

المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
ARAB CENTER FOR RESEARCH & POLICY STUDIES



(Doha Institute)

Case Analysis

*The Yemeni Revolution: replacing Ali Abdullah Saleh,
or replacing obsolete institutions?*

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Doha, MAY - 2011

Series (Case Analysis)

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When the Yemeni uprising broke out, it appeared to follow the same model that had begun in Tunisia: a series of social protests that became a political movement once the opposition parties joined the spontaneous youth revolt, followed by the emergence of a program for democratic reform. But the situation in Yemen has become slightly different. President Ali Abdullah Saleh, despite very few qualms about his electoral majority in 2006, decided to follow the dictator's handbook and interfere in the country's laws, and perhaps in its constitution, introducing changes that would enable him to retain power – despite the fact that this would upset established balances – and then pass it on to his son. This is what led the opposition parties to confront him and ally themselves with Yemeni youths, forming a movement that has been demanding the resignation of the president since day one of the protests. This paper examines the effects of the crisis that led to the revolt, and interrogates possible alternatives: will the replacement be democratic, military, tribal, a mixture of all three, or something else altogether?¹ In other words, are the protesters seeking to replace individuals, or institutions?

Introduction

Yemen is a unique case in the ongoing Arab revolutions. For example, the Yemeni regime is facing demands for its fall raised by many of those who until recently were some of its closest allies. However, this is not even the main difference: the main difference is that, in this case, we are dealing with a “tribal democracy,” a form of government not quite related to either modern democracy or traditional tribalism. The Yemeni president is elected and has represented the majority since 2006, unlike former presidents Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali (Tunisia) and Hosni Mubarak (Egypt), both of whom were accused of widespread vote-rigging. If Saleh's removal from power would end the struggle and place Yemen on the path to democracy, this would suggest that the solution were simple. Yet democracy is more than just replacing the ruler; above all, it is a system based on respect for certain basic premises, one of which is that no one is above the law. The Yemeni system that Saleh has headed since 1990 is based on a power-sharing agreement among the president, the tribes allied to him, and the army. This is not really a rational understanding of modern democracy. If the aims of the current revolution were simply to remove a person and replace him with another while the regime continued on the same bases, then not much would change once that individual was gone.

Let us begin by specifying some issues that should receive the attention of the relevant political forces during the revolution and after the prospective end of Saleh's rule. In my opinion, Yemen

¹ I owe a literary debt to Dr. Azmi Bishara, who read this paper and provided a number of criticisms and questions that drove me to re-examine my perspective. In truth, these comments were absolutely timely, because had the paper been published in its initial version, it would have missed out on the issue of the developing role of the Taghyir Square youth, and the subsequent development of the opposition demands from abstract stances that seemed to be negotiating for a power transfer, to deeper positions demanding democratic change and a modern state.

faces two kinds of problems: those that are socio-political and those that are socio-economic. The second variety seems more pressing and is more interesting, since it relates to a number of worrisome and mutually exacerbating factors. Unemployment is growing, at least 42% of the population already lives on less than USD 2 a day, and many sectors of society suffer from unfair distribution of water resources, all of which contributes to vast amounts of social suffering, particularly among children – and now an explosive demographic situation is making matters even worse.² All of these are factors that lead to explosive anger and tension.

The first set of problems is more complicated, principally due to Yemen's social makeup. This matter is related to the following issues: overlapping and/or conflicting loyalties (to the tribe, the clan, or the state); a lack of transparency in appointments and positions, which leads to the marginalization of certain social groups; and paucities of transparency and accountability, both of which lead to corruption. Perhaps even more dangerously, the country suffers from a pronounced lack of modernization, which is essential to the creation of a modern, democratic society; consequently, this has led to an increased military and tribal presence.

In this paper, I will focus on the first problem (i.e., on Yemen's socio-political issues, which are related to issues of modernization in the Middle East with which some scholars have already dealt). Theoretically, this paper places itself within the same critical discourse as Burhan Ghalioun,³ Azmi Bishara,⁴ Halim Barakat,⁵ Khaldoun Hassan al-Naqib,⁶ Hisham Sharabi, and Saadeddine Ibrahim, as well as others who have studied the problems of modernity and the modernization of society in the Arab world. This paper is also indebted to the work of David

² The opposition's initial demands in February 2011 included some social and economic issues, which the state authorities truly need to address. However, the opposition's demands in March and the beginning of April focused on political aspects and revolutionary reforms. For a discussion of the social and economic issues, see the United Nations Development Fund's report for 2010 "Yemen Report, 2010," *Millennium Development Goals*, UNDP, <http://www.undp.org.ye>.

³ Some of Burhan Ghalioun's publications include, *Al-Mihna al-Arabiyya: al-Dawla dudd al-Umma* [The Arab Challenge: The Nation vs. The Umma], (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wihda al-'Arabiyya, 1993); *al-Hadatha al-Maghdura* [Wasted Modernity], (Paris: La Découverte, 1993); *al-Wa'i al-Dhati* [Self Awareness], (Beirut: al-Mu'assassa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr, 1992).

⁴ See, for example, Azmi Bishara, *Turuhat 'an an-Nahda al-Mu'aqa* [Propositions about the Stunted Renaissance], (Beirut: Riad al-Rayyis li-l-Kutub wa-l-Nashr, 2003).

⁵ See, for example, Halim Barakat, *al-Mujtama' al-'Arabi al-Mu'asir* [Contemporary Arab Society], (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wihda al-'Arabiyya, 2008).

⁶ See Khaldun Hassan al-Naqib, *al-Mujtama' wa-l-Dawla fi al-Khalij wa-l-Jazeera al-'Arabiyya* [Society and the State in the Gulf and the Arab Peninsula], (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wihda al-'Arabiyya, 1989).

Apter,⁷ Freeman,⁸ Dale Eickelman,⁹ Carl Brown,¹⁰ and the “school of action theory” in the social sciences.¹¹

This paper emerges from the idea that a limited understanding of the role of the tribe in Arab societies has led to unbelievable and unacceptable conclusions, such as the belief that, “in situations where the tribe (which was divided into branches and divisions) represented an independent unit, then the tribal Arab region must be imagined as a place of chaos.”¹² In a more contemporary period, we note that anthropologists and ethnographers discuss the tribal issue either as a “state institution,” or as a “force that opposes the state,” or as “groups that contribute to the formation of social and political cohesion on the local levels.”¹³ In short, as Khaldun Naqib points out, the result is that “tribal organizations are portrayed as established and powerful, and anyone who opposes them appears to be ineffectual, creating social and economic structures that lack any clear historical roots.”¹⁴

It is clear that “systems do not rely on abstract social phenomena when facing sensitive issues such as controlling the military.”¹⁵ Each regime develops its own ways of achieving control, in which the leader tries to protect himself from officers with political ambitions, and “these methods differ depending on the level of political maturity that the particular regime has reached, so some of them resort to tribes, or sects, or even to mercenaries, while others use manipulative strategies that reach into patrimonial roots and histories; yet, others seek to rely on institutions,

⁷ David E. Apter, *The Politics of Modernization*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

⁸ L.C. Freeman, *Patterns of Local Community Leadership*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968).

⁹ Eickelman Dale F., *The Middle East, an Anthropological Approach*, (Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1981).

¹⁰ Carl L. Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East*, (Princeton University Press, 1984).

¹¹ In particular, Talcott Parsons, Edward Shills, and Jesse Pitts, *Theories of Society*, (The Free Press, 1961); see also, Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social System*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951).

¹² R.B. Serjeant, “The Interplay Between Tribal Affinities and Religious (Zaydi) Authority in the Yemen., *Al-Abhath: Journal of the Center for Arab and Middle East Studies*, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, American University of Beirut, 1982.

¹³ Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama since 1800*, (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Khaldun Naqib, *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁵ James A. Bill and Robert Springborg, *Middle East Politics*, (Harper Collins Publishers, 1990, 260-261).

and we, sometimes, find governments that resort to more than one method,” depending on their needs.¹⁶

Undoubtedly, the success of democracy in a country like Yemen will require an extreme effort on the part of the elite in order to move beyond the tribal era and old tensions. It also needs to proceed intelligently in order to acquire popular support through mechanisms that do not limit opportunities for anyone. The elite, which leads the change, must remain attentive to the difference between agents and objects in politics and society.

The role of the opposition parties in the Yemeni revolution

Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, where the events that led to the revolution and the fall of the ruler were spontaneous, and where the protesters’ demands were social at the beginning, the revolution in Yemen was motivated by political factors.¹⁷ Several analyses have indicated this,¹⁸ such as a recent report presented to the US Congress.¹⁹ It is worth noting that the Yemeni opposition parties, even before the revolts in Egypt and Tunisia had started, had already expressed strong disapproval over President Saleh’s plans to modify the electoral law, to create a new Higher Commission for Elections and Referendums, and perhaps to modify the constitution to allow himself another chance to run; the opposition’s anger was inflamed, too, by his apparent ambition to pass power onto his son.²⁰ The Yemeni opposition protests began on January 16 (i.e., two days after Ben Ali’s fall in Tunisia) and gained more weight and popularity with the passing of time, especially after important elements of the political and military elites joined the

¹⁶ See above.

¹⁷ This matter becomes clear when we recall the arrests of Yemeni opposition protesters as early as the first days of the protests, which did not happen in Tunisia, where the opposition seemed to be as shocked by the breakout of protests as the government was. We know that human rights activist Tukai Karman, a leadership figure in the Islah party, was arrested for her role in organizing the student protests that broke out on January 16. We find that the Joint Meeting group led a protest in Sanaa on January 24, in response to a speech by Saleh. See, “Student Protests Continue for a Second Week,” <http://www.al-tagheer.com/news26185.html>.

¹⁸ See, for example, this passage from *The New York Times*: “unlike Egypt, peaceful protesters in Yemen were not led by young people, but by opposition parties, particularly Islamist ones.” Anthony Shadid, Nada Bakri, Kareem Fahim and Liam Stack, “Waves of Unrest Spread to Yemen, Shaking a Region,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/28/world/middleeast/28unrest.html>.

¹⁹ Jeremy Sharp, “Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations,” March 3, 2011, CRS Report to Congress, <http://www.fas.org/sfp/crs/mideast/RL34170.pdf>.

