Middle East and North Africa Programme: Yemen Forum Workshop Summary

After the National Dialogue: Where Next for Yemen’s New Politics?

March 2013
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is a summary of a workshop held in Egypt in March 2013, which brought youth activists and policymakers from Yemen together with international policymakers to explore the status of Yemen’s new politics and identify mechanisms for youth activists to take on greater leadership.

Stable perceptions of political actors

Perceptions of Western actors remain generally positive. Both European countries and the United Nations are perceived to play constructive roles in the transition process. In a breakout session, participants called for the United States to balance its focus on counter-terrorism with support for security sector reform and to disassociate its engagement in Yemen from American ties to Saudi Arabia. Some participants considered that Yemeni political elites are blocking progress in the transition due to personal interests and lack of capacity, while others disagreed with this perception. Iran is seen to be growing in influence by means of supplying funds and weaponry.

The national dialogue – set clear parameters

Many hopes are pinned on the national dialogue conference (NDC); however, participants expressed that precise objectives for the dialogue have not been agreed or communicated. Questions of representation of women and geographical diversity in the dialogue remain important and civil society can serve as a bridge between communities and the conference in Sana’a. It was emphasised that indicators for the dialogue’s success or failure should be stipulated, and alternative avenues to the dialogue such as economic reform, state-building, and local dialogues should be further explored. Clear and binding guarantees should be set that the recommendations which come out of the NDC will be implemented.

Yemen’s new politics – calls for institutionalisation, democratisation, and de-centralisation

Yemen’s politics continues to operate by means of personal relationships, patronage practices, and mobilization around prominent elite figures. Partly as a result, divides are occurring within the youth movement, southern movement, and the established political structures in Sana’a along geographical, sectarian, and political party lines. Participants repeatedly stressed the importance of shifting to a more institutionalised form of politics, in which political participation, aid delivery, and dialogue with external actors would occur through established and open, often legally codified, procedures.
This institutionalisation is a necessary component in dismantling the old regime, improving and democratising relations with international actors, and democratising internal political party structures. In addition, a number of participants recommended de-centralisation as a means to build political institutions across Yemen, deliver aid more widely, and promote a greater role for youth in Yemen’s politics.

Youth – from activists to leaders

Youth continue to be active in civil society, youth wings in political parties are growing, and new, youth-oriented political parties have been established. Youth activists aim to have both a more direct role in politics and a more significant overall impact on the progress of Yemen’s transition. Participants recommended a mixture of increased external support for youth capacity-building alongside a greater effort by youth to seize existing opportunities for gaining political and leadership experience. These opportunities include the available space for youth to monitor government conduct and expenditure, as well as to engage in local politics around the 2014 elections. International policymakers recommended that, when engaging with international actors, youth should prioritise the most important issues and make precise demands in order to deliver efficient and effective messages.

International engagement in Yemen – communicate and broaden reach

The full scope of international engagement in Yemen is not being adequately communicated to the Yemeni public, who associate international actors with security actions and elite politics and are less aware of international development assistance. International actors should support institution-building across Yemen as a means to transparent dialogue with stakeholders based both in and outside the capital. External state actors should improve coordination with each other and with international NGOs when working in Yemen. The Friends of Yemen process should be continued and modified to include representatives from civil society organisations (CSOs) and youth groups.

Action points

Key actions to take in the short term are:

- Agreeing clear objectives, indicators of success, and implementation mechanisms for the national dialogue;
• Youth and CSOs establishing monitoring and government accountability initiatives, with external support and engagement;

• Prioritising state-building and institutionalisation of politics; and

• International actors improving communication with the Yemeni public and broadening their reach outside the capital.
INTRODUCTION

In March 2013, the Chatham House Yemen Forum convened a workshop in Cairo, Egypt for Yemeni civil society activists, in association with Resonate! Yemen. Civil society participants were active in a variety of fields – including human rights, development, journalism and political activism – and came from different regions of Yemen, including Sana’a, Taiz, Hadramawt, and Aden.

The week of activities focused on bringing together Yemeni civil society activists in dialogue with Yemeni and international policymakers, but sessions were also held on stakeholder analysis and media engagement.

This paper summarizes the sessions held on the second day, when policymakers from a number of Western governments and international organizations participated in discussions with Yemeni activists and policymakers, with the aim of increasing mutual understanding of each group’s role in the transition process in Yemen, focusing on key mechanisms for civil society involvement. There were no designated panellists and participants were free to speak in English or Arabic, so as to enable a genuine exchange of perspectives and the full equality of all participants.

