Yemen’s Arab Spring – Democratic Opening or Regime Maintenance?

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Abstract

Yemen’s revolt of 2011, like its counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt, raises many questions about recent analysis of authoritarianism in the Arab world. The long-standing regime of Ali Abdullah al-Salih and his General People’s Congress (GPC) party seemed to represent a classic case of authoritarian upgrading. The surprisingly open political system in Yemen, which followed the emergence of the new state in 1990, masked the extent to which the president exerted control through a network of informal alliances and, in recent years, external support and patronage. The widespread and persistent protests against the regime which led ultimately to a handover of power to Salih’s vice-president and the formation of a government of national unity between the GPC and the opposition, seem to constitute yet another set of challenges to the theses of authoritarian upgrading and Arab hostility to democracy. However, the narrative of popular protest leading to the demise of a reviled authoritarian regime received a setback as the Yemeni situation developed. The protest movement, which emerged, in the first instance, from outside established centres of political activity, was quickly overtaken and marginalized both by the established parties of opposition and by tribal actors. While the exit from office of al-Salih represents a major rupture in Yemeni political life, the future is best read in terms of the reassertion of pre-existing political dynamics, both domestic and international rather than in hopeful but unfounded expectations of democratic transformation.

Introduction

On the 23 November 2011, at a ceremony in Riyadh, president Ali Abdullah al-Salih of Yemen finally signed a deal brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council under the terms of which he would transfer
power to his vice-president, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi. The deal led to the formation of a new government of national unity in which power was shared between the dominant General People’s Congress (GPC) and the opposition coalition, Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), which brings together six Yemeni political parties, the most significant of which are the Islamist Islah party and the Yemeni Socialist Party. The transfer of power represented the culmination of almost a year of protests and seemed to presage the departure from office of another Arab president, after Bin Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, and Gaddafi in Libya, in the space of less than a year as the ‘Arab Spring’ claimed a fourth victim.

Section One: Making sense of the the Arab Revolts of 2011

The events of 2011 in the Arab world have so far defied analysis. However, one conclusion is already apparent. The political turmoil in the region poses a deep challenge to the ways in which Arab political dynamics have been understood in recent decades. In particular, as the authors of the Introduction to this special issue have pointed out, the theme of authoritarian persistence which has been so prominent in recent scholarship on the Middle East appears, on the face of it, to be significantly undermined. Likewise, the thesis of Arab exceptionalism – the argument that the Arab world is inherently or culturally antipathetic to democracy is open to serious critique in the face of recent events. And, as Michael Hudson has pointed out, stereotypes of Arab passivity in the face of strong leadership, the durability of US hegemony and the stability of the regional balance of power all come under scrutiny in the light of the region-wide protests, dramatic upheavals and regime changes that have taken place (Hudson, 2011).

But, while these events challenge established themes in recent scholarship on the region, substituting one set of misleading insights for another will bring no clarity to our understanding of what is going on. However, a number of potentially misleading or overstated themes have already emerged in recent commentary. In the first place, despite repeated reference to 2011 as the Arab 1989, this is simply not the case. There are two major reasons for this which have to do with international and the domestic contexts respectively. As Robert Springborg has observed, the international context in which the Arab revolts have taken place is significantly different from that of 1989. In 1989, the broader context was highly favourable to the successful outcome of democratic revolutions in the former Soviet satellite states, characterised as it was by the expansion of the Western security umbrella, promised membership of the EU and support for changes required to achieve that, together with a region wide, near consensus on the desirability of democracy and market-based economies. None of this applies to the Arab world in 2011. American and European security concerns, including access to oil, control of immigration, combating terrorism, and a regional balance of power, remain in place. At the domestic level, the political and economic capacities of Arab states today are very different from those of
central and eastern Europe in 1989 with higher unemployment rates, lower levels of industrial and human resource development, much less diverse exports and greater levels of dependence on foreign assistance than was the case in the former Soviet bloc. Indeed, the focus on the political character of the revolts has tended to obscure the very significant extent to which they emerged from economic grievance (Springborg, 2011: 5-6).

Secondly, democratic outcomes are far from inevitable. The international context is also critical to the question of the likelihood of democratic outcomes following the revolts of 2011, although by no means the only significant factor. Schwedler et al argue that the United States has no appetite for letting the people of the region have autonomy in determining the direction of their futures ‘particularly if participatory elections mean upsetting the economic cart or messing with the balance of diplomatic relations’ (Schwedler et al). This is a theme taken up by Springborg who contrasts the lack of significant strategic Western interests in Tunisia, which make a democratic outcome more likely in that country, with the case of Egypt, where a range of issues have the opposite effect (Springborg, 2011).

