Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen

Like other Arab revolutions in 2011, it is said that Yemen's rebellion was modeled on street protests in Tunis and Cairo. As this erudite new study explains, however, what happened in Yemen is far from being a mere echo of events elsewhere. In fact, the popular uprisings that came as a surprise in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria were already well under way in Yemen. As early as 2007, this country on the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula was embroiled in sit-ins, demonstrations, and open rebellion against the government. The author ably demonstrates how Yemen's political upheaval is rooted in divisions and conflicts of the past, especially the country's troubled national unification in 1990. Based on years of in-depth field research, this book unravels the complexities of the Yemeni state and its domestic politics with a particular focus on the post-1990 years. The central thesis is that Yemen continues to suffer from regional fragmentation, which has endured for centuries. En route the book discusses the rise of President Salih, his tribal and family connections, Yemen's civil war in 1994, the war's consequences later in the decade, the spread of radical movements after the U.S. military response to 9/11, and finally developments leading to the historic events of 2011. Politics in this strategically important country is crucial for many reasons, not least on account of its links to al-Qaeda terrorism. The United States and Western allies have good reason to regard Yemen as a security risk. This book sets a new standard for scholarship on Yemeni politics and is essential reading for anyone interested in the modern Middle East, the 2011 Arab revolts, and twenty-first-century Islamic politics.

Stephen W. Day is Adjunct Professor of Middle East Politics at the Hamilton Holt School at Rollins College. He has written for many journals, including *Middle East Journal*, *Middle East Policy*, and Publications of the *Carnegie Foundation*.

Cambridge Middle East Studies 37

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Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen

A Troubled National Union

STEPHEN W. DAY
Rollins College

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013–2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107606593

First published 2012

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Day, Stephen W., 1961–
Regionalism and rebellion in Yemen : a troubled national union / Stephen W. Day.
p. cm. – (Cambridge Middle East studies ; 37)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-107-02215-7 (hardback) – ISBN 978-1-107-60659-3 (paperback)
1. Regionalism – Yemen (Republic) 2. Government, Resistance to – Yemen (Republic) 3. Yemen (Republic) – Politics and government – 21st century.
4. Yemen (Republic) – Politics and government – 20th century. 5. Yemen (Republic) –Strategic aspects. I. Title.
JQ 1842.A38R433 2012
953.305′3–dc23 2011039452

ISBN 978-1-107-02215-7 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-107-60659-3 Paperback

The photograph on the cover depicts the aftermath of a tragic scene in the city of Taiz on May 29, 2011, when Yemen's republican guard and central security forces stormed "Freedom Square," where peaceful protesters had camped for months as a rallying point for demonstrations against President Salih's regime. The invading troops fired live ammunition, including heavy anti-aircraft weapons and RPGs, on unarmed citizens, many of whom had taken shelter in tents that provided shelter whenever they slept in shifts outdoors. During the attack, at least four protesters died, some burned alive inside the tents, including disabled youth unable to flee without their wheelchairs and crutches. Many more people were left with serious injuries. According to the photographer, Wael al-Absi, before capturing this image on his camera, he and others had tried to dissuade the troops from attacking, pleading that all Yemenis are brothers and sisters. But the troops apparently acted under strict orders to carry out their murderous assault. After the injured were rescued, and the corpses of martyrs retrieved, Wael al-Absi snapped this photo of a man using a blanket to extinguish flames engulfing one of many tents that were intentionally ignited by soldiers. The anonymous man struggles as he fans the fire, while seeking to put out the flames. Credit: Wael al-Absi, and Aleshteraki.net newspaper.

In memory of the late professor
Othman Said Qasim al-Mikhlafi,
whose dedication to democratic principles and
resistance against government corruption and dysfunction
inspired the research contained in this book.

May Othman's children and grandchildren
always know the continued value of his work,
and one day realize the promise of his vision
for a Yemen governed in each province and district
for the sake of social justice.

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Preface

I first submitted the bulk of this book's manuscript to Cambridge University Press in October 2010. At the time, I wrote urgently to the senior Middle East editor in New York City, Marigold Acland, predicting the collapse of Yemen's government. "Do I have a manuscript for you!" is a parody of my words, yet it captures the thrust of my message. At the time, I had a working title, *Yemen Unraveling*. Marigold was patient with my enthusiasm, two months before a Tunisian youth named Muhammad Bouazizi set himself on fire in Sidi Bouzid, unleashing dramatic mass street protests in Tunis and later Cairo, Egypt. By the end of January 2011, it was clear that the entire Arab world was witnessing a remarkable historical event. The following month, large street rallies commenced in Yemen, and by April it was obvious that the government of Yemen would not long endure.

