



ARAB UPRISINGS

Yemen's Stalemate

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

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Yemen seems trapped in an endless political stalemate. More than a year after massive protests erupted challenging the 33-year-old regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen seems no closer to achieving a meaningful political transition. The deadlock has persisted despite the outrage over regime violence against civilians, splits at the top of the military, a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning the violence and calling for a transfer of power, a Nobel Peace Prize for leading Yemeni protest figure Tawakkol Karman, and the near assassination of Saleh himself. In the absence of a political solution, the humanitarian situation has dramatically worsened and regional conflicts across the country have intensified. Is there any hope for Yemen?

There is no doubting the astonishing resilience, creativity, and courage of the Yemeni protest movement. The protestors gathered in Sanaa's Change Square, including Nobel Laureate Tawakkol Karman, represent some of the best and most inspirational of the activists of this past year's Arab uprisings. It is astounding that they have maintained their energy and kept up their numbers despite massive regime brutality and dim hopes of political success. But they have also struggled to put forth a clear political alternative, and as Stacey Philbrick Yadav has argued, have been badly served both by the "opportunistic opposition" of tribal leaders and regime defectors and by the traditional opposition parties of the Joint Meetings Party (JMP). They have proven that they cannot be silenced, but seem as stymied as anyone about how to break the deadlock.

The poorly conceived transition plan pushed by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and backed by the United States and the United Nations has proven to be an impediment to meaningful change. It offered immunity to Saleh as an inducement for his departure, but the Gulf states showed little interest in promoting any real democratic change. The GCC plan left the role of the armed forces and other state institutions untouched, and made no provisions for a genuine role for the protest movement. Even so, Saleh failed to sign the agreement for months, instead stalling for time and taking every opportunity to divide and weaken his opponents. In September he returned to Yemen unexpectedly and retook the reins of power.

Many hoped that Yemen would finally move forward when Saleh unexpectedly signed the GCC deal in late November. But instead, as most Yemenis and analysts expected, he has continued to exercise power from behind the scenes. He shows no sign of actually living up to the promise to depart the scene and allow Yemen to move on. The immunity from prosecution guaranteed to Saleh by the GCC deal -- and recently extended to all government officials who have served him -- outrages many Yemenis. It has provided neither justice nor a political transition. Instead it has rewarded a culture of impunity and given Saleh a blank check to kill.

The presidential elections slated to be held in February are widely seen as a sham, even if they are not postponed, wired to simply ratify the elevation of Vice President Abd Rab Mansour al-Hadi and maintain Saleh's power behind the scenes. Such elections do not seem likely to

either satisfy the protestors or remove Saleh and his regime from real power. Saleh's family members remain entrenched in key positions in the security apparatus. Meanwhile, as Abdul-Ghani al-Iryani noted in December, Saleh and his regime continue to stall, divide the opposition, and play on Western fears of al-Qaeda.

The costs of this political stalemate are enormous. The mounting humanitarian crisis is reaching staggering proportions. Secessionist sentiment in the south is rising rapidly, while the Houthi rebellion in the north remains potent. Reports of al-Qaeda seizing strategic towns are likely exaggerated, but the jihadist organization is clearly taking advantage of the chaos to build its presence. Real power is devolving to the local level as the political center remains frozen. The absence of legitimate political institutions raises the risks of a complete collapse into civil war.

The international community, including the United States, has only intermittently paid attention to Yemen -- an oversight that will haunt it for years to come. The United States too often has been focused on counterterrorism and the struggle against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to the exclusion of other issues. This has led too many officials to view Saleh as a necessary partner, rather than the key part of the problem which his regime is, and to trade off the right to carry out drone strikes for real pressure for political change. Even where those tradeoffs are not consciously chosen, the sheer complexity of the problem and the crush of other regional crises have made it difficult for the United States or the international community to act.

In September, Tom Finn asked whether there was "any way out for Yemen." More than four months later, it is difficult to argue that we are any closer to achieving the meaningful political transition Yemen so desperately needs. At this point, Saleh should be given a deadline to leave Yemen or lose the amnesty promised by the GCC deal (the blanket immunity recently approved by the Yemeni cabinet for all government officials should be rejected completely). The assets of Saleh and regime officials should be frozen and a travel ban imposed until real change is achieved. But even such steps will not be enough without fashioning new Yemeni political institutions which can respond in a meaningful way to the demands and the needs of the protest movement and the diverse regional groups which have so powerfully challenged decades of Saleh's autocratic rule. Too much time has been lost already.

*Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS
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Worst and best case scenarios for Yemen

By Sheila Carapico, March 24, 2011

While many things remain unknown about the conclusion to Yemen's current political crisis, one thing is clear: developments are simply too fast moving and too complex for anyone to predict the next turn, much less the final outcome. Based on recent events, however, it is possible to consider worst-case scenarios of violence or chaos, and best-case scenarios for a new social contract pointing towards a more democratic future.

Here's the background to this week's news, in a nutshell. At least since President Ali Abdullah Saleh restored unity by force during a short civil war in 1994, Yemen has staggered under odious burdens of rising poverty, inequality, corruption, cronyism, political de-liberalization, economic disinvestment, and ecological degradation. In power since early 1979 in North Yemen and seemingly determined to rule for life, prepare his favorite son Ahmad Ali Saleh as his heir, and retain a monopoly of seats for his ruling General People's Congress in an increasingly impotent parliament, the president derailed a functioning competitive multiparty electoral process.

Southerners living in what had been the People's Democratic Republic (PDRY) prior to 1990, having failed in the 1994 secessionist bid, have been protesting for several years against material deprivation and military repression. Discontent simmered in the former North where Ali Abdullah Saleh had ruled since 1978, too. The regime battled a localized al-Huthi insurgency in Sa'ada province up towards the Saudi border, claiming the Zaydi Shi'a rebels were inspired by Iran. Both the "harak" (movement) in the former South and the al-Huthi rebellion considered their grievances to be separate from those of the rest of the country, and the regime successfully portrayed them as isolated, illegitimate throw-backs to the PDRY and the Zaydi imamate, respectively, that threatened the unity of the republic. But across the country citizens were alienated, frustrated, and miserable.

The popular revolts that toppled Tunisian and Egyptian dictators in early 2011 inspired Yemenis. Bypassing the formal opposition coalition of the so-called Joint Meeting Parties, mostly youthful demonstrators thronged to public squares. Although in contrast with Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain they couldn't assemble in fantastic and photogenic numbers in a single central metropolitan area, in a half-dozen major cities and a number of small towns constituted themselves as a nationalist pro-democracy movement. They chanted the North African slogans, "Irhal" and "Isqat al-Nizam," calling for the immediate removal of the president and his whole regime. In response to violent attacks by purported pro-regime counter-demonstrators, they mockingly turned the slogan around: "al-nizam yurid isqat al-sha'ab:" the regime wants the downfall of the people.

Notwithstanding President Saleh's vague promises of an electoral transition in 2013, demonstrations persisted, spread, and expanded. Some members of parliament, the ruling General People's Congress (GPC), and the administration quit in solidarity with "the youth." Even some prominent shaykhs of the president's own Hashid tribal confederation declared their sympathies with the rebels.

Last Friday, March 18, in a pitch of fury or panic someone ordered snipers to open fire on demonstrators near Sana'a University. The next day, at least 50 lay dead, and others mortally wounded. In disbelief, anger, and grief, a record 150,000 marched in Sana'a's biggest day of rage so far.

Senior diplomats, ministers, ruling party members, and civil servants resigned en masse. Most striking were defections from within the military, long the main base of Saleh's support. Most ominously for Saleh, Major-General Ali Muhsin (al-Ahmar), a regime stalwart and top commander who pitilessly prosecuted the 1994 campaign against the South and the war against the al-Huthis, announced his support for the demonstrators. Launching a partial military

revolt, he ordered his tank units to defend the demonstrators even as the Republican Guard under Ahmad Saleh positioned itself around the massive presidential compound. The reformists are wary of a wolf in lamb's clothing.

What, then, are the possible scenarios for the coming days, weeks, or months? Quite a few are circulating already, mostly quite dire. The mutineers could clash with the American-armed Republican Guard led by Ahmad Ali Saleh and other forces headed by members of the Saleh family. An Ali Muhsin victory would amount to a military *coup d'état* at the hands of a new dictator no less savory or popular than President Saleh or his son. Prolonged battle could destroy the country or collapse the state. The former PDRY could re-declare its sovereignty. Other regional or tribal aspirations for autonomy could come to the fore. There could be a free-for-all reminiscent of Somalia, or as in Libya rebels could take some territory as the old regime unleashes its fury on the population in those areas. It's impossible to predict the outcome of a fight to the finish, except that more blood would be shed.

Any of these outcomes would turn Yemenis' dreams of freedom into nightmares of tyranny and/or anarchy. Other Arab reformers rooting for liberalization would be disheartened. Warfare or chaos in Yemen could also potentially threaten the stability of neighboring Saudi Arabia, embolden radical jihadists in the Peninsula, and thus ultimately endanger the interests of the United States.

But things don't need to turn out badly for Yemen, its neighbors, and America. What are the alternatives? Best-case scenarios seem contingent on Saleh following Ben Ali and Mubarak's example rather than Qaddafi's. If he resigns immediately, power could be transferred to a technocratic, civilian transitional government. New parliamentary and presidential elections could be organized in a matter of months. This transition would be easier in some ways than Egypt's because there are already organized, legal political parties in Yemen (the several JMP parties and perhaps a reconstituted GPC). Since the existing multiparty electoral process has been suspended rather than irretrievably despoiled, it could be resuscitated.

It might be desirable to amend the constitution, as Saleh himself recently offered to do by way of feeble concessions, such that the country is run by a parliamentary rather than a presidential system. But unlike Egypt, Yemen would not have to change the constitution before holding elections. Instead of quick piecemeal amendments, Yemenis could re-constitute a contemporary version of the National Dialogue of Political Forces that held mass conferences and scholarly workshops nationwide in 1993 and early 1994 and eventually offered social contract and constitutional proposals in papers the most comprehensive of which was called the Document of Pledge and Accord. That effort, which failed to thwart the 1994 civil war, could be restarted now to engage the street protesters in a genuine civic conversation about necessary reforms and help envision a national path towards more democratic, just, transparent, responsible civilian governance.

This is a tall order, but it is do-able. It is the best-case scenario for angry yet hopeful Yemenis who have put their lives on the line, for the now-beleaguered pan-Arab pro-democracy movement, and ultimately for America. Under its counter-terrorism strategy during the past couple of years the United States spent hundreds of millions of dollars bolstering a corrupt military dictatorship that backtracked on reforms, muzzled the press, disregarded popular aspirations, and resorted to extra-judicial detentions and even executions.

