

Yemeni Youth Key to Real Change

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Emerging protest groups predicted to become political power-brokers.

With seven out of ten of Yemen's 23 million people under the age of 25, experts say that the power of the burgeoning youth protest movement may hold the balance of power in determining the country's future.

Yemen has one of the highest demographic growth rates in the world, with its population predicted to double by 2030. Youth unemployment stands at over 50 per cent and is expected to rise further.

Abubakr al-Shamahi, founder and editor of the online forum Comment Middle East, said that these factors meant that young people, with little to lose and the time to dedicate to activism, would continue to put pressure on the establishment.

"They have fundamentally changed politics, in my opinion, and eventually they will change elite politics because they are such a huge proportion of Yemeni society," al-Shamahi said, speaking at a July event at Chatham House. (For more on other political actors involved, see [Yemen's Multiple Power Struggles](#).)

The Yemeni youth movement has evolved from a couple of hundred different groupings, some of them with only two or three members, into a number of more organised structures. The three largest are the Coordinating Council of the Youth Revolution of Change, CCYRC, the Civic Coalition and a movement called Country for All.

Consisting mainly of urban, educated young people, these groups have been holding regular meetings and workshops, mostly in Taghir Square, to shape a common political agenda.

Al-Shamahi said the youth movement established its independence when it opposed the April initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council, GCC, to transfer President Ali Abdullah Saleh's power to his deputy, Abd Rabbu Mansur al-Hadi, for a 60-day transitional period ahead of a presidential election. Under that plan, a prime minister selected from the opposition would then be appointed to lead a transitional government.

Unlike much of the opposition, the pro-democracy youth movement rejected the GCC proposal, largely because the initiative also makes it likely that Saleh – currently undergoing medical treatment in Saudi Arabia after an attack on his palace on June 3 – would receive immunity from prosecution.

"The GCC initiative is not an answer to the basic lines of what people demand," Dr Hamza Alshargabi, a blogger and CCYRC member said. "One of the main challenges facing the GCC initiative is the immunity of Saleh and his family, when it's the civilians the international community should give immunity to."

"Also, the GCC initiative gives space for elections 60 days after the president's departure, which is impossible because the current electoral lists have been forced [upon us]," he continued. "We need a new voting system, and it will take at least six months to design it."

The youth movements were demanding real change, Alshargabi said.

"People went out in the streets to change the regime, not to change the person," he noted. "If we don't address this, there will be no real change, because you will still have the same elements and tensions, and this can potentially lead to more pressure and a new series of protests."

Abdulalem Al-Shamery, a British Yemeni journalist and editor-in-chief of the Yemeni Voice magazine, said that young people were particularly disappointed by the international community's apparent lack of interest in their plight. They have the impression that the international community focuses solely on the regime and opposition parties, he said.

A CCYRC communiqué in May called for a silent demonstration to protest the inaction of the United Nations, United States President Barack Obama and other international leaders.

Alshargabi said the group was not calling for military intervention, since the situation in Yemen "is complicated enough", but "the international community needs to recognise, both in words and actions, the aspirations of the people of Yemen. What I would like to see from the international community is a legitimate recognition that the dynamics in the Arab world are different from, for example, the national movements in the Sixties or Seventies."

Unlike Egypt's revolution, which took place in only 18 days, the protests in Yemen have been going on for

almost six months, allowing the youth movement time to develop a political agenda of its own.

Initial demands which focused simply on ousting the Saleh administration, have now evolved to include establishing a parliamentary democracy based on proportionate representation.

Saleem Haddad, an independent Middle East consultant who edits the Yemen section of the online journal Muftah.org, said the youth movement was continuing to develop.

Emphasising that “the mechanics of the movement are still being contested and negotiated on the street of Yemen at the moment,” Haddad said, “The youth movement has undoubtedly opened up a space for itself in the Yemeni political tradition”.

Haddad said he was uncertain whether this would translate into concrete political power.

“I think this will depend really on how well they are able to build and mobilise legitimacy outside urban centres, in the grassroots, in rural areas; and also how capable they are of building political coalitions while also maintaining the core values that they have,” he said, speaking at the same Chatham House event.

Alshargabi said he believed the CCYRC would evolve into a political party, even though some of its members were arguing that it was too early, and the security situation still too unstable, to take this next step.

“This is an uphill struggle, and it’s going to take time,” he said.

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Location: Yemen

Topic: Regime

Focus: The Arab
Spring

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/yemeni-youth-key-real-change>