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The Project on Middle East Political Science

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Yemen began its long-awaited National Dialogue Conference this week in Sanaa. The NDC hoped to find some zone of consensus for moving forward in its transition from the long rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh. It has been beset by many problems of representation, withdrawals and boycotts, deeply entrenched divisions, and the perception of irrelevance to the real problems of Yemenis. For a while it looked like it might never actually convene.

The stakes are high, as April Alley argues in an October essay, in a country facing a slide back into political collapse and mass violence. As Danya Greenfield argues, the urgency of the situation leaves few options: “despite opposition to the dialogue, it is clear that the status quo is unsustainable. The oft-repeated mantra among many Yemenis is that the question is one of dialogue or civil war.” But just because something is needed does not make it possible. “Yemen’s National Dialogue” collects outstanding recent Middle East Channel analysis of the National Dialogue, its challenges, and its prospects.

The chasm between the North and South looms particularly ominously over political transition discussions. In his contribution, Stephen Day, author of last year’s *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen*, argues that the “greatest source of Yemen’s continuing problems is the poor foundation of its 1990 national union.” Regional contentions and unresolved questions of national unity go deeper than what is on the agenda at the NDC. Indeed, as Peter Salisbury reports, secessionist sentiments are on the rise in the South and many Hirakis (supporters of southern rights) view the NDC as a non-starter. It is urgent but won’t be easy for the NDC to find an acceptable framework for relations between the North and South, and more broadly between the center and periphery.

The NDC also convenes in the context of the declining relevance of the central state and a profound failure of governance. As Silvana Toska argues, “while formal political power and many government institutions remain in the hands of the old elite, the overall balance of power in the country has shifted away from Sanaa and the government.” The political talks will have little traction if they fail to account for the real distribution of weapons and power among armed groups. A member of the government complained to Adam Baron, “the center of power remains in the hands of certain armed groups controlled by men ... who work for themselves rather than for Yemen. Until this changes, the problems will not be solved.” There may have been some progress on core issues of security sector reform, as Holger Albrecht points out in his essay, but President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi’s approach to reform “has meant primarily the replacement of the top brass in the government, the bureaucracy, and the security services in order to consolidate his position and curb the influence of potential rivals.”

The role of external players in the NDC also remains problematic. There is widespread recognition that the NDC might never have convened at all without the tireless work of U.N. mediator Jamal Benomar. But there remain deep tensions between internal Yemeni aspirations for change and the interests of key foreign players. The United States remains deeply focused on combatting al Qaeda, while the Saudis have long-standing interests in the distribution of power in its southern neighbor. The amnesty accorded to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the consequent failure to come to terms with the legacy of his rule (see Adam Baron's essay), haunts the process. Saleh's old party, the GPC, as Tik Root reports, remains dominated by its old leader and unable to make changes many view as necessary.

The National Dialogue Conference process raises conceptual questions beyond Yemen, as well. For instance, is building the capacity of the central state really the right answer for a country such as Yemen? Silvana Toska suggests that the efforts to build an effective Yemeni state may run contrary to the push to build a unified Yemeni nation, and thus might have counter-productive effects. Lisa Wedeen, in an October 2010 *Middle East Channel* essay included here, challenged the very concept of "state failure" which underpins the presumed urgency of the NDC, pointing to how this analytical framework actually supported the regime's political strategy. And can any elite pact, however well-crafted, really respond to the demands of a mobilized popular uprising? For Stacey Philbrick Yadav, the composition of the NDC undermines significant changes in the identities forged among Yemeni revolutionaries and activists through the long months of collective action. Would destabilizing Yemen around a fundamentally unchanged power structure really count as success?

I hope that you find the essays collected in "Yemen's National Dialogue" useful.

Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS
March 21, 2013

Overcoming the Pitfalls of Yemen's National Dialogue

By Danya Greenfield, March 18, 2013

Among the urban elite and diplomatic community in Sanaa, all eyes will turn to the launch of the long-awaited National Dialogue Conference today, a key component of the transition plan agreed upon in November 2011 that ushered out former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in exchange for full immunity. The good news about the internationally-backed agreement is that Saleh was finally forced from the presidency after more than 30 years of autocratic rule and the fighting stopped. The bad news is that it did not address any of the underlying issues that have plagued Yemen since before the uprising and have only been exacerbated in the time since. The National Dialogue, thus, is positioned to tackle the thorniest issues including calls for Southern independence, the restive Houthi movement in the north, the question of federalism and decentralization, constitutional reform, empowering women and youth, and other issues.

The National Dialogue itself has been controversial, plagued by would-be spoilers and bitter complaints about the structure of the dialogue and the flawed process that created it. Since Saturday, when the final list of participants was announced by President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, several high-profile figures have withdrawn their names, including Nobel prize-winner Tawakkol Karman and the influential tribal leader Hamid al-Ahmar, and the Joint Meetings Party (JMP) coalition released a statement expressing deep disappointment with Hadi's selection of participants lacking proper qualifications and independence. Demonstrations are underway in Sanaa, protesting insufficient youth inclusion and the government's inaction in dealing with human rights abuses during and after the revolution. The government has called up 60,000 troops to ensure security for the dialogue in the capital; while the streets are generally quiet now, checkpoints have been established on nearly every street and the city's residents are holding their breath.

Yet despite opposition to the dialogue, it is clear that the status quo is unsustainable. The oft-repeated mantra among many Yemenis is that the question is one of dialogue or civil war. Given the stark choice, there is consensus that the dialogue will proceed. The most important issue to be discussed is the status of the South, which joined Sanaa in 1994 after a bloody civil war, and has suffered persistent and systemic marginalization since. The preparatory committee for the National Dialogue decided that half of the dialogue's participants would be from the South, so the list of 565 names includes a strong contingency of Southerners. However, there is concern over credibility since most of the southern separatist HIRAK movement leaders have consistently rejected participation citing a Sanaa-centered process that does not acknowledge their quest for equality and equity. With flare-ups of violence and a general strike called in the southern stronghold of Aden, it is clear that acceptance of the dialogue in the South will remain a divisive issue.

It is within this context that Yemen will forge forward, and just reaching this moment — despite powerful figures who wish to see its failure — is a noteworthy accomplishment. What might make this dialogue succeed where others have failed is the sentiment that there is no alternative and the broad international support that is helping to drive forward movement. After the opening plenary session, the delegates will divide into nine working groups that will serve as the real venue for discussion and negotiation, which will convene for two months before another plenary session. The delegates represent a cross-section of Yemeni society from around the country, including all political parties, civil society organizations, business leaders, youth, women, and independent figures. With significant support from the United Nations, the United States, and others in the international community, the National Dialogue will have a well-staffed and well-equipped secretariat, including a media outreach center and other mechanisms for community involvement beyond the delegates.

There is presently a great deal of momentum and optimism that will hopefully carry the National Dialogue delegates past maximalist positions and generate a climate of negotiation and compromise. But after countless conversations in Sanaa over the past week, there are some worrisome dynamics that should be noted in order to increase its chances for success:

There is a perception that the National Dialogue is being driven by an international agenda, particularly in the way it was constructed (not including tribal representatives and religious authorities), the allocation of representation (decision made by U.N. envoy Jamal Benomar) and some of the topics proposed for discussion (good governance, the environment, and child marriage). Among Yemenis sensitive to interference by outside powers, this is a particularly salient issue. Many will lament the role of international actors, and yet at the same time, they will admit that only through external pressure will anything move forward in a country that lacks strong leadership. Finding the appropriate balance will require a nuanced approach on the part of the United Nations, World Bank, Europeans, United States, and other supportive parties.

Many Yemenis express concern that the National Dialogue is merely an exercise among political and social elites, established families, and power brokers that is largely being followed by people in Sanaa, but not the rest of the country. In a nationwide survey conducted by an international firm in January, 52 percent of respondents across the country had not heard of the National Dialogue. When asked what President Hadi's priority should be, 40 percent answered corruption, 38 percent answered the economy, and only 7 percent answered the National Dialogue. There is now a concerted awareness-raising campaign underway through billboards, print media, and television so this will likely increase over time, but it is an indicator of the disconnect between Sanaa and the periphery that will need to be addressed.

The allocation of seats is heavily tilted toward political parties and existing elites who will likely dominate the dialogue. Although a percentage of seats were allocated

for independent figures, the parties ended up playing a large role in the selection of those delegates as well. While creating strong political parties is generally an objective for a healthy, well-functioning democratic system, in this case, with many entrenched interests seeking to perpetuate the status quo, it risks leading to the marginalization of women, youth, and non-affiliated independent delegates. Ensuring that these voices are not drowned out by stronger and better organized political party representatives will be essential for the success of the dialogue in reshaping Yemen's political environment and redistributing power.

Some expect that the key decisions will be made outside the margins of the dialogue among Yemen's primary power brokers and that all this dialogue activity is just for show. The question is whether the dialogue will actually be a meaningful forum to resolve the most divisive issues, or just a sideshow to pacify the international community and revolutionary activists clamoring for change. This will depend largely on the previous two factors and to what degree Hadi provides leadership to open space for genuine discussion and debate that leads to decision-making processes inside the dialogue structure.

In addition to these challenges, there are fears that a constitutional referendum, a new parliament, and installation of a new government will be stuck waiting for movement on the toughest issues to be decided by the dialogue — namely, the relationship between the north and south (distribution of political power and resources) and the system of governance (presidential versus parliamentary versus mixed). It would be difficult to move forward on the process-oriented pieces like constitution-drafting and election preparation until there is consensus on these essential questions. Given that, it would be wise for the dialogue participants or the secretariat to set specific benchmarks for each working group in order to advance a sense of momentum even in the face of delays. Many people make grandiose statements about what will happen if there is success or failure, but how will this be defined? Keeping in mind that the transformation to federalism, for example, within six months or a year is completely unrealistic, how will success

be measured? Is failure the outbreak of armed conflict? Defining some of these points at the outset might help set realistic expectations about what the dialogue can achieve increasing the potential for success.

Yemen is no stranger to national dialogues, and many Yemenis will boast that there is a tradition and culture of dialogue and consensus-building not present in other Arab countries facing similar challenges. That may be true, but the list of issues to address would be a heavy load for any country — let alone one that is divided by

deep political and economic cleavages, wracked with poverty and unemployment, and struggling to maintain security with separatist violence and extremism in various forms. Despite the obvious obstacles ahead, there is great opportunity in this moment. And hopefully next March 18 will be the anniversary of an important milestone in Yemen's democratic process.

Danya Greenfield is the deputy director of the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council.



Consolidating Uncertainty in Yemen

By Holger Albrecht, February, 22, 2013

Yemen's joint Nobel Peace Prize winner Tawakkol Karman might serve well as a poster child of the Arab Spring, but the outcome of the Yemeni transition does not make a good model — if there is one at all. Events throughout 2012 certainly did not fulfill the expectations of the revolutionary youth who have consistently returned to the streets of Sanaa, Taizz, and Aden. Former President Ali Abdullah Saleh has continued to exert some influence in Yemeni politics: as head of the former regime party General People's Congress (GPC); through his connections in the military and bureaucratic apparatus; by maintaining healthy ties in the main tribal confederation, the Hashid, that has dominated Yemeni politics since the 1970s; and in being propped up by Saudi support. Yet, with President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi and Saleh-rival Ali Mohsen increasingly consolidating their position, the end game might just have begun for the Saleh connection. As stated by Saleh, politics in Yemen is like dancing on the heads of snakes. With Saleh out of office, his former vice president on the verge of consolidating his grip on the presidency, and military strongmen as power brokers in a volatile

security framework, the lead dancer is gone, but the snakes are still there.

In January, I visited Yemen's capital Sanaa for a three-week research mission to learn more about the role of the Yemeni military in politics and current security sector reforms. Somewhat inculcated with media reports about rebellions in the North and South, persistent kidnappings and assassinations, along with occasional armed struggle between factions of the regime, I was surprised with the measure of normalcy that had returned to the capital — and perhaps also with the only limited signs of destruction in a city that has witnessed two major army units lock their horns since the summer of 2011. While Yemen seems to contain all the ingredients for a failed-state recipe, inclusive dialogue among political forces is as much a feature of the post-Saleh transition as violent conflict. The establishment of a military committee in January 2012 has been supported by U.S. and Jordanian advisors. The initiative promised to bring the two sides to the negotiating table and to restructure the Yemeni armed forces. When

I interviewed the committee's spokesman, Maj. Gen. Ali Saeed Obeid, he claimed that the committee's mission was almost accomplished. However, he certainly underestimated the major reform challenges still to be addressed in the restructuring of the domestic security establishment and the military. Yet, a fragile truce of sorts has been sustained on the streets of the country's major cities, where political conflict turned openly violent in 2011 between the camps of the former president and his rival Ali Mohsen, allied with the Islamist-tribal Islah Party. In Sanaa the regular police forces are still largely absent. Several militias man road-blocks and patrol the streets of the capital to pitch their territory, but their presence also allows a measure of security to return to the capital. In early February the military made a concerted effort, under the command of the general chief-of-staff, to engage with al Qaeda militants in al-Bayda, including units of the regular army and the Special Forces (*al-Qawwat al-Khassa*), which had long been loyal to former president Saleh. Irrespective of the success of this particular military operation, it might indeed indicate a more unified stance of the armed forces. That military units previously under the command of the ousted president now act upon the orders of the new political leadership is certainly bad news for the al Qaeda uprising in the South.

On the political front, a Technical Committee recruited among representatives of Yemeni civil society came up with a 20-point plan that identified the rift between the North, whose tribal elites have dominated politics since the 1994 civil war, and the South as the single most pressing issue on the political agenda. Moreover, a November 2011 peace agreement encouraged the establishment of a National Dialogue Conference (NDC) that was composed of all major political and societal forces, including the GPC (112 seats) and opposition parties, most importantly the Islah Party (50), the Yemeni Socialist Party (37), and the Nasserist Party (30). Quite remarkably, the NDC also comprises representatives of the secessionist movement in the South (Hirak, 85 seats) and the Houthis in the North (35), in addition to representatives from youth (40), women (40), and civil society organizations (40).

