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**EVALUATING
POLITICAL
REFORM IN
YEMEN**

Sarah Phillips

**Democracy and
Rule of Law Program**



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SINCE THE REPUBLIC OF YEMEN WAS CREATED in 1990 through the unification of the northern and southern states, the Yemeni regime has very consciously framed its policies in the language of democracy, while simultaneously muzzling initiatives that might help facilitate democratic consolidation. There has been a marked increase in the level of popular political activity, but the country's power structures have proven resilient to political reform.

Although the same president has been in power since before unification, Yemen is regularly portrayed as having made genuine moves toward democracy. The country was recently pushed into the spotlight by the presidential elections in which a credible opponent officially captured nearly 22 percent of the vote. The director of the National Democratic Institute's Middle East Program stated: "Having watched democratic developments for ten years in the Middle East, this may have been the most significant election so far." Yemen also has lively parliamentary and public political debates, in which citizens and opposition figures routinely criticize the government. The number of parliamentary votes for the main opposition party increased roughly four-fold between 1993 and 2003, and there is generally enthusiastic participation in the electoral process. President Ali Abdullah Saleh regularly makes declarations about the importance of democratic values. Indeed, the idea of an unfolding transition to democracy has become an important legitimizing platform for the Yemeni government, domestically and internationally.

In practice, however, the situation is more complex. Alongside some progressive changes, there is a president approaching his thirtieth year in power, a government that is perceived to be increasingly corrupt, and a deeply fragmented political opposition that has been unable to force real concessions from the regime. There has been a worrisome increase in the harassment of journalists in recent years, but even government-run newspapers still sometimes publish articles criticizing the narrowing of press freedoms. In other words, Yemen's regime can claim some aspects of democracy but not enough to genuinely constrain them.

The changes that Yemen has witnessed since 1990 thus do not represent a clear democratic transition but contain elements of several broad patterns of political change in the Arab world, where limited openings, controlled pluralism, and regime endurance are related processes and where all too often repression tends to follow periods of relaxed control.

YEMENI POLITICAL SYSTEM: PLURALIZED AUTHORITARIANISM

The Republic of Yemen was created when the historically and politically divergent northern Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the southern People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) unified in 1990. The current political system is superimposed on a society with strong tribal structures that are often quite autonomous from the state, considerable regional differences, and extreme poverty.

Yemen's experiment with democratic procedures and institutions must be viewed against the backdrop of this tribal structure and of unification, a task that has been the overriding concern of the regime since 1990, even though the rhetoric has given more prominence to democratization.

The YAR was a traditionalist, free market state heavily dependent on foreign aid from the West, whereas the PDRY identified itself as Marxist and was propped up by the Soviet Union. Considerable debate exists over the reasons behind the sudden unification, but it is clear that both sides were attracted by the short-term political and economic benefits and probably thought they could outfox their counterparts to expand their own power. The atmosphere of intense distrust between the leaders under which unification was conducted meant that despite initial appearances of democratic willingness, intense interparty and regional rivalry undermined cooperation.

Unification was achieved by essentially merging the two former regimes in what was, theoretically, a reasonably equitable power-sharing arrangement. Even though South Yemen's population was only around a quarter of that of North Yemen, the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), which ruled the south, and the General People's Congress (GPC), which controlled the north, agreed to share power on a roughly fifty-fifty basis until the first elections could be held. Neither state had an established history of electoral or democratic politics. Political parties had been banned and, except for the small-scale parliamentary elections held in each state in 1988, institutionalized political participation had been virtually nonexistent. Nonetheless, the public was very optimistic about the democratic foundations of the new unified state and enthusiastically embraced the rights it was granted.

Like many states in the Arab world that have embarked on a process of limited reform, Yemen developed a political system best described as pluralized authoritarianism.¹ The regime is authoritarian, and although some space is granted for alternative voices, there are severe restrictions on the establishment of alternative institutionalized power centers that might threaten the elite. Elections are usually regular and at times even somewhat competitive, but the officials are much less focused on policy formulation than on building and reinforcing patronage links between themselves and society. In pluralized authoritarian states, opposition groups can unintentionally strengthen the regime they seek to weaken. The managed and curtailed political space that regimes grant opposition groups can mean that the opposition's actions serve to either legitimize the regime, providing them with access to funding from donors advocating democracy, or act as a pressure valve for popular discontent. Formal, and therefore identifiable, opposition groups provide avenues for dissent that are more manageable for the regime than if discontent were simply left to bubble below the surface unchecked. Regimes in pluralized authoritarian states thus maintain their positions in part through the type of openings that might normally be expected to dislodge them.

The granting of some political space, however limited, and the holding of somewhat competitive elections also provide certain benefits to members of the opposition. As a result, the opposition is very wary of provoking a harsh response from the regime by manifesting its dissent too boldly. As a leader of the *Tajamma' al-Yemeni li al-Islah* (Yemeni Gathering for Reform, or *Islah Party*) told the author, "[President] Saleh could call a state of emergency and dissolve *Islah*, other political parties and the parliament, and arrest thousands of *Islahis* ... Right now we are pushing for progress but we avoid [the] more sensitive issues." Although opposition members complain vocally about the limits and controls placed on them, they have been disinclined to champion systemic changes too aggressively for fear of losing ground gained since 1990. Opposition members may see the current

system as flawed, but many also believe that the likely alternative is chaos or further repression. Thus they see political demands that threaten the regime too dramatically as counterproductive. In Yemen, the perception that the regime's removal would lead to a power vacuum and to strife reinforces the view that negotiating with the regime is more prudent than aggressively working to topple it.

The opposition's fear of creating a power vacuum and provoking the regime into unleashing its security apparatus has further reinforced the preference for coexistence over unrestrained confrontation. Equally important is the opposition's perception of its own weakness and what it sees as the lack of realistic alternatives to the present regime. President Saleh played on the opposition's weakness when he announced in the lead-up to the 2006 presidential elections, "Yes, some opposition figures say it is very necessary [for me] to accept [the presidential] nomination for there's no alternative ... Why are there not alternatives?"

EARLY REFORMS AND THE CHALLENGE OF UNIFICATION

When the two former Yemeni states unified in 1990, the new Republic of Yemen declared itself a participatory parliamentary democracy—the first in the Arabian Peninsula. Voting rights were granted to all citizens over the age of 18, and far greater freedoms in expression and political association than existed previously were written into law. The new constitution, which was adopted after a nationwide referendum in 1991, gave voting and candidacy rights to all adult citizens; it recognized the legal equality of all citizens, judicial independence, and a directly elected parliament; and it guaranteed a democratic political system. Islamic Sharia was to be the "main source" of legislation, a view that was challenged in 1994 by the Islamist Islah Party, which believed the wording could lead to a secular state. Islah succeeded in having Sharia declared the "sole source" of all legislation. In reality, Yemen's legal code has remained an often incoherent and poorly enforced blend of Sharia, tribal, and Western-style laws that is frequently administered on the basis of political or personal affiliation.

The political reforms introduced in the early 1990s were dictated by the necessity to cobble together the two parts of the country rather than by a genuine desire to transform Yemen into a democracy. As a result, reforms were only partial, with new laws granting rights that were quickly watered down. The Press Law of 1990, for example, made considerable promises regarding the right to the freedom of knowledge, expression, the press, and access to information. It led to an almost overnight explosion in the number of publications in the country, and it increased the public's ability to scrutinize the government. However, the new law also stipulated strict qualifications that journalists had to meet and other restrictive conditions under which an organization could publish material. The Yemeni penal code allows journalists to be imprisoned for humiliating the state or for distributing "false information," and the regime has not hesitated to avail itself of these rights. Material deemed to be harmful to national unity, security, the economy, Islam, or the president is also technically prohibited from publication.

Likewise, the Parties and Elections Law of 1991 removed many of the previous restrictions on political association and facilitated the establishment of an unprecedented number of grassroots organizations and political parties. However, the law again aimed to prevent people from using their new rights to the detriment of such loosely defined entities as "Islamic precepts and values," "the

sovereignty, integrity, and unity of the country and the people,” “the republican system,” or “the national cohesion of the Yemeni society.” These ambiguous articles have been used by the regime to protect itself from the spirit of the constitution.

Yemen’s first postunification elections were held in April 1993, and were marked by a great deal of popular enthusiasm. Roughly 3,000 candidates participated in the elections, and voter turnout was quite high. International observers deemed the process relatively free and fair although electoral violations were still blatant. Significant flaws notwithstanding, the process was a huge departure from the practice of politics just three years earlier.

Three major political parties participated in the elections: the GPC, the YSP, and the Islah Party. The GPC, President Saleh’s party and the ruling party of North Yemen, was and remains the largest of the three. It retains the ideological incoherence that justified its inception in 1982, when political parties were banned and a broad political umbrella was the preferred method of accommodating competing political factions. It comprised a vast number of diverse elites that supported the regime and helped formalize the system of patronage available to politically relevant supporters of President Saleh’s rule.

The YSP, the ruling party of the former South Yemen, was the most ideologically radical ruling party in the Arab world. Identifying itself as Marxist, it called for revolutionary socialist struggle. The party was wracked by factional violence, which culminated in a two-week civil war in January 1986 that killed thousands of party members and civilians. After the bloodletting, the YSP began to look to pluralism in an attempt to recover from the massive societal and political rifts that the conflict exacerbated. The YSP entered into Yemen’s unification in 1990 as the weaker of the two partners but pushed to ensure that a commitment to pluralist politics was part of the unification arrangement.

The Islamist Islah Party was created a few months after unification, largely from members of the GPC in an effort to marginalize the YSP and give a distinct political voice to the GPC’s more religiously inclined members. In the early years, Islah’s organizational structure and policies were almost identical to those of the GPC, although this has changed incrementally since the party officially became a member of the opposition in 1997. Islah is a moderate Islamist party and is not averse to formal, multiparty political participation. Like the GPC, Islah rests on a diverse coalition of tribal elites, moderate and hardline Islamists, and conservative (tribal or Islamist) businessmen. As a result of the diversity that exists particularly at the elite level, the party is difficult to pin down ideologically. Islah also maintains strong connections with the international Muslim Brotherhood.

In Yemen’s first parliamentary elections in 1993, the YSP polled better in the former south than the GPC did in the former north, where the Islah Party also found considerable support, but the socialists were still dismayed by the overall results. They came in considerably behind the GPC and a close third behind the upstart northern-based Islah Party. As a result, the YSP lost the privileged position that it had held in the 1990–1993 interim government. The GPC and Islah established a coalition government, an alliance the disempowered southerners viewed as creating a serious imbalance of power between North and South Yemen. The two sides descended into a series of worsening accusations and violence.

In the hurry to solve the pressing short-term concerns of unifying the two states, the enormity of the project had been seriously underestimated. Democracy was seen as a convenient mechanism

with which to blend two dramatically different political systems, and many of the difficult questions of state building were put on the backburner indefinitely. The result of pinning such high hopes on a poorly defined democracy was a great range of amorphous debates and little concrete progress toward fixing the problems of the fledgling state. Yemenis were soon to discover the difficulty of hastily combining unification and democratization, and authoritarianism was reconsolidated, albeit never officially.

CIVIL WAR AND THE REVERSAL OF REFORM

Relations between the two former ruling parties became increasingly antagonistic after the 1993 elections, with each denouncing the other's supposed lack of commitment to unity and power sharing. In an attempt to cool the mounting crisis, a group of respected northern elites established the National Dialogue of Political Forces to publicly thrash out potential solutions to the situation. The solutions they recommended were outlined in the Document of Pledge and Accord, which called for further limits to executive power, a bicameral legislature, and greater decentralization of power. Support for the document was widespread throughout both the north and the south, with all three major parties clamoring to be seen as supporting the democratic vision it articulated. By March 1994, the National Dialogue of Political Forces broke down amid the continued struggle between the northern and southern elites, and the stage was set for civil war.

Fighting broke out in April 1994, and the bloody two-month conflict that ensued destroyed much of the buoyancy surrounding the idea of unity and, by extension, the democratization that had been grafted onto it. The GPC was victorious and cracked down on the elements of the YSP that it deemed secessionist. It also quickly adopted constitutional amendments that retracted many of the progressive reforms introduced after unification. In the GPC's view, its efforts at power sharing and democratization had led to the YSP reneging on its commitment to unity. The bloodied YSP felt that it had been maneuvered out of its rightful share of power by the GPC's desire to gain control of the south's valuable natural resources.

In September 1994, barely two months after the fighting ceased, constitutional amendments were passed by a special committee, without a popular referendum. The YSP's defeat in the war cost the party its parliamentary veto, allowing amendments to be drawn up by the ruling GPC–Islah coalition. Close to half of the original articles in the constitution were amended, and 29 new articles were added. The amendments abolished the Presidential Council and broadened the powers of the president. The Presidential Council, which in the 1991 constitution was a five-member body elected by the parliament, was replaced by the Consultative Council (Majlis al Shura), whose 59 (now 111) members are appointed by the president. Unlike the Presidential Council before it, the Majlis al Shura was initially an advisory body that could not issue binding resolutions, although it has since been granted some minor legislative functions. The legal code of the former South, much of which was quite progressive, particularly regarding women, was also formally nullified. Further consolidating power in the executive, the amended constitution allowed the president to appoint the prime minister, head the Supreme Judicial Council—overriding the constitutional separation of powers—and decree laws when parliament was not in session. The president led the Supreme Judicial Council until 2006.

