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Between Government and Opposition:

The Case of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform

Amr Hamzawy

The practice of switching sides between the government and the opposition has been a hallmark of Islah and continues to make it an exception among its Islamist counterparts.

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About the Author

Amr Hamzawy is a distinguished Egyptian political scientist who previously taught at Cairo University and the Free University of Berlin and is currently a senior associate at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. Hamzawy has a deep knowledge of Middle East politics and specific expertise on the reform process in the region. His research interests include the changing dynamics of political participation in the Arab world and the role of Islamist movements in Arab politics. His most recent book, *Getting to Pluralism: Political Actors in the Arab World*, co-edited with Marina Ottaway, was published in September 2009. Hamzawy regularly contributes articles in Arabic to various academic journals. He also writes a bi-monthly op-ed for the leading Arab daily *al-Hayat* and a monthly op-ed for the Egyptian independent daily *al-Shorouk*.

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Summary

Like Islamist parties across the Arab world, Yemen's Islamist Congregation for Reform (Islah) has a religious ideology and platform. Islah participates in legal politics in hopes of accomplishing constitutional and socioeconomic reforms, and over time it has committed itself to upholding democratic procedures internally as well as externally.

Yet Islah differs from most other Arab Islamists. The party combines tribal influences along with those of the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood and more radical Salafi groups. As a result, it faces deep internal divisions on key issues, including its relationship with the ruling establishment, its role in the opposition, and the participation of women in politics. Moreover, Islah is not simply an opposition group; until 1997, the party was a junior partner in a ruling coalition.

Under Yemen's authoritarian regime, President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his General People's Congress dominate political life, and there are no effective checks and balances among the different branches of government. Since its move to the opposition, Islah has had no choice but to cooperate with the regime in order to gain a degree of influence in key political choices. Yet its fractious composition prevents it from developing a clear parliamentary platform, forcing it instead to balance tribal and political interests, differing interpretations of the party's Islamist platform, and both loyalist and opposition constituencies. As a result, no one knows where the party stands, and it has no clear path toward the reforms it seeks.

Within the spectrum of Islamist parties and movements in the Arab world that participate in legal politics, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah) represents a unique case. First, unlike most Islamist parties and movements, Islah did not enter the political scene as part of the opposition. Rather, it began its participation in 1990 as an ally of the ruling General People's Congress (GPC), before turning against it and becoming the leading opposition party by the end of the decade. Second, compared to other Islamist parties and movements operating in the Arab world, Islah lacks a clear ideological and programmatic narrative as well as an ideologically motivated membership. Much of Islah is composed of traditionalist and tribal groups that share a loose commitment to the objectives of Islamizing state and society in Yemen.

This paper examines the role of Islah in Yemeni politics and the characteristics of its parliamentary participation. It seeks to address four questions: 1)

Under what conditions did Islah decide to participate in politics and did its participation change the nature of the Yemeni political game? 2) Why did Islah switch sides from the ruling coalition to join the opposition? 3) What are Islah's parliamentary priorities and has its legislative platform changed since the 1990s? 4) Have Islah's internal structures, decision-making processes, and its rhetoric on key policy issues changed over time as a result of its participation in Yemeni politics?

Islah's Entry Into Yemeni Politics: Post-Unification Developments

An analysis of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform requires an understanding of the tribal character of Yemeni society and the tension this creates within the party between its rather weak ideological orientation and its engagement in tribal politics.

Yemen's tribalism has its roots deep in history and continues to permeate and inform the political, social, and economic life of the country today. Indeed, the pervasive tribalism accounts for the dynamics of Yemeni politics and needs to be taken into account in analyzing them. Contrary to the institutions of the modern state that are organized around the two principles of universal citizenship and equality of all before the law, tribalism sustains different rules for state and society. In today's Yemen, the tribe is the main point of reference for its members and collectively represents their interests. The state and its resources are often used to achieve the parochial goals of the tribe. By the same token, due to the strength of particular tribes, political actors—primarily the ruling establishment and opposition parties—lobby tribes for support and loyalty. The pervasive tribalism also means that political life revolves to a significant extent around tribal personalities, usually leaders, rather than being shaped by ideologies and programs. In these circumstances, patronage is an influential political tool.

The strength of tribalism in Yemen and the weakness of modern state institutions and lack of a common identity among its citizens have affected Islah and its place in Yemeni politics. They influence the party's political behavior and determine its internal dynamics, making them more obscure and harder to define. Moreover, Islah has had no long experience with the dynamics of semi-pluralist politics, which has shaped Islamist parties and movements elsewhere in the Arab world. Islah developed its political culture while an ally of the ruling GPC. As a result, Islamists in Yemen have been imbued with a concept of politics expressed in terms of loyalty, patronage, and connections. This has further diminished the party's ability to engage in internal debates leading to a cohesive ideological narrative about Yemeni state and society, to a clear programmatic concept of what positions can be justified in Islamic terms, or to a common stance on key policy issues. Indeed, a striking feature of Islah

is that leading party members have repeatedly made contradictory statements on issues. These include Islah's relations with the ruling GPC, the party's commitment to the opposition role Islah has been fulfilling since it joined the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), and the party's position with regard to the ongoing tensions in the North and South of Yemen.

Islah is one of the numerous political parties that were formed shortly after the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. No fewer than 50 parties formed and contested the parliamentary elections of April 1993, the first after unification. Islah was one of these parties. It was formed by members of the GPC, the party that had ruled North Yemen before unification, and members of the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood. After its formation, Islah remained an ally of the GPC and cooperated with its effort to marginalize the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), the former ruling party of South Yemen. The late Sheikh Abdallah al-Ahmar, the former head of the Hashid Tribal Confederation and a man who enjoyed good relations with the GPC and President Ali Abdullah Saleh (president of North Yemen from 1978 to 1990 and of Unified Yemen since 1990), played a leading role in establishing Islah in 1990. Al-Ahmar remained the president of Islah's Supreme Board—the party's powerful executive body—from 1990 until his death in 2007. He convinced the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood, other Islamist elements, and a number of influential tribal personalities to join together and establish Islah. Thus, Islah as a party emerged as an alliance of three distinct groups: the tribal forces headed by al-Ahmar; the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood, which has provided the party's organizational and political backbone; and a number of conservative businessmen, represented initially by Muhammad Abdul Wahab Jabari, who became a member of Islah's Supreme Board.[1]

The Muslim Brotherhood came from the Sunni community, which represents slightly more than 60 percent of the Yemeni population (the next largest is the Zaydi Shi'i community, which is estimated to represent 30 to 35 percent of the population) and emerged in North Yemen in the early 1960s. Like other Islamist parties and movements in the Arab world, it was influenced by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The founders of the movement, such as the prominent Sheikh Abdul Majid al-Zindani, were students at Egyptian universities in the early 1960s. Initially, the Muslim Brotherhood markedly shaped the party ideology and platform of Islah. The first article of Islah's basic law defines it as a "popular political organization that seeks reform of all aspects of life on the basis of Islamic principles and teachings." Sheikh al-Zindani became the president of Islah Central *Shura* Council—the party's national legislative body—in 1995 and stayed in office until 2007.

