

# **A Report on the Yemen between the Uprising and the Transition**

## **1. Institutional enemies of the protests:**

The most important feature that describes the tribal Yemeni is the hierarchical system that divides the society into socio-castes which do not experience any kind of social mobility within, and thus individuals inherit their social ranks and roles regardless of the mobility among socio-classes that can simply change the economical status and not the social rank. So we can say that the Yemeni society is divided into castes where the strongest in terms of money and authority are main three socio- castes: First, the caste of tribal leaders “Sheikhs”, followed by the category of Hashemite descendents who, according to their belief, gain superiority because they descend from the family of Islam's Prophet Mohammed Ibn Abdullah the Hashemite. After the two categories of Sheikhs and Hashemite descendents, there is the caste of judges and clergies who also get their power on theocratic religious basis and they are necessarily passed to the next generations of the same families. The third socio-caste consists of the land owners and the tribesmen.

It is necessary to point out that these three socio-castes lost their relevance in south Yemen after the independence in 1960 and the establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Yemen where the Yemeni socialist party ruled South Yemen until 1990. Moreover, the socialist approach in the South managed to bridge the gaps between those socio-castes through integrated education, nationalization, and mandatory scouts' camps for teenagers from both genders that integrated children from all social back grounds. In return, these three groups maintained their importance in the northern half of Yemen even after getting rid of the royal regime and the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic. And in spite of the transition from a monarchy to a republic, these three groups were still the actual rulers; either through selecting the president or getting rid of him as in the case of the assassination of President Ibrahim al-Hamdi, who started in his era to issue explicit instructions to reduce the authority of tribal leaders and ban civilians from carrying weapons as well as his left-leaning approach, which provoked the tribal leaders and their affiliates in Saudi Arabia who feared the progress of the left wing in the North and its possible bonding with the left in the South. And this is how Ali Abdullah Saleh, the son of Yemen's most powerful tribe: Hashid, became president and gained all the support he needed from Abdullah Bin Hussein Al Ahmar the head of Al Ahmar's family that leads all the Northern tribes who saw in Saleh the maintenance of the tribe's power.

In 1990 Ali Abdullah Saleh, president of North Yemen, signed the unification agreement with Ali Salem Al Beed, president of the South, and together they announced The Republic of Yemen. Both former regimes tried to melt into a more liberal oriented new system especially in terms of economy and head towards “The open market economy”, which was a global trend at that time due to the end of the cold war and the Soviet Union collapse. The most obvious consequence of the unplanned rush into getting rid of all the socialism features in the South and the steps that followed the unification was the focus on privatizing governmental institutions and selling them to businessmen who had strong affiliation with the tribes in the North or/ and the president Saleh himself. After that wave of privatization, the state gradually

abandoned all its responsibilities and the institutions that belonged to the public simply became privately owned by a group of favored business men as well the president's family and his tribe, Hashid.

As a result of the state's abandonment for its basic responsibilities and providing no other alternatives for the people after selling most of the governmental institutions to a few persons, people started to suffer escalating inflation waves after taking away the governmental support from basic services and laying off masses of employees after privatizing factories, companies and all sorts of production institutions. All those factors had a significant effect on the middle class that started to gradually disappear between 1994 and 2005 and even though both of the North and South suffered the economical setbacks and corruption, Southerners felt more injustice. On July 7<sup>th</sup>1994, Ali Abdullah Saleh had strict orders to retire most Southerners with high military ranks, and used the nationalized lands as gifts to all the tribesmen and military officials who helped him win the 1994 civil war.