Finally, the northern-dominated military flooded into the south, appropriating land and extending the hegemony of northern elites in the region. The once-robust southern court system that was removed by the constitutional amendments has been gradually replaced by a system more prone to patronage-based affiliation, much to the infuriation of many southerners. The consolidation of the patronage system is one of the most important legacies of the postwar period and probably the most antithetical to the development of democracy. The selective distribution of benefits and application of punishments grant a huge amount of power to the regime. Unlike the situation in some other Arab states, Yemeni oppositionists are less curtailed by legal restrictions—which would require a stronger system of formal institutions—than they are by the regime’s discretionary application of the law and distribution of favors.

Additional constitutional changes were approved in 2001 by referendum, although the substance of the amendments was not made widely available prior to the vote. The changes further relaxed the restrictions on the president and his ability to dissolve the parliament. Whereas the 1994 constitution had required that a nationwide referendum be held before such action could be taken, the 2001 amendments required only that voters “elect a new House of Representatives within sixty days from the date of issuance of the decree of dissolution.” Nevertheless, the president has never dissolved the parliament, although the threat remains. The amendments also extended the presidential term from five to seven years. The local press has since been rife with speculation that this was to allow time for Saleh’s son, Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, to reach 40 years of age, the constitutional minimum age for the president. When President Saleh was subjected to a barrage of negative articles in the press about the issue of political inheritance in 2004, he told the army that the press and the opposition were “hostile forces” and “mentally ill.” This confrontation marked the beginning of a further narrowing of political space, and shortly thereafter the harassment of journalists and political activists increased significantly.

The Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) Law of 2001 and its 2004 bylaw reiterated the government’s formal commitment to political pluralism but allowed room for considerable government monitoring and control of NGO activities. Yemeni NGOs are also controlled through the informal government patronage available to groups that do not overstep the government’s redlines. The regime places a high level of pressure on NGOs to accept a semi-official role, by granting state funding in exchange for a degree of political acquiescence. Thus, while there is legal space for NGOs, the regime’s redlines are perpetuated by a civil society aware of the consequences and probable futility of aggressive dissent, and aware of the rewards of at least partial compliance. Yemen’s economic turmoil compounds this situation because while there remains the background threat of political violence, economic scarcity makes government “offers” of financial assistance hard to turn down. Many organizations are faced with the difficult choice of either having a very minimal political impact or having no impact at all through being forced to close down.

Despite the regime’s political dominance, President Saleh still emphasizes his need to at least appear to be sharing power, stating publicly that: “We want all political powers under the parliament’s dome. We want all the parties to have a chance, and we don’t want a 99.9 percent majority.” The heavily lopsided distribution of power aside, the idea of electoral competition and political pluralism still carries significant weight within the Yemeni system. The regime’s greater interest in unity than reform has meant that Yemen has charted an uncertain political path, but a number of reforms still warrant assessment.

HOW SIGNIFICANT ARE THE CHANGES?

Despite the reversal of reform that followed the civil war, there is still a degree of openness in the Yemeni political system. The country has not reverted completely to the authoritarianism that marked both North and South Yemen before unification. A multiparty system, regular elections, and a sometimes vocal opposition still exist, but their significance in putting Yemen on a path to democracy remains questionable.

To assess the significance of Yemen's limited reforms and the changes they have spurred, one must ask whether they have merely reinforced an authoritarian regime, or whether they may still precipitate a more significant shift away from centralized control. From the regime's side, there is little to suggest that electoral politics and managed pluralism have been intended to greatly expand the circle of decision makers. On balance, the postwar period has witnessed far more major retreats from reform than progress. The YSP boycotted the 1997 parliamentary elections, and the GPC, lacking a unified opposition, won a landslide victory. Following these elections, Islah left the ruling coalition and joined what its leaders termed the "loyal opposition," that is, a party with a growing grassroots support base but with enduring patronage ties between its leadership and the regime. The GPC's increase in dominance can be traced from the 1993 parliamentary elections where it won 145 of 301 seats, to 187 seats in the 1997 elections, to its near total victory in the 2003 elections, with 229 seats occupied by GPC members and several more occupied by officially independent candidates with strong ties to the GPC.

Political reform does not depend on the government alone but also on other actors. It is, therefore, helpful to look at whether there have been any changes on the demand side to the successes and failures of actors outside the regime in expanding their room to maneuver under the conditions of pluralized authoritarianism. Although Yemen's political opening has not fundamentally altered the distribution of power, it appears that some oppositionists have recognized the potential to open up further space for themselves. This recognition may seem a small step considering the obstacles that any group faces in wresting actual power, but it bears the potential to become more significant in the foreseeable future, particularly if the regime's support base continues to narrow. The fight for further political space in an essentially closed system can be seen in the functioning of the parliament, the establishment of an opposition coalition, and, most importantly, in the 2006 elections.

Significance of the Parliament

On paper, the Yemeni parliament has considerable power, but in practice it is severely constrained. The constitution gives parliament the responsibility to propose and approve legislation; question the prime minister, ministers, and their deputies; approve the government's program or withdraw confidence in the government; review and approve the budget; and, with a two-thirds majority, impeach the president if he is found to have violated the constitution or committed grand treason. Unlike in other Arab states, Yemen's executive does not have the constitutional right of veto.

The regime has undermined the parliament's constitutional right of oversight, and the parliament has not, as an institution, vigorously demanded these rights to be upheld. There is a feeling of powerlessness among the members and a sense that their primary purpose is to rubber-stamp decisions made by the executive to provide a veneer of democracy to citizens and foreign donors. The provision of democratic semblance is the most obvious function of the parliament, but its significance goes deeper.

Parliament extends patronage to a large section of local elites and gives them a stake in the political system without offering them sufficient power to alter it. It also serves as a gauge of public opinion—an early warning system for mounting tension in society. It is a relatively safe way for the executive to judge popular political sentiment and address grievances before they grow to the stage where a more forceful response is required. Parliament functions as a sounding board that can alert the executive to broader discontent and provide it with advice to buffer some of the excesses of its policies. The parliament is a tool to widen the net of political opinion and allow a limited, controlled amount of upward communication from society. In this sense, parliament appears mainly to reinforce the power of the existing regime by softening its relations with the society.

