

Yemen – 2012 – Grant Kippen & Hisham Al-Omeisy

Transcript

Grant: Thank you very much. My name is Grant Kippen. I'm joined here by Hisham Al-Omeisy. The discussion today is going to be around Yemen, and the topic of elections and the state of democracy in Yemen. I'll start off by doing a brief intro for myself and then I'll ask Hisham to briefly introduce himself. I was the chief of party for the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) in Yemen from December of 2011 until June of 2015, so it really covered up a very, I guess, important time in Yemen's political transition and it was there for the early presidential elections and then trying to, as in response to the Gulf Cooperation Council, GCC, implementing mechanism, try to provide support to the Election Commission in Sanaa as they ramped up to add to the National Dialogue Committee, looking at sort of the issue of elections and the electoral systems and biometric voter registry, etc. So Hisham, do you want to jump in?

Hisham: Thank you, Grant. My name is Hisham Al-Omeisy. I'm originally from Yemen. I'm currently a senior Yemen advisor with the European Institute of Peace. Before that I worked as the Information Centre director for the US mission to Yemen and before that I worked for the UN.

Grant: Great. Thank you. So basically, how we're going to approach this topic, and I think it would not be a stretch to say we could probably talk for hours about this but given the time considerations we're going to try to focus our discussion, the conversation, around a number of different themes. Distinct themes. So, it'll be conducted more in a sort of a conversation between Hisham and myself. Let me just begin.

As I said earlier, sort of setting the stage, the advent of the Arab Spring was rolling through the region and certainly not had an impact in Yemen and then with the GCC Agreement coming to the floor, and then the implementing mechanism that followed, there was a very distinct timeline to what we were going to see or what Yemen was going to see in terms of a political transition. So, I'd like to start by perhaps throwing this out to Hisham. Just broadly speaking, do you think that there are any sort of key takeaways from the elections from democracy in Yemen and? I get we could focus on the time period that we talked about, sort of the Arab Spring. Then on to the GCC and afterwards.

Hisham: Sure. I mean, technically, Yemen remains to be one of the very few democratic states South of the peninsula. We're a country that has been surrounded by monarchies yet had certain democratic institutions and some imperfect processes in place. When what has been dubbed as the Arab Spring came along, it was initially about a change of the regime and the prevalent status quo, and a lot of people were hopeful and wanted a real democratic process and a more representative government. But unfortunately, the reality of the matter is that counter forces intervened and the GCC initiative was introduced. Which in my view and perhaps others, stalled true change and repackaged the regime into power. We had an election, a presidential election. But it was more of supporting a one-man race. It wasn't a real or competitive election per se. It was more of a referendum on a sitting vice president, who was part of the regime, and the elections were more or less a process to notarize selection by the powers that be - not the public, if you will. And it was only for like a two-year period, a transitional period for that new President to be in place.

Unfortunately, it went on for little over a decade and people kind of lost faith in that process and in democracy in general, because of the series of unfortunate events that followed right after the elections, the transitional period did not work as well as it should have. The GCC initiative outlined

this enterprising plan that didn't have a realistic implementation mechanism. It wasn't practical in terms of the timeline, and it was quite ambitious and none of that transpired on the ground. What we had, what we ended up having, in Yemen was a lot of corruption, a lot of nepotism, which kind of cascaded into an all-out war civil war inside the country. We had these multiple factions that exploited the power vacuum left behind by competing factions of the regime. So, we had the rise of Al Qaeda, we had the rise of the Houthis, we had the rise of secessionists in Yemen, leading to an all-out war in 2015, when the Houthis moved into the capital, rode that wave of popular discontent with the corruption, nepotism that was happening in the aftermath of the transitional period. And we've been stuck in that war for the past decade.

Grant: Yeah, a lot of different parts there that I'd like to respond to. One, I completely agree in terms of the timeline of the implementing mechanism, I think it was two years that all of these different milestone activities were supposed to take place. What you mentioned already the early presidential election. Which I don't think there was, you know, anybody was under the illusion that it wasn't really anything more than sort of a ratification of that agreement. But in terms of the timeline itself, I mean, I think it would be extremely challenging even in a Western democracy, let alone a country such as Yemen going through, you know, a very challenging political transition to be able to marshal the resources and get everybody on board to make that change. I think from my perspective, anyway as an international kind of coming in for that period of time, it just struck me that we're running very all-out in some respects, but in other ways, there was the whole issue of timing. While there was sort of a calendar in terms of the timeline, people had their own and I'm saying, you know, different stakeholder groups involved in the process had their own sort of timeline about how they saw things or being discussed and, you know, and I and it was very challenging to keep it going. I think many people, it was a infamous IBM commercial years ago that you know, herding cats type of thing, and it was really trying to bring all of these different stakeholder groups together in a process to try to get their input around what they saw happening but it, you know, time was definitely not, did not work to, the advantage of what they were trying to achieve.

