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Transcript

Where Next for Yemen? Perspectives on the Youth Movement

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Kate Nevens:

Good evening, everyone and thank you ever so much for coming. I'm Kate Nevens. I'm the manager of the Middle East and North Africa Programme here at Chatham House. I'd just like to take this opportunity to ask everyone to turn off their mobile phones because it will interfere with our mics and our speakers as well.

So tonight's event forms part of our programme of work under the Yemen Forum. One element that we feel just hadn't had enough attention and hadn't been focused on in its own right was the youth movement and we thought, if we are going to talk about the youth movement, we should have a panel of young or younger analysts. I think Chatham House's cut-off point is 35 for young people so I think we roughly fit. And I'm going to ask Abubakr to begin. Abubakr Al-Shamahi is a freelance journalist and he's the founder and editor of *Comment Middle East* and he's a BA politics student from SOAS and he's very active within the Yemeni community in the UK.

Abubark Al-Shamahi:

Firstly, I would like to thank Chatham House for hosting the event today and the Yemen Forum for inviting me. Just to give you a bit of background about my own experience in the country, I was there in April for about a month, interning at the *Yemen Times* newspaper, if any of you know the publication. The protest movement there that I saw was a mass movement – regular protests in the region of hundred thousands maybe in Sana'a. Towards the period I was in, you know, marches were starting to happen. People were starting to go into areas that were known as kind of pro- Saleh areas of the city and march into those areas ...You know, kind of, the fear barrier was broken from what I saw. The actual Tahrir Square itself was somewhere where you saw people of different affiliations. You saw tribal people. You saw women, youth.

OK, it's not the kind of fairytale that a lot of you had been saying it is, but there were elements of coordination between the different movements that you wouldn't have seen before. You saw tribes-people applauding women on stage, for example, which was something I was surprised about. And there were, you know, because of the time that the protests had been going on for, there were regular conferences. There were town hall-style meetings, poetry nights even. To me, it was a fantastic cultural change that I saw there and, in a way, the people were empowered. I mean, the story of a man I know – western-educated, worked in the Ministry of Electricity, hated for all the time that I've known him has always hated the corruption that's existed in that

ministry. I've never seen him as happy as I did when I was there for that month. He was beaming 24/7. So I think that's an example of the change that's occurring.

But Yemen, in itself, is a particular case. It's quite different to the rest of the Arab World. It has to be because of the Yemeni way. We haven't had our resignation moment as such, but yet we still got the President away. He's out of the country. He's seemingly unlikely to return and yet, at the same time, his son is still at the Presidential Palace. The Vice President seems impotent and powerless. State media still produces the same stories, the same propaganda. We still have Abdo Janadi spouting his fantastic stories. I think it shows the power of Saleh's sons and nephews and what power they had before the collapse of the regime because I think over the last few years, in particular, they have been dominating the political moves in Yemen. They've been behind a lot of the policies that we've seen over the last few years.

In terms of the humanitarian, economic situation – because I think that definitely ties in with the political situation in Yemen -- you have mile-long queues for petrol for people who are leaving their [inaudible] behind I think. Three days now, people are telling me, there's protest about firewood – women protesting that they are having to use firewood now to cook with. The refugee situation, villagers in places like Arhab being bombed and I think that contributes to the political situation because you get a lot of people now who are saying that, you know, this isn't us and it's gotten to the stage where we can't really take it anymore. You know, whatever we had before under the Saleh regime, it was, in a way, better than what we are having now where we can't even feed our own families.

In terms of what's going on at the moment, I think the traditional outlook is that there is an internal power struggle with [inaudible] itself and the wider Hashid tribe. The role of the outside powers – Saudi Arabia – trying to retain their own influence, but also at the same time balance between having a stable Yemen which is obviously stable to Saudi Arabia, but at the same time not allowing Yemen to get too strong or too democratic because then there will be repercussions for Saudi Arabia. The US, as well – they always seem to have their terrorism blinkers on. There does seem to be a realization in US policy making that maybe the problem in Yemen wasn't as big as they thought it was, but at the same time there is still that focus on al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. And also we have the opposition parties who have shown their incompetence because even though their president is out of the country – he is dying – yet they still have not managed to take hold of the situation and use the opportunity.

I think the traditional outlook – yes, it does cover a lot of things. It does cover the elite politics, but it does not cover the youth movement. I think the youth movement, in a country where the average age is 18, its very strong in numbers and its very powerful. The youth, as far as I know from what I've seen from the example they've set over the last couple of months, I think they will continue for a long time even if their numbers are reduced and they have been over the past few weeks, in the end, many are unemployed. They don't really have anything to lose. At the same time, they have shown they are independent from the opposition blocks. They've shown that through their refusal of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) proposal and I think one of the main reasons, apart from Saleh's flip-flopping on the GCC proposal, one of the main reasons it hasn't worked is because they know the youth will reject it. They will not stop their protests.

