

**POPULAR PROTEST IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST (II):
YEMEN BETWEEN REFORM AND REVOLUTION**

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POPULAR PROTEST IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST (II): YEMEN BETWEEN REFORM AND REVOLUTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Even before the popular wave from Tunisia and Egypt reached Yemen, President Saleh's regime faced daunting challenges. In the north, it is battling the Huthi rebellion, in the south, an ever-growing secessionist movement. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is showing mounting signs of activism. Sanaa's political class is locked in a two-year battle over electoral and constitutional reforms; behind the scenes, a fierce competition for post-Saleh spoils is underway. Economic conditions for average Yemenis are dire and worsening. Now this. There is fear the protest movement could push the country to the brink and unleash broad civil strife. But it also could, and should, be a wake-up call, a catalyst for swift, far-reaching reforms leading to genuine power-sharing and accountable, representative institutions. The opposition, reformist ruling party members and civil society activists will have to work boldly together to make it happen. The international community's role is to promote national dialogue, prioritise political and economic development aid and ensure security aid is not used to suppress opposition.

Events in Tunisia and Egypt have been cause for inspiration with a speed and geographic reach that defies imagination. In Yemen, their effect has been to transform the nature of social mobilisation, the character of popular demands and elites' strategic calculations. They emboldened a generation of activists who consciously mimicked their brethren's methods and demands, taking to the streets and openly calling for Saleh's ouster and regime change – aspirations many quietly backed but few had dared openly utter. The official opposition, tribal leaders and clerics at first mostly stood on the sidelines. But as protests steadily grew in size – and as the regime security forces resorted to heavy-handed violence – they played catch-up and have come to espouse some of the demonstrators' more ambitious demands.

Largely caught off guard, the regime's response was mixed. It has employed harsh tactics, particularly in the south, arresting, beating harassing and even killing activists. By most accounts, supporters donning civilian clothes took the lead, wielding sticks, clubs, knives and guns to disperse

demonstrations. Police and security personnel at best failed to protect protesters, at worst encouraged or even participated in the repression. The events on 8 March, when the army used live ammunition against demonstrators, represent a worrisome escalation.

The regime also mobilised supporters, organising massive counter-demonstrations. Some likely joined due to financial inducements, yet it would be wrong to dismiss them so readily. Saleh still enjoys genuine support born of tribal loyalties and nurtured by a deep patronage system that doles out benefits. He benefits from a large wellspring of negative legitimacy, given the absence of a clear or popular alternative leader. Finally, the president has been compelled to make a series of unprecedented concessions, notably regarding presidential term limits and hereditary succession.

None of these tactics appears to have worked. Violence boomeranged, enraging the youth movement and attracting more supporters to the protesters' side. Regime efforts to rally supporters have met with some success, yet every day sees more defections from traditional pillars of support, including tribal heads and clerics. Saleh's concessions, impressive as they might have seemed to him, are viewed as both insufficient and unworthy of trust by protesters who continue to come out in force.

What comes next? It is easy to look at Tunis and Cairo and predict the regime's rapid demise. Some traits are shared. Far more even than Tunisians or Egyptians, Yemenis suffer from poverty, unemployment and rampant corruption; if economic disparity and injustice are an accurate predictor of unrest, the regime has reason to worry. As in those preceding cases, the demonstrators have condensed their demands into a call for the leader's unconditional departure, and they are displaying remarkable resilience and ability to expand their reach in the face of regime counter-measures.

Still, Yemen is neither Egypt nor Tunisia (though, for that matter, nor was Egypt like Tunisia, which says something about how oblivious popular protests are to societal differences and how idle is speculation about what regime

might be the next to go). Its regime is less repressive, more broadly inclusive and adaptable. It has perfected the art of co-opting its opposition, and the extensive patronage network has discouraged many from directly challenging the president. Moreover, flawed as they are, the country has working institutions, including a multi-party system, a parliament, and local government. Qat chews are a critical forum for testing ideas and airing grievances. Together, these provide meaningful outlets for political competition and dissent, while preserving space for negotiation and compromise.

Other significant differences relate to societal dynamics. Tribal affiliations, regional distinctions and the widespread availability of weapons (notably in the northern highlands) likely will determine how the transition unfolds. There is nothing resembling a professional military truly national in composition or reach. Some parts of the security apparatus are more institutionalised than others. Overall, however, it is fragmented between personal fiefdoms. Virtually all the top military commanders are Saleh blood relatives, who can be expected to stand by his side if the situation escalates.

Then there is the matter of opposition cohesion, which has proved critical in successful regional uprisings. Preserving unity of purpose amid the ongoing Huthi rebellion and tensions between northerners and southerners will be challenging. In the south, the movement best equipped to mobilise protesters, the Hiraak, promotes secession, an agenda around which other Yemenis hardly can be expected to rally. While Hiraak supporters recognise that a strong protest movement in the north benefits their cause by distracting the security apparatus, the link thus derives from strategic opportunity, not cooperation in pursuit of a common goal. This may be changing: youth activists are seeking to transcend geographic divides, and the umbrella opposition group – the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) – is building closer ties with rebels in both north and south. It is too early to predict the outcome, which could well determine Saleh's fate.

The spectre of descent into tribal warfare likewise makes many Yemenis nervous. A potentially bloody power struggle looms between two rival centres within the Hashid tribal confederation – one affiliated with the president, the other with the late Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar's sons. Rules of the game are in flux, presenting an uncommon opportunity for serious reform – but also for violent conflict.

The protesters, with the wind at their backs, expect nothing less than the president's quick ouster. The president and those who have long benefited from his rule are unlikely to give in without a fight. Finding a compromise will not be easy. The regime would have to make significant concessions, indeed far more extensive than it so far has been

willing to contemplate. To be meaningful, these would have to touch the core of a system that has relied on patron-client networks and on the military-security apparatus. The opposition and civil society activists have a responsibility too. A democratic transition is long overdue, yet they should be mindful of the risk of pushing without compromise or dialogue for immediate regime change. The outcome could be a dangerous cycle of violence that jeopardises the real chance that finally is at hand to reform a failing social contract.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Opposition Parties:

1. Continue to support youth- and civil society- led peaceful protests both rhetorically and, on a case by case basis, through official participation by the Joint Meetings Parties (JMP).
2. Pursue negotiations with the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) and religious leaders on a plan for the peaceful transfer of power.
3. Propose a specific timeline and prioritised agenda for an inclusive national dialogue.
4. Suggest far-reaching, immediate reforms to:
 - a) ensure implementation of regime promises not to extend the president's term or pass the office to his son; and
 - b) shift power from the presidency and the military-security establishment to a more representative civilian government.
5. Keep a distance from the increasingly acrimonious power struggle pitting the Saleh and al-Ahmar families.
6. Maintain pressure on the regime to hold it accountable to its reform commitments through popular protests; international observation of the national dialogue; agreement on a timeline for the transition; and a media campaign.
7. Intensify efforts to reach out to and coordinate with Huthi supporters and members of the Southern Movement (Hiraak) willing to seek peaceful reform.

To Reformers within the General People's Congress:

8. Advance concrete suggestions on an agenda and timeline for a peaceful transition of power and an inclusive national dialogue.
9. Work with members of civil society to pressure the president to undertake immediate action on his reform commitments (including no extension to his term; no transfer of power to his son; a genuine national di-

- alogue; protecting rights of protesters and punishing those who violated them).
10. Invigorate the multi-party system by either:
 - a) resigning from the GPC and forming a new party comprising reformers from across the political and regional spectrum; or
 - b) reforming the GPC from within by activating party membership at all levels and empowering urban youth within the party structure.
 18. Continue to make clear and public statements condemning the use of violence against peaceful protesters throughout the country.

Sanaa, Brussels, 10 March 2011

To The President and his family:

11. Respect the rights of all citizens – including in the south – to peaceful protest and assembly and prosecute perpetrators of violence against demonstrators.
12. Take verifiable steps to ensure implementation of promised reforms regarding presidential term limits and inheritance of power.
13. Pursue negotiations with the JMP and religious leaders on a plan for the peaceful transfer of power and national dialogue, including meaningful curbs on the power and privileges of the president's Sanhan tribe through civilian oversight of the military-security establishment.
14. Halt use of inflammatory rhetoric against the JMP, protesters, the Hiraak and the Huthis.

To the Friends of Yemen, including members of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the G8, as well as representatives from the UN, the EU, the Arab League, the IMF and the World Bank:

15. Facilitate the national dialogue through willingness to serve in an observer role;

To Saudi Arabia:

16. Channel efforts through the Friends of Yemen process rather than via engagement with individual sheikhs;

To Western donor governments, including the U.S.:

17. Ensure that security assistance does not skew the playing field against reformers by:
 - a) recalibrating the mix, giving the highest priority to economic and political development aid;
 - b) taking steps to ensure military-security assistance is not used to thwart domestic opposition and peaceful protests; and
 - c) developing stronger ties with civil society and opposition groups, including those in the Hiraak pursuing peaceful protests.

POPULAR PROTEST IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST (II): YEMEN BETWEEN REFORM AND REVOLUTION

I. INTRODUCTION

This is the second in a series of briefings and reports that will examine the unprecedented protests in North Africa and the Middle East.¹ These popular uprisings are rooted in a common set of conditions: autocratic regimes; lack of representative institutions; flagrant iniquities; corruption; nepotism; and, more broadly, a sense that rulers increasingly have been treating public resources as private goods. As a result, the wave of protests has spread with remarkable speed throughout the region. Yet, similarities aside, local conditions vary greatly, which accounts for strikingly different trajectories in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and elsewhere.

Based to the extent possible on its field presence, Crisis Group will provide necessary background, describe events in specific countries, examine local actors and analyse societal dynamics. Where appropriate, it will offer recommendations and broader comparative conclusions, while reflecting on longer-term implications for the international community.

II. AN UNFOLDING POPULAR REVOLT

A. ORIGINS OF THE CURRENT UNREST

Two weeks before Tunisia's January 2011 Jasmine Revolution shook the region, the head of Yemen's ruling party parliamentary bloc, Sheikh Sultan Barakani, announced that his party would not only "reset" the clock for presidential term limits – a move that would allow President Ali Abdullah Saleh to stand again – but would "remove the clock" completely, potentially enabling Saleh to become president for life.² The statement triggered a political firestorm, tapping into festering resentment over the concentration of power and wealth around the president and his family. Sheikh Sadiq al-Ahmar, the pre-eminent sheikh of the powerful Hashid tribal confederation,³ warned that the amendment, if passed, would "destroy Yemen", and Saleh would become a "Pharaoh". The secretary general

² Saleh came to power in north Yemen in 1978 and became president of unified Yemen in 1990. He won unified Yemen's first presidential elections in 1999 with 96 per cent of the vote. He won the first genuinely competitive presidential elections in 2006, with 77 per cent of the vote. The constitution states that the president shall be elected for no more than two seven-year terms. As such, 2013 should mark the end of Saleh's tenure. In the past, the ruling party had publicly discussed two options for amending the constitution to allow Saleh to stand again: 1) eliminating term limits completely, and 2) changing the presidential term limit from seven to five years. Changing the term limit from seven to five years would "reset the clock" so that Saleh would be eligible for two more terms in office.

