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PEOPLE'S PEACEMAKING PERSPECTIVES

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Yemen

YEMEN'S CIVIL PROTEST MOVEMENT is the largest in its history and the longest-running of the Arab Spring uprisings. Though it has been increasingly overshadowed by violent power struggles within the elite, the protest movement has given unprecedented hope to millions of Yemenis.

Seventy-five percent of Yemen's 24 million population is under the age of 25 and Yemeni youth have been instrumental in challenging the country's exclusionary politics. However, they are not just voicing a set of grievances; many have begun to articulate visions for a more inclusive political settlement that would guarantee long-term peace and security. The protests have created unprecedented opportunities for young people, including women, to debate the future shape of Yemeni society and politics. Any future system will need to be responsive to these debates, begin addressing the grievances and aspirations which have driven so many to protest, and be legitimate in the eyes of the Yemeni people.

The EU has been at the forefront of international support to the Arab Spring movements in its Southern Neighbourhood. Its stance has raised expectations among Yemeni youth of similar support for their aspirations.

Findings and recommendations in this Policy Brief and accompanying report were generated from consultations with youth from diverse backgrounds in July and August 2011 in four major cities: Sana'a, Taiz, Aden and Al-Mukalla and supplemented by interviews with politicians, religious and tribal authorities, businessmen, experts, and women and youth leaders.

KEY OUTCOMES

- **Build on the opportunity** presented by the protests to support Yemeni aspirations for a more stable and inclusive political system.
- **Promote stronger, better co-ordinated and more transparent international engagement** to end violence in Yemen and contribute to a rapid and peaceful transition.
- **Prioritise inclusion** not just as an end goal, but as an integral feature of ongoing transition processes, ensured at all stages of national and international engagement.
- **Engage with actors outside Sana'a** to avoid overlooking urgent peripheral concerns that are unlikely to be addressed by an elite agreement in Sana'a.
- **Give the 'Southern issue' appropriate priority** in transition negotiations in order to prevent future conflict.

The People's Peacemaking Perspectives project

The People's Peacemaking Perspectives project is a joint initiative implemented by Conciliation Resources and Saferworld and financed under the European Commission's Instrument for Stability. The project provides European Union institutions with analysis and recommendations based on the opinions and experiences of local people in a range of countries and regions affected by fragility and violent conflict.

"The political, social and economic system has become closed off to most people. The system is not delivering or working for its people."

Young woman, Taiz

Findings and Recommendations

1.

Build on the opportunity presented by the protests to support Yemeni aspirations for a more stable and inclusive political system.

"The squares allowed rural, tribal and urban people to meet each other and exchange ideas and thoughts. We realised that our thoughts and demands are united."

Young man, Taiz

In Yemen, most political dialogue takes place in private spaces, which makes it rare for the country's diverse communities to come together to exchange perspectives. During the protests, the sudden eruption of tent cities in 'Change Squares' across the country provided an opportunity for Yemenis of diverse geographical, social and political backgrounds to meet publicly and discuss challenges facing the country. The squares became centres of debate and learning where Yemenis could educate each other. However, the space provided by the squares has been reduced and undermined by ongoing attacks against protestors.

"In the past, women were not allowed to participate in protests. It was considered *ib* [shameful] for a woman to give a speech to men. Now you see women giving public speeches and spending the night in the square. These are very big changes."

Young man, Sana'a

Youth consulted feel that one of the major benefits of the protest squares has been their ability to help bridge gaps and change misperceptions. Women in particular express optimism about the effects the protests have had on the visibility and acceptance of their role in the political process. Young women feel that the public spaces created by the protest movement provided an opportunity for them to educate the public on the political dimension of women's issues.

"Civil society has had a big impact on youth engagement and it has proven to Yemenis that it is the foundation of a democratic state."

Young man, Al-Mukalla

Youth in all cities express excitement at how the protest movement has re-energised civic engagement. It is crucial to build on this optimism and enthusiasm towards peaceful political change and to ensure that the opportunity for open public discussion continues in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Build on the EU's new European Neighbourhood Policy's response to the Arab Spring supporting the development of 'deep democracy' and extend this approach and the attendant funding to Yemen.**
- **Support the development of civil society in Yemen, through a framework similar to the EU's new Civil Society Facility.**
- **Promote civic education and debate among young men and women on their role in peace, security and governance processes, building on the Squares as a space for meeting and learning.**
- **Support dialogue and networks between diverse groups of youth from across the country, including women, entrepreneurs, civil society activists, Southerners, and those from rural areas and support efforts to develop a more co-ordinated and coherent civil society voice.**
- **Support new and emerging television, radio, print and online media and social programming by and for youth, building on existing programmes.**

2.

