

## Post-revolutionary Politics in Libya: Inside the General National Congress

Piecing together the nascent political picture in Libya is essential to understanding the current roadblocks to democracy. Unlike Egypt, no single party, force, or personality anchors the political scene. Unlike Tunisia, no coalition provides a gauge of the relative strength of political groups. In Libya, where parties were banned even before the reign of Muammar al-Qaddafi, post-revolution politics remain fluid, loyalties fleeting, and ideological fault lines less defined than in its North African neighbors. Nevertheless, ten months after the country's first free elections, an early snapshot of the contemporary political scene is coming into focus.

Elections for Libya's legislative body<sup>1</sup>, the General National Congress (GNC), held in July 2012 were widely considered free and fair. They yielded a body in which eighty seats were allocated to political parties while one hundred twenty went to independent candidates. Two political forces, Mahmoud Jibril's National Forces Alliance (NFA) and the Muslim Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party (JCP), dominated competition for the party list seats with the NFA coming out on top with a plurality (thirty-nine out of eighty) of seats.

International media hailed the NFA's electoral victory as a surprising success by liberal secularist forces, but that was a misleading conclusion. As Mahmoud Jibril himself reiterated many times, the NFA coalition is neither liberal nor secular, but rather nationalist and nonideological. Moreover, the 120 candidates who won independent seats did not initially align themselves with either of the two main groups but instead, opted to support either of the two groups on

an issue-by-issue basis. In the end, the July 2012 elections produced a strong (but not dominant) non-Islamist faction led by the NFA, and a statistically weaker (but more cohesive) and ideologically motivated Islamist opposition led by the JCP.

Given this ideological polarization and the fragmentation of independent members and smaller parties, no majority coalition has yet been formed. Thus, early into the GNC's tenure, Libyan politics moved behind the curtain and politicking became increasingly opaque.

This state of affairs is exemplified by the struggle around the political isolation law, a piece of legislation that would prevent individuals who worked for the Qaddafi regime from serving in any public position for a period of ten years. Because of its direct impact on many members of the current government and the assembly, it has been fought bitterly. The law's approval was stalled in parliament for several months until those who supported it (mostly Islamist groups and some of the militias) orchestrated a quasi coup d'état by besieging several institutional buildings with armed militias and vociferously calling for the immediate adoption of the law. Immediately after passage of the law in May 2013, it became clear that it was simply an attempt to cover a bid for power by groups inside and outside the GNC. Their goal was to reach a result they did not have the legal means to obtain otherwise: the overthrow of the Zidan government and the installation of a prime minister more sympathetic to their values and reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> Technically the GNC was supposed to be a constitutional assembly, but because of the lack of clear guidelines on repartition of powers it assumed the role of a legislature.

The question of how Libya went from having a very successful election which saw political parties and individuals democratically competing through debates and dialogue, to today's bitterly polarized assembly intent on passing a contentious political isolation law through the use of armed pressure, requires a deeper analysis of the evolution of the political forces vying for power inside and outside the GNC. It is also important to assess the relative influence of the two dominant groups in the Libyan political landscape, loosely defined as the Islamists (centered around the Muslim Brotherhood) and the non-Islamists (anchored by Mahmoud Jibril and the NFA).

## The Islamists

Islamist groups active in Libyan politics currently include the JCP (the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya), a fragmented ensemble of Salafi groups, and a few influential independent religious personalities.

Before the revolution the Muslim Brotherhood was not involved in Libyan politics—Qaddafi banned the organization when he came to power, aggressively jailed members in the 1990s, and only in the mid-2000s did they reintegrate into society—but the group took active measures from the beginning of the Libyan uprising to ensure it had a voice in Libya's post-revolution politics. The Brotherhood's Shura Council, for example, convened just days into the uprising in mid-February 2011 and called on all Brotherhood members to return to Libya to help overthrow the regime.

Throughout the Libyan uprising and the subsequent political transition, the Brotherhood worked to capitalize on its organizational strength to ensure it would be politically relevant in the future. It established a charitable organization in 2011, *Nida al-Kheir*, to coordinate aid from the Gulf with organizations working on the ground in Libya, which helped them to build some credibility among the population. The Brotherhood also backed a number of media organizations, including Manara Press, in an effort to amplify the group's message.

