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News Analysis: U.S. puts high hopes on Libyan opposition, but major challenges remain

English.news.cn 2011-08-25 06:57:02

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by Ran Wei

WASHINGTON, Aug. 24 (Xinhua) -- As days of Muammar Gaddafi's rule in Libya are numbered, the U.S. is putting high hopes on Libyan opposition, the National Transitional Council (NTC), for forming a new government, and even for embracing a bright future of Libya. But experts warned that major challenges and uncertainties may lie ahead for the war-ravaged country.

Since protests broke out in this northern African country early this year, the U.S. has been showing strong support to the opposition. When Gaddafi's forces in March approached the verge of Benghazi, the opposition stronghold, NATO began its airstrikes on Gaddafi targets, literally turning the tide of the situation in Libya.

On July 15, in a Libyan contact group meeting in Turkey's Istanbul, the U.S. and other countries formally recognized the NTC as the sole interlocutor on behalf of the Libyan people.

After Libyan rebel forces seized control of much of Tripoli, U. S. President Barack Obama on Sunday put his high hopes NTC, asking it to "steer the country through a transition by respecting the rights of the people of Libya, avoiding civilian casualties, protecting the institutions of the Libyan state, and pursuing a transition to democracy that is just and inclusive for all of the people of Libya."

Of course, the U.S. support to Libyan opposition is more than just rhetorics. The U.S. State Department said on Tuesday that Washington was working to release one billion to 1.5 billion U.S. dollars of Libyan frozen assets to NTC.

In a regular briefing, State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland said that the U.S. hoped the process could be completed in coming days and the assets would go to NTC "to meet the humanitarian need and to establish a secure stable government."

However, despite some optimistic prediction on Libya's future because of the U.S. staunch support and its abundant oil resources, some experts believed that the way ahead is in no shortage of challenges.

David Pollock, expert with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said that the biggest hurdle would be the internal divisions inside the Libyan opposition and the Libyan society.

"It is pretty clear that the opposition is not unified. Libyan society is divided along regional, tribal and other lines, so that is going to make it more difficult to keep a government together and keep a country stable in the future," Pollock told Xinhua in a recent interview.

The most recent example of opposition's internal division is the assassination of its military commander Abdel-Fattah Younis on July 28. Although the killer is still at large, many suspect that it was some kind of "settling of scores" inside the opposition.

Furthermore, historically, Libya has never been a centralized state, with various tribes being its key elements.

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If Libya's western and eastern tribes can not reach a consensus on their turfs, the disagreement could "pave the way for a new round of fighting a few years later," Ted Carpenter, expert with the Washington-based Cato Institute, told Xinhua.

Echoing these concerns, a New York Times story on Tuesday also questioned: "Can they (rebels) build a new government of unity and reconciliation, or will their own internal rivalries mean divisions in the new Libya?"

Besides internal struggles, Carpenter also listed other significant challenges that post-Gaddafi Libya could face, including "repairing the infrastructure damaged in the fighting and replenishing the now largely empty Libyan treasury."

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