In terms of their relationships with elite dynamics and basically elite politics, I think there are divisions between the [inaudible youth, as I've said, and it can be seen from recent events such as the use of force against the protestors outside the vice president's house. But at the same time, to qualify this, it is natural and even healthy to have such divisions in such a huge movement. We are talking about like I said a couple of hundred thousand people. In a way, if we want to have a functioning democracy in Yemen, there will be differences, you know, people who don't agree with each other. You know, this is natural. The parties also at the same time I think aren't very happy that the youth have such a big force now because they have taken away from the traditional power base of the opposition and have shown how impotent the opposition were previously.

At the same time though I think it's important to also show that the youth movement understand that they are on the same side as the opposition parties and the anti-government elite. They acknowledge a role that the [inaudible] brigade have played. They understand that they protected them and they are in the revolution itself or the counter protest that happened. And also, the youth aren't just restricted to the independent youth movements. You have the youth wings of the parties themselves. You have the Islah who's the... I think the similarities you can see with Egypt where the youth of the Ikhwan movement have more or less fallen out in a way with the leadership and that can be seen to an extent in Yemen at the moment.

The youth movement itself, it has I think matured over these last few months. They've taken the opportunity to learn about how you organize yourself and from the stage where I was there where you had probably literally a couple of hundred youth movements, where some youth movements would only have

two or three people and now they've kind of gathered together and now they've got you know two or three I think big coalition movements. There is no more talk of you know, I think, that the parties are robbing the revolution in a way. I think one of them actually as I was speaking to himself said that this kind of talk does not make us seem like we are a real power. Basically, the west or western organizations have not taken us seriously when we've gone in meetings with them and complained about other people robbing our revolution. They have become more pragmatic and they acknowledge that democracy does take a long time. It's not going to come just straightaway.

Also, one of the people I spoke to said that we play with the cards that we get dealt with and that's I think – they know that they have the tribes – Al-Ahmar, the [inaudible], but they have acknowledged that these people exist and we can't just shun them off. We've got to be able to deal with them in a pragmatic manner.

In conclusion, they have fundamentally changed politics in my opinion and eventually they will change elite politics because they are such a huge proportion of Yemeni society. The elites have also realized that they can't co-opt the youth movement as has been shown over the last couple of months. They have got their own plans. There has been talk for a while now of the transitional council and I think it's been quite difficult to get that into effect but they have been getting closer. In conclusion, I think the youth have achieved legitimacy the opposition didn't have beforehand amongst the Yemeni people and I think the organic youth movement that we are seeing in Yemen today will hopefully lead to a better future for the country. Thank you.

Kate Nevens:

This is Saleem. Saleem Haddad is an independent consultant specializing in humanitarian development policy, conflict prevention and state-society relations in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. He's worked on Yemen quite a lot as well as Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan and is the editor of the Yemen and Gulf section of *Muftah.org*.

Saleem Haddad:

I think it's very difficult to talk about the youth movement in five minutes or seven minutes or even in an hour. So I think I should start by saying that the youth movement in Yemen is not a monolithic group. They are diverse and, I think, more important than that is that it is still a process that's taking place right now. I mean, the mechanics of the movements are still being contested

and negotiated on the streets of Yemen at the moment. But what I thought I would do is try and take a step back a bit and look at the major processes of that have driven the youth movement, maybe highlight where I think they are going to some degree. I think it's important first of all to put this into perspective.

Egypt's revolution took place in 18 days whereas Yemen's protests have been going on for nearly six months now. The positive side of this was that it allowed the youth movement to really develop and shape its goals. The protest squares became spaces for debate and discussion. At one point there were 40 daily newspapers published in Change Square in Sana'a and about 20 weekly newspapers and even now you still have civil society organizations led by youth that are you know organizing capacity, building workshops. So while these protests were very divided, I think the movement was able to really form cross-country coalitions and sort of unite a lot of these divided groups.

What has emerged from this process is, I think, a progressive movement calling for a civic democratic state. It's led by educated, I would say, mostly urban youth, although I think certainly youth from rural and tribal areas. The majority of the youth have no official political affiliation. Maybe 30 percent I would say are affiliated to a political party and even then I wouldn't take those affiliations very concretely because I think what we hear over and over again is the reason the people are in the streets is because of the failure of the political system to represent and include youth.

