The Southern Movement in Yemen

In a video clip posted on Youtube, images of mutilated bodies follow one another followed by the grim face of the Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh and the text “In this image he is swearing, swearing to clean the land from the owners ... us!” It continues showing maps of Southern Yemen with the text “Our land, our country South Arabia” ending with the announcement “We don’t believe in war and power, we will return our land in Arabia” ending with the announcement.

While most of the picture material comes from the London-based opposition movement’s Sout al-Ganoub (The Voice of the South) website that forms only one arm of the locally rooted movement, the sentiments in the video reflect well those prevalent throughout the country itself. The video has triggered months-long discussions. One participant, Oneeyedboxer, expresses sentiments common among Adeni youth towards the Northern Yemeni rulers: “don’t you forget your Imam(s) locked you for years from civilization; don’t you forget that when European officials came to visit North Yemen they used to tell you that they are Jinns with blue eyes, so that you don’t talk to them… How do you expect a government with ninety percent of its people illiterate to rule? Shame on you to have someone rule over you who does not even have a high school diploma. This is not a war of the South and North, it’s a war of ideology.”

These and similar voices have been found on the Internet point to today’s social and political dissent in what used to be South Yemen, which has roots in the uneven state-society relationship and the imbalanced development of the two parts of the country. Since Yemeni unification this imbalance has to some extent deepened despite opposite expectations, resulting in protests and mass demonstrations. While such protest have been stifled by the government, the movement’s presence on the Internet is harder to silence.

Unification of the "one Yemeni homeland"

In the area that forms today’s Republic of Yemen, a centralized administration and state territorial control have proved to be difficult tasks. The Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) came into being from a long and violent civil war (1962-1969) that brought Egyptian troops and civil servants to an area basically untouched by foreign rule. The republican state never managed to establish full territorial sovereignty and large parts of Northern and Eastern regions still today remain under tribal control. In the South, the rulers managed to do something the British had failed a little earlier when in 1967 they formed a nation state out of the British Colony (Aden) and the two Aden protectorates: the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY).

Whereas the unification in 22 May 1990 was at first enthusiastically welcomed by everybody in Yemen, years that followed crushed the illusions in the South. High inflation, inefficiency in running the state finances, centralization of state bureaucracy and the accompanied marginalization of Southern administrative centres formed the basis of dissatisfaction. Once World Bank policies started to frame socio-economic development impoverishment befell not only the poor but also many among the middle sectors of society. These were accompanied by kidnappings, house robberies, and murders of Southern politicians – presumably linked to president Saleh. By 1993 it became clear that the unity was not on a solid ground and the Southern leaders withdrew to Aden. The short but devastating civil war was fought in early summer of 1994 between the Northern and Southern army factions. Emerging from the war, Southern popular sentiment was that the honeymoon was over and what had come to replace it was simply Northern occupation.

During the past year, people of the former South Yemen Republic have joined a popular movement demanding fair rule and equal citizenship against which the Yemeni government has taken harsh methods. While the western world concentrates on Al-Qaida and kidnapped tourists, the movement has taken a visible presence on the Internet, which offers a whole new platform for political protest.
among al-harakat al-ghaniyyah (Southern movement) as the movement is popularly known. The movement is partic-
ularly strong in Hadhramaut governorate to the east where most of oil wealth comes from. The activities there have in-
cluded stopping Northern people from buying or confiscat-
ing land, erecting road blocs to harass drivers with Northern license plates, and pushing demands for getting at least twenty percent of the oil income.

The Southern movement has no national leadership or joint organization and locally takes a variety of forms. It has been
most active in small towns in Dhala‘ governorate, some hundred kilometres north of Aden where the 1963 Southern revolution had its starting point. These locally based initia-
tives are not necessarily connected to exiled Yemenis who have formed the Southern Democratic Assembly (TAJ) in London, or with the National Opposition Front (MOWF), an older resistance coalition working from outside but active on the Internet.

The movement unites people of all social strata. It was
sparked in spring 2007 by popular protests organized by the Yemeni Retired Military Consultative Association, formed by
former military commanders and army men. Following the
1994 reorganization of the army, these men feel they have
faced systematic discrimination. Often accompanied by unemployed youth, former civil servants and factory workers, as well as human
rights activists, demonstrations have been staged in front of local gov-
ernment premises. Due to lack of job opportunities and discrimination
in access to foreign education, youth with university and high school
diplomas have also joined the movement. Since the revolution this is
the first time young people have taken an active role in politics, which predicts a good future for civil society activities in the South at large.

Notwithstanding the arrest of leaders of the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), political parties and the opposition united in the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) largely remain outside the movement. These parties, most notably the Islah Party (Congregation for Reform) and the YSP took a
long time to announce support to the movement. In addition, activists of the movement regard the opposition parties’ cooperation with the
government with avarion.

Secession or federation
While most people in the South view that a change is necessary, not
all agree that secession would be the right solution. Another scheme is
federation where each governorate (Yemen is divided into 21 governor-
ates) could enjoy autonomy, including deciding on its own norms for
public morality. A group of religious personalities recently demanded the establishment of a state body to monitor public virtues in the man-
er of Dubai or Saudi Arabia, causing alarm among the inclusive

In another upsetting incidence Nasir al-Shalbani, the former Minister of Religious Endowments (awqaf) and currently preacher in a Northern mosque, issued a fatwa against the protestors calling them “Infidels” and “Communists” who want to “Christianize and Americanize the coun-
try,” thus applying rhetoric typical to some Islamist groups throughout the Middle East. In response, the Coordination Council of Military and Civil Retirees Societies, joined by the unemployed and teachers in all Southern governorates, filed a lawsuit against the former minister accusing him of instigating bloodshed in the demonstrations.

Still the question of secession and re-establishing a state to the terri-
ory that used to be the PDY is not an uncomplicated issue. Historical-
ly a big number of Adenis have roots in Ta‘izz area just across the former
border. These Adenis object to any secession even if otherwise favour-
able to the Southern cause. While culturally Ta‘izz resembles the South,
including its cultural and economic orientation, a secessionist state would be out of the question for the mighty Northern highland tribes. To the Yemeni state the movement poses a big challenge alongside other problems caused by sympathizers of Al-Qaida and the armed conflict that was going on in the Northern province of Sa‘ada for years, all making foreign ana-
lysts call Yemen a potential failed state.5

Moreover, in a manner typical to Yemeni politics at large, elite re-

discussion response to the problems in the South has been to establish new “civil society” bodies. Two competing committees have been established to ensure a smooth move towards a democratic process and to end the civil unrest. The first one, established by Presidential Decree and headed by one of President’s Southern allies, was charged with the
task to evaluate the situation in the South and to find solutions to calm down popular dissent and to work towards enhancing national unity. A com-
peting committee, the Yemeni Centre for Histori-
cal Studies and Future Strategies, was to follow, set up by prominent Northern army generals, and members of the political elite and intelligentsia from both South and North. While it is clear that the
former committee works in close contact with the
government and the latter one with the op-
position parties, it remains to be seen whether this truly Yemeni solution to the problem, setting
up of new “NGOs” to hold meetings preferably in
five-star hotels, ever finds feasible solutions to the
deep-rooted dissent prevalent throughout the
country.

Notes
1. http://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=uaBqzU26E0.
2. On corruption in Yemen, see A. S. al-Dahı, al-fasād fil yawm. Al-`asbāb, al-muzahir, al-mu‘alagat. The Arab Center for
Strategic Studies Monograph Series no. 40, 2006.
3. See S. Dahlgren, Contesting Realities. Morality, Propriety and the Public Sphere in
Aden, Yemen (University of Helsinki Press 2004).
Strategic Studies Monograph Series no. 11, 2000.
5. J.M. Sharp, Yemen: Where is the Stability
Tapping Point?, Arab Reform Bulletin Vol. 6
issue 6, July 2008. Carnegie Endowment for

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