



# 'ONE HAND DOES NOT CLAP': PARTISANSHIP AND THE DUAL CHALLENGE OF WOMEN'S INCLUSION IN YEMEN

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COVER PHOTO: Nasserist party member Rana Ghanem participates in a Yemeni inter-party dialogue workshop in Helsinki, Finland, organized by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies and CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation, on October 28, 2021 // Photo credit: CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation



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The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Because Yemen's political parties are important to both Track I and Track II diplomatic negotiations and dialogue, it is possible to advance gender-inclusive approaches to peacebuilding by expanding their roles in decision-making and agenda-setting within their parties. This policy brief reviews the recent history of women's partisanship and changes in the nature and function of Yemen's political parties since 2011, and draws on data collected in conjunction with a recent Sana'a Center and CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation training workshop for partisan women. Data show that partisan women are eager to participate in decision-making within their parties and ready to help represent their parties in Track I and II work but experience some systemic roadblocks. On the basis of this research, we offer a range of recommendations for various stakeholders that include:

- Approaching inclusion as more than consultation by affording women opportunities to participate in decision-making and to shape party agendas and practices.
- Encouraging opportunities for women to represent their parties, including both men and women, in Track I and II work.
- Recognizing intersectional identities by engaging partisan women on issues not explicitly tied to gender.

Steps to enhance women's roles within their parties offer a dual benefit for parties and for peacebuilding. Women's participation in partisan decision-making can not only help to shape more gender-sensitive party agendas but may also strengthen the role of parties as representative institutions after years of internal decline.

## INTRODUCTION

Can practices of political inclusion inadvertently deepen gender exclusion? This policy brief addresses this question by exploring the relationship between women, partisanship and the peace process in Yemen. Political parties – as constitutive members of the internationally recognized government – have a dedicated place in Track I diplomacy and are deeply engaged in Track II dialogue as well. A decade of instability and war, however, has produced important changes in Yemen's political parties, leaving them more exclusive and organizationally brittle. Expanding the role of women in Yemeni political parties could yield a double benefit, as it could help to ensure that women's priorities are reflected in their parties' agendas, but also could help to reinvigorate party institutions themselves and reposition them for a post-conflict future.

Based on recent interviews and a two-week training conducted with partisan women in 2021 by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies and CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation, this policy brief reflects on the way changes in the partisan sector over the past 15 years have sapped the potential of the political parties as effective peacebuilders capable of reflecting the interests of Yemeni society comprehensively. One woman active in governorate-level leadership summarized a view expressed by many participants when she said, "We feel we are forgotten and excluded, and this a patriarchal world. Women in political parties are very marginalized, and we need awareness in the parties themselves to empower women politically and raise awareness in the field of gender within the parties."<sup>[1]</sup> Women spoke of the need to develop expertise to "prove their worth" to their political parties, yet their responses also highlight an under-recognized asset: the networks that partisan women share with women in civil society.

As party leadership and institutions have ossified, many women have found meaningful work in the associational sector. Reframing experience in civil society as relevant political experience could help to open doors to women's leadership and build bridges between work that occurs on different peace tracks. Partisan women continue to face forms of marginalization that affect Yemeni women broadly – often a reason that women were attracted to partisan activism in the first place – but they also find that conflict dynamics have left their parties increasingly undemocratic and gender exclusive on an internal level. Without attending to this, there is some risk that greater inclusion of political parties in the peace process could inadvertently deepen women's exclusion if steps are not taken to promote women's participation in the internal decision-making practices of their parties.

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[1] Interview #5, Mukalla, September 2021.

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## METHODOLOGY

In September 2021, the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies and CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation hosted a two-week workshop and training for women from Yemen's primary political parties. Interviews cited in this brief were planned and conducted adjacent to the workshop by a team supervised by the Sana'a Center using questions posed by the authors. Members of our research team interviewed participants in the training from all of Yemen's major political parties, with variation in their age and geographic region covering women from Sana'a, Marib, Mukalla, Taiz, and Lahj. The women who participated in the training workshop were nominated by their parties, and therefore reflect women who are already recognized as partisan women, though several also play a role in civil society organizations engaged in Track II and III peacebuilding work. This is significant because when women who are already recognized express frustration with the closed nature of their own political parties, the effects likely reach further than what is captured here. These interviews were supplemented by earlier interviews with partisan women conducted by one of the authors before the war, as well as ethnographic field notes detailing the conditions facing partisan women in the 2000s. Earlier interviews and observations include conversations about the role of women in the parties with male party leaders, many of whom continue to be active members of their parties and may function as important gatekeepers.

