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Discerning Yemen's Political Future

Introduction

This project was originally imagined as a multi-authored consideration of Yemen's April 2009 parliamentary process — its lead-up, outcomes, and likely consequences. Following the postponement of these elections, the authors have instead sought to examine not only the stated and implicit reasons for the delay, but also Yemen's increasing political unrest — turmoil which the regime has helped foster and to which it has begun to overreact. For the authors, the key question is less whether the elections will be held in 2011, but whether the country will remain intact until then.



Lisa Wedeen

All of the authors register the Salih regime's "muddling through" approach to citizen disorder and regional fragmentation in contemporary Yemen. Sheila Carapico eloquently describes how the regime increasingly has suppressed press freedoms, but far from enabling the regime to keep hidden its internal problems, censorship has "alerted international journalistic networks to conflicts they might otherwise have overlooked." Sarah Phillips documents the limitations of the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), a coalition of five parties representing a variety of ideological commitments which functions like an elite-based lobbying group; its weakness may mean that political opposition to the regime is left to "radicals from outside the system." For Stephen Day, it is the Southern Movement and its demands for "equality

of citizenship" that prove the most politically promising attempt to counteract the regime's current coercive, but tenuous, hold on government. And it is the regime's exaggerated response to uprisings in the southern and eastern governorates, as well as its attempts to appease protesters by allowing indirect elections of local governors, which have backfired, prompting some leaders of the Southern Movement to speak openly in terms of secession. April Longley Alley and Abdul Ghani al-Iryani want to see a unified Yemen sustained and urge the regime to participate in a "mediated national dialogue," which, in order to be successful, must generate "far-reaching institutional reforms," rather than the *ad hoc* ones that have undermined Salih's bargaining credibility.

Most of the authors are pessimistic about Yemen's future, and the political tensions characterizing the country also find expression in the authors' arguments. For Longley Alley and al-Iryani, the Salih regime remains "both a hindrance to and a necessary partner" in achieving stability. For Phillips, the JMP's strategy of ne-



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gotiating directly with the regime is both essential to the coalition's survival and detrimental to its flourishing; the JMP needs to be more populist, but efforts to cultivate constituencies independent of the regime's patronage system make leaders more vulnerable to charges of treason. Day describes the regime's "monopolistic political control of the country" and also speaks of "north-south splintering." These tensions in the authors' diagnoses, and in Yemeni politics, suggest that the regime might be both challenged by but also able to weather protests in the country, that its divide-and-rule strategies have not ensured stability but still may be capable of keeping the regime durable. I simply do not know. The vibrancy of Yemeni political life, evident in wide-spread protests, in the newspaper articles of a courageous but harassed press, and in the clarion calls for social justice articulated in mosque sermons and political rallies may or may not be successful in curtailing corruption or transforming regime politics as usual. Insofar as the authors manifest a desire for political transformation and for stability, they are giving voice to two aspirations that may, at times such as these, be at odds.

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Southern Aspirations and Salih's Exasperation: The Looming Threat of Secession in South Yemen

April Longley Alley and Abdul Ghani al-Iryani

April 2009 should have been a month for political campaigning, peaceful contestation, and parliamentary elections. Yet springtime in Arabia Felix has been characterized by political violence, instability, and calls for disunity. Instead of opening polls, the regime is erecting checkpoints, enforcing curfews, and stifling press freedoms. Instead of following through on promises of political and economic reform, tanks, artillery, and military personnel are moving into the south to crush popular dissent. Indeed, recent events reveal the increasing vulnerability of the regime and even the unity of the state.

Of the numerous and intertwined challenges facing the Salih regime, the evolving protest movement in South Yemen is quickly emerging as Sana'a's most pressing political threat. The crisis has been long in coming, with numerous opportunities for President 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih to act in enlightened self-interest to address the demands for services, jobs, rule of law, and a degree of regional autonomy. Yet Salih has repeatedly failed to adequately address southern grievances. Instead, he has chosen a path of co-option, targeted repression, and inadequate concessions which only has provoked greater opposition. What started as a peaceful protest movement demanding reform within the context of unity has shifted towards a movement for an independent South Yemen. In some cases, this movement has even turned violent in its struggle against the regime.



April Longley Alley

Several recent events suggest that there is an escalating crisis in the south with potentially devastating consequences for Yemeni civilians there, the national economy as a whole, and ultimately the viability of the state. First and foremost, there is a shift in southern rhetoric from reform in the context of unity to demands for independence. When organized protest began in the spring of 2007, those calling for immediate independence were a fringe minority. Today, however, the balance is changing. Several prominent southern politicians, including 'Ali Salem al-Beedh and Haydar al-Attas, are opening the door to independence, asserting that the current unification model is untenable. Moreover, domestic observers and prominent political figures, including the former presidential candidate Faysal bin Shamlan, suggest that grassroots

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opinion in the south no longer supports unity — at least under Salih's leadership. While some southerners may be using the call for independence as a tactical bargaining maneuver, many worry that violence could quickly transform this demand into a non-negotiable, ideological commitment. Certainly, this is the case among portions of the expatriate Yemeni community in the United States. At a rally in Washington, DC on May 11, 2009, a group of southern protestors, carrying pictures of slain civilians and signs demanding press freedoms, chanted slogans in support of southern independence. When asked if Salih could take any actions to rectify the situation, they replied that unity is no longer on the table.

