

Libya does U-turn on banning religious political parties

Country/Region: Middle East and North Africa, Libya

Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC) has lifted a ban on religious-based political parties after objections from Islamists, just one week after introducing the surprise measure.

The NTC issued a new law on 25 April that banned political parties based on religion, tribe or ethnicity.

It was denounced by Islamist parties, chiefly the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Development Party (FDP), whose spokesman said it was undemocratic and "only suits liberals". Leader Mohamed Sawan called for the law to be reviewed, adding, "if it's not changed, we would have to protest it."

On Wednesday (2 May) a new version of the law was published that made no mention of the controversial measure.

Voters will go to the polls in June for Libya's first general elections since the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi last year; they will choose 200 members for a new General National Congress that will write a new constitution and form a government.

Last week, NTC spokesman Mohamed al-Hareizi said banning religious parties was designed to preserve "national unity", adding:

Parties shouldn't be based on ethnic or religious ideologies. We don't want the government to be divided by these ideological differences.

It was a surprise move given Libya's strong Islamic identity and indications by the NTC that the country will be run in accordance with sharia.

No explanation has yet been given for the decision to lift the ban just a week after it was introduced.

The U-turn means that the FDP and other Islamist parties, such as the Nation Party – comprising former militants from the Islamic Fighting Group – will now be able to stand in the elections.

Islamists had been kept on a tight leash in Gaddafi's Libya, as in pre-revolution Tunisia and Egypt. Libya is expected to follow the same pattern as those countries, where Islamic political parties emerged from the Arab Spring with the most popular support, taking the largest share of the vote in post-uprising elections.

Regional trends

The NTC's ban of religious political parties followed a similar decision by the [Jordanian parliament](#) the week before.

It came amid a number of developments in the region that have indicated efforts to limit the influence of Islamists, amid widespread concerns, particularly among Christians and other minorities, that Tunisia, Egypt and Libya were being dominated by an Islamist agenda.

Tunisia's governing Islamist party, Ennahda, said at the end of March that it will not support changing the constitution to make sharia the main source of legislation in the country, as had [previously been proposed](#).

The party said it would uphold the separation of religion and state enshrined in the first article, which says, "Tunisia is a free State, independent and sovereign; its religion is Islam, its language is Arabic, and its form is the Republic."

Ennahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi, who in the 1970s called for the strict application of sharia in Tunisia, said that they are "not going to use the law to impose religion".

The issue has polarised Tunisian society, with liberals concerned about civil rights calling for a secular state, while Salafists have been pushing for sharia. Hechmi Haamdi of the hardline Islamist Al-Arydha movement described Ennahda's statement on sharia as a "betrayal".

In Egypt, Islamists suffered [significant setbacks](#) to their political aspirations last month, when two leading Islamist presidential candidates were disqualified from standing, and the body appointed to write the country's new constitution was suspended by a court following complaints that it was not representative and lacked diversity.

The upcoming Egyptian presidential elections, in which secularists linked to the Mubarak regime are going head-to-head with Islamist candidates, and the Libyan poll, in which Islamist parties will now be able to run, will be crucial markers of how the dust of the post-Arab Spring political landscape will settle.