³ There are two main tribal confederations in the northern highlands: Hashid and Bakil. The Bakil confederation is numerically larger and more decentralised. The Hashid confederation was more hierarchically organised under the late pre-eminent sheikh, Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar. He was succeeded upon his death in 2007 by his eldest son, Sadiq, who has proved far less powerful. President Saleh and his kin hail from the Hashid confederation's Sanhan tribe, specifically Bayt al-Ahmar village in the Sanhan region. Bayt al-Ahmar can refer to the president's village or to Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar's family (the House of al-Ahmar). Both are part of the Hashid confederation but should not be confused.

¹ A first report examined the events in Egypt. See Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°101, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (I): Egypt Victorious?*, 24 February 2011.

of the opposition Nasserite Popular Unionist Organisation called on Saleh to “save face” and step down.⁴

While the proposal to “remove the clock” may have been a bargaining tactic to press opposition parties to compromise on long-debated electoral and constitutional reform, its timing could not have been more unfortunate. On 14 January, the Jasmine Revolution toppled Tunisia’s president, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, and Sanaa braced for the aftershocks. That night, the president placed his security forces in the capital on high alert in anticipation of potential riots. Yemenis watched Al Jazeera and discussed how faraway events might impact their own country.

Initially, the street reaction was muted. On 15 January, several dozen student, civil society, and opposition activists participated in a rally in Sanaa in support of the Tunisian uprising. In response, the regime briefly detained several, including opposition parliament member Aydaroo Naqeeb from the Yemeni Socialist Party and the charismatic director of the non-governmental Women Journalists Without Chains and member of the opposition Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah), Tawakkul Karman. Small demonstrations continued throughout the week at Sanaa University, with students calling for a similar revolution in Yemen and chanting slogans such as “Oh Ali, join your friend Ben Ali”.

From the outset, student and civil society activists have been clear in their demand that Saleh step down. Their slogans are largely borrowed from the Tunisian and Egyptian examples: “The people want the fall of the regime”, “Leave, Leave” and “After Mubarak, O!Ali”, among others. Karman explained that once the regime was gone, protesters would be ready to discuss reviving the national dialogue⁵ and other steps toward necessary reforms. Until

then, they appear determined to focus exclusively on removing Saleh and his family from power.⁶

If street activists have been adamant in their call for regime change, the established opposition parties were, until recently, far more cautious in their official statements and positions.⁷ The principal opposition actor, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) is a loose coalition of five groups, including the powerful Islah, which is Islamist in outlook, and the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), which has its roots in the south. Following the Tunisian uprising, the JMP sponsored rallies in a well-organised and careful manner, having secured all required government permits. While some of its rank and file, particularly young members like Karman, demanded more dramatic change, the coalition leadership focused on substantive political reform, not Saleh’s immediate ouster. In the words of the current chairman, Dr Muhammad Abdulmalik Mutawakkil, “the JMP is interested in reform, not in the role of specific people. We are not as interested in who is ruling the country as we are in how the country is ruled”.⁸

The JMP organised three major successive rallies following the Tunisian uprising. On 20 January, demonstrators in Sanaa, Taiz and Al-Baydah governorates criticised the controversial constitutional amendment that would allow Saleh to stand again for president in 2013 and urged the ruling party to return to the national dialogue. Demonstrators denounced poor living conditions and hereditary rule. Some also called for the president’s departure, albeit without the JMP’s official sanction. Then, on 29 January, the coalition organised four separate rallies in Sanaa that attracted thousands of demonstrators each. On the following Thursday (the first day of the weekend), 3 February, even larger demonstrations that were spread more broadly throughout the country attracted international attention. While young protesters in particular mimicked Tunisian and Egyptian slogans, the official banners, speeches and chants were highly scripted and focused on political reform, not Saleh’s immediate ouster. Moreover, the JMP leadership was careful to avoid open confrontation with regime supporters.

At the height of the Egyptian uprising (25 January-11 February), student and civil society demonstrations waned. Karman said that she and others reduced their activities

⁴Quoted in *Al-Masdar*, online, 10 January 2011.

⁵The national dialogue has its roots in a February 2009 agreement between the ruling party and the opposition bloc. Both approved a two-year delay of the April 2009 parliamentary elections, during which time the ruling party and the opposition were to: 1) revise the Supreme Council for Elections and Referenda; 2) compile an accurate voters list and 3) discuss electoral and constitutional changes, including moving to a proportional list and a parliamentary system. While the original dialogue was primarily between the political parties, it soon expanded to include other actors and issues. Most importantly, it theoretically incorporates the Huthi conflict and the growing separatist movement in the south. After numerous fits and starts, the ruling party and the opposition belatedly agreed to a framework for implementing the dialogue in July 2009. The process stalled again in October 2009 and has yet to restart. For more information, see: April Longley Alley, “Yemen’s Multiple Crises”, *Journal of Democracy* 21:4 (October 2010).

⁶Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 17 February 2011.

⁷Immediately following the Tunisian revolution, a small number of opposition party activists called for regime change. However, they were acting independently and did not have the sanction or support of the opposition bloc.

⁸Crisis Group interview, Dr Mohammed Abdulmalik Mutawakkil, current chairman of the JMP opposition bloc and secretary general of the small Zaydi religious party, the Union of Popular Forces, Sanaa, 4 February 2011.

because all media attention was focused on Egypt.⁹ Immediately following Hosni Mubarak's fall, however, the tenor and pace of mobilisation changed dramatically. On 11 February, the night of the Egyptian president's resignation, thousands of Yemenis took to the streets across the country in celebration and to call for similar change. For the first time, large demonstrations began to take on a more spontaneous, organic character, as individuals came into the streets in response to SMS messages and Facebook calls, or simply joined as marchers passed their homes and shops.

During celebratory marches, young demonstrators spoke of a new wave of freedom sweeping the Middle East that could not pass Yemen by. A youth leader discussed ways of unifying the country's regions and groups, particularly the Huthi rebels in the north and the southern separatists,¹⁰ behind a call for regime change.¹¹ Inspired by the Egyptians' success, grassroots organisers redoubled their efforts and began to stage daily demonstrations in the capital as well as in other governorates.

Initially, the JMP, powerful tribal leaders and clerics¹² largely stood on the sidelines, as civil society activists

and students led daily anti-regime protests. During the first week, their numbers remained small – ranging from several hundred to several thousand – but participants showed themselves dedicated and tenacious, even when confronted with an increasingly violent regime response. Partially in reaction to public outrage over the regime's use of and/or tacit support for violence, the movement gained strength, and, on 18 February (after Friday prayers), tens of thousands demonstrated in at least eight cities, including Sanaa, Taiz and Aden.¹³ On 20 February, the JMP announced that it could not accept an invitation for dialogue with the ruling party while the regime engaged in violence against peaceful protesters. Coalition leaders "urged [their] supporters to join young protesters in peaceful protests against the regime."¹⁴

On the same day, the Huthi spokesperson, Mohammad Abdulsalam, said that "the young people's movement and the Joint Meeting Parties in Saada have participated in preparations for protests in support of [coordinated] protests in Aden, Taiz, Sanaa, and other governorates".¹⁵ Cooperation with the southern activists also rose, as demonstrators mixed secessionist chants with calls for the fall of the regime. Within the ruling General People's Congress Party (GPC) itself, defections began. On 23 February, seven parliamentarians left it in protest of the authorities' use of violence, bringing total resignations at that point to nine.¹⁶ Street activists demanding immediate change clearly were gaining the advantage, as cooperation between the primarily youth-led protest movement, the JMP, the Huthis and activists in the south increased.

The following Friday, 25 February, activists organised even larger anti-regime demonstrations. The website of the independent weekly newspaper *al-Masdar* reported that more than a million gathered at University Square in Sanaa, known by demonstrators as "The Square of Change", in support of immediate regime change.¹⁷ *Al-Minbar*, a website supportive of the Huthis, claimed that tens of thousands took to the streets in Sadaa governorate calling for Saleh's ouster.¹⁸ The actual number of attendees likely was more modest – tens of thousands in Sanaa, thousands in Aden but over 100,000 in the epicentre of protest,

⁹ Crisis Group interview, Tawokkul Karman, Sanaa, 17 February 2011.

¹⁰ The Huthi rebellion began in 2004 as a geographically contained conflict between a small group of rebels loyal to Hussein al-Huthi and the Yemeni government. It has since passed through six rounds of intense fighting and has yet to be fully resolved. For more information on its origins and history, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°86, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, 27 May 2009. The southern separatist movement has its origins in the unification of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in 1990 and the 1994 civil war, in which Saleh defeated an attempt by leaders of the former PDRY to secede. In 2006, groups of "southerners" (citizens living in the area of the former PDRY) began to stage protests and sit-ins calling for equal treatment under the law, greater local autonomy and other reforms. After two years of unsuccessful protests, the movement began to call for separation. For more information, see April Longley and Abulghani al-Iryani, "Fighting Brushfires with Batons, An analysis of the political crisis in south Yemen", The Middle East Institute online, Policy Brief (February 2008); April Longley Alley and Abulghani al-Iryani, "Southern Aspirations and Saleh's Exasperation: The looming threat of secession in south Yemen", The Middle East Institute online, *Viewpoints*, no. 11 (June 2009); Stephen Day, "Updating Yemeni national unity: Could lingering regional divisions bring down the regime?", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 62, no. 3 (2008).

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, youth activist and journalist, Sanaa, 11 February 2011.

¹² In practice, there is no clear distinction between the JMP opposition, tribal leaders and clerics. The JMP, like the GPC, comprises a variety of social and political elites, including tribal and religious leaders. Islah, for example, was founded by the late Sheikh Abdullah Bin Hussein al-Ahmar. The powerful

Sunni religious leader, Sheikh Abdul Majid al-Zindani, is a member of Islah's Shoura Council and Hamid al-Ahmar also is a leading party figure. That said, statements and actions by clerics and tribal sheikhs are a useful barometer of shifting alliances and protest dynamics.

¹³ "Yemen: End Deadly Attacks on Protestors", Human Rights Watch, 18 February 2011.

¹⁴ *News Yemen* (in Arabic), 20 February 2011.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Al-Masdar*, online, 23 February 2011. That number has now reached thirteen. See below.

¹⁷ *Al-Masdar*, online, 25 February 2011.

¹⁸ *Al-Minbar*, online, 25 February 2011.

Taiz.¹⁹ Still, what was most remarkable was that these protests were primarily led and organised by a new group of youth and civil society activists, acting largely independently of formal political parties.

With support from the JMP and other prominent social figures, the protests have continued to grow in size. The protest/sit-in at Sanaa University's "Square of Change" is regularly drawing tens of thousands. Organisers estimate that 50 per cent are tribesmen, 40 per cent students and 10 per cent Huthis and others.²⁰ Various civil society and professional organisations, including lawyers and doctors, have their own sit-in tents. Demonstrations in other governorates, particularly Aden, Taiz and Ibb, continue to swell, likewise attracting tens of thousands into the streets on weekends after Friday prayers.

