



Elections in Divided Contexts: The Libyan Case in 2026 between Procedural Readiness and Political Deadlock

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الانتخابات في السياقات المنقسمة الحالة الليبية عام 2026 بين الجاهزية الإجرائية والانسداد السياسي

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Abstract:

This paper examines the complexities of organizing presidential elections in the Libyan context, a state that has experienced what is termed "creative chaos." The process of holding elections faces a significant hurdle: the contradiction between electoral preparedness and the mechanisms of implementation. Despite procedural readiness, the application mechanism frequently collides with political obstacles that are difficult to surmount, namely the fragmentation of political actors and the absence of an agreed-upon constitution. Conducting elections under these current conditions could trigger a new military crisis among stakeholders, potentially returning Libyans to the starting point of armed conflict between warring parties. This study seeks to propose preliminary solutions based on a constitutional and political agreement between the conflicting parties to ensure fair and transparent elections, free from the hegemony of political and military actors. This study employs an analytical approach to examine the Libyan case, providing an analysis based on a comparative balance with states that have undergone regime collapse. It investigates how those states navigated such stages and successfully held elections. The study reveals that the competing political and military forces pose a substantial threat to the electoral process, hindering its success in the absence of constitutional, political, and military consensus. Conflicting interests among these parties may lead to the use of military force, thereby causing the elections to fail and creating a profound rift that exacerbates the crisis and leads to the rejection of electoral results. The paper concludes that presidential elections in Libya cannot serve as a solution to the current crisis until a political and military settlement is reached among the dominant actors on the Libyan scene. In other words, elections should be the culmination of political solutions and settlements between the parties, rather than the initial step in the process.

Keywords: Elections, Libya, Legitimacy Crisis, Divisions, Political Settlement.

المخلص:

تعنى هذه الورقة دراسة شديدة لتنظيم انتخابات رئاسية للحالة الليبية، والتي مرت بما يسمى بالفوضى الخلاقة، فإن إجراء الانتخابات يواجه عقبة تناقض تجهيز الانتخابات والية إجراءاتها، فعند الجاهزية تصطدم آلية التطبيق بعثرات سياسية، يصعب تجاوزها، وهو الانقسام الفاعلين السياسيين وغياب الدستور المتفق عليه، وإجراؤها في ظل هذه الظروف الراهنة قد يسبب في وقوع أزمة عسكرية جديدة بين الفاعلين، من شأنها أن تعيد الليبيين إلى نقطة البداية من اقتتال بين الأطراف المتنازعة، وتسعى هذه الدراسة إلى وضع حلول أولية تقوم على اتفاق دستوري وسياسي بين الأطراف المتنازعة، لإجراء انتخابات نزيهة وعادلة بعيدة عن سيطرة الفاعلين السياسيين والعسكريين للأطراف المتنازعة. اتبعت هذه الدراسة المنهج التحليلي لدراسة الحالة الليبية وتحليلها، تحليلاً قائماً على الموازنة بينها وبين الدول التي مرت بسقوط الأنظمة، وكيف تجاوزت هذه المرحلة، وتم إجراء انتخابات فيها، وتبين هذه الدراسة أن القوى السياسية والعسكرية المتنازعة تشكل تهديداً كبيراً على العملية الانتخابية، وتحول دون نجاحها في حال عدم توافق الدستوري والسياسي والعسكري بينها، وقد يؤدي تضارب المصالح بين هذه الأطراف إلى استعمال القوى العسكرية، مما يفشل هذه الانتخابات ويحدث شرخاً كبيراً، يؤدي إلى تفاقم الأزمة ورفض الانتخابات. وتخلص هذه الورقة إلى أن الانتخابات الرئاسية في ليبيا لا يمكن أن تكون حلاً للأزمة الراهنة، إلا بعد تسوية سياسية وعسكرية للفاعلين والمسيطرين على المشهد الليبي، أي أن الانتخابات تكون تتويج للحلول والتسويات السياسية بين المتنازعين، ولا يمكن أن تكون هي الخطوة الأولى بين الأطراف الفاعلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الانتخابات، ليبيا، أزمة الشرعية، انقسامات، تسوية سياسية.

