

The Yemen Uprising: Imperatives for Change and Potential Risks (ARI)

*Abdullah Al-faqih**

Theme: The Saleh era has been marked by rampant corruption, personalisation of the State, the distortion of culture, social divisiveness and rent-seeking. In the eyes of many Yemenis, President Ali Abdullah Saleh is now part of the problem, not the solution.

Summary: The collapse of President Ali Abdullah Saleh's autocratic regime, some contend, would entail risks. As the argument goes, with Yemen occupying a very strategic location and already facing a rebellion in the north, a secessionist movement in the south and a growing al-Qaeda threat, Saleh's departure would make Yemen's problems even more complex and a greater threat to domestic, regional and international stability. However, the country is already experiencing a great deal of instability and the purpose of the political change is to reverse the appalling trend towards lawlessness and disintegration of the State. So far, Saleh has shown no interest in State-building and stability; rather, his actions in the past few years reflect his bizarre interest in riding the storm and using crises to gain financial and political support.

Analysis: In early October 2010, Yemen's long-serving President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, made one of his biggest mistakes. After months of negotiations with the Yemeni opposition about how to go about engaging in a national dialogue, he suddenly ordered his ruling party, the General People's Congress (GPC), to withdraw from the process he had himself initiated in July. Saleh's move came after a committee –consisting of two members from the GPC and two others from a coalition of six Yemeni opposition parties, known as the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP)– had drafted a road map for implementing a process of national dialogue. Saleh also announced his party's intention of holding parliamentary elections in April 2011, regardless of the JMP's opinion. To make good on his promise, Saleh used the GPC's overwhelming majority in the House of Representatives (HoR) to unilaterally amend the electoral law, while single-handedly appointing the committee that would be responsible for managing the elections.

Moreover, in early January 2011, the GPC agreed to debate in Parliament a set of constitutional amendments, the purpose of which was the removal from the Yemeni Constitution of the clause establishing limits to presidential terms, thus eventually allowing Saleh to run for President indefinitely. The amendments were planned to be set before the voters in April 2011, as part of the parliamentary elections.

For many months, the JMP had been calling for a comprehensive national dialogue in which all relevant political parties and forces could address any relevant issues. The purpose of the dialogue, from the JMP's perspective, was twofold: to address the current

* *Professor of Political Science at Sana'a University, Yemen.*

crises and grievances; and to restructure the State and the political system in such a way that it would be able to tackle the sources of tensions, instability and violent conflicts. In short, the JMP wanted the dialogue to lead to a historical deal that would dismantle Saleh's autocratic rule and install a genuine democratic process.

Saleh, a well-known master of tactics, had agreed in mid-July 2010, under mounting regional and international pressure, to call for an inclusive national dialogue. By doing so, he probably wanted to pre-empt a meeting of the Friends of Yemen (FoY), scheduled to take place in New York on 24 September, to discuss the progress made by the Yemeni government in implementing the political and economic reforms called for by donors. Saleh, who is always in need of cash, had probably hoped that the meeting would result in further allocations of funds to Yemen.

To Saleh's dismay, the New York meeting produced no aid package as he had hoped for, and while Saleh intentionally wasted time between mid-July and late September in devising how to divide his opponents before the dialogue started, the FoY's joint statement called on the Yemeni government to, among other things, speed up the national dialogue process, describing it as 'the best basis for building lasting security and stability'. But Saleh, who had fought forcefully with donors to separate politics from economics –requesting economic support but leaving aside political reform–, decided to act unilaterally. By choosing to go alone on the parliamentary elections and constitutional amendments, Saleh totally misread the domestic, regional and international environments. It is possible that he had thought that he too could succeed in doing what President Muhammed Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah II of Jordan had succeeded in doing before him: to organise rigged elections which eliminated any representation for the opposition and to tailor the constitution to his family's emerging needs.

While Saleh continued to carry out his unconstitutional and unlawful plans, opposition parties, independent politicians, activists and even some GPC members kept asking for a return to dialogue. Saleh closed his eyes and ears to all appeals. When, by the end of December 2010, the US Department of State issued a statement urging all Yemeni parties to 'delay parliamentary action' and to resume dialogue, the Yemeni government considered the declaration an 'interference' in its internal affairs.

Table 1. Critical dates in the current Yemeni uprising

July 17, 2010	Saleh initiates the preparation of a process of national dialogue
Sep 24, 2010	Friends of Yemen meet in New York
Oct 31, 2010	GPC withdraws from the preparation for a national dialogue
Dec 11, 2010	The GPC block in the HoR unitarily amends the election law
Dec 15, 2010	Saleh appoints members of the elections committee
Dec 31, 2010	US calls for constitutional amendments to be delayed
Jan 01, 2011	The GPC block in the HoR approves constitutional amendments
Jan 14, 2011	Collapse of the Bin Ali regime in Tunisia
Jan 25, 2011	Start of the Egyptian revolutions
Feb 02, 2011	Saleh calls for a return to national dialogue
Feb 03, 2011	JMP organises a major demonstration
Feb 11, 2011	Mubarak quits; Yemeni uprising starts momentarily
Feb 18, 2011	Several people killed in a massive protest in Aden
Feb 21, 2011	JMP and the Houthi rebels declare their support for the youth uprising
Feb 23, 2011	At least 10 very influential GPC legislators quit the party
Feb 25, 2011	Hundreds of thousands demonstrate; at least 10 killed
Feb 26, 2011	Key sheikhs in Hashid and Bakeel tribes join the protest
Feb 27, 2011	At least 12 people killed in Aden demonstrations
Mar 01, 2011	Millions of people across Yemen demonstrate in a 'Tuesday of rage'
Mar 10, 2011	Saleh proposes changing the constitution, but is rejected by the JMP
Mar 12, 2011	Security forces allegedly use poison gas to disperse protesters in Sana'a; at least seven people killed and scores injured
Mar 18, 2011	Plain clothes sniper teams from the Republican Guards kill at least 52 protesters; Saleh declares a state of emergency
Mar 19, 2011	Yemen's tribal sheikhs and religious scholars issue a communiqué calling for Saleh to step down in order to prevent <i>fitnah</i> (ie, civil war); opposition leaders for the first time physically join the protest

The collapse of the Tunisian regime on 14 January was not a good sign for Saleh, but he was still able to bring together his higher-ranking military officers in a huge lecture hall and tell them that 'Yemen is not Tunisia', and many Yemenis would probably agree that Yemen is quite different from Tunisia. Saleh nevertheless decided to raise the salaries of Yemen's military and civil servants. He ordered the government to absorb 25% of the unemployed and to establish a fund for unemployed youth.

When the revolution moved to Egypt and gained momentum, Saleh hastily called for a joint emergency meeting of the elected HoR and appointed a *Shoura* (Consultative Council). The date set for the meeting was 2 February, that is, just one day before the date set by the JMP for a major demonstration, which suggests that Saleh was –as usual– manoeuvring in an attempt to divert attention from the opposition's planned rally. Calling it an initiative, a trembling and sleepless Saleh declared in front of the members of both houses that there would be 'no extension, no inheritance', meaning that he would not extend his term in office beyond 2013 and that he would not transfer power to his son. He also called for a postponement of the constitutional amendments and parliamentary elections and a return to dialogue. His manoeuvre failed and thousands of people poured onto the streets on 3 February, calling on him for the first time to step down.

The most critical point for Saleh's regime and for the youth uprising came on 11 February, when the Egyptian military forced Mubarak to relinquish power. At that exact moment, hundreds of students and activists took to the streets to celebrate the downfall of the Egyptian 'pharaoh'. At the same time, Saleh ordered plain-clothes military and security personnel along with some thugs to occupy al-Tahreer (Liberation) Square at the heart of Yemen's capital, Sana'a. Saleh's move did not prevent the youth from establishing their own area in front of Sana'a University, naming it al-Tagheer (Change) Square. The protest movement would later spread to Taiz, Aden and other major Yemeni cities.

