



Yemen's Turbulent Spring: Imminent Change amidst Continuing Conflict



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Summary

The protests in Yemen have brought about remarkable changes in Yemeni politics and have shaken the regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh who has been ruling the country since 1978. The protests united the different groups in opposition to the regime such as the Southerners, the Houthis and the al Qaeda with the common people protesting against the Saleh regime. In the absence of a popular leader to replace Saleh, the political process in the country looks stalled. Repeated attempts by Saudi Arabia, GCC, the USA and the UN have not yielded any significant results. The future of the popular protests remains unclear at this point of time. There is also no sign of political consensus among the parties over the future course of action. Strong political will and cooperation among all the political parties, opposition groups and people is necessary to take the country out of the present crisis.

Ever since its unification, Yemen has remained a volatile country being engulfed by a number of conflicts. There has been a secessionist movement in the south of the country. The Shiite Houthi tribesmen have been waging a war against the government and have been involved in an armed movement, allegedly backed by Iran. Besides, Yemen has remained the hub of al Qaeda activities which has formed Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Al Qaeda has found a safe haven in Yemen taking opportunity of the existing political and economic conditions and the government's inability to defeat them. The 'Jasmine Revolution' also rocked Yemen with thousands of protesters hitting the streets of capital Sanaa and other major cities. For the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh this became yet another important issue which demanded immediate attention. Since then, continuing protests and the strong military response from the government has paralysed the country. In the absence of an acceptable political solution, the situation has only become more violent with looming threat of further disintegration of the country.

United demand of protesters

Protests started in the capital Saana, and soon spread to other parts of the country. The protesters demanded resignation of Saleh alleging him as corrupt and authoritarian; and repeated assurances by Saleh did not convince the people. There is a visible difference between the protesters in Yemen and other neighbouring Gulf countries. While protesters in the neighbouring Gulf countries demanded social and economic betterment and political reforms, Yemeni protesters remained focussed on their demand of President Saleh's ouster from power. As days passed and more number of people from various sections of the society joined the protests, it became difficult for the Saleh government to control the situation. The opposition made efforts to make it a political issue by starting a sustained campaign against Saleh.

Simultaneously, Saleh started losing support of some his own party men and trusted senior military officials. As a result, his support base within the party dwindled, and made his struggle to remain in power more challenging. Thus, Saleh had to face the twin challenges of keeping his party men and military officials in his side as well as to deal with the growing rage of the protesters. The situation further worsened when some of his own tribesmen defected to the protesters side alleging corruption and authoritarian rule. Taking advantage of the chaotic situation in the country, the Houthis and southerners joined the fray against Saleh. Similarly it was also reported that some of the al Qaeda terrorists also joined hands with the protesters. While the joining in of the Houthis and the al Qaeda strengthened the protests, it also created more pressure on Saleh for dealing with the protesters. Though the various groups in opposition have had different agendas and objectives, they became united in their demand for the overthrow of the Saleh regime. While earlier Saleh had dealt with all these groups individually, he was now confronted with a united front.

The response of the state

As the protests started spreading, Saleh initially thought of crushing the protesters by means of force and persuasion. To win the hearts and minds of the people, Saleh made an attempt to imitate the steps taken by the rulers in his neighbourhood – announcing welfare measures for the people and offering a ‘national dialogue’ between the people and the government. But constrained by limited financial resources, the quantum of social and economic packages offered by him were unimpressive. Nevertheless, he promised to offer jobs to university graduates, give scholarships to students etc. The announcements however were not enough to pacify the people and thus, the protests continued to gather strength with each passing day. Lack of resources at the hands of Saleh to deal with the situation made him more vulnerable in the face of protests by the people. Similarly, the call for a national dialogue was also not accepted by the protesters who perceived it as a ploy by Saleh to buy time and refused to be party to a dialogue unless Saleh first agrees to step down by the end of 2011.

As it got tougher by the day to handle the crisis, Saleh in a desperate attempt, announced that he would not contest the next presidential elections, nor would he bring his son Ahmed to power. But this assurance was not enough for the protesters, who insisted on their demand of Saleh stepping down from power. Saleh, however, continued to engage the protesters in talks and made attempts to strike deals with them. While the opposition demanded President Saleh to step down by end of 2011, Saleh wanted to continue till the end of the current tenure in 2013. For the next presidential elections, Saleh has agreed for constitutional and legal reforms to revamp the parliamentary, judicial and legal system of the country. Saleh, however, stated that he would not step down unless power is transferred to ‘safe hands’.

