

5-3-2011

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Recommended Citation

Carapico, Sheila. "No Exit: Yemen's Existential Crisis." *Middle East Report Online*, May 3, 2011, 1-7.

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No Exit

Yemen's Existential Crisis

by Sheila Carapico | published May 3, 2011

A venal dictatorship three decades old, mutinous army officers, dissident tribal sheikhs, a parliamentary opposition coalition, youthful pro-democracy activists, gray-haired Socialists, gun-toting cowboys, veiled women protesters, northern carpetbaggers, Shi'i insurgents, tear gas canisters, leaked State Department cables, foreign-born jihadis -- Yemen's demi-revolutionary spring has it all. The mass uprising in southern Arabia blends features of the peaceful popular revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia with elements of the state repression in Libya and Syria in a gaudy, fast-paced, multi-layered theater of revolt verging on the absurd.

Whether the drama will end in glory or tragedy remains to be seen. But indications are not promising. Already, President 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih has stalled and contrived to avoid signing a late April deal brokered by Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) neighbors desperate to restore a semblance of stability in the most populous corner of the Arabian Peninsula. The GCC extracted a verbal promise from Salih to resign the presidency after a period of 30 days. But convincing him to make good on his pledge under conditions satisfactory to Yemeni elites, the pro-democracy movement and interested foreign parties is a gargantuan task, requiring more diplomatic legerdemain than has been brought to bear so far. On April 30, instead of signing onto the proposed agreement, Salih sent tanks firing live ammunition to clear some 1,500 campers from a central square in the Mansoura district of the southern port city of Aden. 'Abd al-Latif al-Zayani, secretary-general of the six-nation GCC, who had flown to the Yemeni capital of Sanaa to meet with Salih, returned to Saudi Arabia red-faced and empty-handed.

Under the Bush and particularly the Obama administrations, the United States has been deeply implicated in Yemen, which emerged in the late 2000s as a haven and launching pad for the Arabian Peninsula branch of al-Qaeda. Especially since the Christmas 2009 "crotch bomber" attempted to detonate an explosive device hidden in his underwear on an airplane in Detroit, the US has spent up to \$300 million upgrading counter-terrorism, military and internal security forces loyal to Salih. The Pentagon provided helicopters, armored vehicles, ammunition, surveillance technology, Humvees, night-vision goggles and other military equipment, as well as training, to its Yemeni counterparts. Classified cables released by WikiLeaks show that this assistance increased despite the Salih regime's widely recognized backsliding from democratization and toward repression, as well as plentiful red flags in 2009 and 2010 that American-made weapons were being used against domestic enemies. Gulf and French officials were also frank with the State Department in their assessments of the regime's shattered legitimacy. [1] Indeed, as early as 2005, the US ambassador in Sanaa wrote a cable envisioning scenarios including Salih's fall to the legal parliamentary opposition, plotters among his inner circle or mass popular protests. [2] No one could have predicted the confluence of all three. But Washington, forewarned, might better have hedged its bets. It has yet to do so.

Over \$1 billion in additional US military assistance already in the pipeline has been frozen in light of the spring's events. Hesitant to distance itself from Salih and low on sympathy for the protesters, the US was upbeat about the prospects for the face-saving GCC agreement to be sealed by the end of April. The Embassy in Sanaa announced that it was "distressed" and "disturbed" by the "violence, April 27, that killed [12] and injured hundreds of Yemeni

citizens...on the eve of signing an historic agreement...that will achieve through peaceful, democratic and constitutional means a transition of authority leading to new presidential elections in July 2011." Its press release urged "Yemeni citizens" to show good faith by "avoiding all provocative demonstrations, marches and speeches in the coming days," adding coyly: "We also urge government security forces to refrain from using violence against demonstrators."

The Central Players

At center stage in the Yemeni potboiler is President 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih, barricaded in a fortified palace compound in the capital behind Revolutionary Guards and US-armed Special Forces commanded by his son and one-time heir apparent Ahmad. Peeping over the parapets, Salih delivers nearly nonsensical speeches in his trademark not-quite-literate Arabic inveighing against Zionist instigators and fornicating demonstrators. The revolt against his rule is coordinated from "an operations room in Tel Aviv," he ventured on March 1. On April 18 he denigrated the popular movement as an un-Islamic "mixing of sexes." To these and other pronouncements the throngs jeer and hurl their shoes at the giant video screen in the plaza outside Sanaa University: In video footage of the scene, the footwear looks like flies buzzing around the president's face.

