

**64** December  
2012

## **“Youth” Inclusion in Yemen: a Necessary Element for Success of political transition**

Atiaf Zaid Alwazir \*

Modern Yemen has witnessed previous revolutions and coups, but the revolution of 2011 had the unique aspect of being a youth led mass movement [at least at the beginning of the uprising] with participation from people of various backgrounds, transcending the elite circle of politics. A common question arises: what role do the “youth” who ignited the mass protest movement play today in the transitional process?

While youth played a significant role in the revolution, they were sidelined in the political negotiations that led to the signing of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) transition plan and there are indicators today that show their potential marginalization in the upcoming national dialogue process.

A key indicator for change in the political structure of the country is the level of political inclusion that transcends the traditional small inner circle. Hence, this paper attempts to review the level of “youth” inclusion, by first defining the “independent youth”, and focusing on their past, current and potential role in the transitional process.

### **Background**

The Middle East witnessed an eruption of simultaneous mass protests throughout a number of countries in the region. Youth were central agents in the calls for change, and many risked their lives in devotion of their

belief. Their resilience was contagious, inspiring groups around the world. Their courage made the world recognize this long ignored group, hailing them as heroes, and equal partners in the calls for political transition.

\* Atiaf Zaid Alwazir is a researcher, blogger and a co-founder of [Support Yemen](#) media advocacy campaign. Since the beginning of the Yemeni revolution in January 2011, Ms. Alwazir has been chronicling the revolution on her [blog](#) with commentaries, videos, and photographs. She obtained an M.A in international affairs

In Yemen, protests began in a number of cities starting from mid-January 2011, when youth inspired by the fall of Ben Ali's regime, took the streets. Day by day, more people joined and many camped in the squares until they transformed into tent-cities with thousands of inhabitants.

Bowing to international pressure, on 23 November 2011, Ali Abdullah Saleh signed the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) power transfer deal after months of negotiations. The deal involved the transfer of power to his Vice President Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi, in return for immunity from prosecution.

This power transfer deal is a product of two parallel processes: the first, a grassroots mass youth movement that demanded comprehensive changes, and the second, a political process where the opposition coalition the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) entered into negotiation with the former ruling party the General People's Congress (GPC). This led to former President Saleh's removal<sup>1</sup> and the beginning of the transitional period after the uncontested election of Abd Rabu Hadi as new President.

A national unity government has since been created, evenly divided between the JMP and the GPC for a two-year transitional period. Phase two is under way and preparations for the national dialogue and the constitutional reform process are taking place.

Leading this transitional process are members of the JMP and GPC with the support of the "international community" including the United Nations. The emphasis on the political

track – in its traditional form- has unfortunately neglected the grassroots movement, and marginalized the youth, whose sacrifices led the political parties to the negotiations table. A common question arises: what role do the "youth", who ignited the mass protest movement, play in this transitional process?

### **Who are the "Youth"?**

The youth who sparked the revolution are often mistakenly referred to as a unified bloc of individuals under one centralized command. In Yemen, according to the UNDP, youth between the ages of 15 and 24 represent a quarter of the population; hence not all the 5.2 million will share the same ideologies and vision.

The revolutionary youth movement in Yemen began as an organic group of numerous small entities that are in a similar age group and share common grievances. They were divided between those who felt politically oppressed and those who are economically deprived due to the high unemployment and poverty rates. Initial protests were led by "independent youth" who camped in the squares and organized and led protests to say out loud enough oppression, enough humiliation, by demanding political and social changes making them the representatives of the people's demands.

When I asked revolutionaries in Change Square and on social media sites "how do you define independent youth, the answers varied but provided indicators for identifying this group.

The term "youth" is often equated with "Independent youth" and often used

---

<sup>1</sup> Saleh remains head of the GPC party

interchangeably, even though there are substantial differences. When it comes to age stratification, Independent youth, like youth, generally refers to individuals between the ages of 18 and 38. Although in some instances, the term has been used to describe individuals who are older but share the aspirations of the youth movement, making it more of a state of mind.

