

Yemen's History of Political Alliances and Lessons for the Future



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December 16, 2025

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Introduction

Alliances are a common phenomenon in Yemen, deeply rooted in the country's political life and social structures. Yemeni tribes, for example, often form alliances for protection and defense that are based more on mutual interests than on blood ties. This pattern extends into the political sphere, where Yemen has witnessed various types of political alliances during its modern history.

This study examines past alliances among political actors in Yemen, from the declaration of political pluralism as a constitutional right following unification in May 1990 to 2017. Most of these alliances were temporary and tactical, often formed to confront common adversaries, and ended in dramatic ruptures. Despite their shortcomings, however, these alliances enriched Yemeni political life in several ways. For example, the opposition alliance known as the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) developed a clear institutional structure and defined references and clear goals in an effort to counter increasing authoritarianism and reform the political environment.

Yemen's public and civil life is currently moribund; armed groups dominate, and the influence of political parties has sharply declined during the conflict. Still, studying past alliances provides valuable insight for future politics, including a better understanding of how actors calculated advantage, mobilized popular support, and engaged in partnership to further their goals, which included redistributing influence, shifting bargaining power, or neutralizing political rivals.

Strategic cooperation can be a potent force in Yemeni politics. The JMP's experience underscores how an alliance built around a clearly defined organizational structure and goals can help smaller actors achieve outsized influence. A detailed framework defining how partners manage relations, resolve disputes, and make collective decisions provides a strong foundation to begin on. Another central challenge today lies in generating grassroots momentum. Yemeni political actors often attribute their failures to armed groups obstructing political activity. To overcome this, political actors can better engage with the public through nontraditional channels, particularly the internet and social media. Institutional, consistent, and focused messaging that reflects the public's aspirations is more likely to gain popular support.

While the task appears immense, parties seeking to overcome Yemen's challenges and chart a new course can begin drawing on lessons from the past to confront the political challenges of the present and future.

Methodology

This study adopts a historical approach to examine four political alliances in Yemen between 1990 and 2007. Three 'ruling alliances' involved former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and his General People's Congress (GPC) party with various political actors – the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah), and the Houthi group (*Ansar Allah*). Comparing these ruling alliances helps identify recurring patterns and notable shifts in Saleh's alliance-building strategies over time. The fourth alliance, the Joint Meeting Parties, was an 'opposition alliance' that brought together several actors in an effort to counterbalance the ruling regime at the time.

A comparative methodology is employed to trace similarities and differences across these alliances, with the broader aim of illuminating the dynamics of Yemeni political life and how the alliances functioned and evolved within, and contributed to, a shifting political environment.

For each alliance, the following factors are considered:

- **Emergence:** assessing the motivations, political context, and historical circumstances that gave rise to the alliance.
- **Trajectory:** examining patterns of coordination, cooperation, conflict, and, ultimately, dissolution.
- **Dynamics:** investigating the underlying political, social, and institutional forces that enabled both the formation and collapse of these coalitions.
- **Impact:** analyzing the influence of the alliance on Yemen's political landscape, including post-alliance relationships among its constituent actors.

Historical Background

Yemen was previously divided into two independent states: the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), commonly known as North Yemen, and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), commonly known as South Yemen. The YAR, established in 1962 following the revolution that overthrew the Zaidi Imamate, adopted a republican system and aligned with the Western bloc during the Cold War, receiving backing from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. The PDYR, formed in 1967 after the end of British colonial rule, aligned itself with the Eastern Communist bloc and became the only state in the Arab world to adopt Marxism as its official ideology.^[1]

Despite the stark ideological divide between the two states, Yemeni unification was achieved in May 1990 through a swift merger that introduced political pluralism and abolished the one-party systems that had dominated both states. Previously, the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) governed South Yemen, representing a mix of pan-Arab nationalists and leftist currents, and the General People's Congress (GPC) held power in North Yemen, which included a variety of other political currents, including pan-Arab nationalists and the Muslim Brotherhood.^[2]

With the introduction of political pluralism, Yemen witnessed the emergence of more than 40 political parties. Alongside the two former ruling parties, one of the most influential newcomers was the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (the Islah party), which united the Muslim Brotherhood with tribal actors, most notably from the powerful Hashid tribal confederation, headed by Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar. Several previously underground groups, such as the Ba'athist and Nasserist parties, became legally recognized. New parties representing Zaidi political Islam also emerged, including the Al-Haqq party and the Union of Popular Forces.^[3]

[1] Nasser Muhammad, *The Yemeni Political Crisis 1990-1994* [AR], 2010, Sana'a: Dar Al-Taqaaddum Al-Ilmi, pp. 24-30

[2] Bliqis Abu Osba, *Political Parties and Democratic Transformation* [AR], Madbouly Library, Cairo, 2004, pp. 93-108.

