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*Arab Reform Briefs are Monthly analysis and insights from engaged Arab scholars or activists dealing with all key reform issues in the social, economic, political and legal domains.*

### **Yemen after the Elections: A Fragile Agreement and a Complex Situation**

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Saleh tried repeatedly to depict the Yemeni revolution as a simple disagreement that degenerated into a conflict between the former ruling party and the opposition, and it is on this premise that his regime dealt with both, the revolution and its revolutionaries. In his view, the latter are no more than a base for the opposition parties and, in the best-case scenario, an independent force that the opposition uses to channel its objectives<sup>1</sup>.

Some analysts see certain logic in the theory, since the opposition in Yemen has quite an extensive base through which it channels its influence whenever it chooses. They therefore see the Yemeni revolution as one of the links in the chain of rivalries and struggles, even if they believe that the opposition succeeded this time around in using the Arab and international situations to its advantage, and was thus able to go further than it ever did before.

On the other hand, others believe that such an analysis is unfair to the revolution and unjust towards the revolutionaries who, from the very beginning, have called for the downfall of Saleh and his regime and, in doing so, breached the boundaries set by

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.moainpress.net/news\\_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=4302](http://www.moainpress.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=4302)  
<http://www.abbabaa.org/banews/2011/09/081.htm>

**opposition party leaders at the time. These same analysts go on to say that, given the fact that different strata of the Yemeni population have had enough reason to rebel for quite some time, how would it be with the winds of revolution and change are sweeping the Arab world? In light of this, any analysis of the Yemeni revolution in isolation of the above factors would be misleading.**

Now that more than ten months have elapsed since the onset of the revolution in Yemen and start of the political settlement stage, the issue is still open and the object of unresolved debate. Saleh and his supporters are still holding on to their old theories, and the two sides still see the picture through entirely different lenses. Those who support the first theory believe that the political settlement between the former ruling party and the Yemeni Joint Meeting Parties and their allies is another proof that the crisis has been resolved strictly among the main stakeholders, leaving the revolutionaries entirely out of the loop. Not only did the settlement fail to refer to the revolution conceptually, neither were the young revolutionaries represented in it nor were their opinions taken into account, either in drafting the Agreement or the resolutions that ensued from it.

At the opposite end, supporters on the second opinion believe that, despite the effort to dispel the notion, what took place in Yemen is a confirmation that what took place was indeed a popular revolution. As proof of that, they say that the official opposition's main objective was initially to force the regime to sit with it at the negotiations table, and that it would have accepted Saleh's initiatives from the very beginning had it received Arab and international assurances that he would abide by them. They also believe that what prevented this from happening was the steadfast resistance and audacious demands of the youths holding out in the public square, and the revolution had done the rest when it removed the regime's head from power, at a time when he sought to remain in office forever.

In their opinion, the theory that the opposition was the party represented in the Agreement is

another proof of this headless revolution's popularity, whether this head was a party leader or political movement. This is what actually brought the official opposition into the fray, since it was better organisation at the political level and, consequently, better able to act as an official representative.

Regardless of the circumstances, however, the fact is that today Yemen is going through a de facto second transitional stage, a two-year period that began with the election of a compromise President of the Republic, Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi, on February 21, 2012.

We will try in this paper to highlight the most important characteristics and challenges of this particular stage in Yemen's history, through the following focal point:

- Attitude of the revolutionary forces
- The relationship between the former regime and the Joint Meeting Parties and their allies
- The challenges facing the transitional period

**First: Attitude of the revolutionary forces (one main objective but several interests)**

If we try to draw a map of Yemen's revolutionary forces, we will find them to be a wide and probably non-homogenous mixture<sup>2</sup>, quite a normal and logical phenomenon given that they reflect a popular revolution in which most elements of Yemeni society are represented. On one side, we find the all-important revolutionary and party-affiliated

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youths, the activist bases of the country's main political parties. On the other, we find the independent youth groups among which are political activists, jurists, merchants, craftspeople and others, individuals who never practiced or took part in politics, and all of whom, in the pursuit of a better future, found their *raison d'être* in the revolution.