Even though the economy was rapidly deteriorating in the 1990s especially after the civil war between the North and the South in the summer of 1994, major changes were made regarding the Yemeni law, for Saleh's regime was forced under the West's pressure to move towards the political pluralism that the whole region was heading to. For example, article (61), year 1991, presented political parties as the means of stabilization and healthy political practice that allows the peaceful transfer of power, and this was quite the opposite of the political parties' image in the public memory over the years which was fed by both of the totalitarian regimes in the South and the North before the unification. Article (61), also known as the Political Parties Law, allowed political parties that remained secret and illegal for almost thirty years to merge to the public and register officially. Also, article (25),1990, The Law of Press and Publications, as well as article (13),2001, The Law of elections, and article (1),2001, The Law of National Organizations and Institutions. All these laws resulted in a number of political parties, private newspapers, and hundreds of NGOs and all of them together created a surface that the regime tried to present to the world as the new democratic liberal Yemen. Yet, in reality, that surface was made of quantity rather than quality and; therefore, lost the purpose behind political pluralism. So instead of creating political balance and observing the government's performance, the political parties were too scattered and torn apart in a way that made the opposition more of a fictitious opposition that only served the "Democratic" image of the regime. Consequently, over the years, sham elections were held where tens of parties would participate and lose only to justify for Saleh and his party in the name of "Democracy" to remain in power while his regime continued to maintain the tribal rule in the shape of a republic using "Divide and conquer" policies everywhere. For example, supporting the Zaidi religious sect that produced "Al Huthi" movement later against the Sunni Fundamentalists and vice versa as well as depriving the South from all the privileges it had as an independent country before in a way that accumulated Southern grudges against the Northern regime. However, the years between 2004-2010 showed that the regime's policies started to get out of control when six wars in Sa'ada east of the country went on between the army and the "Huthi" movement, as well as the peaceful movement of the South that started demanding the separation between the North and the South and going back to the pre 1990 borders and last but not the least, Al-Qaeda operations in the South and West from time to time. All that added to the accelerating collapse of all public sectors due to the corruption, made Saleh's regime seem to be managing a failing state.

## **2. Reasons for the protests:**

When one closes his/her eyes for a moment before the fourteenth of January 2011, a strange scene appears. There is no room to go into details like the alarming rates of illiteracy, poverty and the low status of women, which have all become more of clichés that are repeated consequently to explain the situation in Yemen. A deep observation is the only way to analyze how a whole generation of young Yemenis melted completely in the scene and got used to it.

The many civil wars, political setbacks, executions, assassinations and detentions that the 80s and 90s generation's parents witnessed produced a passive and submissive climate for Yemeni youth, which made them adapt to what their peers in other places around the world would find impossible to tolerate. Also, it has become clear that most of the people of this generation are often the sons of the poor, despite the fact that their parents used to belong to the middle-class, which receded gradually against the ruling minority that controls the country's wealth leaving the vast majority between the poverty line or below in many cases. All those factors made the majority of people fall under economic, social and cultural marginalization as a natural result of the collapse of the infrastructure of the society followed by the collapse of the superstructure of the society in its cultural and social forms, which did not allow for the formation of any political identity for the majority of young Yemenis.

On one hand, the majority of Yemeni youth who make more than 60% of the Yemeni population never showed significant political participation in the past two decades. On the other hand, a small percentage of Yemeni youth joined the political life. And even though the Yemeni youth that joined political parties joined different parties, the majority of youth chose one of two parties; Islah- Muslim Brotherhood party and the General People's Congress Party which is the ruling party. The youth joined the first as a normal result of being given the spiritual and religious interpretation of the economic and many social deficits young Yemenis dealt with in the absence of realistic and affective political ideologies giving the youth of this generation hope of salvation from the bitter reality by a dreamy theocratic state that has been marketed for in the party's newspapers, educational curriculum and publications. To the contrary of Islah's- Moslem Brotherhood ideologies, General People's Congress Party was attractive to young men and women because of the examples that this party set for people who made sudden fortune and became powerful and famous in no time just by becoming members in this party.

