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About this Series

Op-Med is an ongoing series of opinion pieces on topical issues in Mediterranean politics from a transatlantic perspective. The series brings together European, North American, and southern Mediterranean experts through the German Marshall Fund–Istituto Affari Internazionali strategic partnership. The series examines key questions surrounding the political, societal, and economic evolution of specific Mediterranean countries as well as the broader regional and international dynamics at play in the Mediterranean region as a whole.

A Transatlantic Perspective on the Libyan Election

by *Ronald Bruce St John*

For the first time since 1965, Libyans have gone to the polls to elect a 200-member General National Congress (GNC). This body will appoint an interim government, oversee the drafting of a constitution, and supervise countrywide elections for a national government based on that new constitution. Hailed by international observers as free and fair, the election was doubly remarkable in that 1) it took place only nine months after the fall of the Gaddafi regime and 2) voters supported moderate parties, reversing a regional trend in favor of Islamist groups. The surprise results of the election offer the transatlantic partners unexpected new opportunities to promote democratic governance, regional security, and expanded commercial interests in the region.

Eighty of the GNC's 200 seats were allocated to political parties with the remaining 120 reserved for independent candidates. The National Forces Alliance (NFA), a diverse coalition of 60 political parties and 200 civil society groups, won 39 of the party seats. Supervised by Mahmoud Jibril, a former prime minister in the interim government, the NFA was described by the Western press,

always keen to apply their labels to political movements elsewhere in the world, as a “liberal” political party. In stark contrast, the NFA, recognizing the central role of Islam in Libyan society, presented itself to Libyan voters as a moderate Islamic movement. The Justice and Construction Party (JCP), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, ran second in the voting, winning only 17 party seats. It presented itself to the electorate as a progressive religious party. Collectively, moderate or “liberal” political parties took over 60 percent of the party seats in the GNC. The poor showing of Islamic-centered parties like the JCP was the result of several related factors. Historically, the Libyan people have displayed little appetite for the more extreme, radical strains of Islam, and this remained true throughout the non-ideological February 17 Revolution. Structurally, the Gaddafi regime suppressed all Islamic movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood, so there was little in the way of an organized base to support the JCP. Politically, the Brotherhood reached an accommodation with the regime in Gaddafi's final years, a pact resented and criticized by many Libyans. Philosophically, Libyans

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in the post-Gaddafi era were suspicious of any effort to impose a new ideology or political agenda upon them. In addition, there was widespread concern that Islamic parties like the JCP were influenced — or would be influenced — by forces outside Libya. After a long period of isolation, most Libyans longed for a more open socioeconomic and political system and feared the Islamists would once again close them off from the outside world.

The election results for the 120 independent seats were not as clear-cut as those for the 80 party seats. Genuinely independent candidates or individual candidates with ties to parties other than the NFA won a majority of the GNC seats reserved for independents. Consequently, they will have considerable influence over the policies of the new congress. Many of these independent candidates were elected on the basis of local connections, tribal affiliation, or social standing as opposed to ideology. Therefore, it is unclear at this point if they will pledge their support to the NFA or another political party or attempt to form their own voting bloc. While the NFA will likely be able to form a working coalition, political maneuvering in the world's newest democracy will go on for weeks.

In the run-up to the election, public opinion polls indicated that most Libyans thought the country was moving in the right direction; nevertheless, security remained a widespread and major concern. The new interim government appointed by the elected GNC will be in a better position than its predecessor, the appointed National Transitional Council (NTC), to address long-standing issues of dialogue, transparency, and legitimacy.

At the same time, the election is unlikely to be the panacea hoped for by many Libyans. Absent an effective police force and functional armed forces, both the GNC and the new interim government it appoints will remain reliant to some degree on the medley of militias and revolutionary forces in Libya. To entrench new freedoms, security must be restored throughout the country. The transatlantic partners can continue to be of assistance here, providing much-needed technology, training, and equipment. In addition, they are in the best position to coordinate joint strategies with neighboring states to establish border security, curtail arms trafficking, and reduce illegal immigration.

The election also provides the transatlantic partners with a fresh opportunity to modify long-standing regional strate-

gies that have favored stability over democracy and human rights in the Arab world. Election returns confirm that Libya remains a very promising candidate for democratization. The political process in place is meant to lead to a new constitution followed by countrywide elections: it will almost certainly result in a moderate Islamic government. This is consistent with Libyan history, tradition, and experience as both the monarchy (1951-69) and the Gaddafi regime (1969-2011) declared Islam to be the religion of the state and Islamic sharia law to be a central component of the legal system. For this reason, the political platform of the moderate, mainstream, and victorious NFA wisely stated that Libyan law would be guided by the principles of sharia law. In so doing, it neutralized a central appeal of the Islamists.

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If the transatlantic partners can divest themselves of old paradigms and embrace change, they can promote democracy and human rights within the political system likely to evolve in Libya. In this regard, they are off to a good start as in the run-up to the election, many of the partner states provided materials, training, and education, mostly through the UN and NGOs, on subjects like creating an independent press, organizing a political party, and writing a constitution. As Libyans move to draft a new constitution that will define Libya's future government and the future of its democratic experiment, the transatlantic partners have an ongoing role to play in working through the UN and NGOs to foster and support the development of civic organizations, political parties, and institutional development.

As security improves and the political process plays out, economic prospects will also improve, providing trade and investment opportunities for the transatlantic partners. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) expects economic activity to double this year, which will put it well ahead of 2010, the last full year of the Gaddafi regime. Private sector development is vital to the future of Libya as it must diver-

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sify its economy away from hydrocarbons if it is to provide much-needed jobs for an extremely young population. As the government is burdened with massive social welfare and reconstruction costs, much of the needed investment in infrastructure and industrial development will have to come from outside the country.

Although the results of the Libyan election were a surprise to many observers, they reflect a familiarity with democracy that began with the early period of Greek influence and manifested itself in modern times with the creation of the Tripoli Republic (1918), and the declaration of independence (1951). Reflecting this tradition, Libyans went to the polls on July 7, 2012, casting aside ideology and tangential issues, to elect a representative government that could bring security and rebuild the country. As they move forward to create a new constitution and elect a national government, they are poised to become a model for democratic governance within an overwhelmingly Islamic polity.

About the Author

Ronald Bruce St John is the author of several books and monographs on Libya, including *A Transatlantic Perspective on the Future of Libya*, Mediterranean Paper Series, May 2012.

About GMF

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