Yemen Conundrum

Sajid Aziz

It all started in January 2011 with protests and demonstrations, organized predominantly by youth to demand civic rights and the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had been ruling Yemen for far too long, since 1978. 'Change Square' was adorned outside Sana University; youth in Ta'iz set up a 'Martyr Square' outside their university[1], both inspired by and patterned on the model of movements sweeping Egypt and Tunisia.[2] 'The night to come to an end' was a conspicuous slogan emblazoned on placards and entrances to these squares.[3]

Saleh, who was notorious for courting external powers and had turned the knack of 'divide and rule' into a sophisticated art which he knew like the back of his hand, refused to comply with the genuine political demands, unleashing the wrath of his security forces on the peaceful protesters. As the peaceful protests grew, they were joined by a whole slew of groups and classes: aggrieved tribes disenfranchised Houthis, Hirak (Southern Movement), civil society activists and youth.[4] Government responded with brute force. 'Martyr Square,' which had then become 'Freedom Square,' was burned in Ta'iz. More than fifty protesters were mowed down in Sana in March 2011.[5] The ensuing anarchy was soon turning the movement that was to enkindle a new dawn into a long night of chaos. Houthi took control of Saa'da in north Yemen and made the government forces and its aides to flee; while Islamists took charge of the southern town of Jaar. Moreover, infighting within the ruling elite further deteriorated the precarious security situation. Sana which had earlier hosted peaceful protesters, marching and rallying their demands, was turned into a war zone where Republican Guard headed by Ahmed, Saleh's son, and other government forces loyal to Saleh battled Hashid tribe. Saleh himself was wounded and later airlifted to Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, the people of Yemen took a heavy toll. The lull that the GCC-brokered 'peace' deal brought was merely a prelude to a more macabre and grotesque civil war. As the transition government of Hadi failed to live up to the promises it had committed itself during the negotiations, people again took to the streets. Houthi after routing their rivals in north, closed in on Sana, capital of Yemen, practically controlling it but in name only. As public support for the transition government plummeted, further undermining the credibility of the government, Houthi militias took control of Sana.

Hadi fled to Aden in south Yemen. The southern thrust of Houthi ultimately made him to seek refuge in Saudi Arabia. The neighboring kingdom of Yemen, Saudi Arabia, reacted to this situation by initiating an orgy of aerial strikes, what it initially dubbed, 'Operation Decisive Storm'.[6]

As this article is being written, a number of things are happening. Saudi Arabia continues to pound Houthis with aerial strikes and there are even claims of cluster bombs being used by it. But Houthis' juggernaut refuses to relent, AQAP (al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula) has found germane ground to expand its tentacles in southern Yemen by playing upon the local grievances and exploiting the sectarian card.

Many theoretical frameworks exist to study civil wars and explain secessionist movements. This paper invokes relevant theories to properly conceptualize the Yemen imbroglio. Karl Deutsch's four-cell matrix typology theory on patterns of political integration helps us to understand the civil war of 1994 between north and south Yemen and the continuous fragility of the Yemeni state. On the other hand, French Middle East expert Pierre Rondot's distinction between the *pays legal* (country legal) and the *pays re'el* (country real) illuminates our understanding of the GCC-sponsored negotiations to end the conflict in Yemen. In sections where theoritical framework does not suffice, historical record is relied upon to understand the issues involved. The paper attempts to explain how a peaceful movement which started with non-violent protests ended with a brutal civil war that continues and the subsequent rise of Houthis and their control over Yemen. In addition, the role of regional and international forces/actors is discussed, specifically the part played by GCC in negotiations and the motives behind the Saudi airstrikes against Yemen.

Following key questions are explored in this study:

Key Questions

- Who are Houthis and how did they become the dominant power in Yemen?
- What factors led to internal decay in Yemen and the subsequent weakening of the state and its shrinking monopoly on violence?
- Why did GCC-sponsored negotiations fail?
- What motives do Saudi aerial strikes serve?
- What explains the eclectic nature of non-violent protests in Yemen?