It is estimated that one-fifth (twelve to fifteen members) of the National Transition Council (NTC), the governing body during the period of the revolution, were affiliated with the Brotherhood. The number is not clearly defined because no

political affiliation was officially proclaimed within the NTC, and moreover, for security reasons not all members declared their participation in the transitional body. Of key importance, however, thanks to the cohesion of Brotherhood members within the NTC and their ability to exercise influence over the other members, the NTC appointed Dr. Amin Belhaj (the head of the Brotherhood Shura Council) to lead the committee that wrote the rules governing the July 2012 GNC elections.

Allowing a larger number of seats for parties within the congress was key for the Brotherhood, which at the time was the only group with the organizational capacity to stand for elections across the country with only a few months' preparation. Given Belhaj's affiliation, it should come as no surprise that the initial electoral law allocated 135 of the GNC's 200 seats to parties, rather than independents. Following the release of this controversial draft electoral law, NTC member Fathi Baja argued that it was adopted "under pressure from" the Muslim Brotherhood, and that the party was the only political group that could gain a majority in the next election.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the political equilibrium within the NTC changed over the ensuing months before the July 2012 elections, and in a clear setback for the Muslim Brotherhood, the electoral law was later amended to allocate eighty seats for party lists and 120 for independents.

While maneuvering to shape the system in its favor, the Brotherhood faced the even more daunting task of winning over a population skeptical of its regional ties to the pan-Islamist movement and its close cooperation with Qaddafi during its rapprochement just a few years earlier. In the spring of 2012, the Brotherhood launched the JCP and made clear that the party was open to all Libyans, not just those who were members of the Brotherhood. The group avoided any connection with its Egyptian counterparts and pursued a 'Libya first' agenda.

The Brotherhood showed early on that it could leverage its connections at the highest levels of government with its organizational capacity on the ground to attain political influence far exceeding its actual popularity in Libyan society. Through initial maneuvers in the NTC and a number of key GNC decisions later, the Brotherhood demonstrated an uncanny ability to influence Libyan politics despite

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<sup>2</sup> Agence France-Presse, "Libya's NTC Adopts Election Law, Drops Women Quota," January 28, 2012, [http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gN5\\_8HWi3dScd2EJPymFIQH8ttw?docId=CNG.4ffac2cc40606474bc6242c7407d8a26.e1](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gN5_8HWi3dScd2EJPymFIQH8ttw?docId=CNG.4ffac2cc40606474bc6242c7407d8a26.e1).

the broad segment of the population that remains, at best, apathetic to the organization. This was thanks to its cohesive leadership, disciplined followers, clear ideological and motivational message, and great economic resources (presumably obtained through financing from sympathetic Gulf organizations).

## The National Forces Alliance

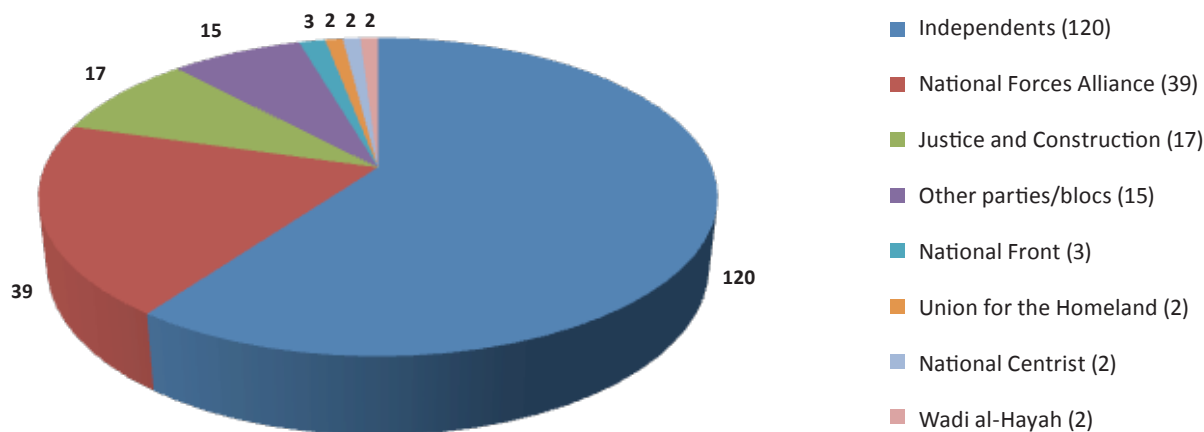
In the run-up to the July 2012 GNC elections, the ideological counterweight to the Brotherhood was Mahmoud Jibril and his loose political coalition, the NFA. Jibril was well known for his ties to the Qaddafi regime as head of the National Planning Council and the National Economic Development Board, and cooperated closely with his son Seif al-Islam. Despite his close ties to the regime during its final years, Jibril defected at the outset of the uprising and emerged as a key leader in the NTC, which he chaired from its formation in March 2011 through October 2011, at which point he resigned.