Backing an economically, politically, environmentally, and ethically unsustainable *status quo* will not make Americans safer or win hearts and minds in Arabia; it will put the United States on the wrong side of history and could even give comfort to our worst enemies. The Obama administration and other Western governments must announce an immediate suspension of military aid to the Saleh government and bring all possible diplomatic pressure to bear to convince President Saleh that the time has come for him to relinquish power.

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Who is running Yemen?

By Jeb Boone, July 11, 2011

On June 3, Yemen's long-ruling President Ali Abdullah Saleh was badly injured in an attack by unknown assailants. His departure from Sanaa to a military hospital in Saudi Arabia seemed to many people to have finally resolved the long standoff between Saleh's embattled regime and a variety of political challengers. But the intervening weeks have brought Yemen no closer to resolving the political uncertainty.

Anti-government protesters first erected tents in cities like Sanaa and Taiz. Tribal leaders then began to slowly come out against the Saleh government and express their support for the youth movement. As the once resilient tribal patronage system began to break down, chaos erupted across the country, leaving Saleh with only a small piece of real estate in a northern mountain valley to reign over. With Saleh in Saudi Arabia and no replacement in sight, who is running Yemen?

In the vacuum created by Saleh's absence, his politically crippled deputy has been left as a steward to Sanaa's empty seat of power. Just days after his unplanned departure, Saleh's son Ahmed took up residence in the presidential palace, sending a message to protesters and defiant tribesmen that his father's will would be done through his proxy. Meanwhile, Yemen's political opposition, the Joint Meeting Parties, has taken control of Sanaa's Change Square protest camp, attempting to solidify its political life in any new government. While Sanaa's power brokers look to posture themselves to take seats of power, the Yemeni government has lost total control over the rest of the country.

Yemen's rugged northern tribal regions have rarely been ruled directly by president, imam, or foreign colonizer until the rise of Ali Abdullah Saleh in 1978. Learning from the dismal failures of the Ottomans and succeeding five failed presidents, two of which were assassinated, Saleh took a more nuanced and delicate approach to ruling the

fractured region. Instead of governing Yemen's tribes by force or sheer military domination, Saleh began to co-opt the tribes into Yemen's government through a system of patronage. Some sheikhs received government stipends while others were placed in prominent political and military positions.

Throughout most of his political career, Saleh maintained a subtle but stable hold on the Yemen Arabic Republic, known as North Yemen. In 1990, he became the first ruler since the Queen of Sheba to rule over the entire historic region of Yemen (except for northern regions now under the control of Saudi Arabia). In spite of a civil war in 1994, he continued to hold North and South Yemen together in one state.

Fissures began to appear in Saleh's fragile dominance over Yemen's north in 2004 when a group of tribesmen, calling themselves the Believing Youth, rose up in armed rebellion against the Saleh government. While the Yemeni government claimed that the Zaidi Shiites of the northern Saada governorate sought to reinstitute an imamate, the rebels themselves claimed that they were marginalized and discriminated against by the government. These Houthi rebels, named after their now dead leader Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, fought a series of six wars against the Yemeni military, with the last war ending in 2009. Ironically, what was once the most war-torn region of Yemen is now the safest. With most of the military focused on maintaining control of major cities swarmed by anti-government protesters, the Houthis have had an opportunity to rebuild their communities and live in complete lack of state control.

Sanaa: Saleh's last bastion

One of the last remaining vestiges of government control in Yemen is the country's capital, Sanaa. In spite of Saleh being whisked away to Saudi Arabia to receive treatment for wounds sustained in an attack on his palace, his son

Ahmed, commander of the Republican Guards, and his eldest nephew Yahya, commander of the Central Security Forces, have maintained a stranglehold over the city. Military checkpoints still dot the city; more ominously, soldiers of the Central Security Forces, the only Yemeni military branch that has remained ostensibly loyal to President Saleh, still roam the streets. All along the city's major thoroughfares, Yahya's men stare intently at passing traffic, looking down the barrels of Russian heavy machine guns mounted in the back of camouflage-painted pickup trucks.

The rural north: The land of tribal autonomy

Yemen's tribal areas have never been friendly to centralized control, at the behest of foreign powers or Yemeni leaders. The country's most powerful tribal confederation, Hashid, has even managed to bring the fight to Saleh's doorstep in the capital. Under the leadership of Sadeq al-Ahmar and his younger brother Hamid, a billionaire businessman and opposition political figure, the Hashid confederation and Yemen's Republican Guards engaged in a 13-day-long war in downtown Sanaa. After Saudi mediators managed to negotiate a ceasefire, fighting began in several tribal strongholds such as the city of Arhab, just a few miles outside Sanaa. With fighting still ongoing, tribesmen are showing no intention of coming under the umbrella of Saleh's government ever again.

Marib governorate: Yemen's Wild West

The Marib governorate, east of Sanaa, has been wracked with chaos ever since the death of Jabr al-Shabwani, son of prominent Sheikh Ali al-Shabwani, killed by a U.S. drone strike in May 2010. To take revenge for his son's death, Ali destroyed a section of one of Yemen's largest oil pipelines, leading to billions of dollars in lost revenue for the Yemeni government. As anti-government protest began sweeping the country, Ali and his tribesmen ramped up their campaign against the government's infrastructure. The oil pipeline was attacked several more times, and attacks against power stations began. In addition, tribesmen still control a long stretch of road leading into Sanaa, blocking shipments of fuel.

Taiz: The hub of the youth revolution

Last February, protesters first erected tents in the city of Taiz, Yemen's intellectual and industrial capital. Since the first tent spike was driven into the asphalt, crackdowns on protesters have been worse than in any other city in the country. Also unlike anywhere else in Yemen, tribesmen have been fighting back against security forces in Taiz. Sheik Hamoud al-Makhlafi, a former member of Saleh's ruling General People's Congress Party, has declared himself and his tribe to be defenders of the youth revolution. Street battles are a common occurrence in this contested city as Saleh and his relatives attempt to retain control of Yemen's second-largest city.

Aden: South Yemen's former capital

Founded in 2007, Yemen's southern separatist movement has suffered extremely violent crackdowns and political imprisonments. Claiming to be under the occupation of the northern tribal regime, the southern movement has come out of the shadows in Aden and is operating in the open. The military personnel loyal to Saleh's regime are distinctly absent in Aden. Unlike Yemen's capital where anti-government banners and signs are found only near Sanaa University, the port city is emblazoned with anti-government graffiti on walls and shops and even across the high security walls of now empty government buildings. The flag of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, the former state of South Yemen, is a ubiquitous symbol, hastily spray-painted throughout the city.

The Abyan governorate: Under AQAP control?

Last month, armed militants descended from the surrounding mountains into the city of Zinjibar, the capital of the Abyan governorate. The militants were able to seize control of the city and adjacent villages with ease, according to Abyan residents and witnesses who say that Yemen's elite American-trained counterterrorism unit inexplicably withdrew from the area hours before the attack. Since the seizure of the area by what the government claims to be al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) militants, a war of attrition has been waged by the Yemeni military through constant airstrikes and artillery bombardments.

Thousands of Abyan residents have fled the intense violence.

With southern Yemen falling away from government control and the north embroiled in political and tribal chaos, Yemen's fractured entities show little sign of coalescing. While several tribes, including the Houthi rebels and the Hashid Confederation, have expressed support for the youth revolution, few people, if any, have command of the vast tribal network that Saleh utilized so masterfully. Along with disparate northern tribes, many southern Yemenis have expressed a desire to secede from the north completely regardless of who is in power in Sanaa.

Prospects for the future

Whatever government is born from Yemen's conflict, if any, it will face the almost insurmountable task of re-creating a state out of a county that has descended into regional control. With the economy gradually slipping into

complete free-fall, powerful tribesmen have taken it upon themselves to supply Sanaa with gasoline and other basic essentials, increasing personal revenue and solidifying their control over major highways. With Yemen importing most of its supply of wheat grain and other basic foods, the power to distribute fuel to trucks bringing food into major cities has fallen to tribes. Any new government that is born from Yemen's political turmoil would face these tribes as powerful rivals to consolidated central government.

With tribes seizing control of the northern economy, Yemen's south is left to suffer the consequences of what has essentially become a foreign economic crisis. As already deep-seated hatred for northerners continue to fester as the conflict continues, south Yemen, similar to Somaliland, may simply find it more prudent to secede and avoid undue suffering.

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Opposition to Yemen's opposition

By Stacey Philbrick Yadav, July 14, 2011

After six months of ongoing peaceful protests, a fracturing of the armed forces, and ongoing violence in numerous parts of the country, Yemenis face increasingly dire conditions each day. And yet they keep showing up. While non-democratic (nay, anti-democratic) neighbors fitfully engage in mediation efforts while also giving refuge to President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the United States continues to interpret the crisis through the lens of counterterrorism. Concerned about the risk of an emboldened al Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the United States has offered tepid support for the aspirations of the country's majority, pinned its hopes on an atavistic autocrat, and

opted to increase controversial drone attacks in some of the most unstable parts of the country.

This strategy is mistaken. It presupposes a narrow understanding of U.S. interests centered on counterterrorism, which I, and others, have argued against elsewhere. But it also assumes that working against the revolutionary aspirations of millions of Yemenis is, in fact, the best way to counter the threat of AQAP. Supporting the development of a democratically-constituted Yemen and offering support to its leaders as they build legitimate state institutions makes more

sense. This Friday, the Organizing Committee of the Revolution, which is advocating for Saleh's immediate transfer of powers and the formation of a transitional council, has issued a call for a march in pursuit of a "Civil State." Yemenis from across ideological, occupational, generational, and class lines will gather around the country to demand a state accountable to its rights-bearing citizens. It will be the 25th Friday on which they have done so, camped out in the squares for the weeks in between.

Opportunistic, "spontaneous," and organized oppositions

It has been widely observed that Yemen's opposition movement is in fact a very wide tent, featuring multiple groups with shared (and some not-so-shared) visions of Yemen's ideal political future. The six-month standoff between the opposition and the regime has by now also produced considerable de facto devolution of authority in this highly regionally-divided and socially stratified country. But the emphasis on the different factions of the opposition has been too frequently inverted in media accounts, placing undue (and historically short-sighted) stress on those groups engaged in armed conflict with elements of the Yemeni armed forces loyal to President Saleh and his family.

Attention has focused mainly on the "opportunistic opposition" composed of various tribal leaders (especially the Ahmar brothers), military figures (notably Ali Muhsin and his First Armored Division) and insurgents (including the Huthis in the North and an array of Southern secessionists, usually unnamed). What these groups have in common is that they are willing to use force, and that they are "latecomers" to the movement for political change. All that we know of their substantive politics is that they would like a piece of the leadership pie in a post-revolutionary Yemen. Some, undoubtedly, have larger appetites than others. All of this is certainly important, and it means that they are relevant to a political solution, but it does not mean that they are central to it. For this, we ought to look more closely at the other two sources of political opposition.

