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Complex power relations in Yemen provide opportunities for al-Qaeda

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Summary

Yemen's problems have frequently been ascribed to neocolonialism, regional politics and domestic power struggles. Though these factors are contributory, they are only the tip of the iceberg. The real problems are endemic and deeply rooted in the nature of society and the evolution of the state. Although modern political institutions exist in Yemen, such as a supreme court, parliament, political parties, trade unions and a free press, these institutions do not necessarily operate as might be expected. In fact, what exists in Yemen is merely a despotic authority, where decision-making usually takes place outside the formal institutions. The weakness of the state limits its capacity to penetrate society, creating a void that has been filled by intermediaries who benefit from the regime's durability. These intermediaries also play a crucial role in the survival of the regime by controlling the peripheries.

Antagonistic state-society relationship¹

The antagonistic state-society relationship in Yemen, present throughout its history, is rooted in factors related to ecology, for example, isolation and modes of production; religion, notably the Zaydi revolutionary heritage; and the tribal social structure. Shafi'i (Sunni) and Zaydi (Shia) sectarian tensions also complicate the religious landscape. The salient feature of Yemen is the limited capacity of the state to penetrate and regulate society, and the dichotomy becomes apparent if we contrast concepts such as, north/south, ethnic/regional, tribal/urban and Zaydi/ Shafi'i.

1 This article is an excerpt from a chapter in a forthcoming book: Ahmed A. Saif, "Void vs. Presence: The in-betweenness of State & Society in Yemen," in Larbi Sadiki, Layla Al-Zubaidi and Heiko Wimmen, eds, *Unmaking Power: Negotiating the Democratic Void in the Arab Middle East*, London, Zed Book, forthcoming 2010.

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Paradoxically, the gap between state and society has become wider since the abolition of the former political systems, after the revolutions in the south and the north. The repressive Marxist-style regime in the south destroyed the social structure in an attempt to create a classless society, and imposed its transformation programme by means that were culturally foreign and reprehensible.

The abolition of the Imamate system in the north had two results. The first was the incorporation of tribal leaders into the state apparatus, creating a new elite in what Halliday has called the rule of “republican tribalism”.² The Saudis also contributed by continuing to subsidise the tribes and major chieftains after national reconciliation in 1970, subsidies that were probably equal to the amount of funding given to the Yemeni government.³ This new elite, however, has gradually relinquished its historical role as a coalescent social power by distancing itself from its fellow tribesmen during the process of becoming a commercial-bureaucratic elite. The second result was that the Zaydi Imamate was not replaced by a consensual one, and this revived the endemic regional, tribal and sectarian divisions.

The outcome is that the state has not acquired legitimacy based on a developmental or structural basis, nor has Yemeni society maintained its former strength. The divisions between social groups and their leaders on the one hand, and continual educational and modernisation changes on the other, have given the society a transitional character.

Decaying political legitimacy

Unity was imposed by the stroke of a pen in 1990. However, a highly fragmented society and a self-perpetuating political elite prevented the state from establishing an ideological hegemony, in Gramscian terms.⁴

² Fred Halliday, *Arabia without Sultans: A Survey of Political Leadership in the Arab World*, London, Vintage Press, 1975, p 95

³ M. E. El Azhary, “Aspects of North Yemen’s Relations with Saudi Arabia,” Chapter 13 in B.R. Pridham, ed, *Contemporary Yemen: Politics and Historical Background*, London, Croom Helm, 1984, p 198.

⁴ See the Gramscian concept of hegemony in Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, especially pp 181-2.

The failure to develop an ideology that goes beyond the concerns of narrow corporate interests, and to which the different groups can subscribe, undermined the state’s legitimacy and fomented sub-national loyalties. Therefore, it was to be expected that the transfer of power in Yemen would be violent, perpetuating a vicious cycle.

The decaying legitimacy of the political system has permitted the continuation of the sub-national parochial system. The failure to bring about development and the weakness of representative bodies led to the institutionalisation of tribal, regional and sectarian norms that have further deepened the divisions in society. This has also weakened central authority and enhanced local loyalties at the expense of national cohesion. This fragmentation results in individuals and groups in government posts directing the state’s agencies and resources according to their tribal and regional allegiances.