Over the summer of 2011 Marigold presented a contract for publication. I was busy following every development in Yemen, as well as in other Arab countries caught in the "Arab spring," including Libya, Bahrain, and Syria. By then, the politics of Tunisia and Egypt had receded into the background, and these other Arab states, including Yemen, drew more media attention. It was fortunate, while the process of editing my manuscript got under way, I had an opportunity to add new content that could account for the dramatic developments across 2011. Some frustration came from the fact that the Yemeni president was more determined to hold on to power than either Ben Ali of Tunisia or Husni Mubarak of Egypt. Anyone who has written current political history for later publication in print can appreciate the uncertainty under which I worked on the book's conclusion.

When Yemeni President Ali Abdallah Salih was injured in a bombing at his palace in June 2011, and then evacuated for treatment in Saudi Arabia,

I sweated over a decision to change all of my references to his political leadership to past tense. After Salih miraculously recovered from his injuries and returned to Yemen in September, appearing as the zombie foe of the "Arab spring," I worried that the past tense phrases may need to be switched back to present tense. It was an enormous relief on November 23, 2011, when Salih finally signed the Gulf Cooperation Council agreement to transfer his executive powers and resign all but his ceremonial title as president. This came one week before the final deadline that I had agreed to meet. Thus the timing of political events on the ground cooperated surprisingly well with production of this book.

Given the legacy of Yemeni politics, both old and recent, it is possible that after the book enters the printing process developments on the ground may alter the meaning of this narrative. Of course, this is the nature of working on current political themes, although the case of Yemen in 2011 may be more extreme. Yemen's politics is constantly perplexing because the land is a quixotic place, and its people are more prone than others to open contestation and rapid reversals of position. Nonetheless, I hope this book effectively explains the broader background to the remarkable events of 2011 in Yemen, while providing a complete account of what took place during the year. What the year 2012 holds for Yemen is entirely another matter.

In the choice of titles for the book, I resisted using the word "revolution." Recent events in Yemen have certainly been revolutionary, not least in social terms. But the determination of whether or not their political effects amount to a revolution remains for scholars and analysts in the years to come. It is my hope that the new year and years to come bring a fulfillment of all the promises Yemeni unification held in 1990, so the people of this country can enjoy peace, prosperity, and a much brighter future. The continued failure of Yemeni politics will bring much darker times for its people, and people of the entire region.

This is my first book on Yemen. It results from seventeen years of research, which accumulated in boxes and files since the start of my doctoral dissertation at Georgetown University in 1995. I lived and studied in Yemen between 1995 and 1997, and then briefly traveled back for more research in 1998 and 2002. My last trip was a limited one in the late summer of 2005. Thus it has been a few years since I set foot in the country. I still manage to keep an active understanding of developments through contacts with friends inside Yemen, as well as the miracles of computerized telecommunication, the Internet, Arabic news Web sites and weblogs, and more recently Twitter.

It is remarkable how much a Yemen researcher can accomplish today sitting in central Florida, with a computer, compared to when I first started my studies in the early 1990s. However, I would trade this technology, and what it can do in the hands of a researcher, for a month of travels inside Yemen. There is no substitute for living in the country, following events in person, and bearing witness. I look forward to returning soon. There is already a *plus ça change* sense about the Arab uprisings of 2011. The most ardent street protesters in Cairo, Egypt, bitterly protested its transitional elections in late November, reoccupying Maidan al-Tahrir and calling for the military tribunal's immediate abolition. A deep suspicion exists in the Arab world that current political transitions are stage-managed so that little change actually takes place, belying most media reports. As Galal Amer wrote from Cairo on November 24, 2011: "We're making a big fuss about wallpaper without really changing the apartment, like the man who owns a donkey and wants to pretend it's a mighty camel." If there can be genuine revolutionary change in the Arab world, then the hardest work begins after the transition, when democratic vigilance is needed most.