In contrast to these latecomers, who mainly joined opposition protesters after the March 18 massacre, the leaders of the "Change Revolution" took cues from their Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts and mobilized an absolutely unprecedented, nonviolent opposition movement that has stretched across the country. Beginning in earnest in February, protesters issued a critique of both the regime and of the ineffective opposition parties that abetted Saleh. Gradually, the hundreds of semi-organized groups camped out in "Change Squares" across Yemen's major cities have come to articulate a more specific set of demands. Still, the complete removal Saleh, his immediate family, and the remnants of his political regime remain at the top of the list.

Yet it is misleading to call this a "youth" revolution, or to assume that its February origins were *sui generis*. The ages and social positions of its leaders vary tremendously, and many leaders of this "spontaneous" opposition have their roots in the partisan politics of the ideological opposition. They are called "youth" in part because of their (relative) age, but also because the common thread in their organizing is one of hope for the future, making youth a logical rhetorical motif. It is a metaphorical youth, perhaps, but its aspirations are unquestionably forward-looking.

The massive and utterly unprecedented protests organized by these groups are astounding, in their scope, duration, and peacefulness. But the biggest misperception about the Yemeni revolution is that it began with the protests of more or less spontaneously organized youth.

For over a decade, the organized political opposition has sought to substantially reform the political regime in Yemen and to replace Saleh through legal and non-violent mechanisms. This opposition, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), is itself a cross-ideological umbrella of religious parties, socialists, and other leftist nationalists. Indeed, it is so ideologically diverse that issues of procedural and institutional reform have, for a long time, been all that the groups can agree to pursue in common. The Youth revolutionaries' critique of the JMP has centered on its gradual and incremental approach, and its

perceived neglect of grassroots. Alienated over time from constituencies outside of Sana'a, the JMP had difficulty articulating a common position on the Huthi crisis, all but missed the emergence of the Southern movement, and was able to carve out only minimal concessions from an encroaching regime. In other words, until a mobilizing push came from Cairo and Tunis and they began to organize (reformist, but not revolutionary) protests of their own in January, the JMP appeared to be teetering on obsolescence.

So why should we care about JMP? For two reasons: first, because the JMP and the "youth" leaders are not entirely discrete categories and there has been a great deal of cooperation, mutual reinforcement, and ideological co-articulation across this porous border; second, because revolutions beget new institutions. If Yemen's revolution succeeds, it will be JMP leaders who will be best able to navigate (and, they hope, craft) whatever new institutions take shape in Yemen. The protesters themselves seem to appreciate this. As one activist complained recently, "Our problem now is not with [Saleh], but with the JMP." Some of the youth leaders complain that the JMP is "hijacking" the revolution by taking control of Sana'a's Change Square in cooperation with Ali Muhsin's forces, and marches of "Independent Youth" are being organized against the member parties. At the same time, members of the Yemeni Socialist Party and other leftists have now also begun to raise the specter of an Islamist takeover within the JMP itself, as well as in the squares. But neither accusation seems entirely fair to the historic role of the JMP, or of Islamists within the alliance.

What about the Islamists?

As in Egypt and elsewhere, at least some of the U.S. ambivalence toward the revolution in Yemen relates to the possibility (or probability) of substantial Islamist participation in a post-revolutionary democratic regime. But rather than ask "what if" Islamists were allowed to legally participate, we ought to ask how Islamists have functioned to date.

Unlike Egypt and Tunisia, Yemen has enjoyed a much higher degree of political competitiveness over the past two decades. Islamists have been organized and integrated into the existing regime. During the 1990s, they even participated briefly in a power-sharing Presidential Council and held several cabinet portfolios. Over the past decade, however, as the Saleh regime blurred the boundary between the ruling party and state institutions to deepen its advantages, the electoral system has become less competitive and press more openly suppressed. Meanwhile, the Islamist Islah party, Yemen's second largest party since the 1993 elections, moved into the opposition. Since its nascent stages in 2002, the Joint Meeting Parties has served as an increasingly institutionalized vehicle for coordination between Islah, their former rivals, the Yemeni Socialist party, and a handful of smaller parties.

So what does the experience building and sustaining the JMP tell us about Islah and the likely future of Islamism in a post-revolutionary Yemen? First, cross-ideological cooperation has tended to cohere around "non-controversial" issues of procedural democratic reform. The issues that have cemented the alliance have been questions of transparency, anti-corruption, devolution, electoral reform, etc., and there is a generation of Islamists conversant in the idioms of and committed to building a democratic regime. The most divisive issues have been related to issues of gender equality and, to some extent, sectarian and regional concerns. But even on these thornier questions, the alliance has not broken, even when it has been bent by disagreement.

By far the most important lesson from the decade of JMP coordination, however, has come from developments within member parties. While deep fissures exist within both the Islamist Islah party and the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), the process of building and sustaining the alliance bolstered the internal position of moderates within both parties and isolated ideological extremists. As the Southern Movement gained ground, secessionists did not advance to leadership in the YSP. And in the 2007 internal Islah elections, a slate of young activists with deep commitments to the JMP were voted to the

party's internal governing council. It's worth noting that 13 women, including current protest leader Tawakkol Karman, were elected, despite the party's unwillingness to field a female candidate in national elections. The popularity of these younger JMP activists within Islah was an indictment of more radical leaders, like Shaykh al-Zindani, who was voted out of his leadership position and who had publicly opposed this faction, especially the women. Many activists, both inside and out of the party, credited the internal shakeup to the younger cadre's role in mobilizing cross-ideological support for political reform — of building the antecedents of the revolution.

It should come as no surprise, then, that many of this younger cadre of activists have been central to the peaceful, democratic revolutionary movement, and have provided a critical link across the porous border between the JMP and the “youth” Islamists in a democratically-constituted Yemen will be socially conservative on some issues, but they will be democrats. U.S. policy, favoring a myopic focus on AQAP, has bypassed the story of these Islamists for too long.

U.S. interests in Yemen

Any effort to “get Yemen right” is likely to get lost in the noise, but there are plenty of ways to get Yemen wrong. Unfortunately, viewing the country largely (if not exclusively) through the lens of counterterrorism has been the dominant approach adopted over the past decade and strengthened considerably under the Obama administration. Using John Brennan, counterterrorism advisor and former CIA station chief in Riyadh, as the primary public face of U.S. policy in Yemen communicates this approach — as does his meeting with President Saleh in Saudi Arabia. Words of tepid support from U.S. diplomats regarding political transition show that the Washington still pins considerable hopes on the idea that

Saleh (or his successor) might still serve as a “good czar” in Yemen, ruling the country with a firm hand in order to limit the spread of AQAP or its ability to stage an attack on the U.S. or its allies, notably Saudi Arabia.

But the status-quo strategy has substantively increased risk to U.S. strategic interests and stands to continue to do so. Saleh has been, at best, an inconsistent ally. He has abetted the rise of AQAP, cooperated fitfully with counterterrorism policies while building ties with some advocates of violence, and used aid earmarked for counterterrorism assistance to squash his domestic critics, including many in the JMP. His unwillingness to yield to popular pressure for reform (even before the current crisis) has increased the chaos and undermined the legitimacy of those Yemeni institutions that will be needed for future counterterrorism cooperation.

There is no good reason *not* to support the protesters' demands for a transitional council in Yemen. Supporting a new regime and, in time, encouraging that regime as it rebuilds the institutional legitimacy that has been destroyed or prevented by decades of mismanagement can help to produce the good will necessary for long-term cooperation in counterterrorism. The alternative — support for an aging and injured autocrat and/or his designated successors, plus a strategy of drone strikes that violate Yemeni sovereignty with impunity — will lead to a wellspring of anti-American sentiment. With good cause.

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Qaddafi's fall rivets Yemen

By Tom Finn, August 23, 2011

SANAA, Yemen — Shock waves are once again rippling across the Arab world. Scenes of Libya's "freedom fighters" streaming into Tripoli on Monday, Aug. 22, were soon reverberating across the region and the world. It was not long before eyes were turning to the other rulers under threat in the Middle East, searching for the next candidate to fall. Most turned to Syria, where some are prophesying that a similar fate awaits the beleaguered and increasingly isolated President Bashar al-Assad.

But in Yemen, the poorest and youngest country in the Arab world, tens of thousands were also tuning in to soak up the drama unfolding in North Africa. It was the downfall of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak in early February that first set Yemen's protest movement ablaze, sending thousands of young men spilling into the capital's dusty streets to face the rubber bullets and water cannons of President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime.

Six months of mass demonstrations and armed clashes have come to a grinding stalemate between the seemingly irremovable Saleh and a fractured opposition struggling to form a transitional government to manage the democratization of Yemen.

But Sunday night, as the Libyan rebels tightened their grasp on Tripoli, that same feeling of nervous energy and unfathomed potential was back in Sanaa. Excitement seemed to ripple down the long lines of dusty, battered tents in Change Square, a sprawling shantytown filled with thousands of die-hard protesters, as men fumbled with their television remotes and cranked up the volume on their radios.

Within minutes a huge crowd had assembled around a projector in the middle of the square to watch the fuzzy images of jubilant Libyans being broadcast live on Al Jazeera dance across a white sheet of tarpaulin. One man tugged at my sleeve, beckoning up at the sight of

two men draped in Libyan flags holding each other in an emotional embrace, and shouted in English, "We want this too!" A teenager who had shimmied up a rusty lamppost with a megaphone in his hand soon whipped the crowd into a frenzy, shouting, "O Ali and O Bashar, Qaddafi lost his head."

"Our turn tomorrow," the crowd roared as it marched out of the square.

The Libyan showdown has brought a welcome breath of fresh air to Yemen's uprising, which as it enters its seventh month is threatening to grow stale. A few months ago, the deafening calls for the strongman to go followed by a series of mass defections by major generals and senior members of Saleh's government and tribe appeared to have brought his regime to its knees. But in recent months the momentum has ebbed. The Yemeni youth movement is slowly being nudged aside by powerful tribal warlords and military chiefs jostling for position.

Little has changed since early June, when Saleh was airlifted to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment after a suspected booby-trap explosion ripped through the mosque in his compound, maiming the president and injuring several of his aides. Saleh was lucky to escape with his life. On Monday, Abdul Aziz Abdul Ghani, the speaker of Yemen's upper house of parliament and the third-most powerful political figure in the Yemeni government, succumbed to the injuries he sustained in the same attack. Ghani, known to be one of the few officials Saleh trusted, is the second senior official to have lost his life in the palace explosion.

