



Statement

Published 3 March 2022

By International Crisis Group

## International Unity is Needed to Prevent a Divided Libya

*Libya again has two rival administrations pressing claims to be the rightful government. Both sides have armed loyalists. Outside powers should join hands to help stop them from clashing once more.*

Libya is at a perilous crossroads – again. On 1 March, the country’s Tobruk-based parliament, the House of Representatives, voted to endorse a new interim government headed by former Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha, giving it the greenlight to take over from the sitting prime minister, Abdulhamid Dabaiba. The vote’s proponents insist that the procedure was sound, but factions in the capital Tripoli say it was fraudulent. The latter reject the new cabinet and oppose appointing a new executive entirely. As the camps square off, omens of renewed fighting are visible for the first time since an October 2020 ceasefire ended six years of political feuds and intermittent conflict. Armed groups allied with the Tripoli-based government have already closed Libyan airspace to prevent incumbent ministers from travelling to Tobruk to take part in Bashagha’s swearing-in ceremony. With others gearing up for confrontation, what happens next will depend largely on how foreign powers react. A splintered international response could encourage an institutional split and military mobilisation. But a united international condemnation of the use of force coupled with a call on Libyans to chart a consensual way forward with UN assistance could avoid this scenario.

The 1 March vote risks breaking apart the [unified interim government](#) that formed in the months after a ceasefire declared in October 2020. That government brought together the country’s rival power centres, one based in Tripoli and the other in Tobruk, which formed after contested parliamentary elections cleaved the country in two in 2014. Efforts to instal a new government have been under way since early 2022, after the national electoral commission indefinitely postponed a presidential election that had been slated for 24 December, citing insurmountable legal disputes regarding the candidates running for the country’s top position.

Since then, Libya’s main political camps have put forward conflicting ideas for resolving the impasse. The Tobruk-based group, which includes House speaker Aghila Saleh, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar (who led forces that besieged Tripoli in 2019) and Tripoli-based factions that want to oust Dabaiba, said politicians should form a new government and amend a draft constitution before new elections. The other, which includes western Libya’s main political blocs, wanted Dabaiba to stay in power until a new legislature is elected and can choose a new executive. Even presidential hopeful Saif al-Islam al-Qadhafi, son of the late dictator, who



Libya's security forces parade at the Martyrs' Square in the capital Tripoli on February 17, 2022, as Libyans commemorate the 11th anniversary of the uprising that toppled longtime strongman Muammar Kadhafi. The anniversary comes as the country, for years plagued by divisions between east and west, finds itself with two rival prime ministers based in the capital Tripoli. MAHMUD TURKIA / AFP

is historically at odds with the second camp, echoed the need to keep the Dabaiba government in place and proceed with a legislative ballot.

The polarisation between these two broad camps deepened after 10 February, when the House appointed Bashagha as prime minister-designate and tasked him with forming a government by the end of the month. This appointment was the result of a deal among Bashagha, Saleh, Haftar and their respective allies in the House. At first, the agreement also had the approval of Khaled al-Mishri, the chairman of the High State Council, the rival assembly located in Tripoli. But Mishri withdrew his support in late February, seemingly under pressure from several members of the Council he heads, who opposed the move to put a new government in place. The pro-Dabaiba camp responded to the House's manoeuvres by announcing that the government was working on its own roadmap to hold a legislative ballot in June. They said the Tobruk-based parliament had no right to appoint a new executive and

that Dabaiba would hand over power only to a successor backed by a popular vote.

Divisions among foreign actors mirrored Libya's cleavages. Cairo and Moscow gave their initial blessing to the House's efforts to instal a new government, seemingly believing that Libya would benefit from an alliance among former enemies like Bashagha and Haftar. Beginning in early 2022, Egyptian officials actively supported reaching an understanding between the two and proceeding with the plan based on their deal. Turkey, while maintaining friendly ties with Bashagha, stuck by Dabaiba and called for fresh elections, banking on polls being a better guarantee of long-term stability. The UAE backed Dabaiba, while its Gulf adversary Qatar, made discreet overtures to Bashagha while still bankrolling its traditional allies aligned with Dabaiba. In effect, the Gulf monarchies' allegiances have shifted: barely a year ago, Abu Dhabi was aiding Haftar militarily, while Doha was providing diplomatic and financial support to the Tripoli-based authorities. Amid these

fast-changing developments, the U.S. and other Western states have adopted a wait-and-see approach.