[3] Mahmoud al-Ta'her, "Yemeni Political Parties and Their Most Prominent Alliances in Rebuilding the State [AR]," Noon Post, April 25, 2019, <https://www.noonpost.com/27503/>

Alliance 1: The GPC and YSP (1990-1993)

Emergence

Unification between North and South Yemen was formalized through a ten-point agreement between the GPC and YSP.^[4] A united Yemen had been a national ambition since the emergence of Yemeni nationalist movements in the early 20th century, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the prime backer of South Yemen, provided an impetus for both ruling parties. The unification deal addressed key matters such as the name of the new state, a referendum on the constitution, the formation of a Presidential Council, the composition of parliament, and the duration of the transitional period. However, it did not establish clear mechanisms for resolving disputes or managing conflicts. In practice, the two former ruling parties shared power in the government and the Presidential Council, headed by President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the leader of the GPC, with Ali Salem al-Beidh, the head of the YSP, as his deputy. Senior cadres from the former southern state moved from Aden to Sana'a, the capital of the unified Republic of Yemen.

Trajectory

After unification, efforts of both parties initially focused on laying the legislative foundation for the unified state and preparing for the first competitive parliamentary elections in Yemen's history. A notable milestone was the approval of a new constitution for the Republic of Yemen in May 1991.

However, throughout the transitional period, there was covert coordination between the GPC and Islah – two northern-based parties – to counter the YSP's influence. The GPC carried out this work discreetly, as it was officially a partner of the YSP in achieving unification and could not openly confront its coalition ally. By contrast, Islah, representing the Islamist current in Yemen, publicly attacked the socialist and leftist ideology of the YSP. The party carried out a public campaign against the new constitution ahead of a referendum, portraying it as contrary to Islamic principles. Islah partisans were also accused of involvement in numerous assassinations carried out against YSP members.^[5]

Yemen experienced an escalating political crisis leading up to the 1993 elections, which were expected to formalize a power-sharing arrangement between the two ruling parties. However, the election results only intensified the conflict: the YSP came in third place, behind the GPC and Islah. Now a junior partner in the coalition government, it continued to view and present itself as the legitimate representative of southern Yemen within the unified state.^[6]

^[4] "The Text of Yemeni Unity agreement [AR]," Al-Mushahid, January 23, 2018, [اتفاقية الوحدة.pdf](#)

^[5] "Socialist Leader Mohammed Al Mikhlafi Recounts the Conflict Over the Draft Constitution for Yemen Yemeni Unity [AR]," Belqees TV, March 23, 2025, [belqees.net/reports/اليمنية-الوحدة-دستور-مشروع-على-الصراع-ل-الشاهد-المخلاف-بيروي-ل-القيادة-الاشتراكي-محمد-المخلاف-بيروي-ل-الشاهد-الصراع-على-مشروع-دستور-الوحدة-اليمنية](#)

^[6] "The First Parliamentary Elections, April 1993 [AR]," National Information Center, <http://yemen-nic.info/contents/Politics/entkh1993.pharrangementp>

The GPC-YSP alliance came under increasing strain as the GPC consolidated its dominance within the unified republic, backed by Islah, while northern-southern tensions continued to rise. Yemeni and Arab mediation efforts, including the signing of the “Covenant and Agreement” document in Amman in February 1994,^[7] proposed practical measures to resolve disputes, but no breakthrough was achieved. Notably, the failure to integrate the two former state armies further heightened tensions and helped transform political disputes into direct military confrontation. A bloody civil war broke out between April and July 1994, pitting the GPC, Islah, and southern factions that had been defeated during a power struggle in South Yemen in 1986, against the YSP, in which northern forces emerged victorious.

Dynamics

Despite the power-sharing deal between the GPC and YSP during the transitional period, their relationship was characterized by deep-seated tension and instability, stemming from contradictory ideologies, long-standing rivalries, and overlapping authorities. Both parties had previously exercised absolute authority within their respective states and each found it difficult to adapt to the new political order of pluralism and power sharing. Instead, each party took steps to obstruct integration and preserve its individual power base. This refusal to concede power and genuinely engage in power sharing was the ultimate catalyst for the 1994 Civil War.