That political environment along with the very difficult socio-economic conditions left 45% of Yemenis poor with less than 2\$ per day income according to the latest UNDP statistics. Yet, what was left of the middle-class formed the force demanding for change that meant a just end to the wars in Saada, serious negotiations on the Southern case, accountability, transparency and the freedom for political detainees who reached thousands of activists, journalists and civilians.

### **3. Leftist actors in the protests:**

The first protest against Saleh's regime was on January 15<sup>th</sup>. 2011, right after Bin Ali left Tunisia. The Protest was a response to a Facebook event that was called for by a group of journalists and civic activists. After that one protest, there were daily protests outside Sana'a University campus on a daily basis where three groups participated simultaneously. Those three groups consisted of the educated elite or the intelligentsia, the university students committee of the Yemeni Socialist party, and the university students who most of the time did not have any partial memberships. Between mid January and February 3<sup>rd</sup>. 2011, all the protests outside Sana'a University demanded the end of Saleh's regime. However, on February 3<sup>rd</sup>. 2011, the opposition Joint Meeting Parties called for a festival on what they called the "Thursday of Wrath" where they held a festival outside campus calling for political reform. The Opposition's demand did not meet the demands of the protests that started before which created a gap between the youth leftists who started protesting earlier in January to overthrow the regime. The older formal leadership of the Yemeni socialist party remained conservative in terms of the demands as the Yemeni Socialist Party is a member of the Joint Meeting Parties-JMP that also includes the northern-based, tribal, and Islamist Moslem Brotherhood-oriented Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah), Hizb Al-Haq (a semi-religious party), the Unionist party, and the Popular Forces Union party that were all joined together to form the JMP in 2005.

On February 11<sup>th</sup>. 2011, the first tent was built in the Freedom Square in Taiz, a city in the middle between north and south Yemen. A week later, Yemeni youth in Sana'a led by the Students committee of the Yemeni socialist party built their own tents in front of Sana'a University and as the weeks followed, tribes from all over the country joined to create the Change Square. Also, at the same time a new wave started to appear in the South where voices different than those who were calling for separation appeared on February 16<sup>th</sup> when youth in Aden, the capital city of the former southern state, went to the streets calling for the same demands that youth in Sana'a and Taiz were calling for and waving the unification flags.

What was very interesting to notice is how the right wing in general and the religious parties in specific joined the square one month after the protests started and were attacked by the police. Also, the official leadership of the left did not join the square immediately until all the other parties joined to the contrary of what the leftist students did. In addition, women were very significant at all points during the period from February to April. Female students from the left along with apolitical background female students participated in building the tents, guarding the entrances for the sit in areas, marches, field hospital and most importantly the awareness campaigns and negotiation circles among the tribes as well as the coalitions that were formed in the square. However, Saleh's speech on how men and women should not be protesting side by side for religious and moral reasons was received with the same logic by the Moslem Brotherhood-Islah protesters who ended up beating female activists who refused to go on separate marches with women only. And with the fanatic right wing ideology that found its way among the poor and the illiterate, women's participation remained significant but not as wide as it did in the squares before while it prospered in the other spaces such as the conferences that represent the revolutions abroad and the media.

#### **4. Demands of demonstrators from the Left:**

By the end of February, over 400 coalitions were formed in the Change Square, Sana'a. Liberals, leftists as well as apolitical activists formed The Coordinating Council of the Youth Revolution of Change in order to help the revolution's components get together under one roof, and at the beginning of March, 2011 they announced The Declaration of Youth Revolution Demands, which stated the revolution's demands as agreed on in all the change and freedom squares around Yemen. Those demands were announced in the document as the following:

- 1) Remove the current regime peacefully and remove all its figures and all members of the President's family and his relatives from all leadership posts in the military and civil institutions.
- 2) Forming a Transitional Presidential Council that constitutes of 5 civil members that are widely known for their competency, integrity and experience. These members have to be approved by the revolution youth leaders and the national powers. Individuals that represent the previous regime should be excluded from the selection. The Transitional Presidential Board will have the responsibility to issue all decision and decrees that will ensure attaining the demands of the revolution. After serving in the Transitional Presidential Board, members will not have the right to run for President or Prime Minister posts until one electoral cycle is completed.
- 3) After overthrowing the regime the Board has to declare a six month transitional period. This period starts with a constitutional decree announcing the termination of the current constitution and dissolving the Parliament, the Shura Council and the Local Councils.
- 4) The Transitional Presidential Board will appoint a widely accepted national figure who will form a Transitional Cabinet of qualified technocrats within one month.
- 5) A Transitional National Board to be formed and include representatives of the youth and all political and national powers. The Transitional National Board will provide:
  - a) A solution for the Southern issue that yields a fair and satisfactory response
  - b) A solution for the Sa'ada Case issue that resolves the preceding effects.
  - c) Monitoring the performance of the Transitional Presidential Board and the Transitional Cabinet.
  - d) Forming a new Supreme Council for Elections which will be responsible for correcting the voter records and preparing for free and fair elections during the transitional period.
  - e) Selecting a Drafting Committee of reliable legal advisors to propose a new constitution for a civil, democratic and modern state that has: a republican parliamentary system based on proportional list-based electoral system, and a system of social justice and equal citizenship. The new constitution has to be completed within three months from its initiation, and the then put for national referendum.
- 6) Restructuring the higher judicial council to ensure the full separation and impartiality of the judicial authority.
- 7) Dissolving the Ministry of Information and forming an independent higher authority that will ensure freedom of expression and diversification of media and communication outlets.
- 8) Dissolving the Ministry of Human Rights and creating an independent higher council for human rights.
- 9) Legally pursue and prosecute the corrupt officials and retrieve public property and money.
- 10) Immediate release of all political detainees and the missing persons and dissolving extraordinary courts and private prisons.
- 11) Legal persecution of all individuals that caused, assisted and incited the killing and injury of those

who participated in the peaceful demonstrations. Deliver appropriate compensations to the families of the deceased and honor them duly.

12) Dissolving the Political Security Forces and National Security Forces, and forming a new dedicated national security agency under the umbrella of the Ministry of Interior. The new national security agency will be responsible for observing Yemen's external threats.

13) Merging the Republican Guards with the Military Forces, and dissolving the National Defense Council to ensure full impartiality of the Army and Security Forces.

As those demands were announced, the JMP did not show any reaction and kept their comments in the media in one direction by saying that they are 100% behind the squares' steps and decisions. Meanwhile, marches continued on weekly basis in spite of the brutal attacks against them while the sit in continued to get bigger and bigger every day until it took over three main streets around the university campus filled with tents for the tribes, students and workers who moved to live in those tents to participate in the sit in. Moreover, the intelligentsia used their own tenets for seminars and specialized sessions to teach the protesters. There was the lawyers' tent for example where all the lawyers the joined the sit taught classes about the constitution, international law and transitional justice and so on there were many similar tents that got full attention from the protesters especially the tribes that came from the villages.

## **5. Methods of organizing :**

It is a fact that the concept of peaceful struggling is still new in the Arab world and Yemen, for people have not participated in large numbers in such kind of uprisings before. In Yemen, there were two examples before the February revolution; the Peaceful Southern movement as well as the civic activists' protests for human rights and women right in front of the Yemeni Cabinet each Tuesday and those two categories were still elite oriented and did not include large masses. Therefore, people started learning the concept of peaceful protesting through practice after getting involved in the February revolution and sit-ins. For instance, tribesmen from all over the country that joined the Change Square in Sana'a were constantly trying to prove to the rest of the country, the media and the international community that they left their weapons behind and were not willing to go after revenge for their family members who were shot and killed during the protests.