Internal negotiations took an agonizingly long time before the NDC was announced in late November 2012. It was accomplished only upon substantial pressure from the U.N. Special Advisor to Yemen, Jamal Benomar, who had to overcome a protracted turf battle between the GPC and the major opposition coalition in the Joint Meeting Parties. While the NDC and the Technical Committee's recommendations are yet to yield any positive results, one aspect is quite noteworthy: the degree of inclusiveness of participation in both venues of negotiations reflects an understanding of the complexities of Yemeni power politics. In its inclusive approach toward negotiating the political transition, the NDC has invited repeated protests by the revolutionary youth who have continued to demand the exclusion of Saleh and his associates from the political scene. While this might indeed happen very soon, due to the recent weakening of the Saleh camp, the National Dialogue is a signature for Yemen-style Realpolitik that distinguishes itself considerably from other Arab Spring countries where revolutionary discourse paired with increasing levels of violence led to intractable stand-offs and the complete discrediting of the ancien regime's "remnants" (*feloul*), ignoring that they were still there as a political power to be recognized. While it may be premature to praise these efforts at reconciliation and dialogue, Yemenis may have understood that political complexity triggers either compromise or disaster — a lesson yet to be learned in Syria, Egypt, and possibly Tunisia.

Apart from balancing negotiations, Hadi has taken steps to strengthen his position vis-à-vis the Saleh connection. Under the guise of military restructuring and security sector reforms, Hadi — former vice-president and token representative of the neglected Southern governorates — has been conspicuously unwilling (or incapable) to engineer structural reforms. Restructuring and reform, in Hadi's view, has meant primarily the replacement of the top brass in the government, the bureaucracy, and the security services in order to consolidate his position and curb the influence of potential rivals. By early 2013, he had been somewhat successful, changing almost the entire leadership in the military and security apparatus. He has dealt a significant blow to the Saleh connection and built

up his own power base, in a fragile alliance with the Islah Party and Ali Mohsen.

The new minister of defense, Mohammed Nasr Ahmed, is from Hadi's Abyan governorate and is a close ally and friend of the president. That the minister has been targeted in numerous assassination attempts speaks for the significance of his appointment. The minister of interior, Abdel Qader al-Qahtan, is from the Islah Party. In addition to several governors and regional military commanders, the former president's half-brother Mohamed Saleh al-Ahmar was sacked as commander of the air force and left his post only after a 19-day stand-off with Hadi in April 2012. Through a presidential decree on December 19, Hadi dissolved the Republican Guard (*Haras al-Jumhuriya*), the most potent army unit in the country under the command of the former president's son Ahmed Ali Saleh. The Central Security Forces (*al-Amn al-Markasi*), the political police including an anti-terrorist unit, had been under the command of the former president's nephew Yahya Saleh, who was succeeded by the chief of security in Taizz, Abed Rabbo Ahmed al-Maqdashi.

The National Security Bureau (*al-Amn al-Qawmi*) is a U.S.-sponsored, well-equipped intelligence agency, founded in 2002 and led by former Saleh-man Ali al-Anisi and Saleh's nephew Amar. The Bureau's new head is Ali al-Ahmadi, an economist from the Shabwa governorate in the South. Hadi also replaced the former commander of the Special Forces (*al-Qawwat al-Khassa*) Ahmed Dahhan, a Saleh-loyalist from his Sanhan tribe, with Ali Qushaibi who is believed to be affiliated with Ali Mohsen. The Emergency Police (*Shurta al-Najda*), a special unit tasked with the protection of government buildings and foreign embassies, saw Saleh-loyalist Mohammed al-

Qawsi replaced by Husayn al-Ghadi. The former head of the Military Intelligence (*al-Istikhbar al-Askari*) Mujahed Roshaym, from the Northern al-Jawf governorate, was replaced with Ahmed al-Yafa'i. The Presidential Guard (*al-Haras al-Riasi*) was dissolved due to uncertain loyalties of its officers and rank-and-file soldiers. There is now a new Presidential Security Unit (*al-Wahda al-Harasa al-Riasiya*), recruited mainly among people from Hadi's Abyan governorate.

Whether Hadi's restructuring efforts will be ultimately successful is impossible to predict and will heavily depend on the relations with his current allies: his own people in the GPC, the Ali Mohsen camp, and the Islah Party. There is a chance that, once the common political rival Ali Abdullah Saleh is finally sidelined, this fragile coalition may break up and slip into open rivalry. It also remains to be seen whether the bureaucratic apparatus and the security establishment — still consisting in large part of personnel recruited under Saleh — will be deeply impressed by leadership changes at the top of their organizations. These apparatuses have always suffered from a notorious lack of corporate loyalty, institutionalized chain-of-command, and internal cohesion. While Yemen's future remains uncertain, however, a consolidation of sorts has taken place throughout the past year that included an implicit agreement to negotiate, a new president's advent in politics, and an ousted ruler's unpromising future.

Holger Albrecht is assistant professor of Political Science at the American University in Cairo and Jennings Randolph senior fellow at the United States Institute of Peace. His research was sponsored in part by a grant from the Project on Middle East Political Science.



Can Yemen be a Nation United?

By Stephen Day, March 14, 2013

This March is a critical month in Yemen's political transition since 2011, when millions of peaceful street protesters ended 33 years of rule by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. In the coming week, the country's transitional leader, President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, is scheduled to inaugurate the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). Beginning on March 18, the NDC is expected to hold a series of meetings with more than 500 representatives, who will attempt to find solutions to several pressing problems for Yemen. What hangs in the balance is nothing less than Yemeni national unity. The conference was supposed to start last year after Hadi was elevated to the post of president by public referendum in February 2012. For the sake of a successful national dialogue, it was recognized the NDC had to take place under a large tent encompassing all the major political parties and social factions. Building this tent has proven difficult. The process was postponed more than once because some parties refused to accept a predetermined number of seats, while others refused to participate under any circumstances.

Until recently, many observers doubted Hadi would ever be able to start the NDC. If the first meeting indeed takes place, it will be a noteworthy accomplishment. Nonetheless, it would be foolish to interpret this meeting as a sign that Yemen has "turned the corner," finally overcoming its troubles. For one thing, Yemen has a long history of organizing conferences like the NDC, in which weighty national problems are discussed at length. Yet there are examples of national conferences from the past that ended with signed agreements and friendly handshakes, only to serve as a backdrop for fighting. This happened most recently in 1994 after Yemen's "Document of Pledge and Accord" (DPA) was signed in Amman, Jordan. The DPA was negotiated by Yemenis living inside the country, much as the current NDC. It was signed on February 20, 1994, and then followed two months later by full-scale civil war. The fighting in 1994 took place between

north and south Yemeni leaders who, a mere four years earlier, had agreed to unite under the new banner of the Republic of Yemen.

Regardless of what happens after March 18, even if peace prevails, there are a number of reasons why Yemen's troubles will remain. Some of these relate to the NDC itself because its framework and agenda have been shaped by conflicting foreign and domestic interests. The role of external actors in Yemen has swelled during the past few years. There has been much recent speculation that the Iranian government is stirring up trouble. But there has been no more troubling foreign presence in Yemen than that of the U.S. and Saudi governments. Saudi Arabia has long interfered in Yemen, providing funds to conservative tribal and religious leaders who usually work at cross-purposes with Yemen's government. For more than a year, the United States has operated a little "Green Zone" in the capital Sanaa, while the U.S. military operates lethal predator drones in the country's airspace. As a result, the United States has sown more suspicion and local opposition than any other country. Meanwhile, the United States serves as one of the primary sponsors of Yemen's political transition, along with Saudi Arabia. By shaping this transition to serve outside interests, foreign actors have fueled tension among domestic actors.

There are three main internal sources of trouble in Yemen. First, the vast majority of Yemenis have experienced severe economic hardship. Since the middle 2000s, the economy has gone from bad to worse in a brutal downward spiral. By 2011, poverty and unemployment had reached catastrophic levels, affecting as much as 50 to 60 percent of the population. It was largely for this reason that the government became dependent on external actors, namely Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, as well as the United States, Britain, and other western member states comprising the "Friends of Yemen" (FOY). It is important to bear in mind that, unlike other

countries caught in the wave of “Arab Spring” revolutions in 2011, Yemen was already looking at total collapse one full year earlier. As early as 2009, observers not only speculated that Yemen’s president could be overthrown, but many thought the country was on the verge of becoming a “failed state.” It was largely for this reason that the FOY was formed in late 2009, holding its first meeting in January 2010 in London, where participants pledged billions of U.S. dollars in emergency aid. In short, the historic events of 2011 may have surprised leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, and Syria, but this was decidedly not the case in Yemen.

Second, during the past decade, Yemen became increasingly divided along regional lines. Indeed, these divisions were the source of major internal rebellions beginning in the middle 2000s, which more recently complicated the national dialogue process and delayed Hadi’s opening of the NDC. The greatest regional divisions are located north and south of the capital Sanaa. Northward in Saada province along the border with Saudi Arabia, a fierce armed rebellion against the old regime started in 2004. It took the name of the rebellion’s leader, Hussayn al-Houthi, son of a traditional Zaidi religious cleric who called for a revival of Zaidi rule, not seen since the end of the North Yemeni Zaidi Imamate in 1962. Once the son was martyred in a battle with government troops in September 2004, his tribal supporters gained increasing control of lands in Saada and neighboring provinces until 2011 when they replaced central government authority across wide swaths of territory. South and east of Sanaa, a separate rebellion, called al-Hirak or “the movement,” began in 2007 with peaceful forms of resistance. The old regime tried to suppress al-Hirak, first using a campaign of arrests and then armed force. This caused many of the movement’s supporters to adopt militant calls for secession in early 2009, intending to revive the old independent southern state. Today calls for secession are even stronger, and al-Hirak’s supporters are the greatest opponents to dialogue in the NDC.

Third, since the creation of a transitional government in early 2012, powerful players associated with the old regime

have continued to exercise influence in political, military, and economic fields. Indeed, one of the problems with the GCC-brokered agreement to remove Saleh from office was its granting of generous amnesty terms to Saleh, his family, and key associates, thus protecting them from prosecution for human rights violations. There was virtually no one held accountable for horrific violence during and before 2011. As a result, Saleh, along with his sons and nephews (who held top command posts in Yemen’s armed forces) have been able to hang around the capital, interfering in various affairs. In 2012, Hadi gradually restructured Yemen’s military and security forces, ordering some of Saleh’s nephews to resign their posts and merging branches previously under the control of Saleh’s oldest son, Ahmad. Yet as recently as February 2, Ahmad has led meetings of senior military officers in Sanaa, speaking as commander of the Republican Guard in open defiance of Hadi. Meanwhile, Saleh, who always had the reputation of a wily fox, denied that his resignation as president applied to his position as head of the ruling General People’s Congress (GPC) party. Thus, in bizarre circumstances, Saleh still directs a party that holds half of the transitional government’s cabinet posts and the lion’s share of seats in the upcoming NDC.

In the final analysis, Yemen’s NDC is likely to fail because of these incongruities between the country’s domestic and international arenas. While the United States and Saudi Arabia seek to shepherd the country through its political transition, they have also ensured the amnesty enjoyed by Saleh and his family, allowing the latter to continue shaping events. Saleh has long served Saudi and U.S. interests. The United States built much of its post-2001 military strategy with Saleh’s assistance. Saleh approved the United States’ first drone warfare assault in 2002, and U.S.-trained and funded counter-terrorism units were commanded by Saleh’s oldest son and nephews. Given U.S. and Saudi desires to battle al Qaeda on Yemeni soil, neither state has any interest in losing control of these counter-terrorism units. Members of the Saleh family have too much knowledge and experience to be cast aside. The same applies to Saleh’s fellow tribesman and former regime enforcer, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who abandoned

Saleh in support of the 2011 revolution. If any one of these individuals were barred from the country, they would look for ways to undermine internal security through proxy tribal and military forces. And as long as they remain inside the country, there will be no genuine change.

Beyond problems in the military and security field, there are fundamental conflicts about the best solutions to Yemen's economic problems and regional divisions. Foreign economic aid enters Yemen through central government offices, thus outside actors and politicians in Sanaa will want to maintain this centralized system because it offers them greater control. However, the proposed solution for mending Yemen's regional divisions involves decentralizing the functions of government, perhaps reforming Yemen's constitution along federal lines as recently suggested by Hadi in a visit to the former southern capital Aden. The issue of federalism may be the ultimate stumbling block in the NDC, just as it was in Yemen's 1994 DPA. In 1994, Saleh, al-Ahmar, and other tribal, military, and religious leaders in Sanaa accused southern proponents of federalism of committing treason, and it was on this basis that the former fought a costly civil war. There is a great likelihood that tribal and military actors in Sanaa will reject a federal solution to Yemen's regional divisions, especially if it is seen as being imposed by foreign actors. Yet without a federal solution, it is difficult to envision how the supporters of al-Hirak in the south and al-Houthi in the north will ever support Yemen's political transition. The reality on the ground in Yemen today is a country divided among different regional authorities, both formal and informal.

The greatest source of Yemen's continuing problems is the poor foundation of its 1990 national union. The political culture of this early union unfortunately showed an intolerance of differences among people from multiple regions. Yemeni society was always more diverse than indicated by the old north-south border. Intolerance of political and social differences existed on both sides of this border. But it was especially bad in the north among Sanaa's elites, most who preferred to define the national interest in exclusivist terms. Through much of the 1990s and 2000s, these elites refused to admit a prominent newspaper publisher from Aden, the late Hisham Bashraheel, had as much right to define the national interest as anyone in Sanaa. Bashraheel and his family were constantly harassed by Saleh's regime, which raided the Bashraheel home in 2010 and closed down their newspaper, al-Ayyam, the oldest in the country. Many other Yemenis, like factory workers in Tihama, business entrepreneurs in al-Mukalla, and devout Zaidi followers in Saada, have also been denied opportunities to define the national interest in their own terms. Until all Yemenis find a way to create a system of government tolerant of differences, the country will be burdened with division, conflict, poverty, and a lack of development. Indeed, the tolerance of differences is the only way for Yemen's national union to continue.

