1993

Elections and Mass Politics in Yemen

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Embassy of Yemen

Yemen's Presidential Council, May 25, 1990. From left to right: Salim Salih, Vice President Ali Salim al-Bayd, President Ali Abdallah Salih, 'Abd al-Karim al-Arashi and 'Abd al-Aziz 'Abd al-Ghani.

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Yemen's experiment in popular parliamentary elections has shaken things up in the Arabian Peninsula, the last place on earth that the United States wants to see democracy flourish. But internal political differences, profound economic crisis and Saudi hostility puts this achievement at risk.

The Yemeni parliamentary election of April 27, 1993, marks a watershed for the Arabian Peninsula. The multiparty contest for 301 constituency-based seats, and the period of unfettered public debate and discussion that preceded it, represents the advent of organized mass politics in a region where political power has long remained a closely-held family affair. In the weeks after Yemenis

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went to the polls, the regime next door in Saudi Arabia sent armed police to raid a university campus in Riyadh and arrest a professor active in a banned human rights committee. These and other developments in the region may compel the Clinton administration to weigh its democratization rhetoric a little more seriously. When a high-ranking State Department official visited Yemen in mid-May, he followed his pro-forma congratulations with a cautionary note: "I don't think you should look on what you do here as a model for anyone else to follow."[1]

Yemen's commitment to elections accompanied the unification agreement between Ali Abdallah Salih, president of the (North) Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), and Ali Salim al-Bayd, leader of the ruling party in the (South) People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). Following formal unification on May 22, 1990, a five-member Presidential Council headed by Salih held executive power, and the two former parliaments were combined in a unified Chamber of Deputies. Under a constitution approved by national referendum in May 1991, political parties organized openly and most restrictions on association, expression and movement were lifted. The 1991 referendum specified that the elections be held within 30 months of unification, but a combination of technical problems, procrastination and conflicts between "Ali and Ali" (Salih and al-Bayd) postponed polling beyond the November 1992 deadline.

In the months before April, a multiparty Supreme Elections Committee (SEC) drew up 301 districts and established procedures for voter and candidate registration, a 10-day campaign period, write-in ballots, and counting procedures.[2] In early 1993, 2.7 million adults (including 77 percent of eligible males and 15 percent of eligible females) registered to vote. Some 4,800 candidates registered, the majority of them independents.[3] More than 3,600, including 50 women, stayed in the campaign until the end.

Political Space

How did it happen that two erstwhile dictators presided over relatively fair, peaceful multiparty elections?

The answer lies mainly in the conditions that led to unification. The end of the Cold War eliminated the Soviet assistance so essential to the PDRY's survival, and reduced Western and Gulf interests in sustaining inter-Yemeni tensions. Dissidents from each polity had sought refuge in the others' capital, and most independent political movements, organizations and unions were committed to unity. Planners looked to recent oil discoveries along their common frontier to bring in foreign investment and exchange. In short, realizing that in order to maintain power they would have to share power, Ali and Ali agreed not only to merge their polities but to open up the process to wider participation.[4]

The process had some unique facilitating features. Unlike other "democratizing" systems, Yemen inherited two ruling parties that shared power in a delicate, often tense balance during the transitional period, each retaining control of its former military and security apparatuses. The General People's Congress (GPC) was founded by Ali Abdallah Salih in the 1980s as an Egyptian-style amalgam of all political tendencies within Salih's regime. Ali Salim al-Bayd's Yemen Socialist Party (YSP), born during South Yemen's anti-colonial struggle and divided between old-guard Leninists and a growing number of social democrats, was better organized and had a more coherent ideology than the GPC.