But now, nearly three months and 10 operations later, Saleh looks to be gearing up for a dramatic return to his country. He rounded off a televised address to the country last week with a vow to his supporters that he would "return to Sanaa soon." His speech was met with

a deafening chorus of boos and gunfire as his supporters fired their Kalashnikovs in celebration, and his opponents in protest, at the prospect of his homecoming.

Ironically, Saleh's exodus has helped ease the strain on his crumbling regime, which is currently headed by his deputy, Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi, and shielded by his son, Ahmed Ali, the head of Yemen's elite Republican Guard. Those rallying in Change Square, now bereft of their once deafening, powerful rallying cry, "Irhal, ya Ali" ("Go out, Ali"), are being forced to come up with a new set of demands and strategies to try to push their uprising forward.

But with no common enemy, the fragile alliance binding the disparate members of Yemen's opposition is beginning to show its cracks. On Sunday, a group of influential politicians pulled out of a 143-member national council formed last week by the opposition, claiming it did not fairly represent politicians from the oil-exporting south. (North and South Yemen were unified under Saleh in 1990, but southerners often accuse the north of discrimination.)

Yemen's formal opposition, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), a motley grouping of Islamists, socialists, and tribal elements — not to be confused with the street movement — has spent months trying in vain to broker Saleh's exit. In May, the JMP signed a deal drawn up by the Gulf Cooperation Council that sought to end the veteran leader's 33-year rule. But Saleh has repeatedly refused to sign, and the fear remains that if the president goes for good, the bonds holding together Yemen's Shiite rebels, southern secessionists, and English-speaking students will quickly unravel.

A sudden reappearance by Saleh might breathe new life into the protesters, but it could just as easily spell civil war. Sadeq al-Ahmar, the grizzly-bearded sheikh at the head of Yemen's most influential tribe, which has sided with the opposition, recently swore "by God" that he would "never let Saleh rule again." The last time hostilities between the Saleh and Ahmar families turned violent, in May, a week's worth of mortar battles erupted, flattening an entire neighborhood in the capital's east and killing hundreds on both sides. With thousands of Ahmar's rebel tribesmen and renegade troops loyal to defected general Ali Mohsin roaming the capital, it would only take the smallest of sparks to reignite hostilities.

Whether it's Saleh or someone else who seizes the reins in Yemen, the country's next leader will have a lot to contend with: a growing political vacuum, a rapidly imploding economy, and the prospect of even deeper chaos as outlying provinces slide from the government's grasp into the hands of al Qaeda and other jihadi groups that are exploiting the political turmoil to move more freely and launch more ambitious attacks.

With little prospect of NATO or other foreign troops on the ground in Yemen, Saleh may not be as rattled by the Libyan experience as some might hope. Yet the sight of Qaddafi behind bars could still have an earth-shattering effect in Yemen. If Egypt was anything to go by, Libya might still prove inspirational enough to set things here in motion again.

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Any way out for Yemen?

By Tom Finn, September 14, 2011

“Why do you guys in the West keep falling for the same old tricks?” Yusif Al-Ra’adi, a lean-looking student who passed up his studies in engineering back in May to join his country’s uprising, told me as we sat in the shade of a sheet of blue tarpaulin in Sana’a’s Change Square. “He [Saleh] has no intention whatsoever of stepping down, it’s a dance, this is a political agreement that really means nothing to us.”

Such skepticism throws cold water on the hopes raised by Yemen’s President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s decree this week granting his deputy the right to sign a deal with the opposition for a transfer of power. Saleh is currently in Saudi Arabia recovering from chest wounds he sustained in a booby-trap bombing of his palace in early June. He surprised observers with an announcement that Yemen’s Vice President, Abed Mansour Hadi, could now sign a deal drawn up by the Gulf Cooperation Council, which offers Saleh immunity in exchange for early presidential elections. A peaceful way out of this year’s bout of bloody demonstrations and swirling financial and political turmoil might still be on the cards.

But the sense of optimism rippling through the pages of western newspapers has been much harder to detect here on the grubby streets of the capital, Sana’a. “No deal, no maneuvering, the president should leave!” was the cry that rang out through the city on Tuesday as tens of thousands of men, women, and children spilled out onto the streets to decry the latest attempt by the country’s president to evade pressure to step down. Yemen’s beleaguered but tenacious demonstrators have endured months of bloody repression, tit for tat political negotiations, and hollow concessions. Now — unsurprisingly — they say that Saleh’s agreement delegating “constitutional capabilities” to his deputy is nothing but a ploy by the embattled leader to buy himself more time.

The decree certainly has its shortfalls. While Hadi technically now has the ability to sign Saleh’s premiership

away, Saleh retains the right to reject the deal if he desires. Yemenis have learned over the years not to put much faith in Saleh’s promises. More importantly, there is no reference to the fate of the institution currently propping up the regime in Saleh’s absence: the armed forces, large portions of which remain under the control of Saleh’s son, nephew, and cousins.

For all those problems, the deal might still look attractive to some parts of the opposition. With Yemen locked into a seemingly unbreakable stalemate between an absentee president and a fractured opposition coalition in the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), some analysts are touting early presidential elections as a potential escape route to Yemen’s political turmoil. But while the JMP might jump at the chance to face off against Saleh and his ruling party in the polls it’s unlikely that elections would do anything to placate the hundreds of thousands of Yemenis who remain camped out in tented shantytowns across the country.

“Presidential elections now will only replace one dictator with another. The youth expect a genuine solution and not a democracy charade,” says Salem Ben Mubarak, a leading member of a coordinating council on Facebook called the Youth Revolution for Change. “We want fundamental constitutional changes and fundamental government behavioral change and we will not rest until our demands are met.” Salem’s views echo that of thousands of other youthful pro-democracy protesters who feel that the formal opposition in its ongoing negotiations with the incumbent regime is selling them down the river. As the days drag by, Salem and his counterparts fear that their peaceful pro-democracy movement will soon be eclipsed by Yemen’s tribal warlords and military chiefs who’ve been jockeying for position in Saleh’s absence.

For now Saleh’s strategy appears to be working — as he drags the hoped for transition out, the patchy alliance of anti-Saleh actors is starting to splinter. For the first time in

months the painful issue of north-south division (North and South Yemen were unified under Saleh in 1990, but southerners often accuse the north of discrimination) has resurfaced and is preventing opposition groups from forming a solid and united front.

But protest leaders, who point to the large and ongoing demonstrations, hope for something more. “There should be comprehensive reforms in the country’s governmental institutions,” argues Alaa Aj Jarban, a young protest leader from the southern port city of Aden. He, like other protestors, calls for a referendum on the political system, and elections for president and the government. And unlike some Arab protest movements, Jarban is eager for international assistance, especially financial and technical assistance to “help Yemenis build a new democratic and civil country.”

As Saleh continues to ponder his next move in Riyadh, “the situation,” as locals call it here, is growing increasingly desperate. Frustration is giving way to outright anger as the cost of food and fuel continues to skyrocket in a country where some 40 percent of the population of 23 million people live on less than \$2 a day and one third face

chronic hunger. For those unable to afford petrol-powered generators, electricity is now a fleeting luxury, flicking on for an hour each day and off again for ten. Indeed, the United Nations has recently accused the government of trying to pressure and punish the civilian population by cutting off access to electricity, fuel, and water.

How things play out in the next few weeks will be determined by whether the United States and Yemen’s neighbors in the gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, become convinced that the impending collapse of Yemen merits a more interventionist role. So far their only real achievement has been to keep Saleh in Saudi Arabia who despite giving periodic reminders that he’ll be “returning to Sana’a soon,” seems unlikely to be flying back anytime in the near future. Otherwise, with political negotiations continually flopping, Yemen’s economy faltering, and tensions running high among protesters on the ground, the fate of this impoverished country will end up being thrashed out by Yemen’s fractious armed forces and powerful tribal chiefs. Yemen’s tenacious democratic protest movement deserves something more.

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Yemen’s counterrevolutionary power-play

By Abdul-Ghani al-Iryani, September 16, 2011

Observers of Yemen are often asked why the revolution there has taken so long and why it has been so inconclusive. The more basic question — never asked, though inextricably tied to this — is why an uprising started in the first place.

When the Arab Spring started in Tunisia and began to spread in the region, I did not think the conditions in Yemen were ripe for it. Indeed corruption, inequality,

and the callous disregard for law were much worse in Yemen than any other country in the region. However, the conditions usually viewed as prerequisites for revolution — a large and mobile middle class, a strong civil society, high literacy rate, and internet penetration — are all non-existent. Yet the state does benefit from an historical accident, the adoption of a multi-party system in 1990 as part of the unity agreement between South and North Yemen. Twenty years of multi-party experience

and the attendant mobilization skills of politicking made it possible for Yemeni activists to launch the revolution. Unfortunately, the absence of a broad middle class and a dynamic civil society has stunted the movement's momentum. The revolution has gradually transformed into what is largely an elitist struggle for power.

In February, the revolution was in its purest form, an escalating popular protest not controlled by political parties or political factions. Activists demonstrated a degree of national unity rarely witnessed in Yemen. But the Joint Meeting of Parties (JMP), the main coalition of opposition groups, was reluctant to participate in the protests. As a result, youth in squares across Yemen cried out, "No partisanship and no parties. It is a youth revolution."

Junior partners in the JMP, especially the Yemen Socialist Party (YSP), were more forthcoming in support of the revolutionary platform from the start. Meanwhile, the Islamic party Islah, the main opposition faction, which until recently had an alliance with President Ali Abdullah Saleh, was hesitant to commit until the revolution gathered pace. They had the most to lose by openly challenging the regime. Islah eventually joined the youth in full force and successfully maneuvered to control the organizing committee of Al-Taghyeer (Change) Square in Sana'a and was instrumental in setting up many provincial protest squares. It's worth noting that the exception to Islah dominance played out in al-Hurreyah (freedom) Square in Taiz, Yemen's third city, which came to be referred to as the heart of the revolution.

From then on, the slogans and the rhetoric of the protestors came to represent the voice of the JMP rather than the youth. A notable example of this shift in rhetoric is the attacks on the General People's Congress (GPC), the nominal ruling party which lacks hard power and which the masses do not perceive as a primary adversary of the revolution. Islah's disparagement of the GPC is seen as a self-serving tactic, a ploy which they hope would lead to disbanding the GPC and thus giving Islah a real chance of gaining a majority in post-revolution elections.

The situation transformed in March after the massacre at al-Karamah where snipers shot dead 54 unarmed youth and injured many more. That horrific event led to mass defections within the regime, the military, the bureaucracy, and the ruling party.

