

How Saleh's Death Will Affect Prospects for Peace and Stability in Yemen

Shoqi Maktary and Katie Smith, January 2018

While the war in Yemen has been going on for over 1000 days, the death of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh marked a new escalation of conflict in the capital, Sana'a. The result was three days of intense clashes between forces loyal to former president Saleh and those loyal to the de facto Houthi authority, aerial bombardments of Hadah and Komim areas, the death of over 125 people, including the assassination of former president Saleh, and the fragmentation of Saleh's political party, the General People's Congress (GPC). The escalation of conflict and Saleh's death will have a serious effect on the prospects for Yemen's peace and stability, altering the calculations for negotiation. This short analysis describes how Saleh's death affects the dynamics presented in [Pathways to Peace and Stability in Yemen](#) published by Search for Common Ground in August 2017.

Houthi-Saleh Split: The Houthis, a religious-political movement associated with the Zaidi Shi'a branch of Islam, and Saleh, the president of Northern Yemen from 1978-1990 and of unified Yemen from 1990-2012, entered a "marriage of convenience" in late 2014. The pragmatic alliance between the Houthis and Saleh's GPC faction has been shaky since its inception - the Houthis and the Yemeni Government, under Saleh, engaged in a series of attacks and counter-attacks throughout the 2000s. Saleh's government attacked Houthi strongholds, including killing their leader, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, in 2004, whereas the Houthis provoked the ousting of then President Saleh in 2012. However, Saleh saw an opportunity to come back into political prominence and supported the Houthis as they took control over Sana'a in 2014.

In this arrangement, the Houthis benefited from the political legitimacy, patronage networks, and public support contributed by Saleh. In turn, Saleh and the GPC benefited from the Houthis' elimination of Saleh's political adversaries in their push for military control of territory and population centers, with hopes of re-establishing political control. However, the tenuous alliance had threatened to completely dissolve for months. Many believed that Saleh would break this alliance in August 2017 and that the resulting military confrontation would leave Sana'a in the midst of a protracted crisis. Instead, August passed without incident and the Houthis continued to infiltrate their loyalists into ministries and gain influence and support from former Saleh supporters who began to see the Houthis as the leading force to control northern Yemen.

The divisions between the Houthis and Saleh re-emerged clearly on November 29, 2017 when competition for control over the Saleh mosque in Sana'a sparked contained clashes between Houthi fighters and Saleh-loyalists. On December 2, Saleh escalated tensions between his loyalists and supporters of the Houthis by announcing his separation from the de facto Houthi authority, requiring that his supporters declare allegiance to him, take up arms against the Houthis, and reconsider negotiations and engagement with the Saudi-led Coalition. While this divorce was expected, it seems that the split between Saleh and his followers and the Houthis was not pre-determined, but rather Saleh's political miscalculation that he would receive safe harbor and unwavering support from tribal sheiks that had previously supported him and swift support from the Saudi-led Coalition. Instead, the sheikhs' support was not unconditional and they looked to see how clashes were playing out before siding with who they perceived to be the strongest, the Houthis. Also, once Saleh broke ties with the Houthis and declared his readiness to engage in negotiation with the Saudi-led Coalition, he also seems to have anticipated immediate and extensive support from them as an ally to counter the Houthis' control. This support also failed to materialize.

Saleh's Death and Its Impact: Houthi forces responded forcefully to Saleh's ultimatums and assassinated him on December 4, 2017. Saleh had dictated Yemeni politics for decades, and even in death, he has altered the political and security landscape going forward. Moving forward, the security, political, and social situation in Yemen will unfold based on four evolving dynamics in the wake of Saleh's death:

- **Fragmentation and competition for control of the GPC:** The future of the GPC will perhaps be the biggest determinant of political and negotiation dynamics. For decades, the GPC had been a one-man show led by former President Saleh. Now that his leadership is gone, there has been a fragmentation of allegiances and competition for control of the largest political party in Yemen. The first fracture of the GPC began before Saleh's death; when Saleh entered into allegiance with the Houthis, many supporters shifted their support to the Government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. In the wake of Saleh's death, this fracture is intensifying as Saleh loyalists switch their allegiance to the Hadi Government. The Hadi Government has much to gain from the support of the GPC, which can help strengthen their political legitimacy, authority, and control. The second split within the GPC promotes the authority of Ahmed Ali Saleh, former President Saleh's son and ex-commander in the Yemeni Republican Guard. While Ahmed Saleh has not released any public statement on his intent to maneuver for control, key GPC figures and regional powers have rallied support behind him. Finally, the third faction is divided along those in the GPC that will remain aligned with the de facto Houthi authority. At this point, it remains unclear to what extent this loyalty is in response to coercion by the Houthis or done out of choice.

The fragmentation of the GPC, specifically the potential competition for leadership between President Hadi and Ahmed Ali Saleh, stands to escalate and prolong the conflict. Throughout the conflict there has been tension around who should be represented at the negotiation table. A fractured GPC further complicates these discussions and threatens a parallel devolution into competition for power within the GPC, that would unfold alongside the Yemen's conflict among the Hadi Government, Saudi-led Coalition, and the de facto Houthi authority.

- **Strengthened military presence, but diminished political capacity of the Houthis:** The severance of relationships between the Houthis and Saleh has strengthened and consolidated the Houthis military power, but it has weakened them politically. Militarily, the Houthis have established that they can crack down on dissenting factions and have begun arresting those who had alliances with Saleh, as many key supporters have claimed the Houthis have placed them under house arrest. However, Houthi authorities can no longer rely on Saleh's established political experience and connections, which were important for their ability to manage day-to-day governance and engage in political negotiations.

The Houthis have now lost Saleh's political acumen and experience in negotiating, but they are not a monolithic group. There remain factions in the de facto Houthi authority structure that are open to negotiation, such as the political council, but they lack the knowledge on how to move away from arms and towards the negotiating table. In early January, the de facto Houthi authority allowed the deputy to the United Nations Special Envoy to visit Sana'a after months of denying him entry. These are promising signs for their willingness to approach the negotiation table.

- **Transfer of territorial control to Coalition forces:** On the front lines of the conflict, the Government Army succeeded in taking over some districts in governorates along the coast of the Red Sea in

Hodeidah province, such as Kokah and some parts of Hays, immediately after Saleh's assassination. To many within and outside of Yemen, this transfer of control has been perceived as a Hadi Government and Coalition campaign to recapture the port of Hodeidah – the main entry point for goods into Yemen that is currently controlled by the Houthis. Instead, the leadership of the forces controlling these areas defected and joined sides with the advancing Government forces, effectively transferring control of the territory to the Coalition. Since this first exchange of control, gains in Hodeidah have been minimal and slow. In December, the Houthis were attempting to consolidate power and arresting those that were associated with Saleh's defection. Thus, many tribes on the frontlines are fearful of Houthi retaliation. At this time, a Coalition campaign to capture Hodeidah would take time to materialize and would be disastrous to the humanitarian impacts of the conflict – blocking much needed food, fuel, and medical supplies from civilian populations.

- **Currency fluctuation and limited availability of resources:** In recent months, areas under de facto Houthi control have experienced scarcity in the availability of goods, liquidity issues, and inconsistent delivery of services, such as waste disposal. Civilians are concerned over diminished reserves of food and supplies due to restricted funds and limited availability. Particularly in the first few weeks of 2018, there has been a sharp decrease in the value of the Yemeni *rial*. The Houthis have begun to arrest exchange brokers to stabilize the currency, but the currency has continued to devalue. Until Saleh's death, the Houthi authorities had been able to deflect most of the blame for governance failures on Saleh. Before Saleh's death, most of the technocrats in the Houthi-controlled areas were Saleh loyalists, but they have since been ousted from these positions and replaced with allies of the Houthis. Now, the Houthis have instituted new heads of ministries and other administrative positions, but these authorities will not be able to deflect blame on others if services are not provided and the currency collapses.

Recommendations to the International Community: Given the unfolding dynamics in Yemen, the international community should respond to the new dynamics in Yemen in the following ways to promote peace and stability:

- **Facilitate dialogue between the competing factions of the fragmented GPC:** The GPC has been multi-sectoral, cross-cutting party for decades. As the GPC deals with the fallout of Saleh's death, there will be an increased need to engage those competing for authority and find non-violent solutions moving forward. The international community should look to engage leadership of the Hadi Government and those supporting Ahmed Ali Saleh before they officially announce their divergence and intent to lead the GPC constituency. This conversation should prepare parties to participate in a more inclusive negotiation platform that represents all parties to the conflict, including but not limited to, the de facto Houthi authority, Islah, and the Hiraq southern separatist movement, and not only those that participated in the U.N. backed Yemen peace talks in Kuwait.
- **Stabilize the Yemen Central Bank and ensure liquidity in local markets:** The international community must find ways to support the Yemeni financial sector to stabilize the currency fluctuation, increase liquidity, and disburse salaries. Improvements in currency stability will help improve the humanitarian situation on the ground – including access to resources – and eliminate some stressors on local governing bodies.