Given Islah's origin as an alliance of a rather motley array of groups, it is not surprising that the party's ideology has remained vague and its platform ambiguous. Throughout the 1990s, Islah could be best described as a conservative party that promotes tribal and religious values. It believed in Islamic

Sharia as the sole source of legislation and the foundation of a comprehensive vision to reform Yemeni state and society. Over time, especially after Islah moved away from its alliance with the GPC, the party has opened up to democratic ideas. Today, Islah accepts democracy as compatible with the Islamic concept of *shura* (consultation) and rejects all forms of dictatorship. It recognizes the right of secular parties and movements, such as the YSP, to participate in Yemeni political life. Islah bases its own participation on respect for the constitution and the pluralist rules of the political game it enshrines.[2]

While Islah's ideology and platform have been weak from the outset, the tribal character of the party has gradually grown more influential. The post-unification era in Yemen marks the emergence of tribes as powerful stakeholders in political life, especially in parliamentary and local council elections. The tribal character of Yemen had been reinforced during the civil war in the north between 1962 and 1967. Some tribes fought with the republican forces, which were backed by the Nasser regime in Egypt, while others defended the traditionalist Imamate rule. Ultimately, however, all tribes were motivated by the desire to acquire weapons and financial assets. In addition, possession of weapons and growing financial assets reaffirmed the role of tribes and tribal leaders as protectors of their members. Tribes became more effective in providing security and social services in their areas, increasing their ability to negotiate with the state and undermining the central authorities.

As a result, the legitimacy of the state diminished in tribal areas. Governments in North Yemen *de facto* recognized the influence of the tribes and were forced to delegate the task of maintaining order to tribes that took their side. The Hashid Confederation, long headed by Islah founder Sheikh al-Ahmar and considered one of the most influential tribes in North Yemen, has maintained its strength since unification. Inevitably, the role of the Hashid Confederation has strengthened the tribal faction in Islah over other elements.

Tribal constituencies of Islah are concentrated in rural areas, above all in the northern Hasid territory in the governorates of Sanaa and Amran. The growing role of tribal leaders in Islah has added to the ambiguities and confusions inside the party. Tribal leaders are known for shifting their stands and loyalty across the political spectrum to secure tribal interests. Moreover, some leaders of the same tribe or clan are found in the GPC, while others belong to Islah, a conscious effort to adapt to changing political circumstances and to lessen the impact of either of the two parties on the tribes. The divided loyalty and shifting stands of tribal leaders have helped undermine Islah's ability to develop a clear ideological and programmatic vision.

Islah's Islamists have never acquired the muscle of the tribal constituencies, but have always played a major role within the party. This is particularly true of the Muslim Brotherhood component of Islah, which is the largest in terms of members and, above all, the most efficient in organizational and political capabilities. Like other Islamist parties and movements in the Arab world, the

Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood is predominantly urban based and has its strongholds in universities and professional associations. Within Islah, the Muslim Brotherhood has developed an elaborate and clear approach to political participation on the basis of its endorsement of democratic procedures, which it claims do not contradict Islamic values and teachings.

For the movement, political participation complements religious and social activism, since Islam presents a holistic approach to various aspects of life, including politics. Thus, political activism is understood and framed as part of *da'wa*, the preaching of Islam. In the 1990s, the movement came to accept pluralism, acknowledging the right of other parties to propagate nonreligious ideologies and platforms.[3] The Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood has evolved from a religious movement to a political party under the banner of Islah. It rejects the idea of establishing an Islamic state, considering the concept of a theocratic state problematic. It separates religion from the state, but combines religion and politics in its activism.[4]

There are other Islamist elements within Islah in addition to the Muslim Brotherhood. Some party figures are close to Salafi groups. Salafism, which was introduced to Yemen in the last three decades and influenced by Saudi Wahhabism, has a different concept of politics than the Muslim Brotherhood. Salafis are skeptical of political participation and denounce democratic procedures as non-Islamic. Yet parliamentary and local elections in Yemen have demonstrated that Salafis and their followers still vote for Islah candidates as the best available option.

Since its inception, Islah has undergone several changes, yet it is still far from being a unified party with a clear ideology and program. This lack of unity has weakened the party's role and activism in Yemeni politics. Between 1990 and 1997, Islah was an ally of the ruling GPC and participated in the coalition government from 1994 to 1997. However, in 1997 Islah switched sides and joined the Yemeni Socialist Party and other parties in opposing the GPC. Islah leaders justified this step on the grounds of the GPC's and President Saleh's unwillingness to introduce significant democratic reforms. Since 1997, Islah has gradually become the leading opposition party in Yemen, especially since joining the JMP.

However, Islah's new political role as an opposition party has remained contested internally. While alive, Sheikh al-Ahmar never withdrew his support for President Saleh. Salafi leaders in Islah have been particularly critical of the alliance with secular parties, mainly the socialists and the Nasserites in the JMP. Some of them have also denounced Islah's move to the opposition as violating Islamic prescriptions about the relationship between the ruled and their rulers, which, they maintain, necessitate obedience to the ruler.[5]

Islah's break with the GPC led to an opening of the party toward the South. In the parliamentary elections of 1993, Islah had won all its 63 parliamentary seats in North Yemen. In the elections of 1997, it won some seats in the South.

Although the party has remained predominantly a northern party, Islah's opening toward the South and its later alliance with the Yemeni Socialist Party has led to a second set of significant changes in the party, mainly related to the reduction of the influence previously enjoyed by tribal leaders. A clear indicator is the changing composition of Islah's parliamentary bloc since 1993. Whereas 60 of Islah's 63 MPs elected in 1993 had tribal affiliations, their number decreased in the parliament of 1997 to 24 out of 53 MPs and later to 11 out of 45 in the parliament of 2003. Clearly, tribal dominance within Islah has decreased since its break with the GPC. This has lessened the party's dependence on tribal leaders and created a more receptive internal environment for the party's activism. Tribal leaders, as noted, are highly volatile politically, tending to put the personal and business interests of their tribal constituencies over political stances and policy platforms.

