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Public Employment, Oil Rents, and Bureaucratic Corruption in Libya

A Historical-Institutional Analysis, 1951–2026

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Researcher: Mohamed Saleh Tantoush

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Abstract

This article examines how public employment in Libya has evolved from an instrument of state-building into a mechanism for distributing oil rents and constructing political loyalties. Drawing on rentier state theory, historical-institutionalist analysis, and a range of primary and secondary sources spanning the monarchical period (1951–1969), the Jamahiriya (1969–2011), and the post-revolution era (2011–present), the article argues that payroll corruption—encompassing ghost employees, multiple-salary fraud, and systematic over-staffing—is not a technical administrative failure amenable to digital solutions alone. It is, rather, the institutionalised expression of a distributive state that substituted oil revenues for productive employment, weakened the fiscal contract between citizens and state, and ultimately left its bureaucracy without the professional norms or information systems needed to resist capture. The post-2011 collapse of central authority did not create this dynamic; it merely removed the ceiling that had previously contained it, transforming what had been a centrally managed patronage apparatus into a decentralised arena in which armed groups, tribal networks, local councils, and ministerial factions compete openly for payroll access. The article concludes that durable reform requires not only digital payroll verification but a fundamental renegotiation of the social contract through which the Libyan state relates to its citizens.

Keywords: public employment; rentier state; bureaucratic corruption; Libya; public administration; Jamahiriya; post-conflict governance

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1. INTRODUCTION

After 2011, a story circulated widely across Libyan social media: a horse had been placed on the government payroll. No one could verify it, and no official record confirmed it. Yet the anecdote spread and was believed—or at least found plausible—because it arrived in a context already saturated with documented absurdities: deceased public servants receiving monthly salaries, children under ten holding formal employment contracts, and civil servants drawing wages simultaneously from two or three ministries (Al-Wasat, 2017). Libya ranked in the bottom ten of Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index in 2025, among 182 countries surveyed (Transparency International, 2025). When corruption is sufficiently normalised, adding a horse to the civil service register no longer strains the imagination.

This article takes that story seriously—not as anecdote but as diagnostic. The capacity of Libyan society to find the horse-on-payroll scenario credible is an index of how thoroughly public employment has been decoupled from the logic of public service. Tracing the historical and institutional roots of that decoupling is the central task of this analysis. The article asks: how did public employment in Libya evolve from a nascent instrument of modern statehood into a vehicle for rent distribution and political patronage? And what structural conditions made payroll corruption so resistant to the administrative and digital reform efforts that successive governments have attempted?

The argument proceeds in four moves. First, the article situates the Libyan case within rentier state theory, showing why the absence of a fiscal contract between state and citizen creates institutional incentives for exactly the pathologies observed. Second, it traces the historical evolution of public employment through the Kingdom (1951–1969), identifying early patterns of social-function overstaffing that foreshadowed later excess. Third, it analyses how the Jamahiriya (1969–2011) systematically dismantled the private sector and non-governmental labour markets, leaving the state as the sole rational employer and the payroll as the primary channel of oil-revenue distribution. Fourth, it examines how the post-2011 collapse of central authority decentralised but did not eliminate this dynamic, producing a situation in which multiple armed and civilian actors compete for payroll access in ways the state no longer has the institutional capacity to resist. The article concludes by reflecting on what genuine reform would require.

Empirically, the article draws on a range of primary sources: the Administrative Control Authority's (ACA) 2023 annual oversight report; the Ministry of Education's Statistical Guide for 2023–2024; budgetary data; official statements; and reports from the Libyan News Agency. Secondary sources include Vandewalle's foundational work on the Libyan political economy (1998, 2012), Wright's modern history (1981), the World Bank's 1960 economic survey, the Library of Congress country study (1989), Lacher's analysis of post-conflict public sector dynamics (2023), and Atish and Al-Fituri's account of public sector reform (2021). These are supplemented by Abdussalam's doctoral research on Libyan labour markets (1987) and Sawani's work on administrative continuity and change after 2011 (2017).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: RENTIER STATES AND DISTRIBUTIVE BUREAUCRACIES

The concept of the rentier state, developed by Mahdavi (1970) and elaborated by Beblawi and Luciani (1987), provides the primary analytical lens for this article. Rentier states derive their revenues predominantly from external sources—hydrocarbon exports in the Libyan case—rather than from taxation of domestic productive activity. This structural feature has several institutional consequences that are directly relevant to understanding Libyan public employment.

First, the absence of a tax-revenue relationship between state and society severs the accountability link that fiscal theory identifies as the foundation of responsive government. Where governments extract resources from citizens through taxation, citizens have both the incentive and the institutional leverage to demand accountability for how those resources are used. Where resources arrive externally and flow downward, the relationship is inverted: the state distributes rather than extracts, and the citizen's relationship to the state is defined by what they receives rather than what they contributes (Beblawi and Luciani, 1987; Ross, 2001).

Second, and following directly, distributive states have weak incentives to build the information systems—accurate population registers, labour market databases, financial monitoring infrastructure—that would enable effective oversight of public expenditure. Taxation requires knowing who earns what; oil rents do not. A state that does not need to count its citizens for revenue purposes has little institutional pressure to count them accurately for employment purposes. Vandewalle (1998, pp. 21–23) applies this logic specifically to Libya, arguing that the shift from a subsistence economy to oil revenues occurred before the country had developed the administrative traditions, professional cadres, or monitoring systems needed to manage large-scale distributive programmes without significant leakage.