The core arguments of this study are that Houthis are a product of internal political dynamics of Yemen and the conventional notion that they are an Iranian-sponsored militia is naively simplistic, if not totally false. This paper argues Zaydi Houthis, not unlike other marginalized groups, tribes and sects, had been forced politically and religiously on the periphery of the power structure. Their movement, in late 1980s and early 1990s, to reassert their political power and reclaim their religious turf culminated in a war against the government of Saleh. The government forces with the help of Saudi Arabia defeated the Houthis. Moreover this paper claims the GCC-sponsored negotiations were a sham and their failure was inevitable and subsequent Saudi aerial strikes were military means to weaken the forces that had challenged the status quo in Yemen.

A Story of Independence and a Civil War

Prior to the union of south and north Yemen in 1990, Yemen had been last united centuries before under the leadership of Zaydi Shia imams. It was based on both 'tribal loyalty and peasant acquiescence'.[7] South Yemen broke away from the United Yemen in 1728. By 1839 Great Britain had taken over south Yemen , while the sagged and limping 'sick man of Europe,' Ottoman Empire, appropriated to itself north Yemen, only to relinquish it after having received a scathing drubbing in WWI.[8] Power in north Yemen reverted back to the imamate of the Hamid ad-Din. And it remained under them till 1962 when civil war erupted in north Yemen between Republicans led by al-Sallal, chief of the bodyguard and key military official, supported by Nasser of Egypt and nationalist military officers and royalists supported by Saudi Arabia in cahoots with Great Britain, who desired the restoration of Zaydi imamate. Saudi Arabia feared the glimmerings of nationalist forces in its backyard, which could possibly become a source of instability for it. Great Britain used south Yemen as a base for Algerian and Belgian mercenaries to undermine the Republicans in north, which could become a source of impetus for the forces fighting for independence in south Yemen against British colonialism.[9] South Yemen had great strategic value for Britain; it gave access to Indian Ocean via Suez Canal. The clumsy nationalists, predominantly 'Nasserites' in south Yemeni army, invited Egypt to intervene on their behalf. Egypt sent an expeditionary force of 20,000, supported by both China and Soviet Union.[10] The ensuing civil war between the Republicans and Royalists was gory as it resulted into the death of more than a hundred thousand persons. Egypt lost nearly 15,000 soldiers and

twice that number was wounded. The demoralization that set in within Egyptian forces as a result partially contributed to its rout by Israel in the Six-Day-War in 1967. The civil war came to an end in a negotiated compromise in late 60s, with no winner.

Ali Abdullah Saleh became the President of north Yemen in 1978; prior to that he had been appointed as a military governor in Ta'iz during the presidency of the Ahmed bin Hussein al- Ghashmi. After the assassination of Ghashmi, Saleh was first appointed as a member of the four-man provisional presidency council, ultimately 'elected' by the parliament to become the president of north Yemen. After 1990, he continued to rule United Yemen, brought about as a result of the merger between north and south Yemen; till he was ousted by a GCC-initiative in 2011. It is to be noted parenthetically that north Yemen had got independence in 1967 and functioned as an independent state for over two decades.

Civil War Between North and South Yemen

United Yemen came into being in May, 1990 as a result of the merger between south and north Yemen. In less than five years a civil war erupted, between them, in 1994. What were the causes of this war? Karl Deutsch's theory of 'four-cell matrix typology' on patterns of political integration helps us to understand the viability and failure of different types of associations of political communities. His distinction of amalgamation and integration conceptually explain the durability of some political associations and the failure of others. Amalgamation is just the formal merger of the independent units, whereas integration creates a 'sense of community and of institutions and practices'[11] which develops to the level of dependable expectations in which peaceful changes are assured. Though north and south Yemen amalgamated when they merged together in 1990, but they never built up on that to generate a greater level of integration. This not only explains the civil war of Yemen of 1990s, but it also gives sufficient insight into the reemergence of the Hirak (Southern Movement) in south Yemen. Both sides thwarted plans that called for development of national political and military forces: unifying the militaries, creating a national economy and promoting a single administrative structure.

