



# YEMEN'S SOCIALIST PARTY AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE YEMENI LEFT

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COVER PHOTO: A Yemeni man walks past a Che Guevara poster in the capital Sana'a, on October 11, 2011, during Yemen's Arab Spring uprising. // Photo by ymphotos / Shutterstock



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.

Yemeni political parties have performed dismally in recent decades. This has both spurred, and been spurred on by, the failure of politics in general in the country, which culminated in the outbreak of war almost six years ago. Yemen's political parties today have abandoned their positions as national power brokers capable of pushing forward a political process to end civil strife and assumed the position of warring parties. The parties have adopted varied roles in the warring camps, including committing to alliances with regional powers interfering in Yemen. The ramifications of such distorted positions will have a rippling effect on Yemen's future.

In particular, leftist and Arab nationalist parties' institutional structures have weakened and fractured, altering their historic place in Yemen's public sphere. As their political clout has declined, their popular base has been left vulnerable to polarization by more effective and better organized local powers. This has meant that while leftist and Arab nationalist parties have engaged in the war – either through pushing their supporters to the frontlines, backing the internationally recognized government and state institutions, or having their local organizations succumb to the control of the de facto authorities – they have nevertheless remained weak in the political and military power balance in Yemen.

The Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) represents a vivid example of what has become of the Yemeni left. A chain of political missteps over the years and a misguided repositioning – including its response to the war – has pushed the YSP away from its historic role as a party that sided with the working and peasant classes and put common national interest ahead of other considerations.

Founded in the late 1970s, the YSP, in its early stages, championed issues of social justice. This included the integration of marginalized communities, such as nomadic Bedouins, as well as pushing for a progressive family law that empowered women politically, economically and socially. Even after the YSP's single-party rule in South Yemen ended in 1990 – when the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south merged with the Yemen Arab Republic in the north to form the unified Republic of Yemen – the party continued to unequivocally take the side of disadvantaged classes.

Over time, however, this legacy faded as the YSP gradually abandoned its moral and ethical positioning, a process that accelerated during the pre-war transitional period and then through the YSP's entanglement in the war. The party has ceased its endorsement of just causes that side with the common citizen's basic needs and civil rights, and it has failed to voice a clear stance against threats that could

fragment the country.

The YSP's moral degradation becomes more pronounced when contrasted with its historic legacy and its political literature. Instead, by avoiding controversy and maintaining a low profile to avoid being the target of other political powers, the party took a passive and ambiguous stance with regard to key intellectual and social issues. Its focus appears to have been carving for itself a zone of political safety, in return for some of its leaders receiving positions in state institutions.

This political timidity has caused huge disappointment among leftists in Yemen, who were expecting their party to adopt an honorable position that radically sided with people's daily struggles. The YSP's remaining constituency and supporters have found themselves abandoned by their party at a fundamental level. Critically, the YSP utterly failed to shape a third option for Yemenis, to step out of the dichotomies of war and offer an alternative to the current conflict's modalities; instead, it slipped toward representing the interests of militia groups.

## **From Avant-Garde Social Party to Morally Adrift and Institutionally Ruptured**

The evolution of the YSP since the 1970s is a result of the profound shifts that both unsettled and reshaped the party, and the choices made by the party to adapt. Most profound was the ideological shift. The YSP began as an avant-garde socialist party that, according to one of its founders, Abdulfattah Isma'il, established a secular state that eliminated social inequality and class stratification, and guaranteed freedom of religion. Decades later it had become a political party with no clear ideology that endorsed Islamic law as the source of all legislation ahead of the 2012-2013 National Dialogue Conference, even if publicly it continued to adopt typical leftist discourse.

Recurring internal party crises – the most known is the bloody infighting of 1986 among the party's competing factions that left thousands dead – caused deep and lasting ruptures in the YSP and reduced its popularity in the South, which to this day the party is still attempting to restore.

In the period following the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 leading up to the 1994 summer civil war saw the targeting of the party's leadership by President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime. This deprived the YSP of key figures



who could have played an effective role in its renewal. Meanwhile, much of the remaining YSP leadership post-1994 defected to rival parties and political movements such as the General People's Congress (GPC), and later, the Southern Movement.

Moreover, moving the party's headquarters to the North following unification affected its institutional structure and created organizational problems that led to divisions within the party's popular bases, particularly in villages in Taiz. This was most visible in the competition between socialists based in Jabal Sabir districts, and those in Ma'afir, Shammaytain and Samea' districts, and internal competition within the Hugaria area. This struggle came at the expense of developing popular bases in other parts of the country – including tribal areas, and undermined the party's institutional outreach. As a result, rivals such as the GPC and Islah began to eat away at the YSP's popular base, particularly in Hadramawt. More recently, the party has also had to compete with new political powers such as the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which seeks to appeal to the YSP's traditional southern base, and the armed Houthi movement, which recruited some of the party's leadership.

