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Manea, Elham

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Hopes, Expectations and Outcomes in Yemen

Elham Manea

Was it a surprise?

Was it a surprise that people poured into the streets demanding an end to Yemeni President Ali Abdallah Salih's rule? No. It was not. The time was ripe for such an eruption.

When the youth demonstrations started in February 2011, after more than 32 years of Salih's rule, Yemen was the embodiment of a failed state, ranking 13th among countries deemed most at risk of failure in the Fund for Peace's 2011 Failed State Index. In a country where two-thirds of the population is under the age of 24, the unemployment rate was conservatively estimated at 35 percent; other estimates put the rate at 49 percent. Nearly half the population was living under the poverty line, on less than \$2 per day. Corruption was epidemically rampant. The country ranked 146th out of 179 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (2010). Water is scarce and the country's oil resources, which account for two-thirds of public revenue and 90 percent of export receipts, have dwindled.

Certainly, under these circumstances, protest demonstrations and demands for change were only to be expected. The time, I repeat, was ripe for such an eruption. Not to expect this would have been bizarre.

What surprised me, however, was the involvement of the youth – their pivotal role in shaping the dramatic events that took place in Yemen, as well as their determination to stay peaceful. That was a bit of fresh air.

Few, if any, expected the chain of events that started when Tunisian Mohammad Bouazizi set himself on fire on December 17, 2010 – a flame that spread from one authoritarian Arab state to another. These countries were also ripe for a change. And like their Arab counterparts, Yemeni youth were fed up with their corrupt political elites; they wanted change, a future, and

wanted it now, in their own country. Just a day after President Ben Ali fled Tunisia, young, middle-class, educated Yemenis decided to organize a demonstration in front of the French embassy to protest the shameful official French position toward the Tunisian uprising. A day later, a huge demonstration started at Sana'a University. The uprising was thus launched, and spread to other cities in Yemen.

At this moment, there was again hope in Yemen – something I have long missed in my country. I belong to a middle-aged Yemeni generation that lost hope, a fact that prompted me and many other educated Yemenis to leave the country and build a future elsewhere. And now here I am, meeting a different sort of Yemeni youth – educated, determined to make a difference, but in their own country. In fact, when I attended a women's rally at Taghir Square at Sana'a University on February 28, 2011, nothing but hope could be sensed.

Unity was the motto at the time. But at that point, unity was achievable only because the rallying cry of toppling the president proved to be so powerful. It managed to unify different groups that in other circumstances stand at odds with one another. In this case, each joined the movement, but for different reasons.

Even during these days, before the March 19 massacre of protestors in Taghir Square, I was pestered by doubts. As a human and a Yemeni I could not help but hope; and hope, believe me, is a magical force. But as a social scientist, I learned long ago that one cannot cook without the necessary ingredients. In the Yemeni case, the necessary ingredients for a stable nation-state are absent. In fact, the problem with Yemen has to do with the project of the state itself.

In the end, the reality of Yemeni political and social structures rose to take over once again, and the expectation that things could indeed change for the better faded away. This is in short where we stand today.

If we try to untangle Yemen's web of political problems, it becomes clear that the country is facing serious concurrent issues:

First: There is a power struggle among the core ethnic elites who have run the country for decades, enabling the president to survive and remain in

power. Their bickering threatens the stability of the whole system. Over time, the state came to represent the interests of a dominant ethnic group (northern Zaydi Qahtani of the Hashid tribal confederation), becoming a vehicle for safeguarding their ethnic interests. Other social groups were pushed to accept the institutional reality of a state that has rarely considered them to be equal citizens. The lack of solid institutional foundations made it possible for the “ethnicized” elites to hijack the state’s institutions for their benefit. These core leaders control among themselves the army and security services. However, their solid alliance began to wither at the beginning of 2000, when Salih started to groom his son Ahmed as his successor. The youth protests provided a golden opportunity to one faction of these core strongmen, the Al-Ahmar brothers (the sheiks of the paramount Hashid tribal confederation) and Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar (Salih’s half brother and top military commander). They readily joined the youth protestors, and military confrontations followed. Ironically, the youth protestors were calling for an end to the Salih regime, but found themselves stuck with a situation in which those who decided to join and protect them were very much part of that regime. This is one reason why the youth project of change ultimately floundered.

Second: Yemen is not one Yemen. It is many Yemens. And the issue here transcends the north-south division. The issue here has to do with the statehood projects in both North and South Yemen. The scope of this article does not allow this issue to be discussed in depth here. Suffice it to say that Yemen is two units, each of which is divided in turn along ethnic lines, a situation that led to recurrent violent coups and wars in each region both before and after their unification in 1990. More specifically:

North Yemen has been split along tribal and sectarian lines, among other divisions. The most relevant division today is that between Hashimite Zaydis, Qahtani Zaydis, Sunni Shafites and Sunni Salafites.