I mean one of the things that, again I'll jump in here, on the challenges in any transition process and I think it out in Yemen, it was just how committed the political leadership was to making sure that the mechanism was happening, and these milestones were going to be achieved. And my sense was, and I'd love your response, your perspective on this Hisham was the whole role of political leadership, political responsibility. While there were political parties in the country, did they really represent the best interests of the population, or the people that they purported to represent?

Hisham: Not really. I mean, this is my honest opinion, my personal opinion, but you can read about that and you could hear from all the Yemeni activists during that period and the Arab Youth Revolution leaders. The parties, the stakeholders, were more interested in kind of a revolving door of leaving the regime and joining the opposition, to re-establish themselves, rebrand themselves and come back to power. So, there was very little representation there. The last time we had a parliamentary election was in 2003. That gives you a clear indication of how things have not changed politically, it's almost more than two decades and we still have the same people. A lot of people have already actually died since then. I remember during the phase between 2011 and 2013, and this goes for the National Dialogue Conference as well that had 565 representatives who nobody actually elected—they were handpicked and vetted by a process overseen by the powers that be at the time and at the auspices of the GCC—and again they did not really represent their constituencies in the sense that they ran campaigns and were voted in and elected by the public.

We have 333 districts in Yemen. They did not represent those districts, or the governorates, for that matter. Ministers and officials have become known as traditional leaders of the community, but almost self-appointed, they may have had popular support way back when, but they kind of grew into that position and stayed there for the better part of the past 30 years. If you want to hold elections today, for instance, nobody's voting for those people. This is one of the reasons why people took to the streets in 2011 is that all these people do not really represent the best interests of the population. They don't really have the votes. It's just that it was mostly the politics that were performative. In Yemen, all these politicians came into power because of deals and agreements, backdoor agreements and because they've had, they've enjoyed for the longest term, support from regional countries.

This is one of the things, for instance, that the Houthis actually exploited really well in coming into power by basically showcasing to the local population that these guys are proxies for foreign powers. They're not exactly representative or elected officials, but of course, in a classic Yemen way, Houthis became the very monster that they attacked. They were there, they came in, they hijacked power. They will never hold elections, and they've basically quelled any dissenting voices. Launched this massive, brutal campaign where they imprisoned people, tortured, kidnapped and killed. I remember talking to some of the people there and they took the bait where Houthis projected themselves as the saviors of the nation of the Republic. But as soon as they took power they became much, much worse than the previous regime and now we have that crisis, that mistrust between the larger population in Yemen. The leadership, the usual suspects who claim to represent Yemenis, but in reality, they don't. We did this massive survey a few years ago with the EIP when we went down and asked people: Do you feel that the current political powers or political parties represent you or represent your interests? And 78% of the respondents said no, so that again gives you an indication of that kind of gap. between those who claim to be representing Yemen and the larger population.

Grant: Well, I think that's a very interesting point. And one it's not just playing out in Yemen, but in other countries as well as we get into the whole role of political parties and how they purport to represent people, engage people, you know, how inclusive are they? Do they really represent the wishes, etc., or desires of the population? Then it rolls into elections and what people perceive to be the grouping, the candidates that best represent their particular interests. On that note, in terms of this political transition, what do you think people think of the early presidential election? The turnout was something like 64-65% and I think there were some boycotts that went along with certain groups around that election as well. What were the expectations? Did people move from the Arab Spring, to the GCC, to the election? If people felt that there was something there, there was a reboot, where their expectations raised that there would be a change? And then, maybe it fell off as the chief, as the national dialogue process, went along. I don't know if that was something that was covered in the survey that you conducted but, just people on the ground, how do they see it? How do they feel?

