

BARRIERS TO FEDERAL DEMOCRACY IN IRAQ: LESSONS FROM YEMEN

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After a lengthy delay, the Republic of Yemen held its first local elections on February 20, 2001. These elections had been postponed since the unification of the northern Yemen Arab Republic and the southern People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in May 1990. During the interim years between 1990 and 2001, the new united Yemen organized three national elections, two parliamentary and one presidential. The first was held in April 1993, when citizens had the opportunity to choose their representatives for a parliament that would, in turn, select a new central executive authority. Instead, the voting resulted in political stalemate and eventually civil war in 1994, thus demonstrating one of the problems when a regionally divided country holds a free and open national election. Rather than help alleviate social tensions and reduce the chances of conflict between rival groups,

democratic elections tend to exacerbate group divisions, making conflict and instability more likely, not less.¹

Some advocates of democracy in the Middle East suggest that divided countries like Yemen should create autonomy for regional groups through federalism or other forms of elected local government, as in postwar Iraq. Thus, in retrospect, Yemen's 2001 local elections hold greater significance. Following the American invasion of Iraq in March 2003, democratic federalism served as a guiding principle for a new system intended to represent three main regional groups: Kurdish, and Shii and Sunni Arab. Based on Iraq's transitional constitution the Kurds were allowed to maintain their autonomous regional authority in three provinces of the north, while Shii and Sunni groups were allowed to consider forming similar structures in three or more separate provinces. When Iraq's national parliamentary election was held in

December 2005, Shii and Sunni parties chose national unity over regional autonomy. However the northern Kurdish parties elected a separate regional parliament.

The federal path taken in Iraq is linked to an old school of thought that sees democracy as a process of political engineering, where the key to success is negotiating the right balance of power between rival groups using various constitutional mechanisms and transitional pacts.² During the late 1980s and early 1990s theories about engineering "democratic transitions" gained broad appeal. Before the end of the decade, however, the validity of these theories was severely questioned. By the time U.S. forces toppled Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, there remained little confidence in the work of political engineers promising new democracy projects abroad.

The results of Iraq's 2005 elections confirm the trouble with electoral democracy in divided countries. Escalating sectarian violence and growing evidence of civil war between Iraq's Sunni and Shii, Arab and Kurdish populations mirror Yemen's own experience one year after its first parliamentary election. It would be a mistake, however, to draw direct parallels between these two countries, since there are obvious differences separating them. Unlike Iraq, Yemen's democratization occurred independently without foreign intervention, military occupation or the widespread resistance by groups violently opposed to the emerging political process. In addition, while Yemen's internal divisions are similar to the divisions in Iraq, including the Sunni-Shii distinction and other tribal and cultural differences, Yemen's divisions are not as "deep."³

Yemen's Shii population is from the minority Zaidi sect, a group concentrated in the country's northwestern mountains that historically developed greater religious compatibility with the surrounding Sunni (Shafii) majority. Thus, Yemen's sectarian divide is less problematic than the original Sunni-Shii split that occurred centuries earlier in Iraq. In addition, there is no national-linguistic group in Yemen similar to Iraq's Kurds or Turkmen, since all Yemenis speak Arabic and consider themselves Arab. Despite these differences, it remains true that many of united Yemen's political troubles are reflected in Iraq's problems today. For this reason, there is much to gain by examining Yemen's recent history, especially the circumstances surrounding its local elections in February 2001. The most relevant issues concern the structure of central-local government relations, the interaction among political elites representing various regional interests, and the distribution of valuable state resources.

BACKGROUND

Before Yemen united in 1990, the leaderships of the two former ruling parties, the General People's Congress (GPC) in the north and the Yemeni Socialist party (YSP) in the south, agreed to share power in a pre-election transitional government. Troubles grew when the 1993 election brought an end to a nearly 50-50 power-sharing arrangement, and the leaders of the GPC and YSP were forced to renegotiate the distribution of central government offices. Unlike the system of proportional representation used in Iraq's first election, Yemen's national election in 1993 was organized in winner-take-all, single-member constituencies, most of

which were highly competitive because the GPC and YSP were joined in the campaign by more than 20 other parties (four of which competed nationwide) plus thousands of independent candidates. The general effect of winner-take-all elections is to raise the political stakes, as the losing party may be cut out of power. When the votes were counted in Yemen, they revealed no clear majority. The GPC won enough seats (122 out of 301, or 41 percent of the total, compared to the YSP's 56 seats, or 19 percent) to take the lead in forming a coalition government.⁴ A third party with an Islamist agenda uniting Zaidi and Shafii voters surprised many observers by garnering more seats (62, or 21 percent of the total) than the former southern ruling party.

What Yemen's 1993 election revealed more than anything else was a clear pattern of regional voting. The GPC won almost all of its 122 seats by narrow margins in the northern provinces, gaining only three of the total 56 southern electoral districts. Meanwhile, the YSP swept most southern provinces by landslide margins, winning 41 of 56 southern districts while claiming an additional 15 victories across the northern border, mainly in areas close to the former southern capital of Aden. Following the election, the former northern president, Ali Abdallah Saleh, proceeded to form a new three-way coalition between his GPC, the YSP and the Islamist Islah ("Reform") party. By introducing a new power-sharing partner, Saleh looked to marginalize his main rivals in the YSP. He also had longstanding ties to the Islamists because his regime fostered their growth during the 1980s in order to challenge the socialists' appeal across the old borderline. At the beginning of negotiations in late

spring 1993, Saleh proposed a 3:1:1 distribution of power in the country's five-member executive body, with a clear GPC majority and the YSP and Islah each holding one seat. While Islah members were pleased to have their foot in the door, the leadership of the YSP insisted on equality of representation (2:2:1) with the GPC.

As Yemen's post-election negotiations reached a stalemate, the political crisis refocused attention on the old north-south division. Southerners began complaining about excessive concentration of power in the northern capital, Sanaa. By the fall of 1993, top YSP officials asked to renegotiate the unity constitution along federal lines with guarantees for southern regional autonomy. The socialist party reasoned that it had won a landslide victory at the polls in southern provinces and therefore should be allowed to control southern local affairs. Since 1990, northern officials had sought to replace key financial officers in the southern provinces with northern loyalists, and the remaining southern provincial officials began withholding government revenues. Northern leaders responded to these actions and to the increasing calls for federalism by accusing the southern leadership of treason and planning to secede from the union. Through the fall and winter of 1993-94 numerous popular conventions were held around the country, many of them calling for a decentralization of power.⁵ In January 1994, representatives of the main political parties and a number of prominent independent politicians negotiated what became known as "the document of pledge and accord" (*watheqat al-ahd wa al-itifaq*), later signed by President Saleh and the southern vice president, Ali Salem al-

Baydh, at a ceremony sponsored by the late King Hussein in Amman, Jordan. This document included a call for political decentralization, but it was never implemented; the main rivals refused to compromise.