The JMP's decision to officially support the youth protest movement was a significant change, although important differences exist between the parties and street protesters. Most importantly, the JMP still is leaving the door open for negotiation and dialogue, while the majority of youth and civil society protesters are not. According to the rotating chairman of the coalition, Mutawakkil:

The JMP is still not calling for the immediate ouster of Saleh. They are discussing this issue internally, but no

decision has been made. They are still interested in changing the way the country is ruled, not in changing people. It is still possible to have a peaceful transfer of authority.²¹

An Islah member echoed these sentiments: "The JMP is still open for dialogue. But they continue to wait for guarantees that the president is serious".²² Student protesters are frustrated with the JMP's willingness to conduct dialogue with the regime. A sign commonly held by university demonstrators reads: "no dialogue, no parties". Nor is there unanimity within the JMP. While it still is in discussions with the ruling party, several important members have issued statements calling for Saleh's immediate departure.²³

Overall, as time has gone by, the trend among the opposition, religious leaders and tribal networks has been toward supporting the protesters' more far-reaching demands – even though the picture is not always as clear as it first appears. The JMP's stance regarding both Saleh's departure and the possibility of dialogue is continually evolving. On 2 March, the opposition, in coordination with a group of clerics, offered Saleh a five-point plan as a roadmap for honourable and peaceful transition that would require him to leave office by the end of 2011.²⁴ It also asked the regime to respect the rights of citizens to continue peaceful demonstration, to investigate and prosecute those responsible for violence against demonstrators and to initiate an inclusive dialogue with all relevant parties, including parts of the exiled southern separatist opposition.²⁵

When on 7 March the president called on the opposition to attend a national conference and begin dialogue, it refused, saying that it would participate only if Saleh agreed to leave within a year.²⁶ It vowed to intensify protests in response to the president's rejection of their transition offer.²⁷ In short, even as many JMP leaders leave the door open for dialogue and a peaceful transition, their demands increasingly are in tune with those of street protesters.

¹⁹ *The New York Times*, 25 February 2011. Since Mubarak's fall, the city of Taiz has played an increasingly important role in the protest movement. By 18 February, tens of thousands were engaged in a sit-in which, they said, would last until the regime's ouster; by 25 February, numbers had swelled to over 100,000. The governorate of Taiz is reputed to be among the most educated and politically motivated in the country; it also is home to some of its most established business families. Moreover, Taiz is own businesses throughout the country and form the largest percentage of government workers. They have long felt neglected by the central government; as they see it, they suffer from their lack of strong tribal affiliations with the current regime and resent that development and business initiatives are focused in Sanaa. Grievances also are tied to sectarian divisions. The northern highlands are predominantly Zaydi (a branch of Shiite Islam distinct from the Twelver Shiism), while the more settled agricultural regions of middle and southern Yemen, of which Taiz is a part, follow the Shafei school of Sunni jurisprudence. For details on Zaydism, see Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, op. cit. Yemenis often point out that, historically, the Zaydi tribal highlands have ruled over the Shafeis agricultural areas. Although the government is filled with Shafei bureaucrats, many feel that real power lies with the president, who is a Zaydi, and his northern highland supporters. Given the governorate's large population and historical importance as a centre of political activism, its increased involvement is an important pivot point shaping the direction of popular protests.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Abdulghani al-Iryani, Sanaa, 6 March 2011.

²¹ Crisis Group interview, Dr Mohammed Abdulmalik Mutawakkil, Sanaa, 1 March 2011.

²² Crisis Group interview, member of Islah, Sanaa, 1 March 2011.

²³ They include Sheikh Hameed al-Ahmar (son of the late pre-eminent sheikh of the Hashid Tribal confederation, member of Islah, and prominent businessman) and, more recently, spokesmen like Mohammad al-Sabri of the Nasserite Party. Al-Sabri told Al-Jazeera on 1 March that the "opposition decided to stand with the people's demand for the fall of the regime, and there is no going back on that", al-Jazeera.net, 1 March 2011.

²⁴ Agence France-Presse, 4 March 2011.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior Yemeni official, Sanaa, March 2011.

²⁶ *Gulf News*, 8 March 2011.

²⁷ Agence France-Presse, 7 March 2011.

Important religious, tribal, and other social leaders are also gradually aligning themselves with street demonstrators. As early as 4 February, religious leaders in the western coastal governorate of al-Hudaydah – traditionally politically quiet and a regime stronghold – launched a campaign calling on youth to organise a Tunisia- or Egypt-like revolution. Aware of the importance of religious discourse as a mobilising tool, the regime quickly dismissed the region's director of religious endowment.²⁸ More importantly, one of Yemen's most influential salafi clerics and a long-time Saleh ally, Sheikh Abdulmajid al-Zindani,²⁹ condemned violence against protesters and increasingly threw his weight behind the movement. In a serious blow to the president, he delivered a fiery speech to demonstrators at Sanaa University on 1 March, asserting that the president "came to power by force, and stayed in power by force, and the only way to get rid of him is through the force of the people". He added that "an Islamic state [in Yemen] is coming."³⁰

The situation is nuanced, however. While Zindani is now publicly backing anti-regime protesters, he is far from having cut ties with the president. Shortly before his impassioned 1 March speech, Zindani and other religious leaders met with the president to advise him on how to move the country through the crisis. In fact, the *ulama* council (a group of scholars and religious authorities led by Zindani) is working with both the JMP and the regime – against the youth protesters' wishes – on a compromise that would allow a peaceful transfer of power.³¹

The protest movement, likewise, has attracted growing tribal support. Since mid-February, when the regime resorted to significant violence against peaceful protesters, several important tribal sheikhs have joined. To a large degree, this reflects a historic rivalry between the president's family and sons of the late powerful Sheikh Abdullah

bin Hussein al-Ahmar, who, sensing growing dissatisfaction with the regime, have sought to bolster their chances of claiming power.

Hamid al-Ahmar, a prominent businessman and member of the (Islamist) *Islah* opposition, arguably is now the most outspoken and powerful voice promoting anti-regime protest and Saleh's immediate ouster. His brother, Hussein, who enjoys stronger ties with the tribal base, also has been deeply engaged in the protest movement, flexing his political muscle through the non-governmental National Solidarity Council and, most recently, by holding meetings in his home governorate of Amran in an effort to secure tribal allegiances.³² On 17 February, he warned that should the president fail to protect peaceful protesters, he would rally the tribes to their support.³³

On 26 February, Hussein made good on his threat. He resigned from the GPC at the largest anti-regime rally in the history of the Amran governorate, which gathered thousands of tribesmen from the Hashid and Bakil confederations. At the rally, Hussein and his tribal supporters called for the regime's fall and Saleh's immediate departure. In a forceful speech, he told supporters:

We are on the path of change. We are neither scared of thugs nor tanks. The armed forces belong to the people, not mercenaries. We will confront this regime with our bare chests in peaceful revolution, and we will never accept any tutelage over our land.

He reportedly also "urg[ed] the Huthis and the Southern Mobility Movement [SMM], to 'drop their slogans, adopt a unified motto calling for the fall of the corrupt regime, and to build an institutional state', saying that 'the regime itself made our brothers in the South go out and demand disintegration [from the North]'"³⁴

Although these are significant steps, it still is premature to suggest that the Hashid (or Bakil) tribal confederation has turned decisively against Saleh. Hussein's and his brother's dramatic opposition carries important weight within tribal groupings, yet "the tribes" are far from constituting a unified bloc and have not shifted as coherent units against the president. Immediately after the tribal gathering in Amran, several prominent sheikhs within the Hashid and Bakil confederations reiterated their support for Saleh, objecting to Hussein's speaking on their behalf.³⁵

²⁸ *Al-Watan*, online, 8 February 2011.

²⁹ Zindani is deeply embedded in the ruling patronage system. He is the founder of Iman University, a well-known salafi university in Sanaa that the U.S. accuses of promoting violent extremism. In 2004, Zindani was named a "special designated global terrorist" by the U.S. Treasury Department for his alleged role in terrorist financing. Zindani and his *ulema* council represent the salafi-leaning segment of the larger sunni religious community. He has long provided advice and political support to the president and is close to his relative, Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, the commander of the north-west military division. In the 1980s, Ali Muhsin and Zindani played key roles in mobilising Yemenis to participate in the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union. Zindani also is a founding member of *Islah* and enjoys deep political and personal ties with Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar's family.

³⁰ *The New York Times*, 1 March 2011.

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, senior Yemeni officials, Sanaa, March 2011.

³¹ Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar's family comes from the governorate of Amran, which is immediately north of Sanaa and the heartland of the Hashid tribal confederation.

³³ Quoted in *Marib Press*, 18 February 2011.

³⁴ Quoted in *Marib Press*, special report, 26 February 2011.

³⁵ *Al-mu'tamar.net*, 26 February 2011.

In short, the protest movement has gained strength even as it must contend with diverging views. Over time, the JMP's position on regime change has moved closer to the street's, although it has yet to fully echo the protesters' views. Several important social and political components of the elite publically have joined the protest movement, though in their case as well distinctions remain.³⁶ Whereas youth and civil society activists rule out the very idea of negotiations, there still exist lines of communication between critical elite members and the regime. More broadly, the anti-regime opposition is internally fractured along regional, ideological and political party lines.

B. REGIME RESPONSES

The regime responded to the wave of demonstrations with a mix of repression, counter-mobilisation, economic enticements, political compromise and outreach to key social groups.

1. Repression

From the outset, police and security services reacted harshly to student and civil society-led demonstrations, arresting, beating and harassing activists.³⁷ Things took a turn for the worse in the aftermath of Mubarak's resignation.³⁸

Regime supporters in civilian clothes appear to have played a frontline role in countering protesters. Known as "*baltagiya*" (the word used to describe regime-backed thugs in Egypt), they are said to have used rocks, sticks, clubs, knives and even guns to disperse anti-regime demonstrations. Police and security personnel not only failed to protect demonstrators but are blamed for encouraging and even participating in the violence. Protesters claimed that many *baltagiya* were security officers and police in

civilian attire and that government vehicles transported armed pro-regime demonstrators to protest sites, supplying them with rocks and batons.

The government denies these allegations, blaming criminal elements instead. To an extent, it has sought to reel in its supporters. Tellingly, almost immediately after Saleh condemned violence against demonstrators and called for renewed dialogue, regime loyalists reportedly ceased attacks on peaceful demonstrators in front of Sanaa University.³⁹ Claiming that the president and his allies wished to halt the violence, a senior military officer said, "Ahmed Ali [the president's son] personally contacted high ranking GPC members shortly before the president's announcement, urging them to do their part in stopping the violence and controlling their supporters". But, he added, "Yemen is not the United States nor is it Europe. People here have guns and are well-armed. It is difficult to control everything".⁴⁰

However, despite subsequent statements by the president calling on security forces to protect civilians, instances of violence, injury and death have continued to rise steadily. On 3 March, armed men opened fire on anti-regime protesters in the city of al-Baydah, in central Yemen, killing at least five. A day earlier, in the port city of Hodaydah, security forces stood by as armed men attacked peaceful protesters with daggers and stones, injuring dozens. Several were hurt when soldiers opened fire on demonstrators in Harf Sufyan.⁴¹ Violence spread to the northern governorate of Ibb on 6 March, as regime supporters attacked demonstrators, killing one and injuring 53. On 8 March, significant violence erupted in Sanaa. Hours after inmates rioted in Sanaa prison, which led to at least one dead and 80 injuries, the army stormed the campus where demonstrators had been camping since mid-February. The army used live ammunition, rubber bullets and tear gas on hundreds of demonstrators. At least one died and over 90 were wounded. In short, the regime has repeatedly failed to protect citizens' right to demonstrate peacefully and has done little to bring those responsible for violence to justice. This is exacerbating the sense of grievance, fuelling the protest movement and making compromise far more difficult. Geographically, violence has been worst in the governorates formerly part of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (an area referred to in this report as "the south") – Aden, Lahij, Dala'a, Abyan, Shabwa, Hadramawt, Al-Mahra and parts of Al-Baydha.⁴² Since 2007,

³⁶ A total of thirteen parliament members have resigned from the ruling party. Several government members have also submitted resignations, including the deputy minister of culture and the deputy minister of youth and sports. Al-Jazeera.net, 5 March, 2011.

³⁷ Security personnel arrested Tawakkul Karman on a Sanaa street on 23 January, accusing her of organising unlicensed protests; that same day, they detained eighteen other activists, including human rights lawyers Khalid al-Anisi and Ali al-Dailami. These arrests immediately sparked demonstrations in Sanaa and Taiz calling for their release. Possibly realising the volatility of the situation and the potential for protests to spread, the regime released the three the following day.

³⁸ Between 11 and 16 February, six persons died and over 100 were injured in protest-related violence. "Yemen: End Deadly Attacks on Protesters", Human Rights Watch, 18 February 2011. The estimate of protest-related deaths between 16 – 28 February ranges from nineteen to 27 – an average of three per day. The overwhelming majority of victims have been from the port city of Aden. Agence France-Presse, 28 February 2011.

³⁹ "Yemen: Tenuous Calm in Sanaa", Human Rights Watch, 21 February 2011.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 20 February 2011.

⁴¹ Harf Sufyan is a city in the Amran governorate that in the past has witnessed conflict related to the Huthi rebellion.

⁴² Before unification in 1990, Yemen consisted of two states: the socialist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY)

the south has been home to a predominantly peaceful protest known as the “Southern Movement” (Hiraak). It originally called for reform in the context of national unity. In late 2008/early 2009, after nearly two years of peaceful demonstrations yielded little reform and significant regime brutality, it shifted to calls for separation.⁴³ Fearful of that agenda, the regime has dealt with southern demonstrators – including those organised by the JMP – far more harshly than with others. For instance, whereas the 3 February JMP protests were without incident throughout most of the country, security forces arrested at least 22 JMP activists in Aden. On the same day, they used tear gas and live bullets to disperse unarmed demonstrators in the south-eastern governorate of Hadramawt⁴⁴ calling for regime change and the release of Hiraak prisoners.⁴⁵

Clashes were particularly severe in Aden where, anticipating growing protests, the regime significantly increased its military presence, going so far as to patrol streets with tanks and armoured vehicles. Security forces have been quick to use live rounds against unarmed demonstrators and, in recent weeks, demonstrators have lashed back by setting government buildings ablaze.⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch estimates that between 16 and 25 February at least nine people and possibly as many as 18 were killed and over 150 injured; others have been disappeared, including Hiraak leaders.⁴⁷ The level of violence in Aden caused a national backlash against the regime, and Saleh ordered the council of ministers to investigate.⁴⁸ But it will take much more than a commission to address the complex and combustible anger in Aden that has been both unleashed and augmented by the recent wave of demonstrations.

2. Counter-mobilisation

The regime also has sought to mobilise its own supporters. After a meagre showing on 27 January, the GPC staged a massive demonstration in the capital’s Tahrir Square on 3

February. By most estimates, pro-regime demonstrators outnumbered the simultaneous JMP rally by several thousand. Since then, Saleh loyalists have occupied the square, making use of a series of tents provided by the ruling party. After Mubarak stepped down, the GPC significantly stepped up its pro-government demonstrations. On 18 February, it rallied thousands of supporters from the surrounding areas for a counter-demonstration in Taiz.⁴⁹ Over time, it has tried to organise demonstrations in areas close to where the opposition stages its protests.⁵⁰

It is difficult to assess the level of regime support based on the size of pro-regime demonstrations. There is evidence that considerable resources are being expended to transport, feed, shelter, provide gat and possibly pay individuals to attend its rallies. A senior military officer confirmed that the GPC gives its supporters tents and daily meals in Tahrir Square, although he vehemently denied that cash was being paid, arguing that this would be shameful (*‘ayb*) in tribal culture.⁵¹ Numerous journalists, opposition members and activists, nevertheless, insist that financial incentives (either direct payments or the threat not to pay civil servant salaries) play an important role in the regime’s ability to mobilise support.⁵² According to a prominent human rights activist, regime loyalists in the square receive approximately 3,000 riyals (some \$15) daily, plus food and accommodation: “Saleh is popular because of his money, not because people believe in him”.⁵³ Moreover, he said, the government uses plainclothes military and security personnel to swell their ranks and physically assault anti-regime demonstrators.⁵⁴

Even assuming financial incentives, these do not tell the entire story. Most of those camping in Tahrir Square are tribesmen from areas surrounding Sanaa who are largely loyal to the president and his family due to the regular patronage they receive from the regime. Nor should one dismiss the feeling among some that the protests are disrupting normal life. A Sanaa resident explained why he and many of his neighbours participated in pro-regime demonstrations:

People are afraid of what will happen if the protests continue. They worry about their homes, their families and their belongings. While the protests were peaceful,

in the south and the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in the north. To call the former PDRY territories “the South” is geographically misleading; in reality, they cover the country’s south and east. Geographically, Taiz city is located in the south, but politically it was part of the YAR, i.e., “the North”.

⁴³ For years, peaceful southern protesters suffered significant human rights abuses at the hands of police and other security forces. For background, see “In the Name of Unity: The Yemeni Government’s Brutal Response to the Southern Movement Protests”, Human Rights Watch, 15 December 2009.

⁴⁴ Hadramawt is Yemen’s largest governorate in terms of land mass. It has a small population, significant oil and fish wealth, a rich mercantile tradition and a particularly strong sense of regional identity.

⁴⁵ *Yemen Post*, 3 February 2011.

⁴⁶ Xinhua (in English), 18 February 2011.

⁴⁷ SABA online, 28 February 2011.

⁴⁸ SABA online, 28 February 2011.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Yemeni civil servant, Sanaa, February 2011.

⁵⁰ The exception, however, is in the south, where the regime has had virtually no success in rallying support.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Sanaa, 14 February 2011.

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, civil society activists, Sanaa, February 2011; independent political analyst, Sanaa, February 2011; University of Sanaa professor, Sanaa, February 2011.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Khalid al-Anisi, Sanaa, 17 February 2011.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

you never know when they will turn violent. This is unacceptable in a residential neighbourhood. So, I went out in support of the regime to block the protesters from passing through my area.⁵⁵

The GPC has deployed other tactics to undermine protesters' momentum. The day before the 3 February rallies, armed regime supporters occupied Tahrir Square, forcing the JMP to relocate at the last minute. Likewise, security officers and regime supporters blocked roads to deny protesters access to strategic arteries and symbolic venues, such as Tahrir Square and Taiz's central square. Since 3 February, Tahrir Square has been occupied by a curious combination of thousands of loyal tribesmen from the surrounding countryside and tents containing art exhibits and books. Pro-regime demonstrators carry signs condemning "sabotage" and "sedition" and labelling anti-regime activists foreign agents (*umalaa ajanib*).⁵⁶

3. Economic enticements

Saleh has displayed some of the adaptability and flexibility that have kept him in power for so long, even as their effectiveness appears to be waning. In the weeks following the Tunisian uprising, he issued several bread-and-butter promises designed to tamp down popular anger. He announced a \$47 monthly salary increase for all civil servants, an income tax reduction and forgiveness of university tuition for a specified group of graduates as well as a comprehensive tuition review. He also extended the abysmally inadequate welfare program of 2,000 riyals (approximately \$10) per month to a further 500,000 individuals and pledged to open the government's already bloated civil service to additional university graduates.⁵⁷ Finally, he ordered that soldiers not be charged for food and gas so that they "can perform their tasks and duties".⁵⁸

Such promises were risky. All were made with little concern for economic reality; in addition, although they might appease certain segments of the population, critics and

supporters alike expressed concern that failure to live up to them could trigger even more serious unrest in the future. A GPC member noted:

The president should not have promised all these benefits, because there is no way to pay for them. It was driven by political, not economic reality. How are they going to absorb new graduates into the central government at a time when they need to be reducing the civil service? The problem is that these promises do not come with a strategic vision.⁵⁹

A young civil servant echoed this frustration: "In general, I am happy with the president's speech to parliament, but he should not make unrealistic promises about jobs and the economy. In one of his speeches, he mentioned hiring 25 per cent of all graduates into the civil service. It is absolutely impossible".⁶⁰

4. Political compromise

The president also has suggested the possibility of significant political compromise and reform. In his 2 February speech to a special session of parliament and the Shura Council, he promised "not to be stubborn, whatever the circumstances ... [and to] make concessions in the interest of this nation". He offered four major concessions: to resume the national dialogue (stalled since October 2010); freeze a set of constitutional amendments unilaterally proposed by the GPC in early January (including the controversial elimination of presidential term limits); add individuals who turned eighteen after 2008 to the voters list; and pursue "no extension [of the presidential term limit], no [family] succession of power, and no resetting the [presidential term limit] clock". He then invited opposition parties to form a national unity government.⁶¹

For the opposition, the speech was both ambiguous and contradictory – and, accordingly, so too was its response. Its leaders called the proposal "positive" but quickly clarified that they were waiting for "next steps" as proof of the president's sincerity. On 13 February, they belatedly accepted the initiative but requested international oversight to ensure faithful implementation of any potential agreement. They also questioned the details. The JMP asked why Saleh had promised to freeze rather than with-

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, resident of al-Qaa neighbourhood, Sanaa, February 2011.

⁵⁶ The most deeply resented and politically explosive label arguably is "*burghuli*", a derogatory term describing those hailing from Taiz and adjacent areas. The slogan "Get out, *burghuli*" is used as in echo to the anti-regime demonstrators' "Get out, Ali". Regime supporters deny they have promoted such sentiments; a senior military officer strongly rejected the accusation: "This word would create discord (*fitna*) and could not have come from the government or the ruling party". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 20 February 2011. Whatever the truth, Yemenis strongly condemned what they viewed as a dangerous attempt to foster divisions, and protesters' fervour in Taiz increased perceptibly.

⁵⁷ 26 September.net, 2 February 2011.

⁵⁸ Quoted in 26 September.net, 31 January 2011.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, GPC member, Sanaa, February 2011.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2011. As an anonymous political economist put it, "people don't revolt from hunger or poverty; they revolt when feeling toyed with The promises made by Saleh are unrealistic considering the 27 per cent deficit in the national budget and that by July this year the state will be unable to pay for its employees' salaries, especially since Yemen's oil production has declined since last year". Quoted in *Yemen Times*, 2 February 2011.

