



A HISTORY OF YEMENI POLITICAL PARTIES: FROM ARMED STRUGGLE TO ARMED REPRESSION

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COVER PHOTO: The flag of the Republic of Yemen



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Early political party activity emerged in North Yemen in the 1930s and 1940s in opposition to the imamate, but it was limited in size and influence. In the South, small, weak parties composed of southern elites populated the political sphere, though they lacked a popular base. By the 1950s, with Arab nationalism and Islamic ideological movements on the rise regionally, Yemeni parties adopted the ideals of regional Baathists and Arab nationalists as well as the Arab Left and the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite being prohibited in both North and South Yemen in the 1960s and 1970s, party activity flourished underground. Conflicts within and among political movements were frequent and at times bloody throughout Yemen, and the pre-unification disputes between the socialists in Aden and the Sana'a regime, with its links to Saudi Arabia, Iraq and political Islam, were both political and ideological.

A shift to political pluralism after unification in 1990 led to the licensing of 22 parties, with the strongest being President Ali Abdullah Saleh's ruling General People's Congress (GPC), the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) and the Yemeni Congregation for Reform, known as Islah. But party politics proved contentious through the 1993 parliamentary elections, and the GPC and its Islah ally were able to subvert terms of the unity agreement that guaranteed the YSP half of the top leadership positions in government. After Saleh emerged victorious from the 1994 civil war, Islah was instrumental in rooting the Socialists out of power structures. YSP headquarters and properties were seized, and politicians were excluded from public office, sowing the seeds of today's secessionist cause.

Small parties have continued to emerge and be licensed since the 2000s, while pragmatism softened ideological commitment and opposition parties began to form alliances. Still, the GPC under Saleh, with its ability to wield state finances and structures in support of the party, remained insurmountable. By 2011-12, there were 39 officially recognized parties. Around the same period, when the GPC used its control of parliament to enact electoral law amendments rejected by opposition parties, the opposition parties called for mass protests. The Arab Spring-inspired uprising in Yemen in 2011 would prove the beginning of the end for Saleh and of the fracturing of his GPC party.

Disputes, failed negotiations, uncomfortable alliances and miscalculations by the GPC and opposition parties marked the post-uprising political transition period, and a rift formed between the traditional opposition parties and Yemeni youths who had brought down Saleh's regime. Attempts to forge a new political system crumbled and war erupted. Saleh's GPC split when the former president joined forces with Ansar Allah (the Houthi movement) and new political movements grew more powerful than traditional parties. A significantly weakened GPC faction

led by President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi remained allied with Islah, but the Houthi movement and, later in the war the Southern Transitional Council, also became prominent political players through their forces' successes in battle and ability to impose authority in areas under their control.

The realignment of party stances during the war and loss of influence among former political elites has left some senior officials within the traditional parties concerned they will not be heard during any peace negotiations. Indeed, much party work has been suspended, waiting to resume after the war. Among party leaders' stated concerns:

- A broad dialogue, stretching perhaps two decades, will be required to resolve consequences of war, including the disarmament of militias, ending foreign influence, securing regional and international guarantees to avoid renewed war;
- the Houthi movement and Southern Transitional Council (STC) have smothered political activity, which will require parties to rehabilitate their cadres;
- some of the traditional parties still require a vision to expand the participation of youths, women and the marginalized, and all must come up with fresh ideas to avoid the rise of new parties to replace them.

Three parliamentary elections have been held since the multiparty phase began in 1990. A review of the 1993, 1997 and 2003 elections and of the internal regulations of the three largest parties (the GPC, Islah and the YSP) provide some indications about the parties' sources of strength, the roles of women and the extent to which various parties' ideologies underpin internal policies and approaches.

Voter turnout was strong in 1993 and 2003, at 84.5 percent and 76.6 percent, respectively, dropping to 61 percent of registered voters in 1997, when the YSP boycotted the vote, resulting in a strong showing for the GPC in the south. Even in 2003, with the YSP participating and opposition parties running as a bloc, the GPC dominated, winning 57.8 percent of the popular vote to secure 76.1 percent of the seats in parliament (a figure that grew to 79.4 percent after several independents joined the parliamentary bloc of the GPC). This result indicated both structural electoral issues and poor coordination among opposition parties. Yemen's parliamentary elections also affirmed the power of tribal affiliation and the GPC's proficiency in using the benefits of state to secure tribal support. And while some parties have instituted measures to improve women's participation in the party apparatus, they clearly have been more successful in securing women's votes than in running women as candidates for public office.

All three of the largest parties have a stated system of internal democracy of varying degrees, and all select senior leaders in secret votes. All three also make clear their general ideological orientation, most notably Islah with its explicitly religious regulations. Few regulations exist to improve women's party participation. Although all three parties include internal accountability mechanisms, regulations tend to provide the highest party leader a great deal of latitude in terms of length of service.

Political parties operate in Yemen under the Political Parties and Organizations Act No. (66) of 1991, which considers parties “a right and a pillar of the political and social system.”^[1] However, this law tends to be selectively enforced and its provisions favor large parties, allowing them to access state aid; smaller parties with insufficient vote totals and representatives in parliament are excluded. Law No. 66 also lays out a system that allows the ruling party to control the acceptance and rejection of applications to set up new parties. But most detrimental to the functioning of political parties in Yemen is the current war. For political parties to function, there first and foremost must be a state capable of enforcing the rule of law.

[1] “Law No. (66) of 1991, concerning political parties and organizations,” full text, Political Parties and Organizations Act in Yemen, website of the National Information Center, https://yemen-nic.info/db/laws_ye/detail.php?ID=11337

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Yemeni political parties dates back to the mid-20th century, when they worked largely in the shadows during an era of deep ideological contestation. Political parties became active in the late 1950s as an extension of movements outside Yemen, including Baathism, Arab nationalism, the Arab Left and the Muslim Brotherhood. Although prohibited in North and South Yemen before unification in 1990, relations between the political parties were turbulent, often to the point of engaging in armed conflict, not only with each other but also internally. And although they took part in multiparty elections beginning in 1993, President Ali Abdullah Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) dominated the scene, reducing the other parties to the status of marginalized opposition.

The opposition parties then shifted to an approach of forming alliances amongst themselves in an effort to strengthen their position. In 2003, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) was established, bringing together opposing ideological groups that were able to hold a dialogue on a united platform with the ruling GPC over a number of years. The JMP was a player in the Arab Spring protests that kicked off in February 2011 and became a partner in the consensus government formed under the Gulf initiative, which saw the GPC's share of Cabinet portfolios reduced to half.

War since 2014 has radically changed the playing field once again. As the armed Houthi movement (Ansar Allah) moved into Sana'a in September 2014, a new government was formed in accordance with the Peace and National Partnership Agreement reached primarily between Saleh's successor, Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, and the Houthis. But with Houthi domination of the capital — and no apparent interest in sharing power — the more inclusive government laid out within the agreement and hoped to stop the war never stood a chance. Hadi resigned in early 2015 and fled to Aden. Soon after, the Saudi-led coalition intervened militarily with the elusive goal of restoring Hadi to power. Now, with most of their leaders outside the country, members unable to function freely and resources drained, the traditional parties have marginal influence.

Armed groups with sectarian and regional affiliations, such as the Houthis in the North and the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) in Aden, have grown at the expense of civilian political movements that built up over decades. Under the influence of regional rivalries playing out in the country, Yemen risks losing the democratic successes — however flawed — it has achieved in recent decades. The tendency to resort to arms instead of elections could dominate the political scene for years to come.

This paper aims to understand the role of Yemeni parties as they evolved historically, shedding light on an understudied aspect of modern Yemeni politics. It is based on eight in-depth interviews with officials from four of the major Yemeni parties: the GPC, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform, known as Islah), the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) and the Nasserist Party. Twenty-four middle-ranking party officials (14 women and 10 men) also responded to questionnaires between September 2020 and March 2021; the author conducted five unstructured follow-up interviews. It also looks at the emergence of new forces, including the Houthi movement and the STC, which have benefited from a decline in the influence of the traditional parties.

The paper is divided into sections detailing the various historical stages of party life in modern Yemen since its beginnings, leading up to the critical period around the 2011 uprising, the rise of the Houthi movement and the outbreak of armed conflict. Women's roles, internal party regulations and key characteristics of Yemeni political movements also are discussed.

I. YEMENI POLITICAL PARTIES: EMERGENCE, CONFLICTS AND ALLIANCES

Yemeni Parties Before Unification

Political parties have been repeatedly prohibited throughout Yemen, under Law No. 7 of 1963,^[2] Article 37 of the constitution of North Yemen in 1970, and Article 3 of the constitution of South Yemen in 1978.^[3] Prior to these laws, in the mid-1930s, the anti-imamate Committee of the Struggle (Hay'at al-Nidal) was formed. The Yemeni Liberal Party (Hizb al-Ahrar) was established in Aden in June 1944^[4] by northern politicians fleeing the rule of Imam Yahya. Other small parties were active in Aden before the British exited South Yemen, including the People's Congress Party (Hizb al-Mu'tamar al-Sha'bi), the Federal National Party (Al-Hizb al-Watani al-Ittihad) and the Southerners League (Rabitat Abna' al-Janub), but these were generally weak, elitist organizations that lacked a popular base.

In the 1950s, Arab nationalist, socialist and Islamic ideological movements active in the region began to establish local affiliates inside Yemen, often through Yemeni students who returned from periods of study abroad.^[5] The Arab Nationalist Movement (Harakat al-Qawmiyyin al-Arab) established a base of support in Aden in 1959. In October 1961, Abdullah Bazeeb set up his Party of the Democratic People's Union (Hizb al-Ittihad al-Sha'bi al-Dimuqrati), the first Yemeni party based on Marxist theory,^[6] and in 1962 he followed that with the Socialist People's Party (Hizb al-Sha'b al-Ishtiraki), which was mainly active among laborers in Aden.^[7] The Arab Islamic Vanguard Movement (Harakat al-Tali'a al-Arabiyya al-Islamiyya) was established as an organizational framework for the Muslim Brotherhood.^[8]

[2] Yemen in 100 Years, Memory of the 20th century 1900-2000 [AR] (Sana'a: Center for Research and Information at the Yemeni Saba News Agency, May 2000), p. 99.

[3] Jihad Saleh, Yemeni Opposition Parties and their Role in Political and Democratic Development, 1990-2011: The Joint Meeting Parties as a model [AR] (London: Al-Sharq Future Center for Research and Studies, May 2016), p. 5.

[4] Saeed Ahmad al-Janahi, The Yemeni National Movement from Revolution to Unity [AR], (Aden: Markaz al-Amal, 1992), pp. 65-68.

[5] Fouad al-Salahi and Mohammed al-Maytami, Arab Political Parties: Yemen's Situation [AR], (Beirut: Lebanese Center for Studies, 2007), p. 17.

[6] Al-Janahi, The Yemeni National Movement, pp. 157-172.

[7] Mohammed Omar al-Habshi, Southern Yemen Politically, Economically and Socially since 1937 and until the Establishment of South Yemen [AR] (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a, 1968), pp. 110-118.

[8] Nasser al-Taweel, "The Islamic movement and political system: From alliance to competition (part six) [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, May 9, 2009, <https://almasdaronline.com/article/659>

There were bloody conflicts between the different political movements in both North and South Yemen. Ever since the independence of the South in November 1967, the ruling National Front (Al-Jabha al-Qawmiyya) witnessed consecutive conflicts: Qahtan al-Shaabi, the first president of South Yemen, was placed under house arrest until his death and the execution of his successor, Salim Rubai Ali, in 1978; after the establishment of the Socialist Party, Abdelfattah Ismail was killed in the factional fighting that broke out in January 1986 inside the YSP; Ali Salem al-Beidh became leader of the party after his group emerged victorious; and Ali Nasser fled to the north along with thousands of soldiers loyal to him, including the current president, Hadi.^[9]

In the North, there was no ruling party until 1982 when the GPC was established following years of war between the Aden-backed leftist opposition and the Sana'a government, which had backing from Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood. Headed by Saleh until his death in 2017, the GPC included northern political forces, tribal sheikhs and Islamists. Conflict among the ruling elite had led coups against the first two presidents of the republic, Abdullah al-Sallal and Abdulrahman al-Eryani, and the assassination of their successors, Ibrahim al-Hamdi and Ahmed al-Ghashmi. When Saleh assumed the presidency in July 1978, he formed alliances with Baathists, the Brotherhood Islamists and Riyadh, which had influence over prominent tribal leaders. The activity of leftists and Nasserists outside this power structure was severely curbed, as the security apparatus assassinated many political figures.

Pre-unification disputes between the two sides, with their varied links to Saudi Arabia, Iraq and political Islam, were both political and ideological. Sana'a stood with Riyadh in helping the Arab mujahideen fighting in Afghanistan in the 1980s and sent forces to help Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, while Aden supported Russia and Iran in both conflicts. Aden saw Sana'a as a retrogressive regime loyal to Riyadh while Sana'a dealt with Aden as an atheist communist regime; both regimes found allies among dissident groups from the other side. North Yemen and Saudi Arabia supported the Liberation Front (Jabhat al-Tahrir), the Southerners League and the families of the sultans whom the YSP excluded after 1967 for opposing the regime in Aden. Aden supported the leftist Revolutionary Democratic Party (Al-Hizb al-Dimuqrati al-Thawri) when it formed in the North in 1968 with a military wing, the People's Army Organization (Munazzamat Jaysh al-Sha'b).^[10] Leftist forces that had been operating in secret in the North under the umbrella of the Popular Unity Party (Hizb al-Wahda al-Sha'biyya) joined various other southern leftist and nationalist parties to form the YSP in October 1978,^[11] and it ruled the South until 1990.