In order to maintain the organization and the peaceful approach during the protests, social networks were used to call for the protests' timings and locations. As inside the square, a stage was built to announce marching plans to the protesters. Even though at the beginning of March a lot of foreign reporters were asked to leave the country, the protesters managed to build a media tent in each square in the country where amateur photographers and videographers and the professional ones who were pro-revolution would document on daily basis then send their tapes to different international media channels as well as social media and internet websites.

The traditional opposition represented in the Joint Meeting Parties continued to refuse negotiations with the regime as the youth in the squares demanded until March 18<sup>th</sup>. 2011. That Friday that was named

later “Al Karama- The Friday of Dignity” witnessed the murder of more than 60 peaceful protester and the injury of over 300 in less than one hour who were shot during the Friday prayer by snipers who settled on the roof a governor’s house near the Change Square in Sana’a. As a result of what happened on March 18<sup>th</sup>, a huge wave of resignations came from government officials, diplomats and national reporters and journalists. Yet, the turning point was when General Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar joined the square on March 21<sup>st</sup> bringing with him the majority of the army and creating a controversy among the square components who were divided between Islah members who were affiliated with him in one way or another through the tribal and ideological backgrounds and welcomed him, and those who saw in him a real threat to the peacefulness of the revolution not to mention his history as Saleh’s relative and military iron fist that fought in 1994 in the South and Saada.

As expected, General Ali Mohsen became a burden on the revolution because of the equal armed weight he represented, which simply made him an equivalent to the regime’s national guards. As a result, the fear of a civil war was Yemenis’ biggest nightmare after March 21<sup>st</sup> knowing that the regime violent escalation towards the peaceful protesters was one of the various attempts to drag the army to an armed conflict with the national guard, and this caused severe harm to the image of the revolution in the international media that viewed the situation as a fight over power between cousins instead of a nation’s call for freedom, equality and social justice. Also the armed conflict between the regime and Al-Ahmar’s sons who represented Hashid in Al-Hasaba area in Sana’a last May helped in achieving the regime’s plan to take away the world’s attention from the violations against peaceful protesters to watch the cousins’ fight over power. And the last challenge was on September 18<sup>th</sup>, six months after the Friday of Dignity, when the regime attacked peaceful protesters with RPGs and bombs and fired at General Ali Mohsen’s deviated forces and succeeded in starting an armed conflict that lasted for two weeks and ended many civilians’ lives. Similarly, the regime kept on attacking the Freedom Square in Taiz using a multiplied degree of violence such as shelling and burning the protesters’ camps in order to provoke the tribes there to get involved in another armed conflict.

A different voice was starting to grow In the middle of all those challenges to turn the scene from a peaceful revolution to a wide civil war through armed conflicts between the deviated army with Al Ahmar Family and the regime at times and the air forces and tribes in Nehm near Sana’a at other times not to mention the religious armed conflicts the raised from time to time between the Sunni Fundamentalists and the Zaidi Huthis in Hajja, Al Jawf and Dammaj. The young leftists and liberals started to find their way among all that mess with the help of civic activists in order to maintain the peaceful approach of the revolution away from all the conflicts around by high lighting the revolution’s goals and methods and rejecting the other violent distractions and enduring the difficult collective punishment that was imposed by the government on people like the 20-22 hours a day of power cuts as well as lack of water, and continuously rising prices for the basic goods, gas and products.

During all that bulk of events, the traditional opposition, JMP, agreed to sign the Gulf Countries Council’s Initiative after a serious of negotiations between Sana’a and Riyadh. Saleh kept on agreeing and refusing to sign until he ended up changing the GCC’s initiative five times and insisting on granting him full immunity against any sort of legal prosecution even though he repeated in his speeches for a whole year that his regime did not commit any sort of violations against the protesters.

When the JMP signed the GCC initiative in May and then its detailed plan in November, the youth in the squares felt betrayed by the traditional opposition for signing an agreement that grants Saleh full immunity from prosecution. However, the lack of any other options and the constant threat of a civil war especially with General Ali Mohsen’s burden on the revolution’s shoulders left the square components with no other options than working with what is after the initiative knowing that the gulf countries and the

US government has always seen in Saleh the perfect ally for their interests in Yemen with all the access to its wealth and governance that he has given to them.