Hisham: It was a bit of a mixed bag. There was a lot of fear mongering. Let me just say that around that period, if people didn't go through with this process, whether it was true or not, people believed that the country was going to disintegrate. So, for some people the incentive was basically that this option was better than having the country fall apart. For other people, it was because it was pitched as a transitional period, they're like, let's give it a try. It's just two years for that President, so let's just give it a try. To others, of course, the political parties that wanted to push through with it because part of the deal was granting an immunity for the previous regime. So they also had a vested interest and wanted the GCC initiative to work, and they got the commitment of all these parties because there were spoils to be shared, if you will, after that agreement and after the elections, because there's going to be a government that is made of the

opposition and also the regime and other parties that were brought on board. They had these multiple incentives in multiple parties that wanted the deal signed, but to the general public, it was like hopping on a train and hoping for the best. This is why the turnout was about 60%. They were a little bit confused; they didn't really understand the mechanisms because there was a lot of ambiguity around it, but they were also not left with many options.

A lot of people from the youth and from the change squares were opposed to the GCC initiatives because it lacked clarity and, also, because to some, it was clear there was a lot of attempts at manufacturing consent and also kind of pulling the rug from these independent voices that at one point rose to the forefront during that period. There was a deliberate marginalization of these voices and the agreement, the elections, everything was pushed and centered around traditional forces, around the existing political parties. That's not exactly what people went to the streets for.

Grant: So, if political parties are seeing this sort of somewhat unresponsive, adequate or whatever, given where we are ten years later, after, well more than 10 years later, after the Houthis took over, what's your sense in terms of what's required to do? Political parties need to go through some sort of overhaul in terms of how they act? Is there something else that will have to be done? You know, maybe a movement or something like it? It seems to me that there's some fundamental changes that are going to need to happen in order for, you know, to get back to what would be a more representative democracy.

Hisham: That is a very important question, but it also requires very long answers because, for instance, the parties have lost a lot of their legitimacy over the past few years. Because they've disconnected from their local base, most of them reside abroad and if they had a semblance of legitimacy remaining after the war, they've now lost that, especially after the Houthis took over and the corruption continued. For instance, the Prime Minister's actually here in the U.S. trying to raise money for the Yemeni Government but a lot of people [in Yemen and abroad] are basically saying, yeah, if we throw any money at Yemen [government] at this point, it may end up lining the pockets of officials more than actually helping the people. So, there's a lot of that and even some internationals are saying that. There is, as you said, a need for a total overhaul to kind of recreate and rebuild those bridges with the public, the actual constituents, and you have to listen to the people to restore the social contract.

This is one of the things that we've been trying with a number of initiatives in Yemen, to bridge that gap. Local voices need to be heard. You need responsive governance. You need to understand the perspectives of the people at the local community level. Understand the basic needs, the priorities for instance. People are saying we need to focus on the Constitution, on the legitimacy of institutions, rebuild this and that. Which is understandable and important, but right now, there are too many fires to put out first, for instance, dealing with the current humanitarian crisis. Yemenis would care less who rules Yemen and more if they can access basic services and sustainable livelihoods. Can I get clean water? Can I get electricity? Can I get food on the table? Those are the basic priorities of the local level and, for instance, in the temporary capital Aden. For the past 48 hours, there was no electricity, and Aden was supposed to symbolize a success story of the legitimate Yemeni government, as opposed to the Houthis and Sana'a, and they failed.

Aden actually became a cautionary tale. The area controlled by the government became an example of what not to do, and the Houthis exploited this really well. They warn people and say, 'it's better that you live in our areas under repression than live in poverty and a devastating situation in government control areas.' And Yemenis have been stuck between a rock and a hard

place because they can't live in government-controlled areas, but they also can't live in Houthi controlled areas either because they risk being kidnapped, tortured, disappeared or killed.

You need a total overhaul of the system but also develop a holistic approach where you basically address all these issues, including the roots of the conflict, which hasn't been addressed since the GCC initiative. Things like power sharing. Addressing nepotism and mismanagement of state resources. Inclusion, representation were a big part of the demands in 2011, 2012, and even during the NDC. People felt that they're not being represented, not in the Parliament, not in the government institutions. Not in foreign diplomatic missions, not in the decision-making processes in their own districts and their own communities. All of those issues have yet to be addressed.