While many participants in the Sana'a Center and CMI training were willing to be cited by name, we have opted to retain the anonymity of all interviewees in this report. First, we hope to avoid any implicit privileging of non-anonymous statements on our part or by readers. Second, security conditions are fluid, and rather than try to assess or reassess who among our interview subjects might safely be named at this moment, we believe that the ample evidence of harassment and threats against politically active women in different parts of the country under different jurisdictions is sufficient to warrant categorical anonymity. While risks might be less pronounced in the case of male partisans or less relevant in references to pre-war research material, a uniform approach is the most equitable and reflects best research practices.<sup>[2]</sup>

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[2] As the director of the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), Marc Lynch provided background to this decision in 2016, when he argued against new requirements imposed by some political science journals that clashed with best practices among researchers working in the Middle East and North Africa. Much of what he describes is not unique to the MENA region but a characteristic of research practices in authoritarian settings and/or under conflict conditions. The author is grateful to Sarah Parkinson for a rich discussion of this topic in preparation of this paper. Marc Lynch, "Area Studies and the Costs of Prematurely Implementing DA-RT," *Comparative Politics Newsletter* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 36–39. Aside from the risks documented, for example, in sources cited below on women in peacebuilding CSOs that stem directly from the conflict, Sheila Carapico has written about the moral hazards produced by the role of research conducted by citizens of countries that play even an indirect role in producing conditions of insecurity. Sheila Carapico, "On the Moral Hazards of Field Research in the Middle East," *POMEPS Studies* 8, no. The Ethics of Research in the Middle East (July 2, 2014): 27–29.

## PARTIES AS A SITE OF OPPORTUNITY FOR WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS

The international community has expressed an intermittent commitment to women's inclusion in peacebuilding in Yemen. As Joke Buringa recently noted, only one-quarter of the resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council between April 2015 and May 2021 made any reference to women or gender.<sup>[3]</sup> International commitments to the Women, Peace and Security agenda's priority of "meaningful participation" for women has largely been operationalized through Track III diplomacy. In Track II, women active in a range of civil society organizations (CSOs) have worked directly with the Office of the Special Envoy to the Secretary-General for Yemen through Yemeni Women's Pact for Peace and Security (Tawafuk) and younger women have also had opportunities to engage through the Youth Peace and Security Pact for Yemen launched in 2020. But women have no formal role in Track I negotiations, and their peacebuilding contributions are thus limited to "informal consultations, often derisively referred to as forums for token representation," and civil society activism.<sup>[4]</sup>

Scholars have described a fundamental blindspot in the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, where calls for meaningful inclusion have too often failed to grapple with the "fact that terms like 'women's interests' obscure the diversity of women's political interests and preferences."<sup>[5]</sup> Focusing on the role of partisan women can help to address this blindspot by acknowledging that women – like men – have diverse ideological commitments, while they also bring particular kinds of lived experience to their parties in consequential ways.

Women's roles in peacebuilding and security under diverse local conflict conditions and through civil society have been well-documented by research conducted over the past several years.<sup>[6]</sup> This is far less true of the role of women in Yemen's political parties. Given the role of Yemen's political parties as recognized Track I stakeholders, however, parties should be considered channels through which women can represent themselves in the peace process. Some independent women express concerns that efforts to include partisan women in negotiations

[3] Joke Buringa, "Strategizing Beyond the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in Yemen: The Importance of CEDAW," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, August 23, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/14915>

[4] Hadil Al-Mowafak, "Engaging Women in Yemen's Peace Process Requires Better Alliances," Yemen Policy Center, October 4, 2021, <https://www.yemenpolicy.org/engaging-women-in-yemens-peace-process-requires-better-alliances-and-networks/>

[5] Hilary Matfess, "Dangerous Blind Spots in the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda," Inkstick, October 6, 2021, <https://inkstickmedia.com/dangerous-blind-spots-in-the-women-peace-and-security-agenda/>

[6] Iman al-Gawfi, Bilkis Zabara, and Stacey Philbrick Yadav, "The Role of Women in Peacebuilding in Yemen," CARPO, February 27, 2020, [https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/carpo\\_brief\\_14.pdf](https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/carpo_brief_14.pdf); Maha Awadh and Nuria Shuja'Adeen, "Women in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Yemen," UN Women, January 2019, <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20arab%20states/attachments/publications/2019/02/womeninconflictresolutionandpeacebuildinginyemenfin.pdf?la=en&vs=2608>; Marie-Christine Heinze and Marwa Baabbad, "'Women Nowadays Can Do Anything': Women's Role in Peace, Conflict, and Security in Yemen" SaferWorld, June 2017, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1125-awomen-nowadays-do-anythina-gawomenas-role-in-conflict-peace-and-security-in-yemen>

will perpetuate partisan capture of the process and further circumscribe the roles of independents and civil society.<sup>[7]</sup> This suggests that partisan and independent women have been pitted against one another in a way that does little to advance women's inclusion or peace.

