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Chapter 26

From ballots to bullets. Libyan 2012 elections as the origin of the unachieved transition

Chiara Loschi

Introduction

Libya held its first post-Al-Qadhdhāfī parliamentary elections on July 7, 2012, resulting in the country's first elected parliament, the General National Congress (GNC). However, shortly thereafter, a legitimacy battle began and tensions between elected representatives grew. Such tensions between former revolutionary groups and members of the armed forces and security apparatus escalated, eventually leading to civil conflict.. Since then, hopes for a peaceful democratic transition have disappeared. This chapter is concerned with the following questions: What problems affected the planning and implementation processes? What factors impacted the elections on democratization and reconciliation processes?

This chapter contends that Libyan instability has its roots in the rules of the game and the processes established for the 2012 parliamentary elections. In particular, the argument put forth here is that the election preparations and results paved the way for the emergence of long-lasting cleavages that not only exacerbated pre-existing frictions but also hampered the establishment of new deep divisions. Thus, the 2012 Libyan elections did not erase or substitute older societal-deep rifts, but, on the contrary, they amplified their reach. Against this background, new transitional institutions did not emerge as mediators between competing parties and could not agree on a unifying national interest or the necessity for a monopoly on the use of force.

Post-conflict elections have many more challenges than routine elections. Indeed, they aim at building legitimized institutions and governments; setting up democratic procedures and opening political participation; and establishing and consolidating peace and demilitarization. In short, voters and candidates should be able to participate and compete without fearing for their lives.

During times of transition, transitional institutions establish new rules and allow freedom of the press and speech, but against a context of highly polarized societies seeking to revive conflicts. Libya was no exception to these risks. The Libyan 2012 elections provide a useful case study in the frame of post-2011 political processes in Arab countries. The process set in motion for the preparation of the elections and the following dynamics confirm that elections matter, but not only to explain institutional developments in newly democratizing states (Lust-Okar and Jamal 2002). In particular,

in the Libyan case the electoral process called into question the understanding of post-conflict state building. The election preparations caused fragmentation along both new and old cleavages that influenced the process in the short term and paved the way toward subsequent political crises and security instability. The parliament elected with the July 2012 elections became an additional arena in which members could strive for a privileged position vis-à-vis local constituencies and privileged access to the process of nation building, instead of building strong national transitional institutions.

The chapter focuses on pivotal events concerning the preparation for elections and the following phase to analyze their consequences. The argument is that several critical processes launched with the planning of the elections had long-lasting negative effects on the outcomes and on the political processes initiated after the results. Specific gaps and exclusionary politics that emerged with the post-2011 phase did not disappear with the elections, but were amplified, creating the conditions for the subsequent deepening of conflict and the intervention of foreign actors. This is of utmost importance to better capture the impact of the electoral process, as well as international sponsorship of electoral mechanisms, on subsequent political developments and the reconstruction process in post-conflict countries. This is particularly salient in Libya, where international actors and the UN continue to call for national elections, but they are consistently sabotaged by domestic and the very same international institutions and actors. It is in this context that experts question the idea of promoting elections as a process for political stabilization (Wehrey and Badi 2022).

Setting the scene: Libya's ten years of impossible transition

Beginning on February 15, 2011, the Arab revolts that broke out in Tunisia and Egypt reached Libya. The regime established on September 1, 1969, by Colonel Mu'ammar Al-Qadhdhāfī was targeted by protests, and on February 27, 2011, the National Transitional Council (NTC) was established as the transitional political authority, ready to take over in case of regime collapse. In response, the colonel embarked on a campaign of repression against the protests. This marked the beginning of a conflict that continued until Al-Qadhdhāfī was captured and killed on October 20, and Sirte – the leader's hometown and the loyalists' last stronghold – fell to the opposition forces.

On October 23, the NTC proclaimed the end of the revolution and the liberation of the country. At the request of the Libyan authorities and to support the new transitional authorities of the country in their post-conflict efforts, the United Nations Security Council created a special integrated political mission, the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), on September 16, 2011.

