Libya’s Troubled Transition

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Summary
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More than a year after the outbreak of the uprising against Muammar Qaddafi’s rule, Libya is in the midst of a challenging transition. Qaddafi is dead, his forty-two-year-old regime overthrown, and the country liberated. And now Libyans are laying the groundwork for elections that will start their country on the path to a new constitution.

But absent are state institutions to manage the transition, security services to keep the peace, and sufficient national unity to ensure a safe transition. The National Transitional Council laid out a timetable for transition, but its legitimacy among the public is weak. What is more, it lacks the institutional infrastructure to ensure the timely and successful implementation of its own road map.

Adding to the tension are tens of thousands of armed revolutionaries refusing to give up their weapons until their various needs are attended to and repeated outbreaks of fighting between a range of tribal and militia groups settling scores from the recent past or battling over turf. And the country remains deeply fragmented along regional lines. The numerical strength of the westerners of Tripolitania is
tensely balanced against the revolutionary force of the eastern region of Cyrenaica—which includes the rebel stronghold of Benghazi—and the divided southern tribes of Fezzan.

Still, the chances of a successful transition are not bleak. The process is bolstered by widespread pride in Qaddafi’s overthrow, a significant sense of Libyan identity, and general agreement about the next key steps: hold elections, draft a new constitution, and establish a structure of democratic governance. Tribal and regional differences may be at the root of internecine conflict, but they are less virulent than the sectarian and ethnic divisions that have fueled prolonged civil conflict in some other regions of the Middle East. Libya’s geopolitical environment is fairly positive, particularly when compared to countries in the Levant that are arenas of intense international struggle. And then there is Libya’s copious oil revenue, which if properly managed can help to rapidly rebuild state and national institutions in a way that is not available to some other post-revolutionary states in the region.

There are many ways that the Libyan transition can go wrong. But if Libyan leaders and their friends in the region and abroad stay the course, Libya has a good chance of transitioning from dictatorship to accountable government—and taking the first steps toward rebuilding state, society, and economy in that ravaged land.

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