



# Civil society and democratization in Yemen. Enhancing the role of intermediate bodies

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WORKING PAPER 3

LAURENT BONNEFOY | MARINE POIRIER



## CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY YEMEN

Enhancing the Role of Intermediate Bodies



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# Civil Society and Democratization in Contemporary Yemen

Enhancing the Role of Intermediate Bodies



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## Introduction

In the early 1990s, after unification of North and South, the Republic of Yemen embarked itself in an outstanding democratization process that no country in the region had yet experienced. The constitution, approved by referendum, appeared as particularly liberal, granting civil society and opposition parties a wide range of rights and a share of the exercise of power. Expectations were high, there were some tangible results (for example during the 1993 parliamentary elections or when a multi-party coalition ruled the country between 1990 and 1997) but unfortunately these have been short-lived due to multiple factors, either internal or international, political or economic<sup>1</sup>.

President 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih has been in power since July 1978 and was re-elected in September 2006 for a seven-year term in what appeared as an ambivalent election: competition was authentic as Faysal Bin Shamlan, supported by a large coalition of opposition parties (the Joint Meeting Parties<sup>2</sup> - *Ahزاب al-liqa al-mushtarak* – including the Yemeni Socialist Party and the Islamists from al-Islah<sup>3</sup>) opposed him, nevertheless, the candidate of the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) monopolized much of the state's resources during his campaign and fraud was manifest in certain regions<sup>4</sup>. Official results granted Bin Shamlan around 22% of the ballots and 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih was declared victor.

Undoubtedly, political and civil rights as well as press freedom in Yemen are higher than in other countries in the region. Officially, the regime's legitimacy is based on multi-party elections and the opposition is recognized constitutional rights, for example taking part in the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendum that supervises the organization of the different ballots. Tensions between the government and the opposition are yet persistent and have been growing over the last years giving a sense that the system is increasingly autocratic with President Salih, his clan and the ruling GPC party controlling most if not all the levers of power.

Despite this reality, there is a blooming independent press, a high number of papers of various grade and shrewdness but which often investigate touchy issues and remain very critical of the government. Nevertheless, the high illiteracy rates and the weak circulation of the media in the rural areas diminish their role and capacity to correctly inform the population. Furthermore, papers are frequently subject to pressure by the Ministry of Information or even by the security forces. In April 2009, eight papers were temporarily closed down due to their coverage of demonstrations and repression in southern governorates. Journalists and editors of the Al-Sharea independent weekly were convicted in June 2007 of "disseminating information liable to undermine army morale" as this paper had published sensitive information on the war in Saada opposing, since June 2004, Zaydi

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Philips, *Yemen's Democracy Experience in a Regional Perspective: Patronage and Pluralized Authoritarianism*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 352 p.

<sup>2</sup> Michaëlle Browers, "Origins and architects of Yemen's Joint Meeting Parties", *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 39, n°4, 2007, pp. 565-586.

<sup>3</sup> Laurent Bonnefoy, Marine Poirier, "Le Rassemblement yéménite pour la réforme (al-Islâh) : la difficile construction d'un projet d'alternance" in Myriam Catusse, Karam Karam (eds.), *Les dynamiques partisanes dans le monde arabe*, Beirut: Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (To be published); Nasir Muhammad 'Ali al-Tawil, *Al-haraka al-islamiyya wa al-nidham al-siyassi fi al-Yaman. Min al-tahaluf ila al-tanafus* [The islamist movement and the political system in Yemen. From alliance to competition], Sanaa: Maktaba Khalid bin al-Walid, 2009, 498 p.

<sup>4</sup> Marine Poirier, "Yémen nouveau, Futur meilleur ? Retour sur l'élection présidentielle de 2006", *Chroniques Yéménites*, n°15, Sanaa: CEFAS, 2008, pp. 129-159.

revivalist rebels, the “Huthis”, to the Yemeni army<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, political rights and freedom of expression appear to also be in decline. Such negative trends should be contextualized in order to be analyzed thoroughly.

Historically, the regime has been based on an original political formula that mixes power-sharing, co-optation, the convergence of religious identities and a relatively low level of repression. The 1962 republican revolution in North Yemen toppled the regime of the Zaydi<sup>6</sup> imamate which had ruled all or parts of the country for over a thousand years and legitimized its rule on Zaydi religious identity and on a specific social hierarchy topped by Hashemites or *Sada*, i.e.: individuals claiming descent from Prophet Muhammad. The fall of the Zaydi imam’s monarchy gave way to a more direct separation between politics and religion in the country. This occurred through the establishment of the republican regime, once inspired by Gamal ‘Abdul Nassir’s model in Egypt. The South (where only around a fourth of the population of unified Yemen lives) witnessed an entirely different process: a former British colony with the port of Aden as its capital, it became independent in 1967 and remained the only socialist Arab state until unification in May 1990.

It is generally assumed that contemporary religious identities in Yemen are more or less divided between two Islamic sects (a number of Ismaili, Jewish and Hanafi minorities remain). Zaydis are constituents of a Shiite sect often described as moderate in its jurisprudence, distinct from the Twelver Shiites found in Iran, Iraq or Lebanon, and close to Sunnism in many aspects. For their part, Shafi’is, adherents of the other sect, are Sunni. Yet throughout the twentieth century, the divide eroded considerably. A number of transformations, encouraged and instrumented by the republican state, question the relevance of the religious gap. No accurate and trustworthy statistics exist, but Shafi’is are usually considered to be the significant majority of the 25 million people in Yemen, while Zaydis represent around 35 percent of the population, with their bastions in the north, mainly in Saada, Hajja and also Sanaa. The opposition between these two identities has gradually led the way to a process of convergence<sup>7</sup>. The dominion of this “new” Yemeni religious identity is yet incomplete and has to face important resistance coming from certain Zaydi groups who can be labeled revivalist, and by Salafis<sup>8</sup>.

Owing to recent changes—particularly internal and external migrations, individualization and marketization of religious identities, and the improvement of education levels—most Yemenis now consider the divide only as symbolic. Recent difficulties linked to a brutal conflict around the city of Saada in the North of the country opposing the army and an armed Zaydi revivalist group headed by the Huthi family, do not seem to significantly affect the structure of the convergence of religious

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<sup>5</sup> International Crisis Group, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, Middle East Report, n°86, 2009. Samy Dorlian, “Les reformulations identitaires du zaydisme dans leur contexte socio-politique contemporain”, *Chroniques Yéménites*, Sanaa: CEFAS, 2009 pp. 161-176.

<sup>6</sup> Zaydism is a branch of Shiism distinct from Jaafarism (Twelver Shiism, which dominates in contemporary Iran, Iraq and Bahrain and is present in, inter alia, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia). It first took root in Mesopotamia and Central Asia in 740 but gradually reached Yemen where its elite, claiming descent from prophet Muhammad, ruled the country until 1962. For analysis of the role of the former Zaydi elites in contemporary Yemen, see: Gabriele Vom Bruck, *Islam, Memory, and Morality in Yemen: Ruling Families in Transition*, New York: Palgrave, 2005, xix-348 p.; and Isma’il al-Akwa’, *Al-zaydiyya: nashatuha wa mu’taqidatuha* [Zaydism: its activities and beliefs], Sanaa: Editor unknown, 2000, 126 p.

<sup>7</sup> Laurent Bonnefoy, “Les identités religieuses contemporaines au Yémen: convergence, résistances et instrumentalisations”, *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, no. 121-122, 2008, pp. 201-215.

<sup>8</sup> Laurent Bonnefoy, “How Transnational is Salafism in Yemen?” in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, New York : Columbia University Press (To be published).



identities. Indeed, despite episodes of violent stigmatization orchestrated by certain radical groups, the vast majority of the population is indirectly (and most of the time passively) taking part in the convergence. For instance, the president is himself of Zaydi origin (much like the majority of the ruling elites) but never refers to his primary identity. At the grassroots level, many Sunnis do not mind praying in Zaydi mosques and vice versa. Consequently, the religious divide only marginally structures political affiliations.

For decades, another feature of the Yemeni political formula has been its capacity to integrate and accommodate a wide variety of actors and identities. The relationship between the state and various political, especially Islamist, or social, particularly tribal, groups and their integration into public institutions (army, police, the education sector, parliament, etc.) have accounted greatly for regime stability. Confronted to a wide variety of crises (unification in 1990, the Gulf war, the 1994 war between secessionist southern elites and the northern army), the regime has proved its resilience on a number of occasions. Yet, the post-9/11 context has put this formula in jeopardy encouraging or at least facilitating an already existent trend towards the monopolization of power around President Salih and the ruling party. Between 1993 and 1997, the “opposition” al-Islah party had participated in a governmental coalition. Furthermore, the head of this party, ‘Abdallah al-Ahmar, also paramount chief of the main tribal confederation, the Hashid, was elected speaker of Parliament with the support of the ruling GPC from 1993 until his death in late 2007.