A word is needed about the book's translation and transliteration of Arabic. I sought consistency by using a reverse apostrophe [‘] for *‘ayn*; and an accent grave [`] for *hamza*. All other essential diacritical marks are missing. Thus, although the distinction between Arabic letters, *daal* (d) and *dhal* (dh), is obvious, other similar Arabic letters with no equivalent in the Latin alphabet are not indicated. For the sake of simplicity, I use common English spelling of words such as Yemen, Ottoman, and al-Qaeda. Whenever the English spelling of proper nouns and names with *‘ayn* has been popularized, I abandon the diacritical marks. For instance, Abdallah and Abd al-Aziz, as well as names of better known cities, such as Sanaa, Aden, and Taiz. Lesser known cities and places, such as al-Dali‘ and Yafi‘, appear with diacritical marks. In order to keep the text more accessible to readers who are unfamiliar with Arabic, I provide English translations of all Arabic titles that appear in footnotes. Throughout the book I translate *muhafatha* as "province," not governorate, even though the latter is common in books about Yemen's local administrative units. When referring to individual Yemenis, I first give their full names, but thereafter use their customary first names. For example, the late Shaykh Abdallah bin Husayn al-Ahmar appears more frequently as Shaykh Abdallah. The exceptions are individuals better known by their last names, such as the ousted President Salih.

Acknowledgments

It is impossible to count the people who assisted the research in this book. There are literally hundreds in Yemen and the United States. I should begin by thanking professors at Georgetown University who served as mentors when I began my doctoral dissertation on Yemen in the middle 1990s. In particular, the late distinguished and beloved professor Dr. Hanna Batatu, who always insisted on the value of examining politics in its fullest social, economic, cultural, and historical dimensions. No element in this process is insignificant for the sake of sound political analysis, thus requiring patience and a good supply of ink pens. Dr. Michael C. Hudson offered much appreciated advice and counsel over the years. Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies made possible my Ph.D. studies through a generous graduate fellowship. I will always be thankful for this first-rate institution in Washington, DC.

Two of my research trips to Yemen were made possible by fellowships from the American Institute for Yemeni Studies. Dr. Maria de Jesus Ellis and Dr. Christopher Edens, as well as others who served on the staff of the AIYS residence in Sanaa, provided great help over the years. Inside Yemen, I owe special thanks to the late Professor Othman al-Mikhlafi who served as my primary advisor. Without his expertise about Yemen's government administration, a willingness to make introductions to individuals inside and outside of government, and the generosity with which he shared his own time, my research would never have started or finished the same way. In countless *qat* sessions with Othman, who had earlier traveled to Europe and throughout the Middle East where he found causes for joy greater than what was so distasteful about Yemeni politics during the late 1990s and

early 2000s, he refused any hint of *joie de vivre* beyond what the bitter taste of *qat* could provide. In his words, "I will not celebrate until the dictator Ali Abdallah Salih is removed from power." It is tragic that he did not live to see this day. Had he lived until 2011, he would have fiercely supported the youthful street protesters in Sanaa, Taiz, Aden, and other cities, urging them to keep standing up for their dignity and human rights, even after Salih resigned.

Also in Yemen my research benefited from assistance by a number of people at universities in Sanaa, Taiz, and Aden; the Yemeni Center for Research and Studies, the National Institute of Administrative Sciences, the Ministry of Local Administration and Ministry of Civil Service in Sanaa; and staff at provincial offices throughout the country. Most noteworthy are Dr. Abduh Ali Othman, Dr. Muhammad Husayn Shamsan, the late Dr. Abd al-Aziz al-Tarmoum, Dr. Abd al-Aziz al-Maqaleh, Dr. Muhammad al-Mutawakkel, Dr. Ahmad Ali Sultan, Dr. Abd al-Aziz al-Baghdadi, and Dr. Muhammad Ahmed al-Mikhlafi, founder of the Yemeni Observatory for Human Rights and now minister of legal affairs in Yemen's transitional government. I benefited from many long conversations with the brave, always insightful independent journalists of Yemen, including Hisham Bashraheel, his brother Tamam, son Bashar, and their *al-Ayyam* staff throughout the country; the late Dr. Abd al-Aziz al-Sakkaf, founder of the *Yemen Times*, whose daughter Nadia now carries on his proud legacy; and the late Omar al-Jawwi and his colleagues at *al-Tagammu'a*.

I must mention individuals whose kindness in Yemen never failed, not least the late Mahfouz al-Shamakh, Najeeb Shamiri, Sadiq Amin Abu Ras, Abd al-Malik al-'Ulafi, Abdallah Ghanem, Amin Qasim, Hassan Ba Zara'a, and Othman Abd al-Jabar; the fine poets Ahmad al-'Awadi and Said al-Shadadi, the late poet Muhammad Haitham, Abd al-Nasser al-Mude'a, Muhammad and Khaled al-Iryani, Abd al-Qaddus al-Bishari, and the young Ahmad Sharaf al-Din; my YCRS students Thaira Sha'alan, Aisha Dammaj, as well as Altaf, Akram, Qaid, Abd al-Karim, Abd al-Kafi, and many others, including the late Abd al-Rahman al-Amiri who was indispensable for my learning Yemeni dialects; from Taiz Abd al-Kader al-Guneid, Omar Itzak, Izzedine Said Ahmed, and Shawki Ahmad Hayel Said; from Aden Badr Naji Muhammad, Khaled Abd al-Wahed Numan, Badr Ba Sunaid, Abdallah Ibrahim, Hasan Hubaishi, Abdallah Abadan, Wahbi Uqba, Raqiyya Hamaidan, Salih Ba Surra, Aishe al-Douh, Muhammad Said Muqbil, and Farouq Bin Shamlan; from Hadramaut Saad al-Din Talib, Abd al-Rahman Bukair, Husayn Jailani, Mahmoud Ben Dahdah, Ahmad Ba Raoud, Awadh Bahrak, Abd al-Rahman

al-Saqqaf, Salih Ba Qais, Muhsin al-Amoudi, Alawi Bin Sumait, and Salah al-Baiti.

I want to acknowledge the critical role played by the Middle East editor at the New York City office of Cambridge University Press, Marigold Acland. I thank her for encouraging the inclusion of my research in the Cambridge Middle East Studies series. At Cambridge, I also want to thank Joy Mizan for her assistance; Mark Fox and Joe LeMonnier for their work on the book's maps and photographs; and Laura Lawrie in Sedona, Arizona, for her project management and copyediting. I appreciate Wael al-Absi's artistry and bravery as a photographer in Taiz, Yemen, and his agreement to let me use his photo on the cover of this book. Thanks also to the publishers and photographers of *Yemen Times*, *al-Ayyam*, and *al-Masdar* for allowing me to include a few of their photos on inside pages. Any errors and omissions are my own.

Parts of this book's manuscript first appeared in other forms as articles in academic journals and online publications. I especially thank Michael Dunn, editor of the *Middle East Journal* in Washington, DC, who first published my essay on Yemen's southern al-Hirak in the summer of 2008. Much of this essay, "Updating Yemeni National Unity: Could Lingering Regional Divisions Bring Down the Regime?" appears in Chapter 8. John Calabrese, editor of the Middle East Institute's online publication, *Viewpoints*, published my essay about the cancellation of Yemen's 2009 parliamentary election. Anne Joyce, editor of *Middle East Policy*, published my earlier 2007 article comparing and contrasting the politics of regionalism inside Yemen and Iraq. I am grateful to the late, dearly missed, Christopher Boucek of the Carnegie Foundation, who thought of including my analysis of al-Hirak in the 2010 book *Yemen on the Brink*, which he coedited with Dr. Marina Ottaway. Finally, I am appreciative of the excellent work done by Dr. Bassam Haddad and others on the staff of *Jadaliyya*'s Web site, who provided the best continuous coverage of the Arab revolutions in 2011. Thank you for being willing to include three essays of mine about Yemen.

I want to acknowledge other colleagues who have helped shape my thinking about Yemeni politics, whether on conference panels or in personal exchanges. In particular, Dr. Sheila Carapico, whose decades of research has gained well-deserving acclaim and have greatly influenced my view of Yemen; and Dr. Bob Burrowes, who likewise blazed an early path down which all other American researchers walk whenever they enter into the study of Yemen. I also want to thank Dr. Abdu

Sharif, Dr. Muhammad Zabarah, Tarek al-Wazir and the Yemeni Heritage and Research Center, Dr. Renaud Detalle, Dr. Lisa Wedeen, and the new generation of Yemen researchers, April Longley, Gregory Johnsen, Sarah Phillips, Laurent Bonnefoy, and Alistair Harris.

Finally, I want to thank Bernadette, for being the one who never let my complaints prevent me from completing this work. You gave much needed inspiration to reopen my work on Yemen and to compile it for the benefit of others.