²⁰ Indeed, one only needs to recall some of the slogans raised in those days, such as “No bringing the clock back to zero, no to passing on to your children”; “Revolution, revolution, oh young people”; “Jobs for your friends”; “Oh Yemeni people, learn a lesson from Tunisia”; “I swear, I swear, you leader, that your rule will end”; “Ali, your time has come, we will throw you off the throne”

protesters, and more schisms and resignations occurred within the regime, including members of the president's family and some of his allies, especially after the regime brutally cracked down on peaceful protests.

The question that now needs to be answered is about succession. This is not a new subject in any case, since it is easy to find examples in Yemeni political discourse and in leaked American assessments of the situation that discuss what would happen if the president suddenly died, resigned or was forced from power. These assessments were contained in diplomatic cables issued by the US Embassy in Sanaa in 2005, (and later published by the WikiLeaks website) at a time when Saleh – like Mubarak and Ben Ali – was considered an ally of Washington.

The US Embassy in Yemen and corruption

According to one of the aforementioned cables, in 2005 officials close to Saleh confessed to the US ambassador in Sanaa that the regime was facing one of two options: “Either resignation, or collaborating together to force the government to fight corruption and bring in reforms.”²¹ The cable reveals how Saleh's coterie assessed the president: “[He] is more interested in enriching his family than in making the strategic choices necessary to lead Yemen into the future.” From the confidences of Yemeni officials with direct contacts with the US Embassy, it appears that President Saleh was “more and more isolated, and less and less responsive to advice” offered to him by members of his close personal circle whom the cable describes as “practical progressives”. Saleh “listens to no-one,” and is “unrealistically and stupidly confident”; he always makes the correct decisions, the ambassador's source was quoted as saying. The cable's language and tone recalls similar communications from the US Embassy in Tunis, which went into considerable detail about the corruption of Ben Ali, his family and his cronies.

The same cable reports accusations of corruption against Saleh, his family and his inner circle, including allegations against Brigadier General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, commander of the Yemeni Army in the crucial Northern sector, and the tribe of late Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar, who had been speaker of Parliament and head of the Islah (“Reform”) party, as well as leader of the Hashid tribe, prior to his death in 2007. All of this was said – and recorded – prior to the 2006 elections, during which Ali Saleh announced he would not run – before later changing his mind.

²¹ Cable sent on February 23, 2005, <http://213.251.145.96/cable/2005/05/05SANAA1352.html>.

The US Embassy in Yemen and the succession

A second cable from the US Embassy in Sanaa²² is more specific and detailed about the issue of Saleh's successor. First, it confirms that "true power still derives from the military and the tribes, and the next [p]resident would have to meet with their approval." This reality does not appear to have changed since that time. As we continue to hear news about more tribes joining the revolution, this suggests that either this is a "tribal" revolt against the state, or that tribalism in Yemen is more influential than modern institutions and organizations.

Secondly, the cable transmits a widely held belief that the next Yemeni president will come from the inner circles of Saleh's family, or from his allies within the military. And in 2011, prominent members of the president's family and tribe have broken with him, announcing that they have joined the protesters in the streets. A presidential candidate could very well be among them.

In addition, the cable indicates that "there is no clear chain of command should the [p]resident step down, die or become incapacitated while in office," which is complicated for the diplomats. However, just as in other countries where such changes have recently taken place (Tunisia and Egypt), the Yemeni elite knows that the guidebook for the transfer of power during the transitional period figures to be the current constitution, despite reservations they may have about it. In this view, any modifications or re-writing of the constitution would be one of the missions of the next regime, and should be subject to popular referendum.

The cable also explains that Saleh's long tenure (32 years) has been due to his reliance on what is known as "the triumvirate". The cable also identifies the two other sides who, in 1978, formed this tribal and military alliance with Saleh based on a "power-sharing" agreement following the assassination of President Ahmad Hussein al-Ghashmi on June 24, 1978. They are Brigadier General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar. Today, this alliance is no longer in place since Abdullah al-Ahmar's two sons, Sheikh al-Sadiq and Sheikh Hamid, now support the protesters in Taghyir Square calling for Saleh's resignation. In fact, Sheikh Hamid was one of the main supporters of the late opposition candidate Faisal bin Shamlan in the 2006 elections. In the summer of 2009, Sheikh Hamid appeared on Al-Jazeera, calling on Saleh to step down.²³

²² Cable on September 17, 2005, <http://213.251.145.96/cable/2005/09/05SANAA2766.html>.

²³ See, "Ahmar is supporting Saleh for Yemeni president, while his son predicts that the ruling Congress will fail," *al-Watan*, September 9, 2006, <http://www.alwatan.com/graphics/2006/09sep/9.9/dailyhtml/politic.html>.

General Ali Ahmar has also split from the regime and joined the protesters. However, it is important to note that the collapse of the old tribal-military alliance does not mean that this alliance will not search for another way to return to power after Saleh's removal from office.