⁶¹ Quoted in 26 September.net, 2 February 2011.

draw specific constitutional amendments and why he affirmed the right to freedom of expression only to then ask the opposition to cease protests – a request the opposition promptly ignored. The president's comparison between protesters and a looting mob likewise was viewed as ominous, as when he stated: "Every citizen has the right to defend his property in case someone insists on causing chaos and acting as a mobster".⁶²

The speech only temporarily calmed the political waters. Protests spread, and demands for Saleh and his family to leave escalated. On 20 February, the opposition announced that it would not accept dialogue as long as the regime was using violence against protesters and that it would encourage supporters to join the youth's anti-regime protests. In early March, the opposition, in coordination with the *ulama*, then submitted the above-mentioned five-point plan calling for a peaceful transition within the year. Thus far, Saleh has rejected it, insisting that he will remain president until the expiration of his constitutional term in 2013. Still, in principle he has agreed to the remaining four points: guarantees that peaceful protest can continue; prosecution of those responsible for violence; steps to implement his promise not to stand for a new presidential term or pass power to his son; and a broadly inclusive dialogue.⁶³

5. Outreach to critical social groups

Historically, the two main pillars of Saleh's rule have been the northern tribes and Islamists. With support eroding from both, he has spent considerable time reaching out to them. During the weeks following Mubarak's ouster, in particular, he held a series of meetings at the presidential palace, first with the sheikhs of the Hashid confederation and then with Bakil sheikhs as well. In large measure, these were designed to counteract Hussein and Hameed's efforts to undermine his tribal base of support. During closed-door discussions, the president reportedly promised greater financial support for the sheikhs; in an attempt to rally Zaydi tribal solidarity against what he also allegedly framed as a Shafei-led protest movement, he suggested he might be the "last Zaydi president".⁶⁴

The perception that Saleh is concentrating on solidifying tribal allegiances even at the cost of exacerbating sectarian divisions has alienated many Yemenis from areas such as Taiz, Ibb and Hodeida, as well as tribesmen from the northern highlands, all of whom claim they favour focusing on institution building rather than maintaining personal-

ised patronage networks. A Yemeni from Taiz strongly criticised the president's exploitation of the Zaydi-Shafi divide as a means of marshalling tribal support.⁶⁵ In a similar vein, a journalist summed up growing frustration with Saleh's priorities: "The political elite is deeply disturbed that Saleh still has a tribal mentality. Despite the new movements, he is focused on the tribes and the military. This goes against real dialogue and reform".⁶⁶

Importantly, such sentiments are not directed toward the president alone. Many youth activists have criticised Hussein and Hameed al-Ahmar on similar grounds. They argue that they are looking for a more fundamental democratic transformation and fear that the protest movement could devolve into a feud between the Saleh and al-Ahmar families.⁶⁷

As protests spread, Saleh also has reached out to religious scholars who enjoy considerable influence. As seen, results have been mixed. On 28 February, he met with the committee of religious scholars led by al-Zindani. During the meeting, Saleh reportedly said, "I'm ready to leave power but not through chaos. I'm fed up now after 32 years, but how to leave peacefully? You scholars should say how".⁶⁸ The clerics recommended that he set up a unity government charged with overseeing new parliamentary and presidential elections. They also advised him to remove corrupt individuals from his immediate entourage, almost certainly a reference to family members.⁶⁹ But dynamics soon began to shift. Zindani – unpopular with many civil society and youth activists but with a substantial following within the salafi community – denounced the president in no uncertain terms the day after the meeting.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, senior GPC member, Sanaa, March 2011.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, two political independents with access to presidential advisory circles, February 2011. On Zaydi-Shafei differences, see fn. 18 above.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2011.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2011.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Sanaa, February 2011.

⁶⁸ Nassar Arrabyee, "Yemen opposition refuse unity government and insist on 'day of rage'", 28 February 2011. <http://narrabyee-e.blogspot.com/>.

⁶⁹ Ibid. Later that same day, an opposition spokesman rejected the very idea of a coalition government.

III. THE NEXT EGYPT?

The speed with which protest movements have erupted in North Africa and the Middle East and the ways in which they have unfolded have been so unpredictable (and mostly unpredicted) that any speculation by definition is foolhardy. Objective measures – such as poverty or unemployment levels, the nature of the regime or access to modern forms of communication – have proved unsatisfactory forecasters, as more amorphous, psychological and emotional factors have played important parts. As an official from a country that has yet to be affected by the unrest put it, “it is true, Egypt was not like Tunisia. It also is true that Libya was not like Egypt. And, yes, we are not like Libya. Does that mean we should feel reassured?”⁷⁰

Still, it is useful to examine both the similarities and differences between Yemen and other cases, as these can help assess, if not the likely outcome of the protest movement, at least its shape and character as well as the regime’s probable responses.

Economic grievances. Even more than Tunisians or Egyptians, Yemenis suffer from poverty, unemployment and rampant corruption. The country has one of the highest malnutrition rates in the world, and an estimated 43 per cent of its population lives below the poverty line.⁷¹ Unemployment hovers at 35 per cent; among those between the ages of 18 and 28, it reaches 50 per cent.⁷² Transparency International ranks Yemen 146th out of 178 countries on its corruption perceptions index.⁷³

The gap between expectations and reality, as well as perceptions of blatant injustice and unfairness, have played important roles in translating discontent into protest. Inequalities between very rich and very poor in urban centres, particularly Sanaa and Aden, are more and more visible. Likewise, perception that the wealth of a few is the result of corruption and private plunder of public resources – as opposed to the product of hard work – has become prevalent. A civil servant said:

There is a growing gap now between those who are very rich and those who have nothing. What is worse, those who are very rich often do not work hard for

what they have. They get their wealth through corruption or nepotism. How is a man supposed to feel when he sees a young boy in a nice car with everything he wants, yet the man who works hard cannot get ahead and take care of his family?⁷⁴

Political context. Yemen’s regime is less repressive, more broadly inclusive and more flexible than were its Egyptian or Tunisian counterparts. Abdulghani al-Iryani, an independent political analyst, said:

We do not have the type of pervasive torture and abuse that existed in Egypt. Yes, there are abuses, but people have not been systematically humiliated in the same way and therefore do not have the same vendetta-driven hatred of the rulers.⁷⁵

While the regime undoubtedly has engaged in brutal repression in Saada and the south, Saleh’s general modus operandi has been to strive for compromise even as he co-opts and splits the opposition. He has ruled not so much through a strong central party or professional military-security apparatus as via a complex and flexible network of tribally- and regionally-based patronage relationships. The result has been the incorporation of large elite components into the system, providing them with important financial and social benefits and thus diminishing their incentive to pursue the kind of radical change that ultimately might jeopardise their own position.⁷⁶

This inclusive system of patronage traditionally has discouraged opposition parties – notably Islah – from directly challenging the president. Although, over time, the Islamist party has chosen a more oppositional stance, many in its top leadership have personal, financial and political ties to the president. In the words of a GPC member, “they want some reforms, yes, but not a 100 per cent change in the rules of the game”.⁷⁷ As seen, the JMP early on stressed it was not calling for Saleh’s ouster but rather for meaningful power-sharing and political reform, a caution that reflected both vested interests and fear of chaos. Even as protests grow, many in the JMP cling to the hope of negotiations through dialogue.

Moreover, although democratic institutions are not the main locus of political power, they exist, and the regime cannot afford to ignore them. They include a deeply flawed but functioning multi-party system, parliament and local

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, February 2011.

⁷¹ “Republic of Yemen: Background”, International Monetary Fund, 19 August 2010, at www.imf.org/external/np/country/notes/yemen.htm.

⁷² “Analysis: Yemen’s ‘youth bulge’ and unemployment – an explosive mix”, RefWorld, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 26 September 2010. www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,,YEM,4562d8cf2,4ca19b535,0.html.

⁷³ “Corruption Perceptions Index, 2010”, Transparency International.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2011.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 11 February 2011.

⁷⁶ A prominent civil servant and ruling party member estimated that roughly 70 to 80 per cent of leading social figures had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. That said, he noted that the proportion of coopted elites was significantly lower in the south. Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February, 2011.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, Islah member, Sanaa, February 2011.

governments. These provide significant outlets for political competition and the expression of dissent. The country also enjoys a relatively free press by regional standards, despite clear limitations when it comes to covering the war against the Huthis, the conflict in the south and, more recently, the protest movement.

Possibly most importantly, qat chews⁷⁸ provide citizens with a unique public forum for sharing and testing ideas as well as airing grievances. Yemenis often joke that they solve their country's problems over qat and then forget all that was said the next morning – the implication being that there is freedom to talk but not necessarily to act against the regime, much less change it. Even so, the ability to openly voice complaints traditionally has stymied the move from political demands to street politics. Many suggest that qat also might dampen people's eagerness to protest. During all major demonstrations organised in February by the JMP and the GPC, participants dispersed around one o'clock in the afternoon to buy and chew qat. In numerous interviews, Yemeni and foreign nationals agreed that the real measure of the protests' potency was the hour at which they ended – before or after lunch.⁷⁹

Elite cohesion. Although patronage networks still extend relatively broadly, over the past decade they gradually have narrowed to the president's sons and nephews, triggering resentment that could prompt a shift in elite alliances. Tensions have grown within the president's Sanhan tribe, particularly between the so-called old guard (such as the powerful commander of the north-west military division, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, in charge of the war against Huthi-led insurgents) and a younger generation. Likewise, powerful tribal figures – notably the sons of the late Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar – feel their inheritance has been hijacked by Saleh's family. More generally, traditionally coopted tribal, social and economic elites increasingly are feeling left out and could seek a redistribution of power. Already, Hameed and Hussein al-Ahmar have broken with the president; the resignation of thirteen GPC parliamentarians (including Hussein al-Ahmar) is another foreboding sign.

To date, however, although some reshuffling of political alliances and coalitions has begun, it is taking place along largely predictable lines, affecting Sheikh Abdullah's sons and their supporters in addition to a group of vocal GPC dissenters. But should the process spread beyond these circles and reach GPC elites more broadly, rapid regime change almost certainly would result. As a political analyst put it, "the GPC parliamentarians who so far have resigned always were critical, and so their decision was not a surprise. When we begin to see 20 to 30 resignations, we will have reached a significant tipping point".⁸⁰

Ongoing political conflicts and a heterogeneous opposition. Long before the Tunisian uprising, Yemen had been wracked by conflict both in Saada (against the Huthis)⁸¹ and the south (against the Hiraak). The driving factors behind these two struggles are distinct, complex and beyond the scope of this report. What matters is that over time the regime has been losing control over these regions; frustrated with the failure of both the regime and opposition parties to adequately address their grievances, citizens from these two large areas operate mostly outside the formal political arena.

As a result, some Yemenis argue that, far from following a trend set by others, their country was ahead of the curve. A GPC member observed: "People are saying that Yemen will be next, but really we were first. Look at what has already happened with the Huthis and the Southern Movement [Hiraak]. People are taking matters into their own hands, albeit in a different way".⁸²

At the same time, the regional schisms that are reflected in these disparate rebellions present a potential obstacle to the kind of genuine nationwide protest seen at play in Tunisia and Egypt. In the south, the movement best equipped to mobilise large numbers of protesters, the Hiraak, is promoting independence – an agenda around which other Yemenis hardly can be expected to rally.⁸³ As protests spread to the rest of the country, the JMP leadership has sought to forge a tactical alliance with the Hiraak by side-stepping the issue of separation over which they differ

⁷⁸ Qat is a mildly narcotic leaf generally chewed by Yemenis in a social setting. The qat chew is a central part of the country's social and political life. Chews are held immediately after lunch in homes, offices or even on the streets. They offer a venue for exchanging ideas, venting grievances and socialising. See, Daniel Martin Varisco, "On the Meaning of Chewing: The Significance of Qat (*Catha edulis*) in the Yemen Arab Republic", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, no. 21 (1986).

⁷⁹ Heather Therrian, director of the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute in Yemen, noted: "The real measure of protests is whether they last past lunch, when Yemenis usually chew qat. If they do, then there is reason to worry". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa 2 February 2011.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Abdulghani al-Iryani, Sanaa, 27 February 2011.

⁸¹ See Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, op. cit.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, GPC member, Sanaa, February 2011.

⁸³ That said, within each geographical area, the inspiration from uprisings in North Africa could be felt. Immediately following the Tunisian revolution, a Hiraak member explained: "Tunisia has had a huge impact on protests in the south. The people of the south have similar grievances as the people of Tunisia, but to an even greater degree. The greatest impact has been in Aden. People no longer are afraid of the security apparatus, and they are going to the streets daily". Crisis Group interview, Aden, January 2011.

sharply. The JMP chairman said, “now the plan is to focus on a unified strategy and only tackle the issue of unity at a later date”.⁸⁴ In like manner, other opposition activists reached out to the Hiraak, claiming some success: all agreed on the need to bring down the regime before addressing other political issues,⁸⁵ and, in the wake of Mubarak’s ouster, southern demonstrators cried out “Leave! Leave!” and “The people want the fall of the regime!”

Still, the issue of regional differences remains and will not be so easily overcome. Most Hiraak activists continue to call for separation and raise the flag of the former South Yemen republic. An activist explained: “We cannot coordinate with the northerners because our goal is southern independence. The JMP’s goal is unity. Theirs is an issue of rights. Ours is an issue of statehood”.⁸⁶ Others bitterly recalled that the people of Taiz, Ibb and Sanaa had never protested injustice and violence against citizens from the south. As an Hiraak supporter put it, “if the northern people are against the injustice that is happening in the south, why do they not take to the street and protest this? Why are they not saying anything about what is happening in Radfan?”⁸⁷ If the south really is part of the same country, and we are all brothers, then why are there tanks and soldiers in Radfan, Aden and other places?”⁸⁸

Implicit in these questions is the suggestion that, were northern protesters to acknowledge the south’s specific problems and aspirations (which they are only beginning to do), coordination might be possible. The Hiraak, a loose movement with disparate factions divided by geography among other factors, is split on this. Some leaders evince greater willingness than others to work closely with their northern counterparts; in Aden in particular, potential for coordination is greatest, given the city’s bigger geographical mix of people from both north and south.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, Dr Mohammad Abdulmalik al-Mutawakkil, Sanaa, February 2011.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Tawakkul Karman, Sanaa, February 2011.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, Aden, November 2011.

⁸⁷ Radfan is a Hiraak stronghold in Lahij that has been under virtual government siege since December 2010.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, Aden, January 2011.

⁸⁹ Aden residents with deep roots in the north tend to reject both separatism and the current status quo. Moreover, those who consider themselves true “Adenis” often are as sceptical of the so-called “Bedouin” Hiraak leaders from the countryside of Dala’a, Abyan and Lahj as they are of the north’s “tribal” regime. According to an Adeni activist, consensus around the need to focus on the regime’s fall is growing in the southern city: “The protests on 25 February were primarily led by students who were calling for the fall of the regime. During a march from Crater [a district in Aden] to Ma’allah [an adjoining district], a group from the Hiraak joined and raised the south Yemen flag. This triggered a dispute among protesters, and eventually all agreed to raise neither the south Yemen nor the

Elsewhere, there is far less consensus. Hiraak leaders have been watching closely as protests in the north challenge the regime and push for change; such pressure might well provide them with an opportunity to pursue their own secessionist cause. A southern politician explained, echoing the views of many of his colleagues: “The two sides may have a common goal in the regime’s fall, but ultimately the Hiraak has its own plan. The JMP with its calls for Saleh to ‘get out’ enjoys only limited influence in the south. Most people there want separation”.⁹⁰

The prospect of violence. Tangible fear of spiralling violence arguably is an important factor inhibiting nationwide protests. Nearly all the top military commanders are Saleh blood relatives; they can be expected to side with him were the situation to escalate. Tribal affiliations, regional differences and the widespread availability of weapons (particularly in the northern highlands) also could come into play. A tribesman from the Bakil confederation said:

Several things make the situation particularly dangerous. First, tribal revenge killings: If someone gets hurt or killed during a demonstration, it will not be over. It will spark a cycle of revenge. Secondly, we are all armed. It will not be like Tunisia or Egypt, where only one side is armed and where people are only hitting each other or the security forces only use tear gas. Reluctance to protest does not mean there is no real desire for change. People want genuine economic and political reform but they are afraid about the way to bring this about. If we were to follow the Egyptian or Tunisian examples, it would be a disaster.⁹¹

Expressing a similar view, a prominent southern politician noted: “I am sure that if the regime were to fall quickly, there would be chaos in the north. It would be worse than Somalia. The country would split between north and south, and there would be fighting between the northern tribes”.⁹² Specifically, analysts worry that a confrontation between the al-Ahmar brothers and the regime could ignite a large-scale tribal conflict, overshadowing current demands for democratic reform.

So far, the regime has adapted its response to fit these regional discrepancies. In the northern highlands, given the strength of armed tribes, it has primarily deployed sticks, clubs and tear gas to fight back protesters; in Taiz, Ibb, Aden and Hadramawt, by contrast, where fear of separa-

current Republic of Yemen flag. There are still divisions over the issue of independence. I am sure that separation is still in the minds of the people, but for now they are focused on getting rid of the regime”. Crisis Group interview, Yemeni Journalist, Aden, 25 February 2011.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2011.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2011.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2011.

tism (in the latter two cases) is greater and concern about counter-violence lesser, regime repression has been more severe and the use of live rounds more common. In the words of the above-mentioned southern politician, “the regime acts differently in Sanaa than it does in other parts of the country because of the relative balance between the regime and the tribes. If a tribesman is killed in Sanaa, it will cause a tribal war. In Taiz and Aden the regime can just kill people”.⁹³

Yet, even as fear of violence might inhibit protests, resort to violence is likely to intensify them. Since 11 February, clashes between pro- and anti-regime demonstrators have become progressively bloodier. This has exacerbated anger and resentment, particularly in sprawling urban areas. In the south, the regime’s brutal response to peaceful protests since 2006 seems to have only hardened protesters’ resolve, broadened the appeal of separation and led parts of the Hiraak to resort to violence as well. The use of force against Huthi rebels in Saada also has backfired; the rebels’ appeal is far greater now than it was in 2004, when the conflict began, as is their territorial control. Similarly, the regime’s tough reaction to youth-led protests in Sanaa, Taiz and Aden is boosting activism and encouraging the opposition to raise its demands. Should this continue, the opportunity for dialogue and reform could be lost.

Mobilisation capacity. It is too early to fully assess the means by which Tunisian and Egyptian protest movements mobilised and the relative impact of various communication tools.⁹⁴ Still, it is worth noting that, as of December 2010, only 9.96 per cent of Yemenis enjoyed internet access and only 0.74 per cent used Facebook. In comparison, internet usage in Tunisia was 34 per cent and Facebook penetration 17.55 per cent. In Egypt, it was 24.26 per cent and 5.49 per cent respectively.⁹⁵ Moreover, mobile data services are expensive in Yemen and thus primarily an elite privilege. In the northern highlands, tribal sheikhs and religious leaders have the greatest capacity to mobilise, yet their willingness to do so often is dampened by inclusion in patronage networks.

That said, some of these constraints appear to be changing. Youth activists are seeking to act independently of the older generation of leaders⁹⁶ and employing new modes of communication.⁹⁷ Moreover, tribesmen are playing an increasingly important role in anti-regime protests in areas such as Sanaa, Amran, Sadaa, and al-Baydah.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ For an initial study of the Egyptian case, see Crisis Group Report *Egypt Victorious?*, op. cit.

⁹⁵ See “Facebook Usage: Factors and Analysis”, *Arab Social Media Report*, Dubai School of Government (January 2011), p. 12, at: www.dsg.ae/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=fXqdJfBHRxg%3D&tabid=222.

⁹⁶ On 16 February, a group of 30 young activists met with the JMP leadership, asserting their determination to continue demonstrating despite the JMP’s decision to return to the national dialogue. Later in the month, the JMP responded positively to the request, and it is now supporting youth-led anti-regime protests.

⁹⁷ Sanaa protests’ activists have four or five active Facebook groups and Taiz at least two. According to Tawakkul Karman, Facebook is the activists’ primary tool to summon friends into the streets, followed by text messaging and face-to-face gatherings. Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 17 February 2011.

IV. IS REFORM STILL A VIABLE OPTION?

Regional events have ushered in an opportunity for compromise and reform that soon could be lost. Prior to the dramatic events in Tunisia and Egypt, political, economic and security conditions in Yemen were deteriorating rapidly. Elites in Sanaa were locked in a two-year battle over electoral and constitutional reforms. The Huthi conflict remained unresolved; the southern separatist movement was growing in strength; and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula⁹⁸ was expanding operations both inside and outside of the country. Most importantly, for the average Yemeni, economic conditions were dire and worsening. Behind the scenes, a fierce competition for power and wealth has been underway, especially among a young generation of tribal elites positioning themselves for the post-Saleh era.

In this sense, the current wave of regional protests could serve as a wake-up call, signalling the potential for mass protests to upend the existing power structure, impelling the regime to shift course and the country as a whole to forge a new social contract based on genuine power-sharing and accountable institutions. A ruling party member remarked: “Change must come. The question for our leadership is this: Do you want to lead [change] or do you want to be changed?”⁹⁹

The impact of Egypt and Tunisia can be felt in myriad ways: opening new debates, breaking taboos and forcing people to shift positions on several highly sensitive political topics – including the extension of Saleh’s presidential term and family succession, as well as the question of civilian control over the military. Prior to the current unrest, the overwhelming majority of GPC supporters and even many within the opposition backed Saleh’s bid to remain in office beyond 2013. Opposition leaders and civil society activists used to talk of the need to prepare for a “peaceful transfer of power”, but there was no firm position on when such a transition should take place.