Third, the substitution of rent distribution for productive employment creates a distinctive form of social contract—what Vandewalle (2012, pp. 105–106) calls the rentier bargain—in which political stability is purchased through guaranteed income rather than earned through economic performance. Public employment, in this context, is not primarily about service delivery; it is the monthly mechanism by which oil revenues flow from state to household. This makes the public payroll politically untouchable in ways that go far beyond ordinary institutional inertia. Cutting the payroll is not merely an administrative decision; it is an act of social and political redistribution that threatens the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of families and the networks that sustain political elites.

Historical institutionalism complements rentier state theory by drawing attention to the path-dependent character of administrative arrangements. Institutions are not merely functional responses to current incentives; they carry the accumulated weight of prior choices, crises, and settlements (Pierson, 2004; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). In the Libyan case, this means that understanding the payroll corruption documented in the 2020s requires tracing the institutional templates laid down in the 1950s and subsequently reinforced, rather than disrupted, by the oil boom of the 1960s and the revolutionary period that followed.

Finally, the post-conflict public administration literature—particularly the work of Lacher (2023) and Sawani (2017)—extends this framework to situations in which state collapse fragments the distributive apparatus without eliminating the distributive expectations it had generated. Informal actors—armed groups, tribal coalitions, local councils—do not replace the state's distributive function; they colonise it, inserting themselves into the payroll and procurement systems while the weakened central authority lacks the capacity to resist. The result is what Lacher calls a "public sector without a state": a massive payroll machinery that continues to operate, and even expand, while the governmental authority that nominally controls it has largely ceased to function as a coherent institution.

3. FOUNDATIONS OF THE DISTRIBUTIVE STATE: THE LIBYAN KINGDOM, 1951–1969

3.1 The Structural Weakness of the Post-Colonial State

Libya entered independence in 1951 as one of the poorest countries in the world. Emerging from Italian colonial occupation and the destruction of the Second World War, the new kingdom inherited limited infrastructure, a rudimentary public administration, and an economy based almost entirely on subsistence agriculture, pastoralism, and small-scale trade. The 1952 census counted a total population of approximately one million; literacy rates were among the lowest on the continent; and formal skilled labour was almost entirely absent (Library of Congress, 1989, p. 120). The federal structure that gave institutional form to the kingdom—comprising the provinces of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan—reflected not a deliberate constitutional choice but the practical impossibility of integrating three regions with distinct tribal configurations and colonial histories into a unified administrative apparatus at the speed that formal independence required (World Bank, 1960, p. 46).

In this context, the civil service was necessarily political before it was administrative. Its primary function was not to deliver services but to give the new state a physical presence across the territories: to plant the flag, so to speak, in towns and villages where the kingdom's authority was otherwise abstract. As the World Bank's 1960 survey observed, Libya possessed a reasonable civil service law on paper, establishing competitive examinations, security of tenure, and political independence for public servants, but the law's practical application was limited, seniority outweighed competence in promotions, and the recruitment of qualified specialists was consistently frustrated by salary levels that could not compete with what the nascent oil sector and foreign agencies were offering (World Bank, 1960, pp. 463–465).

3.2 Oil, the Dual Economy, and the Origins of the Distributive Gap

The World Bank's 1960 report contained an observation whose implications would prove decisive for the next six decades of Libyan political economy. While the newly discovered oil deposits would generate substantial government revenues, it noted, they would provide direct employment for only a small fraction of the Libyan workforce—the Bank estimated that oil-related employment, even after the construction of refineries and downstream industries, would not exceed approximately five percent of the total labour force (World Bank, 1960, pp. 21–23). The implication was stark: the state would have access to growing revenues without the economy generating a commensurate growth in productive private-sector employment.

This created what economic historians have subsequently identified as a dual economy problem. On one side sat a small modern enclave—foreign military bases, oil companies, and government agencies—generating cash income for a relatively small number of workers. On the other sat a large traditional sector of subsistence agriculture and pastoralism that absorbed the majority of the population but generated little disposable income and no path toward the kind of skills and capital accumulation that industrialisation typically requires. As the Library of Congress (1989, p. 120) notes, agriculture employed more than seventy percent of the workforce at independence and contributed approximately thirty percent of GDP, but there was no significant manufacturing sector, technical skills were scarce, and the human capital base for rapid economic diversification simply did not exist.

When oil revenues began flowing in earnest in the 1960s—and particularly after Libya's abolition of the federal system in 1963, which concentrated fiscal authority in the central government and enabled larger-scale expenditure plans (Vandewalle, 1998, pp. 21–23)—the state faced a structural dilemma that would prove enduring: it had revenues that needed to be spent domestically, a population that needed income, and no private sector capable of intermediating between the two. Public employment was the path of least institutional resistance. As the World Bank had warned, and as Vandewalle later documented, this pattern created a consumption economy dependent on external income before oil fully replaced aid and base-rental revenues as its primary source of foreign exchange, and government spending—including salaries—became the channel through which external resources reached domestic households.

3.3 Early Patterns of Social-Function Employment

Even in the kingdom's first decade, before oil revenues had fully transformed the fiscal landscape, observable patterns of social-function employment—overstaffing in public enterprises as a form of implicit social welfare—were present. The World Bank's 1960 survey documented this with characteristic directness. In a review of the state salt monopoly, the report found that the enterprise maintained a workforce substantially larger than its productive requirements, estimating that at least one third of employees were surplus to operational need, and noting that the enterprise had continued to employ approximately 200 workers in 1957, a year in which it produced no salt at all (World Bank, 1960, pp. 461–462). In a separate review of government printing operations, the survey found enterprises that had been established to serve public administrative needs but had begun accepting private commercial contracts and competing with the private printing sector, operating without commercial accounting standards and without clear boundaries between public-service and commercial functions (World Bank, 1960, pp. 463–465).

