

A revolution within the revolution: the Houthi movement and the new political dynamics in Yemen

Ramón Blecua | Spanish diplomat currently with the European External Action Service (EEAS).

Also available the Spanish version: **Una revolución en la revolución: los Houthi y las nuevas relaciones de poder en Yemen**¹

Theme

The political transition in Yemen has entered a critical stage after the Houthi movement's takeover of Sana'a and President Hadi's flight to Aden. The polarisation of the political forces reflects the growing tensions in the region and could end in an open military conflict.

Summary

The delicate balance of Yemen's political transition, supported by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative, is in danger of breaking up as a result of two opposing forces: an alternative political project represented by Ansar Allah, based on the country's tribal and religious traditions, and the Jihadi utopia of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the self-declared Islamic State (Daesh). The two competing centres of power in Sana'a and Aden are acting as poles for the regional tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran and their respective allies. The risk of a military escalation that might suck in the countries of the region, in the context of an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in Yemen, requires the International Community's urgent attention.

Analysis

The political crisis in Yemen and its international repercussions

The rise of Ansar Allah as Yemen's most powerful force has sent unprecedented shockwaves throughout the region. Its recent Constitutional Declaration has been considered a *de facto* military coup and triggered some dramatic developments, such as the closing of most Western and Arab embassies in Sana'a. Saudi and Gulf

¹

http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/web/rielcano_es/contenido?WC_M_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/ari21-2015-blecua-revolucion-en-revolucion-houthi-y-nuevas-relaciones-de-poder-en-yemen

officials have accused Iran of being behind this 'Shia rebel group' that has masterminded a coup to overthrow the legitimate Government as part of a regional subversive strategy. Far from refuting the allegations, Iranian sources close to the Revolutionary Guards expressed their satisfaction at their allies' success and welcomed the new member of the 'axis of resistance'. Although some channels of communication between Riyadh and Tehran have been active, including Omani mediation efforts, little progress has been reported.

The advance of the Houthi militias on Sana'a last September and their effective control over the capital's remaining power centres in January seem to be the result of their capacity to exploit the power vacuum created by President Hadi's inability to exert effective governance, more than a plan to topple the Government. Many in and outside Yemen also believe that former President Ali Abdullah Saleh was behind the intrigue that opened the gates of Sana'a to them, in a bid to derail the transition and pave the way for his return to power.

The 2011 revolution allowed Ansar Allah to influence the renegotiation of the country's future political regime, a process from which they had until then been excluded. The clash between the traditional political elite's interests and the new aspirations of the growing disenfranchised sectors of Yemeni society has given rise to the circumstances necessary for the movement to become the leading force in the national political process. The dramatic events since the resignation of President Hadi and the technocratic government on 22 January have heightened the fears of a reversal of the democratic gains of the past two years. The radicalisation of the Houthi movement's discourse and its more aggressive stance towards whoever it considered an opponent has run parallel to its progressive international isolation. Negotiations now underway seem to be a long way from achieving any agreement and the prospect of a broad political consensus seems increasingly unlikely, while the United Nations Special Adviser on Yemen, Jamal Benomar, has warned that the country stands on the brink of Civil War.

President Hadi's recent flight to Aden has increased the political tensions, having claimed that all decisions taken since September should be considered null and void as they were taken under duress. The country's *de facto* division between the Houthi-controlled areas and the territory recognising President Hadi's authority could advance the cause of the Southern secessionists more effectively than their political mobilisation has so far achieved. The polarisation of both sides has been underlined by the recent appointment by President Hadi of Brigadier Thabit Jawas as commander of the Special Security Forces, an officer considered responsible for killing Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi. Both sides seem to be preparing for a military showdown that would define the new balance of power, a development that could provoke the country's Libyanisation. Recent clashes in Aden for control of the airport between pro Saleh forces and Houthi militias, on one side, and forces loyal to President Hadi, on the other, are a sign of the ongoing escalation. The Houthi

Supreme Revolutionary Committee has declared a general mobilisation and the advance on Taiz makes an imminent move on Aden all the more likely.