On top of the institutional rupture suffered by the party, numerous local party bodies, instead of serving the party interests, obstructed new initiatives and ideas put forward by party members. This manifested in the YSP's failure to build on the political and popular momentum of the youth revolution of 2011. As a partner in the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) which opposed Saleh's regime, it missed the political opening of 2011 to renew the party and adopt an inclusive national project.

## **Defined by a Concentration of Power, at the Margins of Political Relevance**

Perhaps one of the most important reasons for the party's institutional structures rupturing and its overall political role shrinking has been the authoritarianism practiced by the head of the party, the Secretary-General, and the concentration of decision-making powers at the top of the party. This is a condition that overshadowed the YSP's history, defined its internal struggles, and subsequently reflected on its performance. The party became synonymous with its Secretary-General, who acted as the face of the party. In spite of the party's numerous sub-structures, from the grassroots to middle and top leadership, the direction of

the party was defined by the whims, charisma and popularity of a single figure. Reducing the party and its decision-making authority to the head of the party, represented by one person, is a condition seen not only among leftist and Arab nationalist parties in Yemen but in the region in general.

Though the political leadership of the YSP attempted in recent years to activate the party's sidelined sub-structures, re-define their role and separate them from the direct authority of the Secretary-General, this did not solve the problem. Moreover, the fact that the current Secretary-General, Dr. Abdulrahman al-Saqqaf, remains out of the country has paralyzed the YSP during the war and fragmented the party's political decision-making among its local organizations. These organizations continued to adopt minor and secondary causes that conformed with the narrow political margins allowed by the de-facto authorities in their areas, rather than with national causes. This pushed the party as a whole to the margins politically as it failed to adopt a comprehensive position towards the country's fateful causes.

These flaws transformed the party into a collection of small fiefdoms, active in Yemeni urban areas, at the expense of the party's national structure, which became an organizational void distant from its members. The lack of contact between the party base and its committee leadership paralyzed the work of the YSP's grassroots organizations in Yemeni cities, which have always been the party's main strength. This left YSP members exposed and politically vulnerable to polarization by other parties and groups, leading some to defect to other parties or to be exploited as a political cover to legitimize local warring parties' actions in the war.

Moreover, the YSP's legacy as the ruling party in a single-party state in South Yemen meant that the orientation of YSP's leadership was, to a certain extent, driven by its eagerness to restore its popularity in the South, or at least to guarantee its relevance as the custodian of the Southern Issue. This orientation became more salient in recent years. The southern origins of the party kept shaping its direction on key issues, not only in the unwritten rule that the party's Secretary-General must always be a southerner, but also on how the party handled the Southern Issue – a secondary, albeit important, issue – at the expense of broader national issues. To this end, the YSP established a party structure in the South with full decision-making powers to ensure the party's relevance there, even if it contradicts decisions made at the party's higher official bodies. Still, It is clear that part of the YSP's chain of command moves to the tune of the southern street, even when that is in opposition to the party's political manifesto and historic stances.

The fear gripping at the leadership of the party – of losing its relevance in the South and being replaced by new formations established during the current war, such as the STC – led to YSP's political paralysis. not only in the South but in Yemen in general. The party leadership's fear and political timidity stems, in part, from the historic guilt of being complicit in the unequal 1990 unification deal, which led to the 1994 civil war, the South being looted by the northern regime, and decades of southern suppression by the government in Sana'a. This past trauma shaped the party's ambiguous official stances to the events witnessed in the South during this current war, where they did not dare support secession but didn't oppose it either.

In this regard, the party's stance vis-a-vis the STC was ambiguous at best and eventually led many party members to defect to the secessionist group. Notably, the YSP's support for a two-state federal system (South/North) during the National Dialogue Conference alienated the party base and middle leadership that leaned toward secession for South Yemen.

The continuous narrative of history is what determines the paths of states and parties. When it comes to the YSP's journey spanning more than 40 years, since its founding in 1978, there is a legacy that is reminiscent of the left's golden age which has inspired the imagination of Arab intellectuals –a golden age that was short-lived for reasons that cannot be sufficiently detailed in the scope of this article. However, it's in fact possible to thoroughly examine the reality of the political fragmentation that the YSP suffers from today and the cumulative outcome of what has become of the YSP as an institution and not what has become of its members. Thus, highlighting the YSP's current situation and miscalculations is an attempt to bring attention to its past and ongoing mistakes so it can reactivate its role as a political power for the future, rather than as a party restricted at its top, lingering nostalgically in a dreamy past.



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