The Arab Springs in Yemen : A stolen revolution

15 JULY 2026

Sarah Ben Salah



Photo by BP Miller on Unsplash

In 2011, the Yemeni population was living under the autocratic rule of president Saleh, relying on corruption and favoritism to rule the country. Therefore, when the revolution brokered, it was filled with aspiration of a democratic transition to a more equal society. However, Other prevalent powers in the region also saw this as an opportunity to promote their own diplomatic and geopolitical interests. Indeed, after the revolutionary movements of the Arab Springs, a transitional plan was presented, backed by Gulf Countries and the UN. As the intent was to achieve stability in the quickest and most efficient way, the plan failed to address some of the major socio-economic issues touching the Yemeni population at the time. This disregard for deep issues led to a disenchantment for the population of the post-revolutionary plan, and eventually to its downfall and one of the biggest humanitarian crises of our time.

the premises of the revolution

The Yemeni revolution of the Arab spring started on February 3rd 2011. Not unlike the other countries undergoing similar waves of protests, Yemen's movement was rooted in the rejection of a corrupted government, and demand for democratic and economic reforms. At the time, the country was facing several structural issues, including the lowest Human development Index in the Arab world, driving the population into intense precarity, social division, and human rights abuses, laying grounds for a pre-fragmented civil society (Amnesty, 2012).

First initiated by independent youth activists forming the "youth of the Revolution" in the capital city, Sana'a, the energy of the Yemeni uprising was fueled from the fact that, at the time, "change was being demanded by all the Arab People" (Al-Karimi, 2017). Growing in popularity, it was soon joined by other parties and regional groups, the most prominent one being the Houthis : a Zaydi Shiite armed organization supported by the government of Iran. Originating in the northern province of Saada, the Houthis defend the Zaydi identity against what they perceived as political marginalization and the growing influence of Salafism in Yemen. Their early mobilization was also shaped by opposition to the central government of Ali Abdullah Saleh, leading to a series of conflicts with state forces between 2004 and 2010. By the time of the 2011 uprising, the group had developed significant military experience and structure, allowing them to transition from a regional insurgency into a key national actor. While initially aligning with broader revolutionary demands against corruption and authoritarianism, the Houthis simultaneously pursued their own territorial and political ambitions, progressively consolidating control over northern regions and positioning themselves as a dominant force in opposition to the Saleh government (Shaiban, 2022).

After a meeting held between the revolutionary youth and the Houthis, the leader of the ladder, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, announced that his organisation would be joining the uprising, allying the organization to the Youth Uprising to act towards a pro democratic goal.

As the intent was to reunite widely under a democratic ideology, the inherent differences between the different groups were overlooked, allowing the revolutionary movement of 2011 to grow on fragmented roots, drawing a mix of secularists, socialists, moderate islamists, leftists and liberals (Hendawi, 2014). While it provided power in numbers to the movement, it was marked by deep divergence, making it inherently unstable and impossible to rely on for a sustainable political transition or coherent state-building process in the post-revolution period.

On March 18 2011, also called the "Friday of dignity", the revolt took a turn. While protesting peacefully in Sana'a's change square, over 52 people were killed, and although the president did not recognize ordering it, many testimonies assured that this massacre was caused by the Yemeni Security Forces (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

As the civil society rose in resentment, key military officials massively disengaged, and the head of state started losing his general support from the defense forces. Ultimately, after 33 years of autocratic power, Ali Abdullah Saleh started to look for an exit as his grip over the institutions was diminishing, and turned towards the Gulf Cooperation Council.

The instability and precarity touching Yemen at the time was calling for a radical change in government, but also allowing external forces to intervene and influence the situation quite easily. The way this intervention would be handled could therefore influence the future of an entire nation and its population, all calling for an immediate turnover.

With the support of the five permanent members of the security council and the European Union, a transition initiative was created in 2012. This transition Plan was a UN-backed, two-year process initiated by the Gulf cooperation" (International Peace Institute, 2013).

