

# Yemen's domestic and regional politics

By Bernard Haykel

## ■ Executive summary

Yemen is politically fragmented by three decades of misrule. Many political actors and constituencies oppose the Salih legacy and they need to be included in any future political framework if the country is to become stable. The main regional actor is Saudi Arabia, whereas the U.S. remains the principal hegemon in the region. Saudi Arabia's policy towards Yemen is in flux, whereas the U.S. is too narrowly focused on the threat posed by al-Qaeda. Unless the U.S. and the Saudis change their policies, Yemen will not develop a strong central government.

## A fragmented country

Yemen suffers from a highly fractured political landscape, which is the legacy of the regime of President 'Ali 'Abd Allah Salih, who came to power in 1978 and formally resigned his office in February 2012. Salih deliberately prevented the emergence of institutionalised forms of governance, effectively undermining all government and civil institutions. He pursued policies of political segmentation and tribalisation in order to create a highly personalised system of rule with himself at the centre of a clientelist network of patronage. He deliberately sustained an unstable system that created unpredictability, which he then leveraged to his advantage. To maintain his network, Salih appropriated oil and gas revenues, and foreign aid from donors. To perpetuate it, he appointed members of his family to positions of power throughout the security and military services, as well as other government and economic institutions. His son Ahmad was Salih's unofficially designated successor and was made head of the highly effective and well-armed Republican Guard, which he has controlled until recently.

## Limits to authoritarianism

Salih could not take full control of the country. Yemen's civilian population is heavily armed and belongs to organised tribal, regional and religious groupings. Furthermore, the central government does not have sufficient revenues from oil or gas to enable it to co-opt everyone through patronage. Because of this, a number of forces refused to acquiesce to Salih's rule, especially as his mismanagement of the country's resources increased, his revenues declined

and he appointed more of his family members to positions of authority.

## Regime dissidents

1. Al-Hirak is a broad and loose coalition of southern dissidents and secessionists, consisting of southern Yemenis who have felt occupied and badly governed by the Salih regime since the latter won the 1994 civil war. His opponents, the socialists, had ruled the south since independence from the British in 1967. They decided to unite with North Yemen in 1990 on the basis of a power-sharing agreement and ultimately a commitment to democratic politics. Salih reneged on this agreement by waging an assassination campaign against the socialists (1990–1994) and this led to a two-month civil war. After his military victory in 1994, Salih retribalised the southern regions, placing his allies and cronies in key positions of power. These have engaged in predatory economic and political practices that have alienated the majority of the southern population. It is this popular resentment against the government in Sanaa that has, since 2006, allowed radical Islamist groups associated with al-Qaeda to find a hospitable environment in these regions. Salih has opportunistically used their presence to obtain U.S. military and economic support. The U.S. has, for example, armed and trained key units of the army that are loyal to Salih and which were used against his domestic enemies in the 2011 uprising. The Americans' myopic policy of focusing exclusively on the al-Qaeda threat has alienated many people in Yemen, not only because drone attacks have killed innocent

people, but also because the U.S. has effectively empowered Salih. Some of the same dynamics appear to be in place now with Salih's successor, President 'Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi. Like Salih, Hadi is heavily dependent on U.S. and Saudi patronage and is garnering their support, in part because of the fight against al-Qaeda.

2. In northern Yemen, where a large Shi'a Zaydi population lives, Salih's regime has for decades alienated this community through discriminatory religious and political policies. Salih, with the help of some elements in Saudi Arabia, has promoted strongly anti-Zaydi groups of Salafi Muslims in this region. Feeling beleaguered and marginalised, the Zaydis organised themselves politically in the early 2000s under the aegis of a family of religious scholars called the Houthis. They began by criticising Saleh's pro-U.S. policies, which led to armed confrontation and a series of wars with the Yemeni army. This ultimately dragged the Saudi Arabian military into the fray, leading to considerable property destruction and a large refugee problem. In 2011, as Salih's power waned in the provinces, the Houthis took control over large areas of the north, but still remain outside the political framework of government. Like al-Hirak in the south, the Houthis need to be engaged and brought into the political process in order to unite the country and bring about stability. There are accusations by the central Yemeni government that the Houthis are being supported financially and militarily by Iran. Although this may be true, it does not amount to the Houthis becoming clients or proxies for Iran, since the religious and political differences between the two are considerable. The Saudis, however, are convinced that the Iranians are behind the Houthis, and this is likely to exacerbate the tensions along the Saudi-Yemeni border.
3. General 'Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar is a former ally of President Salih and former commander of the First Armoured Division. He broke with Salih during the demonstrations of 2011, adopting the position of "defender of the revolution". In so doing he was seeking to reinforce his own position and political fortunes against Salih and his family members, who were appropriating all power. An important fact about 'Ali Muhsin is that he has been, for at least two decades, the protector and patron of many Salafis and radical Islamists and enjoyed a very close connection to the late crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Nayif ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Sa'ud, and presumably the present Saudi minister of the interior, Prince Muhammad ibn Nayif. 'Ali Muhsin remains a strong player in the Yemeni political game thanks to the financial resources he continues to obtain from Saudi Arabia.
4. The al-Ahmar shaykhs (Sadiq and Hamid) of the Hashid tribal confederation are important actors. Like 'Ali Muhsin, they were once close Salih allies, but decided to break with him because of his family's domination of the country's politics and economy. Although the al-Ahmar shaykhs enjoy considerable prestige as scions of an ancient family and have amassed great financial resources (especially Hamid), they are divided. Each sees himself as the natural leader of Yemen and both have significant resources to act as spoilers in any arrangement that would exclude them. In other words, they have to be included in any future political dispensation. More important still is that Hamid controls the Islamist party al-Islah (the local Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood) and, through this, has managed to dominate the youth and student movements that played a central role in the demonstrations that ultimately led to Salih's abandonment of the presidency. Hamid now has his eye on the presidential election, which is due to be held in 2014, and hopes to win this. He remains a divisive figure and it is unlikely that Yemen will enjoy stability if he comes to power.
5. The Yemeni youth, who led and participated in the demonstrations in Sanaa and Taiz and paid a heavy price in the number killed by pro-Salih forces, have been excluded from the political arrangement that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) brokered to end Salih's rule. They have been unable to organise around a single leadership, political party and platform. Their main rallying call is to reject the amnesty from prosecution that Salih and his family have obtained, to have Salih's relatives dismissed from their posts and to seek an end to corruption and government mismanagement. They have found themselves not represented seriously in the new cabinet under President 'Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi. The youth movement is a recent development in Yemeni politics, and it is likely that it can still mobilise large numbers of people to demonstrate in public squares, but is finding it difficult to translate this effort into effective political power.