We will also find the official opposition represented by the Joint Meeting Parties, which brings under its wing seven main parties: The Islah Party, the Yemeni Socialist Party, the Nasserite Party, the al-Haq Party, the Ba'ath National Party, the September Alliance and the Union of Popular Forces.

Also among the important revolutionary forces is the Southern Movement, the Houthis, the political forces that broke rank with the ruling party, the military elements that joined the revolution under the leadership of the First Armoured Division<sup>3</sup>, and the tribal leaders who declared their support for the revolution bringing with them the considerable weight they enjoy within Yemeni society.

Although these groups have joined forces under the banner of the revolution's main objective, bringing down Saleh and his regime, each maintains its own interests and objectives to this day, some of which are clearly contradictory<sup>4</sup>. For example, when the revolutionary youths call for blowing up the old regime's headquarters given their symbolic significance, their call largely contradicts if not hurts other major groups which, by joining the revolution, gave it a considerable boost. The same applies to other major groups made up mainly of political leaders, diplomats and cadres who, after working with and serving with the regime for a long time, decided to break rank with the ruling party.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.al-tagheer.com/news27928.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/332304>

When we see that the revolutionary map also includes the Houthis and the First Armoured Division, led by General Ali Muhsen Al-Ahmar, we realise that we have here another example of how wide the differences between these groups are. Al-Ahmar has spearheaded Saleh's six wars against the former<sup>5</sup>, and the same could be said about the southern issue that brought General Ali Muhsen and the Islah Party into partnership with Ali Saleh, in the war against the South in 1994.

The divergence of interests even appears in revolutionary slogans other than the one calling for the regime's downfall. The slogan calling for the establishment of a civil state is not welcome to some religious leaders and groups in the revolution, chief among which is the main religious party in the country, which happens to enjoy significant power within the revolution. The same applies to a number of tribal groups who, despite their leaders' denials, see in this call a threat to their power and gains, neither of which they seem ready to relinquish; and there are many more such examples.

This polarisation became obvious at two different stages; the first was in the period that immediately followed the Al-Karamah Friday (dignity Friday), i.e., March 18, 2011, that cost the lives of fifty martyrs. Immediately following that Friday, the opposition parties officially announced their support for the revolutionaries' call for the regime and its leader to go, and the above-mentioned military and political leaders broke rank with the ruling party. This marked the point at which the situation began to deviate from the youths' main demands and the narrow interests of the newcomers began rising to the surface, although they kept their differences under wraps and did not voice them in public.

In the second stage, the polarisation appeared even starker, starting with the announcement

<sup>5</sup>

<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/23/196555.html>

of the Gulf Initiative and its multiple amendments<sup>6</sup>, and ending with the signature of the final version<sup>7</sup> and its enduring Executive Mechanism<sup>8</sup>, which led us to the current transitional phase.

Thus, while the block of the Joint Meeting Parties and their political allies were a genuine party to the Agreement, and all what ensued from it, the revolutionaries disagreed among themselves on what attitude to take. However, despite not being a party to the Agreement, some of them did not conceal their support for it and for all what ensued from it, including the formation of a government and election of a president; among the latter were the tribal leaders and military forces that joined the revolution.

On the other hand, the groups that make up the Southern Movement opposed the Initiative from which they felt excluded, since it neither referred to the Southern problem nor named it as one of its priorities. Nevertheless, although the Movement welcomed the Initiative as a move that could lead to a peaceful resolution of the problem, they remained unbound but its outcome, which is why they decided to boycott the presidential elections.

Although the Houthis agree with the Southern Movement as far as rejecting the Initiative is concerned, they went further than that when, instead of welcoming it as a positive step, they condemned it as a move that serves American interests and aims to place the country under foreign tutelage. This explains their negative position vis-à-vis the presidential elections and their decision to boycott them.