[9] Discussed in Ali al-Sarraf, *South Yemen: Political Life from Colonization to Unity* (London: Riad al-Rayyes Books, 1992), p. 343.

[10] Al-Janahi, *The Yemeni National Movement*, p. 489.

[11] Samir Abdulrahman al-Shumairi, "Democracy in major Yemeni parties [AR]," Al-Hiwar Al-Mutamaddin Center, August 13, 2003, <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=9218&r=0>

Political Pluralism After Unification

The GPC, YSP and Islah were the largest Yemeni parties of the 22 licensed by the parties committee after promulgation of the law on political parties.^[12] Another 17 parties were declared in 2011, taking the number of officially licensed parties to 39.^[13] Since none had experienced competitive elections in an open system, political life quickly became contentious. The GPC and the Socialist Party acted “according to the logical calculations of two rivals confronting each other in a chaotic environment.”^[14] The parliamentary elections of April 1993 saw the GPC and Islah win the majority of seats and YSP, the representative of the state of South Yemen in the unity agreement, ranked third, which contributed to the war that broke out in 1994.

Formed at Saleh’s behest by Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, leader of the Hashid tribal confederation, Islah was created as a tool in Saleh’s hands to circumvent the terms of the unity agreement that made the YSP officially partners in power.^[15] The GPC and Islah worked together against the Socialists in the war that erupted in the summer of 1994, and Islah was instrumental in rooting out the Socialists from power structures after Saleh’s victory in the war. Hadi managed the war as minister of defense and was appointed vice president after it ended as a member of the GPC, which took in many disaffected YSP figures. Between 1990 and 1993, Yemen had adopted a distinctive democratization model unique at the time in the Arab world.^[16] But the unity terms and the new party system presented a barrier to democratic norms. With southerners only 20 percent of Yemen’s population at the time, the YSP was at a disadvantage against Islah and the GPC.^[17] Given the tension created by this situation, society came to view the army and use of force as alternatives to the parties as a means of achieving change in the country.^[18]

[12] Jihad Saleh, *Yemeni Opposition Parties*, p.5. Forty-six parties announced their existence, but only 22 were approved.

[13] Mohammed Saeed al-Kamel, “Sources of political funding of parties in Yemeni society and mechanisms of overseeing it,” *Journal of the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences*, Sana’a University, Issue 37 (2016), p. 127.

[14] Michael C. Hudson, *Bilateral Attraction, Logical Thinking and the War in Yemen: Yemen’s War 1994 – Its Reasons and Results* [AR], (Abu Dhabi: Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 1998), p. 36.

[15] Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar, *Memoirs: Issues and Positions* [AR] (Sana’a: Al-Afaq, 2007), p. 248.

[16] Laurent Bonnefoy and Marine Poirier, “Civil society and democratization in Yemen: Enhancing the role of intermediate bodies,” *Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia*, November 2009, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281599662_Civil_society_and_democratization_in_Yemen_Enhancing_the_role_of_intermediate_bodies

[17] Brian Whitaker, “Democracy is the means to preserve existence: Yemen’s unity, the crisis and the solution,” *Documents of London Conference*, November 25-26, 1995, pp. 29-30.

[18] Abu Bakr al-Saqqaf, “Equal citizenship is the largest absentee: Yemen’s unity, the crisis and the solution,” *Documents of London Conference*, November 25-26, 1995, pp. 138-141.

Still, the GPC and the Socialists could have formed a coalition government following the 1993 election, with Islah remaining in opposition with an influential parliamentary bloc, but this path was not chosen. It also would have been possible to establish a governing coalition of the GPC and Islah without the Socialists, allowing the latter to establish themselves as a broad-based opposition movement in both the North and South.^[19] The tripartite coalition that was formed, in which the GPC dominated, reflected the desire of the major parties to divide power and protect their positions at the expense of national interests. A serious attempt at averting conflict was made via an agreement known as the Document of Pledge and Accord signed before the war of 1994, establishing a pattern of dialogue then descent into war that was to be repeated in 2014.^[20] But it was the failure to integrate military institutions that was the biggest factor in transforming the political dispute over unity into war in 1994, a war with effects that are still felt to this day. The YSP headquarters and funds were seized and politicians were excluded from public office, practices that sowed the seeds of today's southern cause. The Houthis may have sown the seeds of further conflict, too, in their treatment of Islah since 2015, and of the GPC after killing Saleh.^[21]

The 1993 coalition of the GPC, Islah and the Socialists separated the big parties from the smaller, forcing the smaller parties to form a bloc to attain more influence. In August 1993, the first alliance of these small parties was formed, the National Opposition Bloc (Al-Takattul al-Watani Li-l-Mu'arada).^[22] Following its exit from power after the 1994 war, the Socialist Party joined the National Opposition Bloc and another alliance, the Supreme Coordination Council of the Opposition was formed as a bloc of parties loyal to the ruling GPC.^[23] But the Socialist Party boycotted the 1997 elections, while the Supreme Coordination Council failed to recommend a presidential candidate in the first Yemeni presidential elections in 1999 and was unable to coordinate in local elections in 2001.^[24]

[19] "Text of the Agreement of Yemeni Unity [AR]," Al-Moheet, January 23, 2018, [نص اتفاقية الوحدة اليمنية - موسوعة المحيط](#)

[20] "Text of the Document of Pledge and Accord signed in Jordan in 1994 [AR]," Yemen Press Network—Yazaan, January 21, 2021, https://yazaan.net/infocenter_news12.html

[21] In a Sana'a Center interview in January 2021, a member of Islah who was arrested by the Houthis in Sana'a said: "They detained me for three months and did not say why I was detained. In December 2017, they just released me because they needed enough space to detain members from the GPC after Saleh was killed. Detention centers were full and there was no space to detain more people without releasing those in detention."

[22] It was comprised of the Nasserist party, the League of the Sons of Yemen (renamed Southerners' League), the Popular Forces Union (Ittihad al-Quwwa al-Sha'biyya), the Party of Truth (Hizb al-Haqq) and the Yemeni Unionist Assembly (Al-Tajammu' al-Wahdawi al-Yamani).

[23] Jihad Saleh, "Yemeni opposition parties," p. 7.

[24] Yemeni Strategic Report 2002, Yemeni Center for Strategic Studies, (Sana'a: Dar al-Majd, 2002), pp. 72-73.

It was not until Islah joined the opposition parties in forming the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) in 2003 that opposition politics began to really take shape. The JMP consisted of parties with a deep historical experience and ideological base such as Islah and the YSP; what they also had in common was a shared opposition to the ruling GPC. The Yemeni parties thus began to shift from narrow ideological commitments to a new level of political pragmatism.^[25] The JMP bloc also offered a form of domestic cover for the Socialist Party and international cover for Islah.^[26] The Socialists sought to resume political work after years of stagnation and repression while Islah sought a political alliance that would distance it from association with Islamists behind the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington. Coordination between them began during the 2003 parliamentary elections and developed further during the 2006 presidential elections, presenting a serious challenge to the GPC's monopolization of power.

The JMP and GPC Dialogue: The Road to 2011

Yemen had a relatively strong opposition once the JMP was established in 2003.^[27] Although its parliamentary bloc continued to shrink in size due to GPC control of the system, it possessed strong media outlets and an ability to mobilize the public. The JMP launched a political reform project in 2005,^[28] which became the subject of dialogue between the JMP and the GPC until the February 2011 revolution. During this dialogue, the JMP demanded reforms to the political system that included amending the constitution, adopting a parliamentary system of governance^[29] and shifting to proportional representation.^[30] Although the GPC resisted conceding on any of these points,^[31] it still engaged in the dialogue on this basis.

[25] Ahmad Ali al-Ahsab, "Crossing to the future: The Yemeni opposition parties' rough road to renew themselves [AR]," Saba Center for Strategic Studies, Year 2/Issues 7-8, January/April 2011.

[26] Mohammed al-Mekhlafi, "Beyond politics with Doctor Mohammed al-Mekhlafi, deputy secretary general of the Yemeni Socialist Party [AR]," interview by Aref al-Sarami, Yemen Shabab TV, January 20, 2018, video 13:00 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_KOo6pKl9Q&list=PLVCrgW4RRY398YD-oDQIJlEm-ykR7BoCs&index=46

[27] The JMP is comprised of the Arab Socialist Baath Party, Democratic Nasserist Party (Al-Hizb al-Nasiri al-Dimuqrati), National Democratic Front Party (Hizb al-Jabha al-Wataniyya al-Dimuqratiyya), Liberation Front Party (Hizb Jabhat al-Tahrir), Social Nationalist Party (Al-Hizb al-Qawmi al-Ijtima'i), Nasserist Popular Corrective Organization (Tanzim al-Tashih al-Sha'bi al-Nasiri), the Yemeni League (Hizb al-Rabita al-Yamaniyya), the Popular Forces Union (Ittihad al-Quwwa al-Sha'biyya) and the Party of Truth (Hizb al-Haqq). See: Jihad Saleh, *Yemeni Opposition Parties*, passim.

[28] "Text of the project of the JMP for national and political reform [AR]," Marib Press, November 29, 2005, <https://marebpress.net/articles.php?lng=arabic&id=14>

[29] The governing system in Yemen is a combination of the type of parliamentary and the presidential system used in France.

[30] "Text of the project of the JMP for national and political reform [AR]," Marib Press, November 29, 2005, <https://marebpress.net/articles.php?lng=arabic&id=14>

[31] "The Yemeni opposition initiative widens the gap with the ruling party [AR]," Al-Bayan, December 17, 2005, <https://www.albayan.ae/one-world/2005-12-17-1.126907>

The first of several agreements reached was the Agreement on Principles signed in June 2006 to set guarantees for free, fair and secure local and presidential elections in September 2006. Based on this, an agreement was reached to resolve the issues pertaining to the electoral register and the neutrality of governmental media, public institutions, public money and armed forces in the elections.^[32] Though it was not implemented in practice, the two sides reached a further deal on February 23, 2009, to amend Article 65 of the constitution to extend the term of parliament by two years to April 2011^[33] and postpone parliamentary elections due in April 2009 to April 27, 2011, to allow time to reform the electoral system.

The fate of the February 2009 agreement was no different from previous efforts in that achievements on paper did not translate into concrete actions on the ground. In mid-2009, the JMP formed the preparatory committee for national dialogue, and in September 2009 it announced the “national salvation” project^[34] in which the southern cause was strongly present. The Houthi movement also took part,^[35] its first major foray into collaborative work with the array of political forces in the country. The project’s central proposal was for a federated system of local governance, intended to resolve the tension that had emerged in Sa’ada and the South. On July 17, 2010, the GPC and the JMP signed a document to implement the February 2009 agreement and form a committee to prepare for a comprehensive national dialogue.^[36] But in December 2010, the GPC used its control of parliament to unilaterally approve the electoral law amendments, triggering the JMP to call for popular protests and setting the scene for the momentous events of February 2011.^[37]

[32] Jamil al-Ja’adbi, “GPC and JMP: five agreements in five years of dialogue [AR],” Al-Motamar Net, July 26, 2010, <https://www.almotamar.net/news/82853.htm>

[33] This agreement was reached four days before parliament’s term ended on April 27, 2009. Without it, a more complicated crisis would have emerged because the GPC could have held elections without the JMP parties.

[34] “Text of the document of the vision of national salvation project [AR],” Al-Masdar Online, September 7, 2009, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/46053>

[35] Mohammed al-Mekhlafi, “Beyond politics with Doctor Mohammed al-Mekhlafi, deputy secretary general of the Yemeni Socialist Party [AR],” interview with Aref al-Sarami, Yemen Shabab channel, January 20, 2018, video 6:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_KOo6pKl9Q&list=PLVCrgW4RRY398YD-oDQJJEm-ykR7BoCs&index=46

[36] Jamil al-Ja’adbi, “GPC and JMP”

[37] “Yemen: Strict security measures around the parliament after the opposition called for popular protests, GPC calls on all sides of the political process to participate in the elections [AR],” Asharq al-Awsat, December 15, 2010, <https://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?issueno=11700&article=599522#.XoF1Jegzbcc>

Yemeni Political Parties and the February 2011 Revolution

In early 2011, the experience of the Yemeni political parties, both those in power and those in opposition, showed that years of dialogue could return to square one in an instant. When the Arab Spring protests erupted in Tunisia and Egypt, the prospects for political work in Yemen had reached a dead end, the economic crisis had worsened and the situation in the South and Sa'ada had not been resolved. The protests in Tunisia and Egypt inspired protests in Yemen, but the protests were led by the same political elite that had failed at the dialogue tables.

The GPC retracted its unilateral measures as the protests began to spread to Yemen. On the other hand, the rhetoric of the opposition was immediately tough. "We are here to topple a corrupt and tyrannical regime," Islah MP Najib Ghanem said. "A revolution for justice erupted in Tunisia, and it's now reached Egypt and tomorrow it will be in Yemen."^[38] As of February 11, 2011, anti-government protests were held on a daily basis in Taiz and most other cities, marking the beginning of the Yemeni Spring. The uprising was characterized by two key factors: the GPC was able to organize protests in support of Saleh in the face of protests by his opponents, while Islah played a dominant role in the opposition. Islah was the force capable of organizing crowds of thousands of protesters, using the financial muscle of the party and some of its leaders such as Hamid al-Ahmar,^[39] who later stated that he had spent more than half of his fortune to topple Saleh's regime.^[40]

The government's violent reaction toward these protests backfired against Saleh and the GPC. Many members of parliament, Shura council members and university teachers resigned from the party as protests spread around the country,^[41] despite a proposal by Saleh for early elections.^[42] The situation escalated dramatically after about 50 protestors were killed by snipers while performing Friday prayers in Sana'a's Change Square on March 18 in what became known as the Friday of Dignity massacre.^[43] Following this, 23 GPC members of parliament resigned in protest,^[44] and on March 21, General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, the second man in

[38] "Yemenis protest in 'day of rage' in Sana'a [AR]," BBC, February 4, 2011, https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2011/02/110204_yemen_rage

[39] John R. Bradley, *After the Arab Spring: How Islamists Hijacked the Middle East Revolts* [AR], (Cairo: Hindawi, 2013), p. 93.

[40] Hamid al-Ahmar, "Sheikh Hamid al-Ahmar in the Journey of Life (2nd episode) with Aref al-Sarami [AR]," interview by Aref al-Sarami, Journey of Life, Ma'een TV, July 19, 2013, video 16:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lb2g2MJ1JUE>

[41] "Sana'a anti-government protests escalate, protests reach Hadramawt [AR]," AFP via France 24, February 23, 2011, <https://www.france24.com/ar/20110223-yemen-protest-regime-against-thousands-sanaa>

[42] "Saleh proposes referendum on new constitution before the end of year and transition to a parliamentary system [AR]," AFP via France 24, March 10, 2011, <https://www.france24.com/ar/20110310-saleh-yemen-proposals-reforms-parliament-opposition>

[43] Abdelkarim Salam, "Friday's slaughter in Yemen: Premeditated murder by the authority and media [AR]," Swiss Info, March 20, 2011, www.swissinfo.ch/ara/-29788964/السلطة-والإعلام-دد-السلطة-والإعلام/مذبحة-الجمعة-في-اليمن-جريمة-مع-سب-ق-إصرار-وترص-دد-السلطة-والإعلام

[44] "Massive crowds in Sana'a mourn those killed during Friday protests [AR]," AFP via France 24, March 20, 2011, <https://www.france24.com/ar/20110320-massive-crown-bury-martyrs-killed-abdullah-saleh-yemen>

the regime, announced his support for the uprising,^[45] placing the 1st Armored Division that he commanded next to Change Square as a protection force. Saleh's regime had split in two. It was the JMP that took on the role of negotiating with the regime on behalf of the protest movement, in coordination with the general. This was despite the fact that the protesters had adopted a distinctly non-partisan rhetoric, using slogans such as "no partisanship, no parties, our revolution is a youth revolution." A civil state with equal citizenship rights for all was the main demand of protesters on the streets. The messaging from Islah, however, was confused: Some officials, including Sheikh Abdullah Saatar, called for a civil state,^[46] while influential figures such as Sheikh Abdelmajeed al-Zindani^[47] continued to talk of establishing an Islamic state.^[48]



Yemeni youth and supporters of the Joint Meeting Parties hold a demonstration in Al-Hurriyah Square in Taiz city against President Ali Abdullah Saleh during Yemen's Arab Spring uprising, April 22, 2011 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed al-Basha

[45] "Military and tribal figures join protesters, France calls on Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down [AR]," France 24, March 22, 2011, <https://www.france24.com/ar/20110322-yemen-personalities-hostile-abdallah-saleh-france-takes-position>

[46] "Crowds in the capital call for establishing a civil state, confirm revolutionary decisiveness is the solution [AR]," Akhbar Alyoum, July 16, 2011, https://akhbaralyom-ye.net/news_details.php?sid=42609

[47] In February 2004, the US Treasury placed al-Zindani on its list of sponsors of terrorism, which entailed demands for freezing his funds. He remained at liberty in Yemen, taking part in the post-uprising national dialogue as a leading Islah figure.

[48] "Radical Cleric Demands Ouster of Yemen Leader," New York Times, March 1, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/02/world/middleeast/02yemen.html>

The Gulf Initiative and Political Transition

Worried about instability engulfing the country, the United States and Gulf countries stepped in to mediate. During his early attempts to mediate between Saleh, the JMP and Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, the US ambassador in Sana'a Gerald Feierstein proposed that Saleh give up power to a vice president appointed by Saleh in exchange for immunity for him and his family.^[49] Both Saleh and Mohammed al-Yadumi, the head of Islah, asked Abdelkarim al-Iryani, the second deputy head of the GPC, if he would accept the post of president. Al-Iryani refused,^[50] but this idea became central to the internationally-backed Gulf initiative^[51] adopted in early April 2011.

The initiative,^[52] which leaders from the JMP helped devise, included forming a power-sharing government of the GPC and the opposition, and Saleh handing over power to his deputy Hadi in exchange for immunity from prosecution, via a new presidential election with Hadi as sole candidate. This was in addition to other measures to be carried out during the two-year transition phase that would conclude with new elections based on a new constitution. The initiative was eventually signed in Riyadh on November 23, 2011, after months of the GPC and JMP arguing over some of its clauses and even the formalities related to the signing ceremony.

In signing an initiative that classified the situation in Yemen as a “crisis,” the opposition parties in effect gave up on framing the situation as one of a popularly driven political “revolution.” The GPC became the opposition parties’ partner in the creation of a new government, and this resulted in a rift between the parties and the youth protesters, including those within their own ranks. As author Mohammed al-Shibani put it: “After a few weeks and after many of the regime’s corrupt figures and military, tribal and religious allies [joined] the square, the beautiful dream began to shatter. It was completely destroyed ten months later when those who rode the wave from within the regime made a political settlement based on quotas and division of power at the expense of the idea of change for which hundreds of young men sacrificed their lives.”^[53]

[49] Mustapha Noman, “Ali Abdullah Saleh (30) [AR],” *Independent Arabia*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/61936>

[50] Interview with Abdulghani al-Iryani, a senior researcher at the Sana’a Center, who had conveyed Yadumi’s message to Abdelkarim al-Iryani, January 27, 2021.

[51] “Text of the Gulf initiative [AR],” *Al-Riyadh newspaper*, November 24, 2011, <https://www.alriyadh.com/685755>

[52] “Text of the mechanism of the Gulf initiative,” [AR], National Information Center, accessed November 15, 2021, <https://yemen-nic.info/sectors/politics/trans/initiative.php>

[53] Mohammed Abdelwahab al-Shibani, “February, the lasting memory and stolen dream - as it was caught on camera at the Square and beyond [AR],” February 11, 2021, <https://www.khuyut.com/blog/the-stolen-dream>

Between the beginning of the uprising in February 2011 and signing the initiative in November 2011, both the opposition and the authority were targeted with violence. Protesters were killed in Sana'a during the Friday of Dignity, the square where they gathered in Taiz was burned, and many were killed and arrested in different governorates. As for Saleh, he and other GPC leaders were injured in a bomb attack at the presidential compound mosque on June 3, 2011, raising suspicions that figures from Islah or Al-Ahmar's family were responsible for an assassination attempt against Saleh.^[54] No judicial process established who was behind any of these attacks, which contributed to both the GPC and JMP rejecting the mediation agreement.

When the government of national unity was formed and parties within the JMP lost their status as opposition, a vacuum formed on the opposition side that the Houthis movement was able to exploit. While expanding militarily, the Houthis took part in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) despite not being signatories to the Gulf initiative. They benefited from a process which, in effect, shone a light on government corruption and failure to resolve the security and economic situation. Meanwhile, the various political parties divided up ministerial portfolios, apparently placing their interests and partisan conflicts ahead of those of ordinary Yemenis.^[55] The JMP miscalculated in its conclusion that in removing Saleh as an individual it had succeeded in toppling the regime,^[56] and would therefore be able to haggle over the spoils in the post-uprising political arrangement.

Visions on National Dialogue Issues Realign Parties

The JMP found itself at a crossroads when it participated in the formation of the national unity government in December 2011. Ministerial portfolios and seats at the national dialogue were distributed among the JMP on an individual party basis, not to the body as a whole.^[57] Although the disintegration of the JMP was never officially announced, the political and intellectual differences among its parties were apparent during the NDC in the visions they presented. Abdulrahman al-Saqqaf, secretary general of the Socialist Party, referred to the alignment between the GPC and Islah on the southern question as "strange";^[58]

[54] "New details about the crime of blowing up the presidential mosque [AR]," Almotamar, May 26, 2012, <http://www.almotamar.net/pda/99467.htm>

[55] Helen Lackner, "Yemen's peaceful transition from tyrant rule: Was success possible?" The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2016, Stockholm, p. 8.

[56] Muhammad Al-Yadumi, "Yemen's future amid the current situation [AR]," interview by Ahmed Mansour, Without Borders, Al-Jazeera, September 14, 2012, video 4:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qStel5bJN8Y>

[57] The National Dialogue Conference seats were distributed as follows on December 12, 2012, according to the report of the technical committee in charge of preparing for the dialogue: 112 seats for the GPC and its allies, 50 seats for Islah, 37 seats for the Socialist Party, 30 seats for the Nasserist Party, 20 seats for the other parties in the national unity government, 85 seats for the Southern Hiraq, 35 seats for the Houthis, a total of 120 seats for independent youths, women and civil society organizations (40 seats for each), and 76 seats for others including 62 assigned by President Hadi.

[58] Farea al-Muslimi, "Secretary General of the Yemeni Socialist Party: We are against war and the coup, the legitimacy suffers from many flaws," Sana'a

both of them saw the root of the issue as lying in internal conflicts since the south's independence in 1967.^[59] The Socialist Party^[60] and Houthi movement,^[61] on the other hand, both attributed the roots of the southern cause to the 1994 war and the practices of the winning party. Similarly, the Socialist Party and the Nasserist Party^[62] both regarded the issue of Sa'ada as a political situation created by the policies of the ruling regime. The Southern Hirak – some of whose factions later formed the STC – and the Houthi movement presented a joint vision on the issue of Sa'ada.^[63] Despite accusations against each other over Sa'ada, Islah and the GPC both condemned the six wars and accused the Houthis of committing several violations during the Sa'ada wars

Political parties submitted to a division of federal regions imposed by Hadi's government,^[64] after being unable to resolve this core issue during the ten-month dialogue. Instead of addressing citizens' concerns about their livelihoods, party leaders were set on marketing the illusion of their success to gain the support of the international community, which extolled the "Yemeni model" for peaceful transition.^[65] But with armed battles continuing to erupt and citizens' daily suffering increasing, the model seemed to be an illusion.

The Romance of Dialogue Grows Cold

After the dialogue ended, the fighting began to expand. The Houthis advanced toward Amran, 50 kilometers north of Sana'a, describing the army there as "the militia of Islah party" and accusing it of having extremists who practice takfir (declaring Muslims as infidel) among its ranks.^[66] The Houthi movement depicted the battle as one against Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group (IS), sometimes

Center for Strategic Studies, December 29, 2017, <https://sanaacenter.org/ar/publications-all/analysis-ar/5222>

[59] GPC's vision regarding the southern cause [AR], Althawrah, May 14, 2013, <http://althawrah.ye/archives/44678> Islah's view on the roots of the southern cause [AR]: https://yemen-nic.info/national_dialogue/trans/news/detail.php?ID=54492

[60] The Socialist Party's view on the roots of the southern cause [AR], Gulf Center for Development Policies, April 28, 2013, <https://gulfpolicies.org/2019-05-18-07-27-50/2019-05-18-09-43-24/2008-2019-07-10-07-53-09>

[61] Ansar Allah's view on the roots of the southern cause [AR], Alrshad, www.alrshad.net/رؤية-أنصار-الله-الجذور-القضية-الجنوب

[62] The Socialist Party's and the Nasserist Party's view on the Sa'ada issue [AR], Almasdar Online, April 29, 2013, <https://almasdaronline.com/article/44892>

[63] The Southern Hirak's and Ansar Allah's view on the Sa'ada issue [AR], Almasdar Online, April 29, 2013, <https://almasdaronline.com/article/44892>

[64] The Socialist Party secretary general, Yassin Saeed Noaman, said about this in his book Crossing the Strait: "The meeting to which the president invited the party secretary generals on Sunday, December 22, 2013, did not address the document. It went straight to the option of the six federations – as if the issue had been postponed in order to [force] approval... The issue was not even discussed at the dialogue except two days before the document was submitted. Some parties insisted on having their option approved in a way that does not allow holding any serious dialogue. This marked a return to the old behavior when dealing with dialogues," in "Crossing the Strait... An initial critique of the experience – 3 [AR]," as excerpted by al-Eshteraky.com, April 21, 2014, <http://aleshteraky.com/hegac/item/996-rbhj-adeoib-ai-fbh-phdi-ddcejbq-adfdbq-addaddq>

[65] "Benomar: The Yemeni model is the best and the most complete among all models of transition [AR]," Althawrah Net, March 14, 2014, <http://althawrah.ye/archives/75418>

[66] "Yemeni developments: Amran, Ali Mohsen's war with Ansar Allah - the Houthis - Al-Imad - Hawas – Rajeh [AR]," BBC, YouTube, June 1, 2014, video 1:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnpxQFVxxU8>

referred to as Daesh.^[67] The Houthi leader began using the term “Daesh affiliates” to describe government loyalists and followers of Islah. At the same time, Islah’s media outlets accused Saleh and the GPC of being complicit with the Houthis and accused Hadi of complacency in failing to give enough support to the army in Amran.^[68] Some suspected the defense minister, Mohammed Nasser Ahmed, of complicity with the Houthis,^[69] and later even accused Hadi of facilitating the Houthis’ entrance to Sana’a.^[70] Amid UN Security Council calls on the warring parties in Amran to withdraw from the governorate and on security forces to maintain loyalty to the state,^[71] the Houthis won the battle and seized the governorate in July 2014. The Houthis and Saleh’s GPC then seized an opportunity to organize protests against the government over a sudden increase in fuel prices, which was announced during a meeting that Hadi himself chaired,^[72] to try to take control of the capital.