Stephen W. Day is an assistant professor of political science at Stetson University in Florida and Author of "Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union" (Cambridge University Press, 2012).



Yemen's Southern Intifada

By Peter Salisbury, March 13, 2013

In early February, a car made its way along the winding road from the southern Yemeni port city of Aden to Dhale, a dusty mountain town of traditional mud-brick houses. As the car sped toward its destination, the flags and checkpoints increased in regularity with every passing mile.

Yemen's flag is made up of three horizontal stripes of red, white, and black. Those flying from the rooftops along the roadside sported an additional blue triangle dotted with a single red star. The flags, a remnant of the south's independent past, are a symbol of defiance; the checkpoints, manned by soldiers from Yemen's north, a source of simmering tension.

"See," said Fatima, an Adeni college professor, as the car stopped at yet another checkpoint so that a uniformed youth, his cheek bulging with the narcotic *qat* leaf and an AK-47 casually slung across his shoulder, could take a look inside. "How can they say that this is not an occupation?"

On the outskirts of Dhale, the military checkpoints came to a sudden halt. The government had no jurisdiction beyond the town's borders. At the top of a hill in the center of Dhale, Shalal Ali Shaye'a, a top leader in Dhale of Hiram, squinted into the sun. "Look," he said, pointing to another blue-triangled flag painted onto the mountainside opposite him. "This is the free south."

Shaye'a is a leading member of one of the more radical factions of *Hiram al-Janoubi* ("the southern movement," better known in Yemen as Hiram), a loose coalition of southern rights groups formed in Yemen in 2007. Since a popular uprising unseated former President Ali Abdullah Saleh — a hated figure for many southerners — in 2011, secessionist sentiment has been on the rise in the south and the pro-independence wing of Hiram has been gaining confidence. While politicians and diplomats in the

northern capital of Sanaa have been focused on the peace plan that led to Saleh's ouster, Shaye'a and his cohort have been planning their "peaceful intifada" which they hope will end with talks in Geneva, an end to the checkpoints, and the arrival of U.N. peacekeepers.

But if recent events are anything to go by, southerners' attempts to extricate themselves from their two decade-old union with the north could prove to be a messy affair. Tensions between Hiram and the government had been rising for months when, on February 20, security forces raided the Aden home of Qasem Asker Jubran, Yemen's onetime ambassador to Mauritania, now a committed secessionist. Jubran was arrested, accused of planning to disrupt "by any means possible" a rally planned for the next day by Islah (Yemen's biggest Islamist party) to celebrate the first anniversary of the man who replaced Saleh as president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. Over the next week, Hiram protesters clashed again and again with security forces. By the end of February, members of the southern movement estimated that up to 20 of their number had died in the violence, while the Islah's party headquarters in the southern city of Mukalla had been set on fire in just one of a series of attacks on northern political parties and businesses.

Dhale and nearby Radfan hold an important place in Hiram and southern mythology. It was in Hibilayn, a village in Radfan, that British troops shot and killed seven men in October 1963, sparking the uprising that ended British rule in the south. The revolt was launched from the craggy, volcanic mountains of Dhale, and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), the socialist state that succeeded the British, populated its military with men from the area.

In 1990, bankrupted by the fall of the Soviet Union and a bloody 1986 civil war, the PDRY merged with its northern

neighbor, the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), led by Saleh. But four years later Ali Salem al-Beidh, the PDRY leader who took the south into the unity deal, declared the foundation of a new state, the Democratic Republic of Yemen. Southerners had complained of an unequal partnership and of a campaign of assassinations targeting their leaders since the north-south merger. Fed up after a series of inconsequential talks, they had decided to quit the union.

The militaries of the PDRY and YAR, which were not integrated after unity, went to war. Dhale was a key battleground during the fighting, which the northerners won, backed by tribal militias, mujahedeen recently returned from Afghanistan, and even former PDRY soldiers who defected after a bloody civil war in the south in 1986.

Many southern officers and civil servants, including Shaye'a, were forced into early retirement after the war, and most accounts of the life in the south after 1994 run down similar lines: of northern tribal, military, and economic interests taking over vast swathes of land and businesses; of soaring unemployment among southerners while northerners arrived to take juicy government jobs; and of brutal repression of any kind of secessionist sentiment or expression of southern identity.

"Before unity," Shaye'a said, "I was a student at military college. I graduated in 1990, into unity. I practiced for a few years and then the war started. They kicked all our soldiers out, and I fled. I came back six months later. After they kicked us out, we lived in a miserable situation."

In 2006, former military officers from the region began to organize protests at home and in Aden over low pensions and lack of jobs. A year later, HIRAK was formed as an umbrella organization to bring together the plethora of southern rights movements that had sprung up since 1994. Today, it is made up of around seven major groups and many more splinter organizations, loosely formed around the Supreme Council of the Southern Movement, led by Hassan Baoum, a popular pro-independence activist.

Hirakis are not just disappointed former government workers. Many of the group's most vocal supporters are so young that they cannot remember life before unity. At one of the weekly marches the group holds in Crater, a volcanic outcrop of the Shamsan mountain which towers over Aden, Nour, 20, tried to explain her involvement in the movement.

"I was born inside unity; I don't like it. I want separation," she said. "It is unfair. I don't like the poverty. I want to get back the country. We need to support the demonstrations."

Unemployment is a big issue for young southerners like Nour. Even those who do not actively support HIRAK believe that the best state jobs go to the friends and families of Sanaa's political elite. This is frustrating and baffling to those who believe that most of the country's resources are located in the south — two of Yemen's biggest oil fields are to be found in the former PDRY, while Aden was once one of the busiest ports in the world.

Other HIRAKIS have only recently come around to the secessionists' way of thinking. "I am from those who wanted to correct the road of the unity," said Nasser Mohamed Al-Khubaji, one of HIRAK's top leaders in Lahj, as he reclined in the cushioned *mafraj* of his simple home in Radfan in mid-February. "I thought we could do something through parliament. But when we took up the case of the south, we faced aggression. People became angry with us."

Al-Khubaji quit parliament after the 2007 shooting of southerners preparing for a rally to celebrate the anniversary of the revolt against the British by the central security forces. As a member of parliament for Lahj governorate, he had taken part in the preparations. "When we were preparing for our revolutionary activities, the military from the north came. They killed four and injured 20," he said. The opportunity for negotiation with the north died then, he said: "The time was over for talk."

If Nour had been born to the north, she would probably have taken part in the protest movement that unseated Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011, voicing frustrations about Yemen's northern elite similar to those heard across the south. But like many Hirakis, after initially supporting the revolution she came to see it as a largely northern affair.

Yemen's 2011 uprising started as a nonviolent movement in the big northern cities of Taiz and Sanaa. But it soon descended into a violent elite power struggle, fought between military units loyal to Saleh and his son Ahmed Ali; those with ties to the powerful general and former Saleh ally Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, and militias loyal to the tribal leaders and brothers Hamid and Sadeq al-Ahmar.

The deal brokered by members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to end the fighting in November 2011 was an elite peace accord, Nour said, not a solution to southerners' problems — the GCC deal explicitly references the problems in the south, but does not go far enough toward addressing southern grievances for many Hirakis. "I don't care about 2011; that was just a fight between Ali Abdullah Saleh and Hamid al-Ahmar," she said. "It has nothing to do with the south."

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Yet if foreign diplomats involved in brokering the accord are to be believed, the GCC deal presents a unique opportunity for southerners, in the form of a much-vaunted national dialogue conference. The deal's brokers have effectively staked Yemen's future on the dialogue's success and President Hadi has said that the country could descend into civil war if it fails.

During six months of talks, which are due to start on March 18, the conference's organizers hope that working groups will be able to draft a new constitution and discuss solutions to the country's many problems, including the "southern question" as it is often described in Sanaa. Delegations from Yemen's many fissiparous factions have been invited to the conference and Hirak has been offered the second-biggest allotment of seats, 85

in total. Yet for many Hirakis, the conference is a non-starter.

Despite diplomats' best efforts to convince them that attending the talks is in their best interests, a number of Hiraki groups have said that they will not go to the dialogue. Most vocal in rejecting the talks have been factions linked to Baoum and al-Beidh, one of the main architects of unity in 1990 and, since 1994, one of its biggest critics. They want bilateral negotiations between the north and the south over separation, not to discuss the shape of the unified state.

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Other southern movement leaders are more open to the idea of the talks. In March 2012 Mohamed Ali Ahmed, the former governor of Abyan governorate, returned to Aden after nearly two decades in exile in Britain. Diplomats overseeing the GCC deal, who describe him as a moderate, say that he has become a key point of contact in Hirak. Speaking at his home in Aden in February, he told *Foreign Policy* that he would go to the dialogue even though Hadi is yet to meet a series of demands that he helped southerners to formulate in 2012 as a precondition to taking part in the conference.

"We will go so that the international community does not say that southerners do not cooperate," he said. "We cannot ignore the international community. We will [get our demands] from the inside. We cannot ignore the will of the people, but we want to use peaceful means."

Ali Ahmed believes the creation of a two-state federal union between the north and south followed by a referendum after five years could be the best path to independence, an idea first floated by Hirakis in 2009. But the al-Beidh factions of Hirak, many who mutter that Ali Ahmed is working for Hadi to maintain rather than end unity, has become increasingly hard line.

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The differences between al-Beidh and Ali Ahmed run deep — much deeper than mere strategy. On January 13, 1986, the bodyguards of then-President Ali Nasser Mohammed opened fire on a meeting of the PDRY's politburo. Former associates say that he hoped to consolidate his power by assassinating the leaders of a faction loyal to his predecessor, Abdul Fattah Ismail, who was killed soon after the fighting started. But Ismail loyalists led by al-Beidh gained the upper hand in the ensuing civil war and after a month of fighting Mohammed fled to the north along with tens of thousands of his followers. Among those who fled north with him were Ali Ahmed and Hadi — Yemen's current president.

Hirak's leadership has worked in recent years to reconcile the differences between the *Toghma* — the winners of the 1986 war — and the *Zomra* — Nasser Mohammed's "desperate band" of followers — hoping that the common goal of independence will be enough to patch over past rivalries and resentments. Since 2009, Hirak has held reconciliation marches every January 13 to mark the anniversary of the civil war. The 2013 rally was the biggest ever, according to the local *Yemen Post*. A number of Hirakis, who see the march as a watershed moment for the independence movement, claim that one million people attended (more reliable estimates run to the tens of thousands). But many *Toghma* still view their *Zomra* counterparts with suspicion. Some of the bloodiest fighting during the 1986 war occurred between militias loyal to Ali Ahmed and Baoum in Abyan; Shaye'a still recalls how his father, ministry of interior at the time, was killed by Nasser Mohammed's men at the January 1986 politburo meeting.

Hirak is unified in its quest for independence, said Jubran, who is widely seen as al-Beidh's man in Aden (the former president lives in exile in Beirut) during an interview at his home in the southern capital a week before he was arrested. "There are a lot of disputes between the different parties of Hirak," he said. "But the main goal is freedom. We are unified. In some other parties they want five years and a referendum but they will not prevail. When we got independence in 1967 no one told us to make freedom or a referendum and we don't need a referendum now."

"Ninety-nine percent" of southerners are behind the al-Beidh faction of Hirak, Jubran argued. While this figure is likely some way off — and a of number Hirakis say that they support the equally pro-independence Baoum, who is based in Yemen, rather than Beirut-bound al-Beidh — it is fair to say that a growing number of southerners are falling in behind the two men's uncompromising approach. And at rallies across the country, it is al-Beidh's image that is most visible on placards and banners. In Dhale and Lahj it is not uncommon to hear him described as "the president," a title he still bestows upon himself. Analysts estimate that support for the al-Beidh and Ahmed factions is split about 70 to 30 among Hirakis.

Some southerners had hoped that the northern revolution would lead to improvements in life in the former PDRY, and worried that independence would require a long, potentially bloody, and hugely costly struggle. Others thought that having Hadi, a southerner, as president might see Hirak treated with more leniency and were encouraged when the huge reconciliation march in January was allowed to pass unmolested. But the violence in February proved a tipping point for even more moderate southerners.

"I don't support Hirak, I am not a Hiraki," said Anas, a young southern woman who lives in Aden, in March. "But I no longer support unity either."

Perhaps sensing the direction in which popular opinion is going, southern movement leaders who had previously expressed willingness to compromise have also been taking a more combative stance of late. In February, Haydar al-Attas, prime minister of Yemen's first unity government, said that he would reject an invitation to the dialogue and demanded that Jamal Benomar, the U.N. envoy to Yemen, oversee a referendum on independence.

"In the end, they will all come around to our way of thinking or they will not matter," said one al-Beidh aligned Hiraki leader in response to the news. Ali Ahmed, who is

not as widely popular as Baoum and al-Beidh, could lose the chance of a future role in the south if he attends the talks, he added.

Many southerners are skeptical of the international community's intentions meanwhile. At the Crater march, Mohamed, a pro-independence activist, could barely contain himself. "Where is the international community in all of this?" he asked, an often-repeated refrain at the march. "Where are our rights? In the north, they fought for one year, people were killed, and the international community gave them their peace. The northerners have dominated us, killed us, stolen from us since unity. Where is our dialogue with the north? We have been fighting for 20 years, but still they ignore us."

Thus far, the southern movement has been largely peaceful — surprisingly so, given the availability of arms in Yemen and the number of disaffected, unemployed young men in the south. The leaders of even its more radical factions say that they are committed to peaceful protest, and while violence flared up in February, it did not boil over into the kind of devastating armed conflict seen in the north during 2011.