Remains the position of the revolutionary youth, the most difficult to understand and

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<sup>6</sup> Abdel-Malek Al-Mikhlaifi, "The Third Gulf Initiative for Yemen: Draft of an Agreement or Trap?" **Al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi**, No. 388, (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, June 2011), p. 132.

<sup>7</sup>

<http://www.alwasatnews.com/3149/news/read/546987/1.html>

<sup>8</sup>

<http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20110913/Con20110913444349.htm>

analyse. The fact that they do not constitute a single block, are not untied under one political banner or fall within a single framework, make it impossible to pinpoint a certain position on which they all firmly agree. To overcome this obstacle, I decided to pinpoint the indicators that best explain the position of the most important youth groups, while not forgetting to mention, whenever possible, the positions of other less well-represented groups.

When the Gulf Initiative was announced, the revolution's youth openly declared their rejection of any political solution, and insisted on remaining in the public square until all their demands are met; they also insisted on a decisive outcome of the revolution<sup>9</sup>. In reality, however, they neither took concrete steps to ensure this decisive revolutionary outcome, nor presented an alternative to the Gulf Initiative, despite the length of time between the announcement of the first draft and signature of the final version.

When it was announced that Saleh had signed the Gulf Initiative and its Executive Mechanism in the Saudi capital Riyadh, divisions started to appear among the revolution's youth. While some of them began celebrating the signature and declaring victory, others were unhappy and condemned it as a politically convenient step that does not respond to their demands. This brought out into the open the different political and partisan trends under which influence some of the youths' were operating, although most party-affiliated youths remained faithful to the positions of their political leaders, many of whom were party to the Agreement. It is important to avoid generalising, here, since some party-affiliated youth held firm to their rejection of any political solution, at a time when not all the independent youth groups and blocks rejected the Agreement.

These divisions became all the more obvious with the onset of the preparations to elect the compromise candidate for the presidency of the republic. Now, the public squares where

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<sup>9</sup> [www.islamweb.net/media/index.php](http://www.islamweb.net/media/index.php)

once sit-ins had taken place were full of election banners, seminars were held in specially erected tents and calls for boycotting the elections were met with disapproval and derision. Political partisanship went to ridiculous lengths in their effort to mobilise public support and urge the people to take part in the elections, especially on the day dubbed “Your voice is a gain for the revolution,” which fell on Friday, February 17. Naming that particular Friday was a clear and open statement by the official opposition that it was fully capable of steering the course of the revolution, at this stage of the process, when once the custom was to seek consensus on a name on which everyone agreed. This time round, the name reflected one particular point of view, which could not have had much in common with those who opposed the elections<sup>10</sup>.

Even the most prominent and active youth leaders felt this change, and the principled position of activist Tawakul Karman, who once opposed any political solution, is a case in point. Although Karman had called for a decisive revolutionary solution and even led demonstrations in support of it, we saw her on election day going personally from tent to tent urging the young revolutionaries to vote, and taking pains to be seen casting her vote in the media.

Some see this “transformation” in the position of the revolution’s youth, if we can call it that – though I personally prefer the word “development” – as an outcome of the political parties’ presence and role which they believe was obvious from the very beginning. They particularly point to the Islah Party’s position where the political, since it is a political party, is mixed-up with the religious, based on the party’s religious ideology, and with the tribal-familial, since the party is clearly a political cover for the power and influence of the Al-Ahmar tribe.

Others blame this transformation on the long duration of the revolution, the many sacrifices the youth have made in this regard and the

endless pressure brought to bear against them at every level, let alone their fear that the country might enter into a protracted civil war, whose drums the old regime beat ceaselessly. Therefore, the transformation meant for them a kind of “warrior’s respite,” after which they would be able to pursue the remaining objectives of the revolution with renewed vigour. They also saw it as their right to celebrate this considerable achievement, i.e., Saleh’s resignation from the presidency, which is why they celebrated Election Day and took part in it.

In reality, this development was a result of the two above factors, together. On the one hand, it is difficult to ignore the partisan element and its impact on the scene and, on the other, everyone needed to feel that there was indeed an achievement worthy of celebration, especially in light of the divisions among different state institutions, and the failure to reach a decisive solution.