The creation of the National Transitional Council in 2011 appeared to be one of the most promising steps for a peaceful transition. In July 2012, elections were held for a 200-member unicameral parliament called the General National Congress to replace the NTC. However, this was

the start of a prolonged crisis. In 2014, the weakness of the GNC and escalating internal conflicts led to the creation of two rival parliaments and their associated governments: one in western Libya and one in the east. However, already in 2013, insecurity and conflict had been spreading, and the ability of Libya's national authorities to provide basic services was collapsing, contributing to calls for the dissolution of the GNC. The political transition definitively collapsed in 2014. In March 2014, parliament expelled Prime Minister Ali Zeidan in a vote of no confidence and appointed Defense Minister Abdallah al-Thani as interim prime minister. Amid renewed militarization of the civil conflict, in June 2014 a House of Representatives (HoR) was elected to replace the GNC. However, the Islamist political coalition in the GNC rejected the legitimacy of the HoR elections and the shift in power. At this point, the political and military conflict truly erupted. National and local forces organized around two main warring alliances against each other: Libya Dawn (*Fajr Libia*) and Operation Dignity (*Karama*). In July 2014, Tripoli-based militias allied with the GNC leadership and launched 'Operation Dawn' to control key areas of the capital. Following these clashes, the HoR moved to Tobruk in the east of the country without a formal transfer of power from the GNC. In Tobruk, the HoR voted to establish an interim government chaired by Abduallah al-Thinni. In the west, the GNC was reinstated in September by a coalition of armed militias united under the name of Fajr Libya, which had extended its control over central Tripoli.

These events were crucial for the establishment of two distinct centers of powers. Although UNSMIL sponsored negotiations in Skhirat between parliaments and governments and appointed the Government of National Unity (GNU), in the longer term, this resulted in a reconfiguration of the conflicting parties and security actors rather than marking a political change. In the east, the HoR failed to vote to formally recognize it, instead recognizing the role of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), under the command of General Khalifa Haftar. At the same time, external interference led to an escalation of militarization, exacerbating the internal conflict. The LAAF, supported by Russia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt, also relied on foreign fighters from Syria, Sudan and Chad, as well as Russian mercenaries. Armed groups in western Libya, an area nominally under their control, supported the UN-recognized GNU. Turkey and Qatar supported the GNU with weapons, ammunition, training and foreign fighters. Adding to this conflict scenario, in 2014 the Islamic State claimed its presence in the country as the Islamic State Organization in Libya, further polarizing the internal conflict by occupying cities such as Derna and Sirte, and organizing attacks on oil terminals in early 2016, before being virtually eliminated in late 2016.

Paradoxically, since 2011, any military support for the parties in the conflict, includingfrom European Union member states, has been in violation of UN Security Council resolutions, which imposed an arms embargo on Libya. This, however, has been totally ineffective so far. At the same

time, the lack of demilitarization of political actors and militias in the west of the country and especially in the capital Tripoli, led to a proliferation of armed groups and militias and further fragmentation of power. This went hand in hand with the progressive efforts of European institutions to establish a Libyan institutional interlocutor within the framework of political cooperation, which was increasingly based on the need for European institutions to establish control over migratory flows through Libya.

The overlapping of several and often contradictory international policies strongly conditioned and constrained the evolution of the phenomena that emerged in Libya after 2011. In this context, claims of particularism and demands for political pluralism, opportunities for cultural mobilization, freedom of protest, the participation of women and the role of young men and women in the cultural life of the country experienced increasingly greater obstructions. After further Libyan conflict broke out in 2019, which ended with the ceasefire of October 2020 and the launch of a Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), the national debate has reopened on a sustainable democratic transition for the country and a political solution leading to institutional reunification may have been set in motion. In February 2021, after two rounds of voting, the LPDF selected a new executive council, creating an interim Government of National Unity, which is still in power. The GNU was tasked with overseeing the presidential and parliamentary elections that had been set for December 2021. However, due to prolonged debates over the legal and constitutional basis of the elections and disputes over candidate eligibility, the High National Election Commission (HNEC) announced the postponement of the elections. At the time of writing, elections seem to be off the Libyan political agenda. How have the 2012 elections spread the seeds of such long-lasting instability in Libya?