This was the third in a series of Yemen Forum workshops for civil society activists. The first two events were held in Egypt in October 2011 and Jordan in May 2012, and the summaries are available to download from the Chatham House website: Yemen: Strategies for Change – Playing the Policy Game (2011) and The Role of Youth Activists in Yemen’s Transition Process (2012).

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-mémoire to those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

The Chatham House Rule

‘When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.’
SESSION 1: PERCEPTIONS

During the first session, participants discussed their perceptions of various actors involved in Yemeni politics over the previous year. Small groups consisting of both policymakers and activists were asked to choose words to describe the role of key state actors, groups, and individuals. The descriptions below represent the consensus reached within the groups, although not necessarily the view of each workshop participant. Names of international actors were randomly selected for discussion during this exercise; not all actors in Yemen were considered.

Perceptions of international actors

Perceptions of Western governments were generally positive. Germany was noted for its part in sponsoring the national dialogue, and the United Kingdom for playing a prominent role in the Friends of Yemen process. The UK was also seen as a cautious observer in Yemen. Perceptions of regional actors were mixed. Participants considered that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) had provided a compromise solution in Yemen, though it had faced obstacles to implementing this solution. Iran was perceived to be growing in influence and was described as associated with weapons and money. Lastly, the UN was viewed positively and UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Jamal Benomar, was considered ‘patient’ and a problem-solver.

Perceptions of Yemeni actors

While during the Jordan workshop Yemen’s president, Abdo Rabbo Mansur Hadi was described as ‘the best of the worst,’ participants now had more positive views and described the president as a leader who is willing to be flexible. The other main actors in Sana’a continued to carry negative connotations, with some participants dissenting. For example, the General Party Congress (GPC) was seen as ‘inconsistent’ and operating by means of personalised politics; however, a number of participants disagreed with this characterisation. The family of Ali Abdullah Saleh, the former president, was seen as less powerful than in the past. Elite players such as General Ali Mohsen were described as ‘self-interested’ obstacles to change.

Perceptions were mixed among the participants regarding Yemeni actors outside of Sana’a. The southern movement were seen as sharing an objective but facing factionalisation, and the Houthis were seen as both ‘victims of oppression’ and a determined political force. Some participants disagreed with these characterisations. The youth movement was described
as active but less effective; however, one participated noted that it is more the case that other actors are side-lining the youth.
SESSION 2: ASSESSING THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE

Participants discussed the national dialogue conference (NDC), which was set to begin in Sana’a a week after the workshop. Objectives, potential obstacles to success, and prospects for realistic outcomes were considered. A number of recommendations for the dialogue emerged from the discussion; these are outlined below.

Prospects for what the dialogue can achieve

Some participants expressed that the dialogue’s main objective is to address broader issues, such as deciding Yemen’s regional structure and the question of a centralised versus de-centralised state. Others considered that the dialogue would be more effective in reaching consensus on local questions. Each perspective expressed that the dialogue is most likely to achieve its objectives based on either a national or a local focus.

It was noted that it was too early to evaluate the national dialogue’s achievements, though some participants highlighted that the process of organising the dialogue already indicates a success. One participant emphasised that the political debates encouraged by the discussion around the dialogue have themselves been a positive step. Participants explored the idea of representation in the dialogue, with some optimistic that youth, having been present in the dialogue’s planning, would continue to play an important role. One participant highlighted that women are unlikely to have much influence in the dialogue. Yemeni policymakers welcomed these assessments and called for guidance from the youth on how to ensure representativeness in the dialogue’s decision-making processes.

Potential obstacles to success

Participants discussed potential obstacles to the national dialogue’s success and noted three possible issues.

- **Undefined goals and unrealistic expectations.** Half of the participants felt that the goals of the national dialogue have not been well defined. It was also stated that traditional elites and their political parties lack clear goals for their participation in the NDC. Participants agreed that expectations for the NDC are too high: for example, questions on security and the economy cannot be adequately handled by the dialogue alone. A few participants expressed that the NDC’s objectives are in fact clear.
Governance, the question of a federal system, and the Sa’adah issue were listed as the key points for discussion.

