

Benghazi: A Microcosm Of Libya's Impatience With The NTC

Benghazi, considered Ground Zero for the Libyan uprising which began in February 2011 and culminated in the toppling of former dictator Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, has once again become a hot bed of political unrest in recent months. More recently, the protests in Benghazi have resulted in the removal of another Libyan politician – the National Transitional Council (NTC)'s number two official, Abdul Hafiz Ghoga.

Following a series of protests in Benghazi against the interim government, on 22 January 2012, Ghoga announced that he was resigning from his position for the “benefit of the country.” Ghoga made his announcement after a crowd demanding the ouster of the NTC broke windows and forced their way into the interim government's local headquarters in Benghazi, forcing the council's chief, Mustafa Abdel Jalil, to become trapped inside the building for several hours. The protesters, many of them armed with machine guns, had besieged the main metal gates and the courtyard of the compound. Abdel Jalil attempted to quell the unrest, but retreated into the building after protesters threw water bottles at him. Explosions caused by home-made bombs were also reported some 500 metres from the compound. The protesters said that the explosions were meant as a warning to the NTC, a warning which the NTC has so far appeared reluctant to heed.

To quell the eastern city's unrest, the NTC responded by offering the resignation of the Council-appointed city mayor, Saleh El-Ghazal, as well as promising to hold an election for a new city mayor. However, the citizens of Benghazi are not satisfied, believing such motions are superficial; and have, therefore, continued to take to the streets, a move which Abdel Jalil says is threatening to drag Libya into a “bottomless pit.”

So what is the cause for this unrest? The seeds of the latest conflict came in Benghazi in October 2011, when the NTC moved to the capital Tripoli after declaring Libya officially liberated from Gaddafi's forty-two-year rule. This was despite the fact that the citizens of Benghazi started the uprising which eventually unseated the dictator. Seeing a rise in anti-government feeling, Abdel Jalil moved quickly and announced his government's decision to name the eastern city the future “economic capital” of Libya. However, the citizens of Benghazi remained largely unimpressed, and protesters there have frequently declared that the NTC is ignoring their city in favour of Tripoli.

What Jalil and other NTC officials appear reluctant to admit is that Benghazi is arguably a microcosm of the wider challenges the NTC faces throughout Libya. The situation in Benghazi demonstrates that the NTC still has a long way to go with regard to uniting the country, proving their legitimacy as interim leaders, as well as stepping up the security on the streets. Since Gaddafi's overthrow, Libyan authorities seem to have focused most of their attention on securing the country's borders, disarming the populace, and uniting Libya's various armed militias into one national army and police force. Such intense focus on these security concerns has come at price, as Libyan citizens believe that the NTC has failed to address the root cause of these problems: the lack of democracy and lack of attention being paid to the citizens' needs.

The NTC is still under fire for a number of issues, including the following:

- The lack of employment opportunities for Libyan people.
- The lack of compensation for the families of soldiers who died in the conflict.

- A draft law, which sets rules for an assembly vote in June 2011. The law includes an article which bans dual nationals from running for office, a rule which has upset many Libyans.
- The 10 per cent of seats reserved for women in the national assembly does not represent the demographics of Libya.
- The lack (or perceived lack) of financial and political transparency on the part of the NTC.
- The slow pace of reform since the fall of Gaddafi.

The Way Ahead:

Going forward, the NTC needs to prove to Libya that it can meet the demands of the entire nation by focusing on the microcosm that is Benghazi. By addressing the needs of the 700,000-strong city, the NTC has the chance to show that it is not just another unelected regime that exists solely to serve its own needs. If the NTC fails to address these issues, however, Benghazi may once again become 'Ground Zero' for another civil war.

Looking ahead, Western investors may likely become reluctant to take the plunge and partner with Libya. Thus, for the time being, Western businesses are advised to partner with tested security and political risk firms which can guide them through the ever-changing situation that is Libya.

NB: It is important to note that the situation in Libya is in a constant state of flux and that the available information may be inconsistent due to the issue of reliability of certain sources.

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