Can a Federal State Solve Yemen's Problems?

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While Yemen's new federal state appears to be a positive solution that avoids the feared "Somalization" of Yemen, the new constitution may not bring the stability the country desperately needs. In the details of the proposed federal state are political agendas that reflect the continuance rather than a resolution of the political struggles that have plagued Yemen. In fact, the decision to divide Yemen into six regions was a last minute effort by the interim president to patch together a conclusion to a stymied National Dialogue that had not been able to resolve core issues dividing the country. The most stubborn political issues facing Yemen are the secessionist movement in the south and the Ansar Allah movement in the north and the borders of the new federated regions were drawn precisely to weaken these two rival powers to the current regime. As such, it is not clear that the new constitution can repair Yemen's torn political fabric. Facts on the ground point to a growing gap between the attempts to rebuild the state in Sana'a and continued fighting in the north, south, and east of Yemen. When the Yemeni president was putting together the committee charged with writing the new constitution, Ansar Allah fighters from the north struck close to the national capital, Sana'a, and the movement's leader declared that it was time for a new national reconciliation and the ending of political games.[1]

The Gulf Initiative[2] was first floated in the spring of 2011 to allow Yemen's long time president, Ali Abdalla Saleh, to peacefully retire while also providing a means for Yemen's political elite to rebuild the state. The Gulf Initiative stipulated a two year interim government comprised of half opposition ministers and half ruling party ministers under the presidency of Saleh's vice president, AbdRabu Mansour Hadi. In addition, the Gulf Initiative created Yemen's much heralded National Dialogue[3] to allow the feuding Yemeni political elite to negotiate solutions to the country's problems before writing a new constitution and holding elections for a new government. Five hundred sixty five delegates from varying political parties, tendencies, regions, genders, and ages came together to solve Yemen's political problems. Thirty percent of the delegates were women, twenty percent were from the youth protestors, and fifty percent were from the south, though many of these southerners supported the northern government in Sana'a, such as President Hadi himself. Only a much smaller group of the southerners were on the committee specifically addressing the southern issue. Major and minor political parties participated as well as important national personalities and tribal leaders. The Dialogue divided its work into committees to address the major issues facing Yemen. These were development, the southern question, state building, good governance, the conflict in the north in Sa'ada, transitional justice, rights and freedoms, the military and security apparatus, and special entities, meaning the protection of particularly vulnerable and underrepresented groups in society.[4] In general, the Dialogue went well and delegates easily agreed to the outlines of a future Yemeni state and society. However, a few issues defied resolution; the southern question in particular frustrated the successful conclusion to the Dialogue.

Southern activists are demanding the reestablishment of the southern state that was dissolved when the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (south) unified with the Yemen Arab Republic (north) in 1990. But while southerners are generally united in rejecting the north, they are deeply divided among many competing political and social factions. The question of who would represent the south in the National Dialogue threatened to derail the National Dialogue even before it began. President Hadi resolved the issue by appointing a list of southerners, most of whom were associates of the president. The head of the southern delegation was Muhammed Ali Ahmed, the former governor of Abyan governorate, the birthplace of the President, and close associate of the president from his days in the PDRY leadership. Hadi contacted Ali Ahmed, who was still living in exile since the war of 1994, specifically to build a coalition of the willing to participate in the National Dialogue. However, not even the president's hand-picked

southern delegation could bridge the gulf that separated the large majority of northern representatives from the smaller southern delegation. The southern delegation lacked sufficient legitimacy in the south, the solutions proposed by the National Dialogue were unacceptable even to the president's hand-picked delegates, and protestors in the south made it clear that the National Dialogue was irrelevant to them. While southerners demanded self-determination, the north equated self-determination with secession, which the north rejected as treason, and the international backers of the Gulf Dialogue feared that secession would further destabilize the country and allow the growth of al-Qaeda.

The National Dialogue did not meet its deadline of September 2013. Negotiations dragged on and international backers feared the Dialogue's failure. As the hour got late in the life of the National Dialogue, the president created a special committee of sixteen members, eight from the south and eight from the north, to deal with the stubborn southern issue. This high level committee tried to find an agreeable solution through the creation of a federal state. Southerners were amenable to the idea but wanted to divide Yemen into two states corresponding to the two states that came together in 1990 to form the current Republic of Yemen. Northerners rejected the two state solution because it appeared to represent de facto secession. Northerners proposed five or six states that divided the south into two states. Southerners rejected this idea as an attempt to increase the already deep divisions within the south and render the south powerless before the north.

