

Yemen: The Political Struggle Continues

Written by Charles Schmitz

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CHARLES SCHMITZ, FEB 9 2012

Many Yemenis were disappointed with the political compromise brokered by the GCC that led to Ali Abdalla Saleh's departure. Most Yemenis wanted Saleh and his associates held accountable for the massacre of protesters over the last year and at the very least they wanted those that committed the atrocities isolated from power. Instead, the GCC plan granted immunity to Saleh and left all of his clan and associates in the very positions from which they orchestrated the violence. So to many Yemenis the GCC compromise did little to advance the demands for substantial change in Yemeni politics and instead appeared to be an imposition of international powers. The United States and Saudi Arabia want stability in Yemen because their primary concern is their own security; political change is only good if it promotes stability, in their view. Democracy, on the other hand, is sometimes quite destabilizing and messy in the short term. As new political parties fight to open a space for themselves in national politics, such as the al-Houthis and the southerners, the country struggles to create new political compromises among the various contenders for power.

The GCC compromise called for an interim government formed by an opposition prime minister with a cabinet divided evenly between the opposition parties and the ruling party. Mohammed Basindawa formed the interim government in December. On Feb 21st there will be elections in which the compromise stipulates that the opposition and the ruling party will only nominate one candidate, the vice-president, Mansour Hadi. This will end Ali Abdalla Saleh's presidency; he is still formally president despite having relinquished his powers to his vice president. This interim government will serve two years with Hadi at the helm during which a new constitution will be written. The new constitution will include proportional government in order to strengthen the power of minority parties and groups. At the end of the two-year interim government, new elections will elect leaders under the new constitution.

Ali Abdalla Saleh is relatively happy with this agreement. The US and Saudi Arabia wanted him out of power in the spring and most thought that his injuries and long convalescence from the assassination attempt signaled his demise. But Ali Abdalla and his relatives retained a firm and violent grip on the chaos in Yemen during the summer and successfully resisted attempts to dislodge them by the combined efforts of the Americans, the Saudis, and the Yemeni opposition. The GCC agreement recognized their entrenched status in Yemeni politics, though their power is related to the control of the security apparatus rather than their legitimate leadership role. The GCC agreement is a realpolitik agreement between the US, the Saudis, and the Yemeni political elite. It does not represent substantial change in Yemeni politics.

Thankfully, however, Yemenis promoting substantial and needed political and economic change have not given up on reform. Since Ali Abdalla Saleh turned his powers over to vice-president, and president elect, Hadi, the protests have continued on both sides. There have been small revolts within various government institutions, including some military units demanding dismissal of leaders considered corrupt or culpable of the violence against protestors. There have been revolts against entrenched leaders in education, in the Air Force, in the election committee bureaucracy, and in government newspapers staffed with those considered corrupt opponents of real change.

On the ruling party's side, there has been a counter-reaction that attempts to stop the tide of change infecting the government bureaucracy. Saleh supporters occupied the streets around al-Thawra newspaper demanding that the Prime Minister's position be split into two positions, one for the opposition and one for the ruling party. Saleh supporters resented the fact that Mohammed Basindawa, from the opposition, was alone given the position. The

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ruling party and its supporters also wanted the military committee, tasked with demilitarizing the political conflict, to have greater ruling party participation.

Thus, the political struggle for Yemen continues despite the GCC agreement. Ali Abdalla Saleh's travels should be seen in the context of this continued struggle over Yemen's future. The United States and Saudi Arabia wanted Ali Abdalla Saleh out of Yemen in order to reinforce the (rather weak) impression that he is actually out of power. Ali Abdalla Saleh turned the tables on the US by requesting a formal visit to the United States as an acting head of state, which he still is legally. The US tried to make it appear as if he were coming only for medical reasons. This decision caused great uneasiness in Democratic Party circles in Washington. Democrats feared it would raise the specter of parallels to Carter's decision to allow the Shah's visit for medical reasons that was followed by the hostage crisis and the consolidation of Khomeini's power in Iran.

Ali Abdalla Saleh complicated matters by declaring that he was in perfect health and in need of no treatment. Instead he came to the United States to demonstrate that he is still a head of state being received as such by the superpower that tried to dethrone him. He is enjoying his visit. Now that he forced the United States to recognize his status as head of state in Yemen, he has declared that he is returning to Yemen to participate in the elections, the very reason that the US and the Saudis wanted him out. Ali Abdalla Saleh appears more adept at these kinds of political games than the US.

Ali Abdalla Saleh has not won the game in Yemen, however. Though the GCC agreement appears to cement an elite compromise with the Yemeni political opposition's acquiescence, the response on the street has been to continue the struggle for real change. Their small intifadas in the bureaucracy empower those in the Yemeni opposition that want to push further towards substantial political change. The southerners and the al-Houthis in Sa'adah have both declared their opposition to the agreement and they are boycotting the symbolic elections on the 21st of February. Mansour al-Hadi is indeed a figurehead, a compromise leader. He has no base of power in Yemen other than his connection to Ali Abdalla Saleh. This may be his true power though, because he will simply oversee rather than try to determine the outcome of the struggles for power that are occurring across all of Yemen at all levels. Though the GCC agreement is disappointing in many ways, it has not closed the door on political change in Yemen thanks to the stubborn struggle of Yemenis for better governance and human dignity.

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