This rough two-party equilibrium created space for other political organizations. The Saudi-backed Islah (Reform) Party is a marriage of convenience between Shaikh Abdallah al-Ahmar, the head of the powerful Hashid confederation, and the urban-based Muslim Brotherhood. In 1991, the Islah had led an unsuccessful boycott of the 1991 constitutional referendum because the *shari'a* is stipulated simply as "the main" rather than "the only" source of legislation. The Iraqi-leaning Yemeni Ba'th is much smaller in numbers, but also wields some influence in tribal and military circles through its charismatic leader, Mujahid Abu Shuarib.[5] The most important among some 40 other parties are three Nasirist factions; a *sayyid** group known as al-Haq (Right); Omar al-Jawi's progressive Unionist Party; and the League of the Sons of Yemen led by Abd al-Rahman al-Jifri. Some smaller parties, unable to field a full slate and obtain state campaign financing, ran candidates as "independents."

Despite instances of disorder and violence, and scores of complaints, the outcome indicated a genuine contest. The GPC won 123 constituencies; Islah came in second with 62 seats, mostly from its tribal rather than its Islamist wing; the YSP took 57, mostly in the former PDRY; independents won 47; the Ba'th seven; three Nasirist parties each gained one seat; al-Haq won two, and one district's election was postponed.[6] The YSP claimed that in addition to 57 party members, 13 independent socialists won with its support, and an additional 17 genuinely independent deputies-elect share its vision of the future.[7] Some speculated that Islah, which declined to estimate its unofficial sympathizers, had 30 supporters who won under the GPC banner, plus three independents. By any count, the arithmetic mandated a coalition government.[8]

Domestic Pressures

Arab leaders have promised free elections in the past and not delivered. What made Salih and al-Bayd—neither of whose personal histories indicates a commitment to political liberalism—follow through? The answer lies in societal pressures which took different forms: mass conferences, strikes, demonstrations, political organizations, press commentaries, academic symposia and *maqiyal* or "salons."

Prior to the elections, a series of mass conferences provided outlets for articulate opposition elements. A nine-day Talahum (Cohesion) Conference in December 1991, gathered some 10,000 men; although its banner was the

Sayyid (plural *sadah*) refers to persons claiming descent from Muhammad, the prophet, who comprised a ruling aristocracy in North Yemen prior to the 1962 revolution.

Bakil tribal confederation, urban intellectuals were among the organizers and authors of a 33-point resolution calling for judicial independence, strengthening of representative parliamentary and local bodies, fiscal restraint and management, revitalization of agricultural and services cooperatives, an independent media, environmental protection, free elections within the mandated time-frame, peaceful resolution of tribal conflicts, and other reforms.[9] Some seven other tribe-based but civic-oriented mass conferences in 1992 each issued written demands for the rule of law, pluralism, economic development and local autonomy. The Saba' (Sheba) Conference of Bakil and Madhaj tribes elected a council of trustees, a council of social reform, and follow-up committees to ensure institutional continuity.

This activity culminated with a national conference of representatives of the smaller center and left parties and political organizations, led by Omar al-Jawi. This time, the two ruling parties strove to delay, discourage, coopt and eventually offset what promised to be a major event by holding a simultaneous counter-conference and by arranging the ouster of their opponents from the San'a Cultural Center to the local Sheraton. Well-publicized in the opposition press but ignored by the official media, the center-left conference criticized delayed preparations for the elections and the government's reckless printing of money, and proposed a code of political conduct for political parties.[10] The Ta'iz Conference in November 1992, headed by al-Jifri, went even further in attracting faculty, journalists and professionals; challenging Ta'iz's governor; constituting steering and work councils; and articulating explicit demands for civic and human rights, local elections, and improved local services.[11] Not to be outdone, the Islah organized a 4,000-strong Unity and Peace Conference in December under the slogan "The Quran and the Sunna Supersede the Constitution and the Law."[12]

These conferences, both tribal and urban-based, involving tens of thousands of people, were among the transition period's most important political developments. In response, the regime felt compelled to adopt its own code of political conduct, dismiss the Ta'iz governor, accept the principle of local elections, and adopt a rhetoric of electoral rights.