Impact

The GPC-YSP alliance, despite its short-lived lifespan and bloody aftermath, achieved several significant accomplishments in Yemen's political history. These included the declaration of unity, the approval of a new constitution, and the organization of Yemen's first democratic parliamentary elections. However, the election was one of the most critical factors in reinforcing political disputes between the two allies, as the YSP moved into opposition. As animosity and violence increased, a faction within the party emerged as openly hostile to the unified state. The bloody civil war that followed left deep divisions and enduring repercussions that continue to shape Yemen's political landscape today, most notably, feelings of marginalization among southern populations at the hands of northern political elites, which planted the seeds for the growth of secessionist movements in southern Yemen.^[8]

[7] "Yemeni Covenant and Agreement Document 1994 [AR]," Wikisource, ar.wikisource.org/wiki/وثيقة_العهد_والاتفاق_اليمنية_1994

[8] Jamal al-Suwaidi, Michael Hudson, Paul Dresch et al. "The 1994 Yemen War: Causes and outcomes," Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2014.

Alliance 2: The GPC and Islah (1993-2003)

Emergence

Although the alliance between the GPC and Islah emerged after the latter's founding as part of the unified republic, the pact, in reality, preceded the declaration of the new state. The GPC, founded in 1982, consisted of several political currents, including the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood was a natural ally of the northern government due to its ideological opposition to the ruling YSP in South Yemen, and served as a primary force actively resisting leftist expansion into North Yemen.^[9]

When the Islah party was formed in 1990, it did not merely represent the Muslim Brotherhood; tribal elements also had a strong presence. The party's first president was the Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar, the leader of the Hashid tribal confederation. Al-Ahmar, as paramount sheikh of the tribal confederation to which President Saleh belonged, shared a tribal bond that underpinned their strong political relationship. This was especially important given the key role of tribal solidarity in the system of power Saleh had built since assuming the presidency in 1978.^[10] According to Al-Ahmar, Saleh asked him to form the Islah Party to confront the YSP after unification, as Saleh and the GPC could not do so due to the power-sharing agreement.^[11]

Trajectory

When Islah finished second in the 1993 elections, ahead of the YSP, it emerged as the GPC's partner in power, securing representation in both the Presidential Council and the government. As the political crisis escalated following the elections, the alignment of the GPC and Islah against the YSP became increasingly evident. With the escalation of the political crisis after the elections, the alignment of the Islah party and the GPC against the YSP became increasingly apparent.^[12] Islah-aligned forces served as the vanguard in the civil war against the YSP in 1994, and after the YSP was defeated and excluded from power, the GPC-Islah alliance continued in government. However, tensions would soon emerge, particularly related to proposed financial reforms and preparations for the 1997 parliamentary elections, in which the GPC secured an outright majority that enabled it to govern alone.^[13]

^[9] Bliqis Abu Osba, "Political Parties and Democratic Transformation," Madbouly Library, Cairo, 2024 pp. 91-93.

^[10] Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, "What Remains of the Hashid's Power? The Rise and Fall of Yemen's Most Powerful Tribe," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, September 14, 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/august-2023/20837>

^[11] Abdullah bin Hussein Al-Ahmar, "Memoirs: Issues and Stance [AR]," Al-Afaq, Sanaa, 2007, p. 248

^[12] Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, "Presidential Concils in Yemen: Exploring Past Attempts at Power Sharing and Possibilities for the Future," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, May 12, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/14140>

^[13] "Islah's Experience Between Power and Opposition... A Reading in Political Practice [AR]," Al-Islah Net, May 27, 2023, https://alislah-ye.net/news_details.php?lang=arabic&sid=102

Islah's exit from the government coalition following the 1997 election further deteriorated the relationship between the parties, and existing tensions became public. However, the personal relationship between Saleh and Al-Ahmar, anchored in customary tribal arrangements, prevented these tensions from escalating into a full-blown crisis. Saleh was keen to retain Al-Ahmar as Speaker of Parliament, and in return, Islah endorsed Saleh as its presidential candidate in the 1999 elections.^[14]

But this arrangement did not last. In 2001, the GPC-led government abolished the system of scientific institutes, a parallel religious educational system fully managed by Islah that had served as the backbone of its youth recruitment efforts.^[15] The move dealt a severe blow to the party, depriving it of this institutional base and leaving it with few incentives to maintain its alliance with the GPC. The early 2000s also saw the emergence of the "succession project" as Saleh sought to pave the way for his son, Ahmed, to assume the presidency.^[16] This plan, and the growing influence of Ahmed and Saleh's nephews, Tareq, Yahya, and Ammar, provoked many of Saleh's long-time allies, including Sheikh Al-Ahmar and his son, Hameed, a leading member of the Islah Party and a businessman with large political aspirations.

