



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE  
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: [contact@chathamhouse.org.uk](mailto:contact@chathamhouse.org.uk)  
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 [www.chathamhouse.org.uk](http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk)

Charity Registration Number: 208223

## Middle East and North Africa Programme Workshop Summary

# Accountability and Political Inclusion in Yemen

November 2010

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions, but the ultimate responsibility for accuracy lies with this document's author(s). The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

## Introduction

This paper is a summary of the discussions which took place during a workshop held at Chatham House on 2 November 2010 on the topic of 'Accountability and Political Inclusion in Yemen'. The workshop brought together a diverse group of Yemeni political and civil society actors with academics, NGOs and policy-makers from the UK, US, EU and GCC. The meeting aimed to facilitate dialogue between these groups and to encourage the generation of new policy ideas to help overcome some of the political challenges currently faced by Yemen.

Key recommendations that emerged from the workshop:

- Civil society organizations in Yemen need to be empowered through training and capacity-building. A UN-sponsored civil society conference in the run-up to the next Friends of Yemen meeting would help civil society actors communicate their needs and concerns to the international community.
- The national dialogue process needs to be broadened, bringing in the voices of non-party opposition groups such as the Houthis and the southern movement. Opposition parties should be included in Yemen's formal meetings with the GCC.
- The Friends of Yemen should address poverty and rights issues more clearly, and increase Yemeni ownership of its agenda through engagement with civil society actors in Yemen.

Other key issues discussed included: transparency and corruption; press freedoms; the Yemeni tribal systems as a both a stabilising factor and a potential social safety net; and the idea of 'state capture' by private interests.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-mémoire for those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

### The Chatham House Rule

"When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed".

## **Political inclusion and accountability**

The workshop began with a discussion of the key political challenges in Yemen, prospects for reform and the role of external actors. Participants were asked to vote on their feelings concerning Yemen's future: whether they were optimistic, pessimistic or uncertain. The vote was evenly divided between the three options, reflecting the complexity of the issues at hand.

## **Rebuilding trust**

Surveys by the Yemen Polling Centre suggest that public confidence in political parties is extremely low, with 58% of the population believing that no party represents them. There is a significant lack of trust between the government and the Yemeni population, as well as between the government and opposition groups. It seems that the government does not see public policy deliberations as leading to constructive outputs, and in turn Yemenis are failing to engage with the political process. The lack of engagement on the part of young people and women is particularly problematic.

A number of promises regarding amending the electoral law have been broken, and there is an urgent need to end the political stalemate over the next round of parliamentary elections, scheduled for April 2011. If the elections go ahead without agreement being reached over the electoral law there is potential for increased unrest as the population loses faith in the democratic process.

Better channels of communication are needed for opposition groups and citizens to convey their sentiments to the government. Yemenis involved in the southern movement continue to feel that the government is not making an effort to listen to their concerns and there is a need for increased dialogue and willingness to compromise on the part of the government. The accusation that the southern movement has ties to al-Qaeda hinders the possibility of resolving the conflict by further decreasing the possibilities for dialogue between the government and the southern movement.

There is a need for greater transparency on the part of the government, particularly with regard to the Sa'dah conflict with the Houthi insurgents. There is very little information available concerning events in the Sa'dah conflict, to the point where it is even unclear to most Yemenis how or why the various episodes of the conflict have begun or ended.

### **Political will**

There remains a serious question mark over whether the current Yemeni administration has the political will to make necessary reforms. Some individuals in the government are committed to reform but there is no sense that they are working together as a team, or that the administration as a whole is behind the reform agenda. The ruling party has been in power for over 30 years and it is difficult to achieve change without significant pressure. The struggle for succession to President Saleh is a significant preoccupation for sections of the elite and may be a greater driver of events than any will to reform.

Extensive reforms are needed before the government can fully tackle the economic, social and political problems Yemen faces. A lack of political will on the part of the current administration could seriously endanger Yemen's chances of overcoming these problems. Domestic and international actors must consider how to create the necessary political will among Yemen's elite.

### **The role of the international community**

The international community has the potential to play a beneficial role in Yemen – particularly with regard to changing the regime's strategic calculus on the issue of reform – but there remain concerns over its involvement. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq loom large in the minds of Yemenis, who fear that kinetic intervention in the form of military action by foreign forces could have a destabilizing effect and aggravate the security situation rather than improve it. The material and political support international actors are lending the Yemeni government may be acting as a disincentive to change, and the international community must consider carefully the impact of its involvement in this respect.