The sort of overarching slogan of the youth movement is change, freedom and dignity and, over these past five months, they've really developed more concrete goals about developing a parliamentary system, you know, constitutional and electoral reform. But I think apart from these core goals – sort of, very specific goals – I think there are two broad points that I would like to make and I preface this by saying it's my opinion. What we can say as the first thing is the three key issues that drove youth to the streets in Yemen I think can be fundamentally boiled down to exclusion, corruption and violence, and violence against citizens in everyday life, but also violent conflicts throughout the country. I think these three grievances have also shaped the cornerstone of the youth movements approach to politics.

Reading through a lot of their documents, what strikes me is that there is a big focus, first of all, on the peaceful nature of the movement which we've seen in practice. Second of all, this focus on inclusive processes and sort of, you know, building different coalitions throughout the country. And thirdly on

transparency – transparency of the movement itself, transparency on independence of the state they want to create, the judiciary, the security sector. I think this has also been shaped by a very nuanced understanding of the power dynamics in the country. Whether it's their rejection of the GCC plan or the appeasement of the opposition parties or the ongoing struggles against co-optation, I think, you know these core values have really driven how the movement acts and you can refer back to those three values.

The second conclusion I'd like to draw from looking at sort of the goals of the youth movement; I think we are witnessing to some degree the development of a progressive, consensus-based politics among the youth. What I mean by this – because youth have been mobilizing and negotiating with actors on the ground of the past six months and it's been a struggle. It hasn't been sort of a quick uprising where they've been able to convince everyone. I mean they've had to really go out and talk to people and convince a very divided country to protest. So this interaction with tribal, social, political actors I think you know there's been sort of a realization that the solution to Yemen's problems will need buy-in from all of Yemen.

This is a very progressive step forward and step away from President Saleh's regime's tactics of running the country which have been very divide and conquer. This focus on consensus-building is not something that is imported from abroad. I think it's something that has a long history in Yemen and Yemeni culture and society, this sort of respect for building consensus among different people. This is something that is inherently Yemeni and inherently democratic. I think if given the chance really to succeed in those ways, it could potentially provide some positive change in the country.

In terms of the future, I think it's important to go back to what I initially said and say that the revolution is far from over. I mean, it's still happening in the streets. Protesters are attacked. The squares are being attacked. They are being shut down. There are ongoing security issues so the process is by no means complete, but beyond this, the youth movement have undoubtedly opened up a space for themselves in the Yemeni political tradition. Now, what remains to be seen is whether they will enter the system as sort of another actor within sort of the broad array of actors or whether they are able to sort of reshape and restructure the Yemeni political system along the lines of this sort of this consensus-based politics. I think this will depend really on how well they are able to build and mobilize legitimacy outside urban centres, in the grassroots, in rural areas and also how capable they are of building political coalitions while also maintaining the core values that they have.

But I think to take away from all this is that the long term affects of this entire process of the revolution or the protests have really empowered youth and I think this is something that you constantly see. Yemeni youth have been excluded in a lot of different avenues and this is really sort of their call to say we need to be taken as serious actors in how this country is being run. I think that is something that is definitely going to stay and continue in the long-term.

Kate Nevens:

Next I would like to invite Thanos to speak. Thanos Petouris is a PhD candidate at SOAS and his research is on the nationalist, anti-colonial movement in Aden with a particular focus on the formation of its south Yemeni identity and I'm hoping that you might speak a little bit about the relationship between south Yemen and ...

Thanos Petouris:

And the movement. Quite. I'm afraid that I'm approaching the youth movement in Yemen from a less optimistic perspective from the previous speakers concerning the connection between the movement and the south. So the Youth of the Revolution of Change, the official name of the movement, appeared in the Yemeni political field at the time when two quite different, but also quite potent secessionist movements were challenging the very basis of the political arrangements of the Saleh regime which is the unity of the Republic of Yemen.

And between the two movements, the south – or Hirack, as they call themselves – pose I think the biggest threat to it. The reason for that is that the southern movement with the help of the policies of the government has managed to politicize and revive the idea of a distinct south Yemeni identity and from this basis to challenge the legitimacy not only of the regime, but also of the agreement under which two countries came together in 1990. Being a southerner means certain things in Yemen, but most importantly it means that you are more likely than any other in Yemen to be cut off from access to basic state services, access to work, a proper education etcetera or at least this is the perception of the people in the south.

Now, within this political environment, the youth movement emerges inspired by what the youth achieved in Egypt. Their goal is to express this frustration of both the young segment of the population which is educated, middle class and ready to offer to their country, but is otherwise socially marginalised and crushed under the burden of unemployment and corruption. And also to

represent of the rest of the population that has not been able to, as yet, to translate its grievances into concrete political action. So as far as the youth movement is concerned, the political system in Yemen needs to be changed, its institutions reformed, corruption fought and also, above all, I suppose, prevent the breakup of the country for which they have repeatedly put responsibilities on the policies of President Saleh.