Promote stronger, better co-ordinated and more transparent international engagement to end violence in Yemen and contribute to a rapid and peaceful transition.

Young people in all four cities closely follow international responses to events in Yemen. External actors are seen to have a key role in resolving the current crisis. But youth are critical of current international engagement, and frustrated with the approach of the United States (US), Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC), as well as the EU and the United Kingdom, which they see as lacking energy, vision and consistency.

Many draw distinctions between the international community's response to protests in Syria and Libya and those in Yemen. Youth interviewed called for greater pressure to be placed on the Yemeni regime, including targeted sanctions against those responsible for violence against protestors. For most, the option of immunity for President Saleh and his key inner circle contained in the GCC initiative is now untenable, given the repeated and ongoing attacks on unarmed protestors.

"The regime uses the illusion of 'human rights' and 'terrorism', in our name and against us, to blackmail the international community into funding and support."

Young woman, Sana'a

Youth feel that the regime manipulates international fears of terrorism to weaken external support for the protest movement. While the EU is viewed most positively compared to other international actors, youth believe that fear of political change and subordination to the interests of the US and Saudi Arabia prevent it taking a stronger stand.



Women attend a demonstration to demand the ousting of Yemen's President Saleh in the southern city of Taiz.

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"Saudi Arabia is threatened by our protest movement. If your neighbour gets new curtains in their house it won't be long until your wife demands new curtains for your house."

Young man, Sana'a

Saudi Arabia, Yemen's biggest neighbour and a key player in the GCC, has the potential to be an invaluable partner in resolving the crisis in Yemen. However, it has not been able to deliver on these expectations or effectively lead the transition process, and Yemeni youth are suspicious of its intentions.

Yemen's multifaceted crisis requires a stronger and more comprehensive approach from the EU and the international community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- React more forcefully to attacks on civilians, beginning with EU sanctions against those who are responsible for repeated and unprovoked attacks on unarmed protesters.
- Follow up on UN Security Council Resolution 2014 (2011), by continuing to exert pressure on all relevant actors in Yemen to commit to a rapid and peaceful transition.
- Support ongoing inquiries into human rights abuses committed against unarmed civilians during the course of the protests.
- Encourage the US and Saudi Arabia to adopt a longer-term approach to co-operation with the Yemeni government on international security and counter-terrorism issues, with a sufficient recognition of the impact an illegitimate political settlement in Yemen would have on the long-term dynamics of radicalisation and conflict.

A new role for women?

Awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to Yemeni political activist Tawakul Karman for her role in the Arab Spring shines a spotlight on the role women have played in Yemen's protest movement. In a country where women face extreme levels of marginalisation and exclusion, the fact that about one-fifth of those taking to the streets every day are women represents perhaps the biggest surprise of Yemen's uprising.

Prior to the protests, much of the discourse around women's rights centred on the political manoeuvring of the various political parties: the regime used the issue to appear modern and democratic to international actors, while elements of the opposition rallied against women's rights to garner support from more conservative forces in society. In Yemen, women have traditionally been discouraged from appearing in public spaces, let alone participating in public protest and political activism.

The positive impact the revolution has had on the visibility and participation of Yemeni women emerged as a prominent theme in the consultations. As soon as protests began, women took to the streets to show that they too were affected by issues of corruption and exclusion. Women gave speeches to tribal leaders in public and often spent nights in the protest squares.

"I went out in the streets to tear down and rebuild, not to tear down and remain silent."

Young woman, Aden

The protest squares allowed women's issues to be discussed openly across the diverse spectrum of Yemeni society, within the broader context of widespread marginalisation. Not insisting on women's rights as a separate struggle has been a tactical choice by activists, who argue that "women's demands go hand-in-hand with youth demands for a more equal society where the rule of law guarantees rights and freedoms." This has allowed some dramatic headway: "Through interacting and being exposed to these issues many men have become aware of the marginalisation of women", said a young protester in Sana'a.

