



NIAS Area Studies  
Africa Weekly #04, Vol. 1, No. 4  
22 March 2022



## IN FOCUS

## Libya: Political Polarization and Parallel Governments

*Political uncertainty strikes Libya at regular intervals since the overthrow of the Gaddafi government overthrow in 2011.*

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## COMMENTARY

**Libya: Political Polarization and Parallel Governments**

*Political uncertainty strikes Libya at regular intervals since the overthrow of the Gaddafi government overthrow in 2011.*

S Shaji



Image Source: The National/Reuters

In February 2022, Fathi Bashagha was sworn in as the new Prime Minister of Libya in place of Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh. The incumbent and interim Prime Minister is backed by the United Nations (UN). The election of Bashagha, a former interior minister, was subsequently approved on 1 March 2022 by the national parliament (Libyan House of Representative), located in Tobruk, a city in the far east of Libya. The Western faction leader Dbeibeh has not recognized the government of Bashagha, claiming that only through duly held national elections the Prime Minister can be chosen. The High State Council, a part of the Parliament based in Tripoli, has rejected the parliamentary declaration (of House of Representatives) designating Bashagha as Prime Minister. In a way, the political crisis has several fault lines, the roots of which can be traced to Arab Spring days and the Libyan political system cleaving it into East-West conflict. The immediate trigger for the current situation goes to the inability to hold national elections in December 2021. The national election was postponed by the national election commission citing inadequacies in election legislations and eligibility criteria of candidates. Of course, both Bashagha and Dbeibeh project the

current situation as a conflict between ‘legitimate vs illegitimate’, though both vie for political power in the country.

The Government of National Unity (GNU) came into power under the supervision of the UN on 10 March 2021 by bringing together different factions based in Tripoli and Tobruk, ending the decade-old divisions and polarizations. The country's administrative structures were split into two, between East and West of Libya, an oil rich State in the Eastern Mediterranean in North Africa. However, the current crisis has once again brought forth an enormous degree of political polarization in the country, which has also divided loyalties of armed forces of the country between two factions. In fact, from 2014-15, Libya witnessed extremely polarized and separate regimes based on a regional basis which in turn was supported by various militias and external actors by their specific geopolitical and economic interests. For instance, from 2014 to 2021, a Government of National Unity was in power under Fayeze al-Sarraj, based in Tripoli and was supported by Qatar and Turkey. Libyan National Army chief [General Khalifa Haftar](#) has had control of the eastern part of Libya based in Tobruk. Such an arrangement was supported by countries like Russia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, etc. In 2021, a historic ceasefire was agreed upon among various warring parties through the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, and an Interim Government under [Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh](#) (a businessman from the Western city of Misrata) was formed. The broader objective was to hold elections in

December 2021. At the same time, Libya did not have a proper constitutional provision about electoral legislations, which was a significant inadequacy.

Interestingly, the existing electoral laws were approved by Speaker of Libyan House of Representative - Aguila Saleh Issa, a powerful politician. In other words, electoral laws which empower the election commission and electoral system were not approved by the Parliament but by the Speaker. Such a situation has created a hazy view of electoral processes; and has led to conflict and unhealthy competition among various political actors within the system. The Speaker himself entered the electoral fray, along with the surprise entry of Seif al-Islam Gaddafi (son of Muammar Gaddafi, the former ruler of Libya) and General Haftar. Even, Dbeibeh, who had earlier declared his intention not to run for Presidency, announced his candidature in November 2021. Such an intense power rivalry and aspirations brought the system to a standstill as the institutions could not decide the eligibility of the candidates to compete in elections for the highest office in the country.

The postponement of elections, uncertainty of future elections, and the control of oil resources have brought in political polarizations and fractured the institutions again while threatening the gains made in the last two years. The external actors also began to take sides in the political quagmire which Libya is currently facing. Most external actors consider this Eastern Mediterranean nation a gateway to Africa. Though now, the situation in Libya seems to be calm, at least outwardly, the human rights violations, divisions within Armed forces, violence against journalists and political activists are widely reported across the country. Bashagha has strong support from militia groups from Misrata

militias which resisted the attempts from the Eastern Wing under General Haftar to take over Tripoli. On the economic front, the El Sharara oil field, which produces 300,000 barrels per day, is closed following the political imbroglio that has paralysed the country's economy. There are several deadlocks over budgetary provisions on various aspects of the economy. There is a complete paralysis or absence of institutional or procedural efforts to undertake and implement decisions.