These examples are small in scale and anecdotal in character, but they reveal institutional patterns that would persist and metastasise over the following decades. Two are particularly significant. First, public enterprises were being used to perform a social employment function—absorbing workers who had no other income options—rather than, or in addition to, their nominal productive function. Second, the boundary between public and private economic activity was already porous in ways that created accountability gaps. When a public enterprise operates without commercial accounting standards, it is structurally opaque in ways that facilitate rent extraction. The salt monopoly workers who received wages for not producing salt, and the print workers who blurred public and private clients, were early instances of a relationship between the Libyan state and its employees in which the nominal justification for employment—service delivery and production—had already become secondary to the distributive function.

4. THE JAMAHIRIYA AND THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF THE DISTRIBUTIVE PAYROLL, 1969–2011

4.1 Revolutionary Nationalisation and the Elimination of the Private Sector

The coup of September 1969—officially designated the "Al-Fateh Revolution"—inaugurated a regime whose ideological commitments to social justice, national sovereignty, and popular ownership of wealth provided both the justification and the impetus for a systematic dismantling of the private economic sector. Nationalisation proceeded rapidly across multiple domains: Italian-owned assets were expropriated; banks, insurance companies, and foreign trade operations were taken into state ownership; and a series of measures progressively eliminated private retail, wholesale, and import activity (Vandewalle, 1998, pp. 107, 151–152). By the mid-1970s, the Libyan state had effectively become the sole legitimate economic actor across most sectors, not merely as a regulator or market participant but as the owner, operator, or controller of virtually all significant economic activity.

Vandewalle (1998, pp. 151–152) argues that this process, while rhetorically framed as the recovery of national wealth from foreign and class exploitation, was organisationally chaotic and strategically incoherent. Nationalisations proceeded without adequate planning for what would replace the expropriated entities' functions, often destroying operating business relationships and management capacity that could not be easily replicated in state form. The result was not the construction of a productive national economy but the expansion of the state's nominal ownership over economic activity while its actual capacity to manage that activity efficiently deteriorated. A state that owns everything but can manage little is a state that generates employment through control rather than through production—which is precisely what Libya's public sector became.

The oil sector's employment profile made this dynamic unavoidable. Despite its contribution of approximately sixty percent of GDP and virtually all export earnings by 1984, the oil sector provided direct employment for fewer than 10,000 Libyans (Library of Congress, 1989, p. 114). This is the structural paradox at the heart of the Libyan political economy: the sector that financed the state employed almost no one, while the state itself became the primary—eventually the near-exclusive—employer. The consequence for public administration was that the payroll ceased to reflect a demand for labour in any economically meaningful sense and became instead a distributive instrument: the mechanism through which the government translated hydrocarbon revenues into household income.

4.2 The Green Book, Property Rights, and the Destruction of Labour Market Alternatives

Muammar Gaddafi's Green Book, first published in 1975, articulated an economic philosophy that, whatever its theoretical pretensions, had the practical effect of eliminating the institutional conditions under which an independent private labour market might have developed. The slogan "partners not wage-workers" in the Book's economic section attacked wage employment as inherently exploitative, calling on workers to seize control of enterprises and convert them into collective management arrangements (Library of Congress, 1989, pp. 213–214). The complementary slogan "the home belongs to its occupant" targeted property rights in a way that collapsed the rental market, converted tenants into owners by administrative decree, and eliminated real estate investment as a source of private income (Vandewalle, 1998, pp. 105–106). Law No. 4 of 1978 gave legal force to these principles and enabled widespread confiscation.

The practical consequences were extensive. From 1978, as the Library of Congress (1989, pp. 124–125, 213–214) documents, the state assumed responsibility for the import and distribution of basic goods, establishing approximately 230 government retail markets intended to replace the thousands of private traders whose businesses had been suppressed. These markets proved unable to replicate the logistical and information functions of the private trading networks they had displaced, generating shortages, queues, and a flourishing black market. But the institutional legacy was durable: by systematically eliminating private commerce, private property development, and the management autonomy of productive enterprises, the state had destroyed the economic alternatives to public employment. For a young Libyan entering the labour market in the 1970s or 1980s, the civil service was not merely the most attractive option; given the legal restrictions on private economic activity, it was often the only formal option available.

Gaddafi himself acknowledged the destructive consequences of this strategy in a television interview broadcast on the Tunisian satellite channel Nessma on 25 January 2011—days before the uprising that would end his rule:

> "But let me tell you the result. The workers' revolution of 1978 in Libya, which I ordered, in which the workers marched on everything—enormous and dangerous violations occurred. They took control of everything [...] There were violations, and they took even small private things [...] And now we are compensating the people who were harmed by the workers' revolution. A large part of it—perhaps thirty percent—was genuine destruction." (Gaddafi, interview with Nessma TV, 25 January 2011)

The significance of this admission extends beyond its rhetorical drama. It confirms that the policy direction identified by outside observers—the systematic elimination of private economic alternatives—was understood within the regime itself to have been destructive. The "compensation" Gaddafi referenced was the distributive apparatus that had grown up to manage the consequences: a state that, having destroyed the private sector's ability to employ people, had been forced to absorb them into its own payroll instead.

4.3 The Jamahiriya's Administrative Architecture and Bureaucratic Proliferation

The declaration of the People's Authority in 1977, establishing the Jamahiriya (literally "state of the masses"), represented a complete institutional redesign of the Libyan state whose administrative consequences were, paradoxically, the opposite of the decentralisation its rhetoric promised. The new system was built around a hierarchy of Basic People's Congresses (local assemblies in which all adult citizens were theoretically participants), People's Committees (executive bodies that replaced ministries and municipal administrations at various levels), and the General People's Congress (the nominal national legislature). Ministries were renamed "secretariats" and ministers became "secretaries." The institutional language changed entirely; the underlying administrative requirements did not.