Ansar Allah and the Zaydi revival

The Houthi movement has deep roots in Yemeni history, although the Iranian revolution had an important effect on Hussein al-Houthi. President Saleh, himself a Zaydi, like 35% of Yemenis, always considered the Hashemite elite a threat to his leadership and political legitimacy. He opposed the Houthi's mobilisation to restore Zaydi traditions, a jurisprudential school very close to the Sunni Shafi'i, except for the hereditary political role played by the Prophet's family. In order to divide the Northern tribes, he supported Wahhabi Salafists. Finally, he launched a series of bloody campaigns against the Houthi and their tribal allies with the support of the US and Saudi Arabia, accusing the group of being an instrument of Iranian policy and a threat to both the State's Republican nature and regional security.

The conflict raged for six years, causing considerable destruction in the Sa'ada region, with thousands of casualties and over 150,000 refugees resulting from action by the army, led by General Ali Mohsen, and a loosely-bound organisation of part-time fighters. Iranian support at this stage seems to have been limited, mainly consisting of training through Hezbollah, besides some small-arms deliveries. Despite increasing US support and the Saudi's direct implication in the conflict in 2009, the Houthi managed to resist the attacks and took advantage of the mistrust between Ali Mohsen and Saleh. After 2011, with the Army divided into opposing factions, the Houthi managed to conquer Amran and advance towards Sana'a. The group, which started calling itself the Believing Youth, evolved into an organised political movement and a disciplined militia modelled on Hezbollah. Its social programmes and the perception of being untainted by the Saleh regime's pervasive corruption made it increasingly popular, even beyond its traditional stronghold. When the revolution started in 2011, the Houthi found a fertile ground for their message of national independence and social justice. Despite the GCC Initiative's intention of excluding them from the power-sharing agreements, the Houthi managed to expand their following and break their political marginalisation.

Articulated around the al-Houthi, an extended clan that is at the centre of a network of alliances between influential tribal sheikhs and prominent Hashemite families, Ansar Allah relies heavily on family connections at the leadership level. The patriarch, Badr el Din al-Houthi was a renowned Islamic scholar that bridged several generations to the former Zaydi Imamate, a powerful source of political and religious legitimacy. Aged barely 27, Abdelmalik al-Houthi replaced his brother Hussein as the movement's leader after Saleh's forces killed the latter. He is a charismatic leader and despite his lack of experience and relative isolation in Sa'ada, he has proved to have a keen political acumen. The organisation has evolved from an organic alliance of multifarious elements in a tribal environment into an effective military and political organisation bonded together by loyalty to the Sayyed, the title by which they address al-Houthi, and by social, religious and tribal relationships.

The considerable autonomy of the different units and field commanders has the advantage of fostering initiative and flexibility but at the same time the drawback of limiting the direct control over strategy and allowing local leaders to operate at cross purposes. The internal dissensions between the so-called political and military wings and territorial expansion since June 2014 are also challenges for the movement's future development as a national organisation. The influence of the military commanders Abdallah Yahia al-Hakim and his brother Abdelhalik suggests that the military wing's power is consolidating, a process that was precipitated in 2014 by the assassination of certain of the movement's prominent political figures, the last one being the respected journalist and human rights defender al Khaiwani, killed on 17 March.

A revolution within the revolution

The revolution that ended the rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh resulted in a negotiated deal between the regime's various factions. The original plan, proposed by the GCC and backed by the International Community, was designed to guarantee the role of existing political elites in an orderly transition, excluding Ansar Allah from the power-sharing agreements. Saleh himself retained immunity from prosecution and retained his enormous fortune while continuing to exert his influence in the new regime through a wide network of supporters. His former Vice-president, Abderabbo Mansur Hadi, was elected by consensus the new President, charged with the responsibility of leading the country through a democratic transition. Between 2012 and 2014 Yemen underwent one of the most extraordinary political experiments in the region, with a National Dialogue Conference under UN stewardship and the active involvement of the G10 as the representative of the International Community, in which non-traditional political actors, such as young activists and women's organisations had a voice. When the new Constitution began to be drafted following the adoption of the conclusions of the National Dialogue, the conflicting agendas of the different parties became more acute. Suddenly, in September 2014, the Houthi emerged as the leading political force in Yemen, demanding a new power arrangement, as hastily recognised by the International Community in the Peace and National Partnership Agreement of 21 September brokered by the United Nations Special Adviser on Yemen.