Thirdly, from the beginnings of the revolts, commentators have noted the marginal involvement of Islamist actors and movements and, in its place, the far greater significance of near-spontaneous groups of young, previously apolitical, young people. While this is undoubtedly true, it has become increasingly clear that in any democratic opening in the Arab world, Islamist actors will play a very significant role.

Finally, the question arises as to the extent to which what is happening across the region is, in Hudson’s phrase ‘monolithic’ (Hudson, 2011). As Lisa Anderson has noted, the profound differences between the uprisings are not always apparent. The timing of the revolts, sudden and almost simultaneous, seemed to suggest that the similarities shared – aging leaders, corrupt and ineffectual government, and an educated, unemployed and disaffected young population – were sufficient to explain them (2011:3). The very term ‘Arab Spring’ assumes the emergence of a unitary phenomenon across something called the ‘Arab world’. It is clear that the contagion or demonstration effect has been enormously significant in all that has happened. What transpired in Egypt could not have taken place without the departure of Bin Ali in Tunisia. The rather limited protest movement of early Spring 2011 in Sana’a was hugely revitalized by the protests in Tahrir Square in Cairo and, in particular, by the resignation of Mubarak. Nonetheless, each of these movements can only be understood, and their likely outcomes imagined, if we look closely at their individual contexts.

Section Two: The Yemeni Protest Movement of 2011
Origins and spread of protest movement

Political instability in Yemen prior to 2011 was nothing new. The constitution of the modern state of Yemen which came into existence following the unification in 1990 of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) formally inaugurated a multiparty political system with guaranteed voting and candidacy rights to all Yemeni citizens, equality before the law and the independence of the judiciary. In reality, Yemen, the poorest country in the Arab world, has been ruled over by the dominant figure of Ali Abdullah al-Saleh, head of the ruling General People’s Congress (GPC) since unification in 1990. Despite the existence of opposition parties and a lively civil society sector, no real challenge to the entrenched power of the regime issued either from established political parties or the non-governmental sector.

The country has been beset by a series of seemingly intractable problems in recent years. Yemen has a population of 24 million spread over approximately 135,000 villages and communities. It has one of the highest rates of population growth in the world at around three percent per annum. According to some estimates the total population could reach 60 million by 2050, if current rates of growth continue. Unemployment is estimated at 40% and 43% of the population live below the poverty line. The gender gap is growing: literacy rates for women are 29% compared with 69% for men. More than 50% of girls do not complete primary school as compared with 18% for boys. Adding to the crises facing the country is the depletion of both oil and water resources. Oil reserves, on which the regime is overwhelmingly dependent to maintain patronage networks, subsidies and the payment of civil service salaries, are rapidly dwindling and could run out within a decade. Meanwhile, the country’s groundwater reserves are also facing depletion with some suggesting that Sanaa could become the first capital city in the world to run out of water (Durac, 2010: 649-50; Fattah, 2011: 80).

In the north the Houthi movement has been engaged in on-off conflict with the regime since 2004. In the south the Hirak movement, seeking redress for the marginalisation of the southern governorates that comprised the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen prior to 1990, has been moving ever closer to a secessionist stance in the face of regime hostility to its demands. Elsewhere, the perceived threat of radical Islamism in the form of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has drawn the concerted attention of the United States, Saudi Arabia and the Saleh government. In the midst of this, the apparent intention of the president to oversee an amendment to the constitution which would keep him in office until such time as his son, Ahmed, could succeed him, provoked widespread discontent in 2010. Against this backdrop, the emergence of a protest movement in Yemen in 2011 might have seemed somewhat unsurprising. However, while widespread in the past, protests had almost always been orchestrated by the political elite.

On January 15 2011, the day after Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali stepped down as president of Tunisia, several dozen student, civil society and opposition activists attended a rally in Sana’a. The protests
were given significant momentum following the resignation of Hosni Mubarak in February as hundreds of activists gathered in front of the university and thousands of others took to the streets elsewhere in the country calling for similar change in Yemen (ICGa, 2011: 3). The regime preemptively occupied Sanaa’s Tahrir Square which was filled with pro-regime supporters. In response, anti-regime protesters occupied a crossroads outside the university and renamed it Taghir (Change) Square which became the centre of the Yemeni protest movement (Fatteh, 2011:81). At its peak, the protest camp in Sanaa covered approximately one square mile and housed around 10,000 people. However, similar protests took place in other Yemeni cities, especially Taiz, Aden and al-Mukalla. In Taiz, thousands gathered after the fall of Mubarak, setting up tents in a central area of the city which was renamed Hurriyah (Freedom Square). The protesters in Taiz sought to distance themselves from the political parties which were seen as branches of a corrupt political system in need of radical change (Gordon, 2012).

