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Libya's New Cabinet: Formation and Challenges

Unit for Political Studies

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Introduction

On Wednesday, the Libyan parliament approved an interim government headed by Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibeh. The parliament voted in the cabinet following consultations with the Libyan Dialogue Forum, which selected Dbeibeh as Prime Minister last February. Despite Dbeibeh's success in forming his team and securing the approval of Parliament within the specified timeframe, many questions arise about the ability of this government to implement the forum's roadmap and facilitate the parliamentary and presidential elections planned on 24 December.

Forming the Cabinet

Abdulhamid Dbeibeh, upon being selected as prime minister, began consultations with tribal and political parties, social figures, businessmen and leaders of military groups to choose his government.⁽¹⁾ Dbeibeh was forced, on two occasions, to postpone announcing the names of his government team, due to disagreements. Pressures remained up until the Parliamentary vote, when the session was adjourned early on, and Dbeibeh acquiesced to the objections of a number of deputies to exclude Omar Tantoush, a relative of General Haftar, named as Economic Minister, and Lamia Bousadra, a Watan Party affiliate, set to be Foreign Minister. Had he failed to gain parliamentary approval, Dbeibeh would have had to seek a vote of confidence from the Dialogue Forum, in accordance with the steps laid out by the roadmap. Among the most prominent challenges that Dbeibeh faced were the tribal and regional balances, evident in his cabinet selection, with the regional background a clear criterion in the distribution of ministerial portfolios, the same basis upon which Dbeibeh himself and the interim presidential council was chosen. In addition, Dbeibeh stressed a number of conditions that must be met by candidates, most notably their ability to move around Libya freely and not to have held any ministerial positions since 2011.

Five women have been appointed out of 33 government posts, with Najla el-Mangoush as the new Foreign Minister and Halima Abdulrahman leading the ministry of justice.⁽²⁾ It is the first time that women have held sovereign ministries since independence. Dbeibeh resorted to an expanded government to run the precarious transitional phase in order to satisfy all parties and ensure parliamentary approval, but this provokes fears about governmental effectiveness, at a time when the country needs a homogeneous government team with a limited number. On pressing matters such as unifying and institutionalizing the security and military services, and providing critical services like electricity and water, improving health services and responding to the global pandemic. Dbeibeh himself was well aware of the pressures involved with forming a government, acknowledging that he would only have a free choice on one minister, while the rest were chosen based on recommendations from MPs, receiving more than two thousand CVs to take over ministerial portfolios.⁽³⁾

1 "Libyan Lawmakers Approve Government of PM-Designate Dbeibah," *Al Jazeera*, 10/3/2021, accessed on 16/3/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3qLzCdG>.

2 "Libyan Women Want Progress after Appointment of First Female Foreign Minister," *Reuters*, 11/3/2021, accessed on 16/3/2021 at: <https://reut.rs/2OXsu0G>.

3 "Dbeibah to the Parliament: Everyone Wants the Ministry of Defense," Anadolu Agency, 9/3/2021, accessed on 13/3/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/38B8cRt>.



Dbeibeh himself temporarily retained the Minister of Defense post, acknowledging that naming a person from a particular region for the defense portfolio was problematic.⁽⁴⁾ Indications are that Haftar's position on the future political and military stage was an important immediate consideration in postponing a decision on who would take up the post so that Dbeibeh chose to avoid a contentious decision that could have impeded reaching an agreement. This would seem to indicate that Haftar remains an obstacle to the future formation of a unified army.