The unexpected arrival of the Houthi at centre stage of Yemen's political scene had more to do with infighting in the traditional political elite than to a premeditated plan by their leader. President Hadi tried to use his predecessor's formula to limit the influence of the former strongmen of the Saleh regime, General Ali Mohsen and the members of the al-Ahmar clan, while ex-president Saleh also had an axe to grind for the betrayal of his former associates. Paradoxically, it was the Saudis who contributed to this Shakespearean drama when they decided to undermine the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen as part of their regional campaign against the challenge of the republican version of political Islam. All were surprised by the result. The agitation against the Government's decision to cut fuel subsidies, led by Ansar Allah, suddenly turned into a political earthquake when key military

units refused to fight the Houthi popular committees or actually cooperated with them in their take-over of the capital. The Islah Party (the Muslim Brotherhood's Yemeni franchise) and the al-Ahmar clan, their main supporters, were routed by the Houthi onslaught, leaving no organised force to oppose them. The take-over of Sana'a is the beginning of what al-Houthi has called a new phase of the national revolution, originating in the protests of 2011 and directed at foiling the intrigues of the traditional political forces supported by foreign powers to hijack the political process.

A Houthi agenda for Yemen

The initial Houthi objective of defending the Zaydi tradition and the political role of the Hashemite elite evolved into the consolidation of a militant organisation that aimed to translate their military success into political influence. Ansar Allah's two main proposals became fighting corruption and rejecting foreign interference. Presenting themselves as the champions of Yemen's national independence and political regeneration allowed them to quickly expand their support beyond their traditional tribal base. Despite being excluded from the GCC Initiative, Houthi representatives had been active in the National Dialogue and the political process, despite a certain ambiguity about the more progressive elements of the recommendations.

Their unexpected success in taking control of the capital has thrown them into a new political dynamic, taking up responsibilities in security and administration. Their interference with the usual work of State institutions, inefficient and corrupt as they are, has set them at loggerheads with other sectors of Yemeni urban elite, which has so far been the system's main beneficiary. The tensions with the technocratic government of Prime Minister Khaled Bahah, initially brought in at the Houthi's request, were the result of the movement's difficulties in reconciling their methods with the prevalent political culture. Supervision by Houthi popular committees in the various ministries has been seen as an unacceptable interference with the administration, while taking political opponents hostage to increase the group's political leverage has been a prime example of the clash between traditional methods and accepted political processes.

Al-Houthi may have miscalculated his latest move, which has exposed him to criticism both internally and internationally. Clashing with the forces still loyal to President Hadi on 18 January, following the latter's attempt to pass a Constitutional draft, the Houthi quickly took control of State media, military installations and the presidential compound. In a confusing political drama, that included the discovery of Hadi's conspiracies against the Houthi, the President finally resigned, plunging the country into an unprecedented political vacuum. Both Saleh and Hadi have gained political capital from the situation, while the Houthi have taken the blame for derailing the political transition. Additionally, the southern separatists will receive a boost from the current defiance of the orders emanating from Sana'a. In the southern governorships this will benefit their demands for independence. Although

lacking solid political support in the South, Hadi has managed to cobble together a National Salvation Alliance, which is basically a repackaging of the forces supporting his first government, except the Socialists and Saleh's faction of the General People's Congress (GPC).

The Houthi's real political agenda is still very much the subject of speculation and the absence of any direct contact between international representatives and al-Houthi add to the confusion. His enemies accuse him of trying to restore the Imamate that ruled Yemen for centuries and at the same time of being part of a Shia revolutionary plan that mirrors Iranian geopolitical ambitions. The confusion is aggravated by the organisation's hybrid nature, combining a traditionalist base with a revolutionary ideal, both of which are antithetical to republican values, along with a nationalist component. In that respect, Ansar Allah is a revisionist project similar to others that have replaced the region's decaying Arab nationalist founding myths, giving new life to traditional tribal and religious identities. Furthermore, Ansar Allah exploits its credentials as a popular movement untainted by the corrupt practices of the traditional political parties, aiming to restore security to the country, combat al-Qaeda and defend national sovereignty. It is suspected of being behind the publication of a document detailing the payments for years of Saudi bribes to Yemeni political and tribal leaders. They have also exposed the complicities of high ranking personalities of the previous regime with AQAP and radical Salafists.