A second ominous trend is the escalation of violence and repression. From 2007 to 2008, the protest movement was overwhelmingly peaceful, even in the face of government repression. (There was a brief exception in April and March of 2008 when protestors set fire to police stations, primarily in the governorate of Dhahia.) Confrontation in 2009, however, is more violent, organized, and risky. Skirmishes and protests were particularly intense around the April 27, 2009 anniversary of the 1994 civil war. On that day, rioting broke out in the normally peaceful governorate of Hadramawt. In Abyan, thousands of protestors from around the south gathered in an anti-government demonstration in the capital of Zinjbar. (The area just north of Zinjbar had been a battleground between southerners and the government in February 2009.) The epicenter of the conflict, however, is in Dhahia and the area of Radfan (a district in the governorate of Lahj). In these regions, former southern military men have organized militias to fight the advance of the northern army. While these groups lack heavy weaponry, they are familiar with the mountainous terrain and are arguably more motivated than the underpaid and demoralized forces of the central government.

For its part, the regime is becoming more aggressive in its struggle to tamp down the secessionist threat. The government has moved heavy artillery and weaponry into the south, particularly into Lahj and Dhahia, to quash the opposition. Rhetoric and political theater in the capital also verifies a militant turn. Salih has warned that southern secession will result in "many Yemens" and fighting from "house to house." On May 22, 2009, in celebration of the anniversary of Yemen's unity, the regime staged an expensive and wasteful display of military might in the capital, complete with an over-flight exhibition of MiG-29 fighter jets purchased from Russia. In addition, the regime is engaged in a ruthless attack on press freedoms. In early May, the government illegally suspended the publication of seven opposition papers: *al-Mustaqilla*, *al-Masdar*, *al-Watani*, *al-Diyar*, *al-Nida'*, *al-Share'*, and *al-Ayyam*, as well as several popular blogs. Since then, the government has established a special court in Sana'a to prosecute journalists. Of all the brazen attacks, the relentless harassment of the south's most prominent newspaper, *al-Ayyam*, has drawn the most popular ire. Government-sponsored vigilante militias, known as "Committees for the Defense of Unity," intercepted *al-Ayyam's* distribution trucks and burned its newspapers. After that, on May 13, 2009, government security forces attempted to storm *al-Ayyam's* headquarters in Aden, resulting in one death and three injuries. In short, both the regime and southerners are engaging in increasingly risky behavior that may result in a self-sustaining cycle of violence.

Another worrisome trend in the evolving crisis is the emerging role of violent Islamist actors. In recent months, both the southern opposition movement and the Salih regime have intentionally incorporated, and in other cases unintentionally attracted, violent Islamist elements. In a move that is all too reminiscent of the unification/civil war period, the regime in Sana'a is repeating old patterns by informally encouraging Islamists to harass and attack the southern opposition. At Friday sermons, state sponsored *ulama* preach against the "separatists" and urge Yemenis to protect unity. Even more alarming, Yemeni sources suggest that Salih is allowing and tacitly supporting the formation of vigilante militias, like the "Committees for the Defense of Unity," to intimidate the south. Moreover, Shaykh Abdul Majid al-Zindani has been quite vocal in calling for violent opposition, and he has blamed the United States and foreign actors for inciting secessionist demands. Shaykh Zindani, along with Shaykh Sadeq al-Ahmar, issued a joint *communiqué* warning that unity will be defended — no matter how much blood is shed.

For their part, the southern movement is also becoming entangled with violent Islamist groups. In early 2009, the government mounted a major offensive to wrest control over two cities in Abyan, Zinjbar and Ja'ar, away from an Islamist

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militia controlled by Tariq al-Fadhli.¹ In response, al-Fadhli, a former associate of 'Usama bin Ladin and supporter of the Salih regime, defected to join the southern movement. Given al-Fadhli's past affiliations, many in the movement were initially skeptical. Yet al-Fadhli has deep roots in Abyan (his father was a former Sultan), and it seems that at least for now he is an accepted part of the movement and a leader in his area. In addition to al-Fadhli, al-Qa'ida on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has claimed solidarity with the southern cause. On May 13, 2009, the leader of AQAP, Nasir al-Wuhaishi, announced his support for the southern protestors and called for establishing Islamic rule in Yemen. Wuhaishi lashed out at President Salih, labeling him as an infidel and an agent of oppression. The motivations behind this announcement are not entirely clear. One possible explanation is that AQAP is using the southern cause as a bargaining chip to force Salih's retreat from his efforts to curtail AQAP activities. Another explanation is that AQAP was acting on instructions from its patrons inside the regime. In other words, the organization has no intention of following through on its promises of solidarity, but is instead stirring the political pot of elite rivalry inside the Salih regime. Whatever the motivations, there is no indication that the southern movement has sought, or is accepting, AQAP support.

