Arab Reform Initiative

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Youth and the Future of Libya

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Young people stage a protest demanding the dissolution of the legislative and executive institutions in the country at Martyr's Square, Tripoli, Libya, 01 July 2022.
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When young people took to the streets during the uprisings of 2011, they set in motion a shift in Libyan socio-economic dynamics that remains not fully captured or understood. Chief among our collective blind spots are the consequences of war on young people that have had to survive through difficult circumstances. Libya has been through a multitude of armed conflicts and different phases of civil war. An entire generation grew up, and/or was born in times of war. Many studies highlight with empirical evidence how violence and years of instability fundamentally change society, i.e., societal structures and norms.[1]

For Libya, it is imperative to highlight that violence in its various forms has always been a factor that drove social and political developments. To a certain extent structural violence – exemplified in economic marginalisation, political exclusion, and suppression of fundamental freedoms – has both laid the foundation and shaped most of the root causes that drive the current conflict. Young Libyans participated in 2011 to change their conditions, both peacefully and violently; their participation stemmed from frustrations regarding the lack of work opportunities, political freedoms, and decades-old regional marginalisation and grievances.[2]

However, the outcome of the uprooting of Gaddafi's regime is a continuous cycle of armed conflicts. Positively, it has also enabled the re-emergence of civil society and, for a brief period, freedom of expression and political participation. Youth remain one of the largest demographics in the country, they take part in both fuelling the conflict as members of armed groups and also leading civic projects and finding innovative ways to change the economic conditions. Indeed, one of the many consequences of war is a more self-reliant youth, a generation that is carving out opportunities for themselves through complete State failure. However, for that to translate to a positive change, it requires a supportive environment, which can only be achieved through political stability.

Political Obstacles to Integration

The perspective of youth in Libya regarding the multitude of issues that plague the country remains largely missing from policymaking. They are often viewed as a vague problematic social group. There is a lack of data regarding youth, their aspirations and development during the conflict. In a recent research paper

published by the Arab Reform Initiative[3] , findings highlight that conflict-related issues must be addressed from different angles. For example, one cannot address conflict resolution without transitional justice, or economic reform without addressing reforms to the education system. The research also finds that the majority of young people feel that 2014 had a larger impact on their lives than the 2011 revolution and subsequent period of tenuous political transition.

Young Libyans were just about to start their professional careers or go to university when major disruptions derailed their plans. Many had to adapt, found themselves displaced and had to seek different kinds of employment, such as freelancing in the private sector, research, and tech. The destruction of infrastructure and collapse of the State meant that young people find little avenues of development. Legal and financial frameworks for the private sector are underdeveloped, banks often have issues of liquidity, and the frequent power cuts all contribute to an increasingly difficult environment for work. Add to that the challenges posed by armed conflicts that can erupt at any moment and paralyse civilians' lives.

The loss of hope in Libya translated to sentiments of political apathy and a wish to build a better life elsewhere. It paints a grim picture of the future of the country; at the same time, it also highlights a duality to the consequences of conflict. The devastation of the war has not only led to a failed State but also a resilient, adaptive, and self-reliant young generation -- one that does not rely on the State but seeks better educational and work opportunities where they could find them. This requires a supportive environment and a developed infrastructure which can only be established through political stability. As conveyed in a private policy dialogue convened by the author with Libyan youth in May 2022, elections yielding a resolution to the current impasse is an important step towards reconciliation, justice, and structural reform.[4]

However, elections have been postponed and the political process is currently at a standstill. In June 2022, during talks facilitated by the UN Special Mission in Libya, members of the House of Representatives and the Presidential Council were unable to agree on a constitutional basis and an electoral law for the upcoming elections.[5] Since then, Tripoli witnessed violent armed conflicts due to governmental rivalry and armed groups' shifting alliances.

The conclusions from both the research paper and policy dialogues highlight that governance and centralisation is the main obstacle towards any development. There seems to be a consensus that the central structure of the government and lack of proper distribution of resources is a common grievance amongst the majority of Libyans and especially those in the Eastern and Southern regions. This identified challenge is also relevant to discussions around reconciliation and justice: as long as the centralised government structure remains unchanged, these issues will continue to stand in the way of trust in any political process.

Youth's lack of trust in the political system and apathy due to frustration with corruption and fear of repercussions leave little avenue for political participation. At the same time, the latest populist policies that targeted youth conducted by the current prime minister Abdul Hamid Al Dbaiba, such as support for loans for housing and marriage, indicated that policy addressing youth can play a crucial role in moving things forward politically. However, the mounting corruption level from the previous and current governments means that these funds allocated for development projects like Ihya Libya are also a means for theft and embezzlement.[6]

Youth Priorities and Recommendations for Reconstruction and Reconciliation

For Libyan youth, political awareness on a large scale to encourage the population to participate in the upcoming elections, along with reform of the education system and economic support for young people, are amongst the main priorities to be addressed by any future government. Politically, legislative authorities represented in the House of Representatives and the Presidential Council, along with legal experts, should improve electoral law and introduce provisions to support youth volunteer programs at different levels and stages of elections. For youth, such measures are seen as useful tools to improve youth participation in politics. The Ministry of Youth should also expand its reach of programs towards awareness on social responsibility, political participation, and the different roles of governing bodies. There is a severe lack of information about the expected roles of each elected body and what citizens in Libya should expect from their elected

representatives. Civil society organisations should be supported to play a supervisory role in the electoral process to ensure more transparency and overall improve the communication strategy around elections.

Economically, for the political process to succeed, it is crucial for young people that there is support for businesses and start-ups. One way of doing this is collaboration between the Ministry of Youth and the Ministry of Labour in joint programs. Another is educational system reform to address gaps in the current labour market, along with revisions of outdated curricula and improving the infrastructure of facilities that have been damaged by conflict.

With regard to reconciliation, youth recommendations tackle this important issue from different angles. Reconciliation must be victim-centred, focusing on the returns of those who have been displaced and taking steps towards repatriation. Justice is also central to this: the Libyan government and any international efforts must tackle this as a fundamental step. Youth also see the destructive role the Libyan media plays in inciting hate speech, and feel this has to be addressed without encouraging intimidation and threats against journalists and reporters.

The reconciliation process in Libya also requires awareness-raising, and here Libyan civil society could play a vital role in creating initiatives that would address tribalism, regionalism, and divisions, as well as facilitating local dialogues in support of national reconciliation. This can be done through supporting civil networks that co-create such initiatives between regions and localities to ensure cohesive parallel processes. Finally, development projects that support reconciliation must do so under the leadership of Libyans.

A pressing issue that came out in the policy dialogue discussion is the international non-governmental organisations' engagement with Libyan civil society. It was evident from the examples provided by young people who have a lot of experience working in civic spaces that current support for Libyan organisations leaves much to be desired and improved. While young people are often the main beneficiaries of development programs, they are often not integrated into higher-level programs that address political or economic reform. Libyan civil society organisations must set plans for the development agenda in Libya, not donors. Likewise, the inclusion of young people in the political process facilitated by the

United Nations Special Mission in Libya should consider youth as participants and not only as knowledge providers.

Conclusion

Libyan youth as the largest demographic in the country can lead on many of the issues that are the core of the current conflict. They must not be seen only from a position of vulnerability but should be considered as actors that could affect real change on multiple levels. This would require an enabling environment that is politically stable. This means that preparations for elections must be supported so that youth can take active roles and be properly integrated into the political process.

Libya at the moment is facing even bigger economic hardships, with high inflation rates, increasing unemployment, and a crumpling public sector – all of which make life for young people in the country unfeasible. Reform is needed urgently, and conditions for the private sector must be improved for young people's projects and businesses to be supported.

Yet, even when political and economic processes are addressed, the consequences of more than a decade of conflict, resulting in divisions, ethnic conflicts, and steep human rights violations of all Libyans, will still need to be addressed through justice and dialogue. Youth in Libya see this as crucial and want to take part in facilitating dialogues and having conversations about how they wish to see Libyan society in the future.

Endnotes

1. *Krause, Jana. Resilient Communities Scorecard. Cambridge University Press, 2018.*

2. Cordaid, "Libyans at Risk: Measuring the Daily Safety for Effective Peacebuilding in Libya", December 2020.

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4. Notes from Youth policy dialogue. 12.05.2022.

5. TRT, "Libya's Rivals Fail to Reach Deal in Election Negotiations." 29 July 2022. Available at https://www.trtworld.com/africa/libya-s-rivals-fail-to-reach-deal-in-election-negotiations-un-58147

6. Khalifa, Asma, Fawzi Boukhriss, and Mohamed Rami Abdelmoula. Unemployed Working-Class Neighbourhood Youth: Survival and Resistance Strategies. September 30, 2022), available at www.international-alert.org

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About the author



Asma Khalifa

Asma Khalifa is a Libyan activist and researcher who has worked on human rights, women's rights and youth empowerment since 2011. From 2014, she focused on Peacebuilding in Libya. Her work in Libya includes improving women's participation in local government and addressing gender-based violence. In 2015 she co-founded Tamazight Women Movement, a think/do tank that aims to research and advocate on women's rights issues in Libya and North Africa. She also co-founded the Khalifa Ihler Institute. In previous years, she fulfilled several roles as consultant, advisor and research on gender issues and capacity building in peacebuilding in Libya.

On May 25th 2016, Asma received the Luxembourg Peace Prize during The World Peace Forum in the European Parliament in Luxembourg and in 2017 she was named as one of the 100 most influential young Africans by the Africa Youth awards. Currently she is doing her PhD at the German Institute for Global Area Studies, researching the impact of civil war on intergenerational relations.

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