Defiant if not oblivious, Salih announced in late April 50,000 new, unfunded civil service jobs and vowed to relinquish power only "through the ballot box," calling, spuriously, for elections monitored by international observers. "People who resign from their posts and join the revolutions are the symbols of corruption and they do not have agendas for reforming the economic, cultural, social and developmental situation in the country," he told military cadets on April 25. Next, presumably enraged by Al Jazeera coverage of the demonstrations, he accused Qatar, one of the GCC states sponsoring the exit deal, of "inciting and financing chaos."

The partners to the proposed exit deal are the leaders of the so-called Joint Meeting Parties or JMP, a motley coalition of Socialists, Sunni Islamists and other conservatives affiliated with the party known as Islah, and partisans of Nasserist, Baathist and liberal platforms, as well as Islamists from the Zaydi branch of Shi'ism practiced in (northern) Yemen. This legal, parliamentary opposition coalition has been bargaining with the ruling General People's Congress over the rules of the suspended electoral process for several years. It includes prominent national figures like former South Yemeni Prime Minister Yasin Sa'id Nu'man, human rights activist and Sanaa University professor Muhammad 'Abd al-Malik al-Mutawakkil and Islah spokesperson 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Anisi, among others with a measure of "street cred."

Comprised of politicians from both of the two Yemeni polities that unified in 1990, this important group has extensive experience in Yemen's unique National Dialogue of Popular Forces and in electoral and parliamentary politics. With its rotating chairmanship keeping any one star out of the limelight, the JMP has played a pivotal yet ambiguous role in the 2011 political crisis, embracing the demonstrations after they were well underway, refusing Salih's belated February offer to form a coalition government and now conferring with the GCC and other international actors to find an exit from the impasse. The JMP leaders accepted the deal whereby Salih would step down in return for immunity from prosecution for his many crimes and the promise that they would gain substantial parliamentary representation.

The Plotters

When Salih accuses his opponents of sedition, he is referring explicitly to defectors from his inner circle. Two were tagged by US Embassy officials who detected dissension within Salih's original "triumvirate" at least as early as 2005 and again in 2009. This fact alone makes them worth noting. One is Gen. 'Ali Muhsin, Salih's henchman since 1978, head of the First Armored Division and the Northwest Military Command who prosecuted merciless campaigns that vanquished southern secessionists in 1994 and scourged Sa'ada province in the far north in order finally to defeat Zaydi Houthi rebels and their tribal allies in 2010. In both battles, the general called upon radical Sunni jihadis to join the fight against godless Socialists in the south and Zaydi partisans in Sa'ada. US Ambassador Thomas Krajeski described him in 2005 as a sinister arms smuggler whose name was spoken in hushed tones because he was feared and mistrusted by the Houthi rebels, southerners, leftists and others. [3] Subsequent cables revealed the rumor that he was assigned the nearly impossible task of fighting the Houthis in order to ruin his military reputation and thus his political ambitions. There is strong evidence, as well, that during its intervention in the conflict in 2010 the Saudi Air Force was given targeting recommendations to strike coordinates that turned out to be 'Ali Muhsin's command headquarters. [4] The general's March 19 defection and deployment of tanks to protect the demonstrators from forces loyal to the president was thus no surprise. Subsequent skirmishes could be the harbinger of a civil war between factions of the military.

In blogs, interviews and Facebook postings, pro-democracy spokespersons made it clear that they were not fooled by cynical turncoats jockeying for power but hardly interested in liberal democracy. When 'Ali Muhsin's troops deployed to the square outside Sanaa University, the demonstrators initially cringed, thinking he was coming to destroy them.

The other power broker, who broke ranks after at least 50 peaceful protesters were murdered on March 18, is Hamid al-Ahmar, the most politically ambitious of the ten sons of the late 'Abdallah bin Husayn al-Ahmar, paramount chief of the Hashid tribal confederation, long-time speaker of Parliament and stalwart of the original triumvirate backing Salih's rule. Although not his Reaganesque father, as a member of Parliament, part of the Supreme Committee of the Islah party, a millionaire businessman and a prominent figure in the Hashid confederation, Hamid is able to draw large crowds in the family's hometown of 'Amran. Salih is himself a Hashid.