There were also several outbursts of popular frustration, most notably in December 1992. Outrage with the collapse of the value of the riyal, inadequate services, mounting unemployment, government corruption and postponement of the elections erupted in mass demonstrations against both the state and private merchants in all major cities. Along with strikes and threatened strikes by groups ranging from garbage collectors to judges, the near-riots reminded the government of the power of popular wrath.

On a smaller scale but a more institutionalized basis, numerous independent political organizations emerged. The Committee for the Defense of Human Rights and Liberties, established by liberal university professors, initiated the National Committee for Free Elections (NCFE), in turn spurring the formation of other electoral NGOs. Although they failed on their own terms to guarantee the integrity of the balloting process, they did perform a modest watchdog function and met again after the elections to prepare for the next round. Syndicates, charities and interest groups have been increasingly active.

The press is also significant within the political arena. More than 100 partisan and independent newspapers and magazines, mostly founded since 1990, covered these events. Although the government daily, *Al-Thawra*, and state-run television and radio tend to dominate news coverage, a number of opposition weeklies have a strong readership among the literate, urban, politically active population: *Sawt al-'Ummal (Voice of the Workers)*, based in Aden, has the largest circulation of any paper. Party organs, including *Raay, Al-Tashih, Al-Sahwa* and others, provide critical commentary and information about opposition conferences and independent organizations. There has emerged a press corps of scores of men and several dozen women who more and more approximate a fourth estate, conducting interviews, attending parliament, asking critical questions at press conferences, testing the limits of press law and defending one another against lawsuits.[13]

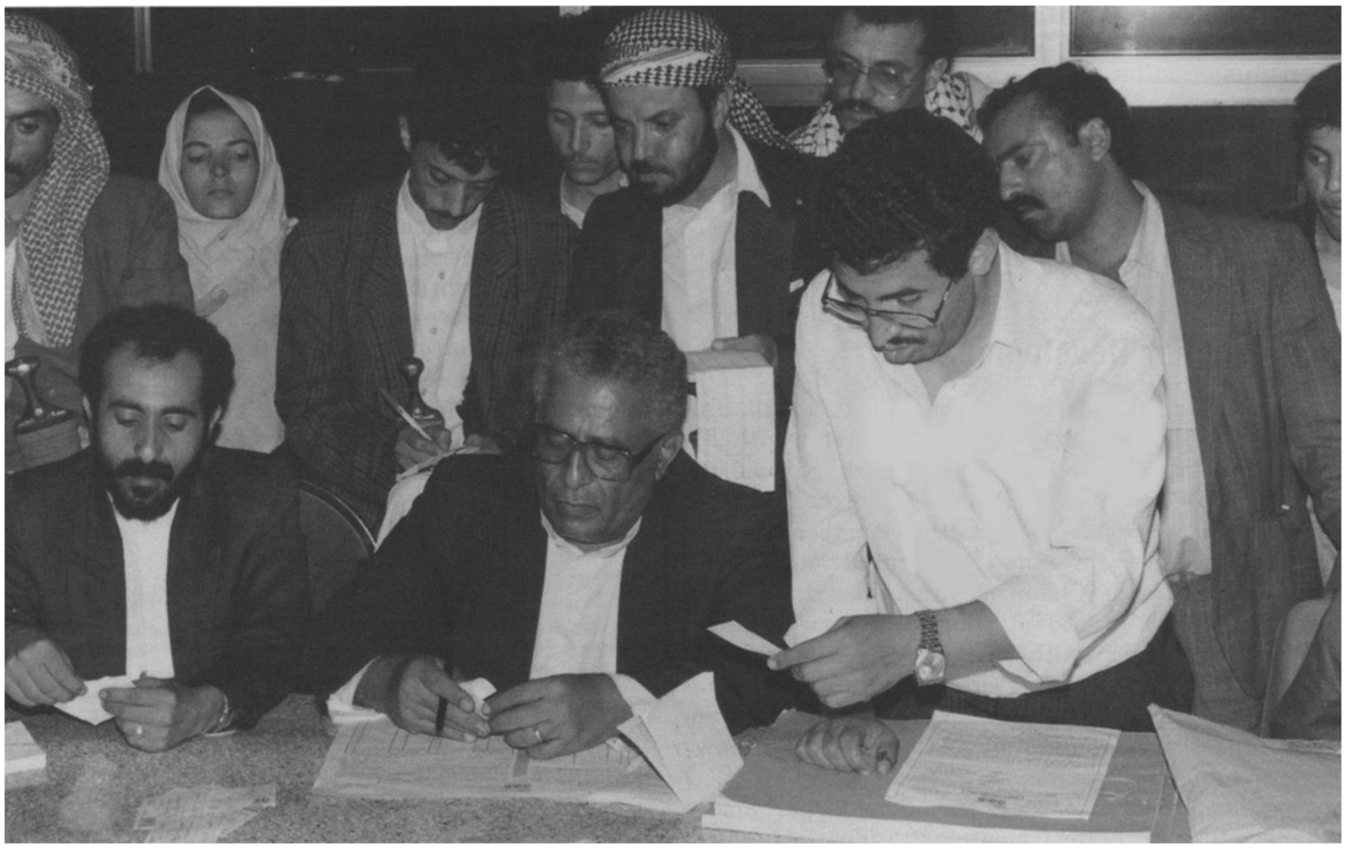
Related to the mass conferences, political organizing and press activity was a trend toward academic symposia on topics such as the constitutional amendments, administrative decentralization, municipal services, and the campaign experience of women candidates. Typically inviting members of each party and independent specialists, such symposia, virtually unheard of in the old North or South Yemen, provided fora for discussion, debate and refinement of ideas which were then reported in the opposition press.