This project was a council agreement, aiming to allow a smooth transition of powers from president Saleh to an interim president, as well as safeguard regional stabilization. The UN special envoy Jamal Benomar, alongside the Gulf cooperation, brokered the implementation of the "Gulf initiative", the latter taking the shape of a gradual compromise solution to Yemen's crisis, entailing the resignation of Saleh, and the delegation of his power to Hadi, who was at the time his prime minister (Al-Muslimi, 2015). This deal called for forming a coalition government, organizing a national dialogue to draft a new constitution.

The first stages after the introduction of this plan were heavily marked by the disassociation of the Houthis from the rest of the revolutionary movement : soon, the militia positioned itself as the main opposition force to the Gulf initiative, as well as the proposed new government. (Shaiban, 2021). The main justification for this was the western influence on the deal, as the houthis are part of an international "axis of resistance", aligned against Western and Saudi influence in the region, ideologically and strategically.

This desolidarization and empowerment of the Houthis in the north are often considered to be the cause of the escalation of violence leading to the civil and regional war marking the country. However, the Houthis gained more power than it could've been expected, and this empowerment can be directly linked to the content and materialization of the gulf initiative.

the transitional plan and the cycle of overlooked humanitarian need.

The content of the transition plan was deeply flawed in its prioritizations, which can be explained by different factors : it was mostly made and backed by external forces, excluding completely the necessary input of Yemeni voices in order to put international advantages at the forefront of the negotiations.

First, the agreement was set to be established on a strict timeline of 2 years, in order to fulfill effectiveness expectations. This led to a speeding up of the negotiations and establishment processes, such as a rushing through

of the draft of the constitution, as well as division of provinces in just two weeks, passing on the opportunity to submit those to referendum (Al-Muslimi, 2015) . This created a first stepping stone for the population to feel overlooked, and grow resentment towards the forces active in the transition of power.

Second, regarding the content of the agreement, one essential criteria was disregarded by the alliance redacting the transitional plan, although it was one of the main motors of the revolution in the first place : like Saleh, Hadi's government had no solution for "corruption, unemployment and food insecurity" (Holleis, 2021). The humanitarian and social distress that the population was going through pre-revolution was still very much active and required to be prioritized in a way the gulf initiative failed to. Indeed, it did not address the necessity to improve state institutions, as the country was already weak economically and security wise, nor did it address the deep-rooted internal divisions of the country. The emphasis of the agreement was more put on a negotiated political transition centered on elite power-sharing arrangements, particularly the transfer of authority from one leader to another, rather than on structural reforms, accountability mechanisms, or inclusive governance capable of addressing the underlying socio-economic grievances and regional disparities. Once again, the population grew resentment and frustration, eventually leading to political polarization, soon materialized in the recruitment of armed forces (and general support) for the Houthis, which were simultaneously gaining more power.

Third, the coalition chose efficiency over addressing accountability and reparations : this way, the agreement granted Saleh and his associates immunity from any future legal prosecution regarding potential crimes committed in Yemen while in power (Al-Muslimi, 2015). This decision, while facilitating the smooth political transition, represented a massive disregard for the many human rights abuses committed during Saleh's years in power, as well as during the uprising, although they were heavily documented and denounced by national and international organizations.