But a number of questions about Hirak's more extreme wing remain to be answered, not least its commitment to a nonviolent struggle. While Hiraki activists at marches like those in Crater are unarmed, and it is easy to believe people like Nour when she expresses her commitment to a peaceful uprising, al-Beidh's arm of Hirak has been accused on a number of occasions of building its own militia, and has recently been linked with arms shipments from Iran. Clashes have broken out between Hirak-aligned armed groups and government troops in recent years, many of them in Dhale and Lahj, a stronghold for the al-Beidh faction.

It is particularly hard to reconcile Shaye'a with the idea of Hirak's peaceful intifada. A number of Yemeni analysts say that he is one of the leaders of "The Movement for

Self Determination," or Hatam, a militia formed after the civil war which has fought with the Yemeni military on a number of occasions in the past. In October 2010, a bomb placed outside of Al-Wahda Sports Club in Aden killed four people. The attack was blamed on Hatam, which planned to disrupt an upcoming football tournament, and Hirak. The government named Shaye'a as the ringleader of the group that planned the blast — a charge he denies. "They are willing to say anything about the southern people," he said. "It is far from my peaceful revolution. I love sports."

Shaye'a remained tightlipped as to whether Hirak has armed militias in and around Dhale, but when he left his home, he clambered into a battered Toyota pickup, armed gunmen — one man wielding a rocket-propelled grenade launcher — bouncing in the back as the truck wound its way along the dirt road. Earlier, he had explained why he lived in Dhale rather than Aden.

"We started here, in Dhale and in Radfan, because we were safe here," Shaye'a said. "Here, all the people are active with Hirak. Most of our army who were kicked out of their jobs came from here. Most of the military forces who were retired came from here. Here, the community helped us to start out activities. They were ready. The occupation forces were here — there was action and there was reaction."

Al-Khubaji, Hirak's man in Lahj, agreed that his area was under Hiraki control but disagreed that the movement's success in the area had been achieved through force. Hirak has spent much of the past six years building a parallel state structure, providing public goods to residents of the area, he said. "Most of our work is in enhancing administrative and regulatory capacities," he said. "Politically the governorate is under the rule of Hirak. But we are under occupation. Before us, the courts were full of cases. Now, we have the councils of Hirak to solve problems. We even solve security problems. I would say that 90 percent of Lahj is under Hirak control. The occupation forces are still here; here, but not in control."

But few moments later, he added a familiar caveat. “Our movement is to get separation peacefully,” he said. “But I cannot guarantee that other interests and movements will not take action. We insist on a peaceful movement. But we will not discourage anyone who wants to take this path.”

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It might not be long before it becomes apparent how, exactly, Shaye’a, Jubran, and others plan to move forward.

Jubran — who was freed in late February having declared his commitment to peaceful protest — ended his interview with the promise that by the 20th anniversary of the south’s last attempt at separation, it would be an independent state once again. “On 21 May 2013, you will see,” he said. “The peaceful intifada will begin.”

Within a year, he said, it would all be over.

Peter Salisbury is an independent journalist and analyst.



Best Friends Forever for Yemen’s Revolutionaries?

By Stacey Philbrick Yadav, Tuesday, March 19, 2013

If there is any consensus on Yemen these days, it is around the assertion that the National Dialogue Conference that commenced Monday *must* succeed. Of course, what *must* happen often does not. But the problems with the insistence on the need for success go deeper. The meaning of success is subject to such widely different interpretations, by domestic and international actors alike, that any outcome short of outright anarchy is likely to be heralded by some, while even a seeming breakthrough will be condemned by many.

But the more substantial problem with the claim that the National Dialogue must succeed is that it overlooks features of Yemen’s transitional process that have been broken from the outset, and largely ignores the sustained, reasoned critique that this process has engendered from the beginning. This critique has been expressed not simply by mounting separatism in the southern city of Aden and its peripheries, or even the obvious loss of sovereignty over some parts of the country over the past two years. Indeed, those forms of critique actually fit the prevailing narrative of Yemen as preternaturally divided and ungovernable, a narrative that helped to justify former President Ali

Abdullah Saleh’s rule for three decades, as he sold himself to Yemeni and foreign audiences as the least worst alternative to anarchy.

An alternative form of dissent challenges this narrative and the broader patterns of the Yemeni elite’s divisive politics of identity. It is a form of resistance that underwrote the revolutionary movement but is flagging in the face of Yemen’s transitional framework. The media and international diplomacy have primarily focused on the intrigues and high politics of two main groups: civilian political elites and organized groups that wield force. But this focus misses the deeper significance of new revolutionary movements, which have proven that these elites could not alone determine the trajectory of change in Yemen. Indeed, by the eve of the revolution, political elites from the regime and opposition alike had contributed to making formal political institutions largely irrelevant to the lives of most Yemenis. And while insurgent groups in the North and the South were capable of *challenging* the state, they were no more capable of controlling it than government forces were capable of fully displacing them.

Ultimately, it fell to a popular revolutionary movement to give shape and direction to a call for change that had long emanated from reformists in the formal opposition. Participants in this movement have not only changed Yemeni politics, they have themselves been changed by the process of political mobilization and the experience of collective action. When the international community sanctioned the formal opposition to represent Yemenis in the transitional process, it failed to take full account of the transformations that the revolutionary movement had brought about for so many of its participants. This lies at the heart of the misconceptions underlying the National Dialogue and its limited prospects for true “success.”

It is not simply that the transitional process, of which the National Dialogue is a centerpiece, underestimated the importance of the revolutionary movement or overestimated the ability or willingness of existing elites to negotiate a way forward for Yemen. The transitional planners — largely unpracticed in responding to popular mobilization — assumed the same approach to identity that Saleh adopted for so long. They assumed that self-interested actors would stand only for themselves, could only represent a particular set of interests or fixed identity groups, and that they would understand themselves in singular terms. This kind of cardboard political reality can be *made* by political elites and institutions, but is not inevitably given or destined to remain fixed for eternity. Quite the contrary. As political leaders appeal to, describe, and categorize groups, they help to make them socially, politically, and economically significant. Yemeni identities are being treated as fixed at precisely the moment when they are most radically in flux.

The National Dialogue process has not been entirely oblivious to these new realities. Yemeni elites and their backers at the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the United Nations did some important work when they created the slate of participants in the National Dialogue. But asking complex individuals with dense networks of relationships to narrow their affiliations runs counter to important *other* work, done by activists in the revolutionary movement, who have helped to multiply those ties and have encouraged Yemenis to stand with and

for people who were different from them. In short, the revolutionary movement was built on and sustained by a form of solidarity that is being profoundly challenged by the National Dialogue.

Over the past year, I have had the chance to talk with dozens of revolutionary activists across the political spectrum, in the context of workshops and training sessions related to the transitional process. These meetings included members of the Southern Movement, the Houthi movement, secular liberals, doctrinal Marxists, and Islamists of a wide range, from different parts of Yemen and from the diaspora. Nearly all of these activists have spoken about the transformative power of collective action. They describe the ways in which working with dissimilar “others” transformed the way in which they viewed themselves, others, and their society. Much of this began in protest squares, in forms of cooperation that that they never anticipated, in providing order, public goods, and basic functions of the state with delimited spaces of popular sovereignty.

Most important in activists’ accounts of their own transformations were everyday practices sustained under conditions that were decidedly abnormal. Many recount being surprised when their own presuppositions were challenged. As one recalled of her time in Sanaa’s Change Square, “One of my fondest memories was a day I had tea at a tea house in the square with four men: an Islahi, an atheist, a secular Socialist, a religious Zaidi, and myself. We laughed a lot, disagreed on politics ... there are many unexpected friendships [that started in the square].” This contributed to changing perceptions of ideological others. A female activist noted that her participation “changed my perception of some Islamists, whom I assumed would not accept me as a woman ... but that was not the case. Of course, the fact that I, as a woman, stayed late in the square surprised people, but ... I felt that our interactions broke many stereotypes of the other.” Another major node of reassessment was reflected in a shift from thinking of “the tribes” as corporate units to “tribesmen,” as co-participants in the revolution. As one urban activist described, “The assumption I had about tribes being by default an obstacle

in front of civic engagement and transition into modernity was proven wrong [in the square].”

These shifting attitudes are often described in terms of friendship. It was common for me to hear activists assert that, “many of my most valuable friendships were actually developed during the revolution and wouldn’t have happened otherwise.” But for others, it has instead been described as solidarity — a willingness to stand with others with whom one does not precisely agree. Among those who cite the transformative effect of collective action, there is no effort to efface difference between movement participants. Indeed, the shared commitment to deliberative democracy *presupposes* difference. But it also presumes that solidarity is possible amid this difference, and that actors may choose to stand for and with those who are different from them.

In other words, what happened in the squares has been understood by many revolutionary activists as more than the simple convergence of interest. This points to something else that scholars know about the relationship between identity and interest. Interests are not free-floating things out there. They are tied to identities, by which individual claims are articulated in terms of one’s interests *as* a member of a particular group; they reference collectivities. So the rethinking of collective identities has implications for the pursuit of interests.

If, by the time the transitional agreement was signed, Yemenis were in the process of seeing themselves differently, imposing a transitional structure that forced

people to abandon these newly-formed solidarities in favor of group identities as they were understood by the old regime and outside actors (like tribes, Southerners, women, etc.) was an intervention that should be recognized as such. Seeing the National Dialogue in this light, it becomes easier to understand that resistance to it has not been just about “who gets a seat,” but also about what it means to hold such a seat (or not), and in whose name each of the participants might reasonably be expected to speak.

In this regard, the National Dialogue failed well before it began. Its planners asked Yemenis to abandon a newly-forged willingness to stand in solidarity with dissimilar others, in favor of a politics of descriptive representation — to be little more than (categorical) bodies in the room. As one activist has reflected, “the way groups are identified [by National Dialogue planners] puts us in closed boxes and reduces our identity to only one, something that makes me extremely uncomfortable.” The National Dialogue — which was originally intended to include even fewer participants — asks people to represent categories in ways that might facilitate mediation, but in its conventional and elite-driven approach to the politics of identity, it fails to take account of the lived experiences of many of the people its delegates claim to represent.

Stacey Philbrick Yadav is assistant professor of political science at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York and author of the forthcoming Islamists and the State: Legitimacy and Institutions in Yemen and Lebanon (I. B. Tauris, 2013).



A Shake Up in Yemen's GPC?

Tik Root, February 22, 2013

Facing perhaps its biggest crisis yet, Yemen's ruling party of over three decades, the General People's Congress (GPC), is in desperate need of reform. As one of the only ruling parties to have survived a widespread Arab Spring uprising, it is now navigating uncharted territory. While the party and its leader, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, are doing infinitely better than their imprisoned, exiled, dead, or dismantled counterparts across the Middle East and North Africa, the party's continued relevance and prosperity is by no means guaranteed, a reality to which it is struggling to adjust.

Formed in 1982 by Saleh, then president of the northern Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), the GPC was created to counter the rise of dissident leftist groups, like the National Democratic Front. Over time, the GPC grew into the country's dominant political force, winning the most seats in the first national elections held after the unification of the YAR and the southern People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1990. In the last parliamentary elections held in Yemen, in 2003, the party won 76 percent of seats. But, by the time the Arab Spring broke out the GPC was more a collection of powerful elites living off access to government coffers than a political party in the democratic sense of the term. Hardly bound to public opinion, the GPC ruled with relative impunity and only occasional resistance from the country's pseudo opposition coalition (the Joint Meeting Parties, or JMP). In hindsight, it is not surprising that the party became a primary target of revolutionaries.

Yemen's popular uprising that began in January 2011 brought millions of protesters to the streets. Activists called for the "fall of the regime," and events often turned bloody, with more than 2,000 deaths reported by Yemen's human rights minister. In November 2011, after many delays, Saleh finally signed an internationally brokered Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) agreement to relinquish the presidency. In February 2012, President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi was elected in a one-man

race called for under the GCC transition plan. Over this turbulent period the GPC's popularity, membership, and monopoly on government resources took a predictably hard hit. Now, with fewer spoils to go around and the need to mobilize support, the GPC will have to evolve into a more self-sustaining entity.

Nevertheless, in contrast to its regional counterparts, the GPC emerged from the Arab Spring remarkably intact. The party maintained a vast organizational network, with millions of followers, and a huge media operation. Through Hadi, it held onto the presidency and half of the cabinet posts. Saleh, who remains president of the party, received immunity for crimes committed during the uprising as part of the GCC deal. The GPC also indirectly retained considerable military heft through Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali, who will continue to head the powerful Republican Guard until a military restructuring, announced in December, is implemented. But while appearing outwardly strong, the party has started to unravel from the inside.

Yemen's political crisis brought longstanding divisions within the GPC to the surface, as members find themselves debating the party's future for the first time in decades. Although some members deny the problem, the GPC is seemingly split into two camps. Saleh and his hardline supporters, like loyalist member of parliament (MP) Sultan Barakani, believe that the party is structurally sound and in a position to rebound quickly. The more progressive branch, led by former Prime Minister Abdul Kareem al-Eryani and backers of President Hadi, stress that the party must learn from the events of 2011 and hint at the need for reform. A primary point of contention between these liberal and conservative wings is who should lead the party.

"Saleh is not a normal President for the GPC, he is the founding President. If he leaves, many members will leave the party," says Yasser Awadi, a young GPC MP, alluding to the patronage networks that Saleh has constructed

over the years. The other claim that Saleh supporters make is that there is currently no one capable of replacing him. “Dancing on the heads of snakes,” as Saleh famously quipped about his 33-year rule, required managing technocrats, tribes, militants, the international community, and more. Hard shoes to fill according to Barakani, “He has the charisma, he has the experience to lead the party. If GPC wants a new leader they really have to search.”