Preparations for elections

The transitional period should have led to the establishment of state institutions and nationwide support for a new political leadership. In preparation for the elections and discussions around the electoral law, transitional institutions, embodied by the National Transitional Council (NTC), faced the most complicated challenges of the process. Elections became the cornerstone of the transition and the NTC persisted with them from the start and during the following months. The first issue to emerge was the legalization of new political parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi movements. Their arrival on the scene opened the debate over the political system that the new institutions had to acquire. Second, instrumental reactivation of older political agendas such as those that the federalist movements from east Libya put forward, also influenced both pre- and post-election phases.

In any case, in 2011, the death of Al-Qadhdhāfī and the declaration by the NTC of Libya's liberation on October 23 set in motion the process toward parliamentary elections to designate the 200 members of the General National Congress (*Mutamar Al Chaab Al Aam*). Elections took place on July 7, 2012, and the NTC, headed by Abdul Rahim El-Kleib, handed over power to the GNC. The GNC was consequently charged with appointing and overseeing the constituent assembly and the election of a new government. The NTC's temporary constitutional declaration (TCD) of August 3, 2011, had charged the NTC with the promulgation of an electoral law and the establishment of an electoral commission within 90 days of the declaration of liberation in preparation for elections that would take place within 240 days of this same date. Based on the legal framework sketched in the TCD, the NTC promulgated election, political party and constituency laws, and appointed the High National Election Commission to implement the ensuing registration, preparation and electoral process.

It first promulgated Law No. 2-2012 to formally legalize political parties, which had been outlawed during the Al-Qadhdhāfī regime. The NTC established the High National Election Commission with Law No. 3-2012 on January 19 to oversee the GNC elections. The law provided a mandate for an independent commission composed of 17 members, amended twice with Laws No. 31- and 44-2012 to a final membership of 11. The drafting of the electoral legal framework led to the emergence of the first divisive issues. Drafts of the electoral law were released in January 2012 on social media to give Libyan civil society groups and individuals the opportunity to submit feedback online. The drafts raised opposition against the electoral system (AFP 2012; Pack and Cook 2015) and a revised version of the law, Law No. 4-2012, was issued in late January. The final law set that 80 of the 200 seats would go to party lists while the majority, elected by proportional representation, 120 seats, would go to independents, elected by majority vote. This system aimed at avoiding a strong party-ruled majority in Congress, which reflected liberal technocrats' concerns over a possible Islamist takeover. It also aimed at ensuring a broad-based national unity government, which would be necessary for the GNC to reach the two-thirds majority demanded by the TCD to pass major legislation, such as a new constitution. Some argued that an individual-based system would exacerbate regional divisions by empowering local elites and notables rather than national figures, but others argued that a party-based system would provide too much power to established groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. To counter this latter argument, the NTC proposed to ban political parties formed on the basis of religious, ethnic or tribal affiliations with the aim of reducing the influence of social cleavages on the electoral process. However, due to the opposition of Islamist groups, the NTC dropped this proposal in the final version of Law No. 29-2012. Ultimately, to secure seats, those candidates running in single-member districts had to engage with and find support among

local concerns and issues; however, in so doing, the system crystalized and acknowledged the political relevance of pre-existing local configurations of power (Pack and Cook 2015).

Another significant fracture emerged with the federalism issue, which recalled older political demands. Libyan independence sanctioned in January 1952 from Italian colonial occupation led to a federal arrangement of three regions ruled by King al Idris al Senusi as a result of UN-led mediation that started in 1949. Claims of Cyrenaica's status as a largely autonomous and influential province from 1951 re-emerged after 2011 due to strong political marginalization during the Al-Qadhdhāfī regime and political groups in the east began appealing to the sentiments of Cyrenaican political power. The majority of Libya's water and oil reserves are in Cyrenaica, but only around one-fourth of the country's population lives in the region, so that federalist demands for preferential resource allocation represented a salient source of conflict. Indeed, in March 2012, a number of political leaders in the east declared the establishment of the Cyrenaica Regional Transitional Council, an independent body with no affiliation to the NTC that echoed the independence aspirations that had emerged in the early post-colonial years (Baldinetti 2010).