More frequent and informal is an updated variation on the male qat session, or *maqiyal*, which approximates the "salons" of 19th-century Europe.[14] Nowadays these customarily informal social gatherings may elect a chair, select a topic, establish rules of order, and hold organized political discussion on topics ranging from relations with the Gulf to women's rights to exchange rate policy.

Collectively, these civic activities applied considerable pressure on the regime to fulfill its promises, abide by a code of conduct, address its critics and respect political pluralism. Several Yemeni intellectuals have criticized international observers and reporters for presenting an unduly positive picture of the electoral experience, and many participants in the conferences and seminars are quite cynical about their own influence, insisting that they have been marginalized from the political process. By the same token, it is difficult to imagine the events of the past year taking place had they been passive.

External Involvement

Rumors in San'a had the US playing a major if covert role in organizing the elections and the post-electoral compromise. There is scant evidence, though, of Western pressure for political liberalization in Arabia. Although US-Yemeni relations seemed poised to improve immediately after unification in May 1990, they deteriorated after Iraq's



Members of the tallying committee counting ballots in the presence of the candidates or their representatives, San'a. Ron Wolfe

invasion of Kuwait because, in the words of US Ambassador Arthur Hughes, "San'a wanted to maintain normal relations with Baghdad."[15] American aid, never monetarily significant, was slashed from $30 million to $3 million, and Agency for International Development (AID) direct-hire staff reduced from 19 to four or five.

Unity and electoral democracy have never been high on the US agenda for the Arabian Peninsula. Washington habitually defers to Saudi perceptions. James Schelsinger, former CIA director and secretary of defense and a man with some experience in setting the US strategic agenda in the Middle East, asked recently "whether we seriously desire or prescribe democracy as the proper form of government for other societies. Perhaps the issue is most clearly posed in the Islamic world. Do we seriously want to change the institutions of Saudi Arabia? The brief answer is no...."[16]

Once elections were scheduled, though, Washington felt obliged to make a show of support. An embassy memorandum in April 1993 claimed that "We have shaped nearly every program to strengthen Yemen's emerging democratic institutions and to underline US support for this development...."[17] Deputy Assistant Secretary of State David Mack arrived in early May to say that he was "instructed to congratulate the Yemeni people and government."[18]

Accordingly, with $480,000 (mostly for American staff and their travel expenses), AID funded the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), and the International Republican Institute (IRI) to assist election officials and observers.[19] Hastily arranged, these projects had minimal effect. IFES was still conducting training on the eve of the elections, using a syllabus their own team leader considered inadequate. IRI's team of international observers included few Arabic speakers. Even the US Republicans could not overcome neighboring Arab states' reluctance to have their citizens observe the process. The IRI team included one person from the United Arab Emirates and a Bahraini who arrived on a tourist visa. NDI's plan to organize volunteer Yemeni monitors for each of the 7,000 polling stations was a fiasco, and illustrated the NDI's lack of familiarity with an Arab environment.[20]

US press coverage was favorable, as were the reports of these US and international observer groups. But Washington's reaction was qualified by an obvious concern that pluralism not spread to other parts of the Peninsula. The State Department's Mack emphasized that "one election does not make a democracy" and that US support is more likely to consist of corporate investments than restored levels of aid. While holding that Yemen would have to take further steps toward democracy before satisfying US standards, and agreeing that countries have the right to choose the style of democracy that best suits their internal environments, Mack then cited Kuwait's more controlled, limited-participation poll last August as a precedent for Yemen![21]

US and Gulf pressures may have been a factor in Yemen's appointment of a new foreign minister, Muhammad Salim Basindwa, who publicly disavowed Yemen's Gulf war stance and spent much of his time away from the fray courting a rapprochement with the Gulf monarchies.[22] Ambassador Hughes announced a modest $1.7 million increase in US assistance, but made it clear that improved Yemeni relations with the Gulf are more important to Washington than civil rights and political pluralism.[23]

Post-Election Developments

In the new parliament's first session, Shaikh Abdallah al-Ahmar, the Islah leader, won the speakership with 223 votes. Balloting for three deputy speakers returned one each from GPC, Ba'th and YSP. A package of constitutional amendments put immediately to the Chamber proposed replacing the existing five-man Presidential Council, technically selected by the Chamber, with a US-style two-term president and vice president; creating an upper house (a Consultative Council) with equal representation for each governorate; and mandating elections for the local councils, district administrators and governors.[24] An Islah-proposed amendment would require that all Yemeni laws conform to *shari'a*.

Pending discussion of these amendments, parliament extended the term of the transition Presidential Council, with three Congress members and two Socialists, through October. Prime Minister Abu Bakr al-Attas of the YSP, asked to form the new government, appointed 15 ministers from the GPC, eight Socialists, six from Islah, and Abu Shuarib of the Ba'th.[25] Only a third of these 30 ministers were new.

A general eight-point government program, whose most sensitive proposal concerned the long-delayed merger of the two armies, was put to parliament for a vote of confidence in early July.[26] But just when bargaining and compromises seemed to produce a workable coalition, the deputies balked. For more than a week in late July and early August, al-Ahmar pounded his gavel in a vain attempt to restore order as a raucous debate raged over the program, the constitutional amendments, the composition of the Presidential Council, and unification of the armed forces. After an alternative program drafted by parliamentary committee was presented, 260 deputies demanded to address the floor, threatening to drag on the debate endlessly. Finally a vote of confidence on the program passed on the implicit premise that the substance of the debate would be deferred to deliberations on the constitutional amendments package. As the Chamber went into recess in early August, the Islah and the Socialists were each threatening to withdraw from the coalition unless their respective demands for *shari'a* law and the vice presidency were met.

When parliament reconvened in September, a three-party committee was formed to discuss the proposed constitutional amendments, now revised to concentrate more power in the hands of the chief executive. Critics, including the newly-formed opposition coalition of five small parties, many Socialists, and independent intellectuals, contended that the current constitution has not yet been implemented, and that the continuing focus on the composition of government institutions only served to divert attention away from a deepening economic crisis which promises to grow more acute as a World Bank-IMF structural adjustment program is put into effect. Popular ratification of the political establishment has not diminished profound disagreements over basic issues of governance and accountability, and more than a few thoughtful Yemenis fear that even the startling accomplishments of the last several years—unification and participatory politics—remain vulnerable to hostile forces in the country and in the region. ■

Footnotes

1 *Financial Times*, May 14, 1993.

