

## Yemen's revolution: The lack of public reasoning

By: Nadia Al-Sakkaf

The sound of heart beats was deafening in Sanaa's 20<sup>th</sup> street when protestors moved in the demonstration's forefront. Around 15 snipers were positioned on rooftops on two sides of Dairi street intersection with 20<sup>th</sup> street. Protestors planned on Friday, March 18<sup>th</sup>, to expand the sit-in area and to erect new tents at the intersection. Members of the National Security Intelligence Service aided by plainclothes security men burned rubber tires thinking to foil the expansion plan. They were mistaken. Eye witnesses said later that the front line demonstrators kept moving forward even though they met sniper bullets with their bare chests, one row after the other, until the crowd captured the snipers. After all and despite their weapons and specialized training the snipers were unable to defeat protestors solely armed with passion and desire for freedom. This incident, dubbed "Bloody Friday", tipped over the balance in Yemen's uprising. It changed the international community's attitude towards the regime. Until 15<sup>th</sup> March, the president, Ali Saleh, who played the card of being the only force able to contain "Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula", was their man in Yemen.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why toppling the regime is taking much longer than it did in Tunisia and Egypt. It seems that the west, mainly the US, has not yet identified their new man in Yemen. Nevertheless, the international rhetoric on Yemen, especially from Germany has been quite outspoken against Saleh since then, condemning his acts of violence. It was the killing of nearly 60 protestors on March 18<sup>th</sup> that qualified Saleh to be amongst the Arab leaders to be removed.

### The Yemeni revolt between political parties and protest movement

A popular joke in the Arab world states that an Arab leader came across Aladdin's magic lamp. When asked what three wishes he desired, he said: cancel Fridays, make facebook vanish and remove al-Jazeera from the screens. The joke highlights three significant tools used in the Arab Spring, the regional news channel, Facebook and, even more interesting, the importance of Friday's religious ceremonies as a catalyst of political mobilization. The religious opposition party in Yemen, the Islah (Reform), orchestrated the so called *Shaheed* (Martyr) Project. The project aims at recruiting young men, who are willing to die for their cause. The mobilization through this project relies on people's passion for change while promising them a better life on earth, as well as the promise of heaven in the afterlife. The potential *shaheed* wears a white long men's dress (*disdasha*), symbolizing a shroud, and a headband with the word *shaheed* written on it. Those men have said their good byes to their loved ones before joining the demonstrations and are fully aware of the risk they are taking. The "chosen ones" or potential *shaheeds* constitute the front rows of demonstrations. On Fridays, when millions of protesters march in the streets across Yemen after prayers they also honor the men who gave their lives in the struggle for freedom in their chants and on their banners. However, there is a problem with blind passion especially in a country where people are not used to take responsibility for their own lives, as it is the case in Yemen.

Public reasoning is lacking. A glance at the demands of protestors clearly reveals the existence of a unified political message: topple the regime. Despite the fact that Yemeni demonstrators acquire the jargon of the intellectual elite, there is a huge gap between the political language they are using and their true feelings. For example, when asked why they are protesting, most revolutionary youth refer to dignity, corruption and poverty. Officially, however, the revolutionary opposition makes no reference to these issues.

In fact, the nation's entire demands are summarized in one word *Irhal* which translates into "Get out." This is a deliberate political move by the opposition parties who fear that the formulation of more specific demands might divide the crowds - or worse - allow these parties to be held accountable if and when they assume power. For example, the semi-organized women's movement in Yemen, the *Watan Coalition*, demands a 30 percent quota for women in elected and non-elected bodies of a new government. Yet none of the banners, even those carried by women reflect this claim, and none of the political parties even touches this point during negotiations. If the issue of quota was raised publicly, all political forces would have to address it, hence revealing their true colors. This lack of public reasoning and the missing clarity and precision of the political vision in the popular movement are exploited by existing political parties in order to seize power.

In a way, this argument is legitimate because crowds cannot make policies or rule a country. Countries need institutional bodies and political parties to manage them. The lack of democratic and political experience among the revolutionary youth is an obstacle to their organized political representation. One example of this problem is that there are at least 72 factions and independent activist groups who only make up for one third of the 300,000 protestors in the sit-in area near Sanaa's university, on Fridays, their number easily surpasses one million protestors coming from all kind of backgrounds. In comparison, the established parties achieved a much higher level of organization. At their main protest site, the *Tagheer* (Change) Square in Sanaa, they set up committees with defined roles and responsibilities regarding protection, medical aid and media contacts. Without this important organization, Yemen's revolution probably would not have gained such momentum, considering that the protestors come from very different backgrounds and orientations