Abbreviations

ACC	Arab Cooperation Council, short-lived international organization sponsored by Iraqi president Saddam Husayn in the late 1980s
AQAP	Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula, branch of the international organization formed in Yemen with support of Saudi members in 2009
FLOSY	Front for the Liberation of South Yemen, anticolonial organization based in urban areas of Aden with Egyptian sponsorship in the late 1960s
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council, international organization formed among the oil-rich states of the Arabian peninsula in the 1990s
GPC	General People's Congress, ruling party of the former north Yemen, YAR, founded in 1982 by Ali Abdallah Salih, who led it into unity with south Yemen
JMP	Joint Meeting Parties, coalition of the main Yemeni opposition parties, including Islamists and socialists, formed in the early 2000s
NDF	National Democratic Front, Marxist opposition group in western midland and coastal regions of YAR during the late 1970s and early 1980s, supported by PDRY
NF	National Front, first south Yemeni ruling coalition after independence in 1967, derived from the NLF
NLF	National Liberation Front, broad-based anticolonial organization operating in rural areas of south Yemen in the 1960s, including many Marxists

PDRY	People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, former south Yemen ruled by Marxist leadership of YSP in alliance with the Soviet Union, 1969–90
SEC	Supreme Elections Commission, government agency in united Yemen responsible for voter registration and vote counting; later SCER
YAR	Yemen Arab Republic, former north Yemen ruled by republican leaders who overthrew the last Zaydi imam, 1962–90
YSP	Yemeni Socialist Party, Marxist ruling party of the former south Yemen, PDRY, that entered national unity with the GPC

Chronology of Modern Yemeni History

1839	British Empire begins colonization of Aden in southern Yemen
1872	Ottoman Empire begins second occupation of Sanaa in northern Yemen
1904	British and Ottoman Empires demarcate north-south border in Yemen
1918	Ottoman Empire withdraws from north Yemen; Imam Yahya Hamid al-Din restores Zaydi monarchal rule in north Yemen
1948	Imam Yahya overthrown and executed; brief constitutional monarchy under al-Wazir family until Yahya's son, Ahmad, restores authority of Hamid al-Din family
1950s	Free Yemeni activities in north Yemen; trade union activism in Aden
1962	Imam Ahmad dies natural death, and his son briefly claims to rule before being overthrown on September 26; start of north Yemen civil war, 1962–70, with Egypt backing republicans and Saudi Arabia backing Imam and royalists
1963	Beginning of south Yemeni revolution against British colonial rule on October 14
1967	South Yemeni independence on November 30 after British withdrawal
1970	North Yemen reconciliation between republicans and royalists, leading to informal "republican pact," which governs YAR
1972	First north-south Yemeni border war
1975	South Yemeni ruling party formed, leading to YSP in 1978

1977	North Yemeni president Ibrahim al-Hamdi assassinated
1978	Ali Abdallah Salih becomes president of north Yemen after al-Hamdi's successor, Ahmad al-Ghashmi, is assassinated by south Yemeni bomber
1979	Second north-south Yemeni border war
1982	North Yemeni ruling party, GPC, founded by President Salih
1984	First oil strike on northern side of border in central interior region
1986	Intra-regime war in Aden on January 13 leads to thousands of deaths; President Ali Nasir Muhammad flees into exile, while Ali Salem al-Bid becomes south Yemeni head of state
1989	National unity talks in November between presidents Salih and al-Bid in Aden
1990	Unification of north and south Yemen, forming Republic of Yemen on May 22
1993	First parliamentary election on April 27; no party wins majority, leading to political stalemate and conflict
1994	"Document of Pledge and Accord" signed in Amman, Jordan, in February; April–July civil war won by northern army
1997	Second parliamentary election on April 27; GPC wins landslide victory
1999	President Salih wins first direct presidential election with 97 percent of vote
2000	USS *Cole* naval destroyer bombed in Aden harbor, October 12
2001	First local council elections in February; post-9/11 formation of Public Forum for Sons of Southern and Eastern Provinces in December 2001–January 2002
2004	First al-Huthi war in Sa'da; martyrdom of founder of al-Huthi "believing youth"
2006	Second, more competitive presidential election in September; Salih wins 77 percent of vote
2007	Southern peaceful protest movement "al-Hirak" formed after sit-ins by retired military officers in Aden
2009	Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) declared in January; fourth parliamentary elections in April canceled after boycott by JMP opposition coalition; army launches "Operation Scorched Earth" in sixth and most deadly al-Huthi war north of Sanaa