A Warm Welcome

Despite the difficulties facing the Dbeibeh government, 132 out of 133 deputies attending the parliamentary session in Sirte voted in its favor. Whatever the reasons underlying this consensus, the votes increased the government's domestic and international legitimacy. In Libya, the approval of the government was met with optimism about the next political stage, and various internal parties pledged to extend the government a helping hand. Fayez al-Sarraj (outgoing chairman of the Presidential Council) congratulated the Dbeibeh government on "an important step to end fighting and division",⁽⁵⁾ and expressed his full readiness for the handover. The head of the High Council of State Khaled al-Meshri also expressed hope of "reaching the desired goal of holding elections on the agreed date".⁽⁶⁾ Speaker of the Libyan House of Representatives Aguila Saleh claimed the day was "historic".⁽⁷⁾

Internationally, the United Nations Support Mission in Libya hailed the vote as an "opportunity to move forward towards unity, stability, reconciliation and full restoration of Libyan sovereignty".⁽⁸⁾ The United Nations Security Council stressed the importance of unifying Libyan institutions and called for "all authorities and actors in Libya to ensure a smooth handover of all competencies and duties to the new interim government".⁽⁹⁾ The United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Italy jointly welcomed the new cabinet and emphasized "the necessity for full implementation of the ceasefire resolution and withdrawal of all foreign fighters and mercenaries from Libyan territory".⁽¹⁰⁾ Turkey, Russia, the Arab League, the Arab Maghreb Union, Qatar, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Sudan, and the Sultanate of Oman unanimously welcomed the Dbeibeh government.⁽¹¹⁾

4 "Libya without a defense minister .. the Dbeibeh government is waiting to give it confidence," Al-Jazeera.net 9/3/2021 accessed on 13/3/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/30FSINi>.

5 "Statement of the President of the Presidential Council," Media Office of the President of the Presidential Council of the Government of National Accord, Facebook, 3/3/2021, accessed on 13/3/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3rjiPcB>.

6 "Statement of the High Council of State on Granting Confidence to the Government of National Unity" Media Office of the High Council of State, Facebook, 3/3/2021, accessed on 13/3/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3viJJKp>.

7 "Libya: The government of Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh obtains the confidence of Parliament to lead the transitional phase," France 24, 3/3/2021, accessed on 13/3/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3bKdv3a>.

8 "Statement of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya Concerning the Parliament Granting Confidence in an Interim Government of National Unity," UNSMIL, 10/3/2021, accessed 3/3/2021 at <https://bit.ly/3comzJY>

9 "Security Council Welcomes Confidence Vote by Libya's House of Representative to Endorse New Unified Interim Government's Cabinet," United Nations, Security Council, 12/3/2021, accessed on 13/3/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3lftucg>.

10 "Joint Statement by France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States on an Interim Government of National Unity in Libya," U.S. Department of State 11/3/2021, accessed 13/3/2021: <https://bit.ly/3lBEA2d>

11 "Arab and International Welcome for the Dbeibeh Government in Libya," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 10/03/2021, accessed on 13/3/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3lkQpTJ>.



Legitimacy and Healing the Rift

Since the launch of Haftar's Operation Dignity at the beginning of 2014 Libya underwent a sharp political and institutional divide, with executive and sovereign institutions emerging in the eastern region such as the Central Bank of Libya in Benghazi and the Armed Forces General Command in Al-Rajma, in parallel with various ministries of the Libyan Interim Government in Bayda. Members of Parliament affiliated with Haftar's camp established the city of Tobruk as their seat of the House of Representatives while others boycotted the parliament until nearly half of its members moved to Tripoli to convene sessions there, in the wake of 2019 and 2020 attacks by Haftar's forces on the capital and the western region. The United Nations and most countries recognized the only legitimate executive authority in Libya as being Fayeze al-Sarraj's Government of National Accord (GNA) Presidential Council, appointed in the aftermath of the 2015 Skhirat Political Agreement. Nevertheless, division and fragmentation persisted, as did the various parallel bodies in the eastern region. The inability of the House of Representatives to achieve a quorum to hold a session aimed, under the Skhirat Agreement, at approving the reconciliation government, served to deepen the political and institutional divide in the country – as did the alliance of its president Aguila Saleh and other MPs with General Haftar. Meanwhile monetary policy of the parallel central bank in Benghazi – pumping huge amounts of the Libyan dinars minted in Russia into the market – contributed to a deterioration of the dinar's value against foreign currencies and an upsurge in inflation indicators, deepening the country's economic and livelihood crisis. The GNA remained unable to extend control over the whole of the eastern region, as well as parts of the central, southern and western regions. During the April 2019 offensive launched by Haftar's forces, it was compelled to retreat to the outskirts of Tripoli, the capital.