In sum, it has become a pattern in Libya, the state with the biggest oil resources in the African continent, that political uncertainty strikes the country at regular intervals after the overthrow of the Gaddafi Government by the NATO-backed forces in 2011. Of course, the UN continues to support Dbeibeh as the official Prime Minister and pursue the path of political processes to conduct elections as early as June 2022. Recently, there have been proposals from the UN officials (such as Stephanie Williams, UN's Special Adviser on Libya) in charge of Libya to form a Joint Committee, comprising members from both the High State Council (the Western side) and the House of Representatives (the Eastern faction) to conduct elections, a promise made to 3 million eligible voters in the country through the Ceasefire Agreement in 2021. In the eventuality of such a proposition taking fruition, it could be a golden opportunity to usher Libya into political stability, durable peace and economic development and overcome the setbacks of recent times. It will be probably the last peaceful opportunity to end the country's continuous streak of parallel governments.

## AFRICA IN BRIEF

16 March-22 March

By Apoorva Sudhakar

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### LIBYA

#### UN officials call for holding long-pending elections

On 16 March, Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs raised concerns in the UN Security Council over the political impasse in Libya and said: “Libya is now facing a new phase of political polarization, which risks dividing its institutions once again and reversing the gains achieved over the past two years.” The UN official said the priority should be to fulfil the aspirations of 2.8 million registered voters and said: “They should be able to choose their leaders through credible, transparent, and inclusive elections according to an agreed-upon constitutional and legal framework.” Meanwhile, Libyans have expressed displeasure over the recent developments, including the appointment of a prime minister by the House of Representatives. Africanews quoted a few Libyans who opined that the solution to the crisis was holding elections; they said having two governments has only resulted in a “crisis of legitimacy” and negatively impacted the economy. (“[Tensions rise in Libya as the risk of ‘parallel governments’ grows, Security Council hears](#),” *UN News*, 16 March 2022; “[Libyans react to stalemate of rival governments in the country](#),” *Africanews*, 18 March 2022)

### ETHIOPIA

#### The world should not forget Tigray, says WHO chief

On 16 March, World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Ghebreyesus called on the international community to not forget the conflict in Tigray. Tedros drew a comparison with the war in Ukraine. The Guardian quoted him: “there is nowhere on earth where the health of millions of people is more under threat than in Tigray,” adding, “Just as we continue to call on Russia to make peace in Ukraine, so we continue to call on Ethiopia and Eritrea to end the blockade, the siege, and allow safe access for humanitarian supplies and workers to save lives.” Tedros listed out the medical emergencies in Tigray,

including the unavailability of treatment for 46,000 HIV patients and those suffering from tuberculosis, cancer, and diabetes. Tedros said a communication blackout under such a “catastrophic” situation would mean it was “a forgotten crisis. Out of sight and out of mind.” (Lizzy Davies, “[‘Nowhere on earth are people more at risk than Tigray,’ says WHO chief](#),” *The Guardian*, 17 March 2022)

### SUDAN

#### Alleged gangrape of a teenager by security forces sparks outrage

On 15 March, demonstrations were held against the alleged gang rape of an 18-year-old girl by security forces in Khartoum. The teenager said as many as nine men in the uniform of security forces had beaten and raped her in the capital city when they were searching for people involved on 14 March’s pro-democracy protests. The head of the country’s Social Development Ministry said several cases of sexual assault had been reported from the same area over the past few weeks. The Ministry head said this was a tactic used by security forces to restrict movement. The Guardian quoted her: “That’s a well-known oppressive policy in our country ... it is not the first time they have been doing this and it won’t be the last time.” She further said: “We have a history of using women’s bodies, whether it’s in Darfur or at the dispersal of the sit-in in 2019 or at the protests. The security apparatus use rape as part of their work.” (Zeinab Mohammed Salih, “[Protests in Sudan after alleged gang-rape of young woman by security forces](#),” *The Guardian*, 16 March 2022)

