

Apr 20 2012

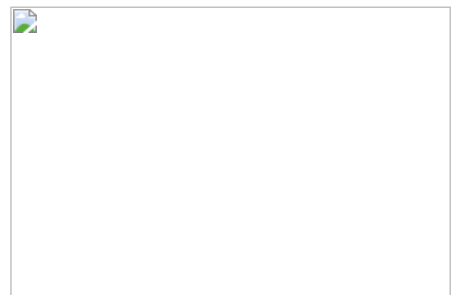
Islamism in Libya

David Britain

This article is fourth in a [special series of posts](#) commissioned by LSE IDEAS exploring Islamism and the Arab Spring. The series also includes articles on the [history of political Islam](#), [Tunisia](#), [Egypt](#), and a concluding post on [pluralism and minorities](#).

By Alia Brahim

The joke is that, in calling for the legalisation of polygamy during a speech declaring the success of the Libyan revolution, Mustapha Abdul Jalil was just wanting to take another wife. Indeed, within a few months of the onset of the Libyan revolution, the tenor of its leadership began to shift. The reassuring words and pro-western stances of secular technocrats such as Mahmoud Jebriil, Ali Tarhuni and Abdelrahman Shalgham had been instrumental in the diplomatic offensive that led to the NATO intervention which helped to dislodge Qadhafi. However, even while that military confrontation was still ongoing, the revolutionary foreground was gradually taken over by Islamist figures such as Abdulhakim Belhadj, the former jihadi leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), and Ali Salabi, the Qatar-based cleric associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. But is this eclipse part of a larger story for the Libyan political process?



Libyans demonstrating at a pro-sharia rally.

Over fifty political parties have registered in the run-up to elections for a constitutional assembly which are due to take place on 19 June, unleashing a flurry of activism and media campaigns. The first national elections in almost five decades, the poll will empower a 200-member National Assembly to write a new constitution.

As [Lisa Andersen](#) argued throughout the 1980s, religion and religious sentiment have been uniquely significant in Libya's modern history, unlike other Arab successor states of the Ottoman empire. As opposed to Islam, the traditions of both Arab and Libyan nationalism were considerably weaker, reflecting the special character and timing of the modern Libyan encounter with Europe. Libyans continue to be deeply religious and socially conservative, but after forty years of repressive rule cloaked in a highly idiosyncratic ideology, as well as a resurgence of nationalist sentiment during the overthrow of the Qadhafi regime, it is not yet clear whether the majority now seek a determining role for religion in politics. Crucial to that question, no doubt, will be whether the secular camp is able to engage on a grassroots level, and indeed organise its own ranks to form a united bloc against Islamist parties, and thereby succeed where their counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt failed.

As elsewhere in the Maghreb, the Islamist advantage arises from a claim to authenticity which contains three broad components: legitimacy, from a familiar, religiously-based discourse that emphasises morality; credibility, from having endured repression, prison and exile on account of tirelessly confronting the former regime; and competency, from mobilising extensive pre-existing local and international networks to provide charitable and welfare services and to 'get things done'.

In Libya, this advantage could be uniquely amplified by a favourable balance of military power. Unlike [Tunisia](#) or [Egypt](#), Libya holds its first elections on the heels of a major civil conflict. As daily reports of tribal, ethnic and regional clashes indicate, the country has not yet stabilised. After the revolution, the transitional government failed in its primary self-imposed task of disarming the population. This could possibly enable various militia groupings to translate their military clout and revolutionary status into political gains. Prominent among such armed groups are distinctly Islamist brigades, such as the Tripoli Military Council and the February 17 Battalion, whose leaders, including Abdulhakim Belhadj, Ismael Salabi and Fawzi Bu Katif, are now tipped for political roles.

