**Libya: Semi-autonomy sought by leaders in east**

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***Civic leaders in eastern Libya have called for semi-autonomy for the oil-rich region.***

They made the announcement at a meeting attended by hundreds of people near the eastern city of Benghazi.

Supporters of the move say the region, which is known as Cyrenaica and contains much of the country's oil, has been neglected for decades.

But the governing National Transitional Council has argued against federalism, amid fears it could break up Libya.

Delegates danced and sang as they met to discuss the issue of autonomy at a hanger on the outskirts of Benghazi, the BBC's Gabriel Gatehouse reported from the meeting.

In a statement, tribal and political leaders said "a federal system is the choice of the region" of Cyrenaica, which stretches from the central coastal city of Sirte to the Libyan-Egyptian border in the east.

They said they had appointed Ahmed al-Zubair, Libya's longest serving political prisoner under Col Muammar Gaddafi and a member of the NTC, as leader of a governing council.

Mr Zubair pledged to protect the rights of the region but added that the council would recognise the NTC to run Libya's foreign affairs, the Associated Press reports.

A spokesman for the meeting, Their Elheiri, told the BBC they were simply reverting to a constitutional agreement from the 1950s, which divided Libya into three states - Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and Fezzan - and gave Cyrenaica a large degree of autonomy.

He said the move had the support of the local army as well as political and tribal leaders.

Although their declaration has no legal force, it will cause tensions with the interim government in Tripoli, our correspondent says.

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