Introduction:

The repercussions of the regime collapse crisis in the Arab region prompted several states to hasten the conduct of presidential elections as a mechanism for building legitimacy, filling the presidential vacuum, and installing qualified leadership to guide affected nations toward stability and state reconstruction. While elections are intended to ensure a peaceful transition of power and preserve national sovereignty and unity, they do not constitute a peaceful transition among conflicting parties that have fragmented the state's apparatus and rendered it fragile (Paris, 2004; Reilly, 2008).

In conflicted states suffering from institutional fragility and a lack of political and military synergy among actors, elections often reach a deadlock and may even worsen the situation between factions competing for power (Sisk, 2009).

The Libyan model represents a particularly thorny and complex problem for implementing a serious electoral plan due to the prevailing division in power centers that emerged following the fall of the previous regime in early 2011. This division persists in the absence of radical solutions, which require a consensual constitution and a political and military settlement to bridge the gap between rivals and military actors. Furthermore, there is a pressing need to limit international and regional interventions that seek to prolong the crisis and delay elections, as seen in the Libyan case (Diamond, 2006; Belloni, 2012).

By late 2025 and the onset of 2026, these circumstances highlight a stark contradiction between the technical, logistical, and international preparations for elections and the reality of a state divided at all levels. With settlements reaching a stalemate, the failure of a consensual constitutional referendum, and contested legitimacy among warring parties, elections under these conditions remain incapable of producing a unified legitimate body to lead the country to safety (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005).

Accordingly, this paper aims to provide an analytical approach grounded in theoretical literature, analyzing the Libyan case by studying its political, social, and military divisions. It proposes a genuine and equitable settlement for all parties and the establishment of constitutional consensus. If such a settlement is achieved, elections could then serve as a fundamental solution for establishing an agreed-upon legitimate authority. However, should the settlement fail, proceeding with elections while ignoring these underlying issues may cause tensions to accumulate and explode, further complicating the crisis.

Research Problem:

Despite the broad consensus in political literature and international documents that elections are a central tool for rebuilding political legitimacy and ending transitional phases in post-conflict states, practical experience in many divided contexts reveals a clear gap between the procedural readiness of the electoral process and its actual capacity to produce political stability and a sustainable democratic transition. This gap becomes more acute in cases characterized by a lack of constitutional consensus, a multiplicity of power centers, the continued influence of armed actors, and contested legitimacies between competing political bodies.

The problem of this study lies in the structural contradiction inherent in the Libyan case in 2026. On one hand, there is an escalating level of procedural readiness, including partial legal frameworks, technical and logistical preparations, and international support. On the other hand, there is a persistent state of deep political deadlock that hinders consensus on the "rules of the game" and undermines the prospects for accepting election results. This contradiction raises a fundamental problematic: the focus

on the procedural dimension of elections may be used as a technical substitute for addressing the root causes of the political crisis, rendering the electoral process susceptible to being a tool for reproducing conflict rather than resolving it.

Consequently, the study stems from a central problematic centered on the extent to which elections—in a divided Libyan context lacking a comprehensive political settlement—can perform their primary function of producing a legitimate and governable authority. The study assumes that the absence of political and constitutional consensus, combined with the zero-sum logic of the actors, limits the effectiveness of elections as a transitional mechanism, regardless of the level of procedural readiness. Thus, this paper seeks to deconstruct the problematic relationship between electoral procedurals and political legitimacy in Libya, outlining the limits of the electoral approach in light of the structural political deadlock.

Research Questions:

This study is guided by a primary research question, from which a set of sub-questions branch out. These questions seek to deconstruct the dimensions of the research problem and provide a systematic analysis as follows:

Primary Question:

- To what extent can elections, within the politically and institutionally divided Libyan context of 2026, contribute to the establishment of a legitimate and stable authority, given the existing contradiction between the procedural readiness of the electoral process and the persistent political deadlock?

Sub-questions:

1. What is meant by "divided contexts," and how do their structural characteristics influence electoral functions and political outcomes?
2. What is the nature of the procedural readiness for the electoral process in Libya in 2026, and what are its legal and institutional limitations?
3. What are the most prominent manifestations of the political deadlock in the Libyan case, and how does this impact political actors' acceptance of election results?
4. To what extent does the absence of constitutional consensus contribute to weakening the political legitimacy of the electoral process and its outcomes?
5. How does the presence of armed actors and the political economy of conflict affect the integrity of the electoral process and the prospects for a peaceful transition of power?
6. Do elections in the Libyan context represent a potential mechanism for conflict resolution, or are they a tool for its reproduction under the current conditions?
7. What are the potential scenarios for the outcomes of the 2026 Libyan elections in light of the continued political division and varying levels of procedural readiness?