### **Shattered stereotypes**

The tribes of Yemen surprised the world and the Yemenis alike when they refrained from using their arms even when being shot at. Instead, they joined the protestor's "silmiya silmiya" (peaceful peaceful) chants when marching in their traditional attire from all around the country. The defection of the prominent army general, Ali Muhsin Al-Ahmar, a member of the president's tribe, two days after the "Bloody Friday", gave Yemen's revolution an extraordinary push. Equally important was the move of tribal leaders in the areas of Marib, Khawlan, Sa'ada, Shabwa, among them even sheikhs from the president's Al-Ahmar clan who joined the revolution against Ali Saleh. Most astonishingly, the tribes initially accepted to leave their weapons at home and to join the peaceful protests despite their almost historic involvement in armed conflict and possession of heavy artillery. The ability of those tribesmen to let go of a centuries-old culture of violence and revenge killing for the sake of ousting the president indicates that the stereotype of Yemen as a culture plagued by tribal conflict seemed exaggerated at

least for most of the first five months of the year. With political will and education, many Yemenis were hoping in this period, a civilian state based on equal citizenship could become a political option in Yemen. In fact, this is what the tribesmen themselves were demanding as they joined the revolution. Moreover, the demonstrations in Change Square achieved what many mediation efforts failed to produce: Rival tribal sheikhs from clans fighting each other reached agreements ending conflicts that lasted decades.

On May 21st, the rules changed. With the attacks by State Security and Republican Guards forces against the powerful leader of the Hashid tribe, Sadeq Al-Ahmar, the political conflict gradually transformed into tribal warfare. Especially since armed tribes had already taken over several government offices and security check points outside Sanaa.

Another stereotype that was shattered to pieces was about women. Considering that 50 percent of Yemeni women are illiterate and less than 20 percent are integrated in the formal economic sector, it was amazing how women were not only part of the revolution but on many occasions, especially in the beginning, leaders of it. The conservative male dominated society somehow allowed women to play a leading role. One publicly expressed explanation is that these extraordinary times require desperate measures. However, it seems that as Yemen's women have tried the taste of being publicly active and engaged in their own country's affairs, they are likely to continue playing a significant role after the revolution, even if not as prominent.

### **The role of social media**

The reference to Facebook in the above mentioned joke seems valid even in Yemen where internet penetration does not exceed 5 percent. Facebook and other social media played a crucial role in the mobilization of the public and in getting young people of the silent majority involved. Yemenis with a Facebook profile are relatively better off than the 40 percent Yemenis below the food poverty line, whose first concern is where the next meal will come from. Yet even they joined the revolution and lobbied for it through creative art work on the revolution and forming events for protests. In fact, using Facebook and text messaging was the main tool used in Yemen's revolution to organize the public. It only requires one person with internet access to convey the time and location of the next protest to 100 people in a room and so on. Yemenis also lobby on websites for the prosecution of Ali Saleh as a war criminal.<sup>1</sup>

### **Yemen left on its own**

The Gulf Initiative, despite all the shuttle diplomacy to and from Yemen, has failed by all standards. The Gulf States, along with the international community tried to convince Saleh to resign, although there are question marks over the wholeheartedness of Saudi King Abdullah and the Bahraini Crown Prince Salman al Khalifa. This initiative was Yemen's last chance for a non-violent exit. Now, the international community is empty handed and, in simple words, Yemen is left on its own to sort out its problems.

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<sup>1</sup> See under: <http://yemenportal.net/> and <http://yemenportal.net/thawra> (both Arabic)

From the onset of event, three possible scenarios seemed possible. Reports from Saleh's close family said that he had fallen ill again after recovering from cancer. If this takes the better of him he might have one or two strikes against protestors before he surrenders and leaves to Jeddah to join his fellow Arab ruler Ben Ali of Tunisia.

The more violent scenario was chosen by the opposition parties through the protestors' escalation committee. The plan is to take over sensitive state institutions such as the cabinet, the TV and Radio Corporation, as well as governorate offices outside the capital Sanaa. The protestors know that they cannot take over the presidential palace without thousands of them being killed, so they opted for the Prime Minister's office.

In the case that protestors cannot take over vital state bodies, their fight will become similar to the one of Libya's opposition. It is likely that security and army officers defect and join the revolution especially when they see that they are going against their countrymen to protect a regime that is already falling. The effort it will take to rebuild the nation after the revolution is proportional to how long it takes for a regime to be changed. Today there are already shortages in fuel, cooking gas and electricity. Many private sector companies are losing and international investors have packed and left. Many jobs were lost and it will take enormous efforts and billions of donor money to stabilize the economy and restore a semi-normal life in the country. What Saleh chooses to do in Yemen will define the pace of recovery in the country later and how he will be remembered by history. Will his place be as the man who unified the two Yemens and who established the oil industry? The way things are going, this image is highly unlikely.