Concerns about partisan capture also speak to changes in the parties themselves, beginning in the pre-war period. Most parties have become more exclusive and partisan pathways have become more closed to women in comparison to opportunities that exist in civil society. Given that Yemen's political parties – as constituent members of the internationally-recognized government – have a dedicated role in Track I negotiations, parties are a site through which women may be able to expand their efficacy as peacebuilders and may also serve as an important form of connection to a much wider cohort of women peacebuilders currently operating on other peace tracks and in civil society. Whether and to what extent parties will enable women's leadership in this way will likely vary and may depend in part on how parties have approached women's leadership before and during the current conflict.

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[7] Hadil Al-Mowafak, "Engaging Women in Yemen's Peace Process Requires Better Alliances," Yemen Policy Center, October 4, 2021, <https://www.yemenpolicy.org/engaging-women-in-yemens-peace-process-requires-better-alliances-and-networks/>

## PARTIES, WOMEN, AND PARTISAN WOMEN

The partisan landscape in Yemen is to some extent composed of unlike units, given the diverse institutional histories of its main political parties. In the period following the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990, Yemen's major political parties have varied in their proximity to power. The Yemeni Socialist Party was the ruling party of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) prior to unification in 1990 and participated in a power-sharing government until the civil war in 1994. It never recovered much formal political power following the war, winning only four seats in the 2003 parliament, but it remains an important political party and is represented in the current government.

The Yemeni Congregation for Reform, or Islah, was only established after the unification of North and South, but enjoyed a steady place in Yemen's parliament from its first election cycle. The party participated as a junior partner in government in the 1990s, but gradually shifted toward the opposition in the 2000s, most notably after the 2003 elections. Small parties like the Nasserists, the Union of Popular Forces or Al-Haqq have played a role in national-level political discourse that significantly outweighs their small share of elected office.

The General People's Congress, a large umbrella party without a clear ideological anchor, developed as a mass organization in North Yemen and became Yemen's largest political party following unification; its share of parliament has grown across each election cycle. The negotiated power-sharing agreement at the heart of the GCC-brokered transitional agreement in 2011 constituted a transitional government in which the GPC split power roughly equally with the opposition parties described above. While the GPC was fractured by former President Saleh's decision to align with Houthi forces in 2014 and the subsequent Houthi control of the capital and therefore a segment of Yemen's bureaucracy, it remains the leading component of the internationally-recognized government of President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

Mobilizing women as voters turned out to be easier and less controversial in the pre-war period than integrating women into leadership and decision-making roles within the parties. Interviews and observations with members of all of these parties in the 2000s suggest that secular parties often made rhetorical commitments to gender equality but did not always match their rhetoric with material support for women candidates; some women complained of a lack of funding for their campaigns, while others suggested that their parties would only run them in districts where the party was already certain to lose.<sup>[8]</sup> This

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[8] Interview #10, Sana'a, January 10, 2009.

was confirmed by male partisans as well, who did not blame women for their presumed non-competitiveness but attributed it to the “cultural backwardness” of Yemeni society, though they did little to challenge sexist attitudes directly.

There were important differences between secular parties, however. The Nasserists were most integrated in internal party functions, and Nasserist men were more openly inclusive in the way they discussed partisan women, even when such women were not present. Nasserists played a prominent role in challenging YSP leaders, especially, for what some described as the latter’s discriminatory language and for its focus on “the priorities of yesterday” regarding questions of gender equality.

