

Yemen's Successful Revolution

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Brief Analysis

With help from Washington and the GCC, Yemen's political transition has been successful thus far, though deeper reform efforts will test the new government's stability.

The scheduled conclusion of Yemen's National Dialogue Conference this week brings to an end the latest stage of a unique experiment in political transition in the Middle East. Most of Yemen's stakeholders participated in the six-month dialogue process, intensely discussing the various issues facing their country. The idea of conducting such a dialogue was formally espoused in the 2011 power-sharing agreement brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). That agreement, which facilitated the transfer of power from former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, allowed Yemen to avoid most of the extreme violence that has plagued other countries in the region and enjoy a relatively peaceful Arab Spring. Although many of Yemen's problems will require years if not decades to overcome, a democratic process has begun that augurs well for nonviolent resolution of those challenges. As other countries continue to struggle with their own transitions, it is useful to take stock of how Yemen got to this point and to identify opportunities for further international support.

SALEH'S REGIME

The success of Yemen's revolution has much to do with how the country practiced politics during Saleh's rule, and how the regime dealt with political opposition groups. Broadly speaking, Saleh attempted to include as much of society as possible into the state's largesse in order to broaden his support base (though these efforts were much less evident in certain areas, particularly the south). He not only allowed a political opposition to exist, but provided a role for it in government, engaging with opposition figures in a manner that empowered them. Although Saleh's General People's Congress Party was clearly in charge, it did not have absolute authority and was open to criticism -- the state did not systematically imprison opposition critics or comprehensively suppress their supporters.

For their part, political opposition groups were not monolithic. Their members espoused disparate views (socialism,

tribalism, and so forth), which helped reduce the influence of Islamists while cultivating a new generation of leaders with a variety of political voices.

Although the regime was not shy about using security forces to impose its will, it typically refrained from doing so unless political efforts had failed, and then usually in a limited manner. In the case of the Houthi rebels, this policy was ineffective, and the group created its own autonomous political zone in the north. Indeed, the state's lack of absolute territorial control gave various groups a great deal of freedom, such that opposition grievances often centered on the lack of government presence as much as regime abuses.

THE YEMENI SPRING

Among other factors, Yemen's geographical isolation and largely homogenous population contributed to the relatively peaceful transition from Saleh to President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi. Given its location at the end of the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen saw little outside meddling by regional powers or transnational groups, which prevented political conflict from escalating. When foreign powers did intervene, it was frequently at the government's behest (e.g., many Gulf states sent aid). And while deep political fissures persist in the form of groups like the Southern Movement and Houthi irredentists, much of the population is ethnically similar. This means that questions of identity, respect, and past grievances are limited and unable to fan the flames of ethnic nationalism or provoke sectarian clashes, allowing politicians to focus on other issues.

Western and GCC policy priorities have also played a central role in the transition. The rise of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) clarified for many Western governments what might happen if Yemen fell into civil war. One key development was the expanded role of former counterterrorism advisor John Brennan, who became Washington's main interlocutor with Saleh. From his post in the White House, Brennan -- who had a long history with Yemen based on his years as a CIA official in Saudi Arabia -- brought high-level attention to the country, which eliminated bureaucratic hurdles. As a result, the United States provided focused attention and assistance to Yemen, including military advice and support as well as additional civilian assistance. These efforts were complemented by considerable financial and political commitments from GCC states.

MANSOUR HADI'S LEADERSHIP

When Mansour Hadi was sworn in as president in February 2012, he took charge of a government split between Saleh's supporters and newly empowered opposition leaders. He also faced an aggressive AQAP presence in the south and armed standoffs between political factions in the capital. Yet through a combination of effective government initiatives, robust leadership, and well-timed foreign interventions, he was able to beat back al-Qaeda's offensive, demilitarize politics in Sana, and foster an atmosphere of free dialogue about Yemen's problems. In particular, he has strongly supported the National Dialogue, which began in mid-March. Additionally, because some members of the Saleh regime were retained as part of the GCC power-sharing agreement, his political opponents have been divided, giving him more freedom of action and allowing him to benefit from the old government's talent.

Mansour Hadi's efforts to slowly reform the military -- such as promoting professionalism instead of patronage and providing face-saving exits for military leaders too close to the old regime -- have also fostered an atmosphere of tolerance for the transition process. Earlier this year, for example, the government appointed Ahmed Ali -- Saleh's only son, former heir apparent, and head of the Republican Guard under the old regime -- to serve as ambassador to the United Arab Emirates. And when difficulties with Saleh loyalists have proven intractable, Mansour Hadi has appealed to the international community, spurring foreign governments to threaten belligerents and regime stalwarts with asset seizures and sanctions. These targeted interventions have helped the president deal with entrenched power groups.

Since Mansour Hadi does not have a personal political power base, he has sought to balance the interests of Yemen's

diverse groups and build state institutions in order to solidify his position, as opposed to cultivating informal power networks. This has had the unintended effect of fostering stability through stronger government. He has also sought to address the regime's history of abuses by apologizing to southerners and Houthis for past conflicts and facilitating the establishment of a \$1.2 billion fund for former southern civil servants and military officials who were dismissed following the unification of North and South Yemen. These gestures have done much to promote stability. Finally, the president has concluded several international agreements to secure funding for his government and improve Yemen's economic situation through the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the UN.

NEXT STEPS

Although Yemen's political transition has been successful thus far, deeper reform efforts will test the new government's stability. A series of constitutional, political, and economic reforms will likely take place following the conclusion of the National Dialogue Conference. Many of these measures will be difficult to implement, requiring an active American role in support of Mansour Hadi's leadership. U.S. officials should be prepared to publicly and materially back any reforms that meet Washington's objective of stabilizing Yemen. They should also work with the international community to help Sana professionalize its military, modernize its administrative structures, stabilize its economy, and expand its offensive against AQAP. In addition, a period of reform may give Washington an opportunity to rethink its current strategy of heavy reliance on drone strikes against AQAP, and to seek a more enduring partnership with Yemen aimed at improving local governance and security conditions.

Daniel Green is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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