## **6. The difficulties of transition:**

It is very difficult to define the official left's position separately, for it is part of a bigger being where both of the right and the left met to form the JMP. Therefore, the left's role can only be seen as part of the opposition as a whole which represents now 50% of the transitional government according to the GCC initiative. As a result, the left wing of the JMP is seen now by the progressive revolution components as the balance between the rest of the right wing religious parties.

The progressive elite has its own fears regarding the transitional period. Issues like secularizing the new constitution, women's 30% quotas, and freedom of expression and faith are the issues that started to appear to the surface in an environment of fear of what is going to happen next. After the wins of the Moslem Brotherhood parties in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt, progressive Yemenis have come to worry about Islah winning the parliamentary elections in 2014. However, the average Yemeni citizen is often looking for new faces who are not affiliated with parties neither from the left, nor the right. To most Yemenis, all JMP parties are one being and if they have to choose between a JMP candidate and an apolitical candidate, they would go for the second. This can only be a normal result of years of armed conflicts where those parties were involved sometimes not to mention that to many people, those opposition parties went to the negotiations in Saudi Arabia with the regime. So the fact that the average Yemeni has lost faith in the traditional political parties and their way of political practice makes it difficult for those parties to connect with the Yemenis unless they involve the youth in their parties and the ones are not in the transitional period steps that were agreed upon in the GCC initiative.

The external interference in Yemen's policies can be described as the most important factor in determining this nation's fate. On one hand, The US drones in the south that killed tens of people besides the hundreds that were burned alive at the ammunition factory in Abyan, which was exploded by one of the Yemeni Special Unit for Fighting Terrorism's operations, all of those violations against Yemen's independence under the name of fighting terrorism played a big role in the US double standard government's policy of dealing with the Yemeni revolution. The American ambassador in Sana'a who has been speaking frequently to the media about he thinks is right for the country, repeatedly supported Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, the president's son to remain in charge of the national guards and described him as an investment for the US government that trained him to be the head of fighting terrorism units in Yemen and the Middle East. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia's historical support to the tribal rule in Yemen has stood against any project that aimed to transform Yemen to a civic state. Moreover, the Saudis support to the theocratic perspective can also be an obstacle ahead of progressive Yemenis who aim for a civic state.

## **7. Perspectives:**

After the elections that were held on February 21<sup>st</sup>. 2012, Vice President AbduRabu Mansoor Hadi became Yemen's president for the transitional period. In spite of the division that the "One Candidate" elections created, all components whether with or against the elections agreed to look forward to the National Dialogue Conference in order to put all the points on one table to discuss. The priorities for this period can be summarized as the following:

- Lifting all armed forces from the cities and move all military camps outside the cities.
- Including all the components of the Yemeni social and political spectrum especially women, the Southern and Huthi movements with significant representations in the National Dialogue Conference and the Constitution Writing Committee
- Start the preparations to restructure the army according to the United Nation's convoy's suggestion.

To sum up, the threat on the Yemeni revolution that is still ongoing are various. The fear of armed conflicts can be the most dangerous for what it can be fatal to any sort of peaceful struggles. Also, the religious filtering and lobbying against any progressive approach can represent what is more than an ideological conflict when those ideologies hide behind Kalashnikovs and tanks. For instance, the current attacks on leftist writers and activists by Moslem Brotherhood-Islah scholars who demanded prosecution and punishment for a leftist writer and activist for an article that she wrote explaining their point of view as a defending religion. Such incidents must be seen as alarms to manage the transitional period wisely in especially when it comes to restructuring the army, dealing with armed civilians and writing a new constitution that guarantees the freedom on faith and speech as well as gender equality.