According to the same cable, sources estimate that Ahmar controls at least 50% of the military's forces and resources, which makes him "the second most powerful man in Yemen". Given this, we must ask: what are the general's chances of succeeding Saleh? It is true that protesters welcomed his split from Saleh and his alliance with the opposition, but Shiite rebels in the north consider him to be a harsh military ruler who led the armed forces' campaign against them during the bloody civil war. As for the leftists and southerners, they fear that the goals of the current revolution will be obliterated by a struggle over military power, while the Islamist opposition seems to be more accommodating and welcoming of him. Moreover, he poses a problem for the Americans due to his former ties to Osama Bin Laden.²⁴

Finally, according the cable, in 2005 the US diplomat who wrote it could not see a single competitor who could be a true counterweight to Saleh. Until recently, top-level US officials made similar statements, in which they expressed their fears that change in Yemen would happen suddenly, without time for preparations²⁵. Frankly, what concerns America is the stability of a regime that guarantees continued cooperation on various fronts against Al-Qaeda. However, recent events have altered the facts on the ground, and it is no longer possible to describe Saleh as a guarantor of stability. What is even more interesting is the scenario that the cable's author imagines occurring in the year 2013. Having correctly predicted that the president would prevail in the 2006 election despite widespread disillusion about corruption in his regime, the cable anticipates a transfer of power within the same circles of influence – raising serious questions about the nature of "democracy" under Saleh.

²⁴ Some of these reports indicate that General Mohsen was mobilizing Islamists to work with bin Laden. See, for example, Sudarsan Raghavan, "Yemen's future hinges on its two most powerful men," *The Washington Post*, March 31, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/yemens-future-hinges-on-its-two-most-powerful-men/2011/03/29/AFLxOnCC_story.html?hpid=z2.

See also, Jane Novak, "Yemen: Al Qaeda in Broad Daylight," May 28, 2005, *World Press*, <http://www.worldpress.org/Mideast/2089.cf>.

²⁵ Some reports mentioned this relationship indicating that the major general Ali Mohsen was recruiting Islamist activists to work with Ben Laden. See for instance: Sudarsan Raghavan, "Yemen's future hinges on its two most powerful men," *The Washington Post*, March 31, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/yemens-future-hinges-on-its-two-most-powerful-men/2011/03/29/AFLxOnCC_story.html?hpid=z2. And Jane Novak, "Yemen: Al Qaeda in Broad Daylight," *World Press* May 28, 2005, <http://www.worldpress.org/Mideast/2089.cfm>.

The West and democracy in Yemen

Several definitions of democracy circulate in the West. Some focus on its institutional and procedural elements, while others give priority to the principle of equality. To quote a simplistic definition from American political science attributed to the late Samuel Huntington, “a system is democratic if the most-powerful collective decision-makers are chosen in fair, honest and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes, and all adults are capable of voting.”²⁶ The main feature of this definition is its capacity to resolve disputes through peaceful channels, which are enabled by the rule of law and the protection of civil and political rights. In such systems, the constant tension between the government’s need to assert its authority and its need to remain responsive to its citizenry is mitigated through various measures and institutions, including elections, political parties, strong legislative bodies, free press, etc. These are all more prevalent in what Karl Popper describes as an “open society,” as opposed to a “closed society,” in which one of the main differences between the two is related to the transfer of power.²⁷ This can be clearly seen in the following table:

Open society	Closed society
Democracy	Oppression
Personal decision-making	Tribalism
Individualism	Ethnic, national, or class primacy
Social fractiousness	Social cohesion
Bloodless transfer of government power	Blood accompanies government changes
Political ethics	Politicization of morality
Humanist fraternalism	Totalitarian nationalism

Given the strength of such intellectual currents in the West, and since many Western observers (including American ones) have expressed anxiety over the future of this country where weapons are widespread, and where some regions are thought to be safe havens for Al-Qaeda, the attitude of some American diplomats as expressed by the 2005 cables is astonishing. For example, we read that “[d]espite weak institutions and submissive political parties, democracy has permeated Yemen enough that the public will expect to choose its next [p]resident in open elections”.²⁸ In a report by a European Union delegation sent to monitor the 2006 elections, there is similarly

²⁶ David Garnham and Mark Tessler (eds.), *Democracy, War and Peace in the Middle East*, (Indiana University Press, 1995).

²⁷ Dominique Colas, *Sociologie politique* [Political Sociology], (Paris ,PUF, 1994).

²⁸ See cable, above.

optimistic language: “As the only country in the Arabian [P]eninsula with a constitution that explicitly describes it as a representative democracy, Yemen can be considered to be an important and possible model for the development of democracy in the region.” The report even affirms that the elections were successful “since they offered an open space for political competition in which all the major political parties participated, and in which voters were able to pick freely between candidates.”²⁹

In reality, this kind of flattery – despite its partially factual content – is inconsistent with the fact that democracies cannot be tied to the approval of tribes or armies. And while one cannot question the results of an election in which no proof has been found of widespread irregularities, the question is: how can Yemen be described as a true democracy when we know, according to these same Western experts, that the regime is based upon tribal alliances and military might?