According to NTC law, 100 seats went to western Libya, and only 60 to the east and 40 to the south. The ratio was based on population districts, but federalists demanded that the NTC allocate 100 seats for the future GNC to each of Libya's three historic regions. With the aim of controlling federalist influence, the NTC issued a first constitutional amendment on March 13, 2012. This amendment modified several points of Article 30 of the TCD and required that the members of the GNC select (outside of its members) a body composed of 60 people to draft a new constitution. The solution replicated the model of the original 1951 constitutional committee with 20 representatives from each region, that is Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and Fezzan (Sawani and Pack 2013). With a similar rationale, the NTC issued a second constitutional amendment on June 10, 2012, to delineate the proposed membership of the constitutional council, namely specifying the appointment of 20 representatives from each of Libya's three historic regions for a total of 60 members (Pack and Cook 2015).

Only 48 hours before election day, on the morning of July 5, boxes and other election tools in Ajdabiya were destroyed by allegedly federalist groups. Later that day, a group of protesters not officially affiliated with the Cyrenaica Regional Transitional Council shut down the five oil installations of Sidra, Haruj, Zuwaytina, Brega and Hariqa. During the night, the NTC issued a third amendment to the constitutional declaration that mandated the creation of a constitutional assembly elected through free and direct suffrage rather than one appointed by members of the GNC. This amendment aimed at reducing the tensions mounting in the east over the GNC seats distribution.

However, the NTC's last-minute decision did not accommodate all federalists; hundreds of people demonstrated in Benghazi the day before the election calling for a boycott because the GNC seats were still not divided equally by region. Nevertheless, many citizens in the east participated in the elections, presumably as they would have had the amendment not been promulgated. This chain of events made it clear that emerging institutions were prone to consider amendments, suggesting that they could be blackmailed into sitting at the table and accommodate spoilers' threats. In other words, calls for a boycott and a disruption of the system emerged as a winning strategy for the extraction of concessions outside electoral participation. This called into question the strength of central institutions and their capacity to establish nationwide systems and electoral mechanisms, and even to establish a monopoly on the use of force, while local and particular political agendas increased their political relevance in the fissures of society.

Electoral outcomes and the end of the democratic process

The HNEC declared preliminary results on July 17, 2012, and confirmed them on August 1. The elections were conducted with minimal violence and led to a full transfer of power from the outgoing NTC to the incoming General National Congress. It thus appeared that despite the initial difficulties and the rising tensions due to the emergence of religious parties and federalist demands, the Libyan transition could proceed and succeed.

With a final turnout of 61.58%, the GNC was finally elected. Mahmoud Jibril's National Forces Alliance (NFA) won 39 seats, followed by the Justice and Construction Party (JCP), which received 17 seats. In third, the National Front Party with three seats organized old 1980s anti-Al-Qadhdhāfī alliances and strong pro-parliamentary advocates. The National Centrist Party, a faction of the NFA, won two seats in a separate list. The Unity in Favor of the Homeland, the Bloc of Wadi El Haya for Democracy and Development and the National Centrist Party elected two candidates each. A total of 15 political entities lists, organized at both national and local level, gained one seat each. The 120 independents seats created a heterogeneous assemblage of personalities, out of which only one woman won a seat (Table 26.1).

On October 14, 2012, with the support of the National Forces Alliance and a number of independents, the General National Congress appointed Ali Zeidan, an independent, as prime minister. After prolonged negotiations over the composition of the new government, Congress approved his cabinet nominees and Zeidan took office on November 14.

The electoral system prevented the organization of clear ideological and larger blocks, rendering the GNC fragmented and based mostly on local and individual interests, with strong ties to micro-level constituencies. In addition, it led to several shifting alliances, undermining the coherence

of the government's actions. Negotiations between the national and local levels persisted on an *ad hoc* basis, making the government more vulnerable and suggesting that despite the election of a government, there was no moving away from this plurality of power centers (Lacher 2013). One of the direct consequences was that the new GNC failed, crucially, in securing a monopoly over the use of legitimate force. On November 23, 2011, the NTC established a transitional administration, headed by Prime Minister Abdul Rahim al-Keeb, with the highest priority to assert national authority over the assortment of armed groups and impose security on uncontrolled areas. One case in point is Decision No. 7 taken in October 2012, which authorized the use of force in Bani Walid. On October 2, 2012, clashes erupted in Bani Walid, an ex-Al-Qadhdhāfī stronghold, between the pro-government militias from Misrata and local militiamen. The stronghold was shelled a few days later, and government and government-aligned military forces led the military offensive and entered Bani Walid on October 24, 2012. This decision uncovered the existence of competing camps within the GNC, and opened the way for a military offensive. The military operation caused the destruction of local institutions, businesses and homes in Bani Walid by militias from Misrata and other local strongholds.