US embassy cables made available by WikiLeaks indicate that Hamid al-Ahmar has been maneuvering against Salih since soon after his father's death in late 2007. One cable from August 31, 2009 quotes him calling Salih "the devil" and his son Ahmad and nephews "clowns." According to the same State Department missive, he promised to organize anti-Salih demonstrations if and when he could persuade 'Ali Muhsin to go along and also enlist Saudi assistance. A second cable dated the same day put al-Ahmar among a small group of insiders blaming Salih for "wrong-headed policies" contributing to "Yemen's myriad problems" who may be "truly concerned about the fate of Yemen, or, smelling blood in the water...positioning themselves for a post-Saleh era." In April 2011, the US Embassy in Sanaa felt compelled to issue a terse denial of rumors of its support for Hamid al-Ahmar.

50,000 Pairs of Clasped Hands

State-run Sanaa television runs continuous tape of people jumping up and down, yelling "the people want 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih," and file footage of marches celebrating his leadership. Yet neither he nor the dissident counter-elites can contain the unprecedented, sustained, spontaneous grassroots uprising of the past three months. The crowds clamoring for change

(*taghyir*) are diverse, and dispersed among at least a dozen cities and towns. At the core are the youth, the demographic plurality between the ages of 15 and 30 who have never known another government leadership: university students, graduates, dropouts and wannabes grasping at straws of hope for a better future in the Arab world's poorest country. They have turned their daily marches and sit-ins into performance art with music, dancing, skits, caricatures, posters, chants and collective gestures of defiance like 50,000 pairs of clasped hands held high. Women, most prominently the eloquent and outspoken Tawakkul Karman, head of the NGO Women Journalists Without Chains, have raised their voices more and more, in solidarity with demands for change and lately in outrage at the president's sleazy innuendo directed at "ladies" who march or speak in public. The freedom struggle has now gone viral and virtually nationwide.

A peaceful *intifada* has been in motion since the summer of 2007 in the south, the territory known as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen and ruled by the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) from 1967 to 1990. In 1990, the south unified with the north, already ruled by Salih, and then attempted secession four years later. During the short civil war, the president called in assorted tribal militias and "Afghan Arabs" -- *salafis* returned from the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan -- to assist the regular army under the command of Gen. 'Ali Muhsin. A beer factory and civil service administration offices in Aden were torched and looted, while the erstwhile southern Socialist leadership fled by boat to Oman. Northern military officers and gangs of scalawags installed themselves as governors, administrators and landowners. Men deprived of their jobs and pensions and women stripped of the rights enjoyed under the old Socialist administration seethed under what they regarded as occupation. Oil revenues from wells on what had been Southern soil flowed into the coffers of Salih and his cronies. After more than a decade of economic collapse and political repression, the youth and some of the old YSP cadres launched what became known as al-Harak, a movement for change. [5] By late 2010, their protests had become commonplace, although Salih and the official media succeeded temporarily in presenting their grievances as secessionist gripes that would destroy Yemeni unity. On April 26, they marked the anniversary of the start of the 1994 civil war in which the former South attempted to reestablish its independent sovereignty.

Whether or not they harbor genuinely separatist sentiments, residents of the former South Yemen have good reason to feel they have been punitively targeted and deprived of basic liberties and entitlements.

Yet, by the same token, many southern tribulations resonate in every province of the republic: the grotesque enrichment of regime cronies at the expense of the many; deteriorating standards of living; obscenely bad schools, hospitals and roads; the skyrocketing price of meat, staples and even clean water; the lack of jobs for college and high-school graduates. Ambassador Krajewski had already seen prospects for revolt in the 2005 riots prompted by the lifting of fuel subsidies. Then, dissatisfaction was particularly acute among the perennially restive tribes of the eastern provinces of al-Jawf and Ma'rib, where truckers and pump farmers consider cheap fuel their lifeblood. Grandiose pageants of presidential power, half-truths in the official media, indignities at military checkpoints, arbitrary arrests and imprisonments -- these and other daily insults feed popular alienation, despair and frustration, most notably among the youth. While a privileged few cool off in swimming pools in their luxury compounds, the water table has fallen, decimating the farm economy that remains the livelihood of the rural majority. Farmers and ranchers facing starvation have flocked to the cities where water supplies and social services are swamped.