Another aspect of change in Islah is that it has created charitable, religious, and educational institutions to enlarge its power base through the delivery of social services, following a pattern common among Islamist parties and movements in the Arab world. For example, the Islah Social Welfare Society (ISWS) engages in health awareness campaigns, religious education, illiteracy eradication, and relief donations, mostly directed to the urban poor, during the holy month of Ramadan. ISWS coordinates its activities with the Muslim Brotherhood and explicitly displays its adherence to the movement's ideology. Businessmen and tribal leaders affiliated with Islah also provide charity and welfare services in their areas. Religious leaders within Islah concentrate on mosque preaching, Islamic schooling, and university education to maintain their constituencies. A pivotal role in this regard has been played by Sheikh al-Zindani, who founded a well-known religious university—al-Iman University—and inspired the creation of the so-called Virtue Councils in early 2009, whose mandate is to safeguard religious morality in Yemeni society.

Switching Sides—Islah's Participation in Yemeni Politics

Most Islamist parties and movements that participate in party politics in the Arab world do so from the opposition benches. In a few cases, as is the case with the Islamic Constitutional Movement in Kuwait and the Algerian Society for Peace, Islamists have joined coalition governments either for short periods of time (Kuwait) or as junior parties with limited access to real power (Algeria). The Yemeni Congregation for Reform represents a different experience altogether. Islah switched sides, moving from an ally of the ruling GPC to an opposition party. However, this move has been far from complete because of Islah's unwillingness to break with the GPC at all levels and because influential leaders within Islah have remained critical of its alliance

with the opposition. The result is a party that regularly goes back and forth between the government and the opposition on key political issues and whose policy platform lacks clarity and vision.

At the beginning, the Islamist platform of Islah did not push it away from the alliance with the ruling GPC. Throughout most of the 1990s, Islah remained a close ally of President Saleh, motivated by several factors. First, many of those who joined Islah originally belonged to the GPC or were supporters of the northern regime it represented. Second, leading members of the two parties belonged to the same well-established tribal, business, and personal networks that form the Yemeni elite. Third, both the GPC and Islah shared a history of rivalry with the Yemeni Socialist Party and the secular ideology it propagated.

In 1990, after the unification of North and South Yemen, Islah entered the political fray in Yemen to support the leadership of the former northern regime against the southern Yemeni Socialist Party. In exchange for its support of President Saleh and the GPC, Islah was given the position of deputy prime minister and four portfolios in the 1990–1993 government: legal affairs; local governance; health, religious affairs, and endowments; and supply and trade. The GPC–Islah alliance developed into an electoral and parliamentary coalition in 1993. In 1994, Islah joined the GPC's war against the Yemeni Socialist Party, which ended with the latter defeated and its leaders exiled.[6]

The defeat of the YSP in the civil war created a new dynamic in Yemeni politics, because the strengthened GPC could dispense with its alliance with Islah. In the lead-up to the 1997 parliamentary elections, there were incipient signs of disagreements between the GPC and Islah on their electoral platform as well as on candidates. Although opposition parties started pointing to those disagreements, the GPC and Islah continued to assert their strategic alliance. Disputes between the two parties revolved around several key issues.

There were differences as to the mechanism through which power would be divided in the South where the YSP's defeat had left a power vacuum. The GPC was also worried about the possibility that Islah would seek to expand its influence beyond the political space the regime was willing to grant it as a junior partner in the ruling coalition and pose a challenge to it. Like the experience with Islamists of other ruling parties in the Arab world, the GPC was fearful of the well organized and popular Muslim Brotherhood component inside Islah, anticipating it would reach out to constituencies in the South and organize them. Finally, the GPC was consumed with its effort to strengthen its own power base and control over Yemeni state and society. For example, the GPC had adopted a policy of modernizing the educational system to contain the influence of the Muslim Brothers and other Islamist elements affiliated with Islah in schools and universities. In the second half of the 1990s, this policy led to the closing of some religious educational institutions controlled by Islah, deepening its disagreements with the GPC.[7]

In light of these measures, Islah's leadership chose to exert pressure on its ally by initiating a campaign questioning the integrity of the parliamentary elections of 1997; it called the voter registries flawed and alleged the GPC had misused state resources in the lead-up to the elections. However, it remained unclear whether the intention of Islah's leaders was to pressure the GPC to broker a new electoral deal with it or to break away from the alliance.

The final move toward the break between the GPC and Islah was largely the result of the GPC's conviction that it could end the alliance with Islah without great electoral losses. In the lead-up to the parliamentary elections in 1997, the GPC secretary general announced that his party wanted to achieve a "comfortable majority." Convinced that the GPC was intent on securing this comfortable majority without its allies, Islah protested this policy, warning of a GPC conspiracy against democracy in Yemen and positioning itself close to opposition parties, such as the Yemeni Socialist Party and the Nasserites. The socialists and Nasserites were determined to boycott the elections, viewing them as having the sole objective of granting President Saleh and the GPC false democratic legitimacy. Islah, however, was unwilling to go this far and in the end, severed its cooperation with the opposition and took part in the elections.

Islah secretary general at the time, Muhammad Abdullah al-Yadumi, claims that the GPC had threatened to declare a state of emergency and abort the democratic process if Islah boycotted the 1997 parliamentary elections. Al-Yadumi says that Islah had considered joining the boycott of several opposition parties, but the threat of a government declaration of a state of emergency led it to conclude that participation in the elections was in the interest of the Yemeni people and democracy. In Al-Yadumi's words, "participation in the elections was going to protect what there is of the democratic margin for participation, so we participated."[8]

In the 1997 election campaign, Islah coordinated with the opposition on some issues, such as petitioning for electoral safeguards and for a transparent update of the voter registries. However, having decided to participate in the elections, it turned against cooperation and dropped its demands for safeguards. Islah ended up participating as the GPC's chief competitor and won 53 of the 301 parliamentary seats, second to the GPC's 187. After the elections, Islah joined neither the GPC in a coalition government nor the opposition camp. It preferred to play the game of accommodating the regime rather than completely severing ties. Islah's leaders, especially Sheikh al-Ahmar, still viewed the GPC and President Saleh as strategic allies.

The 1997 parliamentary elections thus unleashed a period of great ambiguity in the relations between Islah and both the ruling GPC and the opposition parties. In the presidential elections of 1999, Islah named President Saleh as its candidate. Before the 2003 parliamentary elections, however, Islah joined the Opposition Supreme Coordination Council—which originally included the YSP and four smaller parties—to form a new opposition coalition, the Joint

Meeting Parties. The JMP developed a collective electoral platform, making the GPC their common enemy and demanding the introduction of democratic safeguards and significant political reforms. They also coordinated on candidates. The results of the 2003 elections meant the return to parliament of the YSP, which won seven seats, and the Nasserites, which won three. Islah saw its pool of seats decline from 53 to 45.

