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Bloody Protests in Yemen

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my college in Sanaa on Sept. 25. (Photo: Khaled Fazaa / AFP-Getty Images)

Since May, Yemen has witnessed widespread civil unrest in the southern governorates including Aden and Marib. Three protesters were killed during demonstrations in Mukallah, and two more were killed in Dhalie. On Oct. 13, five people were shot dead at a sit-in in Radfan, Lahj, when security forces opened fire on the crowd. Witnesses reported a dozen wounded. Over 50,000 people gathered the next day in Radfan for a previously scheduled demonstration despite these brutal security practices. Several Yemeni Socialist Party (Y.S.P.) leaders were charged with liability for the Radfan deaths because they organized the demonstration. No one in the security forces has been held responsible for any of the protesters' deaths or beatings. Another large demonstration is scheduled for November, and the situation remains tense.

"We want equal rights," retired Brig. Gen. Ali Moqbel told the Arab American News. General Moqbel leads the Retired Military Consultation Association (M.C.R.A.). After the 1994 civil war between the Y.S.P. and President Ali Abdullah Saleh's northern

forces, over 100,000 southerners were forcibly retired on below sustenance pensions. This disenfranchised group, known as "the stay-at-home party," has taken to the streets. "The goal of the M.C.R.A.," Muqbel said, "is to return all southerners to their previous employment in the same positions, both civilians and soldiers, who were referred to retirement after the war in 1994."

The current instability is rooted in the past. The 1990 unity of North and South Yemen brought northern hegemony, leading to civil war in 1994. Afterward, the unified country's democratic and pluralistic foundations were undermined by successive constitutional amendments that centralized power in the executive. The Y.S.P., which had ruled South Yemen, was marginalized. Post war reconciliation was stymied by practices of the northern elite that economically subjugated the south. Dr. Abdullah Al-Faqih, a professor of political science at Sanaa University explained, "The economic system became something resembling a colonial economy where the purchasing power and the economic benefits

follow one direction—from the south to the north."

Professor Bob Burrowes of the University of Washington invented the word "kleptocracy" to describe Yemen. He defines it as "government by and for thieves." Corruption and nepotism assured President Saleh's post civil war domination, a Yemeni editor explained to the Arab American News, "To preserve the loyalty of tribal leaders and senior military commanders, Saleh kept on ignoring many of their ill practices. Saleh has been busy pleasing his cronies with the country's wealth and senior positions just to remain in power for as long as possible."

Dr. Aidroos Nasr Naser Al-Naqeeb, who heads the Y.S.P. block in parliament, noted, "The Y.S.P. Central Committee indicated that the south was treated as the spoils of war including land, people, companies, and wealth. The current violence against the protesters reflects the type of politics which has dominated after the outcome of the war."

A high-ranking official of Saleh's ruling party, the General People's

Congress (G.P.C.), disputed that influential northerners stole southern lands, calling it "a lie." Dr. Aidroos countered, "Land theft is an undeniable fact. The land stolen includes agricultural lands, land of the former government in the south, lands of corporations and wide areas suitable for building and investment trading. This occurred in all southern governorates."

Dr. Aidroos has little confidence in a governmental committee recently established to solve land issues. "While I don't doubt in the committee's fairness or in their desire to do something better, there are influential people stronger than all these committees," he said. "They are big military leaders and officials in the ruling party that have substantial authority and the power to destroy any person that damages their benefits."

However, Dr. Aidroos pointed out, "There is a long line [of people] in the G.P.C. that have a strong desire to institute many reforms in Yemen. Their inability to speak bluntly or even to hint comes from the fear of the consequences or official procedures. These consequences occur against anyone with an outspoken position

that crosses the 'red lines' established by powerful people. G.P.C. members in parliament claim they have orders from high up which are against their own inclination and which obstruct the work of parliament to do any reforms."

In addition to forming the land committee, the government has tried to mitigate growing civil unrest by reinstating 7,000 former military officers. Saleh also proposed several constitutional amendments including a quota system for women, the empowerment of local councils with tax and expenditure authority, and broadening the number of officials selected by the electoral process. The plan designates a presidential system, contrary to the opposition's proposal for a parliamentary system.

After years of broken promises, Saleh's reform platform has been met with skepticism by some who call it another show for Western observers; for example, prior to the 2006 local elections Saleh repeatedly promised that the G.P.C. would institute a quota system for women. It didn't happen. Consequently, women occupy less than 1 percent of G.P.C. seats on the local level. Saleh has not appointed

any women governors and only two as cabinet ministers. Saleh already has the authority to empower Yemeni women, and he doesn't.

"The regime has no actual desire for any administrative, financial, political, or legal reforms," Dr. Aidroos finds.

"The recent initiative of President Saleh in practice will further consolidate power in the central authority, and all the posts will be derived from presidential authority. The presidential initiative will hinder the emergence of democracy in Yemen." Dr. Aidroos says that Saleh's initiative is designed to "protect the status quo under the guise of the protection of national unity."

In a typical Saleh sleight of hand, the plan establishes more elected positions, but the G.P.C. has ruled out the more fundamental step of electoral reform. The commission overseeing future elections will be appointed by the president and his appointees, Saleh announced. In discussing Yemen's presidential election in 2006, Dr. Aidroos describes Yemen's voters as "terrorized and bribed" and

the process as "subverted by extensive forgery." The result does not reflect the will of the voters, he says.

In Yemen, half of all 5 year olds are physically stunted by chronic hunger and three-quarters of women are illiterate. Yemen's oil and water are depleting rapidly. Unemployment and inflation are high.

Governmental corruption is rampant. Military spending is among the highest in the world and health spending among the lowest. The situation is so critical that professor Al-Faqih believes, "Only profound reforms can save Yemen from descending into a total chaos similar to that experienced by Somalia and Lebanon before that."

Some individual cabinet ministers have implemented significant measures to combat corruption and increase government efficiency.

However, the entrenched power of "influential people" limits the capacity of even the most earnest patriot.

The opposition Joint Meeting Parties (J.M.P.) sees "the need to transform to a parliamentary system." Dr. Aidroos explained.

"We as a country face civil unrest, economic stagnation, and

social difficulties. There is no remedy without increased parliamentary authority, the separation of authority between the executive branch and the parliament, and the ability of the parliament to act as a check on executive power."

Saleh has long used the courts, the government media, and security forces to squelch dissent. Responding to the southern protests with bullets and propaganda may trigger a civil war if the public loses hope in gaining equality through peaceful means. In order to gain the public's trust, Saleh needs to take action. A government interested in reform, modernization, and pluralism does not kidnap, beat, and imprison journalists. The release of editor Abdulkarim Al-Khaiwani from jail with an apology would be a good first step for Saleh in demonstrating his newly found sincerity.

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