By late April 1994, exactly one year after the 1993 vote, Yemen was at war with itself as military forces from the former north and south (never unified after 1990) settled a political contest on the battlefield. After two and a half months of fighting with full-scale weaponry, including fighter aircraft, surface-to-surface missiles, tanks and other heavy artillery, the army of the north prevailed on July 7, 1994, and southern political elites fled into exile. Immediately afterward, President Saleh pushed through a number of changes in the country's constitution, abandoning the five-member executive committee and concentrating power in his own hands. At the same time, Saleh sought to maintain the appearance of power sharing with southerners, appointing a new southern vice president and later a southern prime minister. More important, he expressed his intention to abide by the "document of pledge and accord" by decentralizing power away from the capital city and allowing the election of top local and provincial officials. This latter issue was particularly important because it appeared to signal the regime's continued commitment to democracy. In the end, this commitment would be tested by the demands of democratization at the local level.

YEMEN'S LOCAL POLITICS

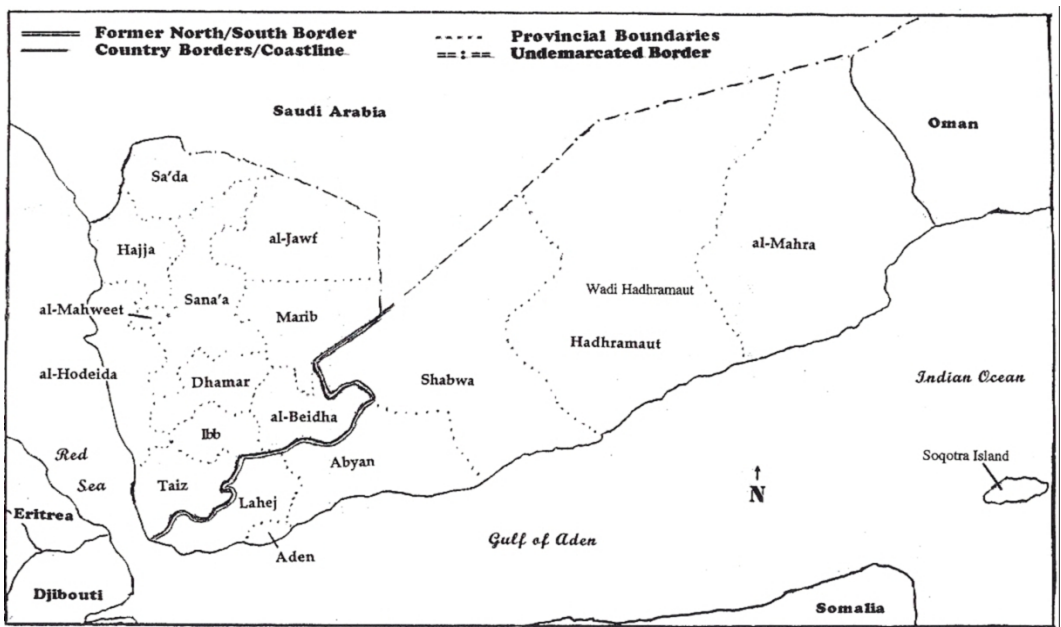
At the time of Yemeni unity in 1990, the joint north-south leadership emphasized the common identity of all Yemeni citizens,

considering the country's regional differences to be insignificant. Based on this belief, the joint leadership agreed to an exchange of provincial officials similar to the 50-50 power-sharing arrangement in the central government. Thus, an equal number of northern and southern governors crossed the former borderline to administer local affairs in the other half of the country. However, just as northern and southern Yemenis failed to cooperate effectively with each other in the central ministries of Sanaa, most of the transplanted governors found great difficulty carrying out their duties on the other side of the border. In a few cases, the environment was so inhospitable that the appointed governors left their posts and stayed at home.

Following the civil war in 1994, President Saleh carried out a large-scale restructuring of the southern administration. To begin with, he ended the central administrative role that the former capital, Aden, had played in the five outlying southern provinces: Lahej, Abyan, Shabwa, Hadhramaut and al-Mahra. Thereafter, the central ministries in Sanaa would treat Aden as just another local administrative zone. In addition, each of the southern provinces received an entirely new political leadership: namely, a governor, deputy governor, director of public security, and chief of political security.⁶ Moreover, those who replaced the top provincial officials came primarily from the north, specifically the mountainous "highland" provinces that are home to the country's Zaidi population and its most dominant tribes, Hashid and Bakil. Only Abyan, Shabwa and al-Mahra (a remote, sparsely populated and politically insignificant province on the eastern border with Oman) found some south Yemenis administering their own local affairs.

The mid-southern provinces of Abyan and Shabwa would play an important role in Yemen's postwar politics because it was here that President Saleh built half of his new southern political alliance. Whereas Saleh was compelled to share power before 1994 with a YSP leadership drawn primarily from Aden, Lahej and Hadhramaut, he now turned to partisans of former southern prime minister Ali Nasser, who had been exiled after the southern government's bloody intra-regime fighting in Aden in January 1986. Ali Nasser is from central Abyan, and President Saleh relied on many of Ali Nasser's associates to represent the south in the reorganized central government.⁷ Abdurrabo Mansour

At the local level, President Saleh appointed northern highland officials to direct the police and security forces in Aden, Lahej and Hadhramaut. Meanwhile, he showed greater willingness to rely on officials from Shabwa, but not Abyan, to administer their own police and security affairs. This indicated that Saleh and northern political elites remained wary of Ali Nasser's returning from exile and gaining too much influence in his former Abyan home base. Even in Shabwa, those appointed to local security positions were not drawn from Ali Nasser's associates, but instead from members of the pre-independence leadership who were exiled from South Yemen in the late 1960s and



Hadi, also of Abyan, was appointed vice president in the summer of 1994, while three other mid-southern partisans were named ministers of interior, transportation and labor.

early 1970s. After political independence in 1967, these more traditional and tribal leaders were violently opposed by Ali Nasser and other Marxist revolutionaries. In this sense, the traditional tribal leader-

ship in Shabwa (and other southern provinces) provided Saleh with a counterweight to Ali Nasser's partisans, thus forming the other half of the president's new southern alliance.⁸

Since taking office in the north in 1978, President Saleh has generally observed tribal loyalties in the country. For this reason, he appeared more comfortable with the tribal half of his southern alliance than with the partisans of Ali Nasser. Saleh himself is a member of the Hashid tribe in the northern highlands, the region encircling Sanaa. Hashid wields great influence through its paramount shaikh, Abdallah Husayn al-Ahmar, who is also head of the Islamist Islah party and

speaker of the Yemeni parliament. Hashid members of Saleh's extended family also command various branches of the Yemeni military. Differences exist within and between the president's family and the family of Shaikh al-

Ahmar, and conflicts occur inside the larger Hashid tribal confederation. However, the core of the Yemeni regime's power is the solidarity of this highland tribal group.

President Saleh's preference for tribal allies in the south was on display in November 1996, when he invited Ali Nasser to join him in Aden at the anniversary celebration of South Yemeni independence from British rule. As Saleh bestowed honorary medals on members of South Yemen's traditional tribal elite, Ali Nasser

sat alone near the edge of the viewing stand. Earlier, in the spring of 1996, the south's first mass protests since the civil war erupted in al-Mukalla, the coastal capital of Hadhramaut. Thousands of local residents took to the streets complaining about abusive behavior by police and army troops, some of whom served under the command of Muhammad Ismail, a family relative of President Saleh. Upon hearing that the demonstrators called for provincial elections and local self-rule, Saleh ignored the opposition and turned instead to the region's tribal shaikhs, whom he offered to appoint to a special temporary advisory council. While Hadhramaut's shaikhs refused the offer, their desire to play a

While democratic elections may be held to determine who ascends to political office, the promise of broadly representative government in the divided countries of the Middle East is a mirage.

greater role in politics strengthened the regime's hand in the post-war south, similar to the role played by Shabwa's traditional tribal leadership.

By 1997, Saleh felt enough confidence in his ruling GPC party and its

two-sided southern alliance to hold Yemen's second parliamentary election on schedule, exactly four years after the first election. The YSP had been badly weakened since its leadership was exiled and its properties seized, thus the socialists and other smaller opposition parties decided to boycott the vote. This left the Islah party as the GPC's only serious challenger. Given that Saleh exercised monopoly control over the country's radio and television stations and heavily influenced voter registration among vast numbers of

civil and armed-service employees, the GPC easily won a landslide victory at the polls. According to the official results, the president's party gained 62 percent of the parliamentary seats, but unofficially it controlled up to 70 percent. After the vote, Saleh reached out to south Yemenis, especially in the restive oil-rich province of Hadhramaut, by naming Fareg Ben Ghanem as prime minister. Neither a tribal leader nor a member of Ali Nasser's group, Ben Ghanem was a nonpartisan Hadhrami technocrat from the ministry of planning.

Once in office, Fareg Ben Ghanem announced bold plans to increase financial transparency, reduce corruption and decentralize power to locally elected provincial councils. In less than one year, he resigned in frustration at the lack of support for his policies inside the regime. This was particularly true of the poor support he found for the plan to decentralize government authority, a plan opposed by both the GPC under President Saleh and the Islah party under Shaikh al-Ahmar. Due to tribal loyalties within the Hashid confederation, Saleh ensured that al-Ahmar retained his post as speaker of the Yemeni parliament despite Islah's resounding defeat in the 1997 election. From this post, Shaikh al-Ahmar effectively held veto power over any new legislation to create local elected leaders. For his part, Saleh was content to have al-Ahmar to blame for delaying the legislation's passage through parliament.

It took nearly two years after Ben Ghanem's resignation for President Saleh to adopt Yemen's new "local authority" law on February 10, 2000. The long delay indicates the political sensitivity of central-local relations in the country. When a draft of the new law was circulated for parlia-

mentary approval in 1999, it was clear that Saleh had retreated from his earlier promise to allow pluralist elections for provincial governors and general managers at the district level. Instead, the president retained his power to appoint the top local officials, while giving citizens the limited right to elect local consultative councils intended to advise the president's appointees. This legislation clearly contradicted an article of Yemen's constitution requiring elections for all top local leadership posts. A few members of parliament noted this fact, and several (especially from the south) voted against the legislation, saying it "sanctifies central control."⁹ Later in the year, when Saleh announced the date of the first local elections, he also ordered a simultaneous national referendum on a package of 17 constitutional amendments. One of these amendments was designed to eliminate the disparity between the constitution and the new "local authority" law by granting central government control over all local affairs.

RESULTS OF LOCAL ELECTIONS

When Yemeni men and women went to the local polls in late February 2001, there was irony in their exercise of voting rights. Although this was the first time Yemenis could select their democratic representatives at a local level, the referendum meant voters were simultaneously choosing to withdraw their representatives' constitutional right to govern.¹⁰ The run-up to the election witnessed an escalation of violence, and President Saleh deployed 70,000 troops to patrol the streets around polling stations. In the weeks leading to the vote, kidnappings, bombings, shootings and assassinations became common daily occurrences. The competition was intense

among 30,000 candidates vying for more than 7,000 local council seats because the YSP and other opposition parties chose to join the campaign, after realizing the mistake of boycotting the 1997 parliamentary elections. During the campaign, the GPC demonstrated its power as a one-party ruling system. GPC officials employed political leverage through the government, promising local development projects and other bribes in exchange for votes, monopolizing television and radio broadcasts (an enormous advantage in a country where the illiteracy rate is over 60 percent), and using the supreme elections committee to tilt the registration and balloting procedures in its favor. Days before the vote, every opposition party, including Islah, denounced the election as a fraud.¹¹

The publishers of the *Yemen Times* newspaper described February 20, 2001, as "one of the deadliest election days in the history of Yemen."¹² The violence and illegal practices were so extensive that some 200 electoral centers (roughly 12 percent of the total) had to cancel or postpone the balloting process. In several northern and southern districts, the GPC and the opposition accused each other of carrying out murderous attacks on political candidates. Government sources reported a total of eleven deaths and 23 injuries, but independent sources put the numbers at 40 killed and more than 100 injured.¹³ The violence was worst in the western midland province of Ibb, where partisans of the GPC and Islah continued fighting for several days after the polls closed. On February 25, the president's Republican Guard used tanks to attack several villages of Islah supporters in the al-Radma district of Ibb. According to the international daily

Al-Hayat, Yemeni government sources reported nine killed (five from Islah plus four members of the Republican Guard) and eleven injured, while local independent sources said the casualties were much higher.¹⁴

Once the first election results were released, top GPC officials were quick to claim a sweeping victory, winning 80 percent of the local council seats. Later official vote counts showed the GPC won only 62 percent of the seats, but this still represented another landslide victory for President Saleh, who in September 1999 won 96 percent of the vote in Yemen's first direct presidential election.¹⁵ When the newly elected local councils met to choose their leaderships, the GPC proved its strength by gaining control of every province except two, Hadhramaut in the east and Marib in the desert interior, where independents and representatives of Islah held sway. The GPC was also challenged by YSP socialists in Lahej, al-Dhale and Aden in the southwest.¹⁶ Al-Dhale is a new province straddling the former north-south borderline. It was created by presidential decree in 1998, and, during the next three years, government troops faced continuing armed resistance in the region. President Saleh also planned to divide other southern regions, attempting to split the large eastern province of Hadhramaut into one section along the coast and another in the interior valley, Wadi Hadhramaut. However, this plan failed when it met widespread popular opposition in 1997 and 1998. In the provincial capital, several thousand people rallied in the streets, and tens of thousands signed petitions to preserve Hadhramaut's territorial unity.

From the start of local council activities in the middle of 2001, it was clear that

most councils would function as mere "talk shops" with little authority over provincial and district affairs. The main problem is that the central government allots few financial and technical resources to enable council members to carry out their already limited duties. Council members receive no government salaries, and in most district councils, their central subsidies amount to a few hundred dollars per month. Later regulations allow provincial and district councils to raise their own funds from traditional zakat taxes, special fees applied to residents' electricity bills, and taxes applied to the popular sale of qat, the leaves of a plant chewed for its stimulant qualities. However, these revenues proved irregular because other more powerful local officials claim the same resources, and the voting public resents a tax increase by its new representatives. As a result of poor funding, there is redundancy in Yemen's local administrative structure, since the people's elected representatives sit idle while the president's appointed staff carries out the day-to-day affairs of government.

When local council members are engaged and actively seek to represent the interests of the voting public, they often face resentment from local bureaucrats. During the first year after the local elections, several district and provincial councils voted to withdraw their confidence from local officials appointed by the central government. This first occurred in Hadhramaut, where the Shibbam council voted against the district's assistant manager; later the Seiyyoun council voted to reject its housing director and other councils took similar actions in districts along the Hadhrami coast. Although Yemen's local elected councils lack the authority to

hire and fire those who work in local government, the practice of "withdrawing confidence" soon spread around the country. This was the most significant democratic development after the 2001 elections, as provincial and district councils found the "no-confidence vote" to be their strongest means of political influence. Eventually President Saleh took notice, and the appropriate central government ministries removed a few local officials who clearly lacked public trust. At approximately the same time, President Saleh also removed some central government officials as part of a "forced retirement" program to reduce the number of public employees.

The need to cut the government's payroll was part of a package of reforms recommended by the International Monetary Fund during the last half of the 1990s. Many individuals complained, however, that Saleh used the forced retirements to target officials from southern provinces. In particular, many Ali Nasser partisans who joined the central government after the 1994 war were forced to retire in 2000 and 2001. Before the end of 2001, a group of southern political figures started an informal association called the Public Forum (*al-multaqa al-am*) for the Sons of the Southern and Eastern Provinces, recalling the name of the first independent southern party that originated in Aden during British colonial rule.¹⁷ The purpose of the Public Forum was to represent the interests of south Yemenis, who complain they are excluded from political, social and economic opportunities because north Yemenis, particularly from the mountainous highlands, monopolize the country's resources. This group functioned as a broad umbrella organization, drawing support from partisans of Ali

Nasser as well as members of the traditional southern leadership exiled in the late 1960s. Thus it signaled a new united opposition encompassing both sides of President Saleh's southern alliance. The group's meetings were also attended by southern members of parliament and other prominent non-government personalities.

This new nonpartisan assembly was directed by a 1960s exile from Abyan province who was a longtime close associate of President Saleh. During the month of Ramadan 2001 (November-December), the Public Forum held regular nightly meetings in the director's house in Sanaa, where he presided with the assistance of a respected independent member of parliament from Hadhramaut who had been appointed minister of oil in 1997.¹⁸ Under the leadership of such high-profile figures, the meetings had considerable prestige and were regularly attended by more than 100 people. Toward the end of the month of Ramadan, the forum's membership drafted a personal letter to President Saleh listing five demands, including expanded local governance, equality of citizenship, and access to jobs and land. When the president sent no response, the forum's director published the letter in January 2002; this drew further public attention through the independent and opposition press.¹⁹ Within days, the government began a campaign of intimidation against the forum's director, accusing him of treason and demanding that he publish a formal retraction of the forum's letter. The director refused, but under pressure he ceased holding meetings in his house. Near the end of May 2002, President Saleh finally met the director to discuss the need to redress southern grievances. At the time, however, this meeting held less

significance because Saleh had already initiated separate talks with southern members of the old socialist opposition.

In January 2002, President Saleh greeted Salem Saleh Muhammad, the former deputy head of the Yemeni Socialist party from Lahej province and a rival of many Public Forum members. At the time, Muhammad was returning from exile after fleeing the country during the 1994 civil war. At the beginning of political unification in 1990, Muhammad was one of only two southerners to serve on the original unity government's executive committee. Upon his return in early 2002, Yemenis in the north and south began talking about "a new relationship" between the government and opposition. During the next few years, other prominent socialist officials returned from exile, including the former speaker of parliament, Yasin Said Numan, and the former director of southern security. After returning to the country, these members of the former socialist leadership adopted a moderate political course, vowing to play a constructive role in the country's future. When the YSP held its fifth general congress in the summer of 2005, Dr. Numan was elected secretary general, and a few months later he entered a formal dialogue with GPC officials.²⁰

Looking at these latest developments from the perspective of Yemen's political system in 1990, when the GPC and YSP shared power in a transitional government, it would be easy to conclude the country had turned full circle in fifteen years. After breaking with the YSP at the time of the 1994 civil war, President Saleh shifted to a two-sided alliance with individuals from Abyan and Shabwa in the mid-southern region. Toward the end of the decade, when both sides of this alliance

became politically restless and began using one voice to express their discontent, a new shift was required. Ironically, this opened the possibility for Saleh's regime to reconcile with its original YSP partners-in-unity, especially individuals from the southwestern province of Lahej. It seems President Saleh is caught in a difficult balancing act, forced to play one regional opposition against another. Through much of the twentieth century, the northern government in Sanaa practiced a similar balancing act. This was true during the years Saleh ruled the former Yemen Arab Republic, and it was true during the reign of the Zaidi imams before 1962. The difference since 1990 is that political unification tripled the size of the territory administered from Sanaa. As a result, there is an increased number of regional groups competing for a piece of the political pie, thus bringing additional pressure on the central government to satisfy more political demands.

DEMOCRACY AND NATIONAL UNITY

When Yemen held its first local elections in February 2001, the event represented three things. First, it indicated the general health of democracy in the country; second, it offered a signpost marking the government's progress toward a post-civil-war reconciliation; and, third, it helped answer longstanding questions about the compatibility of democracy and national unity in regionally divided countries. Yemen's 1994 civil war raised doubts about the original idea behind Yemeni political unification in 1990: namely, the idea that the two former halves of the country could be integrated through an open pluralist political system. Once civil war erupted,

many political analysts speculated that Yemen might fragment into two or more territories; the speculation continued after the war ended.²¹ Responding to uncertainties in the postwar environment, President Saleh concentrated all political power in Sanaa, while restricting civil liberties, press freedoms, and the public's general right to organize and assemble. Thus, the status of Yemeni democracy declined immediately after the war. By the time of the 2001 local elections, when the regime reversed constitutional requirements that local government be fully accountable to the voting public, it was clear that democracy would remain confined inside narrow boundaries.

If Yemeni citizens were given the opportunity to elect their own provincial governors and district managers, and these local officials were granted broad political powers, then it is likely this would strengthen opposition to President Saleh's regime in many regions of the country. Thus, the regime's decision to restrict local voting rights appears to be an attempt to prevent regional opposition from gaining a platform on which to stand. The best example of this regional opposition, and its potential to coalesce around the local interests of Yemenis living outside the central government's highland region, is the Public Forum joined by individuals from President Saleh's two-sided southern alliance. The fact that both sides of this post-civil-war alliance united to demand political change, especially the strengthening of local government powers, is evidence of the pressure felt by the president. And the fact that the president responded by welcoming home his civil-war rivals from the YSP is evidence of how little room he has to maneuver.

Following the 1994 civil war, President Saleh promised to decentralize government in order to appease the southern population, so the creation of local elected councils bears directly on the question of Yemen's postwar reconciliation. After the first local elections, when the grievances of council members surfaced in the eastern province of Hadhramaut and expressions of public disappointment spread elsewhere (especially other provinces from the former South Yemen), the president reached out to his old YSP rivals and allowed many of their most prominent exiles to return home. Thus, in an indirect way, Yemen's local elections led to a resolution of issues from the civil-war period. However, it is not clear this is a final resolution. The president's actions resemble his customary practice of shifting alliances between tribesmen and political partisans from one region to another. For this reason, Yemen's political game remains much the same, with numerous competing political demands and the potential for renewed conflict in the future. It is to President Saleh's advantage, though, that Yemen's divisions are not rigidly defined by the religious and linguistic differences that prove so destabilizing in countries like Iraq.²²

Democracy presents a dilemma in regionally divided countries due to inherent tensions between the popular desire for increased power and representation at the local level, on one hand, and the state's need to preserve political unity and stability at the national level, on the other. These tensions pit dominant political elites in the central government (and other members of the regional group they represent) against less formal political elites who act on behalf of other regional interests poorly served by the central government. Since

an expansion of local democratic control puts at risk the interests of political elites in the central government, these elites will perceive democracy as a threat to political stability and national unity. Democracy at the local level is unlikely to become a threat if it can be used effectively to articulate popular interests for the sake of maximizing public goods. However, if there are illegitimate imbalances of power in the political system that create perpetual disputes about the distribution of public goods, then expanding local democracy is likely to become destabilizing. This is the situation in Yemen; President Saleh's regime jealously withholds local democratic control.

The crucial issue for democracy in divided countries is the political and geographic distribution of state resources. While the political distribution of resources is flexible (such as how government offices are distributed among representatives of various regional groups and what share of the national budget these representatives control), the geographic distribution of resources is fixed (for example, the physical location of natural resources like oil and mineral deposits, or state revenues from port facilities and other physical infrastructure). What usually determines the nature of government in regionally divided countries is the correlation between the political and geographic distribution of goods. When the politically dominant group is a minority that seeks control over valuable resources located outside its home territory, this leads to conditions that are not conducive to the growth of democracy. This is the situation in Yemen today, and it was also the situation in Iraq under the former Baath regime of Saddam Hussein. For decades, Iraq's Baath party was

dominated by political elites from the country's minority "Sunni triangle" north and west of Baghdad, while the country's valuable oil resources were located in regions populated by the majority Arab Shii in the south and the Turkmen and Kurds in the northeast.

In Yemen, it is the representatives of the minority Zaidi highland group around Sanaa, particularly key members of the Hashid tribal confederation like President Saleh and Speaker of Parliament Shaykh Abdallah Husayn al-Ahmar, who control the most important government offices with access to the largest share of the national budget in military and security affairs. Meanwhile, the country's most valuable natural resources, petroleum and customs revenue from the seaports, are located outside the highland region. Although Yemen's oil and natural gas fields are miniscule compared to other countries in the Arabian peninsula, what does exist is located in Marib and Shabwa provinces in the desert interior and in Hadhramaut province further east. The country's largest trading port is located along the southern coast at Aden, while al-Hodeida port on the western Red Sea also generates considerable government revenue. Smaller ports exist along Hadhramaut's coastline, and valuable fishing and agricultural resources are also present in Abyan, Ibb, Taiz and al-Hodeida.

As a result of this disjuncture between the distribution of political and natural resources, the state's dominant highland group expends considerable energy to control resources outside the northwestern mountains around Sanaa. At the same time, the representatives of peripheral groups, particularly in regions with valuable natural resources, mobilize and lobby the

central government for a greater share of goods and services, either through expanded local powers in the provinces or increased employment and government subsidies in Sanaa. Since 1994, the region that represents the greatest concern to members of the dominant highland group is Hadhramaut. This sizable province in the east contains the country's largest oil field in Wadi al-Maseela. In addition, its population has one of the strongest regional identities, as shown when the Hadhrami people successfully resisted government attempts in 1997 and 1998 to split their land in half. Another reason Hadhramaut is considered a risk by highland elites is that the two remaining and most prominent political exiles, the former socialist Vice President Ali Salem al-Baydh and Prime Minister Haydar al-Attas, both come from this territory.

