

Tobias Thiel

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Report

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➤ Yemen's Arab Spring: From Youth Revolution to Fragile Political Transition

Tobias Thiel

In February 2012, Yemen's revolutionary movement achieved its first victory: the removal of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. However, the co-option of the movement by Yemen's key powerbrokers, regional insurgencies and daunting economic challenges threaten to squander the opportunity to repair Yemen's failing social contract. Stabilisation efforts, though indispensable, must not come at the expense of a democratic and civic state.

2011 became a year of revolt for the Arab Middle East and North Africa. Driven by the desire for freedom, dignity and social justice, millions of Arabs took to the streets to expel veteran strongmen and their sycophantic advisors from their palaces and remove the quasi-feudal structures constituting the backbone of their regimes. Struck by the resemblance of the uprisings, commentators quickly hailed this transnational wave of protest as an 'Arab 1989', spearheaded by Facebook-wielding youth. The spontaneous mobilisation seemingly repudiated political scientists' explanations for the resilience of Arab autocracy: rentierism, overblown security apparatuses, sophisticated regime strategies of division and co-option, and political culture.

REGIME RESPONSES AND ELITE FRAGMENTATION

Having survived in Yemen's notoriously ungovernable political landscape for over 33 years, Mr Saleh recalcitrantly clung on to power in the face of the burgeoning protest movement. His power has been founded on two pillars: the rentier state and the military. Unable to govern the country single-handedly, Saleh has distributed political rents from Yemen's largely oil-driven economy through an inclusive patronage network of tribal, religious, military and party elites to secure their allegiance. Through his family, he dominates the state's security apparatus. Saleh's son Ahmad Ali heads the Republican Guards, his nephews Yahya and Ammar command the Central Security Forces and the National Security Organisation, while – until recently – his half-brother Mohammed was in charge of the Air Force and his nephew Tariq of the Presidential Guard.

As the protests gained momentum, Mr Saleh responded with a mix of political manoeuvring: patronage and bribery, co-option, repression and propaganda. He mobilised a large countermovement at Tahrir Square, bought the loyalty of tribal sheikhs, lowered the income tax, and raised the wages of civil servants and security forces. In an attempt to co-opt reformists, Mr Saleh pledged to discard a constitutional amendment to prolong the presidential term and reform the electoral system. Simultaneously, many activists came under attack by plain-clothed thugs or were arrested by security forces. Saleh framed the uprising as an affront against unity, freedom and democracy and claimed that the demonstrations were orchestrated from 'a control room in Tel Aviv for destabilising the Arab world [... that is] managed by the White House.'

When traditional strategies proved unable to contain the spread of the movement, the regime response became heavy-handed. March 18 – the ‘Friday of Dignity’ – became a watershed moment as pro-government rooftop snipers massacred around 50 peaceful demonstrators and wounded more than 200. Whether authorised by Mr Saleh or not, the killings exposed the moral bankruptcy of the regime and its support haemorrhaged virtually overnight. A similar event occurred in Ta’izz on May 29: pro-Saleh forces killed several dozen protesters when they raided the protest square with tanks and bulldozers, storming a makeshift hospital and burning people alive in their tents. Faced with increasingly brutal repression, the youth movement expanded into a mass uprising.

The March 18 massacre accelerated the fragmentation of Mr Saleh’s traditional support base. Earlier, Sheikh Abdulmajid al-Zindani, an influential, incendiary cleric with a flaring red beard, had sided with the youth movement. Sadiq al-Ahmar, head of the powerful Hashid Tribal Confederation, and his brothers Hamid, Hussein and Himyar, publicly turned against the president. Now, long-time ally Major General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, the powerful commander of the First Armoured Division, moved troops into Sana’a vowing to protect the protestors. His move precipitated dozens of resignations by prominent diplomats, ruling party members, government officials and military officers.

Ironically, the most powerful supporters of the democracy movement are veteran regime insiders. The defections did not result from a democratic enlightenment within the elite, but are emblematic of Saleh’s failed alliance policy. The increasing concentration of power around his immediate family breached unwritten power-sharing agreements within the regime’s inner circle. Especially Ali Muhsin had many reasons to settle old scores: Saleh had entangled him in an unwinnable war against the Houthis and launched a failed plot to have the Saudi Air Force ‘accidentally’ bombard his headquarters.

THE MILITARY, THE TRIBE AND ISLAMISM STRIKE BACK

Mr Saleh skilfully stalled and sabotaged various mediation efforts by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), hoping to outlast the revolutionary fervour. After the third failed attempt to sign a GCC-brokered initiative, hostilities erupted in Sana’a on May 23. Ahmed Ali’s Republican Guards faced Sadiq al-Ahmar’s Hashid tribal fighters and 25,000-30,000 troops of the First Armoured Division. On June 3, Ali Abdullah Saleh was severely injured in an attack on the president’s compound and was flown out to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment. Saleh blames Ali Muhsin and the Al-Ahmars for the assassination attempt, which is plausible but unconfirmed.

Although a ceasefire temporarily ended the hostilities in Sana’a on June 7, fighting continued along other conflict lines across Yemen. Tribes in Arhab and Nihm became entangled in a protracted war with the Republican Guards. Tribal fighters damaged several tanks, shot down a Yemeni warplane and captured military equipment from a Republican Guards base. Driven by the fear of an Ali Muhsin or al-Ahmar-dominated post-Saleh regime, the Houthi rebels expanded their sphere of influence to Amran, Hajjah and Mahwit. The radical Shi’a movement clashed with Sunni tribesmen and Salafist fighters, leading to a calamitous humanitarian situation in the north.

Meanwhile, several hundred Islamist militants took control of the provincial capital of Zinjibar in May 2011. Although some Yemeni military units engaged in heavy fighting with the militants, the opposition alleges that Saleh’s regime secretly colluded with Al-Qaeda. During the clashes, the Yemeni Air Force ‘mistakenly’ bombed soldiers from the renegade 119th brigade, which had defected to Ali Muhsin. The US intensified drone attacks against Al-Qaeda, killing the radical cleric Anwar Al-Awlaki and other high-profile leaders. In Al-Baydha’, Tariq al-Dhahab took over the town of Rada’a to extort the release of his brother and 14 other Islamists from government prison.

The economic impact of the crisis has been devastating. With already 45 percent of Yemen's population living below the poverty line in 2010, the deteriorating security situation across the country crippled the Yemeni economy. Many Yemenis face shortages of fuel, water, electricity and basic foodstuffs. Real GDP contracted by 7.8 percent in 2011 and oil output stagnated at 180,000 barrels/day, compared with 260,000 b/d before the crisis. Conservative inflation estimates for 2011 range from 20 to 30 percent. Despite some black market variation, the foreign exchange rate of the Yemeni rial remained largely constant thanks to fund streams from Saudi Arabia and at the cost of the depletion of a fourth of the Central Bank's foreign exchange reserves.

The violence between heavily armed factions transformed what started as a peaceful youth movement into an elite power struggle. Fully aware that a new regime dominated by old elites would be all too similar to the one they seek to oust, the youth movement struck a Faustian bargain with Yemen's key powerbrokers for Saleh's removal: the military (Ali Muhsin), the tribe (the al-Ahmars) and Islamism (Abdulmajid al-Zindani). These powerbrokers began using the protestors to further their own political ends. Political parties, particularly Islah, increasingly gained control over the change squares. Well-funded and organised, they outdid independent youth, who lack organisational capacity, funding and political experience. Intimidation, threats, beating and a takfirism campaign (denouncing fellow Muslims as infidels) moreover led many centrists and independents to retire from the squares in June.

A FRAGILE POLITICAL TRANSITION

After months of deadlock, Ali Saleh unexpectedly returned from Saudi Arabia in late September. The Security Council issued resolution 2014 urging Saleh to sign the GCC initiative and, on November 23, he finally bowed to international pressure. The GCC initiative, monitored by UN special envoy Jamal Benomar, transferred presidential authority to vice-president Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi. In the initial 90-day phase of the initiative's implementation mechanism, Mohammed Basindwa was appointed prime minister

and a bipartisan government, dividing ministerial posts equally between the ruling and opposition parties, was sworn in. The Committee on Military Affairs for Achieving Security and Stability was founded and elections were scheduled for February 21, 2012. The parliament passed a controversial immunity law for Mr Saleh and 500 of his aides in January, but UN human rights chief Navanethem Pillay rejected the law as inconsistent with international law.

Conceived with stabilisation rather than retribution in mind, independent youth, the Houthis and Hiram remained unconvinced that the GCC deal marked the beginning of a democratic transition. The revolution continued unabated, but with crucial tactical changes. Protestors went on a more than 250km long 'life march' from Ta'izz to Sana'a in December to protest the GCC agreement's immunity clause. The march sought to address the failure of the largely urban middle-class-based movement to appeal to the 70 percent of Yemenis living in rural areas. Simultaneously, disgruntled public employees initiated the 'revolution of institutions'; they purged corrupt officials from more than 19 public institutions, such as the national airline, state television, the Sana'a police headquarters, the Coast Guard and some military units.

On February 21, Yemen held a referendum that confirmed acting president Hadi as Yemen's new president with a considerable majority. JMP loyalists went to the polls to vote out Mr Saleh, while most independents, the Houthis and Hiram boycotted the referendum. Many activists perceived a power-sharing agreement with Saleh's General People's Congress Party as a betrayal to 'the blood spilled by the martyrs of the revolution'. Hiram launched a few attacks against polling stations in southern governorates. Mr Hadi's inauguration initiated the second phase of the GCC initiative; the ambitious project envisages a comprehensive national dialogue, the amendment of the constitution, and new elections within two years.

Backed by foreign powers, President Hadi initiated some bold moves. The new Sana'a Protective Security Force, which consists of units from rivaling factions under the command of the Committee on Military Affairs, has removed several military installations in Sana'a.

Amid growing concerns that Saleh's cronies were further destabilising the country, Hadi dismissed four governors and 19 high-ranking military commanders, including Mohammed and Tariq Saleh. The Air Force commander Mohammed Saleh refused to step down and threatened to shoot down commercial airplanes at Sana'a International Airport, but Hadi remained determined.

The fragile achievements in the north are matched by chaos in the South. Aden is witnessing an unprecedented security vacuum, as the absence of the state allows Ansar al-Sharia, the Southern Movement, former regime loyalists, armed gangs and Salafists to wreak havoc. The recent upsurge in Islamist violence by Al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Sharia in Abyan, Shabwah, Al-Baydha' and Lahj has developed into a full-blown insurgency, which suggests at least some links with Saleh's associates.

The US counter-terrorism strategy – a combination of empowering boutique military units under Saleh's family command and drone warfare – exacerbates the very security challenges it seeks to resolve. The regime is known to divert counter-terrorism capacities for other purposes: when Islamists gained ground in the south during 2011, Yahya Saleh's counter-terrorism unit remained in Sana'a as a de facto regime protection force. The Pentagon's plan to spend \$75 million in military aid in 2012 will ensure that Al-Qaeda remains a cash cow for the government. While disgruntled tribesmen often steal American weapons from the Yemeni military, militants often draw their *raison d'être* from American drone attacks, which have led to a high number of civilian deaths. Any security strategy in Yemen should therefore centre on providing incentives for the disarmament of non-state actors, rather than promoting the further militarisation of the state.

THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

Yemen's new government faces daunting challenges from all sides: the old regime, the protestors and regional insurgencies. Unless the new president fills the power vacuum, Saleh will continue to interfere in the transition process. In a Medvedev/Putin-style scenario, his re-election in 2014, or that of his son Ahmed, cannot be discounted. Protestors are frustrated that their movement has been co-opted by elites who play according to the same old highly personalised 'rules of the game' outside of Yemen's weak formal institutions. As the wounds inflicted by the 1994 civil war and other regional divisions run deep, the spectre of state fragmentation hovers over the transition process. The secession of the south – and, perhaps, that of the Houthis – is a distinct possibility if the Sana'a-based government fails to put an inclusive power-sharing agreement on the table. Although a southerner himself, Mr Hadi has no political capital in the south because he helped crush the southern rebellion during the 1994 civil war.

The new government must focus on quick-wins for the transition period, while keeping an eye to long-term strategy. The national dialogue, transitional justice and a new constitution are key priorities. There has to be a trade-off between inclusiveness and efficiency, but youth, civil society and women, Hiraq, the Houthis and reform-oriented members of the ancien régime must all be part of the process. Much rests on whether he can effectively bring the armed forces under a unified, technocratic leadership, but Hadi must not repeat the mistakes of the Iraqi de-ba'athification, as short-term stability depends on maintaining a precarious balance of power between the old and new regimes. The transition period must provide tangible (economic) improvements for the Yemeni population, such as improved access to water and electricity, reconstructing Sa'dah or revitalising the Aden port.

Long-term stability, on the other hand, requires that the failing social contract gives way to a more democratic and inclusive power-sharing arrangement, which provides enough space for Yemen's extensive pluralism. Given the regional dispersion of power, effective state management necessitates core-periphery cooperation, not coercion. HIRAK and the Houthis must be persuaded that a united Yemen is not based on occupation, but an equal partnership. Only a federal, decentralised system with a large degree of local self-rule can provide effective mechanisms to defuse these internal conflicts.

The litmus test for the new government will be Yemen's transformation from a rentier state to a productive, post-hydrocarbon economy. Civil service reform, and particularly the elimination of 'ghost workers', is essential to create responsive and transparent public institutions that can address widespread poverty and unemployment. Developing the ability to tax as well as ending the squandering of public money and endemic corruption are necessary to fund state expenditures. Development aid is much needed, but donor funds can be a double-edged sword. Their massive influx into a resource-poor environment can reinforce rent-seeking behaviour; competition over Yemen's scarce resources has exacerbated conflicts for decades. The donor community should therefore provide technical assistance for the transition process with conditional aid, while persuading the government through political dialogue to enact reforms in key sectors.

Diagnosed as being 'on the brink' of a failed state for almost a decade, Yemen has continued to function – albeit poorly – and its history reveals that political pragmatism trumps ideology. The protest movement has opened a window of opportunity to foster structural change: it has challenged the hegemony of identity politics and engrained democratic ideas into mainstream political culture. Power shifts inevitably generate resistance among those who lose their privileges. This is why Yemen will continue to experience violence and remain an unconsolidated democracy in the foreseeable future. Although the transition will not be orderly, it has afforded Yemenis a chance to rebuild their flawed national union – an opportunity that must not be squandered. ■