

Opportunities for change in Saleh's absence

*Al Jazeera Centre for Studies**



President Saleh's departure from Yemen for treatment after an assassination attempt during the performance of Friday prayers on the 3rd of June has raised internal and external calls to seize this opportunity for political change that would take the country out of its current predicament. Washington, for example, made statements after the incident indicating the possibility of taking advantage of his absence for a peaceful transition of authority determined by the potential state of his health, the impact of his absence on the cohesion of the regime and the options available before the revolution to impose change.

Betting on the President's Health

News presented on the health conditions of President Saleh, the severity of his injury, its impact on his life and his ability to reassume his position as president of the Republic remains torn between underestimation and intimidation. Some sources claim he only needs a few days to recover and return to his daily life while others claim he needs several months and may still never be the same again. This is no doubt part of the psychological war between the revolution and the political system due to the importance of his central role in settling the conflict between them and in the possible options for the transfer of power.

It is clear that the two sides are betting on the status of the president's health and the time he needs to recover to determine the course of development of the situation in Yemen. Different spectrums of the revolution bet that his injury is serious and requires several months for recovery, but because the volatile situation in Yemen will not give him such a long time, he will have practically left the political scene, which is the primary goal of the revolution. This then, will make way for the pursuit and achievement of other goals and the completion of a smooth and peaceful transfer of power through the available options.

On the other hand, the ruling party and the influential elite bet that the president is in good health, is continuously improving, and will be back within a few days to take command of the regime once again, and will block any of the revolution's options for change, and raise the spirits of the regime's followers and supporters. Perhaps an indicator of this was the celebratory and "decorative" event arranged for the alleged success of his surgery, during which fireworks and bullets from various weapons were fired forcefully in the skies of the capital and a number of cities and villages in Yemen, leaving six dead and 86 wounded by projectiles landing in populated areas. One of the purposes of this event was to show force and terrorize the other party while signifying that the return of president is imminent.

The Impact of Saleh's Absence on the Coherence of the Regime

Without a doubt, President Saleh's sudden absence from the arena put the political system in a state of confusion and rendered its political ability to maneuver as just as inefficient as when in his presence. Moreover, the regime has shielded itself with military and security tools to maintain a strong and coherent image until his return.

President Saleh's complete exit from the political scene at this time, whether because of death or disability to perform his duties efficiently as he did in the past, would certainly be a great loss to the system and the ruling elite and would weaken them in their struggle against the revolution; and there is no "charismatic" figure in the ruling elite that would be able to replace his consensus figure, take his own fateful and decisive decisions, or match his level of political tactics, cunning and ability to dodge. The general feeling of the political system's weak performance after Saleh is increasingly likely to lead to a decline in its popularity and the gradual abandonment of increasing numbers of supporters to join new revolutionary forces.

Although Saleh's absence may weaken the regime, it will not lead to its collapse or push the ruling elite to surrender and relinquish power to the revolutionary forces. The source of Saleh's power in the regime comes mainly from the domination of kinship and tribalism in the joints of force in the state and their interests and social status are linked to the survival of the regime. In fact, the power of this chain of 'asabiyya, or social unity, (as per Ibn Khaldun's Muqaddimah), is what has made the regime resilient in confronting the Yemeni revolution in the past four months, unlike the case in Tunisia and Egypt. Behind this chain comes a larger chain encircling the system, namely, people with whom they have relations of expediency. In a society like that of Yemen where the economy is insufficient, resources are scarce, the state is the main source of wealth and social influence, and other alternatives are not available, it is often prevalent to have relations of advantageousness between the political system and its followers and supporters where mutual benefit forms the cement that ensures cohesion. Nonetheless, part of the popular strength of the system in the community and the streets of Yemen stems not from these relations but from faith in and love for the president and the regime in general, or from fear of and hatred for the alternative, while a whole other part stems from the fear of repression and the system's ability to deprive rights.

According to the analysis above, Saleh's absence from the political scene will affect the regime's power but its collapse is unlikely as it and a share of his popularity stem mainly from his stay in power, his ability to distribute benefits, and the spread of fear; and the exit of the current ruling elite from the power, even if for a few months, is what would undermine his regime and extract his sources of power. Therefore, the forces of social solidarity and expediency are expected to resist through all possible means with full force to prevent the departure from power and the collapse of the regime. In case of his final leave, a search for another figure to replace him will be conducted and the most probable candidate is his son, Ahmed, Chief of the Republican Guard. It is likely that the forces of social solidarity and expediency seek to have him, or one of the individuals close to him, be the next candidate in the early presidential elections, as per the Russian model (Putin-Medvedev), to overcome problematic regarding hereditary succession.

Options for Change in Saleh's Absence

Saleh's departure from the political scene sent hopes once again for finding a way out of the state of obstruction between the revolution and the political system and led to the increase of the price paid by the population as a result of this situation whether in the form of deteriorating economic conditions, higher inflation rates, major deterioration of water and electricity services in most provinces (power outages in the capital sometimes reached up to 12 hours a day), severe shortages of fuel derivatives (i.e. oil, diesel, and cooking gas, which are instead available in black markets in abundance for three times the price with the knowledge of the security apparatus), the severe proliferation of weapons among the population, or the extent of insecurity in the society. Some interpret this as a result of the power vacuum, while the opposition and revolutionaries attribute it to the regime's deliberate negligence as a form of collective punishment to reduce the amount of supporters of the revolution in the society.

Although the exit of President Saleh as a pivotal figure in the events has made way for the discussion of options for change, they remain limited and are hindered by many difficulties.

Change through the Vice President

This is the preferred choice of many internal and external parties as it provides for smooth and peaceful change within the political system by granting the powers of the President of the Republic to the Vice President on a temporary basis and having him supervise the organization of fair and free presidential elections.

The most important obstacle of this choice so far is the general feeling that the temporary delegation of presidential powers to the Vice President is for the short term purpose of the president's treatment and does not authorize any major changes affecting the future of the regime and the ruling party beyond the limits of the provisional authority granted to him. What is most important is that the Vice President understands that this authorization is a façade; authority for the issuance of actual decisions lies in the hands of others, due to faults in the composition of the Yemeni political system i.e. the formal structures of the system do not reflect the actual channels for the exercise of power. There are recognized informal channels through which relatives of the president assuming positions of power exercise concrete authority reaching all parts of the system. The Vice President's attempt to exercise his constitutional powers against their will, with no real power to protect himself, will put his personal safety at risk.

The Vice President is currently under great pressure from internal and external parties to employ the president's authority but is still reluctant to respond. However, the longer the absence of the President, the greater the pressure thus rendering him more likely to respond and take responsibility for the necessities of the crucial and historical circumstances that Yemen is witnessing if granted the support and adequate protection of influential internal and external forces.

It will put the political system at stake and may lead to internal dissent as the discrepancy between the constitutional and legal authorities represented by the Vice President and the power of physical force represented by the relatives of the president will become more apparent.

The Transitional Council Option

In contrast to the ceaselessly cautious and hesitant position of the Vice President, the revolution youth pushed street protestors in the squares towards the formation of a transitional interim, filling what they see as a power vacuum left by Saleh. The establishment of a temporary transitional council is the choice of the entire spectrum of the revolution today as it is seen as the best choice under the limitations of other options and the reluctance of regional and international powers to take considerable and straightforward positions to support the change. The establishment of this council represents appropriate escalation, which is dictated by circumstances of the stage and accords the revolution a number of benefits, including: the creation of parallel authority to represent revolutionary legitimacy imposing fait accompli and emphasizing that the choice of the revolution cannot be undone and that there is at the same time one institutional frame reflecting all components of the revolution. More importantly, this option proceeds with the revolution regardless of the prospects of the president's return.

Youth blocs have put forward more than one formula for the Council as there is still no agreement on a common plan to accommodate all the components of the revolution although work is underway. The Joint Meeting Parties have announced that they are in the process of forming a temporary presidential council by consultation with all the revolution's spectra and will officially announce its inauguration within a few days, adding that it will start immediately with the exercise of its powers in areas that emerged from the authority of the regime of President Saleh to fill the power vacuum within it, to express popular sovereignty, and represent people of various parties.

The most crucial of impediments behind this choice is embodied in the positions of some regional and international parties opposing it, threatening that they will not recognize it. This choice also practically implies the full withdrawal of legitimacy from the political system, and takes away the possibility of change within the political system through the Vice

President if the deterioration of President Saleh's health becomes apparent or if his return is deferred. It also creates a parallel authority that competes and conflicts with the current regime on the legitimacy of representation internally and externally. Perhaps it is a move to intensify the situation in Yemen to match that of Libya, especially in light of the ruling elite hoarding behind military and security tools to resolve the conflict, which could cause the country to slip into the abyss of violence and civil war.

Option to Return to the Gulf Initiative

Following the announcement of President Saleh's injury and his transfer to Saudi Arabia, Dr. Abdul Latif Al Zayani, Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), declared that the initiative is still an appropriate framework for and a gateway to resolving the crisis in Yemen. There is no verified information as to whether the initiative was made once again between the parties in power and the opposition, although it is unlikely at this time for the political system, as it will probably not accept it while it is in a position of weakness because of the president's health. Saudi Arabia, which is considered a main player in this track and the biggest supporter of President Saleh, so far does not seem willing to put greater pressure on the president to accept what he had previously refused. There is no evidence that it is prepared to change its position and earlier choices in dealing with the Yemeni revolution. However, the Joint Meeting Parties are not expected to accept the additions requested by the president for the sake of accepting the initiative at when Saleh has departed and the status quo is in their favor; and there is no justification for having provided concessions that had not been approved of previously while the regime is at the height of its power. Also, the youth of the squares will consider it a betrayal of the revolution after it came very close to achieving their goals.

Compromise through the initiative remains a very possible option if the president still needs extensive treatment, or proves to be unable to reassume his presidency as influential regional powers would prefer intervention to determine the paths of change and reduce the damage of revolutionary change to a bare minimum.