

Ghosts from the Past:

Libya's Election Quandary and the Re-emergence of Saif al-Islam al-Gaddafi

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(Hazem Turkia - Anadolu Agency)

After more than a decade of conflict, instability, and economic hardship, Libya was expected to hold its first presidential election in December 2021. However, political disputes over candidate eligibility and legal challenges prevented Libya's High National Elections Commission (HNEC) from finalising the candidate list, and as a result, the elections were postponed. Post-conflict elections, even if fair, run a high risk of being denied legitimacy by the losers unless some sort of real reconciliation has taken place.

In Libya, there is still no secure and stable political settlement, therefore, holding elections under these circumstances would not have solved the main issues.

This policy outlook aims to analyse the reasons behind the postponement of these elections and examines the international community's new approach towards preparing a well-designed electoral infrastructure to solve the existing issues and eventually hold credible elections this year, as expected.



Emad Al-Sayah, Chairman of Libya's High National Election Commission speaks during a press conference in Tripoli, Libya on November 7, 2021. (Hazem Turkia - Anadolu Agency)

Introduction

After more than a decade of conflict and instability, Libya was expected to hold its first presidential election in December 2021. However, just two days before elections were scheduled to take place, the High National Elections Commission (HNEC) released a statement suggesting the polls be postponed until January 24. However, until now, there has been no compromise about the new date or the electoral procedures. The whole election process has been marred by controversy about rules and regulations. Many Libyan experts believe that without making significant progress on several key issues, including a commonly accepted legal framework for the election, the reunification of institutions, economic reform, security sector reform and political and military settlements, elections will only lead to more division.

Recently, Stephanie Williams, the U.N. special adviser on Libya, [said that](#) elections could be held in June. However, key issues such as the election law and security difficulties have not been tackled and are unlikely to be resolved in coming months. To date, there is no structure to specify who should run for the presidency and what their powers should be, including the fact that the electoral commission has not been able to decide which candidates qualify, with candidates having been disqualified and then readmitted. For instance, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, son of Libya's long-time ruler Muammar Gaddafi, was initially deemed ineligible to run in the country's planned presidential election [according to](#) Libya's election commission. However, a court in Sabha [reversed](#) the electoral commission's decision to nullify Saif al-Islam's candidacy for December polls, which led to the wide-ranging polarisation in Libya and has threatened the electoral process. Even if the elections had taken place

in December, it would have been very unlikely that the country's dangerous polarisation would have significantly subsided.

Saif al-Islam Gaddafi's entry into the race has added another layer of uncertainty and division. Saif is currently [wanted](#) by the International Court of Justice for alleged crimes against humanity that took place during the 2011 uprising, however, he seems to believe that the uncertainty and economic difficulties have led to certain nostalgia in parts of the population towards his father's authoritarian stability.

The impact of delaying planned elections

Over the past several decades, holding elections has become a fundamental part of the international community's peacebuilding agenda. Elections are crucial events in war-to-peace transitions as they mark the transition from violent to peaceful modes of political contestation and spearhead efforts for more inclusive and legitimate governance. If elections are regarded as credible, they can promote democratisation by legitimising political institutions, establishing norms of nonviolent conflict settlement and habituating opponents to democratic routines. If they degenerate into violence, they may de-legitimise the government that comes to power, but also undermine trust in electoral institutions, and in the worst-case precipitate a return to civil war.¹

Libya's warring factions signed an agreement in October 2020, arranged to pave the way towards a political solution to the country's ongoing conflict. That diplomatic leverage was chiefly made possible thanks to serious defeats inflicted on Haftar's LNA by UN-backed GNA forces. The cease-fire agreement created a basis for the political negotiations that began on October 26th 2020, designed to set up a new interim government with the main task of preparing the country for elections scheduled for December 24th, 2021. Over the last few months, preparing the country for the vote has been as daunting. The main issues have included providing security and order, removing foreign fighters and mercenaries and a lack of consensus on election laws.