In its war against al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, the government had also once been eager to show that dialogue was more effective than repression and had co-opted a number of militants, giving them money and jobs in exchange for their promise to abandon violence against the state. Such a strategy drew criticism from the government’s allies who accused it of being inconsistent and was also challenged by internal developments. Repression increasingly became an option encouraging the emergence of a new generation of militants that proved less willing to accept compromise. As a consequence, the government soon became a direct target of operations and attacks.

The anti-terror front, combined with the still continuing war in Saada governorate between the army and the Huthis, growing contestation since 2007 in the former South-Yemeni regions where secessionist sentiment is on the rise, as well as the economic crisis all give a sense that Yemen is confronted to a dire situation that may well threaten more directly than ever before its relative stability. Pressures linked to demography (a 3 percent growth each year according to international organizations) and to the near depletion of natural resources (water especially, for instance in the Sanaa and Taiz basins, as well as oil) add strata and complexity to the crisis.

A Somali-like scenario of a failed-state, that has been predicted for many years, including by high-ranking Yemeni officials, is a possibility but is not ordained. Yemen has numerous assets that should be preserved and encouraged. One of these is surely a lively, various and dynamic civil society that plays its role in representing citizens and in being an intermediate body between the state and the population.

It is precisely this civil society that is the main focus of the report. Evidently, civil society cannot be considered a cure-all solution and it may sometimes appear as an illusion giving the impression that democracy and pluralism go in pairs with a rise in civil society actors<sup>9</sup>. A first section will describe and analyze the persistence in Yemen of what could be called a traditional civil society comprising of tribal and religious actors, who traditional as they may be, are also engaged in modernization processes. A second section will highlight the emergence of more modern actors since unification who, often benefiting from foreign support, are developing a new agenda and, in their own way, are responding to a specific framing of issues (development, Human rights, gender) produced internationally. The tentative merger of both categories is an interesting trend that will also be stressed in that section. A third section will focus on the different challenges and prospects facing the various civil society actors and that often limit their capacity to take an active part in the democratization process.

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<sup>9</sup> Michel Camau, "Sociétés civiles 'réelles' et téléologie de la démocratisation", *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, vol.9, n°2, 2002, pp. 213-232.

## Traditional Civil Society

For long, much research on civil society in the Arab world has implicitly worked within a normative frame. Civil society was approached with the idea that it was mainly, if not exclusively, structured around specific liberal non-governmental actors that should be supported by the West because they shared and defended “its” values and some objectives many regarded as universal (democratization, women’s rights, transparency, environmental issues, etc.). They were seen as the “good guys”, those that could potentially change the Arab societies from within. As such, they were perceived as progressive in essence. Consequently, conservative non-state actors or those that advocated for non-liberal reforms were largely ignored or not deemed fit for research by political scientists and sociologists who studied civil society movements. In a way, they were seen as in a class of their own, relics from the past only anthropologists should study and care about.

More recent work has directly addressed the political implications of these conservative and traditional actors, amongst which tribes and religious institutions, taking into account their influence and also their capacity to represent society but also launch campaigns, activities and stand in for state weaknesses<sup>10</sup>. If one is to accept a broad and non-normative definition of civil society<sup>11</sup>, one should most probably take into account a large spectrum of actors and include some groups, individuals and organizations, more or less institutionalized, that form what could be labeled a traditional civil society comprising of religious, tribal and local actors.

Rather than the exogenous name “civil society (translated into Arabic into *mujtama’ al-madani*)”, some have argued that Arab societies have had their own form of civil society, labeled *mujtama’ al-ahli*, based on local community actors and parochial or primordial links. Some even ended up considering that the Arab world did not yet match the democratic prerequisites to have a true civil society that would be independent either from the state or from parochial and exclusive identities (either tribal, regional or religious)<sup>12</sup>. Although telling, the opposition between an exogenous civil society whose agenda and funding are necessarily international and a local society whose agenda is based on local culture needs to be reevaluated. Traditional proponents of the *mujtama’ al-ahli* may also adapt to the international agenda and modern actors of the *mujtama’ al-madani*, civil in their own rights, need to adjust their platform and modes of action. What is needed is a dynamic view of civil society, one that acknowledges that civil society is not necessarily a new phenomenon in Yemen and that categories are shifting and adapt to their own context.

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<sup>10</sup> On Yemen see for example, Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen. The political economy of activism in modern Arabia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, xv-256 p.; Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008, 300 p.; Baudouin Duprêt and François Burgat (eds.), *Le shaykh et le procureur. Systèmes coutumiers et pratiques juridiques au Yémen et en Egypte*, Cairo: CEDEJ, 2005, 335 p.; Janine Clark, *Islam, Charity and Activism. Middle-Class Networks in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004, xvii-236 p.; and Sarah Ben Nefissa, Maggy Grabundzija and Jean Lambert (eds.), *Société civile, associations et pouvoir local au Yémen*, Sanaa: CEFAS/FES, 2008, 332 p.

<sup>11</sup> The purpose of this report is not to discuss the different theoretical debates on civil society that have emerged within academia, particularly regarding its link to democratization. Consequently, we adopt a broad definition of civil society as the different organizations and individuals acting on a voluntary basis to defend certain non-commercial shared interests and who are distinct from state structures and institutions and who do not aim to directly exercise governmental power.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the debate between the *mujtama’ al-ahli* and the *mujtama’ al-madani*, see Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen*. Op. Cit., pp. 4-18.

## A) A Tribal Society?

Yemen is often described as a tribal society either by foreign analysts or by local elites. In an interview granted in the mid-1980s, President 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih asserted: "The state is part of the tribes and our Yemeni people are a collection of tribes."<sup>13</sup> Although self evident to some, such a claim could be contested as large segments of the population do not per se belong to tribes. Indeed, other forms of social organization based for example on the belonging to a specific village or even to an urban center are prevalent in a number of regions, al-Hujariyya for instance. Nevertheless, it is undoubtful that the core of political, economic and military power is in the tribal areas, particularly in the North-Western highlands, and that such has been the case for many centuries.

The depiction of the tribes as civil society actors might also appear as controversial as for many they represent backwardness and a certain brutality that is far from civil. Consequently, debate among Yemeni intellectuals is sharp<sup>14</sup>. Weapons, violence, vendetta (*thar*) and clientelism are an integral part of tribal practices and may well be considered as tools of oppression that hinder participation of ordinary citizens by petrifying a certain social hierarchy topped by hereditary tribal leaders<sup>15</sup>.

The role of tribes as an intermediary between the state and society yet cannot be contested. This is particularly the case in a country like Yemen where the majority of the population is still rural and where state infrastructures appear to be lacking. The tribal system offers specific structures and consistent rules (*'urf*) that, decentralized and ancient as they are, are usually considered legitimate by the population. Instruments of conflict resolution<sup>16</sup>, of protection and of solidarity may well stand in for some of the failures and inefficiencies of the central government. Tribal poetry is still a lively means of communicating, informing the population, and contesting dominant powers, then re-enacting the dynamism and independence of this traditional civil society<sup>17</sup>. While qat<sup>18</sup> consumption spreads well beyond tribal circles, it is a central prop of tribal culture and an effective means of collective deliberation. Lengthy daily qat sessions (*maqya*) allow issues to be discussed and some problems to be solved peacefully in a manner that may at times appear to be based on democratic principles<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government and History in Yemen*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Muhammad al-Zahiri, "Al-mujtama' al-yamani The Yemeni bayn tasayyis al-qabila wa-tahamish al-muassasat al-madaniyya society between politicization of the tribe and marginalization of the civil", in *Organizations Sarah Ben Nefissa, Maggy Grabundzija et Jean Lambert (eds.), Société civile, associations et pouvoir local au Yémen*, Op. Cit., pp. 153-180. Al-Zahiri argues that tribes, although contributing to the permanence of certain negative features in society (such as the primacy of blood ties, violence and aloofness of the constitution), can be understood as a functional equivalent of civil society institutions at the local scale. In his opinion, the Yemeni tribe and the civil functions it ensures should be considered proof that traditional institutions do not need to be discarded in order to build the "new" civil society. See also, Muhammad al-Mutawakkil, "Al-mujtama' al-madani wa al-muwatana wa al-sultat", in *Civil society, citizenship and local authorities al-mahaliyya Sarah Ben Nefissa, Maggy Grabundzija et Jean Lambert (eds.), Société civile, associations et pouvoir local au Yémen*, Op. Cit., pp. 355-366.

<sup>15</sup> See the different contributions of Samir al-Shamiri, Muhammad al-Shraybi and Fuad al-Salahi in Sarah Ben Nefissa, Maggy Grabundzija et Jean Lambert (eds.), *Société civile, associations et pouvoir local au Yémen*, Op. Cit. and Samir Al-'Abdali, *Thaqafat al-dimuqratiya fi al-hayat al-siyassiya li qabail al-Yaman [The culture of democracy in the political life of Yemeni tribes]*, Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2007, 303 p.