- **Limited outreach and divided constituencies.** Confidence-building measures with the Southern Movement were not taken prior to the dialogue, and as a result the NDC faces a crisis of representation with regards to the south. Delegates from the south face opposition to their participation from their own constituencies. In addition, outreach to the south has been limited to urban elites. One participant placed the onus of responsibility on certain groups from the south for choosing not to participate in an opportunity for discussion.

- **Challenges to reaching consensus.** A number of participants stated that personalised politics may prevent political personalities from being willing to make necessary concessions in the NDC. While some delegates are concerned for their careers, others have ties to armed groups, and both impact delegates’ interests in the dialogue’s success.

**Recommendations**

- **State clear objectives.** Precise indicators are needed for what the outputs of the dialogue should be. Some participants stated that the goal should be to identify and address underlying problems, rather than creating a laundry list of the challenges Yemen faces.

- **Build trust and confidence.** Civil society should act as a bridge between local communities and the NDC. This can increase the representativeness of both the NDC and the future constitution, as well as build trust in the dialogue among constituencies, particularly in the south. Mobile technology and the media can support outreach by civil society and expand the dialogue’s discussions into a national debate. Confidence in the NDC can also be built by means of effective aid delivery by the Yemeni government.

- **Improve conference and voting procedure.** Voter registration procedures for the constitutional referendum should be clarified and communicated to the public, and special measures should be taken to ensure that women register. At the NDC, votes should
be confidential, and decisions reached among delegates should not be subject to veto.
SESSION 3: SCENARIOS FOR YEMEN AFTER THE DIALOGUE

This was a challenging discussion as the dominating concern for participants remained the national dialogue itself. Three avenues were considered as potential alternatives to the NDC in the medium to long term. Firstly, sub-national dialogues could be held by local leaders in governorates across Yemen to address political and economic issues on a community level.

Secondly, policymakers could move towards a focus on the pressing economic crisis. Both members of the policy community and the youth participants emphasized that the economic situation will reach crisis proportions by the end of the decade unless immediate measures are taken, no matter the outcomes of either the NDC or the 2014 elections.

Corruption will remain an endemic issue in Yemen, and a third alternative to the national dialogue could be to focus on combatting corruption and institution-building towards the creation of an effective state.

There was widespread agreement on the importance of guaranteeing implementation of the recommendations reached at the NDC. While some of the youth considered current guarantee measures to be insufficient, an international policymaker pointed to high levels of international scrutiny on Yemen and voiced an opinion that there was sure to be oversight of implementation as a result. It was recommended that youth stakeholders act as a pressure mechanism for implementation of the dialogue’s outputs as well.

Though it was stated that a number of international and Yemeni stakeholders currently see no alternative to the national dialogue, one participant expressed that the international community sees the NDC as only the beginning to a political solution for Yemen. This, the participant explained, is particularly the case given low levels of awareness in Yemen about the national dialogue and its aims. Participants also heard that external factors will play a continuing role in Yemen’s politics.

Lastly, the point was raised that no agreed indicators exist for when and if the national dialogue can be considered to have failed. International policymakers expressed interest in hearing from the Yemenis on ‘what the dialogue’s failure would look like’.
SESSION 4: CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

During the breakout sessions, participants discussed elements of Yemen’s politics in more depth with a particular focus on how certain policy areas might develop over the medium to long term. Each group was asked to reach consensus on two scenarios for 2015 or 2020 related to certain policy areas: an ideal and a likely scenario. Participants further discussed the mechanisms and actors which are important for achieving this scenario. Four focus groups addressed the following topics: dismantling the old regime, relations with regional and international stakeholders, a new generation in the south, and Yemen’s changing politics.

Dismantling the old regime

The following was outlined as an ideal scenario for the status in 2020 of Yemen’s politics with respect to dismantling the old regime: the political system operates through the power of institutions rather than individuals. Corruption is minimal and all domestic and external actors in Yemen exhibit high levels of transparency. Political parties are fewer in number and more accountable to the population. Notably, the decentralization of power empowers governorates across Yemen. This accompanies a greater sense of citizenship among all Yemenis.

In order for this scenario to be achieved, the group agreed that important roles would be played by the following actors: political party leaders, the business community, military leaders, tribal leaders, and women.