Speaking to TRT World Research Centre, Alan J. Kuperman, Associate Professor at LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas, commented that "Based on my scholarship, I believe that in the wake of civil war, an agreement on constitutional design should precede elections, which otherwise are likely to inflame conflict, potentially violently. Accordingly, I believe the internationally driven plan for elections in Libya prior to an agreement on constitutional

¹ Fjelde, H., & Smidt, H. (2021). Protecting the Vote? Peacekeeping Presence and the Risk of Electoral Violence. *British Journal of Political Science*, 1-20. doi:10.1017/S0007123421000132

design is fundamentally misconceived. A one-month delay is a good start, but I would recommend a 2-year delay, and in the interim, a constitutional convention should decide how Libya's governance will be organized – including vis. local vs. central authority, presidential vs. parliamentary, electoral rules, etc. There is no reason to believe that such a delay in elections would reignite the civil war. The civil war stopped due to a balance of military power between east and west Libya, not due to the agreement to hold elections, which was a consequence not a cause of the ceasefire”.

The absence of a constitution remains at the core of Libya's problems. Thus, the current election laws have not been widely accepted by all parties; there have been ongoing disputes over the eligibility of some of the main candidates such as Haftar and Saif Islam al Gaddafi and the eventual powers of the future president.

Post-conflict elections, even if fair, run a high risk of being denied legitimacy by the losers unless some sort of real reconciliation has taken place. In Libya, there is still no secure and stable political settlement, therefore, holding elections under these circumstances would not have solved the main issues. There would have almost certainly been conflicts among competing political groups and military factions, which could have driven the country deeper into crisis.

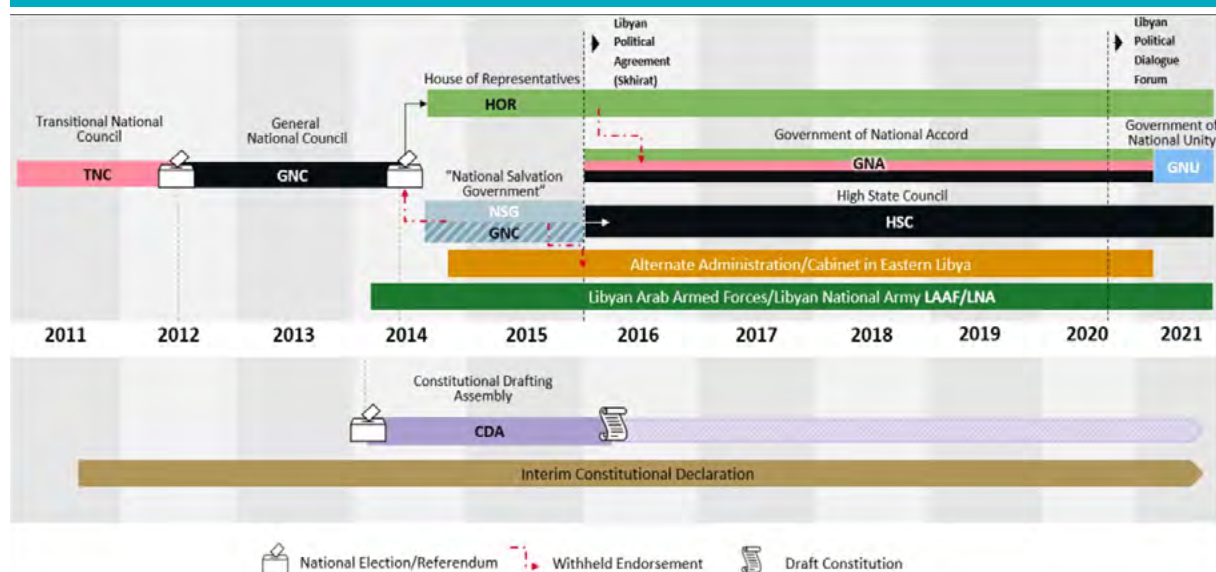
Imad K. Harb, Director of Research and Analysis at Arab Center Washington DC, told TRT World Research Centre that “Any postponement of a political process has its price and impact. This is no different in Libya. While it is good to make sure that everything gets organized and settled, in the Libyan case, there have been unnecessary delays be-

cause of personal and factional interests. After decades of Gaddafi rule and the absence of state institutions and after ten years of transition, the Libyan political process should have been completed already. State institutions have to be re-established for the sake of modern and effective governance. This includes military institutions and security services. Democratic participation of the Libyan people is essential, and it can only be assured if the people believe that they are building their state, not that of warlords and militias”.

Federica Saini Fasanotti, Non-resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, told TRT World Research Centre, that “I think that elections for January 24 are pure fantasy, given all the problems that the HNEC now has to solve and the unwillingness of many Libyan political figures to actually arrive at the elections. Nevertheless, their postponement is certainly less dangerous than actual elections without the necessary legal and security framework that must be put in place before them. The disaster caused by the 2014 elections, should never be forgotten”.

Over the past few years, attempts to reach a political solution to Libya's conflict have failed. Therefore, the international community should take more concrete actions to address key issues facing the country, including providing security, strengthening the rule of law, fostering a sense of national identity among all Libyans and, more importantly, promulgating a new constitution. However, through what has appeared at times as being a singular focus, the international community pushed Libyans to hold elections at almost any cost. Over the past few years, it has become clear that without securing an environment conducive to lasting stability, holding elections will not solve existing problems.

Figure 1: Figure: Libya's Post-Gaddafi Transition, 2011-2021



Source: CRS

Post-conflict polls are highly likely to be successful in promoting peace and recovery when democratic institutions are relatively stronger. In this context, credible commitments help identify the kinds of institutions that are especially important when holding post-conflict elections. First, security institutions, including civilian control over the military and police, help lower the probability that politicians can resort to violence before, during, or after elections and thus lend credibility to their promises to respect the peace. Second, a well-designed electoral infrastructure with honest electoral commissions, for example, can help convince politicians and voters that the electoral process will be free and fair. Third, constraints on the executive, such as an independent judiciary and strong legislature, reduce election winners' ability to repress election losers and those they represent.²

In this context, recently, the US ambassador and special envoy to Libya, Richard Norland, [stated](#) that Libyan politics are complex, adding that some contradictory candidacies led to fears of renewed violence. Norland said the current period in Libya is a test of the intention of Libyan leaders who say they are committed to holding elections, adding that the High National Elections Commission (HNEC) was technically ready to hold elections on December 24 but the process was derailed by contradictory candidacies.

Saif al-Islam's candidacy

There have been no unified front-runners in the election, in fact, candidates have been highly divisive. For example, Aguila Saleh, the chairman of the House of Representatives (HoR) and a close ally of Haftar. Haftar himself, who is seen as a rival character among the large majority of Libyans especially in the west part of the country because of his [involvement](#) in Libya's last war, and his attempts to conduct several coups over the past years. And Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, a son of Libya's overthrown dictator who is wanted by the International Criminal Court on charges of crimes against humanity.

Saif al-Islam's candidacy, in particular, has caused great concern for some Libyans about what might happen to their country if he wins the election. The main concern seems to be bringing the Gaddafi regime back instead of moving towards democracy and stability. Many Libyans seem to believe that he would open up the country from the [nightmarish police state](#) created by his father, who eviscerated Libyan institutional life under his [Jamahiriya](#).



People gather to protest against the candidacy application of Saif al-Islam al-Gaddafi, the son of former Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi, for upcoming presidential election in Tripoli, Libya on November 15, 2021. (Hamza Alahmar - Anadolu Agency)

According to Federica Saini Fasanotti, "The mere fact that the most political of Gaddafi's sons, after all the post-revolution vicissitudes, showed up and not only was not immediately sent to The Hague but even ran for the seat of the president of Libya... all this says really a lot on his moral standing and above all on the superficiality of the Libyan institutions that have allowed such an opprobrium".