At the same time, a small but strong counter-current of conservative voices emerged in the consultations, which argued that women's role be limited to a narrow range of gendered pursuits. Similarly, young women explained that they face two obstacles to protest: the private struggle within their family for their right to protest, and their struggle against regime thugs in the public arena.

Nonetheless, the increased visibility and participation of women is seen as a symbol of a new Yemen, and youth expressed the desire to build on this development and to promote a greater role for women in Yemeni society. As a young female activist in Taiz said, "It's not complete equality, but it's a beginning, and we have started moving forwards".

3.

Prioritise inclusion

not just as an end goal, but as an integral feature of ongoing transition processes, ensured at all stages of national and international engagement.

"This party system was created, steered and structured by the regime to maintain and reinforce its power."

Young man, Sana'a

Political exclusion emerged as a major factor driving the protests. Youth feel that the current system of political parties, symbolised by President Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) and the oppositional coalition of the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), is used to legitimise and maintain President Saleh's rule. Both the GPC and the JMP are seen to prefer closed-door patrimonial bargaining over inclusive participatory politics.

"There is no difference between the regime and the other parties, including those who are now siding with the revolution."

Young woman, Taiz

Youth express a deep distrust of GPC and JMP party leaders, who they feel are 'part of the problem' and are unrepresentative of the majority of the population. There is also a growing perception that Islah (the largest opposition party within the JMP) is attempting to hijack the protests.

"People need to know and be educated that it's not simply a matter of giving someone 1,500 riyals and telling them to go write your name on the ballot."

Young man, Sana'a

Young people express concern that the transition process proposed by the GCC initiative constitutes a continuation of the closed-door political process in Yemen. They emphasise concerns about the short timeline proposed for the transition and, in particular, that early elections will favour existing political forces now widely

perceived as illegitimate. For Yemeni youth, elections in themselves are not a sign of a successful transition. Electoral reform and education around electoral processes are seen as fundamental prerequisites for legitimate elections. Yemenis are more likely to support a carefully chosen transitional leadership than a government elected from candidates they distrust under rules they want to see changed.

Any transitional process needs to be negotiated in a transparent and open manner and must include representative voices drawn from Yemen's diverse protest movement, rather than relying on unrepresentative formal leadership.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Adjust the timescale for elections under the GCC initiative to reflect a longer period of transition, ensuring the necessary pre-election processes are in place to support a more legitimate election. Short time-lines will favour existing political forces that are increasingly perceived as illegitimate, and are unlikely to create a stable and legitimate transitional government.
- Ensure that any internationally-backed transition plan that is adopted ensures inclusion and participation of Yemeni youth and women at every stage.
- Build the capacity of young men and women to participate effectively at all levels of the political process, including through supporting the establishment of a civil society advocacy platform that would better connect youth to national and international policymakers.

4.

Engage with actors outside Sana'a to avoid overlooking urgent peripheral concerns that are unlikely to be addressed by an elite agreement in Sana'a.

"The international community doesn't really have an idea of what's actually happening on the ground. The focus is only on actors in the capital."

Young woman, Taiz

The worsening security situation has severely constrained the ability of international actors, including humanitarian aid agencies, to travel and engage with peripheral parts of the country. Activities in Sana'a often have little impact on events outside the capital. This is a reflection of a growing fragmentation of the country into increasingly localised conflict dynamics, which are often only peripherally related to goings-on in Sana'a, and increasingly unlikely to be addressed by an elite agreement at the centre.

"In Aden we have no communication with the EU mission or with embassies, but in Sana'a we heard there was a lot of contact and they felt their concerns were being heard. This creates a gap, not just between us and the international community but also within the Yemeni community."

Young man, Aden

Youth based outside the capital, particularly in the South, express both frustration at their lack of access to international policymakers and organisations and distrust in the ability of Sana'a-based elites to act as a conduit for their concerns. They highlight the inability of poor people to protest and make their voices heard, which has often meant that they continue to be overlooked in national and international level policy and programming.

5.

Give the 'Southern issue' appropriate priority in transition negotiations in order to prevent future conflict.

"Families are too busy struggling to make a living, digging their lands. They cannot leave their lands behind and go protest."