Wright (1981, pp. 192–193) observes that the multiplication of congresses and committees was at least as much a tool of political mobilisation and surveillance as it was an administrative reform. The citizen was drawn not toward an independent labour market or a free civil society but into formal state channels—congresses, committees, revolutionary committees established from 1977 onwards in workplaces, schools, and military units—each of which required staffing, coordination, and monitoring. Revolutionary committees, which Vandewalle (1998, pp. 187–190) characterises as a parallel political apparatus designed to enforce ideological conformity rather than administrative efficiency, added a further layer to an already complex structure. By 1985, their membership was estimated at between three and four thousand, present across the administration, enterprises, and armed forces (Library of Congress, 1989, pp. 186–187).

The political consequences for public administration were far-reaching. When control is exercised through political loyalty rather than professional performance—when the revolutionary committee member's ideological reliability matters more than the department head's technical competence—the conditions for systematic corruption are established. Accountability runs upward through political channels rather than outward to service recipients, so the concealment of incompetence and fraud within politically loyal networks is structurally easy. Gaddafi himself illustrated this tolerance in a speech delivered in 2006, marking the thirty-seventh anniversary of the revolution, in which he acknowledged that corrupt officials had been tolerated if their aim was merely "to meet their needs"—which was, he suggested, what the revolution had been for (Wright, 1981, pp. 268–270). A 1980 anti-corruption campaign had resulted in the arrest of more than 2,000 individuals, but subsequent analysis indicated that it had been primarily a political purge rather than a genuine anti-corruption initiative (Wright, 1981, pp. 268–270).

4.4 Economic Crisis, Sanctions, and the Deepening of Rent-Seeking

From the mid-1980s, falling oil revenues generated fiscal pressure that the Jamahiriya managed by protecting current consumption—principally salaries and subsidies—while cutting capital investment and drawing down foreign reserves. As the Library of Congress (1989, pp. 122, 151) documents, foreign reserves declined by approximately 75 percent between 1980 and 1984 as the state chose to maintain the social contract of guaranteed income rather than adjust to reduced revenues. Limited liberalisation experiments in the late 1980s and 1990s—allowing some private trade and relaxing certain commercial restrictions—did not alter the fundamental structure: the state remained the dominant employer, the payroll remained the primary income channel for most Libyan families, and the private sector that emerged was small, politically dependent, and operating at the margins of a still state-dominated economy.

The international sanctions imposed following Libya's implication in the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie deepened these pathologies in specific ways. By restricting access to international capital, technology, and investment, the sanctions increased the premium on state-controlled access to foreign exchange, import licences, and government contracts. As

Wright (1981, pp. 269–270) and later analysts note, the state's control over who could access foreign exchange and who could import became a source of rent in its own right: public officials who could allocate these permissions became patronage brokers, and the distinction between bureaucratic function and corrupt rent-extraction became increasingly difficult to maintain. The banking system did not develop as a productive financial intermediary; it operated instead as a repository of state surpluses and a channel for directed—politically allocated—lending. When the institutional framework for legitimate private economic activity is this distorted, the payroll is not simply an employment mechanism but a political instrument whose manipulation is both structurally available and rationally attractive.

4.5 Labour Market Projections and the Scale of State Dependency

The trajectory toward near-total public-sector employment dependency was visible in the planning data well before it was fully realised. Abdussalam's 1987 doctoral research at the University of Durham, drawing on projections by the Libyan General Secretariat for Planning, provides a revealing window into official expectations (Abdussalam, 1987, pp. 47–70). Total Libyan employment was estimated at approximately 712,000 in 1980, of which foreign workers accounted for 31.3 percent. By 2000, planners expected total employment to reach 1.713 million, with the foreign worker share declining to 13.3 percent as "Libyanisation" of the workforce proceeded.

Crucially, the sectoral projections revealed where this employment growth was anticipated. The largest absolute increase was projected for the administrative, services, trade, and transport sectors—precisely those activities funded directly or indirectly by government expenditure—rising from 317,000 in 1980 to 787,000 by 2000. Agriculture and primary extraction were projected to grow from 140,000 to only 228,000, reflecting the continuing inability of the agricultural sector to absorb the rural-to-urban migration that oil-funded urbanisation was producing. Manufacturing and construction were projected to grow substantially, but the manufacturing projection rested on the large state-owned heavy industries—the Misurata Iron and Steel Complex, the Zuwarah Aluminium Smelter—which, as Wright (1981, pp. 192–193) documents, had been constructed using imported technology, foreign contractors, and turnkey delivery methods that built little indigenous technical capacity and created few spillovers into a broader manufacturing ecosystem.

By the time reliable employment data became available for 2012—published by the General Information Authority—the actual outcome had largely vindicated the structural trajectory implied by these projections: 1.524 million economically active persons, of whom 1.1686 million, or 76.7 percent, were employed by the government. When workers in state-owned enterprises and mixed public-private entities are added, the effective dependence on public-sector income was higher still. Libya had completed the transition from a subsistence economy, not to a diversified market economy, but to a state-as-employer-of-last-resort economy, with the oil sector financing the payroll and the payroll constituting the primary mechanism of household income.