The vote to show force in Bani Walid was disrupted and many deputies left the chamber to avoid having to vote. Eventually, only about two-thirds of GNC members were present. According to Lacher, the resolution was accepted with 65 votes in favor, just 7 against and about 55 abstentions (Lacher 2013). Despite weak formal support, the alliance between the revolutionary forces within the GNC was sufficient to launch the attack. The same fissure emerged with the debate on the political isolation law, which would exclude from office those who had served under the Al-Qadhdhāfī regime. The Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis and representatives of the revolutionary strongholds supported the exclusion of those who had served under Al-Qadhdhāfī, and, on the other side, the Alliance and many independents from the south and center opposed the proposal. The vote over the issue stalled between December 2012 and early May 2013, also forestalling progress on other major policy issues. When a vote was finally put on the agenda in March 2013, armed protesters affiliated with the Islamist current surrounded the GNC offices. The law was finally adopted on May 5, 2013, while armed groups organized barricades in front of several ministries to push their demands for political exclusion.

The episodes and escalation since late 2012 confirm that central institutions were subject to the blackmailing strategies of armed groups that considered the GNC a tool to legitimize their use of force. In other words, those transitional institutions based on democratic rule were easily highjacked. Although the elected GNC and government continued to issue laws and decrees, their ability to enforce decisions was extremely limited.

As mentioned, another long-lasting divisive element is the instrumental re-emergence of the regionalist/federalist movement which established a new arena of political bargain outside ballot boxes. After the election, Libya's Oil Ministry appointed 32-year-old militia leader Ibrahim Jadhran from Ajdabiya, in eastern Libya, as a regional commander of its Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFC) to ensure the protection of eastern oil fields. Jadhran had federalist sympathies and used his position to advance that agenda (DeVore 2014; Mezran and Eljarh 2014). Indeed, Jadhran's guards launched an oil blockade in July 2013 and seized three petroleum-exporting ports. Libyan oil exports shrunk from 1.7 million to 110,000 barrels per day. Zeidan opted for negotiation rather than confrontation due to Jadhran's military strength and the unreliability of pro-government forces. In the longer run though, the federalists found themselves cut off from oil revenues and funds because governmental threats deterred companies from doing business with them. However, Jadhran's blockade denied Libya's government its main source of revenue and despite being short-lived, it exposed the inner fragility of the Libyan transitional authorities and provoked a governmental crisis. In particular, governmental military personnel eventually blamed the government for inadequately supporting them when trying to negotiate with Jadhran's PFC (DeVore 2014).

Islamist and Salafi movements: electoral results, instability, and international concerns

The Islamist forces within and outside the GNC represent a heterogeneous field. After the regime's downfall and in preparation for elections, some forces played a pivotal role in establishing long-lasting fractures, both intentionally and unintentionally. During the electoral process and the post-election phase, a wide spectrum of Islamist parties, jihadists and Salafi movements appeared on the political scene and played a pivotal role in determining the subsequent political set-up. In particular, the emergence of multiple religious-oriented movements and parties after 42 years of regime repression captured the attention of not only Libyan political actors but also Western and European governments and experts.

Islamist parties and movements not only directly participated in the political rivalries within and outside institutions, and in the fragmentation of the security apparatus, but they were also the target of Western and neighboring countries' concerns, or support, legitimizing the ideological cleavage opposing Islamist against liberals. This process allowed Libyan personalities, whose aim was to gain international support, to define their role in subsequent domestic conflicts based on this ideological divide, thus paving the way for an escalation of foreign intervention in the country.

In preparation for the elections, the electoral legal framework hampered the creation of major ideological blocks in the GNC, but it permitted the Muslim Brotherhood party and the Salafis groups to enter the political scene. However, the idea of a deep divide between Islamists and seculars was based on a non-existent ideological cleavage. Western media outlets referred to this divide in their

titles when interpreting the elections' results: 'Libya's First Post-Gaddafi Vote to Test Islamists', said Reuters on July 5, 2012; 'Liberals Claim Lead in Libyan Election', according to France 24 on July 8, 2012[1]; 'Election Results in Libya Break an Islamist Wave' for the *New York Times*;[2] and 'Libya Election Success for Secularist Jibril's Bloc', titled the BBC news website.[3] Thus, it seemed that the Islamists of the Justice and Construction Party and the liberals, represented by Mahmoud Jibril's National Forces Alliance party, were clearly ideologically opposed.

This was a misleading interpretation of the results, but it had an impact on Western and European constituencies. While the NFA led by Jibril, who was considered a liberal, did win 39 out of the 80 seats, the larger picture including the 120 independent personalities' profiles reveals that Muslim and Salafi together won a greater number of seats than individual so-called liberals (Lacher 2013). In fact, 'liberal' and 'secular' labels are extremely problematic in this case: 'liberal' cannot account for the diverse personalities in the GNC, and 'secular' does not describe any Libyan candidate running in the election. In any case, such nuance mattered little for external actors who responded to the Libyan crisis using the trite, but simple framework of Islamists versus liberals.

Among jihadist movements, older generations of Libyan jihadist had created a number of groups during the Al-Qadhdhāfī regime, among them the largest was the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG; *al-Jama'a al-Islamiya al-Muqatila bi-Libiya*). It operated in secret until they declared their existence in 1995. Following several attempts to assassinate Al-Qadhdhāfī during that decade, the regime ruthlessly repressed it (Fitzgerald 2016). Several former LIFG figures subsequently played key roles in the revolution and opted for participating in the Libyan democratic transition, forming political parties and running in elections.

The Zeidan cabinet had some LIFG members among its ministers: Sami al Saadi as Minister of Martyrs and Missing Persons, who resigned his post at the end of 2012,[4] and Khaled al-Sharif, a relevant figure in the organization (Lacher 2013). After the fall of Al-Qadhdhāfī, a second generation of jihadist established *Ansar al-Sharia* Libya. The movement's largest support came from Benghazi, and later from the neighborhoods of Derna and Ajdabiya. *Ansar al-Sharia* was highly heterogeneous, and some members persuaded the leaders not to physically disrupt them (Fitzgerald 2016). The movement had transnational aspirations, and it is reported that fighters from Derna and some members of *Ansar al-Sharia* from Benghazi joined the struggle of Qaeda-linked groups in northern Mali against French forces (Lacher 2013). *Ansar al-Sharia* Libya decided to focus on charitable work and social services to create a society based on its definition of Islamic principles, eventually leading to an Islamic state overseen by its interpretation of sharia (Fitzgerald 2016), in line with *Ansar al-Sharia* Tunisia's strategy (Merone 2017). In 2012, a series of attacks against Western institutions revealed the existence of organized extremist groups in Libya. Among these attacks, the assault

against the US diplomatic mission in Benghazi on September 11, 2012, which resulted in the death of Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three staff members, had considerable international repercussions. Subsequently, mass protests took place in Benghazi against *Ansar al-Sharia*, although the organization had not claimed the attack and argued that it stood against violent extremism. In any case, public opinion both inside and outside Libya was heavily influenced by the idea that radical groups were an actual threat to security and stability and this was impossible to ignore.

These feelings increased when in November 2014 militants from different groups and former combatants in the Syrian civil war pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The belief of an Islamist plot to gain control of the government began to circulate in Libya and neighboring countries. In Tunisia, there was a growing sense of insecurity which politicized the management of the Tunisian security sector and the borders with Libya (International Crisis Group 2014). The establishment of the Islamic State organization in the region of Sirte and in the city of Sabrata, close to the Tunisian border, raised concerns among Tunisian authorities because of security spillover from the border. Indeed, the jihadi group set up a camp in Sabrata to attract Tunisian jihadists seeking to flee the country, especially after the Ennahda-led government in August 2013 declared *Ansar al-Sharia* a terrorist organization (Meddeb 2016). In 2013, military officers in Egypt removed the country's first democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, representative of the Muslim Brotherhood, and eventually established a new authoritarian regime led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Inevitably, this built a rationale for anti-Islamism support in Libya (Anderson 2017). It also opened the door to external actors and contributed to the legitimization of a strong anti-Islamist political and military stance among Libyan leaders who wished to acquire international and regional credit.