For Kuperman, "Even by 2012, many Libyans were nostalgic for the stability that they had enjoyed under Muammar Gaddafi, as documented in a survey at the time. That nostalgia has only grown with the persistent anarchy, insecurity, and economic slump in Libya – and Saif is the beneficiary of that nostalgia. However, other Libyans, especially in Misurata, would never peacefully accept the rule of a Gaddafi. So, if elections are held and he wins, which is possible, it might reignite conflict, depending on the constitutional design at the time".

In the early 2000s, all of the Gaddafi children became involved in Libyan public affairs in one way or another, their positions usually stressing the extreme personalization and corruption of the system around the immediate family of its founder and, correspondingly, the profound dissolution of Libyan society by it. Saif al-Islam himself, after his education at Al-Fatah University in Tripoli, went to study in Vienna, where he came under the influence of Shukri Ghanem, Libyan oil minister during the Gaddafi era. He later began graduate study at the London School of Economics in Political Science.³

² Flores, T. E., & Nooruddin, I. (2012). The Effect of Elections on Postconflict Peace and Reconstruction. *The Journal of Politics*, 74(2), 558–570. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381611001733>

³ Joffé G. (2013) Civil Activism and the Roots of the 2011 Uprisings. In: Pack J. (eds) *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qadhafi Future*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137308092_2

For several years, Saif al-Islam styled himself as the moderate, modernising force inside his father's regime. Thanks to Saif al-Islam's influence on Gaddafi, Libya achieved some limited economic reforms in the 2000s, including steps to integrate with the global economy by consulting with the International Monetary Fund on structural reforms and passing stock market, real estate, tax and other regulations to attract foreign investment.⁴ One of the outcomes of Saif al-Islam's engagement with the outside world and his Western education was his understanding that Libya would have to change if it was to cope with globalization and increased economic and cultural contact with the wider world. However, the limited economic reforms mainly served Gaddafi's family and their associates and offered little to the underemployed and frustrated youth.

Unfortunately for the Libyan people, Saif was part of the problem, not the solution. He played the role of reformer in the eyes of the international community for a brief period, but he was focused primarily on removing Libya from sanctions lists in order to entice investors. There is no evidence that genuine political reform was anywhere on Saif's agenda, despite his having handsomely paid some notable American academics to give lectures in Libya just as his brothers paid for pop stars to perform on their private yachts. Indeed, any political liberalization or additional transparency would have interfered with Gaddafi's ability to use state wealth for his family's personal benefit.⁵

During the revolution in 2011, Saif backed his father position and [warned](#) Libyans that his father would fight until the last man and last woman. With the family's trademark pomposity and condescension, he [wagged](#) his finger at the camera and called them "rats". In his interview with the New York Times, Saif [said that](#) "What happened in Libya was not a revolution, you can call it a civil war, or days of evil. It's not a revolution".

Mustafa El Sagezli, Director of The Libyan Program for Reintegration and Development (LPRD) [wrote that](#) "Gaddafi is an insult to their revolution, and an insult to the thousands who died over the course of his father's brutal 42-year reign. That his candidacy causes hurt and pain is self-explanatory, as is the fact that he stands no chance of winning fairly. But the reason he should be barred from running is that his candidacy alone is dangerous for Libya".

In Imad's opinion, "From what is known about Saif al-Islam, he has no discernible political ideology or agenda. If he were to win the presidency, he is likely to unify the country under an authoritarian regime. He was a pillar of his father's dystopia and he believed during his fathers' rule that he will be the heir-apparent. But his candidacy is still illegal (so is Haftar's) because he has charges of war crimes

pending against him. Considering the different aspects of his legacy, his competition with Haftar, his legal troubles, I find it very difficult that he has a chance to win".

Sami Zaptia, Editor in Chief at Libya Herald, told TRT World Research Centre, that: "Saif's unexpected reinstatement as a presidential election candidate by the Libyan courts - despite still being wanted by the International Criminal Court - was probably political to avoid divisiveness. It could have been the real reason for the elections being postponed by the High National Elections Commission (HNEC). Forecasting elections in an undeveloped, new democracy as Libya is very risky. There are so many unknowns about the electorate and very few track records of voting habits. In my opinion, with the current presidential candidates, Saif cannot win an election. I do not think he has enough wide and broad support [...]. Moreover, I see Khalifa Haftar, Aref Nayed (from the Wifala tribe) and Aguila Saleh (to a lesser extent) fighting for the votes of broadly the same supporters.

Sami Zaptia further argues that "Many Libyans would say I wish we could Gaddafi back. This is an emotional reaction to the post-2011 chaos. However, Saif has not had to face an election campaign where his agenda is critically analysed but more importantly, his and his father's history are re-aired in the media for the public to remember why his father's regime was overthrown. Saif is very much associated with his father's regime and with the outbreak of the 2011 revolution he had a choice to be with the people or his father. He chose his father. Unlike Haftar, Saif has no coercive power. He has no Libyan National Army (LNA). He also does not have Haftar's coercive power to shut down the eastern oilfields. His winning will depend on having huge and wide support. I think his popularity is overrated. Furthermore, Most of the pro-February 17th Revolution supporters would not vote for Saif. And even if he somehow wins the election, he could never set foot in Tripoli and certainly Misrata. He would probably be assassinated, or a mini civil war would start".

Saif al-Islam's political prospects and his ties with external actors

Saif al-Islam seems to be counting on the support of a number of Libyan tribes, especially in the south, in the Warshefana region and around Sirte, his father's birthplace. Given that he has been out of politics for almost a decade

⁴ Vandewalle, D. (2012). Reconciliation, civil war, and fin de régime, 2003–2011. In *A History of Modern Libya* (pp. 173–209). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9781139094580.012

⁵ Chollet, D., Fishman, B. and Kuperman, A., 2015. Who Lost Libya? [online] Foreign Affairs. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2015-04-20/who-lost-libya>

and also that for many Libyans he represents a step back to the old regime, he has little prospect of success in the election. Under Gaddafi, Libyans experienced more than four decades of repressive authoritarian rule so, the large majority of Libyans have limited nostalgia for the Gaddafi era and they demand to move towards economic stability and democracy. If only for this reason, Saif al-Islam is not seen as a genuine candidate to fulfil the aspirations of Libyans for democracy and freedom.

For instance, when Saif al-Islam announced his candidacy, armed groups in key western cities such as Tripoli, Zawiyah and Misrata took up their weapons, headed to [the polling stations](#) to [threaten](#) to disrupt the elections.

[It's not the first time](#) his return has been announced. In March 2018, the Libyan Popular Front, a party that does not hide its pro-Gaddafi views, announced that the son of the so-called 'African King of Kings', as Gaddafi was sometimes known, would run for president.

For some time after the 2011 uprising, Libyans did not know whether Saif al-Islam was alive or dead. In 2017, he was [released](#), after being granted amnesty by the House of Representatives.

For Sami, "There is a wrong illusion that most Libyans want to go back to the Gaddafi era. No. They want the stability and security of that era. Most Libyan youths were born in the last decades of the Gaddafi regime. They did not experience the worse decades of the Gaddafi regime. They did not experience the oppression, arrests, assassinations, the nationalisation of business and property and mandatory army conscription. They forget about the negatives of the Gaddafi regime – the very negatives that led to the Libyan youth to rise against the Gaddafi regime & overthrow of his regime".

Saif al-Islam's eligibility to stand as a presidential candidate under Libyan and international law will continue to be strongly disputed. He is still [wanted by the International Criminal Court](#) and has yet to clear the 2015 war crimes conviction. As a result, much of the anger over his candidacy is driven by moral outrage that a figure who terrorised civilians during the 2011 revolution is being allowed to run for president.