Jibril's connection to the former regime made him an easy target for the Brotherhood and other critics. Mohamed Sawan, president of the Muslim Brotherhood, frequently stated his unwillingness to work with Jibril, and famously likened his views on sharia to those of Qaddafi.<sup>3</sup> By implying similar ideological views between the two, Sawan intended to discredit his opponent in the eyes of the Libyan population.

To counteract these accusations and guarantee success in the July elections, Jibril devised a two-prong electoral approach. First, he downplayed his connections to the former regime, emphasizing his capacity to act as a technocrat and his lengthy experience in international business and governmental institutions. Second, he capitalized on the fact that he joined the revolution at the very beginning and highlighted his leadership role in the NTC to devise a complex electoral strategy: in cities where the name Jibril carried large popularity, the bloc presented weak candidates and focused the campaign on Jibril's personal fame; in the countryside, where Jibril's name did not carry the same weight, the NFA sought out strong, local personalities to run on his list. Moreover, Jibril undertook a strong campaign to recruit civic organizations to support him; leading up to elections the NFA included more than fifty political parties and more than 200 NGOs.

This broad structuring of the National Forces Alliance had serious implications for the ensuing elections (in which it would outperform its competitors) and for its influence within the GNC (in which it would greatly underperform). While this strategy ensured electoral success, in reality it undercut ideological coherency and long-term party loyalty. Whereas the Brotherhood played the long game of building political legitimacy, popularity on the ground, and a coherent ideological base, the NFA opted to define itself as broadly as possible, attain as much immediate influence as it could, and iron out its internal inconsistencies later on.

### Results of the July 2012 GNC Elections<sup>4</sup>



<sup>3</sup> George Grant, "Justice & Construction leader confirms NFA not part of coalition plans; likens Jibril to Qaddafi," *Libya Herald*, July 12, 2012, <http://www.libyaherald.com/2012/07/12/justice-likens-jibril-to-qaddafi/>.

<sup>4</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General\\_National\\_Congress](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_National_Congress).

## Early Politicking of the GNC

The results of the July 2012 GNC elections and somewhat misguided media coverage obscured the relative strengths of the parties involved. Jibril's NFA obtained an admittedly impressive thirty-nine of the eighty seats available to party lists, while the Muslim Brotherhood's JCP came in a distant second with only nineteen. This led many commentators to proclaim a liberal victory in the elections. However, this hasty assessment ignored the fact that it was unclear how the remaining 120 independents would align themselves, and whether the loosely connected NFA members would follow Jibril's marching orders or pursue different agendas.

A noteworthy opinion poll conducted by the Libyan Center for Research and Development just after the elections found that 81 percent of those who voted for NFA did so because it was headed by Mahmoud Jibril. Among the primary reasons for his selection, voters noted the absence of prominent leaders from other political movements that could compete with him, or match his experience and qualifications. Votes for Jibril and, by extension, the NFA were based less on the nuance of his ideology or party platform and more on the perceived competency of his leadership. Hasty media analysis proclaiming a liberal sweep made incorrect assumptions about voters' intentions. Moreover, Jibril himself often noted that his party was neither secular nor liberal, but rather nonideological and nationalist. He stressed the fact that everybody in Libya is Muslim, and the words 'secular' and 'liberal' are understood to be incompatible with Islam.