The special committee of sixteen was unable to come to an agreeable solution. September passed without a conclusion and international backers pressed the president to conclude the Dialogue so that the process of writing a constitution could begin. International backers were worried that without elections the government would be unable to gain the necessary legitimacy to govern effectively and prevent a slide into political chaos. As a means of concluding the National Dialogue, the president proposed the creation of a committee of technocrats to determine the proper number of states Yemen should be divided into according to "objective" and "scientific" measures. President Hadi did appoint a committee, but it was not a committee of technocrats, but a committee of politicians. In the eyes of the president and his supporters, deciding on the form of the new Yemeni state it was critical to moving forward; to critics, this looked like a political sleight of hand to impose the northern version of federalism. Indeed, the committee met and within a week had chosen to divide Yemen into six states under the new federal government.[5] The decision was met with outcry in many quarters of Yemen, not just the southerners. Ansar Allah, the movement that controls the Sa'ada region rejected the division because it appeared to divide the regions Ansar Allah controlled into multiple states and more importantly it joined Ansar Allah's territory with Sana'a, effectively denying the ability of Ansar Allah to control the local state. It also denied Ansar Allah access to the sea on the Rea Sea coast. The borders of the new regions seemed designed specifically to limit the Ansar Allah politically and economically. The southerners rejected it for the same reason they rejected it before: the south was divided into two states.[6] The eastern part of southern Yemen contains a large proportion of Yemen's oil reserves and the division of the south into an eastern and western region denies Aden, the former capital of the south, control of the oil reserves in the east, thus creating two much weaker southern regions.

While federalism in principle appears a good solution to a country torn by regional movements for autonomy, federalism does not guarantee political consensus. Institutions arise from particular political contexts and reflect the interests and agenda of the dominant political elites. In 2000 Yemen instituted local governance in the form of local councils elected in each district, but the particulars of revenue collections and expenditure control ironically strengthened rather that weakened the central control of the government in Sana'a.[7]Similarly, Yemen's particular version of federalism appears aimed at taming the aspirations of the southern movement and Ansar Allah in the north rather than incorporating these movements into Yemen's body politics. In reality both of these movements may have the political clout to derail any institutional form that does not reflect their interests to a greater degree.

Having determined that Yemen will be divided into six regions, President Hadi is pressing ahead with the writing of a new constitution that will enshrine the federal system. The general expectation seems to be that Hadi's term as transitional president will extend through the year (2014) to allow for the writing of a constitution, a referendum, and then elections for a new government. But given the leader of Ansar Allah's call for a new national reconciliation and the ending of political games, it appears that the road to political stability in Yemen may take much longer than one year and that the current transitional government may not be able to meet the challenge of leading the country to a

peaceful transition.

[1]AlMasdaronline, *"In light of his followers' destroying houses and a government school in Hamdan: Al-Huthi calls for reconciliation."* 10 March 2014, http://almasdaronline.com/article/55476

[2]Akhbaralyom, *"Akhbar al-Yom publishes the complete text of the Gulf Initiative,"* 27 October 2011, http://www.akhbaralyom.net/news_details.php?sid=46687

[3]http://www.ndc.ye/default.aspx

[4]www.ndc.ye

[5] Al-Jazeera, *"Decision to divide Yemen into six regions in a federal government,"* 10 February 2014, http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/f9e75d0d-d420-4a27-828b-46f39a95ccdd

[6] Akbaralyom.com *"The Herak declares its rejection of the division of Yemen and Baoum calls for demonstrations in Aden"* 19 February 2014. http://www.akhbaralyom.net/news_details.php?sid=76522

Abdu Aish, *"Growing rejection of the decision to divide Yemen into regions"* Aljazeera.net, 15 February 2014.http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/5badd428-2986-41d1-903a-2c4dd35001f9

[7]World Bank, *Comprehensive Development Review, Yemen.http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTYEMEN/Overview/20150272/YE-Urban.pdf*

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