Overlooking accountability was a double-edged sword : not only did it fuel resentment and frustration in the Yemeni population, leading to a growing political and social polarization, it also allowed Saleh to retain a grasp on the political life of the country. Indeed, the agreement did not stipulate that Saleh must abandon politics in return for the lack of prosecution against him. Although at first sight harmless, this missing safeguard allowed the former president to remain highly active by forming an alliance with the Houthis. While the latter had already expanded their formation in northern Yemen, ironically by exploiting the political and economic difficulties of Saleh's government (Amnesty International, 2018), This alliance facilitated the expansion of the group in the country and in the public discourse, fueling their efforts with legitimacy.

from fragile government to regional war

The fragilization of the government in place led to the turning point of 2015 : the Houthi took control over the capital city, Sana'a, plunging the country into a civil war. This overturn of power pushed Hadi to flee to Saudi Arabia in 2015, leaving the Houthis to take control of key institutions. What eventually led to the following intense rise in humanitarian crisis was however the external intervention of the Arab League and of Iran in the conflict in 2015, which has turned, since then, the country into a civil war. The coalition of the Arab states conducted over 25 000 airstrikes in March 2015 (ACLED, 2023), while Iran provided support to the Houthis, turning the conflict into a regional war. This intervention, led primarily by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, aimed initially at restoring the internationally recognized government, but resulted in a widespread destruction of infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, and ports, severely disrupting the country's already fragile peace and socio-economic well-being. The imposition of blockades and restrictions on imports further deepened food insecurity in a country heavily dependent on imports, contributing to what the United Nations has described as one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world, marked by famine risks, mass displacement, and recurrent cholera outbreaks (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

While this crisis is still very much active nowadays in Yemen, the political field keeps on evolving, from regional subgroups growing to well-established entities grounding themselves more and more into the political and social reality.

recent developments

The internationally built and recognized government has now been in exile for more than a decade, with little to no legitimacy remaining amongst the Yemeni population. As it slowly loses authority on the ground, southern separatist movements have begun to introduce their own claims, rooted in the idea of an autonomous region and adding further complexity to the conflict dynamics. The most prominent one, the Southern Transitional Council, (backed by the United arab emirates) has been for a few years now in a constant push and pull battle with the recognized government over southern territories(Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2026). One of the most recent and representative instances occurred in december 2025, when the STC took control over a non-houthi part of southern Yemen, announcing a new 2 years transitional plan (Xinhua, 2026). While this initiative was eventually, a month later, dismantled by a counter-attack by the recognized government (Al-Jazeera, 2026), it is still representative of a shared idea among separatist groups of imposing on the population a new, efficiency oriented, transitional plan.

The political, social and economical state of Yemen is now marked by precarity and instability. It is therefore destined to evolve, in search of more peace and higher standards of living. While very uncertain, this change seems to have a good chance of being, once again, heavily influenced by external interests at the detriment of the Yemeni's, and see the initial sources

of instability relegated, once again, to a secondary level of importance. Indeed, Yemen's most powerful actors at the moment are all following an international political agenda, neither of which puts the wellbeing and improvement of living standard at the forefront of their campaign.

This, however, does not mean that the population is doomed to the international instrumentalization of their strategical position : Indeed, some Organizations support a more community-based approach, fostering dispute resolution and inclusive talks in areas like Aden and Hadramaut, building trust and addressing violence drivers through bottom-up stability before national negotiations(Al-Dawsari & Nonneman, 2021). Furthermore, World Bank scenarios explore varied socioeconomic paths to 2030 without assuming foreign-led resolutions ((Lofgren et al., 2023). These views prioritize internal reforms and civil society over top-down elite pacts.

Therefore, although underrepresented, alternative pathways to social and political reconciliation exist in Yemen, with approaches decentralizing international and geopolitical interests from the conversation.

Overall, Yemen's experience during and after the Arab Sprıngs was one of a kind : while it started on a wave of hope and will for national-level change, it soon became an example of how deeply international interests can plunge a country into conflict and precarity, only to safeguard interests foreign to its own. While the reconstruction and battle for peace is still ongoing in Yemen, and in a time when conflicts and proxy wars in the Middle East are on the rise, it is essential to look at previous political initiatives and mistakes, in order to prevent them from occurring again. Yemen, after being stuck in a cycle of disregard for humanitarian and civil society needs for more than a decade, deserves an inclusive transition, allowing real repair and progress for the population.

References: