

Yemen: an opposition of many voices

Author : **Franck MERMIER**

Translator : **Valérie HARTWICH**

The excuse of Al-Qaida

In 2011, Ali Abdallah Saleh will celebrate thirty three years as head of the Yemeni state. Since 1990, following the unification of Yemen, his power has extended to the southern provinces, which, after the British troops left in 1967, were incorporated into the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, governed by a Socialist regime allied to the USSR. The Unity Constitution, adopted by referendum in 1991, provided for a multiparty system, organized an electoral system and press freedom. For those reasons, unlike its neighbors, Yemen, sole republic in the Arabic peninsula, saw a rich civil society and political life flourish thanks to its regional distinctive characteristics, its diverse historical customs and its ideological influences spanning from Marxism to Islamism, in their numerous variations. This is due to the necessary coexistence of the two former unique parties, the General People's Congress in the North and the Socialist Party in the South, which shared power between 1990 and 1994, but also to the powerful Yemenite Congregation for Reform, an Islamist party long linked to Saleh's regime. To this political vibrancy one must add another distinctive, this one negative, feature of Yemen, which makes it the poorest country in the peninsula, namely that its limited oil and gas resources constitute the bulk of the state's budget, with a population exceeding 23 million inhabitants and an unemployment rate amongst young people seemingly in the region of 30% (according to the World Bank).

Since 2000 and the terrorist attack against the US warship USS Cole in the gulf of Aden, the world media has taken little interest in Yemen aside from through the prism of Al-Qaida. The Yemeni origins of the Bin Laden family, who originates from the region of the Hadramaout, the Yemeni nationality of numerous Guantanamo prisoners and the subsequent terror attacks against tourists and Western embassies in the country have only strengthened this phenomenon. Yemen is currently seen as a haven for Al-Qaida, alongside Somalia, Afghanistan and the tribal regions of Pakistan, even more so since the organization of Al-Qaida for the Arabic peninsula reformed from Yemen in 2009. The regime in Sanaa took advantage of the "war on terror" to violently repress all opposition: the Zaydite rebels in the North, but also the Southern secessionist movement, of which a large fringe condemns the use of weapons in their struggle, but equally opposition parties or activists of "civil society" fighting against corruption, generalized prebends, the shrinking of the democratic space, discretionary imprisonments and infringements on press freedom. The latter are common. Backed by Western powers, the regime of president Saleh often depicts its opposition as the devil outlawing them, whether they are from the North or the South, and 'unmasking' their links to Al-Qaida. In the process, it is destabilizing the country and the regime by abusing and grossly exaggerating a danger, leading Western countries to turn a blind eye to the

infringements to democratic liberties and human rights in Yemen. This is a litany that has only been confirmed by the protest movements in Arab countries!

The rise of numerous oppositions

Today the regime in Sanaa faces increased tensions, in the Northern as well as in the Southern regions, which, up to 1990, constituted the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, with Aden as its capital. These conflicts are far more menacing to Saleh's regime than Al-Qaida in Yemen. Since 2004, the bloody conflict with the Zaydite rebellion led by the supporters of al-Houthi has caused the death of thousands of victims and the forced displacement of at least 100 000 inhabitants of the Northern regions of Yemen. In September 2009, war was declared and even spilled over into Saudi territory, leading to the intervention of the Saudi army. Episodically, president Saleh announces the end of the war concluding on a terrible defeat for the Zaydite rebels, before the latter are even able to deny this by launching new attacks against Saada, the religious bastion of Zaydism¹, where the founder of the Zaydite imamate, who governed Yemen from 897 to 1962, is buried.

In May 2009, the former president of South Yemen, Ali Salem Al-Bid came out of his silence when he left Yemen for Austria, denouncing the Unity Agreement which he himself signed in 1990. Though his portrait and the Southern flag are increasingly seen at the frequent protests organized in the Southern regions, the "Southern movement", as it coined itself, started in the Noughties. Since 1994, the domination of the regime in Sanaa over the Southern provinces of Yemen has amongst other things translated into the nomination of numerous senior civil servants of Northern origins within local authorities and security services, but also into the despoliation of formerly nationalized land. After the defeat of Southern leaders in 1994, nationalized land was given to loyal followers of the regime in Sanaa, amongst which numerous tribal sheiks, senior officers and wheeler-dealers. Thousands of soldiers and civil servants were forced to retire, which only accentuated the social and economic marginalization of certain Southern regions, such as Aden, where numerous families rely on the revenues of civil servants. These «pensioners», organized in regional committees, have spearheaded the protests in the Southern regions, multiplying *sit-ins* and protests, mainly in Aden, Dhale', Yafi', Radfan, Abyan, where former soldiers are predominant.

