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Opinion – The Centrality of Yemen’s Tribal Politics in Peace Efforts

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POORNIMA B, SEP 25 2022

The intractability of the civil war in Yemen is mainly rooted in weak state-society relations fuelled by divided sects, unequal distribution of resources and involvement of external powers. These factors have together intensified through the years and complicated Yemen’s situation. Decades of mistrust and dissatisfaction with the state mechanism and governance have eroded the interaction between the state and society in Yemen. Tribalism is an influential aspect of Yemeni society. It forms a layer of identity that plays a role in social, political and security dimensions. Many political leaders have hailed from powerful tribes like former President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who hailed from the Hashid tribes. Saleh steered through his political career by gaining the support of the elites, including those from the tribes, mainly by pitting one group against the other.

The role of tribes has become more robust and autonomous in Yemen as tribal governance and traditions came to compensate for the lack of a strong central government. Tribal identities generally precede national identities. In a war-torn, fragile state with weak state-society relations, tribal affiliation is more robust, thus, becoming a decisive factor in the trajectory of the conflict. For instance, in Syria, the Islamic State gained tribal support by taking advantage of inter-tribal rivalries and the tensions between Arab tribes and the Kurds. At the same time, the Syrian Defence Forces were also highly reliant on the local tribes to fight off ISIS (Dukhan 2018). A similar situation prevails in Yemen. Tribes have donned a prominent position in deciding the war’s progression. While the tribes have been instrumental in slowing down the momentum of the Houthi movement in several provinces, they have also lost many of their kin, including the Sheikhs or the tribal leaders, as collateral damage (Al-Dawsari 2020).

The inability of the Yemeni government to form a strong core hailed from many variables, of which external intervention played a considerable part. In particular, Saudi Arabia perceived any attempts by the Yemeni government at consolidating state power as threatening its interests. Autonomous groups were motivated to undermine any efforts to strengthen the centre, which was vividly observed in Northern Yemen, especially in the areas near the Saudi Arabia-Yemen border (Okruhlik and Conge 1997, 560; Peterson 2018).

Such interventions from regional and extra-regional powers have impacted state-society relations in Yemen. As groups at the grassroots level increasingly exercised autonomy, a stable government could not sustain itself, and a powerless centre passed down the onus of governance to tribal groups in most parts of the state (Dresch 2009, 7). Even though the tribes managed their ties with the government, they fell victim to co-option and divide and rule policy adopted by the politicians. This phenomenon had ripple effects on elections, press freedom and on the overall development of Yemen.

In protracted conflicts, the tribal sections develop interests and assume important positions, whether to choose whom to support or help in conflict management or transformation efforts. Some tribes remain neutral and help in the mediation processes. They have been responsible for prisoner swaps, protecting civilians and arranging for temporary ceasefires. There have been countless incidents where tribal members have successfully negotiated and contained a high-tense situation (Almashhad Alyemeni 2021).

However, these tribal groups struggle between the Houthis’ impunity and an ineffective central government. This

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disposition, compounded by inadequate political representation, has reduced the efficiency of the tribes' potentialities in managing the conflict. Reports cite that the UN's intervention has sometimes derailed tribal mechanisms to deal with negotiations and settlements at the local level (Al-Dawsari 2021). The tribes had already lost economic assistance from the centre, and losing political and military assistance would highly likely only complicate the conflict.

Many tribes want to see the war end as early as possible. At this juncture, their desperation can sway either way. One possibility is that the tribal leaders could call a truce with the Houthi militia, assuring non-intervention and, in return, ensuring the safety of their tribal areas. This would mean that the tribes will also not fight for the government forces or support them in any way. The other way is that these tribal groups can be given the necessary political autonomy and representation to work with other stakeholders on peace processes from the bottom to the top to bring out a comprehensive arrangement that stops the brutality of the ongoing civil war in Yemen. The tribes would prefer this option as they realise that the Houthis will break truce agreements, as happened multiple times in the past, namely in Bayda in 2020 and Hajour in 2019 (Al-Batati 2020; Al-Ashwal 2019).

The government and its supporters must work on confidence building mechanisms with the tribes as short-term measures to establish a united front for peace efforts. The focus needs to be laid on building state-society relations in the aftermath of the war as part of the post-war reconstruction framework and sustaining stable and just governance. Either way, the tribes have constantly proven their significance to the identity of the Yemeni society. Rather than exaggerating or downplaying the role of tribes, any peace initiative introduced by any well-intentioned party should involve the tribal fraternity and employ their services optimally.

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