The strategy of President Saleh's regime in dealing with Hadhramaut has been to court the wealthy Hadhrami bankers and business investors living elsewhere in the Arabian peninsula, while at the same time spending government funds to rebuild the province's infrastructure. In addition, Saleh has maintained a Hadhrami, Abdul-Qadr Ba Jamal, in the prime minister's post since April 2001. And, in May 2005, the regime launched a public-relations campaign in the province when it held the fifteenth anniversary celebration of Yemeni unity inside the Hadhrami capital, al-Mukalla.²³ All of these attempts to include Hadhramis in political life (and thus diminish a source of regional opposition) appear to have succeeded; there have been no mass demonstrations in the province like those that occurred between 1996 and 1998. While this is a notable achievement for the

government, Hadhramaut still has one of the highest poverty rates in the country. Given Yemen's generally poor economic conditions and rapid population growth rate (one of the highest in the world), the government's attempt to balance the demands of Hadhrami citizens with the demands of other Yemenis living in a half dozen or more critical regions remains a daunting task.

CONCLUSION

United Yemen's recent political history illustrates many of the barriers to democracy in regionally divided countries. The dilemma of democracy in countries like Yemen is finding the optimal distribution of central and local government powers to best serve common national goals. In order to serve the needs and interests of regional groups, there must be enough local power to generate legitimate democratic representation. At the same time, the nation-state must preserve enough central power to maintain political unity and stability. The "correct" balance of power in any single country is highly debatable because of the complex relationship between democracy and national unity in regionally divided countries. Unlimited democratic powers at the local level (confederal or weak federal systems) may put national unity at risk, while concentrated power at the national level (strong federal or unitary systems) may deny local democratic rights. Outside the Middle East, the same problem exists in countries as diverse as India, Nigeria and Canada, each of which confronts regional ethnic secessionist movements within larger federal democratic structures.

Since its failed experiment with pluralist democracy in the early 1990s,

Yemen has essentially been under one-party rule. Beginning in the summer of 1994, the GPC consolidated power in the former south by dismantling the YSP's base of operations. Afterward, the country continued to schedule regular national elections, holding its third and most recent parliamentary vote in April 2003, when the GPC won another landslide victory. But none of these elections lived up to the initial standards of the 1993 vote, once described as "the most open, free and fair polling experience ever in the Arabian peninsula."²⁴ Since 1994, the GPC has become virtually synonymous with the state, as its top officials use the privileges and facilities of government to ensure the party's victory at the ballot box. More important, the GPC pursues policies that concentrate power in Sanaa, thus abandoning the idea of devolving authority to locally elected bodies at the provincial and district level. For this reason, Yemen's leadership operates on the assumption that expanding democracy presents a risk to political unity and stability, while centralized one-party rule best serves the national interest.

It is difficult to predict what would happen in Yemen if genuine local elections were held, or what would have happened at the beginning of unification if Yemen had adopted a federal form of government instead of its unitary system. In some regions of the country, especially north of Sanaa close to the Saudi border, the rise of radical religious oppositions seems as probable today as the regional secessionist movements of the past. One thing that is clear when Yemeni citizens go to the polls is the consequent killing, kidnapping and other political violence. There is no reason to think that federal elections like those held in Iraq would bring more peaceful

results. There are no magic formulas for "engineering" democracy; rather this is a process involving a struggle for power among rival groups. Given this reality, it is wrong to think that stable democracy could be engineered in Yemen or Iraq if only the right constitution and elections could be put into place. While democratic elections may be held to determine who ascends to political office, the promise of broadly representative government in the divided countries of the Middle East is a mirage.

The general problem with democracy in divided countries is that partisan formations tend to reflect competing ethnic regional interests; thus political pluralism reinforces rigid group distinctions. This is particularly clear in Iraq with the formation of distinct Shite, Sunni, and Kurdish parties. As a result, the competition at the ballot box creates barriers to the kind of political compromises necessary for stable democratic rule. Direct majoritarian elections in a unitary government (the model adopted in Yemen) raise the stakes of a first election so high that groups perceive they are in a do-or-die struggle for survival. This is true because, if one group (highland elites in the GPC) gains a monopoly of power in the central government, others on the periphery (southerners in the YSP) will fear losing control over their own internal affairs. The alternative model adopted in Iraq is to hold proportional elections in a federal system of government. However, this carries the possibility that groups on the periphery (Iraqi Kurds and Shii) will use their independence to secede or otherwise break up the nation. Either way, the result undermines national unity, as the experiences of both Yemen and Iraq indicate. For this reason, many divided countries tend toward one-party rule or

broadly representative coalition governments.

After 1994, when President Saleh revived one-party rule in Yemen, he did not resolve the country's problems with democracy. Much of Yemen's continued electoral violence results from perceived injustices by GPC officials manipulating voter registration lists and violating the ballot-counting process. There are still areas of the country where high percentages of the population oppose the authority of the GPC, so the president has clearly been unable to extend the ruling party's umbrella to cover majorities in all regions. Nonetheless, by using the GPC to set a national agenda after the civil war, President Saleh successfully reframed the nature of political debate in ways that will likely preserve Yemeni unity. This is no small achievement, considering the turmoil in Iraq during 2005 and 2006, when U.S. policy makers sought to balance the minority interests of Kurds and Sunni Arabs with the interests of the newly empowered Shii majority. It is unlikely that these American efforts will reframe the political debate between Sunni, Shii and Kurdish leaders as successfully as President Saleh's ruling GPC party has done in Yemen. Instead, Iraq's political and economic resource competition is likely to generate more intense group rivalries, turning the appeal of federalism into a struggle for control over the country's northern and southern oil fields.

In 2005, when some of the most prominent southern Yemeni exiles returned home and reclaimed their leadership of the socialist party, they adopted a moderate position on a number of political issues, including the question of central-local government relations. In a late September

press interview, the YSP's new secretary general spoke of the need to hold a dialogue with the ruling GPC in order to remove antagonisms from the country's political life.²⁵ When asked specifically about the pre-civil war "document of pledge and accord," and by implication the YSP's previous demand for federalism, Dr. Yasin Said Numan stated that the party no longer subscribes to its prewar positions, adding that the party now wants to advance local government through the existing electoral process. During the same month, the independent Aden newspaper *al-Ayyam* (a strong advocate of greater local control and decentralized government), organized a forum with Aden's governor, local administrative staff, and government critics from academia and civil society. Participants in the discussion agreed to a common distinction between national and local resources, acknowledging that revenues drawn from oil extraction and customs duties at port facilities are properly considered national resources, beyond the claim of regional groups living in areas from which the revenues are drawn.²⁶ This marked a significant change from the past, when socialists and many other southern Yemenis demanded a share of income from Aden's port and Hadhramaut's oil fields.

Disputes over the distribution of resources and political power in Yemen will continue in the future. This is the nature of politics in regionally divided countries. It is important, though, that these disputes be resolved peacefully and constructively within a united political system. If a federal structure of government were designed in Yemen to empower regional group interests (for example, Hadhramis in the east and the people of Aden, Lahej and

al-Dhale in the southwest), and members of these groups organized to demand control of resources from their own territory, the exercise of democracy would inevitably undermine a common national identity. Under the current system Yemeni citizens in Aden, Hadhramaut and other outlying regions may feel excluded from their fair share of the country's wealth because highland political elites dominate the central ministries, as well as the military and security forces. In decades to come, however, there is good reason to think Yemen's commercial elites from Aden, Hadhramaut and Taiz in the western midlands will gain enough influence both inside and outside the GPC to compel change within the system.

If Yemen is to develop a fully functioning democracy, its regional divisions clearly necessitate some form of local rule. But this cannot be achieved overnight, nor can it be engineered from the outside as American military forces have tried to do in Iraq. As America's own history of revolution, national independence, and civil war can attest, the attempt to establish an effective balance of democratic powers at central and local government levels is an arduous process. And the process is not helped when outside intervention aggravates political sensitivities surrounding questions of national sovereignty. It is interesting to note that, before the former South Yemen gained its independence in 1967, British colonial authorities attempted to establish a Federation of South Arabia, drawing together more than a dozen sultans and emirs. Since each local leader was jealous of the other's power, the initial federal plan called for a rotating presidency similar to the first Iraqi governing council established in 2004 under U.S. administra-

tor Paul Bremer in Baghdad. In the case of South Arabia, an increasingly violent insurrection forced the British to make a hasty retreat under fire. Later the British federal plan was scrapped by the leaders of two rival national liberation movements, the second more radical than the first.

Federal democracy may be a legitimate political ideal for regionally divided countries to strive for around the world, but in the Middle East, the concept of federalism is badly tainted by its association with past and present Western interventions. The legacy of Western leaders drawing lines in the sand for the sake of separate ethnic regional interests poisoned Middle East politics through much of the twentieth

century. The irony in many countries of the region is that popular interests could be well served by moderate forms of federal government. In Yemen and Iraq, many citizens may wish to see this goal achieved. Under present circumstances, however, any rapid attempt to empower local interests at the expense of the central government would almost by design lead to the breakup of the nation state. In order to achieve accountable representative government more responsive to the public good, these countries require democratic processes that are homegrown and therefore capable of gradually shifting the balance of central-local government relations.

¹ The problem with elections in divided countries is the subject of a large body of academic research dating from the 1950s. It formed the basis of Arend Lijphart's theory of "consociational democracy" that suggested coalition governments are the solution to the problems of ethnic-sectarian divisions (*World Politics*, January 1969, pp. 207-225). The most widely cited work is Donald Horowitz's large volume, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (University of California Press, 1985).

² The foundation of what came to be known as the "democratic transitions" school is a 1970 article by Dankwart Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model," in *Comparative Politics*, Volume 2, April 1970, pp. 337-363. The main research in this school was conducted in the 1980s by a group of scholars at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, DC. See Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy*; (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). Later research by Timothy Sisk is more representative of the "political engineering" approach to democracy; see Sisk, *Power-Sharing and International Mediation in Ethnic Conflicts* (US Institute of Peace, 1996).

³ Yemen's original north-south borderline was drawn in the early twentieth century by Ottoman and British authorities. This geographic division was given an ethnic-sectarian dimension after World War I, when the newly restored Zaidi imamate replaced Ottoman rule in the north. However, the Sunni-Shii distinction in Yemen between the Shafii majority (living along the west coast, in the western midlands, and across the former South Yemen) and the minority Zaidi is no longer a strong or "deep" division. The concept of deep divisions is usually reserved for countries like Israel-Palestine, Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia, where religion and language clearly split the population. By comparison, Yemen's divisions are defined by relatively mild differences in dialect, dress and other customs.

⁴ Abdulaziz Sultan al-Mansoub, *al-Intikhabat al-niyabiyya fi al-yaman*, (Sanaa, Yemen, 1995); p. 79.

⁵ Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); pp. 176-182.

⁶ Results of a field survey conducted in Yemen during 1996 and 1997. In contrast to these survey results in southern provinces, only one of ten northern provinces (Hajja) experienced similar personnel changes after 1994. Additional major changes occurred in the southern provincial offices of banking, finance, taxation, customs, audit and control, and the state prosecutor.

⁷ The origin of President Saleh's alliance with Ali Nasser and his partisans is in dispute, but it certainly predates the post-civil-war era beginning in 1994. There is evidence that Saleh wanted to include members of the Ali Nasser group in the first unity government in 1990. Some argue Saleh formed an alliance with Ali Nasser immediately after the latter's political exile in January 1986; others suggest the Saleh-Nasser alliance

first took shape in the early 1980s, when the two leaders engaged in reconciliation talks after the 1979 border war between North and South Yemen.

⁸ When the supporters of Ali Nasser fled north after the January 1986 crisis, they were encouraged by President Saleh and the GPC to reconcile with the earlier group of political exiles from Abyan and Shabwa. Although the two sides reached an initial agreement that prevented the settling of old scores, revenge attacks began to occur after the 1994 war, particularly among groups from Shabwa. Partisans of Ali Nasser and representatives of Shabwa's tribal leadership both confirm that Saleh's regime sought to exploit new divisions between the two groups during the mid-1990s (personal interviews in Sanaa, summer 2002). As the regime's "divide and rule" tactics became clear to both sides in 1997, representatives from Shabwa sought a new truce in order to advance their local interests. For these efforts they were accused of working against the central government and plotting to secede, just as the YSP's leadership was charged with secession prior to the 1994 war. In late 2001, many of the same individuals joined a new opposition group called the Public Forum for the Sons of the Southern and Eastern Provinces, referred to later in this paper.

⁹ Othman Said Qassem al-Mikhlaifi, "*Qanun al-Sulta al-Mahaliyya fi al-Yaman*," *Al-Masar* (Bethesda, MD), Volume 1, Number 2, Summer 2000, pp. 93-95.

¹⁰ The referendum legitimized the government's restrictive "local authority" law; and it was assured passage since there was little attempt to inform voters about the constitutional amendments. During the election campaign, the English-language *Yemen Times* conducted a survey of radio and television coverage of the referendum issue. The paper revealed that 86 percent of the air time was used to present propaganda encouraging citizens to vote "Yes," while only 14 percent was devoted to informing citizens about the content of the constitutional amendments. No air time was allotted to explain why voters might choose to oppose the amendments. *Yemen Times*, February 19, 2001, "Initial Report of Media Coverage Reveals GPC Campaigning Dominated Official Media." On the referendum ballot, there was no description of the 17 constitutional amendments, all of which were grouped together as one item requiring a "yes" or "no" answer.

¹¹ Nine days before the vote, a group of lawyers representing the main coalition of opposition parties filed a number of lawsuits in Sanaa to stop the elections. *Al-Ayyam*, February 12, 2001, pp. 1 and 8. After the election, these lawyers filed a new set of lawsuits to have the entire election process nullified. Both motions failed to alter the election results.

¹² Preliminary Results: Violent Incidents, *Yemen Times*, February 26, 2001, p. 1.

¹³ Brian Whitaker reported approximately 100 violent incidents around the country and claimed that "at least 45 people died on election day or during the prolonged and turbulent counting of votes." *Middle East International*, No. 645, March 9, 2001, p. 17.

¹⁴ *Al-Hayat*, February 26, 2001, p. 1. There is more extensive reporting in "Tanks Take Over," *Yemen Times*, February 26, 2001, p. 1. Government sources claim the fighting in Ibb started when several Islamic militants ambushed government forces. Reporters for *Yemen Times* interviewed local Islah supporters who say the conflict arose when the local GPC chairman of the district's election committee refused to release the election results, and then government forces were contacted to carry the ballot boxes away.

¹⁵ The 1999 presidential election was a no-contest race because of a 10 percent parliamentary seat requirement for parties wanting to nominate a candidate for executive office. Islah was the only opposition party that met the required number of seats, but it refused to participate in the political contest. In order to give the vote some semblance of legitimacy, the GPC sponsored its own rival candidate from the former South Yemen.

¹⁶ YSP officials protested the GPC's selection of Aden's secretary general, since it is widely believed the socialist party's popular female candidate in Shaykh Othman district received more votes than anyone in the province. In Aden's Crater district, the Islamist Islah party also out-pollled the GPC.

¹⁷ Interview with the Public Forum's director at his home in Sanaa, July 3, 2002.

¹⁸ This 1997 oil minister, Feisal Ben Shamlan, is currently running as the main opposition candidate in Yemen's second presidential election scheduled late September 2006. Given his respected status as an independent politician, Ben Shamlan was chosen to lead a coalition of Yemen's main opposition parties, including the strange political bedfellows of the Islamist Islah and Yemeni Socialist parties. While Ben Shamlan is expected to make a stronger showing than Ali Abdallah Saleh's last opponent in 1999, the continuation of Saleh's reign is virtually assured.

¹⁹ Extensive Arabic coverage began on January 7, 2002, in the Aden-based newspaper *Al-Ayyam*. *Yemen Times* also ran a story on that date. A copy of the forum's letter in Arabic is reprinted in the newspaper *Al-Ray Al-*

Am, January 15, 2002.

²⁰ "After Years of Antagonism, PGC and YSP Get Intimate," *Yemen Times*, September 15, 2005, p. 1.

²¹ The post-civil-war views of Arab and western political analysts can be found in two books that summarize the results of conferences held in London and Abu Dhabi, UAE: Jamal al-Suwaidi, ed., *The Yemeni War of 1994: Causes and Consequences* (Abu Dhabi: Saqi Books, 1995), and E.G.H. Joffe, ed., *Yemen Today: Crisis and Solutions* (Caravel Press, 1997).

²² In Yemeni history, the cultural element that most distinguished Yemen's highland group from other groups in the country was its Zaidi (Shii) sectarian practices. Today, this sectarian element is less significant than the highland group's tribal customs and distinct spoken dialect, accent and slang. As a result, the political grievances that non-highland Shafii (Sunni) groups feel toward the dominant highland elites in Sanaa do not take a religious form as is the case between Sunni and Shii groups in Iraq. In fact, during the last three years, the strongest religious opposition to the highland political leadership in Sanaa came from fellow Zaidis within the highland region. Beginning in 2003, the Yemeni military engaged in an escalating battle with radical highland tribesmen loyal to the son of an elderly Zaidi cleric in Sada province named Husayn Badruddin al-Huthi. At the time of Iraq's invasion in March 2003, al-Huthi's followers encouraged a religious-based opposition to President Saleh's alliance with America. Soon Zaidi clerics across the highland region began preaching militant sermons against the Yemeni government, even inside the historic grand mosque in the old city of Sanaa. Eventually President Saleh called on government forces to arrest the preachers and many of their followers. Amidst these events, members of Iraq's newly empowered Shii clergy criticized the Yemeni government's crackdown on the Zaidi preachers (*Yemen Times*, May 9, 2005, p. 1; and "Informed Comment," May 10 and 20, 2005, at www.juancole.com). The Iraqi clerics intended to express solidarity with what they saw as persecuted Shii Muslims, but their criticism did not resonate in Yemen because President Saleh's crackdown had no obvious sectarian motive.

²³ Although it is important that this event was held in Hadhramaut, Ulrike Stohrer observes that the Yemeni government does not typically use the annual unity date to celebrate the country's regional diversity, for instance by showcasing Yemen's variety of music and dance. Instead the event is choreographed to emphasize the uniformity of the Yemeni people. See "Yemen Update," *Bulletin of the American Institute for Yemeni Studies*, No. 44, 2002, pp. 26-28.

²⁴ Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen*, pp. 53-54. Carapico's analysis of Yemen's most recent parliamentary election provides the best insight into how the country's democracy has declined. Also see Carapico: "How Yemen's Ruling Party Secured an Electoral Landslide," *Middle East Reports*, May 16, 2003, www.merip.org/mero/mero051603.html.

²⁵ "Interview with Dr. Numan," *Yemen Times*, September 26, 2005, p. 4.

²⁶ *Al-Ayyam*, September 15 and 17, 2005, No. 4587-4588, *Fi nadwa muntada al-ayyam hawl murwazanat aden*, p. 5 in both editions.