigned, and a boycott by the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated opposition. His government is at best only in nominal control of much of the country, including the capital.

While some 250,000 are on the government’s payroll as outsourced security providers, they mostly operate under the direction of Islamist and regional warlords who constitute the principal power in the country, and terrorise, kidnap and murder civilians, top army figures, judges, and security and government officials with impunity.

Armed clashes are a frequent occurrence around Tripoli, where nationalist forces have fought pitched battles with militias backed by the GNC regime, and in the eastern port city of Benghazi. Last week, Abdelaziz al-Hasadi, the first prosecutor general appointed after Gaddafi's fall, was gunned down in the eastern city of Derna. Many of his fellow judges have fled Benghazi for the capital, fearing for their safety if they pursue cases against the militias.

Last month, gunmen tried to kill Deputy Prime Minister Sadiq Abdulkarim, who also serves as interim interior minister in Tripoli. This came less than three weeks after the assassination of Deputy Industry Minister Hassan al-Droui. Zeidan was abducted by an Islamist militia last October, only to be released shortly afterwards by another militia.

In January, pro-Gaddafi forces in the south seized control of the Tamenhint air base 30 km northeast of Sabha, the main city in the region, after semi-nomadic Toubou forces from Murzuk who were guarding it withdrew. The Toubou unilaterally pulled out, charging that the Zeidan government was deliberately exploiting clashes in Sabha between them and the Toubou and Awlad Sulaiman tribes to divert attention from moves to install a new administration.

Recent clashes have been the deadliest since a ceasefire agreement in March 2012 that ended tribal battles that had led to the death of at least 150 and wounded hundreds of others. At that time, Toubou leader Issa Abdel Majid Mansour threatened a separatist bid to protect his people against ethnic cleansing.

The Toubou and other sub-Saharan ethnic minority groups have faced vicious attacks by Arab militias, with thousands held incommunicado in makeshift prisons controlled by the militias and subjected to torture and killings. They have been excluded from the political and economic life of the country, leading to shifting regional alliances between the Toubou, Tuareg and other black minority groups in southern Libya, northern Chad and Niger, and a degree of alignment with pro-Gaddafi forces they once opposed.

There were unconfirmed reports of pro-Gaddafi forces taking control elsewhere, leading the government to pass a new law banning satellite television networks broadcasting pro-Gaddafi news and commentaries. Another decree bans scholarship

students and public employees from speaking out against the conditions in Libya.

Zeidan called an emergency GNC session to declare a countrywide state of alert, and announced the deployment of troops in the south to suppress the rebellion. A Defence Ministry spokesman said later that the central government had reclaimed control of the air base.

There is great anxiety in imperialist circles that the opposition to both the Islamist proxies Washington used to topple the Gaddafi regime and Zeidan's neo-colonial regime will bring down the tottering government. Recent developments presage a possible return of NATO forces to Libya.

Just last November, Zeidan warned of a possible "intervention of foreign occupation forces" to protect civilians under the United Nations Charter's Chapter VII, because "the international community cannot tolerate a state in the middle of the Mediterranean that is a source of violence, terrorism and murder."

This was the same pretext for the NATO intervention that caused the crisis in the first place.

French Admiral Edouard Guillard recently appealed for a renewed imperialist intervention in Libya, claiming that developments on the southern border could lead to a "terrorist threat." While France claims to have ruled out Western military action for the time being, Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, speaking in response to a call for intervention from Niger, said that a meeting of officials from Britain, Germany, France, the US, Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia, to be held in Rome at the beginning of next month, would discuss what help they could give Libya.

"That does not mean we have to have people on the ground," he said, "It means we have to help governments that want to get rid of terrorism, which is the case with the Libyan government."



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