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that these words were written more than six years ago. Since that time, Yemen’s democracy has been interrogated by its own people, who took to the streets chanting for the fall of the regime, demanding the resignation of a president who officially won 72% of the vote. If such things can take place in a democracy, then what would be the case had Saleh been as bereft of popular endorsement as Ben Ali, Mubarak, Libya’s Moammar Gaddafi, or others like them for all those years? And how can we speak of a democratic system when we know that Yemen’s history – both recent and older – has been drenched with blood? Indeed, going back to the 1970s, Saleh himself played a significant role in the events that led to the assassination of then-president Ibrahim Mohammad al-Hamdi and the ensuing rise to power of Ahmad Hussein al-Ghashmi, who was his direct commander and to whom he owes a great deal. Not even eight months went by before Ghashmi met his own end in a bombing – and was succeeded by Saleh.

There is no doubt that Yemen currently needs its people to gain confidence in state institutions, especially since that confidence has been undermined a great deal by the regime’s brutal repression. What might save Yemen from an internecine conflict, whose consequences can only be guessed at, is neither flattery, nor claims that democracy has deep roots. Had such narratives been accurate, Yemen’s democracy would not have been shaken by one protest – or 20 – on the street. For these reasons, I argue that the basic political issue on the table in Yemen today is this: rather than a simple power transition, what is needed is a correction of the democratic pathway through the creation of institutions which guarantee that everyone is equal before the law, and which can block the way to any power center attempting to compete with the state.

²⁹ EU Election Observation Mission, Yemen, *Final Report on the Presidential and Local Council Elections*, 2006, http://eeas.europa.eu/human_rights/election_observation/yemen/final_report_en.pdf.

The goals of the revolution

Democracy cannot arise and develop in the shadow of a state whose structure and support rely on forces that run contrary to modern understandings of the state. There are several definitions of the nation-state, but also common factors on which all agree. The major characteristic in a nation-state, according to Black, is the support provided to “the political decision or its equivalent, a centralized political power.”³⁰ This takes advantage of the modern information revolution and emerges, according to Black, from “modernizing leaders” [both the business and political elites] desire to mobilize social resources and rationalize them through a vision that aims to achieve the greatest amount of control, effectiveness and production”. The second quality of the nation-state, according to Black, lies in the expansion of its functions vis-à-vis earlier forms of political organization. Therefore, it is impossible, according to this theory, for tribes or any other primordial political groups to take on the role of the state. The third quality is the rule of law, which generally leads to increased bureaucracy. The fourth quality is the development of the role of the citizen in the modern nation-state, and his or her increased role in public life.³¹

If we now turn to the demands of the Yemeni opposition, we can observe that there is a movement within it that is pushing towards reforming institutions, and not just replacing individuals. The opposition is itself the field for a struggle between two visions: one of them is focused on the smoothest and quickest route to getting rid of Saleh, replacing the sources of his power and achieving necessary reforms; the other insists that modern, democratic change demands modern, democratic institutions, and not just the transfer of power from one leader to another.

Much if this has been reflected by the development of the protesters’ demands: the goals announced in February 2011 were quite different from those which emerged over the couple of months. The statement issued by the main opposition alliance on February 14, 2011 consisted of six demands to which the ruling party, the General People’s Congress (GPC), was expected to respond.³² Three of these were: 1) the construction of a non-centralized state for all Yemeni

³⁰ C.E. Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization*, (New York, Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1966).
Anthony M. Orum, *Introduction to Political Sociology*, (Prentice-Hall, Inc.1978).

³¹ See, “The Yemeni Opposition Rejects President Saleh’s Proposal and Raises Six Demands,” *ArabNet 5*, February 14, 2011, <http://www.arabnet5.com/news.asp?c=2&id=78590>.

³² Mohammad Hatem, “Yemen’s Opposition Lists Key Demands as Demonstrations Continue,” *Bloomberg*, March 30, 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-03-30/yemen-s-opposition-lists-key-demands-as-demonstrations-continue.html>.

citizens in which justice and equality would reign supreme; 2) admitting that there was an issue in the South and reaching a just resolution to the conflict; and 3) bringing a complete stop to the wars in the Northern Suda region. The protesters also demanded an equitable distribution of resources and the resolution of Yemen's economic problems in order to achieve fairness and equality in distributing public sector jobs, among other things, to put an end to corruption, and to create meritocratic national institutions on national grounds, and not on alliances or cronyism. The sixth demand was "the necessity to make the war against terror a national issue, and remove it from circles of opportunism, because this plague threatens national security, and all possible national resources must be used to combat it, in a manner differently from that being done today." These goals can be slewed, not only because they target the ruling party – the party responsible for the crisis – but because they do not assume a structural change in the power institutions, or in traditional alliances.

Then, on March 30, 2011, the following list of demands emerged, none of which were mentioned in the first:³³

- That Saleh step down;
- That his family be banned from participating in civil and military affairs;
- That the current constitution be declared obsolete;
- That an interim national council be formed consisting of five members with no connections to the Saleh regime, one of whom would represent the country's youth; and that a transition period of six months be announced, during which the parliament and Shura Council would be dissolved;
- That the interim council would appoint a technocrat to form an interim government;
- That purloined public and private funds and property be re-distributed, and all political prisoners be released;
- That the Ministry of Communications be dissolved and journalists be allowed to operate freely;
- That the security apparatus, the intelligence agencies, and the Defense Council be dismantled, and a national security council be established instead. This body would fall under the purview of the Interior Ministry, and its mandate would be limited to investigations and to guarding against external threats to internal stability;
- That town councils and the Higher Judicial Council be dissolved, the solicitor-general removed, and a supreme constitutional court established.