Since September 2014, the Houthi have applied a gradual strategy, showing that power is within their reach but then resorting to negotiations. This brinkmanship has yielded considerable political gains, but as the stakes become higher so has the resistance of other players. Houthi leaders are aware that they cannot rule Yemen on their own and while they keep insisting on their 'Constitutional Declaration', they have engaged in political negotiations with other groups implying that they are ready for a compromise. But they are now facing a different political scenario, given Saleh's barely disguised political ambitions, the expectations of the political forces arising from the 2011 revolution and the core interest of other tribal groups that are coming to the fore. This will require negotiated compromises that will test the political skills of the Houthi leadership, since their easy gains could also quickly be reversed by a shift in political alliances between the other players. The nature of the charismatic leadership of Abdelmalik al-Houthi has been the basis for criticism that he believes in his messianic mission for the country, which could eventually lead to him not tolerating dissent. Recent moves, such as the attacks on opposition demonstrators and critical journalists have culminated in the ransacking of the offices of the National Dialogue Secretariat. These violent reactions seem to be dictated by a feeling of isolation and the suspicion that conspiracies are in the making, giving the hardliners more influence in political decision-making.

One of the Houthi leadership's main weaknesses seems to be its disregard for the economic constraints facing the country and the resulting international dimension. The suspension of the GCC economic assistance and the reduction in the income

from oil and gas since last year are leading Yemen to a financial collapse. The IMF extended facility and the World Bank's programmes have been put on stand-by and most cooperation programmes by Western countries will be affected by the closure of their embassies and the lack of a functioning government. The continuing fall in GDP since 2011 –having fallen an additional 2% in 2014 alone–, dwindling foreign reserves and an out-of-control budget deficit are harsh realities that the Houthi will have to face sooner rather than later and for which they will probably be blamed, even if they cannot be held responsible for the result of so many years of looting and mismanagement.

The Houthi and the Jihadi threat

The Houthi are not the cause of sectarian polarisation, but the reaction to it. Radical Salafists, with the support of the Saleh regimen, have been spreading divisive sectarian messages for years. The case of Zindani, an ally of President Saleh, is a good example of the use of religious conflict for political reasons since the 1980s, when the famous Dar al Hadith Madrasa was established in Dammaj. On the other hand, militant Islamist and Jihadi groups have a long tradition in the South, where they became the main opponents of the Marxists regime in the YDPR, as occurred in Afghanistan also. AQAP emerged in 2009 as the result of the merger of the organisation's Saudi and Yemeni branches. Using a highly effective strategy of cooperating with certain elements of the regime and systematically eliminating their opponents through targeted assassinations, AQAP made quick inroads in the provinces of Marib, Shabwa, Abyan and Hadramaut. Despite its efforts to create a Yemeni identity through a new brand, Ansar al-Sharia, and its help to local communities abandoned by the State to their own devices, the organisation is still largely considered to be dominated by foreign jihadis. It should not be forgotten that the first Caliphate in the region was established by AQAP in Abyan in 2011, a reminder of the advantage that the militants can gain from exploiting internal conflicts.

The partition of Yemen along the lines of the two former States prior to the unification in 1990 is no longer considered unrealistic, and some regional powers would even favour such an option to limit the Houthi's influence. The fact that the fragmented political forces in the South would be unable to agree on a common platform, let alone effectively confront AQAP, would turn that alternative into a Pandora's Box. The recent take-over of the Bayhan Military Base by a group of AQAP and tribal fighters, where about 1,200 soldiers surrendered to a much smaller force, is a serious warning that brings to mind the collapse of the Iraqi army. US counterterrorist operations have continued until last week, but the evacuation of Anad and the departure of most of the Special Forces as the Houthi advance south makes it doubtful that they will have the capacity to maintain the current strategy from bases in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, in the context of an open military conflict, Jihadi forces could become mixed with local tribal militias, making it very difficult to continue counterterrorist operations. AQAP and Daesh could take advantage of the conflict to expand their influence in other territories and attract more recruits, gaining

access to arms supplied to anti-Houthi forces. Besides, the lack of a State presence in large areas and the worsening humanitarian crisis provide a fertile ground for the Jihadi message.