### SOUTH SUDAN

#### UN official highlights crimes equivalent to war crimes in South Sudan

On 18 March, the UN Commission on Human Rights (OHCHR) in South Sudan released a report outlining the prevalence of evidence suggesting “that members of the Government of South Sudan have engaged in acts ... amounting to war crimes” in parts of Central Equatoria and Western Equatoria. The Chair

of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan said 142 individuals were listed to be investigated for crimes under national and international law. The Chair accused the political elite of looting the money and food aid contributed by the rest of the world. The Chair said the report outlines conflict at the sub-national level and said: “Violent conflict at sub-national level cannot be separated from the political history of conflict in South Sudan, and has evolved from decades of war between political elites seeking political control of the country...” The Chair further highlighted instances of sexual violence and added: “Sexual violence in South Sudan has been instrumentalized as a reward and entitlement for the participation of youth in conflict, and as a means of building ethnic solidarity, as well as constituting a form of retribution against the ‘enemy’.” (“[Abuses by South Sudan govt amounts to ‘war crimes’: UN](#),” *Al Jazeera*, 18 March 2022; “[Statement by Yasmin Sooka, Chair of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, to the Human Rights Council](#),” *UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, 18 March 2022)

#### DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

##### Fourteen, including seven children, killed in machete attack in Ituri

On 18 March, 14 people were killed in a displaced people’s camp in a machete attack in northwestern province Ituri. The casualties included seven children and five women. The news report quoted a community leader who accused the CODECO group of carrying out the attack. The attack comes amid a military crackdown, with the support of the Ugandan army. (“[DR Congo: Fourteen killed in machete attack in Ituri province](#),” *Al Jazeera*, 20 March 2022)

#### NIGERIA

##### Bandits kill at least 23 in the latest attack in Zamfara

On 20 March, at least 23 people, including a village head and three others holding important positions, were killed by bandits in a village in Zamfara State. The attack took place in the Bukkuyum Local Government Area. *Premium Times* outlines that attacks in the Bukkuyum and Anka areas have claimed 200 lives in 2022. A local youth leader said the

bandits struck in the morning as men had resorted to sleeping outside the community, in the bush, during night fearing attacks. The bandits began their attack as the men made their way back to the community; they looted shops and raided houses looking for livestock. (Mohammed Babangida, “[Bandits kill village head, 23 others in Zamfara](#),” *Premium Times*, 21 March 2022)

#### SOUTH AFRICA

##### Parliament divided over government stance on Russia-Ukraine war

On 17 March, President Cyril Ramaphosa said NATO was responsible for the war in Ukraine. *Al Jazeera* quoted Ramaphosa: “The war could have been avoided if NATO had heeded the warnings from amongst its own leaders and officials over the years that its eastward expansion would lead to greater, not less, instability in the region.” However, Ramaphosa clarified that he would not “condone the use of force and violation of international law.” The development has led to a difference of opinions in the South African parliament. The Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation cautioned against taking sides, maintaining that South Africa has good bilateral relations with Russia and Ukraine. However, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) separately met with the Russian Ambassador and pledged support to Russia. Meanwhile, the leader of the opposition party Democratic Alliance said the government “has picked the wrong side of history, and it has dragged 60 million South Africans along with it.” The developments came after Ramaphosa claimed that South Africa had been approached to mediate the Russia-Ukraine war. (“[S Africa’s Ramaphosa: NATO to blame for Russia’s war in Ukraine](#),” *Al Jazeera*, 18 March 2022; “[Russia-Ukraine conflict: South African political parties clash over government’s stance](#),” *Nation*, 17 March 2022)

#### REGIONAL

##### Cyclone Gombe claims 53 lives in Mozambique, six in Malawi

On 18 March, the death toll from tropical Cyclone Gombe reached 53 in Mozambique, a week after the cyclone made landfall on 11 March. On 17 March, the National Institute of Disaster Management (INGC) said 80 people were wounded at 400,000 people impacted in

northern and central Mozambique; 45,000 homes were completely destroyed and 30,000 partially destroyed. The cyclone has also affected parts of Madagascar and Malawi, with the latter recording six fatalities.