Very early on in their first open letter to President Obama dated 17 March, the movement admit that I quote, 'The Saleh regime has turned the south of the country into a torture chamber of our fellow Yemenis in Aden, Abyan, Hadhramout and Shabwa,' because the people of the southern part of the country were protesting the undo deprivation suffered by own southern fellow Yemenis of their rights and the holding of the assets of the south by the members of the Saleh family and their chief cronies.

Also, in the second open letter to the President which actually appeared here in the newspaper yesterday, on the internet, the movement acknowledges that in the south, tensions reached the point of our southern brothers demanding a breakup of the recently united country because of the refusal of the Saleh regime to abide by the unification agreement, signed with the leaders of the former [inaudible]. We therefore see a conscious attempt from the very beginning of the youth movement to address the grievances of the south, assure people in the south that their demands for equality are part of the wider goals for the movement and, thus, try to mobilize and include as much support as they can from the southern provinces of Yemen.

In my opinion, members of the youth movement were always aware of how easy it would be to alienate the support in the south given their antithetical goals. Moreover, the regime itself has tried to highlight these divisions by responding to demonstrations in the north and south quite differently, protecting the square in Sana'a on the one hand whilst crushing any attempt to dissent in Aden on the other.

Now how did the south react to developments in Sana'a? One of the problems with the southern movement is its fragmentary nature. You have the Yemeni Socialist Party, people in Dali who seem nostalgic of the former [inaudible] and Islamist segment in Abyan and also Hadhramout. Although since 2007 when the southern movement first appeared, these different actors have not been able to find a common voice. Faced with the youth movement initiative and its early success, they were forced into what I think was quite an opportunistic alliance with the youth on the basis of getting rid of President Saleh. This fits in well with the southern movement's long term

strategy of a unilateral succession just at the moment when Sana'a will be preoccupied with the elite rivalries of capturing the state.

However, the fragmentation of the southern movement, its lack of a clear strategy, the antithesis between the goals of the youth in Sana'a and its own ulterior goal of succession coupled with the very brutal response of the regime to the first demonstrations in Aden, are in my opinions the reason the youth movement is not quite as visibly in Aden compared to what is the case in Sana'a, Taiz and even [inaudible]. At the same time, in Hadhramout, where the crowd is occupying a large square in the city of [inaudible], we are seeing signs of a different kind of discourse taking place – one that is directed not only against the regime and its failings in the south, but also one that entertains the idea of an independent or at least quite separate from the core Hadhramout questioning whether Hadhramout has a future in the state together either with the north or the south.

Now how does the youth movement fit into this compartmentalized situation? I think that if the transitional plan that has been put forward by the movement were to be adopted and enough time is given for comprehensive and inclusive constitutional negotiations between the parties, there would be still an opportunity to address the grievances and demands of the south. Article 5 of the Declaration of Youth Movement demands a state and I quote: 'A transitional national board will be formed and include representatives of the youth in all political and national powers. The transitional national board will provide a solution for the southern issue that yields a fair and satisfactory response.'

I think that, more and more, the youth realise that the country cannot be run with the same institutional arrangements in place and more and more different political actors point toward the direction of the federal system, much like had originally agreed between the north and south in 1990. I also think that time is here of the essence and the absence of the president in Saudi Arabia has opened a window of opportunity that the international community has so far chosen to ignore. The more the political situation remains stagnant, the more opportunities given to centrifugal forces in different parts of the country to reassert their position and present us with irreversible facts on the ground. I think that the international community, either within the framework of the Friends of Yemen or the GCC [inaudible], ought to pay much more attention to the proposals to the Youth for the Revolution for Change which seem to address the challenges of the country in a more inclusive and pragmatic way. Thank you.

Kate Nevens:

Finally, we have Abdul. Abdulalem AlShamery is a British-Yemeni journalist and editor-in-chief of the *Yemeni Voice Magazine* which I believe may currently be looking for some funding. He also works with British-Yemeni nationals to support Yemeni NGOs on leadership and governance issues.

Abdulalem AlShamery:

Thanks so much. Thanks for the invite. I'm going to talk about the general mood of the youth in Yemen and I'm going to divide that into three sections. The happiness or the pride of [inaudible] of the achievement that they have done, the disappointment and the future that they are looking forward to. Yemenis have always been labelled as terrorists, as the home of al Qaeda. Again misled or mishandled by the Yemeni government or the regime. They have always said about us that we are the most illiterate nation in the region. We reject all sort of contacts with the international world.

Now, the youth have proved that wrong and they got together against the corruption. They got together and they said here we are. We are the young people. We want to change into a democratic country but we need your help. There is a kind of disappointment among the young people. They stood to be counted, but unfortunately nobody counted them. The opposition unfortunately ignored or totally ignored the youth and their demands. They said that we are with the youth, but unfortunately they are not because they are looking forward to power and they listen to what the international community are saying to them.