Thus, the window for avoiding protracted violence, and with it an accelerated slide into central government collapse, is closing rapidly. In fact, given the hardened position of many southerners, there is no guarantee that unity can be preserved under Salih's rule. If Salih continues to combine co-option, targeted repression, and empty promises of reform, the crisis will gradually escalate. While these tactics may buy Salih a few months of reduced tensions, they will not address underlying grievances and will ensure that Yemen stays on its current path towards state failure.

If Salih chooses increased repression and overwhelming military force, as the authors fear he will, the pace of failure and the threat of humanitarian crisis will increase dramatically. This option would likely combine conventional military forces, the security services, and vigilante militias; this is by far the most dangerous strategy. In pursuing this option, the regime risks winning the conventional battle, while at the same time unifying the population behind the need to fight a prolonged guerrilla-style insurgency. Like the five-year-old insurgency in the northern governorate of Sa'ada, guerrilla-style combat is possible and sustainable in parts of the former South as well. This is especially true if southerners receive outside funding and if the population is unified behind the need to defend themselves. Moreover, if an insurgency in the south were to correspond with a resurgent Huthi rebellion, both insurgencies would be strengthened as government forces are stretched thin. Unfortunately for the regime, the Huthi season is rapidly approaching, and there is already evidence, from the statements of al-Huthi followers and leaders of the secessionist opposition, that the two groups are coordinating their efforts. Finally, the involvement of violent Islamist elements in the southern conflict also could serve to protract and intensify fighting. In light of these complicating factors, the regime would be well advised to learn from the British experience in the rugged mountains of Dhalia and Radfan. The northern military easily defeated the South's conventional forces in the 1994 civil war, yet today there is no conventional army to fight, only a potentially long and bloody counterinsurgency to execute.

Today, the best option for peacefully preserving unity is for the regime to participate in a mediated national dialogue. To be successful, this dialogue must produce far-reaching institutional reforms, particularly substantive political and economic decentralization. While Salih had the opportunity to direct this process in 2007 and 2008, he failed to do so effectively. As such, facts on the ground have changed. Patterns of broken promises and *ad hoc* reforms have chipped away at Salih's bargaining credibility. It is now virtually impossible for the regime to peacefully resolve the crisis in the South without broad participation from domestic elites and the supervision of a credible outside mediator.

The presence of an outside, honest broker is increasingly a necessary condition for resolving the current crisis. Salih has lost his domestic bargaining credibility. Therefore an outside broker must guide, and to some degree guarantee, the terms of any agreement. Additionally, the Yemeni elite are fragmented and may require an outside agent to facilitate an

1. Al-Fadhli is a seasoned mujahidin with close ties to the Salih regime. The commander of the northern district, 'Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, is married to al-Fadhli's sister.

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inclusive dialogue and solution. Currently, no domestic actor has the clout to bring together a broad cross-section of Yemeni elites to include northerners, southerners, members of the ruling party, members of the Joint Meeting Parties, and most importantly, leaders of the grassroots southern movement. In particular, domestic bargaining and reconciliation is complicated by the nature of the southern opposition. Salih's effort to marginalize the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) leadership, which supports unity, has helped to create a new group of populist, grassroots leaders in the south. The leadership of the grassroots protest movement often supports secession and it poses a formidable obstacle to bargaining within the parameters of unity. Given all parties' profound distrust of Salih, and their internal fragmentation, an outside broker is necessary to facilitate a meaningful bargaining environment.

One potential regional broker could be the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). On April 29, 2009, a semi-official Saudi newspaper, *al-Riyadh*, published an editorial expressing concern over the state of affairs in Yemen and suggesting a national dialogue between all parties under the auspices of the GCC. While Yemen's Gulf neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia, have a long and duplicitous history of meddling in Yemeni affairs, at this point, the Kingdom has a pressing interest in supporting political and economic stability on its border. The threat of state failure in Yemen, and with it the risk of expanded sanctuary for al-Qa'ida, is a grave concern in the Kingdom. As such, the GCC may have both sufficient incentives and the necessary clout to play a positive mediating role.

In sum, a peaceful resolution to the southern crisis partially depends on Salih's willingness to significantly compromise and seriously address southern grievances. Resolution also will require a national dialogue guided by an external mediator. Unfortunately, there is no indication that Salih or his close supporters are considering any type of mediated negotiation. Even if they choose to act, the authors fear that their efforts will again be too little and too late.

As US policymakers continue to watch the unfolding events in Yemen, two areas of concern immediately present themselves. In the area of strategic communications, policymakers should realize that US support for "unity" could be interpreted in Yemen as the US Administration's unflappable support of one-man rule, in the form of Salih, at the expense of all other considerations and much needed reforms. As such, the Administration should continue to emphasize US support for a "unified" Yemen that respects democratic institutions, the rule of law, press freedoms, and human rights.

