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UPHEAVAL IN YEMEN

BACKGROUND AND PROSPECTS OF A REBELLION WITH UNCERTAIN OUTCOME

Christoph Dreyer

In normal circumstances Yemen rarely makes the international headlines – usually only when Westerners are kidnapped or militant Islamists cause a stir. The country at the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula lacks the political and economic clout to attract much attention unless unusual things are happening. Even since the start of the protests in the Arab world, Yemen has only sporadically penetrated the awareness of the general public in the West. Yet the political upheavals that have been taking place there since early this year are no less dramatic than those in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya or Syria.

In Yemen, as in other Arab countries, a mass movement driven largely by young activists outside the established opposition has shaken the foundations of a system long regarded as immovable. Not least among its achievements is the fact that the days of president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has been in power for 33 years, appear to be numbered. And Saleh had just set out to extend his presidency beyond 2013 – the latest date at which, according to the constitution, he must stand down.

Even after Saleh's announcement of his resignation, it is unclear where future political power will lie – but a speedy return to political normality is hard to imagine, especially as the opposition movement has triggered the formation of different camps even within the regime. In any case, the instability in Yemen could have major repercussions on the security situation in the south of the Arabian Peninsula and in the Horn of Africa. For this reason alone the West should not ignore these events, but neither should its view be restricted to a narrowly defined security perspective.

AN ECONOMY TEETERING ON THE EDGE

Yemen is the poorest country in the Arab world. The International Monetary Fund estimates that 43 per cent of its 23 million inhabitants are living below the poverty line. Economic output is put at less than 900 dollars per head. The population is growing at 2.9 per cent per year, which means that it will double in 25 years. The oil boom in the neighbouring Gulf states brought employment for hundreds of thousands of Yemeni migrant workers in the 1970s and 1980s, but soon after the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 the Iraq crisis put an abrupt end to this important source of income for many Yemeni families. After Iraq's invasion of Kuwait President Saleh argued against military intervention by the international community. In response Saudi Arabia and Kuwait sent the Yemeni workers home, flooding Yemen's labour market with unskilled workers.

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The industrial sector has always been underdeveloped in Yemen. Agriculture, too, no longer brings in foreign currency as it did in the days when coffee was a major export. The country is now forced to import ninety per cent of its staple food, wheat. Ever-larger areas of agricultural land are being used to grow qat, a crop that requires intensive irrigation. Qat is a mild drug that in Yemen is consumed socially in the afternoons. Qat consumption is therefore not only hindering economic activity; it is also – with population growth, climate change and inefficient irrigation methods – one of the factors that is causing the groundwater table to fall so rapidly that in only a few years the capital, Sanaa, may no longer have an economically viable water supply.

There is one most important pillar of the Yemeni economy: oil sales make up around 60 per cent of state revenue and 90 per cent of export earnings. But the reserves discovered in the 1980s are limited and since 2001 production has been declining. The known reserves could be exhausted in just ten years and export of liquified natural gas, which began in 2009, will only partially compensate for the loss of revenue. In any case, most of the population derive little benefit from the oil revenues. Members of the inner circle

of President Saleh's regime have used them instead to line their own pockets and to buy the allegiance of political, economic and social elites.

The overall picture is indeed bleak. On the grounds of its economic position alone, Yemen could be regarded as at risk of becoming a "failed state" like Somalia. And to this must be added a political situation that in many respects was explosive even before the mass protests began.

A POLITICAL POWDER KEG

Since 2004 the army has been engaged in a number of rounds of fighting in an escalating conflict with Houthi rebels in the mountains in the far north of the country. The insurgents take their name from the clerical Houthi family, members of which have stirred up a renewal movement in the governorate of Saada and claim to be defending the identity of the Zaidi religious group, which is strongly represented in northern Yemen. In fact the conflict is fuelled by feelings of religious, social and economic discrimination in a chronically underdeveloped region. It cannot, however, be considered an ideologically coherent movement; instead an increasingly obscure tissue of ideas has developed over the years as social, cultural and financial motives have blended with the desire to resist intervention by the state.

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The clashes have at times encroached on areas close to Sanaa. A number of ceasefires have been agreed, but none has proved lasting. The UN Refugee Agency estimates that some 350,000 people have fled in the face of the fighting, but once again few of them returned to their homes after the latest ceasefire in February 2010.

The conflict is further complicated by its international dimension. While the government side accused the rebels of (unproven) Iranian support, the rebels claimed that Saleh was acting on the orders of Saudi Arabia. In late 2009 and early 2010 Saudi Arabia was drawn into the conflict directly when the militants attacked Saudi border posts. It responded with air attacks on Houthi positions on

Yemeni soil. By the time the fighting ended, more than 130 Saudi soldiers were dead.

Political, social and economic currents also come together in the secession movement in the former South Yemen. In the summer of 2007 protests by South Yemeni ex-officers calling for higher pensions – to which the security forces responded harshly – set in motion the growth of a broad but incohesive movement. This has become a vehicle for the expression of dissatisfaction – which has been building up since unification – with the political superiority of the north and the low level of investment in the southern provinces. It also reflects the discontent felt as profits from exploitation of the country's oilfields – which lie mainly in the south – are largely siphoned off by the president's clan. As confrontation with the regime has escalated, the movement has found a powerful symbol in the South Yemeni flag. Its leaders originally preached non-violence, but over time some of the protests have become more radicalised: both the calls to break away from the North and the shootouts with the security forces have become more frequent.

A third internal battlefield for the Yemeni state is the confrontation with militant Islamists, in particular al-Qaida. Religious extremists have had a strong presence in Yemen since the return of the Afghan Arabs from the fight against Soviet troops in Afghanistan after 1989. Many of the fighters joined the security forces; a large number were deployed against the South Yemen separatists in the civil war of 1994. In the 1990s they carried out no major attacks in Yemen. In particular they did not directly oppose government interests in Sanaa but used Yemen primarily as a safe haven.

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It is widely assumed that that there was a sort of non-aggression pact between the two sides at this time. This clearly continued in force even after the suicide attack on the U.S. warship USS Cole in the port of Aden in 2000 and the attacks of 11 September 2001, when the U.S. government declared Yemen a frontline state in the "war on

terror” and the government in Sanaa officially cooperated with the USA in tackling terrorism. Certainly there were numerous inconsistencies in the Saleh regime’s handling of the Islamists: on several occasions, in moves that were clearly tactically motivated, high-ranking arrested terror suspects were released, and the regime frequently demonstrated very limited willingness to cooperate with the U.S. authorities in prosecuting alleged Islamist terrorists.

However, over the last about five years a younger generation of activists that seeks direct confrontation with the Saleh regime has been emerging within the militant Yemeni Islamist scene. The newcomers have made their presence felt with increasingly frequent attacks on Western targets in Yemen, including embassies, oil companies and tourists. These extremists founded a Yemeni branch of al-Qaida, which included among its leaders a number of the 23 convicted top terrorists who escaped from a prison in Sanaa in mysterious circumstances in 2006.

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Early in 2009 the group announced that it had been joined by al-Qaida extremists from Saudi Arabia, where the movement had been greatly weakened since 2003 as a result of increasing persecution by the authorities. This was marked by bestowing on the organisation the new name “al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula” (AQAP). The group has drawn attention to itself with attacks not only in Yemen but also in Saudi Arabia and on targets in other countries, including the attempted attack of the “underwear bomber” Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab on a U.S. airplane at the end of 2009 and the parcel bombs found on freight planes in October 2010. U.S. observers now rate AQAP as the branch of al-Qaida that poses the greatest threat to the United States.

The fact that AQAP has been able to emerge as such a threat from within Yemen highlights the risks to the region and to Western security interests that state failure in Yemen would entail. However, it also shows that the present regime under President Saleh has been unwilling or unable to act effectively to ensure the protection of such interests on its territory.

MASS MOBILISATION FROM BELOW

The beginnings of the Yemeni protest movement go back to 2007, when a group of activists around the woman heading the organisation "Journalists Without Chains", Tawakkul Karman, commenced weekly demonstrations in Sanaa. They were initially calling for greater press freedom, more newspaper licences and the release of arrested journalists. As time went by, however, they increasingly turned their attention to issues of democracy and human rights in general.

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The revolution in Tunisia gave new momentum to what was still a marginal movement. Instead of calling for isolated gradual improvements in the country as they had done at the outset, the demonstrators in Yemen now demanded the fall of the regime. "Tunisia was our solution", said Karman of this turn of events. "The problem in our society is the regime, just as in Tunisia. The whole regime must go."

On 15 January, the day after President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali fled Tunisia, a couple of dozen students, democracy activists and members of opposition groups occupied the square in front of Sanaa university and began to proclaim their solidarity with the revolution in Tunisia and to demand the immediate resignation of President Saleh. Further rallies took place in the days that followed. The demonstrators' slogans were akin to those of the revolutionaries in Tunisia and Egypt: they were protesting against corruption and brutality on the part of the regime, the absence of opportunities for involvement in politics, the lack of prospects for young people and the inactivity of the established opposition.

At almost the same time the parties making up the opposition coalition JMP roused thousands of supporters to take part in a series of demonstrations against the move by the government camp to amend the constitution, thus enabling the president to remain in office beyond 2013. Saleh had come to power in 1978 in what was then North Yemen and became head of the united country when the North joined with the previously socialist South in 1990. However, he did not seek election until 1999, which means

that his second seven-year term of office – the maximum permitted under the constitution – ends in 2013. The planned reform would have reduced the term of office to five years but would also have removed the restriction to two terms of office, hence opening the way for Saleh to remain in government for life. At the outset, however, the immediate resignation of the president was not one of the demands of the established opposition.

In a speech to Parliament on 2 February Saleh signalled his readiness to compromise, indicating that he was willing to put the proposed constitutional changes on ice and to renounce an extension of his term of office and regulation of the succession – in other words, a transfer of power to his son Ahmed. He offered the opposition the prospect of a place in a government of national unity.

Despite this, the anti-regime demonstrations grew ever larger after the fall of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak on 11 February. On that day thousands of people flocked onto the streets in a number of Yemeni cities to celebrate the revolution on the Nile and demand similar change in their own country. The demonstrations continued daily, assuming the spontaneous and emphatically non-violent form that had been seen in Tunisia and Egypt. They were led by youth activists and representatives of civil society such as Tawakkul Karman – who, together with two Liberian women, has been awarded this year's Nobel Peace Prize for her non-violent campaigning.

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The security forces responded harshly from the outset. Soon after the fall of Mubarek the first deaths were reported and more than 100 demonstrators were injured. No doubt partly as a response to the violence, the protests swelled after Friday prayers on 18 February, for the first time attracting tens of thousands of people. Two days later the opposition coalition JMP declared that no dialogue could take place while the regime was using violence against peaceful demonstrators. At the same time the coalition called on its supporters to join the peaceful protests.

In the days and weeks that followed the pressure on Saleh continued to grow. In Sanaa a tent city was set up on the

square in front of the university as a permanent protest camp. Rebels in the North and secessionists in the South expressed support for the demonstrators' aims. Several of the ruling party's members of parliament resigned in protest at the violence being used against demonstrators.

During March security forces in several cities used live ammunition against demonstrators. A watershed was reached on 18 March when snipers in Sanaa killed 52 opponents of the government. Three ministers resigned in protest before Saleh pre-empted further disintegration by dismissing the entire cabinet. Thereupon a number of high-ranking officers, tribal leaders, politicians and diplomats went over to the opposition in quick succession – at their head the country's second-highest general and commander of the operation against the Houthi rebels, Ali Muhsin, and the most important of the tribal leaders, Sadiq al-Ahmar. Defection spread throughout the military command. In the weeks that followed there were repeated clashes between troops loyal to Saleh and army units led by a group of generals who were now on the side of the opposition.

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After various compromises proposed by either the President or the organised opposition had been rejected by the other side, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) intervened in April. The members of the GCC are Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar; Yemen itself has been seeking admission for some time. The GCC's aim was to help the President and opposition to arrive at a negotiated interim solution. Agreement in principle was reached twice, but on each occasion Saleh cancelled the signing of an agreement at the last minute, most recently on 22 May. In Sanaa this triggered heavy fighting between security forces loyal to Saleh and the tribal fighters of Sadiq al-Ahmar.

In other parts of the country, too, public order was breaking down. In Saada in the North the army effectively left the field to the Houthi rebels with the withdrawal of General Muhsin. In the province of Abyan in southern Yemen militant Islamists took control of several areas, including the capital Zinjibar. Tens of thousands of people fled from

the fighting there. At the end of June, 57 Islamist prisoners with links to al-Qaida managed to break out of a prison in Hadramaut.

The violence reached a peak on 3 June when Saleh and several other top politicians were seriously injured in a grenade attack on the mosque of the presidential palace. Saleh needed months of medical treatment in Saudi Arabia;. Contrary to widespread expectations, however, the Saudis did not use the opportunity to prevent his return and thereby put an end to the power struggle in Yemen. In the middle of August, after weeks of stalemate, the opposition put forward a sort of national transitional council consisting

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not only of party politicians but also of youth and tribal representatives and defecting members of the military. The Council was swiftly declared by a spokesman for Saleh to be illegal and unconstitutional. When Saleh eventually returned to the country at the end of September, renewed fighting immediately broke out in Sanaa between troops of the President and followers of General Muhsin and Sadiq al-Ahmar.

An announcement in early October of Saleh's resignation initially came to nothing. It was not until the end of November, after international mediation efforts on the basis of the GCC proposal had escalated to the Security Council, that Saleh signed an agreement with opposition leaders in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, in which he consented to hand over power with immediate effect to his deputy, Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi. However, Saleh will formally retain his title until a new president is elected. Parts of the protest movement immediately rejected the agreement, not least because it guarantees Saleh freedom from prosecution.

INFORMAL POWER STRUCTURES

With some pride Yemen claims to be the only democracy on the Arabian Peninsula. At the most recent presidential elections in 2006 a number of candidates vied for office, and despite some irregularities Saleh's most important opponent, Faisal bin Schamlan, won 21.8 per cent of the votes – a respectable outcome. The parliamentary system, too, is relatively well developed. The most important

opposition grouping, the moderate Islamist Islah party, has even been involved in government in the past. However, the real, informal power structures are only thinly veiled by this institutional façade. This is illustrated by the position of Vice President Hadi, who now formally holds power for a transition period. In reality he has never stood out as an important player in the web of Yemeni politics. For a long time his most important role, as a result of his background, was probably to function as a token of appropriate representation of the country's South in the government.

The real political powerhouse can be imagined as a series of concentric circles with President Saleh at the centre. Immediately surrounding him are several close relatives; further out are the elite of the Sanhan tribe to which Saleh belongs – as does General Ali Muhsin, who defected in March to the opposition. These about 50 people form the regime's inner circle: they control the most important military positions as well as significant areas of the Yemeni economy, including the oil trade and the shadow economy.

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Likewise part of the regime, albeit outside this inner circle, are people such as the key leaders of the two most important tribal federations, the Hashid and the Bakil, and a number of religious personalities. Official state structures, by contrast, serve mainly as an additional opportunity to expand the president's patronage network beyond the areas where his influence of traditional, informal social structures is limited.

One of the peculiarities of the Yemeni regime is that most of the members of the inner circle are completely unknown to the public. However, the few well-known names are sufficient to give an impression of the closed nature of this power structure. For example, Saleh's oldest son Ahmed – who was long regarded as the President's chosen successor – commands the 30,000 troops of the Republican Guard, a particularly well-trained and well-equipped elite force. With Saleh's nephew Tariq, the commander of the Presidential Guard, he is responsible for the personal protection of the head of state. Other important positions are held by Saleh's half-brother Mohammed, who is

commander of the air force, and two other nephews – Yahya, who is vice-commander of the Central Security Forces, a paramilitary police force assigned to the Ministry of the Interior, and Ammar, who is deputy head of the National Security Bureau, a secret service directly responsible to the President.

Perhaps the most colourful figure in Saleh's inner circle is General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, who is only distantly related to the President and who until his defection to the opposition camp was regarded as the second most powerful person in the country. He provided Saleh with crucial military support in 1978, when Saleh used the power vacuum that followed the death of President Ahmed al-Ghashmi to seize power in what was then North Yemen. The support of the Sanhan tribal elite in the lengthy power struggle of that time is said to have been sealed in an informal agreement known as "the pact" (*al-ahd*) that laid down not only Saleh's leadership role but also Muhsin's position as his successor.

When Saleh had his term as president extended from five years to seven in 2001, thereby making it possible for him to remain in office until 2013, the tribal elite of the Sanhan are said to have seen this as an attempt to install his son Ahmed as his successor: the reforms meant that by the time his father's term of office ended, Ahmed would have reached the prescribed minimum age of 40. This would have been a clear breach of the "pact", which is why Saleh's moves angered both Muhsin (even if not necessarily on account of his personal interest in the presidency) and others.

Since then Saleh and Muhsin have been viewed as competitors and the general's military role has been noticeably curtailed. Thus some observers assume that the President deliberately engineered the conflict with the Houthis – which is taking place in the north-west region of Yemen that is under Muhsin's command – to weaken his powerful competitor. In the light of this one must ask whether Ali Muhsin's apparent defection to the opposition was not in reality part of the

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forces, in order to be well-placed for a dominant position in a post-Saleh era.

SALEH'S SHADOWY OPPONENTS

Until his death in 2007, another key figure in the opaque Yemeni power struggle was Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar. He was for decades the undisputed leader of the Hashid, the smaller but nevertheless more influential of the two major tribal federations. As the main mediator with the tribal elite, co-founder of the Islah party – the most important opposition grouping –, long-standing President of Parliament and an important confidant of Saudi Arabia he was theoretically in a position to be a powerful opponent of Saleh. In practice, however, he was a long-time pillar of the regime, which bestowed sinecures on the Hashid in the form of important posts in the military and bureaucracy.

This ambivalent role is reflected in the erratic political course of the Islah party. Founded in 1990 in the context of unification, the party brings together tribal elites, the moderate Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Salafists, some of them radical. The party's original aim was to combat the negative influence on the North's traditional social structures of the Marxist Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) that had been the governing party in South Yemen. Islah is far and away the best-organised grouping within the opposition, and in theory with its Islamist character it provides an ideological alternative to the regime, even if in practice it is not a party with a strong manifesto. It has a broad membership base, including people such as Tawakkul Karman – a fact that liberal critics see as grounds for suspicion that the activist is pursuing a covert Islamist agenda. And like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in the Palestinian territories, an important aspect of Islah is its charitable work, through which it reaches deep into society.

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At the parliamentary elections of 1993 Islah formed an alliance with the General People's Congress (GPC) of President Saleh and was subsequently involved in government from 1994 to 1997. During the first direct presidential election of 1999 it supported Saleh's candidacy; with the

GPC it prevented the challengers of the YSP being given permission to stand for election.

Later, however, relationships between Saleh and Sheikh al-Ahmar progressively deteriorated, clearly as an aspect of the power struggle within the inner circle. In advance of the presidential election of 2006 Islah joined with the YSP and several smaller parties to form the opposition coalition JMP, within which Islah is by far the numerically strongest and best-organised single force. Contrary to widespread expectation, this coalition is still in existence today; its members now seem to have turned permanently against the regime.

Nevertheless, until the start of the protest movement these parties carefully avoided challenging the regime directly; they refrained from highlighting any serious alternative to the much-deplored system of corruption and patronage, let alone attempting to mobilise the masses against it. The tactics of the JMP could instead be interpreted as a move to secure or enlarge its own share of the sinecures available for distribution. As a result, the opposition has lost credibility among many of the anti-regime demonstrators.

Since the death of the tribal patriarch Abdullah al-Ahmar, his leadership role has passed in varying degrees to his ten sons. The holder of what is formally the most important position as leader of the Hashid is now the oldest of these sons, Sadiq al-Ahmar, who was born in 1956. He has a less visible political presence than his father and maintained a certain distance from the regime even before the start of the protests. After the massacre of 18 March he left Saleh's GPC party.

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Sadiq's brother Hamid al-Ahmar has for a long time been more often in the limelight. He is well-known as a successful businessman in the telecommunications industry, a billionaire and media entrepreneur. Since 2006

he has become increasingly committed to the opposition coalition JMP and has emerged as its major financial backer and a vociferous critic of Saleh, although in business terms his long involvement with the regime has brought him

considerable benefit. He was also quick to offer financial support to the protest movement. At the end of March, as part of the protests, Hamid al-Ahmar called on the President to leave the country immediately; in the later street battles his residence was largely destroyed.

Hamid al-Ahmar's long association with the regime nevertheless renders him suspect in the eyes of the young demonstrators and many in the JMP. Despite this he could be one of the people to benefit from a new power arrangement, even if he is not necessarily a potential presidential candidate. There is, however, speculation that he could in future pull the strings from a position in the second rank, dominating from the rear.

Alongside him, a prominent role in the Ahmar clan is played by Hussein al-Ahmar, who maintains close contact with many tribal leaders and enjoys the special trust of Saudi Arabia. He has mobilised tribal militias in the conflict with the Houthis but has also offered to function as an intermediary. During the anti-regime protests he aligned himself as early as February with the opponents of Saleh. Speaking to thousands of tribe members in Amran in northern Yemen he called for Saleh's immediate departure from the country. However, Hussein al-Ahmar's claim to speak for all the tribes has met with opposition from high-ranking sheikhs, by no means of all of whom approved of his defection from the regime.

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Controversial support for the protest movement came also from Abdulmajid al-Zindani, perhaps the most influential Islamist preacher in Yemen. Zindani is one of the founders of the Islah party, heads an important association of clerics and has a large following among the thousands of Yemenis returning from Afghanistan. After the unification of 1990 he was one of the five members of the Presidential Council that nominated the transitional government. Zindani is also said to have advised Saleh on later occasions. He is, however, reputed to be closer to Ali Muhsin and to the Ahmar clan. Nevertheless, Saleh took the preacher under his protection a few years ago when the USA wanted to prosecute him for his alleged support of al-Qaida.

It was therefore a serious blow for the President when in a high-profile speech to the demonstrators in Sanaa on 1 March Zindani turned against him, claiming that Saleh had used force to seize power and to defend his position, and that only the force of the people could drive him from power. "The Caliphate is coming", he proclaimed from the podium – not exactly what many secularly oriented demonstrators wanted to hear.

Incidents like this show that as prominent representatives of the regime defect to the protest movement, the movement is constantly at risk of losing some of its sovereignty over its goals and means. Moreover, the more prominent the defectors, the more uncertain it is whether they are opposing Saleh for reasons of conviction or simply attempting to manoeuvre themselves into a favourable starting position for involvement in a new regime. This reveals the other side of a revolt that, as in Tunisia and Egypt, emerges spontaneously and without influential leaders: as soon as things progress beyond the protests to concrete negotiations with the existing regime, the movement has little with which to counter the slick manoeuvrings of the established political forces.

CONTRADICTORY INFLUENCE OF OTHER COUNTRIES

This is most clearly manifested in the fact that the young people and civil-society groups who are the real drivers of the protest movement are completely overlooked in attempts by other countries to mediate. It remains to be seen whether the creation of a transitional council will change this. In the search for dialogue partners with which to negotiate a political transfer in Yemen, international actors have so far at any rate focused on the established opposition. The most active part in this has been played by the Gulf Cooperation Council.

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Saudi Arabia – by far the largest and politically most significant member of the GCC – is without doubt most affected by the political developments in Yemen. The two countries have a common border almost 1,800 kilometres long that runs through mountainous regions and deserts; historically there are political and economic links between

them. Their relationship came under strain in the recent past as a result of Saleh's decision to side with the Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War. Saudi Arabia also fears the infiltration of extremists over the hard-to-monitor border.

In practical terms relationships between the two countries are shaped less by the respective foreign ministries or other officially responsible bodies than by individual Saudi princes and the ministries that they head. These have in the past pursued different, sometimes contradictory goals, expending substantial funds in the process. For a long time the leading role in this context on the Saudi side was played by the defence minister, Crown Prince Sultan, who died in October. Over many decades he built up an extensive network of influence and informants with his southern neighbours. Before 2000, the Special Office for Yemeni Affairs for which Sultan was responsible had an annual budget of some 3.5 billion dollars. For example, before his death Abdullah al-Ahmar was receiving a monthly payment that amounted ultimately to 800,000 dollars. This practice is said to have declined in importance over the last decade, but it is clear that in early 2011 thousands of Yemenis were still receiving regular direct payments. However, since the end of 2010, if not before, the seriously ill Prince Sultan was regarded as effectively incapable of holding office.

Over many decades the Saudi Crown Prince Sultan built up an extensive network of influence and informants with his southern neighbours.

Since his death the power in Saudi Arabia's policies towards Yemen has switched to other figureheads. An increasingly important role is being played by the Ministry of the Interior under Nayef – who has now been promoted to Crown Prince – and his son and deputy Mohammed, who is responsible for tackling terrorism. Partly in the light of the activities of al-Qaida, the head of the Secret Service, Prince Muqrin, has also acquired increasing influence. Overall, the absence of a consistent Saudi policy towards Yemen has become more apparent than ever.

For this reason it is not easy to state to what extent Saudi Arabia was initially interested in supporting President Saleh. In recent years dissatisfaction has clearly been growing in Riyadh over the fact that aid money for the country's poor

southern neighbour has seldom been used for its intended purpose. Despite this, at least some of the Saudi royal family probably had an interest in not exacerbating the weakness of the fragile Yemeni state. At all events, Saudi Arabia refrained until the spring from public criticism of Saleh. Only after the defection of General Muhsin, which escalated the crisis, did the kingdom put its weight behind the GCC mediation initiative with the aim of ousting the President from office.

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The United Arab Emirates also has a tradition of significant aid payments to Yemen and now regards the situation there as one of its greatest security risks. Qatar in its turn has for some time been attempting through various international mediation initiatives to establish itself as a diplomatic heavyweight. Since 2008 it has acted as an intermediary in the Houthi conflict. In consequence it was hardly surprising that both countries should become actively involved in the GCC's endeavours.

What was surprising was the fact that a joint initiative of this sort came into being at all, since the countries of the institutionally poorly developed GCC have in the past struggled to come up with a common policy towards Yemen. However, since the spring of this year – probably out of concern that the country might collapse – they have taken a leading role in international mediation efforts in the attempt to persuade President Saleh to accept a negotiated transfer of power. These GCC initiatives also enjoy the explicit support of Western governments.

The West's financial aid to Yemen is small by comparison with the payments made by the GCC states: Germany, one of the most important bilateral donors, pledged 79 million euros in development aid for 2009 and 2010. In 2010 the USA supported Yemen with 63 million dollars from the budget of the Foreign Ministry and around 150 million dollars from Ministry of Defence funds. Despite these relatively small sums, Western support is not insignificant in political terms because it helps to legitimise the regime. However, a number of factors severely restrict the effectiveness of this aid.

Firstly, Western governments and aid agencies face the problem that in the interests of transparency and good governance they must select partners in ministries and other official institutions. This means that in many cases they are working with bodies that have little to do with the actual channels of influence that make up the informal Yemeni power structure. Even if they were to gain access to the real decision-makers on the Yemeni side, they would lay themselves open to the accusation of supporting non-transparent or even corrupt structures. For this reason alone the practical influence of Western donors is far less than that of neighbouring states that are more closely involved in the informal networks of the Yemeni elites.

Above all, though, Western aid is hallmarked by a conflict between the objectives of development policy and those of security policy – a conflict that the regime has skilfully exploited to its own advantage. Since the middle of the last decade the USA, in particular, has repeatedly sent Saleh’s regime contradictory signals. On the one hand the U.S. government called for credible political and economic reforms and planned multi-million-dollar programmes to promote such reform. On the other hand it suddenly tightened the conditions as soon as a defusing of the risk from al-Qaida in Yemen gave it the opportunity to do so – or it suddenly put funds for promoting reform on hold because Yemen became less cooperative in tackling terror. The outcome was that the USA signalled to Saleh’s regime – albeit unintentionally – that in cases of doubt development policy and the promotion of democracy are negotiable if the overarching interest of combating terror makes this desirable.

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The one-sided priority given to security considerations has also shaped the development of U.S. attitudes to the protests in Yemen. Despite the violence against peaceful demonstrators, the USA initially continued to back Saleh and supported the restrained attitude of the opposition, who sought a compromise with the regime. At that stage the aim was to avoid abrupt change, even if lives were lost as a result, because Saleh was still considered as the assurance of cooperation in tackling al-Qaida. Even at the

beginning of March an important advisor of U.S. president Barack Obama was therefore still calling on the Yemeni opposition to engage constructively with Saleh's offer of dialogue.

It was not until the end of that month that U.S. government representatives began to move away from Saleh and to support the GCC initiative for a controlled transfer of power. Once again the security situation was quoted: it was at risk of deteriorating further if Saleh did nothing to resolve the stalemate with the opposition. The protest movement observed this long allegiance to Saleh with disappointment and criticised it as a betrayal of its cause.

UNCERTAIN PROSPECTS

Even now that President Saleh has provided written assurance of his resignation, Yemen's political future is still shrouded in uncertainty. The previously circulating negative scenarios that envisaged possible civil war or the complete collapse of state control have by no means been rendered implausible. In the most favourable but not particularly likely case, the turmoil may prove to be a healthy wake-up call and at last provide the impetus for creating a genuine division of power and responsible and representative institutions. The only thing that is certain is that a fast, friction-free switch to a stable new order is out of the question.

The uncertainty is compounded by the fact that the complex patronage networks make it impossible to tell who is likely to actually gain the upper hand in the struggle for power. It remains to be seen to what extent Saleh will relinquish effective military and economic influence as well as his state office. To the end there was no sign of a mass defection movement away from him in the government party, the GPC. Similarly, the criticism by important sheikhs of Hussein al-Ahmar's attempts to push himself to the fore demonstrates that the regime continued to enjoy some support among the tribes.

Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, the army, too, cannot be regarded as an autonomous, relatively independent and cohesively acting political force that could add its weight

to the scales to help clarify the distribution of power: various military units are too closely linked to members of the inner power circle, and in recent months splits within the military have become too obvious. This means is also unlikely to be able to act as a stabilising factor during a period of transition.

Finally, it remains completely unclear who could take the helm in the medium term after Saleh renunciation of power. After the events of recent months, a dynastic solution – in other words the democratically dressed up enthronement of the president's son – is unlikely to be workable. However, there is equally little sign that the opposition is in a position to put forward a candidate from outside the regime who would be able not only to function as the nominal head of the political system but also to establish himself in practice as an effective power centre and create a degree of cohesion among the divergent forces in Yemen. It would therefore be hardly surprising if, after months of tussling, one of the prominent defectors from Saleh's inner circle were to be thrust into presidential office in the guise of the opposition candidate.

In the event of such a solution it is highly doubtful whether much would remain from the impetus of the protest movement other than a new individual at the head of the existing patronage networks. The young people and activists from civil society who have set the political upheavals in Yemen in motion must therefore take on board the possibility that when it comes to shaping the political future of their country they will be left out in the cold – unless at a sufficiently early stage they manage to adopt an organisational form that would enable them to develop a clear programme and negotiate compromises with other political stakeholders. The mediation efforts of the Gulf Cooperation Council have already supplied a preview of this exclusion from the decision-making process.

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Regardless of who pulls the political strings in Yemen in the future, that person will inherit a bundle of political and economic problems that will be hard to manage: shortage of water, falling oil revenues, population growth, unemployment – during the months of protest none of

these problems has come any closer to being solved. The same is true of the Houthi conflict, the secession movement in the South and the issue of al-Qaida.

For the West this muddle presents a dilemma. If Yemen slides into civil war or if the state collapses completely, there is a risk that in the immediate vicinity of Saudi Arabia there will arise a sort of second Somalia – a refuge for militant Islamists in the midst of the stability-dependent oil states of the Gulf region and a second anarchy-ridden coast close to the internationally important shipping routes around the Horn of Africa and the Bab al-Mandab, the strait connecting the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea. To stand by and do nothing is therefore not an option, but in the light of sober reality the West's scope for action is very limited. The most fruitful avenue might well be to attempt to persuade the neighbouring states – in particular Saudi Arabia – to make use of their own far greater opportunities for influence, including informal channels.

In so doing, however, Western governments should also be clear about their own priorities: the previous wavering between promotion of development and the potentially overriding combating of terrorism has had no noticeable positive impact. It would make more sense to set clear priorities for economic reform, good governance and transparency – priorities that are not thrown overboard at the first sign of difficulty with security policy issues. This is the only way in which the West will be able to establish itself as a credible partner for the forces of reform in Yemen. And it is the only way in which the West can help to ensure that large parts of the Yemeni population do not continue to feel that they are not represented by their government and so turn to rebellion, secession movements or pacts with the Islamists. In this respect at least the upheaval in Yemen provides a rare opportunity for a change of course.

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