Basically, they have lost touch with the young people and their demands. Also, there is a disappointment with the international community. The international community, they didn't get together like they did with Egypt, Libya and Syria now. They left the young Yemenis alone, although they are asking for a peaceful country, a peaceful Yemen, but they are not supporting the young people. They are only supporting the regime and they are supporting the opposition unfortunately. That's a kind of a disappointment for the young people. Despite the disappointment, they are looking forward to a better future and they are opening up their hands for the international community to come and support them. If you want, they said to the international community, a peaceful country, if you want us to kick out al Qaeda out of our country, please come support us and help us and listen to our demands.

I was also asked to talk about British Yemenis and Britain – how can they play a future in the role of Yemen people? Before I go into the British-Yemenis, let me just try to describe the political structure of the British-Yemenis here in Britain. We have pro-regime and we have pro-Islah, which is the Islamic party. We have the southern movement and inside the southern movement they are divided into two separatist and those pro-unification [inaudible] with grievances. We got together three weeks ago and we were talking how can we support Yemen, how can British Yemenis play a good role in Yemen's future. We have a lot of Yemenis who are working in Britain in different kinds of jobs and they have different kinds of experience and skills and they want to implement it inside Yemen. They want to go back to Yemen and share the knowledge, share the experience and skills.

There must be some kind of connections. Connect youth to youth. Connect businesses to business in Yemen. Politicians – well, we haven't got any politicians, but those people with experience in politics, they should be connected with the emerging leadership in Yemen. This will never be happening unless we find some kind of support of the British government and here's the role of the British government. I think if you look at the role of the British government in supporting Yemen and then helping Yemen, let's talk about economically in a minute, but I think DFID and FCO, they are funding Yemen tremendously. But does it go to the development project or does it go to the regime itself to develop the regime and its system? I think this is what's happening at Yemen at the moment. The money goes into the regime and the money is spent by the regime in different ways and this is what happens. This is why the youth and the young people are coming out.

Britain also, they do fund projects and I was talking to the previous ambassador and they said instead of giving the money into the government budget we are putting it into the social fund something. I don't know what it's called in English, but [inaudible voice in audience]. Yes. And they are supervising the money and they are making sure the money is spent as they have asked for. This is what we need. We need from Britain to support the Yemeni diaspora, the British-Yemenis to go back to Yemen and share the knowledge and share the skills and try to bring Yemen out of this corruption and have a corruption-free country. This is what we are going to do and in about two weeks time, the emerging NGO coming out of this will be announced and will be launched to support the Yemen and will be working closely with NGOs in Yemen and if there is any kind of support that you can give, any support, any skills that you can share with the Yemenis, the door is open. Thank you.

Kate Nevens:

You might want to give the British government the right to reply on that. Now we'll talk questions. We have about 25 minutes left. There is a microphone going around. If you would like to ask a question, if you could put up your hand. Just let us know who you are, your name and your affiliation. Keep the questions short if that's OK.

Question One:

We get a lot of conflicting reports coming through daily about the youth in Yemen. They are very vocal. They are very proactive and it's nice to see that they are, but what if the government should suddenly changed. What place would the Yemeni youth have and do they have any mandate? Do they have any policies? Do they have any structure to which they could form or be part of the government and, if so, would they have the respect of other countries like Saudi Arabia, the US, the UN and so on?

Kate Nevens:

Saleem, would you like to talk a little bit about what they've put forwards in terms of transitional...

Saleem Haddad:

I think the youth have come out in response almost immediately to the GCC plan with their own proposal that I think is a lot more popular on the ground and a lot more reflective of the realities on the ground and I think, you know, a lot of analysts who understand Yemen, a lot of organizations working on Yemen think is probably a more pragmatic, realistic approach to solving the Yemeni problem so to speak than the GCC plan. So I think this is part of the struggle is realizing the actually the youth movement have, I mean, a better understanding than I do as someone who is not Yemeni, having worked in Yemen. They have a lot better understanding than international organizations and donors of the power dynamics in Yemen.

I think that they've succeeded in making that, putting that in to practice. The question is, how much? You know, the documents are there. They are online. They are a quick Google away. You know and the grassroots, the Yemeni youth movement is really promoting it, trying to get support for it, but it hasn't been taken up for whatever reason by the powers that be in Saudi or elsewhere.