This division has since 2004 partly expressed itself in the tribal and sectarian war of Sada’a, led by the al-Huthi family, and in the current fighting between Salafi groups and the Huthis in the northern provinces. The Huthi movement has turned the northern Sada’a into a state within a state. Its troops have been fighting their way to neighboring governances since the end of 2011 (Haja, Amran and Al-Jawf). Some news reports indicate that this fighting is taking

place with the blessing of the Yemeni president. It would not be a surprise if this turns out to be true.

Sectarian division has also been obvious in the alienation of the Sunni Shafites in the area's middle regions, specifically in Taiz, Ibb and Al Baida. It was no coincidence that many of the youthful students who started the protests came from these middle regions!

South Yemen, on the other hand, has been divided along tribal, regional and cultural lines. The most prominent division has been that between the Ad Dali and Radfan regions on the one hand, and the Abien and Shabwa regions on the other. The region of Hadramout, moreover, has always considered itself a separate unit that deserves statehood. The Southern Movement is divided between those who demand separation and those who demand a federal system. Interestingly, this divergence also falls along regional lines!

Both the Southern Movement, with its fractured leaderships, and the Zaydi Huthi movement supported the youth uprising when it started in February. However, the support of Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and the al-Ahmar clan has increased the influence of Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood Islamists in the sit-in camps, leading to an end to this cooperation.

Third: Yemen has always been a weak state. Today the state is not only weak; it is on the verge of collapse. North Yemen has struggled to control its territory since its inception in 1962. And South Yemeni political elites used brutal coercive measures under the socialist system (1967 – 1990) to keep the state under control. But the moment the party collapsed, the state apparatus toppled with it. Since the 1994 civil war, the weakness of the Yemeni state has been its most characteristic feature. The power struggle between core elites, the south's persistent challenges to northern authority in their regions, and the on-and-off Huthi rebellion have destabilized the whole system, creating a power vacuum. This vacuum has been filled in some parts of the south by Islamist terrorists.

Given the magnitude of Yemen's problems, I have expressed doubt that the Gulf Cooperation Council's initiative, issued on May 21/22, 2011, which led to a presidential inauguration of the former Vice President Hadi, would provide Yemen with a safe exit from its explosive situation.¹ In fact, I have considered it a patchwork solution unable to defuse the crisis either in the short or long run. This document treats the Yemeni crisis as a simple conflict between two fighting parties and ignores the Huthi and Southern movements. Most importantly, it seeks to preserve the status quo within the Yemeni political system. This has to do with the leading role played by Saudi Arabia in charting the initiative. The kingdom has an interest in preserving the old Yemeni system, whose leaders have been its trusted allies despite the tensions between the two. The Saudi government also has an interest in hindering real political reforms in Yemen, lest this encourage Saudi citizens to demand similar actions.

Yet keeping the status quo is the surest way to impending disaster in Yemen.

What Yemen needs are serious steps that address the very core of its problems: a single ethnic group's control of the decision-making process and the corresponding exclusion of other regional, sectarian and tribal groups; the absence of a nation-state that represents all segments of its population; an institutional deficit; and a need for real democratic reforms that usher in the rule of law and are able to hold state officials accountable. Achieving this will require three important steps to be taken:

¹ The initiative calls for the Yemeni president to delegate his authorities to his vice president, and set a 90-day period within which the vice president is to call presidential elections. However, it makes sure there will be only one candidate in the presidential election, the vice president. It also holds that after the vice president is "elected" as president, he is to be responsible for overseeing a transitional period. The opposition is to name a candidate for the position of prime minister, and a "national consensus government," divided on a 50/50 basis between the government and the opposition, is to be created. The government is to have the authority to "disengage" the armed forces and their rival military forces and send them back to their camps. The government and the president are to call for a national dialogue conference, tasked with discussing the Yemeni conflicts (including the southern question) in a manner that preserves Yemen's unity.

Demonstrating the will to be part of a nation: The Yemeni state, before and after unification, has been perilously weak since its inception. For the country to start afresh, its various social groups with their diverse sectarian, regional and tribal affiliations have to agree to be part of this nation. They have to want to be part of this nation. But if this will is to emerge, the state must guarantee equal citizenship to its citizens and must stop acting to safeguard a single ethnic group's interests.

Creating a federal system: I am of the mind that keeping Yemen unified will be less costly than allowing it to separate into different units. To give one example, the separation of South Yemen would not mark the end but the beginning of southerners' problems. The divisions within South Yemen would come to the fore, which would ultimately divide it into at least three parts. From this point of view, a federal system that guarantees regional autonomy, prevents the hegemony of one region over others and respects citizens' rights offers a way out of this crisis. The one condition necessary for this step is that the various Yemeni social groups must demonstrate a will to be part of this federal system. If this is absent, then an orderly separation is warranted.

Creating a state that functions: The international community would be wise to step in and help Yemen build its institutional foundation, strengthen its state's capabilities and achieve conditions of law and order. I am mentioning the international community here because Yemen is not in a position to do that alone.

I am well aware that all these steps will be very difficult to achieve. Nobody said that the task is simple. A difficult and complex situation requires difficult decisions and solutions. And even if this task seems overwhelming, as a human and a Yemeni I will never lose sight of the fact that it is we, the humans, who can make a difference.

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