In response, Islah would move closer to the opposition, culminating in the establishment of the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) coalition in 2003.^[17] Islah-affiliated media and the party's grassroots base later supported the opposition candidate, Faisal bin Shamlan, in the 2006 presidential election.^[18] Following the death of Sheikh Al-Ahmar in December 2007, the dispute between the GPC and Islah further intensified, eventually escalating into open conflict. This rift would reach its peak during the 2011 uprising, when Islah played a significant role in the protests.. Saleh would later accuse several Islah leaders of involvement in the June 2011 assassination attempt on his life.^[19]

[14] Nasr Taha Mustafa, "Yemeni presidential elections: Are there any surprises?" Al-Motamar, August 26, 2006, <https://www.almotamar.net/news/print.php?id=34192>

[15] "Yemen: Islah Criticizes Decision to Abolish Scientific Institutes [AR]," Al Jazeera, May 11, 2001, www.aljazeera.net/news/2001/5/11/اليمن-الإصلاح-ينتقد-قرار-إغلاق

[16] "Youth Revolution Closes the Curtain on the Succession Option in Yemen [AR]," Al Khaleej, April 15, 2011, www.alkhaleej.ae/2011-04-14/ثورة-الشباب-تسدل-ستار-على-خيار-التوريث-في-اليمن/العالم/سياسة

[17] "The Joint Meeting [AR]," Al Jazeera, December 22, 2014, www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/2014/12/22/اللقاء-المشترك

[18] Saddam al- Ashmori, "Thousands Chant for Bin Shamlan," Yemen Times. August 22, 2006, https://yementimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/20060828_issue_976_vol_VI_16pages.pdf

[19] Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, "What Remains of the Hashid's power? The Rise and Fall of Yemen's Most Powerful Tribe," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, September 14, 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/august-2023/20837>

Dynamics

As with its earlier alliance with the YSP, the GPC's partnership with Islah initially lacked a governing framework. There was no significant ideological divergence between the GPC and Islah. However, this did not imply complete harmony; in general, the GPC was pragmatic, while Islah remained rooted in ideology. The most fundamental underpinning of the alliance was the personal relationship between Saleh and Al-Ahmar, which helped restrain open conflict. Al-Ahmar once summarized his relationship with Saleh as follows: "He is my president, and I am his sheikh."^[20] After Al-Ahmar's death, the frail bonds between the parties were cut, intensifying open hostility that helped lead to Yemen's 2011 uprising.

Impact

The GPC-Islah alliance played a decisive role in the 1994 Civil War, tipping the balance in favor of the Sana'a government and its northern allies. Its mere existence also helped preserve multiparty politics following unification. Despite the steady decline in Islah's parliamentary representation, it remained the second strongest party after the GPC in elections, thanks in large part to its extensive media influence and large popular base. Islah's official break with Saleh and GPC would lend new weight to the political opposition.

Ultimately, the relationship between the two parties evolved into open enmity following the 2011 uprising. Saleh's suspicion that Islah was behind the 2011 plot on his life would influence his later decision to ally with the Houthis and assist in their takeover of power in Sana'a in 2014. Even after the end of the Saleh-Houthi alliance in 2017 and the GPC's fragmentation into multiple factions, its relations with Islah remain characterized by tension and mutual distrust, including among the factions that are components of the internationally recognized government.

^[20] Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, "What Remains of the Hashid's power? The Rise and Fall of Yemen's Most Powerful Tribe," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, September 14, 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/august-2023/20837>

Alliance 3: The Joint Meeting Parties (JMP)

Emergence

Yemeni parliamentary elections after unification created a new political landscape. In August 1993, after the first elections brought the three largest parties – the GPC, YSP, and Islah – into a coalition government, smaller parties found themselves in need of a unifying umbrella. In response, they formed the first opposition alliance, the National Opposition Bloc.^[21] The bloc remained mostly a theoretical framework until the YSP joined in 1995, after which it became known as the Supreme Coordination Council for Opposition.^[22] This new grouping gained greater prominence and was seen as a more effective opposition, benefiting from the YSP's political experience and public support.

Islah first carried out limited coordination with the Supreme Coordination Council for Opposition in 1996 as part of efforts to press for electoral reform. It officially joined the opposition after falling out with the GPC, leading to the formation of the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) bloc in February 2003.^[23] This alliance emerged in response to the increasingly authoritarian tendencies of the Saleh regime and aimed to improve the conditions of political work, with electoral reform as its central priority. The JMP specifically called for reforming the electoral commission,^[24] changing the electoral law,^[25] and expanding the powers of local government.

