

Libya destabilised by Egypt coup

By Jean Shaoul
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The military coup in neighbouring Egypt that overthrew President Mohamed Mursi's Muslim Brotherhood government has further destabilised the shaky NATO-installed interim government of Libyan prime minister Ali Zeidan.

Zeidan, who is close to the secular National Forces Alliance, the largest bloc in the National Congress, expressed his "respect for the will of the Egyptian people" in welcoming the military coup. Libya's ambassador to Egypt, Fayez Jibril, described the demonstrations of June 30 as a "popular uprising" and promised to honour all deals signed with Mursi's government and more Libyan investment in the Egyptian economy.

In stark contrast, the Justice and Construction Party, the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, the second largest bloc in the Congress, condemned the coup as a dangerous setback for democracy in the Arab Spring countries.

Libya, following the NATO-led war to overthrow the regime of Muammar Gaddafi, is characterised by bitter factional infighting along regional, ethnic, tribal and religious lines. The last few weeks have seen escalating tensions between the Islamist militias, backed by the Muslim Brotherhood and the city of Misrata, and tribal militias, backed by Zintan and powerful eastern tribes.

At the end of last month, Abdul Salam al-Mosmari, a prominent critic of the Muslim Brotherhood, was killed in a drive-by shooting in the eastern port city of Benghazi. This was the first targeted assassination of a political figure. Angry protesters took to the streets in towns and cities throughout the country denouncing the Brotherhood, which has denied any involvement.

Benghazi has seen 57 assassinations since the end of the war that toppled the Gaddafi regime in 2011, mainly of former members of Gaddafi's intelligence and security services. None have been investigated by the authorities.

Soon after news of al-Mosmari's assassination broke, protesters stormed the offices of Islamist parties and their allies in several cities, shouting, "We don't want the Brotherhood, we want the army and the police."

In Benghazi, buildings used by the judiciary were bombed, and there were overnight clashes between an armed gang and military forces. Two soldiers were killed. In a separate incident, a car bomb exploded in the city centre, injuring a colonel in the Libyan navy.

There was a mass breakout at Kuifiya prison in Benghazi amid the fighting, and more than 1,100 prisoners escaped. It is unclear whether the breakout was part of the protests or if the prisoners received help from outside. Three were shot dead by security forces as they tried to escape. About 110 have since been recaptured.

In Tripoli, the capital, protesters set fire to tires in the streets and demanded the dissolution of Islamist parties. A group of youths attacked the Justice and Construction Party headquarters. Another group attacked the headquarters of the liberal National Forces Alliance. An armed gang attacked the headquarters of the al-Watan (The Nation) party, led by former militia leader Abdelhakim Belhadj.

A few days ago, presenter Ezzedine Qusad of Libya's privately owned al-Hurra TV was killed by three gunmen. He had received a telephone call a few days earlier threatening his life if he delivered a speech celebrating Eid al-Fitr, the festival marking the end of Ramadan.

Fuelling the protests is the ever-growing anger at the deteriorating economic and security situation in the country. More than half of the country's young people—Libya has one of the world's youngest populations—are out of work. Thousands have fled by boat in search of work and asylum to southern Italy.

There have been repeated strikes and protests in the oil and gas industry, which accounts for 70 percent of

Libya's GDP and 95 percent of its exports. Earlier this month, two major oil terminals in eastern Libya were closed, in addition to a third that has been closed since early July, as security guards sought higher pay and local people demanded more jobs in the oil and gas industry.

The closures have cut Libya's oil exports to about 425,000 barrels per day (bpd) from previous levels of more than 1 million, crippling the economy. Before the unrest of the last few months, Libya's production had nearly recovered to the 1.6 million bpd seen before the NATO-led invasion that toppled Gaddafi.

There are the hundreds of militias that were initially armed and financed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in order to overthrow Gaddafi and install a more pliant, pro-Western government.

The weak police force depends largely on the Supreme Security Committee (SSC), a quasi-official body of former anti-Gaddafi fighters under the Interior Ministry, to ensure law and order.

Human Rights Watch said that last October, about 8,000 people were in detention, the majority held for more than a year without charge or due process rights, including judicial review and access to a lawyer, some being held by the government and others by various militias. Detainees in some facilities have reported repeated torture and deaths in custody.

The interim government, officially inaugurated last November after elections in July and made up of a coalition of liberals, Islamists and former regime figures, has been rocked by the passing of the Political Isolation Law that banned Gaddafi-era officials from holding office, the sacking of the defence minister following the massacre of anti-militia protesters in Benghazi last June, and resignations.

Earlier this month, Deputy Prime Minister Awad al-Barasi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood-linked Justice and Construction party, resigned, saying he was not given enough powers to carry out his duties and criticising the cabinet.

Zeidan has announced that he will reshuffle his government, hinting at the formation of a crisis government to stabilise the situation, a key demand of a tribal conference that took place early July in Zintan, in the mainly Berber western region of Libya.

A further factor destabilising the interim government is the procedure for electing—no date has yet been set

for the election—the members of the Constituent Assembly tasked with drafting the new constitution for Libya that must be put to a referendum for approval. Congress has approved a 60-member Assembly drawn from the three former provinces, Cyrenaica, Fezzan and Tripolitania, which will meet in the Cyrenaica city of El Beida, home of the old parliament building, to avoid the heavy lobbying that would take place if it were held in Tripoli.

But the proposals are facing heavy criticism for failing to give due representation to women and Libya's ethnic minorities. Contentious issues include the weight to be given to Sharia law and a decentralised form of government or at least recognition of autonomy for the oil-rich Cyrenaica.

Facing a desperate political situation, Zeidan is ever more reliant on NATO. Libya participated as an observer, along with Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, in a US-NATO Black Sea military exercise last July named Sea Breeze 13. A recent meeting of the US, AFRICOM and NATO agreed to train Libyan military forces, with Britain planning to train Libyan armed forces in Cambridgeshire in "basic infantry skills and leadership."

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