It is no wonder, then, that Yemen exercises democracy and implements structural adjustments selectively, resulting in the state’s presence as a coercive force and reinforcing its limitations in the productive, distributive and service areas. Society, by contrast, is following a separate path. The state’s weak institutions and its limited capabilities fail to penetrate and regulate society and, because of its multiple internal divisions, society is not capable of forming organisations that can exert pressure in the public interest. In this context, society is limited by fragmented identities based on sub-national parochial affiliations and thus becomes ever more frustrated and alienated.

Politics of survival

The enduring elements in the ruling establishment since 1962 have been high-ranking military officers and the most powerful tribal leaders. The tribal leaders have mainly been the same individuals or their descendants, while the military has varied: though always present, they have swung from revolutionary nationalists to leftists, and in 1978, the military became dominated by a conservative clannish-tribal orientation which has survived to the present.

Tribal leaders remain the predominant power base of the ruling establishment in the countryside. These leaders historically expressed the interests of their tribes, and thus were the real power for political change. Since 1978, however, the military regime has strengthened

its coalition with the tribal chieftains. It has separated them from their tribesmen and linked them to the ruling centre by providing them with considerable wealth, not only through their share in the state revenue, but also through their links with other commercial and financial institutions.

Wealth in Yemen is important for political hegemony. Because of the weakness of the state, financial hand-outs have become an effective method of ensuring the loyalty and support of different sections of society. The ruling establishment, therefore, has accumulated wealth and power and become one of the biggest proprietors in the country. In addition to income derived from state oil revenue, the ruling establishment obtains its wealth from three main sources.

Sources of wealth

The first is the large military budget, which does not correspond to the real size of the army and the security forces. In Yemen, one of the poorest countries in the world, the average annual expenditure on the army and security forces was 52% of the country's total budget for the period 1981-1996, and it is widely believed that this level of spending continues.⁵ Abdul-Salam points out that thousands of military men who are listed on the payroll do not actually exist.⁶

The second source of wealth is the control of import licensing.⁷ The ruling establishment is also involved in estates, industry, and imports through the Military Economic Institution, which was later renamed the Yemeni Economic Institution.

The third source is smuggling, which is conducted freely and on a vast scale. Smuggling in all forms, including arms, drugs, other goods and people is a flourishing business. The origins of smuggled goods vary – some come from as far away as Pakistan and Dubai or the Horn of Africa. Similarly, the destinations also vary, from the domestic market to neighbouring countries, mainly Saudi Arabia. Because of the huge

profits generated by this business, massive networks have emerged that sometimes pull together disparate, even adversarial, parties to cooperate, such as senior civilian and military officials, tribal chieftains and terrorist groups.

Smuggling and terrorism

Interestingly, the smuggling routes are extended along oil and gas pipelines and coincide with the distribution of al-Qaeda cells in Yemen. These routes are also, surprisingly, the same as the ancient pre-Islamic caravan routes. Although there is no evidence that this distribution is deliberate, the same feature has been found in Central Asia where terrorist groups are distributed along the oil pipelines.

The smuggling routes extend from two abandoned sea points on the southern Yemeni coast. The first starts from Shaqra, a neglected sea port east of al-Mukkala. The second starts at Qana, an ancient deserted port in Shabwah. Both routes extend northwards to meet in the northern part of Shabwah and pass through the provinces of Marib and al-Jawf. Because these routes pass through remote, deserted areas that are inhabited mainly by recalcitrant tribes, the tribal leaders are crucial to the smuggling activities in areas where the government has little control. The emergence of a network made up of tribal leaders, terrorists and some influential officials was inevitable.

In addition, the ruling establishment benefits from the political patronage of other countries such as Saudi Arabia and Libya.⁸ It continues to maintain power through hegemony based on alliances with a variety of social forces, which must be continually nurtured by rewards.

A fragile governance

Tribal leaders or sheikhs have succeeded in maintaining their political and military autonomy vis-à-vis the state. As a result, respective governments have found themselves managing rather than governing the tribes.

5 Abdo Saleh Saleh, *The Social Foundation of the Contemporary Yemeni State*, PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1998, pp 261-2.

6 M. Abdul-Salam, *The Republic between the Sultanate and Tribes in Northern Yemen*, Cairo, al-Amal, 1988, p. 120.

7 Abdo Saleh Saleh, *The Social Foundation*, p. 263.

8 M. E. El Azhary, "Aspects of North Yemen's Relations with Saudi Arabia." Chapter 13 in B.R. Pridham, ed, *Contemporary Yemen: Politics and Historical Background*, London, Croom Helm, 1984, p 198.

The tribal sheikhs constitute the key political elite, who control the linkage between the tribesmen and the state. As a result, the sheikhs receive financial payment from the state in return for maintaining social stability.

At the same time, the tribal leaders also receive revenues from Saudi Arabia, to further that country's own political ends in Yemen. The Saudi agenda is to keep the country weak and fragmented and maintain the centre at the mercy of Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the Yemeni regime has co-opted the sheikhs, who represented key power centres, into the cabinet, the advisory council and the army.

In this context, the state displays both strong and weak characteristics at the same time. In terms of maintaining control, the state's penetration of society is strong, particularly in the urban areas. But it is weak in carrying out traditional government functions, such as providing adequate health care, basic education, social security and so on. A weak production base, insignificant oil reserves and poor development plans mean that the government prefers to continue as a rentier economy. A large share of the state's revenues is spent on the apparatus of force, such as the army and security forces. This is accompanied by the centre's excessive spending, which is vital for the survival of the regime, but results in the government failing to accomplish its development plans because of financial shortages.

Tribal power

Given the established smuggling networks mentioned above, the sheikhs consider it essential to keep this lucrative business going. Terrorist organisations are frequently the destination of smuggled goods, mainly weapons, and as such are valued customers, so protection and concealment are provided. At the same time, the sheikhs use their valuable connections with senior influential officials, involved in smuggling, to mediate and reach agreements between the state and the terrorists.

Finally, as has been noted by Bonnefoy and Poirier, the tribal system offers specific structures and consistent rules (*'urf*) which, although decentralised and ancient, are usually considered legitimate. These institutions provide protection and solidarity in light of the failures and inefficiencies of the central government.⁹

⁹ Laurent Bonnefoy and Marine Poirier, "Civil Society and Democratisation in Contemporary Yemen: Enhancing the Role of Intermediate Bodies," unpublished paper, 2009, p 7.

Reforming civil-military relations

Subordinating the military forces to civilian authority is one of the most enduring problems of Yemen. There is an inverse relationship between the strength of the formal army and the influence of tribal power centres. Therefore, the tribal elements, which are the main source of the informal army, are aware that strengthening the formal army should not exceed certain limits.

The need to curtail the army's power motivated the regime to take a number of measures. First, the authorities did everything possible to ensure that the military was infiltrated and controlled by their cronies and agents. The aim was to create divisions, and to ensure that the army served the government's purpose of keeping a tight grip on power. This was achieved by relying on elite forces and special military units under the direct command of the leader and not subordinated to the Ministry of Defence.

Second, the government tends to run all the key state ministries and agencies through military officers who are strongly loyal to the ruling establishment. The result of a military lacking cohesion and a delegitimized regime is that society has been abandoned to violence and armed conflicts. The aim is to fragment and weaken civil society and consequently maintain government supremacy. Insecurity drives social groups to seek alternative armed power and in this way Yemeni society has become even more militarised.

If executive-legislative powers cannot always control where, when, and how military forces are used, then civilian control cannot be said to exist. The subordination of the military to civil government must be supported actively and explicitly by public opinion: the media, universities, political parties, and commercial and professional associations, among others. While a country may have civilian control of the military without democracy, it cannot have democracy without civilian control of the military. Therefore, to effectively combat terrorism and prevent state failure in Yemen, it is crucial to implement state-building and rule of law effectively and quickly.