When protests did not achieve their goal, the Houthis launched an intensified attack on the capital while they were negotiating with the government via Omani mediation^[73] to reach a new political agreement reflecting new realities on the ground. Thus, the Peace and National Partnership Agreement,^[74] which required Hadi to appoint political advisers from the Houthi movement and the Southern Hiraak alone,^[75] was signed on the evening the Houthis seized the capital, September 21, 2014. It made the Houthi movement effectively the predominant power in the country, with the ability to impose its views on others, including the internationally approved president. The political parties signed an agreement they had no role in formulating.

[67] “Al-Houthi: Ansar Allah’s battle in Amran with the three American products, IS, Islah and Al-Qaeda [AR],” July 10, 2014, Moqawama, <https://www.moqawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=31036&cid=199>

[68] The only brigade in Amran to fight Houthi forces was the 310th led by Brigadier-General Hameed al-Qushaybi.

[69] “Western diplomat: International community supports the president against armed groups threatening the capital [AR],” Akhbar Alyom, March 16, 2014, https://akhbaralyom-ye.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=77383

[70] “GPC’s media outlets interview the leader [Saleh] on the sixth anniversary of blowing up the presidential mosque [AR],” Al-Yemen Alyom, June 3, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iS6CooUOuz4&feature=emb_logo

[71] “UN Security Council members call on Houthis, armed groups to withdraw from Amran [AR],” UN News, July 11, 2014, <https://news.un.org/ar/audio/2014/07/310232>

[72] Fuel prices were increased from 2,500 Yemeni rials (approximately US\$10 at the time) for 20 liters to 4,000 Yemeni rials. Hadi later submitted to Houthis demands to lower the price to 3,000 Yemeni rials. This did not prevent the Houthis from advancing, and many citizens sympathized with them because of the fuel hikes.

[73] Abdelkarim al-Iryani, a member of the dialogue committee, said: “On Saturday noon, the Omani mediator at Sultan Qaboos’ office came to Sana’a. The mediator had been meeting with the Yemeni government and the Iranian government and conveying messages to and from the president. But when he came to Sana’a on that Saturday, we had failed at the dialogue held [the previous] Thursday night. ... Can you believe that the Omani mediator came carrying the text we negotiated at 10:30 on Thursday without changing a single word? What does this mean? It means we negotiated in Sana’a, and the text was approved in Sa’ada, then it was sent to Tehran then to Muscat and from Muscat it was sent to Sana’a.” Abdelkarim al-Iryani, “Text of the interview of Dr. Abdelkarim al-Iryani with the Yemeni army’s newspaper [AR],” Al-Tagheer, December 12, 2014, <https://www.al-tagheer.com/news74371.html>

[74] “The Peace and National Partnership Agreement,” full text via UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, September 21, 2014, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/YE_140921_PeaceNationalPartnershipAgreement_en.pdf

[75] Peace and National Partnership Agreement, September 21, 2014, p. 2, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/YE_140921_PeaceNationalPartnershipAgreement_ar.pdf

The Houthis and Saleh's supporters faced no resistance when seizing military camps and state institutions. The army remained neutral, raising Islah's suspicion that there was a plan to push it into a battle it would lose.^[76] The party decided not to fight, saying it would not be used as a tool in a civil war.^[77] This decision angered hardliners who confronted the Houthis when they entered Sana'a, suffering heavy losses. It also led to a rare breakdown in party discipline as some members accused the party's leadership of preventing 40,000 fighters from stopping the Houthis from taking the capital.^[78]

The Peace and National Partnership Agreement met the Houthis' demands to form a new government and have Hadi appoint political advisers from the Houthi movement and the Southern Hirak. Since 2012, Hadi had been appointing officials from Islah, the Socialist Party and the Nasserist Party as advisors on an equal footing. But a new crisis emerged over the cabinet formation. Despite an agreement to grant the GPC and its allies nine portfolios, the JMP and its partners nine portfolios, and, for the first time, the Houthis and the Southern Hirak six portfolios each^[79] – a strong indication of their ascendancy – the agreement was not implemented as agreed when the government was announced.^[80]

The GPC wing loyal to Saleh announced it was withdrawing its ministers from the government over a lack of consultation^[81] and Hadi was sacked from his post as deputy head and secretary general of the party.^[82] The real motive was likely the UN Security Council imposing sanctions on Saleh^[83] and the US ambassador setting a deadline for Saleh to leave the country.^[84] The Houthis also objected to the cabinet formation and did not submit the names of their representative, claiming Hadi's government had not adhered to the conditions agreed to in the Peace and National Partnership Agreement.^[85] These developments paved the

[76] Ahmad al-Zarqa, "Yemen's Brotherhood, from authority to the street [AR]," October 7, 2014, <https://al-akhbar.com/Arab/39132>

[77] Ali Al-Jaradi, "Beyond politics with Ali Al-Jaradi, head of the media department in Islah [AR]," interview with Aref al-Sarami, Yemen Shabab channel, May 2, 2018, video 24:44, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E64CHYMM8IA&list=PLVCrgW4RRY398YD-oDQIJlEm-ykR7BoCs&index=31>

[78] "Yemeni Islah ordered 40,000 fighters not to confront the Houthis last September; Zindani's secretary to Asharq al-Awsat: Party supporters aim to isolate political leadership [AR]," Asharq Al-Awsat, April 21, 2015, www.aawsat.com/home/article/341716/الإصلاح-اليمني-أمر-40-ألف-مقاتل-بعدم-مواجهة-الحوثيين-في-سبتمبر-الماضي

[79] "Bahah: Consultations to form a Cabinet are advancing quickly, follow-up with components to name their candidates is underway [AR]," Saba news agency, October 25, 2014, <https://www.saba.ye/ar/news372825.htm>

[80] "Khaled Bahah's Cabinet formation in Yemen [AR]," Al-Jazeera, November 11, 2014, www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2014/11/11/حكومة-خالد-بحاح-في-اليمن

[81] "Yemen: Saleh's GPC wing withdraws its representatives from new cabinet [AR]," BBC Arabic, November 8, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2014/11/141108_yemen_withdrawal

[82] "Text of the statement of the exceptional session of the major permanent committee of the GPC [AR]," November 8, 2014, Almethaq net, <https://www.almethaq.net/news/news-40929.htm>

[83] "UN Security Council sanctions former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh [AR]," BBC Arabic, November 7, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2014/11/141107_yemen_un_sanctions

[84] "Major permanent committee of the GPC."

[85] "Yemen: Bahah's government sworn in despite Houthis' objection," BBC Arabic, November 9, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2014/11/141109_yemen_new_government_sown

Instead of responding to these demands, on February 6, 2015, the Houthi movement announced what came to be known as the “constitutional declaration,” which effectively granted functions of the presidency to their Supreme Revolutionary Committee, headed by Mohammed Ali al-Houthi.^[90]

The parties were in a state of confusion. Islah demanded the Houthis retract the declaration^[91] at the same time as it prevented citizens from protesting to reject it.^[92] The Socialist Party^[93] and the GPC^[94] also issued statements of condemnation, while the Nasserist Party accused the UN envoy of turning a blind eye to the coup.^[95] Most countries withdrew their diplomatic missions from Sana’a and evacuated citizens, while major foreign companies closed their headquarters. Houthi plans were then spoiled by Hadi’s escape from Sana’a to Aden, where he renounced his resignation – a move welcomed by Islah, the Socialist Party and the Nasserist Party.^[96] As Houthi and pro-Saleh GPC forces pushed together toward Aden, Saleh declared Hadi’s only means of escape would be by sea,^[97] and Hadi survived air strikes on Al-Maashiq Palace on March 19, 2015.

Hadi eventually fled from Aden via land to Oman and then Riyadh, and the Saudi-led coalition began military operations with airstrikes on March 26, 2015, with the stated aim of the campaign being the return of Hadi to power. The only party to declare open support for the intervention was Islah,^[98] provoking Houthi pursuit of its members in territories under Houthi control.^[99]

[90] “Yemen: Much more than a ‘constitutional declaration’ and less than a revolution [AR],” Watan.net, July 2, 2015, <https://www.wattan.net/ar/news/122541.html>; On the committee, see: Adel al-Ahmadi, “Who are the members of the Houthis’ revolutionary committee: The militias’ ruling council? [AR]” Nashwan News, February 19, 2015, www.nashwannews.com/newsold/154816/من-هم-أعضاء-اللجنة-الثورية-للحوثيين-مج

[91] “Yemen’s Islah Party rejects the Houthis’ constitutional declaration [AR],” Akhbar Elyom, February 7, 2015, www.akhbarelyom.com/news/newdetails/440439/1/حزب-الإصلاح-اليمني-يرفض-الإعلان-الدستوري

[92] “Protests against constitutional declaration amid the Houthis’ intensified deployment in Yemen [AR],” Radio Sawa, February 7, 2015, www.radiosawa.com/archive/2015/02/07/20150207-20-20202020-2020-20202020-20202020-20202020-20202020-20202020-20202020-20202020

[93] “Yemen’s Socialist Party announces its rejection of ‘Houthi coup’ and warns of escalation [AR],” Alyemeny Aljadid, February 7, 2015, <https://www.alyemeny.com/news/425#.X9qEeLNRXIU>

[94] “GPC announces its rejection of the Houthis’ constitutional declaration [AR],” Text of the statement, Yemen Press, February 7, 2015, <https://yemenpress.net/news42199.html>

[95] “Benomar responds to the Nasserist Party’s statement [AR],” Text of the statement, Almasdar Online, Sana’a, February 17, 2015, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/123583>

[96] “The Yemeni scene three days after the president breaks free [AR],” Almasdar Online, February 24, 2015, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/123894>

[97] “Saleh vows that those rushing towards secession will only escape via one route [AR],” Hour News, March 9, 2015, www.hournews.net/40025/20202020-2020-20202020-2020-20-20202020-20202020-20202020-20202020-20202020-20202020

[98] “Islah announces support of Operation Decisive Storm [AR],” Al-Jazeera, April 3, 2015, www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2015/4/3/20202020-20202020-20202020-20202020

[99] Ashraf al-Falahi, “Comprehensive report in numbers of the Houthis’ campaign against Islah [AR],” Arabi21, April 6, 2015, www.arabi21.com/story/822463/20202020-20202020-2020-20-20202020-20202020-20202020-20202020-20202020

The Socialist Party issued a vague statement of denunciation, calling for an end to what it called internal and external wars blighting the country. However, Socialist Party officials also attended the Riyadh Conference convened by Hadi in May 2015, indicating their recognition of Hadi's authority as president.^[100]

The Nasserist Party took a similar stance, condemning internal and external war while recognizing Hadi's authority.^[101] At the same time, both parties had officials in Sana'a who denounced the coalition campaign.^[102] Saleh's wing of the GPC also called for a halt to all military operations, though it was working with the Houthi forces and rejected Hadi's legitimacy.^[103]

[100] Final statement of the Riyadh conference regarding Yemen [AR], Al-Jazeera encyclopedia, May 19, 2015, www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/events/2015/5/19/إعلان-الرياض

[101] Interview with a member of the General Secretariat in the Nasserist Party, November 2020.