Yet even joining the JMP did not stop Islah's leaders, especially Sheikh al-Ahmar, from supporting President Saleh and making several political deals with him and the GPC. In the 2006 presidential elections, al-Ahmar endorsed Saleh for the presidency against the JMP's candidate, Faisal bin Shamlan, who was supported by Islah as a party. Al-Ahmar's support for the president and the continued coordination between the two men explain why the GPC parliamentary bloc elected al-Ahmar speaker of parliament repeatedly from 1993 till his death in 2007.

Since 2003, Islah's practice of switching sides between the GPC and the opposition has continued. In 2005, al-Ahmar called Saleh incapable of reforming the government and declared that it had become impossible to reach electoral or political agreements with the GPC. In the lead-up to the 2006 local elections, which were held on the same day as the presidential elections (September 20, 2006), Islah's leadership announced its full support of the JMP. However, the GPC and Islah negotiated a political agreement on how to reform the government through introducing democratic and decentralization measures, and al-Ahmar supported Saleh in the presidential elections.

Recently, Islah displayed the same ambivalence over the question of postponing the parliamentary elections scheduled for April 27, 2009 for two years. When the GPC declared that the security threats facing Yemen in the North and South made it necessary to delay the election and requested parliament to do so, Islah's parliamentary bloc protested vehemently. Its MPs accused the GPC of conspiring against democracy and free and regular elections, called on President Saleh to block any postponement, and threatened to boycott the political process. Yet a few days before the election date of April 27, 2009, Islah joined the GPC in voting for postponement.[9] Subsequently, the GPC and Islah began negotiating to restore the National Dialogue Forum—a consultative, non-binding body that brings together the government and the opposition.

Several factors explain why Islah has never opted to break completely with the GPC. First, Islah does not see itself as an alternative to the GPC. Its Islamist platform and its move toward the opposition in the last years have not led the party to reconsider the objective of reforming state and society in Yemen through consultation and coordination with the ruling GPC.[10] Second, channels of communication between the two parties have always remained open, even in the periods of heated electoral competition at the national and local levels. Third, key figures in Islah's leadership, such as Sheikh al-Ahmar and Sheikh al-Zindani, have maintained enduring relationships with President

Saleh and periodically assured him that Islah neither aims at replacing the GPC nor at challenging the power of the president.[11] Indeed, the death of Sheikh al-Ahmar in 2007 has had a negative impact on relations between the two parties and is a key reason for Islah's growing opposition to the government.[12]

On the other hand, the very nature of the GPC and Islah as umbrella organizations for tribal, conservative, and religiously inspired groups has meant that they have been competing for the same constituencies, producing ongoing tensions between them. More votes for the GPC mean fewer for Islah in many cases, and vice versa. The GPC has viewed the growing electoral success of Islah in the South as a direct challenge. In the 1997 parliamentary elections, for example, the GPC sought to defeat Islah candidates in the governorates of Ibb and Taizz, because Islah had scored significant electoral victories there in 1993.[13]

Attempts at regulating competition failed repeatedly. Both sides were unwilling to compromise. In the 1997 elections, the GPC and Islah agreed that the GPC would run uncontested in 100 out of the 301 electoral districts and Islah in 50, while they would compete in the remaining 151 districts. In practice, however, both the GPC and Islah ran candidates as independents in the districts where they were not supposed to participate.[14]

The GPC has systematically resorted to additional means to defeat Islah at the polls. Since 1997, GPC candidates have capitalized on their party's access to the state's financial resources and media outlets to influence elections. The GPC has also used the armed and security forces to instigate clashes with opposition supporters. In the 2006 local elections, the GPC notched up its competition with Islah by trying grassroots politics and providing social services in urban and rural areas for the first time. GPC candidates attempted to attract voters through field visits and the provision of services. Tribal leaders were specifically targeted to convince them to limit their contacts with Islah or to run for office with the backing of the GPC.[15] GPC maneuvering and patronage resulted in significant losses for Islah and the JMP parties. Islah's share in the local councils dropped from 23 percent of the seats after the 2001 elections to less than 10 percent. The YSP's share decreased from 4 to 3 percent.[16]

On another level, the GPC's leadership, specifically President Saleh, has played in recent years on the contradictions within Islah between those groups in favor of the party's alliance with the JMP parties and those which are skeptical of it. Most recently, Sheikh al-Zindani, who has frequently criticized Islah's alliance with the YSP, was rewarded by the president. Saleh endorsed al-Zinadni's efforts to form Virtue Councils.

The GPC has also used the differences between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi components of Islah to create a state of instability inside the party. Salafis have been encouraged to move out of Islah and form new political parties. Salafi sheikhs and conservative preachers have been promoted by

the government to replace preachers affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in various mosques. The government's aim has been twofold: one, to limit Islah's control over mosques, which has helped the party in constituency building and electoral mobilization; and two, to deepen the rift within Islah between the Muslim Brothers and the Salafis. However, as noted the actual participation of Salafis as a group in Yemeni politics has remained minimal due to their scattered location and traditional teachings that forbid participation in politics.[17]

Although far from being complete and unquestioned among its rank and file, Islah's gradual shift toward the opposition has helped the party to mature as a political force. Islah has abandoned the more simplistic slogans and arguments of the 1990–1997 period, such as "Islam is the solution" and the denunciation of secularism. It has become more pragmatic and accommodating in its attitude toward non-religious opposition parties, mainly the YSP. The security challenges facing the Yemeni state in the North (the Houthi rebellion in Saada) and in the South (the separatist movement and al-Qaeda) have made Islah see its role in the tribal areas of the North and its alliance with the southern-based YSP as essential pillars in keeping Yemen together and preventing the collapse of the state. Islah's policy platform has also come to focus increasingly on pushing for political and socioeconomic reforms, fair representation of Yemeni parties in state institutions, and active participation of the opposition in decision making and in fighting corruption.

In addition, Islah's ideology and vision have evolved while participating as an opposition party. It has presented itself, like other Islamist parties and movements in the Arab world, as a party pressing for political change from within an authoritarian political system, using peaceful methods. Islah has underscored its commitment to democratic mechanisms by regular participation in national and local elections and acceptance of their results, despite regime manipulation. Like other Arab Islamists, this participatory vision has been religiously legitimated by equating democracy with the Islamic concept of *shura*.

Islah's positive evolution in the opposition, however, does not mean that the party's ambiguities or its constant switching between the government and the opposition sides will cease any time soon. Islah's accommodating attitude toward non-religious parties and its acceptance of pluralism have not led the party to abandon the view of Sharia as the sole basis for organizing state and society in Yemen. The dissatisfaction of several strong leaders in Islah with its current course and the ongoing communication between them and the GPC have prevented the party from adopting a clear opposition platform. The JMP parties, for their part, have never stopped questioning Islah's commitment to the alliance. Divisions between the Muslim Brothers and the Salafis within Islah have prevented the party from taking concrete stances on issues pertaining to the role of religion in politics, especially since Sharia provisions were enshrined in the constitution early in the 1990s. From the time al-Zindani

began pressing for the formation of the Virtue Councils in July 2008 until their formation in early 2009, Islah leaders remained divided between support and skepticism, and the party could not reach a unified position.