When one follows the demonstrations still taking place in different governorates, the sit-ins in the public squares and the compromise President and his government’s insistence on the public’s right to hold these activities; when one reads the names of various Fridays that followed the new President’s inauguration, which include, “We Want to Restructure the Army<sup>11</sup>,” “Restructuring Friday is a Commitment to the Army and Security Services’ Martyrs,” “Bringing the Killers to Justice is a Pledge to the Martyrs of Dignity,” and “This is the Friday of Punishment”, etc., it becomes clear that the youth are still actively pursuing the revolution’s objectives. Their demands have not changed since the very beginning; they still include the eradication of corruption and its symbols, getting rid of personalities associated with the former regime, sidelining members of the former ruling family, restructuring the army, bringing the killers of

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.albadee.net/index.php/news/2229>

<sup>11</sup> Naming the Fridays that followed the elections, namely Friday March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012, indicates that the revolutionaries are still pursuing their demands.

martyrs to justice and a number of economic and social demands.

**Second: the relationship between the General People's Congress Party and the Joint Meeting Parties and their partners: (partners in government, but opposite interests)**

Although the two groups are partners in the national unity government and agree on the person of the compromise President, Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi, signs of this consensus' fragility soon began to appear. There were clear signs of that in the process of forming the government, the manner of its announcement and the preparations for the presidential elections, whereby Ali Saleh insisted in every one of his speeches on portraying Hadi as the candidate of the former ruling People's Congress Party.

With Saleh's return home after the presidential elections, and his insistence on attending the inauguration and investiture of the new President, the Joint Meeting parties and the Prime Minister announced that they will not be attending the ceremony. They deemed it a new invention and not part of any Yemeni tradition, and considered the new President as inaugurated when he swore the constitutional oath in front of parliament.

It became clear, however, that Saleh was finding it difficult to accept the new situation and was trying his best to thwart the Agreement. On March 10, 2012, a first announcement was made to the effect that Saleh's return to Yemen did not mean that he intended to lead a quiet life and stay away from politics, but quite the opposite; it heralded his return to politics, this time as leader of the opposition. In this capacity, he met in the mosque that bears his name with a number of his party's leaders and supporters, and launched a scathing attack on the revolution and revolutionaries, accusing them of destructiveness and of serving foreign interests. He also launched an attack on the government, criticising its performance and describing it as negligent and deficient.

Saleh continued to preside over his party's meetings on a regular basis, and it became clear that he was actually steering the decisions of government members who belonged to his party, which some saw as a violation of the Gulf Initiative and terms of his immunity. The problem is that neither the Gulf Initiative nor its Executive Mechanism openly states that Saleh should desist from any political role, and did not call on him to relinquish his party's leadership as a condition. This is why he and his party continue to claim that his actions are a legitimate right, which he is not willing to relinquish.

On March 18, 2012, the anniversary of the Al-Karama massacre, the Joint Meeting Parties insisted on commemorating the occasion, and used the opportunity to send a number of messages, the first being to the youth in the public squares, the martyrs' families and the wounded, underlining their intention to pursue the revolution and adopt the youths' demands. Their second message was for Saleh and his party, reminding them of their crimes and of the fact that they would not be safe had it not been for the immunity agreement, meaning that they will be pursued for their crimes if the Initiative fails.

The speech delivered on that occasion by the Prime Minister, who heads the unity government, reflected the high level of tensions between the two sides; he blamed the former regime, which he called "autocracy," for the massacre and used the speech to respond to the accusations Saleh levelled against his government. After the speech, tensions between the two sides escalated into an open conflict, especially after Saleh's party saw these statements as a violation of the truce provided for by the Agreement, forgetting that it had itself violated it on several occasions.

As a result, Saleh instructed his party's ministers to stay away from the Cabinet meeting, but an intervention by the President ensured that the meeting did take place, after all. The meeting decided to form a committee comprised of four leading personalities,

whose responsibility is to calm the situation and put an end to the two parties' media campaigns.

