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Assessment Report

Yemen After Ali Abdullah Saleh

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Any observer of the political situation in Yemen cannot help but feel uneasy these days, especially when one compares the reality on the ground with the image of what was called the "Youth Revolution" of Yemen and the promise it seemed to contain. The power of the state continues to spiral downwards, with the city of Zanjibar (not to be confused with Zanzibar in Tanzania) falling to Al-Qaeda-linked forces; the city of Taaz, meanwhile, has been under the control of rebel forces for a week, following confrontations between them and the Republican Guard (the elite of the Yemeni Army). In the meantime, Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh survived an assassination attempt. It transpired that the severity of his wounds was more serious than had previously declared, with the President suffering burns, a brain haemorrhage, and serious wounds to his upper body. His son Ahmad, who is head of the Republican Guard, continues to live in the Presidential Palace. Despite being invisible in official media since the uprising took shape, Ahmad Saleh attended a high-level meeting chaired by the Vice-President for heads of the security services.

All of this took place while the US Administration made clear its preference for a peaceful and orderly transition of power which would be "in the interests of the Yemeni people". This was in the context of visits by the US Ambassador to Sanaa, Gerald Feierstein, and a number of European diplomats with figures on the Yemeni political scene, including the Vice-President and the (renegade) Chief of the First Armored Brigade, Ali Mohsen Ahmar.

On the ground, the capital, Sanaa, witnessed a huge march led by youth who presented their demands for a transitional council to the home of the acting President, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. The protesters used their slogans to make clear the point that "the Yemeni revolution does not belong to the Gulf states or to the US". Going back a little bit, we find that the Yemeni youth were the first to follow in the footsteps of the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt, and called for a similar oust of Ali Abdullah Saleh and his son and heir-apparent Ahmad from power.

It should be pointed out that while the regime was quick to make some concessions to the protesters – who remained unsatisfied – the people in power very quickly dug in and began to clamp down on protesters. This revealed some important distinctions between the regime in Yemen and those in either Egypt or Tunisia.

It is not so difficult for those who look to see that, in reality, the powers who control Yemen are a series of clientele groups who have influence in all spheres of public life, particularly those linked to the security services and the military. The economy of Yemen is a corrupt one, reliant on contracts awarded by state-owned companies, foreign aid, and the weapons trade. As a result of this, there is no role for any state institutions; the scene is dominated, instead, by informal organisations who barter and scheme. The constitution as well is selectively exploited by the ruling clique to further their own aims as opposed to providing the guidelines for governing the country.

The GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) initiative was a serious attempt to overcome the impasse the revolutionary forces of Yemen had come to; it had also been accepted by the leadership of those revolutionary forces. The Gulf-backed plan had called on Saleh to step-down to make way for his vice-president to come to power within 30 days, with a national unity government led by the opposition for

two months before a new president could be elected. The plan also included legal amnesty for Saleh and his aides.

Saleh ruined the opportunity this plan presented with his remarkable trickery and stubbornness. The end result of all this was that Saleh was the target of an assassination attempt by unknown assailants; he is now being treated for his wounds in Saudi Arabia, while his vice-president has taken the helm in accordance with the Constitution. This development in itself is telling of the behind-the-scenes divide within the inner circle of the Yemeni regime.

The state's military-security apparatus, still loyal to Saleh, is trying to find a way to continue to dominate the life of the country either directly, as it had done under Saleh, or through some indirect means. The indirect means might include finding a suitable candidate for the presidency from the south, thereby helping to cement a national consensus. At the very least, they are trying to find a way to contain the growing demands for separatism within the south of the country, so long as any southern president is not a politically dominant force in the country, similar to the current vice-president is. One real risk is that the ruling elite will try to use force to deal with the coalition of revolutionary forces and tribal groupings. Such an outcome would be devastating for the future of Yemen, with its intricate social fabric, especially given the activities of Al-Qaeda within the country and long-running uprisings in the north and south of Yemen.

There has been a long history of party political activity in Yemen, together with an entrenched regime, tribal groupings, and the military. All of these have previously swayed some sort of power in the country. What makes the revolution in Yemen truly remarkable is the way in which the youth have risen to become a political force in Yemen. Circumstances in the region, including the successful revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt, have brought the youth to the fore as a political bloc in their own right. What is truly novel in all of this is how the present coalition of the opposition crosses tribal and traditional boundaries and how it reflects a remarkably high-minded, cerebrally mature, disciplined and civil movement making their demands for change.

Being longer-lived than the revolutions in either Tunisia or Egypt, the Yemeni revolution has seen the creation of youth blocs which coordinate together on strategy and tactics, holding open meetings and debates. The most important achievement remains that the revolution paved the way for a new form of political action in Yemen, overcoming the traditional agents for change. Provided this development can be translated into a new reality on the ground for Yemen, it can set the stage for a transformation of how Yemeni youth see themselves. Once these youth blocs become an organized political actor in Yemeni political life, they will increasingly see their identity as being citizens of the Yemeni nation-state, at the expense of other, secondary identities. This will contribute to the building of a state of civic institutions and modern forms of political representation, in a state governed by the rule of law, justice, and equality, a state which can progress forwards to modernity, leaving behind the backwardness of the past.