A second area of concern is the strategic implications for the United States if Yemeni unity becomes imperiled through widespread, coordinated insurrection. In this scenario, the Salih regime would become completely focused on its survival at all costs. In the ensuing distraction, US interests would likely be neglected, if not ignored, by the Salih regime as it struggles to regain control of the south. In the unlikely event that the south were able to break away from the north, the ensuing economic collapse of the north's economy would be difficult to halt. In the more likely event of a prolonged insurgency, the economic viability of the state would be threatened further, and internal unrest could provide additional space for al-Qa'ida to expand its areas of influence. Finally, the maritime border could be used to facilitate movement of al-Qa'ida supporters to/from the Horn of Africa and provide additional support nodes for piracy in the Gulf of Aden, a practice that is currently inhibited by US support for the nascent Yemeni Coast Guard. As such, the stability of a unified Yemen is in the best interests of the United States. Currently, the Salih regime remains both a hindrance to and a necessary partner in achieving this outcome.

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Kill the Messengers: Yemen's 2009 Clampdown on the Press

Sheila Carapico

Holding scheduled elections this April or May would have taken great statesmanship by Yemen's leadership, but could have demonstrated that democratic processes are steadily becoming routine in Yemen. Instead, a clampdown on the independent press signaled growing repression. Unable to defuse the tensions behind intermittent conflict in the far north and low-intensity insurrection in the south, Yemen's leaders resorted to the suppression of news coverage. However, crude measures to keep military operations out of the news backfired, and focused the attention of Arab and international advocates of press freedom on Yemen's domestic unrest.



Sheila Carapico

A newly invigorated and varied range of periodicals signified the relative political openness in Yemen following its unification in 1990. The "war of words" between two rival official news establishments was the harbinger of the armed confrontation that broke out in 1994. After unification, in addition to what had been the state-owned media of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) and the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and their respective ruling party organs, dozens of dailies, weeklies, and occasional newspapers flooded kiosks with an array of viewpoints. Press freedom was relative, not absolute; a press prosecution office that opened in Sana'a in 1993 prosecuted at least 20 cases for violating the press law's requirement of "truth," most of which ended in acquittals. Following the defeat and flight of its former leadership, the old PDRY organs either disappeared entirely or re-emerged under new editorial management and with content. Although the Ministry of Information's unified national broadcasting corporation and a raft of state and ruling party publications issued the official line, plenty of opposition and private newspapers survived. Press freedom, however, was whittled away by limitations on access to paper and printing facilities, travel restrictions, intimidation, prosecutions (with a few convictions), and occasional police or para-military actions.

Whereas press trials in the 1990s were witnessed mainly inside the courtrooms, in the 2000s, and most dramatically during the crackdown that began in late April 2009, a network of Arab and international press defenders documented and publicized additional violations. In 2006, for instance, there were reports of ill-founded defamation lawsuits by the National Bank for Trade and Investment against *al-Diyar*, against *al-Shoura* by the Defense Ministry, and against the independent *al-Wasat* by the Religious Endowments Ministry and the military police, all for reports related to corruption or similar misdeeds.

The special ban on independent coverage of military affairs was quite effective in remote regions of the far north. A media blackout, backed by a total travel ban, prevented most or all journalists from reaching the parts of Sa'ada governorate where fighting occurred. One prominent journalist who defiantly reported civilian casualties was pardoned after serving part of a prison sentence for conspiring with the al-Huthi rebellion. In June 2008, the former editor-in-chief of two newspapers affiliated with the al-Haqq party, *al-Shoura* and *al-Umma*, became the first journalist tried before a criminal court of security affairs which had formed in 2000. The journalists' syndicate protested both the site and the verdict. In October 2008, another court upheld the Ministry of Information's directive suspending the professional accreditation of the chief editors of *al-Thawri*, a Socialist newspaper, and a new newspaper, *al-Shari'*, for a year. These cases, noted by international watchdogs, had a chilling effect domestically, but did not silence the opposition press entirely.

The media blackout has been less effective recently in the larger, more urban, and more accessible southern provinces, where reporters and editors defied the state in reporting on violence, southern dissatisfaction, and state corruption. This caused the Salih Administration to overreact. In April, the Sana'a bureau of the *Al-Jazeera* satellite channel received threats via text message after the station aired footage of southern demonstrators along with commentary about the possible dissolution of Yemeni unity. In early May, coinciding with World Press Freedom Day on May 3, eight indepen-

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dent newspapers — *al-Mustaqilla*, *al-Masdar*, *al-Watani*, *al-Diyar*, *al-Ahali*, *al-Nida'*, *al-Shari'*, and *al-Ayyam* — along with a popular blog and the www.almukallapress.com and *al-Taghir* news sites, were shut down, at least temporarily. The grounds seem to have included both reports on army operations and muckraking about corruption in high places; *al-Masdar*, for instance, ran a story on April 28 about the President's son's handling of investment. Another 70 independent outlets received direct or indirect warnings. *Al-Ayyam*, a widely circulated Aden daily which launched in the 1950s and whose outspoken editors and offices had been the object of past lawsuits, gunfire, and threats, was a particular target. Copies of the paper were seized and burned, vigilantes attacked its offices, and its editors were criminally charged. The last issue available on the internet in early June, published on May 5, ran the headline "Aden security confiscates over 50,000 copies of *al-Ayyam*" and photographs of one dead and one of the four injured in an exchange of gunfire in al-Dala'a followed by news articles containing further details. Government forces also confiscated at least four consecutive daily issues of *al-Quds al-Arabi*, a Palestinian newspaper published in Europe, for its commentaries on these events in advance of Yemeni Unity Day on May 22.