Islah's ambiguities and internal divisions have harmed the party electorally and politically on various occasions. Most significantly, they have impeded the party's legislative role and its performance in successive Yemeni parliaments. In contrast to other Islamist parties and movements, such as the Moroccan Party for Justice and Development and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which over time have developed well-organized parliamentary blocs with clear legislative priorities and active parliamentary participation, Islah has never reached a level close to that.

Islah in Parliament—Legislative Priorities and Performance

Islah's role in parliament has to be evaluated against the background of two realities of Yemeni political life since unification in 1990. First, since it started to contest parliamentary elections in 1993, Islah has been losing seats while the GPC has been increasing its representation. Second, in the last two decades Islah has changed its position in Yemeni politics from a partner in the ruling coalition with the GPC (until 1997) to alliance with opposition parties grouped in the JMP.

Since entering Yemeni politics, Islah's representation in parliament has fallen gradually from 62 seats out of 301 in 1993 to 53 in 1997, and then to its current tally of 45 after the 2003 elections. The other major opposition party in Yemen, the YSP, which boycotted the 1997 parliamentary elections and participated only in the elections of 1993 and 2003, has fallen precipitously from 56 seats in 1993 to 7 in the current parliament. Meanwhile, the GPC increased the number of seats it won from 123 in 1993 to 187 in 1997 to 229 in 2003. This partly reflects the growing institutional and political dominance of the GPC, which emerged at the end of the 1990s as the country's uncontested ruling party. Islah has become the major opposition party facing the GPC. However, its ability to compete with the GPC has been diminishing, and it leads an opposition that has suffered substantial parliamentary and political losses between 1993 and 2003.

In the parliamentary elections of 1993, Islah ran based on an electoral platform that spelled out the party's coalition with the GPC, its commitment to religion (Islam is the solution) and exposed its uncertainty with regard to democratic mechanisms. It finished second after the GPC, besting the YSP.

The 1997 elections reflected the outcome and effects of the 1994 civil war between the North and the South. The war ended with the defeat of the South and enactment of a new electoral law in 1996 (law 27/1996) that banned former southern leaders from participation in political life, dealing a blow to

the YSP, which boycotted the elections. The GPC won a clear parliamentary majority of 62.1 percent—187 seats, compared to 40.5 percent in 1993. Islah's approximate share of the popular vote fell to 17.6 percent from 20.9 percent in 1993, resulting in 53 seats. In 1997, Islah's candidates ran on a quasi-opposition platform, criticizing the GPC's dominance over Yemeni politics and the lack of democratic safeguards in the electoral process. In the 2003 elections, Islah's losses continued. Only 45 of its parliamentary candidates were elected and the party's share of the vote fell to 14.9 percent. Despite the parliamentary representation of the YSP and other opposition parties, the GPC's dominance reached unprecedented heights. President Saleh's party secured 76 percent of parliamentary seats, 229.

Islah more skillfully presented its opposition platform in the lead-up to the 2003 elections. In line with other opposition Islamist parties and movements in the Arab world, Islah's platform called for gradual, peaceful democratic reforms and for a fair distribution of political power between the GPC and other parties. The fact that Sharia provisions had been enshrined in the constitution in 1994 prevented Islah, unlike other opposition Islamists, from putting forward the application of Sharia as the keystone of its opposition platform. Sharia was replaced by calls for democratic reform, political change, better governance, and measures against corruption.

The growing dominance of the GPC over Yemeni politics and the shrinking role of Islah have been also demonstrated at the local level. After the local elections in 2001, the GPC's representation in local councils was 61 percent against Islah's 23 percent. The YSP controlled 4 percent of the seats in local councils—mainly in the southern governorates—and independents 12 percent. Like the parliamentary elections in 2003, the local elections in 2006 enhanced the majority status of the GPC. The ruling party ended up securing over 80 percent of the seats on local councils. Islah's share of the popular vote declined to less than 10 percent, the YSP's to 3 percent, and that of independents to approximately 5 percent.

As a party with a declining presence in a parliament dominated by the president's party, Islah, especially after its move toward the opposition since 1997, has behaved like a small party trying to have some impact on key legislation and policy issues. Unlike other opposition Islamists in the Arab world, Islah's positions and activities in parliament have not reflected a comprehensive platform. They have been characterized by ambiguity and switching sides between the GPC and opposition parties, the two characteristics that shape Islah's overall role in Yemeni political life.

From 1993 to 1997, Islah's parliamentary bloc assisted the GPC bloc. Until 1994, the parliamentary agenda was influenced by the post-unification struggles over the distribution of power between North and South Yemen. This resulted in a bitter conflict between the North-based GPC and Islah, on the one hand, and the South-based YSP on the other. The Islamist platform of

Islah was used effectively to discredit the socialist agenda of the YSP. Indeed, the ideological controversies between the YSP socialists and Islah's religious leaders, such as Sheikh al-Zindani, who systematically described the YSP as an atheist organization, added to the tensions between North and South.

After the YSP's defeat in the 1994 civil war, the GPC and Islah formed a government with Islah the junior partner in the ruling coalition. Its parliamentary bloc focused in the post–civil war phase on ensuring the conformity of Yemeni legislation with Sharia provisions. President Saleh had rewarded Islah for its support during the civil war by accepting its demand to enshrine Sharia in the constitution. In December 1994, the GPC and Islah parliamentary blocs amended article 3 of the constitution to make Sharia the source of all legislation. The amendment was the clearest sign of Islah's adherence to an Islamist platform between 1993 and 1997. However, the party failed to capitalize on it to introduce further legislative changes. Several religious leaders in Islah disapproved of the education law, which was passed by the GPC and the YSP before 1994, and obliged the government to close down some of the educational institutes that taught Sharia and *fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence). Islah's parliamentary bloc failed to change the education law.

After the elections of 1997, Islah's legislative priorities and performance have been shaped by its changed position in Yemeni politics as a result of joining the opposition. Islah has used its participation in parliament to underscore its commitment to democratic mechanisms and its recognition of the legitimacy of the existing state's legal framework, but also has called for the introduction of political and economic reforms. Contrary to its legislative initiatives before 1997, Islah's parliamentary bloc has devoted less attention to legislation related to religious and moral issues. Islah has acted only when the GPC has proposed laws that contradict some Sharia provisions, trying to block them.