Although the GNA Presidential Council is considered to be the only legitimate government in Libya (according to the United Nations sponsored Skhirat Agreement), this did not prevent regional and international powers and certain neighboring countries from dealing with Haftar and the Libyan Interim Government headed by Abdullah al-Thinni in Bayda. Neither did it prevent provision of support to the parallel agencies in the Eastern Region – thereby obliging the Government of National Accord to make financial appropriations for the parallel government and pay the salaries of its employees as well as of recruits in Haftar's security and military services.

Challenges Aplenty

Consolidating institutions under a single executive authority represents a major challenge for Dbeibeh and his government team. Over the past six years, the political and institutional divide has been consecrated, a *fait accompli* the overcoming of which demands solid political will, harmonious political discourse among components of the government and the various parties, and readiness to relinquish political, material and regional spoils acquired through investment in the divide – as well as regional and international commitment to dealing with the Dbeibeh government and the



new Presidency Council *as the sole legitimate executive authority in Libya*. Unity, however, remains consensual, based on regional quotas, and therefore threatened by the risk of a breakdown of consensus itself; this may lead to a parting of ways. Hence the importance of strengthening national unity based on commitment of affiliation *to Libya* rather than to sub-national entities, and especially to those of the state's non-political institutions. Quotas in unelected state institutions of bureaucracy should be eradicated as soon as possible and replaced by considerations of competence, merit, and supply and demand.

The security, economic and services portfolios represent other complex challenges awaiting Dbeibeh and his government; they are accorded great weight by the Road Map in creating the enabling environment for general elections. Progress in the security file is basically conditional on the unification of the police and military agencies and their institutionalization under the administration of the executive authority, restricting weaponry to the state's hands and expelling foreign fighters from the country. These conditions are difficult to achieve within the time frame that has been given to the government, given the complexity of calculations and regional connections of parties to the conflict. Services and economic matters are likely amenable to resolution despite the accumulated crises – assuming stabilized oil production and success of efforts to unify the central bank and ratify a fully integrated budget.

The form of the expanded government and the complexity of security and economic challenges are not the only sources of concern regarding the Dbeibeh government's ability to arrive at general elections by the end of 2021. Legal and constitutional obstacles represent another difficult knot requiring attention. To preclude any challenge to the legitimacy of the Presidential Council and the government, conducting elections demands constitutional rule and electoral legislation, in addition to inclusion of the road map approved in the Constitutional Declaration and the Forum for Political Dialogue. Even if the government gains legitimacy from the House of Representatives' vote of confidence, the Presidential Council will have no place on the institutional and executive stage without constitutional ratification of the newly approved road map.

Conclusion

Only a month after the Libyan Dialogue Forum selected a new head of government and a presidential council, Abdelhamid Dbeibeh formed his government team and passed the parliamentary confidence test with flying colours and a nearly unanimous majority. However, neither such success nor the positive reception he encountered domestically and externally will serve to eliminate the impediments to his government implementing much needed security, economic, services and legislative measures within the tight time frame given. His opting for a big tent government to placate various stakeholders combines with the limited managerial experience of most ministers as factors that may well prove decisive in limiting the cohesion and effectiveness of the government team. The complex tangle of accumulated crises in domains of security, economy and services threaten to obstruct smooth progress



towards reaching the general elections at the end of 2021. This could facilitate different scenarios than those approved by the Forum and compel various parties to prioritize achieving consensus through mutual and reciprocal concessions. Beyond the catastrophic – and unimaginable – option of a resumption of fighting, there can be no alternative to a political process.