That changed after Ben Ali’s and Mubarak’s hurried departures. Some called openly for an immediate end to Saleh’s rule. The JMP made “No to extension” its slogan, while GPC members once supportive of the president’s continuing tenure began to say he still had a chance to stay on but only if he were to implement far-reaching reform. Even within the GPC, harsher voices were heard. In the words of a party parliamentarian, “has he [Saleh] not had enough time [32 years]? Now he is at the height of his rule and is beginning to fall. He could still be a hero if he were to leave peacefully”.¹⁰⁰ The internal debate now appears to have shifted even more firmly against Saleh remaining past 2013, with the JMP opposition insisting that he depart within a year. According to a political analyst, “Saleh has now begun to accept that he has to go. The negotiation is now over whether he should implement the reforms needed for peaceful transfer of power within a year and then resign or, whether he should be allowed to finish his term [ending in 2013]”.¹⁰¹

The issue of patrilineal succession – once considered too sensitive to be broached in public – elicited even less debate. Yemen’s political class and protesters were united in rejecting the suggestion that the presidency pass to Saleh’s oldest son, Ahmed. According to the ruling party’s Abu-Lohm, “people want Saleh to move against regime cronies. They are frustrated with Saleh’s family and those around him. Inheritance [*tawreeth*] has become a moot point”.¹⁰² In his 2 February speech, Saleh bowed to reality, confirming he would not bequeath power to Ahmed. A GPC member pointed out that Gamal Mubarak’s fate had played a critical role, insofar as Saleh had modelled Yemeni’s succession on the Egyptian example, adding:

When the inheritance model came into vogue in the Arab world, it harmed Yemen. In order for the president to pave the way for his son and nephews, he had to get rid of certain obstacles, including important social and tribal figures. He removed and marginalised older technocrats and politicians who might have posed a challenge.¹⁰³

But the issue of inheritance goes beyond the son’s fate. Yemenis are rejecting the very notion that Saleh’s extended family is entitled to privileged access to power and wealth. As a result, many opposition members have begun publicly to demand that Saleh remove his relatives from military-security positions. Zayd al-Shami, deputy head of Islah’s parliamentary bloc, called on the president to:

⁹⁸ Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was formed in January 2009 out of a merger between al-Qaeda’s Yemeni and Saudi branches. It is headed by a Yemeni militant, Nassar al-Wuhayshi, and two deputies of Saudi origin, Sa’id al-Shihri and Mohammad al-Awfi, both of whom graduated from Saudi Arabia’s “rehabilitation” program before returning to violent jihad. AQAP is willing and able to launch attacks both inside and outside Yemen. It claimed responsibility for an attempt to blow up a Northwest Airlines flight over the U.S. on 25 December 2009 as well as for the attempt to send two parcel bombs to the U.S. in October 2010.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Mohammad Ali AbuLohom, Sanaa, 31 January 2011.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2011.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, Abdulghani al-Iryani, Sanaa, 5 March 2011.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Mohammad Ali AbuLohom, 31 January 2011.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2011.

discharge his relatives from the military institutions' leadership and relieve his son Ahmed from the Republican Guards command, as a practical interpretation of his solemn pledge about not resorting to hereditary power transfer.¹⁰⁴

Student and civil society demonstrators were blunter. In a 17 February demonstration in Sanaa, protesters held up a sign reading: "Get out Saleh, and your dogs as well". In this quickly shifting political environment, a number of Saleh's staunchest supporters started questioning the concept of inheritance and suggested that the president ought to remove some family members from the military-security apparatus.¹⁰⁵

These discussions paved the way to a debate on the nature of civil-military relations. In the past, the topic had been considered too sensitive to be raised meaningfully at the negotiating table; only rarely was it evoked at qat chews or social gatherings. Today, it is seriously deliberated among influential political actors and activists. Yasin Saeed Nuaman, general secretary of the Yemeni Socialist Party, said, "the Yemeni people need to change the rules of the game. In the past, they used to make changes to an old building. Now political reform must be more dramatic. If they are serious about reforms, they must talk about reforming the army".¹⁰⁶

Yemen lacks a professional military truly national in composition and reach. While parts of the military-security apparatus are more institutionalised and professional than others, on the whole it is highly fragmented and personalised. Powerful commanders from the president's family manage divisions more like private fiefdoms than components of a national institution. Although in theory civilians oversee the security apparatus, in practice civilian ministers are powerless on decision-making and budgetary affairs. Equally significant, the overwhelming majority of senior military-security posts are held by Saleh family members. If the next president is not from Saleh's clan, there almost certainly will be a power struggle between the military command and civilian leadership. As a civil society activist noted, if the JMP wins the presidency, "the president it puts forward would not have the loyalty of the armed forces. How then will they be able to impose their authority?" Yemen, he said, "must change the relationship between civilians and the army. We must build genuine institutions before Saleh leaves power".¹⁰⁷

In short, tremors from the Tunisian and Egyptian political earthquakes – and spreading protests in Yemen itself – have created an unprecedented opportunity for reformers. But time is of the essence. If far-reaching political reforms are not quickly implemented, the country runs the risk of experiencing violent civil strife. A prominent southern politician warned: "Yemenis need a plan to build a state, not just to bring down the regime. If they do not, and Saleh quickly departs, it could be worse than Somalia".¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in *Ilaf Yemen*, 9 February 2011.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interviews, GPC supporters, Sanaa, February 2011.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 6 February 2011.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2011.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2011.

V. CONCLUSION: A PATH FORWARD

A chance remains for political and social leaders to peacefully negotiate a more democratic and inclusive power-sharing arrangement capable of addressing popular grievances. Such an agreement would require the regime to make significant compromises, indeed far more than it so far has been willing to contemplate. Saleh has publicly promised not to extend his term, not to bequeath power to his son, to form a unity government and to enter into a sincere national dialogue with the opposition and other relevant actors to reform the political system. However significant these steps, large segments of the population are legitimately concerned that his offer of compromise, and his professions to bend to popular will, are mere survival tactics designed to allow him to ride out the storm. What is more, as protests have spread, so too have demands that he and his family immediately relinquish power.

Within this shifting environment, it is incumbent upon Yemen's political leaders to establish a clear path for implementing Saleh's promises and ensuring a peaceful transfer of power. The JMP – as the official opposition bloc – ruling party reformers, civil society activists and the international community all have critical roles to play. In particular, they must pressure the regime to implement tangible reforms, while at the same time, avoiding a dangerous descent toward widespread civil strife. Although popular demands for change must be addressed, Yemen's social and political structure means that any precipitous regime change risks prompting serious violence. This would have long-lasting negative implications for the feasibility of sustainable democratic and economic reforms.

A. THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Over time, the JMP has hardened its position. It retracted its earlier agreement to resume the national dialogue, saying that it will not negotiate while the violence continues. On 1 March, it pre-emptively rejected the immediate establishment of a national unity government. Then, in coordination with the *ulama*, it offered the president its plan for a peaceful transition of power within a year. Most recently, on 7 March, the group rejected Saleh's offer to attend a national conference¹⁰⁹ on 10 March, saying that it would not return to the negotiating table unless he agreed to step down.¹¹⁰ All these decisions are understandable; the or-

ganisation must take into consideration the views of its supporters and the widespread sympathy for anti-regime protests.¹¹¹ Moreover, the JMP's five-point plan, while not perfect, demonstrates that lines of communication remain open and that the opposition is willing to put forward constructive suggestions, as opposed to continually rejecting those offered by the other side.¹¹²

Moving forward, the JMP should make it a principal concern both to take on board popular demands and to acknowledge the need for a negotiated transition through an inclusive and clearly defined – in terms of both timelines and priorities – national dialogue. Given its current position of strength, and as it pushes its five-point plan, it should be open to compromise and continue to suggest ways to immediately resume the national dialogue. This simultaneously would evince responsiveness to constituent demands for immediate action and avert a political escalation. Renewed national dialogue, in turn, could set the stage for an acceptable coalition government.

At the dialogue itself, the JMP should see it as its mission to quickly lock in, implement and institutionalise the president's promises through legal and constitutional changes. It should offer a prioritised agenda and timeline. In so doing, it would be important to recognise the dangers – and limitations – of concentrating on replacing individuals (namely, Saleh and his son and close family members) rather than transforming institutions. While, as discussed, the issue of inheritance is central, to focus on it from the outset threatens to back the president into a corner, encouraging him to fight rather than compromise, and to distract from more lasting change.

The demand that he remove all family members from government is more akin to a punitive verdict than to a negotiated agreement involving both power-sharing and accountability. Eliminating certain individuals undoubtedly would strike a popular chord, but it would not address the underlying political problem, namely the absence of strong institutions. Making clear, public proposals for establishing civilian oversight over the military-security apparatus would go a long way toward addressing popular grievances and setting the stage for enduring reforms.

Focusing on individuals would also risk fuelling the destructive personal feud that opposes the Al-Ahmars of Sanhan (the president's family) to the Al-Ahmars of Hashid (the sons of the late Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar). Hameed al-Ahmar repeatedly and for some time has called for

¹⁰⁹ After consultations with top political and security advisers, Saleh called for a national conference to be held in Sanaa on 10 March. The opposition refused. But the state-run news agency reports that thousands will attend from across the political spectrum. Sunil K. Vaidya, "One Killed in Yemen", *Gulf News*, 8 March 2011.

¹¹⁰ *Gulf News*, 8 March 2011.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group phone interview, Islah member, Sanaa, 1 March 2010.

¹¹² GPC partisans and international actors often criticise the JMP for not putting forward clear, pro-active proposals in negotiations with the GPC.

Saleh's resignation; today, he is one of many demanding the wholesale removal of the president's family. Yet, his prominent position in the JMP's Preparatory Committee for National Dialogue long has represented an obstacle to genuine negotiations, as the president and his family suspect the dialogue is but another weapon in the al-Ahmar brothers' arsenal. Besides, many Yemenis consider the Al-Ahmar clans to be cut from the same cloth and see little benefit in exchanging one for another. The JMP would do well to distance itself (at least rhetorically) from this competition, which alienates opposition parties from potential supporters, especially reform-minded GPC members and southerners.

Flexibility and clarity likewise will be critical in future negotiations. At times, the JMP has frustrated both the GPC and international interlocutors by the lack of clarity in its demands and priorities. In preparing for the national dialogue, for example, it canvassed its grassroots constituency on the issue of political reform and then produced a document called the "Proposed Vision for National Salvation".¹¹³ The document was all-encompassing, covering peaceful transfer of power, corruption, rule of law, decentralisation, civilian-military relations, a shift to a parliamentary system and much more. Although its underlying theme was the need for power-sharing and accountability, it was more akin to a laundry-list without any sense of priority.¹¹⁴ A GPC representative recently complained that the five-point plan was ambiguous. He said:

One of the points was that the president should take steps to ensure follow through on his promise that he will not stand again for the presidency in 2013 and that he will not pass power to his son. In the next point, they [the JMP] require that the president complete steps for a peaceful transition of power within a year. Which one is it? Is the JMP asking the president

to fulfil his promises or are they asking him to leave in a year?¹¹⁵

JMP press statements clearly indicate that the coalition is asking him to leave in a year, but its unnecessarily ambiguous language is typical.

In addition to clearly defining demands and priorities, the JMP should recognise that a "winner takes all" attitude will not serve its or the country's interests in the long term. The movement should take advantage of its position of relative strength to embrace compromise; the alternative could be to create a highly flammable political environment.

Finally, the JMP ought to develop a strategy to help hold the regime accountable for its commitments. Among ideas that have been mooted are: agreeing with the regime on a specific timeline for the transition; resuming the national dialogue but with international monitoring; launching an opposition media campaign; and continuing peaceful protests. It likely will take all of these to make sure that a genuine project for power-sharing and democratisation is initiated before the political situation deteriorates further.