There are, however, some members of parliament that have started to see their institution as a potential vehicle for change and also as a place to voice dissent and raise public awareness of Yemen's problems. In the last few years, parliamentarians have rallied against corrupt deals that were being passed by the regime without oversight. This was most notable in parliament's outrage at the regime's attempted sale of a sizeable concession for oil exploration in "Block 53" at well below its market value in 2004. In 2005, around 100 members for the GPC broke ranks and signed a petition against the reduction of fuel subsidies. Even though the protest was ultimately ineffective, it remained noteworthy as a coordinated effort against a policy that was important to the regime. The parliamentarians were ultimately strong-armed into complying with a decision that was made behind closed doors, but this time they did not lend credibility to the process, instead making their own inability to act against a highly unpopular bill a matter of public record and debate. There have also been a number of high-profile resignations and defections from the GPC, each of which was a calculated protest against the status quo. In late 2005, a group of 16 progressive parliamentarians established YemenPAC (Yemeni Parliamentarians Against Corruption) in an effort to combat rising corruption. In the wake of the 2006 elections, YemenPAC successfully drafted and lobbied for amendments to the Anticorruption Law to form a stronger and more independent anticorruption commission. They also managed to remove the president from the commission selection process, despite the government's initial objections. These may each seem like small steps, but they represent an attempt by those outside the regime to create further space for themselves in an unpromising situation.

Yemen's parliament is neither genuinely independent nor effective, but it forms part of the softer end of the regime's drive to retain control and is an attempt to monitor and in some cases respond to citizens' concerns. Though sometimes only barely tolerated by the regime, the parliament has also been used to provide feedback from the society, and some changes in the regime's stance have occurred as a result. On balance, parliament's function has been more cosmetic than anything, but it is conceivable that this could change in times of popular discontent or if enough members of parliament begin to see their interests as opposed to the regime that constrains them.

Significance of Civil Society

The notion that civil society is a key base from which to propel a transition to democracy is a dominant theme in the literature on reform in the Arab world and in the democracy advocacy programs found throughout the region. After Yemeni unification, many civil society organizations emerged to fill the political space that was deliberately vacated by the regime, but they have not been sufficiently equipped to protect that space or fight for more once the regime began to retract it.

Yemeni civil society's inability to successfully counteract the regime has meant that it has not emerged as a key actor in promoting a democratic transition.

There are three key barriers to civil society forming an effective counterbalance to the regime in Yemen. The first is that civil society tends to rearticulate the same system of patrimonialism that drives the ruling elite—the effectiveness of actors in the civil sphere is derived largely from their proximity to the leadership. Without personal connections to regime figures, political activists, advocacy groups, newspapers, and professional syndicates are unlikely to stay solvent or have their interests heard. Second, the way in which the concept of civil society has been applied to the Middle East by Western scholars and democracy promoters often presupposes an American lobby-group style of politics, where organized groups are empowered to bargain with the state to achieve specific goals. This assumes the rule of law and respect for the sovereignty of the state by those bargaining with it, neither of which are consistently apparent in Yemen. The law, or more often the lack of its enforcement, does not consistently protect civil groups, which makes it extremely difficult for activists to press beyond the regime's redlines without risk of punishment. If civil society is to counteract the state, it must be clear where and what the state is, but Yemen's tangled web of patron–client links makes this identification difficult. Finally, and most important, gains by civil society in Yemen, such as the growing number of organizations and the slightly more liberal regulatory laws, have not corresponded to losses in the regime's power. In a pluralized authoritarian state, the presence of an active though stifled civil society can actually help to protect the state's key political elites. The dilemma is that waiting for the state to grant genuine reforms is not an attractive option either.

Opposition Coalition

The opposition Joint Meeting Party (JMP) coalition was formed in 2002 in an effort to undermine the dominance of the GPC. It is a rather unlikely partnership between the Islamist Islah Party, which dominates the group, the YSP, and three other minor parties. The unusual nature of a coalition between an Islamist and a secular party should not be overlooked, particularly considering that Islah was in coalition with the GPC against the YSP less than ten years ago and that the two parties fought a bloody civil war just twelve years ago. It is one of Yemen's many ironies that Islah and the YSP have found common cause—an indication of the importance that interest-based alliances hold over ideology in Yemeni politics. The parties' willingness to cooperate is also a sign of increasing electoral pragmatism within the Yemeni opposition.

The JMP coalition is based on an agreement among its members not to compete against one another if the outcome would favor an outsider. In its first attempt at cooperation in the 2003 parliamentary elections, the JMP was largely ineffective and was characterized by distrust, particularly between Islah and the YSP. It appears that by early 2006, however, the regime was plagued by so many problems that the opposition smelled blood in the water and began to frame its desires more sharply than it had previously dared. In the months immediately prior to the 2006 presidential and local elections (which were held simultaneously), the willingness of JMP members to cooperate increased enormously, much to the surprise of most Yemenis. There was considerable optimism domestically and internationally that a formidable opposition was rising to capitalize on the regime's failures.

Ultimately, the JMP did not do as well as it might have in either the presidential or the local elections. Instead, the party achieved what had been the opposition's unspoken mandate for the past several years: to provoke debate and apply pressure on the president to reform himself, without

actually targeting his job. The many electoral violations notwithstanding, Yemeni voters also preferred the idea of a strong and familiar leader who had been pressured to improve, over the prospect of unpredictable change with a new untested leader. President Saleh was officially awarded 77 percent of the vote, and the JMP's presidential candidate, Faisal bin Shamlan, received 22 percent. In the local elections, the JMP did even worse, winning just 9 and 14.5 percent of seats at the governorate and district level, respectively.

The JMP did not launch an official challenge to the results despite its initial—and clearly exaggerated—claims that bin Shamlan received 2 million more votes than he was officially awarded. Instead, the party released a statement that it wanted “to avoid a clash or confrontation with the authorities which (might) derail the process of change that has begun.” The JMP accepted that it did not yet have the capacity to challenge for the presidency and so accepted that its role was mainly educational. Bin Shamlan even stated several weeks after the elections that he would continue his political life as an independent, not a member of the JMP, whom he said he had joined only to “extend the desire [for] change among Yemeni people.” The elections thus provided the opportunity for a flurry of coordination among the opposition against a common opponent, but once the elections were over the opposition broke into more disparate parts.

For all of its failings, the JMP (particularly Islah) has still become the only organized, nonviolent, potential threat to the regime. That such a threat even exists represents a significant shift in the last fifteen years. This time, the JMP alliance proved to be weaker than the sum of its parts, but it is likely that its members will learn from this experience and regroup for the parliamentary elections in April 2009. For the JMP's performance to become more significant in the next elections, it will have to see its function as being less a political lobby group and more of an alternative power center.

2006 Elections

The September elections were a victory, at least on one level, for popular participation and electoral administration. The vocabulary of democracy that characterized the rhetoric during the campaign period underlined that, if nothing else, recourse to the concept of democracy has become the most legitimate way to frame a political debate. The elections also showed that people are increasingly expecting politics to be conducted through the electoral process, which is conceivably an unintended form of institution building, and a consequence of the regime's use of democracy to legitimize itself.

