



## BRIEFING

# Exclusion, violence and public protest in Yemen

Briefing for House of Commons debate on the Middle East and North Africa

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Recent events across the Middle East have given cause for the international community to re-examine what it means to support truly sustainable stability overseas. As the case of Yemen highlights, political systems that fail to address the needs of their citizens, or exclude them from meaningful participation, will not result in 'stability' that lasts.

Western involvement in Yemen has tended to focus on counter-terrorism policies and state-heavy stabilisation measures, which do not necessarily address the security needs of ordinary Yemenis, and may even create further insecurity. This briefing looks at the underlying causes of conflict and insecurity in Yemen, and how the UK can better support the transition to sustainable, peaceful politics in Yemen.

### Background

Yemen faces a number of fundamental social, economic and political challenges and is at high and increasing risk of further conflict and instability. The situation in Yemen is currently characterised by low-level, violent conflict—fuelled by chronic, increasing poverty and unemployment, limited and uneven access to services and increasing radicalisation, especially among youth.

Conflict over dwindling resources affects all levels of Yemeni society, from localised conflicts over land and water to national-level political struggles. Oil revenue supports Yemen's patronage system; however reserves are estimated to run out in the next ten years. Water resources are diminishing rapidly and a water crisis is imminent. The country is also heavily dependent on food imports, making it especially vulnerable to global price shocks.

Yemen is ruled by an increasingly unpopular regime led by President Ali Abdullah Saleh of the General Party Congress (GPC). While it is considered a democracy by regional standards, many of the state's institutions are merely for show and the President has increasingly centralised political power in his office.

The Yemeni Government currently faces a number of open conflicts on various fronts. In the northern governorate of Sa'ada, the Government has been embroiled in an on-and-off violent conflict with the Houthi rebellion since 2006, a conflict that has complex religious, political and economic dynamics. While a ceasefire was brokered in February 2010, there have been reports of renewed fighting between Houthis and pro-government tribal forces.

Secondly, the Government also faces secessionist groups in the South who, frustrated by perceived economic and political marginalisation, have become more vocal about their grievances and are calling for secession. Thirdly, the Government is facing increased acts of terrorism, including the formation of a transnational Al-Qaeda network based in Yemen, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which has been staging attacks against Western and government targets in the country.

Finally, open tribal conflict is currently concentrated in a limited number of governorates where the Government has little or no control, such as parts of Al-Jawf, Amran, Marib, Shabwa and Sa'ada. These acts of violence are linked primarily to tribal dynamics, but may interlink with other dynamics such as regional, religious or economic conflicts.

### Anti-government protests

Recent protests in Yemen reflect long-standing challenges to the country's stability, but also present new opportunities for creating a more inclusive and sustainable peace.

As with other countries in the region, Yemen suffers from widespread corruption and unemployment, a declining economy, rising living costs and a nepotistic regime that has increasingly centralised power with an ageing president who rules over a young, frustrated and political excluded majority.

It was therefore no surprise that, in the wake of protests in Tunisia in early January, protests erupted on the streets of several Yemeni cities – a response to stalled electoral and constitutional reforms, and growing anger and frustration at economic grievances and political disenchantment.

Early protests in Sana'a and other major cities amounted to little more than political jockeying among the country's elite as they sought to maximise their negotiating positions. Opposition rallies called for the implementation of proposed electoral and constitutional reforms, reflecting an ongoing national debate in which few Yemenis have been engaged. Tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets, both for and against the regime. Many of these were bussed in and offered qat as compensation, though this proved insufficient to keep them there late into the day.

As protests in Egypt grew in strength, a small but significant number of youth and student activists, not aligned to either political party, emerged and began calling for President Saleh to step down. This movement, organised by university students and other middle class activists in urban areas, has overtly sought to learn from and replicate the protests in Egypt, including calling themselves "the youth movement", using similar slogans ("the people want the fall of the regime"), emphasising peaceful protests, setting up a public projector screen to broadcast Al-Jazeera (in Taiz) and using Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other sites to publicise protester actions and government responses. Local sources report the establishment of youth-led 'national committees for uprising and peaceful revolution against corruption and tyranny' in Yemen. The youth movement is increasingly able to demonstrate an ability to mobilise large numbers of protesters and within a short period of time, indicating that it is growing in strength.

Despite the growth in more organic protest movements, protesters' agendas continue to be fragmented and representative of only a very few. In the South, up to tens of thousands of protests have demonstrated almost weekly since 2007, calling for independence from the North and an end to the 'occupations'. Nearly 70 percent of southerners support dissolving the 1990 unity agreement with the North, and feel no identification with the protests now happening in the northern cities. Even in the North, it is increasingly clear that the only national agenda unifying protesters is the immediate ousting of Saleh, but significant division remains as to who or what an alternative would be.

Representation among protests is limited even in Sana'a and other northern urban centres. Limited internet connectivity and very low levels of education indicate that student-led protests continue to be dominated by better-off youth in urban centres. Many in Yemen, particularly in the country's more rural areas, have been consistently excluded from the political process. Today, they have little or no faith in the ability of political and state systems to address their most basic daily grievances.