[102] "Statement by Socialists against the aggression [AR]," AlYemeni One, July 1, 2016, <https://www.alymenione.com/7140/>

[103] "Saleh's party calls on Houthis, Gulf countries to stop military operations in Yemen [AR]," Akhbar ElYom, March 26, 2015, www.akhbarelyom.com/news/newdetails/438024/1/حزب-صالح-يدعو-إلى-وقف-الأعمال-العسكرية-ف/

II. PARTY WORK IN WARTIME

Realigning Party Stances, 2015–Present

The coalition intervention led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates rearranged political alliances once again in Yemen. There have been three broad groupings on the ground since 2015. First, the Houthi movement and the Saleh-led GPC – a shaky alliance, considering Saleh’s wars with the Houthis from 2004–2010, that devolved into armed clashes in early December 2017, ending with the killing of Saleh and weakening what was left of the GPC in Sana’a. The second side consisted of parties that recognized Hadi’s government and considered the Houthi move a power grab, and who supported, if to varying degrees, the coalition campaign: Islah, the Socialist Party and the Nasserist Party. A third side emerged when the STC was formed in May 2017. After Saudi-led coalition forces took back Aden in July 2015, the UAE, the other primary player in the alliance besides Saudi Arabia, gradually established military formations to work with it not just against the Houthis but also against Hadi and Islah. These included the Security Belt forces, Elite forces in Shabwa and Hadramawt, and other formations affiliated with the STC. In August 2019, these forces fought government troops loyal to Hadi, which ended up putting the STC in control of Aden.

The GPC: War Worsens Divides Brought on by Fall from Power



Islah supporters rally in Taiz in support of the internationally recognized government, March 3, 2019 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed al-Basha

The party split worsened with the coalition's intervention in 2015, with leading figures in the GPC switching sides. Abdulaziz bin Habtoor, a GPC permanent committee member since 1995, shifted from Hadi to Saleh to become prime minister of the "salvation government" established equally between the Houthis movement and the Saleh-affiliated GPC in Sana'a in November 2016, while Minister of Communications Ahmed Obaid bin Dagher split from Saleh to stand with Hadi, becoming his deputy prime minister in 2015 and prime minister in April 2016. GPC officials loyal to Hadi met in Riyadh in October 2015 to dismiss Saleh from the party,^[111] while the GPC's wing in Sana'a dismissed senior party officials in April 2016 for supporting the coalition.^[112] After Saleh's death (and that of Aref al-Zouka, secretary general of the GPC in Sana'a) in December 2017, remaining GPC members in Sana'a appointed first deputy chief Sadeq Amin Aburas as the new party chief, while officials backing Hadi said he was now the GPC's head by dint of its procedural rules.^[113]

As of December 2017, the GPC had three wings: the Sana'a wing; the Hadi/Riyadh wing; and the wing of Saleh's eldest son, Ahmad Ali Saleh, supported by the UAE. The party in Sana'a appointed Ahmad Ali Saleh as its deputy chief^[114] despite their differing positions on the coalition campaign (Saleh's son supports it, the Sana'a GPC still does not). Currently there is one wing of the GPC inside Yemen that is under the control of the Houthis and another wing outside Yemen whose members' positions are influenced by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, where they reside. GPC officials outside Yemen, including Hadi, met in Cairo in 2018 in an effort to unify ranks. More extensive talks followed in Jeddah in 2019.^[115] Agreement was reached to recognize Hadi as the party chief while empowering assistant secretaries general to take on more leadership duties, and to ensure party leaders abroad are on the same page in their communications with party officials in Sana'a.^[116] But the split between officials affiliated with Riyadh and those who identify with Abu Dhabi has continued nevertheless.

[111] "Yemen, GPC dismisses President Saleh, refers him to regulatory oversight body hours after his interview with Al-Mayadeen channel [AR]," Rai Al-Youm, October 13, 2015, www.raialyoum.com/اليمن-حزب-المؤتمر-الشعبي-يعزل-صالح-ويج

[112] "Abdullah Saleh's party suspends leaders for supporting Saudi aggression [AR]," Sputnik News, April 4, 2016, <https://arabic.sputniknews.com/arab-world/201604041018185734>

[113] "Sadeq Abu Rass, Saleh's successor as GPC chief [AR]," Al-Jazeera, January 8, 2018, www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/icons/2018/1/8/-/22222222-22222222-22222222-22222222

[114] "Abu Rass appointed as chief of GPC, Al-Rai', Labouza and Ahmad Ali appointed as deputy chiefs and Ghazi Al-Ahwal appointed as secretary general [AR]," Al-Motamar Net, May 2, 2019, <http://www.almotamar.net/news/145746.htm>

[115] "GPC's division 'strengthened' by two meetings in Jeddah and Cairo. GPC secretary general in Yemen, Ahmed Obeid bin Dagher, announced that a meeting was held on Monday evening for a number of party leaders in Jeddah [AR]," Anadolu Agency, July 23, 2019, www.aa.com.tr/ar/الدول-العربية/1539207-انقسام-حزب-المؤتمر-اليميني-يتعزز-باجتماعين-في-جدة-والقاهرة

[116] Interview with a GPC leader who is close to Hadi and who attended these consultations, January 23, 2021.

The final collapse in relations came as no surprise. In the months preceding, Saleh was told the Houthis had prepared a court and a noose similar to the one used to hang former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, commenting: “I know that my relationship with them will end dramatically.”^[126] On December 2, 2017 when he was besieged in an area only a few kilometers square he called for an uprising against the Houthis.^[127] Saleh was killed two days later. Some of his men left Sana’a while others were detained by the Houthis after they seized the GPC headquarters. The Houthis publicly displayed Saleh’s body wrapped in a blanket and the gunmen surrounding his body described his killing as avenging the murder of the movement’s founder, Hussein al-Houthi, who was killed by government forces in 2004.^[128]

The GPC entered a phase similar to that of the Socialist Party after the 1994 war, lacking a figure that could unite it. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar announced he was reactivating his membership in the party,^[129] meaning the president and his deputy were now both from the GPC. However, both Hadi and Al-Ahmar, and other prominent GPC officials, including Rashad al-Alimi, Speaker of Parliament Sultan Al-Barakani and bin Dagher, failed to convince some MPs residing outside Yemen to attend a parliamentary session in support of Hadi held in the city of Sayoun in April 2019.^[130] Sadeq Amin Abu Rass also failed to create a new center within the GPC although he had the largest bloc of GPC members in Sana’a. Without unifying the GPC wings inside and outside Sana’a and establishing new alliances and policies based on the needs of the present rather than past conflicts, the GPC cannot restore its position in the Yemeni scene as a political force. Lacking the freedom of movement and the finances to maintain existing cadres and attract new ones, the GPC will continue to melt away as its people gravitate toward the more effective political forces, including the Houthis, who from an early stage in their alliance have been able to bleed support from the GPC.

[126] “In an exclusive interview with Sputnik, Ahmad al-Soufi: I will document the last moments in Ali Abdullah Saleh’s life [AR],” Sputnik News, January 14, 2019, www.arabic.sputniknews.com/20190114/-1038251481/حاور-خاص-أحمد-الصوفي-علي-عبد-الله-صالح.html

[127] “Saleh turns against the Houthis, calls for turning the page with Saudi Arabia [AR],” Deutsche Welle, December 2, 2017, www.dw.com/ar/صالح-ينقلب-على-الحوثيين-ويدعو-لفتح-صفحة-جديدة-مع-السعودية/a-41624133

[128] “Video of the Houthis’ killing of Ali Abdullah Saleh; Doctor Mohammed Al-Baz commenting on his murder [AR],” Al-Mehwar channel, December 4, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-xBPGE_OzA

[129] “Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar announced activating his GPC membership and exposed the goals of a conspiracy being planned by putschists [AR],” Mareb Press, October 27, 2016, https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=123509&lng=arabic

[130] “Parliamentary session in Sayoun selects Al-Burkani as speaker of parliament replacing Al-Raii, and the majority regains the parliament in the presence of Hadi, the government, the judiciary and ambassadors [AR],” Asharq Al-Awsat, April 14, 2019, www.aawsat.com/home/article/1678246/البركاني-يخاطب-البرلمان-في-صاونا-ويعلن-عن-تعيينه-رئيسا-للجهاز-التشريعي

Islah: An Islamist Movement Losing Allies



Supporters of the General People's Congress rally in Taiz city in support of the internationally recognized government, March 30, 2019 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed al-Basha

When the armed Houthi movement seized Amran in July 2014, Islah said it should be considered a terrorist group.^[131] A few months later, after the Houthis gained in strength and seized Sana'a, Islah tried to reshape its relationship with them. A delegation of Islah officials visited the Houthi movement's leader in Sa'ada in late 2014,^[132] exposing Islah's weakness in the new balance of power.

Islah and the JMP had already been jostling for position within the Mohammed Basindawa-led cabinet (2011-2014). As a representative of the Muslim Brotherhood, Islah supported Mohammed Morsi's regime in Egypt, which was backed by Qatar. This created tension between Islah and its traditional ally, Riyadh, as well as with the UAE, which opposed movements related to both Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood.^[133] In 2014, the UAE detained Yemeni academics from the Islah party over accusations they belonged to a Brotherhood cell working

[131] terrorists [AR], AlAraby AlJadeed, July 10, 2014, www.alaraby.co.uk/الإسلام-إلى-تصنيف-الخوتيين-كإرهابيين

[132] Islah spokesperson Saeed Shamsan discusses details of his meeting with Abdelmalik al-Houthi in an interview with Al-Jazeera, accessible on YouTube, November 29, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQt8dJiMj5I>

[133] "Rapprochement and alienation between the UAE and Islah [AR], EMASC, September 28, 2015, <http://www.emasc-uae.com/news/view/4263>

in the UAE.^[134] Islah cadres in southern Yemen, especially in Aden, were later subject to assassination and harassment via Abu Dhabi allies,^[135] after Riyadh failed to mediate the dispute between them.^[136] UAE media also accused Islah of working with the Houthis in Yemen.^[137]

Islah received a boost in 2016 when Hadi sacked the UAE-backed Khaled Bahah as prime minister and vice president in April 2016,^[138] appointing Ali Mohsen as vice president, a position he continues to hold at time of writing. Islah's disputes with UAE allies in Aden and Taiz escalated into armed clashes that ended in Islah's favor in Taiz.^[139]

Islah's gradual expansion in the South since the mid-1990s hit problems, however, with the rise of the STC in 2017. Besides Shabwa and Wadi Hadramawt, Islah only had the governorates of Marib and Taiz where it was capable of being publicly active and enjoyed strong influence. The Houthis began to put serious pressure on Islah's large network of activities in education, charity work and media, closing some down and confiscating assets. Islah remained closed to attempts by other parties to infiltrate it and peel away members, but it lost its ability to meet and organize. Today, it also remains under pressure from regional powers, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, over its links to the Muslim Brotherhood.

[134] "UAE releases Yemeni academics after detaining them for around two years over what Abu Dhabi's authorities call 'the Brotherhood's cell' [AR]," Anadolu Agency, June 14, 2016, www.aa.com.tr/ar/589404/-/الدول-العربية/الإمارات-تفرج-عن-أكاديميين-يمنيين-بعد-اعتقالهما-نحو-عامين; one of the detainees, Abdelmalek al-Hussami was the former regulatory officer of Islah in the governorate of Taiz before he traveled to teach at an Emirati university.

[135] "Yemen: Ghost of assassinations return to Aden and accusations against Emirati-backed cells [AR]," Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, August 30, 2020, www.alaraby.co.uk/البحرين-تدعي-مشاركة-الجماعة-الإسلامية-في-قتل-مئات-المدنيين-في-اليمن

[136] "Islah leadership visits Abu Dhabi for the first time, both sides discreet about the visit [AR]," AlMawqea Post, November 13, 2018, <https://almawqea.net/news/35668>

[137] "Brotherhood's collusion with the Houthis results in the defeat of Yemeni forces of the Nihm battle; Brotherhood accused of being behind the sudden, mysterious decision to open the Nihm frontline without providing necessary defense preparations [AR]," AlArab, January 29, 2020, www.alarab.co.uk/تواطؤ-الإخوان-مع-الحوثيين-يكلف-القوات-اليمنية-خسارة-معركة-نهم

[138] "Yemen: Hadi decides to dismiss Bahah and appointing Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar as VP and Ahmad bin Dagher as prime minister [AR]," CNN Arabic, April 3, 2016, <https://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2016/04/04/yemen-new-prime-minister-and-vice-president>

[139] Maged Al-Madhaji, "Taiz at the Intersection of the Yemen War," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, March 27, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/9450>. Some Islah elements joined the Qatar-funded "popular mobilization" military camps in 2017, working separately from Islah groups allied to Hadi and the coalition: Interview with an independent Yemeni journalist who was in Taiz, December 3, 2020.

The Houthi Movement and the STC: Actors Whose Impact Diminished the Parties

The Houthi Movement: A Dramatic Rise to Power

Neither the Houthi movement nor the STC are considered political parties, though their greatest expansion took place during the current war. Since 2011, the Houthi movement has been the only power to experience a sustained rise via a strategy of temporary alliances combined with the power of arms. The Houthis have shifted alliances based on what serves their interests. They allied with their rival, Islah, to remove their mutual opponent, Saleh, from power. Then they allied with Saleh against Islah. The Houthi movement always ended these alliances after they had served their purpose. This approach propelled the group to become the de-facto authority over two-thirds of the country's population.

Since its inception, the movement has used religious ideology to bind members to the group and maintain discipline. In addition to its vast network of media, education programs and mosques, since 2015 it has subsumed state institutions under its control. The movement also placed members of prestigious Hashemite families in decision-making positions based on its doctrine of considering religious and political governance to be the exclusive right of this class of society. The Houthis also benefited from the mistakes of the national unity government, then later benefited from the corruption and ineptitude of Hadi's government in Aden, the rivalry between the GPC and Islah, and the crude military actions of the Saudi-led coalition and its internal disputes. All of this may have served them more than support they received from Iran.