Trajectory

Under the JMP, parties moved beyond narrow ideological commitments to a new level of political pragmatism, marking an unprecedented transformation in modern Yemeni political history. The bloc aimed to achieve a complex, two-stage objective: strengthening public opposition to the growing authoritarian tendencies of the Saleh regime; and rebalancing the pluralistic political system between the ruling authority and the opposition. To help it accomplish these goals, the JMP tapped its increased tools of influence, including an effective media apparatus and a well-organized, diverse base of popular support.

[21] Mohammed Abdelmalek al-Mutawakkil, "The National Opposition Bloc [AR]," Almasdar Online, January 8, 2011, <https://almasdaronline.com/article/14826>

[22] Tawfeek Al-Ganad, "A History of Yemeni Political Parties: From Armed Struggle to Armed Repression," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 7, 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/16421>

[23] The Joint Meeting Parties include Islah, the YSP, the Nasserist Unionist People's Organization, the Arab Socialist Ba'ath, the Popular Forces, and Al-Haq. "The Joint Meeting [AR]," Al Jazeera, December 22, 2014, www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/2014/12/22/اللقاء-المشترك

[24] Mohammed Abbas Naji, "Security vs Reform [AR]," Ara'a Hawl Al-Kahleej. September 1, 2006. https://araa.sa/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2827&catid=9&Itemid=172

[25] "Dr Al-Eryani: Parties will discuss the proportional representation list after the Parliament voting on the extension agreement [AR]," National Information Center, April 14, 2009, <http://www.yemen-nic.info/news/detail.php?ID=21198>

One aspect that made the JMP bloc a unique phenomenon in Yemeni political history was its clear references, structures, and mechanisms for coordination. After its formation ahead of the 2003 parliamentary elections, the JMP member parties signed what became known as the Principles Agreement, which outlined mechanisms for electoral coordination.^[26] For the JMP, winning parliamentary seats was seen as a crucial first step toward undermining the GPC's one-party monopoly on power. To accomplish this goal, a clear framework was established to organize relations among the parties. A rotating leadership structure was agreed upon, which included a president and a media spokesperson, and senior leaders of the JMP were tasked with implementing the provisions of the Principles Agreement. The alliance ultimately won 58 out of the 301 seats in parliament.

After the elections, the JMP adopted a new approach for dealing with the GPC, developing political reform proposals and using them as reference points for dialogue with the ruling party. The first of these was the 2005 Political Reform Project,^[27] which aimed to establish guarantees for free and fair local and presidential elections, address issues related to the electoral register, and ensure the neutrality of state media, public institutions, public funds, and the armed forces.

The 2006 presidential election marked another turning point in Yemeni political life, as the JMP successfully mobilized support for an alternative presidential candidate to President Saleh. The opposition's candidate, Faisal bin Shamlan, won 22 percent of the vote, a strong showing given the resources at the Saleh regime's disposal.^[28] The respectable challenge to Saleh at the ballot box would pave the way for renewed dialogue between the JMP and GPC over electoral reform and local governance. One of the main outcomes of these negotiations was an agreement in February 2009 to postpone parliamentary elections until April 2011.^[29]

The 2011 popular uprising against the Saleh regime was not an isolated event but rather an extension of the JMP's ongoing dialogues and disputes with the government, albeit with greater escalation and the use of new forms of public mobilization. The grassroots membership of the JMP parties played a prominent role in the sit-in squares, and in many cases, the parties helped organize and manage protest activities. The JMP's leadership negotiated on behalf of the uprising, eventually signing the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative with the GPC, which stipulated a power-sharing arrangement and Saleh's resignation within a transitional period not exceeding two years. This period also marked the beginning of a perceived dominance of Islah within the opposition bloc.^[30]

[26] "Text of the Principles Agreement Between the Joint Meeting Parties [AR]," Al Jazeera, October 3, 2004, www.aljazeera.net/2004/10/03/نص-اتفاق-المبادئ-بين-الحزاب-اللقاء

[27] "Text of the Joint Meeting's Political and National Reform Project [AR]," Mareb Press, November 29, 2005, <https://marebpress.net/articles.php?lng=arabic&id=14>

[28] "Yemen Final Report: Presidential and Local Council Elections," European Union Election Observation Mission, September 20, 2006, https://www.eods.eu/library/FR%20YEMEN%202006_en.pdf

[29] Tawfeek Al-Ganad, "A History of Yemeni Political Parties: From Armed Struggle to Armed Repression," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 7, 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/16421>

[30] Ibid.