Similarly, according to Nevens, around half of the residents of the camp in Sanaa represented Yemen’s youth movement, a grouping of young, prodemocracy activists who see themselves as unaffiliated to any traditional political alliance (Nevens, 2011: 26). By March, this movement had formed an umbrella grouping - the Civil Coalition of Revolutionary Youth – which brought together Yemen’s four main youth organisations, the Alliance for the Youth’s Revolution; the Alliance of the People’s Youth Revolution; the Alliance of Youth and Students for a Peaceful Revolution; and the Coalition of Change Leaders (France 24, 2011). On March 23, the Civil Coalition released a list of its demands: the immediate dismantling of the regime, the arrest of those involved in fraud or corruption, the drafting of a constitution to transform the political system from presidential to parliamentary, a decentralized government and full transparency. The overall vision of the protesters was:

‘to lay the ground for a civic, modern and democratic state which can interact with the realities of the modern world on the basis of equal citizenship, human rights, social justice, a plural political system, [and] the freedom of expression and opinion’ (Nevens, 2011: 26).

The initial reaction of established political actors to the protests was one of caution. Initially, the opposition coalition, the Joint Meeting Parties, stayed on the sidelines. However, by February 20, it announced that it could not accept dialogue with the ruling party while the regime was engaged in attacks on the protesters and called on its supporters to join the protests (ICGa, 2011: 3).

The protesters were also supported by the Houthi movement in the north of Yemen and by the Hirak movement in the south of the country. The Houthi rebellion began in the Saada province in 2004 when anti-government demonstrations and disturbances by members of the Zaydi Believing Youth (Shabab al-Mumin) movement spread to Sanaa with protesters criticizing the regime for its cooperation with the United States in counterterrorism. When the government tried to arrest the leader
of the movement, Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, fighting broke out. Since 2004, there have been six bouts of fighting with the loss of several thousand lives (including that of al-Houthi) and very significant internal displacement of the population. There have been several ceasefires – the most recent was reached in February 2010. However, the government has done little to address the underlying causes of the violence which have been transformed from locally driven concerns at marginalization and economic underdevelopment to widespread anger and dissatisfaction with the Salih regime (Boucek, 2010: 1-10). On the same day, that the JMP rejected dialogue with the government, a spokesperson for the Houthis announced cooperation with the protesters in the organisation of protests in a number of Yemeni governorates.

The initial phases of the protest movement also saw cooperation between protesters in the north and the south of the country. While the protests that broke out in early 2011 have commanded international attention, southern Yemen has witnessed regular demonstrations against the Salih regime since 2007. The Southern Movement (al-Hirak) began as a group of military officers, forced into early retirement after the 1994 civil war, started to hold weekly sit-ins in towns and cities in the south to demand better treatment from the regime in Sanaa. However, protests grew rapidly and by December 2007, hundreds of thousands of people attended the burial ceremony of four men killed by security forces in October of that year (Day, 2010: 8-9). The southern governorates contain only a fifth of Yemen’s population but generate most of the country’s wealth and there is widespread grievance at the region’s economic underdevelopment and political marginalization. The governors of all seven southern provinces come from the north (Finn, 2011). As the Hirak spread, its demands became increasingly radicalised with some calling for secession and independence. When the disturbances of early 2011 broke out, Hirak members agreed to work with protesters in the north to bring about an end to the Salih regime. They agreed that calls for southern independence would weaken the prospects for achieving this goal and engaged in ‘a flurry of communication, coordination and cooperation’ (ICG, 2011b: 11).

Regime responses

From the beginning the regime adopted a number of strategies in reaction to the protests. Activists and protesters were harassed, arrested and beaten. On January 23, security personnel arrested Tawwakul Karman and eighteen other activists, prompting a further round of protests in Sanaa and Taiz which led to their release. As well as attacks on the demonstrators, Saleh announced a number of economic concessions. These included pay raises and free food and gas for the military and security forces, salary increases for the lowest paid civil servants, the reduction of income tax by half, the introduction of new subsidies and price controls, and an extension of social welfare assistance to half a million families (Boucek and Revkin, 2011: 2). However, regime violence continued against the protesters. On February 25, a 17 year old protester was shot and killed by police in Aden. This was followed by a
dramatic escalation in the level of regime repression on March 18, when government supporters fired from rooftops near Sanaa university on thousands of demonstrators leaving Friday prayers, killing at least 30 people (Boucek and Revkin, 2011: 3). These attacks had a dramatic impact on the course of the protest movement. In the first instance, the opposition announced that dialogue with the government was now impossible. Secondly, the attacks were followed by mass defections from the ruling party. Around 20 MPs and approximately half the country’s ambassadors resigned. The most significant development was the defection of one of the leading military figures in the country, General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar. Ali Mohsen, a cousin of the president, commanded the 1st Armoured Division and was head of the North West Military Region, one of four in Yemen. He was a major player in the military campaign against the Houthi insurrection in Saada and was often described as the as the second most powerful man in the country. Ali Mohsen was also reputed to be opposed to the increased influence of Ahmed Saleh, the president’s son (and long-time presumptive successor) (Hill, 2011b: 3). Ali Mohsen’s defection provided the protesters in Sanaa with protection as he ringed Change Square with his soldiers and promised to protect them from the regime.

