

27 March 2014

## Yemen's 'Steady' Political Transition?

With broad external support behind it, is Yemen's reform-minded government inching the country towards greater unity and security? Not according to Casey Coombs. In his view, the country continues to be buffeted by self-interested sheikhs, tribes and political elites.

By Casey L. Coombs for ISN

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Although Yemen took inspiration from the Arab Spring uprisings, the course of its subsequent political transition stands apart from those experienced by Tunisia and Egypt. Among its Arab world counterparts, Yemen is the only state to end its unrest with a negotiated settlement and transition agreement facilitated under the auspices of the international community.

"In contrast to what's happening in Syria," according to U.N. Secretary-General Special Advisor on Yemen, Jamal Benomar, "where the latest big headline is that they agreed to be in the same room for the first time, here in Yemen the transition has moved forward."

Broad-based international support, including billions of dollars of humanitarian and development aid, has given interim President Abd Rabu Mansur Hadi the legitimacy and capacity to carry out the bevy of reforms and confidence-building measures outlined in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) political accord, which secured the resignation of longtime President Ali Abdullah Saleh autumn 2011. But all is not as it seems in one of the Middle East's least developed countries.

Successes?

Despite a series of highly-publicized successes, most notably the conclusion of 10 months of National Dialogue talks that produced the framework of a new social contract with the state, the transition process has been far from flawless. President Hadi's [remarks](#) at the closing ceremony of the Dialogue summed up the ongoing tensions since he took office in February 2012:

"I did not take over a nation. I took over a capital where gunshots are continuous day and night, where roadblocks fill the streets. I took over an empty bank that has no wages and a divided security apparatus and army," he told a roomful of delegates representing Yemen's diverse political theater and civil society.

"The National Dialogue [outcome] document is the beginning of the road to build a new Yemen," he added, highlighting the transition's simultaneous potential for success and failure.

Benomar similarly cast the milestone achievement as a qualified success during a [closed-door briefing](#)

before the 15-member U.N. Security Council. "In a nutshell, Yemenis have developed the blueprint for a new system of democratic governance, setting the country on an upward and irreversible trajectory," he told reporters after the brief. At the same time, he underscored the role of countervailing forces: "Elements of the former regime continue to manoeuvre to obstruct, frustrate and undermine the course of change, aiming to set back and bring down the transition...constitut[ing] a genuine threat that could plunge the country into chaos if the threat is not removed soon."

On that basis, the Council acted preemptively to address those challenges that it determined to be "a threat to international peace and security in the region," by unanimously adopting resolution 2140 in late February. This established a sanctions regime and panel of experts tasked with identifying spoilers and handing down appropriate punitive measures.

As with other aspects of Yemen's political transition, the jury is out on whether this initiative will make a substantive contribution to the country's political stability. In general, many observers are positive about the country's situation relative to its Arab Spring counterparts. Compared to the crises in Egypt, Libya and Syria, for example, the relatively orderly restructuring of Yemen's ossified authoritarian government does not look so bad. Indeed, international stakeholders have tended to focus more on these macro-level, "big picture" considerations, arguing that the situation could have been much worse had outside actors not intervened.

Critics see things differently. Fernando Carvajal, an expert on Yemeni politics at the University of Exeter, worries about the potential consequences of overlooking low-level conflicts and fringe movements. "It seems no one is worried about credibility. The issue seems to be simply, 'let's meet the milestones and claim success,'" he said. "Ceremonies are just distracting the media from reality across the country," he added. "Low coverage simply focuses at the top, on the president, the embassies and Benomar; not events at the periphery."

Examples of this include a bloody battle between hardline separatists and state forces in the southern Hiraki stronghold of Al Dhale since December. The violence has forced humanitarian groups based there to temporarily cease operations and has prevented a U.N. Human Rights team from investigating allegations of the disproportionate use of force by the military. Further east in Hadramawt Province, an alliance of local tribes has overpowered state troops from strategic towns and roads in oil-rich areas of the province, after Yemeni soldiers mistakenly shot dead a prominent tribal leader and initially labelled him a member of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

"Yemen as you see it today is not ruled by democracy," according to Khaled Al Ghomery, a civil servant in Sanaa. "It's still ruled by sheikhs, by tribes and elites fighting for their own interests, not the interests of the state or the people," he told ISN.

Indeed, the unified Republic of Yemen is experiencing some of the worst episodes of violence since the 1994 civil war that almost unraveled a unity pact between the former North and South Yemeni polities four years earlier.

"I think if Abd Rabu [President Hadi] continues in the current direction and manages to balance competing powers - like the northern sheikhs, Al Houthi, and Hirak - things will cool down. But if he favors any one party, it will be very bad," Ghomery said.

## Slow Going

Hadi has approached the dismantling of the former regime with painstaking caution in order to avoid upsetting a delicate balance of power centered on ex-President Saleh and Major General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar. This is especially important bearing in mind that Mohsen, long considered the second most

powerful man in Yemen, defected from Saleh's regime at the onset of 2011 protests and took half of the army with him.

"Balance is the key," argues a local political analyst. "If that balance is maintained and not upset on any side, then we will be fine. If it is upset in any way, then we could have problems." Indeed, the analyst attributes the manageable levels of retaliatory violence during the restructuring process to Hadi's alliance with the international community. "We've been fortunate that we have a coalition of forces, both domestic and international, that are in support of the transition. I think that the strength of that coalition is clearly more than any of these individual actors can handle on their own."

"The ramifications will become apparent only after some time. It can go either way," he added. "The end result is not guaranteed greater stability."

Yet, despite the constant oversight of reputedly independent outside stakeholders, Ghomery suspects that back room deals play a significant role in the democracy project. His suspicions are widely shared among the population at large. According to Ali Al Bokhaiti, National Dialogue delegate and spokesman for the Houthi movement's political arm, Ansar Allah, "that's why southerners [Hirak] have been so skeptical throughout the transition process; because all they have ever seen from Sanaa are slogans and advertisements. They haven't seen any promises translated into reality."

#### Realistic Assessment

Assessments of Yemen's Arab Spring-inspired political transition have tended to focus on its relative stability compared to other transitions in the region while overlooking the nuances of the domestic context. Key personalities have been stripped from the towering heights of Yemeni political, military and commercial institutions. A recently decreed federal, power-sharing political structure will replace the exclusive centralized system of the Saleh era, and a slew of "good governance" measures have been created to hold institutions and actors to account. While these lofty initiatives are unique in that they enjoy broad-based support from the international community, they have yet to stand the test of time. Like all of the Arab Spring political transitions unfolding since 2011, Yemen's remains in the preliminary phases of tackling systemic problems that will likely take generations to remedy.

As Harvard researchers Lant Pritchett and Frauke de Weijer observe in their 2010 paper on fragile states undergoing transitions much like Yemen's, "it is much easier to create an organization that looks like a police force—with all the de jure forms, organizational charts, ranks, uniforms, buildings, weapons—than it is to create an organization with the de facto function of enforcing the law."

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Casey L. Coombs is a freelance journalist currently based in Sanaa, Yemen. You can follow him on Twitter at [@Maccoombs](#).

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ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland