

# Federalism as Peace-Building: Searching for Solutions to the Conflict in Yemen

Written by Alexandra Lewis

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ALEXANDRA LEWIS, MAR 5 2014

In February 2014, the Yemeni Government, led by President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, announced that its state would be re-structured according to a United Federal Republic system. As I have recently outlined in an article for the *World Politics Review* (2014), this new system was introduced in the aftermath of a ten month National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in an attempt to begin to resolve decades of conflict and insecurity in Yemen, which had come to the fore and arguably produced civil-war-like conditions in the aftermath of the 2011-2012 Arab Spring.

Anthony Oberschall argues that federalism is a common peace-building solution advanced in contexts affected by conflict (though more usually so where conflict is centred around ethnicity); but he notes that the track record of such solutions is problematic, and that it is difficult to generalise about their effectiveness (2007, p. 11). Yemen's insecurity is determined by conflicting identities, as well as by political and tribal allegiances, which have seen clashes erupt between the centre and the periphery, and between the North and South of the country. Tensions and mistrust between parties are rampant, and federalism has been advanced symbolically as a promise of increased self-administration and freedom from authoritarianism by the state to key players. After all, "Federalism's principal advantage is that each group" currently disputing the legitimacy of the state would have "a stake in government" and would also in principle "be able to protect and promote its own interests" under the new system (Basham, 2004). However, in practice, the federalisation of Yemen does little to redress persisting grievances and is already highly contested (Lewis, *Yemen's Creation of Federal Republic Leaves Major Grievances Unresolved*, 2014).

Federalism is rapidly becoming a dominant approach to peacebuilding in contexts affected by protracted instability, being advanced as a less extreme alternative to separatism (which, after all, "is an issue that concerns state sovereignty and territorial integrity just as it is one that concerns the fundamental principles upon which any state is founded" (Okojie, 2013, p. 415)). In theory, federalism allows for power-sharing and offers "a likely basis of an eventual political settlement" in contexts like Yemen, where "intrastate conflicts escalate into violent sectarian struggles" (Sisk, 2013, p. 7). In recent years, the successes and challenges associated with the federalisation of states according to ethnic/clan, religious, and political lines have been widely debated in terms of their potential to bring about national reconciliation in Somalia (Zoppi, 2013), Nigeria (Egbe, 2013), Iraq (Basham, 2004) and elsewhere. However, what is often overlooked is the reality that "Federalism is a highly sophisticated form of democracy", whereby "Successful federalism presupposes the existence of a stable democratic order" that includes (1) "populations with a supportive, or at least a congenial, political culture" (Basham, 2004) and, I would add, (2) Governments that are amenable to the devolution of power. By definition, conflict-affected states do not possess these qualities, and this does not bode well for federalisation as a form of peace-building in Yemen.

The Arab Spring has demonstrated that Yemen does have an active political culture, with strong support for democratic governance being evident among many of its youth movements, women's groups and civil society organisations: "Yemeni citizens have long desired a well-functioning and responsive democracy, with strong state institutions capable of addressing their demands and priorities" (Miller, al-Bukari, & Aymerich, 2012, p. 1). Yet this support is not universal. In particular, a rejection of Western-led intervention in Yemen has led to a rejection of democratic governance models and other normative principles that are linked to outside influence by some groups (Mawry, 2013). It was anti-American sentiment that mobilised the Houthis to protest the Yemeni Government's

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support of the War on Terror in 2004, which later led to seven consecutive wars in the far North of Yemen after then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh sent in the army to arrest Houssein al-Houthi – the movement's leader (Boucek, 2010). While the Houthis themselves are not inherently an anti-democratic insurgency, recent years have seen a rise of political radicalisation in Yemen and a rejection of liberal politics (Lewis, 2013).

Additionally, while Yemen is said to have taken a firm step away from authoritarianism and towards the promise of “unprecedented reform” following President Saleh's forced removal from power in 2011 (Miller, al-Bukari, & Aymerich, 2012, p. 8), the ruling regime has shown little commitment to substantive change and the Government is still dominated by the same (though slightly reshuffled) group of elites that has ruled the country since its unification in 1990. As April Longley Alley attests, since President Hadi has taken power, “everything and nothing has changed” (2013, p. 74); “Old-regime elites”, including General Ali Mohsen, the Islah and General People's Congress parties, the Ahmar clan, and Saleh's own family, continue to “have a role in reforming the very system they helped to create” and they have proven highly reluctant to give up power (p. 75). This has influenced the shape of their latest attempt at reform, the federal system, which keeps the Houthi insurgency at bay by incorporating their territories into centrally dominated jurisdictions.

The federal system can also potentially be read as representing a continued Government commitment towards eradicating the threat of Southern separatism from Yemen, by dividing the South into two distinct administrative zones (Zimmerman, 2014), though further research is needed in this regard. Southerners fought for secessionism in the 1994 Yemeni Civil War, in which the Northern-led Sana'a leadership demonstrated that they would not tolerate the notion of Yemen's partitioning. Since then, demonstrations led by the Southern Mobility Movement –*Al-Hiraak Al-Janubi* – have been brutally suppressed by Yemen's Government (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 16). The Hiraak have repeatedly walked away from the NDC negotiation table, precisely because of Northern reluctance to offer their territories the status of a single state under the proposed federal system (Yemen Post Staff, 2014). There are obvious reasons for this: the South comprises approximately 4 million people, and so their division will likely have significant logistical benefits from an administrative perspective. However, the political implications of this division should not be ignored.

Federalism has been advanced in Yemen as a policy aimed at granting increased representation to groups that have fought (sometimes for decades) against their repression by the state. However, rather than granting these groups increased autonomy, the federalisation process has been structured according to divisions that will fairly obviously limit the power and influence of the state's most prominent enemies – the Hiraak and the Houthis. As such, it is difficult to read federalism in its current form as a long-term peacebuilding solution in the midst of Yemen's on-going conflicts and insecurity.

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## About the author:

**Dr Alexandra Lewis** is a researcher working on development, peace and conflict in Somalia and Yemen, with a focus on youth and violence. She is based out of the University of Leeds and has published extensively on themes of instability in Yemen. She has also taken on a number of commissioned research projects on Yemen, working for a variety of international and national governmental and non-governmental organisations.