Since the parliament of 1997–2003, Islah's legislative priorities have changed and it has come to seek the following: constitutional amendments aimed at a fairer distribution of power between the government and the opposition, reforms in electoral laws and laws pertaining to political rights, improving parliament's oversight of the government's socioeconomic policies, and a reduction in corruption. To a lesser extent, it has also sought religious legislation. These priorities became clearer after Islah and the JMP parties agreed in January 2003 to a joint electoral platform for the 2003 elections and a joint parliamentary platform.

Concerning constitutional amendments, Islah's bloc voted in 2000 for two government-sponsored amendments that extended parliament's term from four to six years and the president's term from five to seven years. In endorsing the two amendments, Islah assumed that lengthening parliament's term would provide more stability in the legislative process and partially free the parties from the influence of powerful electoral constituencies, such as tribes.

Islah expected the longer parliamentary term to make it easier to introduce political and economic reforms.

Rhetorically, Islah defended the amendment to the president's term as a way to make the country more stable. In fact, its support reflected the support of key Islah leaders, including al-Ahmar and al-Zindani, for President Saleh. However, in 2007, when Saleh proposed through the GPC additional constitutional amendments to shift Yemen from a presidential to a parliamentary system and to reduce the presidential term to five years and set an upper limit of two consecutive terms, Islah's bloc refused to fall in line. Islah parliamentarians criticized the president's initiative as undemocratic and designed to sustain his and the GPC's dominance of Yemeni politics. Throughout 2008 and most of 2009, the two parties along with smaller parties have been discussing these proposals in the National Dialogue Forum.[18]

As for electoral laws and laws pertaining to political rights, Islah MPs have systematically attempted to block the initiatives of their GPC colleagues they find undemocratic in spirit. However, the GPC has been able to ignore Islah's opposition in most cases because of its comfortable parliamentary majority.

Several examples follow. In 2000, Islah MPs opposed the bills on local councils, which entailed the appointment of governors by the Ministry of Interior. Islah demanded that governors should be directly elected like members of the local councils. The GPC majority passed the law.[19] The parliament again took up the law of local councils in 2008. The GPC bloc suggested an amendment providing for the election of governors by the members of local councils instead of the appointment of governors by the president. Islah MPs opposed this seemingly democratic amendment, because it clearly favored the GPC, which has controlled more than 80 percent of the local council seats since the 2006 local elections. They renewed their demand for direct election of governors, but in vain. Parliament passed the GPC amendment.[20]

In 2006, the GPC and the JMP parties, including Islah, signed an "Agreement of Principles" aimed at organizing the presidential and local council elections of September 2006. The agreement, which was preceded by parliamentary passage of a new law for elections and referenda (law 26/2006), changed the composition of the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendum (SCER). It added two JMP members, making four in all, as compared to five members who were appointed by the GPC. The agreement also stipulated that the sub-electoral committees, which were responsible for the validation of voter lists and the supervision of the election process, would be composed of 54 percent GPC-appointed members and 46 percent JMP-appointed members. The agreement also emphasized the neutrality of the military and security services, public money, and public media during the elections.[21]

After initial euphoric statements, Islah MPs became disenchanted with the inner workings of the committee in the early days of validating the voter lists.

Islah claimed that the SCER failed to carry out its mission. It accused the GPC members in the commission of obstructing the validation process, expelling election observers from civil society organizations, and using the security services to intimidate JMP commission members.[22] The presidential elections ended with an overwhelming victory for the GPC candidate, President Saleh, over the JMP candidate, Faisal bin Shamlan. Saleh won 77.2 percent of the vote. The local elections also were a sweeping victory for the GPC

In 2008, Islah MPs proposed a new law to ensure the judiciary's independence and reinforce the separation of executive and judicial authority. Islah's bill aimed at changing the practice of the appointment of judges by the Minister of Justice, which gives the executive considerable influence over the judiciary. The bill would have created a general assembly, composed of senior judges, to nominate judges eligible for high judicial offices. The assembly's nominations would have needed the approval of the parliament and the president.[23] Islah's legislation was referred to a parliamentary committee for study, and no decision had been reached as of October 2009.[24]

In 2008, the Islah bloc also proposed a law to grant and protect free access to information. It was endorsed by other opposition MPs and widely supported by civil society organizations and various professional associations. Even so, the GPC majority brought down Islah's legislation. Later last year, the cabinet adopted a different bill prepared by the National Information Center, a government agency, and moved it to the parliament for deliberations. The government's proposal would impose severe restrictions on access to information, including harsh penalties for journalists—up to six months in prison—for publishing any information deemed by the authorities to be politically sensitive or a threat to Yemen's national security or its foreign relations. As of October 2009, the parliament had yet to pass the government's bill.[25]

Islah MPs have devoted significant attention to social and economic issues. In its electoral platforms of 1997 and 2003 as well as in several declarations of programs, Islah has repeatedly criticized the government's failure to improve the living conditions of Yemenis by introducing just and effective social and economic policies. Like their Islamist colleagues elsewhere in the Arab world, Islah MPs have gradually mastered the technique of supporting their criticism of the government's failure with numbers demonstrating social and economic hardship—for example, more than 45 percent of the Yemeni population lives on $2 a day, 18 percent live on $1 a day, and the unemployment rate runs as high as 35 percent. However, Islah has confined its parliamentary activism on social and economic policies to criticism of the government and largely failed to increase effective parliamentary oversight powers or develop alternative policies.[26] Failure to develop alternative, concrete policy measures in the socioeconomic realm brings Islah closer to the majority of Islamist parties and movements that participate in Arab politics. The Moroccan Party for Justice

and Development, the Egyptian and Jordanian Muslim Brotherhoods, and Algerian Islamists all have been heavily criticized for their inability to develop concrete policy platforms that address issues such as poverty, unemployment, and social services.

Since 1997, the Islah bloc has been disapproving of the government's annual budget and abstaining from voting on fiscal issues. Islah's opposition to GPC-backed bills on social and economic issues has remained largely ineffective because of the GPC's parliamentary dominance. For example, the Islah bloc opposed the new income tax law in 2005, the law of wages and salaries in 2007, and various privatization measures that allowed foreign investors own real estate in Yemen in 2009. In all three cases, the GPC majority passed the legislation. Islah MPs have succeeded in introducing amendments to only to a few GPC bills. Most recently, in 2009, the Islah bloc amended the micro-credit law meaningfully. The bill circulated by the government gave the central bank the right to confiscate the borrowers' property in case of failure to pay back government loans. Islah viewed this as contradicting Sharia provisions and demanded its removal. Before passage, the legislation was amended to grant the central bank only the right to refer borrowers in default to the judicial authorities.[27]