General Ali Mohsin, Shaykh Sadeq al-Ahmar, and Sheikh Abdul-Majid Al Zindani were the most notable converts to the revolution. Mohsin, the second-most powerful person in Yemen, was Saleh's closest ally. As Saleh succeeded in concentrating power around him and his closest relatives, Mohsin was sidelined and, in turn, became Saleh's greatest competitor. Al-Ahmar inherited the powerful position of the Paramount Sheikh of Hashid Tribal Confederacy from his father, the legendary Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar, whose approval of Saleh was sought by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia before it agreed to install Saleh as president in 1978. Moreover, Zindani is the most popular and best-known Yemeni hard-line cleric with links to Osama Bin Laden. A leader of Islah, he was Saleh's ally against Islah moderate leadership in the past few years.

All three regime insiders — Mohsin, al-Ahmar, and Zindani — are publically perceived as equal partners with Saleh in the regime's past misdeeds. They lost some of their privilege in the past few years as Saleh and his family sought to monopolize power, but continued to enjoy access and privilege that even the vice president and prime minister couldn't dream of. Mohsin's forces, the First Armored Division, began to provide military protection to the Sana'a protest square while at the same time exercising excessive police control of the square. Islah activists and radical students of Zindani's Al Iman University also lent hand to this crackdown. Many independent protesters, seeing their revolution being hijacked by the original tripod of regime power — the military, the tribe, and politicized Islam — went home in resignation.

The introduction of these figures into the revolutionary camp polarized the public and gave the Saleh regime an opportunity to regain some popular support. Saleh moved from a defensive to an offensive posture. Hence, Saleh's supporters chanted, "No Mohsin; No Hamid (al-Ahmar)."

At that point, the revolution appeared so adrift that many concluded that it was no longer a revolution; it became just another episode in the regime's perpetual factional competition and power struggle.

After the initial thuggish response, and the murder of more than 200 innocent protesters, the regime developed two comprehensive strategies. The first was to maneuver and stall in the hope of outlasting the revolutionary fervor so that Saleh can stay in power until the end of the presidential term, 2013 — even if he has to give up much of his presidential authority to his vice president. The second strategy — developed at the negotiation table by regime moderate negotiators, their JMP counterparts, and international mediators — was a peaceful and orderly transfer of power, a political transformation that would lead to a fully decentralized parliamentary system.

Most of the GPC and the general public support such a transition, originally expressed in the famous Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative, later elaborated upon by U.N. mediator Jamal Bin Omar. The GCC Initiative, signed by the JMP and GPC, stipulated the transfer of Saleh's executive power to the vice president, who would then oversee the formation of a government of national unity; the opposition would hold the prime-ministerial post and half the cabinet portfolios. In return for giving up power, Saleh and all his associates would be granted immunity from prosecution. But at the very last moment Saleh refused to sign it.

Both of these strategies have partially succeeded. While outlasting the revolution is an unreasonable expectation, the regime is now in a stronger position than it was just a few months ago. In contrast, the revolutionary movement has weakened due to the opposition's miscalculations, elites' hijacking of the revolution, and the regime's disingenuous plan to subject the people to such hardship that "stability" is valued at any cost. The second strategy is now at the final crossroads.

After months of false promises, Saleh has signed a limited delegation of power to his vice president. But will the process of implementing the initiative move forward? We are awaiting JMP's response. If they agree, they will find the vice president and most of the GPC to be as anxious to complete the transfer of power as they are. While this arrangement falls short of the opposition's expectations, the two sides can capitalize on the constitutional authority of the vice president to overcome Saleh's recalcitrance and proceed with the business of forming a government of national unity. In such an outcome, the power dynamic would change and produce a more powerful coalition in favor of a peaceful transfer of power. If that does not happen, though, there is nothing on the horizon that would stand in the way of a military confrontation that could — if not checked by the international community — deteriorate into civil war.

As the politicians haggle over the transfer of power, the youth seem to be set up for a bitter disappointment. While they advocate a new Yemen of freedom, democracy, equality, and equal opportunity, they find themselves in alliance with some of the shadiest characters of the old regime. Some of the youth leaders now recognize that they need to re-examine their alliances and identify those on the other side who share those democratic ideals. As the opposition is leaning toward accepting Saleh's latest initiative, many of the youth now realize that they have more in common with the GPC rank-and-file than they do with some of their current allies. Once Saleh leaves office, the youth can expand the democratic camp into the GPC popular base and improve the chances of having a more democratic future.

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The costs of ignoring Yemen

By Marc Lynch, September 19, 2011

The long stalemate in Yemen took a bloody turn yesterday which was as horrifying as it was utterly predictable. Regime forces opened fire on the tenacious, peaceful protestors in Change Square in Sanaa, killing dozens and flooding the hospitals with the wounded. The internet has been flooded with horrific videos which could easily have come from Libya or Syria. The violent crisis which many of us have been warning would result from neglecting Yemen and allowing its political stalemate to grind on has now arrived. The Sanaa massacre should be a crystal clear signal that the Yemeni status quo is neither stable nor sustainable, and that the failure to find a political resolution ensures escalating bloodshed and humanitarian crisis. It is time to push for an immediate political transition — and one which does not include immunity for Saleh's men.

It has been difficult to get anyone to pay attention to Yemen. For months, ever since President Ali Abdullah Saleh had been rushed to Saudi Arabia for treatment of wounds from an apparent assassination attempt. Distracted by hot wars in Libya and Syria, the struggling transition in Egypt, and the diplomatic train wreck between Israel and the Palestinians, the United States and most of the region put Yemen on the back burner. Even though thousands of incredibly determined and resilient Yemenis continued to protest regularly, and analysts warned with increasing desperation that missing the opportunity to bring about a transition would be a disastrous mistake, the urgency faded away. Indeed, Saleh's regime counted on that fading external urgency as part of its strategy of delay and distraction, hoping to outlast, confuse, divide, and where possible crush the protest movement. Now, Yemenis are paying for that neglect in blood.

The United States, the Gulf Coordination Council (GCC), the United Nations, and Yemen's opposition need to push for Saleh to leave power now and for Yemen to immediately begin a meaningful political transition. Not in a few months, not in a few years, and not empty promises of future change

which no Yemeni any longer believes. This does *not* mean calling for military intervention. After Libya and the debate over Syria, military action has regrettably become many peoples' first rather than last instinct even when it is very clearly neither appropriate nor likely. It means throwing full political support to Yemen's opposition, making clear that Yemeni officials will be held accountable before international tribunals for their role in violence against civilians, and pushing hard to end a stalemate which too many saw as an acceptable state of affairs.

Months of inattention have made this task harder, not easier. Yemen's protest movement had been one of the most impressive and even astonishing of its Arab counterparts, and by March it seemed inevitable that Saleh's regime would soon fall in the face of a peaceful, mass uprising. But it did not fall, even after Saleh's departure, and a grinding stalemate ensued. The United States and the international community essentially delegated the Yemen file to Saudi Arabia and the GCC, which quickly proved that it was either not up to the task or not interested in finding a real solution. The Yemeni regime played on that inattention, looking to buy time and muddle through. The protestors instead proved amazingly resilient, turning out tens of thousands of people even as they struggled to find any way to achieve a political breakthrough. Qaddafi's fall from Tripoli had inspired the Yemeni protestors, renewing hope and galvanizing their efforts — making this week's escalation and brutality all the more significant not only in Yemen but across the region.

The atrocities should generate renewed urgency, but there should be no illusion that a solution will now be any easier to find. After long, difficult months the opposition is more fragmented. People are really suffering from the economic collapse. The regime's survival after it seemed on the brink of collapse has baffled its adversaries. Battle lines have hardened, and offers which once might have seemed reasonable now seem unacceptable. With the list

of dead and wounded Yemeni civilians growing and rage swelling across the country, few are likely to be interested in the GCC's deal granting amnesty to those responsible for a fresh massacre. I agree with them. One of the most important accomplishments of Libya and of the rapidly evolving international norms around the Arab uprisings has been the rejection of impunity for such atrocities, and Saleh's regime should be no exception.

This week's violence should be a spur to break this stalemate. But I fear that it is more likely that the world will simply continue to ignore what's happening in Yemen. Most of the attention of the Middle East policy community this week will be directed instead towards the drama of the Palestinian bid for recognition at the United Nations. Few in the West see many major interests in Yemen beyond the narrow, exclusive — and in today's context nearly indefensible — focus on al-Qaeda in the Arabian

Peninsula. The endless reports of horrors from Syria, and before that Libya, have numbed people to what must seem just one more episode in an endless litany of atrocities.

But all of this would be a mistake. For half a year now there has been a chance for Yemenis themselves to bring about genuine, positive change and break the dominance of a repressive and corrupt regime. The new round of violence makes achieving that change more urgent — and, if the United States, the GCC, the United Nations and others could only be brought to notice, finally possible. Yemen matters. Yemenis matter. Ignoring them has allowed a hurting political stalemate and a worsening humanitarian crisis. A non-policy of inattention to Yemen has only increased the risk of collapse into a real civil war, which would pose infinitely worse policy choices. Don't wait for that.



Time to freeze Saleh's assets

By Jeb Boone, November 10, 2011

On Monday, French Foreign Minister Alan Juppe stated that freezing Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh's assets should be discussed as soon as possible. Such an assets freeze has been an action pushed by nationwide protesters for months and is widely seen as the first step that must be taken if Yemen's 10-month long political stalemate is to come to an end.

After being tricked into believing that Saleh would sign a Gulf Cooperation Council brokered power transfer deal three times, the international community has finally realized that Saleh has no intention of leaving power until at least 2013, the end of his official presidential term of office. Other than using language

to "condemn" the killing of peaceful protesters, an ineffectual U.N. resolution, and asking nicely, an asset freeze would be the first real attempt to put pressure on President Saleh to step down.

Meanwhile in Sanaa, looming above the entrances to Change Square are enormous 60 foot high signs demanding an end of Saleh's 33-year long hold on power over Yemen. While some of these banners are partially in Arabic, all of them have "Get out" printed across them in English. Protesters often wave English placards during demonstrations and flock to journalists with their homemade English signs.

Protest committees have released open letters to President Obama and other western leaders, pleading for the international community to step up pressure on Saleh to follow up on his promise to leave power. While it is only a pledge to discuss the freezing of Saleh's assets with other European leaders, such a pledge is the first of its kind to take concrete action against Saleh beyond simply rhetoric.

Short of asking for foreign military intervention, which most protesters reject outright, Yemenis have done all they can to make their struggle known to those abroad. Fully aware of their own lack of coverage in the international media, Yemenis have sought to increase their visibility in the international community from the outset of the protest movement last February by providing English language resources to Western journalists, establishing committees made up of English language speakers to issue press releases and hold press conferences, and making sure every protest sign was in both English and Arabic.

The United States and other Western nations continue to see Saleh as an ally against terrorism and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) but in fact the Yemeni president is an enabler of further unrest. While rival political and military factions continue to battle in Yemen's urban centers, fighting endures in the country's rural tribal areas as well. Virtually impossible for Western journalists to cover, fighting in the Arhab and Nihm regions of the Sanaa governorate between tribesmen and loyalist military forces have gone on for months with Arhabis threatening to seize control of the Sanaa airport several times.

