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Civil Society in Yemen: The Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia

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Civil society in Yemen

*The political economy of activism
in modern Arabia*

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Preface and acknowledgments

I hope my colleagues find this work worthy, for it is the product of many years' research, and a great many people provided information and insights. My interest in Yemen began with my first visit to Sana'a, Hodeida, Taiz, and Aden in 1972, as part of a larger tour of the region made possible by my undergraduate year at the American University in Cairo in 1971-72; it has continued ever since.

Research on which this book was based has been supported, directly or indirectly, from a range of sources. I returned to Sana'a in January 1977, with a grant for PhD dissertation research from the State University of New York at Binghamton. During the next four years of continuous residence in North Yemen, I worked as a "freelance" social scientist, conducting baseline surveys for several international development agencies and contractors, including the US Agency for International Development and the World Bank. These included an urban planning survey of workplaces in the five cities of the YAR; a short study of women's economic activities in three rural locations; "rural economic recognizance" in Hajja and Hodeida governorates; a comparative study of agricultural production in Ibb and 'Amrān, conducted in conjunction with the American Institute for Yemeni Studies; and a nationwide survey conducted in twenty-two communities for the national rural electrification project. Between expeditions for these studies, I worked from my home in Sana'a with what was then called the Confederation of Yemeni Development Associations, preparing a dissertation on the "cooperative movement."

During the 1980s and 1990s, I returned to North Yemen on several occasions: in 1982 on behalf of Cornell University's rural development research project; in 1986 with a research grant from the University of Richmond; in 1987 as a consultant for the International Fund for Agricultural Development; in 1989 and 1990 in my capacity as then president of the American Institute for Yemeni Studies (AIYS); and in 1991 as a consultant for the United Nations Development Programme on management development problems after unification. In 1993, while

on sabbatical from the University of Richmond, and after several months in Egypt under a grant from the American Research Center in Egypt, I went back to Yemen as a Fulbright fellow. The Fulbright offered the luxury of full-time research, which in that period meant reading newspapers, conducting interviews, and attendance at public events such as seminars, conferences, and sessions of parliament. Again I extended my stay past the grant period, supported by the Netherlands embassy through the Women's Studies and Social Research program at Sana'a University. I had packed my papers and books for a planned departure in early May 1994. In the event, however, I evacuated on a US military aircraft, only to return in July 1994 to help with a Human Rights Watch report on the war. Finally, the University of Richmond generously paid for a short trip in the summer of 1996 to update the narrative in this book beyond the war.

During a total of about six years in the country, I have visited every governorate except distant al-Mahra, taken notes on over 2,000 interviews, and collected shelves full of materials. This necessitates a certain selectivity in content, citations, and acknowledgments in this book.

First, while striving to provide a clear historical perspective, I have avoided recapitulating historical details already published in English. Thus many important figures are not named, some political events and policies are not explained, there is no military information, and foreign policy is not addressed systematically.

Secondly, I have not cited interviews, which are far too numerous to document, although this is the convention among political scientists. Instead I have adopted an ethnographic voice in describing many of the events and processes I observed firsthand, while citing published sources for factual information and individual interpretations.

Thirdly, the list of persons who have helped me is too long to publish. My interpretations are deeply influenced and informed by the work of my friends the Yemen research community, including the "old-timers" from the 1970s and the new generation in the 1990s, with whom I have shared adventures, interviews, stories, notes, panels, and critiques and from whom I have benefited immeasurably. Without the political historians who explained regime changes, the ethnographers who recorded village life, and the consultants who compiled statistics, this work could not have been done. Among the foreigners, therefore, I single out only two whose collegueship I value still but who will not read this, Ron Hart and Leigh Douglas.

Among Yemenis, moreover, the responsiveness, cooperation, and hospitality toward a Western woman with no government or family sponsors and an insatiable appetite for information has been incredible.

There is a true lady, an extended family, and a whole neighborhood in old Sana'a who opened to me a feminine network to which I still retreat for emotional sustenance. I suspect that the manners and idioms they taught me stood me in good stead elsewhere. In any case, I enjoyed unmitigated, unrelenting hospitality virtually wherever I went: ministries, businesses, provincial and district offices, homes and farms, seminars and conferences, and male qāt-chews. For research purposes a qāt-chew amounts to a "focus group," for people speak openly and the guest is entitled to introduce a discussion topic, listen in on other business, and to take discreet notes. In these and other settings I enjoyed the collaboration of Yemeni colleagues who worked with me in the field or on documents, not translating but helping me to translate for myself while offering their own insights and analyses. Finally, I owe a great and genuine debt of gratitude to the Yemeni government, the Yemen Center for Research and Studies, and the foreign and interior ministries for the unfettered access I have enjoyed to all aspects of Yemeni life and politics; and to the countless officials who personally offered documents, permissions, and friendly respect.