Abdul Qader al-Hilal, the mayor of Yemen’s capital Sanaa since July 2012 and long-time GPC member, does not see the party’s current structure as natural. “Normally in the third world, the President of the country is the president of the party,” he says. Hilal and other Saleh skeptics admit that the former president deserves to be part of the GPC’s future, but dispute the claim that party membership is contingent on Saleh’s leadership. They argue that Hadi, given his work as president and backing from the international community, would make a preferable alternative. They also recognize the roadblock that Saleh poses to the party’s recovery.

Saleh has become a symbol of the corruption, strong-handed tactics, and political games seen during his tenure; a reputation that the GPC must also shoulder. He is attracting the ire of the international community as well. During the U.N. Security Council’s recent trip to Sanaa, which was aimed at encouraging the transition process, the British co-chair of the delegation, Sir Mark Grant, singled out Saleh when asked to specify potential transition “spoilers.” Last week, this view gained official backing from the Security Council, which released a statement accusing Saleh of “interference in the transition.” The council, under a resolution passed in June 2012, is empowered to act against those obstructing implementation of the GCC initiative, a move that could involve sanctions.

For his part, Saleh has yet to show much willingness to step aside. Despite telling the Saudi Gazette newspaper in a January interview that, “I am now Ali Abdullah Saleh, an ordinary Yemeni citizen,” he continues to participate in everyday political life: making speeches, scheduling

public appearances, and running his own media outlets. People close to the former president say that this apparently insatiable desire to stay relevant is as much a product of Saleh’s genuine belief that he is doing what is best for Yemen, as it is an attempt to preserve his own position and legacy.

With Hadi and his camp hesitant to make an active move for the GPC presidency, the leadership deadlock looks set to continue until — barring extraordinary incidents such as assassination — party support shifts decidedly to one side, or the international community finds a way of pressuring Saleh into leaving. In the meantime, the GPC has another major hurdle to overcome.

The party is facing an identity crisis of sorts. Lacking any real ideology and having lost its traditional primacy, the party must find a new way of defining its political role. Once again, opinion falls along two lines. The hardliners tend to frame the GPC as defenders against Islamic rule. Barakani, for example, emphasizes that “the only thing that prevents the Muslim Brotherhood from taking full power in Yemen is the GPC.” This is no doubt an exaggeration, but one that plays on a palpable fear among many liberal Yemenis. Islah, the country’s main Islamist party, made up of both Muslim Brotherhood and more conservative Salafi elements, saw its standing skyrocket during the Arab Spring and was given a greater number of posts in the transitional government than it had ever held before. A simple GPC message of opposition to Islah could appeal to those who view Islah as a threat and, though not fond of the GPC, see few viable alternatives.

Other GPC members, rather than highlighting the threat of Islah, stress that the party has learned from the past and is ready to serve the Yemeni people. Hilal believes that the GPC is better prepared to understand the concerns of underrepresented groups like youth, who make up 75 percent of Yemen’s population, and women. Whether or not the average youth or woman — demographics all but excluded from the GPC’s leadership — agree with that assessment is debatable. Regardless, acknowledging that the GPC will likely have to broaden its support base could prove beneficial for the party.

Despite the GPC's shortcomings, opponents should not expect the party to collapse overnight. Nearly all GPC members, though divided on many issues, see the party as necessary for maintaining Yemen's delicate balance of power. They have a point. The GPC's sudden departure or decline could throw the country's political balance, patronage networks, and military into flux; a prospect of which many are wary. Even self-described independent and pro-revolutionary business professor Dr. Ahmed bin Mubarak, who has since been named secretary general of the upcoming National Dialogue Conference, agrees, "We need [the] GPC. The GPC is not just Saleh. I think we need balance in Yemen."

However, if the GPC wants to remain a long-term fixture of Yemen's power structure, it must undergo, as Hilal puts it, "a restructuring to deal with the changes that have happened." The second year of Yemen's transition period, which is ambitiously meant to include a comprehensive National Dialogue, a constitutional referendum, and

February 2014 presidential elections, will be a critical test of the GPC's ability to enact such reform. One bold move would be to preemptively replace Saleh as party president, though this is a risk that no one in the party appears ready to take. Another, more realistic, way for the party to work through internal disputes, renew stagnant leadership ranks, and clarify its political platform would be to hold a party congress, which has not happened since 2005. There are rumors that the GPC is preparing to gather, but no official announcement has been made.

Neither of these steps would ensure the GPC's future success, but either would be a sign of progress. Until then, however, the party will continue to be, as one commentator phrased it, "a car without an engine," bound to lose its lead.

Tik Root is a freelance journalist based in Yemen whose writing has been published by The Atlantic, Aljazeera, and the Washington Post, among others. He tweets @TikRoot.



Hot Pants: A Visit to Ousted Yemeni Leader Ali Abdullah Saleh's New Presidential Museum

By Adam Baron, March 14, 2013

SANAA - I hadn't even finished reading the first sentence of the first report on Yemen's most written-about museum, but I already knew I'd have to visit.

It wasn't the elephant tusks, the decorative swords, or the Swedish health-food products — I would only learn that these were some of the items on display later. No, the first thing I learned about the museum that former President Ali Abdullah Saleh had built to commemorate his rule was that it showcased a pair of pants. But not just any pants: These were the pants Saleh had donned that fateful day when a bomb blast nearly killed him.

I needed to see Yemen's most infamous pair of trousers. To my mind, the display seemed an odd combination of politics, kitsch, and conflicted nostalgia over the recent past — an Arab Spring equivalent of the National Museum of American History's exhibit featuring Archie Bunker's chair.

But the museum was still not open to the public. Unwilling to wait, I decided to mine my contacts to get in. The gatekeeper, it seemed, was one of Saleh's secretaries; a friend passed on the number of his assistant, and a call to him yielded a meeting with the secretary the next day.

I assumed his aim was to vet me. This being Yemen, the word “meeting” was actually a euphemism for *qat* chew, meaning he had a full afternoon to do so. We mostly talked politics — the museum barely figured into our conversation. I did confess the sartorially rooted purpose of my visit to his assistant. That didn’t appear to be a problem: I made it to the museum, housed inside the four-year-old, \$60 million Saleh Mosque, two days later.

As I descended a staircase in the sumptuously decorated compound and entered the exhibition, I discovered I wasn’t the only visitor. Oddly, there was a group of Asian tourists milling about.

The museum is tastefully decorated — more akin to an American presidential library than anything else. The items on display, mostly gifts given to Saleh by foreign dignitaries, were almost comically dissimilar. An impressive assortment of decorative swords sat a few yards away from a display case dominated by metal “Central Intelligence Agency” and “House of Representatives” plates, which struck me as the kind of souvenirs a midwestern grandmother would purchase on a visit to Washington.

Pride of place was rightfully given to the charred article of clothing I’d come here to see. The bottom half of a mannequin, placed in a glass display case in the center of the larger of the museum’s two rooms, sported the black dress pants. A decent portion of the front of the pants, it appeared, had evaporated in the explosion that nearly killed Saleh. His black Montblanc belt, however, remained intact.

Staring blankly at the display, I flashed back to June 3, 2011. I don’t recall hearing the sound of the fateful blast, but as word spread of an explosion at the mosque where Saleh was praying, I was jolted from yet another Friday of mass protests, spurred to push through the crowd in pursuit of a TV.

At that point, no one knew where the country was headed. Despite assurances otherwise, Saleh seemed dead set against signing an internationally backed agreement that

would have him cede power. Twelve days before the fateful explosion, clashes ignited between pro-Saleh troops and fighters loyal to one of the most powerful tribal leaders in the country, who had broken with the former president two months prior. As parts of Sanaa descended into urban warfare, the hopes and aspirations of those who had taken to the streets with the aim of toppling Saleh by peaceful means were all but drowned out by the sound of shelling. Saleh’s near-death experience, everybody knew, would be a game changer — though at the time, no one knew exactly how.

Government officials were claiming that Saleh had only suffered minor injuries, but his failure to appear on television that night seemed to confirm suspicions that things were far more serious. Staring out at a blackout-darkened Sanaa from the roof of a friend’s apartment building, I was seized with a sense of foreboding. Heading back to my house exhausted, my cab driver was moved to ask me if things were this bad in “my country,” apparently mistakenly assuming I was Pakistani.

In the heat of the moment, Saleh’s subsequent flight to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment seemed to provide a way out of the country’s political crisis. Here, citizens were hoping, was a Yemeni *deus ex machina*.

“It would be absurd for Saleh to return,” a Yemeni analyst told me the next day, speaking with infectious optimism. Three months later, of course, return he did.

Face to face with Saleh’s totaled trousers, it was hard to feel anything other than sympathy with and — dare I say — admiration for the controversial leader, who rose from humble beginnings to rule Yemen for longer than any leader since the fall of the country’s monarchy. Say what you will about the former president, but he still did something that every other leader targeted by the Arab Spring refused to do: He ceded power. It might have been months late and it may have been on his terms, but he managed to retain his reputation as a survivor in the process.

Leaving the building, rather self-conscious about being swayed by a charred article of clothing, I ultimately concluded the museum has done its job. Whatever you

say about Saleh's PR team, they're still able to get the message out.

But would Yemenis feel the same way? Checking in with a friend and his father the next afternoon, I showed them my photos from the museum, curious to gauge their reactions. They're a dissimilar pair — a deeply pragmatic tribal sheikh and his idealistic, college-educated son — and I'd never known either to hide his disdain for Saleh.

But uncharacteristically, this time they didn't say much. My friend, noting the locations of the pants' burn damage, did make a joke that was racy enough that he felt compelled to say it in English so his father wouldn't understand. But in place of seething anger directed at Saleh, they seemed mainly to be subsumed by a passive, broadly directed malaise.

My friend, whom I'd met during the protests, had risked everything to join the revolution. It was one of his only significant acts of filial rebellion: Upon discovering that my friend had joined the demonstrations in secret, his father, enraged by fear, dragged him to their village and shackled him in the basement. He remained defiant, refusing food and drink for days until his father, moved by the show of commitment, relented and gave his blessing.

But the discrepancy between Yemen's political reality and what many hoped the protests would achieve had transformed him into a pessimist. "My father was right, and I was wrong," he said, each syllable dripping with emotion. "It was all pointless. Nothing changed."

The weight of his words rendered both of us silent for a good 10 minutes.

Many cast the negotiated nature of Saleh's departure as a necessary, if far from ideal, step that saved Yemen from being engulfed in a civil war. Still, the goal of 2011's protests, as those taking part stressed even at the time, was not solely the end of Saleh's time in office — it was the fall of the regime. But today, there's a new man at the head — Saleh's longtime Vice President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who was elected, so to speak, in a vote where he was the sole candidate.

But if Hadi's steps toward reform have garnered cautious support from many of his predecessor's fiercest opponents, few shy away from noting that the previous regime lingers on. The ultimate fate of Yemen's most divisive military leaders — Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali, and Saleh ally-turned-defector Ali Mohsen — remains unclear. Even the political rhetoric of the factions in the current unity government has remained strikingly similar to the Saleh era.

For Yemenis like my friend, it's hard to get very worked up over something like the Saleh museum. He may no longer be president, but Saleh still heads one of Yemen's most powerful political parties, still makes periodic speeches, and still resides in a well-protected home in central Sanaa.

Even those who continue to fight the good fight have largely responded to the museum's opening with little more than mild bemusement. Meeting with a bunch of activist friends the day before my visit, I barely elicited a reaction when I announced my plan to visit the museum. The real offense to the revolution, one seethed, are the presumptuous gestures toward "youth inclusion" in a transitional process presided over by most of the same people Yemeni youths had taken to the streets to overthrow.

These activists hoped that the events of 2011 would truly change the country — that they'd spawn some new political force. And for a few moments, it did seem that Yemen was entering a new era. But recalling the hundreds of hours I logged listening to the aspirations and anxieties of the remarkably diverse array of Yemenis camped in Change Square — Sanaa's once-sprawling, now all but abandoned anti-government sit-in — it is hard not to sympathize with those demoralized by the lack of change.

The old order lives on: Two years later, Yemenis are still talking about most of the same people they were talking about before the protests even began. It may take an "ousted" leader opening a museum dedicated to his rule for the rest of the world to be alerted to this. But the vast majority of Yemenis need no reminder.

Adam Baron is a freelance journalist based in Sanaa, Yemen. He blogs at adambaron.com and tweets at @adambaron.

Triage for a fracturing Yemen

By April Longley Alley, October 31, 2012

Nearly a year after former President Ali Abdullah Saleh signed a transition agreement, Yemen risks significant localized violence and territorial fragmentation. While politicians and the international community in the capital prepare for national dialogue, Zaydi rebels, known as the Houthis, and Salafi fighters associated with the Islamist party, Islah, are positioning for further skirmishes in the North. Already, clashes during the last months have killed dozens of people and inflammatory rhetoric by both sides is a harbinger of violence to come. In the South, separatist sentiment remains high and there is no agreement on how to effectively include the southern movement, a loose and divided coalition calling for immediate southern independence or at a minimum greater autonomy, into the dialogue process. Attacks by al Qaeda and its local affiliate, Ansar al-Sharia, are on the rise, with assassinations of over 60 military-security personnel in 2012 alone. The minister of defense has escaped assassination on at least six different occasions.

Long festering economic and humanitarian crises undergird and feed instability. Across the country, average citizens have seen far too little improvement in their daily lives since the new government took control in February. In the short term, pledges from the Riyadh conference and the Friends of Yemen meeting in New York, worth nearly \$8 billion, offer hope of improvements to come. Yet, there is valid concern that, as in 2006, only a small fraction of the pledges will be disbursed. Equally worrisome is the lack of absorptive capacity, which has only been augmented by the destruction and looting of government offices in 2011; a continued political gridlock in 2012; and haphazard changes to the bureaucracy based on political affiliations.