Finally, on April 2, 2011, the opposition parties taking part in the Joint Meeting caucus announced that they had decided upon a shared vision for the period of power transfer. The statement was as follows:

³³ Sarah Phillips and Rodger Shanahan, "Al-Qaida, Tribes and Instability in Yemen," *Lowy Institute for International Policy* (Sydney), November 2009.

First: The president should announce his resignation, and his powers and privileges should be transferred to his deputy.

Second: The deputy, upon assuming power, must work towards restricting the roles of the national security and central security forces, and the presidential guard. This includes defining their duties according to the constitution and the law, and finding able leaders with high nationalist and professional standards who have attained their posts through merit rather than blood or cronyism. All of this should take place under the purview of the Interior and Defense ministries.

Third: That an agreement would be reached with the interim leader (the former deputy) over distribution of power during the transition period, based on the foundations of national unity, in which the following would happen:

1. The formation of a transitional national council that represents all the elements of political and social life, including youth, businessmen, civil society members, and women from across Yemeni society. This council would take on the following:
 - a. The creation of a national dialogue in which all the political actors participate, both internally and externally, without exception, and in which all issues are brought forth. This dialogue should propose solutions for all major issues affecting Yemen, including the Southern issue, and formulate a vision for constitutional reform that would guarantee political and cultural freedoms, and the construction of a modern civil state which would be a civic state with a decentralized system. The dialogue would also develop a political regime on the basis of a parliamentary system and popular consensus.
 - b. The formation of a council of experts and specialists to formulate a program of constitutional reforms in light of the results of the comprehensive national dialogue.
2. The creation of an interim national unity government chaired by the opposition in which all political actors are represented, including businesspeople and youthful protesters. In addition to its constitutional duties, it would also take on executive matters, stabilize the country's economic and financial affairs, and ensure that the social situation does not continue to deteriorate.
3. The formation of an interim military council whose members would be military leadership figures known for their competence and honesty, and who would be respected and appreciated by the rank-and-file military. All the armed forces must be represented in the council, and those officers who were forced to resign after the 1994 war would be able to participate, which would increase this institution's national unity role, since it

would be fulfilling its constitutional role as “the property of all its people whose role it is to protect the republic, secure its territory and safety,” in addition to its temporary role in safeguarding the popular peaceful revolution, maintaining security and calm, and preserving the state.

4. The formation of a Higher Council for Elections and Referendums that would undertake:
 - a. A referendum on constitutional reforms; and
 - b. Parliamentary and presidential elections based on the new constitution’s guidelines.
5. The public affirmation of peaceful expression, the right to peaceful protest, and other civil rights for all Yemeni citizens. The launching of an investigation into the hostile actions taken against protesters across Yemen, but especially the massacres in Aden, Sanaa and Ibin, and other situations in which live ammunition and tear gas were used; those responsible must be brought to court, and those injured and disabled, as well as the families of the martyrs, must be compensated.

This manifesto, for the first time, explicitly laid out the issue of constitutional reforms that would guarantee political and cultural freedoms, and build a modern civil state within a decentralized government where the political model would develop based on a parliamentary system, and be based on a popular consensus. This would place the Yemeni revolution on the same footing as the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. Of course, the creation of the modern nation-state in both these countries entailed bureaucratic challenges, more than tribal ones. In Tunisia, the army managed to remain completely neutral.

What is clear from the development of opposition demands is that the Yemeni revolution has now entered a new, possibly more radical, phase. The protesters know that the transfer of power is not an end in itself, but a means to lay down new political foundations. At the beginning, this revolution was rather nebulous, due to the absence of a coherent leadership, and the heavy presence of traditional leaderships; this led to the belief that what the protesters wanted was the removal of Saleh from power while retaining the same existing institutions and procedures, with only partial changes and reforms. This could have been possible by negotiating the succession in a peaceful manner, and then putting into place steps that would preserve everyone’s dignity in order to preserve Yemen’s unity and to prevent the return of civil war. In the second phase, presidential elections would be held, making possible a smooth transfer of power.

But the youth in Taghyir Square now seem intent on imposing a different kind of agenda, one which brings forth a democratic civil revolution like those in Tunisia and Egypt, in order to establish a new political system. In this case, the results would be very different from what the Saleh-led GPC envisioned, namely the continued consolidation of power by getting the protesters to accept his reform proposals after he stepped down from office.

If the revolution is to succeed in imposing its democratic agenda, which was laid out in the aforementioned statements, it also will be necessary to break with undemocratic traditions, such as allowing tribes and the military to intervene in the priorities of the new government. At this point, whether the latter breaks will take place or not remains uncertain.

Tribalism or citizenship?

For many years, Yemen has been on the brink of becoming a “failed state” due to its own civilian and tribal struggles, foreign interventions, low education rates, dilapidated infrastructure and poor governance. All these problems have become both more critical and more complex in recent years.³⁴ Since 2009, Yemen has witnessed alliances between radical Islamist fundamentalist groups, such as Al-Qaeda, and certain tribes, which has worried both its Gulf neighbors and Western states.