Saleh's departure and the radical shift in the Yemeni political landscape represented a significant new challenge for the JMP. Once the bloc became part of the government rather than the opposition, it was expected to redefine its priorities and future mission, either on a new foundation to reflect the changed political situation or through an organized dissolution. However, the bloc effectively disintegrated without an official to do so. Divisions among the JMP parties became more evident, particularly during the National Dialogue Conference (March 2013-January 2014), when each party participated individually. There, sharp divisions emerged publicly over major issues such as federalism, and, would continue until the Houthis took control of Sana'a in September 2014.^[31]

Dynamics

Despite the absence of a shared ideological or regional identity, the JMP functioned relatively effectively as an opposition alliance. While the Saleh regime attempted to sow discord and undermine relations among JMP members, these efforts failed, thanks in large part to the clearly defined framework governing the alliance and its public platform of priorities.

Overall, the JMP stands out as an outlier in Yemeni politics for several reasons. One, the alliance brought together more than two parties. Second, it adopted and operated under a detailed agreement regarding relations between the member parties. Three, it was not part of any power-sharing arrangement, allowing it to focus solely on advocating for specific political reforms as an opposition. Lastly, and crucially, JMP parties refrained from engaging in armed conflict in favor of peaceful political activity.

Impact

Before the formation of the JMP, Yemeni politics never had a truly effective opposition. The outcomes of its dialogues with the GPC between 2003 and 2010, had they been implemented, could have set Yemen on a different political trajectory by establishing a new model for the political relationship between the government and opposition. Despite some shortcomings, the JMP represents an exceptional and inspiring example of the potential of political alliances and what can be achieved as an opposition force.

The JMP's greatest challenge was ultimately not Saleh's continued rule, but rather the fall of his regime. Designed as an opposition coalition that brought together disparate views, it lacked a unified vision for the post-Saleh era in Yemen. Ultimately, it failed to establish common ground for political action during the transition period before fracturing. The JMP's collapse was a blow to Yemen's political life, and after the onset of the war, political parties' influence declined further as no cohesive force existed to champion political activity over violence. Still, the JMP's prewar experience remains a model for civil political coordination and action in Yemen's modern history.

^[31] Ibid.

Alliance 4: The Houthis and Saleh (2014-2017)

Emergence

As the transitional period following Yemen's uprising neared its end in January 2014, various political actors, with UN support, decided to extend the term of interim President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi.^[32] At the same time, the Houthis were advancing toward Sana'a, and a new alliance began to take shape between the group and former president Saleh.^[33]

There had been long-standing animosity between the parties. Saleh, as president and commander-in-chief of the Yemeni armed forces, had waged six rounds of war against the Houthis in Sa'da since 2004. His administration had even refused to hand over the body of the group's founder, Hussein al-Houthi, who was killed by the army in 2004, until 2013, when this became a condition for the Houthis' participation in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC).^[34] For their part, the Houthis were previously among Saleh's most prominent political opponents, playing an active role in the 2011 popular uprising that forced him from power.

Despite this long history of animosity, the Houthi-Saleh alliance was driven by several factors. Chief among these was the presence of a common adversary: Islah.^[35] For Saleh, Islah had been at the forefront of the 2011 uprising, while for the Houthis, Islah represented a dangerous political and social competitor in Yemen's northern Zaidi regions, the group's traditional sphere of influence.

Both parties also shared an interest in undermining the transitional process. Saleh sought to expose the new administration's failure, while the Houthis, though militarily capable of confronting forces aligned with Islah and President Hadi, lacked both the political experience and popular legitimacy to compete for power through elections.^[36]

Finally, the regional dimension of the alliance cannot be overstated. Saleh represented the tribal aspect of Yemen's northern Zaidi areas, while the Houthis embodied its ideological movement. The NDC's proposed federalization plan for Yemen would have geographically isolated the Zaidi highlands within the Azal region, cutting off from the coast to the west and resource-rich areas to the east. This shared threat helped unite the two sides in torpedoing the plan.^[37]

[32] "Yemen: Federal System Approved and Hadi's Presidency Extended [AR]," DW, January 21, 2014, www.dw.com/ar/اليمن-الموافقة-على-نظام-اتحادي, a-17378700

[33] "Ali Abdullah Saleh, The Man of Contradictory Alliances [AR]," France 24, December 4, 2017, www.france24.com/ar/20171204-علي-عبد-الله-صالح--اتحاد-صالح-والحوثيين-رؤية-بمنية

[34] Ali Jahez, "Yemen: Hadi Releases Hussein Al-Houthi's Remains [AR]," Al-Akhbar, January 3, 2013, <https://www.al-akhbar.com/Arab/44073>

[35] Hamoud Nasser Al-Qadami, "Temporary Interests: Will the Saleh-Houthi Alliance Collapse? A Yemeni Perspective [AR]," The Future Center, November 24, 2016, www.futureuae.com/ar-AE/Mainpage/Item/2180