<sup>16</sup> *Le règlement des conflits tribaux au Yémen*, Les cahiers du CEFAS n°4, Sanaa: CEFAS, 2003, 44 p.

<sup>17</sup> Flagg Miller, *The Moral Resonance of Arab Media: Audiocassette Poetry and Culture in Yemen*, Harvard CMES, 2007, 525 p; Steven Caton, *"Peaks of Yemen I Summon": Poetry as Cultural Practice in a North Yemeni Tribe*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, 351 p.

<sup>18</sup> Qat is a mildly narcotic leaf chewed daily by a large segment of the Yemeni population. Sessions have become major social events and a strong symbol of national identity. Daniel Martin Varisco, "On the Meaning of Chewing: The Significance of Qat (*Catha edulis*) in the Yemen Arab Republic", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, no. 21 (1986).

<sup>19</sup> Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, Op. Cit., pp. 103-147.

Although usually in an informal and non-institutional manner, tribes grant services or help fellow tribesmen in solving their hassle with the administration. They can defend non-commercial interests much like an NGO or a lobby, act as guarantors and also mobilize people around certain themes (including international ones like Palestine) or certain events (elections, demonstrations). Yet unlike a political party and despite mechanisms of clientelism involving tribal shaykhs, tribes do not aim to directly seize political power and to present candidates during elections under the tribal label<sup>20</sup>. Prominent tribal leaders, amongst which the afore mentioned 'Abdallah al-Ahmar, exemplify such a pivotal position of tribes. His sons, doubling as businessmen, now have also become important players. Husayn created in 2007 the National Solidarity Council (*Majlis al-Tadhamun al-Watani*) which more or less aims to act as a conservative forum and a pressure group representing the tribal segment of society, while Hamid and Sadiq are involved in various charities in favor of Palestine. Furthermore, the use of the Internet through various websites also indicates the capacity of this tribal civil society to adopt new platforms and modern means of communication.

Consequently, the capacity of tribal structures to actually represent the citizens and to be an intermediate body between the state and the people is central. In the early 1990s, various large-scale tribal gatherings or conferences in rural areas issued written resolutions reflecting tribal concerns. These declarations (*bayan*) were directly addressed to the central government asking for instance for equal treatment of the different tribes, decentralization through the revival of local development cooperatives, or for the end of foreign intervention in tribal affairs<sup>21</sup>.

Evidently, tribal power and government are often intertwined and it would be wrong to consider both realms as incompatible: President Salih is himself a tribesman and tribal circles of power are dominant in the army as well as in Parliament. Yet, tribal culture in contemporary Yemen remains an active element of the balance of power and due to its prevalence has prevented the state from monopolizing all resources. Even as the spread of small arms<sup>22</sup> and distrust of the state can be attributed to the low levels of infrastructure development in some regions, they have also been effective guarantees against autocratic rule.

As such, Yemen's tribal system appears to be a mixed blessing. The state is formed by complex and sometimes competing networks in which power sharing has long remained effective. In contrast to many other countries in the Middle East, nationalist and even socialist governments in Yemen have proved incapable of destroying traditional structures and therefore have been forced to work constructively with them<sup>23</sup>. Active tribal structures have functioned as participation forums that may

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<sup>20</sup> On the issue of cross party and tribal affiliations, Sheila Carapico writes: "Parties did not represent tribes, nor did party loyalty rest on tribal affiliations. Rather, within each locality (and some families) were many parties, and within each party were people of different tribal (and non-tribal) origins." Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen*, Op. Cit., p. 166.

<sup>21</sup> Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen*, Op. Cit., pp. 163-166.

<sup>22</sup> The figure of 60 million weapons often quoted by analysts and journalists alike appears to be much over-evaluated. In 2002, according to a research carried out by a Swiss NGO, 6 to 9 small arms appeared to be in circulation, an estimate that would rank Yemen among the countries with the most weapons per habitant. Derek B. Miller, "Demand, Stockpiles, and Social Controls: Small Arms in Yemen", *Small Arms Survey Occasional Paper* no. 9 (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, May 2003).

<sup>23</sup> In South Yemen during the 1970s and early 1980s, attempts by the ruling Socialist party to "detrribalize" society failed as regional allegiances, including among the ruling elites, remained central factors in defining alliances and competition. In January 1986, the brutal and deadly conflict inside the Socialist Party in Aden between 'Ali Nasir Muhammad and the partisans of 'Ali Salim al-Bidh and 'Ali 'Antar occurred mainly, although not exclusively, along regional and tribal lines. Fred Halliday, *Revolution and Foreign Policy. The Case of South Yemen 1967-1987*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 46.

well facilitate certain processes of democratization. The pluralism of the media and of the political sphere appear as an indirect effect of an armed civil society that is often able to balance the state and the military therefore preserving a certain degree of independence of society from the central state.

### *B) The Religious Realm*

In parallel, Islamic actors are also active proponents of what can be labeled a traditional civil society. Much like the tribal system, religious actors represent an effective counter-power. Through the systems of religious taxation (*zakaat*<sup>24</sup>) and religious endowments (*awqaf*<sup>25</sup>), as well as through a very dense network of mosques inside the country and through various transnational networks<sup>26</sup>, the Islamic realm appears as largely independent from the state and able to grant many social services to the population (either through welfare, education or Islamic justice<sup>27</sup>). The lively sector of Islamic welfare organizations depends on these mechanisms and might even compete with state institutions to benefit from the donations of pious citizens. Consequently, the religious realm is largely decentralized, with small local actors managing mosques, schools or judicial Islamic courts. Obviously, the development of the republican state since the 1970s has hindered such independence and the government has become a major religious actor collecting the *zakaat*, appointing imams and establishing its own network of religious institutes or summer camps managed through the Ministry of religious endowments. Nevertheless, the crisis of progressive or Leftist organizations (supported by the Socialist state in the South or encouraged by the Northern Yemeni state in the 1970s and early 1980s) that had spawned in Yemen, particularly in the form of local development co-operatives (*al-ta'wun al-ahli li-l-tatwir*), led to a revival of religious actors after unification.

Flexible and rarely institutionalized, the religious sector can be analyzed as a base or starting point for civil society actors. The modernization of charity activities occurred in the 1990s and different organizations, particularly the Islah Charitable society which maintains links with the Islah Islamist party, seem able to combine a religious tradition and belonging with an international orientation and funding. According to Sheila Carapico, "By 1996, there were over three hundred community and religious charities in Yemen – more than in the rest of the Arabian Peninsula combined. These contemporary welfare associations, while evoking the religious connotation of the traditional term *al-jam'iyyat al-khayriyya*, were very much a 1990s phenomenon."<sup>28</sup> The post-9/11 environment and the alleged training of militants in private religious institutions, particularly Salafi ones but also Zaydi ones in the context of the Saada war, have encouraged the government to take control of some institutions or crack down on specific centers.

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<sup>24</sup> The system of the *zakaat*, part of the five pillars of Islam, appears as particularly flexible in the sense that it can be paid to different actors, either linked to the state or independent from it, therefore allowing the emergence of alternative civil actors who collect this personal contribution for welfare projects.

<sup>25</sup> The *awqaf* are a complex system of perpetual donations, often in the form of property or business, that are to be used for religious or welfare purposes by foundations. The role of the *awqaf* is central in funding the construction of mosques or the service of religious scholars. Robert Serjeant and Husayn al-'Amri estimated that around three quarters of the buildings in the old city of Sanaa were religious endowments of one form or another. Robert Serjeant, Husayn al-'Amri, "Administrative Organisation", *Sana'a an Arabian Islamic City*, London: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1983, p. 151.

<sup>26</sup> Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim. Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006, xxvi-379 p.

<sup>27</sup> Brickley Messick, *The Calligraphic State. Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, xii-341 p.

<sup>28</sup> Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen*, Op. Cit., p. 156.

In spite of such a context, out of will or out of incapacity, the state has not gained complete control and independence of the religious realm is still a reality. Religious scholars can either endorse or oppose government decisions through their opinions (*fatwa*), can mobilize actors or defend a number of values acting as consistent counter-powers. Without direct government support, Ismaili Bohra (a small Shiite minority) communities in Haraz region have for instance launched an important campaign to eradicate qat consumption and cultivation and diversify the local economy<sup>29</sup>. Amongst other groups, religious based social networks like the female *nadawat* (Quranic study groups) are for example efficient instruments of mobilization either in favor of the Islah Charitable society or in favor of the Islah Islamist party<sup>30</sup>. The Yemeni branch of the transnational organization, *Sina'a al-haya*, built around the famous Egyptian preacher 'Amr Khalid, broadcasts a religious discourse that aims at presenting a positive and often apolitical understanding of Islam as well as favoring the personal development of its activists<sup>31</sup>. Such discourse is growingly appealing among young people; nevertheless, it does not seem to formulate a social or political agenda as such as it is primarily focused on individual self-help rather than on amending society and the state. This capacity of religious actors to often end up connecting with modern and political agendas and with specific organizations is in itself an interesting fact and might explain the persistence and dynamism of a traditional civil society in contemporary Yemen.