Besides this theoretical approach, a deeper historical approach would help us understand the role of Saleh government that did not help the matters. The

centralized political and administrative structure of the United Yemen, in which power was concentrated in few hands of northern elite and through them to the tribal confederation affiliated to them. This created resentment and a sense of alienation in south Yemen. South Yemen had been a more successful story[12] under Socialists than north Yemen prior to their merger. It had dispensed with its tribal structure to an extent, and helped create a robust middle class inclined toward non-tribal thinking[13]; whereas, north Yemen tended to be wallowing in a tribal past where loyalties did not transcend tribal confederations and monetary incentives. The 'ill-conceived' unification was fraying at the end by 1994.[14] A short but a brutal civil war ensued. It just lasted for over a month in which north Yemen brutally crushed the secessionist forces in south. Saleh's army supported and emboldened by the tribal Hashid confederation and Islamist paramilitaries defeated the army of former PDRY (People's Democratic Republic of Yemen).[15] South was not only militarily crushed but also economically emasculated when vast plots of private and public property were expropriated for northern elite. Revenue generated from oil sales too found its way in north.[16] A society (north Yemen) which had weaned away from its tribal past reverted back to it, thanks to the heavy-handed rule of the northern elite. By using Jihadist mercenaries for petty political gains, the government created conducive ground for Islamist and Jihadist forces to take root in south Yemen, which would morph into AQAP (al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula). Moreover, the drubbing of Southern Movement further entrenched the political economy of corruption, barring long-term solutions to political and economic issues. The tangent between government patronage and regional/tribal loyalty, also became a source of resentment and alienation for governorates (regional unit/provinces), which would find expression in the protests of 2011.

Rise Of Houthi: Odyssey from Saada to Sana

Houthi tribes are Zaydi Shiites. Zaydis, partisans of Zayd, grandson of Imam Hussein who is regarded as the founder of the sect, believe in five imams; unlike Ismailies and Twelvers, who believe in seven and twelve imams respectively.[17] Moreover, they do not adhere to the concept of *taqiyah* (simulation) prevalent in the mainstream Shiites groups.[18] Houthis are similar to Iran in their polemics and political rhetoric rather than in their religious ideology. Rise of Houthi is no doubt a manifestation of a revitalized Zaydi movement but an approach focusing on a single factor ignoring other variables would not grasp the complexity of the situation in Yemen. There are other potent factors that have more to do with politics of

disenfranchisement, economics of exclusion and follies of a government that pursued a policy of pitting one rival against another to perpetuate its rule.[19]

Saa'da in north Yemen, in close proximity to Saudi Arabia, is the stronghold of the Houthi rebels.[20] It had been the last bastion for Royalists during the civil war (1960s) in north Yemen. It also witnessed the intermittent war that raged on for six years (2004-10) between Houthi and forces of Saleh, a self-proclaimed Zaydi.[21] Saleh's ascendance to power coincided with the rise of neo-Salafi Wahabism. He deliberately patronized such groups in cahoots with the family of Saud to weaken the opposition and strengthen his government by courting regional forces. Salafist institutes in Dammaj in northwest Yemen proselytized their religious ideology, later expanding into south Yemeni cities of Aden and Ta'iz.[22] Their anti-Shia streak was an open secret. Politically disenfranchised Houthi watched this development carefully as their religious turf too was being encroached upon.

It was in this backdrop that Ansar Allah, *partisans of Allah*, also known as Houthi, revitalized the Zaydi faith to confront the creeping tentacles of neo-Salafism in their turf. Houthi movement began as a 'faction within the youth offshoot of Al-Haq part'.[23] Al-Haq was a political party, predominantly consisting of Zaydi Shiites, formed to contest the elections of 1993 in United Yemen. Hussein Badr al-Deen al-Houthi joined its youth wing, Al-Shabbab al-Moumineen or the 'Believing Youth,' a movement focusing on cultural activities that asserted the distinct identity of Zaydi Shiites. Hussein al-Houthi got elected to legislative assembly in 1993 and remained there till 1997 when he resigned.[24] After spending a few years abroad, he returned to Yemen and indulged in anti-establishment rhetoric and polemics. He opposed Saleh's government over a whole spectrum of issues, ranging from a political economy of corruption that excluded Houthis, cultural and religious oppression in the form of the mushrooming neo-Salafism to Saleh's support of America in 'war on terror,' Hussein subsequently fled to Marran in central Saa'da and started an armed struggle against the government. Though he got killed in 2004[25], the war raged on for six long years. Saudi Arabia gave its full support to Saleh regime, even launching 'Operation Scorched Earth' in 2009 to pound Houthi hideouts in its aerial strikes. It may be mentioned that Saudi Arabia had supported the Zaydi imamate during the civil war in north Yemen against the Republicans. Saudi Arabia would in fact prefer a government in its backyard, which is at its beck and call. This war also led to the *tribalization* of the civil war in which Hashid, a tribal confederation, fought on the side of government forces, whereas Bakil tribes, rivals of Hashid, stoutly fought on