The agenda of this group focuses on building a civic state with equal citizenship and a strong belief in peaceful resistance as the only means forward. Social justice and women's rights are also top priorities.

Politically, independent youth are not affiliated to the traditional political parties, neither JMP nor GPC, neither to ideological groups such as the Southern movement or the Houthis. However, some youth members of these groups state that they too are part of the independent youth movement, especially when their decisions are taken freely and sometimes against the party/group line. This is mainly because the term "youth" has become synonymous with demanding a new political reality, rather than reforming the current reality. The popular youth slogan used in the protests "no political parties, no partisan politics, our revolution is a youth revolution" symbolizes the hopes of a complete change of the system. It does not necessarily mean youth were against political parties, but rather condemning the bargaining of the traditional political parties.

According to a report by Saferworld, a UK based NGO; the independent youth "have positioned themselves as 'guardians' of the revolution, and as advocates for the national good against what they perceive as the narrow

self-interest of the political elite. Because of this, young women and men remain one of the key repositories of legitimacy within the newly reconfigured Yemeni political system, and potentially strong consensus-builders."<sup>2</sup> It is for this reason that many people in Yemen demand greater "youth" representation in the political process as a way to build greater trust and legitimacy in the transitional period.

### **No Alternatives to the GCC Plan?**

As an example of the important role played by the independents is the "youth plan" drafted in March 2011. The 13-point plan is an example of an independent youth-led effort to formalize demands, and create a shared vision for the future. In one month of extensive daily meetings, the independent youth leaders managed to bring together diverse youth groups - including independent, JMP affiliated, southern movement and Houthi members- in order to agree on main ideas for the future and to articulate that in a concise 13 point plan of action.

Independent leaders took the initiative to start this process and lead various meetings and surveys with revolutionaries in the various squares nationwide. Additionally, discussions on social media were conducted to reach a different audience who are supportive of the revolution but might not be participating in the squares. After the initial draft, the groups received advice from leading Yemeni academics, legal advisors, and politicians from the JMP. The outcome of this collective

---

<sup>2</sup> "Moving beyond promises: Perceptions, priorities, and participation of youth in Yemen's transition," Saferworld, September 2012.

participatory process was a “youth plan” [articulated](#) by the Coordinating Council of the Youth Revolution of Change (CCYRC)- the largest independent coalition - with local buy-in and consensus from over 100 movements and coalitions.

This unprecedented unified document could have been the plan needed to move Yemen forward. While the 13-point youth plan alone was insufficient to govern a transitional period, it had the foundation for a draft plan that could have developed into a transfer of power deal as the points in the document “are appropriate, well-considered, and widely supported. They should not be dismissed as impractical to implement or extra-constitutional”<sup>3</sup>.

Just as the original GCC plan was vague, needed elaboration, and took six months to sign, the youth could have used the six months to modify their plan accordingly, and based on various resources such as the 65 page “Youth Vision for the Future of Yemen” developed by CCYRC, and the large network of contacts in the academic and political arenas. This would have been unprecedented as it would have meant that youth leaders will be involved in negotiations, setting the rules, and focusing on youth priorities rather than on power sharing, this would have been the “Yemen model” to be proud of.

Instead, the traditional forces and the international community decided to rely on the GCC plan, which is imperfect, but from a diplomatic standpoint seemed like an

acceptable solution often falsely citing that while the GCC plan is imperfect, it is the only available option.

The Implementation of the GCC agreement negatively impacted the independent youth movement in many ways. For the pro-democracy youth, the GCC deal was flawed from the outset. Neither the youth, nor other disenfranchised groups in Yemen (such as the southern movement or the Houthis) were involved in the negotiations or the design of the transition plan. In addition, independent youth refused the idea that the JMP was the sole representative of the revolution. According to Philbrick Yadav, this “reflected the dual desire of powerful international actors to work with “known quantities” [...] this had the effect of amplifying the power of the JMP, at the very moment when the JMP’s leadership was being called to account for its own inefficacy by the revolutionary movement”<sup>4</sup>. Hence the GCC negotiations were perceived as a transfer of power within regime elites.