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<sup>29</sup> Peer Gatter, "The Ismaili's 'War' Against Qat in Harâz", *Chroniques Yéménites*, n°14, 2007, pp. 71-88.

<sup>30</sup> Janine Clark, *Islam, Charity and Activism*, Op. Cit., p. 132.

<sup>31</sup> About its Yemeni branch, refer to Intilak al-Mutawakkil, "Al-shabab wa al-mujtama' al-madani [Youth and civil society]", in Sarah Ben Nefissa, Maggy Grabundzija and Jean Lambert (eds.), *Société civile, associations et pouvoir local au Yémen*, Op. Cit., pp. 208-209; in general, refer to Patrick Haenni, *L'islam de marché*, Paris : Le Seuil, 2005, 110 p.

## News Forms of Civil Society

Since unification in 1990, news forms of civil society have spawned and developed as freedom of association became guaranteed by the Yemeni constitution. Article 58 of the constitution states that “Citizens all over the Republic may, in a manner that does not contravene the provisions of this constitution, associate politically, professionally, and in trade unions. They have the right to establish scientific, cultural, social and national organizations and unions [...]. The state shall guarantee this right and provide all necessary means to enable its citizens to exercise it. It shall also guarantee all freedoms for political, cultural, scientific, social, and trade union organizations”<sup>32</sup>. The right to associate is further defined by law n°1 of 2001 relative to associations and foundations, and their legal regime has been completed by various application decrees<sup>33</sup>. This new legislation had a wide scope and replaced law n°11 of 1963 which focused solely on cooperative associations and appeared as outdated.

However, long before the major political overture of the early 1990s, Yemen had witnessed the spread of “modern” forms of civil activism. Indeed, institutionalized civil society based neither on religion nor on parochial links did not develop in the 1990s from a desert landscape, but capitalized on several vivid experiences from the past. In the former British colony of Aden, the civil movement developed in the early 1920s, with the creation of associative structures centered on mutual aid and social progress, followed by newspapers, literary circles, professional unions and political organizations (notably opponents of the Northern Imamate who were seeking refuge in the southern port-city)<sup>34</sup>. In the 1960s and 70s, the self-help movement of the cooperative associations for development of North Yemen spread successfully and is looked back on by many analysts as a unique and early occurrence of a wide scale civil organization<sup>35</sup>.

Post-unification, a variety of associations, amongst which political parties, press organs, foundations and forums, blossomed. The Yemeni experience of a flourishing civil society, that counter balanced the centralizing ambitions of the state, represented an exception in the region. After the 1994 war, the pluralistic formula that had been the norm during the first years after unification appeared to be threatened as liberties progressively declined. Many then acknowledged that the political field was getting narrower<sup>36</sup>. Such a trend was confirmed by various events (repression of journalists and civil rights activists) and by the successive elections (1997, 1999 and 2003), which saw the share granted to opposition parties diminish both in parliament and in government.

Nevertheless, despite the informal restrictions imposed to civil activism and the government's attempts to monitor independent movements, Yemen still cradles a vigorous and dynamic civil

<sup>32</sup> Yemeni constitution (adopted by referendum in 1991 and amended in 2001), online: [www.al-bab.com/yemen/](http://www.al-bab.com/yemen/) (Access on 12 June 2009).

<sup>33</sup> For details, refer to Anaïs Casanova and Guillaume Jeu, *La liberté d'association au Yémen. Une compilation de la législation relative aux associations et aux fondations*, Les Cahiers du CEFAS n°5, Sanaa: CEFAS, 2007, 202 p., and Abd al-Baqi Shamsan, *Hurriyya takwin al-jam'iyyat fi al-jumhuriyya al-yamaniyya [Freedom of association in the Republic of Yemen]*, Taz: HRITC, 2008, 212 p.

<sup>34</sup> Asmahan al-'Alas, “Al-haraka al-ahliyya fi 'Adan (1839-1967) [The civil movement in Aden (1839-1967)]”, in Sarah Ben Nefissa, Maggy Grabundzija et Jean Lambert (eds.), *Société civile, associations et pouvoir local au Yémen*, Op. Cit., pp. 95-102.

<sup>35</sup> Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen*, Op. Cit.

<sup>36</sup> François Burgat, “Les élections présidentielles de septembre 1999 au Yémen : du ‘pluralisme armé’ au retour à la ‘norme arabe’”, *Maghreb Machrek*, n°174, July 2000, pp. 67-75.



society, with around 5,000 registered NGOs<sup>37</sup>. More than half are dedicated to charitable activities, while others are devoted to social and cooperative work (especially in the agricultural sector), development issues, the promotion of democracy and human rights or campaign for women empowerment<sup>38</sup>. The growth of international aid for development and state-building projects has certainly played a major role in the recent boom of advocacy NGOs in Yemen. By funding local projects, international NGOs have encouraged the constitution of new associations, generating in the 2000s a new wave of expansion of civil society.

Over the last decades, various typologies of civil society organizations have been discussed by academics, generally articulating “advocacy” with “service” NGOs<sup>39</sup>. The first category embraces associations that offer an alternative, anti-hegemonic discourse, led and followed by activists that defend political causes (defense of rights and freedoms, promotion of participative politics, women empowerment). The second comprises local action and community-based NGOs that provide services to the population (education, health care and welfare, relief and reconstruction, cooperative building, etc). Although these categories are suggestive, they fail to render in our case the proper dynamics of the new forms of civil society that have developed tremendously since unification. In order to do so, this research will focus on the politicization of Yemeni NGOs, instead of their fields of intervention, which tend to be extensible and wide-ranged. It will distinguish three different networks of civil society actors, articulated around different political orientations: “party-oriented”, “proto-state”, and “independent”. Obviously, these categories are not rigid, and are meant to underline the porosities between the diverse fields of civil activism and discuss the emergence of distinct circuits of interaction and “communities of action”. By exploring the connections of civil society to the political field and its contingency with other forms of solidarity (including tribal and religious as discussed previously), we aim to recall that organizations are guided by ideals, compete with other actors, might be manipulated by political movements and encouraged to take position for or against the regime. As Sarah Ben Nefissa points out, “the problematic of non-governmental organizations is political in the first place”: regimes and opposition movements have politicized charities and other associations as they consider their community work as a major source of legitimization<sup>40</sup>.

### A) “Party-oriented” Civil Society

Unlike an idealized *apolitical* civil society, Yemeni actors of the civil realm often operate in dialogue with politics and even within the political sphere. Owing to the relatively authoritarian nature of the regime, activists often direct their action towards the contestation of state hegemony, adopting a

<sup>37</sup> Reports vary about the exact number of NGOs. According to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, 4567 NGOs have been registered since 1994 until 2008 (quoted by Anahi Alviso-Marino, “Islamic social and political work: Porosities and demarcations between the Islah charity and the Islah party in Yemen”, research conducted under a CEFAS-FES program (To be published)), while ‘Ali Salih ‘Abdallah, Secretary of State in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, speaks of more than 5300 registered NGOs in 2005 (‘Ali Salih ‘Abdallah, “Munazamat al-mujtama’ al-madani, tatawurat”, in □ Civil society organizations: development and failures □ wa-ikhfaqt Sarah Ben Nefissa, Maggy Grabundzija et Jean Lambert (eds.), *Société civile, associations et pouvoir local au Yémen*, Op. Cit., pp. 59-72).

<sup>38</sup> “The role of charities in Yemen’s development”, *Yemen Times*, 27 - 30 September 2007:

<http://www.yementimes.com/article.shtml?i=1089&p=business&a=1> (Access 26 June 2009). According to ‘Ali Salih ‘Abdallah, Yemen has around 500 feminine or feminist associations and more than a hundred advocacy NGOs for the defence of human rights (‘Ali Salih ‘Abdallah, “Munazamat al-mujtama’ al-madani, tatawurat wa-ikhfaqt”, Op. Cit.).

<sup>39</sup> See for example: Sarah Ben Nefissa (ed.), *ONG et gouvernance dans le monde arabe*, Paris - Cairo: Karthala - CEDEJ, 2004, 421 p.

<sup>40</sup> Sarah Ben Nefissa, “Nahwa niqash ‘awlami hawl al-dimuqratiyya fi al-alam al-‘arabi [Towards a world debate on the democracy in the Arab world]”, in Sarah Ben Nefissa, Maggy Grabundzija et Jean Lambert (eds.), *Société civile, associations et pouvoir local au Yémen*, Op. Cit., pp. 9-16.

subversive line<sup>41</sup>. Not surprisingly, associations tend to reproduce the divisions of the political landscape: some are bound by the “Islamic” rhetoric while others by a leftist discourse. Indeed, every political tendency seems to have its own “civil society” with whom it shares common ideals and whose actions indirectly strengthen parties by ensuring their popularity (including by favoring client/patron relations) and visibility. The two main opposition parties, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (*al-Tajammu‘ al-yamani li-l-islah* – often called al-Islah) and the Yemeni Socialist Party (*al-Hizb al-ishtiraki al-yamani* – YSP) for instance, are surrounded by a cluster of actors involved in competing social networks. Although not quite institutionalized and often fluid, each network coheres around a core of references and objectives and provides solidarity relations, at the ideological level but also at times at the regional level or even at the tribal level. As such, these circuits create and enable a community of action and mobilization<sup>42</sup>.