All of this is not to say that Yemen is doomed to a Somalia-like scenario. Indeed, the country's politicians successfully avoided a potentially bloody civil war in 2011 and forged a unique path out of its version of the so-called Arab Spring. The transition agreement signed between the former

ruling party and an opposition bloc offers a chance for an inclusive national dialogue to address long-standing grievances and to reform institutions. However, this outcome is far from guaranteed and immediate action is needed to reduce political tensions, build trust between stakeholders, and halt centrifugal dynamics from pulling the country toward conflict and fragmentation.

In 2011, the country avoided a possible civil war through an elite compromise known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative. At its core, the agreement offered the former president domestic immunity from prosecution in exchange for his resignation. An accompanying United Nations-backed implementation mechanism added flesh to the bones by outlining a two-phase process whereby Saleh would first transfer power to his deputy, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, through non-contested elections. In phase two, President Hadi and the coalition government — split evenly between the former ruling party, the General People's Congress (GPC), and the opposition bloc, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) — would have two years to, among other things, restructure the military-security apparatus, address issues of transitional justice, and implement an inclusive national dialogue that would set the stage for drafting a new constitution before fresh elections are held in February 2014.

Nine months into phase two, the implementation scorecard is mixed. Elites in the capital have successfully hit major benchmarks, such as forming the coalition government, holding early presidential elections, and beginning preparations for the national dialogue, which is scheduled to start in mid-November but will likely be postponed. On more substantive issues, like improving the security climate, reducing tensions, unifying a divided military, and effectively running the central government, implementation has been problematic. In fact, while some progress has been made, the actions of spoilers, selective implementation of the agreement, and inflammatory

political appointments are moving the country away from political compromise and toward renewed conflict. In short, elites are checking the boxes of implementation, while progress on the ground has been one step forward and two steps back.

Most international and domestic critique focuses on Saleh and his supporters as the main spoilers. There is no doubt that Saleh's continued presence in the country and active engagement in politics are significant impediments to political change and reconciliation. His presence is toxic as it inspires distrust and suspicion among former opposition groups as well as with Hadi and his supporters. However, in many ways, the former president has become a lightning rod for critique, drawing attention away from other spoilers and problems with the implementation process that are also undermining the goal of an inclusive, democratic transition.

Buttressing the country's fragile transition will require much more than halting violations from the Saleh side. Other potential spoilers, particularly the powerful General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, should be part of the equation. Much also depends on the ability of the current government and president to address demands of the population for security and basic services and to immediately reach out to marginalized groups, especially the southern movement (Hiraak), through confidence building measures. There is also a need to halt growing fears of blanket de-Salehification within the military and civil service, which is fanning the flames of distrust and eroding confidence in a political compromise among entrenched elites.

Fair or not, many Yemenis look to Hadi to provide strategic vision and balance during the transitional period. While he still enjoys widespread support, partly because there is no alternative, his honeymoon period has expired and citizens are increasingly frustrated by the lack of vision and a leadership style that is too often repeating the mistakes of the past.

Shifting the political trajectory away from further violence and toward a successful national dialogue requires

immediate action on four main fronts: a return to basics; political inclusion; removing spoilers; and demonstrating a new leadership model.

First and foremost, the coalition government and president must refocus their attentions on security and economic recovery. It is difficult to overemphasize the sense of physical insecurity that permeates the country's most important cities, particularly Sanaa and Aden. Both cities are racked by al Qaeda attacks and growing criminality. Despite progress in removing rival military checkpoints, Sanaa remains a divided capital with Republican Guard forces dominating the South, Mohsen and Islah controlling Change Square and Sanaa University in the Northwest and the al-Ahmar tribesmen maintaining significant presence in Hasaba in the Northeast. The proliferation of armed tribesmen in the capital and the presence of military personnel in or near civilian areas is a constant reminder of the potential return to conflict. President Hadi rarely moves from his house and the prime minister conducts affairs of state from his home, sending a message of fear, apprehension, and government weakness to the population.

It would be impossible for the transitional government to resolve all of the country's diverse and complex security challenges. However, they could prioritize security in Sanaa and Aden. Without a modicum of stability in these key cities, it is difficult to encourage confidence in the government or the transition process. As it stands, all major stakeholders have incentives to develop a plan B to protect themselves in anticipation of central government failure or further deterioration.

The government also desperately needs an emergency economic plan with clear priorities. The consensus government is divided, composed of rivals who will soon, if things go well, be competing in elections. It is unreasonable to expect agreement on medium or long-term development strategies. Yet, it is possible to prioritize basic service provision, particularly electricity and water, and the facilitation of humanitarian assistance to an increasingly food insecure population.

To date, this has not happened. Instead, politicians are busy with finger pointing and dividing the spoils of state. The GPC is playing the blame game, portraying itself as a victim of exclusionary politics and sometimes relishing its self-described role as the new opposition. For its part, the JMP is obsessed with locating instances of “old regime” interference and with placing its own loyalists in JMP controlled ministries, ostensibly so that they can avoid GPC interference. Most citizens simply want a modestly functioning government and a chance to start negotiations in the dialogue. They will likely blame all sides of the old party establishment, the GPC and the JMP, for failing to fulfill these basic requirements.

There have been some improvements in living standards and some ministers and technocrats are working to expand on these successes. Yet, the overall environment of zero-sum competition and a leadership void at the government level hampers these efforts. As such, improvements in services and security have been checkered and often depend on the individual will and influence of local leaders to gather support for their particular cities or areas. The southern city of Taiz, for example, has seen some improvement in both security and services because of the new governor’s vision. The same is gradually happening for Sanaa city with the appointment of a new, results-oriented mayor. At the national level, however, an emergency strategy is missing. Instead, elites are picking over the emaciated carcass of the central government, meanwhile losing the rest of the country.

The GCC initiative was based on the spirit of “no victor, no vanquished” and the goal of broadening political participation through a national dialogue. Nearly a year into implementation, the political current is veering significantly from these principles. An atmosphere of fear and distrust permeates the political context and bodes poorly for effective dialogue. Reorienting the political climate toward greater inclusiveness hinges largely on two factors: implementing confidence-building measures aimed at marginalized groups, especially southerners, and assuaging fears of far-reaching de-Salehification. Of the two, the former is most pressing.

Southern movement participation in the national dialogue is a “make or break” issue. Although participation from every group, or current, under the Hiraak umbrella is impossible, a critical mass of participants from the movement is an essential element for reaching a valid compromise on the structure of the state. Yet, Hiraak participation remains elusive.

The technical committee charged with preparing the agenda and procedures for the national dialogue has made concerted efforts to address this issue. They announced that the first priority of the dialogue will be the southern issue or, in effect, a debate over the structure of the state: unitary, federal, or some other model. The committee is considering equal representation of northerners and southerners on the southern issues sub-committee to account for southern fears that their smaller population will dilute their voice in final decision-making. This same committee called on the government to implement 20 confidence-building measures to prepare the political climate for an effective dialogue, about half of which are targeted at the south.

The technical committee is doing its job, but it needs the support of the president, the government, and the political parties to build a supportive environment for dialogue. To date, this has not happened. Thus far, not one of the technical committee’s confidence building measures has been implemented on the ground. Granted, some requests are complex and would take considerable time, such as fully resolving land disputes or addressing illegal dismissals from public sector employment following the 1994 civil war between the North and South. However, the current government has not begun forming committees to begin addressing these issues, nor has it taken advantage of low hanging fruit, such as implementing steps to re-open the South’s most prominent independent newspaper, *al Ayyam*, which has been closed since 2009 following an attack on its offices by the central government on suspicion of supporting separatists.

By contrast, some actions of the government seem to have aggravated tensions. For example, Hadi’s appointment

of an Islahi governor in Aden angered Hiraak supporters who view Islah as a northern-oriented party opposed to southern interests. Regardless of the governor's personal record, party affiliation prevents him from playing a conciliatory and unifying role. In addition, the Ramadan presidential decree adding five Islah affiliates to the technical committee harmed potential outreach to southerners who expected new appointments to eventually come from the Hiraak.

With separatist sentiment strong and virtually no action from the central government to demonstrate a new political era, it is difficult for leaders associated with the Hiraak to participate. Even so, some moderates who are open to a federal option are likely to send representatives. Confidence building measures would facilitate their participation. This group only represents a small portion of the Hiraak and many of them are associated with Abyan governorate, where Hadi has some influence. However, it is not clear that their participation alone will facilitate adequate buy-in. Tangible confidence building measures could open political space to gain and sustain participation from a wider array of Hiraak affiliates.

While the southern issue is most pressing, other confidence-building efforts are also needed to bolster the Houthis' tenuous commitment to national dialogue. However, the parts of the government appear to be stoking the flames of conflict with this group as well. Hadi has appointed a ring of Islah affiliated governors around the Houthi stronghold of Saada. This unexpected and inflammatory political move has raised animosity and contributed to armed clashes between Islah and the Houthis in late September in Amran governorate. Now the Houthis are rhetorically beating the war drums. They maintain that the current government and Hadi are agents of the United States and relics of the old regime that are opposed to the goals of the revolution.

Beyond the need to assure marginalized groups of their place at the dialogue table and an eventual new political order, it is also important to recognize the dangers of excluding signatories to the GCC initiative. Following months of changes inside the bureaucracy and military,

which have targeted not only Saleh's family, but also a wider range of sympathizers, many in the rank and file in the GPC are apprehensive.

The 2011 popular uprising provided a mandate for change, especially at senior leadership levels. Hadi's removal of Saleh's family and close supporters from top positions in the military and the public sector were within his constitutional rights and mandate. They were also necessary to buttress his authority and to signal a new mode of politics. Yet, changes at lower levels of the bureaucracy and military-security services are less defensible and arguably counterproductive in the absence of a stable political compromise and a clear reform plan.

Currently, a tremendous amount of apprehension centers on Islah gains inside the ministries of education, finance, electricity, planning and international cooperation, and interior, as well as new army recruits into General Mohsen's First Armored Division. Islah members defend changes as necessary to fulfill the goals of the revolution, to insure that their ministers can do their jobs effectively and to correct an overwhelming bias in favor of former or current GPC affiliates within the civil service and security sectors. These stated reasons have some resonance, but Islah's claim to represent the revolution is bitterly disputed by the independent youth, Houthis, Hiraak, and even some of its own partners in the JMP.

In this time of profound political uncertainty, party-motivated changes within the civil service and security services are part of the problem, not the solution. Not only are these changes often violating existing civil service laws, but they are creating an atmosphere of fear that is encouraging actors like the Salehs, the Houthis, and the Hiraak to develop contingency plans to defend themselves when political negotiation fails. Islah gains at the expense of the GPC are to some extent strengthening residual support for hardliners in the GPC who argue that Islah is bent on exclusion of others. Ultimately, Islah's intentions should be tested in the context of its performance in government. Yet, until now, citizens have not had a chance to choose new political institutions or vote on a new government.

The current government is not the torchbearer of the revolution. It is an emergency transitional compromise forged to enable deeper changes. Until Islah, or any other party, wins in competitive elections, its mandate for far-reaching change is bounded. For now, the best solution is to fully implement the existing civil service laws. These laws, particularly those governing hiring qualifications, rotations, and investigation of corruption, allow for change that, while slower, will arguably be more durable and in line with popular desire to strengthen rule of law and professionalism.

One of the most important flaws of the GCC agreement was its failure to remove Saleh and his long-time partner, Mohsen, from politics. Removing these two men would not magically solve Yemen's problems. Both have networks of loyalty and influence that would endure even if they were required to remain out of the country for the transition. Yet, Yemenis from across the political spectrum are convinced that their exit from political life would at a minimum build confidence and provide the new president more latitude for constructive decision-making. There are arguments for a longer list of spoilers leaving the country to include Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali, or the powerful Islahi sheikh, Hamid al-Ahmar. But the least common denominator for the majority of Yemenis, with the exception of those close to Saleh and Mohsen, is that these two senior figures are the most deeply entrenched and significant obstacles to building trust and achieving reforms. The first discussions of regime change in March 2011 started with a proposal by Saleh for both Alis to exit the country. With the transition veering toward renewed conflict and mired in competition between old political parties and politicians, maybe it is time to revisit the merits of this first proposal. The two Alis need to go.

Hadi is in an unenviable position. He assumed the presidency after 33 years of seeing Saleh work to consolidate power around his family and close supporters. At the same time, Saleh's former partner and now rival, Mohsen, retains his position as commander of the First Armored Division and the Northwest Regional Command. In contrast to these men, Hadi has virtually no pre-existing

base of support in the army, the government, the GPC, or in the North's complex tribal system of allegiances. He came to power with international support and through a popular referendum in which Yemenis voted not so much for him as for an exit from crisis. The president retains a reservoir of good will from citizens hoping for peaceful change. Yet, the honeymoon period has ended and there is growing concern that his leadership style is too often repeating the mistakes of the past.

First, many are frustrated that Hadi too heavily favors his family, tribe, and region to the exclusion of others. One of the central grievances against Saleh was that he concentrated power and wealth in the hands of his family and that he intended to transfer authority to his son, Ahmed. Now, a common complaint is that Yemen has moved from the Sanhanization of the state (Sanhan is Saleh's tribal area) to the Abyanization of the state (Abyan is Hadi's home governorate).

Indeed, Abyan and the adjoining governorate of Shebwa play prominently in Hadi's civilian and military appointments. Critique, however, is not removed from the harsh reality of political survival. Yemenis are patient and recognize Hadi's need to defend himself. As such, there are no grumbings against the president's selection of an Abyan commander to control his personal protection detail. Nor do Yemenis question the recruitment of soldiers from Hadi's home region to staff this protection unit. Personal security is understandable; however, when staffing other powerful positions, many would like to see the president avoid regional favoritism, or at least to explain his choices, based on qualifications. Understandably, there is also growing resentment of the prominent role Hadi's son is playing as a gatekeeper for the president.