As it turned out, the NFA was unable to win over enough of the 120 independent members or to form a strong coalition with other political forces to grant them control of key items on the GNC's agenda. Although its primary rival, the JCP, was also unable to form a coalition it would begin to demonstrate its ability to rally independents—largely Islamist sympathizers—in order to prevent Jibril's hegemony within the GNC. In the early months of the GNC, the Muslim Brotherhood was twice able to block the NFA's top candidates from key positions: first, in the race for speaker, and subsequently in the race for prime minister.

These early political confrontations immediately demonstrated two key points about GNC politics that collectively set the stage for political gridlock. First, the NFA did not have enough votes to unilaterally set the agenda. Second, the Brotherhood would exert great effort to avoid working with Jibril and the NFA.

## Political Positioning

After the rapid dismissal of the GNC's first elected prime minister, Mustafa Abushagur, in October 2012 the crisis caused by the polarization of the two groups was resolved with a compromise selection: Ali Zidan, a human rights lawyer. Even though Zidan was not an NFA member, he owed his premiership to the full backing of Jibril and his party. Zidan's close ties to the NFA were evidenced by his early, hostile moves toward the Muslim Brotherhood. In December, for example, Zidan stripped Housing Secretary Ali Hussein al-Sharif, a Muslim Brotherhood figure, of a number of key powers and reassigned them to his deputy. Moreover, Zidan passed over a Muslim Brotherhood candidate for the post of religious affairs minister and instead chose NFA-affiliated Abdulsalam Abusaad, an individual widely considered close to the former regime.

Tensions within the GNC are also a result of the role played by its speaker, Mohamed Magariaf, and the lack of clear rules defining the powers of each institution. Magariaf has gradually broadened the scope of his position and claims to be the de facto head of state, which neither Zidan nor a majority of GNC members accept. This lack of clearly defined powers remains one of the primary sources of tension between political groups and state institutions.

## Equilibrium of Forces Inside the GNC

### The NFA and non-Islamist groups

Owing to its lack of ideological cohesion and party loyalty, Jibril's NFA has slowly fragmented. Of the original thirty-nine party list seats won by his coalition in July 2012, perhaps only half remain loyal to Jibril. Moreover, other non-Islamist members of the GNC have begun to coalesce into new political blocs that pose competition. In one of the more notable examples, several members created a political bloc to unite various groups opposed to allowing a supreme role for religion in politics. As of March 2013, this bloc of democratic nationalists included at least twenty members, with prospects for winning over another twenty members previously allied with the NFA.

The independent members in the GNC also include a small group of about ten members who support the realization of a federal system in Libya. The group's philosophy is predicated on the differences among the three regions in which the country was historically divided: Tripolitania in the

northwest, Fezzan in the south, and Cyrenaica in the east. Cyrenaica, in particular, considers its identity distinct, and since the revolution a number of political groups outside the GNC have emerged demanding the creation of a federal state. Within the GNC, there are approximately ten members from the east who are stalwarts of federalism and a handful of southern members who support the idea.

These smaller groups do not always maintain their independence, and side with other major groups according to the issue at stake.

## The Islamists

Beyond the Muslim Brotherhood, there are several other Islamist-oriented groups, most notably, a group of thirty-six parliamentarians formed in late January 2013 often referred to as al-Wafaa (formally known as the Bloc of Loyalty to the Martyrs). Headed by Abdelwahab al-Qaid, the group presents a strong Islamist outlook, but is not necessarily allied with the politics of the Muslim Brotherhood. Of note, the bloc backs GNC Speaker Mohamed Magariaf in order to win his support for a more Islamic legislative agenda in the GNC. Given this pro-Magariaf stance, the handful of GNC members loyal to Magariaf's National Front party also reportedly support the al-Wafaa bloc.

A Brotherhood caucus has also reportedly emerged, encompassing nineteen JCP members and upwards of half of the GNC's independents, although the latter number may be inflated.