5. PAYROLL CORRUPTION: DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE AND STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

5.1 The National Number System and What It Revealed

Beginning in 2014, Libyan authorities attempted to address payroll irregularities through the introduction of a National Number System: a unique identifier to be linked with all governmental databases, including salary payment systems. The legal framework was established by Law No. 8 of 2014, enacted by the General National Congress. In February 2015, the Administrative Control Authority issued a circular requiring all governmental entities to incorporate the national number into their official records. These were rational institutional responses to a known problem; their implementation revealed how serious that problem had become.

When data integration between the national number system and the payroll database began in earnest, the scale of irregularities became partially visible. In October 2016, the head of the National Number Committee at the Audit Bureau reported to Libya Al-Iqtisadiyya that approximately one million employees were found to hold more than one government position simultaneously. A separate report published by Al-Wasat in October 2017, citing ACA data, put the figure for duplicate national numbers identified since 2015 at approximately 100,000—a significant discrepancy that likely reflects different methodological boundaries and data cut-off dates, but which in either case indicates a problem of substantial scale (Libya Al-Iqtisadiyya, 2016; Al-Wasat, 2017).

Beyond multiple-position fraud, the integration process documented other categories of irregularity: individuals holding between two and eight simultaneous government positions; approximately 1,732 national numbers assigned to persons below the minimum legal employment age; and, documented by the Libyan News Agency in September 2020, approximately 7,000 national numbers associated with deceased individuals whose identities continued to generate monthly salary payments from the public treasury (Libyan News Agency, 2020). The ACA's 2017 report also documented cases of employees who had passed retirement age but remained on active payrolls without transfer to the social insurance system—suggesting that the administrative process of retirement itself had become a locus of manipulation (Al-Wasat, 2017).

The temporal dynamics of these figures deserve attention. The national number integration was supposed to reduce the payroll by eliminating duplicate and irregular entries. It did achieve some reduction in the years immediately following implementation. But the ACA's 2023 oversight report—the most comprehensive recent source—recorded that the total number of employees funded from the public treasury had risen to more than two million by 2023, compared to fewer than 1.5 million in 2012 (ACA, 2023). Libya had added more than half a million public employees in a single decade, despite civil war, institutional fragmentation, and economic contraction. The digital payroll reforms had not reversed the underlying dynamic; they had been outpaced by it.

5.2 The Education Sector: A Case Study in Structural Overstaffing

The education sector provides the most richly documented illustration of these dynamics, partly because it is large enough to show statistical patterns and partly because the ACA has examined it with particular attention in its periodic reports. The ACA's 2023 report estimated that the Ministry of Education employed approximately half a million workers—with women comprising roughly 80 percent of the total—and identified both absolute overstaffing and serious geographical maldistribution (ACA, 2023, p. 116–120).

These findings are corroborated and extended by the Ministry of Education's own Statistical Guide for 2023–2024, which recorded a total educational workforce of more than 585,000 employees: over 222,000 in teaching positions and approximately 189,000 classified under the "general reserve" category—a budgetary designation that encompasses personnel with no specific institutional assignment (Ministry of Education, 2025). The geographical disaggregation of these figures reveals patterns that cannot be explained by legitimate pedagogical demand. In the Eastern region, which contains 1,203 schools, there were more than 50,000 active teachers alongside approximately 66,000 employees on the general reserve—a reserve that exceeds the active teaching workforce by approximately 31 percent. In the Western Plain region (587 schools), the reserve exceeded the teaching workforce by more than 12 percent. By contrast, in Greater Tripoli (863 schools), active teachers substantially outnumbered the reserve (52,000 to 33,000), while the Southern region (438 schools) maintained approximately 16,000 teachers against 11,000 reserve employees (Ministry of Education, 2025).

The ACA's analysis goes beyond these numerical disparities to identify the qualitative patterns that produce them: appointments made outside approved establishment tables, promotions without objective criteria, the reappointment of retired employees under new titles, the near-complete absence of job descriptions that could provide a basis for performance accountability, illegal transfers and secondments without documented justifications, and open-ended temporary assignments that have continued for years without formal review (ACA, 2023, pp. 116–120). Specific subject disciplines—mathematics, physical education, statistics, physics, and chemistry—exhibit acute shortages in some schools while the general reserve swells with employees who draw salaries but have no assigned teaching duties. The picture is not one of a system that is merely inefficient; it is one in which the formal categories of employment have been systematically colonised by purposes—patronage allocation, income distribution, political accommodation—that have nothing to do with the delivery of education.

5.3 The Wage Bill: Nominal Expansion, Real Decline

The aggregate wage bill data provides a further dimension of the paradox. Libya's total payroll expenditure rose from 16.7 billion Libyan dinars in 2012—36 percent of total public expenditure—to 59.9 billion dinars in 2023, or 29.7 percent of total expenditure (ACA, 2023). Expressed in nominal dinar terms, this represents more than a tripling of the wage bill. But the relevant comparison is purchasing power. Using exchange rates applicable in each year, total payroll expenditure translates to approximately USD 13 billion in 2012 and approximately USD 12.5 billion in 2023—a modest real-terms decline—over a period in which the total number of public employees increased by more than 500,000. The implication is that the average real wage per public employee declined significantly across this period, even as the state was simultaneously nominally raising salaries and dramatically expanding headcount. Employees receive less in real terms individually while the state spends more in real terms in aggregate—a combination that is only explicable as the joint product of inflationary pressures, currency depreciation, headcount expansion, and the structural impossibility of sustaining the distributive bargain as the employed population grows faster than the oil revenues available to fund it.

6. POST-REVOLUTION GOVERNANCE: DECENTRALISATION WITHOUT TRANSFORMATION, 2011–2024

6.1 The Collapse of Central Authority and the Persistence of Distributive Expectations

Lacher (2023, pp. 162–165) provides the most analytically precise account of what changed—and what did not—in Libyan public employment after the fall of Gaddafi. The fundamental continuity, he argues, lies in the distributive expectations generated by six decades of oil-funded public employment: citizens, families, and communities continued to expect that state employment was their entitlement, that the payroll was the mechanism by which the state fulfilled its obligations to them, and that access to government positions was a legitimate political objective. What changed was the structure of authority that had previously managed—and capped—this distributive competition. Under Gaddafi, a centralised system had controlled who got what from the oil revenues, exercising final authority over employment decisions even when those decisions were politically motivated. After 2011, that central authority disappeared. The distributive expectations and the payroll machinery remained; the referee who had previously managed the allocation was gone.

The consequence, as Lacher (2023, pp. 163–165) characterises it, is an apparent paradox: the Libyan state weakened substantially in its capacity to govern and deliver services after 2011—education outcomes deteriorated, infrastructure declined, health services contracted, electricity supply became unreliable—yet its payroll expanded dramatically. This paradox is the signature of a distributive state that has lost central control: the payroll continues to grow because every faction, network, community, and armed group with any leverage uses that leverage to secure payroll access, while no central authority has either the political will or the institutional capacity to prevent it.

Sawani (2017) situates this within a broader analysis of post-revolutionary administrative continuity and change. He observes that the fall of Gaddafi did not produce an administrative break comparable to the political rupture: the personnel, procedures, and institutional cultures of the old administration largely persisted, even as formal governmental authority fragmented among transitional councils, armed brigades, tribal leaderships, and the rapidly changing succession of short-lived post-revolutionary governments. The state, as Sawani puts it, was no longer the sole actor in public administration; new informal actors had acquired substantial de facto authority over appointments, promotions, and resource allocation, exercising it without legal mandate but with effective power.

6.2 Three Entry Points: How Informal Actors Captured the Payroll

Lacher (2023, pp. 168–171) identifies three principal channels through which informal actors—armed groups, tribal networks, and politically connected intermediaries—inserted themselves into public payroll systems after 2011.

The first was political appointment within ministries. The succession of short-lived governments—Libya experienced more than ten different executive authorities between 2011 and 2024—meant that each incoming minister or deputy minister arrived with a political and social network that expected employment rewards for its support. Ministries were not stable administrative institutions operating on unified professional logic; they were, in effect, temporary coalitions of competing networks. A minister represented one constituency, his deputy another, the director-general a third (often a holdover from the previous regime), and newly hired employees entered through different loyalty channels. The result was that public employment within a ministry became an instrument of rapid political positioning rather than a response to service delivery requirements, since the minister's tenure was unlikely to last long enough to enable the slower process of genuine institutional building.

The second channel was the conversion of security functions into administrative leverage by armed groups. Lacher (2023, pp. 168–171) documents several illustrative cases. An armed group from Misrata took control of the Tripoli headquarters of the National Investment Company in 2011, a state investment vehicle with assets worth billions of dinars, and pressured the company's management into hiring fifteen group members, who then acquired de facto authority over the institution's personnel decisions. A Zintani armed group controlling Tripoli Tower and the offices of the Libyan Investment Authority in 2012 similarly succeeded in placing several of its members on the LIA's salary roll. Revolutionary armed groups that besieged the ministries of justice and foreign affairs in 2013, ostensibly to demand passage of the Political Isolation Law, maintained their siege even after the law passed and achieved undeclared secondary objectives: physical control over the ministries and the insertion of dozens of fighters into their staff lists (Lacher, 2023, pp. 168–171). The pattern is consistent: the provision of security—or the threat of its withdrawal—was converted into employment entitlements, with the armed group functioning simultaneously as protection provider, political pressure point, and recruitment agency.

The third channel was the use of tribal protests and infrastructure blockades, particularly in oil-producing regions, as leverage for public employment demands. In the Zuwaitina oil terminal in the Gulf of Sidra region, a 2013 protest ended with a government commitment to create 440 public-sector positions for community members in enterprises operating at the port. As Lacher (2023, p. 179) observes, this settlement became a template: other communities rapidly adopted the same approach, with escalating demands and, progressively, armed enforcement, creating a dynamic in which the threat of infrastructure disruption became a standard negotiating tool for extracting public employment commitments.

6.3 The Layered Architecture of Patronage Employment

Beyond these dramatic entry points, Lacher (2023, pp. 178–179) documents a more routine but equally pervasive system of layered patronage in everyday employment decisions. The mechanism is straightforward in its logic if complex in its execution: a local education supervisor or health services director requests ministry authorisation in Tripoli to appoint a given number of additional staff. The minister or deputy minister approves the request but attaches a list of names from his own network that must be included. The local official inserts these names and then adds further names from his own network—family members, acquaintances, community members who have paid intermediaries for access, or individuals whose inclusion has been demanded by local power holders. The addition of a Ministry of Labour sign-off requirement (introduced from 2019) added a further layer of patronage opportunity rather than a genuine accountability check: ministry officials could now demand that their own nominees be included in exchange for approving the lists.

The result is a system in which public employment outcomes are the product of a multi-level patronage negotiation rather than any assessment of service need or candidate qualification. The numbers that appear in oversight reports as evidence of excessive headcount are the visible output of this invisible system of competing claims. They represent not a demand for public servants but an equilibrium of patronage entitlements, each reflecting a political or social debt that someone with hiring authority has been obligated to discharge.