The inroads of Daesh in Yemen are a matter of concern for the future, since there are over 1,500 Yemeni fighters presently in Iraq, who could provide a deadly fighting capacity to the already declared Yemeni Emirate of this organisation. The bloody suicide bombing of two Zaydi mosques in Sana'a on Friday, 20 March, that left over 130 dead and hundreds of wounded has brought to the fore the objective of Daesh to create a sectarian conflict as their springboard. It should be underlined that, in Yemen, Zaydi and Shafi'i followers use the same mosques until now and the sectarian divide has been the result of political manipulation, skilfully used by Saleh to divide his opponents. AQAP has not crossed the line of indiscriminate mass slaughter in their effort to gain over the local population precisely for that very reason. Nevertheless, the pressure to maintain the leadership in the Yemeni jihad could create an emulation effect that might accentuate the spiral of violence already in motion.

Conclusions

As in 1962, when Nasser became entangled in a long and destructive conflict in Yemen, while the Saudi monarchy supported the Zaydi Imamate against the new Arab Republic, Yemen could again become the battlefield in a struggle to redefine the region's power dynamics. The fact that this conflict will coincide with a catastrophic socioeconomic and humanitarian crisis in one of the poorest Arab countries, with a powerful al-Qaeda branch and new Daesh affiliates could compound the extent of the threat to regional stability. Radicalisation of a heavily armed and unemployed youth is enough cause of concern, even if not in the neighbourhood of the richest oil producing countries in the Middle East.

What the Houthi will do in these circumstances, facing international isolation, economic collapse and increased internal opposition, is certainly something to worry about. If they find themselves against the wall, they may be tempted to launch a military offensive while they are still strong. The struggle to control the province of Marib, where most of Yemen's energy resources are, or even an offensive on Aden seem very likely. The latest speech of al-Houthi is a clear warning of a military response to what he perceives as an international conspiracy supported by Hadi, described as a puppet, and other Yemeni parties that use al-Qaeda as their instrument. His refusal to attend the Conference in Riyadh, proposed by Hadi and supported by Saudi Arabia, was expected from the beginning and that was probably the intended outcome of the proposal. The request for the GCC's military intervention against the Houthi does not seem to reveal that the President has any particular interest in a negotiated solution.

The collapse of the Saudi-backed and heavily subsidised system (ruled first by Saleh and then by Hadi) in the face of the Houthi onslaught has been perceived as a challenge to the existing regional order in the Arabian Peninsula. This situation will force the new leaders of Saudi Arabia to make transcendental strategic choices, among them to reconsider the role of the Muslim Brotherhood and some of their former associates in Yemen. Saudi Arabia has increased its support for any group opposed to the Houthi and has made clear its intention of acting through an Islamic Intervention Force, if needed. The frantic diplomatic activity since King Salman took over is directed at cementing a coalition of the main Sunni powers, including Egypt, Turkey and Pakistan, to contain the perceived Iranian threat in the region, and Yemen seems to be the likely scenario of such a confrontation.

Iran, on the other hand, has increased its support of the Houthi with an air transport agreement that has opened up 14 weekly flights to Yemen and dispatched additional advisors. Tehran's objective does not seem to be to seek a conflict with Saudi Arabia, but to consolidate the existing status quo; however, the alignment of forces could be difficult to control.

The ongoing negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 on the nuclear issue and the conflicts in Syria and Iraq are much higher priorities for the Iranian leadership and absorb most of their limited resources. Despite the sombre situation, there might still be a silver lining. The potential for the conflict in Yemen to aggravate festering regional tensions should not be underestimated but, if an agreement is reached with Iran, it might also be the first example of the positive results of the new US strategy in what has been described a 'new balance of power system' in the Middle East. The alternative to a negotiated arrangement with international support is already too obvious in the region, with different scenarios to choose from: Somalisation, Syrianisation, Libyanisation, Iraqisation and so forth.