In a New York Times [interview](#), Saif al-Islam said he intended to reunite the country under his father's [Green movement](#) and claimed many Libyans believed his regime should have dealt even more severely with the opposition. He also stated that he was convinced that his movement could restore the country's lost unity.

It is widely believed that Saif's candidacy has also played an important role in delaying the election. In addition to that some Libyan and foreign players pursued to postpone or thwart the elections and they used this as a justification for why they could not go ahead on 24 December as planned.



Khaled Al-Mishri, Chairman of the High Council of State, recently [stated that](#): Holding fair and transparent elections is possible, provided that they take place on a sound constitutional basis with minimised risks. The electoral process was spoiled for several reasons, according to Al-Mishri, including the participation of controversial figures such as Khalifa Haftar and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi.

Saif al-Islam's ties with external actors

Saif al-Islam, who has been hiding for four years, is now back and intends to take part in the Libyan presidential elections. Apparently, he does not have an armed force and has minimal support; he relies on some Libyan tribes, notably in the south, and several external supporters, including Russia and Egypt, reportedly favour his candidacy for the election.

In 2020, [Bloomberg reported](#) the arrest in Libya of two Russians who were allegedly involved in a plot to install Saif al-Islam as a pro-Moscow president. Saif has long been [considered to have links](#) to Russia and the Wagner group and is believed to be Moscow's favourite competitor to rule Libya. For instance, in August 2021, Libyan prosecutors [issued a new arrest](#) warrant over his alleged association with Russian mercenaries from the Wagner private military company. There are [widespread rumours](#) that Wagner mercenaries, who fought for Haftar in the siege of Tripoli but since appear to have left Haftar, provided the security when he showed up in Sabha to lodge his application as a candidate in November 2021.

Under Gaddafi, Tripoli and Moscow enjoyed strong relations and significant economic and political ties, including arms deals and licensing agreements for Russian oil and gas companies. Libya emerged as a significant arms market for the Soviet Union after World War II. In the 1970s, Muammar Gaddafi opened up to Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin began reviving ties with Libya soon after becoming president in 2000, and relations improved

significantly after he met with Gaddafi in Tripoli in 2008. Soon afterwards, Moscow wrote off most of Libya's nearly \$5 billion debt in exchange for contracts on oil, gas, weaponry, and railways.⁶

The Kremlin's strategy is one of [betting on multiple horses](#) in Libya, therefore, Moscow may have considered restoring its former ties with Gaddafi regime supporter by promoting Saif al-Islam as a new candidate. However, other countries including Egypt and the UAE, might be looking for an alternative to Khalifa Haftar who has long been their candidate but in 2020 he failed to topple the UN-backed government in Tripoli since then he has lost some of his support.

According to Alan J. Kuperman, "Obviously, countries that had good relations with the father and feel ostracized by the current Libyan government would like the son to take power".

For Federica, "The presence of Saif al-Islam is the direct consequence of the poverty of the Libyan political class which is absolutely not up to expectations and mainly interested in enriching itself at the expense of its citizens. Facts speak very clearly and are not subject to interpretation, unfortunately. In the face of absolute emptiness, it is normal for some nostalgic Libyans to see in the protégé of the former raise the only real possibility for the country. His foreign supporters, on the other hand - the same ones who have backed Haftar for years - want nothing more than someone to turn to directly and be able to make deals".

In Imad's view, "Moscow will always look for people like Saif al-Islam because it relies on authoritarians to be its friends. I don't think he is powerful or consequential enough to torpedo the election. After all, this is a United Nations-led operation and the UN is not about to hand its fate to him or to Russia. Again, the power is in the hands of the Libyans themselves".

[Reportedly](#), Saif al-Islam Gaddafi visited Egypt on November 14, 2021 before announcing his candidacy for the presidential elections and met with Egyptian President Sisi and Egyptian Chief of Intelligence Abbas Kamel. The alleged meeting [indicates that](#) Gaddafi's son sought Egypt's support and promised a part of the cake of Libya reconstruction projects and exported oil if elected.