The clearest illustration of the state's institutional incapacity in the face of this system is provided by the case of Education Minister Uthman Abd al-Jalil in 2019. Seeking to address the documented gap between enrolled payroll and actual educational provision, Abd al-Jalil attempted to remove approximately 153,000 names from the ministry's payroll—individuals who were not teaching, were not part of any legitimate reserve, had no identified position, and in some cases were fictitious or deceased (Lacher, 2023, p. 184). The Audit Bureau suspended his decisions on procedural grounds. Abd al-Jalil resigned. The episode demonstrates that the problem is not one of administrative will alone: it is structural. When 153,000 payroll entries represent not merely corruption but the accumulated discharge of political obligations to hundreds of thousands of families and networks, the administrative authority required to remove them exceeds what any individual minister possesses without extraordinary political backing—backing that no post-revolutionary Libyan government has been able to muster.

6.4 Armed Groups in the Administrative Interior

The deepest dimension of post-2011 public sector dysfunction identified by Lacher (2023, pp. 184–190) is the penetration of armed groups not merely into the payroll but into the operational management of public institutions. Armed groups did not remain outside the state, threatening it from without; they entered the state's administrative interior, acquiring influence over personnel decisions, budget allocations, procurement contracts, and dispute resolution within public institutions. The entry points were varied: formal security contracts that morphed into de facto management authority, personal relationships between armed group leaders and institutional administrators, and the direct placement of armed group affiliates in key financial and administrative positions.

Lacher (2023, pp. 184–185) documents specific instances: a clinic employee in Tripoli who enlisted armed group members to assault a workplace rival so severely that the rival stopped attending; repeated attempts by competing directors of public enterprises to seize institutional premises with armed assistance; and the staffing of sensitive financial positions—including budget management roles within the Ministry of Finance during the periods of both the Government of National Accord (2016–2021) and the Government of National Unity (from 2021)—with individuals linked to powerful Tripoli militias. In the east, a parallel but structurally different trajectory unfolded, as Khalifa Haftar and his family network pursued systematic control over enterprises, banks, and public institutions, with senior executives and officials either becoming part of Haftar's networks or being installed by them.

The consequence, as Lacher argues, is that public administration after 2011 does not operate according to law and regulation but according to the balance of armed power. Who can protect or threaten an administrator, place or remove a director, approve or block a contract, or force a salary onto a payroll—these are the operative variables in a system in which formal institutional authority and real authority have become largely detached from one another. Payroll corruption in this context is not merely a matter of dishonest officials exploiting weak controls; it is a form of governance—the mechanism through which informal authority relations are translated into formal financial entitlements.

7. REFORM ATTEMPTS AND THEIR STRUCTURAL LIMITS

7.1 Digital Solutions and Institutional Resistance

The Libyan state's responses to payroll corruption have been primarily technical: the national number system, the payroll-database integration project, periodic audits by the ACA, and most recently, in September 2025, the launch by the Central Bank of Libya of a "Ratibak Lahzan" (Your Salary Instantly) system designed to deliver salary payments directly from the Ministry of Finance to individual bank accounts, bypassing the intermediate layer of the employing institution (Central Bank of Libya, 2025). Each of these initiatives represents a genuine attempt to address documented problems, and some have achieved partial results: the national number integration did identify and eliminate some duplicate entries, at least temporarily.

The structural limit of purely technical approaches, however, is that they address the symptom—payroll irregularity—without confronting the cause—the political economy that generates it. Digital systems can record who is on the payroll; they cannot change the political calculations that put them there. When the Minister of Labour can insert names in exchange for approving appointment lists, connecting the payroll to a more sophisticated database does not solve the problem; it just moves it to a different node in the same network. When armed groups can enforce employment demands through the threat of violence, no payroll verification system can prevent them from doing so if the state lacks the coercive capacity to refuse. And when the entire political economy of the post-revolutionary state rests on distributed patronage as its primary mechanism of social stability, the political will to genuinely enforce payroll discipline is structurally compromised by the costs that discipline would impose on the networks sustaining political authority.

The Abd al-Jalil episode is again instructive here. The minister had the institutional authority, as the ACA confirmed, to remove 153,000 inactive employees from the payroll. The Audit Bureau's procedural objections were, in effect, a proxy for the political resistance that the removal would have generated. The formal institutional channel—audit review—was used to block an administratively legitimate decision because the political cost of implementing it was too high for any institutional actor willing to bear it. This is the pattern that pure technical reforms consistently encounter: they identify the problem, they may even generate the legal authority to address it, but they cannot overcome the political economy in which the problem is embedded.

7.2 Atish and Al-Fituri's Framework: The Four Functions of Public Employment

Atish and Al-Fituri (2021) provide the most systematic analytical framework for understanding why technical reforms encounter these limits. They identify four distinct functions that public employment currently performs in Libya, none of which is the delivery of public services for which employment is nominally justified.

The first is unemployment management: when the private sector fails to absorb graduates and job-seekers, the state employs them rather than allow visible unemployment to generate social unrest. This is perhaps the most socially understandable of the four functions, but it is institutionally destructive precisely because it converts the payroll into an open-ended social welfare mechanism with no criteria for entry or exit except political access.

The second is political compensation: employment is used to purchase the political support of specific regions, communities, or tribal constituencies at moments when the government needs to consolidate a coalition or manage a political crisis. The employment commitment is made not because the employing institution needs the workers but because the political relationship with the community to which they belong needs to be managed. This function is particularly difficult to address because it is embedded in the structure of political bargaining itself.

The third is tribal tension management: employment commitments function as a mechanism for managing inter-tribal competition by ensuring that each significant group receives a perceived fair share of public-sector access. Failure to maintain these balances risks escalation to overt conflict; success requires a continuously expanding payroll as new claimants enter and established claimants resist reduction.

The fourth, and perhaps most distinctive of the post-2011 period, is security management: specific employment commitments constitute part of the informal agreements between armed groups and the civilian authorities that give those authorities whatever control they have over the groups' behaviour. These agreements are rarely formalised and almost never publicly acknowledged, but they are structurally real: the employment commitments are part of what armed groups receive in exchange for restraint.

These four functions do not merely accompany or enable payroll corruption; they produce it. A payroll managed primarily to achieve these four objectives is structurally oriented toward expansion, political allocation, and opacity—exactly the conditions under which ghost employees, duplicate entries, and fictitious names proliferate. Audit systems and digital databases can document the outcomes of this orientation; they cannot change the institutional incentives that produce it.

8. CONCLUSION: STRUCTURAL REFORM AND THE LIMITS OF ADMINISTRATIVE SOLUTIONS

The story of the horse on the payroll distils, in its absurdist compression, a political economy that has been centuries in the making. Libya entered independence in 1951 without the administrative traditions, professional cadres, or information systems needed to manage oil revenues without significant institutional leakage. The Kingdom's civil service performed a political function—binding citizens to the new state—before it could perform an administrative one. The Jamahiriya systematically destroyed the private economic alternatives that might have provided employment outside the state, converted the payroll into the primary channel of oil-revenue distribution, and built an administrative architecture designed for ideological control rather than service accountability. The post-2011 period eliminated the central authority that had previously managed and capped the distributive competition, transforming it into a decentralised arena in which multiple actors with varying degrees of force and legitimacy compete for payroll access with no institutional referee capable of adjudicating their claims.

The evidence reviewed in this article points to several conclusions for public administration scholarship and for policy.

First, payroll corruption in resource-dependent states is not primarily an information problem. It is a political economy problem. The ghost employees, fictitious names, and duplicate entries that digital systems identify are not failures of data management; they are the observable outputs of a distributive logic embedded in the institutional structure of the state. Technological reforms that do not address this logic will be incorporated into the existing system rather than transforming it—as the national number integration process demonstrated.

Second, the trajectory from state-building to distributive overstaffing follows a path-dependent logic in which early institutional choices constrain later options in ways that are difficult but not impossible to overcome. The pattern identified in Libya's 1950s salt monopoly—public employment used as a social function rather than a productive one—was not inevitable, but it was reinforced at every subsequent institutional juncture: by the oil boom, by the revolutionary nationalisation programme, by the Jamahiriya's administrative architecture, and by the post-2011 fragmentation of authority. Understanding this path dependency is essential for any serious reform analysis, because it clarifies that the problem is not a recent failure of governance that can be corrected by better management techniques. It is a structural condition produced by sixty years of institutional choices.

Third, the post-conflict literature's emphasis on informal institutions and non-state actors (Sawani, 2017; Lacher, 2023) is essential for understanding why Libyan public administration functions as it does. The formal administrative framework—laws, regulations, establishment tables, civil service rules—exists and is formally operative. It is simply overridden, in practice, by the informal authority relations that armed groups, tribal networks, and political factions exercise over personnel and budgetary decisions. Any reform programme that addresses only the formal framework will fail to engage the real system.

Fourth, and following from all of the above, durable reform requires more than administrative rationalisation. It requires a renegotiation of the social contract through which the Libyan state relates to its citizens. As long as public employment is understood—by citizens and elites alike—as the legitimate mechanism of oil-revenue distribution, the political cost of imposing genuine payroll discipline will consistently exceed the institutional capacity of any government to bear it. Changing this understanding requires building alternative income channels: a diversified private sector, productive agricultural and manufacturing opportunities, and a social protection system that is not contingent on payroll registration. Without these alternatives, the demand for public employment will remain structurally insatiable.

The horse on the payroll is not merely an absurdist metaphor. It is a precise description of a state in which the disconnect between formal employment and actual service delivery has become so extreme that the boundary between human and non-human claimants on the public purse has effectively ceased to matter administratively. Closing that gap requires not a better payroll database but a fundamentally different answer to the question of what the state owes its citizens and on what basis.

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About:

Almagharbia Foundation for Public Policy and Democratic Enhancement

The **Almagharbia Foundation for Public Policy and Democratic Enhancement** is a Libyan civil society organisation established in 2022 to contribute to the development of effective public policies, accountable public institutions, and an informed and inclusive democratic transition in Libya.

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The author:

Mohamed Saleh Tantoush is a Libyan researcher and policy specialist whose work focuses on public administration, civil service reform, governance, peacebuilding, security sector governance, political economy, and institutional development in conflict-affected settings.

He holds an **MA in Public Administration and Public Policy from the University of York**, where his graduate research examined civil service reform in Libya, and a bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering from the University of Tripoli. He is also a Chevening alumnus and holds a PRINCE2 Foundation qualification in project management.

Tantoush has more than a decade of experience in research, policy analysis, programme management, monitoring and evaluation, and institutional advisory work. He has worked with Libyan public institutions, civil society organisations, international development agencies, and humanitarian organisations, including the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, Tetra Tech, the International Organization for Migration, and Action Against Hunger.

His research and professional work have addressed public-sector reform, labour markets, democratic governance, peace and security, migration, conflict resolution, civil society development, and the political and administrative consequences of Libya's prolonged institutional fragmentation. He has managed and contributed to qualitative and quantitative research projects, policy assessments, strategic planning processes, and dialogue initiatives involving governmental, local, and international stakeholders.

He is the founder and General Manager of the Almagharbia Foundation for Public Policy and Democratic Enhancement.

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