Further, Yemen's northern Houthi Shiite rebels have been bogged down in fighting with Salafis in the northern governorates of Al-Jawf and Sa'ada for months. Salafism, an ideology closely associated with Islamic fundamentalism, is also incredibly anti-Shia, going so far as to call Shia Muslims unbelievers. In some cases, AQAP have claimed responsibility for attacks against Houthi rebels in Sa'ada and al-Jawf.

Most interestingly, several Yemenis, including government officials, are claiming that Saudi Arabia is indeed funding

and supporting these Salafi tribesmen in a fight against the Houthis, a group of individuals that Saudi Arabia is incredibly fearful of. Shocking the world and embarrassing the Saudi military, the Houthi rebels beat back a Saudi advance into Sa'ada in 2009 after some rebel elements began to cross the border into the Kingdom. With an army full of inexperienced troops, Riyadh will do everything in its power to contain the rebellion within Yemeni borders. Supporting Salafi sheikhs in Al-Jawf and parts of Sa'ada with weapons and funding is perhaps the most effective method of doing so.

Continuing to tarry in putting real pressure on Saleh to leave power is directly contributing to prolonging conflicts in Yemen's rural areas. Saleh's sons and nephews have been taking the fight to anti-government tribesmen in the rural areas and inside the cities beginning with the war that took place in downtown Sanaa last May between the Hashid tribal confederation and loyalist forces. These tribes never openly threatened the regime through force of arms but simply pledged support to the "peaceful youth revolution." By deciding to openly attack tribes, Saleh has opened Yemen's ancient Pandora's box of tribal fighting prowess.

These tribal areas, often cited as "lawless," are in most cases governed by tribal law and relatively stable. While rural areas under the governance of tribalism does not necessarily give open spaces for AQAP to operate in, violence and unrest in these rural areas absolutely presents an opportunity for AQAP to take hold of rural areas and operate freely.

Indeed, such a situation exists in the Abyan governorate of South Yemen where the military has been battling Salafist fighters for months. The effects of the fighting are beginning to be felt in the southern port city of Aden, where suicide attacks and assassination attempts have become the order of the day. Aden residents and internally-displaced persons in Abyan are continually fearful of an all-out assault on the city. Unrest in the Marib governorate have starved the entire country of electricity and fuel and continues to contribute to the national state of decay now present in urban areas.

To stop further economic and political deterioration as well as reinstating stability across the country, the international pressure on Saleh will have to increase. Freezing his assets is a good place to start, as many Yemeni protesters have harped on since February, but it may take much more. Members of his family are still deeply entrenched in positions of power in the military and other branches of the government. For a solution to be found, international pressure must also be exerted on them to relinquish their positions of power as well.

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A House Divided

By Tom Finn, Atiaf al-Wazir, November 28, 2011

SANAA AND ADEN, Yemen – As Egyptians storm back into Tahrir Square and Libyans round up their remaining war criminals, Yemenis are praying that a power-transfer deal signed by President Ali Abdullah Saleh on Wednesday will prevent their nine-month civil uprising from descending into civil war.

Saleh, 67, had survived months of mass protests, defections from within his army, party, and tribe, and a June bomb attack on his palace that left him bed-ridden for three months in a Saudi Arabian military hospital. But with the economy of the verge of collapse, armed factions of the military clashing in the capital, and the threat of U.N. sanctions and asset-freezes looming, Yemen's wily leader of three decades appears finally to have decided to take a step back.

"This disagreement for the last 10 months has had a big impact on Yemen in the realms of culture, development, politics, which led to a threat to national unity and destroyed what has been built in past years," he told a flock of Saudi sheikhs, foreign ambassadors, and U.N. diplomats

seated on gold-crested chairs in a lavish Saudi palace after singing four copies of the agreement.

The deal, which had been initially cobbled together by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the United States back in April, requires an immediate transfer of power to Saleh's deputy, the relatively impotent Abd Rab Mansour al-Hadi, who will preside over a national unity government until early presidential elections scheduled for Feb. 21.

In return for signing, Yemeni lawmakers will grant Saleh and his sons immunity from prosecution — not a bad deal given the corruption allegations, and the hundreds of protesters shot dead in recent months by government troops. Yemenis, meanwhile, get a rare chance to push their faltering uprising into a new phase and search for a way out of the raging political turmoil.

But with Saleh now entrenched in his palace, clinging to the honorary title of president, and his sons and nephews still holding key positions in the military and intelligence services, the regime remains largely intact. Irked by the

shortfalls of the GCC deal and the thought of Saleh escaping prosecution, the tens of thousands of protesters who remain camped out in dusty squares across Yemen have pressed on with their rallies, marching daily. On Thursday, just a day after the agreement was signed, a mob of Kalashnikov-wielding *balaatija*, as the protesters call them — plainclothes government thugs — shot dead five demonstrators and maimed a further 30 as they stormed through the streets of Sanaa calling for Saleh to be put on trial.

Despite the violence, the sight of Saleh finally signing the deal came as a relief to many. But despite the breakthrough, Yemen faces a flawed and failed political compact. The country's future, most notably the question of its unity — the status of the South — now hangs ominously in the balance.

Saleh has long seen the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 as the jewel crowning his 33 years in power. His ruling party, the General People's Congress (GPC), has banged the drum of unity so hard and for so long that anyone caught questioning the merger is seen as a turncoat and risks being labeled an "enemy of the state."

In reality, Yemen's 21 years of existence have been wracked by internal wars, regional fragmentation, and mass protests. Yemen was, in many ways, the forerunner to this year's Arab Spring. A peaceful intifada has been in motion since the summer of 2007 in the southern governorates of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, once the Arab world's only Marxist state, before state bankruptcy and the collapse of the Soviet Union hastened its merger with the north in 1990. The new republican state never achieved its goal of full territorial sovereignty and large parts of the northern and eastern regions remain under tribal control.

A brief and bloody civil war in 1994 saw Saleh call in Salafi mercenaries — fresh from anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan — to crush the southern army. Flames rose from a government-owned beer factory torched by the Islamist *mujahideen* in Aden, the old capital of the south, as the Socialist leaders fled in fishing boats to Oman.

Northern military officers and opportunist merchants then descended on the south, grabbing land, oil, factories, pensions, and governmental posts. Men deprived of their jobs and pensions and women stripped of the rights enjoyed under the old Socialist administration bristled under what they regarded as northern occupation. Oil revenues from wells on what had been southern soil flowed into the coffers of Saleh and his followers.

The two parts of the country have irreversibly different cultures, many Yemenis believe. In the North it was common in the early years of unity to hear people referring to Southerners as "disbelievers" and describing their women as "loose;" in the South many saw Northerners as "ignorant" and "looters of state property."

Ironically, it was the outpouring of dissent against Saleh this past February — inspired by the uprising in Egypt — that made the president's long-held dream of a unified Yemen look for the first time like a real possibility. Brought together under a broad, anti-Saleh umbrella, societal groups with previously nothing in common were suddenly cast together, now willing to die for the same cause.

The fungal-like growth of a pro-democracy tented city in downtown Sanaa, later dubbed "Change Square," became the melting pot where jean-clad students from the capital mingled with northern Houthis rebels and gray-haired southern socialists camped in tents next to dagger-bearing tribesman from the east. Joyous chants such as "Our unity is a unity of hearts, no north and no south" captured newfound feelings of national solidarity. Youth coalitions in Change Square included members from Aden and Hadramout, both in Yemen's south.

But the initial euphoria soon gave way to disenchantment. As Saleh clung to power and mass protests continued without result, frustration grew, along with southerners' doubts that events in the north would have a positive impact in the south. Today, many southerners feel that a revolution led by independent youth has been hijacked and transformed into a personal power struggle between elites in the north over power.

In the southern port city of Aden, a former British colony built in the dusty crevices of an extinct volcano, leaders of the Hirak, a five-year secessionist movement, who have long seethed at the region's marginalization under northern rule, are now threatening to overturn the 1990 unification deal and declare independence.

Years of intimidation, daylight floggings and midnight arrests by the regime's secret police had forced most of the Hirak's leadership abroad or underground. But with government troops now occupied in the north, they are able to move freely about the city, organizing weekly rallies and holding round-table discussions in coffee shops and restaurants.

"We give the regime this ultimatum: either you acknowledge our legitimate demands to self-determination or you will soon find Yemen split once again into two countries," said Gen. Nasser al-Taweel, a prominent leader of the Hirak, delivering an anti-unity speech from a shabby bus stop turned protest podium in the rundown streets of downtown Aden. Despite brutal repression from Saleh's regime, the secessionists have proved remarkably resilient, deriving strength from a broad support as well as from charismatic leaders capable of mobilizing the population through a compelling narrative of injustice, marginalization, and a history of independence.

But while the secessionist cry is loud, it is also fragmented. Its more radical leaders like Ali Salem Al Beidh — the exiled former general secretary of the Yemeni Socialist Party — demand "complete and immediate separation" while a more moderate faction headed by Haidar al-Attas advocate a federal system of two governorates for five years followed by a Sudan-style referendum for self-determination. Others just want an end to land expropriation and job discrimination and a greater devolution of power to the provinces. Their visions for what a future southern Yemen might look like also vary — from a return to Marxism to a secular multi-party democracy to an Islamist caliphate.

Still, the Hirak leaders do appear to be getting their house in order. A group of prominent exiled leaders told a packed conference hall in downtown Cairo on Nov. 22 they had agreed on federalism as the best way to resolve the south's "unconditional right to self-determination," but warned that a lack of response to this solution would give southerners "the right to resort to all options."

But a serious bid for separation at this point could spell disaster for Yemen. Saleh may be out of the picture, but both the ruling party and the opposition remain, at least overtly, staunch supporters of unity. The south lost its army after the 1994 war, and most of its experienced commanders are now elderly men hobbling around Aden with walking canes. The Hirak's military wing, meanwhile, comprising at most a few hundred men bearing light weapons, would stand little chance against Saleh's tanks and fighter jets. Moreover, a declaration of independence would likely lead to infighting and additional fragmentation within the south itself.

Having followed the plight of the South Sudanese just across the Red Sea, the southern movement leaders are well aware of the importance of garnering international support. But their bid for Western sympathies is likely to be met with bitter disappointment.

Western and Gulf nations continue to pledge billions of dollars to Yemen's central government, insisting that the stability and unity of the regime is paramount. Alarmed as they are by the growing threat of al Qaeda, whose regional branch has established strongholds in parts of the remote southern provinces, the idea of Yemen being carved back into two countries no doubt sends shivers down the spines of Western diplomats. With Saleh gone, the United States in particular will be seeking a strong partner in the north, fearing that a fresh bout of conflict between north and south would only create more elbow room for the militants.