the side of Houthis.[26] Saleh aptly once said, 'ruling Yemen is like dancing on the heads of snakes'.[27] Not unlike south Yemen, Saleh failed to resolve the genuine grievances of the Houthis, who would come to haunt him in future. Late Fred Halladay, while discussing foreign policy under Saleh, had this to say, 'Foreign policy under Saleh consisted of mobilizing external backing for the president's rule against the numerous fissiparous forces that continued to operate within the united country, while preventing outside support for his rivals when possible'.[28]

The war between the Houthis and government forces ended in a Qatar-mediated peace agreement in 2010, but Houthis bided their time to strike at the first opportunity, which was provided to them by the protest movements and the ensuing chaos. As Saleh was forced to vacate the president house in a GCC-sponsored agreement in November 2011[29], his successor Mansour Hadi failed to establish any credibility for his government during the two-year transition period. The interim government of Hadi came about as a result of GCC-sponsored peace negotiations. The infighting and defections within the government, 'tribalization of the civil war,' perennial protests putting a heavy dent on the credibility of the interim regime and other fissiparous forces founding a niche in these tumultuous times to rally their demands, combined to toll the death knell for the Hadi government and heralded the rise of Houthis.

Houthis closed in near Sana in September 2014 and succeeded in controlling the capital within months. Houthis juggernaut advanced from their base in Saa'da near Saudi Arabian border in north, snaking and trudging its way through Zaydi strongholds in Amran into Sana. Its insatiable land-grabbing spree pushed it to march onward to Shafi-majority areas of Hudayda on the Red Rea coast and Ibb in the mountainous midlands in south.[30]

GCC-Brokered 'Peace' Negotiations

The protest movements that started in January 2011 not only drew disparate groups and classes with their own demands to jump on the bandwagon of the protests, but also brought to the surface the tension which had been brewing in the elite clique. Saleh's attempts to abrogate the clauses of the constitution that curtailed his power and the grooming of his son, Ahmed, Chief of the Republican guard, to succeed him, became a source of permanent schism between him and his allies. With increasing protests grew the harshness of the government forces:

'Freedom Square' outside Ta'iz university was gutted down; 10 protesters were mowed down in early February 2011; on February 16th riot police killed two demonstrators in Aden; and on March 18, snipers carried out a macabre act of massacre by killing 52 protestors in Sana square. Public support for the government plummeted and his once-staunch supporters started to abandon him. Sunni clerics distanced themselves from the government; the family of al-Ahmars, leaders of the Hashid tribal confederation, who had stood by Saleh through thick and thin, threw their support behind the protesters after the March massacre.[31] The last straw that broke the back of camel came in the form of General Ali Muhsin's defection. Ali Muhsin, an influential military commander who had been an ally of Saleh for over three decades, renounced his support for the government. Military officers loyal to him even provided a protective ring to protesters outside Sana University. Hasaba, a stronghold of the Hashid tribe, became a literal war zone. Tensions that had been growing for over two months, climaxed in the chaos of 23 May, in which tribes battled government forces. Fighting raged on for two weeks, resulting in the death of 130 people.[32] Saleh too was injured and later airlifted to Saudi Arabia. It was in this background in which government's monopoly over violence had considerably weakened and the ensuing chaos, civil war and political vacuum that resulted from it partly explains the rise of Houthis in north and AQAP and Hirak (Southern Movement) in south. The latter too operate geographically from south Yemen but it would be wrong to lump the two together ideologically.