Misery has become the new normal; millions barely survive on the equivalent of a dollar or two per day.

Misery Loves Company

Without a doubt, Yemenis were inspired by the revolutionary movements in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011. Gatherings in Sanaa and other cities in January, as the spirit of Tunisia diffused in the Arab world, were relatively restrained affairs, replete in some cases with folding chairs for various JMP dignitaries. [6] In February, as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak began to proffer concessions under the sustained pressure of the street, the timbre of the Yemeni rallies rose in intensity. On the evening of February 11, the date of Mubarak's resignation, thousands of joyful youth converged on Sanaa's Liberation Square. There, they were confronted by uniformed security forces and regime-supporting agitators armed with sticks. [7]

Thus prevented from occupying the central Tahrir Square, the youths nevertheless eventually found their own iconic protest locale: the plaza before the gates of Sanaa University, which they have redubbed Taghyir Square in homage both to their core demand and the rhyming name of the epicenter of revolt in Cairo. The first tents were set up there on February 21. People who gathered in Taghyir Square echoed the slogans of Tahrir Square, which in turn had traveled to Egypt from Tunisia: *Irhal!* (Leave!) and *al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam* (the people want to overthrow the regime). Salih's men borrowed the failed tactics of Mubarak, sending thugs wielding batons into the crowds and rounding up known regime opponents. On March 18, in a pitch of fury or panic someone ordered snipers overlooking Taghyir Square to open fire on the assembled protesters. By the following day at least 50 were dead and more lay dying. In disbelief, fury and sorrow, a record 150,000 marched in Sanaa's biggest "day of rage" so far. Ministers, ambassadors, civil servants, members of Parliament and military officers including 'Ali Muhsin declared their sympathies with the protesters. On March 23 a state of emergency was declared. Within a month, a tent city housing men and boys (and sometimes whole families) from around the country stretched, by some accounts, for miles along the streets leading to Sanaa University. Other camps were pitched in other cities and towns.

In provincial cities, where hundreds or thousands had attended rallies, tens of thousands now seized public spaces. In Ta'izz, a large commercial and industrial city in the verdant southern mountains of the former North Yemen, and the neighboring city of Ibb, simmering discontent erupted. The Ta'izz-Ibb area, a rich agricultural zone of peasants and sharecroppers often called the "middle regions," served as a bridge between the southern Harak and the revolutionary movement centered in Sanaa. People from Ta'izz traveled, telephoned and tweeted with family and compatriots in Aden, Hadramawt, Abyan and other parts of the former South Yemen already in ferment. Youth and parents in Hudayda, the Red Sea port that is the hub of the Tihama coastal plain where Afro-Yemenis suffer the country's highest rates of poverty and political disenfranchisement, filled the public square with banners and chants: *Irhal!* In mid-April protesters were shot dead by security forces in Ta'izz, Hudayda and other cities, as well as in Sanaa. Each funeral -- at least 145 to date -- provoked more angry or grief-stricken dissenters to call for the downfall of the regime.

Insurrectionary sentiments fueled patriotic solidarities and unifying sympathies. These spread to the vast plains, mountains and deserts north, northwest, east and somewhat south of Sanaa, in the provinces of Sa'ada, al-Jawf, Ma'rib, 'Amran and Dhamar. In these rather sparsely populated, semi-arid regions analogous to Texas or Wyoming, the so-called

tribal heartland where ranchers, cowboys, truckers and hillbillies carry Kalashnikovs or even bazooka launchers and historically harbor deep mistrust of the central government, conventional protests were mixed with “traditional” acts of civil disobedience, such as road blockages and commercial stoppages. In a heavily tribal area further south, al-Bayda, men threw down their arms in April to march to another popular slogan: *Silmiyya!* (Peacefully!) Bear in mind: Armed tribesmen and villagers could resort to open rebellion but have elected to keep their powder dry.