Women active in Yemen’s primary Islamist party, Islah, were in a somewhat unique position. On the one hand, the glass ceiling was clear – the party did not support women’s candidacy in national elections. On the other hand, it did devote substantial resources to its women’s directorate. Women developed observable political skills – in oration, fundraising, negotiation – and put these skills to use when working with women from other parties. It was the women’s directorate of Islah that produced Yemen’s most internationally-recognized activist, Nobel laureate Tawakkol Karman, who would go on to play a significant role in the 2011 uprising. She was among a cadre of Islahi women elected to leadership positions on the party’s internal Shura Council in 2007 – elections that required courting (and winning) the support of male leaders.<sup>[9]</sup>

Women joined the ruling General People’s Congress for reasons that tended to be more organizational than ideological. Several women in high-ranking positions in government ministries noted that they did not belong to political parties prior to taking on technocratic roles in the ministries, at which point they were informed that they “had to join the party.”<sup>[10]</sup> This reflects the view of many GPC women that party membership was essential to their efficacy in achieving goals within the system. As a YSP leader who was active in South Yemen prior to unification confirmed this by recalling, “remember, we women were the state. We were working in every field ... [After the 1994 war] we saw a decline in our influence. Under these circumstances, most women left the YSP. The majority went to the GPC, with small groups going to civil society organizations or Islah.”<sup>[11]</sup>

The impact of partisan competition was mixed for women in the GPC. On the

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[9] Stacey Philbrick Yadav, “Tawakkul Karman as Cause and Effect,” Middle East Report Online, October 21, 2011, <https://merip.org/2011/10/tawakkul-karman-as-cause-and-effect/>

[10] Interview #7, Sana’a, January 7, 2009.

[11] Interview #10, Sana’a, January 10, 2009.

one hand, partisan competition played a role in creating opportunities for greater women's leadership. Women became members of the internal leadership for the first time in 1990, with unification, and ran for election to the General Committee in 1995, following the defeat of the YSP and as part of the ruling party's efforts to consolidate power on a national level. In explaining the appeal of the GPC to women, a party member explained that "the GPC reaches every governorate, and we can reach women, can work on issues of development, women's literacy, etc." This work, she argued, was only possible "since the GPC became *hizb al-hakim* (the ruling party), after it ended its alliances with other parties," whether the YSP before the 1994 war or *Islah* in its aftermath. After a decade of GPC consolidation, she argued, "our hands are free."<sup>[12]</sup> A YSP woman who shared the same political priorities and had more experience in the field of education lamented that "I know if I were with the GPC, I'd be a minister by now, or at least a deputy minister."<sup>[13]</sup> And indeed, speaking to a woman from the Education Ministry – another nominal GPC member – confirmed this impression.

After the parliamentary elections of 2003 – Yemen's last parliamentary election, and its least competitive – the function of political parties began to shift considerably from an emphasis on winning elections toward a focus on electoral system reforms that would allow the parties a more reasonable chance. At the same time, many Yemenis who were previously active in partisan politics – and especially partisan women – began to shift their activism from the associational sector toward civil society organizations. This had an impact on the substantive focus of CSOs, which became more politically oriented than they had been in the 1990s.<sup>[14]</sup> At the same time, those who remained active in the partisan sphere shifted toward cross-ideological cooperation in the form of an opposition alliance known as the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP). While less revolutionary than the popular movement that eventually developed in 2011, the JMP's priorities aimed at "lifting the weight of oppression off of the people through reform of the political and economic system" – something that partisans saw as cutting across all ideological divisions among member parties.<sup>[15]</sup> This alliance brought together a range of Islamist and secular nationalist parties around issues of procedural reform, but gender equality was a divisive flashpoint among its members.

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[12] Interview #8, Sana'a, January 10, 2009.

[13] Interview #10, Sana'a, January 10, 2009.

[14] Stacey Philbrick Yadav, "Does a Vote Equal a Voice? Women in Yemen," *Middle East Report* 252, November 12, 2009, <https://merip.org/2009/11/does-a-vote-equal-a-voice/>

[15] Interview #10, Sana'a, January 10, 2009.

Despite cooperation between partisan and associational sector activists, the space for partisan competition overall narrowed by the end of the decade, contributing to popular mobilization in 2011. Ironically, the formation of the JMP alliance (described amorphously as “the opposition”) contributed to the declining competitiveness of the electoral system because it was so easy for the regime to exploit important divisions between member parties. There were three primary sources of division:

- **Electoral strategy:** Member parties were divided over the issue of whether to run a coordinated strategy that would maximize the comparative advantage of each party in areas where they were popular – run a JMP-endorsed Socialist in an area with strong YSP support, for example, and a JMP-endorsed Islahi in another area – or to field candidates under the banner of the JMP itself.
- **Women’s inclusion:** Parties could not agree on whether and in what ways to advance women’s political inclusion in decision-making. Some supported a parliamentary quota, while others argued for an internal quota within the political parties. In 2009, the ruling party advanced a quota plan that some argued was designed to scuttle the broad slate of electoral reforms favored by the opposition.
- **Extra-partisan pressures:** The two largest opposition parties – the YSP and Islah – faced pressures that pulled them away from the JMP center. The rising Southern Movement after 2007 was not led by the YSP, but nor were YSP leaders free to disregard its demands, which became increasingly secessionist. For Islah’s part, the Houthi insurgency’s survival across six rounds of warfare with the government – and the government’s reliance on Salafi irregular fighters – contributed to the sectarianization of politics in a way that made it difficult for Islah to remain in an alliance with Al-Haqq (a Zaidi Shia party in which members of the Houthi family played a prominent role). The creation in 2009 of a Salafi organization to “promote virtue and prohibit vice” that included prominent members of Islah and those aligned with the GPC capitalized on the climate of growing sectarian polarization to undermine centrist Islahis and weaken the cohesion of the JMP.<sup>[16]</sup>

It was in this context of internal division that members of the JMP agreed to delay the 2009 parliamentary elections by two years. The popular movement that developed in early 2011, however, eclipsed these plans entirely.

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[16] Stacey PhilbrickYadav, “Antecedents of the Revolution: Intersectoral Networks and Post-Partisanship in Yemen,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11, no. 3 (2011): 559.

## CLOSING THE PARTISAN DOOR IN THE TRANSITION TO WAR

The uprising that took off in February 2011 built on years of growing grassroots mobilization and frustration with Yemen's political parties. While some members of Yemen's political opposition did play a role in the protests, slogans also targeted the parties as a collective, expressing impatience with the parties' inefficacy. In response to this, Yemen's political parties became more exclusive, not less, shutting down their internal mechanisms for deliberation even as they negotiated the parameters of the GCC-brokered transitional agreement.<sup>[17]</sup> The fact that this occurred at a time when women had already been exiting the parties for the associational sector means that partisan women and youth were increasingly unrepresented by many parties that were acquiring the opportunity to shape policy for the first time in decades.

The transitional framework was a short-term boon to Yemen's political parties, as parties; the General People's Congress and members of the JMP divided positions in a national unity government, and parties were guaranteed representation in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) through which Yemenis would redesign their political institutions. The GPC had the lion's share of partisan representation, with more than twice as many delegates as Islah, and three times that of the Socialists or Nasserists. The conference itself also included representatives of the powerful sources of pressure that had divided the JMP over the prior years, from a newly-organized Salafi party, Al-Rashad Union, and the Houthis' Ansar Allah to the Southern Movement. Among the parties "underlying disagreements about what should be on the agenda and whether consensus would be possible were sidestepped by keeping to very broad themes generally tolerable to all parties."<sup>[18]</sup> JMP member parties participated in the dialogue without a coordinated strategy, even as they endeavored to govern together in the cabinet.

Partisan and independent women participated in the NDC and comprised 28 percent of the total delegates. As one observer noted, however, "political parties were shrewd in choosing at least some women and youth representatives who would vote according to their party lines. Outwardly inclusive, old-guard views still dominated."<sup>[19]</sup> There were areas in which women came together across

[17] Ala Qasem, "Five Barriers to Youth Inclusion, Decision-Making and Leadership in Yemen's Political Parties," SaferWorld, December 2013, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/785-five-barriers-to-youth-engagement-decision-making-and-leadership-in-yemens-political-parties>

[18] Elizabeth Murray et al., "National Dialogues in Peacebuilding and Transitions: Creativity and Adaptive Thinking," United States Institute for Peace, 2021, p. 92. [https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/pw\\_173-national\\_dialogues\\_in\\_peacebuilding\\_and\\_transitions\\_creativity\\_and\\_adaptive\\_thinking.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/pw_173-national_dialogues_in_peacebuilding_and_transitions_creativity_and_adaptive_thinking.pdf)

[19] Ibid. p. 93.

party lines, however, and helped to advance a number of final recommendations addressing the rights and public roles of women.<sup>[20]</sup> Women who were active in political parties during the transitional period nonetheless describe it as one of “little movement” in terms of women’s leadership or decision-making inside their parties.<sup>[21]</sup> At the conclusion of the NDC, women retained some decision-making power as four of the 17 members appointed by interim President Hadi to serve on the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC), but critiques of the appointment process by parties themselves and by external observers suggest that women’s pathways to representation relied on presidential fiat more than working through partisan (or even independent) organizations. Moreover, the 17-member CDC was little more than half the size it was originally intended to be, and decision-making about appointments was opaque and appeared to rely on criteria unrelated to relevant expertise.<sup>[22]</sup>