[36] Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, "Yemen's Houthis and Former President Saleh: An Alliance of Animosity," Arab Reform Initiative, October 7, 2016, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/yemens-houthisthey-hoped-would-allow-them-and-former-president-saleh-an-alliance-of-animosity/>

[37] Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, "Federalism in Yemen: A Catalyst for War, the Present Reality, and the Inevitable Future," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 28, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7124>

Trajectory

The Battle of Amran in early 2014 marked the first visible cooperation between the Houthis and the former president. Amran was the last major obstacle to the Houthis' advance to Sana'a from the north and a hub to the Hashid tribe. Saleh mobilized loyal tribal sheikhs to fight alongside the Houthis against pro-government and Islah-aligned forces, and this contribution was significant in the fall of Amran and the Houthis' entry into Sana'a in September 2014.^[38]

Once in Sana'a, Saleh's vast networks across tribes, the army, and state institutions, as well as his control of media outlets, would become invaluable for the Houthis in instilling their authority. Despite their growing military power, they remained a relatively small armed movement at the time. However, tensions resurfaced after President Hadi and the government resigned in January 2015. Saleh and the GPC favored proceeding with constitutional procedures that they hoped would allow them to reclaim their dominant position, given the ex-ruling party's parliamentary majority. Instead, the Houthis would unilaterally announce a "Constitutional Declaration," establishing a new authority outside Yemen's constitutional framework.^[39]

After the Saudi-led Arab-Islamic Coalition intervened in Yemen and wider war broke out in March 2015, the alliance persisted out of necessity in the face of a common enemy. Yet rivalry in Sana'a over control and authority deepened. The Houthis persisted in wielding the banner of revolution against Saleh and his followers, employing "Revolutionary Committees" to supervise state institutions, dominated by Saleh's adherents and considered a tool of his influence, and to impede their work.^[40]

Following the failure of the Kuwait negotiations between the internationally recognized government and the Houthi-Saleh alliance, the two sides formalized their partnership through the creation of the Supreme Political Council (SPC) in August 2016.^[41] This SPC was tasked with exercising presidential duties in areas under the control of forces loyal to the Houthis or Saleh. Although it was stated that the presidency of the SPC would alternate between the two parties, it remained under Houthi control throughout its existence. Later, they announced the formation of a "National Salvation Government" in 2016, with nominally equal representation from both sides.^[42] The Houthis' Revolutionary Committees were officially dissolved, although their member continued to supervise and exercise influence over state institutions.

[38] Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, "What Remains of the Hashid's power? The Rise and Fall of Yemen's Most Powerful Tribe," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, September 14, 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/august-2023/20837>

[39] "Yemen... Saleh's Party Rejects Houthi Move, Considers it a Coup [AR]," Al Arabiya, February 7, 2015, www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/yemen/2015/02/07/ويعتبرها-انقلابا

[40] Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, "Yemen's Houthis and Former President Saleh: An Alliance of Animosity," Arab Reform Initiative, October 7, 2016, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/yemens-houthisthey-hoped-would-allow-them-and-former-president-saleh-an-alliance-of-animosity/>

[41] "Announcement of the Formation of the Supreme Political Council of the Republic of Yemen [achievingAR]," Saba News Agency (Sana'a), August 6, 2016, <https://www.saba.ye/ar/news435871.htm>

[42] "The Houthis and Saleh's Party Announce Formation of National Salvation Government in Sana'a [AR]," RT Arabic, November 28, 2016, www.arabic.rt.com/news/851900-صنعاء-الوطني-حكومة-تشكيل-حكومة-الوفاق-الوطني-صنعاء

Tensions would continue to mount as the Houthis more publicly emerged as the primary actor driving events and holding power in Sana'a at the expense of Saleh and the GPC. These reached their peak in August 2017, when the GPC organized mass demonstrations to celebrate the anniversary of the party's founding. The Houthis responded violently, arresting and killing several Saleh associates. Over the following months, the situation would continue to deteriorate, culminating in three days of clashes in Sana'a in early December. Houthi forces killed Saleh on December 4, 2017, in a dramatic end to an alliance characterized by deep mistrust.

Dynamics

The alliance between the Houthis and Saleh was inherently temporary, forged out of necessity and shared enmity, rather than trust. Despite their history of violent confrontation, both parties shared a regional identity centered around Yemen's northern Zaidi highlands. The federal system for Yemen, proposed during the NDC, was widely perceived in the north as an attempt to isolate and further marginalize the region. These factors helped push a shared northern-Zaidi identity, enabling the two sides to cooperate briefly in the pursuit of power and survival, despite mutual suspicion.