The next challenge to the president came when members of the Al-Ahmar family withdrew their support. From independence until his death in 2007, Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, paramount chief of the Hashid tribal confederation, to which the president’s own Sanhan tribe belonged, was key ally of the president. On his death, his sons occupied key roles in Yemeni public life. Sadiq, the eldest, took over from his father as chief of the Hashid. Another son, Himyar, was a member of the ruling party and the deputy speaker of parliament. Hamid, a member of the Islamist opposition party, Islah, which was founded by his father, is a billionaire with interests in a cell phone network, Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises and media outlets (Taylor, 2011). In May, Salih’s Republican Guards attacked Sadiq al-Ahmar’s compound in Sanaa. Salih had accused Al-Ahmar of orchestrating and funding the youth protests. Over 100 people were killed in the course of a week of fighting. The clashes added the leadership of the Hashid tribal confederation to the list of those opposed to the regime and transformed what had been a largely peaceful youth-led uprising into a power struggle between rival elites (Fattah, 2011).

The GCC Intervention

The increased levels of violence and the destabilising potential of splits within the regime attracted close regional international attention and pressure on Salih to negotiate with opposition forces. By April, Salih agreed to a deal put together by the Gulf Cooperation Council but repeated failed to sign. In June, the bombing of the presidential palace caused serious injuries to the president and
several senior government officials. Salih departed to Saudi Arabia for treatment. However, despite expectations that this might lead to his departure from power, Salih continued to resist doing so and returned to Yemen in September amidst widespread violence and loss of life in the streets of Sanaa. Finally, on November 23 2011, Salih signed the GCC deal in Riyadh. Under the terms of the deal, Salih would remain president until fresh presidential elections were held in February 2012. He and his family were granted immunity from prosecution and he retained his role as head of the GPC. His executive powers were transferred to the vice-president. In early December, as envisaged by the deal, Muhammad Basindwa of the JMP was selected as Prime Minister and a national unity government of ministers evenly split between the GPC and the JMP took office. Shortly afterwards, the GPC and the JMP agreed that the vice-president should be the only candidate in the presidential elections scheduled for 2012.

Section Three: Making Sense of Yemeni Political Dynamics

On the face of it the GPC deal can be read as the end of the dominance of Yemeni political life by Ali Abdullah al-Salih and the GPC. Indeed, the deal reinforces the central role played by the political parties that have emerged since the unification of the country in 1990. However, while an understanding of their role is crucial to an understanding of political dynamics in Yemen, a range of other actors and factors must also be taken into account. Indeed, the defining characteristic of Yemeni politics is the near-impossibility of separating apparently disparate actors into discrete camps. As Hill observes, analyzing the current political transition in Yemen though the interests of ‘government’ and ‘opposition’ parties does not explain political dynamics since neither the GPC nor the opposition JMP represents the real distribution of power. The ruling party contains outspoken critics of the regime while Salih cultivated loyal factions within the JMP (Hill, 2011b:2). Moreover, formal politics in Yemen is further complicated by the significant, if frequently overestimated, role played by tribalism which can cut across party political lines in apparently unexpected ways. In turn the events of 2011 cannot be fully understood without reference both to the Houthi movement in the north and to the Hirak in the south. Finally, reference to domestic actors alone risks neglect of the key influences of outside forces. While the impact of the intervention of the GCC is clear in the deal finally signed in November, the most significant external force in Yemeni political life is, without doubt, Saudi Arabia. However, in recent years the policy and interventions of the United States in Yemen have also assumed critical proportions. Any nuanced assessment of Yemeni political dynamics and any critical assessment of their likely future direction must somehow take all of these interweaving forces into account.

Domestic Actors and Factors
The unification, in 1990, of the Yemen Arab Republic and the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen which brought the modern Republic of Yemen into being saw the creation of a multiparty political system that was remarkably plural by the standards of the Gulf. Despite the short-lived civil war between northern and southern forces, this plural political system has survived. While political life since 1990 has been dominated by the GPC, other significant political parties have emerged. Thus, Yemen has witnessed a degree of genuine political pluralism which was unusual for the Arab world prior to 2011. While political parties are marginal to the concerns of many Yemenis, the biggest parties, the GPC, Islah and the Yemeni Socialist Party have real support bases in the country.

The GPC

At the heart of the Yemeni political system is the GPC which was established in 1982 in the pre-unification Yemen Arab Republic partly as a vehicle for the ‘personalistic system’ of the president and partly to undermine the increasing political power of local development associations that emerged in the north in the 1970s. (Phillips, 2011a: 116). The party is largely devoid of any unifying ideology. Its role is to serve as an instrument of regime survival and patronage. This lack of ideology is reflected in its diverse membership which includes tribal sheikhs, urban-based ‘modernist’ figures, ‘independents’ leftists, Arab nationalists and Islamists (USAID, 2004: 21). However, at the core of the regime in Yemen are family members and members of the elite of the Sanhan tribe to which Salih belongs. Phillips estimates this inner core at no more than 50 or 60 people in total, some of whose members control the country’s most sensitive military positions, including those responsible for counterterrorism operations involving close cooperation with the United States (Phillips, 2011b). For instance, the president’s son Ahmed is commander of the Republican Guards. Saleh’s three nephews also hold senior positions in the military and intelligence services. One, Colonel Amar Saleh is deputy chief of the National Security Bureau (NSB), an intelligence agency formed in 2002 designed to work in closer cooperation with foreign governments. Another, Yahya Mohammed Abdullah Saleh, is chief of staff of the Central Security Organization (CSO), a division of the Ministry of the Interior which maintains an elite U.S.-trained Counter-Terrorism Unit (CTU). Tariq Saleh is head of the Presidential Guard, the Yemeni equivalent of the U.S. Secret Service. Finally, the president’s half-brother, Ali Saleh al Ahmar, is commander of the Air Force (Sharp, 2011:8).

The Joint Meeting Parties

The main opposition bloc in Yemen (and now, partner in the national unity government of December 2011) is known as the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP). The JMP, is an unlikely coalition of a number of opposition parties, the most significant being the Islamist Islah party and the Yemeni Socialist Party, the former ruling party of the PDRY. That this alliance of parties with highly divergent ideological platforms has survived since its initial formation in 2002 has surprised many observers. The JMP
came about for a number of reasons. In the period since the civil war both of the major opposition parties moved towards the political centre and began to employ the language of democracy. However, there was an instrumental motivation for the formation of the coalition also. Both parties feared the increased dominance of the GPC and hoped that a limited alliance of opposition forces would provide some defence against this (Durac, 2011: 354-5). However, as Phillips points out, the real criterion for membership of the JMP is simply not being a member of the GPC and the lack of underlying ideological coherence continues to be a challenge for the coalition (Phillips, 2011a:110).

The Islamist Islah party is the largest in the JMP. However, Islah is itself also a coalition of somewhat disparate forces. The party’s origins lie in a distinctly Islamist faction in the GPC, prior to unification which was heavily influenced by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The party was established in 1990 as a combination of tribal forces, Muslim Brothers, Salafis and businessmen who shared social conservatism and opposition to the terms of a secular, republican state (Yadav, 2010: 207-8). As Longley points out, these four groups often overlap but, nonetheless different tendencies coexist within the party. The Muslim Brotherhood is the ‘ideological core’ of the party (Longley: 2007: 253). The tribal elements in the party tied it to the regime’s patronage networks. The links between Islah and the GPC were exemplified in the relationship between its leader, Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar and the president. Al-Ahmar was not only the leading figure in the Hashid tribal confederation to which Salih’s Sanhan tribe belonged but was elected Speaker of parliament for three successive terms. Under his leadership, elements in Islah fought with the GPC against the YSP in the 1994 civil war and the party entered into government with the GPC from 1993 to 1997. So close have tribal ties been Yadav suggests that it has often been difficult to tell precisely how distinct Islah has been from the ruling regime post unification (Yadav, 2010: 208).

