



Challenges to Peacebuilding in Libya

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Libya remains a country deeply divided and the processes of state building, peace-making and peace building have many obstacles. But these challenges are not insurmountable.

Social cohesion and active political participation in a pluralistic society are essential components of stabilization and peacebuilding. Cultural diversity and the political participation of various social and political actors enriches social cohesion in accountable and transparent political systems of democratic societies. These societies are also arguably strong enough to withstand new challenges and changes. Divided and undemocratic societies, however, are unable to absorb sudden and shocking challenges like those which occurred in the countries of the so-called 'Arab spring', and Libya, in particular.

Since the overthrow of Gaddafi in 2011 and the civil war, the country has been deeply divided and the process of state building, peace-making and peace building has become a very complicated matter.

Libya: A Nation Divided

Prior to the dramatic changes that took place in Libya in February 2011, the old Libyan regime of Muammar Al-Gaddafi had existed for more than 42 years. The regime had a strange 'revolutionary political system' and state structure. Gaddafi's system of *Jamahiriya* lacked active political participation, with no civil society practices or regular and free elections.

This political system strengthened tribalism, social division and conservatism based on a 'divide and rule' policy. Libyans had neither been engaged in real participatory politics nor experienced a transparent relationship between ruler

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and the ruled since 1969. They had not enjoyed active participation in a participatory democratic system, as any civil society does.

On February 11, 2011, the Libyan state and its institutions completely collapsed when Gaddafi's regime was overthrown. The post-Gaddafi's transitional government included Islamists, secularists and others while the external international intervention was still underway. The various factions failed to work together, which led to a civil war in Libya dividing the country into effectively three governments. They failed to compromise on their differences and each group has sought, instead, to remove the other group from the political scene through violence.

The violent conflict between the coalition of Operation Dignity and the Operation Dawn coalition fractured the unity, security and rebuilding of the civil state in Libya. Dignity Operation currently includes coalition forces from the eastern tribes, ex Gaddafi officers, and the Zintani militia of the west. Operation Dignity is led by retired general Khalifa Hifter to restore security to the troubled cities. Operation Dignity is supported by the House of Representatives (HOR) and the internationally recognised government, based in Tobruk.

There are also disputes in post-Gaddafi's Libya amongst the politicians over power and access to resources. Policies such as those advocated by Tunisian politicians in post-revolution Tunisia, were not evident in Libya. Instead, Islamist groups and nationalist groups disputed, and continue to dispute, over power, oil and the identity of the state. They have not been able to engage in a process that promoted politics as a language of communication to manage their differences and minimise violence. In consequence, the political and geographical division has been deepened both horizontally and vertically.

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So far, the new Libyan politicians, who were mostly educated in and are oriented towards the West have failed to lead the country into becoming a modern state based on pluralism, diversity, order and security. These politicians or professionals are considered different and foreign to the many Libyans who have never enjoyed education, work or living in a different region such as Europe. The locals call the new politicians “double faces” or “dual citizens”. They live in a gap and are isolated from their own Libyan society. They have no proper interaction with others from the various cultural and social backgrounds of Libyan society, which is tribal in nature, conservative and highly religious. The nature of this society and its inhabitants has played a significant role in reshaping and rebuilding the state in the post-revolution era.

The Absence of Civil Society in Libya

Many NGOs have emerged in Libya with assistance of some international donors and organisations from European and the US since the transitional period of 2012. But many Libyans still ‘look at these organisations with suspicious eyes, owing to division, lack of transparency and absence of the state’, remarked Fathi Tomi, a Libyan activist whom I discussed this with.

In today’s Libya, [there are no active civil society organisations](#) on the ground that can contribute to grassroots peace building, or that can aid cultural diversity and social cohesion. Most active civil society organisations have already moved to Tunisia, and, owing to Libya’s civil war, several human rights activists have been subjected to violence, kidnapping, or even killed like [Salwa Bugaighis](#), an active human rights lawyer who fought against the dictatorship and defended political prisoners who were arrested by the Qaddafi regime. She also played a prominent political role as an organizer of the [February 17 Youth Coalition](#) and was a member of Libya’s first opposition government in over four

decades. Salwa was murdered at home by masked gunmen, moments after voting in the Libyan general election on 26 June, 2014 and [no one was brought to justice](#).

A Future Peace?

Whoever makes and builds the peace in Libya needs to solve the horizontal and vertical political and geographical division in the country. New leaders should accept the participation of all Libyans in the reconciliation and peace building process, which includes elimination of the [Political Isolation Act](#) enforced by the transitional council governing Libya after the fall of Gaddafi's rule in 2011. This Act did not allow for statesmen of Gaddafi's rule to become engaged in the new political life and to build the new Libya.

Gaddafi's officers were not only a few in number, but there were also hundreds of them with very close tribal connections to the societal ranks of Libya. This created a tense relationship between the former regime's loyalists and "new leaders of Libya". This law has already deepened division and led to a severe political crisis and violence over interests and power. Conflict of interest and power have been galvanised by political differences and religious ideology, as well as by conflict over oil.

As such, a future peace also needs consider a just distribution of resources to benefit all Libyans. Today, Libyan fighting groups are in dispute over oil installations. They seek power and the financial benefits of the state despite the [peace deal backed by the United Nations](#) in December 2015. Libya is a country with very rich oil deposits, but its people have been poor and marginalised because the resources are controlled by warlords. The unjust distribution of resources for more than 45 year has had a serious impact on the

division of Libya. Future plans should consider resources allocation and benefits for all social and political spectrums in order to encourage their engagement in rebuilding Libya.

The Libyan Government supported by the UN should tailor a national peace building plan to bring all social, cultural and political spectrums together to work to resolve all of their accumulated issues and conflicts in Libya.

Rebuilding a modern state in Libya requires placing Libya under the UN for a transitional period – similar to what happened, for example, in East Timor. This plan must be endorsed by elected body or the Libyan House of Representatives.

This step will encourage and empower the Libyan civil society organisations – civil society organisations, based in Tunisia to move back to the Libyan soil and contribute to future peace. Libyan civil society organisations should take a leading role in implementing this plan, supported by national, regional and international actors, to contribute towards building a trust between social and political groups.

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