Outside of the GNC, there has also been a significant increase in the number and consistency of groups defining themselves as Salafi in recent months. Likely backed by Gulf money, they support a radical, orthodox vision of Islam close to Saudi Wahhabism. Although Salafis remain a clear minority among Islamist-oriented groups in Libya, and are politically marginalized because of their radicalism, they have nevertheless been able to influence a number of GNC members who have attempted to advance Salafi ideology in the Assembly.

Two other forces in the Libyan Islamist spectrum that play a crucial role, although informally, are the Grand Mufti Sheikh Sadeq al-Gharyani (rumored to be the real leader of the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates) and Sheikh Ali Sallabi (a widely respected figure among those who sympathize with an Islamic vision of politics). Sallabi distinguishes himself by his strong advocacy for dialogue among all segments of Libyan society and his preference for a moderate role for

sharia in society. Sallabi often preaches for equal rights for women and men and for minorities, while the Brotherhood maintains a more literalist interpretation of sharia.

Although neither Sallabi nor al-Gharyani is explicitly attached to any particular force, they each play a major role in the Libyan political arena due to the influence of their position and their standing as eminent scholars of Islam. Sallabi is internationally recognized as a Muslim thinker, which carries considerable weight among the Libyan population. Meanwhile, al-Gharyani is capable of influencing political outcomes and decisions because of his power to issue statewide fatwas.

## Political Forces Outside the GNC

Beyond all the forces described thus far, another important actor that casts its shadow on the Libyan political scene is the wide composite and fragmented universe of the militias of the revolutionaries, or *thuwwar*.

Much has been written about this heterogeneous and fragmented collection of armed groups, some formed by revolutionaries who fought against the regime, others by opportunists who joined and fought at the end of the war, and still others comprising purely criminal elements and jihadist extremists. Only the first group is worthy of discussion here, since they claim some legitimacy and, thus, influence the political process.

The *thuwwar* have largely been left out of the political process thus far, excluded by both the current government and the GNC. They remain restless and angry, asserting that the revolution's goals of change have not been fulfilled, and are critical that too much attention is given to former members of the regime who defected only at the last moment (many of whom now associate with Jibril's NFA)

Moreover, the *thuwwar* have grievances against the Zidan government for its refusal to grant them official recognition. In March 2013, these militias threatened an attack against the capital to demand the prime minister's resignation. Their malcontent against the government escalated until, under the pretense of supporting the political isolation law, a group of militias surrounded the main buildings of the state's institutions, forcing the GNC to approve the law under de facto military threat. The *thuwwar*'s capacity to disrupt the political process is one of the most worrisome developments to date and casts a shadow on the stability of the country's institution-building process and larger transition.

## **Conclusion: Moving Beyond Political Fragmentation**

The GNC's fragmentation and the collision between the two main blocs—loosely defined as Islamists (led by the JCP) and non-Islamists (led by the NFA)—has essentially paralyzed the decision-making process and brought about a dangerous polarization of the political landscape. Collectively, this state of affairs has produced a highly polarized GNC that, instead of addressing the country's woes and driving reconstruction, has become a microcosm of its poor health: a weak, fragmented, politically stalled body. The GNC has practically lost its legitimacy and its protracted inactivity puts the entire transition process at serious risk.

In fact, in a bid for power political forces utilized the necessity of adopting the political isolation law as a pretext to unleash militia forces against the government and forced the GNC to pass the legislation. Nevertheless, it became immediately clear that the purpose was not the idealistic one referenced in public—that of freeing Libya

from the remnants of the Qaddafi regime—but rather to weaken the government's institutions and force the prime minister to resign. More specifically, these political groups, defined broadly as the GNC's Islamists, aim to substitute Ali Zidan with a personality more inclined to their values and principles. This radicalization of some of Libya's key political actors, who appear incapable of moving beyond narrow interests to advance decisions that would benefit the country as a whole, will have serious implications for the entire democratization process.

Libya's greatest hope for crafting a democratic system with legitimacy and buy-in from all actors depends on whether those in power focus on reaching national unity through a process of compromise and reconciliation, and by overcoming differences. The Libyan people and the international community should exert all efforts to support those individuals and groups struggling to find common ground between opposed ideological positions and allow for the strengthening of plural and democratic institutions.

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