Impact

The alliance between the Houthis and Saleh succeeded in derailing Yemen's post-uprising political transition, achieving one of its primary goals. However, the alliance failed to contain the ensuing chaos, as the situation quickly descended into civil conflict and then all-out war, following the Saudi-led military intervention in 2016.

The Houthis ultimately inherited much of Saleh's political and infrastructure, including within state institutions and the armed forces. However, after the alliance officially ended with Saleh's slaying, many of his loyalists would defect to the internationally recognized government, most notably his nephew Tareq Saleh, who commands the National Resistance forces on Yemen's West Coast and has served on the government's Presidential Leadership Council since 2022.

Past Political Alliances

The period since Yemeni unification has been marked by several conflicts and the creation of various political alliances. Of the four major alliances that emerged during this time, two collapsed due to internal conflict: the GPC-YSP and the Houthi-Saleh alliance. The other two disintegrated after the disappearance of their common enemy: the GPC-Islah alliance and the JMP.

President Saleh's rule, the longest in the history of the modern Yemeni state, was marked by his frequent use of alliances as a tool of governance. He formed three major partnerships for two main reasons: first, for pragmatic purposes, such as his alliance with the YSP to achieve unification; and second, to confront common enemies, as in his later alliances with Islah and the Houthis. Although Saleh participated in several power-sharing governments during his presidency, these were temporary arrangements designed to sideline his partners in the end, as he did with the YSP and later with Islah.

Saleh's alliances generally lacked structured frameworks for managing operations or resolving disputes, instead relying on individual ties. This reality was a contributing factor in their devolution into hostility and animosity. This was especially true for partnerships built upon a legacy of prior conflicts and vendettas, such as with the YSP or the Houthis. In the absence of transparency, accountability to constituents, or mechanisms for coordinating responsibilities, these alliances were doomed to collapse. Overall, Saleh's alliances can be categorized as authoritarian alliances, driven by his desire to consolidate power, expand authority, and regain control.

In contrast, the JMP represented a fundamentally different model. As an opposition coalition, it was able to transcend ideology in favor of political pragmatism and operated according to clearly defined terms of reference. It benefited immensely from an organizational structure, clear internal regulations, and the absence of regional factionalism. Notably, even after its disintegration, relations among its member parties did not descend into open hostility, despite diverging interests.

Present and Future Political Alliances

After the Houthis eliminated their partner Saleh, they chose to rule unilaterally, establishing an absolute, individual authority. On the other hand, the internationally recognized government continues to rely on an alliance of anti-Houthi parties to legitimize its rule and management of the conflict with the Houthis. However, the government has been plagued by division and dysfunction throughout the conflict. Since the start of the conflict, no coherent political alliance has yet emerged, whether modeled on previous examples or based on a new framework.

The most notable recent development is the formation of the National Political Bloc, announced in November 2024. It has faced sharp criticism for excluding key southern actors, such as the Southern Transitional Council and the Hadramawt Inclusive Conference, and for relying on international support. There are widespread fears that it will suffer paralysis and eventually dissolve due to the lack of a viable environment for political activity.^[43]

For new political blocs to endure, several conditions must be met. They must operate as instruments of peaceful action with unified, clearly defined goals. Internal cohesion is equally essential. Trust remains the cornerstone of any political alliance, supported by detailed frameworks outlining how partners will manage their relations, resolve disputes, and make collective decisions. Any new coalition will also need to clearly define its relationship with state authorities and the scope of its objectives within the limits of its real influence.

^[43] Maysaa Shuja al-Deen and Tawfeek al-Ganad, "An Uncertain Future for Yemen's National Political Bloc," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, April 21, 2025, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/jan-mar-2025/24650>

Most alliances formed after the outbreak of the conflict have drawn inspiration from the JMP's experience in establishing organizational and procedural frameworks. Yet, another central challenge lies in generating grassroots momentum. Yemeni political actors often attribute their failures to armed groups that obstruct political activity. To overcome this obstacle, they must actively engage with the public through nontraditional channels, particularly the internet and social media. Such engagement should be institutional, consistent, and focused on clear messages that reflect the public's aspirations.

The rise of regional divisions, the militarization of political parties, and parties' collective inability to revive political life represent significant challenges not faced by earlier Yemeni political alliances, which operated in a less militarized environment. While the task appears immense, parties seeking to overcome these challenges and chart a new course of political action in Yemen must begin by understanding the historical dynamics of political alliances in Yemen. Only by learning from past successes and failures can parties start to confront the political challenges of the present and future.

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This analysis was produced as part of the Supporting Political Dialogue for Peace in Yemen project, implemented by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies and CMI-Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation, and funded by the European Union.



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