The Yemeni Socialist Party, although having much lower levels of representation in parliament than Islah (8 seats as compared to 46) nonetheless has greater weight within the JMP than this might suggest, not least because it continues to attract support in the south of the country. Its origins lie in the communist movement in British-ruled South Aden in the late 1960s. It became the ruling (and only legal) party when the PDRY was established following British withdrawal in 1969. After unification with the YAR, and especially after the 1994 civil war, the party moved away from its socialist principles towards more pluralistic politics. The party continues to have strengths in national politics. It is Yemen’s only party of the left and its secular ideology retains appeal for some intellectuals and women; it has some historical legitimacy as the party of the south and has done much to transform itself into a liberal and democratic party (Ishiyama, 2005: 18-19). As the only other major party in Yemen, it is a logical partner for Islah. Without it, as Phillips notes, the JMP would be little more than a vehicle for the Islamist party (2011a: 107).

**External Actors and Factors**
Domestic political dynamics alone cannot explain the trajectory of Yemeni political life. For decades, Saudi Arabia with which it shares an extensive border has played a major and extremely intrusive role in Yemeni politics while the influence of the United States has become increasingly significant.

**Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabian policy on Yemen has historically been driven by a number of factors. In the first instance, the shared 1800 km long border between the two countries is cause for concern. The exact line of the border has been a subject of dispute and was finally demarcated only as recently as June 2000 when Yemen formally accepted Saudi sovereignty over the southern provinces of ‘Asir, Najran and Jizan which had briefly belonged to the Yemen of the Imamate. The Saudis, in turn, abandoned any ambition to expand their territory through Hadhramawt to the Red Sea. Despite the resolution of the border issue, the Saudis continue to fear  

‘creeping contamination by Yemeni arms, qat and drug smugglers, economic migrants, child traffickers and Africans gravitating towards the richest country on the peninsula in search of work’ (Clark, 2010: 215).

There are fears also that many Yemenis had never been reconciled to the loss of the three provinces to Saudi Arabia. The Saudis have also been alarmed by the course of political development in Yemen since unification in 1990. The experiment in political liberalization in their near neighbour with elections, competitive parties and a relatively free media alarmed the authoritarian government of Saudi Arabia ((Okruhlik and Conge, 1997: 561). The Saudis are also concerned both by the Houthi movement in the north and asserted linkages between the Houthis, Iran and al-Qaeda. The Zaydi (hence Shiite) background to the Houthi movement underpins Saudi concerns. In an analysis offered by Zuhair al-Harithi, a member of the Shura Council in Saudi Arabia, the Houthi movement has become a threat to regional security because of its sponsorship by Iran and links with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) (al-Harithi, 2010). Both claims are dismissed as far-fetched by most commentators. Much of the argument for links with AQAP stem from the defection to the southern camp of Sheikh Tariq al-Fadhil in 2009. Al-Fadhil was formerly a central figure in the Salih regime, and, more significantly, fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s. However, as Day points out, many key northern figures have similar links to religious extremism (Day, 2010: 9-10). The link between the Houthis and Iran seems equally tenuous with little evidence of any Iranian involvement in the conflict. Indeed, Hill and Nonneman suggest that the Saudi Special Office for Yemen Affairs noted to their US counterparts that the regime was exaggerating any such involvement to them (Hill and Nonneman, 2011: 18).

Real or imagined, Saudi concerns have prompted significant involvement in Yemeni affairs going back decades. The Saudis have historically tried to keep central government in Yemen weak and its
political actors divided. To do this, they have cultivated relationships with political leaders in government as well as tribal leaders in both the Hashid and Bakil tribal confederations, through an extensive patronage network (Haykel, 2011; Fattah, 2011).