Although the JMP was initially reluctant to join the protests, street pressure and Saleh's failure to take any concrete steps eventually persuaded the JMP to join.

Since 11 February, the uprising against Saleh has expanded both socially and geographically, encompassing religious scholars, sheikhs, key tribes, government officials, academics, lawyers, engineers and others. Some GPC parliamentarians and State officials resigned from the party and, in the case of State officials, quit their jobs. So far, those calling for Saleh's departure have garnered the support of the Houthi rebels, the influential Hashid and Bakeel Tribal Confederations, the religious establishment, the Salafi groups, the JMP, the exiled southern leaders and the secessionist movement in the south.

The massacre on Friday, 18 March, in which Saleh's snipers killed at least 52 protesters and injured hundreds, seems to have significantly shifted the balance towards the protesters. On 19 March tribal sheikhs, who have been traditional Saleh supporters, finally joined the protest. In addition, most tribal sheikhs, business leaders and religious scholars openly called for Saleh's immediate departure in order to prevent a civil war. At the same time, high-ranking officials including ministers, deputy ministers, ambassadors and others continue to resign either from State or ruling party positions or both.

Imperatives for Change

Some media coverage suggests that the uprising in Yemen is the result of events in Tunisia and Egypt. Some even go so far as to suggest that the Yemeni youth took to the streets only to imitate their counterparts in other Arab countries. However, this view of the uprising is very far removed from what is actually happening. Whereas the events in other Arab countries have opened a window of opportunity for change in Yemen, the causes of the uprising are deeply rooted in Yemen itself and in the hearts and minds of its young people, who account for nearly 70% of its population.

First, Saleh has remained in power for too long and, as a result, has completely lost touch with reality. In the eyes of many Yemenis he is now part of the problem, not of the solution. Saleh, who 'manages by crisis' –ie, he either creates crises to strengthen himself or lets small problems develop into major crises– is no longer able to act as the strong man who saves the nation in times of difficulty. His handling of the Houthi rebellion in the north, the secessionist movement in the south, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Yemen's deteriorating economic and social conditions all prove his lack of vision to deal with the complex challenges facing the country.

Secondly, Saleh has used his many years of rule to concentrate military, civil and economic power and wealth in his immediate family, relatives and in-laws, thus alienating almost all relevant political and social groups within his own ruling party, the opposition parties, the military and security institutions and society at large. Putting the family first, instead of the people, was probably the most critical factor in the collapse of Ben Ali's and Mubarak's regimes. It will also be the factor that will bring Gaddafi and Saleh down. Ironically, the Yemeni opposition at the onset of the current crisis asked Saleh for the first time to dismiss his relatives from positions of leadership in the military, security, State and financial spheres. By doing so, the opposition was probably throwing Saleh a lifeline, but he refused to take it.

Third, the Saleh era has been marked by rampant corruption, the personalisation of the State, the distortion of culture, social divisiveness and rent-seeking. While some GPC leaders enjoy the respect of all quarters of society, the party as a whole is widely viewed

more as a mafia than as a political organisation. Saleh's tormented childhood, poor education and lack of political morality have made him afraid of people with stronger ethics, intelligence or vision. As he has grown older, he has restricted his trust to only a few individuals among his close relatives, who lack political skill and experience and who have kept themselves busy accumulating wealth. Saleh has thus become a growing burden to his country.

Fourth, the embattled Saleh seems to have significantly lost regional and international legitimacy. A careful reading of the leaked US diplomatic cables reveals that Saleh's management style is viewed locally, regionally and internationally as a threat to stability and security. The reasons are many, but the most significant is Saleh's failure to meet regional and international expectations on many significant issues. For instance, Saleh not only miserably failed to contain al-Qaeda, but he also seems to be courting the group in order to play it against his domestic opponents, the Saudis and the West. For example, before the FoY's New York meeting in September, Saleh had started what at the time appeared to be a tough 'war on terror'. But the war ambiguously ended on the same day that the FoY held their meeting, as if Saleh had staged the battle just to garner some extra cash. Likewise, during the 20th Arabian Gulf Football Championship, which was organised in two southern Yemeni cities between 22 November and 5 December 2010, it was reported that Saleh had captured all suspected al-Qaeda elements and jailed them. But as soon as the competition ended, the suspected al-Qaeda affiliates were let off.

