

# Dialogue in Libya: challenges and conditions of success

By **Abdallah Hadeed**

## ■ Executive summary

Libya is entering its fourth year after the announcement of the country's liberation on October 23rd 2011, which was supposed to end the fighting. However, the successive transitional governments formed after 2011 were the products of political conflicts rather than consensus, and their main priority has been to serve the interests of specific parties rather than those of the country as a whole. What remains absent is the adoption of significant measures to promote the principle of consensus so as to consolidate the building of the nation to which Libyans aspire.

The lack of readiness for change has led to deepening chaos in the country. Several factors have led to such negative developments, i.e. a lack of mutual trust among political entities and among citizens in general; the lack of a shared vision of where the country should be heading; and the lack of focus on the basic issues that will bring Libyans together. Dialogue is clearly needed, and the question becomes whether the concept of dialogue is familiar to Libyan culture.

Libya is entering its fourth year after the announcement of the country's liberation on October 23rd 2011, two days after Muammar Qaddafi was killed. This date was supposed to signal the end of the fighting. However, several regional and ideological wars started in the country and proceeded to complicate the situation. The successive transitional governments formed after 2011 were the products of political conflicts rather than consensus, and their main priority has been to serve the interests of specific parties rather than those of the country and the nation as a whole. What has been – and remains – absent from the scene is the adoption of significant measures to promote the principle of consensus so as to consolidate the building of the nation to which Libyans aspire.

The lack of readiness for change in Libya has led to deepening chaos in the country. Several factors have led to such negative developments, hindering the movement towards democratic change:

- There has been a lack of – and sometimes even complete absence of – mutual trust among political entities and among citizens in general.
- No shared vision of development has emerged or has been translated into a viable strategy. No one seems to

have a comprehensive vision of where the country should be heading, let alone a vision shared with others. Politicians are still simply reacting to circumstances.

- There has been no focus on the basic issues that will bring Libyans together. On the contrary, each has been clinging to what distinguishes him from others. Similarly, many controversial issues have created uncertainty about the Libyan identity.

Many calls for dialogue have been made in recent times and hence the question needs to be asked as to whether the concept of dialogue is familiar to Libyan culture.

## Dialogue in Libyan culture

Dialogue, in its cultural or social sense, is a term that is widely familiar in Libyan culture and has been relevant throughout Libya's history.

The term "national dialogue" was popular after the liberation in 2011, yet paradoxically everybody turned a deaf ear to it. Instead, other terms replaced it, such as "national reconciliation", which was first promoted in the form of a complete amnesty for anyone who had committed a crime

against the nation and his fellow citizens, without any kind of accountability.

The concept of “transitional justice” was also promoted as a synonym for “national dialogue”. Yet this concept was met with rejection and opposition from a large segment of society, since it unintentionally allowed people to assert their personal rights at the expense of the nation as a whole. This led to the spread of chaos and contributed to people resorting to the gun to resolve their differences.

It is also noteworthy that at that time the state grew accustomed to offering quick solutions to complicated crises. As a result, it looked as if the crisis that was gripping the country at a particular time had ended, whereas in fact it was becoming more serious. Libya has experienced several such crises during the past few years, with the same results.

This highlights the pressing need to define the term “dialogue”, which could in turn pave the way to building a common understanding and enhancing trust among Libyans, since views about this term differ and its controversial nature can easily lead to failure or disruption.

The term “dialogue” in its broadest sense implies a discussion between two sides or more, with guarantees of each side having the best intentions to reach a widely accepted conclusion. When analysing the term “dialogue” as it is commonly understood in Libyan society, it appears that the stages associated with dialogue are those of:

- presenting an idea or a point of view, together with evidence that supports this idea/point of view;
- responding to this idea/point of view by listening carefully and hearing what the other side is trying to say; and
- reviewing the idea/point of view and sacrificing some personal interests for the sake of the public interest or postponing a personal demand in order to focus on the larger issues at hand.

Hence, the concept of dialogue is not necessarily linked to the presence of a conflict, but could instead be aimed at promoting development and progress. If Libyan society is still attached to this cultural inheritance, it could be an important factor to facilitate the development process in Libya. As pointed out by Cécile Molinier, resident representative of the United Nations (UN) Development Programme in Mauritania: “If dialogue is part of the culture, it makes it easier for people to leave connotative language behind and speak openly.”

Internationally, the term “dialogue” is widely used to refer to any process that involves people engaging in a discussion in order to attend to the needs of the society. It generally entails negotiation, deliberation and debate, all of which can be referred to as mechanisms of dialogue.