Significance of the Study:

The significance of this study stems from the nature of the problematic it addresses and the political and methodological context in which it operates. This significance is divided into two interconnected levels: the theoretical-scientific level and the practical-analytical level.

Theoretical and Scientific Significance:

This study derives its scientific importance from its contribution to enriching the literature on elections in divided contexts by moving beyond reductionist approaches that limit the electoral process to its procedural or technical dimensions. The study seeks to deepen the theoretical debate on the dialectical relationship between procedural readiness and political legitimacy, highlighting the limitations of the electoral approach in the absence of political and structural consensus. Furthermore, the study contributes to the application and development of essential concepts in the literature on democratic transition and peacebuilding—such as contested legitimacy, incomplete transition, and hybrid governance—by applying them to the Libyan case as an analytical case study with high explanatory value.

Practical and Applied Significance:

The practical significance of the study lies in its capacity to provide a deeper understanding of the potential outcomes of the 2026 electoral process in Libya, thereby benefiting decision-makers, political actors, and institutions involved in the transitional process. The study elucidates the potential risks of overemphasizing procedural readiness in isolation from addressing the political deadlock, and it highlights the political and institutional conditions necessary to transform elections from a conflict-management tool into a conflict-resolution mechanism. Moreover, the findings of this study can contribute to directing public policies and international efforts toward more comprehensive and realistic approaches to supporting political stability and legitimacy building in Libya and similar divided contexts.

Research Objectives:

This study aims to achieve a set of interconnected scientific and cognitive objectives that align with the research problem and its core questions. It seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the problematic of elections in divided contexts, specifically through the Libyan case of 2026. These objectives are defined as follows:

1. Analyze the conceptual and theoretical framework of elections in divided contexts, and delineate the limits of their efficacy as a mechanism for managing political transitions in post-conflict states.
2. Diagnose the nature of political and institutional fragmentation in Libya, tracing its evolution and its impact on the trajectory of political transition and the functional roles of the electoral process.
3. Evaluate the level of procedural readiness for the 2026 electoral process in Libya, specifically regarding legal frameworks, institutional capacities, and technical and logistical preparations.
4. Analyze the manifestations of structural political deadlock in the Libyan case, particularly the absence of constitutional consensus, contested legitimacies, and the influence of armed actors and the political economy of conflict.
5. Explore the dialectical relationship between procedural readiness and political legitimacy, and assess the capacity of elections to produce a legitimate and governable authority within the current context.
6. Forecast potential scenarios for the outcomes of the 2026 Libyan electoral process, in light of the interaction between political, institutional, and security factors.
7. Contribute to providing an analytical framework that can be utilized in studying similar cases of elections held within divided contexts.

Research Hypotheses:

This study is based on a central hypothesis stating that the efficacy of elections in divided contexts is not measured merely by the fulfillment of procedural requirements, but rather by their capacity to be integrated into a broader political settlement. Accordingly, the study builds upon the following hypotheses:

Primary Hypothesis:

The study posits that the procedural readiness for the 2026 electoral process in Libya—despite its relative development—does not, in itself, lead to an effective political transition or the production of an authority with stable legitimacy, given the persistence of the structural political deadlock.

Sub-hypothesis:

The study assumes that the absence of constitutional consensus and the contested legitimacies among existing political bodies constitute the most influential factors in undermining the political impact of the electoral process, transforming it from a mechanism for political settlement into a formalistic procedure with limited impact.

Research Methodology (Methods and Approaches Adopted):

This study employs a Qualitative Analytical Method as its general framework for analysis, given its suitability for examining complex political phenomena characterized by the intersection of institutional and legitimacy dimensions, as is the case with elections in divided contexts.

Furthermore, the study utilizes the Case Study Approach by focusing on the Libyan case in 2026 as an analytical model. This approach allows for a deep understanding of the relationship between the procedural readiness of the electoral process and structural political deadlock, without seeking to generalize the findings beyond this specific context.