Grant: Yeah, I mean when I was with IFES in Yemen, we did, as I mentioned briefly in the intro, provide some support to the NDC in terms of providing experts on electoral systems and things for consideration. We work very closely with the Ministry of Interior and more importantly, the election commission on the development of a biometric voter registration. Something that you know, was seen as required to get some credible, inclusive professional process for parliamentary and presidential elections. If it had been decided that that was the path to take at the end of the implementation process. But it struck me that there were, well, one side was working, there were other stakeholders, shall we say, that had different agendas, and you know, some wanted to play this out for an indeterminate amount of time. Others were more committed to try to keep to that timeline, etc. But what struck me in some of the meetings that I had with political parties was because, you know, part of what we were doing was trying to bring the whole notion, you know, of the biometric voter registration process, etc., together. So, we had a number of meetings with the various parties on that and, you know, it struck me, as somebody that comes from a political party background here in Canada, there seemed to be a chasm between the leadership in the party where the party was going with what you're talking about, Hisham, grassroots mobilization and education. At the time it really left me wondering just what, what's success going to look like down the road for parties, if they don't engage and just only talk amongst the, you know, keep that conversation, that dialogue, only within the senior officials within a particular party or not

Hisham: Definitely, and this is one of the things we've been talking about and trying to advise the political powers on, and that the rate of erosion of their legitimacy is exceedingly high at this point. So much so that even if by some miracle you managed to sign a deal with the various factions, it will never be binding because you don't have the buy-in from the local population. So even if you agree to a ceasefire, even if you agree to opening roads, the people on the ground have no obligation to follow through because they don't recognise you as their leaders. You're not addressing their concerns. For instance, one of the things they've been talking about for the past two years is a peace process and a road map, but there's no mention of elections there. Because as you mentioned in your example, there's vested interest by some stakeholders to kind of extend this phase—this kind of current status quo indefinitely— because there's a realisation [by those in power] that if come tomorrow, an election is called for, “nobody's going to vote for us.” So, to them, the only way they stay in power is continuing this absurd situation for as long as they can where they can basically grab on and stay in their chairs [positions of power].

Grant: I know at one point of time this whole transitional process was deemed to be sort of a model and I've heard people describe it, particularly UN officials describing, you know, their role and the and the process that that had unfolded, as one to be used in other countries. I know the UN team has gone to Libya; they've gone to Egypt. You know, I think initial views on that were quite positive, at least we have a sort of a guideline, if you will, the road map. Very, very quickly unravelled and I think my own sense is not necessarily because there was a road map, but getting back to the point I made earlier about the political leadership, the responsibility to it and you raise

the point too, is that once a bunch of coalition government was put in place it was basically our term to look at how we can leverage some other government resources that have been, you know, unavailable to us or to them in the past. So, it's kind of a bleak situation. But where do you think the international community's role in helping move this process, you know, getting back on track, if you will, what can the international community do at this particular point in time?

Hisham: We need to develop these parallel tracks. For instance, I understand the urgency of putting out fires, immediate fires, which is good, and it should be done. But they also should develop a longer term map for sustainable peace if you will. In terms of rebuilding state institutions, propose for instance that in three years elections will be held, it doesn't even have to be presidential elections. It could start with a new system of electing governors for instance and force the political parties to be more representative, more inclusive. The last government didn't even have a single woman, and those appointed were from specific areas, where they knew they had tribal backing or from political parties and actors that they needed support from, but it wasn't necessarily the representative who would be accepted nationally. Moreover, a serious talk needs to be had with the various factions and parties and to say to them, here are the things that you should not be doing, such as human rights violations, imprisonment, silencing dissent, and this goes across the board, not just the Houthis, but also the other sides, but also in saying: now you need more accountability and for the accountability to work, you need also more transparency in terms of government expenditure, because everybody's just hoarding the resources and the Yemenis don't know where the money is going. I mentioned earlier the example for Aden. Saudi Arabia has been giving a lot of money to the government and [the government] turns around and says we're broke. We can't even give you electricity in Aden, which is the capital now. But where did the money go? And that creates resentment and additional mistrust between the officials and the populations that they are supposed to be governing.

Of course, one of the biggest issues in Yemen has always been the lack of funding and, whether we like it or not, the humanitarian crisis is one of the priorities that we need to address. We keep seeing the HRP, the Humanitarian Response Plan, getting less funded, so there needs to be a focus and a more concerted effort on shifting strategy. It's always been more humanitarian aid, but they need to move towards restructuring that towards development, sustainable development, because if you just focus just on providing aid, it will go on forever as people become reliant on it. Instead of just giving people fish, teach them how to fish, help them rebuild the infrastructure so that they can stand on their own feet.

