



CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY  
CENTER FOR POLICY STUDIES



OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE

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# Democratic Governance in a Tribal System

2005 / 2006

CPS INTERNATIONAL POLICY FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM ▲

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### Abstract

Yemen is one of the poorest countries on the Arabian Peninsula. It is beset with numerous geographic and demographic problems including serious water shortages, depleting oil reserves, rapid population growth and a dispersed rural population. The government has endorsed a western-style democracy in order to address these issues, but has at the same time deliberately marginalized a functional tribal system and further weakened traditional values that could have had a strong role to play in governance. The current state monopoly over tribal politics is not conducive to positive social change, and tribal politics needs to become carefully integrated into the system in a way that is recognized by all persons involved. Government priorities should primarily involve getting the whole of society involved in the tribal question. Tribal conflicts needs to be properly dealt with, and ways to integrate tribal laws into the judicial system must be found. There is a need to engage with local communities and people's trust in the government must also be enhanced. Projects implemented by the international donor community have so far focused on specific sectors, and lack a larger framework of action in addition to incentives for sustainable cooperation. Donors need a clear and transparent agenda, effective communications with society, and also a greater understanding of the local political economy.

This policy paper was produced under the 2005-06 International Policy Fellowship program. Fatima Abo Al Asrar was a member of the Democratic Governance, Transparency and Accountability working group, which was directed by Professor Alan Doig. More details of their policy research can be found at <http://www.policy.hu/themes05/governance/index.html>.

The views contained inside remain solely those of the author who may be contacted at [asrar@policy.hu](mailto:asrar@policy.hu). For a fuller account of this policy research project, please visit <http://www.policy.hu/asrar/>

July 2006

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# Contents

Executive Summary.....	4
1 Background and Introduction.....	5
1.1 <i>Background</i> .....	5
1.1.1 <i>In the same context</i> .....	6
1.2 <i>Introduction</i> .....	7
1.2.1 <i>Tribal Heritage</i> .....	7
1.2.2 <i>Historical Snapshots of Yemeni Politics</i> .....	7
1.2.3 <i>Tribes: Why do we need to address this issue? Why don't we just let them evolve gradually and live the way they used to?</i> .....	9
2 Tribal Domination and Lack of Influence.....	9
2.1 <i>Tribes: The Informal Government of Yemen</i> .....	9
2.2 <i>The Rationale of Tribal Politics</i> .....	10
2.3 <i>State-tribal relations</i> .....	12
2.4 <i>The need for action</i> .....	13
3 Strategic Priority Recommendations.....	14
3.1 <i>For the Yemeni Government</i> .....	14
3.2 <i>For the International Donor Community</i> .....	15
References.....	17
<i>Books and Articles</i> .....	17
<i>Other Sources</i> .....	19
Appendix.....	23

## Executive Summary

Yemen has undergone various political experiments that have left it weaker and poorer today than it has ever been. Although Yemen is the only democratic state in the Arabian Peninsula, it has yet to harvest the results of this democracy; for it has a president who has been in power for 28 years and a tribal culture that undermines the state's capacities for action and effectiveness.

Yemen's estimated population is 18.5 million, with 75% of the Yemeni population residing on rural and rugged terrain. The government of Yemen lacks the capacity to deliver basic services to a majority of the areas as a result of the difficult demographic and geographical considerations of the country, a lack of policy planning and because of endemic corruption. Development challenges continue to cause massive governance problems, ones which strike at the core of every sector.

The need to address the issue of democratic governance in Yemen is vital given the current poverty and corruption indicators. The challenges that are facing Yemen in the economic, social and political arenas require a better degree of awareness and policy planning in order to prevent instability and crisis. There is also rising discourse and interest in these fields from both donors and government, made more sensitive given the fact that Yemen sees some of the most important government domains as being *internal* politics, which do not need to be publicized or made responsible within the international development system.

In this paper, I will argue that western-style democracy, which has been endorsed by Yemen, has serious flaws. It has deliberately marginalized a functional tribal system and further weakened traditional values that could have had a strong role to play in governance. Tribes are the nucleus of Yemeni society; and they are not an add-on that one might easily overlook. Integrating tribal leaders into the current state's politics and affairs is one thing, though it should also serve to develop tribal governance systems in such a way that the rapid urbanization that Yemen is going through is also dealt with.

Donors' naiveté with regard to the existing social networks and political economy of the country, coupled with a fear of Islamic extremism, have often contributed to a weakening of the essence of democratic values in Yemen. Also, the current democratic culture has produced isolated political elites, ones standing apart from a mass of people who have got no awareness of their political rights or of how to use them. Yemeni democracy has been unable to deliver on basic concepts of social equity, human rights, equal participation and law and order.

This study shows that, in a place like Yemen, where tribalism has always showed resistance to the powers of the state, implementing democracy without strengthening governance throws into question the credibility of the democratic process. Additionally, most government institutions fall short of their supposed overriding goal of working in the public interest. People know that their system is inefficient – thus, their belief in the government becomes weaker in the ab-

sence of a clear, fair and predictable system. This paper therefore examines some of the hidden tools that might be able to play a role in democratic governance in Yemeni democracy in particular – and in the Middle East in general. Comprehensive, sustainable work for Arab regions, as carried out by foreign authorities, needs to take into account that there is great resistance to western concepts that are carried through by authoritarian domestic governments.

A state monopoly over tribal politics is not conducive to positive social change; tribal politics need to become carefully integrated into the system in a way that is recognized by all persons involved.

There will be no respect for the rule of law enforced by the state so long as there is a higher power that has its own set of counteracting rules. Government and tribes in Yemen clash repeatedly, in a subtle manner, causing chaos and disorder in the state. For the government to truly institutionalize democratic policies, it needs to play a crucial role in integrating the different segments of this society and provide equal chances for participation. For this to happen, deeper political reforms – beyond elections – must take place; ones that weaken current obstacles to economic growth, such as corruption and lack of accountability. The most promising type of political reform is that which will enable society to better participate in its own development process via increasingly representative and efficacious political institutions, leading to tangible improvements in the conditions of life.

In addition, the majority of the Yemeni people continue to feel vulnerable, as they do not have the necessary tools that will allow them to change their situations. Illiteracy plays a big role in holding back the effective participation of the Yemeni public; while the intellectual Yemeni capital is poor, and often resides outside the country.

This paper thus calls for greater consolidated action so that the government will play a positive role in bringing together the various segments of this society and provide equal chances for people's participation. It calls for donors to be more pragmatic in their approach to governance, to recognize the informal rules of governance and to endorse political reforms that go beyond traditional western systems and in the direction of Yemeni ones.

# 1 Background and Introduction

## 1.1 Background

What was once Arabia Felix stands now to be one of the poorest countries in the world. Yemen's present economic, social and development situation has fluctuated unevenly in the last three decades, causing an unstable political and economic environment<sup>1</sup>. Among the major problems that contribute to the pov-

<sup>1</sup> In ancient times, Yemen had relatively fertile land and adequate rainfall, with a moister climate helping to sustain a stable population - a feature recognized by the ancient Greek geographer Ptolemy, who described Yemen as *Eudaimon Arabia* (better known in its Latin

erty are limited access to basic services, a very high fertility rate (6.7%), high illiteracy rates – especially among females (73.5%), high unemployment (40%), significant gender inequalities, gaps concerning a number of development indicators, and a non-renewable water supply which is dwindling at an alarming rate.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.1.1 *In the same context...*

The population continues to multiply, with a growth rate of around 3.5-3.8%, which is one among the highest in the world. The population is expected to double in the next 20 years, growing to about 43 million inhabitants by 2025, a figure entirely incompatible with available economic resources. Yemen is also challenged by a water crisis that leaves 90 percent of the population with less than a minimum amount for domestic supply; in addition, only 69% of the population has access to drinking water.

Despite all of these alarming indicators; the Republic of Yemen (RoY) has always had a low profile among donors, for several reasons (mentioned later). However, there was a shift in interest and in the magnitude of donors' assistance after the September 11 attacks on the US. The new era of trust and cooperation between Yemen and the international donor community needs to be looked at carefully, therefore, with regard to recognizing incentives for change and sustainability of cooperation.

Political observers have multiple and differing 'end scenarios' for this Yemeni era, none of which concludes by foreseeing an optimistic, stable environment for the country. Conflict is likely, hunger is another possibility, and further economic disparities are always to be expected. Policy papers coming from human rights organizations to political activists transmit warnings of a poorer Yemen and a chaotic one. Yet, at the same time, the people who are predicting these scenarios are the ones who *are* involved in active cooperation with the Yemeni government. Most donor reports for almost every project point to successes being had with regard to poverty, governing or democracy-seeking projects – though they always conclude that neither the efforts nor the resources are *enough*, and that more needs to be done.

Yemen's development assistance has been limited, minimal, and carefully tailored by the very fact that this is a country that needs so much help. In addition, development requirements have been set to a high and challenging standard, which the Yemeni government has failed to comply with. Development assistance for Yemen as delivered by the International donor community has focused on trying to implement projects in specific sectors, though without having a larger framework of action that would serve to examine policy content.

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translation, *Arabia Felix*) meaning "fortunate Arabia."

2 The Sabeen kingdom, from the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD; the Awasan kingdom from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC; Ma'in kingdoms from the 7<sup>th</sup> BC to 1<sup>st</sup> AD; the Qataban from the 5<sup>th</sup> BC to the 1<sup>st</sup> AD; Hadramaut from the 5<sup>th</sup> BC to the 3<sup>rd</sup> AD; and the Himyar from the 2<sup>nd</sup> BC to the 6<sup>th</sup> AD

## 1.2 Introduction

### 1.2.1 Tribal Heritage

Yemen is reputed to be one of the oldest centers of civilization in the Near East. Archeological evidence of advanced irrigation and agrarian systems were found in Yemen as early as the third millennium BC. Many kingdoms have ruled the land – from the early 10<sup>th</sup> Century BC until now.<sup>3</sup> Yemen tribes trace their ancestry back to Qahtan, a descendant of Noah. Their existence went to form the state, and their coalitions were important for the protection of land. Continual wars, economic upsets and the instability of the Arabian kingdoms in olden times have contributed to the further fragmentation of tribes, even though tribal heritage and culture still prevails in Yemen.

### 1.2.2 Historical Snapshots of Yemeni Politics

‘Imam after Imam, and a Government more unjust than Sinan’<sup>4</sup>.’ This sarcastic saying is intended to describe the slow change that is happening in the current state politics of Yemen. The Yemeni people do not see any difference between an Imam and a president – and they continue to feel vulnerable in the face of the government’s authority and power. The transition from an authoritarian Imam rule to a Yemeni Republic has had a huge impact on Yemeni society, yet the politics remains the same.

Yemeni tribes have played different roles at central and rural levels, and on the level of the political elites that have been competing for power throughout the history of Yemen, whether in the past rule of the Imams or in the current one of the Yemeni Republic; and there is a fascinating continuity between the past and the present that one can witness through the methods used by rulers for acquiring and making use of their power.

*Northern Yemen* has a social structure of a tribal nature, which was often manipulated in the past by Imams.<sup>5</sup> In the early twenties, the former northern Yemen managed to gain control of the tribes by methods that were both extreme and hostile.<sup>6</sup>

The transition from a tribal structure to a more organized form of civil identity has often been complicated – and was often left unattended in the early rule of the Imam. It was best for Imams to keep tribes at loggerheads with each other in order to shore up their *own* power and personal wealth. In 1948, Imam Yahya died during an unsuccessful coup attempt, and his son Ahmed succeeded him – ruling the northern parts of Yemen in an era of darkness, ignorance, growing

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3 Yahia bin Al Qasim, *The joy of time in the history of Yemen events*, page 475

4 Imam Yahya of the Mutawakiliat Kingdom, which existed between 1911 and 1962, was able to unify the tribes - and he took military action against the Ottoman rulers, which forced the Ottoman government to sign a treaty acknowledging his sovereignty in the area. At that time, the Mutwakilait Kingdom was created, and it witnessed a large amount of resistance from tribes.

5 The Imam kept some of the tribal sheikhs’ sons and relatives hostage, and would have killed them if the tribes opposed his rule. The Imams also used divide-and-rule tactics against tribes, which increased their control over them.

6 Arab nationalist objectives had by Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser.



repression and growing pressure to support the Nasserist movement<sup>7</sup>. After the revolution of September 1962 and the declaration of the Yemen Arab Republic, a civil war followed, until the early seventies, having with it a period of presidential assassination<sup>8</sup>. President Ali Abdullah Saleh assumed power in 1978, and his era has had a degree of political stability and relative tribal control.

As for *Southern Yemen*, the case is different: The fall of Aden, in 1839, into the hands of the British marked the formal separation of the South from the North. Aden was made a crown colony, and the remaining land became the East Aden and West Aden protectorates. By 1965, most of the tribal states within the protectorates and the Aden colony proper had joined up to form the British-sponsored federation of South Arabia. The country declared its independence on November 30, 1967, and was named the People's Republic of South Yemen – but was renamed the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1970 after radicals with a Marxist Leninist ideology supported by the former USSR (making the Southern Yemen, at that time, the only communist regime in the entire Arab World) came to power.

Tribes' existence in the Southern regime was of a different nature than in the North. Southern tribal lands stretched principally across the hinterlands of Hadramout and to the west of Aden; they were of a horizontal nature, and were ruled by Sultans, Sheikhs or Emirs. The Marxist regime was resilient to any tribal ideology, and it worked ruthlessly to weaken tribes and restrict their power in the cities<sup>9</sup>, thereby modernizing the state in a sense that would completely avoid tribal concerns.

North and South Yemen began fumbling with the idea of a unified Yemen around 1971. However, tensions between the YAR and PDRY escalated into armed conflict during the late seventies. Real progress on unification was finally made in 1988, when the YAR and PDRY agreed to renew discussions on unification as well as establish a joint oil exploration project, and to demilitarize the border, allowing Yemeni unrestricted border-crossing passage based on a national identification card. The Republic of Yemen was finally declared on May 22, 1990, with Ali Abdullah Saleh as President and Ali Salim Al-Bidh as Vice President.

This Northern and Southern unity was a major event for the whole of the Arab world. The celebrations and happiness accompanying the merger of the two regimes gave aspirations to the people, as this was viewed as a small step in the dream of achieving greater unity with Arab countries, and in a democratic manner. Yet in spite of the historical unification of North and South Yemen and the free multi-party elections that were held in 1993, the country plunged into civil war, in 1994, for economic and political reasons beyond the scope of this paper; while tribal predominance never failed to surface among a population suffering from poverty and illiteracy.

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7 Two out of five presidents were assassinated: Ibrahim Al hamdi, 1974-77, and Ahmad Al Gashmi, 1977-78

8 Tribesmen were ordered to disarm in rural areas as well as in the cities

9 ICG Report p. 13.

### *1.2.3 Tribes: Why do we need to address this issue? Why don't we just let them evolve gradually and live the way they used to?*

Various reports from human rights organizations, the media and civil society organizations document an alarming number of tribal killings in Yemen over cases like revenge and land disputes – so there is a pressing need to deal with these issues. According to the International Crisis Group, the situation is believed to be getting worse, although this may reflect an increased public awareness that leads to more of these cases being reported;<sup>10</sup> while the number of women and children accidentally injured or killed in tribal conflicts may be rising, though this too may be a product of better reporting. There is some indication, however, that the use of increasingly lethal weaponry and the erosion of tribal 'norms' that severely sanction doing harm to "vulnerable" groups such as women and children have contributed to the rise in the number of injuries and deaths.<sup>11</sup>

Tribal mechanisms play an important role in resolving conflicts by providing a system for the arbitration and mediation of local disputes in a manner that is much quicker than the state's. However, although they are efficient because of the more simple nature of dealing with these things from a tribal perspective, it doesn't guarantee that the process is fair or less corrupt than the more 'formal' legal processes at the state level.

## 2 Tribal Domination and Lack of Influence

We are yet to see a positive aspect to tribal domination in Yemen. Although the Republic of Yemen has allowed for tribal politics to be integrated into the current system, tribalism still fails to have a definitive nature for Yemeni citizens, for it conflicts with the rule of law, resists the influence of the courts and it stands apart from strategic policy areas. In fact, tribes often hold the government accountable for the shortage of service delivery; though will not acknowledge any duties they have with regard to the government or society.

### *2.1 Tribes: The Informal Government of Yemen*

Yemen consists of tribes scattered into 113,000 localities and villages that have various levels of influence and power in the Yemeni Government. Tribal leadership plays a vital role in Yemeni politics, but it doesn't necessarily provide it with strategic vision or represent wider society's interests. For more than 40 years, the Yemeni government has been unable to control all of its territory because of the tribal dominance in some areas. Some of the tribes have been loyal to the state, while others have had their own reservations about the way they were governed.

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10 ICG Report, p. 14.

11 A precipitous drop in foreign aid, a huge influx of returning workers following the Gulf war, the end of remittances, drought, civil war, Sada'a war, etc.

Despite the achieving of political stability and some economic improvements, Yemen is considered one of the poorest countries in the region. There are serious water shortages (decreasing underground water reserves and scant rainfall, no surface water – such as rivers or lakes), oil limitations (depleting oil reserves/annual production), rapid population growth (3.02% per annum), very limited agricultural land for food production, a dispersed population, remote geographical locations that are hard to reach with services such as education, health care, water, etc., and a weak institutional and financial capacity with which to deal with all these rapid changes. Such shocks have caused the tribes and wider Yemeni public to believe that the government is not capable of implementing decentralized change that would be able to reach all segments of society. Promises made to the tribes – of prosperity and urban modernization, that were delivered as soon as the revolution took place in 1962 – were crippled by a series of macroeconomic shocks<sup>12</sup>. In addition, the government has implemented different macroeconomic reforms recommended by the World Bank and the IMF, which restrict spending on public sectors. The tribes thus realized that the GOY cannot be strong without their presence.

Most studies<sup>13</sup> have indicated that tribes have provided a balance in Yemeni politics and have played a vital role in terms of holding the government to account. Such studies however, paid specific attention to the role of tribal *leadership* rather than to tribal society. The majority of the population, whether urban, rural or tribal, continues to be governed by elites and is subjected to tribal customs rather than the government's rule of law. This has had various implications for Yemeni people, where persons with weak or no tribal affiliations continue to feel vulnerable.

As long as illiteracy prevails in Yemen, access to political participation will always be limited; and ignoring the tribal experience that has governed for centuries has caused the GOY to 'limp'.

## 2.2 *The Rationale of Tribal Politics*

Kidnappings in Yemen occurred in the early nineties, targeting both foreigners and government officials. The kidnappings occurred as a way of pressurizing the government to provide services, employment and/or implement development projects. The kidnappings were the only tool available to some of the neglected tribes in order to receive the services they were seeking, as all other government channels were blocked or not simply unavailable. And, strangely enough, this kind of behavior is imbedded in Yemeni culture, from the time of the Imam's rule – for kidnappings of tribal families and keeping them in Sanaa, as 'guests', were used to force tribes to submit to the Imam's power and sovereignty in the area. According to the ICG, the government has also made use of hostage-taking practices for the same purposes.<sup>14</sup>

12 Drivers of Change Study, commissioned by DFID and RNE 2004, ARD study on Democratic Governance in Yemen 2003, ICG report on Yemen 2003

13 ICG briefing report

14 In most cases, tribal clashes take the form of revenge killings and land disputes.

The GoY has responded every time, and has 'delivered' under the circumstances but it has also dealt with this problem firmly, and has worked extensively to bring stability to the country. The GoY has thus been made alert and sensitive to the needs of the people in those areas. National plans for development have been influenced by powerful tribes – marginalizing, therefore, tribes with less power. The only way of getting government attention for the weaker tribes was via ransom – yet, in a democratic system, such things should not occur.

The *major challenge for good government* that GoY has had to confront over the last decade has been the integration of the quite different political, economic and institutional arrangements that existed in the North and South of the country prior to 1990s unification. This process is still ongoing, though an important achievement of the post-unification era has been a growing consensus around a common national identity and a commitment to democracy. In spite of the advent of elections, however, political power still remains centralized in the hands of a largely unaccountable and non-transparent executive. Furthermore, the administrative and judicial systems are not independent from each other. Affairs of government continue to be organized largely along tribal lines, with personal relations frequently taking precedence over the public good in resource allocation decisions. This has manifested itself in the high levels of corruption and rent-seeking that characterize large swathes of the public sector. While the PRSP does represent a significant and positive departure, it is clear that the government currently lacks the capacity to effectively implement a nationwide poverty-reduction strategy due to pervasive weaknesses in policy as well as in institutional and governance frameworks. A lack of technical manpower also contributes in a major way to Yemen's under-development.

Tribes have often been analyzed from a conflict perspective,<sup>15</sup> though tribalism itself is often misunderstood by western scholars.

It would be misguided, however, to over-emphasize the problems of tribalism. A frequent comment heard during the course of this research was that tribes and tribalism *per se* are *not* the cause of Yemen's problems – indeed, working with them and some of their traditional practices (particularly in local dispute resolution) may be an important part of a solution to Yemen's development problems. In this view, the cause of inter-tribal conflict is not a culturally-based resorting to acts of violence but a lack of services – education, health, water, sanitation – that has created an environment of insecurity and competition in which recourse to violence would seem a rational response.

A further recurrent theme linked to the argument regarding the need to work *with* rather than *around* tribal structures was the need to differentiate between problems confronting particular tribal regions: in many, the lack of services, particularly health and education, was a major problem (and a source of inter-tribal tensions); in others it was access to water. Yemenis who were interviewed as part of this study emphasized time and again that the problems confronting Ta'izz are not the same as those confronting Aden, let alone Hadramawt, Sana'a, Marib or Sa'da. So the clear implication is the need to tailor develop-

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<sup>15</sup> Views here are expressed in the ICG report 2003 and the Yemen Times issue 37, August 2000 (to name but two).

ment programs to the needs of particular tribal communities rather than attempting to address 'tribalism' *per se*.

### 2.3 State-tribal relations

There is an open debate about the tribal-state relationship that is slightly alarming; it argues that the state will not hesitate to manipulate tribes in order to achieve greater political power. And, indeed, historical precedents show that the Imams favored this method – while various political observers continue to feel that the government of Yemen has adopted the same approach.<sup>16</sup> Given the magnitude and influence that the tribe possesses in the lives of people in Yemeni society, efforts to destroy this power may seem logical, though, that is, when one seems to have two governments in one state (the formal government of Yemen and the informal tribal rule). This does not contribute to either security, stability, political or development progress.

However, the question here is whether we are eliminating a tribal concept or a tribal reality when we attempt to weaken tribes – and for what purpose? Can the tribe evolve into something more urban and civil?

There is a common conception that tribal conflicts serve the government, as such occurrences undermine and eat into the powers of tribes, and also weaken and divide them. This works perfectly for a state which is afraid of any future tribal alliance that might pose a real threat on the central government.

It is important to remember that, as far as a third-party is concerned, state-tribal relations have *solely been* state-tribal relations, meaning that the state was not ready for other players to interfere in this relationship in any respect. Whether the purpose of interfering is political, religious, developmental or for purposes of humanitarian aid, the Yemeni government has always had to check the real incentives behind these interventions – and deal with them appropriately. The following are some of the examples of how government has dealt with tribes in the last three decades:

- Divide and Rule: by turning tribes against each other. This tactic has been most useful in weakening tribes
- Rewards, which included payments of arms, money or agricultural lands, as well as allowing tribes to loot urban areas (for example, in 1948, tribes were allowed to sack the city of Sanaa as punishment for its inhabitants' collaboration in the assassination of Imam Yahya)<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Political interfering in Yemeni politics has been resorted to by the Saudis since the early seventies, and has always supported the Northern Tribes on the borders for the purpose of opposing the government. The recent civil war in Sada in 2003/2004 shows that the government is intolerant of any kind of external intervention. On the development front, the most recent clash of interests that the NDI was subject to in its tribal reconciliation program was requests from the government to end this program – the justification being that NDI's role might be mistaken as a CIA or FBI plan to find out more about tribal structures and terrorists in Yemen. The tribes had approached the NDI in 2004 to put together a coalition to stop blood flowing, yet fearing that this would lead to a strong alliance between the tribes, meaning that they would become a threatening power, the program was halted.

<sup>17</sup> Yemen Development Challenges, Colburn, p 17.

- Punishments – in the form of hostage taking during the Imamate period, when the Imam would take the family members of a specific tribe and hold them hostage in his palace. If the tribe of a hostage/hostages opposed the Imam's authority, the hostages were killed.<sup>18</sup>
- Land and border disputes
- Lack of services to weak or non-loyal tribes
- Slow development of oil-producing terrain
- The Yemeni government may, like other states, use 'anti-terrorism concerns' to pursue its own (non-related) political objectives<sup>19</sup>. After the September 11 attacks on the US, more assistance has been given to Yemen to deal with the war on terror.
- Revenge Killings: Hundred of Yemenis are injured or killed each year in tribal conflicts.<sup>20</sup> The use of lethal weaponry and the erosion of tribal norms that severely sanction doing harm to vulnerable groups such as women and children have contributed to a rise in the number of injuries and deaths. Revenge killings stir up the tribes, causing them to often move/migrate from one place to another in a period of war. Despite the Yemeni's president call for a ceasefire against tribes, the killings go on.

## 2.4 *The need for action...*

Fighting among different tribes is more common if the tribes concerned are Ma'reb, Al-Jawf, Shabwah, Al-Dhale', Abyan, Sa'dah; and those surrounding Sana'a – Khawlan, Hamdan, Arhab, Nehm, Hashed, etc. Thousands of people had been killed or wounded during years of bloodshed. More than 39 people were killed and more than 200 injured in June 2000 clashes between the Wailah and Dahm tribes near the Saudi-Yemen borders.<sup>21</sup>

The government of Yemen does not use resources to react effectively when such clashes occur – indeed, it often turns its back, allowing the tribes to handle it all. At times, the government does not have either resources or any actual interest in mediating when it comes to tribal disputes – as long as these small-scale tribal conflicts do not affect divisions of power in the country. People often take the law into their own hands to settle differences; thus, it is not overly strange to see people in the streets with more than just a jambia on their waist, for guns, Kalashnikovs, bazookas and other light arms are a common accessory for certain groups and individuals.

State-tribal relations are by no means always ones of conflict. Nevertheless, tribes and tribal leaders, independently of whatever role they might play

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18 Manea 1998, p3.

19 ICG Report, p1. On 3 November 2002, an unmanned U.S. "Predator" aircraft hovering in the skies of Yemen fired a Hellfire missile at a car carrying a suspected al-Qaeda leader, four Yemenis said to be members of the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army, and a Yemeni-American who, according to U.S. authorities, had recruited volunteers to attend al-Qaeda training camps. All six occupants were killed – and this has raised questions about the nature of US-Yemeni cooperation and the power that the Yemeni government is acquiring as a result of this new US alliance.

20 ICG Report, p13

21 Yemen Times, Issue 35 - August 28th - September 3rd 2000, Vol X

in the institutions of government, cherish and forcefully protect their autonomy. Furthermore, the newness of the modern state, rampant corruption, and a stalled democratic reform process also create an environment which sustains tribal authorities as a significant focal point of power.

In a number of respects, state-tribal relations exacerbate the range of conflict situations:

- Tribes continue to feel marginalized and excluded from decision-making processes. Tribal leaders are not happy with the government's failure to deliver basic infrastructure and provide for social services, such as education and health. Also, some tribes reside and often own the lands that are being operated on by foreign companies for oil and gas extraction – and recognizing that the product generates 50% of the oil revenues in the oil sector, people here are disappointed with the kind of services they are subsequently getting (in comparison with other areas too) – and they link this problem with the endemic corruption.
- The most important dynamic in the complex web of state-tribe relationships is the manner in which tribal differences and divisions are manipulated by President Salih, as he plays one off against the other in a way that ensures that none is powerful enough to displace his authority – and which also serves to divert attention from the inadequacies of the central government. Salih manages these tribal differences via a network of patronage and corruption; and such things limit, if not weaken, the authority of the state, institutionalization of the rule of law, they also stymie democratic reform processes.
- The government continues to have a negative view of tribal leaders, seeing them as a bunch of thugs, nomads and people who are more likely to be violent than move in the direction of political discourse. They are often viewed as being 'backward', incapable of making informed decisions or effective use of the resources and aid they are given – and in need of guidance or control by the state.

## 3 Strategic Priority Recommendations

### 3.1 For the Yemeni Government

- Regulating social behavior through law and enforcement. It is impossible to take any act by the government seriously unless the government shows its political will and works to enforce the rule on *everyone*.
- Assuring quality and equity between *all* segments of society.
- The state monopoly over tribal conflict resolution is not solving anything – as regards tribes – at the moment. Tribal conflicts ought to be included in the government's plans and properly dealt with, whether using domestic or international resources. It is important to craft a strategy and a planning methodology via which to integrate tribes into Yemeni politics. A steering committee that will require tribal leaders to begin negotiations with the state, in open debate, will shift the current situation, and more pragmatic solutions can then be found.

- Altering the central focus and expanding development assistance so that it gets to rural areas; also, engaging local communities and help them find ways to integrate themselves with the center.
- With large aid assistance programs, the resources and capacities of both the donors and the state will need to be increased.
- In most cases, tribal areas at the present time contain no signs of a modern life: there are no services, schools, industries or any means for the people to contribute/do something useful for their communities. In some way, killings have become the only thing some persons are familiar with – these are the reason why they exist. Finding ways to generate employment for tribal persons will give the tribesmen something to look towards. A search for alternatives is crucial in this context. It is important to know that the way of life and lack of choices is one of the reasons why tribesmen behave the way they do. Yemen needs to reverse its trend in the direction of alarming unemployment rates.
- Getting the whole of society involved in the tribal issue is essential, and stimulating parliament to talk freely about tribal problems – and find strategic ways to solve them. This domain has to move beyond the sole authority of the state and be discussed more openly and freely by the public. There are some urban areas in Yemen where people do not comprehend or even know about tribal practices. Most Yemeni citizens who reside in big cities (such as Sana'a or Aden) absolutely do not understand the magnitude of the problem, or see ways in which it might be solved.
- Enhancing people's trust in the government of Yemen and the effectiveness of state institutions; while administrative procedures, for all, should be free, fair and predictable/reliable.
- Continual Human rights violations jeopardize Yemeni democracy to a major extent – indeed this is often the 'barometer' determining if Yemen is becoming more or less democratic. Freedom of expression and other basic rights – which the constitution gives the Yemeni citizen – need to be implemented.
- Policy planning in terms of finding ways to integrate tribal laws into the judicial system. This might even facilitate ways of blending tribes, gradually, in with urban communities. Tribal disputes can start to be resolved formally in a court house in the same way that it is done in the tribal context – though having it done in a governmental institution may steadily introduce the idea of order, substituting a judge for the Sheikh, etc.

### 3.2 For the International Donor Community

- In more than once case, donor interference with tribal politics has worsened the tribal situation, and has led to the suspension of hope and a weakening of the state's credibility. The donor community needs to avoid having *direct* contact with tribes – it needs to work through the government, having a clear and transparent agenda and effective communications with society (either via the media or press releases). It is critical that Yemeni society understands what sort of possibilities are available with regard to change – and can then decide if there is room for that envisaged change. Donors need to 'give room' to Yemeni people so that *they* can handle tribe-related projects (that is, if donors are serious about their intentions in resolving conflicts).



- There is often a taboo when it comes to dealing with the government and with corruption issues in Yemen (regarding donors). Donors in Yemen lack the capacity to follow up on such issues, as they have no understanding of the local political economy. Thus, it is important that donors take this debate to the local level and support long-term sustainable dialogue on this issue via the supporting of think-tanks or the Yemeni public policy community.
- Practical approaches with regard to work in Yemen should be introduced, which would look at the *current situation* in the country – i.e. and not so much at the theory of government.
- With large-scale aid assistance programs, the resources and capacities of both donors and the state will have to be increased. This is not limited to financial resources, either – but also to programming expertise.

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## Appendix

### Key Meetings

- Frances Guy: Head of Engaging with the Islamic World, Former British Ambassador to Yemen, Foreign Commonwealth Office, London, UK
- Sefotn Darby: Governance Advisor, Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative, DFID, UK
- Henry Thomson: EITI Expert, London, UK
- Ahmed Al Yamani Fredrich Ebert Stiftung
- Carlo Binda, Head of the Parliamentarians Program, NDI, Yemen
- Robin Madrid, Head of the NDI Yemen
- Faisal Abu Raas, Yemeni Member of Parliament
- Samra Al Shaibani. Senior Communication Officer, World Bank
- Ramesh Saharta, UNICEF Representative in Yemen
- Ali Saif, Chairman of Political Yemeni Forum
- Marta Colborn Jordan Revir Foundation
- Jennifer Lofing, Director, International Programs, Partners for Democratic Change
- Prof. Mohammed Mogram, International law Professor, University of Sanaa, Yemen
- Mr.Ali Saif, Acting Vice Minister of Planning and International Cooperation, Yemen
- Mr. Habib Sharif, Program Manager, GTZ
- Dr.Prof Waheeba Faraa, former Minister of Human Rights in Yemen, President of Arwa University
- Nadia Al Saqaf, Chief Editor in Yemen Times
- Hamoud Munnasar, Chief of Operations for the Al Arabia news channel
- Stefania burka, Senior Communication Officer, Danish Program in Yemen
- Janet Alberda, Political Attache, Dutch Embassy in Yemen
- Fares Asaad, Politcal attaché, US Embassy in Yemen
- Antelak Al Mutwakel, Chairwoman of Girls Education World NGO
- Nabil Shaiban, Director General of Ministry of Planning, Sanaa, Yemen
- Dr. Yahia Al Muwakel, Acting Vice Minister of the Ministry of Planning, Head of the Poverty Reduction and Monitoring Unit
- Hendrik Selle, political attaché of the German Embassy
- Robert Hindle, former head of the World Bank in Yemen, current head of Organizational Integrity, DC, USA
- Magda Al Sanousi, Program Manager, Oxfam GB, Yemen
- Julie MCarthy, Revenue Watch, NY, USA
- Anthony Rechter, Revenue Watch, NY USA
- Sina Oudegbemi, ICD Communication Advisor, DFID, London, UK
- Eamoin Taylor, ICD Communication Advisor, DFID, London, UK
- Alison Cochran, EITI-DFID, London UK