A human rights activist summarized the transitional period as one in which “women fought really hard because they got a glimpse of an international political will to empower them, but it wasn’t a national political will.”<sup>[23]</sup> This lack of will – or parties’ unwillingness to pay what they may have perceived to be the political costs associated with advancing women – exacerbated the existing tendency of women to seek opportunities to address their objectives through the associational sector, in CSOs rather than political parties. Such organizations were seen as providing opportunities for women to shape policy in concrete ways, especially in local communities.<sup>[24]</sup>

As the transition turned to war after 2014, Yemen’s political parties ossified further. Under conflict conditions, party elites worked to “derail the monitoring and accountability functions of their parties” and organizations have become opaque and inaccessible, even to existing members.<sup>[25]</sup> As one remarked, “there is no flexibility [in the parties], responsiveness to movement from the street, looking for solutions before problems occur.”<sup>[26]</sup> Women expressed a great deal of pessimism about the possibilities for improvement, as with one Islahi who

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[20] Samra Shaibani, “What Next for Yemeni Women After the National Dialogue?,” World Bank Arab Voices, February 24, 2014, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/what-next-yemeni-women-after-national-dialogue>

[21] Interview #1, Mukalla, September 2021.

[22] Ashraf Al-Falahi, “Yemen’s Fraught Constitution Drafting Committee” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2, 2014, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/55496>; See also Murray et al., “National Dialogues in Peacebuilding and Transitions.”

[23] Afrah Nasser, “Women of the Revolution: A Vision for Post-War Yemen” Wilson Center, March 31, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/women-revolution-vision-post-war-yemen>

[24] Wameedh Shakir, “Women of the Revolution: A Vision for Post-War Yemen” Wilson Center, March 31, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/women-revolution-vision-post-war-yemen>

[25] Ala Qasem, “Gasping for Hope: Yemeni Youth Struggle for Their Future,” POMEPS, January 12, 2018, <https://pomeps.org/gasping-for-hope-yemeni-youth-struggle-for-their-future>

[26] Interview #4, Marib, September 2021.

predicted that this situation would not change until “the situation stabilizes and peace and life return.”<sup>[27]</sup>

While war has diminished the ability of political parties per se to function as representatives of Yemeni society, it may also have sharpened the urgency that partisan women feel to advance an end to the conflict. While there are still substantial ideological distinctions between partisan women, all of the women we spoke with expressed concerns about the costs of the war for women generally. As one Socialist respondent put it, “we know that women from vulnerable groups are the most affected by the war, and Socialist Party women are no different.”<sup>[28]</sup> Importantly, partisan women enumerated the same concerns that women working in CSOs express, namely the impact of the humanitarian crisis and pervasive insecurity, the collapse of Yemen’s educational infrastructure and a rise in extrajudicial violence from armed groups. A Hadrami respondent reminded us that Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula operated unchecked in her governorate for nearly a year at the outset of the war, which resulted in considerable constraints on civic life.<sup>[29]</sup>

Meanwhile, evolving conflict dynamics have continued to reshape government in a way that has further diminished the position of women. The most recent cabinet, formed in December 2020 in partial fulfillment of the Riyadh Agreement, features no women among its 24 ministers. Its partisan power-sharing logic is almost entirely oriented toward managing the issue of southern secession by integrating significant representation for the Southern Transitional Council at the expense of other interest groups, including political parties.<sup>[30]</sup> Taken together, this provides context for thinking through calls to “include the political parties” in peacebuilding. It suggests that if women are to play a meaningful role in negotiations or engage with Track I initiatives, a two-step approach to inclusion will be necessary, whereby there is an expanded role for parties and an expanded role for women in those parties. The next section explores barriers to that double-inclusion and suggests some practical ways of addressing those barriers.

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[27] Interview #3, Marib, September 2021.

[28] Interview #1, Mukalla, September 2021.