The United States

The US focus on Yemen as a potential security threat crystallised following the attack by al-Qaeda on the USS Cole in Aden harbour in the year 2000 which killed 17 people. Prior to that, the US had a minimal presence in the country although al-Qaeda linked militants had been operating in the country for the previous decade. US concerns deepened after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Relations between the two countries improved in the context of the so-called war on terror. The US worked closely with president Salih’s son, Ahmad and three of his cousins, who control Yemen’s elite security and intelligence units. These were created, funded and trained with western help after the attack on the USS Cole (Hill, 2011c). However, Yemeni reluctance to act decisively against individuals suspected by the US of involvement with al-Qaeda continued to bedevil relations. In August 2009, there was an attempt by AQAP on the life of the Saudi Minister of Interior for Security Affairs, Prince Muhammad bin Nayef. This was followed by an attempted airline bombing over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009. These events coincided with the initiation by the Obama administration of a review of US policy towards Yemen which resulted in the National Security Council’s Yemen Strategic Plan (Sharp, 2011: 10). This strategy has three elements: combating AQAP in the short term, increasing development aid to meet long term challenges, and marshalling international support to stabilize the country. In January 2010, General David Petraeus visited Yemen and announced the intention to double security aid to the country. This was followed by a series of targeted airstrikes with the objective of ‘decapitating’ AQAP (Harris, 2010: 2). Senior US figures stress its commitment to strengthening the country’s capacity to provide basic services and good governance. The US Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Daniel Benjamin notes that, excluding counterterrorism funding, US development and security assistance increased from $17.2 million in 2008 to $40.3 million in 2009 (Benjamin, 2010). Nonetheless, counterterrorism remains the major US priority in Yemen as is clear from the allocation of $75 million in aid to equip the Yemeni Ministry of Interior Counterterrorism Forces to operate against AQAP (Sharp, 2011: 12). However, the ‘increasingly alarmist’ claims about the nature of the threat posed by AQAP have been disputed by some. Harris points out that estimates of the size of the group in Yemen vary from 300 to 500 to as many as several thousands. He concludes that the lower figure may represent active cadres within the organization while the higher figure may include supportive elements. This more sober appraisal of the strength of AQAP in Yemen is supported by a detailed study of Yemen’s eastern provinces conducted over a 12 month period by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. The study Report cites AQAP’s ‘inability to build popular support’ and notes that it suffers from ‘a dearth of local partners as well’. There was no ‘readily apparent political party, military faction or civil society
organization’ that seemed willing to facilitate AQAP outreach to tribes. Nor did the organization have a clear relationship with any of the remaining fighters from militant Islamist groups such as Islamic Jihad in Yemen or the Army of Aden Abyan. Those that have emerged to facilitate its tribal engagement appear to have done so on an individual or familiar basis rather than through formalized means of collective protection (Koehler-Derick, 2011: 140)

The report also makes the provocative claim that putting pressure on the government in Sanaa to address economic deprivation and other ‘drivers of instability’ may not be an appropriate tool for counterterrorism, even if more than justified for other reasons (e.g. to slow state collapse). This is because AQAP’s capabilities to attack the West ‘have not relied on large numbers of disaffected Yemenis’. In other words, the report questions whether a correlation exists between economic deprivation and terrorism in this case (Koehler-Derick, 149-50).

Section Three: The Marginalisation of the Youth Movement (or the Triumph of the old Elites?)

By the end of 2011, the protest movement had succeeded in removing Ali Abdullah al-Salih from office and had effectively ended the hopes of his son, Ahmad, to succeed to the presidency. Despite these achievements, which most observers would have deemed unimaginable at any time in the recent past, the deal which seemed to end Salih’s grip on power effectively marginalised those who had launched the movement against him. The vast majority of the protesters rejected the terms of the deal between the GPC and the JMP as merely the continuation of the old politics in Yemen. For them, the GCC deal was flawed from the outset, neither the youth nor any other disenfranchised group in Yemen (such as the Houthi rebels or the southern movement) were involved in negotiations or in the design of the transition plan. It is perceived as an inter-elite deal in which the international community are supporting a transfer of power within current elites rather than a more fundamental change to state-society relations (Nevens, 2011). Nonetheless, the confluence of the most power political actors, formal and informal, domestic and international ensured that the GCC deal was the only route to transition from GPC dominance that was up for discussion.

The Youth Movement’s rejection of the GCC deal stems from their long-stated distrust of the established political actors. The involvement in the protest movement first of General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, then of the sons of Abdullah al-Ahmar, and finally of the Islah party and the JMP were greeted with deep distrust by the Youth Movement. The old parties are seen as part of the system which needs to be transformed and an elite transfer of power (or power-sharing arrangement) is not seen to constitute a radical shift in Yemeni political dynamics.

However, the entrenched strength of the established political actors combined with the lack of political experience on the part of the youth protesters ensured their marginalisation from the international negotiations at which the GCC deal was pieced together. Apart from lack of political
experience, the Youth Movement in Yemen is less monolithic than might seem to be the case. Al-Akhali describes three different categories of activist: non-political youth – disinterested in taking an active role in the political process in the post-revolutionary period; youth aligned to existing political parties who intend to return to them in the post-revolutionary period in the hope of changing them from within; and independent youth who believe the only way to sustain the movement is to become part of the political process (Al-Akhali, 2011).

Divisions within the Youth Movement are compounded by other divisions within the broader opposition to Salih and the GPC. The ICG notes the absence of a unified voice in the Hirak movement which makes discerning a single set of demands on the part of the southern movement problematic (ICG, 2011b). Furthermore, the outbreak of fighting between Houthi forces and members of the Islah party similarly speaks to significant divisions within the opposition.

The divisions among and political inexperience of the Youth Movement created space for established actors to engage with Saudi Arabia, the GCC and the US to promote a resolution of the situation that suited their interests. Nobel laureate, Tawwakul Karman argues that the US and Saudi Arabia have used their power to ensure ‘that members of the old regime remain in power and the status quo is maintained. American counterterrorism agencies and the Saudi government have a firm grip on Yemen at the moment. It is they, not the Yemeni people and their constitutional institutions, that control the country’ (Karman, 2011).