Question Two:

I am the head of DFID which is the British government's department of international development in Yemen and yes, indeed, I'm going to do the very tedious thing of clarifying the British government's position so thank you. DFID last financial year spent £47 million in Yemen, on development, none of which went through the government at all. It goes in a variety of different routes – programmes, projects, some of them working with the government indeed to try to promote reform and influence reform. This year, as you can imagine, many of our programmes are on hold simply because we don't have interlocutors to work with. You don't have a safe environment. We can't place people in country.

What is still able to go on is indeed the Social Fund for Development which is a Yemeni organization which has a lot of credibility and respect across the country. It isn't seen a partisan in any way. We regularly talk to them and, in fact, recently met with them to check that they still are able to deliver about 80 percent of their programmes across the country which is quite remarkable given the amount of turmoil that there is across the country. We are also giving a lot of humanitarian support and that is going to UN agencies and to ICRC and to a group of NGOs because, I think the very first speaker made the point that Yemen is very quickly heading to economic collapse and an absolute humanitarian crisis. If people can't get fuel, they can't get water, they don't get food. From our point of view, this crisis is taking Yemen back years and years in terms of development.

I was very interested, Abdulalem – what you said that the diaspora got together. Clearly, there are different factions and you said you all talk to each other. That was a very tantalizing statement. I didn't quite get... you've obviously got some thoughts about putting people back in, but very interesting to hear maybe more about how that discussion played out. Was it very factionalized? Was it very polarized? Or actually, did people have some common consensus?

Abdulalem Alshamery:

When we had this meeting, we made sure that we have ten people from the southern parts and ten people from the northern parts of Yemen. We discussed how do we bring the community, well, how do we bring the country out of this crisis and, of course, there are some grievances amongst the southern Yemenis. We said, OK, can we just leave this aside and let's bring our experiences and skills and try to get all the Yemenis that are willing to go back to Yemen and support the country and we did get in touch with some

NGOs in Yemen and they welcomed the idea. But it is a time of is it safe for us to go at the moment? This is what is holding us back, but there are a lot of people, a lot of Yemenis, not only British-Yemenis, but we have Britains as well who are willing to help support the Yemen, who visited the Yemen on holiday or for business or for work and they are willing to go back to the Yemen and try to support the youth.

Question Three:

You've mentioned Saudi Arabia quite a lot and, with Saleh in Saudi Arabia at the moment, what kind of perspective does the youth movement have towards Saudi Arabia and how do you think that would play out in terms of any role for the youth in a future government?

Abubakr Al-Shamahi:

I think speaking to some of the youth activists, they acknowledge that at the end of the day Saudi Arabia has been, in the past, Yemen's big brother. It has got a lot of influence in Yemen through the amount of money that it spends in the country. They acknowledge that that is likely to carry on into the near future at least. In the long run, they would prefer I think Saudi's intervention to be a lot less than it is now, but I think, like I said with the new pragmatism that's coming about, they understand that that is one of the cards they are going to have to deal with and if they want to restructure the country now and reconstruct it after the protests and the economic situation has [inaudible], they are going to need Saudi support amongst other Gulf support as well.

Question Four:

Conventional wisdom has it that the military and the tribes are the two pillars of power in Yemen and Saleh historically was the only man who could reconcile the two. The question to you is: is the youth movement now united and powerful enough to be considered a third pillar as it were whose acceptance is necessary in order to rule Yemen and, if so, is there any man or political system that can actually unite the three? Thank you.

Saleem Haddad:

I think this idea that Saleh is the only man who can control Yemen has been proven to be false. Look at Yemen. It's anything if controlled. You're seeing a process of regional fragmentation that is not new to this year. It's been happening for years now. I think that there are a lot of political systems that

relate to what you've talked about federal systems, sort of decentralized systems that I think could provide a more equal balance of power. And I think the one thing that we've learnt through the Arab spring in general, and I think it applies particularly to Yemen, is this idea that a strong man really isn't the way to achieve stabilization or stability and that actually it's about building consensus and getting people involved and making sure that people are stakeholders in the political process. So I think that part of what the youth movement is trying to do is shift away from this way of thinking and towards this consensus-build politics.

Question Five:

I was in Yemen throughout March and into early April, but as soon as Saleh left, a huge fuel crisis immediately developed. So I have a very simple question: Who pays the bill? How did it – so to speak, overnight – develop to that extent? It seemed to me almost like a tap that was turned off after he left. How does that work?

Abubakr Al-Shamahi:

I think there are a lot of rumours going around in Yemen. I think you had various sides blaming each other with the kind of what's accepted now is that in Ma'rib there were the tribes that were in Ma'rib happened to basically destroy one of the oil, get in the way [inaudible] Sana'a. But when I was there, the main line I was hearing was; 'No, that tribe had done something like that in the past and that when they had done, they had admitted it and so it made no sense.' The tribe made an announcement and so it made no sense for them to do it this time because if it was us, we would say it was us. So it's very uncertain who it is, but something that [inaudible] pointed out was that when Saleh did leave, I think there was power in Sana'a for two days running and then it suddenly went off again.