In addition, instead of indulging in the bargaining process that had began between the people and the government during the uprising, the JMP led the political process without incorporating the people in the street or their main demands listed in the 13-point plan, returning to exclusionary politics. For example, while one of the demands/plan in the document was to “legally pursue and prosecute the corrupt officials and retrieve public property and money”, the GCC plan

---

<sup>3</sup> Carapico, Sheila. Counter-proposal from Yemen’s revolutionary youth  
<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1689/counter-proposal-from-yemens-revolutionary-youth>

---

<sup>4</sup> Stacey Philbrick Yadav, "The Transnationalization of Yemeni Opposition to the GCC Transition Process." Yemen in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities, Harvard University, 19 October 2012.

instead provided immunity for Saleh and members of his government from prosecution. This meant that the GCC plan traded justice for temporary peace.

The decision to impose the GCC plan in light of the exclusion of the rest of society, meant a lack of ownership by the people of their own political process. In order to sustain that process, a reliance on external actors such as regional and international powers was necessary. This ultimately reduced the level of inclusion of important local groups, such as the independents, local technocrats and experts who could have carried this process forward, and made it an external rather than a collective internal process.

Some in Yemen have criticized what they perceived as an international process because representatives from the UN, GCC, US, and the European Union became advisors and monitors for different aspects of Yemen's transition including national dialogue, security, military, and constitutional reform. While the majority of Yemenis appreciate the efforts of the "international community", skepticism looms over the role of individual countries. For example, some fear that the United States, who has the military restructuring portfolio, may use its military aid to solidify the status quo by pushing to keep corrupt allies in the security forces. More recently, even the role of the UN has been questioned. On 25 November 2012, two members of the National Dialogue's technical committee<sup>5</sup> froze their membership in protest over the proposed idea of making Jamal

Benomar, Special Adviser to UN Secretary on Yemen, the sole person responsible for selecting representatives in the National Dialogue Conference. If the 13-point plan or a similar plan was used, the transitional government would have not required as much international support as it does today, because people would have felt ownership over the process, something that is deeply lacking today. We will not know whether the youth plan would have succeeded, and most likely it would have had many obstacles, but it was worth a try to find a local solution.

Since the GCC plan was a byproduct of political negotiations that excluded the vast majority on the street, the focus of the transitional government was on power grabbing and "ownership" of government territories, shifting the priorities for reform away from comprehensive social changes that were the demands of the revolutionary movement. Because of this, young men and women are highly critical of the progress of the transition to date. Majority of the youth have not felt any change to their daily lives such as the dire humanitarian situation, electricity, jobs, basic services and infrastructure. While this of course will take a long time, it nevertheless requires the political will to place these issues as a priority, and to improve communication between the government and the masses. In addition, the Yemeni government should make progress on youth priorities, which were previously addressed in the 13-point plan, such as security sector and military reform, transitional justice and releasing all political prisoners.

Despite the youth's exclusion in the GCC plan, and the fact that they have come under

---

<sup>5</sup> The technical committee set up by President Hadi to define the scope of the Dialogue, the processes, selection process and the timeframe.

attack from both the traditional opposition and the former ruling party; many leading independent activists have continued to lead various youth initiatives demanding reform. Some joined new political parties, others see themselves as watchdog entities putting pressure on the government to fulfill its promises, others have creatively brought back to life forgotten issues such as the case of the forced disappeared, and the rest are remaining steadfast in Change Square, a year and ten months since the start of the uprising.

The most important role independent youth continue to play is their role as mediators in a country where tension between various groups is at its height. Due to their street credibility because of their activity in the squares, and absence of historic animosity, many independent activists are placed at a better position to forge alliances with a variety of entities. A recent example is the role of independent youth in bringing youth voices together against sectarianism. For these reasons, their role is crucial in the upcoming national dialogue that has been postponed numerous times.

### **National Dialogue, a second chance for youth inclusion?**

The upcoming National Dialogue Conference is currently Yemen's top national priority, as it will determine Yemen's long-term political future. It is a key first step to rearrange the political life in the post Saleh era. If the principles of accountability and inclusion are respected it should expand the political elite. Jamal Benomar has rightly stated: "The success or failure of the national dialogue is likely to [make or break Yemen's transition](#)".

