

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Libya: A Mixed Bag

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Libyans voted for a new parliament over the weekend. President Barack Obama [called](#) the elections “another milestone on their extraordinary transition to democracy.” Political and regional fault lines, though, are derailing that transition.

Libya remains divided between its oil-rich East and its politically dominant West. Even though Western rebels ended up capturing Tripoli, it was Eastern rebels who had fought most of the civil war against Qaddafi’s regime. Qaddafi marginalized the East for decades. New election laws have reinvigorated that sense of political alienation.

The Associated Press reports, “*The laws allocate the east less than a third of the parliamentary seats, with the rest going to the western region that includes Tripoli and the sparsely-settled desert south.*” [Emphasis added] Particularly noteworthy is that the election laws were issued by Libya’s National Transitional Council, previously chaired by Qaddafi’s former economics minister, Mahmoud Jabil.

Backed by their own council and army, some rebel commanders and tribal leaders have teamed up and declared self-rule. To pressure a cancellation of this weekend’s vote, armed militias and former rebels calling for semi-autonomy for the East attacked election offices in Benghazi and Ajdabiya and captured oil refineries in Ras Lanouf, Brega and Sidr.

Last month, Dirk Vandewalle, who has lived and worked in Libya for almost fifteen years and just recently returned from Libya as a senior political advisor to the Carter Center’s Election Observation Mission in Libya, [spoke at Cato](#) on what Libya’s long-simmering East/West division portends for its

transition to democracy. Authorities, he finds, have thus far proved incapable of controlling militias that seek greater autonomy.

As a former rebel commander in the East [put it](#): “We don't want Tripoli to rule all of Libya.” The crux of Libya’s challenges, which Vandewalle was careful to differentiate, is state building—the institutions that make a country governable—and nation building—national consensus to govern once institutions are in place. These grievances and divisions are compounded by competing visions offered by ultraconservative Salafists and jihadists inspired by Al Qaeda. Formal elections may give a voice to many in Libya, but their hardest days may still lie ahead.