The state-run broadcast stations, the national daily *al-Thawra*, and the government and ruling party newspapers, such as *26 September*, *14 October*, *22 May*, *Al-Mithaq*, and *al-Mu'tammar*, refuted the opposition papers' coverage indirectly, omitting stories of military operations in favor of counter-images and narratives of south Yemenis celebrating unity, denials that any newspapers had been closed, editorials on the responsibility of the press to national unity, criticisms of *Al-Jazeera's* purportedly pro-Socialist, pro-separatist bias, and speeches from the President and his acolytes.

But the government was not prepared to win its case in the court of public opinion. Signaling new resolve to institutionalize press censorship, the Supreme Judicial Council announced that a new Press and Publications Court would try reporters and editors from the eight papers now criminally accused of publishing material "harming national unity." Journalists gathered peacefully outside the Ministry of Justice and alerted domestic, Arab, and international networks.

As a strategy for keeping news of Yemen's internal problems from reaching regional and international audiences, punishing the messengers has so far proven counter-productive. Censorship has failed to suppress news of southern Yemen's grievances; to the contrary, the banal repression of the press has alerted international journalistic networks to conflicts they might otherwise have overlooked. In May 2009, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information and 37 affiliated human rights and press freedom groups based in Cairo, Bahrain, Damascus, Sana'a, Ramallah, and elsewhere documented press intimidation and appealed to President 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih to respect journalists' rights. The France-based Reporters without Borders, the US-based Committee to Protect Journalists, the London offices of Article 19, the International Federation of Journalists, and various human rights organizations issued a string of notices expressing alarm and calling on Yemen to meet its obligations as a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Arab Charter on Human Rights, and to guarantee freedoms of expression and information. Their appeals were furthered by Yemeni journalists and activists who contacted their colleagues in and beyond the Arab region, and in turn called attention to the very events Yemen's government hoped to keep secret.

Paired with the failure to reach an accommodation with opposition parties to allow elections to go forward, this wave of censorship hardly bodes well for Yemen's reputation as a country transitioning to democracy. If anything, it seems to put the country on a trajectory towards tyranny.

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Yemen Postpones Its April 2009 Parliamentary Elections

Stephen Day

In June 2008, when an American newspaper journalist interviewed Yemeni President 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih, he asked the President to describe what it is like to rule Yemen. "I always say," Salih explained in the capital Sana'a, "it is like dancing with snakes." Most foreign political observers who travel to this rugged, impoverished country tend to sympathize with the difficulty of running such a state. Yemen has a long history of violent revolutions, tribal rebellions, political assassinations, outbursts of rioting, and other frequent social and political turbulence. Thus foreigners are prone to accept Salih's depiction of what amounts to the unenviable task of serving as President in such a dangerous environment. Generally speaking, foreigners credit Salih's effort to develop democracy in the country since the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. They marvel at the president's skills of surviving more than three decades in office.¹ Rarely do they consider what the President's self-description says about his own poor approach to leadership.



Stephen Day

Since 1993 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih has overseen five national elections as head of the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) Party. This includes three parliamentary elections and two presidential elections. Twice Salih was elected President by an overwhelming majority, the first time in 1999 with an official 96% of the direct popular vote and the second time in 2006 with a 77% majority. In addition, the President's GPC Party placed first in each of Yemen's three parliamentary elections. In the first and most competitive election held on April 27, 1993, the GPC won less than a majority with 41% of the new Parliament's seats.² Since then the GPC has won an increasingly larger majority share in Parliament, gaining 62% of the seats in 1997 and 76% in the last election in 2003. On February 24, 2009, however, Salih postponed the country's fourth parliamentary election (originally scheduled this year on the 16th anniversary of the first election) after he conceded to the threat of an electoral boycott by a coalition of opposition parties called the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP).

It is against the backdrop of President Salih's monopolistic political control of the country that one should seek to explain the extension of Yemen's current Parliament until 2011. If 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih is the skilled democratic leader which foreign observers say he is, and he has a proven track record of winning broad support across the country on election day, then why would he back down in the face of an electoral boycott by a coalition of weaker parties? The JMP includes the Yemeni Socialist Party (or YSP), which ruled the former South Yemen, the conservative Islamist party *Islah* (or "Reform"), and various Nasserite, Ba'hist, and other parties. More than a decade ago, the YSP and a few smaller parties followed through on a threat to boycott Yemen's 1997 parliamentary election, yet the President went ahead with the vote on its scheduled date. What explains his recent decision to postpone the 2009 election? Did President Salih concede to opposition pressure because the opposition now includes conservative Islamist forces? If so, then perhaps there are shadows of doubt about the popular legitimacy of President Salih and his ruling GPC.