After the 2005 riots against price increases, with a toll of over a dozen dead, the January and February 2011 demonstrations inspired by Tunisia and Egypt took on a sharper political tone, with slogans calling for a change of regime. On February 2nd 2011 president Saleh declared he wasn't running for a third term in 2013, that he opposed a hereditary transmission of power and decided on the postponing of the legislative elections planned for April 2011. He also announced social measures such as the increase of civil servants' salaries and declared that his office was from now on open to citizens expressing their demands, namely those of the youth. The parliamentary opposition, under which one finds the Yemenite Congregation for Reform headed by Hamid Al-Ahmar (son of the Hâchid's sheik and president of the Abdallah Al-Ahmar parliament, deceased in 2007), the Yemenite Socialist Party, and Nasserian and Zaydite parties, has won a first battle with these concession, which one could also understand as moves to gain time. The president has resorted to such tricks in the past. Had he not announced that he would not be a candidate in the 2006 presidential elections before

making a u-turn, “hailed” by the “spontaneous” demonstrations in support for his candidacy? It was to answer the “people's call” that he “sacrificed” himself once more for the good of the nation. Will he be able to resort to such well-worn scheming, which nonetheless made it possible for him to remain in power for three decades? – by co-opting his main rivals or the potentially dangerous forces in the arcades of power, Islamists, tribal sheiks, Socialists between 1990 and 1994, Southerners having joined forces after that date, whilst dividing tribal groups and creating a parallel fake opposition won over to the regime.

This type of government based on vote catching (access to State resources, to economic opportunities...) creates a political system combining an extreme centralization of power and a sprinkling of political control and repressive power at the local level. The clamping down of the armed forces and the police runs parallel to the multiplication of petty leaders and their own circles. For example, President Ali Abdallah Saleh relies on his kinship and the men of his tribe, that of Sanhân to control the key positions of the military and security structures. His eldest son Ahmad, who came across as his designed successor, is the head of the Republican Guards, another son Khaled leads an infantry division stationed in the region of Sanaa, his nephews Ammar, Yahya and Tareq are respectively heads of National security, Central Security and the Presidential Guard, whilst the half-brother of president Mohammed Saleh al-Ahmar is leader of the Air Force and Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, originally from the same village as Saleh, is commander of the 1st tank regiment...In the regions, it is namely through tribal leaders and local heads of the General People's Congress that another layer of security superimposes itself on top of the already powerfully present octopus-like state security structures.

Convergences or fragmentation of the opposition

The demonstrations in Sanaa, Taez, Hodeïda, Aden and other regions in the country express the same desire for change, the same democratic aspiration and a feeling of exasperation in relation to a worn-out and predatory regime. But does that mean that their demands are the same? In the Southern provinces, a nostalgia for the Southern Yemenite state is ripe and sometimes combines with a hostility towards all things “Northern”, as if in the North, and namely in the Higher Plains region all of Yemen's evils were to be found. In the Northern part of the country, it is in a unitary context that the demands expressed by an increasingly urban youth whose future is less and less certain are expressed. The Yemenite Congregation for Reform, whose tribal base is the region of the Higher Plains, is the most powerful party in the Common Forum to have recognized the legitimacy of formulating the « Southern question ». Its attitude is crucial to the running of events, because it could decide for or against strengthening its oppositional attitude towards the regime, whose main element, the Yemenite Congregation for Reform, has been an integral part from several decades.

The coalescence of the opposition to the Saleh regime is a major risk for its perpetuation, but the shadow of civil war probably explains why both sides, Common Forum or ruling party, have so far not thrown all their weight in the battle and continue to prefer the option of dialogue, regardless of all considerations. However, the breadth of the repression of the demonstrations with several dead in Sanaa, Taez and Aden namely, masks the disparities in terms of the methods used: use of mercenaries partial to the regime in the North, or of the security forces in the South, with live bullets. One may wonder whether the peaceful character of the mobilization and this difference in

treatment will hold for long. As Hamid Al-Ahmar publicly declared in a televised speech in January 2011: « if president Saleh wishes to govern with a club (*sâmil*) then each will bring out his own ».

Notes

¹Zaydism is a branch of Shia Islam. It was named after Imam Zayd b. 'Alî Zayn al-'Âbidîn (deceased 740), descendant of 'Alî b. Abî Tâlib. It is connected to Shia Islam, but stipulates that only the descendants of Fâtima, one of 'Alî's wives, through his sons Hasan et Husayn may pretend to achieve imamate, the spiritual and temporal guidance of the Muslim community.