The Impasse

As April moved into May, scenarios were buzzing like the shoes tossed at Salih’s visage on the giant screen. The accord that was supposed to be signed May 1 remained a work in progress up to the eleventh hour. The basic plan was for President Salih to transfer power to his vice president, the relatively impotent ‘Abd al-Rabb Mansour al-Hadi, within 30 days. Under a new power sharing arrangement, the ruling General People’s Congress would retain 50 percent of the 301 seats in Parliament, the opposition JMP would acquire 40 percent and 10 percent would go to independents, including, presumably, representatives of the youth movement. Within a week a transitional unity government expected to be led by a JMP prime minister, preferably from the former South, was to be formed. Senior statesman ‘Abd al-Karim al-‘Iryani, the current secretary-general of the GPC, having until recently remained aloof from the fray, was dispatched to the Saudi Arabian capital of Riyadh to participate in negotiations with the GCC. Crucially, but vaguely, the proposal specified an end to the demonstrations. The remaining 70 loyalists in Parliament further demanded that Salih retain his leadership of the GPC. It was not clear if a popular opposition demand that he and family members resign their military posts was really part of the deal.

The arrangement was too ambiguous and riddled with loopholes for either Salih or the protesters to accept by the May 1 deadline. In the end, only the GCC monarchies and the JMP leaders were ready to sign. Salih first offered to have either al-‘Iryani or Vice President al-Hadi verify the accord on his behalf in Riyadh, and then promised to sign in Sanaa in the presence of the GCC’s al-Zayani. At the last minute, he acquiesced to sign in his capacity as head of the ruling party but not as president. This refusal scuttled the negotiation. Salih scoffed at a basket of carrots that left him with his arsenal of sticks.

Although Salih was the one who nixed the deal, it was clear that the GCC plan did not have popular backing, either. It had not been negotiated so much as cobbled together. On April 24, a group signing itself as the Youth Popular Revolution Committee already rejected the provision of immunity from criminal prosecution for the president and his family, which could easily amount to *carte blanche* for excessive force during the month-long transition. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch shared these concerns. It was unclear, moreover, how the JMP could disperse the sit-ins and roadblocks; as commentator Jamila ‘Ali Raja told Al Jazeera, the formal parties could invite their own members to abandon the barricades, but not give orders to the tens of thousands they do not represent.

The failed GCC push to reach an accord by May 1 turned out to be the opening gambit in a complex negotiation that seems unlikely to be concluded soon. More and more, personalities from bygone dramas are now weighing in from exile: rebel leader Yahya al-Houthi and former South Yemen leaders Haydar Abu Bakr al-‘Attas, ‘Ali Salim al-Bayd and ‘Ali Nasir Muhammad, to name a few, seek to claim the initiative. If there is to be forward momentum, their views and constituencies, such as they are, will have to be taken into account. And yet these additions to the mix can only complicate matters.

Yemen is now in political limbo and not far from the road to hell. No one believes that the president can continue in office or that he will relinquish power. The popular movement has come too far to back off and yet sees no clear path toward social justice. Gulf monarchies and the Obama administration appear to lack the diplomatic wherewithal, the strategic imagination or the humanitarian decency to envision a solution to the impasse. And yet daily the status quo becomes more untenable. Loyalist patrimonial forces are wont to shoot, and may yet provoke either a mutinous response or a full-fledged rebellion by armed citizens. The spirit of "*Silmiyya*," which served Tunisians and Egyptians so well, can persevere only so long in the face of live fire. In March and for part of April, it was possible to envision an orderly transition to a civilian coalition transitional government. The month of May may bring more bloodshed.

Endnotes

[1] *Washington Post*, April 9, 2011.

[2] The cable was published in the *Guardian*, March 11, 2011.

[3] *Ibid*.

[4] *Guardian*, April 8, 2011.

[5] Susanne Dahlgren, "The Snake with a Thousand Heads: The Southern Cause in Yemen," *Middle East Report* 256 (Fall 2010).

[6] Stacey Philbrick Yadav, "No Pink Slip for Salih: What Yemen's Protests Do and Do Not Mean," *Middle East Report Online*, February 9, 2011.

[7] Nir Rosen, "How It Started in Yemen: From Tahrir to Taghyir," *Jadaliyya*, March 18, 2011.