A Critical Analysis of Libya's State-Building Challenges Post-Revolution

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The recent developments in Libya have been characterised by various breakdowns in negotiations, as competing visions about the future of governance, power, and intrastate relations unfold. Nine years after the 2011 toppling of the Qaddafi regime, the political transition in Libya is still at a standstill (Joffé, 2018). Libya's security dilemma thrives as a result of the deep roots of fragmentation spanning over the last few decades of its recent history (Joffé, 2018). The country's fragmented security landscape contributes to long-standing local conflicts, disorder, and political instability – thus paralysing the country's political transition, with destabilising consequences in the region (Joffé, 2018). Therefore, identifying the factors contributing to the enduring security fragmentation of post-revolution Libya has significant implications for a contextual understanding of Libya's present-day state-building challenges.

Scholars have proposed different explanations for Libya's instability and the fragmentation of its security. However, contrary to dominant explanations linked to the impact of the 2011 external interventions in the country (Perroux, 2019), this paper argues that there are compelling domestic explanations for Libya's ongoing struggles. These domestic explanations must be historically contextualised to fully grasp the processes of conflict, the distribution of power, and the rules governing social interactions within the country. In short, this paper will examine post-revolution Libya's state-building challenges through an in-depth analysis of domestic factors, particularly the absence of strong institutions and the breakdown of cohesive social relations. The hypothesis put forth in this paper is that Libya's security dilemma is invariably tied to the challenges of state-building and democratisation processes reflected through its weak institutions and contested legitimacy issues. Cumulatively, these challenges would help us understand why competing subnational groups act in accordance with their own security interests, especially when confronted with economic difficulties and the lack of strong institutions.

Contextualising Post-Revolution Libya

Nine years after the defeat of Mu'ammar al-Qaddafi, Libya remains deeply divided between its various political and military actors (Silvestri, 2018). The many attempts of internationally supported efforts to establish a unified government and successfully transition to democratic governance have mostly failed (Silvestri, 2018). In light of this, Libya's economy is in crisis, while essential services and governmental functions have continued to deteriorate in the midst of enduring armed conflicts between countless militia groups (Silvestri, 2018). The UN-led negotiations of 2015 brought together the representatives from two rival governments to sign the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) (Silvestri, 2018). The two governments were the internationally recognised Tubruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) and the Tripoli-based General National Congress (GNC) (Silvestri, 2018). The LPA was initiated to put an end to the political deadlock and armed fighting, reconciling the two to a unified administration. This was immediately followed by the formation of the Presidency Council under the direction of Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj (Silvestri, 2018). The Council assumed office in Tripoli and began working on establishing a unity government, the Government of National Accord. Under this framework, the HoR would carry out the functions of a legislative body, while the GNC would form a secondary advisory body to be known formally as the State Council (Silvestri, 2018). In short, the LPA was intended to be in effect during the country's transitional period until the creation of a new constitution and successful parliamentary elections.

Yet, at the end of 2016, the HoR did not approve the LPA's requests and voted unanimously to reject the proposals made by the Presidency Council (Silvestri, 2018). Libya currently has two competing governments separating the East and the West (Silvestri, 2018). The LPA's main objective was to address the internal conflicts between the rival governments in the country. The mediations continued until mid-2018. However, towards the end of 2018, General Khalifa Haftar, backed by the HoR, launched offensive attacks at cities supporting the GNC (El-Katiri, 2012). This escalated the tension between the two governments once again, and at present, both sides are in the middle of a civil war. In the midst of this security void, terrorist groups have also gained territorial grounds in a few districts near Benghazi and previously in the coastal town of Sirte (Perroux, 2019). If Libya's current state proceeds unchecked, it could prove to be devastating to Libya's future. The increasing level of instability and lawlessness has also caused tremendous disruption to the financial sector in Libya, as investments have ceased and development projects are at a standstill (Perroux, 2019).

The State of Libya's Institutions

The discourse around the effectiveness of state-building within the scholarly literature is often related to measures of institutional strength (Hatipoglu & Palmer, 2012). Institutions can be defined as formal and informal rules and norms that organise social, political, and economic relations (North, 1990). During Qaddafi's rule, the state and its political institutions were often limited in their abilities to formalise decisions – that is, often relegated to overseeing superficial governmental functions (Perroux, 2019). Qaddafi ensured that the primary functions of power were delinked from the official representative governmental bodies. This meant that all key decisions were left to the discretion of personalised governmental committees, which Qaddafi had full control of (Perroux, 2019). In short, the state's organisations were essentially hollow and ineffective agencies that were mostly tasked with securing local level loyalties in exchange for public employment and monetary bribes (Perroux, 2019). Furthermore, democracy was never a feature of Libya under Qaddafi's rule, as Libyan citizens were not able to define their public spaces nor did they have an established free press (Perroux, 2019). This essentially meant that Libya was never able to develop strong centralised state institutions, and the only institutions that did function were the ones tasked with overseeing investments and the extraction of the country's oil (Perroux, 2019).