The “Islamist” oriented civil society, of which we shall give an overview first, appears to be the most active and is able to mobilize actors for large scale actions, in the charity sector as much as in labor unions, development, advocacy and human rights associations. Its activists seem to be the most present at grassroots level and have been displaying great ambitions, becoming leaders of party-oriented civil organizations<sup>43</sup>. This network of solidarity largely exceeds the circle of influence of the Islah party, relying on and benefiting from shared religious beliefs binding people together. It capitalizes on its support and mobilization bases through a socially and religiously conservative rhetoric, yet largely involved in democratization and liberalization issues. These nodes of activism, to take up Janine Clark’s expression<sup>44</sup>, revolve around the mass party and its local implantation, as well as major organizations working in service orientated and advocacy NGOs, as well as media and unions.

The Charitable Society for Social Welfare (*al-Jam‘iyya al-khayriyya li-l-islah al-ijtima‘iyya*), often labeled the Islah Charity, undertakes, since March 1990, activities of relief and assistance mainly targeting vulnerable populations<sup>45</sup>. The seven fields of intervention are defined as development and construction, emergency relief, education, social work, health, family development, childhood and youth care<sup>46</sup>. With 23 branches and 236 committees in all districts and governorates of the Republic, it is the country’s largest charity organization. Generally speaking, volunteers and workers participate in what they perceive as a religious duty, broadly sharing values and a sense of Islamic humanitarian work<sup>47</sup>. Although formally independent from the Islah party, both share a similar rhetoric and political framing and many of the leaders of the charity are themselves members of the party.

The “Islamist”-oriented activism also hinges on a large network of advocacy associations, working for the defense of human rights. HOOD (*al-Haya al-wataniyya li-l-difa‘ ‘an al-huquq wa al-huriyyat* - The National Organization for Defending Rights and Freedoms) is led by lawyers and media activists

<sup>41</sup> Myriam Catusse, “Le charme discret de la société civile. Ressorts politiques de la formation d’un groupe dans le Maroc ‘ajusté’”, *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, vol.9, n°2, 2002, p. 311.

<sup>42</sup> Laurent Bonnefoy, Marine Poirier, “Le Rassemblement yéménite pour la réforme (al-Islah) : la difficile construction d’un projet d’alternance”, Op. Cit.

<sup>43</sup> Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 252 p.

<sup>44</sup> Janine A. Clark, “Islamist women in Yemen: Informal nodes of activism”, in Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 164-184.

<sup>45</sup> Its first concern was to provide help to over a million Yemeni returnees from Saudi Arabia after the Gulf crisis.

<sup>46</sup> Also refer to the organization’s website: [www.csswyemen.org](http://www.csswyemen.org).

<sup>47</sup> Anahi Alviso-Marino, “Islamic social and political work”, Op. Cit., p. 14.

whose main activity is to report human rights violations and defend the victims of these abuses by offering them free legal assistance. The association has been dealing with the Guantanamo Bay detainees issue and the defense of Yemeni prisoners, as well as the case of arbitrary arrests and disappearances (notably those linked to the Saada War). Women Journalists Without Chains (*Sahafiyyat bi la quyyud*), for its part, offers training for journalists and assistance to women media activists. The association, headed by a member of the consultative council of the Islah party, also operates as an observatory of press freedom violations and provides support for victims of such infringements. SEYAJ (*Siyaj li-himayyat al-tufula*), finally, is an organization for the protection of childhood: as defenders of human rights, activists organize awareness campaigns about children's situation and assist victims of aggressions (rape, early marriage, illegal labor and traffic, arrests, etc.)<sup>48</sup>.

Besides this variety of associations, actors of Islamic activism dominate to a certain extent the actions of different professional unions, such as the Student's Union<sup>49</sup> or the Syndicate of the Education Professions (or Teachers' Syndicate). Initiatives of the civil organizations are comforted by a wide range of newspapers, such as *al-Sahwa* (*al-Islah* party's mouthpiece), *al-Asima*, *al-Muntada*, *al-Nass*, *Nawafidh* and *al-Nur*. They can also rely on many research centers and cultural foundations, financing reports, conferences and exhibitions. These activities often intertwine as their leaders are involved in several fields.

A broadly competing network, which nonetheless cooperates and participates in joint initiatives with the "Islamist" oriented civil society, is composed of "leftist" actors sharing liberal and secular views. Although less influential today, it draws on vibrant historical experiences, for instance that of the 1940s-1960s in Aden, when literary circles, syndicates and political organizations blossomed and laid the foundations of civil society. Many structures were upheld after the independence of South Yemen in 1967 and the establishment of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in 1970, which encouraged and co-opted some of them. For instance, the feminist movement initiated under the British occupation<sup>50</sup> and conducted by the Society of Adeni Women (*Jam'iyya al-mara al-'adaniyya*) and the Society of the Arab Woman (*Jam'iyya al-mara al-'arabiyya*) progressively lost its independence and turned into a quasi-governmental organization, the Yemeni Women Union (*Ittihad nisa al-Yaman*)<sup>51</sup>. Other organizations, such as the Peasant's Union (*Ittihad al-fallahin*) or the Youth Union (Ashîd - *Ittihad al-shabab al-ishtiraki al-yaman*), were created and became major instruments of politicization and as many reservoirs of militants for the Yemeni Socialist Party<sup>52</sup>. After unification, such organizations muted, merged and new NGOs appeared. However, since the 1994 war, the political and financial fold of the Yemeni Socialist Party<sup>53</sup> has led to the relative decline of these networks.

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<sup>48</sup> Refer to their respective websites: [www.hoodonline.org](http://www.hoodonline.org), [www.womenpress.org](http://www.womenpress.org) and [www.seyaj.org](http://www.seyaj.org).

<sup>49</sup> For precisions about the Students' Union political affiliations, see Intilak al-Mutawakkil, "Al-shabab wa al-mujtama' al-madani [Youth and civil society]", Op. Cit., pp. 205-206.

<sup>50</sup> Asmahan al-'Alas, *Awdhâ' al-mar'a al-yamaniyya fi thul al-idara al-britaniyya li-'Adan 1937-1967 [Status of Yemeni women during the British administration of Aden 1937-1967]*, Aden: Aden University, 2005, 289p., pp. 170-6.

<sup>51</sup> Thaira Shalan, "Les organisations non gouvernementales et la société civile au Yémen", in Rémy Leveau, Frank Mermier et Ugo Steinbach (eds.), *Le Yémen contemporain*, Paris : Karthala, 1999, pp. 285-300, p. 291-2.

<sup>52</sup> Maggy Grabundzija, "Femmes et politique au Yémen (1962/67 – 2003)", *Chroniques Yéménites*, n°11, 2003, pp. 123-136.

<sup>53</sup> After the secessionists' defeat, YSP's headquarters were confiscated and destroyed, its properties seized and a large proportion of its political elite fled into exile.

Despite the scarcity of resources (which contrasts with that of some “islamist-oriented” organizations) and what seems to be a contraction of the YSP’s audience (particularly visible at the electoral level<sup>54</sup>), civil society associations of various leftist shades exist in Yemen and have expanded their activities. Such actors might share ideological proximity with activists and cadres of the YSP, but do not necessarily refer to or maintain close connections with the party. The most active and dynamic organization is certainly the Yemeni Observatory for Human Rights (*al-Marsad al-yamani li-huquq al-insan*), which since 2004, advocates for the promotion and defense of human, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. The organization, which also provides legal assistance, aims at raising general awareness about rights and democratic practices<sup>55</sup>. More recently, in October 2009, the Mass Movement for Justice and Change (*al-Haraka al-jamahiriyya li-l-‘adala wa al-taghayyir*) was set up in Taz by socialist MP Sultan al-Sama’i. It strives for an equal citizenship, the state of law, and a comprehensive national dialogue, and tackles issues related to water, electricity, health and education in the governorate<sup>56</sup>. The weekly *al-Thawri* (YSP’s mouthpiece) and the information website *aleshteraki.net* further contribute to this “socialist” activism<sup>57</sup>.

Although less blatantly, a number of organizations might also be characterized as “leftist”. Hereby, we suggest that these structures are composed of actors who share a general sympathy for liberal and secularist views and whose practices, discourses and analyses are bend by a broad progressive orientation. As such, we might cite the Human Rights Information and Training Center (HRTIC - *Markaz al-ma‘lumat wa al-ta’hil li-huquq al-insan*) and the Women’s Forum for Research and Training (*Maltaqi al-mara li-l-dirasat wa al-tadrib*), both established in Taz<sup>58</sup>. The Yemen Center for Human Rights Studies (*Markaz al-yaman li-dirasat huquq al-insan*) launched in Aden by Muhammad Qasim Nu‘man, editor in chief of the Adeni weekly *Sahifa al-tahdith*, and lawyer and feminist ‘Afra al-Hariri’s Relief Center for Former Women Prisoners and Victims of Violence (*Markaz al-ighatha li-ri‘aya al-mara*) also seem to share this ideological bend.