There are things like when the ambassador or an American official came recently into Yemen, again power was more or less restored in Sana'a for a lot longer than it was before. When the UN happened to come, the same thing happened and there does seem to be a pattern. But I think, at the same time, there have been movements by anti-government tribes to get in the way, just to kind of create a situation where the government doesn't seem as stable as it was. But at the same time, I think it can work in the government's favour because I think a lot of people out there, even before the current crisis, were saying that this is all the fault of the opposition and the youth movement and this is not the change that we want.

Question Six:

Thank you all so much for your presentation. Abdulalem, he's a friend and I knew him for a while. If we had a [inaudible] person like Abdulalem in Yemen, probably the picture, it would be different, but unfortunately he is here in London. Abubakr, we are all with the change, but if we came back to the beginning of the youth movement, we will find there was movement who were positive in fight against corruption and to demand more freedom and the peaceful transfer of power, but the question how? The youth movement was supported by all and even welcomed by Mr President.

When we see the situation in Yemen, how we could recognize that the administration in Yemen for only six months as a civil movement while the tribe they are armed with the heavy weapons – probably you followed what was in the media. They are trying to destroy it and control many ministries. We saw probably the same situation in Taiz. Above all that, all of us, we follow the news, the situation when they are trying to kill Mr President in the mosque. An investigation is still going on to find who is behind. Unfortunately, the youth movement has changed from its main objects. The people in Yemen are suffering. There is no gas, no petrol, no electricity. Yemen faces a state of economic collapse.

Abubakr, you mentioned probably if I understand well, probably this kind of situation came by the government, but logically, this kind of situation is not, I mean, it's not for the benefit of the government at all. It somehow – I'll take it to another point – in somehow the administration give a great opportunity for al Qaeda to extend in Yemen. You can listen to the BBC4 report just 10 days ago about the danger of al Qaeda in Yemen after the Arab Spring. There was a programme – I'm not saying they are about to al Qaeda, but they create a great environment to al Qaeda to operate in Yemen. Yemen, we consider the democracy, in Yemen, it's a democracy country, but we are not combining the democracy in Yemen with the Denmark, with the UK. We are just in the beginning. I would direct your attention...

Kate Nevens:

If you could make this your final point.

Question Six (continued):

Miss Ashton said there is no democracy on the global or the national democracy is a trip evolved with time. What I'm trying to say now – dialogue

and only dialogue is the solution for Yemen. Thank you so much. Actually, I was [inaudible] for quite a long time because a short time . . .

Kate Nevens:

I'll try and sort of desegregate that into a couple of points. So we have economic collapse. We have are the youth moving away from their original objective? What is going to happen with al Qaeda. And is dialogue the solution and how will we get youth voices in the dialogue? Would anyone like to take any of those?

Abubakr Al-Shamahi:

Can I cut in again? You mention the economic problems. Like I said, I'm not saying that the government are entirely to blame for it and I think to a certain extent there are the tribes and things like that. But like I said, there is evidence. These things can't be taken as random events in terms of like I said the power cuts and things like that. Also, I think it works to the benefit of the government because state media is very, very influential in Yemen. I'll say for instance when you talk about the weapons of the government, the tribes were having – does that mean the protestors have weapons? For example, in April, I was on a march in the capital where 12 people died and I saw with my own eyes snipers shooting with central security forces next to them and ordering them around so I think to say that it's the fault of the tribes bringing in the weapons, at the end of the day, I did not see tribes shooting at protestors who were marching and chanting we will remain peaceful whilst being shot at.

And yet, to refer back to the economic problems and the control of state media, I think, for example, after that day, on a taxi on the way home, I was told by the taxi driver that, no, in fact, it was a mob that had been carrying AK-47s and weapons who had actually attacked state TV. I don't know if my eyes were lying, but the control of state media can be seen within a half-hour, an hour, that line can be accepted as fact. Just quickly when you talk about a democratic country – and obviously Yemen you know it's hilarious to compare it to a western democracy – but again state media, you've got newsreaders on state media crying and saying that American-Yemenis are phoning up and saying that Yemeni democracy is better than American democracy. If you are going to portray that line, then you've got to reign in your state media is all.

Kate Nevens:

I'd actually just like to take up a point on dialogue processes and Saleem's idea about progressive consensus. I mean, do you see the kind of dialogue processes that have been trying to happen in Yemen as useful to consensus building? Also, panellists, maybe a little bit about how the southerners might be involved in consensus building?