The Yemeni government, meanwhile, which has mastered the art of manipulating international military aid to use against its internal foes, continues to dismiss

the movement as a small band of malcontents and has repeatedly accused its leaders of being affiliated with al Qaeda. Southerners accuse Saleh of deliberately fomenting conflict in the south in order to make the south seem unworthy of statehood.

An unintended consequence of Yemen's Arab Spring has been the resurfacing of the southerners' grievances. The Hiraq are currently pursuing two tracks — a push for federalism by some and for complete separation by others. Which one prevails will largely boil down to how the ongoing political transition pans out in the north.

As things stand, the appeal of independence is strong; if the emerging government of national unity fails to even recognize the movement's demands for greater equity as legitimate, that appeal will only grow stronger. And if

the political transition degenerates into another power squabble between Saleh's boys and his rival-elites, the consequences could more drastic. It may embolden those southerners entertaining the prospect of declaring independence to take the plunge.

In turn, secession will likely trigger a broader and bloodier conflict as northerners wage war to maintain the country's unity. With rising unemployment, grinding poverty, Salafi militants, U.S. drone strikes, and thousands of internally displaced people, the south is already basket case of problems. Yemen's uprising has considerably raised the price of inaction.

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Saleh wins again

By Charles Schmitz, December 5, 2011

When Yemeni leader Ali Abdullah Saleh signed the Gulf agreement in Riyadh over Thanksgiving weekend, mandating that he step down from power, the protesters camped out in Change Plaza at first didn't know whether to celebrate or explode in anger, so they did both.

Their ambivalence is understandable. The agreement does formally end Saleh's presidency, but it also grants him amnesty from prosecution and, more significantly, leaves him and his family free to participate in politics in the future. Most importantly, his relatives still command the military and security apparatus. Forces loyal to Saleh continue to kill civilians in Taiz, the relatively cosmopolitan city in the middle of the country. Many wonder whether there has been any change in Yemen at all.

According to the agreement, Vice President Mansour Hadi is now acting president. He has called for early presidential elections to be held on Feb. 28, 2012, and announced the formation of a military committee to oversee the withdrawal of troops from the cities, the resolution of Yemen's multiple armed conflicts, and the rebuilding of the armed forces. His announcement paved the way for the new prime minister from the opposition, Mohamed Salem Basindwah, to form a new government made up of opposition members and Saleh's ruling party members — half each. The new government will preside over the presidential elections in February, followed by a two-year interim period in which a new constitution will be written. Another set of parliamentary and presidential elections will follow the adoption of the new constitution in two years' time.

While on the surface it looks as though the Arab Spring, or the Arab Awakening as it is called locally in Yemen, has toppled another ruler, the details of the agreement appear more like a victory for Saleh.

What a difference a few months can make. As of last spring, Saleh's top military commander, Ali Muhsin, had defected and the most powerful tribal confederation, the Hashid, had broken with him and was involved in a fierce military conflict with government forces in the capital. Saudi Arabia, the United States, and the European Union were calling for his immediate resignation and were actively seeking his ouster. In June, Saleh and most of his top officials were seriously wounded in an attack on the president's compound and he was flown to Riyadh for extensive medical treatment. Most thought the president was finished.

But Saleh's relatives managed to scuttle American and European attempts to form a new government without him during the summer, and upon his return to Sanaa in September, he resumed his duties as president. Thus Saleh signed the Gulf agreement from a position of power rather than fearing for his life, and the terms of his departure largely reflect his dictates.

The Gulf agreement is flawed for other reasons. It is a deal between Saleh's ruling party and the group of opposition parties known as the Joint Meeting Party, perhaps better translated as Common Ground. Left out of the agreement are the protesters in the street, the al-Huthi rebels who now control much of the north of the country, and the southern movement demanding secession and the formation of a new state. Incredibly, the agreement stipulates that Hadi is the only acceptable candidate for president in the next elections, meaning that Saleh's vice president will oversee the writing of a new constitution and will supervise the elections for a new government in two years. The deal, which supersedes the Yemeni constitution, also gives Hadi the final word in any dispute between the parties to the agreement. (Let's not forget that it was Hadi who was formally in charge during the summer, when Saleh's clan remained firmly entrenched against all efforts to dislodge them.)

The agreement does call for a military committee to supervise the redeployment of troops and the demilitarization of the cities. It calls for a national conference for political dialogue, at which the Huthis and the southern secessionist movement are supposed to be represented. It also stipulates the creation of a constitutional committee to rewrite the constitution. But all of these efforts at reconciliation and reform in Yemen will be administered by a government over which Saleh retains considerable sway, while his clan remains entrenched in key security and military institutions. The Gulf agreement is more like a counter coup than a revolution of any sort.

If recent days are any indication, the Gulf deal has only compounded Yemen's problems. Upon his return from Riyadh, having effectively resigned from the presidency according to the agreement, Saleh announced an amnesty for all of those who committed "dumb" acts during the current crisis, meaning his henchmen who murdered civilian protesters. He made an exception to his amnesty for those accused of attacking his compound in June and for common criminals. Then, the official news agency Saba reported that Saleh had authorized his vice president to appoint a new prime minister and form a new government — never mind that technically he had no legal authority to do so. Saleh seems to be confused about who is supposed to be in charge, or more likely it is the rest of us who are confused, as he intended.

In the meantime, the bloodshed continues. Early December saw the armed forces loyal to Saleh push into the city in Taiz, killing dozens of civilians. In the north, the Huthis have aggressively expanded the region under their control and are moving to strike a final blow at their Salafist enemies in Dammaj. In the south, al Qaeda killed five soldiers in the military base defending Zinjibar, the capital of Abyan province. Battles between Saleh loyalists and supporters of the opposition have also raged in Arhab, north of the capital.

As for the revolutionaries in Change Plaza, they now reject the agreement entirely. In their eyes, the Yemen

opposition parties that signed the agreement have betrayed the revolution and played into Saleh's hands. They have a strong argument: Saleh remains in the country, retains his position as head of the ruling party, and is immune from prosecution. His sons and nephews control the military and can run for president in the future, his ruling party is firmly entrenched in the new government, and his vice president will be president for two more years during which the country's constitution will be rewritten. The opposition, meanwhile, is participating in the new government, allowing Saleh to claim to the world that change has occurred in Yemen.

What will happen to the protesters — who have vowed to continue their sit-ins, marches, and vigils — is unclear. The new prime minister said that he understands their unhappiness and does not oppose their peaceful demonstrations. Saleh called on all of the protests to stop.

Few in Yemen are fooled by all of this. As if to punctuate the pessimism, Somali refugees in Yemen are now returning to Somalia in larger numbers. Perhaps they know something that the international community doesn't.

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Tawakkol's revolutionary pluralism

By Stacey Philbrick Yadav, December 16, 2011

Watching Tawakkol Karman jump to her feet and clap along throughout Jill Scott's anthem, "Hate on Me," at the Nobel Peace Concert on Sunday was a moment I will most certainly never forget. As a visibly emotional Scott sang with defiance, "You cannot hate on me, 'cause my mind is free. Feel my destiny, so shall it be..." the room was electric, each of us watching to see the faces and reactions of the extraordinary women for whom we were told this song was specifically requested.

But aside from the unifying fact that the three recipients of this year's Nobel Peace Prize — Tawakkol Karman, Leymah Gbowee, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf — have each persisted in the face of personal and political adversity, it has sometimes been hard to determine the common thread connecting their work. Throughout a range of festivities this last weekend, I was frequently asked how Karman, in particular, fit in.

This year's co-recipients were commended "for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's

rights to full participation in peace-building work." And yet, as I argued in October and as Karman herself made perfectly clear in her own remarks on Saturday, her project in Yemen is not really "about" women's rights, per se. It rests instead on a conception of non-violent revolution that views society as a holistic unit composed of differently-situated citizens, defined by gender, region, class, tribal affiliation, ideology, and more, endowed with the right to make claims against their government. And as she led 6,000 people in the Oslo Spektrum through a call-and-response chant straight from Change Square, we raised our arms aloft for peaceful revolution, democracy, rule of law, and comprehensive development — rights to which Karman believes all women, but also all men, are entitled.

But understanding why and how Karman's project speaks implicitly to women's rights is important in this transformational moment in the Middle East, a moment in which authoritarian regimes are being challenged, and Islamists appear to be ascendant. We should remember

that Karman has been roundly criticized in Yemen for her approach — by hardliners in the Islamist party from which she has risen, who have found her visibility as a woman unseemly or inappropriate, and by secular women’s rights advocates who are nervous about the Islamist tone of her approach. Karman’s holistic language is indeed consistent with longstanding arguments put forth by Islamist modernists across the region, who argue that society is ordered by relationships of interdependence and mutual respect but not necessarily full legal equality. But in words and in deeds, she also departs in an essential and revolutionary way from Islamist affirmations of tolerance, emphasizing pluralism instead. The message of tolerance is that some actor or class of actors has the power to permit (and, implicitly, the power to deny) others to share social or political space. This is not an articulation of the other’s *right* to difference. One of Karman’s key themes, by contrast, is the necessity of affirming one another’s right to be different - and diversely so.

This concept of “diverse difference” is one that has been central to the work of another Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen, who has argued against solitarist ways in which we regard each other through one and only one lens. Instead, Sen argues for institutions that allow each person to define for herself the many ways in which she may be different from (or similar to) others and thus to deliberate publicly and make meaningful choices between competing forms of political solidarity. It is with this in mind that he offered in his 2010 work, *The Idea of Justice*, a forceful philosophical argument for his longstanding contention that democracy is both a means and an end of development.

These two ideas — that individuals are diversely different, and that democracy is both a means and an end — are central to Tawakkol Karman’s worldview and work, but also to Islamist political commitments that have been expanding in the Middle East over the past year (and, indeed, over several years, if cross-ideological opposition alliances across the region are any indication). Without question, Karman does not represent *all* or even most Islamist thinking — but her star is rising, as is her message.

So is Karman — an Islamist, a woman, a journalist, an activist, a revolutionary — working for women’s rights? She is unquestionably working for the rights of women to self-definition and political agency. She inhabits many (sometimes compatible and sometimes contradictory) social roles, and assumes that each of her fellow Yemenis — and each of us, more broadly — is as diversely different as she is. This fact of diverse difference is thus ironically unifying, and it is only through democratic institutions that the multitude possibilities of our coming together can genuinely emerge.

Karman is articulating this revolutionary pluralism against a legacy of “state feminism” in Yemen (and throughout the region), where women have largely been positioned as objects of state discourse and policy, with nominal opportunities to shape policy outcomes. This has been true even with regard to the most gender-progressive policies, like those in Tunisia, where women’s gains as women have been guaranteed by fiat, not through deliberation or choice. Her revolutionary pluralism promises to expand opportunities for women to define themselves, to become agentive subjects empowered to join with others (women and men) along axes of politics that matter most to them. Karman’s project offers this even as she avoids singling out gender as a category of singular significance.