Despite official attempts to limit the movements of Al-Qaeda members, powerful groups have been ensuring their and their allies’ interests in a manner that tramples Yemeni law and exposes the state to considerable harm.³⁵ It is no secret that Al-Qaeda aims to transform Yemen into a new Afghanistan, which would completely contradict the demands of the democratic nationalist revolution.

The accommodation of tribal belonging was part of the unity agreement of 1990, in which the Presidential Council was made subject to “consideration for regional concerns and members’ tribal belonging”.³⁶ This needs to be revised. A better method must be found to guarantee maximum representation of Yemeni citizens in state institutions, and this in a manner that reduces the extent to which tribal and family tensions undermine democracy and national unity. This requires new standards for political representation in which parties, unions and civil society organizations must play a role similar to the one they play in more advanced societies, instead of the army and the tribes. If Yemenis succeed in overcoming this hurdle, they will be better-situated to form laws that preserve the gains of the national, civil democratic revolution and its base: the power of the people through representative institutions. The choice here is clear: either

³⁴ See the following English-language report: Hichem Karoui, “Yemen: The Law of the Tribesmen...Is There a 'Pilot' in the Cabin?,” *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, 2(2), December 2010, <http://www.middle-east-studies.net/?p=8799>.

³⁵ On the subject, see, “Potential for the Continuation of Unity and Separation in Yemen,” the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, <http://www.dohainstitute.org/Home/Details?entityID=5d045bf3-2df9-46cf-90a0-d92cbb5dd3e4&resourceId=5ccd2a6c-199f-4560-ae62-33eaf9c5418b>.

³⁶ For more, see “‘The Joint Meeting’ parties,” <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/EF7EC359-9FBB-4B11-A7DE-AB5214C1A988.htm>.

citizens and understandings of citizenship and the rule of law will prevail, or the tribes and old methods will.

To what should we pay attention?

Today, Yemenis have before them a democratic civil solution that matches the aforementioned demands. It will not be easy to implement this solution, but it is the best guarantee of their stability and civil peace in the long run. Leaders must strive to achieve this, and it will not happen without a clear plan with well-defined steps that can be executed with the support of the new majority to which the first phase of the revolution will lead. However, those in power will not give up their privileges and wealth without resistance. It is possible that some influential powerbrokers will play a role in the current and future period, due to their resources in terms of allies and wealth. There are five groups that could have an effect on this situation: 1) the opposition parties; 2) the GPC; 3) the youth; 4) the tribes; and 5) the army.

The opposition parties: The question here is whether the opposition is capable of consolidating its ranks and choosing representatives who can transcend their tribal and clan belongings within a new conception of the democratic state. The group known as the Joint Meeting, which since 2003 has brought together the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah), the Yemeni Socialist Party, the Nasserite Unionist People's Organization, the Arab Socialist Rebirth Party, the Haq Party, the September Alliance and the Popular Forces Union Party,³⁷ is now in the opposition ranks against Saleh and his GPC. But opposition is one thing, and foundations are something else. If Saleh resigns, perhaps the perceived need for a Joint Meeting will dissipate, and each side will pick a representative in new foundational organizations.

The GPC: The GPC will not necessarily disappear upon Saleh's departure, and could instead – maybe for the best – continue if it accepts the new rules of the game, the most important of which are overcoming tribalism and alliances against democracy and the modern state. The Joint Meeting headed in this direction when it suggested that it would agree to Saleh's transferring power to his deputy, who would take over during the interim period.

The youth: Some of those who began the revolt in Sanaa's Taghyir Square played a similar role to that of the young revolutionaries in Tunisia and Egypt. Some, of course, are active in Yemeni political parties, and one way or another, these are the people who represent Yemen's future. It is necessary for them to have their say, and they have truly

³⁷ See, "Peaceful Youth Protesters in Sanaa Insist on their Demands for Regime Change," <http://www.al-tagheer.com/news27384.html>.

begun to make their voices heard through the announcement of their movement's manifesto.³⁸ We must envisage a situation in which the leaders of the youth movement can be at the helm of new institutions.

The tribes: The Yemeni system was built on the cornerstones of the tribe and the military. Despite the fact that a modern, and especially a democratic, state does not rest on such understandings, the situation in Yemen and in some other Arab countries depends more heavily on the tribe and the army than on any other social institution in order to achieve some sort of stability based on balances that are today uneasy, because they were based for a long time on serving autocratic rulers, and opportunistic sheikhs, and not “the people” in the modern sense of the term. At the moment, it is unclear whether the Yemeni opposition is genuinely interrogating this situation. Consequently I expect, at least in the short term, that the tribes will continue to have a strong influence on the political scene; I also would not be surprised if some sheikhs refrained from participating in discussions about the country's future. This would not be in the interest of the democratic civilian revolution, but rather in the continuity of the old regime through new institutions. If, at this stage, it is impossible to avoid this kind of non-participation, or to mitigate its effects, one must nonetheless remain acutely aware of it. If this new Yemeni generation believes in democracy, the next step in building a modern state necessitates the breakdown of all tribal structures and everything else that could place the word of the tribe or clan above the rule of law.

