

Taiz Youth: Between Conflict and Political Participation

by Maged Sultan

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Youth form more than 60 percent of the population in Taiz – estimated at just over 3 million in 2017. Taiz is currently undergoing its most violent phase of armed conflict since April 2015. Up until the end of 2016, the conflict had caused the displacement of 177,880 families, 3,371 deaths and 15,869 injuries, in addition to the destruction of the infrastructure and of 4,149 public and private properties. This has caused a humanitarian crisis, particularly in the three sieged urban districts (which have been under attack for 18 months) and some rural areas like Jabal Habshi and Al Ma’afar districts whose populations were recently forcibly displaced.

Taiz youth’s political participation was significantly high during the 2011 revolution. This continued with their support for the peaceful transitional political process which saw them participate in the 2013 National Dialogue Conference (NDC), and later in their efforts to promote the NDC’s outcomes. They were active in advocacy around issues pertaining to good governance, democracy, human rights and peacebuilding. Since April 2015, the violent conflict has caused unexpected vertical divisions among local communities in Taiz, as well as between smaller groups and individuals, paralysing young activists’ local and national political interventions. But with time, young people have reclaimed their active roles in providing humanitarian assistance and, to a lesser extent, in peacebuilding and advocacy campaigns. Recently, with the government and local authorities’ attempts to recover public institutions, hope was renewed when the youth initiated new activities including calling for the implementation of the NDC’s outcomes and the formation of youth coalitions to support the political process and the restoration of peace. Yet, the youth of Taiz still face a number of challenges and barriers.

Challenges and Barriers to the Youth’s Political Participation

The ongoing conflict is the biggest of these obstacles, blocking all paths to youth political participation. Most young Yemenis support none of the conflict actors, but there is no scope to incubate or respond to their political activities and interventions, hence many of them remain silent.

The armed conflict is also the main reason behind the increased unemployment levels and poverty in Taiz, which in turn negatively affects youth participation in civil and political life. Although ‘the majority are not satisfied with what is going on in Taiz and have no interests to be part of the conflict’, as stated by one young activist, ‘some are involved in the conflict either as fighters or as media supporters due to their bad economic circumstances’.

Insecurity and unsafety also caused by the armed conflict in Taiz hinders youth political participation. As one young activist put it, ‘insecurity and unsafety, as a result of firstly the armed clashes between the different actors and secondly because of the weak performance of the security and justice institutions’ is a real obstacle. This level of insecurity frightens the young population, precluding any potential mobilisation efforts.

Prior to the war, the government provided youth with opportunities to represent themselves at significant political events such as the NDC. These opportunities diminished during the war. Similarly, the weak capacities of local authorities and their executive institutions to provide essential public services, including security, discourages the young population from political participation.

In the same vein, the inability of civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to cope with the conflict is yet another challenge. Due to the armed conflict, many NGOs and political missions stopped their work in Yemen and most donors suspended funds for projects of a political nature. ‘Many donors and local NGOs shifted priorities to humanitarian assistance provision instead’, suggests the chairman of a youth-led NGO.



Proposed Solutions

It is time for the Yemeni government and local authorities to re-engage their youth in the political process. The government’s promotion and implementation of the currently applicable NDC’s outcomes would reopen the doors for the young population to play an effective political role in their

country. Engaging the youth in decision-making and in other local issues such as the monitoring of local councils' and executive units' performance would also significantly enhance their political participation. It is also essential to initiate and support the economic recovery of Taiz through strategic policies and actions, including the provision of facilities and funding for existing and new economic activities, as well as those which have been put on hold.

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and political parties can also help the youth overcome challenges in order to play an effective political role. CSOs should initiate capacity-building programmes to optimise the roles played by the young generation in contexts of peace as well as war. Donors should reprioritise and reallocate funds to support politically neutral activities and projects. Political parties should also play their expected roles in supporting peaceful youth political participation.

Today, activism in Taiz is on hold; the youth are caught in-between the conflict and their desire to play a role not only in mitigating the conflict, but also in assist with rebuilding Yemen. It is time for all stakeholders to do their part and join their efforts to achieve more effective youth activism in the political scene of Taiz in particular, and Yemen as a whole.

Maged Sultan is Chairman of Youth Without Borders Organization.

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