Considering Libya's inexperience with democracy and the absence of effective state institutions, we see how this legacy has impacted post-2011 state-building in the country (Perroux, 2019). Libya has since been unable to transpose formal democratic steps into substantive democratic practices, a key part of any post-conflict state during its transitional process (Perroux, 2019). Francis Fukuyama (2014) argues that the process of democratisation in the absence of a pre-existing modern state apparatus is likely to result in clientelism. This is indeed true in the case of Libya. Fukuyama (2014) draws his analysis from the examples of the Greek and Italian states – arguing that nepotistic practices were difficult to overcome, given the prior histories of these states. The question that emerges is why some states have been able to build themselves based on established rules of conduct that bind together the most authoritative components of society, integrating judicial and administrative independence with social accountability, while other states have not (Fukuyama, 2014). Fukuyama's (2014) central argument is that the state's clientelistic nature forms an inescapable threat of state capture by kin and allies – therefore causing the state to descend deep into cycles of corruption, ineffectiveness, and instability.

Fukuyama's (2014) commentary offers some insight into the present challenges unfolding in Libya. After the revolution, despite the elections held and the processes initiated towards the formation of parliament and a government, Libya has yet to see a constitution formalised (El-Katiri, 2012). This transitional period in Libya was intended to see through the phasing out of previous autocratic laws in favour of the establishment of new ones, as well as the enactment of policies protecting the rights and freedoms of Libyan citizens with the hope that the country would progressively transition towards a successful handing over of power (El-Katiri, 2012). To further complicate the breakdown of the country's transitional process, revolutionary insurgents have persistently stressed these failures to justify their ongoing violent attempts to control security and territory (Perroux, 2019). These insurgents have self-identified as the guardians of the revolution; however, they are often invested in securing their own interest or defending their own ideological inclinations (Perroux, 2019). Presently, the remnants of Libya's state institutions are highly centralised and inadequately managed. There is an absence of technical skills, and neither of these institutions is accustomed to good governance practices that will enable the effective functioning of public administration (El-

Katiri, 2012). Also, regarding Libya's security institutions, instead of rebuilding and equipping the national army and the police, rival political factions that came into power after 2011 preferred to fund and train their own favoured militias (Perroux, 2019). These militias were given legitimacy and formal affiliation with the governments. The Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior established by the National Transitional Council introduced a Security Committee and the Libya Shield Brigades, assigning official roles to militias while permitting them to continue engaging with their own private objectives (Perroux, 2019). This ongoing political divide in Libya has undermined the country's desperate need for collective security and has severely intensified the security dilemma while further weakening its institutions.

One other crucial feature during a post-conflict transitional period is the restoration of order and the execution of justice. The main hope for Libyans after the toppling of the Qaddafi regime was that the creation of democratic institutions would eventually provide Libyans with essential services such as access to health care, education, and basic amenities (Perroux, 2019). However, nine years after the revolution, Libyans continue to live without adequate health-care facilities, a weak national education system, and poor access to basic amenities (Perroux, 2019). Furthermore, many of the perpetrators that were former officials within the previous regime have successfully managed to evade a formal judicial process towards accountability and sentencing (El-Katiri, 2012). The cumulative failure of state authorities to rebuild towards the creation of democratic state institutions has ultimately caused the government to lose the support and legitimacy it previously garnered from its local districts (El-Katiri, 2012). Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder (2002) argue that there is a causal relationship between the degree of democratisation in a state and the strength of its institutions, which in turn explains the likeliness of conflict (Mansfield & Snyder, 2002). The authors found that states in transition from an autocracy to anocracy tend to be more conflict-prone than states that have completely democratised and emphasised that this is determined by the strength or weakness of a state's institutions (Mansfield & Snyder, 2002). In addition, the authors suggest that during the early phases of democratisation, two conditions make the emergence of conflict more likely. The first instance is when political elites exploit growing nationalism for their own gains to create discord in society, while the second instance is when the central government is too weak to counter the polarising strategies of the political elites (Mansfield & Snyder, 2002). The authors concluded that democracy-building should occur in tangent with the establishment of strong centralised institutions (Mansfield & Snyder, 2002).

Applying this analysis to Libya, there is evidence to support this argument. In 2012, Libya's democratic status was 3.1 on a scale of 10 on the Transformation Index Report carried out by the Bertelsmann Stiftung Foundation (Transformation Index Report BTI, 2018). On the same index, Libya scored 4.6 in 2014 and 2.6 in 2018 (Transformation Index Report BTI, 2018). Between 2014 and 2016, Libya was in the midst of designing a process towards forming a united interim government that would lead to the creation of a new constitution and parliamentary elections. Also, the conflict levels declined between 2014 and 2017. According to reports published by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center between 2014 and 2017, Libya recorded steadily declining numbers of new internally displaced persons – from 341,000 in 2014 to 29,000 in 2017 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, 2018). However, the number increased significantly between 2018 and 2019 – from 70,000 in 2018 to 104,000 in 2019 (Security Council Report, 2019). It could be argued that processes of democratisation, coupled with the attempts to initiate the process of rebuilding state institutions as Mansfield and Snyder (2002) suggest, impacted the levels of conflict between 2014 and 2017. Nevertheless, the breakdown of communications, hijacking of the transitional process in the country by political elites, and the limited capacity of the UN-backed government to counter these opposing strategies eventually left the initial phases of Libya's democratic transitional process in limbo, reigniting the rise of civil war in the country.