(“[Mozambique: Cyclone Gombe death toll rises to 53](#),” Al Jazeera, 18 March 2022; “[Tropical Cyclone Gombe - Mar 2022](#),” ReliefWeb, March 2022)

### Over 6000 flee to the Gambia amid operation against Casamance separatists

On 20 March, Africanews reported nearly 6,000 people had fled from Senegal to the Gambia after the former began a military operation against the Casamance rebels. The Gambian National Crisis Management Agency said the total number of fleeing stood at 6,350, including 4,508 displaced. The agency said the Foni Kansala area in the Gambian territory accommodated refugees and IDPs as fighting against the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) continued. (“[Operation Casamance: At least 6,000 people flee to the Gambia](#),” Africanews, 20 March 2022)

### ECOWAS to continue working with Burkina Faso

On 17 March, Ghana’s Foreign Minister said the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) would not abandon Burkina Faso. The Minister led an ECOWAS delegation to Burkina Faso and said the regional bloc would continue to work with Ouagadougou despite concerns over the military government’s three-year transition plan. The Ghanaian minister said: “The issues and the problems that plague Burkina Faso are our problems. It is not in this time of need of Burkina Faso that ECOWAS will abandon it.” The statement comes despite the suspension of Burkina Faso from ECOWAS in January. (“[West African bloc says it won’t abandon Burkina Faso after coup](#),” Al Jazeera, 18 March 2022)

### Over 70 dead or missing over two weeks, says IOM

On 17 March, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said over 70 people had died or gone missing at sea over the last two weeks. The estimates were made after the 12 March incident wherein a boat with 25 migrant passengers capsized off the Libyan coast;

seven bodies were recovered, six people rescued, and 12 remained missing. The total number of dead or missing has risen to 215 in 2022. The Libya Chief of Mission for the IOM expressed disappointment over the lack of action to address the risks of travelling through the Central Mediterranean and called for safer migration options. (“[UN says at least 70 migrants dead or missing off Libyan coast](#),” UN News, 17 March 2022)

## INTERNATIONAL

### UN body warns of food and fuel shortage in Africa

On 16 March, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) warned that the war in Ukraine could trigger food shortages in several regions, especially in North Africa and East Africa. The UNCTAD described Russia and Ukraine as key players in two products - food and fuel. The report outlined the continent’s wheat imports and said Africa imported 32 per cent of its wheat from Ukraine and 12 per cent from Russia. The rise in prices of fuel have also affected Africa; for example, in Zimbabwe, three price increases were blocked by lowering fuel taxes. The UNCTAD said such developments are a recipe for civil unrest. (“[Ukraine war could trigger food riots in fragile African countries - UN body](#),” News24, 18 March 2022)

### France24 and RFI radio suspended by Mali’s military government

On 16 March, Mali’s military government accused France24 and the RFI radio of reporting on “false allegations” of abuse by the army and therefore, called for the suspension of the news outlets. France24 quoted from a statement which read that the government “categorically rejects these false allegations against the valiant FAMA” [Malian Armed Forces] and has launched “a procedure...to suspend the broadcasting of RFI...and France 24 until further notice.” In response, French President Emmanuel Macron said the military government’s decision contradicts the espoused by Malians since the country’s independence. The parent company of France24 and RFI radio called the military government’s justifications as “unfounded accusations.” (“[Mali's ruling junta orders suspension of FRANCE 24 and RFI](#),” France24, 17 March 2022)

### African countries cannot remain neutral on Ukraine, says US ambassador

On 18 March, the BBC reported that the US ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, said that African countries cannot be neutral over the war in Ukraine. Thomas-Greenfield said the war today is not similar to the Cold War and also maintained that the US would give the green signal to South Africa's

offer to mediate. The US ambassador's remarks came after 17 African countries abstained, and eight were absent during the vote in the UN General Assembly on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. ("[African nations' neutrality on Ukraine war under fire](#)," *BBC*, 18 March 2022)

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### About NIAS Africa Studies

As a part of the area studies initiatives, the Institute started a focussed study on Pakistan in 2020. In 2021, it expanded the area studies to include Europe Studies, China Reader, and Maritime Studies. In 2022, the Science, Technology and International Relations (STIR) programme at the Institute is further expanding its area studies, to include Africa.

The primary focus of NIAS Africa studies would be on the following five verticals: contemporary political issues, colonial legacies, problems of governance, civil-military equations, and the rise of radical Islamic groups. The primary objective is to study Africa from an internal prism. ,

NIAS Africa Studies would include a series of expert lectures, workshops, publications and a weekly exclusively focussed on Africa. The initiative also aims to create a network of young scholars studying Africa and also African scholars studying in various Indian institutions.

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### About the team

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