Affiliations to “civil” society and “political” or “partisan” society are linked and may combine with parochial modes of solidarity and allegiance. For instance, Tariq Abu Luhum, son of Sinan Abu Luhum, a prominent tribal figure, heads the Islah charity. Another example might be that of southern shaykh Tariq al-Fadhli, a former militant Islamist, ally of president Salih, and heir of the bygone Sultanate of Abyan. In April 2009, he took an unexpected stand against the regime as he joined the Southern movement of protestation, becoming one of its, however controversial, leaders<sup>59</sup>.

Such affiliations create more or less autonomous networks with reservoirs of sympathizers that can be potentially mobilized in each realm. In a relatively constraining political context, opponents seem eager to play on different registers and to multiply the fronts on which they perform their contention

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<sup>54</sup> For instance, the YSP, which gained 56 seats in the unified parliament of 1993 (around 18%), only retrieved 7 seats (2,3%) in 2003 after the 1997 electoral boycott.

<sup>55</sup> Also refer to: <http://yohr.org/>.

<sup>56</sup> “Ta’iz. Al-i‘lan ‘an ta’assis al-Haraka al-jamahiriyya li-l-‘adala wa al-taghayyir bi ri‘asat al-Sama’i [Taz. The announcement of the establishment of the Mass Movement Justice and Change by al-Sama’i]”, *News Yemen*, 21 October 2009: [http://www.newsyemen.net/view\\_news.asp?sub\\_no=1\\_2009\\_10\\_21\\_32549](http://www.newsyemen.net/view_news.asp?sub_no=1_2009_10_21_32549) (Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> November 2009).

<sup>57</sup> Also refer to their respective websites: <http://www.althawry.org/> and <http://www.aleshteraki.net/>.

<sup>58</sup> Also refer to their respective websites: <http://hritc.org/> and <http://www.wfirt.net/>.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Abd al-Salam Mohammad, “Tariq al-Fadhli... Islami yaqud infisal janub al-Yaman Tariq al-Fadhli... [An Islamist leads the secession of South Yemen]”, *Islam On Line, Al-Taghayyir*, 30 April 2009: <http://www.al-tagheer.com/news.php?id=8701> (Accessed 7 November 2009).

and organize their struggle. Yet, although a large part of civil society actors and organizations remain critical of the government and defend a political agenda, many are reluctant to play as a counter-power and refuse subversion, taking part in what we will call a “proto-state” civil society.

### B) “Proto-state” Civil Society

Much like in other states in the region, a substantial fraction of civil society in Yemen can be defined as “proto-state”, meaning that organizations operate as outlets rather than as buffers between political authorities and citizens. Formally they then lose their function as independent intermediate bodies to become agents of the state, defending or even directly implementing its policies. However, their pro-government stance does not mean that they are ineffective as many, like the Salih foundation, provide a number of services to the citizens. On the contrary, the fact they benefit from the benevolence and the support of the administration might well be in certain circumstances a comparative advantage and facilitate a number of operations.

The multiplication of these parapublic, parastatal<sup>60</sup> or governmentally organized non governmental organizations<sup>61</sup> contrasts with the commonly shared idea that civil society carries an alternative project that may resist and fight the centralizing temptations of regimes. Indeed, some NGOs work in cooperation with authorities, using their interpersonal relations and proximity with centers of decision to develop activities of welfare and advocacy, within the limits fixed by their political affiliation (direct criticism of the Yemeni government and of president Salih may be regarded as “red lines”). As Sarah Ben Nefissa asserts, “Given the influence of state and authorities on community life [...], association leaders must maintain the best-possible relations with them and this situation gives to the Arab world’s associations and NGOs a hybrid feature: they resemble parastatal organizations used by various administrations to collect international funds or to facilitate administrative action rather than real associations.”<sup>62</sup>

In the Yemeni case, some civil society institutions have historically emerged as pro-state, some, independent in the past, have been co-opted by government, while others have been created in order to compete with existing organizations affiliated to the opposition. Al-Salih Social Foundation for Development, for instance, was founded by the president’s son Ahmad ‘Ali Salih in January 2004<sup>63</sup>, with a clear intention to challenge the quasi-monopoly exerted by the Islah charity in the field of social welfare. Largely funded by the President and the government and broadly known as the President’s or the President’s party’s (GPC) charity, its activities range from social work to education, development and gender<sup>64</sup>. After the floods in Hadramawt and Mahra in October 2008, al-Salih Foundation was responsible for centralizing and redistributing the aid sent by international and

<sup>60</sup> Sarah Ben Nefissa (ed.), *Pouvoirs et associations dans le monde arabe*, Paris: CNRS Editions, 2002, p. 19.

<sup>61</sup> Such organizations are often labelled GONGOs, see Sharon Beatty, Ahmad Al-Madhaji and Renaud Detalle, *Yemeni NGOs and quasi-NGOs (Part I : Analysis)*, Sanaa, 1996, p. 7.

<sup>62</sup> Sarah Ben Nefissa, “Associations et ONG dans le monde arabe: vers la mise en place d’une problématique”, in Sarah Ben Nefissa (ed.), *Pouvoirs et associations dans le monde arabe*, Op. Cit., p. 24.

<sup>63</sup> “Muassasat al-salih al-ijtima’iyya li-l-tanamiyya: uslab jadad li-iysal al-khayr li-kul al-nas [Al-Salih Social Foundation for Development: new means to deliver welfare to all people]”, *26 September Newspaper*, 4 November 2004: <http://www.26sep.net/newsweekarticle.php?lng=arabic&sid=16440> (Accessed 27 June 2009).

<sup>64</sup> “Muassasat al-salih al-ijtima’iyya fi al-Yaman tunafiz mashru’ kaswa al-’id [Al-Salih Social Foundation in Yemen executes kaswa al-’id project]”, *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 25 October 2006: <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=54&article=388795&issueno=10193> (Accessed 27 June 2009).

national donors. The alleged inefficiency of the relief campaign led by the foundation led to protestations about its lack of transparency. The Salih foundation also took part in 2008 in the distribution of aid to refugees in the war-affected districts of Saada governorate. Its lack of neutrality in a conflict that opposes a group of rebels, the “Huthis”, to the national army appears as problematic and may well hinder its activities in such a sensitive context.

In the advocacy arena, many NGOs are affiliated to the GPC and work on issues that do not represent a frontal attack of the regime. The Democracy School (*al-Madrassa al-Dimuqratiyya*<sup>65</sup>), for instance, headed by Jamal al-Shami, is the initiator and supervisor of the Children’s Parliament, a very publicized although powerless institution for the defense of children’s rights. Since 2002, around forty “deputies”, elected every two years in selected schools, discuss childhood issues such as education, health or traffic and regularly present their recommendations to the concerned ministries. The NGO also funds and monitors the Women’s Shadow Parliament, in cooperation with the Middle East Partnership Initiative. This institution, whose first session was held in April 2009, was created in order to empower women candidates and prepare them to organize campaigns for the upcoming elections<sup>66</sup>. Although this initiative to train and promote women as political actors is praiseworthy, it may in this case appear as an opportunist step to please international donors without tackling, in practice, gender issues in Yemen. Furthermore, it is allegedly subject to political hijacking by the GPC in its attempts to portray itself as progressive.

Although the Yemeni government continues to tolerate development and human rights NGOs, it has been keen to assure its control over most of professional syndicates through the ruling party<sup>67</sup>. Indeed, labor unions seem to be largely dominated by the GPC and have shown very little capacity of acting independently. One of the only “independent” union, the Yemeni Teachers’ Syndicate (close to the *Islah* party), was countered by the creation in 2008 of a new union, attached to the GPC, dividing the efforts of the professional movement and progressively reversing the balance of power. The Students’ Union has also been the target of various attempts by the GPC to control it, nevertheless these have appeared as inefficient as it remains broadly influenced by *al-Islah* activists<sup>68</sup>.

The Yemeni Women’s Union (*Ittihad nisa al-Yaman*) emerged in 1990 as the merger of the very active Yemeni Women’s Union of former South Yemen and its Northern (less active) counterpart, the Yemeni Women’s Association (*Jam’iyya al-mara al-yamaniyya*). The unification of the two movements resembled an overthrow of the progressive Union of the South by the more conservative Northern elites, thereafter largely denaturing the orientations and activities of the organization. Led by members of the GPC, the Women’s Union has lost its subversive potential and has become a quite passive and timid association for the defense and promotion of women, playing no independent role. Like the Women National Committee (*al-Lajna al-wataniyya li-l-mara*), created in 1996 and placed under the supervision of the Prime minister and, since its creation in 2000, under the authority of the Supreme Council for Women Affairs, its projects remain discursive more than practical.