The army: What has been said about the power of the tribes can also be said about the military. There is not a single modern and truly democratic state in the world that allows the military to intervene in politics, but the construction of the modern state in Yemen, as in other Arab countries, fell upon the military. However, since the Yemeni street does not seem to currently be examining the role of the army, apart from criticizing its actions in the Suda war, it is possible that some attempts will be made to co-opt the democratic uprising and to bring the military to power. Here, we must insist that the place of the military during peacetime is in the barracks.

Conclusion and results:

The demands made by the protesters at Taghyir Square have brought Yemen into a new situation that no one could have anticipated. It is no longer possible to act as if traditional parties, or tribes, are the only ones on the field. It is no longer possible to say that this revolution was a “political maneuver” by the opposition in order to break Saleh's hold on power, as some reports

³⁸ It is worth noting that President Saleh's son is reportedly willing to burn Sanaa down if his father accepts to step down after EU-mediated negotiations with the opposition, “and for this reason, Saleh reneged on his deal with the mediators about his resignation and his handover of power.” See, *al-Hadath*, March 30, 2011, <http://alhadath-yemen.net/news12239.html>.

have suggested. Even if the opposition was the one that motivated people at the beginning, under the influence of events in Tunisia and Egypt, something extremely dangerous happened at that time: Yemeni society was split vertically and horizontally. The youth were joined by members of the civilian and military elites, and by some of the tribes. This did not take place in a vacuum, but in the context of objective social and political conditions that could change in the future if the revolution succeeds, but which must be taken into consideration.

The problem now cannot be posed in the old manner (i.e., by simply asking “what is the alternative to Ali Abdullah Saleh?”). There are thousands of alternatives. In modern states, people come and go, but institutions remain. Instead, the real question is: what kinds of institutions do Yemenis want to build to replace the system against which they have revolted? We know that “Yemeni democracy” during Saleh’s regime did not produce leaders as much as it consolidated the leadership of a single man for 32 years. This would not have been possible had the structures and institutions on which the Yemeni state was officially founded held sway over traditional loyalties and belongings. This largely places Yemeni governance among the group of patrimonial systems, which are less drastic than the outright dictatorships of a Ben Ali, Gaddafi, or the late Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Despite its similarities with other patrimonial systems, however, Saleh’s regime is a different system by many standards. One should not be misled by the common refrain that Yemen is “the one democracy in the Arabian Peninsula”. What is the alternative to Saleh? The protesters in Taghyir Square have comprehensively answered that question with their numerous and cogent demands.

The current period is somewhat uncertain – largely due to the so-called “special nature” of Yemeni society which Saleh and other power-brokers have been trying to take exploit in order to secure their own “solutions” to the crisis – but these “solutions” have been known for years. It is clear that the Americans (and recently, the Europeans) had their own ideas of the post-Saleh landscape, as well as their fears. The most likely candidates to succeed the embattled president are:

1. General Ahmar, described in leaked US Embassy cables as among America’s most powerful allies within the Yemeni establishment. Interestingly, the cables also painted him as the most likely to lead a military coup. There are indications that if Saleh were suddenly removed from power, “the five leaders of [Yemen’s] military region[s] will be potential candidates for the tribal elders to select a president from within them”. Today, the leaders have changed. Saleh made a habit of rotating these commanders – except for Mohsen. But who would want the general? Do Yemenis need a “strong man” – military or otherwise – or do they need strong civil institutions?

2. Also among the potential candidates are the brothers described above. Sheikh Sadiq al-Ahmar, who has inherited his father's position as head of the family, could become the central figure in the coming weeks and months. Sheikh Hamid al-Ahmar, who runs the family's extensive business empire, also wields considerable influence. Regardless of how crucial these men are to their tribes, however, they should undergo a test of democracy in which the tribal leader is equal to more modest individuals, and the rich landowner to the poor citizen, or the middle-class one.
3. Some other names are being talked about, such as Ahmad Ali Saleh, the president's son (a general in the Yemeni Army and head of both the Special Forces and the Presidential Guard), whose father has groomed him as a successor. However, in a recent attempt to placate the opposition, President Saleh announced that he had no intention of running for another term, or of passing power on to his son. This seems reasonable in a situation that is boiling over and uncertain; in any case, one of the demands of the opposition today is the removal of President Saleh's family from the regime. They also might be held accountable for abuses committed over the past 32 years, making it difficult to see how Ahmed Ali Saleh could gain widespread support for his candidacy.
4. Finally, notwithstanding the clear demand to purge Saleh's family from state institutions, a democracy must guarantee equality to all its citizens and cannot punish those who had no hand in corruption or violence. It would therefore be unfair to represent all members of Saleh's family as enemies of the revolution, especially since some of them have announced their support for the protests in Taghyir Square. The only appropriate course will be to investigate and prove any accusations, since some of them may stem from nothing more than a desire for revenge, and this would only perpetuate tribal mentalities. This particular aspect demonstrates once again the pressing need for an independent judiciary. Revolutions have their own logic, one that often transcends the past and establishes the future. In this dialectic (transcendence and establishment), the page is turned. It is as if history begins again.