Grant: 100%, I mean, I think this is an age-old question. In any country undergoing transition, you know the whole notion of sequencing. You know what has to come first, what and where should go, and attention and resources be put to, and the other potential pitfall and all of this is, you know, elections are often seen as sort of the panacea to resolve any conflict, etc., when in fact they often can create more conflict. That was, you know, certainly intended in a country that's going through, any country that's going through, that kind of transition and has a history of using violence to achieve political ends. I mean that that can be a very difficult process to undertake. But again, I know I keep harping on this theme, it kind of goes back to you know responsibility taken by the political leadership that this is a fact. Something that needs to be done and take one's view or any potential benefits for what's good here for the country over the short and longer term.

Hisham: Definitely. I mean, this is one of the things that I keep telling a lot of people that we talk to, especially international stakeholders, they're like, yeah, we're trying to avoid war, this is going to be really complicated, it's going to open Pandora's box... and I'm like, Pandora's box has been

kicked open already. We are already at war. We are in the worst humanitarian crisis. We've already hit all those landmarks and it's already bad, we are at the bottom of that barrel. And we, Yemenis, do understand that there are sacrifices that need to be made, even more than what has already been sacrificed over the past 10 years and 15 years if counting the NDC. But you cannot just basically dismiss it. When you talk to people in the GCC and they say, yeah, the democratic process, that's something that could wait, right now, we're just trying to salvage the country and keep it together. And I'm like, yeah, but the way that it's going, the country's problems will continue to manifest, and basically further disintegrate. And you cannot just push the buck down the road and say we'll talk about elections later on. We'll talk about democratic processes later on. Right now, we just need the strong men of Yemen to lead the country. Well, they haven't, they couldn't. That's not going to work.

Grant: That's not going to work. Yeah. Well, not going to work in Yemen, then it's proved it's not going to work in a lot of other countries as well.

We don't have an infinite amount of time on this. So, is there anything else you'd like to raise here? Hisham I mean, I would put it out there that I'd leave tomorrow if there was an opportunity to go back and help. In this, you know, trying to turn some of this. My experience in Yemen was, I mean, I'm at a loss for words really because of the, you know, what I saw was hope and the people that I interacted with on a regular basis, I mean, a real pride of country. Often felt that were almost embarrassed that this is the way that their country had evolved and not something that they were proud of and. In some ways, didn't want to be a part of.

Hisham: Exactly. This is one of the things that hurts a lot of people, including myself. Now that I'm abroad and away from home, there is so much potential and it's disheartening how people talk about Yemen and especially in these international conferences. Which quite often actually don't include Yemenis, and you see how Yemenis are being robbed of our own agency and they're deciding things for us. They're deciding our fate. They're having all these discussions about Yemen and agreeing on things and then they just come back to us with "here's these solutions that you're going to be implementing." Yemenis didn't really have a say in this and just because you got a rubber stamped by some government official in the PLC or the ministerial cabinet, does that mean that it's in the best interest of Yemenis or that Yemenis were consulted to begin with? No.

Now, honestly, we need more Yemenis to be consulted in these processes and not just the usual suspects, because these suspects have their own agenda, which are often quite divergent, even if they're belonging to the same party. There were times where ministers from the same party or the government walk into meetings and have completely different agendas. They need, at very least, to get on the same page and act together. But you also need to bridge the gap and talk to actual stakeholders on the ground, local stakeholders, and draw a road map that addresses their needs.

Grant: Well, it sounds. I don't mean to be putting words in your mouth, but it sounds like the international community has some homework to do in terms of how it's moving forward in trying to assist in this transition and. Try it, you know, tackling some of these more fundamental issues here.

Hisham:

Oh, yes, definitely. I mean or else we will be here for the next 10 years just talking and endlessly repeating these same points.

Grant

Yeah. Well, we wanted to stick to the time that we've been given. Hisham, I really appreciate your time and your perspective on these issues. And I think it's been a really interesting conversation and hopefully illuminating for those that are going to listen to this, watch this video going forward. I'd just like to thank Jeff Fischer for putting us together and being the impetus for this and also to, I believe, International IDEA who is sponsoring this. So again, on behalf of Hisham and I thank you. Thank you very much for that.

Hisham:

Thank you very much indeed.