2 SEC Technical Committee final report, *al-Taqrir al-khatami l'lijnah al-faniah* (San'a, n.d.).

3 SEC Information Committee, "Parliamentary Elections 27th April, 1993," San'a. The low registration rates for women have been attributed to lack of separate registration facilities in many constituencies; the requirement of photographs for voter registration; exceptionally high rates of illiteracy among women; and, in some places, outright discouragement of women from voting. The conservative Islah, while discouraging women from running, actively recruited female voters.

4 Conversations with Muhammad Zabarah, Abd al-'Aziz Masaud, and Hamud al-'Udi, all of San'a University. On the economic aspects, see Sheila Carapico, "The Economic Dimension of Yemeni Unity," *Middle East Report* #184 (September-October 1993), pp. 9-14.

5 Despite antagonism between their backers, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, the leaders the Islah and the Ba'th share links to Yemen's tribal milieu.

6 *Al-Thawrah*, May 2, 1993. After hearing appeals, the Supreme Court recommended recounts in six districts and re-elections in four, including one Hodeida constituency where the assassination of a GPC candidate days before the election forced its suspension.

7 YSP press conference, April 30, 1993; SEC press conference, May 1, 1993.

8 Seat counts did not accurately reflect the popular vote: 28 percent for the GPC, 18 percent for the Socialists, 17 percent for Islah, 29 percent for independents, and the remainder for 10 smaller parties. *Al-Quds*, May 13, 1993. The official government press put the GPC ahead of independents.

9 See *Al-Mustaqbal*, December 22, 1991; and the interview with Shaikh Abd al-Wahab Muhammad Sinan, *Yemen Times (YT)*, December 25, 1991.

10 See the articles by Muhammad Abdul-Malik al-Mutawakkil in *YT*, August 12 and August 19, 1992; and "National Conference's Political Communique," *YT*, November 25, 1992.

11 Ahmad No'man al-Madhagi, "Assessing the Taiz Conference," *YT*, December 9, 1992.

12 Ahmad No'man al-Madhagi, "Yemen's Right Flexes its Muscles," *YT*, December 30, 1992.

13 Abd al-Aziz al-Saqqaf defeated a suit brought against him for criticizing the president in *Yemen Times*, giving hope to Muhammad Abd al-Rahman of *Al-Tashih* and *Sawt al-'Ummal*, accused of similar "crimes."

14 Women also have qat sessions but have not been observed in this new, political mode.

15 Yemen-American Friendship Association (YAFA) seminar on US-Yemeni relations, San'a, July 22, 1993.

16 "The Quest for a Post-Cold War Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 72, 1, p. 20.

17 USIA/San'a, unclassified cable.

18 Interview with Ahmad No'man al-Madhagi, *YT*, May 16, 1993; and group discussion with Mack, May 9, 1993.

19 The NDI and the IRI are both affiliates of the quasi-official National Endowment for Democracy. These US funds were granted to US institutions, and not given as assistance to the Yemeni government.

20 Ahmad Noman al-Madhagi, unpublished paper (on election observers), April 1993.

21 See footnote 18.

22 See *Al-Islah*, August 3, 1993, reporting Saudi acceptance of Yemeni democracy.

23 Ambassador Hughes' remarks at YAFA Symposium. In the meantime, university professors and lawyers organizing a Saudi Organization for Shari'a Rights were arrested for crimes including smuggling tapes of Yemeni political campaigns and parliamentary debates.

24 The first of several versions of the amendments proposed that the vice president, Consultative Council and local officials up to and including governors would be elected; a later version called for election only of district officials. See Abu Bakr al-Saqqaf, "Malahuzat fi al-Inqalab al-Disturi," part 2, *Al-Mustaqbal*, August 1, 1993.

25 *Al-Thawra*, May 31, 1993.

26 *Al-Raay*, July 6, 1993