One alternative view is that President Salih's recent concession to the threat of an opposition boycott relates to a series of regional uprisings in the country. The first, since 2004, is centered in Sa'da province along the northwestern border with Saudi Arabia. The second, starting separately in 2007, spread across the southern and eastern provinces where the YSP ruled an independent state prior to unification in 1990. Perhaps the recent postponement of Yemen's parliamentary election says more about the growing appearance of cracks in the country's territorial integrity. Could President Salih

1. 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih first came to power as President of the former North Yemen in 1978.

2. At the time of the 1993 election, the GPC competed on a more level playing field with other political parties. Following their victory in a brief civil war in mid-1994 against southern military troops which remained un-integrated into the national army, Salih and the GPC were able to monopolize political resources in the country.

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have agreed to delay the fourth parliamentary election because of fundamental fears about Yemeni national unity and the basic survival of the state in its present form? The five-year-old uprising in Sa'da province has been the more violent and deadly of the two uprisings, both in terms of civilian deaths and injuries and casualties among Yemeni soldiers and security forces. However, the latest round of heavy fighting in Sa'da ended in July 2008. During the past year, therefore, Sa'da has been less of a concern for President Salih than the uprising in the southern and eastern provinces.

Throughout 2008, the southern and eastern uprising grew steadily as it attracted tens of thousands of participants who joined peaceful sit-ins, rallies, and marches calling for a change in government. In early 2009 this "Southern Movement" or "Southern Cause" flared into violent clashes in the provinces of Abyan, Lahij, and Dhale.³ About the time (in February) when the decision was made to postpone the April 27 election, government forces engaged in a violent confrontation with a group of militants inside the town of Ja'ar, a few miles north of Abyan's capital, Zunjbar. Then, on the date that the fourth parliamentary election originally had been scheduled to take place, a larger anti-government rally was held in Zunjbar's main square. This rally drew participants from neighboring provinces and eastern provinces as far away as Hadhramawt. Salih's government refers to the date of April 27 as "Democracy Day," a source of obvious irony in a year when the voting was called off. But the date also corresponds to the start of the 1994 civil war, which led to northern military control over Yemen's southern and eastern provinces.

This is one of the reasons why protesters gathered in the streets of Zunjbar. Among southern citizens, there is a strong feeling that genuine democratic practices are lacking in Yemen. For more than a year, supporters of the Southern Movement have demanded "equality of citizenship," and the right to directly elect their local governors. (One year ago, after the first round of violence in Lahij and Dhale, President Salih attempted to appease protesters by allowing indirect elections of local governors.) The protesters in Zunjbar also sought to commemorate the start of the civil war in 1994. A second main demand of supporters of the Southern Movement is ending the northern military domination of their lives and lifting the military checkpoints along main roads. Prior to the Zunjbar rally, it was announced that one of President Salih's main southern allies during the civil war, Tariq al-Fadhli, would make a public appearance, committing himself to "political independence" in a state that he calls "South Arabia." More than anything else, al-Fadhli's appearance is what drew large numbers of people to the streets of Zunjbar.

In 2009, it is a very striking political development in Yemeni politics to find representatives of the Southern Movement speaking openly in secessionist language today. Ever since the 1994 civil war, when leaders of the YSP formally seceded from the north, just four years after unification, secession has been a highly sensitive topic. Today, it is particularly noteworthy to find old allies of President Salih, such as Tariq al-Fadhli, who fought with northern forces in the civil war against the YSP, now standing with it and other supporters of the Southern Movement against the government.⁴ This signals a major political realignment and is a leading factor in the postponement of the 2009 parliamentary elections. Following the 1994 civil war, al-Fadhli and other prominent southerners accepted membership in the GPC and appointments in the government. Today, they are defecting from the GPC, thus calling into question President Salih's claim to have preserved national unity. It is nearly as troubling that prominent southerners from opposition parties such as Islah are unwilling to defend the government against calls for secession. Too many southerners of all political stripes feel betrayed by a President who used them as political pawns in the past.

In summary, there now appears to be regional cracks not only inside the GPC, but within Islah and the YSP as well.

3. There was an earlier round of violence at the end of March 2008, which lasted a little more than one week and was largely limited to Lahij and Dhale provinces.

4. Tariq al-Fadhli is the claimant to the old Fadhli Sultanate in coastal Abyan, where his family was forced from power in the 1960s by Marxist rebels fighting British colonialism prior to independence. He is also a militant Islamist with past links to Usama Bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida's roots in the Arab Afghan *mujahidin*. He was previously closest to President Salih's military strongman, 'Ali Muhsin, who is occasionally described as the President's half-brother. 'Ali Muhsin is also married to al-Fadhli's sister.

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There has long been a division within the YSP between radical members (particularly from Hadhramawt province in the east and Dhale in the south) who continued to pursue secessionist goals after the 1994 civil war, and more moderate members (particularly from Aden and Lahij, and those members from provinces in the North) who advocate unionist policies and seek to compete for political office within the existing *status quo*. For instance, when the Southern Movement started in 2007, the moderate leadership of the YSP as well as the JMP coalition encouraged protesters not to call for secession. This has been the stance of the Secretary General of the YSP from the northern province of Taiz, Yasin Said Nu'man, and also the JMP's Adani candidate in the 2006 presidential election, Faysal Bin Shamlan, a political independent who was born and raised in Hadhramawt. Beginning in 2009, however, secessionist voices grew louder from Lahij in the west to Hadhramawt in the east.

It remains to be seen what will be the fallout of these political developments. To what extent will the political realignment weaken the GPC's status as guardian of national unity? Could President Salih create further north-south splintering if he continues using the blunt force of his military as a means of responding to the Southern Movement, as he did in the wake of the April 27 rally in Zunjbar? Could this splintering spread beyond the GPC to other southern Islamists who support the Islah party? And what role will the YSP play? On the one hand, the YSP could seek to exploit north-south divisions for its own advantage, perhaps hoping to return to rule in the South. Ironically, the YSP may be best positioned to serve as a unifying force if President Salih would restore some of its powers and the facilities that were seized in the wake of the 1994 civil war, and begin treating the YSP as a genuine partner in national unity. Salih might even allow the YSP to play a stronger role in drafting and carrying out government policies. The most sensible way of averting another national unity crisis is to adopt a coalition government until the next elections in 2011.

If recent developments prove anything, it is the failure of President Salih's approach to ruling Yemen as a "snake charmer." First, Salih charmed the YSP to become partners in unity. Then he charmed Tariq al-Fadhli and other Islamists to ally in civil war against the YSP. Now it seems he has come full circle. It is time for Yemen's snake charmer to cease his old ways. It is time for him to treat his rivals as more than snakes, and finally allow room in government for other politicians to prove themselves as leaders. In 2006 it was unfortunate that a progressive and independent leader like Faysal Ben Shamlan did not have a realistic chance to become president. Salih initially refused to run as a candidate in the 2006 presidential election, observing his commitment to conclude his multiple terms in office. He should have stayed out of the campaign, and allowed younger leaders in the GPC to step forward. The YSP leader Yasin Said Nu'man is another of these capable leaders in the country. Nu'man served as Prime Minister of the former South Yemen, and was the first Speaker of Parliament after unification. What Yemen needs is a good leader who can maintain national unity by bringing an end to Salih's gamesmanship and corruption.

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Politics in a Vacuum: The Yemeni Opposition's Dilemma

Sarah Phillips

The Yemeni regime is in crisis. The oil revenues that sustain it are plummeting, and opposition to its rule is increasing. Protests have gained momentum, and a common anti-regime narrative has emerged between actors as diverse as southern secessionists, northern insurgents, *jihadis*, and average citizens. Protestors on both sides of the pre-unification border decry the price rises on essential commodities, high unemployment, the paucity of government services, corruption, and the lack of equality between citizens. These are grievances that one might expect would play to the advantage of the country's main formal opposition group, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), a coalition of five parties that spans an array of ideological positions from the Yemeni Socialist Party to the Islamist Islah party.



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When the JMP successfully pushed to delay the April 2009 elections for two years — with the goal of implementing electoral reforms that level the political playing field — the coalition's leadership claimed a major victory against the regime. However, in the absence of substantive grassroots engagement, popular discontent is rapidly expanding beyond the Party's sphere of influence. By neglecting to build a solid grassroots support base and provide an alternative to the regime, the JMP has little to offer the people other than the ability to add another voice to the growing chorus against the government.

This essay will make three points: that the JMP remains an elite entity that operates within the state-sponsored patronage system; that support for the coalition on the Yemeni street is not as high as many of its leaders profess; and that this is compounding the dangers of the political vacuum within which no alternative leadership is emerging other than radicals from outside the system.

CENTRALIZATION AND ELITE MANDATE

The JMP's central leadership implicitly conceives the purpose of the coalition as being a mechanism to lobby the government for greater concessions, rather than as a means of gaining power or compelling change through the weight of its supporter base. The structure of the JMP is strongly geared toward elite, lobby-style politics.

The coalition rightly perceives that within the norms of Yemen's centralized patronage system, the most immediate benefits are likely to come from negotiating directly with the regime. This is because the system is so unequal and so indisposed toward the creation of alternative power centers. The presence of alternative voices is usually acceptable — the presence of different power bases is not.

Since the last elections in 2006, the JMP obsessed over the "dialogue" (read: negotiation process) that it pursued with the regime, which aimed to make the 2009 elections freer and fairer. The regime astutely, and ruthlessly, seized upon this focus and worked to distract the JMP from other more relevant political issues through long delays and false promises about what might ultimately be conceded during the dialogue process.