## A series of inconclusive dialogues in Libya (2013-14)

The Libyan authorities announced their interest in a national dialogue through the General National Congress (GNC), which formed a National Dialogue Committee in February 2013. In January 2014 the GNC also announced the establishment of the National Dialogue Preparatory Commission.

Neither of these two committees succeeded in convincing the parties of the necessity of dialogue as a tool for democratic transition and national reconciliation. In addition, the second committee was basically formed as a reaction to the first. Had consultations taken place before the formation of these two committees, they might have yielded better results.

The first GNC initiative, headed by Mohamed Al Harari, remained as a project of the elite and operated on a small scale. It approached a limited and specific number of civil society organisations in Tripoli. It took the form of mere discussions that the person in charge of this committee repeated in different political contexts, which meant that it served the interests of one side only and lost its neutral status.

There were many problems with the National Dialogue Preparatory Commission, headed by Fadhil Al Amine. An important issue was that it was formed by the government of Prime Minister Ali Zeidan, which represented only one side of the conflict gripping the country. After the president of the commission was appointed by the prime minister, he chose the members together with the latter. Hence, the dialogue followed a top-down and not an inclusive approach. The most prominent problem with this committee was that although it was supposed to only prepare for dialogue, it was actually performing the role of the National Dialogue Committee. It held discussions in some cities and was met with rejection in others. If this commission had declared that its purpose was to achieve consensus and prepare for dialogue, the result would have been better. Another problem was that the commission started its operations in Tripoli in a non-national framework.

Can there be dialogue in the context currently prevailing in Libya?

Some literature on dialogue suggests that a Libyan dialogue is not possible: in times of intensified violence, if the government in the country is not adequately organised, and if there is no political will to engage in communication and involve citizens in the decision-making process, then dialogue is not possible.

In such conditions the only process that can be implemented is that of preparation for a comprehensive national dialogue. Several ways of achieving this are available, among which is that of carrying out a partial dialogue, which was actually suggested by the UN Special Represent-

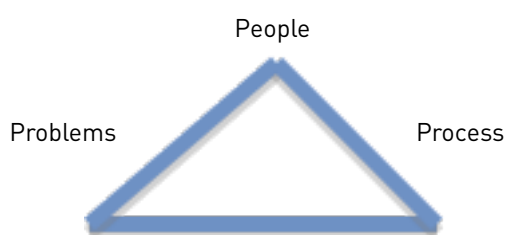
ative of the Secretary General to Libya, Bernardino León, when he invited members of parliament (MPs) to a dialogue that would reunite them and would make parliament an entity representing all Libyans, thus preserving the peaceful use of power and the democratic process in Libya.

### The parliamentary dialogue initiative (October 2014)

The parliamentary dialogue was held under the auspices of the UN and took place in the Libyan city of Ghadames in early October 2014. The aim was to reach an agreement between members of the newly elected House of Representatives who decided to boycott its sessions and the rest of the MPs now based in the eastern city of Tobruk. Some members (mostly MPs from the western cities of Misrata, Gharyan and Tripoli) boycotted the dialogue because they considered it to be a betrayal of the martyrs killed during the revolution. Dialogue was also rejected by a group of MPs from Tobruk, who considered it to be a form of negotiation with outlaws.

The success of any dialogue initiative depends mostly on proper preparation that takes into consideration the required inputs and outcomes of any process of dialogue, as well as the context and history of the particular dialogue being contemplated. The parliamentary dialogue that took place in Ghadames was a partial rather than a national dialogue. Yet was this dialogue well prepared and did its design suit the intended goals?

We can measure this by assessing it in terms of the satisfaction triangle, with its three elements:



Selecting the representatives of the opposing sides was successful to an extent. The issue at hand was also agreed on, and it basically focused on uniting parliament. However, the process for carrying out the dialogue remained controversial.

In particular, no measures were taken to plan the next step. Would the best course be to carry on with the dialogue or to stop it? Opposition started to emerge. A case was filed with the constitutional chamber of the Supreme Court and this process was promoted in the media as the solution to the problem. The reality was actually the opposite of this, however, as the conflict was political in nature, not legal. Furthermore, no measures were taken to mobilise people in support of the dialogue: extensive consultations through focused workgroups, surveys and

questionnaires were absent, and instead the dialogue process was met with narrow-mindedness.