Libya's Sociocultural Landscape

Libya's social composition, culturally bound traditions, and political climate can also pose significant challenges to an effective political transition to democracy. There is scholarly evidence that these internal social divisions can fuel intense social fragmentation and incite conflict (Fearon & Laitin, 2000). However, religious, ethnic, or cultural divisions do not always necessarily result in conflict and fragmentation, as there could be other explanations for identitarian motivations (Lake & Rothchild, 1996). Aside from the important role that state institutions play, some scholars argue that ethnic conflict is most often caused by a group's collective fears of the future (Lake & Rothchild,

1996). This is the principal argument put forth by David Lake and Donald Rothchild (1996). The authors argue that when different groups within society begin to fear for their safety, the need for risk-taking increases, while complex strategic dilemmas with the potential for intense violence also arises (Lake & Rothchild, 1996). As communication breakdown occurs, and issues of reliable commitment towards ensuring security arise, certain groups are likely to become fearful as the state weakens (Lake & Rothchild, 1996). Cumulatively, these factors intensify the potential for violent conflict. Political elites, civil society actors operating within groups, and key state actors may exploit these fears to deepen insecurity and polarise society. Furthermore, the authors suggest that historical grievances that form a group's collective political memory coupled with a decline in cultural security may also amplify these anxieties (Lake & Rothchild, 1996). In some sense, Lake and Rothchild (1996) suggest that rising or increasing levels of anarchy cause these different groups to face high levels of insecurity thus initiating a security dilemma.

This may partly be the case in Libya, where we see that strong rivalries exist among rural villages, cities, and regions, many of which are contending against each other, driven by deep fears of what the other might do (Perroux, 2019). These rivalries, although long-standing (before the 2011 revolution), have historically been exploited and instigated by political elites during the Qaddafi era (Perroux, 2019). Post 2011, most of the important territories have now fallen under the control of militia groups. Additionally, the intense militarisation that has taken place since then has also led to the circulation of arms throughout these cities (Perroux, 2019). This has caused increasing levels of fear amongst the different groups and revived past historical tensions. For example, in the city of Sebha, the Qadhadfa tribe is opposed to the Awlad Suliman and the Warfallah tribes (Oleksy, 2013). This ongoing tension has often resulted in recurring violent armed confrontations (Oleksy, 2013). Indigenous groups in the country such as the Tuareg, Toubou, and Amazigh communities are also not spared from these fear and insecurities (Perroux, 2019). These groups have long histories in the region with their own affiliations, loyalties, and are mainly focussed on protecting their cultural practices and long-term security. Qaddafi's violent and authoritarian political regime over the years has established a strong sense of distrust and suspicion amongst Libyans themselves (Perroux, 2019). At present, under these challenging circumstances, these feelings of fear, distrust and suspicion is difficult to undo.

Fukuyama (2014, p. 3360) explains that "successful state building is dependent, therefore, on the prior existence of a sense of national identity that serves as a locus of loyalty to the state itself rather than the social groups underlying it". Nation-building is critical to the success of state-building and requires the creation of shared national traditions, symbols, and histories that foster a deep-rooted loyalty and trust of one another (Fukuyama, 2014). Libyans have difficult histories to come to terms with, and often these political memories have hampered efforts to mediate and reconcile the fractures within their society. According to Fukuyama (2014), although the state has an important role to play in nation-building, civil society actors also have an important role to play in creating a sense of national identity. However, Fukuyama (2014) cautions that nation-building can also be a dangerous and violent process. The question of whose language, culture and interests takes precedence inevitably arises in the nation-building process. Arabisation has impacted many indigenous communities in Libya, and further hinderance that disallows these communities to retrieve and practice their ways of life would cause further conflict (Perroux, 2019). Perhaps nation-building must be a multi-invested process, whereby consultation and mediations with the stakeholders happens over a gradual period of time. In Libya, trust-building will require long-term investment and commitment from the part of the state and involve listening, mediating, and working alongside the many different ethnic, tribal, and religious groups in the country. This may have implications for demobilising the ongoing security threats and restoring some measure of order to the Libyan state.

Conclusion

The 2011 Libyan uprisings brought an end to decades of dictatorship and prompted the beginnings of democratic political change in the country. In the last nine years, although the country has had two legislative elections and an awakening of its civil society sphere, the country continues to face considerable state-building challenges. Libya has been unable to effectively develop strong democratic institutions; nor has it been able to stabilise. External factors account for some of Libya's state-building challenges; however, the domestic factors impacting Libya are compelling and have clearly contributed heavily to its fragile security situation and the overall instability within the country. Libya is currently in a very precarious situation and delaying negotiations between the two rival governments will prove disastrous for Libya this next decade. It is evident that stronger measures are required from the part of the leading

global actors and multilateral organisations to bring Libya back to a place of resuming dialogue and addressing this conflict. A potential successful future for Libya can only be assured by a coherent and substantial collaboration between Libyans and the international community.

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