2010 Army launches war in southern provinces; United States and Britain hold emergency late January meeting in London to coordinate security policies on Yemen after AQAP attempted to bomb a jetliner in the United States in previous December

2011 Millions of Yemeni citizens join mass protest activities that brought down the Tunisian president in January and Egyptian president Mubarak in February, calling for the resignation of President Salih; Yemeni president evacuated to Saudi Arabia after being struck by bombing on June 3; Salih signs GCC-negotiated transfer of power deal and resigns as executive head of state, November 23

Glossary of Names of Key Political Figures

Regional origin in parentheses; underlining indicates the most common usage of names and titles.

Abd al-Aziz Abd al-Ghani (west midlands): GPC official, founder of YAR central bank, and key representative of midland Shafi'i business interests, 1970s–80s; prime minister, 1994–97; deceased August 2011

Abd al-Karim al-Iryani (highlands): GPC official and strategist, traditional Zaydi ruling class; foreign minister, 1990–98; prime minister, 1998–2001; key negotiator with GCC in 2011 crisis

Abd al-Rabo Mansour al-Hadi (mid-southern): Key partisan of Ali Nasir Muhammad, exiled from south in 1986; vice president of Yemen, 1994–2011; replaced Salih as head of state in November 2011

Abdallah bin Husayn al-Ahmar (highlands): Paramount Shaykh of Hashid Tribe, head of Islamic Islah party; speaker of Yemeni parliament, 1993–2007; deceased December 2007

Abd al-Majid al-Zindani (highlands): Religious Shaykh, fundamentalist cleric and advisor to young Bin Laden in Saudi Arabia; leader of Islamic Islah party, member first presidential council, 1990–93

Ahmad Ali Abdallah Salih (highlands): President Salih's son; head of Republican Guards, 2000s

Ali Abdallah Salih (highlands): President of Yemen; founder of GPC northern ruling party, 1982–2011

Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar (highlands): General, distant relative of President Salih, and military strongman of the regime, 1978–2011; defected from Salih with command of first artillery brigade in March 2011

Ali Nasir Muhammad (mid-southern): Former president of PDRY; living in exile since 1986 war in Aden; supporter of southern *al-Hirak*

Ali Salem al-Bid (eastern): Vice president of united Yemen and head of YSP, 1990–94; replaced Ali Nasir as southern head of state, 1986–90; led southern secession, living in exile since 1994 civil war

Faisal Ben Shamlan (eastern): Independent oil minister, 1994; JMP presidential candidate, 2006; deceased

Fareg Ben Ghanem (eastern): Independent technocrat; brief prime minister, 1997–98

Haider al-Attas (eastern): YSP official, prime minister of Yemen, 1990–1994; living in exile since 1994 war; supporter of southern *al-Hirak*

Hasan Ba Awm (eastern): YSP official, secessionist; radical supporter of al-Hirak southern movement

Hasan Makki (west coast): GPC official, acting prime minister until assassin targets him at start of 1994 war

Jarallah Omar (west midlands): YSP official in old north Yemen, active with NDF in 1980s; instrumental in starting 2000s JMP coalition with Islah leader Shaykh Abdallah al-Ahmar; assassinated 2002

Sadeq al-Ahmar (highlands): Paramount Hashid Shaykh, 2007–11; attacked by President Salih, May 2011; afterward active in calls to remove Salih

Tareq al-Fadli (mid-southern): Shaykh, former sultan's son, exiled from PDRY until 1990; Islamist with Bin Laden and Afghan *mujahideen* in 1980s; GPC member, 1994–2009; late supporter of al-Hirak

Yahya Muhammad Abdallah Salih (highlands): President Salih's nephew; head of central security, 2000s

Yahya al-Mutawakkel (highlands): GPC leader, traditional Zaydi ruling class; interior minister, 1993–95, resigned after pushing reconciliation with southern police in 1994; died suspiciously in 2003

Yasin Said Numan (southwestern): YSP official, moderate proponent of JMP coalition in 2000s; first speaker of parliament in united Yemen, 1990–93; brief exile after 1994; active in calls to remove Salih in 2011