It seems that President Hadi's position vis-à-vis the crisis came as a shock to the People's Congress Party and its leader, who still dealt with Hadi as a member of his party. At the beginning, the President's main thrust was to celebrate the martyrs, consider the victims of the peaceful demonstrations that brought down Saleh's regime as the nation's martyrs, and allocate monthly salaries to their families. However, he later put pressure on Saleh's ministers to attend the cabinet meeting, and threatened to dismiss the government and form a new one if they insist on staying away.

On the other hand, Saleh alluded to the possibility of his party forming the government since it still holds the majority in Parliament, but the President's response to that was decisive, insisting that he would disband Parliament if this happens.

These latest disagreements brought several factors into the open; the first was that the President had succeeded in liberating himself from under his party's shadow, an issue that was still a matter of debate for some. The second was that the lack of trust between the two parties was likely to remain, and that the role of the state sponsoring the Agreement is essential to reconcile between them.

### **Third: challenges facing the transitional stage**

Although Yemen is entering this transitional stage with a new compromise president and a new government, it is still plagued by problems accumulated over the past 33 years of autocracy, during which endemic corruption dominated every sector. The upcoming period thus faces a number of challenges, starting with a dilapidated infrastructure that requires rebuilding, as well as the need to restructure each, and every state institution to enable them to fight corruption, draw new legal and constitutional frameworks and draft a new election law. According to the Executive Mechanism, all these files and issues should be submitted to a national

dialogue conference, attended by all the parties concerned, during which all pending issues will be addressed. Among the main challenges are:

#### **- The old guard's influence:**

Saleh's return to the country intent on dealing with various issues and playing a political role is the main challenge facing both the settlement Agreement and transitional stage. We are not talking here just about Saleh, but also about members of his old regime who still control several key institutions in the country and permeate every level. The latter are actively trying to halt change and working hard, whenever possible, to thwart the Agreement, bring down the government and embarrass the President. In turn, the President is facing major challenges in his effort to sideline the old guard and bring the corrupt among them to justice. Even more important is his ability to exercise his presidential prerogatives as mandated by the people, and by the Arab and international support he personally enjoys. He should also be able to make courageous decisions to sideline Saleh politically, now that he is no longer president.

#### **- The economic crisis**

Yemen suffers from a stifling economic crisis, meaning that the economic file is laden with challenges; the level of poverty has reached 70% and there are international warnings that the country might soon suffer a hunger crisis. Hard currency reserves at the Central Bank have dropped to \$4.5 billion and, last year, the average GDP growth rate was near zero; there also is a lack of electricity and water services, a shortage of oil supplies and the price of basic goods has more than doubled<sup>12</sup>.

Various economic studies confirm that, in 2012, Yemen will need \$15 billion to address its collapsed economy, meaning that in order to overcome the challenges of this stage, the government's should restore services, maintain price stability, fight corruption, ensure the supply of necessary goods and

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.agricultureegypt.info/NewsDetails>

provide the necessary support. These poor economic conditions are what brought the people out of their homes, in the first place, once they lost all hope for reform. Therefore, the new regime had better succeed in providing support, ensuring that it reaches the needy and seeing to it that these funds end up replenishing its development banks instead of squandered by corruption, as was the case in the past. If this does not happen, the state will totally collapse and a hunger revolution will spread throughout the country.

#### - **The Southern issue**

The Southern issue is another major challenge facing the transitional stage, and it is worth mentioning in this context that any discussion of this issue round the national dialogue table will be the first, after having ignored the suffering of the south's citizens for far too long. The southerners see participation in the national dialogue from a different angle. Some refuse to take part in any dialogue before the Southern State, which existed prior to the Unity Agreement, is recognised. Others accept the idea of a dialogue because they see it as giving the southern political forces, based on their geographic affiliation including southern leaders who are now members of the government, the opportunity to enter into dialogue with national forces in the north, on an equal footing, providing all options are open for discussion without preconditions. What is important at this stage is for the new leadership to seek serious and radical solutions for the southern issue. If it fails to do so, either the peaceful struggle in the South will continue as is, with all the wasted human material resources it entails, or the parties involved will resort to carrying arms, an even greater danger since it will drag the country into a cauldron of war and division.