Immediately after the first session of the dialogue, new positions and divisions started to emerge on the part of groups who believed that the process did not represent them or would not serve their goals. This eventually led to demonstrations and protests against the dialogue. In Misrata, for instance, all eight representatives of the city boycotted the parliamentary sessions. Yet, except for two of them, they welcomed the call for dialogue. Of the two who opposed dialogue, one justified his position by the fact that no conditions had been set for the dialogue and that there were no guarantees that its goals would be accomplished. The other one was personally opposed to some personalities from the other camp. It is possible that his positions prior to becoming an MP influenced his stance. After the dialogue started the city supported the advocates of dialogue through religious institutions such as the Misrata section of Dar Al-Ifta (the Grand Mufti’s Office) or some revolutionary armed groups such as the al-Mahjoub Brigade (*liwa’ al-mahjub*). Both issued a statement in support of parliamentary dialogue as a means to return to the political process.

Yet the situation was inflamed by those MPs from the city who refused dialogue and allied themselves with other MPs. In addition, the Tripoli office of Dar Al-Ifta issued a statement indicating that there should be no dialogue before the court ruled on the matter, which further complicated the situation.

As a rule, the involvement of the judiciary in a political conflict does not contribute to its resolution, but instead makes it more serious, especially if one side rejects the verdict when it is not in their favour. A verdict of this kind will make one side victorious and the other defeated, which will widen the gap between the opposing sides, reduce the chances for reconciliation and threaten the success of the dialogue.

As a consequence to this escalation, both sides complained that the dialogue was unjust and accused the parties who called for the dialogue of bias towards one side of the conflict. In such a context the dialogue process and its modalities should have been reviewed in order to guarantee its acceptance and outcomes.

### Dialogue in Libya: challenges and conditions of success

Bringing all conflicting parties to the same table should not be the only goal behind a dialogue. Merely gathering all sides to a conflict at one table without setting other goals can actually aggravate the situation or raise the ceiling of demands, which might lead to escalation of the conflict and make dialogue lose its importance as a tool for resolving conflicts or building consensus. No dialogue is free of challenges, and Libya is no exception. In the Libyan case, the most important challenges are the following:

- *The complexity of Libyan society:* most parties to the dialogue have different interests and diverse visions, even if they are working within the same framework: some boycott the process (the Islamic movement; the revolutionary movement), while others do not boycott it (the federalists; the National Front Alliance of Mahmud Jibril, which claims to be a civil movement).
- *The challenges faced:* the multiplication of meetings and excessive communication without focusing on reaching a common understanding constitute major challenges to holding a constructive dialogue in Libya. This defeats the whole purpose behind such a dialogue.
- *The lack of innovation:* the parliamentary dialogue, like previous dialogue initiatives, was static. The solution being offered emerged from the same problematic environment that had caused the conflict in the first place and involved the same people who had previously failed to agree. As Albert Einstein once said, “we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them”.
- the need to avoid the media and public meetings, because this would make the dialogue political rather than truly national; it could also affect the transparency of the process. The direction of the dialogue should be from the bottom up and not top down, i.e. the dialogue should not be only for the elites;
- the need to ensure the involvement of the whole community in the dialogue: people’s points of view should be taken into consideration by means of workshops, surveys, etc. Involving members of the community guarantees acceptance and protection of the outcomes of the dialogue; and
- the need to develop a comprehensive strategy to foster a culture of dialogue and to always follow this approach.

If a dialogue is carefully prepared and if the process starts on the right basis, dialogue could accomplish its goals in Libya. The following points should be stressed in particular:

- the necessity of having a Libyan-Libyan dialogue, in terms of which Libyans are the ones who choose the path of dialogue, especially during initial exploratory sessions;
- the possibility of combining a comprehensive and continuous national dialogue with specific, piecemeal initiatives, because solutions that are reached through dialogue take a long time to mature and might create conflicts that require rapid decision-making to keep the dialogue on track;
- the need to be fully aware of the diversity of varied cultural contexts and to take into account the social and cultural complexity of the nation;

## The role of the international community in the national dialogue

Libya cannot be reimagined nor rebuilt in isolation from its regional Maghrebi environment, its African depth, and its Euro-Mediterranean extension, all of which are major components of the Libyan identity.

Yet it is extremely important that the national dialogue be national above all else. Through international organisations, the international community could play the role of observer and guarantee that the goals of the dialogue are fulfilled. It could also provide support by sharing international experiences in situations similar to that of Libya, in order not to waste time in repetition. While some activists believe that the involvement of the international community is necessary – a belief that is associated with a widespread feeling of xenophilia – some actors consider that the role of the international community should be to support dialogue through its representatives in Libya, limiting itself to this purpose only, in order not to raise suspicions of external interference.

### THE AUTHOR

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