The National Dialogue represents an important opportunity, and a time where the mistakes of the GCC plan can be avoided. The National Dialogue conference will discuss a number of issues, including but not limited to: the process for the drafting of a new constitution, including the establishment of a constitutional drafting commission, the Southern and Saada issues, as well as the shape of the state etc. These are sensitive issues that will require faith and trust building in the process. When this process is seen as an externally imposed and exclusive process it will be doomed to fail. The solution to resuscitate this process is to give independent youth greater role in the managing of the process and to insist on a high number of youth presences. While it has been reaffirmed that they will be present, the number of independent youth and process for their selection is unclear.

Late November, Yemeni political party members agreed on the division of delegates for the 565-seat national dialogue conference. Youth were given only 40 seats (roughly 7 percent) in the conference, and the criteria for this group is not yet clear.

In order to expand political elite and renew its blood, it is vital that youth are part of the process in a significant number. In addition, if presence of "youth" at the dialogue will only be judged by their age rather than what that term implies i.e. independent youth, then the majority of youth will most likely be from the existing traditional political parties, neglecting the third voice. This does not mean that youth within political parties should be neglected; to the contrary, they should pressure their own parties for greater participation in the dialogue as each party has

been allocated a certain amount of seats, but that should not be at the expense of the independent youth.

To facilitate this, the independent youth should be active in defining and marketing themselves as an entity. A clear process for their inclusion must also be made. “While youth activists generally accepted the principle of representation – i.e. having their grievances addressed by a representative body, rather than being physically present themselves – there was no consensus over how to manage this process”<sup>6</sup>.

Due to their organic nature, limited financial capacity and the absence of a traditional structure, selecting the main leaders of the movement has become a difficult task. The lack of clarity over aspects of the GCC plan implementing mechanism and lack of transparency made it difficult to understand the actual process that will take place. This meant that without understanding the structure of the upcoming national dialogue conference for example, independent youth did not have a chance early on to prepare.

To alleviate this, some independent youth have been planning a nationwide conference to help them prepare for the national dialogue conference, agree on selection criteria and objectives. This however was faced with resistance from the established political parties, who demand that their party “youth” members be included in this conference. Up to date, the independent youth conference has not been held.

The outreach committees that were meant to reach out to the communities in order to discuss the goals and format of the dialogue were not as successful as was hoped because they were not very extensive and their meetings were restricted to certain areas. Since then, the technical committee worked hard to alleviate this obstacle by holding town hall meetings, which were broadcasted, and have appeared on television. Members of the technical committee appeared as guests in television programs and the spokesperson was quite active in social media sites. However, there remains a general sense of lack of clarity by people. A recent document published by the technical committee attempted to alleviate the many questions, which helped but it nevertheless remains a dense document that needs explanation.

In addition to the challenges listed above, independent youth face other obstacles such as the closure of space for discussion.

In the past, independent youth faced repercussions from the former ruling party whenever they criticized the regime. Today they face repercussions from the national unity government, which consists of both former ruling party and opposition coalition members, making them targets of both groups, and closing the space for discussion. Each entity has relied on the absence of independent media to conduct smear campaigns in their own politicized media agencies in order to discredit the independent youth. Some have also been subjected to threats to silence them.

---

<sup>6</sup> “The Role of Youth Activists in Yemen’s Transition Process” Yemen Forum Workshop Summary – Chatham House, May 2012

**Youth inclusion, the only way forward**

For Yemen to move forward, a sincere healing process needs to begin, and a bottom-up approach needs to be emphasized instead of the top-down elite model for the dialogue to succeed. Hence, the youth should be a significant part of this process and should not be neglected or else it will become just another political conference.

It is important that the dialogue is emphasized as a process of civic engagement not merely another overpriced conference. It is also important for Yemen to utilize the resource it has such as the independent youth. This group is a great asset and should be treated as such, not marginalized and neglected.