Others are concerned that Hadi's moves to clip the wings of Saleh and his family have unintentionally, or as a product of a tactical alliance, strengthened the hand of Mohsen and his allies in Islah. Comparatively speaking, Mohsen has been harmed far less than the Saleh side in the military reshuffling and, thus far, he has arguably gained strength. His forces guard the president's house, he has

recruited at least 10,000 soldiers since the uprising, and he is thought to have significant influence in presidential decisions, such as the appointment of Islah affiliated governors in the North. For independents, the Houthis, the Hiraak, the GPC, and even some in the JMP, Mohsen is a dangerous pillar of the old regime whose continued influence bodes poorly for genuine reform and is a reminder of how little has changed.

Regarding the South, there are serious questions surrounding the president's lack of action to implement confidence-building measures. Moreover, his preference for the Abyan and Shebwa regional bloc through presidential appointments frustrates southerners from other areas and could aggravate historic tensions between Abyan and Shebwa and their historic rivals in Dalia and Lahj governorates.

Finally, as it was under Saleh, there is a lack of transparency in Hadi's decision-making process and an unwillingness or inability to communicate a strategic vision for reform. Arguably, even more than Saleh, Hadi's consultative circles are narrow and there is limited communication with stakeholders over the direction of change.

Ultimately, too much may be riding on Hadi's shoulders. Even the one institution that could have provided a check on his unprecedented decision-making authorities

under the GCC initiative, the interpretation committee, has not been formed. Moving forward Hadi still has an opportunity to refine his leadership style and grow his popular support base through a different mode of politics. Yemenis are not expecting a total break with the past in this precarious environment. However, they are rejecting a repeat of the past. By forming the interpretation committee, communicating a clear vision for change during this remaining term, explaining his appointments based on qualifications and avoiding, when possible, the perception of regional or party bias, Hadi could play a pivotal role in calming fears and facilitating an inclusive political compromise.

Yemen avoided civil war; now the hard work of inclusion and compromise begins. While the situation is dire, the transition agreement provides a framework for avoiding a slide into conflict. However, such a slide could become a reality if political constituencies inside and outside of Yemen do not immediately move to facilitate a genuinely inclusive political compact to address competing political agendas. In the absence of such a compact, violent devolution and fragmentation is still on the horizon.

April Longley Alley is the Senior Arabian Peninsula Analyst for the International Crisis Group. She is currently based in Sanaa.



Building a Yemeni state while losing a nation

By Silvana Toska, October 28, 2012

During his recent visit to the United States, President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi of Yemen expressed his concerns that if the National Dialogue — a forum supposedly representing the major political players in Yemen — fails, Yemen could slide into a civil war that will be worse than those in Somalia or Afghanistan. Part of this rhetoric was strategic, intended to nudge the so-called “Friends of Yemen” to commit to much needed (although potentially pernicious) aid. Nevertheless, Hadi is only slightly exaggerating the dangers Yemen could face, and recent developments — such as the delay of the National Dialogue — make his predictions more worrisome.

Hadi, who ran unopposed in February, was elected after a prolonged stalemate since January 2011. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-engineered compromise that ensured the transfer of power from then President Ali Abdullah Saleh to Hadi helped avert the civil war that Yemen was dangerously skirting at that time. Many groups in Yemen, however, view the GCC deal as a failure and an imposition that ensured that formal and informal power remain in the hands of old elites. As the International Crisis Group (ICG) reports, Yemeni elites have kept their hold on power as they continue to play musical chairs with government positions. Meanwhile, the Houthi rebels in the North, the Hiraaki separatists in the South, as well as various youth groups who were the backbone of the early days of the revolution, are left out of the deal.

Unlike Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the Yemeni revolution lacked a distinct end-point and was a visible and drastic departure with the past. Saleh’s stalling techniques in his resignation exasperated the revolutionaries and the international community alike. And even after his departure, Saleh maintains a strong grasp on part of the military: his son, Ahmed Ali, commands the elite Republican Guard and his nephew, Yahya Saleh, heads the Central Security Forces. Moreover, he has a strong power base through his own tribal group, the Sanhan, as

well as tribal alliances that he has been able to buy. On top of all this, he purportedly has links to al Qaeda in Yemen increasing the potential damage that he can do to the government’s efforts to reform. Tellingly, while Saleh continues to entertain political and social actors as if he is still in charge, President Hadi has been turned into a telecommuting president, because he cannot ensure his own security in the presidential palace. Meanwhile, according to Dr. April Alley of the ICG, the Islah Party that was given an important part in the GCC deal is increasingly taking a larger share of government posts. This, too, is not very dissimilar from the Saleh era. Then, many members of Islah, nominally in opposition, received disproportionately large slices of the government pie, even compared to the General People’s Congress (the GPC) — Saleh’s own party.

It is easy, therefore — although mistaken — to view the situation in Yemen as more of the same. While formal political power and many government institutions remain in the hands of the old elite, the overall balance of power in the country has shifted away from Sanaa and the government. The Houthi rebels control most of the northern part of what is known as North Yemen, and the Southern Separatist Movement (the Hiraak) has become increasingly more vocal in rejecting the legitimacy of a unified state. Beside a weak central state, these two groups provide veritable checks to the power of the central government, and there can be no solution to the many, many, ills that Yemen faces without taking this situation into account.

Officially, there have been attempts to accommodate these shifting power centers into the National Dialogue. While the Hiraaki are not partaking in the dialogue, most other groups, including the Houthis, have their representatives at the table. According to Hisham Sharjabi, activist and cofounder of one of the most dynamic new parties in Yemen, Al Watan, the National Dialogue has

been productive, respectful, and inclusive. In September, Hadi also appointed two southerners to the dialogue; they, however, do not represent the separatist movement. Hadi also appointed four new members from Islah, which shifts the balance in their favor and makes it more likely that proposals coming out of the National Dialogue will reflect Islah's own interests.

Outside of the official rhetoric and meeting rooms, inclusion and mutual respect seem even farther from each group's agenda. As their representatives put proposals on the table, Houthi rebels have been fighting with Islah and Salafi groups over control of territory in the North. During one of my meetings in early August with a leader of the Houthi movement in Sanaa, Ali Al Emad, and two members of Islah, tolerant discussions of both parties' roles in the revolution were punctuated with contentious accusations concerning each group's role in the periods prior to and after the revolution. Leaders of Islah have repeatedly rejected the Islamic credentials of the Houthi movement, accusing the Houthis (who are Shiites) of being pawns of Iran who are intentionally exacerbating sectarian tensions for their own benefit.

An irony not lost on the Houthis and Yemenis at large, however, is that Saudi Arabia has been pulling the strings of many Sunni groups (including factions within Islah), as well as individual sheikhs throughout the country. Nevertheless, being accused of collaborating with the global bogeyman of Iran is a heftier charge, and one that resonates with the international community. During his trip abroad, Hadi accused Iran of interfering in Yemen's affairs and causing trouble in the South, while thanking Saudi Arabia for its role and gratefully accepting the millions of dollars it promises to give Yemen. While Iranian covert involvement, especially in the context of its losing an important ally in Syria, is quite plausible, such finger pointing intentionally aims to delegitimize the claims of the Houthi and Hiraaki movements, and ultimately makes compromise that much more difficult.

The Houthis, who suffered greatly under the wars led by General Ali Mohsen — who is now the military power

behind Islah and the president — have legitimate reasons to be cautious of Sanaa. Similarly, while many areas of Yemen (notably middle Yemen) are incredibly poor through various acts of omission by the Saleh regime, the South is incredibly poor through willful acts of commission. And there is little in the current make-up of the current government to assuage their concerns. Hence, given that the government has neither control nor legitimacy over large areas of Yemen — the Houthi areas and the South — it is perhaps fortuitous that the promised aid from the Friends of Yemen will most likely not arrive before the National Dialogue is over (if at all). While Yemen is in desperate need of aid — and humanitarian aid should and must be distributed through international donors as soon as possible — funneling money directly into the hands of a central government that has no capacity to absorb it and in a country that has become de-facto decentralized would be pernicious.

Hadi stated that the failure of the National Dialogue would be a disaster for Yemen. However, unless something happens before the conference is rescheduled, the lack of Southern Separatist representation poses a great challenge to its success. There are legitimate criticisms of the Southern leadership's handling of the situation, such as their inability to act as a united front, put forth a clear proposal for separation, or even to represent most of the South. There are also some less legitimate criticisms, such as those who claim that since the president (a Southerner himself) has issued a specific invitation to separatists to join the dialogue, the separatists are being uncooperative. However, the separatists are hearing conflicting messages and fear that they will again be the losers in a compromise. While the government calls for dialogue of all parties, the so-called Friends of Yemen who support the government in this dialogue have made explicit their rejection of the possibility of secession. In fact, they have proposed sanctions on leaders of the Southern movement. The Southern leaders, meanwhile, have asked for international mediation to help put forth plans for separation. As the government in Sanaa lacks the capacity to deal with its most pressing issues — most notably the need for military reform — the voices in the South who believe that they will be better off alone are getting stronger.

Those voices need to be given a proper venue. The government and the international community need to make it explicit before the national conference that they are willing to consider all options equally, and they need to coax the Southern movement to join the dialogue with the explicit promise that their plans will be given due consideration. The southern leaders need to put forth their proposals for separation, including an explanation of how separation would be feasible for the South (which is a much bigger problem than they acknowledge.) Meanwhile, a parallel proposal for federalism that guarantees the rights of each region, and which establishes safeguards ensuring that government resources are distributed equitably, must be considered in addition to the separatist agenda. The points of each proposal must be widely distributed and discussed, before a referendum can be held on each proposal at a later date. This, of course, would require that the Friends of Yemen accept the possibility of separation, and consider realistically the plan B of providing technical assistance to two separate states, both of which will lack the capacity for the most basic governmental duties.

Of course, none of these proposals outlines an easy path forward for Yemen. And in fact, dealing with the secession issue is harder in practice because it is only one of the many problems facing Yemen. One of those problems is reforming the military such that it is no longer in the hands of rogue generals (Mohsen) or members of the Saleh family. These two questions — military reform and secession — are the two most pressing political issues facing Yemen, and either has the potential to plunge the country into a civil war. A Chatham House analysis of scenarios most likely to unfold in Yemen includes as its best scenario a clause that requires Mohsen to mysteriously die before 2014, sometime after pledging support for Hadi's proposals. Flights of fancy may be attractive given the complex and dire nature of the situation Yemenis now face.

Any potential solution for Yemen must take account of all the various players who currently dominate Yemen's political landscape. Ignoring the concerns of the Southern movement and refusing to countenance the possibility of secession is dangerous. Yemen successfully avoided a civil war last year with the help of the GCC, but it was only a band-aid for the short term. Meanwhile, the voices from different camps are getting louder, and the potential personal benefit of remaining in power, especially with the promise of foreign aid, could further exacerbate the situation.

Last but not least, countervailing foreign interests in Yemen would add fuel to the fire should the country descend into a civil war. In 2007, Saudi Arabia sent an entire air force against a few Houthi rebels crossing its border, and such paranoia is even greater after the Arab Spring and the persistent problems with Shiite communities in the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia. Iran, meanwhile, will continue to balance Saudi Arabia within Yemen. The United States will most likely support whichever group or leader it considers a partner against al Qaeda in Yemen, a policy that rarely works to the benefit of the country on the receiving end of the drone attacks. Should Yemen slide into a civil war, the conflicting interests of these countries would exacerbate it. And considering the fact that Yemen has the second largest number of weapons per person in the world, Hadi's warning could indeed be right: it could be worse than Somalia and Afghanistan.

Silvana Toska is a PhD candidate in the department of government at Cornell University in international relations and comparative politics focusing on the Middle East and Africa.



Yemen's Rocky Roadmap

By Adam Baron, December 10, 2012

Yemen is on edge. It's been more than a year since Yemen's longtime president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, agreed to step down from power, but calm still seems elusive. On Saturday, 17 soldiers were killed in an ambush by alleged al Qaeda militants in the restive Mareb province, where the government has appeared nearly powerless to stop frequent sabotage against oil pipelines and electricity infrastructure. To the south, recent clashes between Yemeni forces and armed locals in the province of al-Dhale have left at least three civilians dead, prompting protests about the excessive use of force and inflaming anti-government sentiments in the separatist hotbed. In the capital itself, nerves have been strained by a string of attacks on security officials by motorcycle-riding gunmen, the latest of which left a counterterrorism officer seriously wounded.

Many local officials and Yemen-based diplomats insist that Yemen's post-Saleh transition is moving forward. Such assurances notwithstanding, anxiety is rampant across the country, fueled by fears that the various factions of this divided nation will be unable to come together to prevent Yemen from falling apart.

"Yemen can't move forward in a situation like this," said Hamza al-Kamaly, an activist who was recently beaten while attending a demonstration against a Saleh-era military commander. "The country is still divided, the military is still divided, and the old regime still has a huge amount of power."

While street protests were the catalyst, Saleh's exit from power was ultimately secured by an internationally backed agreement, mediated by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) last November. It was essentially an elite compromise, forged between Saleh's ruling General People's Congress (GPC) and the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), a coalition of Yemen's established opposition parties, aimed at securing a peaceful transfer of power as the country appeared to be sliding towards anarchy. Defections by key military leaders had split the Yemeni armed forces into

opposing halves. Factional clashes extended to the capital itself, and government's control over much of the rest of the country appeared to dissipate.

The immediate goal may have been securing a peaceful transition, but the terms of the GCC deal provided the outline for a much broader process. Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, Saleh's longtime deputy, was tapped as a consensus candidate for the presidency, ruling along with a unity government split between the GPC and the opposition JMP during his two-year transitional term. If all goes according to plan, 2014 will see the election of a new president and a new parliament under a rewritten constitution, following the reform of Yemen's split military and the peaceful resolution of years-old disputes between the central government and increasingly powerful groups outside of Yemen's formal power structure.