#### - **The security challenge**

This file involves several issues, including the challenge posed by the fundamentalist armed groups who call themselves "Ansar al-Sharia," (the Sharia's advocates), seeing to establish an Islamist emirate. It also involves the government putting an end to this group's

terror acts and bombing campaigns, especially since their activities have escalated both during and after the revolution. The reason is either they decided to take advantage of the security vacuum and widespread instability in the country, or the regime is deliberately playing up this card to warn against what might happen if it leaves the scene.

The file also involves the challenge of restructuring the army and security forces, putting an end to the divisions plaguing the military establishment, removing Saleh's family members from leadership positions, rebuilding the army based on ability and professionalism rather than tribal, partisan or regional considerations, and dismantling all newly positioned security and military points. In reality, the Yemeni state is incapable of facing up to al-Qaeda on its own, and needs Arab and international assistance including training its armed forces to assume this responsibility. This necessarily leads us to the need to reintegrate and restructure the army on a sound basis, without delay, in order for it to successfully resist and challenge the enemy, a process that remains fraught with danger. For despite the formation of a military committee to oversee this particular file in the transitional stage, the latter will undoubtedly encounter fierce resistance from Saleh's family, who used this card to gain countless advantages and fight back against the people and their revolution. The new regime's success in this military endeavour therefore also means the success and safe passage of the revolution to the other shore, else the situation will remain in a state of crisis and distrust will continue to prevail. At this point, even the most dovish elements who accepted a settlement of the political process will not accept that the situation remain as it is, without an end in sight.

#### - **The Houthi issue**

The Houthi issue is a thorny one and a challenge to the transitional stage, especially since it involves armed violence; the regime has fought six different wars against them and there clashes are still ongoing between the Houthis and different tribes and salafi groups.

The most ominous aspect of the issue is the fact that it is an armed conflict; for contrary to the Southern Movement, the Houthis never hesitated to use weapons in response to the manner in which the security forces have dealt with their demands. It is impossible to ignore, in this context, the obvious support the Houthis are receiving from certain countries in the region, countries trying to forge for themselves a role in southern Yemen, one way or another. This makes it even more imperative to deal with this issue seriously and wisely.

### **Conclusion**

Although the revolution began purely as a youth movement with a high ceiling of demands, it ended in a political solution imposed by the internal situation in the country. These conditions were not the only ones responsible for preventing a decisive outcome; various Arab and international parties did not recognise the revolution, because their main objective was securing a peaceful transfer of power and prevent the security situation from going out of hand and threatening their own interests, regardless whether the process achieves the revolutionaries' demands or not. The main common denominator between the revolutionaries' demands and the peaceful transfer of power mechanism is for Ali Saleh to leave the presidency and that his replacement by a new president who will oversee the implementation of the revolution's remaining demands. This task is by no means an easy one given the heavy burden that the new President has inherited, a burden laden with thorny issues that Saleh's regime constantly put off, and used to its advantage without ever finding a solution for them. This stage is all more difficult given the old regime's deliberate attempts to plant various obstacles on the new government's path, to thwart any attempt to reduce the privileges it once enjoyed, despite its participation in the new order and the historic opportunity it was given to play a role in defining the new Yemen's future.

Recent indicators clearly confirm that the Agreement will remain fragile as long as the measures necessary for building trust between the partners in government are not implemented, and as long as the interests of the state and the revolution are not placed above narrow partisan and personal interests. The responsibility of achieving the revolutionaries' remaining demands will continue to rest on the new leadership's shoulders, and countries that sponsored the Agreement are responsible for putting pressure on Saleh and his men to fulfil their part of the agreement that allowed safe conduct. In the same vein, it is incumbent on the revolutionaries to keep up the pressure, and continue the struggle until the initiative is back in their hands and the rest of their demands are implemented.