And democracy is essential to peace, insofar as it allows for the meaningful expression of diverse difference that is so important to coexistence. Pluralism, and the institutions which are required to protect and nurture it, allow women (and men) the right to multiply, not reduce, the complex ways in which they see themselves and others. This last weekend, a woman who has in the span of two short months become one of the region’s most visible leaders affirmed that each person must have the unassailable “right to be different.” It is hard to imagine how a political order built on this vision would be anything short of revolutionary.

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A difficult road ahead for Yemen's political transition

By David W. Alley, Abdul-Ghani al-Iryani, December 23, 2011

On Nov. 23, Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh belatedly fulfilled his pledge to sign the GCC initiative. His signing potentially opened space for a peaceful transfer of power and far-reaching reforms. Yet, such a positive outcome is far from guaranteed and will largely depend on how domestic and international actors tackle three interrelated challenges: 1) preventing political infighting and spoilers from derailing the accord's implementation; 2) demonstrating tangible progress by providing security and basic services to Yemeni citizens; and 3) addressing two key weaknesses of the initiative, political inclusiveness and transitional justice.

First proposed in April 2011, the GCC initiative outlined a "30-60 Transition Plan" whereby the president would transfer power to his vice president, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, after one month in exchange for immunity from prosecution. An opposition-led coalition government would then hold presidential elections two months after the president's resignation.

The agreement and accompanying implementation mechanisms signed on Nov. 23 retain this basic framework and timeline with important exceptions. The most notable among these is that Saleh will retain his position along with limited authorities until elections are held on Feb. 21, 2011. It also established a steering committee to oversee the restoration of security and the reintegration of military/security forces. Moreover, it greatly expanded on the original agreement by providing much needed clarification on questions of responsibility, sequencing, and oversight.

As currently defined, the transitional period is divided into two phases. The first lasts approximately three months, from the signing of the initiative until early elections on Feb. 21, 2011. During this time, the president delegates significant authority to Hadi, an opposition-led coalition government is established, and preparations are made for early presidential elections in which the vice president is

the consensus candidate. Phase two begins after elections and consists of a two-year period devoted to national dialogue and constitutional reform.

All things considered, implementation is going relatively smoothly and political leaders are meeting key agreement benchmarks. Shortly following signature, the vice president issued a presidential decree calling for early elections. Then, on Dec. 10, a national unity government was officially sworn in. The new government is headed by an opposition prime minister and ministerial portfolios are divided equally between the opposition and the president's party, the General People's Congress (GPC). In late November and early December, intense fighting in the flashpoint city of Taiz threatened to undermine the agreement, but by Dec. 4 local mediators secured a ceasefire. That same day, Hadi formed the Military Affairs Committee tasked with overseeing military/security de-escalation and restructuring. The committee began clearing streets of checkpoints in Sanaa and other cities on Dec. 17 and they plan to complete the task within one week. In short, the technicalities of the agreement are being implemented, yet many challenges remain, not least of which is a political environment with a lack of trust, desperate economic and humanitarian conditions, and significant inclusion and justice deficits in the agreement itself.

Political infighting and potential spoilers

The most critical challenge during phase one arguably will be keeping signatories moving in the same direction and holding potential spoilers at bay. This will be especially difficult in the military/security sector where progress has been comparatively slow and where the principle of "no victor, no vanquished" has left intact the two armed power-centers: the army and security forces controlled by Saleh's family on the one hand and a combination of defected army units controlled by General Ali Mohsen, tribesmen

loyal to the al-Ahmar clan, and Islah-controlled militias, on the other.

Because both sides have maintained their positions, and each is deeply suspicious of the other, it would be imprudent to begin with fundamental military or security restructuring. Instead, the first priority should be on coordinated de-escalation. This appears to be happening, as the Military Affairs Committee has called for the removal of all checkpoints and roadblocks, the return of military units to their barracks and, a return of militias to their villages, all of which is to be completed by Dec. 24. If carried out, these measures will go far in restoring a sense of normalcy and security to the capital and other affected cities.

Assuming successful implementation, these steps could then set the stage for the kind of in-depth institutional restructuring that is necessary to establish civilian control over the military. This would entail standardized hiring, firing, and retirement practices as well as the regular rotation of military and security officers. By addressing such matters only after elections are held, the authorities can satisfy the widespread public desire to remove — or at least clearly restrict the influence of — certain military officers, while at the same time avoiding a precipitous approach that carries the potential of provoking a stalemate or, worse, armed confrontation, during the first phase.

So far, international scrutiny has focused almost exclusively on Saleh. That might have been understandable in the past, but it no longer can suffice. At one point or another, each of the armed groups mentioned above has been responsible for violence and contributed to an environment where human rights violations have occurred; going forward, either side could torpedo meaningful implementation of the agreement. Henceforth, the international community will need to closely monitor all parties and hold them accountable — including publicly reprimanding and sanctioning those proven uncooperative.

In addition to military and security obstacles, the agreement could be undermined by political infighting

both within the coalition government and among political parties. Already, the opposition has charged the GPC with a number of violations, including destroying documents in sensitive ministries like interior, finance, and justice. For its part, the GPC accuses the opposition of planning to violate the spirit of the initiative by, among other things, using its ministerial portfolios to proceed with investigations and prosecution of regime insiders. GPC supporters also complain that the opposition has yet to fulfill its commitment under the agreement to halt any direct support for the protests. To date, media outlets on both sides have made deeply inflammatory statements, stoking tensions and undermining the potential for cooperation.

Encouraging opposing parties to honor their commitments under the initiative and to work together will be a constant challenge. While international actors must play an important monitoring role in this respect, so too should domestic oversight agencies and civil society groups. Domestic tools exist, including the civil service law, which governs hiring and firing within ministries. Enforcement of this law could minimize the risk of politicization of bureaucratic decisions and more clearly circumscribe political conflict. International monitors also could work closely with the Central Organization for Control and Audit in overseeing corruption. The abuse of public finance was a central grievance against the Saleh regime and many Yemenis are now concerned that the opposition will be tempted to commit similar abuses. As with the military/security sector, control over the public finances sector must be shared, transparent, and closely monitored to ensure balance and to reduce tensions during the transition. Independent youth activists, their strong misgivings about the GCC initiative notwithstanding, can play a role by pressuring the government as well as political parties to operate lawfully, transparently, and in keeping with their pledges of reform.

Delivering Security and Basic Services

A successful political transition will also depend on the government's capacity to produce tangible progress in the lives of ordinary citizens, notably in the realms of security

and basic services. As noted, some improvement has been made on the security front through the Military Affairs Committee. Among other needs, the priorities should be returning electricity and water provision to pre-crisis levels as well as stabilizing the price of, and improving access to, diesel and petrol. Meeting these objectives will not be possible without substantial international financial assistance, which ought to be closely monitored by donors. Insofar as possible, donors should discourage reactivation of petrol and diesel subsidies, a step with potentially dire fiscal consequences.

Political Inclusiveness and Transitional Justice

The accord is not without critics, or flaws. At its core, it reflects a power-sharing arrangement between the president and his party, the GPC, on one hand and a coalition of political opposition parties, known as the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), on the other. Largely missing from the arrangement are several important stakeholders, including but not limited to: the Houthi rebels in the north; the southern movement; and an emerging constituency that was particularly active during the uprising, the independent youth. As they and others see it, the initiative is little more than a reshuffling of the deck, a new allocation of authority among elites that — in one form or another — have been implicated in the organization of power around Saleh. The principal beneficiaries, they point out, are the GPC and the most influential member of the JMP opposition, the Islamist Islah party, which also enjoys historical ties to the regime. Many also reject the immunity clause, arguing that those responsible for abuses should be investigated and brought to trial.

Establishment of a more inclusive process cannot wait until the onset of the national dialogue. Although reducing tensions among members of the political elite is both legitimate and necessary, a parallel track should be put in place to bring in the three aforementioned groups, lest their exclusion obstruct the government's ability to carry out early elections and a credible dialogue.

Fortunately, the implementation mechanism document

mandates that the new government form a liaison committee to communicate with youth groups and it makes clear that the national dialogue in phase two must include all political actors and forces. Yet, thus far, inclusion efforts have taken a back seat to forging elite alliances at the political center between existing political parties. In many ways, the Houthi rebellion in the north, the southern movement, and the youth initiative uprising were a product of the failure of existing political parties and institutions to adequately aggregate and represent popular grievances and demands. As such, it is imperative that immediate action be taken to broaden meaningful inclusion.

Several steps could be taken in this respect. The government should open up direct lines of communication with these three constituencies in order to better understand their views on, as well as objections to, the structure and agenda of the national dialogue. It could also review the findings of existing government and or party-funded studies that have assessed the situation in the south and in Sadaa and consider implementing applicable recommendations. Important confidence-building measures for the south in particular may include: releasing remaining political prisoners (in a welcome step, the government released Hassan Ba-Aum, a prominent southern movement Hiraak leader who calls for southern independence, shortly after it was formed), investigating human rights abuses, removing certain controversial military and security officers, and more assertively facilitating humanitarian access to areas such as Abyan and Aden. Both the GPC and the opposition have been careful to ensure that southerners are well represented in the unity government. This is an important indication of goodwill, but it is in no way a substitute for engaging with the southern movement and others regarding their priorities and preferences for the national dialogue.

The GCC initiative also suffers from the insufficient attention it pays to issues of transitional justice and reconciliation. Yemenis are sharply divided over the question of whether Saleh and his supporters ought to enjoy immunity. Many in the opposition insist that regime insiders must be investigated and prosecuted for crimes

committed during the uprising; others believe that such an approach would distract the coalition government from its priorities, namely building a new state; still others (essentially Saleh backers), argue that the real criminals are on the opposition side and that individuals such as Ali Mohsen and Hameed al-Ahmar should be brought to trial.

Who should benefit from immunity and how to render justice are divisive, sensitive, and currently unsettled issues. Ignoring them, or putting them aside, risks undermining chances of a lasting political settlement. Still, signatories of the GCC initiative committed themselves to pass immunity legislation for the president and those who have worked with him. Qualms notwithstanding, the signatories should honor their pledge. However, this agreement does not in any way preclude thorough investigation of

human rights violations and a serious national discussion regarding matters related to transitional justice. This discussion is essential to prevent cycles of revenge and to address the deeply-felt desire to expose unlawful behavior and compensate victims. In this respect, the country could build on a long national tradition that centers primarily on exposing the truth and compensating victims as opposed to punishing perpetrators. Ultimately, Yemenis will have to determine how to address their past, but it is best that this discussion begin now.

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