### Salih and the present order

Although Salih is no longer in office, he remains as of this writing a force to be reckoned with. He still leads the General People's Congress, one of the largest political parties. Reports state that he is finding it difficult to relinquish old habits and still acts as if he were president. In addition, although his family members have been dismissed from key positions in the military and security services, they remain influential and have considerable resources at their disposal. The most important of Salih's relatives are his son Ahmad, who until recently headed the Republican Guard, and his nephew Yahya, who was in charge of the Central Security Services. The recent appointment of many of Salih's relatives to overseas diplomatic posts is a step in the right direction but it remains unclear whether this spells the end of his clan's influence. One major source of weakness, however, is Salih's inability to dip into the government treasury to maintain his network of patronage. It seems unlikely that he will use his considerable personal fortune to maintain this system of clientelism.

### The new president consolidates power

'Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi took over as president on February 27th 2012, and he has been trying to build a power base

that is independent of Salih, with mixed success. He is supported by the UN Security Council, the European Union, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. Hadi is from Abyan province in the south, and his presence as the head of state might stave off southern demands for secession. He is, however, an unknown quantity, having kept a very low profile throughout his long tenure as vice-president. Without external military and financial support, it is unlikely that Hadi will be able to effect the necessary changes that will circumscribe the influence of Salih, the Ahmar shaykhs and 'Ali Muhsin.

Thus far, President Hadi has been able, with U.S. and Saudi support and that of the UN Security Council, to remove a number of President Salih's relatives from positions of power. It remains unclear whether this means that they have been effectively neutralised in the power struggle that still rages in Sanaa. In the transition agreement that led to Salih's resignation and which the Saudis brokered, Hadi is intended to be an interim figure, who will be eventually replaced with an elected president. Hadi's power base remains weak, as reflected by his constant need to resort to the U.S., Saudi Arabia and the UN to push through his reform initiatives. The latest such intervention has been the recent UN Security Council warning to Salih and to 'Ali Salim al-Bidh (the former president of South Yemen and vice-president of unified Yemen) to stop interfering in the transitional political process or else face sanctions. In effect, this illustrates that the main political players from the Salih era remain contenders as of this writing.

## Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is the most important regional actor that can play a positive role in Yemen's future. It has deep and long-standing connections with almost every group in Yemeni society, and is helping Yemen financially and providing the oil that the country needs. However, Saudi policy vis-à-vis Yemen is in flux. First, the special Yemen affairs unit in the Saudi government has switched hands several times of late, from the late Prince Sultan to Prince Nayif and then to Prince Muhammad ibn Nayif, so there is no continuity in policy or any institutional memory. Second, there is no easy fix to Yemen's problems in the form of one leader whose backing will help bring about stability. The Saudis are obsessed with preventing Yemen from imploding and becoming a failed state, but it is not obvious that a policy exists that can prevent this from happening. No

single Yemeni leader is able to unite the country. The Saudi policy is run on an ad hoc basis and amounts to providing payments to a multiple Yemeni actors, both within the government and outside it, in an effort to stave off the collapse of the country. This does not amount to a coherent policy that will allow for the emergence of a strong central state and policies that will effectively address Yemen's multiple problems. An immediate remedy to some of the economic difficulties in Yemen would be to establish an organised system of labour migration from Yemen to the GCC countries that would generate remittances. The Saudi authorities and the GCC leaders are not seriously contemplating this because the arrival of large numbers of Yemenis could lead to political instability within the GCC.

## Some policy recommendations for Norway

There are no easy or obvious fixes to Yemen's multiple political problems. Some general recommendations include the following:

1. It is important that Norwegian aid not be used to bolster one person's rule at the expense of others.
2. Norway must act in concert with the GCC countries to present Yemeni leaders with a united front regarding the necessary economic and institutional changes that the country needs to adopt. In this regard Qatar has had some experience in Yemen with various actors and could provide helpful practical advice.
3. The threat posed by radical Islamist groups should be seen as a symptom of deep political and economic problems and not a structural feature of the country's politics. U.S. policymakers predominantly hold that radical Islam needs to be eradicated militarily at any cost. Norway can play a vital role in presenting a more complex picture of Yemen's problems.
4. Norway must seek to bring into the political game the youth movement that led the revolt that ousted Salih from office and not allow the young people to be abandoned and emasculated by the Islah party. They have shown great determination to remain non-violent in the face of government brutality and should be recognised for their political maturity and activist methods.
5. Norway can play a role in trying to convince GCC members to allow Yemenis to seek employment legally in their countries. The benefits of this would be numerous, not least in terms of remittances that would help bolster the failing Yemeni economy. ■

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