



Powerful nonviolent resistance to armed conflict in Yemen

As with the initial uprising against the Saleh regime four years ago, an unarmed civil society movement rises up to challenge the Huthi militia.

Demonstrations in Taiz to force Huthi militia from the city, March 2015. Erem News. All rights reserved. While media coverage of the tragic situation unfolding in Yemen in recent months has focused on armed clashes and other violence, there has also been widespread and ongoing nonviolent civil resistance employed by a number of different actors.



In fact, the most significant setbacks to the Huthi militia in their march southward across the country in recent months have come not from the remnants of the Yemeni army or Saudi air strikes, but from massive resistance by unarmed civilians which has thus far prevented their capture of Taiz, the country's third largest city, and other urban areas. The resistance efforts have also pressed the Houthis to withdraw their forces from a number of previously-held areas, including universities, residential neighborhoods, and even military bases. This kind of nonviolent resistance by ordinary people is remarkable, but it is not new in Yemen.

The fall of President Saleh and rise of the Huthis

It was just four years ago, in 2011, when—inspired in part by the successful civil insurrections against the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia and the Mubarak regime in Egypt—millions of Yemenis took to the streets in massive nonviolent protests against the autocratic US-backed government of Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had held power for three and a half decades. An impressive degree of unity was forged between the various tribal, regional, sectarian, and ideological groups taking part in the pro-democracy protests, which included mass marches, sit-ins, and many other forms of civil resistance. Leaders of prominent tribal coalitions publicly supported the popular insurrection, prompting waves of tribesmen to leave their guns at home and head to the capital to take part in the movement. These tribesmen, along with the hundreds of thousands of city dwellers, were encouraged to maintain nonviolent discipline, even in the face of government snipers and other provocations which led to the deaths of hundreds of unarmed protesters.

These ongoing nonviolent protests, combined with shifting alliances between competing elites and armed factions, made President Saleh's continued hold on power increasingly untenable. Saleh was eventually forced to resign, but it wasn't long before conflict returned. Backed by Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the United States, Saleh's vice president, Major General Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi took over as the head of state, over the objections of civil society and the masses that had ousted the former president.

The new Hadi government was unpopular, lacked credibility, and was widely perceived as inept and corrupt. These factors, combined with the mass resignation of the cabinet, controversial proposals for constitutional change, and support from armed groups allied with the former Saleh dictatorship led to a power vacuum that enabled the Huthi militia (despite representing only the Zaidi minority in the north of the country) to emerge as the most potent military force in Yemen.

Popular resistance to the Huthi takeover

Despite having participated in various forms of nonviolent action in previous years, the Huthi militia made a decision to begin engaging in violence, and on July 10, 2014 they attacked the city of Amran, overrunning a military base, seizing a large array of weaponry, and killing dozens of soldiers and civilians in the process. While the Hadi government was unpopular, the Huthi attack was also summarily rejected by many Yemenis, and the following day massive protests took place in Amran, Sana, Taiz, Ibb, Hadramout, Dhamar, Al Bayda, and Ad-Dhale'e, condemning the Huthi attack (along with Israel's military campaign in Gaza), demanding investigations of the incident and a return of the stolen weapons.

In August 2014, the Huthi's surprised the world by seizing the capital of Sana'a, which led to a new round of anti-Huthi protests in September, with hundreds of thousands marching in Taiz against what they called "threats of royalists" along with calls to resist the violent groups that were trying to impose their control by force.

Major student protests swept the country throughout the fall, primarily in Hodaidah, Ibb and Baydha. On November 2, hundreds of students and employees of the Sana'a University formed a silent chain around their campus, raising signs with slogans condemning the control of their campus by the Huthis. Protests were continuous, with students insisting they would not stop until the "Huthi occupation" ended. As a result of ongoing protests, Huthi forces finally withdrew from the university on December 10.

In addition to demonstrations, a wave of strikes took place across the country targeting a variety of sectors where the Huthis attempted to assert their control: in addition to universities and high schools, the military academy in Sana'a, the judiciary in several cities, and fuel production facilities in Shabwa were shut down. Hundreds of prisoners held captive by the Huthis went on hunger strike, as did President Hadi while under house arrest prior to his escape. Scores of prominent Yemenis have resigned from their posts in protest, including governors, police chiefs, senior military officials, and top administrators in transportation, medicine, communications, and other sectors.