At this stage, developing a unified posture on how to maintain popular mobilisation is of particular importance. The JMP has several options. First, it could deploy popular protests as a tool to move the national dialogue forward whenever it stalls or in order to hold the president accountable for commitments made during negotiations. However, this would risk alienating large portions of Islah's constituency, particularly among the youth, who are dedicated to continued – as opposed to periodic – protests in pursuit of regime removal. It also could further damage the JMP's credibility, confirming suspicions that it is part of the system rather than being truly devoted to changing it.

A second option – holding regular protests in favour of Saleh's ouster – would bolster youth support but could antagonise citizens worried about chaos. Moreover, it almost certainly would close the door to dialogue, as the goal would shift from a coordinated and peaceful transfer of power to toppling the regime.

For the JMP to let civil society groups take the lead in organising protests and itself officially participate only on a case-by-case basis, depending on a given rally's goal, might best serve the movement's – and the nation's – interests. It would allow the JMP to focus on dialogue even as civil society continued to activate the street, a division of labour that could help the JMP shore up its grassroots support without directly antagonising the regime.

¹¹³ "Proposed Vision for National Salvation", Preparatory Committee for National Dialogue, General Secretariat, Republic of Yemen, Sanaa, (2010). For more information about this document, see, www.dialogue-ye.com.

¹¹⁴ The lack of clear priorities in large part reflects the diversity of groups operating under the JMP's umbrella – they include the largest Sunni Islamist party, two small Zaydi parties, the Nasserist party and the former socialist party of south Yemen. Complicating matters, the JMP makes decisions unanimously, giving disproportionate weight to parties with little popular support that have the ability to thwart negotiations. A GPC parliamentarian said in October, "the biggest challenge to negotiation with the JMP is the coalition's own internal divisions, particularly between Islah and the YSP. The two parties have different red-lines and priorities. The YSP wants federalism, while Islah does not. Islah is more willing to accept elections on schedule [parliamentary elections were scheduled for April but will certainly be delayed], while the YSP is not". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, October 2010.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2010.

Finally, the opposition should continue and even redouble its efforts to work with parts of the Hiraak and the Huthis who are willing to seek peaceful political change. Unifying these groups under a slogan short of immediate regime change will be near impossible in the short-term. As such, it is best if the JMP allow the youth and civil society activists to take the lead in coordinating peaceful protests. However, if the opposition were able to extract tangible concessions from the regime that help halt violence against protestors, ensure prosecution of those suspected of involvement and begin a process of real power-sharing, it would be better placed to draw the Huthis and possibly parts of the Hiraak back into the formal political system.

B. REFORMERS IN THE GENERAL PEOPLE'S CONGRESS

Genuine reform almost certainly will fail if pressure comes exclusively from the JMP. Aside from *Islah* and, to a far lesser extent, the Yemen Socialist Party, none of the parties represented in the JMP enjoy a popular base. In contrast, the GPC houses the majority of influential sheikhs, religious leaders, intellectuals and technocrats. An overwhelming majority of its members are frustrated with the centralisation of power and corruption, even as they might have benefited substantially from it. For those who want to avoid abrupt regime change, now is the time to bring about necessary reforms.

As an initial matter, GPC members should, like their JMP counterparts, quickly set an agenda and timeframe for a national dialogue and peaceful transfer of power. If they are truly committed to devising new power-sharing arrangements, they will need to take the dialogue process seriously by producing substantive proposals on sensitive issues like nepotism and civilian control of the military. They also should work with civil society groups and the media to press the regime to follow through on its promises.

Beyond that, reform-minded GPC members should consider various options to gain greater effectiveness. One would be to split off and form a new party. This was first discussed internally in 2005, but without result; today the debate has been revived in many circles. Eleven of the recently resigned GPC parliamentarians announced the formation of a new parliamentary bloc, the "Free Deputies".¹¹⁶ This could be the beginning of a more serious effort to create a new party, although defections to date largely have been from supporters of the al-Ahmar brothers and therefore do not represent a broad social spectrum. If reformers were to align with popular JMP leaders to form a new party combining sheikhs, technocrats and intellectuals, as well as individuals from different regions who

share a desire for a more institutionalised political system, they could draw significant support and mobilise pressure to achieve needed changes.

Alternatively, the GPC could reform itself. Currently, it behaves less as a party, more as a loose coalition of divergent groups bound together by a patronage system. It has neither guiding ideology, nor political platform nor substantive internal policy debates. It is mobilised prior to each election cycle and then quickly demobilised once the outcome is secured. Equally important, the GPC rarely produces policy initiatives or engages with constituents.

Becoming a genuine political party would require activating membership and holding regular meetings at all levels. During election cycles, the GPC undertakes a sophisticated, locally focused effort to canvass constituents and select candidates. That structure could be employed more consistently to engage citizens on reform priorities, serving to inform both the national dialogue and government initiatives. Giving urban youth a voice and, more crucially, authority within the party could help energise policy-making and debate within the GPC and in the government, while defusing the threat of street violence.

C. THE PRESIDENT AND HIS FAMILY

Serious questions surround Saleh's ability to remain in office, but there is still an opportunity for a peaceful, negotiated transition. This would require far-reaching changes, which will not be easy. The president can count on scant support from his close allies to implement reform, given how deeply embedded they are in the status quo and existing networks of corruption. By the same token, the potential for backing actors outside that circle is limited, because of the degree to which he has alienated political allies and the general public.¹¹⁷

Still, one ought not underestimate the reservoir of support he retains among northern highland tribes and Islamist groups; more importantly, he still possesses what one might call negative legitimacy – in other words, the legitimacy that springs from the absence of a clear alternative. Although the window is fast closing, he potentially could capitalise on the threat of continued popular mobilisation to strike a new bargain inside ruling circles. As an activist put it, he has a chance to "get rid of those around him who are corrupt, dismiss or transfer certain military officers from in his own family and reconcile with the Yemeni

¹¹⁶ *Saudi Gazette*, 6 March 2011.

¹¹⁷ Dr Mohammed Mutawakkil, the current JMP chairman, explained: "President Saleh has established a house on the foundations of corruption. If you move one stone, this house will collapse. If he jumps out of his circle of close regime supporters, he will be exposed to the people". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 4 February 2011.

people”.¹¹⁸ In so doing, he likely would benefit from strong international support and could be remembered as the president who led a peaceful transition of power rather than one who led the country to civil war and, perhaps, breakup.

For Saleh, serious reform would mean above all curbing the power and privileges enjoyed by the Sanhan clan’s top brass, notably close family members who are widely associated with corruption and have become targets of the public’s ire. Family members will have to understand the need to significantly curb corruption and transfer authority to civilian institutions as a condition for their longer-term participation in political life. The alternative is for them to seek to cling to power at all costs, risk losing everything in the process and, most importantly, severely damage the country.

It would mean, too, building trust with the JMP but also, more importantly, with the people. Each day that passes without his promises being implemented bolsters support for the grassroots movement that aims to remove him and his family from power. Any confidence-building measures would have to be quickly achievable, measurable, part of a longer-term strategy and directed toward four core issues: political and military-security reform, the economy (specifically, anti-corruption measures), and addressing demands from both the Huthis and southerners.

Putting in place a legal framework to ensure he will not run again in 2013 and possibly voluntarily removing some family members from senior military-security positions, or at least proposing practical steps to ensure civilian oversight of the military, are minimum – and perhaps insufficient – requirements for reform at this point. As an additional gesture, Saleh could consider stepping down as GPC leader, providing the party with the opportunity to develop policies independent of the president and prepare itself to compete in a post-Saleh era. Halting inflammatory rhetoric against the opposition, protesters, the Huthis and the Hiraak is another requirement if the goal is to pave the way for peaceful negotiations and compromise.¹¹⁹

Such steps would help create an environment more conducive to compromise and a meaningful national dialogue capable of tackling institutional reforms and the critically important conflicts with the Huthis and southern separatists. Perhaps most importantly, the regime must immediately end its resort to violence and protect citizens’ right to peaceful protest throughout the country.

D. THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Through the Friends of Yemen, international actors have the ability to help Yemen navigate its difficult transition.¹²⁰ Although the Friends need not seek to play a mediating role in the national dialogue, despite a JMP request to that effect, they should be willing to serve as observers, thereby helping to compensate for the lack of inter-party trust. Saudi Arabia in particular has an important part to play in encouraging a meaningful national dialogue. Its long-standing policy of engagement through individual sheikhs, particularly the Al-Ahmar family, has had the damaging effect of perpetuating intra-elite conflict and complicating the search for compromise. Instead, it should channel its efforts by taking on a stronger leadership role within the Friends of Yemen process.

The international community also should better ensure that its engagement and assistance do not skew the political playing field against reform-minded Yemenis. This is particularly relevant to the U.S. and others assisting the country’s counter-terrorism efforts. While Washington has increased both its economic and military assistance in recent years, focus on security matters continues to far outweigh attention to economic and political needs.¹²¹ Priority should be shifted to political and economic development, with funds flowing, insofar as possible, directly to local civil society and development organisations. Equally important, given growing levels of violence, particularly in the south of the country, donors providing military-security assistance should make every effort to ensure that this assistance is not being used to suppress domestic opposition and protest.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2011.

¹¹⁹ Both the regime and the opposition routinely demonise each other in the media and public statements. Saleh and regime supporters typically accuse the Huthis and others who are Zaydi religious scholars (*sayyids*, i.e., descendents of the Prophet Mohammad) of being Iranian spies, twelver Shiites who seek a return to religious rule. The regime also commonly labels critical southerners as “secessionists”, regardless of their position on independence. During the recent wave of protests, Saleh repeatedly lashed out at demonstrators, associating them with a lawless mob and with a U.S.-Israeli plot to disrupt the Middle East. In a speech to the armed services on 27 February, he vowed to defend his rule “with every last drop of blood”, accusing op-

ponents of “a conspiracy against Yemen’s unity and territorial integrity”. Quoted in Agence France-Presse, 28 February 2011.

¹²⁰ The UK government launched the Friends of Yemen group in January of 2010 in an effort to coordinate international efforts to support Yemen in achieving its reform and development goals. Member states and organisations include countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, member nations of the G8, as well as representatives from the UN, the EU, the Arab League, the IMF and the World Bank. For more information, see www.fco.gov.uk/en/global-issues/conflict-prevention/mena/yemen.

¹²¹ For the latest statistics on U.S. assistance, see: Jeremy Sharp, “Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations,” Congressional Research Service, 3 February 2011, p. 31-35.

Finally, the U.S. and others must reach out more to civil society and opposition groups. So far, engagement has been deeply weighted in favour of the regime; international and notably U.S. military and security assistance inevitably is interpreted as support for the status quo. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's 11 January visit was a first, positive step that helped build relations with activists and opposition leaders. At this point in particular, it is critical for members of the international community to meet opposition leaders, including those in the Hiraak, who are organising peaceful protests. They must also continue to make clear and repeated public statements condemning the use of violence against civilian protesters.

Sanaa/Brussels, 10 March 2011

APPENDIX A

MAP OF YEMEN



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Department of Peacekeeping Operations
 Cartographic Section