Rural youth

While national-level political elites are being called into question, local-level institutions retain a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the population. Local administration, including local councils and informal local authority figures, are widely seen by young people as being better able to address immediate challenges than national-level actors in the capital.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations in Yemen, and pressure formal and informal authorities to provide full access to areas such as Sa'ada, Abyan and Aden.
- Scale-up programming and personnel and review security guidelines in order to ensure greater capacity of the EU's Delegation in Yemen, and undertake scoping missions outside Sana'a to assess programming needs beyond the capital.
- Increase EU understanding of conflict and insecurity dynamics at local levels in order to better inform policies and programmes and ensure they are conflict-sensitive.
- Expand local-level projects, including dedicated calls for proposals for local authorities, that have the potential to support the provision of more appropriate and decentralised good governance to the Yemeni public.

"They send in teachers from the North who teach us, and the history that they teach us is not our true Hadrami history."

Young woman, Hadramout

For most Southerners, the protests did not begin in Sana'a in January 2011, but rather in Aden in 2007 and remain very much framed within the context of Southern demands for a form of decentralisation or, at its most extreme, for secession. The nationwide protests of 2011 facilitated co-operation between Southern and Northern protesters to challenge the current system and provide a fresh opportunity to peacefully resolve the Southern issue. Among youth consulted in Southern governorates, and particularly in Hadramout, these grievances relate to a desire for greater participation in the political process, more control over local resources and the protection of their local identity, history and culture.

"For twenty years we've been excluded politically and economically. The Southern issue is in our hearts and remains a fundamental issue."

Young woman, Aden

If the Southern issue is not given priority within the negotiations around political transition, there is a high likelihood of future conflict in Yemen. While the international community continues to officially support a unified Yemen, they must remain open to a renegotiation of the relationship between the central government and regional entities. The protest movement has created a space where nationwide discussions around federalism and decentralisation can take place, providing a rare opportunity to

redefine the political settlement that addresses the legitimate demands of the South. However, this space is closing as frustrations grow over the ongoing political stalemate and Southern support for the nationwide uprisings begins to falter.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Promote the appropriate prioritisation of the 'Southern issue' within a Yemeni dialogue process through facilitating discussions, public statements and increased engagement with Southern actors.
- Commission research into the underlying grievances in the South, the economic and political costs and benefits of decentralisation and other conflict resolution options.
- Strengthen programming that would address particular grievances in the South, including in the areas of cultural identity, political rights and economic opportunity.
- Support dialogue and networks that bring together actors from the North and South of the country to discuss issues of mutual concern and support nationwide efforts to engage in peaceful debate on these issues.



This map is intended for illustrative purposes only. Saferworld and Conciliation Resources take no position on whether this representation is legally or politically valid.

"The revolution taught me how to demand my rights."

Young man, in Sana'a

The cover picture shows anti-government protesters holding hands during a rally to demand the ousting of Yemen's President Saleh in Sana'a, May 2011. © THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION

References and Acknowledgements

The findings in this Policy Brief were drawn from a wider report entitled *Public Protest and Visions for Change* conducted by Saferworld under the People's Peacemaking Perspectives project. For full details of the project and the report on which this brief is based, please visit: www.saferworld.org.uk/PPP

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Methodology

Given the large youth demographic in Yemen and their role in the public protests, understanding their perspectives on peace and security issues is vital. To do so, Saferworld convened a total of twelve group discussions across the four major cities of Sana'a, Aden, Taiz and Al-Mukalla. These cities were selected in order to provide a diverse geographical selection. Within each location, care was taken to ensure a balance of opinion that included independent youth, those associated with political parties, tribal youth, rural youth, and youth who did not engage in any form of protest.

Within each city, three group consultations were held, with young men, young women and community leaders. Additionally, interviews were conducted with ten experts, leaders and authority figures within each society to provide a more in-depth analysis of local perspectives on the conflict. This provided an opportunity to include perspectives of government and oppositional forces, political party representatives, tribal and religious authorities, business people, women leaders and civil society actors, and national and international NGOs.

Consultations were conducted in Arabic and structured to encourage maximum engagement from participants. The main themes for discussion were: grievances driving people to protest in Yemen; the actors and governance processes best able to address those grievances; decision-making and leadership in current and future governance processes; visions for peace-building; and the engagement of the international community. These ideas were validated in a one-day workshop convened in Cairo in October 2011, which brought together Yemeni youth with international policymakers from the UK, EU and international and non-governmental organisations.

Saferworld's Yemen programme, established in 2010, focuses on combatting exclusion, increasing access to political, security and justice processes for marginalised groups, and increasing the conflict sensitivity of external actors.