For Imad, "Egypt can try to rehabilitate him and give him needed support, but he wins only with Libyan votes. It is hard to discern who inside Libya and what interests continue to be loyal to him. Then again, there is the actual division of loyalties in the country. The east and south seem to have fallen under the sway of the Haftar/Aguila Saleh alliance; the west is under the influence of the GNU and Dbeibah. Where is Saif al-Islam going to muster loyalties in

the election, even if Egypt helps him from outside?"

According to Sami Zaptia, "We can say Russia probably wants the status quo or it would like Saif al-Islam to return to power. It prefers the old guard and a return to the pre-2011 Russian-Libyan dynamic. Russia could also work with Khalifa Haftar. It, however, probably does not want a western Libya-based candidate to win the election, or most Misratans or real democrats, or anyone pro-West (as in the U.S or Europe)- although it could work with current presidential candidate and former Interior Minister and Misratan, Fathi Bashagha. What does the fact that Saif remains in hiding indicate about his own perception of his popularity? If he cannot walk around freely in Sebha, where next to Sirte he is, in theory, most comfortable - how can he enter Tripoli or Misrata? How can he conduct an election campaign? Does he expect or plan to enter the capital Tripoli? How does he expect to impose his presidential will if he is going to be in hiding? Which militias will be aligned to him in Tripoli to impose his presidential will? Will any Misratan or Tripoli militias accept his legitimacy as their president? Remember that the elected House of Representatives, Libya's recognised (with very much lost legitimacy) parliament, is unable to impose its will on western Libya - let alone a hiding Saif. Saif could be being used as a proxy or as a second bet after Haftar if Haftar loses the presidential election by Russia or Egypt. They could also be using Saif as a destabilising spoiler. If Saif had confidence in having wide enough support and had confidence in his political agenda - he would have appeared months if not years ago. His hiding in secret hideouts sends a message that he does not have that confidence and that he is more likely a stooge of an international destabilisation act by external states".

The way forward

The international community made the elections a key part of a ceasefire deal on 23 October 2020, after the failure of a fourteen-month assault led by the warlord Haftar. The ceasefire agreement has generally held so far and the settlement process is supposed to prepare the country to hold the elections in December 2021 but it did not go as planned and eventually the elections as now been postponed indefinitely.

No new date has been set for much-awaited Libyan elections, but recently, Aguila Saleh, the chairman of HoR, [stated](#) that a definitive date must be set by the end of this month. However, doubts are growing about whether the decision would be made by the end of this month to set an exact date for the elections. Recently, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres [urged](#) Libya's political factions and parties to hold safe, inclusive and credible presidential and parliamentary elections as soon as possible.

⁶ Ferhat Polat, 2020. Russia's Policy in Libya from 2011 Onwards. [online] Researchcentre.trtworld.com. Available at: <https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Russias-Policy-in-Libya-from-2011-Onwards.pdf>

Having elections is crucial in setting up a single central authority that would have electoral legitimacy and recognition by the international community, which could provide a clean slate to build a political settlement that could end a decade of war as rival militias and warlords and their external backers fought for dominance. Though this all hinges on the timing of these elections and the consequent environment in which they take place.

The postponement of these planned elections doesn't come as a surprise. While developments on the ground have long been signalling that these elections cannot proceed. Well ahead of the vote, it was clear that the core divisions have not been solved. First, there was a dispute over the controversial election law, which outlined electoral procedures and the post-election institutional setup, was not accepted by all parties. Secondly, no consensus candidates, who could unite a divided Libya, front runner such as Saif al-Islam Gaddafi and Khalifa Haftar, continued to fester and undermine the entire election process. Thirdly, there is a lack of security to hold these elections.