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<sup>65</sup> Also refer to the organization’s website: <http://dsyemen.org/>.

<sup>66</sup> Mahmoud Assamiee, “Woman Shadow Parliament elects its chairwoman, plans for activities”, *Yemen Times*, n° 1256, 4-6 May 2009: <http://www.yementimes.com/article.shtml?i=1256&p=local&a=3> (Accessed 27 June 2009).

<sup>67</sup> Jean Lambert, “Postface”, in Sarah Ben Nefissa, Maggy Grabundzija and Jean Lambert (eds.), *Société civile, associations et pouvoir local au Yémen*, Op. Cit., pp. 214.

<sup>68</sup> Intilak al-Mutawakkil, “Al-shabab wa al-mujtama’ al-madani [Youth and civil society]”, Op. Cit., pp. 208-209.

According to some Southern activists, the Union's manipulation by the regime and its standardization as a state affiliated organization have generated a certain turnout of former affiliates<sup>69</sup>.

A large number of newspapers and magazines (*al-Thawra*, 26 September, 14 October, *al-Mithaq*, 22 May, and *Bint al-Yaman*) broadcast the official discourse and are connected in diverse ways to public authorities. In parallel, other weeklies (*al-Shumu'a*, *al-Dastur* for instance) might claim independence despite their obvious links to influential decision makers. Research centers and think tanks, often claiming to be independent, are also active proponents of such a proto-state civil society, creating confusion about its orientations and agendas. The historical *Ma'had al-Mithaq* (Center of the [National] Charter), created simultaneously with the GPC in 1982, offers training for the party's executives and has a vocation of study and research. Other broadly pro-state research or cultural centers and foundations have been created, such as the Cultural Development Programs Foundation established by feminist activist Raufa Hasan<sup>70</sup>.

Since 2007 and in the context of rising contestation in the South (which we will discuss in the next section), several associations and committees striving for the defense of unity have been created by individuals close to the ruling-party<sup>71</sup>. These initiatives are clearly aimed at counter balancing the expansion of the Southern movements, whose social and political demands have questioned the state's organization and for some of these, Yemen's unity. In that specific context, civil society organizations appear to have been encouraged and created by actors affiliated with the government as a means to challenge opposition movements within society and enhance counter dynamics, sometimes leading to violence<sup>72</sup>.

### C) "Independent" Civil Society

Besides these two politicized realms of civil activism, some domains of activity distinguish themselves by their relative autonomy. Maintaining such autonomy over time is a challenge for the leaders of these "independent" organizations as they are subject to different pressures, nevertheless it remains a reality and allows them to emerge as intermediate bodies defending a number of non-commercial shared interests. The cooperative movement of the 1960s and 70s in North Yemen, although ultimately co-opted by the authorities, remains a unique and early experiment of a vibrant, local based, civil society. Based on mutual aid and self-help, an important network of local committees, conducting activities in the fields of education, health care, water supply and road-building, developed in the central region of Taez. Their successful experience was progressively

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<sup>69</sup> 'Aicha 'Abd al-'Aziz, feminist activist, interview with one of the authors, Aden, April 2008.

<sup>70</sup> See the website [www.mugtama.net](http://www.mugtama.net).

<sup>71</sup> Notably the Homeland Foundation for Deepening National Loyalty and the People's Movement in Defense of Unity and Fighting Corruption.

<sup>72</sup> See "Al-Yaman: 7 jurha fi muwajahat bayn muthaharatayn li-l-*hirak* wa lajan al-wahda [Yemen : 7 injured in clashes between demonstrators of *The Movements and Committees for Unity*]", *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, n°11167, 25/06/09: <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=524826&issueno=11167> (Accessed 7 November 2009), and "Akhar fatawa 'ulama' al-Yaman 'an al-wahda [Another fatwa of Yemeni ulama about unity]", *Marebpress*, 13 July 2009: [http://marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?sid=17519&lng=arabic](http://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=17519&lng=arabic) (Accessed 7 November 2009), both quoted by the blog *Waq al-Waq*. Also refer to April Longley and 'Abd al-Ghani al-Iryani, "Southern Aspirations and Salih's Exasperation: The Looming Threat of Secession in South Yemen", *The Middle-East Institute Viewpoints*, n°11, June 2009, pp. 2-5.

exported to different parts of the country, before being integrated to the state's administration<sup>73</sup>. Some organizations, such as professional cooperatives, local NGOs and rural or youth associations fulfill today these deeds and remain independent. Based on community work and grassroots action, these often participatory organizations have resisted state appropriation as well as politicization<sup>74</sup>.

Similarly local and corporate, the Southern military retiree's movement, which has expanded and intensified since 2007, emerged around a core of local associations of retirees of the former army of the Popular and Democratic Republic of Yemen, protesting against their early and enforced retirement after the 1994 war. These associations are organized at a governorate level and have convened the Coordination Council of Retirees Associations, advocating for the revalorization of pensions and the integration of the Southern non-retiree servicemen to the national army. Civil servants, unemployed youth, teachers, lawyers and academics have joined the movement, mobilizing against what they consider as state discrimination directed towards Southern citizens<sup>75</sup>. These movements illustrate the permanence, particularly in the Southern regions, of a certain culture of civil activism that is less present in other parts of the country where tribal affiliations structure different forms of organization. With the growing contestation in the South and rising repression since 2007, the retiree's movement has nevertheless grown more political taking the lead in pacific marches denouncing northern dominance<sup>76</sup>.

Other associations, such as cultural gatherings and clubs, are obviously less subject to politicization. Although Yemen knows nothing such as the popular club culture, widely spread in Syria and Iraq, these organizations have developed, however irregularly, since the early 1920s in the British occupied Aden. The Writers' Union (*Itihad al-udaba wa al-kuttab al-yamaniyyin*), for instance, was established in Aden in 1970, years before the Yemeni unification, gathering intellectuals of both North and South republics. Since 1989, Al-'Afif Cultural Foundation (*Muassassat al-'Afif al-thaqafiyya*) is dedicated to the spread of science and knowledge. With a public library and a lecture hall, the foundation organizes weekly conferences open to a large public and treats of a wide range of issues. It also caters for the very unconventional (and one must admit rather marginal!) National Association for Fighting Qat Damages (*al-Jam'iyya al-wataniyya li-muwajaha adhrar al-qat*) and the Yemen Association for Water Protection (*al-Jam'iyya al-yamaniyya li-himayyat al-mayah*) that aims to tackle one of the most dire problems Yemeni will face in the next few years<sup>77</sup>. Sporting clubs as well as community (cultural) associations (the Ethiopian cultural center for example) provide activities in a more or less independent way. However, these initiatives have remained limited and marginal due to the lack of support given by the government.

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<sup>73</sup> Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen*, Op. Cit. and Ahmad al-Harbi "Tajruba al-haraka al-ta'wuniyya li-l-tanmiyya [The experience of the cooperative associations for development]", in Sarah Ben Nefissa, Maggy Grabundzija and Jean Lambert (eds.), *Société civile, associations et pouvoir local au Yémen*, Op. Cit., pp. 103-136.

<sup>74</sup> Intilak al-Mutawakkil, "Al-shabab wa al-mujtama' al-madani [Youth and civil society]" and Maggy Grabundzija and Bassem al-Hagg, "Al-jam'iyyat al-rifiyya fi mantiqa al-Hujariyya [Rural associations in the region of al-Hujariyya]", in Sarah Ben Nefissa, Maggy Grabundzija and Jean Lambert (eds.), *Société civile, associations et pouvoir local au Yémen*, Op. Cit., pp. 193-220 and pp. 221-236.

<sup>75</sup> Frank Mermier, "Yémen : le Sud sur la voie de la sécession ?", *ÉchoGéo*, 2008:

<http://echogeo.revues.org/index5603.html> (Access 28 June 2009); April Longley and 'Abd al-Ghani al-Iryani, "Fighting brushfires with batons: an analysis of the political crisis in South Yemen", *Policy Brief n° 7*, Washington: The Middle East Institute, 2008, pp. 1-14.

<sup>76</sup> April Longley and 'Abd al-Ghani al-Iryani, "Southern Aspirations and Salih's Exasperation: The Looming Threat of Secession in South Yemen", Op. Cit.

<sup>77</sup> See the foundation's website: [www.y.net.ye/alafif/](http://www.y.net.ye/alafif/).



