

Fast-Tracking the Arab Spring in Yemen

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The quick fall of Yemen's capital could push the country toward the Syrian model of sectarian strife, but it also presents an opportunity for reform led by a new political player.

On September 21, Ansar Allah (AA), also known as the Houthis, stunned the world by taking over the Yemeni capital of Sana in a single day. Although largely left out of the international spotlight, this takeover marks an important regional development and could provide Yemen with an historic opportunity.

The northern tribal Zaidi identity is a composite of geography (northern mountains), religion (Zaidism, an offshoot of Shiite Islam), and tribalism, with an imam as its leader. For much of Yemen's history, these imams controlled most of northern Yemen; some powerful imams even extended their control to regions in lower and southern Yemen. However, the 1962 revolution in North Yemen, which established a republican regime, ended their rule, though the dominance of the Zaidi tribal elite remained intact. Yet when Ali Abdullah Saleh, a Zaidi tribal officer, took power in 1978, he ushered in a new era of dominance by the northern military-tribal elite. Saleh favored the Zaidi tribes around Sana, whereas the northern tribes of Sadah province, most loyal to the Zaidi imam, were excluded from development, social services, and job opportunities. Although the near absence of the state allowed the Zaidi imams to continue providing significant spiritual and even temporal leadership, gross incursions of extremist Sunni schools into the heart of Zaidism in Sadah propelled the youth there to resort to other means of resistance in order to voice their grievances.

The establishment of AA is the culmination of these efforts. Despite its traditional ideological roots, AA is a modern political and military organization. It is modeled after Hezbollah in Lebanon, emphasizing discipline, credibility, and effective grassroots work, providing basic services to its community, enforcing rule of law, and delivering swift justice. As such, its governance model stands in sharp contrast to the corrupt and inefficient government in the rest of Yemen.

AA came to prominence after defeating government forces in a series of wars from 2004-2009. Although it participated in the 2011 popular uprising against Saleh, it did not join the opposition coalition or participate in the

national consensus government tasked to manage the political transition. Later on, however, AA and the Southern Hirak, a movement demanding the restoration of the Southern Yemeni state, agreed to participate in the National Dialogue Conference and the Constitution Drafting Committee. These positive steps were rebuffed over the last two years as the Sunni military-tribal-political alliance led by the Sunni Islah Party and General Ali Mohsen, the commander who led the wars against Sadah, prevented AA from joining the government. Moreover, the alliance was accused of replacing government officials from the former General People's Congress (GPC) with Islah members.

This systematic exclusion brought the northern Zaidi tribal elite of the GPC and AA into the same camp. In the context of the Arab Spring that ended the Zaidi tribal elite's monopoly of power and called for a more inclusive political system, disaffection with Islah and its allies was rampant among tribal sheikhs around Sana. AA has tapped into this dissatisfaction and attacked Sunni extremist strongholds in Sadah and its neighboring provinces. After an initial failed attempt to stop that advance, the Islah Party decided not to fight AA.

At the military level, the transitional government, led by President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, a Sunni southern general who served as Saleh's vice president until 2012, made restructuring the military and security services a priority. Over the following two years, dozens of commanders in both services were replaced with new commanders loyal to him. However, corruption, tribal patronage, and lack of military discipline have kept both services fractured and ineffective, with many mid-level officers, and even some top commanders, still loyal to Saleh or his rival, General Mohsen.

This situation was made clear when a Mohsen loyalist commanding a key unit in Amran, 30 miles north of Sana, disobeyed the commander-in-chief's orders to hand over his command to another officer. This gave AA the opportunity to advance on Amran, kill the commander, and take over the city on July 9. This swift victory showed Hadi that his government, paralyzed by petty partisan politics and weakened by division and corruption, was powerless to stop AA from advancing towards Sana. All that was needed was a pretext.

On July 30, the opportunity presented itself -- the government's decision to remove fuel subsidies sparked a public outcry. AA's alliance with the ousted Saleh led them to mobilize Saleh loyalists (from the GPC, military, and tribes) and other disaffected and heavily armed tribesmen to participate in sit-ins strategically located near major military installations north, south, and west of Sana. These sit-ins fostered friction with military units in the area, and by mid-September they had turned into a full-scale war with Mohsen loyalists in the northern district of Sana. In two days, AA had taken control of the city and looted the armaments of military units that belonged to General Mohsen. On the second day, hostilities were formally ended with the signing of the "Peace and Partnership Agreement," paving the way for a new era of northern Zaidi tribal elite ascendancy, this time with a strong sectarian undertone and links to Iran.

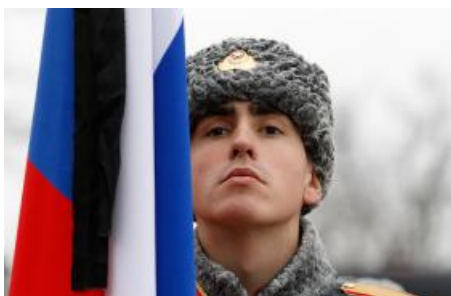
As the main Islamist party in Yemen the past two decades, Islah was hurt by these recent developments. But its re-entrenchment in Sunni provinces, including Ibb and Taizz, highlight that Islah was bruised, not broken. The biggest loser is the former ruling party, GPC. Encouraged by Saleh to support AA, members of GPC have no incentive to now abandon this newly crowned political force. It is therefore likely to emerge weaker than Islah.

For the first time in modern history, Yemen is dominated by two sectarian political groups: AA and Islah. If mismanaged, this could lead to serious polarization, fast-tracking Yemen toward the Syrian model of sectarian strife. However, the primacy of an outsider force such as AA is also an opportunity to catalyze reforms. Unlike the traditional Sana-based political elite whose corruption has frustrated reforms and paralyzed the state, AA is still unscathed as a new political player. Their commitment to good governance and to fighting corruption coupled with a strong prime minister, fully supported by the president, can help Yemen carry out true and necessary reforms that could put the country back on a path of economic growth. It is an opportunity that should not be missed.

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