After much blood had been spilt and Yemen had been put on a 'knife's edge[33],' GCC-initiative extracted a reluctant resignation from Saleh in late 2011 in lieu of immunity from public prosecution and retaining his chairmanship over General People's Congress, the-then ruling party.[34] A single-candidate referendum in 2012 put Mansour Hadi, Saleh's vice-president, on the governing seat of a two-year transition government made up of the ruling party and Islah, the main opposition party, to be followed by a NDC (National Dialogue Conference) which was purportedly an inclusive forum with disparate stakeholders representing their respective constituencies. National Dialogue Conference apologized to south Yemen for the wrongs and injustice committed in the past. Moreover, assurances were promised to Houthi rebels that their cultural, political and economic oppression would be addressed.

But the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) initiative was fraying at the end even before the transition/interim government had completed its stipulated time-period. The reasons lay in the flawed framework of the 'peace' agreement, which shrewdly aimed at the survival of the ruling clique and to simultaneously 'demobilize the social and political forces that demanded structural changes'.[35] The interim government was reflective of this, since it was stipulated in the GCC-sponsored accord that only political parties could take part in the transition government; this clause subtly scuttled the possibility of Houthis and Hirak in the interim government. The interim government consisting of ruling party and main opposition parties, predominantly of Islah, was a quintessential case of old wine in new bottle. Islah party, a mélange of Muslim Brotherhood, Islamists and tribes, was founded by Abdal-Majid al-Zindani and the late Sheikh of the Hashid confederation and long-time speaker of parliament, Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar. Both of them were once staunch supporters of Saleh administration.[36] To create greater moral justification for Houthis, Islah was given the control and governship of key governorates in north Yemen. Rather than a peace pact, guaranteeing a non-violent transition of power and ensuring durable peace, GCC-initiative was a still-born attempt to demobilize the social and political forces yearning for greater participation and structural changes. It was an 'Elite Pact' that aimed at restoring the status quo ante.[37]

Pierre Rondot's distinction between the *pays legal* and *pays reel*[38] explains the conceptual understanding of the GCC-sponsored negotiations. The latter concept demands a deeper examination of factors other than legal. In the Yemeni case, an approach was needed during the negotiations that appreciated and took into account the changed political culture, the economy of exclusion and discredited political elite that continued to cling to power. In short, the negotiations under aegis of GCC did not factor in the emerging power centres which would demonstrate their power in subsequent months in the form of Houthis and Hirak.

In addition to the flawed framework, the policies of the transition government in face of the precariously fluid situation failed. The interim neither had an inclusive justice system nor did it renounce the policies of political exclusion. Politicians and military leaders accused of human rights violations in south Yemen and Saa'da were not held accountable. Similarly the calls for reparation by south Yemen went unheeded. On the head of it was the economic crunch. Unemployment rate stood at 45% in 2009; by the time Hadi ascended to power it had risen to over 55%. The

World Bank, a party to the GCC-initiative, did not help the matters either by making the interim government to stop fuel subsidies, important both to farming and transport, two main sources of income for the people of Yemen. As the transition process lingered, economic crunch deepened and political landscape worsened, interim government lost all credibility. The 'Bread and Butter' protests in the wake of the suspension of fuel subsidies paved the way of the 'National Peace and Partnership Agreement' signed by President Hadi, Houthis and other political parties on 21 September, 2011, which called for an inclusive and non-partisan technocratic government. But it came to nothing as Galaladdin bin Omar who had replaced Jamal Benomar as the special representative of UN to Yemen, said,' Transition government is a mission rather than a time period.' But the 'mission' which had a time period then and did not have one now, soon collapsed. This coincides with takeover of Yemen by Houthi and their thrust onward to south, while AQAP took over the governorates of Jaar and Zinjibar.

To halt the onward thrust of Houthis, Saudi Arabia, on behalf of Hadi government and on his 'request' launched 'Operation Decisive Storm' on March 25, 2015. By April 21, 2015 it had transmogrified into 'Operation Restore Hope[39]'- resorting to aerial strikes, further deteriorating the fragile security situation and wreaking havoc on the civilian population.