Intentionally or otherwise, the JMP framed itself throughout the dialogue as the opposition, rather than a shadow government or even a group that was generating actionable alternatives to the government. This left the coalition in a position where it was essentially requesting reforms that would increase its room to maneuver but that the JMP was not in a position to demand because it had alienated a considerable portion of its potential support base by focusing on the dialogue.

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This is the coalition's dilemma: Extracting concessions from the regime to level the electoral playing field has meant not antagonizing it by playing "hearts and minds" politics, or filling some of the gaping holes in the state's capacity to provide services or welfare.¹ By failing to have done this, the JMP has sacrificed some of the popular support that might force the regime to deal with it on a more equal footing.

SUPPORT FOR THE JMP ON THE STREET

While the JMP's leadership decries the regime, it continues not to directly appeal to the street for fear of crossing over the regime's red lines against competing populist politics, thereby risking being either marginalized or crushed by the regime. The regime has made amply clear that this type of action will be considered tantamount to treason.² The JMP's reticence to take this path is a rational response to a difficult position, but this has damaged its credibility. Dissatisfaction with the regime is, therefore, not being funneled to the JMP automatically, because the coalition's mainstream is widely seen as being enmeshed with the *status quo*.

Clearly illustrating this dilemma, in a number of the demonstrations that took place in 2007 in the south, including in parts of the Yemeni Socialist Party's heartland, protestors turned against the JMP, lumping it together with the government and calling for the downfall of both. The JMP's public preoccupation with institutional and electoral reforms has had little popular resonance. People want alternatives.

With the surge of popular discontent over the dearth of service provision and the lack of equal citizenship, this is not an unachievable goal, and the JMP could find fertile ground if it could better articulate, and act upon, the issues that affect people's daily lives. This said, the gravity of Yemen's situation means that the possibility for business as usual politics is probably already over.

THE POLITICAL VACUUM

The lack of a clear alternative leadership creates space for radical actors, though not necessarily with an Islamist frame of reference.

Jihadis have started to combine southern grievances with internationalist jihadi ideology in public statements and through sympathetic Imams in some mosques. For example, in June 2008, Qassim al-Raymi (one of the leaders of the recently announced al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula), made a statement that specifically referred to the regime's treatment of the south and accused the regime of being irredeemably unjust and corrupt. Al-Raymi is from the northern capital of Sana'a, however, and his reference to the south was more entrepreneurial than personal. This tendency was amplified by the southern Shaykh Tariq al-Fadhli in April 2009, a long-standing regime ally with solid jihadi credentials. He shocked President Salih by publicly defecting from the regime and calling on southerners to "drive away the occupation and have our own southern independence."³ In May, the leader of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, Nasir al-Wahayshi, echoed these sentiments by announcing his support for "the people of Southern Yemen" in their struggle to secede from President Salih's regime.⁴

The two critiques — one jihadi and the other secessionist — are thus merging under the broad complaint that the re-

1. The significant internal divisions among the JMP's members are beyond the scope of this essay but also hamper the consistency of message that the JMP portrays to the public. See Michaelle Browsers, "Origins and Architects of Yemen's Joint Meeting Parties," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 39 (2007), pp. 565–86, and Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective: Patronage and Pluralized Authoritarianism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

2. For example, President 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih explicitly equated protests over prices rises in September 2007 with treason.

3. Nasser Arrabyee, "Soldier killed, 14 injured in Yemen clashes," *Gulf News*, April 29, 2009.

4. Arafat Madayash and Sawsan Abu-Husain, "Al Qaeda Call for Islamic State in Southern Yemen," *Asharq Alawsat*, May 14, 2009.

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gime is ruling unjustly. As the money that fuels the Yemeni patronage system runs out, the rules of engagement that have been operational since unification are rupturing and previously unlikely short-term alliances are becoming more likely.

The willingness of militant jihadis to draw these types of links is an illustration of the potential for southern discontent to spiral into an even more multifaceted, if somewhat disparate, popular rebelliousness against the regime. If the JMP does not manage to provide a more compelling destination for those who call for change, it runs the risk of helping to illustrate that as Yemen moves closer to a precipice, peaceful participation is not particularly effective.

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Yemen's 2006 Presidential Election Results

Results (election took place on September 20, 2006)	
Registered Voters	9,247,390 (September 2006)
Votes Cast	6,025,818 (65.16% of registered voters)
Valid Votes	5,377,238 (89.24% of votes cast)
Invalid Votes	648,580 (10.76% of votes cast)

Candidate	Party	Valid Votes	% of Valid Votes
'Ali 'Abdullah Salih	General People's Congress	4,149,673	77.17%
Faysal bin Shamlan	Joint Meeting Parties	1,173,025	21.81%
Fathi Muhammad al-Azab	Independent Candidate	24,524	0.46%
Yasin Abdo Saed Nu'man	National Opposition Council	21,642	0.40%
Ahmed 'Abdullah Majid al-Majidi	Independent Candidate	8,324	0.15%

The previous presidential election was held on September 23, 1999. In that election, 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih defeated Najib Qahtan al-Shabi, garnering 96.2% of the vote to al-Shabi's 3.8%.

Source: IFES