Recommendations

- Implement moves towards decentralization;
- Create an independent judiciary;
- Implement administrative government reform, including reform of the civil service;
- Reform the constitution;
- Improve law enforcement; and
- Improve budgetary oversight and transparency in the government.
Given current conditions, this breakout group also outlined the following as the most likely scenario for the status of the old regime in 2015. Political competition spurred by the national dialogue will have delivered some administrative government reform, but elements of power will remain in the hands of the following old regime figures: the president, tribes, army, leaders of traditional political parties, businessmen, and clerics. It was further expected that in 2015 some political parties will have merged and new coalitions formed. Figures in the private sector will have gained in political influence; however, reform will primarily take a superficial form. The recommendations listed above can contribute to averting this scenario.

**Relations with regional and international stakeholders**

The following was outlined as an ideal scenario for Yemen’s politics in 2020 with respect to its relations with regional and international stakeholders. Engagement with Yemen occurs through institutions, rather than through political elites. Institution-building supports transparent dialogue between external actors and Yemeni stakeholders based both in and outside the capital. As a result, the benefits of Yemen’s relations with international and regional stakeholders are felt equally across all governorates. These benefits include international pressure on the Yemeni government to address the economic and humanitarian situation, assistance with building the long-term capacity of the state, and investment in infrastructure and job creation. External state actors coordinate well with each other and with international NGOs when working in Yemen. Security continues to be a concern; however, the international community gives equal attention to promoting law enforcement as it does to counter-terrorism.

The group identified two primary means of moving towards the above scenario. Firstly, stakeholders should support the creation of civil society initiatives to monitor government transparency and economic performance. These initiatives would serve as accountability mechanisms to, among other things, monitor the allocation of international aid funds and pressure for the activation of the Executive Bureau. Secondly, the international community should continue the Friends of Yemen process and include representatives from civil society organisations and youth groups.

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1 Donor delivery reform was confirmed in the Mutual Accountability Framework (MAF) agreed by the government of Yemen and its development partners in September 2012. An independent Executive Bureau to oversee aid projects has been established for this purpose; however, there are on-going delays in activating this new body.
Further recommendations to policymakers

- Communicate, through open and official means, the full scope of international engagement in Yemen in order to raise public awareness of international development assistance;
- Maintain attention on government performance and the humanitarian situation even while the national dialogue is taking place;
- Improve support for police reform and assess the impact of current funding to the Ministry of Interior;
- Reduce the extent of military operations;
- Encourage aid bodies to increase feedback mechanisms for project beneficiaries and to increase the transparency of spending;
- Target development assistance to infrastructure, particularly electricity, and anti-corruption measures;
- Encourage closer ties between Yemen and the GCC; and
- Increase engagement with and support for Yemeni private sector companies.

A new generation in the south

The following was outlined as an ideal scenario for the status in 2015 of Yemen’s politics with respect to youth in the south. Youth play a greater role in both decision-making and monitoring of the government within a newly federalised southern governorate. Civil society organisations have gained in strength, and youth have become more prominent actors in political parties. A southern regional parliament includes youth representatives (over the age of 25), and youth issues are well represented in this parliament. Youth issues are further represented in the capital by southern representatives in the national parliament.

A number of actors were established as important to the process of achieving this scenario. These included members of the southern youth movement (activists, political party members, and journalists), the Herak movement, trade unions, the UN and other international actors, and NGOs.

While some of the youth expressed that civil society activists were in need of further training in order for this ideal scenario to be reached, participants also considered that youth can build their capacity through existing opportunities for activism.
Recommendations

- Implement a political decision on a federal state system;
- The international community could provide training and funding for implementing a federal system;
- Youth should conduct awareness raising campaigns to repeal legal restrictions on civil society activity, including targeted advocacy with individuals blocking this reform;
- Youth should use the government in Sana’a as a means to pressure regional governments for reform; and
- The international community should publicly engage with pro-reform figures in politics and civil society.

Changing politics

The following was outlined as an ideal scenario for the status in 2015 of Yemen’s political party system. Parties are governed in a democratic manner and operate with transparency, accountability, and regular transitions of power. Party members are geographically diverse and discrimination in internal party activities is minimal. Political party leaders are elected, not appointed, and new legislation regulates party leadership and terms of office. Women’s participation in political parties has increased. In addition, political parties have cultivated a better relationship with voters and espouse clear platforms rather than basing their reputations in prominent personalities. In 2015, political parties are generally stronger, more effective, and partner with civil society.

Recommendations for democratising political party conduct

- Activate a party monitoring commission in order to regulate internal party elections;
- Ensure that political parties comply with their stated platforms;
- Establish clear organisational structures that set out relations between the party’s leaders and its grassroots members;
- Enact new legislation to impose term limits on party leadership; and
- Increase political and civic awareness among constituencies.