There are multiple explanations for Saudi actions, each possessing a grain of truth. For Saudi Arabia, the success of the southward thrust of Houthis means the latter's control over port of Aden and Bab al-Mandab strait which serves as a conduit for the trade of world's 5% oil.[40] In addition, it links Arabian Peninsula to Horn of Africa and via Suez Canal to Mediterrean Sea. For others, this military campaign is aimed at its ideological rival,[41] Iran, which has watched its influence rise ever since American invasion of Iraq in 2003. It is also seen as an attempt by Saudi King Salman to 'demonstrate his independence from US and to prove his country's military superiority in the region as a complement to its long-standing economic strength'.[42]

But of all the reasons and explanations the most plausible seems to be that Saudi aerial strikes are a part of its strategy to scuttle the political movement[43] that envisaged a Yemen with functional democracy, which is less prone to foreign influence, and a federated state with an establishment of an inclusive system. Moreover, the rise of Houthis, a corollary of the revitalized Zaydi cultural

movement, put a severe dent to the mushrooming of neo-Salafi trend sponsored by Saudi Arabia for over decades. An 'independent' and democratic Yemen in its backyard, not at its beck and call, is too bitter a pill for Saudi Arabia to swallow.

It might be mentioned that the role of foreign powers generally and America specifically has been disastrous vis-à-vis Yemen. the continuous channelizing of dollars to help prop up an unpopular government which had been hand in glove with its northern neighbor in introducing and expanding neo-Salafi Wahabism trend in Yemen, USA inadvertently (or otherwise?) helped create germane ground for AQAP to set its roots in Arabian Peninsula. This Frankensteinian monster first reared its head when USS Cole was attacked in Aden in 2000. Then there was the case of underwear suicide bomber, Umar Farouk Abdal-Mutailab, a product of al-Iman University run by al-Zindani, leader of Islah and once a staunch ally of Saleh. This prompted America to form 'Friends of Yemen' coalition to help 'stabilize' Yemen.

American strategy of pounding al-Qaeda hideouts with drone strikes in southern Yemen has, besides killing a few al-Qaeda leaders, taken a heavy toll on civilians. They also became a source of resentment in south against the government which was seen to be complicit in killing civilians. In May 2010, an American drone attack killed Tahir al-Shabwani, the deputy of the Marib governorate, an oil-producing region in south Yemen which had long been neglected by the central government. He was said to be meeting al-Qaeda members. His killing angered his tribe, Abeida, which battled the government forces. But the most flagrant example of the havoc that the drone strikes were wreaking on the civilian population emerged in the village of Al-Majalah in southern Yemen when Tomahawk cruise missiles rained death on the inhabitants of the village. Pictures released by Amnesty International showed gutted houses along with a cluster bomb and a propulsion unit from a Tomahawk missile. An independent investigation by the Yemeni parliament came out with the findings that fourteen al-Qaeda members were killed along with forty-one civilians, including 23 children.

Conclusion

Lara Aryani, writing in Jadaliyya an e-zine (online magazine), succinctly explained the Yemen crisis, "The humanitarian crisis that exists today was not borne out of the military campaign, but rather out of an economic and political regime that Saleh

created, Saudi Arabia and United states sponsored, Hadi perpetuated and the Houthis exacerbated. As always, the price of power will be paid by the people, with their hopes and their lives."

The people of Yemen are paying price of this war as the Geneva Conference on Yemen of July 19, 2015 failed to produce any tangible results, flunking in its task to bring about a negotiated settlement between the warring parties. While Mansour Hadi, self-exiled leader of the deposed government in Yemen, insists on the implementation of the UN Security Council's Resolution 2216, which calls for the withdrawal of Houthi rebels from all cities and the concomitant restoration of the deposed regime led by Hadi. Houthis regard their control over large swaths of territory as 'positioning' that could be helpful to them on negotiating table. Meanwhile, the war is ripping apart the social fabric of the society, exacerbating the sectarian tension between Zaydi Shi'ites and Shafi (sunni) majority, and a looming economic crisis seems to make the matters worse. According to latest UN reports, Yemen is half food-insecure due to the naval blockade by the US-supported Saudi-led coalition. Yemen nearly imports 90 of its food items.

What started as a peaceful movement drawing a number of players to demand a political change has now turned into a horrifying civil war, which unfortunately seems to continue interminably. The only hope lies in a multi-pronged approach that aims to create a semblance of political stability and religious harmony by addressing the genuine grievances of the long-suppressed groups/sects in Yemen, but also curtailing the role of regional actors which have colluded to have brought this mess and chaos.

Sajid Aziz is a
Research Assistant at CISS

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