The Muslim Brotherhood is rapidly emerging as an organised political force in Libya and benefits from being part of a recognisable global brand whose political star is rising across the region (it operates under the slogan 'you've heard about us, now hear from us'). In addition to name recognition, the Brotherhood has access to financial resources from Gulf states, which continue to build upon the hundreds of millions of dollars made available to the rebels during their revolution. However, the Brothers may struggle to find a social base in Libya, and will surely be challenged by non-affiliated Islamists such as Belhadj who also boasts Qatari support. Together with a close circle of former LIFG fighters, Belhadj is believed to have established control over a number of military entities, with the acquiescence of the National Transitional Council (including, it is rumoured, the National Guard).

There also exists an undeniably Salafi imprint in Libya, as evidenced by the desecration of British war graves, the attacks on Roman statues at Sabratha, and the destruction of marabout tombs. In fact, [paralleling developments](#) across the region, after Qadhafi's evisceration of moderate political Islam in the 1980s and his state of war against the jihadis of the LIFG in the 1990s, Salafism has been the growing Islamist tendency among the youth in the slums of (deliberately) under-developed towns like Derna and al-Bayda. This is the trend that, perhaps, Qadhafi's son Saadi tried to tap into when he made the bizarre announcement in February that he was not a politician but a Salafis. Certainly, Salafis were generally slow to support the uprising against the Qadhafi regime. In addition, some of their more radical cousins reportedly formed a convoy and flew the al-Qaeda flag in the Qadhafi stronghold of Sirte. However, the Salafi ideology runs against the grain of Libya's indigenous Maliki and Sufi traditions and, for the time being, it does not present much of a force to be reckoned with.

Indeed, within living memory for some Libyans, Qadhafi's predecessor King Idris embodied the attempt to reconcile Libya's cultural traditions with the drive for modernity. The monarch was head of the Sufi Sanussiyyah order, and his administration's liberal, pro-western stance permitted the sale of alcohol, a secular legal code, and the presence of British and American bases on Libyan soil. When Qadhafi seized power in 1969, he closed down churches, flew the green flag of Islam, evicted western military forces, introduced hudud penalties, and even equated the sporting of the western-style tie with wearing the emblem of the cross. However, it was not long before the sharia, as a guide to social and political organisation, was supplanted by The Green Book, shifting the theoretical locus of sovereignty from God to the so-called revolutionary masses. Qadhafi accused the religious establishment of paganist tendencies, declared that there was no need for intermediaries between man and God, and argued that invoking the hadith (as opposed to the Quran) was tantamount to heresy. Qadhafi's unorthodox view of, and ambiguous relationship with, Islam led, to a concerted Islamisation of society, but in selective, idiosyncratic ways that have left a bitter taste. Qadhafi's legacy in this regard will vie with the more open and tolerant precedent set by the Sanusis, to determine the degree to which religion is institutionalised in the political and legal process.

However, the worry is less that the imminent processes of democratic expression and debate over the constitution will be unduly impacted by a balance of guns and money that decidedly favours the Islamist camp; that is, by the contingencies of the historical moment. Beyond the electoral process, where more fundamentalist Islamists may well be balanced by coalitions of moderates and secularists, lies the major, though often under-stated, concern: the interim authority's abiding failure to stabilise the country, to secure weapons stockpiles, to lockdown Libya's borders and to integrate former Qadhafi loyalists creates the potential for future armed conflict. In a scenario of deteriorating security conditions, Libya's Islamist militias would surely punch above their social weight. In addition, and given Libya's geostrategic location, civil strife in Libya would enable extremist groups to gain a foothold, and threatens to cast an Islamist shadow over Libya that is less grassroots than in Egypt or Tunisia, and significantly more radical.

Dr. Alia Brahimi is a Research Fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science based in the Civil Society and Human Security Research Unit. She is author of [Jihad and Just War in the War on Terror](#).

This entry was posted in [Africa](#), [al-Qaeda](#), [Islam](#), [Islamism and the Arab Spring Series](#), [Libya](#), [Middle East](#), [Political Parties](#), [Protest](#), [Uncategorized](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).