There also remains a question mark over to what extent the international community is managing to act in a unified manner towards Yemen. The inception of the Friends of Yemen group (FoY) has gone some way towards harmonizing the policies of various international actors on Yemen, but it is not clear whether it has succeeded in its aim of involving the GCC countries. Saudi Arabia is a key player but its strategy towards Yemen remains obscure.

While the participants of the workshop felt the formation of the Friends of Yemen group had been a positive step there was nevertheless significant criticism of the FoY's agenda. Some perceive it to be primarily security-focused, aimed at eliminating the threat from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and failing to prioritize the need to fight poverty in Yemen

and defend human rights. Others responded to this criticism by arguing that the FoY agenda fully supports a 'comprehensive approach' which draws together defence, diplomatic and development tracks and is aimed at improving the situation of the Yemeni population and not only at supporting the Yemeni government.

There was agreement over the need for Yemeni ownership of the FoY agenda and the involvement of wider sections of Yemeni society in the FoY process. This would include bringing women's voices to the table and improving the channels of communication with civil society actors and tribal groups. The tribal system provides a *de facto* social safety net for the country and the historical balance of power between the tribes will play a stabilizing role in keeping the country intact, even as the state apparatus comes under greater strain. Advocates of direct tribal engagement reject the assumption made by actors within the international community that democracy and stability are inherently entwined.

### **Break-out groups**

For the second session, participants split into three break-out groups. Following a short discussion in each, participants were asked to identify practical measures, action points and policy recommendations.

### **State-building, reform and accountability**

The discussion on the topic of reform and accountability centred on the recent political history of Yemen and the problem of increasing centralization of power by the president and ruling party. After unification many were optimistic that Yemen would have a bright future as a democratic state, but President Saleh has now remained in power for over 30 years. Some consider that Yemen suffers from 'state capture', a term coined by World Bank researchers to describe a situation where private interests seize the state and maintain a grip on power through pervasive corruption. The presence of AQAP in Yemen may be benefiting the ruling elite by garnering international attention and funds, and allowing the government to avoid enacting much-needed reforms.

The participants identified two key issues: corruption at both the institutional level and the state level ('state capture'); and the disconnect between the government and the people. It was emphasized that the international community should not support the Yemeni government unconditionally in return for governmental cooperation in the fight against AQAP.

### **Civil society, human rights, and the media**

While civil society and an independent press began to grow after unification, their condition has recently seen a marked deterioration; the environment for civil society activity has been shrinking. NGO workers face increasing difficulties in carrying out their work in Yemen, and local NGOs struggle through not receiving sufficient donor support and not being separated from international NGOs. Those working in the media face constant fear of detainment, as has been recently highlighted by the Committee to Protect Journalists. Reporters and editors are routinely arrested, and there is a lack of transparency in the judicial process.

Participants saw the Friends of Yemen as a key partner for civil society actors in Yemen, having the potential to use its leverage to protect aid workers. Partnership with civil society organizations would also be an important way to create local ownership of FoY policies. However, there is significant concern that poverty and rights issues are not on the FoY agenda, with security issues taking priority.

### **Political inclusion and legitimacy: the national dialogue**

While the Sa'dah war and unrest in the south contribute to the overall sense of instability, both conflicts were described as being vehicles for eliminate elite political competition.

The Sa'dah conflict cannot be understood as a Shi'i struggle, nor as the expression of a coherent Zaydi ideology. The Houthi family control an area the size of Lebanon; and they want to be involved in national politics, but not in a way that jeopardizes their control or compromises their authority. The Houthis need a new framework for engagement that bypasses traditional mediation with the central state. Options include empowerment for civil society, youth education to help break the cycle of violence and media outreach to promote new communication channels.

Southerners argue that they have been trying – and failing – to engage the regime in dialogue since the 1994 civil war; now they want to the international community to listen to their grievances. The southern movement is the expression of a political problem that requires a political solution, and cannot be solved by recourse to traditional forms of cash-based patronage. Trust in dialogue with the government is breaking down, as previous agreements on prisoner amnesties have not been implemented. The GCC states or the international community are needed to act as mediators to ensure that any subsequent agreement is implemented.

## **Recommendations**

With few exceptions, the policy ideas fed back in the final session clustered around three main topics, highlighting how much hope the participants have invested in these key areas.

### **Friends of Yemen**

A significant number of action points proposed were for improvements to the FoY process and its communications strategy. The FoY was encouraged to nominate a representative to enable it to communicate better as an institution. To counter perceptions that the agenda is dominated by security issues, it should establish a dedicated working group on poverty and human rights and put a stronger emphasis on civic empowerment by establishing key partnerships with civil society actors. Human rights issues should be brought to the fore as a necessary complement to the FoY's security and development agenda.