Conclusions

The case of Yemen offers a number of insights into broader Arab political dynamics. In the first place, the Yemeni revolt shares a good deal with those in other Arab countries in terms of origins, motivations and dynamics. As elsewhere, the revolt emerged from outside established centres of political organisation and activity and was led by young people who saw themselves for the most part as acting outside of the political mainstream. The revolt was a response to widespread socioeconomic distress and high levels of poverty and unemployment. As was the case, elsewhere in the Arab world, the fundamental characteristic of the protests was their peaceful and inclusive nature. Finally, the Yemeni case confirms the importance of the use of social media in new forms of political mobilisation in the region. Even in the poorest country in the Arab world with the lowest levels of internet penetration, the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter was significant, if too easily exaggerated. 
The Yemeni case also confirms the challenge to some of the received wisdom concerning Arab political dynamics. The widespread popularity of calls for the reform of the political system, greater accountability and transparency constitute a rebuttal of the argument that Arab culture is inherently hostile to democratic norms, although in the Yemeni case, as elsewhere in the Arab and Muslim world, what form democracy might take is not readily apparent.

However, Yemen also offers a partial contrast to other Arab states in terms of the potential role of Islamists in its future governance. Unlike Tunisia, Egypt or Libya, Islamist political actors have played a significant role in political life since the modern state of Yemen was formed in 1990. The Islah party was in power with the ruling GPC from 1993 until its defeat in elections in 1997. Indeed, some commentators have attributed that defeat to the party’s inability to function effectively in government or to escape its close ties with the ruling regime. Since then the party has continued to have an ambivalent relationship with the regime. Given this history, Islamism is not the repressed or untried alternative that it may seem in other contexts and there is no reason to expect that Islah would triumph in free elections in the way that Islamist parties have done in Tunisia and Egypt, for example.

Finally, the Yemeni revolt exemplifies the need to pay attention to pre-existing patterns of the distribution of political power if we are to make sense of what is happening. In the case of Yemen, the most important domestic actors, the established political parties and tribal and Islamist forces (best exemplified by the al-Ahmar family) together with the dominant external actors, Saudi Arabia and the United States share elements of a common prescription for the country as expressed in the GCC deal. This is focused on continuity rather than revolutionary change. While the precise details of the new political settlement remain to be worked out it is clearly the desire of these domestic and international actors that their key interests are to be safeguarded. This runs directly counter to the maximalist demands of the Youth Movement. However, as was the case elsewhere, notably in Egypt, those who are instrumental in bringing about a change of regime leadership are not necessarily the best positioned to take advantage of subsequent political changes. The key advantages enjoyed both by the GPC and the JMP in organisational and resource terms far outweigh an opposition movement which is in any case divided on important levels. The divisions within the youth movement as well as the very specific agendas of the Hirak and the Houthis suggest that those proposing transformative change in Yemen will continue to be marginalised in the immediate future.

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Fattah (2011) notes the irony that Tahrir Sqaure in Sana’a had been constructed by Egyptians during the Yemeni Republican-Royalist civil war of the 1960s.

In the weeks that followed the end of the 1994 civil war, northern politicians, military officers, tribal sheikhs and businessmen descended on southern cities seeking to profit from the defeat of the southern forces (Day (2010): 6).

Boucek and Revkin (2011) point out that the president gave no indication of how he was going to pay for these measures.

Fattah (2011) puts the number of those killed at 52.

Hill (2011b) reports the story that in 2009 Salih’s military planners presented Saudi pilots with coordinates for a possible airstrike which the Saudis aborted when they realised the target was the location of Mohsen’s HQ. It is commonly believed that this was part of Salih’s strategy to weaken opposition to the succession of his son, Ahmad, to the presidency.


The other parties are Popular Nasserist Unity Organisation, the Union of Popular Forces and Hizb al-Haqq and the Ba’ath National Party which was initially a member of the JMP but left to support the government from 2006 until it rejoined the JMP in 2009. See Phillips, 2011a: 105.

For instance, the 1994 civil war saw Islah supporters engage in armed combat with supporters of the YSP. Prior to the civil war, the socialists were denounced in vitriolic language by certain Islah leaders, as atheistic apostates. See Browers, M. (2007). Origins and Architects of Yemen’s Joint Meeting Parties, International Journal of Middle East Studies: 565-8.

See for example, Jubran (2011) and al-Wazir (2011) on the crucial role played by social media in the organisation of protest related activities.