[29] Ibid. For a detailed account of the implications of the AQAP campaign and its efforts at local governance, see “Yemen’s al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base,” International Crisis Group, February 2, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/174-yemen-s-al-qaeda-expanding-base>

[30] Ibrahim Jalal, “The Riyadh Agreement: Yemen’s New Cabinet and What Remains to Be Done,” Middle East Institute, February 1, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/riyadh-agreement-yemens-new-cabinet-and-what-remains-be-done>

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## PARTIES, PARTISAN WOMEN, AND PEACEBUILDING TODAY

Women with whom we spoke for this project identified a range of practical and conceptual limits to fuller inclusion in their parties and as peacebuilders. They also evaluated partisan women's past inclusion differently – some reckoned that the transitional period from 2012-2014 was one in which there were major advances in women's inclusion and decision-making, largely via the NDC. Others dismissed this inclusion as “cosmetic,” given that it was internationally mandated as a component of the NDC and was not matched by internal practices of inclusion within their parties.

One area of considerable consensus among partisan women, however, is that women's inclusion should mean more than voice. Partisan women do not simply want to be asked for their views, but to have those perspectives and concerns shape party policy. Interviews with partisan women suggest that they have divided views on the impact of women representing their political parties in multi-party forums. Some see parties' promotion of women as a superficial move designed to address the demands of international donors. Nasserist respondents stand out, however, in describing a climate of more genuine partnership between men and women in their party – and this is consistent with the party's past practice as well. Women cited Rana Ghanem's role representing the Nasserists in multi-party settings and appointments of other women to delegations in Berlin, Istanbul and Amman as communicating to them that the party takes their positions seriously. This reflects genuine “acceptance” by Nasserist men, who have signaled that they are willing to be publicly represented by Nasserist women.<sup>[31]</sup>

Nasserist and Islahi women – who may share little ideologically – tend to put particular emphasis on the role of experience and qualification in building women's credibility among partisan men. This is borne out by the history of both parties; in the case of Islah, a robust set of gender-segmented institutions have allowed women to develop practical political experience; this is critical, in the views of one respondent from the party, to a woman demonstrating her “value” and that she “deserves” to play a role in shaping party policy.<sup>[32]</sup> But there is a circular element to this argument: to develop experience, women need opportunities; yet some parties are wary of creating opportunities for those who are seen as inexperienced. Among an earlier generation of YSP and GPC women, experience could be developed through work in ministries, state universities or the Women's Union. Under the volatile conditions of the transition and the current war, this kind of institutional experience is further from reach for most women.

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[31] Interview #6, Sana'a, September 2021.

[32] Interview #3, Marib, September 2021.

Women's experiences in peacebuilding and humanitarian CSOs could be a fungible resource, if party leaders come to see it as a valuable form of political (if not quite partisan) experience. Most of the women who participated in the training have experience working in CSOs of various types. Most of those whom we interviewed did not see their parties recognizing these forms of experience, yet it is partially this experience, and the networks that women maintain with non-partisan women through their shared engagements in civil society, that help partisan women to appreciate the distinctly gendered impact of the conflict, and prompt them to impress upon their parties the urgency women feel for peace. In recent interviews, women expressed an acute awareness of the way in which conflict, insecurity, humanitarian crisis and the collapse of the education sector have a generational effect on women and girls, in particular. Several expressed that they do not seek decision-making power in their parties simply for the sake of it, but because they believe that their understanding of the civilian costs of conflict are unique and need to be taken into account by those engaged in Track I negotiations.

As things stand, however, the relationship between partisan women can be both complementary and competitive, depending on the issues. Partisan women described joint initiatives with women from other parties that were oriented toward peacebuilding but lamented the breakdown of cooperation and absence of partners by remarking simply that “one hand does not clap.”<sup>[33]</sup> Moreover, women also suggest that sectoral rivalries add to partisan and geographic differences. On the one hand, some partisan women express concerns voiced by activists working in the peacebuilding space. In a recent internal report for a prominent European peacebuilding organization, Yemeni CSO workers described a range of material constraints imposed on peacebuilding work. While most identified political restrictions coming from conflict actors, several also mentioned the impact of donor agendas that focus narrowly on the humanitarian crisis at the perceived expense of peacebuilding.<sup>[34]</sup> One member of the YSP with whom we spoke expressed similar frustration with donor-funded “peacebuilding” projects that featured, for example, lessons for school children in rural Lahj about the importance of hand hygiene, asking “why don't we start teaching children about peace, security and stability?”<sup>[35]</sup> She attributed this to donor practices that put funds and programming outside of the reach of the state.

Partisan women may share some critiques of donor organizations with women (and men) in civil society, but as partisans they also remain keen to guard opportunities to shape policy themselves. Some express concern that women who

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[33] Interview #1, Mukalla, September 2021.

[34] Internal report commissioned by Interpeace, February 2020.