Out of 119 parliamentary questions that Islah MPs addressed to the government between 2003 and 2009, 41 raised issues pertaining to Islamic teachings and morality. These issues varied from selling alcoholic beverages in some provinces and showing "indecent movies" in hotels to the closing of religious schools. However, with regard to religious legislation, Islah MPs have succeeded in recent years in amending only two bills based on their Islamist platform. In 2005, the Islah bloc cooperated with the GPC majority to make Sharia part of the curriculum of the state police academy, an amendment to law 10/2001.[28] In 2009, some Islah MPs were among the parliamentary majority that rejected government-proposed amendments of the civic status laws (law 14/2002 and law 20/1992) to raise the eligible age of marriage for women from fifteen to eighteen years. In the end, after taking into consideration the opinion of the parliamentary Islamic Codification Committee, a parliamentary majority approved raising the age of marriageable women to seventeen years.[29]

The parliamentary debate on raising the age of marriage for women has revealed how differently various Islah MPs interpret their party's Islamist platform and relate it to religious legislation. A few Islah MPs voted for the government's proposal, while others, especially Islah representatives in the Codification Committee, denounced it as contradicting Sharia and threatening the moral integrity of women.[30]

An earlier incident revealing the internal divisions among Islah MPs in interpreting the Islamist platform occurred in May 2008, when President Saleh called on religious scholars to form "Virtue Councils" to further moral practices and ensure compliance with Islamic teachings in society. Sheikh

al-Zindani and Sheikh Hammud al-Zarihi, both prominent figures in Islah, were among 25 scholars who established these councils. The Virtue Councils held several meetings, in which the scholars called for a ban on alcohol consumption, a prohibition on women working for private companies, supervision of beaches and public places, and other measures intended to enforce virtues and fight vice. Several Islah members, mainly clerics and preachers, later joined the Virtue Councils.

As a result, Islah was heavily criticized by its partners in the JMP and various civil society organizations, which feared that the formation of Virtue Councils would further diminish individual freedoms in the name of religion. Islah was forced to state publicly that as a political party it would not interfere in issues of morality and so does not approve or disapprove of the Virtue Councils. The statement also described the decision of Islah members to join the councils as personal and not reflecting a party line.

Although the official stance of Islah toward the Virtue Councils has demonstrated a measure of practical separation between its political activity and its religious elements (the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis) influential inside it, it has also brought to the surface the internal divisions within Islah in interpreting its Islamist platform. Islah could not disown the formation of the councils or denounce an initiator, al-Zindani, a prominent party figure. It needed to accommodate him and his influential followers, lest it lose their backing. But the party also had to respect its members who distanced themselves from al-Zindani's initiative, seeing it as an apolitical enterprise with which the party should not be associated.[31]

Overall, Islah's impact on the legislative process has been rather limited since the party moved to the opposition side in 1997. Between 1994 and 1997, when it participated with the GPC in a coalition government, Islah scored its clearest legislative victory: the 1994 amendment to article 3 of the constitution that made Sharia provisions the source of all legislation. Islah's efforts since 1997 to push for democratically inspired constitutional and legal amendments and to strengthen parliamentary oversight of the government's policies have largely failed because of the uncontested dominance of the GPC in parliament. Islah MPs are outnumbered both in plenary discussions and in the standing committees, which review legislative proposals and presidential decrees after their first discussion in parliament.[32]

Although Islah's long-standing ambivalence toward President Saleh and the GPC and its internal divisions have hindered the party's parliamentary activism, more than anything it has been the concentration of power in the hands of the president and the ruling party that has greatly curbed Islah's legislative success. At this level, the experience of Yemeni Islamists corresponds to the wider regional pattern of Islamist parties and movements, which have proven ineffective opposition groups in parliaments controlled by authoritarian regimes.

Trajectories of Evolution—Impacts of Political Participation on Islah

In spite of its limited impact in parliament, Islah has continued to contest elections at the national and local level and to play politics by the rules. Apart from the 1994 civil war, in which the party joined hands with the GPC to defeat the YSP, Islah has upheld its commitment to peaceful participation in political life since its formation in 1990. Islah's emerging acceptance of democratic procedures and pluralism during the 1990s has evolved, so that today they are an uncontested pillar of the party's ideology and role. Indeed, its experience in the JMP has demonstrated Islah's willingness to cooperate with ideologically and programmatically different parties and to develop a joint electoral and parliamentary platform to push for reforms in Yemen.

Yet Islah has had to overcome various obstacles to participate in politics. Operating in an authoritarian regime, in which the president and his party dominate political life and strip checks and balances among government branches of their meaning, has forced Islah, since its move toward the opposition in 1997, to sustain its ties with the regime to have some influence over key political choices. Islah also had to overcome its own mixed constituency and its internal divisions to take part in politics. The tribal, Muslim Brotherhood, and Salafi elements of Islah have prevented the party from developing a clear ideology and platform. As the analysis of the party's legislative priorities and performance has shown, the Islah parliamentary bloc has been forced to strike a balance between tribal and political interests, between different interpretations of the party's Islamist platform among influential leaders, and between those who see Islah as part of the opposition JMP and those who denounce cooperation with the JMP and still view the GPC as an ally. The result has been continued ambiguities in Islah regarding its ideology and platform and a wide skepticism on the outside as to where the party really stands.

These characteristics have made the experience of Islah different from that of other Islamist parties and movements in the Arab world, though not completely. Of course, most Arab Islamists who also participate in politics from the ranks of the opposition have managed to sort out much of their initial ideological ambiguities and to articulate clear parliamentary platforms. Islah has not so far. Still, Islah, like other Islamists, has had to account to its constituents for achieving only limited reforms and justify its continued commitment to reform. Like Islamists elsewhere, Islah has justified itself through a mixed narrative: first, economic and political reforms are framed as long-term and gradual processes of change, requiring patience on part of their advocates. Second, peaceful participation is presented as the best available option to challenge the authoritarian regime while assuring peace within Yemeni society. This last argument resonates well in a country like Yemen, which went through long

periods of instability in the past and seems to be entering a new one now. In fact, the growing security and instability threats in the North and South of Yemen have been used effectively by Islah to justify its participation in legal politics and its ongoing contacts with the regime as essential in preserving Yemen from state failure or disintegration.

Islamist parties and movements have become institutionally more complex and amenable to internal democratic procedures while participating in party politics. For example, the Moroccan Party for Justice and Development has kept a functional separation between the religious movement and the party, while the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has maintained such a functional separation between the movement and the parliamentary bloc. Islah's internal evolution too has been toward growing institutional complexity.