### **Civil society**

A high proportion of the recommendations focused on the role of civil society organizations (CSOs). The international community was encouraged to work with CSOs to access views at the community level as well as helping them to generate pressure for reform. Specific suggestions included training and capacity-building, supporting the participation of women and young people. New suggestions for community-based development partnerships included empowering NGOs in tribal areas and working with the Yemeni diaspora in Western donor states. The UN was urged to host a civil society conference in the run-up to the next Friends of Yemen meeting in Riyadh 2011, to enable better coordination amongst CSOs and provide a platform for civil society actors to get items onto the agenda of the FoY meeting.

### **National dialogue**

A number of recommendations focused on broadening the national dialogue to make it more inclusive and accountable, particularly with respect to involving the southern movement and the Houthis. Options for direct international involvement were also explored, along with the suggestion that there should be an initiative to invite and engage female community leaders in the national dialogue process. The important place of dialogue in Yemeni

culture suggests that it will be key in resolving Yemen's current problems, but the scale of the dialogue process is a significant challenge.

### **Final thoughts**

One participant noted the lack of an animating collective vision for Yemen. Also highlighted was the distinction between negotiation and dialogue: a warning of the risk that dialogue without effective negotiation has the potential to lead to violence.

At the conclusion of the workshop the participants considered which policy suggestion would be their top priority, and which would be the hardest to implement. The recommendation that the international community should directly address high-level corruption was perceived as the most difficult action point to implement, followed by the suggestion of prioritizing the issue of press freedom in the national dialogue process.

A recommendation to widen inclusion in Yemen's application process to the GCC by inviting opposition groups to formal meetings with the GCC was judged as the highest priority, followed by the suggestion of a UN-sponsored civil society conference.

For a more complete picture of the policy ideas generated by this workshop please refer to the appendix of this report, which also gives a breakdown of the vote.



## Appendix: Process and Recommendations

The workshop was split into three sessions, and began with a plenary discussion on the key political issues facing Yemen today. This was followed by a second session in which the participants split into three break-out groups in order to discuss aspects of the topic in more depth and to look at policy solutions for the key political challenges, working in small groups. Each sub-group was asked to generate a single policy idea or action point, and these were fed back to the group as a whole in a final plenary session.

Below is a table with a full set of the policy suggestions generated during the workshop, with a breakdown of the vote by participants on which ideas they saw as having the highest priority and which they thought would be hardest to implement.

Policy suggestion or action point	Top priority	Hardest to implement
Inclusion in GCC application. Bring the opposition political parties into the formal meetings with the GCC and invite NGOs as observers.	11	0
UN-facilitated civil society conference to agree items they want to see on the agenda of the next FoY meeting and potential roles they could play.	6	0
Issue: state capture. Policy objective: vertical programme to disperse power and wealth. Response: honest message in support of this objective to both regime and people of Yemen, creating incentives/removing disincentives for regime to support policy	4	13
Dialogue and only dialogue is key to the Yemen problem	3	3
Increase honesty of the international community with respect to pressure of internal actors to compromise	3	5
Increased funding for training and capacity-building for local community leaders and NGOs in Yemen (especially for youth organizations).	3	0
Involving the southern movement directly with the other political parties in the National Dialogue, and with international involvement.	2	2
FoY: 1) Simultaneous emphasis on civic empowerment alongside security and development. 2) Key partnerships. 3) FoY 'desk' to monitor human rights violations	2	0
Invite and engage female community leaders in Yemen in the dialogue.	2	0
Fostering a free press as a key part of opposition and prioritizing it in the national dialogue process. Encouraging regime figures to see it as constructive	1	7

1) Strengthening support for grassroots civil society organizations. 2) Encourage clarity and more realistic solutions to the PLND national rescue plan.	1	0
Getting poverty and rights more squarely on the agenda of the FoY.	1	0
Urge FoY to include human rights as a necessary complement to its political, economic, security and development agenda, by ensuring effective implementations of Human Rights Treaty Body recommendations.	1	0
Anti-corruption drive. Small/realistic focus on one organization, e.g. the police. Training and showing benefits of dealing with corruption.	1	4
Strengthening civil society, including youth and women's groups, enabling them to articulate needs and influence policy.	0	0
International support for national dialogue, including: 1) participating in a National Dialogue conference in Yemen; 2) private mediation, including by international individuals, organizations and states.	0	0
Intensifying NGO presence in tribal areas. Building capacity and understanding public concerns and views, especially in tribal areas.	0	1
Yemeni polling to understand local grievances, to then inform the national dialogue.	0	0