

Yemen's Failing Democracy

PRESIDENT Saleh and his son Ahmad were sitting together one afternoon chewing qat, a Yemeni joke goes. The son is complaining about not being allowed to run for president in the 2006 elections, as promised by his father. "Give me a chance to prove myself," shouts Ahmad with his cheek full of the mildly stimulating qat leaves.

"Being president of Yemen is hard," the president replies. "However, I will give you a test, and should you pass this test, you have understood how to run Yemen and you can have your go." He holds out a big bag to his son. "In this bag there are fifty mice. Pour them out onto the floor and collect them within five minutes and you can be president."

The son does as he is told and scrambles around trying to collect the agile mice. But after five minutes he has only collected half of them, and is clearly upset: "That is an impossible test!" he shouts, "show me how you do it then!"

After all the mice are back in the bag, president Saleh grabs it and swings it around over his head for a minute before he releases all of the dizzy mice. Within two minutes they are all back in the bag.

Democracy the Yemeni way

The joke refers to the style of its long-serving president and the failings of Yemen's democracy. Officially, the country has been a parliamentary democracy since the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. In reality, the country is run by an autocratic president with extensive powers, and where the boundaries between the ruling General Peoples Congress party (GPC) and the state are nebulous.

President Ali Abdullah Saleh came to power in North Yemen in a coup d'état in 1978 and is now enjoying his 30th year in office ruling over a unified Yemen. He took over a country riddled by chaos and tribal warfare, but was able to turn foe into friend. Working through the traditional tribal networks and allegiances, he brought stability and a certain order to the country through the inclusion into the political system of the strong, and the exclusion or coercion of the weak. This has maintained his popularity with large segments of the population, above all in the area of the former North Yemen.

However, the structures he created to keep the competing forces in check all centre upon Saleh personally and not on the presidency itself. He has in fact made himself indispensable, a fact to which he is only too happy to draw attention; his portraits are visible everywhere.

His personal abilities to keep the country together, alongside the fear of what might happen should he step down, carried him easily through the country's first proper presidential election in 2006 with a comfortable 77% of the vote. The elections, however, were marred by irregularities and the ruling GPC party was able to draw on resources of the state and in doing so completely overshadowed the political opposition during the campaign; an opposition that is increasingly unifying its forces against the regime.

Economic and political marginalisation

The president's three decades in power have left the country's meagre wealth in the hands of an entrenched elite that siphons off enormous amounts of money in a country that every year sinks deeper on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.

While this elite enriches itself, the population suffers. Yemen is the poorest country in the region and half of its five-year-olds are underweight. Cuts in subsidies and rising food prices have led to unrest over the past few years; which ties in with the political marginalisation of large segments of the population. As the opposition is sidelined by the president and his party, dissent is increasingly being channelled through different means, including public protests and armed resistance.

In Sa'ada in the north of the country, the government has been fighting

four wars against a tribe from the Shi'a Zaydi sect since 2004; a conflict that has seen thousands killed and 50,000 people displaced only last year. In the south of the country, in the governorates that used to constitute the Marxist South Yemen, resentment of what is perceived as Northern colonialism and appropriation of their wealth has led to large demonstrations alongside calls for an end to corruption and Northern favouritism and a return to the rule of law. This unrest has spread to several towns and cities in the former North Yemen and has taken different forms such as tribal sit-ins in Marib and teachers' protests in Ta'izz.

The government response

Instead of broadening the political representation and alleviating grievances through the democratic framework, the regime is only increasing the use of measures that caused these grievances in the first place. The use of force to break up peaceful demonstrations has resulted in several deaths and serious injuries and an escalation of the protests.

Meanwhile, the president is doing everything in his power to discredit those that question him and his regime. Using rhetoric referring to the unification of the two Yemens in 1990 and the 1994 civil war, he labels all conflicts and political opponents as 'threatening unity' and, as such, treasonous. Religious clerics have echoed his mantra in religious terms, branding the demonstrators as unbelievers and dissidents from Islam, thus implying that they should be killed.

These repressive measures are being extended to society at large and the non-governmental media is under threat. Several journalists are currently being charged with treason for reporting on the wars in Sa'ada, and others are harassed and threatened by officials or their bodyguards.

Challenges ahead

Following the terrorist attack that left eight Spanish tourists and their two Yemeni drivers dead in July 2007, with the addition of the more recent failed attempts to hit American and Western targets in the capital Sana'a this year, there are fears that domestic Islamist militancy is on the rise, adding yet another dimension to the crisis in the country. Reportedly, the government had reached an agreement with jihadists, leaving them alone as long as they did not attack targets inside Yemen.

Now, however, there are reports that a new and younger cadre of Islamist extremists are willing to take the fight to their homeland. The attack that killed the Spanish tourists suggests that the extremists have brought valuable experience with them from the insurgency in Iraq. Add the probability that the Yemeni economy will collapse in a decade or so when the oil is predicted to run out, and the recipe for a failed state is complete.

Playing the different sides against each other has been a mainstay of president Saleh's domestic politics, and conflict has always been blamed on forces outside the president's control. Recent events, however, indicate that this balancing act is slowly crumbling as the regime's corruption becomes increasingly apparent, and different groups seem more ready to exploit its weakness. While the president's only recipe would appear to be more of the same (he recently proposed to abolish the ineffectual post of prime minister altogether), dizzying the mice is no longer the effective tool that it once was.

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