[35] Interview #2, Lahj, September 2021.

are active in humanitarian relief are “taking” opportunities to shape the peace process that ought to belong to women in Yemen’s political parties. This surely reflects frustration that partisan women feel about their own limited avenues for influence, and perhaps with the limited role that parties as a whole are playing in directing the priorities of government since the new cabinet was formed in 2020. Much of the work being done by CSOs with donor funding is work that in the past might have run through ministries or local councils. But it also reflects an awareness of the inequities at play, as women note that it is those with “soft skills” like English proficiency and project management experience who can attract donor funds to do this work. This was the case before the war as well, but is perhaps more pronounced now, especially in areas where the internationally-recognized government has little or no footprint and service provision is highly localized.

Partisan women also expressed concern that parties are losing ground to militias when it comes to shaping the parameters of any agreement for Yemen’s post-conflict future. As one respondent said, “We have Yemeni political parties based on the law and the constitution – and we have militias ... these militias want to impose themselves as a kind of de facto authority” at the expense of Yemeni parties.<sup>[36]</sup> Even among those partisan women who express disappointment in their parties, or in the partisan sector as a whole, a political order based on rule of law is preferable to the de facto authority of armed militias, over whom they expect to have little influence. As one asked of her own party, “how will I govern the militias?”<sup>[37]</sup>

Based on the international community’s approach during the transitional period and even during the conflict itself, there is good reason to believe that any strategy that seeks to minimize the impact of militias will turn to Yemen’s political parties as an organized representation of Yemeni society. The major political parties will continue to benefit from their name recognition, even if their representative functions have decayed during the war. This makes it all the more important for women to commit to political parties and “work to integrate women’s demands into party programs and visions.”<sup>[38]</sup>

If the parties do so – and particularly if they are able to open channels for new entrants, including women and youth – they could provide a vital bridge to the vibrant work of civil society. This is where the real wealth of Yemeni society is located, as evidenced by the prodigious research and documentation work produced by Yemeni CSOs and the ability of local CSOs to assess needs and

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[36] Interview #3, Marib, September 2021.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Interview #6, Sana’a, September 2021.

direct services to communities in crisis. While these CSOs will continue to play an important role in Track III peacebuilding, their concerns can be amplified and inform decision-making if they build linkages to actors along the other peace tracks, including Yemen's political parties. Given that many women active in civil society were previously active in the partisan sphere in the late 2000s, it makes good sense to begin with women when building such bridges. But this will not be effective unless the parties themselves incentivize women's partisan engagement by affording them genuine decision-making power and allowing them to help rebuild ossified party institutions capable of responding to the needs and aspirations of Yemeni society.

## CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

For parties to be effective agents of peacebuilding in Yemen, their members, and especially their leaders, “must be convinced that no party can exclude the other, because this country accommodates everyone.”<sup>[39]</sup> This logic extends both across parties and within them. We offer the following recommendations to groups who hope to support greater inclusion of women in peacebuilding in Yemen.

### **To partisan women:**

- Leverage the insights, knowledge and skills developed in your work outside of your party to argue for greater decision-making authority within the party.
- Press for your party to resume and regularize internal decision-making mechanisms and elections.
- Use these internal mechanisms to advance a distinctive and gender-sensitive post-war vision for your party so that “partisanship” has positive substantive meaning for women and men.

### **To leaders in Yemen’s political parties:**

- Recognize that international partners expect that your party represents a constituency; take steps to ensure that you know what your constituents want and need – including the women you represent.
- Wherever possible, reinvigorate local party offices and create regular opportunities for communication linking local members with national party institutions.
- Undertake a review of internal regulations and bylaws in dialogue with partisan women.
- Value forms of political experience that may not be developed within partisan institutions and promote those with such experience to leadership positions in the party.
- Treat quotas for women’s representation as a minimum threshold, not a maximum ceiling.

### **To the Office of the Special Envoy to the Secretary-General for Yemen:**

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[39] Interview #12, Marib, September 2021.

- Hold parties accountable for representing their members by asking about internal practices; if parties are the inheritors of the peace process, work now to ensure that they have maintained (or rebuilt) connections to communities they represent.
- Ensure that there are Track I opportunities for partisan women by articulating clear expectations about the participation of women in party institutions.

**To international donors who advocate for gender mainstreaming in peacebuilding:**

- Tie opportunities for participation in peacebuilding activities and projects to gender representation in parties.
- Create opportunities for women to speak on issues that are not simply “about gender” but reflect a more intersectional approach to the many stakes women have.

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