According to Sami Zaptia, "Libyans need to agree on a new post-Gaddafi era social contract. They need to agree on a new vision for the country. On the basis of the prognosis that the era of oil is fast coming to an end, Libyans need to decide whether they want to leave the rentier state first – before it leaves them. They need to decide if they accept that the era of oil is coming to an end. If they accept this prognosis, then they need to plan for a future without oil and unsustainable oil subsidies. They need to start diversifying and decentralising their economy taking advantage of their rapidly reducing oil wealth now and investing in future industries and sectors. These can include renewable energies taking advantage of their climate, tourism taking advantage of their 2,000 km of the Mediterranean coast, transit trade to MENA/Sub-Saharan Africa, etc. As long as the state is weak, the status quo continues. All governments since 2011 have felt weak. They have not had the confidence to reform the economy and the unsustainable state subsidies. They need to invest state subsidies in sustainable development and value-added projects in preparation for the post-oil era. Already 11 years have pas-



People gather to protest against the candidacy application of Saif al-Islam al-Gaddafi, the son of former Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi and Khalifa Haftar for upcoming presidential election in Tripoli, Libya on November 19, 2021. (Hazem Turkia-Anadolu Agency)

sed of wasted money and wasted subsidies. The status quo is weakening Libya economically. It is a non-value-added consumer society depleting its foreign reserves faster than it replenishes. Libya cannot afford another wasted decade”.

For Federica, “Unfortunately, many years will have to pass before seeing a united and democratic Libya. The democratization processes are by their very nature painfully long. Historically they have always taken centuries and Libya, which has never known democracy, will certainly not be the exception that confirms the rule”.

In Imad’s opinion, “Conditions for violence and divisions have not dissipated, despite whatever Haftar or other spoilers have said about respecting the political process. Libya will arrive at its democratic institutions so long as the international community supports its political process. While serious, postponing the elections is not the end of everything. It can be surmounted. What is important is that the people of Libya remain committed to extricating themselves out of the morass they find themselves in”.

Conclusion

Saif al-Islam Gaddafi and his backers seem to be seeking to benefit from the chronic sense of insecurity and economic uncertainty as the country has been plagued with war and chaos since 2011. Saif and his internal, as well as external backers, believe the ten years of chaos, conflict, instability and economic difficulties have led to nostalgia in parts of the population towards the old regime. Consequently, some have argued that Saif is the heir of the old regime, and represents the solution to the ongoing political and economic crisis. Despite the turmoil of the last ten years, the reality on the ground in Libya is that the large majority

of Libyans have limited nostalgia for the Gaddafi era, and revolutionary ideologies generally remain strong. In addition, opposition against Gaddafi is especially strong in the western part of the country. Given that he is not regarded as a consensus candidate and he seems to have very limited support from some tribes in the south without having great support from the major Libyan factions, he would only have a very slim chance of winning the election. But it’s widely believed that his candidacy has added further confusion, polarisation and poses great risks dividing Libya’s political landscape even further.

The danger was enshrined in the way Libya holds elections: the current election law absurdly gives divisive figures such as Haftar and Saif Islam Gaddafi the ability to run for the presidency. For these reasons, Libyans who seek stability and democracy are unlikely to accept if one of these divisive figures become president. Furthermore, even if Haftar or Saif were to come to power, it would be very challenging for them to establish an authority across the country, considering how fragmented the country is. Thus, whatever basis for elections is established, it has to receive broad-based support, otherwise, it could lead to more instability and violence after the poll.

Libyans are exhausted after a decade of war, division and occupation. The international community must take more concrete steps to fulfil the wishes of Libyans for a more prosperous future. Therefore, instead of pushing Libyan people to have elections at any cost, the UN, along with the international community must encourage rival parties to reach a consensus on key issues such as the reunification of institutions, consensus on the constitution, economic reform, security sector reform and reconciliation.



People gather to protest against the candidacy application of Saif al-Islam al-Gaddafi, the son of former Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi and Khalifa Haftar for upcoming presidential election in Tripoli, Libya on November 19, 2021. (Hazem Turkia-Anadolu Agency)