Recent negotiations between Saleh and leaders of the opposition Joint Meetings Party coalition suggest that this small, but significant group of protesters are exercising increasing influence over the agenda of political parties. Saleh's offer to form a unity government to oversee future elections and hold a referendum on constitutional reforms was rejected by the opposition as too little, too late. The opposition recognise that their prospects for gaining legitimacy and power in any future regime depends on their being seen to represent the demands of protesters. While they led the early protest campaigns, they are now playing catch up with protesters, many of whom continue to feel that they are not represented by the opposition.

The government has responded to the protests in a variety of ways: initially by hiring thugs and pro-regime tribesmen to protest and attack anti-regime demonstrators, then through intimidation by security forces, including the killing of some protesters. Under increasing pressure from all sides, President Saleh called for the protection of all protesters by security forces. However, as protests gained steam following the fall of Hosni Mubarak, the regime sent out 'balatiga', soldiers and thugs hired to be the 'pro-ruling party protesters', to attack anti-Saleh protesters with sticks, knives and guns. Police are reported to have used tear gas, water cannons and live bullets against protesters. At the time of writing, around 30 people have died in the protests and many more have been injured.

Violent state security responses to protests in the South have been the status quo. Increased state violence against protesters in the centre and particularly in Sana'a is a worrying new trend. It suggests that just as protesters have learned from their brethren in the region, so too may President Saleh be learning from the experiences of leaders like Qadhafi in Libya that state-perpetrated violence may be necessary to quell rebellion and remain in power.

#### The UK in Yemen

The UK is one of the largest bilateral donors to Yemen. In the results of the Bilateral Aid review, published on 1 March, DFID committed to spending £76 million a year until 2015, with increases contingent upon the Yemeni Government's commitment to reform.

The UK is also providing support to Yemeni counter-terrorism efforts, and particularly since an attempt was made to bomb a US transatlantic flight on Christmas Day 2009, the UK Government has seen engaging in Yemen as key to reducing the threat from Al Qaeda.

The UK Government has a legitimate interest in protecting its own citizens from the threat of international terrorism. However, the presence of Al Qaeda is just one of many causes of instability in Yemen, and addressing it to the exclusion of other sources of insecurity will be counter-productive.

For instance, the approach of some in the international community has focused on strengthening the state-level security apparatus whilst delivering 'quick wins' at the community level rather than long-term sustainable development. This risks exacerbating conflict since state security mechanisms are perceived by many in the local population as an aggressor that threatens their livelihoods and wellbeing – security assistance will not contribute to stability if the public fears the military and does not want it strengthened. These policies are unpopular amongst most of the population and run the risk of enabling the Yemeni Government to pursue some of its separate and unrelated political objectives under the guise of the war on terror.

The UK Government is right to say that reforming Yemen's security and justice systems is vital to promoting the rule of law and reducing armed violence in Yemen. However, it is important to note that supporting state institutions may do more harm than good because the legitimacy and competency of the state itself is in question.

Instead, security and justice reform should empower Yemenis outside of political elites and outside of Sana'a to become meaningfully involved in decision-making on and oversight of security and justice services to ensure they are capable, accountable and responsive to their

needs. This should be part of a broader package of measures that seek to address some of Yemen's other economic and political challenges.

The UK Government should:

support national dialogue that extends beyond Yemen's political elite: The protest movements across the country, while still representing only a minority of Yemenis, present a unique opportunity to open up the political dialogue and to encourage political parties to be more responsive to the felt needs and priorities of their non-elite citizens. These priorities should be a major message in diplomatic conversations with the Yemeni Government and opposition parties.

support constitutional reform: The UK should encourage meaningful debate about the form of government and its leadership. While it remains unclear who will rule after President Saleh, the UK should be wary of supporting yet another individual personality without significant constitutional reforms that decentralise power and service delivery. This will be particularly important for ensuring any chance of a peace accord with the South. Bringing all actors into negotiations around the political process is a necessary prerequisite to elections, as is the development of a plan to afford citizens greater control over their economic and political futures.

promote genuine political will for democratic processes: Many important institutions and systems of democracy have already been established through law or government structures in Yemen, but are not being utilised and implemented because there is insufficient political will to do so. Elections are an important opportunity for individuals to have their say in the political process but if they are conducted through a system that is manipulated by political elites it will only deepen disillusionment and resentment and, ultimately, result in further violence. Implementing decentralisation plans that have already been approved by the government would be an important first step.

support investment in education for civic engagement: In many areas, people lack electricity, radio and TV coverage and a high rate of illiteracy means that communicating information about elections and other political processes is difficult. Especially in rural areas, people often do not link their most basic daily grievances with political and electoral process. Long-term planning is needed and should involve a number of elements including school curricula and public outreach focusing on civil engagement and citizenship.

address underlying political and economic exclusion: Ongoing violence in Yemen is a symptom of the wider capture of political and economic resources. Focusing on elections without also addressing the underlying dimensions of political and economic exclusion will be counter-productive; as attested to by Yemen's current unrest.

reform security and justice services: These should be made accountable and responsive to communities' priorities, including those of excluded and marginalised groups.

consider carefully how military support to the state will be used: The UK should ensure that it is not supporting security apparatus which threatens the security of Yemen's own citizens.

encourage Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States to support non-violent solutions to political unrest: The UK should use the Friends of Yemen process to put pressure on Yemen's neighbours to refrain from supporting the violent oppression of protesters, and instead support sustainable, peaceful solutions.

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