



Volume 5, Special Edition No. 10

September 4, 2011

Yemen Rivalries

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While Syria and Libya grabbed up most of the summer's headlines in the Arab world, Yemen continued to be riven by conflict. The chaos now afflicting Yemen is at once a popular revolt, and a struggle between tribal elites. What began as a massive grassroots uprising has now escalated into violent conflict between forces loyal to President Ali Abdullah Salih, and armed members of the Hashid tribal confederation. According to recent unconfirmed reports, US and Saudi pressure has finally resulted in Salih's acceptance of the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) proposal that he step down in exchange for immunity from prosecution.¹ A brief look back on the nature of Salih's reign and his relations with other Yemeni elites may be helpful in anticipating what will transpire if and when Salih leaves office.

Salih assumed the presidency of North Yemen in July 1978, during the oil boom. Hundreds of thousands of Yemenis worked in the oil-rich Gulf Arab States, remitting approximately \$700 million a year to their families. When oil prices dropped in the mid-1980s, so did the amount of independently-held wealth in Yemen. Around the same time, oil and natural gas were discovered there. Oil quickly became Yemen's primary export, bringing in roughly the same amount of

¹ Mohammed Ali Salih, "Saleh won't be returning to Yemen- sources," *Asharq Alawsat*, August 8, 2011, accessed August 15, 2011, <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=26175>.

annual revenue that remittances had in the 1970s.² But now, this revenue was in the hands of the state — i.e. Salih. By 2010, oil exports accounted for about 70 percent of state revenue.³

Salih consolidated power through systemic cronyism.⁴ Members of Salih's tribe of Sanhan were entrusted with the top military and security positions, minimizing the chances of a coup. Salih's eldest son, Ahmad Ali Abdullah, has headed the Special Republican Guard since 1999. Two of Salih's nephews hold top positions in the Central Security Forces and the National Security Bureau. Salih used state funds to buy the loyalty of elites from outside of his Sanhan tribe. Non-military government positions and sweetheart business deals were the most common rewards. Even certain members of opposition political parties were part of this system. In this way, even the opposition could be smeared with charges of corruption.

Before the Arab Spring, it was no secret that Ali Abdullah Salih was grooming his son Ahmad to replace him as president. Nor was it a secret that this angered other men who wanted the job, like General Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar, who by some accounts had been promised that he would succeed Salih after he left office.⁵ Salih's other notable opponents in recent years included Sheikh Hamid al-Ahmar and his brother, Sheikh Sadiq, of the al-'Usaymat tribe — prominent sheikhs of the Hashid tribal confederation, which includes Salih's tribe. Hamid is also a prominent member of the opposition *Islah* Party. During the 2006 presidential election campaign, Hamid al-Ahmar was an outspoken critic of Salih and supporter of his opponent. In a 2009 interview on *al-Jazeera*, al-Ahmar went as far as to call for Salih's resignation.⁶ Hamid's brother Sadiq is also described in some reports as being the top sheikh of the Hashid confederation. The consensus among Yemen's elites in recent years is that the Sanhan tribe was taking more and more slices from a shrinking pie.

Economic and demographic trends in Yemen are extremely problematic. Thirty-five percent of Yemen's 24 million citizens live on less than two dollars a day. With a literacy rate of only 62 percent, an unemployment rate of 35 percent, and

² Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* [New York: Cambridge UP, 2000], pp.160-2.

³ US Department of State. "Background Note: Yemen" May 20, 2011. [online] Available: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35836.htm#econ>

⁴For more on political corruption in Yemen, see: April Longley Alley, "The Rules of the Game: Unpacking Patronage Politics in Yemen," *The Middle East Journal* 64.3 (Summer 2010) pp. 385-409.

⁵ Longley Alley, 407.

⁶ Longley Alley, 402.

45 percent of the population under the age of 15, it is little wonder that Yemenis quickly emulated the mass demonstrations that erupted in Tunisia and Egypt at the end of 2010 and beginning of 2011.⁷

During the last eight months, several turning points have punctuated the gradual unraveling of Salih's power. Mass protests began in mid-January, with opposition leaders calling for Salih's immediate resignation. Salih refused, but offered not to run for reelection after his current term ends in 2013. On March 18, things took a turn for the worse when 52 protestors were killed and over a hundred wounded, most by roof-top gunmen in the capital, Sanaa. After the March 18 massacre, government and military figures began defecting to the opposition. Chief among those was the aforementioned General Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar, a former ally of the president. Ali Mohsin dispatched forces under his command to protect protestors in the capital. Yemen's ambassador to the United Nations quit on March 20, along with four other government ministers and seven foreign ambassadors.⁸ Sheikh Sadiq al-Ahmar called on Salih to leave power peacefully.

The next major turning point came the week of May 23, when heavy fighting erupted in Sanaa between Republican Guard soldiers and armed Hashid tribesmen around the home of Sadiq al-Ahmar. There are conflicting reports as to what exactly caused the outbreak, but the fighting quickly escalated as hundreds of Hashid tribesmen rallied to the capital in defense of their sheikh. With the exception of the President's own tribe, the Hashid tribal confederation joined a growing coalition against the President's regime. While Salih's patrimonial system reflected the fact that he controlled the purse strings, the Yemeni state has never enjoyed a monopoly on the use of force.

This became clear by the next turning point, on June 3, when an explosion ripped through the mosque in President Salih's compound while he prayed. Salih was flown to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment, and Vice-President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi was left in charge. Salih's son remained in control of the Republican Guard forces battling the tribesmen. Some Yemeni analysts accused

⁷ See: "World Bank Data- Yemen, Rep." accessed August 18, 2011, <http://data.worldbank.org/country/yemen-republic>, and "Population Under Age 15 (percent)," accessed August 18, 2011, <http://www.globalhealthfacts.org/data/topic/map.aspx?ind=82>.

⁸ Tom Finn, "Yemen military commanders join opposition as tanks take to the streets," *The Guardian* March 21, 2011, accessed August 18, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/21/yemen-military-commanders-opposition-tanks>.

Salih of intentionally inciting a civil war, believing that foreign powers with an interest in Yemen's internal stability would have no choice but to support him.

Throughout his 33-year rule, Salih has governed by manipulating, co-opting, or intimidating his political rivals. While this was an effective strategy against rival elites, it has been irrelevant in the face of a mass uprising. When faced with the specter of tens of thousands of ordinary Yemenis protesting, Salih had only two options: accede to their demands and step down, or attempt to crush them. He chose the latter, and in so doing, he shattered the patrimonial system that kept him in power for so long. The violence inflicted upon the unarmed demonstrators has rendered Salih illegitimate in the eyes of most Yemenis, so much so that rivals like Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar and Sheikh Sadiq al-Ahmar have a window of opportunity to defy Salih's authority to an extent that would have been unthinkable even one year ago.

Should Salih finally accept the GCC's proposal, he would have one month to hand over power to Vice-President Hadi, who in turn would serve as the interim president of a unity government. New elections would have to be held two months thereafter. The opposition party *Islah*, the Joint Meeting Parties, the Yemeni Socialist Party, and several others would compete alongside Salih's own General People's Congress, which enjoyed absolute majorities in every election during Salih's reign.

Former allies of Salih publicly broke with the President because they now see his regime as a sinking ship. It would not be surprising if General Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar runs in the next presidential election. After the spectacle of having his soldiers protect the protestors in Sanaa, he can cast himself as a hero of the uprising — despite his 30-year tenure as a powerful insider in Salih's regime.

It is still too soon to know whether the GCC proposal will facilitate a stable transfer of power in Yemen, whether the elections will be reasonably fair, and whether the victor will be a member from one of the opposition parties or a defector from Salih's camp. Salih once famously remarked that ruling Yemen is "like dancing on the heads of snakes." The one event in Yemen that can be expected with some certainty is that Salih's 33-year long dance will soon be at an end.

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The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

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