Yemen and the 'Arab Spring': Moving Beyond the Tribal Order?

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The 'Arab Spring' is without doubt a pivotal moment in the political and social development of the wider Middle East. Some have likened it to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, others to the impact of the 1979 Iranian revolution. It has even been suggested that this particular season heralds the demise of the old colonial state order carved out between the British and French in 1916, the Sykes Picot agreement, as not only pro-democracy campaigners find their voice, but equally, long suppressed national, ethnic, religious and indeed tribal identities come to the fore as the very nature of state identity is contested.

It is not inconceivable for example that an independent Kurdistan will emerge, that Western Sahara will achieve independence at long last from Rabat while despite the best efforts of the current Israeli government, an independent Palestinian state will be recognised internationally in the summer of 2011. Equally, events in Libya, Syria and Bahrain are a sober reminder that both dynastic and republican regimes can fight back and indeed, where national security interests are believed to be a stake, intervene directly in the affairs of a neighbouring polity. Hitherto preferring to fight its wars by proxy, Saudi Arabia's intervention in support of the al-Khalifa has to be set against a wider context of ongoing rivalry and suspicion between Riyadh and Tehran which, while sensitive to regional context, certainly finds parallels in terms of rationale to the Soviet decision to intervene in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Yet while some of the variables that caused Arab Spring can be readily identified – social networking technology that negates state censorship and a growing sense of disenfranchisement from the state (what Ted Gurr referred to as 'relative deprivation') across the Middle East the jury remains out on whether such change is to be limited or whether in fact it portends more profound upheaval across the Arab world that re-orders both the state elites *and* social fabric of any given society, something Theda Skocpol referred to three decades ago as 'social transformation'.[1] In short, Political Islam may be 'a' solution and indeed vehicle for achieving such transformation, but it is not *the* solution as the secular profile of many of the demonstrators in Tahrir Sqaure in Cairo and elsewhere suggests.

Nowhere perhaps encapsulates the tensions and contradictory forces now shaping the Arab Spring than Yemen, a state that has become synonymous with the epithets 'failed' or 'failing'. Endemic tribalism, religious sectarianism, a barely contained rebellion in the north of the country, a growing movement advocating succession across the south and, of notable concern to the West, the presence of a strong al-Qaida affiliate group all suggest a state authority under the existing President, Ali Abdullah Saleh in terminal decline. When set against wider economic and social anomie brought about increased levels of water scarcity, the wholesale decline in oil production, a population of 24 million and growing, an unemployment rate approaching 50 per cent among those aged between 18 and 28, and possessing one of the highest levels of malnutrition globally, then Yemen would hardly seem to conform to the Weberian ideal where authorities in Sana'a exercise a monopoly over state power.[2]

Now, a younger generation, emboldened by events in Egypt and Tunisia and harnessing their activism to widespread grievances over political nepotism and social atrophy, have sparked widespread protests of a type and magnitude across Yemen that has united tribal leaders, the official opposition and indeed clerics, all calling for Saleh to step down from power after three decades in office. The President was caught off guard, his response to the protests displaying the carrot of political concession – announcing his intention not to run for re-election in 2013 – while

condoning the stick of repressive and at times lethal force to quell mass opposition protests, most notably in the capital Sana'a on 18 March 2011 that left 52 anti-government protestors dead. But most importantly, Salah has turned increasingly to that enduring feature of Yemeni politics – patrimony – to ensure both the continued loyalty of his power base among the powerful Hashid tribal confederation and to mobilise this support through counter-demonstrations as a visible symbol of continued fidelity to his regime.[3]

Given these multiple security challenges, 'dancing on the head of snakes', the title of a recent work on Yemen would seem an apt summation of dilemmas now facing Saleh.[4] In a domain where manipulation through both power and patrimony have long held sway, he has perhaps danced on the heads of too many snakes for too long and now some are biting back with venom. Aware however of the security concerns in Washington and capitals across Europe over the emergence of Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in the southern and eastern provinces of Marib, Shabwa, Hadramawt and Abyan since 2009, Saleh has been quick to present himself as the only actor capable of mounting effective operations against a movement whose global reach and influence belies their relatively small numbers and powerbase.[5] It is a powerful message for despite the widespread concerns over the nepotism and corruption that for many define Saleh's regime, paying on primordial fears of *jihadi* threats determines a hierarchy of values that inevitably links the fate of Yemen's President to wider western security interests. It is in effect a dependency relationship but one perhaps where inflation of threat – in this case from AQAP – is realised in the political capital that Saleh has accrued externally, for unlike former Preside Hosni Mubarak, he has yet to become subject to overt calls from the United States to step down from office with immediate effect.

The *International Crisis Group* have termed this 'negative legitimacy', the assumption being that policy in Sana'a and Western capitals is determined by a confluence of what decision-makers are against, rather than in defining more enlightened approaches that link aid, be it in terms of security sector reform or infrastructure projects to wholesale changes of an antediluvian political system prejudiced in favour of tribalism and autocratic role. The stark dichotomy therefore between 'reform and revolution' is seen in terms of 'an either or choice', which, framed as it is by an implicit acceptance of the 'Weberian' state, denies agency to other interpretations of political order within the geographic space that is Yemen.

But here (and elsewhere on the Arabia peninsula) the state is less an independent political actor and more a 'political field', where diverse actors compete for influence and resources. States in this regard should not be seen in a fully-fledged "Weberian" manner, dominated by a rational bureaucratic model'.[6] Seen in this context, the current upheaval in Yemen not only accords with competition across the political field but where the prospect of social revolution as defined by Skocpol remains distant. Undoubtedly, profound shifts in Yemeni politics are underway and few question that Saleh's regime is not in terminal decline. As heartening as the demonstrations may be however (and their characterisation might be more anti-Saleh than pro-democracy), they cannot be divorced from a political field still determined by tribal allegiances. This ultimately will determine the dispensation of power in Yemen in the short to medium term future at least. Even the rifts in the military hierarchy that have so rattled Saleh have tribal context, while some of the main opposition figures, most notably Shaykh Hamid al-Ahmar, have shrouded his own tribal ambition against the prevailing order under the cloak of broad based political opposition. Acute political distress now defines Yemen, something that clearly nourishes a profound sense of 'relative deprivation'. But even with a change of President seemingly inevitable when set against the wider eddies of the Arab Spring, the power of tribal allegiance and its ability to determine leadership of the 'tribal field' will still determine Yemen's political future for some time to come.[7]

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[1] Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

[2] See 'Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (II): Yemen Between Reform and Revolution',

International Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report, No.102 (10 March 2011), p.10 Per capita income is less than $70 per month. Some 65 per cent of the population are under the age of 25.

[3] The term 'tribe' is used throughout although it is recognised that readers may prefer the Arabic qabīlah (or plural qabāyil).

[4] Victoria Clark, *Dancing on the Heads of Snakes* (London: Yale University Press, 2010).

[5] The exact numbers of AQAP remain unclear but most informed commentators suggest that is currently consists of around 200 hard core activists. Many trace its roots to a 2003 jailbreak of 15 al-Qaeda operatives in Yemen, reinforced three years later by a further escape of 23 members from prison in Sana'a. See Eric Stier, ' Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Protests in Yemen', *The Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, 9/10 (March 2011), pp.1-2 at www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Bswords%5D=8fd5893 accessed on 22 March 2011.

[6] See for example Uzi Rabi, *The Emergence of States in a Tribal Society: Oman under Sa'id bin Taymur, 1932-1970* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press), p.3.