Broadly speaking, the impact of societal shifts vary from one country to another in how they impact national unity. In cases where the revolutionary changes are championed by a wide, multi-faceted majority of the people, the case is that national unity is enhanced by the revolutionary societal changes. On the other hand, a minority is able to thwart a simple majority with the aid of external forces. In such

situations, the country is lost in a two-way battle between two sides, each of which is unable to completely overcome the other. Although the balance of power continues to tilt in favor of those opposed to Saleh, American and Saudi pressure may see a reconciliation between the political parties and other traditional forces, on the one hand, and the rump of the Saleh regime, on the other, at the cost of the goals and demands of the youth revolution. This would be brought in under the guise of avoiding a civil war in Yemen. Such a situation is not without precedent in Yemeni history.

The 1962 revolution saw the favorable intervention of the Egyptians on the side of the revolutionaries, who had wanted to pre-empt an expected Saudi intervention in the country, which was expected to be anti-revolutionary. While the Egyptians provided their military support for the revolution, Saudi Arabia provided money and weapons for those tribes which remained loyal to the monarchy. Yemen then sank into an eight-year-long civil war that ended in a constitutional settlement that saw persons from the old monarchical regime, who were not of the Hamid Al Din dynastic line, integrated into the regime as individuals.

The doubts which surround Saudi intentions lie in the Kingdom's fears of a successful revolution, along the same lines as the revolutions of Egypt and Tunisia, on their doorstep. Saudi Arabia fears the emergence of an unruly republic which cannot be controlled through the traditional tribal channels; such a revolution could be a disaster for Saudi Arabia if it extended into its own territory. It is from this vantage point that Saudi Arabia seeks to control the situation in Yemen, to ensure that any new regime is loyal to that state and to avoid the emergence of a democratic process with unknown consequences.

Saudi Arabia has always supported, materially, morally and otherwise, both the regime and the opposition, in the form of the tribes, yet the Kingdom always stood in opposition of efforts to overthrow the regime, utilising its levers of power over the tribes to achieve this. Then, the youth came along to overthrow the yoke, and change the meaning of the concept of tribe, moving away from its old definition as an identity extraneous and superior to national citizenship. No longer is the tribe a guarantor of unyielding stability standing in the way of democratization. Instead, the tribe is, for them, a vehicle for greater citizenship and public participation.

Even if Ali Abdullah Saleh will remain in Saudi Arabia and not return to Yemen, it would not be the end of his regime. His family is in control of a total of 42 sensitive high-level posts spread throughout the country's state apparatus. Unlike the situation in Egypt or Tunisia, the fall of the head of the pyramid will not lead to the end of the system, as there is still a ruling oligarchy that remains in charge in Yemen. The key to this situation are the tribes; the tribe remains outside of the realm of the normally functioning civil society, and is not an organization of individual membership. Questions remain about the ability of the tribal hierarchies to steer the change of the impending democratic transformation.

At the present time, Yemen is in the throes of a struggle between the ruling elites loyal to Saleh and the revolutionary forces. It is obviously in the interest of those left from the ruling elite to cling to power through the office of the vice-president, even if he later sides with the revolutionary forces, thereby weakening the representatives of the military-security apparatus within the remnants of the regime. These representatives of the military-security apparatus might choose to do the same, in the hope of guaranteeing a place in the coming regime for themselves.

Such would not be in contradiction to the wishes of Saudi Arabia, which is striving to keep good relations with all of the concerned parties by providing support to all in any way it can. It is also clear that a civil war is growingly unlikely, given that the youth are tenaciously maintaining the non-violent nature of their protests. There is also the question of American pressure, which is trying to ensure that the ruling oligarchy does not de-stabilize the country through the use of violence, for fear that a violent de-stabilization of the country could allow Al-Qaeda the chance to operate in the Gulf of Aden.

Worthy of mention have been the efforts made by the ambassadors of both the US and Saudi Arabia, who are seen as mediators capable of speaking to all sides at once. The resolution they propose as a compromise that will help avoiding civil war institutes a split between politics and the military; the military-security apparatus would remain in the hands of the professional leaders while the opposition would play a role in politics through the ballot box. Doing so, however, would lead to a situation where the power of politicians is entirely illusory. This resolution also leaves an important question unanswered.

Whatever happens to the youth and their demands if such a plan were adopted? Will the youth's leadership accept the proposals of the American mediators, interested only in their own security assurances? The youth marched for a better Yemeni civil society, and a sovereign, democratic state. The vacuum left by Saleh is now being used by the Saudis and the Americans to try to divide the old positions of power between the figures of the old regime. The youth and the breakaway military officers who sided with them are hanging their hopes on the unlikelihood of the American-Saudi plans, which aim to squash the revolution, succeeding.