But regardless of inclusive aims, Yemen's transitional process was ultimately the product of negotiations between traditional power brokers, and it was aimed at pacifying key players at least as much as it was at paving the way for a new future. Looking forward, the key question remains whether Yemen's varied political factions will be able to come together to bring the country towards stability while laying the groundwork for an inclusive democracy. And as the people prepare for the highly anticipated conference of National Dialogue, achieving said goals continues to appear to be a nearly insurmountable challenge, predicated on the ability of Yemeni stakeholders to rise above crippling divisions to make the mutual concessions necessary to make a true break with the past.

Once dismissed as an empty suit, Hadi, was thrust into the center of the storm as a relative unknown. Since he took power he has surprised some pessimists by his willingness to challenge allies of the former president. Others hope that Hadi's governance style suggests a move away from the heavily centralized rule of his predecessor. And, notably, after nearly a year in office, Hadi has retained the backing

of many Yemenis and the bulk of the country's political establishment, including many fierce opponents of his predecessor.

"There is progress," said Hamid al-Ahmar, a prominent tribal leader and Islah politician who has long been one of the former president's most outspoken critics. "We believe that Hadi today is leading the country, and he is leading the revolution."

Such talk notwithstanding, the divisions within Yemen's elite linger on. The key task of military restructuring still has a long way to go. Ahmed Ali, Saleh's son, as well as General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a former regime strongman who is viewed as close to the Islamist Islah party (the largest component of the JMP), still retain control of many of the nation's troops.

Meanwhile, even as many Yemenis have yearned for technocratic governance, the cabinet has proven a deeply partisan body. The government's paralysis amid mutual distrust has underscored the seemingly intractable nature of divisions between the country's leaders. Far from healing, the deep wounds splitting Yemen's political establishment have continued to fester, echoed by a divisive media climate that often seems to present competing spheres of reality.

Over a year after the agreement on the transfer of power, the hard work of the transitional period has arguably yet to begin. Attention has shifted to the upcoming conference of "National Dialogue," a key step in the transitional roadmap outlined in the implementation mechanism of the GCC agreement. The National Dialogue's stated goal is to provide an inclusive forum for representatives of a range of groups — political factions as well as youth, women, and members of civil society — to draft a new social contract for post-Saleh Yemen, sketching out the shape of the future Yemeni state and setting out the means for drafting a new constitution. Anticipation is high, and the consequences of failure could be dire. The president himself has warned that the failure of the National Dialogue could likely lead to Yemen's descent into a civil war.

According to the most optimistic forecasts, the National Dialogue conference could begin before the end of the year. The dialogue's preparatory committee has nearly completed its work, and both members and observers have characterized its deliberations as productive and largely respectful, despite the historical enmity between many of the factions represented. But the dialogue's success is far from assured. And while an Arab Spring-inspired uprising ultimately set into motion the events that led to the end of Saleh's time in power, pre-2011 conflicts and power struggles continue to cast a heavy shadow over the transitional process.

In the south — an independent country until Yemen's 1990 unification — the activists of the Southern Movement, largely suppressed since the group's 2007 emergence, have come out empowered — and defiant. Rejecting calls for dialogue, many of their leaders have instead raised calls for complete disengagement with Sanaa. It's a viewpoint that is by no means universal among southerners.

But as leaders in the divided grouping jockey for influence, the struggle for legitimacy has pushed many away from pragmatism. Radical voices have increasingly come to dominate the conversation. And as Sanaa-based politicians and international diplomats have strived to fulfill the transition's ambitious, fast-paced roadmap, southern leaders have stressed the need for dialogue among themselves — which many have characterized as a near prerequisite for any possible involvement in talks on a national level — underscoring the challenges of forming a representative body out of groups that are often far from cohesive themselves.

"It's not possible for any faction in the South to claim that it represents the south or all southerners," said Ali Nasser Mohamed, a former president of South Yemen who has yet to commit to entering the National Dialogue, commenting by email from exile in Cairo. "We hope to emerge from [internal] southern dialogue with a compromise vision and leadership that can represent the South in national dialogue."

Then there are also the Houthis, a clan once mired in a devastating, nearly decade-long conflict with the central

government. They have already appeared to take the upper hand in Yemen's far North, where they have carved out virtual control in the northern governorate of Saada and parts of neighboring provinces. In Sanaa, the territory is pejoratively referred to as a "state within a state;" Houthi leaders have dismissed such claims as political posturing, stressing that the group has unambiguously agreed to enter the dialogue process.

But their participation comes amidst a tense climate. Many Yemeni politicians and foreign diplomats claim the Houthis are working with Iran, repeating longstanding accusations that the Islamic Republic has provided arms and funding to the Zaidi Shiite-led group. For their part, Houthi leaders have countered by labeling the current government as a reshuffling of old elites, condemning Hadi for his alliance with the United States, and stressing that national dialogue will not serve as the panacea that many seem to hope it will be.

"The [GCC] initiative only allowed a wing of the regime to rule again; the people do not accept this," said Saleh Habra, the head of the Houthi's political bureau. "The dialogue comes in this context. Entering into dialogue isn't a solution."

It's a viewpoint that's shared by many across political and societal lines. Even if the National Dialogue ends up with the wide-ranging participation necessary to claim legitimacy, the conference's ability to achieve consensus — let alone its ability to do so quickly enough to allow for elections to take place on schedule — remains an open question. And while they've dominated discussions so far, the concerns of the Houthis and the Southern Movement will join a slate of other issues once the dialogue begins. While the participation of the GPC and the JMP has long been a given, many fear that their divisions will taint the dialogue process. And then there's the role of potential spoilers — most notably the former president, who has resided in the capital since returning from medical treatment in the United States this February.

Beyond these factors, of course, are the deliberations of the conference itself. Subjects as diverse as women's rights, the extension of apologies and possible compensation

to victims of Saleh-era conflicts, and widely discussed (though deeply controversial) ideas for changing the structure of the government to a federal or parliamentary system could very well lead to the collapse of the dialogue. Getting everyone to the table, while a key step in the process, is only one of Yemen's worries.

Expectations are high, but a general sense of pessimism is widespread. On a rhetorical level, the goals of the dialogue — reckoning with longstanding issues while paving the way for a break with the past and establishing a mandate for an accountable, democratic governance system — have nearly universal support, whether on the popular level or among Yemen's elite. However, on a practical level, it remains to be seen whether factions deeply invested in the status quo will be willing to make the compromises necessary to make them a reality.

The fears have been focused on the National Dialogue's potential failure, which could very well plunge Yemen into conflict. But even if the dialogue succeeds, restoring unity to this notoriously fractious country will still prove a tall order. Across the country, powerful tribal leaders maintain their hold over their own fighting forces; even the Yemeni army, many here complain, are closer to a collection of private militias than it is to a truly national military. Rather than holding a monopoly on power, the post-Saleh government often appears to be at the mercy of various factions whose interests often seem to diverge from those of the nation as a whole. In some sense, it's a thorny paradox: As the country aims to move forward, the cooperation of such divergent interest groups is key. But their continued sway, many argue, could render any progress in Sanaa moot.

"The source of Yemen's problems is clear," says Mujahid al-Kuhali, who serves as Minister of Expatriate Affairs in the unity government. "The center of power remains in the hands of certain armed groups controlled by men... who work for themselves rather than for Yemen. Until this changes, the problems will not be solved."

Adam Baron is a freelance journalist based in Sanaa, Yemen. He blogs at adambaron.com and tweets at @adambaron.

Don't call Yemen a "failed state"

By Lisa Wedeen, March 30, 2010

Yemen is a weak state by anyone's estimation, but the recent rush to label the country a "failed state" is premature and likely to be counterproductive. Bandied about recently in relationship to the Yemeni regime's struggle with al-Houthi's "Believing Youth," and invoked with renewed vigor after the failed airplane bombing by a Nigerian youth who claims to have derived inspiration, shelter, and onsite training from al Qaeda activists in Yemen, the easy application of "failed state" to Yemen exposes important problems with the term's current popularity. Yemen should not be categorized with such countries as the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Afghanistan, or Somalia, where violence has completely destroyed communities and shattered fragile political arrangements previously in existence. Yemen has thus far endured despite weak institutional capacities and a peripheral location in the global political order. Calling Yemen a failed state may lead to adopting harmful policies, which could create a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy.

Few would deny that Yemen is unstable, with a heavily armed population, widespread poverty, the presence of al Qaeda operatives, and ongoing contestation by citizens of the south (some of whom call for outright secession). This situation is compounded by growing water scarcity, declining oil revenues, tensions within the ruling elite, persistent charges of corruption, and a localized civil war in the northwest governorate of Saada near Saudi Arabia. State institutions do not control violence, nor are they capable of providing welfare, protection, or education to large swathes of the country. Complaints are heard with regularity throughout Yemen about the lack of security, that the state is unable to guarantee safe passage from one region to another, to stop practices of extra-legal justice, or to disarm the citizenry. Moreover, to the extent that a sense of membership coherent and powerful enough to tie people's political loyalties to the nation-state of Yemen does exist, there is little evidence to suggest that the incumbent regime is responsible for creating it.

Although under such circumstances it is tempting to label Yemen a "failed state," it does not follow that "state building" is the appropriate response. The language of state failure obscures how regime incentives to build state institutions can be incompatible with regime incentives to survive. President Ali Abdullah Saleh has been in power for more than 30 years, as the leader of north Yemen since 1978, and of unified Yemen since its inception in 1990. The possibility must be considered that what international analysts regard as the "weakness" of the Yemeni state is directly related to the longevity of the Saleh regime, and following recommendations to build a stronger state could undermine, rather than preserve, the tenuous stability that exists there.

The Yemeni regime has historically relied on spaces of disorder as a means of reproducing its rule. Whereas political science and policy-relevant literatures on "state failure" presuppose the necessity of state-building (i.e., fashioning institutions such as an effective police force, schools, hospitals, and roads in return for a modicum of allegiance and a lot of obedience), a regime's interests in survival can be at odds with processes of state-formation — with the political will to monopolize violence, provide services, and control territory. For example, the costs for the Yemeni regime (in resources, in added vulnerability) of punishing those who resort to local systems of justice rather than relying on state courts may outweigh the benefits of allowing customary systems to co-exist with the state's. As various international agencies and ethnographers can attest, tribal arbitration, to name one example, can be an efficient way to solve some disputes, and powerful state officials (both those who support the regime and those who oppose it) may identify as "tribal" (especially in the northern highlands), thereby making the elimination of such networks extremely difficult. In general, the cost of undermining any of the various local systems of governance evident in Yemen or of attempting to monopolize violence among a heavily armed population can cause more bloodshed than it will prevent. Specific institutional weaknesses that scholars

and policy analysts are quick to identify with “state failure” may, in fact, signal a regime’s successful adaptation to circumstances, enabling it to endure, as indeed the Yemeni regime has for more than 30 years.

Distinguishing the incentives of regime survival from the logics of state-building is not to imply that foregoing state-building in the name of survival ensures regime survival, of course, or that the Yemeni regime’s politics of “muddling through” will continue to work. It does not even imply that the regime always has a coherent set of incentives to which it responds. (Recent fighting among regime members in Saada attests to this lack of coherence.) Considering a regime’s durability and the possible survival strategies open to it nevertheless invites a healthy skepticism towards hasty pronouncements of “state failure.”

The Yemen example offers broader grounds for skepticism about the growing focus on “failed states.” The seemingly neutral analytical category is frequently accompanied by a foreign policy agenda predisposed to U.S. political and military intervention. It is almost always applied to countries already deemed a threat to U.S. security interests. From this point of view, the terminology of “failed states” appears as new language for a familiar impulse. The past half-century has seen a series of purportedly objective labels being used to justify “security”-based U.S. interventions worldwide. It should not be forgotten that certain of these previous interventions played a significant role in producing the very problems with which security specialists in Europe and the U.S. subsequently find themselves confronted.

Although the indicators of a failed state generally involve claims about “good governance,” the variables comprising what “good governance” means are routinely defined by particular stakeholders’ interests — by specific firms, individuals, commercial risk-rating companies, nongovernmental organizations, aid agencies, and bureaus in the public sector. University of Chicago graduate student Sarah Parkinson has argued that stakeholders’ assessments can easily lead policy-makers astray, because such assessments ignore, misunderstand, or contradict

beneficial local practices or mask deeper difficulties. A country can rank high on an indicator such as currency stability simply because every time a conflict breaks out the government forces banks to freeze individual assets, which on its own could scarcely be regarded as a likely contributor to future stability. In the case of Yemen, reliance on stakeholders’ criteria has worked to focus attention on isolated issues, without any nuanced regard for context, neglecting the claims and concerns of insurgents and, arguably, the regime.

Viewed from a perspective of citizen participation and associational life, Yemen is more democratic than many countries in the Middle East. If the U.S. goal is indeed to foster democracy abroad, these vigorous forms of non-electoral contestation need to be protected. “Security” measures introduced from without are likely to endanger grassroots forms of democratic practice from within. An increased military presence multiplies potential targets for al Qaeda-like groups, makes the United States (or others involved) vulnerable to charges of occupation, and taps into a palpable anxiety among a range of Yemenis about issues of national sovereignty. Therefore, the impulse to intervene militarily should be avoided.

Dwindling oil and water reserves mean that Saleh may be unable to purchase loyalty in ways he has managed to do until now. Promoting policies that provide general goods and services to the population may mean coming up with imaginative modes of distribution geared towards controlling corruption by circumventing patronage networks. Eradicating corruption is probably impossible, however, especially if the goals are ensuring both the implementation of some state-building policies and the regime’s survival (again, if indeed these are the goals). The key is to address citizens’ dissatisfactions, both moral and material, on their own terms.

Lisa Wedeen is professor of political science at the University of Chicago and author of “Peripheral Visions: Public, Power, and Performance in Yemen. Chicago,” (University of Chicago Press, 2008). The above is a revised version of a report prepared for Noref.