Saleh’s frustration and desperation with the protesters grew along with the snowballing protests. This made Saleh to increasingly resort to the use of security forces to disperse the gathering and arresting a number of them. As the situation seemed to be slipping out of his hand, Saleh used more brutal force on the protesters. This led to the death of hundreds of protesters and left many others wounded.

Mediation attempts by external powers

Saudi Arabia has been the most influential regional power to intervene in Yemen and has been giving billions of dollars in aid to ensure Yemen’s stability. Saudi Arabia provides around US\$ 1.5 to 2 billion annual aid to Yemen and has been bailing out Yemen from its budgetary difficulties every year.¹ Saudi Arabia has strategic interests in Yemen in terms

¹ Christopher Boucek, “Higher stakes in Yemen”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 14, 2011, at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/06/14/higher-stakes-in-yemen/1rl>.

of securing the long porous border between the two countries and fighting against al Qaeda. Iran's influence among Yemen's Shiite Houthi rebels is also a cause of concern for Saudi Arabia. But despite being provided with all support, Saleh has not been able to deliver in protecting Saudi interests of containing al Qaeda and the Houthi rebellion.

Protests in Yemen have posed a dilemma for Saudi Arabia.² While it is true that Saleh has performed poorly, there are no other popular leaders in Yemen who enjoy the support of various groups to be installed as an alternative to Saleh. Since the protests, Saudi Arabia has been asking Saleh to step down and pave the way for a smooth transition of power. But Saudi Arabia would be concerned if the transition and subsequent developments tend towards strengthening democratic roots in Yemen, as this would mean recalibrating its relationship with such a regime. Thus, Saudi intervention is primarily driven by its security interests, the future of its relationship with Saana and maintaining the traditional hold over the country for which stability in Yemen is necessary. But, certainly, Saudis do not have many options left to manoeuvre in Saana.

With the protests gaining strength and Saleh loosing grip over the administration, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) intervened to maintain stability in its troubled neighbourhood. GCC wanted him to step down and make way for a smooth transition of power and made a proposal in this regard. The GCC proposal calls for the resignation of the president within 30 days from the date of its acceptance and installation of a unity government within 90 days from the date of Saleh's departure. The unity government would include 50 percent of the members from the ruling party, 40 percent from the opposition groups and 10 percent from other groups. The proposal also asks all parties to ensure the holding of a presidential poll within two months from the date of Saleh's departure. The proposal grants legal immunity to Saleh, members of his family, officials of his Presidency as well as his close aides once power is transferred and a new government installed.³ Meanwhile, the Yemeni opposition is divided over the deal. A coalition of seven opposition parties generally accepted the deal. But thousands of protesters still suspect that Saleh is just manoeuvring to buy time and cling to power. The protesters allege that they have not been represented in the talks and the opposition political parties do not represent their views.⁴ Saleh, initially, rejected the GCC proposal. But as he had to

² For an analysis on this see Bernard Haykel, "Saudi Arabia's Yemen Dilemma: How to Manage an Unruly Client State", *Foreign Affairs*, June 14, 2011, at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67892/bernard-haykel/saudi-arabias-yemen-dilemma>; Mustafa Alani, "Saudi Policy Predicament in Yemen", GRC Commentary, July 21, 2011, at http://www.grc.ae/index.php?frm_action=view_newsletter_web&sec_code=grccommentary&frm_module=contents&show_web_list_link=1&int_content_id=74808.

³ "GCC draws road map for Saleh's departure", *Arab News*, April 21, 2011, at <http://arabnews.com/middleeast/article369470.ece>.

⁴ "Opponents of Yemen's president divided over deal", *Arab News*, April 24, 2011, at <http://arabnews.com/middleeast/article371840.ece>.

leave the country and was flown to Riyadh for treatment after being injured in a bomb attack and with no sign of the protests and violence decreasing, he moderated his stand on transition of power.

USA also has expressed concern for the growing instability in Yemen and more particularly about al Qaeda exploiting the situation. In July 2011, Daniel Benjamin, Coordinator for Counterterrorism in the State Department stated that, "United States has adopted a two-pronged strategy for Yemen - helping the government confront the immediate security threat represented by al Qaeda, and mitigating the serious political, economic, and governance issues that the country faces over the long term - the drivers of instability."⁵ Yemen is an important partner for USA to fight against al Qaeda and has been receiving American aid for the same. USA has provided \$ 30.3 million in the financial year 2009 and \$ 58.4 million in 2010. The Obama administration has requested \$106.6 million foreign aid from the congress for 2011 and \$ 115.6 million for the year 2012. In terms of security assistance to Yemen, US Department of Defence allocated \$ 155.3 million in 2010, which is a sharp increase from \$ 67 million in the previous year.⁶ USA also wants Saleh to accept the GCC proposal and was disappointed with Saleh's refusal to sign the GCC initiative. After Saleh moved to Riyadh for treatment, several high level US officials like Deputy National Security Advisor John Brennan and Under Secretary of Defence for Intelligence Michael Vickers have visited Saana and have held talks with both government and opposition leaders. But like Saudi Arabia, the USA is also left with not many options to replace Saleh and find a suitable candidate who will be loyal to them and command the respect of various tribes, opposition groups and the people of the country, thus making way for a smooth power transition in the country.

The United Nations has appealed to all the parties concerned for finding a solution to the crisis and ensuring orderly power transfer in the country and has appointed Jamal Benomar as its envoy to Yemen. A delegation from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) visited Yemen in June-July this year to assess the human rights situation in the country. The report points to gross violation of human rights and alleges involvement of the military and security forces and "excessive use of force against largely peaceful protesters."⁷ The report also indicates extrajudicial killing, arbitrary arrests by the state;

⁵ "U.S. Policy in Yemen", Testimony by Daniel Benjamin, Coordinator, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, before the Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Washington DC, July 19, 2011, at <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/rm/2011/165195.htm>.

⁶ Jeremy M. Sharp, *Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report for Congress, June 8, 2011, available at <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/166831.pdf>.

⁷ "Report of the High Commissioner on OHCHR's visit to Yemen", Office of the High commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), A/HRC/18/21, September 13, 2011, at <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/YE/YemenAssessmentMissionReport.pdf>.

and the impact of the conflict on the education, health, basic standard of living, women and children among others. Meanwhile, the UN Security Council has also called on all parties to move forward on the basis of the GCC initiative.⁸ India has expressed concern over the worsening situation in Yemen and has asked its nationals to leave the country. While a resolution on Yemen is expected to be tabled in the coming days, India, as a member of the Security Council, shares the concern of all other members, and calls for a "Yemeni-led process of political transition that meets the needs and aspirations of the Yemeni people for change."⁹

Saleh's absence and failure of opposition to capitalise

During Saleh's absence, the opposition supported by the protesters met to chart a future course of action for the country. But in the absence of consensus on a leader as well as on a vision for the country, the opposition has remained disunited and has not been able to capitalise on the long absence of Saleh from the country. After almost two months of Saleh's departure for Riyadh, the opposition groups, on August 17, finally announced the formation of a 143-member National Council to force Saleh to step down. But immediately some of the leaders expressed their dissatisfaction over the council and withdrawing their membership from it, thus weakening the National Council. A major voice of dissatisfaction was from the leaders from the south who wanted to have half of the total council members, so as to have representation of north and south Yemen.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the council has elected Mohammed Basindwa, a former foreign minister, as its president.

Prior to his return from Riyadh, Saleh authorised Vice President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi to negotiate with the protesters and the opposition on his behalf. In his defence, he stated that the revolution which started in Yemen reflecting the demands and aspirations of the youth has now been hijacked by some opportunists and warlords. He also has warned the youths to be aware of the elements of Marxists, the Afghani Taliban and the Houthis in the country.¹¹ However, opposition leader and chief of the Ahmar tribe, Sadeq bin Abdallah Al-Ahmar states that Saleh has been skilfully using both Saudi Arabia and the USA to his advantage. In an interview Al-Ahmar has stated that, "He (Saleh) managed

⁸ "Security Council Press Statement on Situation in Yemen", September 24, 2011, at <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF%7D/Yemen%20SC10394.htm>.

⁹ "Security Council Press Statement on Situation in Yemen", August 9, 2011 at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sc10357.doc.htm>.

¹⁰ "Yemen opposition figures quit National Council", *Reuters*, August 20, 2011, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/20/us-yemen-idUSTRE77J1RJ20110820>.

¹¹ "Saleh: The youth revolution was robbed by opportunists and warlords", *Yemen Observer*, August 19, 2011, at <http://www.yobserver.com/front-page/10021293.html>.

to con America with tales of terrorism. He managed to con Saudi Arabia in a similar way. He used the bogeyman of terrorism against the USA and Saudi Arabia, and with Saudi Arabia, he used an additional bogeyman - that of the Houthis. That's how he managed to fool them both.”¹²

Now Saleh is back in the capital after a successful treatment. His arrival in the capital witnessed more violence and death in the country. Saleh’s arrival has added more confusion to the situation, giving him more leverage to manipulate. After two weeks of his arrival Saleh announced to step down from power without clearing elaborating his future course of action; the protesters still have no faith in Saleh. At present, it seems like since the opposition failed to capitalise on Saleh’s absence, he will now play a vital role in shaping the future direction of the country.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula: The beneficiary of the spring

The continuing protests and the subsequent chaos that followed have allowed the al Qaeda to increase and intensify its operations. Al Qaeda took good advantage of the situation and it was reported that its cadres have joined the protesters against the Saleh regime. Al Qaeda acted swiftly to spread their activities to other areas, while the government concentrated on regime survival and dealt with the protesters on the streets. Before the protests, Saleh tried his best to check al Qaeda activities with the help of USA and Saudi Arabia. Thus, it was only obvious and expected from al Qaeda that it would strike back at the opportune time. Yemeni government has also claimed that the al Qaeda terrorists are also fighting against the security forces along with the opposition forces.¹³ Since the protests began al Qaeda has reportedly captured several cities like Zinjubar, the capital of Ayban province; al Huta, capital of Lahj province and Rowda in Shabwa province; and after severe clashes has forced the security forces to withdraw. The protests have given al Qaeda an opportunity to re-emerge while it was fighting a protracted and abrasive war against the security forces. Quite visibly, the activities and achievements of al Qaeda during last few months have further pushed the government on its back foot and it would require further initiatives from the government to regain the areas lost to al Qaeda.

Into the future

Yemen is at the crossroads of history facing a huge challenge to take the country out of the political chaos and lead to peace and economic development. It is time for the political

¹² See *Yemen Post*’s “Interview with Yemeni Opposition Leader Sadeq bin Abdallah Al-Ahmar”, *Yemen Post*, June 25, 2011, at <http://yemenpost.net/Detail123456789.aspx?ID=3&SubID=3753&MainCat=4>.

¹³ “80 Al Qaeda insurgents killed in south Yemen battles”, *Yemen Observer*, August 24, 2011, at <http://www.yobserver.com/front-page/10021305.html>.

leaders and parties to show rationality and statesmanship by adopting the right path for the country's future. Scramble for power among the leaders at this stage would only lead to further disintegration of the country.

Besides the political instability, the internal security situation in the country also poses challenges for any future government. Al Qaeda, Houthis and Southerners would continue to put pressure on the government with their own sets of demands. To deal with such varied and multiple threats, the government would require huge amount of money, apart from the required political will. The impoverished nation is already depending heavily on foreign aid, and with the spiralling problems aid dependency would increase even further. If the political chaos and the attached security threats continue for some more time, Yemen may go the Somalia way in the coming times – characterised by absence of a strong central government, lack of consensus among the political parties, lawlessness, division along the Shia-Sunni ethnic line, increasing space for the radical Islamists, breakdown of economy, unemployment and other associated problems. Inside Yemen today, there are all the ingredients existing for a civil war. If the leaders fail to reach a solution and allow the chaos and insecurity to continue, the country may plunge into a long term debacle. The fragile situation demands that the UN intervene in Yemen and help in brokering a consensus between the government and the opposition. In the absence of any credible action from the UN, external powers would try to meddle in Yemen, and may impose their own agenda on the country.

If Saleh accepts the GCC initiative and allows the power transition to happen, then the whole process would become less violent and understandably, end his rule. For this to happen, Saleh demands that a suitable successor be chosen so that power does not fall in to the wrong hands. Thus, Yemen is stuck in a paradoxical and ambiguous situation. While it is widely believed that regime change is necessary, in the absence of reliable alternate leadership, the risk of chaos and instability looms large. It would take some time for the dust to settle down before an election is held to elect the future government – which would test the popularity of both Saleh as well as the protesters on the streets. But in the meantime, Yemenis must find a way out to steer the country out of the present turmoil.