Saleem Haddad:

I think we need to move beyond these points that you are mentioning. Let's be realistic and let's call a spade, a spade here. You know, this reverting back to throwing the economic collapse – malnutrition rates were 50 percent before any of this happened. So it wasn't like this caused something that wasn't there already. Al Qaeda, again, this is a card that I think is a lot more complex and hides more than it reveals. About the national dialogue, you know, I mean, the national dialogue has been going on for years and years and it's produced no solutions. I was in Yemen in February and we were speaking to people who were very frustrated. This was before the protests sort of hit their tipping point and people were extremely frustrated with the national dialogue processes. We couldn't even, in some areas, use the term dialogue because people were so angry about it.

So I think, what the youth have been doing in practice, not just what they are proposing, but also what they are doing in practice on the ground is really moving the dialogue forward and they are really doing it from the bottom up which I think is new to Yemen, at least new to the Yemeni political system under Saleh.

Thanos Petouris:

Yes, I'm afraid what has characterized the Saleh regime is a total lack of political will to address all kinds of problems, all the way from al Qaeda to the southern issue. The southern movement did not appear overnight. There has been a long process – demonstrations, protests, quite peacefully actually since 2005, 2007. As far as I can understand from this very forum, they were branded by the speaker of the Yemeni Parliament as terrorists and al Qaeda so I was wondering how can one sit down on the same table and discuss with the government when from the beginning they are being seen as the enemy. I suppose this is where the youth comes in and right now it won't be an exaggeration to say that the youth movement is the only one that has political legitimacy in all quarters of the Yemeni population and society. Political

parties in Yemen have not functioned as proper political parties for decades. There hasn't been enough legitimate representation of the people. People who sit down in the national dialogue do not represent anyone apart from their own interests and themselves.

Question Seven:

I'm just wondering if one of you could maybe just touch on the role of women in the youth movement, specifically are the genders working together well? Are they involved in a lot of the work being done and how are they being viewed within it?

Saleem Haddad:

Yeah, I mean, that – and this is part of what I mean when I say progressive and I think you touched on it – is women, you know. Tawakkol Karman was the face of the revolution for really long time. They were really involved. They were out in the streets and you know attempts by the regime to sort of you know make sort of comments about women protesting and it being haram, you know there was a quick reaction against these sort of statements and that's great. I think what we need to be careful about is that in the transitional process, women are not side-lined and that's something that we've seen in past revolutions. We saw it in Algeria in the anti-colonial struggle and I think this is something that is key and worth keeping in mind. Now they are involved and they have a big role. Will they have a big role in the transitional process?

Kate Nevens:

Thank you. What I'm going to do is ask all of our panellists to have one or two last final words before we wrap up the session.

Thanos Petouris:

Well, I suppose what I wanted to say is that the youth movement does not hold a magic wand in the moment that they come to power or be part of a coalition, will be able to solve all problems and all issues in Yemen. I suppose it is important to bear in mind that at least they are shown to have the political will and the support of society to move forward and take Yemen to the 21st century and put on the side all these old divisions and the political arrangements between the tribes, the army and the political elite in Yemen. It doesn't happen over time, but I'm afraid that we're increasingly running out of

time in terms of the situation of the economy and the problems that the country is facing and I suppose the faster that the international community acts, the better will be for everybody.

Saleem Haddad:

I think, to sort of conclude in a very quick way, the youth movement has the potential to really emerge as a peaceful, progressive sort of force and I think it's the potential is still there sort of shape a political settlement that is based on this consensus-driven governance, civic democratic values and a strong drive to fight corruption and promote economic development, but I think there also needs to be a strong stance by the international community to support these initiatives because we are still seeing people killed in the streets. The revolution is not over and I mean the struggle is not over and I think there needs to be people held to account for the abuses that have taken place over the past six months.

Abubakr Al-Shamahi:

I think to reinforce what they've both said about the role of the international community. The youth movement in particular – I'm not talking about the opposition parties, the Ali Mohsin etcetera – I think they in particular need some form of international announcement made from America to give them their legitimacy and to make them have the sense that they are seen as actors in the region. But in terms of predicting for the future, I think like everything in Yemen, we don't know what's coming next. If you look at what's happened, the two major events in the protest movement were both surprises. Ali Mohsin's defection and injury to our dear leader. So I think whatever comes next, I think there will be a surprise in the next few weeks that we can't [inaudible] or see that happening.

Abdulalem Alshamery:

I think I would agree with my colleagues here. The defected army generals, politicians and ministers, they played a huge role in making this revolution the longest revolution in the Middle East. They unfortunately... as I said earlier, the youth stood up to be counted, but now the international community are only counting those people who defected from the ruling party. I think we need to listen to the demands of the youth for making this revolution successful in Yemen.

Kate Nevens:

Thank you very much.