Apparently, Saleh's alliance with the US has not been going well. As one of the leaked US diplomatic cables reveals, after Saleh's numerous unsuccessful attempts to convince the Americans that his war with the Houthi rebels was part of the 'war on terror', he decided, during the sixth round of the war, to send the US-funded and trained Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU) to fight the Houthis in Saada. Understandably, the CTU suffered heavy casualties due to its 'lack of training for this type of warfare'. The fate of the US-supplied patrol boats of the Yemeni Coastal Guard was no better. As reported by the *Wall Street Journal* on 4 January 2011, the boats with servicemen on board were rented, via private companies, to commercial ships seeking armed escorts against pirates in the Gulf of Aden instead of protecting the Yemeni coastline against terrorist infiltration.

Similarly, Saleh's relations with the Saudis over the past 20 years have been anything but stable or cooperative. Whereas the Saudis, or at least some members of the Saudi royal family, have continued to channel billions of dollars to fund Saleh's belligerent government, it clearly appears that they are doing so out of fear of the trouble Saleh can make for his neighbours rather than out of love for him or agreement with his policies. Ironically, all the Saudi billions given to Saleh have not prevented Yemen from becoming a haven for those Saudis associated with al-Qaeda; nor have they prevented Yemen from becoming a safe passageway for illegal human, drug and weapons trafficking.

Potential Risks

While students, unemployed college graduates and activists spend most of their time calling for Saleh to go, Saleh himself and his Yemeni and foreign spin-doctors spend millions of dollars spreading fears, both locally and internationally, about the risks inherent in his departure. But fear is only legitimate when it is considered in isolation of the risks involved if Saleh stays in power. The oft-cited risks are: (1) secession in the south; (2) a power vacuum; (3) the lack of a precedent; (4) civil war; and (5) the hijacking of the State.

(1) Secession in the South

The collapse of Saleh's autocratic regime, some argue, could also mean the secession of the south because it is highly likely that Saleh's departure will lead to the collapse of both the military and security establishments that have been built around his family. It could also be added that giving freedom to the Yemeni people will mean, as it must, granting the southerners the right to self-determination. What makes this risk even more serious is the fact that Saleh's corrupt and self-serving policies since 1994 have taken a heavy toll on Yemen's national identity and social cohesion.

Indeed, Saleh has been quick to exploit his policy-made north-south division. Flags of the former State of South Yemen were printed in Sana'a and sent to the south for distribution. A media support team for the southern cause was also created in Sana'a. To make things even worse, the security forces in the south have been using live ammunition against those calling for Saleh's departure and the number of casualties in Aden alone has exceeded 30, according to some estimates. Some of those who were killed in Aden, the former capital of South Yemen, were shot dead while they were at their homes, perhaps just to prove that Yemenis, as President Saleh had always warned, would fight each other from window to window if his regime were to collapse. It is possible that the regime is using excessive force in the south to push southerners to demand secession instead of calling for Saleh to go.

It should be noted, however, that the risk of secession in a post-Saleh Yemen is slighter than the risk of secession if Saleh remains in power. This is mainly due to the fact that Saleh's policies –or the lack thereof– are to blame for the birth and development of the secessionist movement in mid-2007. Saleh has had almost four years to deal with the political, economic and cultural grievances raised by the southerners who have now joined the movement. For instance, he could have ordered his relatives to return the vast swathes of land they seized in the south in the aftermath of the 1994 war. He could also have appointed southerners to key State positions and granted them genuine local governance. But Saleh acted in line with his usual practices. On the one hand, he tried unsuccessfully to buy off the leaders of the secessionist movement by distributing cash and cars. On the other, he resorted to the use of violence and repression, which has proved to be counterproductive.

Apparently, the survival of Yemeni unity is not dependent upon Saleh's military and security forces, but upon the development of a democratic nation-State that guarantees equal citizenship rights to all its citizens without discrimination. As to unity itself, it is strongly believed that it would be in the interest of all Yemenis, their neighbours and the international community in general. But preserving unity will definitely require a different way of thinking about the grievances of southerners, the structure of the State and the type of development policies to be adopted. In the short term, southerners should be empowered by giving them top State positions, integrating them into the mainstream economy and giving them a fair share of their land's resources.

(2) A Power Vacuum

As the argument goes, with Yemen occupying a very strategic location and already facing a rebellion in the north, a secessionist movement in the south and a growing al-Qaeda threat, Saleh's departure would make Yemen's problems even more complex and more threatening to domestic, regional and international stability. It is said that those who are united today behind the cause of removing Saleh will disagree tomorrow, when Saleh

leaves, on how to proceed with transition and reform. The pattern of revolutionaries uniting against a dictator and then disagreeing on reforms is a well known phenomenon.

But the question of stability in Yemen is quite tricky. For example, between 2004 and 2010, Saleh waged six rounds of war against the Houthi rebels. In a similar fashion, since mid-2007 he has turned at least three governorships in the south into a battle ground between his military and security forces on one side and either the southern movement or al-Qaeda on the other. It is evident that Saleh, who is always concerned with political survival, has significantly undermined his country's security and stability, sometimes even by reaching out to the devil to help him stay in power.

To put it bluntly, there is already a power vacuum and the purpose of political change is to reverse the appalling trend of increasing lawlessness and disintegration of the State. So far, Saleh has shown no interest in State-building and stability; rather, his actions in the past few years reflect his bizarre interest in riding the storm and using crises to gain financial and political support.

(3) The Lack of a Precedent

As the argument goes, Yemenis have never changed their Presidents through peaceful means. Since 1962, two Presidents of the former North Yemen were removed in bloodless coups d'état, and the next two were assassinated. The situation in the former South Yemen was even worse, since the first two Presidents were executed, the third managed to escape and the fourth and fifth ended in exile after being defeated in devastating civil wars. Apart from this discouraging record, the lack of a precedent should not mean that a peaceful revolution cannot succeed; otherwise, the Tunisian and the Egyptian revolutions would not have managed to oust two seemingly all-powerful dictators. Yemenis, just like Tunisians and Egyptians, have discovered a new 'weapon' to use against their dictators, and there is no reason to doubt the weapon's effectiveness in Yemen. It seems that Yemenis, with their peaceful and prolonged uprising, do not just want to get rid of a dictator but want to rid themselves of dictatorships all together.

(4) Civil War

Some argue that President Saleh has money and such a tight control over the military and security forces that events in Yemen might reach a deadlock or, even worse, develop into a civil war. Some assert that the military and security forces have played a crucial role in bringing down both the Tunisian and the Egyptian regimes. Therefore, they wonder about the role the Yemeni military can play at this stage, since both the military and security forces are controlled by Saleh's relatives.

It is true that Yemen's military and security forces are unlikely to play any significant role in deciding the ongoing crisis in favour of the Yemeni people, even though some of their members have joined the youth protest. But it is also true that the military and security forces cannot stand between the Yemeni people and their aspiration for political change. The military itself is internally divided due to Saleh's policy of seeking to build the military around his son, Brigadier General Ahmed, who leads the Republican Guards, at the expense of the President's several half-brothers. In addition, the Yemeni military are poorly armed and paid, even though Ahmed's forces are better paid than other units. The Yemeni army's weakness was obvious during the six rounds of war the regime fought in Saada. Moreover, while the army leadership is concentrated in the hands of Saleh and his family, the military and security personnel come from different tribal, geographical and sectarian backgrounds. One could even go further and argue that, at least, some of the

President's close relatives will be very reluctant to use force against civilian protesters, either because they have better judgement than Saleh or because of the risks involved.

But this, of course, does not eliminate the possibility that Saleh or his relatives and associates might still resort to the use of plain-clothes army and security personnel who are willing to kill for money, promotion or simply loyalty. They have done so already in several parts of the country, including the capital, Sana'a. They have also shown, in some parts of the country, a willingness to use uniformed forces to kill protesters, as is the case in Aden, where more than 30 people have been killed since the beginning of the current protest. The massacre of 18 March in Sana'a, in particular, attests to the risks facing the people of Yemen.

Furthermore, it is not unlikely either that the regime or some of its supporters might resort, in the case of a prolonged stalemate, to the use of extremist and terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and others, either to terrorise the population at large or to eliminate key opponents. Saleh's regime has demonstrated both its ability and willingness to use terror in either peace or war to gain votes or to extort money from other countries. Dangerous as it might be, the regime might be tempted to use this risky strategy out of sheer desperation.

(5) Hijacking the State

The last, but not least serious, threat some speak of is the possibility of the State being hijacked by either al-Qaeda or other religious fanatics. Yemen's liberals fear the religious far right and vice versa. Likewise, the tribesmen fear the Hashemites and vice versa. One could go on listing the concerns of the various groups regarding the hijacking of the State. While their fears are legitimate group-wise, they clearly ignore the fact that Yemen has a highly diverse society, that it is a country, not a distant planet, and that Yemen is definitely not the only Islamic country in the world. Extremism no longer sells in the political market place in Yemen; nor can the far left. Moreover, the suffering of Yemenis under Saleh has taught them a very important lesson: never to trust a single man, clan, tribe, region or sect in power.

Conclusion: On 17 July of each year, Saleh celebrated the anniversary of his rise to power, an event that took place in North Yemen in July 1978. Already as the President of North Yemen, Saleh survived the unification of the two Yemens, the 1994 civil war, six rounds of war in Saada, a secessionist movement in the south and many other crises. If he withstands this uprising, next July he will be celebrating the completion of 33 years in power.

It is, however, very unlikely that Saleh will outlive the uprising, especially after events have reached a point of no return. By now, change for most Yemenis is not just an option, it is indeed the only outcome. In fact, many Yemenis believe that the number-one threat to Yemen's security and stability at this point is Saleh himself and that the longer he stays in power the more likely the country will slip into a civil war.

As to the exact way for Saleh's exit, one can imagine three scenarios. The first and most likely outcome is for the youth uprising to focus its energies in the capital, Sana'a, and this coupled with domestic, regional, and international pressures will force Saleh out. The second scenario is for the Yemeni tribes and protesters to mobilise their forces and to take over military and security units within their reach and then march to Sana'a to face off Saleh and his sons' and nephews' military units. This second outcome, while viable, is

unlikely to occur because of the risk of a civil war that goes with it. The third and most unlikely scenario is for Yemen to follow in Libya's footsteps. This, however, is highly improbable because Saleh lacks the social and political support and the military capacity required for such an endeavour. In addition, the international community's political and military actions against Gaddafi are likely to discourage Saleh from following a similar course of action.

As for Yemen, the downfall of Saleh's corrupt regime would give rise to both fears and to a great deal of hope. Fear is and will be part of Yemen's political life for the near future, but it is hope that matters to Yemenis and the main source of hope are the thousands of young Yemenis who camp out in the streets and public spaces in different cities seeking to oust not only a dictator, but also dictatorship itself. As a country, Yemen should count first and foremost on the will, determination and vision of its young people. Yemen should also have the support of the international community. Neighbouring and friendly countries can minimise the potential risks of Saleh's downfall by making it possible for there to be a smooth and speedy transition to a post-Saleh government. They must also, generously and in a highly-coordinated effort, invest in developing the country's economic and political life.

All parties involved should know that Yemen's security and stability in the short, medium and long term will be heavily dependent on maintaining unity, devising a flexible State and political system, disseminating power horizontally and vertically, directing resources towards development –not militarisation– and preaching in theory and in practice religious moderation, cultural tolerance and acceptance.

Abdullah Al-faqih
Professor of Political Science at Sana'a University, Yemen