Against this background, General Khalifa Haftar increased his public support in Benghazi for his unilateral offensive against Islamist armed groups, including *Ansar al-Sharia*. Haftar launched operation *Karama* (Dignity) on May 16, 2014, with the aim of cleansing Libya of 'terrorism and extremism'.[5] Haftar's rhetoric replicated the rhetoric that el-Sisi had employed in Egypt against the Muslim Brotherhood. As early as May 2014, Egypt indeed supported Haftar, having as a priority to secure its long and porous border with Libya that stretches for 1115 km, against infiltration by Islamist militants, including members and affiliates of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State and against the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood (Mourad 2021). As international observers, including the UN Panel of Experts, have been continuously recording, Haftar also gained support from France in the form of weapons (United Nations Security Council 2019) and intelligence support for Haftar's military staff (United Nations Security Council 2017). Indeed, one guiding principle of French foreign policy in North Africa te is 'stabilization at any costs', which goes hand in hand with the

regional approach against Islamist insurgency in the Sahara–Sahel belt and terrorism at home (Bensaâd 2019).

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that a number of events and factors established in preparation for the 2012 Libyan parliamentary elections created the context for the emergence of long-lasting political divisions and hampered a peaceful transition. In particular, the chapter contends that the election preparations and results paved the way for the emergence of long-lasting cleavages that not only exacerbated pre-existing frictions but prevented the suppression of new inevitable post-revolutionary divisions appearing outside the ballot boxes. The elections were held in a difficult context, but it was hoped that a democratic institutional framework would contribute to appeasing tensions. This did not occur and the resulting political dynamics did not erase social cleavages. On the contrary, the issues that emerged after the elections and the political choices made by transitional institutions amplified pre-existing exclusionary politics and reinforced local-based power centers. Furthermore, the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood party, Salafi movements and organized extremist groups reinforced an ideological cleavage that aroused the concerns of several external actors, who eventually directly participated in the disruption of the transition and the civil conflicts resulting from its collapse.

In preparation for the elections, two pivotal factors stand out. First, the electoral law prevented the establishment of strong parties that could make a positive contribution to the constitutional process. In particular, the law was designed to avoid an Islamist takeover. In doing so though, it favored candidates with strong localized ties and this exacerbated the political relevance of local configurations of power to the detriment of national interests. To secure a seat, one had to have very deep connections to a specific locality, and this favored local notables and kin ties over ideological or policy-related ones. Secondly, the regional/federalist issue re-emerged during the electoral campaign, and the days before the elections confirmed the weakness of transitional institutions and their openness to *ad hoc* solutions when threatened with force by local militias and armed groups. While this could have disappeared in the post-election phase, the weakness of the central institutions amplified the blackmailing power of militias and their political offshoots. The GNC could not gain control of the security apparatus and appointed a supporter of the federalist agenda as head of security for the eastern oil fields; however, the loss of control over the monopoly on the legitimate use of force could not be halted. After the election, it became evident that the security sector was subject to multiple influences and actors' strategies, thus leading to a heavily fragmented security apparatus. In addition to these two elements, the emergence of Islamist political representatives, both inside and

outside parliament, created the conditions for external actors to interfere in Libyan domestic politics. The scenario that emerged after 2012, combined with the establishment of an IS presence in Libya in late 2014, paved the way for the legitimization of clear anti-Islamist political and military stances among Libyan leaders who wished to acquire international and regional credit. This marked the beginning of the strong positioning of external actors in Libyan policies.

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Table 26.1 Composition of General National Congress’ seats (party lists and independents). Personal elaboration based on Lacher 2013 and Smith 2012

Political parties	
National Forces Alliance (Tahaluf al-Quwah al-Wataniya)	39
Justice and Construction Party (Hizb al-Adala wa al-Bina) (Muslim Brotherhood)	17
National Front Party (Hizb al-Jabba al-Wataniya)	3
Wadi al Hayah	2
Federation for Nation	2
National Centrist/Central Party	2
Local interest groups	15
Independents (including personalities associated with National Forces Alliance; associated with Justice and Construction; Salafis, independent or associated with party lists)	120
Total	200

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