The organizational and decision-making structure that Islah has developed contains six legislative and executive levels: the General Congress, the Central *Shura* Council, the Supreme Board, the General Secretariat, the Judiciary Board, and local congresses and councils in each of the 20 governorates of Yemen. According to its bylaws, at all these levels, Islah bases decision making and leadership formation on the concept of *shura*, which compels party members to deliberate and put in practice a participatory approach.[33]

The General Congress of Islah, the party's main executive body, amended in a meeting in March 2009 different articles of Islah's bylaws to allow for greater internal democracy, decentralization, and participation. A significant example is the amendment of article 12 of the bylaws. Before the amendment, article 12 gave the General Congress the right to elect from its own members the delegates of the local congresses of Islah. The amended article 12 stipulates that members of the local councils will elect the delegates of local congresses directly. Also, in the same meeting, the General Congress amended article 14 to transfer the responsibility for electing the members of the Central *Shura* Council, the party's internal parliament, from the General Congress itself to local congresses.

These two recent amendments demonstrate Islah's willingness to improve the inner workings of its executive and legislative bodies by introducing a high degree of both internal democracy and of decentralization of decision-making powers from the national to the local levels. They shed another positive light on Islah's strategic commitment to democratic procedures. It is worth noting that the amendments to article 12 and 14 were pushed not only by the local councils of Islah, which benefit from them, but also by several key figures in the leadership following extensive debates within the party.[34]

Unlike the democratizing drive of Islah manifested in the interplay between the party's national and local levels, two key features of internal democracy in political parties—mobility and change in leadership—have been largely missing. Sheikh al-Ahmar remained president of Islah's powerful Supreme Board from the party's formation until his death in 2007. In fact, the fourth

and last confirmation by the General Congress of al-Ahmar in his position, which took place shortly before his death, violated Islah's bylaws stipulating that the term of the Supreme Board president can only be renewed three consecutive times. Sheikh al-Zindani remained president of Islah's Central *Shura* Council for three consecutive terms from 1995 till 2007. In 2007, al-Zindani was replaced as council head by Muhammad ibn Aglan, who had been vice president between 1995 and 2007. Al-Zindani was then elected to a seat on the party's Supreme Board.[35]

The lack of mobility and change in the top leadership positions is in line with other parties in Yemen and has also shaped the wider composition of the Central *Shura* Council. Since Islah's formation, influential tribal and religious members have systematically controlled more than a two-thirds majority in the council (100 out of 130 seats).[36] Only in leadership positions at the local level, which are determined through internal elections for candidates to run for leadership in local congresses and councils has Islah shown itself able to display a high degree of mobility and change. The last round of elections for the local congresses and councils, held in January 2007, confirmed this trend.[37]

Another trajectory of evolution among most Islamist parties and movements in the Arab world is their gradual opening toward women. Here too, Islah's experience has resembled the wider Islamist spectrum. Islah's discourse on women has changed over time, from an initial skepticism of female political activism to an acceptance of it driven by political and pragmatic considerations. In 1998, women were elected for the first time to Islah's Central *Shura* Council; they won seven seats. Currently, seventeen women hold seats in the council. In the March 2009 meeting of Islah's General Congress, the party's bylaws (article 36) were amended to allow for greater female representation, and a department for women was added to the General Secretariat.

Islah's gradual opening toward women has been propelled mainly by its electoral competition with the GPC. Like Arab Islamists elsewhere, Islah has always had significant female constituencies—currently, they are 18 percent of party membership. However, women were largely ill-represented within Islah and kept out of leadership positions and election candidacy in the 1990s. In recent years, especially after Islah's poor showings in the presidential and local elections in 2006—Islah did not nominate a single female candidate for the 7,000 contested seats in the local councils—party leaders have come to realize the importance of mobilization among women and therefore the need to better represent them in the party's legislative and executive bodies.

Still, as with various policy and political issues, internal division has plagued Islah's opening toward women. Some tribal and religious leaders have opposed it, based on a conservative interpretation of Sharia provisions. Owing to the party's internal division, Islah's parliamentary bloc has consistently declined in the last three years to subscribe to various GPC proposals aimed at introducing a 10–15 percent female quota in the parliament, 20–25 percent in the local councils, and 10 percent in the State Consultative Council.

Conclusion

The Yemeni Congregation for Reform shares some key characteristics with other Islamist parties and movements operating in the Arab world. Like them, Islah has a faith-based ideology and platform and has been participating in party politics with the aim of achieving constitutional, political, and socio-economic reforms. Islah has also gradually become committed to democratic procedures internally as well as in Yemeni politics. These shared characteristics justify identifying Islah as an Islamist party. However, Islah differs from most other Arab Islamists in several ways. The party combines tribal influences with those of the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups. Compared to Islamists elsewhere, Islah has shown a higher degree of internal division on key issues, such as its relationship with the ruling establishment, women's participation in politics, and how to interpret the party's Islamist platform and translate it into political action. Moreover, unlike other Islamists, Islah's participation in politics did not begin in the opposition. The party was a junior partner in a ruling coalition until joining the opposition in 1997. The practice of switching sides between the government and the opposition has been a hallmark of Islah and continues to make it an exception among its Islamist counterparts.

Notes

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31 News Yemen, February 23, 2009, http://www.newsyemen.net/printn.asp?sub_no=1_2009_02_23_25859. See also Abdul Salam Muhamad, bayna takhawuf siyasiyeen wa da´m ´ulama kibar bi'l-hizb- al-amr bi'l-ma´ruf al-yamaniyah taqsim hizb al-islah (Between Fears of Politicians and the Support of Prominent Ulama—The Virtue Councils' Divide in the Islah Party), paper published on Islam Online, June 14, 2008, http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&pagename=Zone-Arabic-News/NWALayout&cid=1212925307466.

32 In the current parliament, the representation of Islah MPs in standing committees is as follows: 2 out of 11 in workforce and social affairs; 3 out of 17 in constitutional affairs; 2 out of 13 in foreign affairs; 3 out of 12 in justice and endowments; 2 out of 11 in local governance; 2 out of 7 in Islamic codification; 2 out of 12 in defense and security; 3 out of 15 in public liberties and human rights; 1 out of 12 in trade and industry; 3 out of 14 in education; 3 out of 10 in information, culture, and tourism; 2 out of 15 in public health; 3 out of 15 in higher education; 2 out of 19 in oil and development; 1 out of 13 in water and environment; 1 out of 17 in services; 3 out of 18 in finance; 1 out of 17 in agriculture, irrigation, and fisheries.

33 Islah Bylaws 2005.

34 Phone interview with Rajeh Badi, conducted on March 22, 2009.

35 Saba News, February 2, 2005, http://www.sabanews.net/ar/print87894.htm.

36 Swiss Info, al-mu'tamar al-rabi' li'l-islah yukaris al-qiadah al-taqlidiyah (The Fourth Congress of Islah Confirms Traditional Leadership), http://www.swissinfo.ch/ara/swissinfo.html?siteSec=43&sid=7571443&ty=st, undated.

37 Al-Sahwa Net, January 23, 2007, referred to at http://www.alshibami.net/saqifa//showthread.php?t=24040.

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