Young activists, many taking advantage of social media networking, have played a role in resisting the Huthi armed advance and have tried to emphasize the need for national unity and nonviolent means of settling differences. A September 28 protest in front of the Ministry of Youth and Sports in Sana'a incorporated national songs and dances in order to emphasize Yemenis' commonalities and to condemn the presence of armed groups. Protesters chanted such slogans as "Dear my country, rise and shine, no weapons after today" and "Altogether for a capital without weapons." Similar themes were stressed in a December 13 demonstration calling for national unity and nonviolent action with protesters marching from Change Square to the president's house. The largest protests during this period took place on January 26, 2015 in response to the Huthi consolidation of their takeover, in which tens of thousands took the streets in Sana'a despite violent repression by the Huthis.

By the end of January, a number of tribal groups and other associations declared they would no longer comply with orders, military or otherwise, coming from the Huthi-dominated government in Sana'a. The Huthis began recognizing that control of government buildings in the capital did not necessarily mean control of the country, even in areas where their forces were present.

A series of mass protests took place in response to the detention of anti-Huthi activists, the most significant of which took place in Ibb on February 15. Thousands of nonviolent protesters who took to the streets were met with gunfire, with armed forces trying to separate the mass demonstration into smaller more controllable units. The protesters not only held their ground, but were able to seize a number of armed Huthis. As these citizens maintained nonviolent discipline and refused to disperse, Huthi-led security forces then refused commands by their superiors to continue firing on the crowd, calling it "deliberate repression of peaceful demonstrators."

Remarkably, even with the dramatic escalation in fighting last month with the Huthi advance southward and the subsequent Saudi military intervention, nonviolent resistance has continued. The most impressive episodes took place in Taiz, located between Sana'a and the strategic port city of Aden. On March 19, Huthi militiamen seized the important Yemeni Special Forces camp on its outskirts and were expected to shortly take over the entire city, no longer defended by Yemeni government troops, who had fled or defected. However, largely youthful demonstrators massed outside gates of the captured base, raising banners rejecting the Houthis' armed presence, and remained encamped to physically block additional militiamen from entering the area. The region's governor, Shawki Ahmed Hayel, called on all Taizis to join the sit-ins and remain in place until the Huthis left the city.

On March 21, armed Huthis militiamen attempted to break up the "human wall" surrounding the base with teargas and gunfire, killing several unarmed demonstrators. This resulted in a public backlash, with hundreds of thousands marching the following day from the center of the city demanding that the Huthis withdraw their gunmen from Taiz. By March 24, a general strike was in effect to demand Huthi withdrawal from city. Taiz effectively shut down and the mostly youthful protesters set up roadblocks preventing access to the city by Huthi reinforcements. Despite additional casualties among the protesters, the Huthis — who just days earlier were presumed to have been preparing to occupy the entire city — were forced to withdraw from the captured base and surrounding areas.

Conclusion

The recent military intervention by Saudi Arabia has resulted in a mixed response. Popular anger at the Huthi aggression has led many Yemenis to support the Saudi air strikes, with rallies in support of the bombing taking place in Ibb, Hodeidah, and Taiz. Larger rallies in opposition have taken place in Sana'a and Amran. Even among those who oppose the Huthis, there is widespread suspicion regarding Saudi intentions and actions due to their previous interventions in Yemen's internal affairs, their support for authoritarian and extremist elements, their maltreatment of Yemeni guest workers, and their ultra-conservative Salafi brand of Islam.

The Saudi role in creating conditions for the current crisis by marginalizing civil society elements in supporting Hadi's takeover of the presidency and their overall aspirations in the Arabian Peninsula have led many Yemenis to fear that once again they seek to usurp nonviolent nationalist pro-democracy forces. In addition, there has been widespread outrage at the large-scale civilian casualties resulting from the Saudi air assault.

It was the sidelining of civil society and leaders of the 2011 nonviolent pro-democracy struggles by the Saudis, GCC states, and the US which helped create the current crisis. It would therefore behove the international community not to similarly ignore the hundreds of thousands of Yemenis who, in the midst of the current chaos and violence, have again taken to the streets in unarmed civil resistance.

The history and ongoing manifestations of nonviolent action in Yemen is greater than is generally perceived by the outside world, which has long dismissed the country as "primitive," "violent," "tribal," "chaotic," and incapable of handling its own affairs. The most effective means of ensuring stability and resisting the Huthis, Al-Qaeda, or other armed extremists comes not from backing allied strongmen, but from allowing civil society to take the lead in developing broad-based democratic institutions without the use of arms.

Yet it is in this history of civil resistance that lies the country's greatest hope. The power of Yemenis of various and even competing tendencies to wage their struggles nonviolently is something that should be acknowledged and encouraged, not undermined in pursuit of military solutions to complex political problems.

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