Recommendations for enabling a greater role for women in political parties

- Enact a 30% quota for female representatives in party lists;
• Hold meetings on women’s political participation with decision-makers such as religious scholars and sheikhs;
• Improve social perceptions of women by supporting strong female public figures and calling attention to media portrayals of women;
• Train and accredit women for political participation; and
• Raise awareness on the legal rights of women.
SESSION 6: THE ROLE OF YOUTH – FROM ACTIVISTS TO LEADERS

Progress in 2012

Participants had mixed assessments of the progress that youth activists have made over the last year. Few youth believed that progress had been made in their aim to achieve greater transparency from the government. Most stated that youth participation in the national dialogue process had not increased; however, approximately half expressed that communication to the youth about the dialogue had improved. In addition, a third of participants voiced that the international community had increased its support to youth outside of Sana’a. One participant summed up the general sentiment and stated that recently, progress has been made in the role of youth in Yemen’s politics; however, the youth movement continues to aim for a more pivotal impact.

Current dynamics of youth activism

It was widely considered that youth activism in Yemen is facing divisions along regional, sectarian, and other factional lines. Youth activists are frustrated at the slow progress of the transition and with their own ability to influence this process. One participant stated that youth are an active force in civil society but remain largely absent from official politics. There was disagreement on whether youth elements in political parties are positive or negative forces in the transition. Some participants pointed to youth wings in political parties and new, youth-oriented parties as a step in the right direction, though one participant expressed that these youth wings are ineffective. Participants heard that policymakers in Yemen have begun to use youth as a card to play in their rhetoric, though the Yemeni policymakers present at the meeting expressed strong support for greater youth participation and capacity-building. It was emphasised that youth are choosing not to join violent groups.

Ways for youth to transition to decision-making roles

Participants recommended a mixture of increased external support for youth capacity-building, alongside a greater effort by youth to seize existing opportunities for gaining political and leadership experience. These opportunities include the available space for youth to serve as political ‘watchdogs’. Youth can monitor progress on action points in the transition process, and one way that activists can hold the government to account is by reporting the findings from their monitoring to the international community and the Friends of Yemen countries in particular. Youth were particularly
interested in monitoring government conduct with respect to the Mutual Accountability Framework, such as in the implementation of presidential decrees, and government expenditure, particularly on the national dialogue conference. International policymakers recommended that, when engaging with international stakeholders, the youth prioritise the most important issues and make precise demands in order to deliver efficient and effective messages.

It was recommended that youth use every means possible to gain decision-making experience, and the local elections scheduled for 2014 were presented as a good opportunity for building political skills. In addition, Yemeni policymakers welcomed a youth role in reviewing draft legislation.

Youth participants stated their continuing need for material support and training for them to carry out these initiatives. They further noted the benefits of existing leadership programmes run by international embassies in Yemen and expressed their support for an increase in such programmes.

**Recommendations**

- Build stronger relationships between youth organisations across governorates;
- Increase youth access to media;
- Activists should make use of new Freedom of Information legislation;
- Youth to improve engagement with policymakers by developing expertise and becoming a resource on specific issues;
- Political parties should enact quotas for youth representation, and ensure that youth wings of parties aren’t excluded from decision-making;
- Youth can influence the Friends of Yemen (FOY) by engaging with policymakers and the international community in the month before each FOY meeting;
- Youth to increase their interaction with Jamal Benomar’s office to exert pressure during the national dialogue; and
- Youth should be pro-active in contacting and lobbying the international community.
ABOUT THE YEMEN FORUM
The Yemen Forum is a specialist global network that pursues policy solutions for Yemen. The collective knowledge and influence of Yemen Forum members raise awareness, share expertise and support governments in forming policies that directly address the causes of conflict, poverty and poor governance in Yemen. The current phase of the project has two major strands: political economy analysis, and the politics of inclusion and legitimacy.

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ABOUT THE MENA PROGRAMME
The Middle East and North Africa Programme, headed by Dr Claire Spencer, undertakes high-profile research and projects on political, economic and security issues affecting the Middle East and North Africa. To complement our research, the MENA Programme runs a variety of discussion groups, roundtable meetings, workshops and public events which seek to inform and broaden current debates about the region and about UK and international policy. We also produce a range of publicly available reports, books and papers.

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