The study also relies on the Structural-Analytical Approach to interpret the manifestations of political deadlock by analyzing the political and institutional structures that constitute the governing framework for the electoral process and determine the limits of its effectiveness.

This is complemented by the Critical Interpretive Approach to understand the non-procedural dimensions of the electoral process, particularly regarding the problematics of legitimacy and the acceptance of electoral outcomes by political actors within a divided context.

Limitations of the Study:

This study is governed by a set of methodological boundaries dictated by the nature of the research problem and its objectives:

1. **Subjective (Thematic) Limitations:** The study is confined to analyzing the problematic of elections in divided contexts, focusing specifically on the relationship between procedural readiness and political deadlock, without delving into the detailed technical aspects of the electoral process or the election results themselves.
2. **Temporal Limitations:** The study is limited to the phase associated with the preparations for the 2026 Libyan elections.
3. **Spatial Limitations:** The study is restricted to the Libyan case as a single-case study, without conducting extensive systematic comparisons with other cases.

Literature Review (Previous Studies):

The literature relevant to this paper is categorized into Arabic and foreign studies. This section presents a critical and analytical review of these studies, outlining their subjects, objectives, and key findings, followed by a commentary that situates the current study within this academic body.

1. Arabic Studies:

- **Abu Ras, M. (2017). "Elections and Democratic Transition in Post-Conflict States."** : This study examined the role of elections in democratic transition trajectories in post-conflict states, aiming to test the capacity of elections to achieve stability and build political legitimacy. The study concluded that in the absence of stable institutions and political consensus, elections might deepen divisions and reproduce conflicting elites rather than establishing a stable democracy.
- **Commentary:** These results intersect with the current study's hypotheses. However, Abu Ras's study remained within a general comparative framework, whereas this paper seeks to provide an in-depth analysis of the Libyan case, focusing on the contradiction between procedural readiness and political deadlock.
- **Busnina, A. (2019). "The Crisis of Legitimacy in the Libyan Transitional Phase."**: This study focused on the crisis of political legitimacy in Libya after 2011, aiming to explain its persistence despite multiple electoral processes. The study concluded that the multiplicity of political bodies and the absence of a consensual constitutional framework turned elections into a tool for conflict over legitimacy rather than a mechanism for resolving it.
- **Commentary:** The current study benefits from this analysis but moves beyond it by directly linking the legitimacy crisis to procedural readiness and its limitations, rather than treating legitimacy as an abstract concept only.
- **Al-Shalwi, A. (2020). "Elections as a Mechanism for Conflict Management in Divided States."**: This study analyzed the political function of elections in divided states, seeking to determine whether elections contribute to conflict resolution or conflict management. It concluded that elections in divided contexts often lead to the management of conflict and the postponement of its explosion, without addressing its structural causes.
- **Commentary:** These findings support the theoretical premise of the current paper; however, this paper applies this conclusion specifically to the Libyan case with a precise analysis of the structure of political deadlock.
- **Al-Akkari, N. (2021). "Political Transition and the Problematic of Building Legitimacy in Libya" (Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Benghazi):** The thesis addressed the political transition trajectory in Libya, aiming to analyze the obstacles to building political legitimacy. It demonstrated that focusing on the electoral path without resolving the constitutional issue contributed to deepening political division.
- **Commentary:** These findings align with the current study's hypothesis, yet this paper expands the analysis by including "procedural readiness" as an independent variable.

Foreign Studies:

- **Paris, R. (2004). *At War's End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict*. Cambridge University Press:** Paris's study aimed to provide a theoretical and empirical critique of the "Liberal Peacebuilding" approach adopted by international institutions, particularly the early focus on elections and market liberalization. Paris tested the hypothesis that rushing toward elections in institutionally fragile and politically divided environments could yield counterproductive results. The study concluded that early elections in the absence of functional state institutions and a broad political consensus could deepen existing divisions and reignite conflict.
- **Commentary:** Paris's thesis serves as a primary theoretical reference for this study, providing a critical framework for understanding the limitations of the technical approach to elections. This paper develops this argument by applying it to the contemporary Libyan case, focusing on the contradiction between relatively advanced procedural readiness and persistent structural political deadlock.
- **Mansfield, E. D., & Snyder, J. (2005). *Electing to Fight*. MIT Press:** This study analyzed the relationship between incomplete democratic transition and the likelihood of conflict explosion. The researchers concluded that elections in the context of incomplete transition could escalate conflict, especially when political elites use nationalist or identity-based discourse to mobilize support.
- **Commentary:** The current study utilizes this explanatory framework to analyze political and institutional conflict in Libya, focusing on how elections contribute to the reproduction of division even in the absence of direct military escalation.

- **Reilly, B. (2008). "Post-war Elections: Uncertain Turning Points of Transition.":** Reilly analyzed the role of post-civil war elections as potential turning points. The study showed that these elections represent "uncertain turning points," and their success depends on a minimum level of political consensus and a clear constitutional framework.
- **Commentary:** These results reinforce the current study's hypothesis regarding the limitations of procedural readiness in the Libyan context.
- **Sisk, T. D. (2009). *Pathways of the Political: Electoral Processes after Civil War*:** Sisk focused on the relationship between electoral processes and peacebuilding, emphasizing the political acceptance of results. The study concluded that success depends on institutional and security arrangements that ensure that electoral loss does not become an existential threat.
- **Commentary:** This vision directly meets the current study's analysis of political legitimacy in Libya, showing that the absence of guarantees makes elections a mere formalistic procedure susceptible to challenge.
- **Belloni, R. (2012). *Hybrid Peace Governance*:** Belloni developed the concept of "Hybrid Governance" to understand governance patterns where formal institutions overlap with informal actors (armed groups, local elites). The study emphasized that elections in this context do not eliminate informal governance but may coexist with it or be reshaped by it.
- **Commentary:** The concept of "Hybrid Governance" is a central analytical tool in this paper to explain how procedural readiness coexists with the continued influence of armed actors and multiple power centers in Libya.

Section One: Conceptual and Theoretical Framework: This study is based on concepts that explain the production of legitimacy through elections as a participatory process that fosters stability and enshrines the peaceful rotation of power, rather than just a formal technical process. Literature indicates that "divided contexts" are characterized by a lack of consensus on the rules of governance and contested legitimacies (Belloni, 2012). In such environments, elections may turn into an arena for conflict management or reproduction (Paris, 2004; Reilly, 2008).

Section Two: Procedural Readiness of the 2026 Electoral Process in Libya: The High National Elections Commission (HNEC) has attempted to enhance its technical and organizational expertise. However, this development remains at the level of management tools and does not address the institutional division or the absence of a constitutional referendum. This relative development remains limited to administrative headquarters, unable to provide successful solutions to the national crisis.

Section Three: Manifestations of Structural Political Deadlock in Libya: The deadlock is driven by the division of executive and legislative powers (House of Representatives, High State Council, and Presidential Council), the failure of constitutional consensus, and the fragility of the security situation (Bogaards, 2013). This has led to the proliferation of arms and the stalling of political solutions.

Section Four: The Dialectic of Procedural Readiness and Political Deadlock: The Libyan scene experiences a stark contradiction between technical readiness and a structural political impasse. This imbalance reflects the inability to unify institutions and the conflict between decision-making centers, which aborts any genuine democratic transition efforts and enshrines chaos.

Results:

1. Improved procedural readiness is not matched by parallel progress in political and constitutional consensus.
2. Structural political deadlock is the decisive factor in undermining the efficacy of elections.
3. The procedural approach is used as a technical substitute for addressing the roots of the political crisis.
4. Hybrid governance and multiple power centers limit the governability of elected institutions.
5. Under current conditions, elections in Libya tend to reproduce conflict rather than resolve it.

Recommendations:

1. Link the electoral path to a comprehensive political and constitutional settlement.
2. Treat elections as part of a broader political process, not an independent technical solution.
3. Provide political and institutional guarantees for election losers to enhance the acceptance of results.
4. Redirect international support toward political consensus and institution-building.
5. Realistically manage hybrid governance through transitional arrangements that gradually reduce the influence of informal actors.

Conclusion: Elections in divided contexts, as in the Libyan case of 2026, cannot be reduced to their procedural or technical dimensions. Procedural readiness remains incapable of producing an effective transition in the absence of comprehensive consensus. The Libyan problem lies not in the possibility of organizing elections, but in their *political function* within a divided context. Elections are the culmination of politics, not a substitute for it.

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