Now possessing the upper hand militarily, the Houthis are in a position to impose their will on a political settlement and change the international community's policy toward them. But this domination will not last if the group does not share power with local political forces and address regional fears that its Iranian ties are a threat to neighbors.

The STC: The UAE's War Child

The STC has presented itself as representative of the southern cause since May 2017, when it was formed in reaction to Hadi's dismissal of UAE-backed officials Aiderous al-Zubaidi and Hani bin Breik.^[140] The STC attracted cadres from the Yemeni Socialist Party by adopting secessionist rhetoric similar to what the YSP had used during the 1994 war. Its hostility toward Islah appealed to cadres from the GPC. The STC has provided thousands of youths with salaries, recruiting them into the Security Belt forces and the Hadrami and Shabwani Elite forces. It has been able to do this through direct Emirati financial, media, military and political support.

[140] "Overview of the STC in Yemen and Aidarus al-Zubaidi [AR]," BBC Arabic, January 29, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/in-depth-42860424>

The STC is geographically active in the space left by the Socialist Party, which the GPC and Islah filled after 1994. While the Socialist Party prefers a federal state of two regions, North and South, the STC calls for two separate states in the North and South along pre-unification lines. The Socialists used secessionist terms to describe the military expansion of the Houthis and Saleh's GPC in 2015 as an invasion by "forces in the North".^[141] But STC expansion has come largely in densely populated southern areas, especially in Aden, Al-Dhalea and Lahj; it has been less successful in the eastern governorates. The establishment of the Hadramawt Inclusive Conference in 2017, a gathering to unify local political positions, deterred STC efforts to attract support from influential Hadramis.^[142] And in late 2019, when STC-allied forces seized Aden and advanced eastward, they could not take Shabwa.

The STC became a partner in the Yemeni government formed as per the 2019 Riyadh Agreement despite its secessionist rhetoric. However, if UAE financial support dries up, the STC will likely look to Riyadh for support. This would put pressure on the STC to implement Riyadh Agreement stipulations about integrating its forces with those of the government.

The STC is clearly at a crossroads. It is a partner in a government it prevents from operating in areas under its control. It also presents itself to northern and other political forces as the legitimate representative of the South, which contradicts government, regional and international pledges to maintain the unity of Yemen. The STC may be forced to choose between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, while hoping to hold on to its independent military formations. Historical rivalries between its base in the areas of Yafea, Al-Dhalea and Lahj and the people of Abyan and Shabwa will continue to hamper efforts to extend its influence eastwards.

Losing a Say in Yemen's Future: Traditional Parties Fear Being Shut Out

Despite the political parties' support for Hadi, their relations with him were strained. In June 2015, the Nasserist Party demanded that the committee tasked with following up the outcomes of the Riyadh Agreement make clear that the parties were not subordinates in government.^[143] The Socialist Party also wanted, but did not receive, a clearer statement of the parties' relationship with the

[141] "Socialist experience in South Yemen [AR]," BBC Arabic via YouTube, August 22, 2019, video 13:30-14:20, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOjd_6E-Gfg

[142] "Preparations to hold it today, how will the Inclusive Hadramawt Conference overcome the obstacle of opposition? [AR]" Al-Mawqea Post, April 21, 2017, <https://almawqeaapost.net/news.php?id=18952>; in a July 2020 interview with the Sana'a Center, a leader in the Inclusive Hadramawt Conference said that, unless its own financial situation improves, the IHC will be unable to compete with the STC's substantial financial resources.

[143] Abdullah al-Noman, "Beyond Politics with Abdullah al-Noaman, secretary general of the Nasserist Party [AR]," interview with Aref al-Sarami, Beyond Politics, Yemen Shabab channel via YouTube, November 15, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nrBM1gsOog>

coalition.^[144] The parties' role was also absent in President Hadi's consultative committee.^[145] After dismissing Bahah in April 2016, the Nasserist and Socialist parties dealt with Hadi's governments as unconstitutional.^[146] The Socialist Party did not nominate ministers to represent it in Bin Dagher's government and those chosen were selected on an individual basis.^[147] Feeling excluded, they have tried since 2017 to form their own alliance to coordinate activities.^[148] They managed to declare the formation of one in 2019 in support of the internationally recognized government, but the initiative went no further.^[149]

Since peace negotiations officially remain limited to Hadi's government and the Houthi movement as two armed parties to the conflict, the main fear of the parties is being shut out of any future political settlement. These fears are enhanced by the composition of the government formed in December 2020,^[150] based on the Riyadh Agreement between Hadi's government and the STC. Despite its use of arms against the government, the STC received five ministerial portfolios while the Socialist Party, the former ruling party in the South, only got two.

In recent years, the war has all but paralyzed party activity. No new members have joined the Nasserists since 2019, while Islah and the Socialists have few new members in government-controlled areas. The GPC membership has declined since 2011 due to its loss of influence and resources.^[151] No general conference has been held by any party since the war began. The Nasserist Party was the last to hold its general conference in 2014. The Socialist Party's last general conference was in 2005, although it held a small general conference with limited powers in 2014 that selected Abdulrahman al-Saqqaf as its new secretary-general. Islah held the last session of its fourth general conference in 2009, and the GPC had the final sessions of its seventh general conference the same year. None of the traditional parties has been able to organize protests or rallies since 2017, when the GPC held a conference commemorating the 35th anniversary of its founding. Hadi's government and the de facto authorities in Sana'a and Aden insist on public displays of loyalty.

[144] "The Socialist Party calls for unifying powers in support of legitimacy and reformulating relations with Coalition [AR]," Al-Eshteraky, August 30, 2019, <http://aleshteraky.com/hegac/item/19842-adamcjaci-ihrh-dchfih-adbhj-adhareq-ddmjriq-harahq-nia%D8%BAq-adrdabq-er-adcfada>

[145] Ali al-Sarari, "Beyond Politics with Ali al-Sarari, member of the Socialist Party's political bureau [AR]," interview with Aref al-Sarami, Beyond Politics, Yemen Shabab channel via YouTube, December 14, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5RjIRBuZKo&list=PLVCrgW4RRY398YD-oDQIJlEm-ykR7BoCs&index=52>

[146] Al-Noaman, "Beyond Politics with Abdullah al-Noaman."

[147] Al-Sarari, "Beyond Politics with Ali al-Sarari."

[148] Al-Noaman, "Beyond Politics with Abdullah al-Noaman."

[149] "From Sayoun, a national coalition consisting of 16 parties to support the legitimacy is announced [AR]," Al-Mahrah Post, April 14, 2019, <https://almahrahpost.com/news/10337#YPyNNoxRXIU>

[150] "Republican decision to form a cabinet, ministers named [AR]," Saba News Agency, December 18, 2020, <https://www.sabanew.net/viewstory/69728>

[151] Sana'a Center interviews with leaders in the GPC, Islah, the Nasserist Party and the Socialist Party in January 2021.

The last time political parties took part in parliamentary elections was 2003, and the last time they participated in presidential and local elections was 2006, meaning citizens lost their main vehicle for holding them accountable. Except for the GPC's Al-Methaq newspaper in Sana'a, party newspapers were suspended in 2015 amid limited public use of party websites. Parties thus became elitist entities lacking contact with their popular bases and whose leaders do not internally communicate and coordinate with each other. Between the war and this partisan paralysis, the traditional political parties risk withering as their cadres age and membership dries up.

Party Leaders' Views on the Challenges of War and Peace

One official in the Socialist Party said his party had played an appropriate role during the current war in submitting peace initiatives. Fadl Sha'ef, head of the party's regulatory department, argued that the GPC and Islah bore some responsibility for the current situation due to policies they had adopted since the 1994 war. He also said it was important that all political parties, including the STC, were involved in drawing Yemen's future.^[152]

The Socialist Party's branch chairman in Taiz, Bassem al-Hajj, said political parties with and without allied armed forces should have equal say in preparing a peace settlement. He added that popular confidence must be restored in the political parties as one way of ensuring there was no going back to conflict. Al-Hajj urged all parties to present themselves as models of integrity, calling on them to critique their previous experience, update their use of communication and technology, and expand participation to include young men and women in leadership positions, like the Socialist Party has done in Taiz and Hadramawt in 2020-21. Party leaders need to present a model of integrity.^[153]

Fadl Shaef, of the Socialists' regulatory department, said the main challenge faced by the party today was picking up from where party work had stopped due to the war. Some party work has resumed quietly in some areas, he said. However, the party needs to address the general economic situation (which pushed some of the party's cadres to join the army, for which their memberships were frozen), and recover funds that have been confiscated or frozen in Sana'a banks.^[154]

As for Islah, Ahmad al-Muqrimi, head of the party's political department in Taiz governorate, said he blamed Saleh's previous GPC government for the collapse of the political settlement and pushing the country to war. He justified

[152] Sana'a Center interview with Fadl Shaef, head of the regulatory department in the Socialist Party, March 22, 2021.

[153] Interview with Bassem al-Hajj, chairman of the Socialist Party in Taiz, February 20, 2021.

[154] Sana'a Center interview with Fadl Shaef, head of the regulatory department in the Socialist Party, March 22, 2021.

his party's participation in the conflict, saying it was in defense of the national dialogue.^[155] Another Islah figure, Abdelqader al-Robadi, said it would take a new broad dialogue lasting perhaps two decades to address the consequences of war. Militias will have to be disarmed and the influence of foreign powers limited, with regional and international guarantees to make sure any political settlement does not break down into conflict again. He also pointed to a smothering of political work by the Houthis, who he said claimed a "divine right" to impose their rule and expressed concerns about the repercussions of portraying Islah in a negative light, as well as a need for Islah to develop its bylaws and rehabilitate its cadres.^[156]

As for the GPC, Ilan Abdelhaq, a party official in Taiz, said the party was trying to maintain its presence on the ground in order to make a strong showing when political work finally resumes. Abdelhaq said parties such as Islah had done much to provoke conflict after 2011 but also had become victims of war themselves. Abdelhaq said the GPC does not currently have a vision for expanding the participation of youths, women and the marginalized due to the scattered location of its leadership and efforts by the Houthi authorities to marginalize the party.^[157]

Abdo Ghaleb al-Udaini, head of the Nasserist party's political division, said the parties need to form a national alliance to allow the resumption of political work, and that they would need new ideas to avoid the rise of new parties to replace them. He blamed the parties as a whole for dragging the country to war by hindering the transition process after the Gulf initiative was signed and the JMP joined the national unity government. He said Islah deserved 50 percent of the blame, the Socialists 30 percent and his own party 20 percent (an unusual statement of self-censure). Although he cited many challenges, including social divisions, human rights violations and a lack of security, Al-Udaini said the Nasserists had made strides in including women and youth in the party's central committees, where 30 percent of members are women and 30 percent are classified as youth.^[158]

[155] Interview with Ahmad al-Muqrimi, head of the Islah political department in Taiz, February 22, 2021.

[156] Interview with Islah official Abdelqader al-Robadi, February 15, 2021.

[157] Interview with Ilan Abdelhaq, a GPC official in Taiz, March 11, 2021.

[158] Interview with Abdo Ghaleb al-Udaini, head of the Nasserist party's political division, March 12, 2021. The parties use the word youth (shabab) without a specific definition, but "under 35" is a rough understanding of the term in Yemeni society.

III. PARTY MECHANICS: STRUCTURE, ELECTORAL STRENGTH AND ATTRIBUTES

There was no law regulating the work of political parties before 1990. Those parties that existed were either opposition parties working mainly in secret or ruling parties established as vehicles for an existing authority (e.g., the Socialist Party in Aden and the GPC in Sana'a). This section, focusing on the multiparty phase since 1990, examines party leadership structures, key parties' track records in parliamentary votes and women's representation within parties and in elections. It also considers parties' differing ideologies, which underpin their internal policies and approaches. Though diverse, the parties share some common characteristics, which shape Yemen's overall political environment.

The Party Leaders

The largest Yemeni parties, the GPC and Islah, were headed by their founders until their deaths. As for the Socialist Party, its first secretary general after unification, Ali Salem Al-Beidh, was forced to flee following the armed conflict with the GPC and Islah. Although the Socialist and Nasserist parties went through several leadership changes, no woman ever served as leader in those or any other parties.

GPC, Islah and the Nasserists' leaders have always been northerners, bar Hadi, although he is not recognized as head of the party by the current GPC leadership in Sana'a. All Socialist Party leaders since unification have been southerners.^[159] The Nasserist Party's leaders, on the other hand, have always been from Taiz governorate, a tradition that goes back to the party's days of underground work before 1990. The top figures of these parties currently operate from abroad.

[159] Abdelfattah Ismail led the party when it was established in Aden in 1978 and until 1981, and he governed the South during that phase although he was northern. The party did not differentiate between North and South Yemen when it governed the South.

Leaders of Major Parties Since the Multiparty Phase Began in 1990

- (GPC) General People's Congress
 - Ali Abdullah Saleh, chairperson from the party's 1982 founding until his 2017 death, after which the party split into two wings
 - Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, based in Riyadh, leader of the external wing from December 2017 to present
 - Sadiq Amin Abu Rass, based in Sana'a, leader of the domestic wing from December 2017 to present
- (Islah) Yemeni Congregation for Reform
 - Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar, chairperson from the party's 1990 founding until his death in 2007
 - Mohammed Abdullah al-Yadumi 2007, to present
- Yemeni Socialist Party
 - Ali Salem al-Beidh, who took over as secretary-general after defeating a rival faction in January 1986 and held the position until fleeing to Oman during Yemen's 1994 civil war
 - Ali Saleh Abbad, secretary general from after the 1994 war until the party's 5th General Conference in August 2005
 - Yassin Saeed Noaman, succeeded Abbad from the 2005 conference and continued until the 2014 party conference
 - Abdulrahman al-Saqqaf, succeeded Noaman from 2014 to present
- Nasserist Unionist People's Organization
 - Abdulghani Thabet, secretary general from pre-unification until 1993
 - Abdulmalik al-Mekhlafi, served two six-year terms until 2005
 - Sultan Hizam Al-Atwani, succeeded al-Mekhlafi, from 2005 to 2014
 - Abdullah Nouman, 2014 to the present

Indicators from Parliamentary Elections (1993, 1997, 2003)

Elections are a basic indicator of the size and influence of political parties, as well as the nature of democratic practices in any country. This applies to post-unity Yemeni elections, despite persistent questions about impartiality and accuracy of results. The financial resources of each party were a key factor in election results and general competitiveness of the parties – for example, the Nasserist organization spent only 1 percent of what the GPC spent in the 2003 elections. On the other hand, even though its resources are robust, Islah spent only 10 billion rials compared to estimates of between 40 and 60 billion rials spent by the GPC in the same elections.^[160] The ruling GPC used state resources and capabilities in the service of its electoral campaigns, causing the opposition parties to complain that they were competing against the state, not a party.^[161]

During the period in question, Yemen saw three parliamentary elections (1993, 1997, and 2003), local elections (2001), and a presidential election (1999). Later, in 2006, a joint presidential-local election was held, which was considered to be the country's last multi-party election. In presenting the indicators of these elections, we will only review parliamentary elections.

The parliamentary vote of April 1993 was the first multi-party elections held in Yemen, with genuine party rivalry, an unprecedented balance between the major parties, strong media coverage and extensive participation. Voter turnout was high (84.5 percent) of those registered, and regional divisions were apparent, though the vote took place three years after unification. The GPC won only three seats in the southern governorates, where the Socialist Party largely prevailed; Islah did not win any seats in the south. The GPC and Islah won the majority of seats in the northern governorates, but the Socialist Party's share was high (15 seats) compared to the GPC and Islah performances in the south.

Although 22 parties participated, only eight parties made it to parliament, three of which gained one seat each. The outcome of the 1993 elections dramatically changed the Yemeni landscape, as they helped lay the groundwork for the transformation of a political crisis into an armed conflict among parties of the Tripartite Government Coalition (GPC, Socialists and Islah).

The April 1997 election was held despite the open wounds of the 1994 war in southern Yemeni society. The Socialists' boycott of the vote gave the GPC a majority of seats, enabling it to form a single-party government. Only 12 parties had participated in the elections, of which only four gained parliamentary seats; voter turnout was down significantly from the 1993 elections, to 61 percent of

[160] Al-Kamel, "Sources of political funding of parties," p. 133. By contrast, the Socialists and Nasserists spent far less, at 100 million and 60 million rials, respectively.

[161] "Annual Report for Human Rights and Democracy in Yemen, 2007," Yemeni Observatory for Human Rights, April 2008, p. 23.

those registered. The GPC also swept southern governorates that normally leaned toward the Socialists, except Hadramawt, where Islah gained more seats than the GPC.

The third parliamentary elections, in April 2003, gave the GPC an unprecedented majority despite the Socialist Party's decision to take part this time. Voter turnout also rose to 76.6 percent.

Table 1:



**Main Party Votes, Seats Won in
Parliamentary Elections 1993, 1997, 2003**

	April 1993				April 1997				April 2003			
Party	Votes	% of Vote	Seats	% of Seats	Votes	% of Vote	Seats	% of Seats	Votes	% of Vote	Seats	% of Seats
GPC	640,523	28.7%	122	40.5%	1,187,339	43.4%	189	62.1%	3,464,716	57.8%	229	76.1%
Islah	382,545	17.1%	63	20.4%	637,728	23.3%	53	17.6%	1,349,774	22.5%	45	15%
Yemeni Socialist Party	413,984	18.5%	56	18.6%	0*	0	0	0	291,659	4.9%	7	2.3%
Socialist Baath Party	80,362	3.6%	7	2.3%	20,409	0.74%	2	0.66%	40,879	0.68%	2	0.66%
Nasserist Unionist People's Organization	52,300	2.3%	1	0.33%	55,438	2%	3	1%	109,720	1.8%	3	1%

*The Socialist Party boycotted April 1997 elections

Source: Yemen's High Electoral and Referendum Commission^[162]

Although the opposition parties were running as a bloc under the JMP umbrella, the GPC still took 57.8 percent of votes cast and 76.1 percent of parliamentary seats. The JMP won 29.9 percent of the vote and 18.9 percent of seats. The disparity between votes and seats indicates structural problems in the electoral system. A system of proportional representation, as the JMP later requested in 2005, would have given the JMP parties around 30 percent of seats. Poor coordination within the JMP meant the loss of at least ten constituencies in southern governorates, where Islah and the Socialist Party both put up candidates that then lost to the GPC

[162] Yemen's High Electoral and Referendum Commission, Statistical Book for Parliamentary and Presidential Elections 1993-2003 (Sana'a, 2006), pp. 16-84.

through splitting the opposition vote.^[163] Ten of the 14 independent candidates who won seats later joined the GPC,^[164] increasing the latter's parliamentary seats to 240, or 79.4 percent.

Thus, the GPC solidified the electoral domination it had realized in 1997. It was the only party to record a dramatic rise in parliamentary seats, from 122 seats in 1993 to 189 seats in 1997 to 229 seats in 2003 (before the 10 independents joined). The Socialist Party recorded a dramatic loss, from 56 seats in 1993 to only seven in 2003, and although Islah's seats declined from 63 seats in 1993 to 53 in 1997 and 45 in 2003, it was not as sharp a fall as sustained by the Socialists.

Yemen's parliamentary elections also affirmed the power of tribal affiliation. Tribal sheikhs and tribesmen won 51 percent of parliamentary seats in 2003,^[165] most of them affiliated with the ruling GPC, 16 of whose local branches were in the hands of tribal sheikhs in 2009.^[166] Islah's competitiveness receded as tribal leaders turned to the GPC because of the benefits it was seen as providing as the party of state. Party platforms have not been an important element in voting for candidates, a phenomenon possibly linked to Yemen's high illiteracy rate.

Following the 2003 polls, the JMP parties held numerous rounds of dialogue with the GPC that focused heavily on the electoral system, voter registration, impartiality of state institutions and use of public funds. But the discussions brought no results before the uprising of 2011 changed the course of events.

Women's Participation in Party Work and Elections

While parties historically have been keen to mobilize women as voters, even those that have enabled women's involvement in the public sphere have tended to cater to Yemen's male-dominated, tribal society by fielding male parliamentary candidates.^[167] Recent and reliable data on the numbers, proportions and nature of involvement of women in political parties are not available, and the current conflict's impact on party activity and communication complicates such data collection. Research from the early 2000s suggests that, on average, fewer than 15 percent of major parties' combined active membership was female, with women holding roughly 10 percent of senior positions (see Table 2).^[168]

[163] "The April 27, 2003 Parliamentary Elections in The Republic of Yemen," National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), April 2006, pp. 25-6, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/1701_yem_elect-rep.pdf

[164] Ibid., p. 24.

[165] Adel Al-Sharjabi et al., "The Palace and Diwan: The Tribe's Political Role in Yemen [AR]," Yemeni Observatory for Human Rights, October 2009, p. 70.

[166] Ibid., p. 61.

[167] Adel Al-Sharjabi, "Political Participation of Yemeni Women: A historical-cultural analysis in light of gender theory," paper presented for discussion at the "Women's Experience in Elections: National Consultative Meeting with Women Candidates in Yemen's Parliamentary Elections of April 27, 2003," Sisters Arab Forum for Human Rights (SAF), Sana'a, September 2005, p. 40.

[168] Ma'ad Yikrib Hussein al-Hamdani, "Political Participation of Yemeni Women," Mohammedia Hamdania House for Studies and Research, Yemen, 2nd edition, 2010, p. 98; Nabil Abdel Hafiz, "Party Work and Women's Participation – Need for Modernization and Activation," presented at a symposium on political parties and the culture of women's political participation, Sana'a, December 29, 2008.

Table 2:

Women's Representation in Four Main Parties, Early 2000s

Party	% of Membership	% of Senior Party Positions
GPC	20%	12%
Islah	13%	9%
Yemeni Socialist Party	8%	10%
Nasserist Unionist People's Organization	12%	12%
Average Proportion	13.3%	10.8%

Source: Compiled from Al-Hamdani (2010) and Abdel Hafiz (2008).

Party officials interviewed by the Sana'a Center in late 2020 and early 2021 consistently estimated the proportion of female representation in their respective parties as much higher, ranging from 32 percent to 37 percent of general membership and from 20 percent to 30 percent in terms of holding senior posts.^[169] To what extent these perceptions are realistic is unclear. Some parties have instituted measures aimed at improving female participation: The Socialist Party, for example, specifies in its regulations a quota system requiring at least 30 percent of senior positions be held by women; the Nasserists, at their 11th General Conference held in Sana'a in 2014, established a 30 percent threshold for women's participation in its higher level bodies. However, the trend through the 1990s and early 2000s had been downward in terms of women's candidacies and victories in parliamentary elections and, later, also in terms of appointments to cabinet-level positions in government. Even prior to the war, when Yemen's political parties were more active, they did not allocate funding within their budgets to advance women's political participation^[170] and avoided joint initiatives to empower

[169] According to estimates by leaders of the Socialist Party: the proportion of women members of the party was 32 percent, and their proportion in senior positions between 27 and 30 percent. Regulations were changed in favor of women in the party, such as the adoption of a quota to represent them in the highest most senior positions by at least 30 percent. Regarding Islah, the percentage of women members of the party was estimated by reformist leaders at around an average of 35 percent, and the percentage in senior positions at 20 percent at the party level. Leaders of the Nasserist party organization estimated the average proportion of women members in the party at 33 percent, and their average percentage in senior positions at 30 percent. Leaders from the GPC estimated the proportion of women members of the party at 37 percent, and their proportion in senior positions at 27 percent. Interviews were conducted between September 2020 and February 2021.

[170] Rana Ghanem, "Political Violence Against Women in Yemen," working paper presented by the Second National Conference against Violence against Women, Sana'a March 7-8, 2010.

women. When the Sana'a office of the US-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) proposed some seats be designated for women only, as mentioned in its report after the 2003 elections, Islah expressed reservations, citing objections from traditionalist elements within the party, and the GPC took no action to move the proposal forward.^[171]

The limited published information regarding women's participation in elections suggests the number of women voters has increased, despite declining numbers of women candidates and winners in each election. In 1993 there were only 21 female candidates put forward by the parties, which was less than two percent of the 1,196 male candidates, while 24 women ran as independent candidates; in 1997 the number of women candidates fell to 17 and in 2003 to 11.^[172] Yet the proportion of women in the voter registry increased from 17.8 percent in 1993 to 42.2 percent in the 2003 elections,^[173] an increase that was likely due to party propaganda and male relatives urging them to vote.

Within the framework of the post-2011 political transition process, the participation rate of women in the National Dialogue Conference in 2013 was 29.4 percent (166 women and 399 men).^[174] This level was only reached because the Technical Preparatory Committee organizing the dialogue set a quota of no fewer than 30 percent women among the 565 representatives.^[175] When the government of national unity was formed in December 2011, women held three ministerial portfolios for the first time,^[176] and in late 2014 a fourth received a minister of state portfolio.^[177] But women's participation in government sustained a setback with the formation of an all-male cabinet in December 2020 – the first Yemeni government without women since 2001.

[171] "The April 27, 2003 Parliamentary Elections in the Republic of Yemen," NDI, pp. 27.

[172] Yemen's High Electoral and Referendum Committee, "Statistical Book for Parliamentary and Presidential Elections, 1993-2003," 2006 edition, pp. 10; "The April 27, 2003 Parliamentary Elections in The Republic of Yemen," NDI, 27.

[173] Ibid., pp. 9, 70.

[174] Intilaq Mohammed Abdul Malik al-Mutawakkil, "The level of women's participation in the National Dialogue Conference and its implications on their future leadership roles," presented at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Berlin, December 17, 2013.

[175] Rania Nadi Mohammed Hussein, Magda Ahmed Mustafa, Wardah Tamer Fawy and Yasmine Abu Al-Hajjaj, "Political Participation of Yemeni Women After the Process of Political Change in Yemen [AR]," Arab Center for Research and Studies, January 2, 2019, <http://www.acrseg.org/41070>

[176] Hamedan al-Ali, "For the first time in Yemen: Four women in the government [AR]," New Arab, November 8, 2014, www.alaraby.co.uk/-لأول-مرة-في-اليمن-أربع-نساء-في-الحكومة

[177] Samah Bin Abada, "Yemeni women's dream of winning their rights after the revolution died early [AR]," The New Arab, January 25, 2015, www.alarab.co.uk/المرأة-اليمنية-حلمها-بفوزها-في-الانتخابات-بعد-ثورة-الربيع-الجزيري-موت-مبكرا

Yemeni Legislation on Political Parties

Yemeni legislation guarantees Yemeni citizens freedom of political affiliation, and the constitution clearly provides for the establishment of “political and party pluralism by the republic’s political system with the aim of a peaceful transition of power.”^[178] This was the first time that political parties gained momentum, supported by the power of Yemen’s constitution. To organize the work of the parties, the Political Parties and Organizations Act No. (66) of 1991 was promulgated, which stipulated that “public freedoms, including political and party pluralism based on constitutional legitimacy, are considered a right and a pillar of the political and social system of the Republic of Yemen” and “the Yemeni people have the right to form political parties and organizations and the right to voluntarily affiliate with any party or political organization.”^[179]

However, Law No. 66 failed to guarantee equal opportunities and resources, as it contains provisions that give large parties the privilege of accessing state aid while denying this to smaller parties. Access to aid is linked to the number of members each party bloc has in parliament and the number of votes won in the most recent elections, making it tougher for small parties. It also provides for the formation of a seven-member Party Affairs Committee, including three Cabinet ministers, which allows the ruling party to monopolize the acceptance and rejection of applications to set up new parties.

More importantly, Law No. 66 is only selectively enforced. It prohibits members of the judiciary, officers and members of the armed forces and security forces, and members of the diplomatic and consular corps (serving in Yemeni missions abroad) from affiliating with any party during their tenure in office, but such violations of the law were a key complaint from the parties in pre-2011 dialogues with the GPC. It also says that political parties enjoy immunity from inspection and wiretapping, but the arrest and trial of numerous party activists over the years indicate security forces often ignored these stipulations. The law says the parties should not receive foreign aid but many politicians do. In 2012 it became public knowledge that Yemeni officials and political figures had received funds from the Saudi Special Committee,^[180] and media reported similar revelations in 2017.^[181] The law also says no party should be subordinate to a party outside Yemen, but Socialist, Baathist, Nasserist and Islamist parties were all part of wider regional movements and relied on external funding to operate.^[182]

[178] “Constitution of the Republic of Yemen [AR],” full text, National Information Center, <https://yemen-nic.info/yemen/dostor.php>

[179] “Law No. (66) of 1991, concerning political parties and organizations,” full text, website of the National Information Center, https://yemen-nic.info/db/laws_ye/detail.php?ID=11337

[180] Muhammed al-Maqaleh, “The special committee: Yemen’s hidden government [AR],” Yemenat, June 6, 2012, <https://yemenat.net/2012/06/91486/>

[181] “Payrolls of the Special Committee: Saudi Arabia reduces its support for Islah and supports new parties [AR],” Masa Press, April 25, 2017, www.masa-press.net/2017/04/25/حصري-كشوفات-رواتب-اللجنة-الخاصة-السع/

[182] Al-Salahi and Al-Maytami, Arab Political Parties, p. 22.

While the law prohibits parties from using mosques and educational and governmental facilities for party activity or propaganda, Yemen's two largest parties, the GPC and Islah, have relied on educational institutions and their affiliates in all elections. Islah used religious institutes under its management to educate its youth cadres before the practice was ended in 2001 at the height of the tension between Islah and the GPC.^[183] Agreement was reached after 2011 for the cadres of both parties to share school administrations,^[184] and mosques were among the most important platforms for propaganda for Islah, which includes among its parliamentarians mosque preachers such as Haza'a Al-Masouri, Mohammed al-Hazmi and Abdullah al-Udaini. Further, the preacher of the Great Mosque in Sana'a was a member of the GPC's parliamentary bloc.

Characteristics and Approaches Shared by Yemeni Parties

A review of the regulations of the three largest Yemeni parties (the GPC,^[185] Islah,^[186] and the Socialist Party^[187]) reveals the following general features:

- All outline a system of internal democracy of varying degrees, and all adopt secret elections as a mechanism for deciding senior positions.
- The regulations clearly reflect the general ideological orientation of each party; this was more visible in Islah.
- The rules of procedure of Islah are unique in their explicit religious nature, asserting that the party is based on the "comprehensive Islamic approach to all aspects of life" and the Islamic principle of "propagating virtue and preventing vice." It says that the constitution and the laws governing political action in Yemen are to be understood within the framework of Islamic law.
- Internal accountability mechanisms are included for the leaders and bodies of each party, but some regulations grant party presidents a semblance of immunity against accountability. The GPC, for example, does not set a limit to the duration of senior positions; the Socialist Party sets a two-term limit and Islah sets a three-term limit.
- There are gaps regarding emergency situations. Islah is unique in allowing its elected bodies to continue in their positions without a term limit if the party's general conference cannot hold elections. But the GPC grants the general committee the right to extend the work of elected party formations for

[183] Al-Ahmar, *Memoirs: Issues and Positions*, p. 320.

[184] Author's interview with a former school administrator in Sana'a, July 5, 2020.

[185] The researcher relied on a paper copy of the rules of procedures, but the internal rules and regulations of the GPC were published in a series of sections on the party's website (Almotamar.Net); link for Section 1: April 23, 2009 [AR], <https://www.almethaq.info/news/article230.htm>

[186] "The rules of procedures of the Yemeni Islah Party [AR]," full text, <https://alislah-ye.net/userimages/pdf/System%20Islah%20Party.pdf>

[187] The rules of procedures of the Yemeni Socialist Party, Article 4 [AR], <https://eshterakimedia.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/pdf>

only six months if elections cannot be held on time – these formations do not currently conform with party regulations.

- During the ongoing war, the parties have violated their internal rules and regulations by failing to hold meetings of their bodies and general conferences in accordance with party regulations.
- There are few rules to boost women’s participation in party work. The GPC requires a minimum of 15 percent of its elected representatives, committees and governing bodies be women; Islah regulations do not specify any minimum.
- Islah^[188] and the GPC^[189] require members to take an oath of allegiance that includes religious obligations.
- The GPC uses language in its oath of allegiance that would normally be considered as falling within the jurisdiction of state, not party institutions, such as defending “national unity, sovereignty, independence and the republican system.”

Some common attributes also can be seen among Yemeni political forces based on their practices and rhetoric, most notably:

- Resorting to violence to achieve political gains in violation of the law, which prohibits parties from forming militias or carrying out activities within the army. Despite this some Yemeni parties have armed wings, complicating the political work,^[190] and each has a history of armed conflict.^[191] The GPC was founded as the ruling party of the North and controlled the military institution that fought the 1994 war in alliance with Islah against the Socialist Party, which controlled the southern army and used it in the war. The GPC and Islah used violence in Sana’a during the 2011 uprising through armed forces loyal

[188] “The rules of procedure of the Yemeni Islah Party,” Article 6. The oath reads: “I swear to God Almighty to adhere to the Book of God and the Sunna of his Messenger (PBUH), to adhere to the objectives of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah), and to execute the duties of membership without obstinacy to God. God is my witness.”

[189] Article 14, paragraph 8, stipulates that one of the conditions for membership is for the member to take the following oath: “I swear to God Almighty that I will abide by the Book of God, His Messenger’s Sunna, and the principles and objectives of the Yemeni revolution, the constitution, the National Charter, and preserve national unity, and abide by the General People’s Congress regulations and programs, preserve its intellectual and organizational unity, execute its directives, keep its secrets, and notto belong to any other party, organization, or political grouping. God is my witness”; <https://www.almethaq.info/news/article230.htm>

[190] A point noted by Jamal Ben Omar when serving as UN Special Envoy to Yemen in 201; “Candidly with Jamal Ben Omar [AR],” Sky News Arabia, September 28, 2014, video 7:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znmK_XaVw3o&t=340s

[191] Among other earlier examples; nationalists and leftists in Sana’a fought Baathists within the military in 1968; Nasserists in the Yemeni military attempted to oust Saleh in 1978; and Aden-backed leftists of the National Liberation Front (many of whose members affiliated with the Yemeni Socialist Party) fought into the early 1980s against the government and the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamic Front, which fed into Islah once it officially began in 1990.

to them that recruited thousands of young people.^[192] Elements of the GPC used arms in their conflict with the Houthis in 2017. Those who managed to flee Sana'a subsequently joined the UAE-backed forces led by Saleh's nephew, Tareq Saleh, which recently announced its own political wing. As for the Houthis and the STC, their expansion relied on the use of weapons against their opponents to achieve political gains. Although they are political actors, they are not considered political parties under the law. During the National Dialogue in 2013, the Houthis wanted their group's members to take a greater share of civilian and military positions.^[193]

- Associating with an external force, ideologically and financially e.g., the Socialist Party with Moscow, the Baathists with Baghdad and Damascus, Islah with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as well as the Saudi government, the Nasserist Party with Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and then Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi, the Houthis with Tehran and the STC with Abu Dhabi. While the GPC differed because of its non-ideological establishment, its leaders have been associated with Saudi Arabia, receiving funds during the Saleh and Hadi regimes. These parties and groups have received explicit financial support from abroad and have regulated their positions as a result.
- Failing to respect the outcomes of elections that go against their will. The most recent example of this was the JMP calling on Saleh to step down even though he won the 2006 presidential election and its failure to accept his proposal for early elections.
- There are no clear boundaries between the political work of these parties and their foundational discourse of revolution.
- Raising slogans of pluralism without complying with them. As the ruling party, the GPC arrested, prosecuted and marginalized its opponents, and these policies continued under the national unity government in 2011.
- A view that supports power-sharing, which conflicts with the majoritarian approach that gives power to the winning party in elections; this perspective prevents minority parties from accepting a role limited to holding the government accountable for its actions until the next election.
- Presenting themselves as the sole bearers of national and religious principles and denouncing those who disagree with them.

[192] With the military divided between Saleh and Ali Mohsen in 2011, the Republican Guard led by Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali, was the military arm of Saleh/GPC, while the 1st Armored Division and the Northwest Military Zone was the military arm of Ali Mohsen and his allies from the Islah party. Each of these men recruited loyal young people through social figures who managed to attract youths.

[193] "The Sa'ada issue - Solutions and Assurances [AR]," Ansar Allah's proposal document to the National Dialogue, 2013, p. 7, www.pdsp-yemen.org/2013/07/19/القضية-صعدة-الحلول-والضماناترؤية-أنصار

CONCLUSION

Whatever their strengths and weaknesses, the ongoing war makes it difficult for the political parties to play an active role. The country is mired in a complicated conflict with sectarian and regional dimensions.

The Houthis began their armed expansion by removing a Salafi group from the center of Dammaj, in southern Sa'ada governorate, in January 2014, accusing it of harboring terrorists — the same allegation directed at the army in Amran, which fell to the Houthis several months later. After Dammaj, the Salafi groups, as well as Al-Qaeda, mobilized to confront the Houthis in several areas including Al-Bayda governorate. These political forces have allowed themselves to be classified largely on a religious basis, with the Houthis as a Shiite religious group and Islah as a Sunni religious party, as if they represent a continuation of ancient sectarian divides. Most Salafis have regarded party activity and democracy as Western heresy that contradicts Islamic law; the Houthis and other religious groups have been in agreement on this point, though each has its own doctrinal alternative. The Houthis believe in the guardianship of Ahl Al-Bayt (descendants from the family of the Prophet Mohammed), while the Salafis also believe in obeying a guardian, even if he rules by force. For both, electoral politics are a means to impose their religious vision and practices on society.

The other key aspect of the current political map is its regionalism. The STC addresses the inhabitants of specific regions in the South, while the Houthis' Zaidi Shiite base is located in northern regions alone, making its religious vision in another way a regional rhetoric.

The main states backing parties to the Yemen conflict (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran) do not believe in a robust multi-party system, and so are content to promote the religious rhetoric of their local allies. In the absence of an inclusive national vision, parties have developed subnational visions that are inconsistent with the state project. The multiparty working environment has been all but destroyed by the exclusionary practices of the various political forces, non-adherence to binding legislative references due to the conflict and the domination of military groups after dialogue descended into violence. In the current situation, de facto powers hold sway in different parts of the country that recognize neither each other nor the authority of the interim president.

The functioning of political parties requires a state capable of enforcing the rule of law, protecting freedoms and criminalizing violence as a means of attaining political goals. This situation is only getting worse, as the culture of democracy and pluralism becomes a distant memory and a growing majority of Yemenis have no experience with it whatsoever. The youngest voters during the last parliamentary election in 2003 are now 36 years old.^[194] Since 60.4 percent of the population is under the age of 25,^[195] democratic illiteracy is growing among the largest demographic group. In short, it will not be enough for the political parties to simply resume work from where they left off when the war is finally over, they will have to return to the basics of what it means to live in a pluralistic political system.

[194] The last parliamentary elections in April 2003 set a minimum voting age of 18.

[195] CIA, The World Factbook, Yemen, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/yemen/#people-and-society>

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