The UN did not oppose the attempt to replace the government. But the UN Secretary-General's special adviser, Stephanie Williams, imposed conditions for accepting the move. First, she said, the new government's appointment should be "consensual" and have the High State Council's buy-in. Secondly, the confidence vote in a new interim premier should be transparent and meet legal requirements – though her office never clarified what these might be. Foreign diplomats said the vote would be valid only if at least 50 per cent of House members plus one supported the new government. But House members advanced their own interpretations. Another point lacking clarity was how many lawmakers the House would need for a quorum. Many of its original 200 members had defected to the Tripoli-based authorities, said they would boycott the proceedings or been replaced. Legislators gave the UN conflicting estimates of the remaining number of parliamentarians, ranging from 164 to 188. As a result, estimates of the quorum for a valid confidence vote varied between 82 and 94. After the High State Council withdrew its support, Williams knew her first condition would not be met and could not be sure her second condition would be, either.

The 1 March parliament confidence vote made matters worse. The House speaker counted 101 members in attendance, and 92 voted in favour. This number was close to or higher than the earlier quorum estimates. But [video footage](#) showed fewer attendees than 101, and only 88 names were read out during the roll call for the vote. The number of

parliamentarians who pronounced the word "confidence" (thiqqa) was unclear because they did not speak into microphones. On 2 March, parliament [clarified](#) that the discrepancy in numbers came about because eight lawmakers had dialled in from remote locations for security or health reasons, while others preferred to cast their votes anonymously after receiving threats from pro-Dabaiba armed groups. The House also changed the total number of those in favour of the new government to 96, adding to the confusion. Bashagha said the ballot was "clear and transparent" and vowed to take office in Tripoli in "a peaceful manner". The next day, however, Dabaiba [called](#) the vote a "coup" attempted through fraud. On 3 March, Bashagha and most of his ministers took the oath of office in Tobruk. On that occasion, House speaker Saleh listed all 96 names of the lawmakers who had supported the new executive, in one last attempt to dispel doubts about the vote of confidence.

The power struggle could disrupt the calm Libya has enjoyed since factions signed the October 2020 ceasefire agreement. It risks undermining reconstruction efforts and the wider economy. Political rivals are also becoming more dependent on armed loyalists. Gunmen allied with the Tripoli-based government reportedly detained two new ministers, preventing them from assuming their duties. It is unclear how Haftar-led forces, who control the east of the country and are allied with the Bashagha cabinet, will respond. The risk of war depends both on the answer to this question and on what the sides' foreign backers decide to do. For now, the foes in the civil war appear unlikely to take up arms again, due to general war fatigue. Neither do outside powers seem eager for renewed conflict. That said, rising animosity between the two governments could change this calculation.

Geopolitical shifts could also affect tensions in Libya. The precarious balance between Turkey and Russia, both of which have military personnel in Libya, could be rapidly upended. Turkey is allied with the Tripoli-based government. Russia deployed fighter jets and the

*“[The power struggle] risks undermining reconstruction efforts and the wider economy.”*

Wagner Group's private military contractors to support Haftar-led forces in the 2019-2020 war, and while it has subsequently sent some of its assets elsewhere, it retains a presence on the ground alongside Haftar. As fighting in Ukraine intensifies, there is a risk of spillover that could drag Libya into a new proxy war. For now, Moscow is the only foreign capital to [officially welcome](#) the Bashagha government. The Kremlin's confrontation with the West over Ukraine makes its strategy in Libya unpredictable.

Other capitals have thus far kept a deafening silence, perhaps waiting to see how the UN responds. On 2 March, the UN Secretary-General said the vote "fell short of the expected standards of transparency and procedures and included acts of intimidation prior to the session". This wording is likely to push foreign powers in the direction of refusing the new government recognition, which would be a blow to those backing the Bashagha-Haftar deal.

Notwithstanding their divisions, external actors should speak with one voice in pressing all Libyan parties to show restraint and condemning the forcible detention of the new

government's supporters. Such a minimum international consensus should be attainable, given that outside powers have a common interest in preventing a return to a divided Libya or a relapse into civil war at a moment of already great geopolitical upheaval. The two sides in Libya should accept UN mediation to break their deadlock and return to negotiating a realistic political roadmap for the way forward. Finding a consensus between the two rival governments admittedly will not be easy, but for each there are good reasons and incentives to accept external mediation: the Bashagha government will be short-lived if it does not receive broad international recognition or, alternatively, gain access to state funds (both of which will be difficult without the UN's support); the Dabaiba government risks losing out if member states begin to gradually flip their recognition in favour of the new executive. The UN's Williams should call on the parties to refrain from violence and urge them to accept her good offices for mediation. Foreign governments should follow her lead in calling for negotiations.