**Libyan Militias Turn to Politics, a Volatile Mix**

**By David D. Kirkpatrick, The New York Times**

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***Jehad Nga for The New York Times***

TRIPOLI, Libya — The militia leaders who have turned post-Qaddafi Libya into a patchwork of semiautonomous fiefs are now plunging into politics, raising fears that their armed brigades could undermine elections intended to lay the foundation of a new democracy.

The militia leader from Zintan who controls the airport here in the capital has exchanged his uniform for a suit and tie and now talks about running for office — with his 1,200 armed men at his back. The head of Tripoli’s military council is starting a political party, and the military council in Benghazi is preparing its own slate of candidates for local office.

Regional militias and the ruling Transitional National Council have already blocked the city of Bani Walid, once a bastion of support for Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, from choosing its local government. Other militia leaders are volunteering their armed support as the military wings of newly formed parties.

Five months after Colonel Qaddafi’s death, Libyans are counting on the ritual of the ballot box to end four decades of rule by brute force. The brigades formed to fight Colonel Qaddafi, and many others that sprang up after the fact, have thwarted the consolidation of a new central authority and become a menace to security, trading deadly gunfire in the streets of the capital, detaining and torturing suspected Qaddafi loyalists, and last week even kidnapping two members of the Transitional National Council for two days.

Libya’s interim leaders say they hope an elected government will have the legitimacy to rein in those militias, and the country is rushing to hold votes. The two largest cities, Benghazi and Tripoli, plan to hold local elections by May, while the Transitional National Council has promised elections in June for an assembly that will govern as it writes a new constitution.

Without a national army or police force, though, many civilians worry that the militias could bully voters, suppress votes or otherwise dominate the process, leaving Libya mired in internecine violence, torn by regional tensions or — as a recent poll suggests many Libyans may now expect — vulnerable to the rise of a new strongman.

Even civilian politicians alarmed by the interplay of guns and politics say they may be powerless to resist it. “We are very clearly saying we don’t want to be part of that,” said Ali Tarhuni, a former interim oil minister and deputy prime minister now starting one of the new parties. “But down the road, what can we do?”

Mr. Tarhuni and others say they fear that Libya could repeat the experience of Lebanon, where armed militias formed during its civil war became a permanent part of the political landscape. Already some brigades around the country, including the one at the airport, led by Mokhtar al-Akhdar, have developed independent sources of revenue, primarily from providing security services. “Protection,” Mr. Tarhuni said.

Others say Libya may yet confound the expectations of chaos on the various election days. The relatively homogeneous city of Misurata recently held peaceful elections. Here in the more divided capital and across the country, Libyan officials admit that they are banking on intangibles, like Libya’s tribal traditions, the unifying spirit of the revolution and the patriotism of its young militiamen, to maintain a degree of order. Nevertheless, Mustafa Abu Shagour, deputy prime minister of the interim government, said he expected to see guns in the streets.

“I am very worried,” he said.

After 42 years of a through-the-looking-glass dictatorship that billed itself as a participatory “rule of the masses,” Libyans appear to distrust democracy. In a poll of Libyans conducted in December and January by a research arm of Oxford University, only 15 percent of the more than 2,000 respondents said they wanted some form of democracy within the next 12 months, while 42 percent said they hoped Libya would be governed by a new strongman. Perhaps most worrisome: a significant minority, about 16 percent, said they were ready to use violence for political ends.

The leaders of the regional militias insist that they are the guardians of democracy, compensating for the leadership failures of the Transitional National Council. But they often continue to rely on armed might outside any legal or political process.

When a peaceful demonstration in Benghazi urged federalism, the interior minister — a militia leader from Misurata — publicly threatened to lead an armed force from his hometown to fight what he called a threat to national unity.

Fawzi Bukatief, commander of an alliance of 40 eastern brigades based in Benghazi, said he was close to announcing a national union of militias, independent of the Defense and Interior Ministries. He said the union could use its firepower to crack down on other armed groups still operating in Tripoli.

“We will stop them, or imprison them,” he said. “We know the fighters. We will decide who is a revolutionary and who is not.”

“The militias are the problem,” he added, “but also the solution.”

In a tweed jacket instead of camouflage, he said he was considering running for office in Benghazi. Doing so while his fighters oversee the vote “can be a conflict,” he said with a shrug, acknowledging that he “will have to step out” of his militia role.

The interim government has been powerless to stop attacks on tribes or neighborhoods suspected of supporting Colonel Qaddafi, much less to guarantee them a right to vote.

In the Abu Salim neighborhood of Tripoli, a militia brigade still operates from a heavily fortified bunker, with roof-mounted machine guns pointing down into the streets. Residents — especially those with dark skin, often suspected of belonging to tribes that fought for Colonel Qaddafi — said they were afraid to walk past the bunker. Inside the bunker, prisoners were banging on the metal doors of small cells.

Abdul Salem el-Massoudi, 42, the neighborhood military council’s chief of “interrogations,” said the militia was still hunting down the suspected perpetrators of a massacre by Qaddafi forces. But as for the dark-skinned Libyans from the city of Tawarga, he suggested that they had themselves to blame.

“Their sons got them into this trouble” by fighting for Qaddafi, he said. “Now, they are refugees everywhere.”

Interim government officials still insist that they plan to control the militias by the election day in June, in part by hiring the militia fighters to create a national guard. It is unclear, however, how much loyalty the money is buying.

Flush with oil money, the interim government has started handing out pay to thousands of militiamen for the work of securing the capital — the equivalent of about $2,000 for each fighter who is single and about $3,300 for each one with a family.

Last month, local brigades began lining up by turns to collect their pay at an old police academy, which happened to be in Hadhba, another neighborhood known for its loyalty to the former dictator. But then a group of fighters from the more rebellious neighborhood of Souk el-Juma decided that they were not getting paid fast enough and, besides that, did not like collecting their cash in a loyalist stronghold.

So a truckload of a few dozen fighters attacked the academy. In a hail of gunfire — many were armed with Kalashnikovs, a few with knives, and they were backed by three machine guns — they broke down the iron gates, tore off some of its pointed spikes as weapons and smashed the windows of the gatehouse.

“Run away! We will kill you!” one fighter shouted to the fleeing neighbors. Another declared: “This is ours right now. We are the owners here.”

Two days later, the Souk el-Juma brigade leaders were distributing the payments to their members at their own headquarters, undercutting any hope of transferring the fighters’ loyalty to a central authority.

Former Qaddafi officials, who are also talking about forming a political party, say they hear an echo of the past. “They are speaking the same language we did,” said one former Qaddafi adviser, speaking on condition of anonymity for his safety. “We used force. They are using force. Nothing has changed but the flag and the national anthem.”

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