The campaign period was the most vigorous the country had seen, and the regime appeared genuinely worried by the level of competition mustered by its opponents. As a result, there was intense pressure placed on both Islah and the YSP to abandon the JMP: Islah was offered cabinet positions, and the YSP was offered the return of confiscated property and offices, in return for leaving the coalition. The sheer number of pictures of the president adorning nearly every building in the country pointed to the regime's nervousness at the seeming strength of its opponents. Several senior government figures noted privately in the days leading up to the elections that they even expected the JMP to win “half or more than half” the seats in the local councils. The GPC's sweep of between 75 to 80 percent of local council seats belies the extent to which the regime's cage was rattled during this time.

The number of people who worked in the polling booths on election day demonstrated a level of enthusiasm for participation in the political process, and the relatively even spread between

GPC and JMP representatives showed considerable pluralism. Around the country there were some 27,000 subcommittees, which watched over the rooms where the votes were cast. Each subcommittee consisted of three people, the members of which were officially divided to favor the GPC to JMP by a relatively small margin—54 to 46 percent. In every committee, there was at least one representative from the two main competing parties. In addition, each candidate (presidential and local) was permitted to have one representative to oversee the process in each polling station where he or she was competing. This meant that at least 200,000 people, including independent local monitors (which some estimates put as high as 45,000 people), observed the process across the country on election day. Despite the regime’s heavy-handed attempt to manipulate the elections earlier on, Yemeni political activists and voters believed that there was still something to be gained at the polls.

Ultimately, the election results showed that the regime was more resilient than many people had expected: It was challenged by the process, but its power was not diminished by the outcome. Despite the fears of the regime and the hopes of the opposition, in the end one phrase summed up the popular mood at the polls, “better the devil you know.” President Saleh proved adept at playing on popular fears of the instability that might occur if he was removed from power. Just days before the elections, attacks by militants on two oil installations reinforced the tenuous nature of stability and security in the country and further exacerbated the climate of fear that had echoed through the campaign. At about the same time, the government paid a “president’s bonus” of an additional month’s salary to the one million or so people on its payroll, thus reinforcing the image of President Saleh as the provider of the nation. In a country beset with poverty, the impact of such payment should not be underestimated.

Despite the description of the elections by some international observers as a “positive development in Yemen’s democratization process,” Yemen emerged from the process as a more consolidated pluralized authoritarian state than one necessarily on the path to democracy. The distribution of power and resources remains centralized, and the formal and informal state institutions remain geared toward facilitating this distribution. Nevertheless, the elections were significant, mainly because of the willingness of the diverse members of the JMP to work together.

PRIORITIES FOR REFORM

The deeply entrenched patronage system, including the exclusive distribution of government appointments and resources, is the biggest obstacle to reform that Yemen faces. Democracy is built on the rule of law, and the ability of the citizenry to influence the government in a regular, protected, and nonviolent manner. The procedures associated with liberal democracy, such as elections and parliaments, are not ends in themselves. They are considered democratic because they attempt to formalize a feedback mechanism that increases the subjection of decision makers to the political will of those affected by their decisions. Yemen’s state-sponsored system of patronage undermines the subjection of the government to the popular will by overriding both the creation of strong institutions and the establishment of law and order. It is clear that without addressing some very basic issues of state building to at least reduce the potency of the patronage system, there is a glass ceiling on the other types of reform that can be realistically achieved.

In the absence of a robust political opposition, the will of the president is central to this pursuit, and the likelihood that he will willingly distribute power away from himself is just the first in a series of hurdles. Of course, not all problems stem from the executive, but the president has the best chance to implement the most changes quickly and thus pave the way for more broad-based reform.

The opposition, however, is still in a position to strengthen its coordination and consistency of message to place additional pressure on the president to commit to more reforms in the short term, with a view to challenging for greater power in the longer term. At this stage, the opposition's capacity to actually seize power in an election is probably less important than its ability to focus popular debates and the attention of the leadership on the necessity of significant reform, which is what the JMP attempted in the 2006 elections. The 2006 elections placed resistance to the Saleh regime in the most prominent position since the 1994 civil war, and the opposition has never been better situated to focus calls for reform around the window of opportunity that this grants them. This window is wedged slightly wider by two factors: first, by the regime's public enthusiasm for reform after the challenge it encountered during the elections campaign, and second, by the regime's subsequent bid for increased international aid, which was largely based on the promise of greater reform. The nearly \$5 billion in aid commitments that Yemen secured at the donors' conference in November 2006 means that donors are likely to apply some pressure on the regime to handle this money responsibly.

Devaluing State-Sponsored Patronage

There is widespread consensus among reform advocates in Yemen that to progress toward democracy, the country should ideally reduce corruption, enhance the rule of law, decentralize power away from the regime, and increase the level of cooperation between opposition parties and activists. The feasibility of these goals hinges predominantly on one central though still malleable factor: the regime-sponsored patronage system. As a whole, Yemen's patronage system is a very blurry target, but it can be separated into smaller, more manageable pieces. Starting a reform process by aggressively targeting those at the top without also addressing other entrenched structural impediments is likely not only to be ineffective but also to alienate key actors who might ease the passage of some necessary reforms.

A fundamental element of the patronage system is the regime's encouragement of citizens' financial dependence on the state, whether through government employment or the reliance on personal connections to the regime to succeed in business. Efforts could conceivably be made by international lending agencies, donors, the JMP, and reform-minded members of the government to promote initiatives that increase citizens' opportunities for financial independence from the state and weaken the importance of personal networks for securing basic needs. Yemen's grim economic situation is already leading these actors to consider where potential openings for such reforms exist.

The more readily achievable priorities for promoting lower-level reform include implementing merit-based hiring policies in the civil service and increasing wages to a realistic level. The government is understandably nervous about the political repercussions of rationalizing the bureaucracy as major international lending groups consistently suggest. Although it would be difficult for the government to terminate a large number of existing employees, it would be relatively simple to implement new hiring practices based on merit—in fact it would only require that the government enforce the law already in place. The political cost of enforcing the existing law would be much lower

for the regime, and the money saved could be funneled into living wages for employees, thus reducing the lure of the lower-level corruption that undermines the government's capacity. This effort would be logically complemented by a drive to clearly articulate the tasks that government employees are expected to perform, as roles are currently poorly defined and redundancy is high. Better definition of tasks would help support a system of oversight with rewards and punishments to employees that are also based on merit instead of patronage ties. The regime might be likely to recognize the benefits of these initiatives, having seen the success of the Social Fund for Development (SFD). The SFD is a Yemeni governmental agency into which donors have been putting considerable—and increasing—amounts of money because of its transparency and effectiveness, both of which are products of the SFD's merit-based hiring policies and the living wages paid to its employees.

The relevance of the patronage system would also diminish should conditions be made more favorable to local businesses and investors. According to World Bank statistics, Yemen's economic climate is one of the least competitive in the Arab world, and in terms of the minimum amount of capital required to set up a business it is the second most expensive country in the world. Businesses are expected to negotiate their tax rates with government officials, as there is no standard rate evenly applied. Personal relationships with powerful officials guide the amount of tax a business has to pay and thus can determine which businesses succeed and which fail. Simplification of the procedures to establish a business is therefore another short-term measure that could be improved to expand people's avenues for financial independence and is an area in which a World Bank program is already making some progress.

Promoting the Rule of Law

If political reform is to progress significantly, state institutions with not only the capacity but also the political will to enforce the law need to be established. Although many of Yemen's laws meet international standards on paper, the corruption and weakness in the judiciary and the lack of institutional power granted to the police force severely undermine legal enforcement. Yemeni citizens are theoretically equal before the law, but in practice punishments are unevenly applied with little possibility of recourse, particularly where the regime itself is involved. The executive regularly intervenes in judicial procedures, and judges tend to be politically appointed, which further skews the legal balance in favor of those already in power. It is virtually impossible to seek legal redress under this system without the protection of personal relationships. Yemenis' attachment to their formal legal institutions is not nearly as high as in some other Arab states, such as Egypt, and remolding them is not inconceivable, particularly if the benefits of doing so are clear. The majority of Yemenis are sick of the inefficiencies and inequalities endemic in their formal systems, and genuine reform would probably be well received at the lower level. Again the difficulty lies in the unwillingness of those at the top to reform a system from which they draw personal benefit.

Strengthening the Opposition Coalition

The regime is unlikely to implement significant reforms if those outside its ranks do not put it under serious pressure to do so. There is no specific set of legal changes that would facilitate growth in the power of political parties because the obstacles they face are not legal in nature. Again, they stem from the discretionary distribution of favors and punishments. The opposition is in a position to demonstrate—as it started to in the 2006 electoral campaign—that it is both unified and committed

to the types of reforms needed to prevent Yemen from descending into a serious economic crisis. If this commitment is viewed as ongoing—not something that is only required when elections are scheduled—then there is potential for significant change. Because the lack of executive political will is one of the biggest obstacles to reform, the opposition may begin to recognize its potential to exploit this and make reform seem the least worst option for the president. If this does not occur before the 2009 parliamentary elections, there will be little room for optimism that Yemen will move beyond a system of pluralized authoritarianism in the foreseeable future. That the JMP's presidential candidate Faisal bin Shamlan abandoned the JMP so quickly after the election was, however, a blow to the type of consistent commitment that the opposition needs to demonstrate to gain the public's trust.

Strengthening Local Administration

Nearly three-quarters of Yemenis live in rural areas, and yet power is heavily centralized in the capital, Sana'a. Democracy advocates have been keen to strengthen Yemen's local councils, but the changes required to grant them genuine power and independence from the central authorities have been continually obstructed. Yemen's local councils, which were first established in 2001, are inexperienced and lack the internal capacity to fulfill the tasks the constitution outlines for them, and they must also contend with serious obstacles from the regime. However, they still hold the possibility of expanding their role and effectiveness in the future, the popularity of which is indicated by the strength of demands for elected council leaders, which are currently appointed by the president.

The president's ability to appoint all governors and council directors is seemingly permitted by the ambiguity of an article in the 2001 constitution, which refers to "the nomination, election and/or selection and appointment of heads of these administrative units." The question of whether the local heads are to be elected or selected is unanswered, and the government has erred on the side of selection.

Moreover, all funding to the councils must be approved and granted by the ministry of finance, which is subject to strong unofficial executive control. In practice this means that the councils have no control over their budgets, which greatly undermines their potential for autonomy. And the central government is only minimally committed to covering operational costs of the local councils. The Local Administration Law states that local councils can only spend their money on capital investments, thus while they can build infrastructure, there is no recurrent budget to operate or maintain the facilities that they build.

Despite these very real hindrances, the idea of effective and decentralized local councils in rural areas is widely supported in Yemen. Some councils have started to demand more rights, gaining the respect of their local communities, and there have been several instances of local councils adopting creative strategies to counter the limitations placed on them. Although councils are not authorized to hire and fire local government employees, a number of council members have begun to "withdraw confidence" in members that were appointed by the central government in an attempt to wrest some political influence from the regime. After the 2006 elections, President Saleh reiterated his promise that governors and local council heads would soon become elected posts. He may have done this because he felt that the GPC's electoral sweep at both the district and governorate levels gave him little cause for alarm, and he may have also have seen it as a low-cost political card to take away from the opposition, which has long called for direct election. Either way, if implemented, this would be a positive step toward greater government responsiveness to its citizens.

The process of decentralization poses a considerable problem to the regime, however. Despite the rhetoric of unification, Yemen is still significantly divided politically, economically, and, some argue, culturally between the mountainous highland region that surrounds Sana'a—where the vast majority of the regime's power brokers are from—and the rest of the country. The centralization of political administration and control in the resource-poor highland region largely hinges on the fact that virtually all of the country's natural resources are all located elsewhere. Roughly 80 percent of Yemen's oil is located in the former South, and the remaining 20 or so percent is in Marib, a strongly tribal area not short on animosity for the Saleh regime. The coastal region, with its fisheries and strategically located seaports, are also outside of the landlocked highland region. For the regime, devolution of power to local councils risks ceding control over the resources that drive the country—a possibility it does not take lightly.² This said, as the direct election of local council leaders was one of the president's key postelection promises, it would be worth the opposition and foreign donors attempting to keep him to his word.

OBSTACLES TO SIGNIFICANT REFORM

One of the biggest obstacles to reform in Yemen is the catch-22 that President Saleh would hit were he to seriously change his regime's approach to governance. If Yemen is to remain a viable state, aggressive political and economic reform must diminish the patronage system and the legal inconsistencies and personalized power that stem from it. However, the president has built his regime's political survival on the same system that undermines its future. Any progressive changes that he implements will necessarily distribute resources and power away from the narrow circle of elites that form his strongest support base, and such changes are likely to be met with resistance from the elite.

Economic Decline

Yemen is one of the poorest countries in the Arab world, and the grim economic situation means that it will be some time before the issue of democratization can become a pressing issue for most Yemenis. Low per capita income is not a guarantee of an authoritarian political system, but research shows that it makes democratic consolidation much more difficult. It also greatly increases the temptation to accept government offers of financial assistance in return for political obedience, undermining the establishment of independent political forces capable of influencing the executive.

The precariousness of Yemen's economic situation cannot be overstated. Poverty levels have nearly doubled since unification in 1990, and by 2005, GDP growth was estimated to be significantly lower than population growth. Yemen is dependent on oil revenues for about 75 percent of its budget, but these look set to decline rapidly in the near future. In early 2005, the Yemeni government estimated that the country had only 750 million barrels of "proven (and fully recoverable) oil reserves" remaining. At current extraction rates, this leaves enough oil to last around three-and-a-half more years. It is likely that new discoveries and improved extraction methods will extend this period somewhat, but a 2005 International Monetary Fund report doubted that this would more than double the extractable amount of oil remaining. The report warned that even with dramatically slowing production, Yemen's oil revenue and exports are likely to "be virtually depleted by 2018." With so much of the population directly dependent on the government for employment, stipends,

and subsidized goods, the political repercussions of oil depletion are serious and would likely overshadow the possibility of greater political reform. Even if natural gas exports begin as quickly as the government hopes, many local economists are predicting a partial economic crash at best. On top of these urgent predicaments, Yemen also faces rapid population growth and freshwater depletion—the per capita availability of which is already just 2 percent of the world average. These very real resource crises bear heavily on the country's future and diminish the likelihood that political reform will be a top priority for the government for quite some time.

Yemen urgently needs to diversify its economy to reduce its dependence on resource rents, but the regime has simultaneously undermined its means of generating alternative sources of income. A recent study by Yemen's ministry of planning and international cooperation and the World Bank showed that regional investment in the country had dropped by nearly three-and-a-half times between 2002 and 2004, and that other international investment had fallen nineteenfold in the same period. The ministry acknowledged that corruption, bribery, and a "lack of government" were among the main reasons for the flight of investors. That so many of the obstacles to investment are imposed by the government is concerning. However, it also means that they are at least partly avoidable, and that there is the potential for change if the regime removes some of the obstructions it has put in place. As oil revenues diminish, the regime will find itself short of the money that it uses to incorporate people into its patronage networks and in need of a more stable source of legitimacy as well as new sources of income. This venture will require some serious changes to the way that the regime approaches governance.

Weak Institutions

Exacerbating the challenge of transforming the structure of power is the fact that state institutions that could help reduce the strength of the patronage system do not exist. Loyalties to Yemen's various patronage networks undermine the potential for loyalty to other formal and informal institutions. Power is the domain of personalities, and the regime has neither built strong institutions nor maintained those that existed in the former South. Contrary to what one might expect of a state, Yemen has actually encouraged the move away from its own institutions and into the hands of individuals linked to it through patronage. The World Bank estimates, for example, that only about 30 percent of Yemen's population relies on the formal judiciary, while the rest call upon tribal sheikhs to settle their disputes. People prefer the efficiency of the tribal system to that of the state system, where courts are inaccessible, corruption is rampant, and verdicts are poorly enforced. The use of traditional dispute resolution is not necessarily a barrier to reform, but it becomes one when the regime encourages the selective use of tribal mechanisms to settle political disputes with its opponents. The regime's use of such methods has undermined its own legitimacy and convinced citizens that neither the state nor its institutions can be trusted, which has in turn reinforced the desire for independent and usually informal institutions that function outside state control. Moreover, there are still some pockets in the country where tribes operate with virtual autonomy from the state.

Desire for Tribal Autonomy

One frequently cited prerequisite to democratization is that the vast majority of citizens must agree they belong to the same political community. Although most Yemeni citizens do not dispute their identity as Yemenis per se, the link between this identity and a sovereign Yemeni state is more

tenuous. Yemen has a complex array of subnational tribal and regional identities, some of which receive more loyalty from their members than does the state, which is seen as feckless and corrupt. Yemen's tribes are often referred to, and often consider themselves, as a state within a state. Tribal leaders do not always grant the government access to the territory under their control, and the number of government soldiers killed for entering an area without the permission of the tribe provides good reason for the state to heed these restrictions.

The strength of Yemen's well-armed tribes at times inhibits the government from carrying out the normal functions of a state, such as extracting natural resources, punishing criminals, constructing government buildings, or controlling the use of scarce water reserves. However, these actions are based on more than a traditional preference for autonomy. Like other Yemenis, the tribes perceive the corruption and inefficiency endemic in Yemen's state institutions, and many believe that independence from the institutions is the only way to defend their interests. Against a weak, mismanaged, and sometimes fierce state, tribal structures and institutions provide a network of social security for its members. This lack of trust between the tribes and the state is a serious obstacle to coherent development and reform. While the desire for tribal autonomy remains, the state will be limited in the ways that it can exercise authority over and therefore govern its citizens. As long as the tribes outside of the relatively narrow group that benefits from the current system feel excluded by the state, they have limited reasons to accept its sovereignty.

Divisions Among Oppositionists

The difficulties with initiating reform are compounded by the fact that Yemeni society is still too weak in relation to the regime to mount a coherent challenge to it. Alongside the manipulation to which oppositionists are subjected by the regime, these groups also repress each other. Yemeni opposition groups exist within a complicated web of regional acrimony, kinship loyalties, tribal/nontribal and north/south splits, all of which are further convoluted by state patronage and funding from other authoritarian Arab states. Foreign funding has meant that most of Yemen's political parties are based on imported ideologies (such as Marxism, Nasserism, Baathism, and Wahhabism), none of which were developed in response to the country's own political circumstances.

In this fragmented environment, rumors are rife surrounding which oppositionists are co-opted by the regime and which are actually aligned with ideological opponents—a situation that severely undermines trust between activists. This distrust provides fertile ground for the type of divide and rule leadership at which the regime is so adept. Furthermore, where a margin of free expression and association coexists with the regime's propensity to repress political action, debate tends to be reinforced as the most viable form of opposition. In this environment, oppositionists are sufficiently free to disagree with one another and define the problems that they face but are generally too restricted to act upon possible solutions. Disagreeing with each other is thus made easier than creating a coherent mandate with which to press upon the government.

Divisions in the Islah Party

Like many in Yemen, the West is also uncertain of the democratic credentials of the dominant opposition party, Islah. These concerns may be overstated but are not completely unfounded. Islah is a party of hazy power centers and somewhat ambiguous public intentions. The majority of its

leaders are centrists, but there is also a powerful though informal hardline Salafi group within the party. Islah's leading hardline conservative, Abd Al Majeed Al Zindani has been useful for attracting Salafi supporters, many of whom reject party politics but may still vote for Islah or support its social programs for lack of a better option. The moderates within the party have a sometimes tense though broadly accommodating relationship with this group. Al Zindani has publicly contradicted the moderates' message that democracy is compatible with Islam and runs a university that is widely believed to breed intolerance and radicalism, which has sharpened international concerns over the intentions of the party. Despite this, Islah as a whole has not taken steps to distance Al Zindani from the party.

It is reasonable to presume that this type of ambiguity serves Islah's political purposes.³ Not expelling Al Zindani and others like him from the party achieves two things for Islah: one, it widens its support base to include members who would otherwise be unwilling to support a party with a purely moderate platform (or perhaps even party politics at all); and two, it provides an obvious contrast between Islamist hardliners and Islah's mainstream moderates. However, by creating what is essentially an Islamist umbrella, a loose coalition that provides a home to a sweeping variety of competing ideological strains, Islah has contributed to public (and also international) uncertainty about its real intentions. Islah's lack of coherence strengthens the concerns of Yemeni liberals, fairly or otherwise, that it is a fundamentalist party operating under a veneer of centrism. Such levels of distrust among local groups limit the impact that outsiders can have in promoting significant reform.

WHAT CAN OUTSIDERS DO TO FACILITATE SIGNIFICANT REFORM?

Foreign donors' margin for maneuver is hampered by their own concerns with combating terrorism. This is not likely to change in the near future, particularly if the potential for a serious economic or resource crisis is realized. In the prevailing climate of heightened security concerns, foreign governments tend to prefer reform and funding initiatives that do not squeeze the Yemeni regime too hard, lest it retract its support in combating anti-Western terrorist threats. It is by no means just the Yemeni side that is cautious about provoking rapid political changes, democratic or otherwise. Security is the key objective of many donor countries, particularly the United States, and the Yemeni regime is adept at marrying its domestic policies—however antithetical to genuine reform and decentralization—to this concern. President Saleh's tacit warning about the link between Yemen's stability and the preservation of his own leadership was writ large across his recent electoral platform. Responding publicly to the outcome of the elections, the president reminded his audience that stability under authoritarianism is preferable to state collapse: "Which is better, the dictatorship of Mohammed Sayeed Barre or the situation in Somalia now?" Elsewhere, he played on Western fears that democracy could put Islamist extremists into power: "Our democracy will not be as [the] US wants it to be in Palestine, yes some Islamic movements are extremist and not qualified to take power but we all must accept the result whatever it is." The U.S. administration's overly congratulatory statement that the elections were "free and fair and will set an example for the region" probably demonstrated to the Yemeni regime that the United States did indeed value stability over greater democratic competition. These types of public statements only reinforce the types of reforms used by pluralized authoritarian states to maintain their positions of power. In the future, the United States and other donors should place more emphasis on differentiating between significant

and cosmetic changes, so that the Yemeni government does not continue to treat the ornaments of democracy as though they were its substance.

Despite these limits, there are some steps that donors could still take. Yemen has shown in the past that it does take account of donor perceptions of the country's political and economic trajectory. To this end, electoral politics have been an important element of Yemen's efforts to secure donor commitments, but they should not be sufficient. The crude connection between seemingly democratic reform and aid money was articulated by Yemen's prime minister days after the 2006 elections: "Yemen today presents itself to its neighbors, friends and development partners as a civilized and democratic country. [The] donor countries' conference will create more positive attitudes for the sake of developing the Yemeni people, particularly following the success of presidential and local elections." The desire of the Yemeni government for international acceptance gives donors some degree of latitude to apply pressure to the areas where it is needed most: the devaluation of the patronage system, institution building, better management and governance, and the greater devolution of power to local authorities. Donors' preference for working with the Social Fund for Development over other Yemeni government ministries might also be emphasized to the government to underline the fact that with greater transparency comes greater donor willingness. Donors interested in democratic reform should also concentrate on working with opposition political parties and providing them with training to build their capacity to place pressure on the regime for greater reform. However, funding from Western donors in Yemen is very limited compared with what is given by the Gulf states, which tend to have different political priorities for the funding they provide to their neighbors. Western donors should attempt to coordinate and negotiate their funding priorities with the Gulf states to increase the impact of the programs that they support.

Negotiating with the Executive

President Saleh is central to any reform process, and if he chooses to act, considerable reform can be achieved in a reasonable time period. There is good reason to believe, however, that some at the top of the regime still do not perceive the urgency with which genuine reform is needed. One indication of this was President Saleh's recent left-field announcement that he intends to solve the country's dire water and energy problems by generating 20,000 megawatts of electricity from nuclear energy. Outsiders should try to press the importance of creating more achievable solutions to Yemen's problems, such as those discussed above. Given that the regime's own survival is inextricably bound to this process might increase the prospects of the regime being receptive to this message, provided that discussions are conducted with sensitivity.

Many Western donor-funded political party, civil society, and journalist training programs have been well received by the participants, but the success of programs targeting the grassroots has limited usefulness in the face of such heavily centralized executive control. These programs can assist in providing information and building the internal capacity of the groups they focus on, but alone they cannot do much to convince the regime to include these groups in political decision making. Without simultaneous pressure on those in power, these initiatives are unlikely to do more than chip away at the outer edges of centralized power.

It appears that while outsiders can facilitate the endurance of pluralized authoritarianism and the curtailed margins of free speech and association that it entails, there is probably not a great deal that they can do to dislodge the dominant political balance of power. Pushing too hard for aggressive

reform is likely to be counterproductive to the West's security concerns and also to the Yemeni government domestically, which must emphasize its sovereignty in its dealings with the West, lest its opponents use this for political advantage. If significant political changes are to occur in Yemen, it is primarily for the Yemeni regime to choose. However, the West should still apply consistent pressure in this direction and work to build the capacity of domestic actors who share this goal.

The likelihood of Yemen charting a course from pluralized authoritarianism to democracy is not high in the near-term future. However, the postunification reforms have changed the dynamics of the relationship between state and society in a more than purely superficial manner and have had an impact on the ways that the state and social forces relate to and interact with one another. Elections may be manipulated and opposition groups hindered and co-opted, but the use of a democratic façade represents a political shift, even if it is not necessarily a democratic one. The location of legitimacy, the modes of political discourse, and the expectations of the citizens are all being remolded to fit within a new political environment in which there is still room for some creative maneuvering for those in Yemen who seek change.

NOTES

- ¹ This term was coined by Marsha Pripstein Posusney, “The Middle East’s Democracy Deficit in Comparative Perspective,” *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance*, ed. Marsha Pripstein Posusney and Michele Penner Angrist (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005) p. 17, note 20.
- ² For further discussion of the impact of these divisions on the regime’s concerns about empowering local councils, see Stephen Day, “Barriers to Federal Democracy in Iraq: Lessons from Yemen,” *Middle East Policy*, vol. 13, no. 3 (Fall 2006), pp. 121–39.
- ³ For discussion of the use of ambiguity by other Islamist parties in the Arab world, see Nathan J. Brown, Amr Hamzawy, and Marina Ottaway, “Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World: Exploring the Gray Zones,” *Carnegie Working Paper*, no. 67 (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2006).

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