Some advocacy NGOs, labor unions and forums single out as relatively mixed and rather independent. The Sisters Arab Forum for Human Rights (*Muntada al-shaqa'iq al-'arabi li-huquq al-insan* – SAF) represents one of the most active feminine organizations for the defense of human rights in Yemen. Led by a popular yet controversial personality, Amal al-Basha, SAF has efficiently promoted since 1999 the defense and protection of women (especially victims of violence), political empowerment of women, training and education to human rights. More recently, in 2004, the Media Women's Forum (*Muntada al-i'lamiyyat al-yamaniyyat*) was established by a group of professional female journalists and media activists. It campaigns for the development of a media industry that would promote human rights and democracy by offering activities of skill development and capacity building in the field of journalism and civil rights activism<sup>78</sup>. We could also mention the Political Development Forum (*al-Muntada al-tanamiyya al-siyasiyya*), *al-Tajammu'* (the Gathering) or *al-Taghayir* (the Change): unlike the two NGOs referred to previously, these organizations create public spaces for discussion, gathering on a regular basis activists of varied political affiliations. Mainly taking the form of weekly qat chews, these assemblies represent one of the most obvious signs of the dynamism of civil society in Yemen.

Labor unions, as we have discussed before, tend to be dominated either by state or by opposition parties, yet the Yemeni Journalists' Syndicate also strikes by its quite unique experience. Indeed, although victim of the general trend of political contraction, the syndicate has remained mostly independent. The chair of the union has been recently led by personalities close to the authorities, such as chief editor of the official Saba news agency Nasir Taha Mustafa (2006-2009) and deputy editor-in-chief of the state-run *al-Thawra* daily Yasin al-Mas'udi since last elections in March 2009. Despite such a leadership, which maintains intense relations with government and the ruling party, the syndicate seems to follow its task with relative autonomy. However, the union has not been able to put an end to the repression of journalists, including for instance 'Abdulkarim al-Khaywani, former editor in chief of *al-Shura* weekly. Victim of repeated harassment in 2004 and 2008 for his coverage of the Saada conflict, he won the Amnesty International Special Award for Human Rights Journalism Under Threat in June 2008.

Finally, the Supreme National Authority for Combating Corruption (*al-Hay'a al-wataniyya al-'aliyya li-mukafaha al-fasad* - SNACC), established in 2007 through election in parliament, is the first anti-corruption authority of its kind in the Middle East. Its role is to investigate and refer to prosecution cases of corruption in all levels of state officials, including the legislative and judiciary authorities. Although state-controlled, the initiative has attracted a variety of civil society actors (from independent to party-oriented or pro-government NGOs) around a major issue in contemporary Yemen. Their daily participation in the activities of the Authority, however, do not seem to be as fruitful as expected, as means and resources are limited and the institution in general lacks of proper autonomy<sup>79</sup>.

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<sup>78</sup> See respectively [www.mwfye.org](http://www.mwfye.org) and [www.saf-yemen.org](http://www.saf-yemen.org).

<sup>79</sup> Member of independent NGO working for the SNACC, interview by one of the authors, Sanaa, May 2009.

## Prospects and Challenges for Civil Society Actors

Over the last decades and particularly since unification, civil society actors in Yemen have experienced deep transformations. An outstanding phenomenon is surely the progressive merger of the traditional and “modern” sectors or of what some label the *mujtama’ al-ahli* and the *mujtama’ al-madani* exemplified by organizations such as the Islah Charitable society or the *Sina’a al-haya* network. Another example of modern re-enactment of traditional networks is the Dar al-Salam association. This NGO was established in 1998 with the aim to solve conflicts through tribal arbitration. It gathered much attention by international actors and relied on a dense network of influential members. According to Laila al-Zwaini it illustrates how “tribal and Islamic actors begin to discover that the newly developing “civil society” can be used to regain their authority under a modern format.<sup>80</sup>”

This merger has been used as a levy to legitimate reforms and popular participation among the Yemeni population within different types of institutions: NGOs, local cooperatives, tribal forums, associations, etc. Building on the capacity of religious, regional or tribal allegiances to mobilize, these actors also use modern techniques of communication and of fund raising, and often work within a normative framework, adopting an international agenda that goes well beyond cultural specificities without suppressing them. Consequently, the division between traditional and modern civil society actors has been blurred and now appears as largely heuristic, then highlighting the need for a dynamic approach to civil society in Yemen.

### A) A Challenging Political Environment

Prospects for civil society actors are affected by the political environment. Much like other countries in the Arab world, the Yemeni government has taken an ambivalent stance: at times favoring civil society activities (like in 2004 during an international Human rights conference in Sanaa or through the establishment in 1997 of the Social Fund for Development, a governmental agency which is supported by international donors and provides grants for NGOs to implement specific projects) and in other circumstances aiming to control all non-state actors (for instance by advocating direct state supervision of the curriculum of all religious institutes or appointing imams in mosques). The decentralization laws, voted in 2000 with the support of international actors, particularly the World Bank, sought to revive the 1970s movement of local development co-operatives and to grant civil society actors more responsibilities at the local level. Due to lack of budget, of experience by the actors involved, and also of political will by the ruling elites, the decentralization process does not appear as fully successful. Elections of local councils, first held in February 2001, were postponed numerous times before being organized in September 2006. Local councilors’ three-year mandate was extended in November 2008 by decision of Parliament for four more years. Although election of governors by local councils, conducted in May 2008, seemed to represent a further step towards decentralization, the transfer of resources from the state to the districts is still ineffective.

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<sup>80</sup> Laila al-Zwaini, “Mediating Between Custom and Code. Dâr al-Salâm, an NGO for Tribal Arbitration in San’a” in Baudouin Dupret and François Burgat (eds.), *Le shaykh et le procureur*, Op. Cit., p. 309.

Legislation voted in 2001 and the subsequent decrees of application seem to have hindered much of the freedom of association granted in 1990 and originally guaranteed by the Yemeni constitution. Administrative procedures at the Ministry of social affairs and labor to obtain the official recognition of an association are increasingly complex and take much energy and time<sup>81</sup>. Cooptation, bribery, state intrusion in independent associations, and arbitrary decisions are recurrent according to many civil society actors. The establishment of new media (other than on the Internet where, despite censorship of certain information websites like Yemen Portal, regulations are still scarce<sup>82</sup>) is more and more difficult as the ministry of Information rejects many demands. The establishment of new papers can now take months if not years. In this constraining environment, numerous actors choose to get around these limitations either by registering in another ministry or by not registering at all. This is the case of many youth associations, such as Long Live Youth (*Yalla shabab hayya*<sup>83</sup>) or rural organizations such as the mutual aid funds for young people (*Sundūq al-tawfiri li-shabab al-sahira* and *Sundūq al-tawfiri li-shabab al-qahifa*<sup>84</sup>) in the region of al-Hujariyya.

The cloning technique (*tafrikh, istinsakh*<sup>85</sup>) through which actors close to the government copy existing opposition or independent structures in order to affect their reputation is common for associations, press and political parties. An important number of organizations have been targeted by these techniques. The organization “Women Journalists Without Borders” had to change its name to “Women Journalists Without Chains”. Another famous example is the *al-Shura* weekly, mouthpiece of the opposition Union of Popular Forces who was cloned (using the same font, heading and color) by pro-government individuals who publish *Minbar al-Shura*. Political parties are no exception: the High council of coordination of the opposition (*Majlis al-a’la li-tansiq al-mu’arada*) is for example not to be confused with the National council of the opposition (*Majlis al-watani li-l-mu’arada*) comprising of pro-government parties.

Other techniques of hampering civil society independence include encouraging false or artificial memberships in specific organizations in order to manipulate votes or design a new majority and then reverse their political orientations. The Journalist syndicate as well as the Writers’ Union (*Ittihad al-udaba*) seem to have been subject to such manipulation various times<sup>86</sup>.

### B) Donor Oriented Activities

The international context and the central issue of fund raising also represent prominent challenges for civil society actors in Yemen. Since the late 1990s, the growing involvement of international aid

<sup>81</sup> Abd al-Baqi Shamsan, *Hurriyya takwin al-jam’iyyat fi al-jumhūiyya al-yamaniyya [Freedom of association in the Republic of Yemen]*, Op. Cit., pp. 69-73.

<sup>82</sup> Patrice Chevalier, “Informer au Yémen. Les journalistes du Net”, in Yves Gonzales-Quijano, Tourya Gaaybess (eds.), *Les Arabes parlent aux Arabes. La révolution de l’information dans le monde arabe*, Arles: Actes Sud, 2009, pp. 209-223.

<sup>83</sup> Intilak al-Mutawakkil, “Al-shabab wa al-mujtama’ al-madani [Youth and civil society]”, Op. Cit., pp. 215.

<sup>84</sup> Maggy Grabundzija and Bassem al-Hagg, “Al-jam’iyyat al-rifiyya fi mantiqa al-Hujariyya [Rural associations in the region of al-Hujariyya]”, Op. Cit., pp. 227-228 and pp. 235-236.

<sup>85</sup> Paul Dresch, *A Modern History of Yemen*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 189.

<sup>86</sup> The press syndicate underwent important pressures before its (finally postponed to 2009) elections in June 2008: lists of new members willing to join the union were sent from all over the country only weeks before the vote. Member of the press syndicate, interview with one of the authors, Sanaa, June 2008. See also: Monica Perini, “The Journalist’s Syndicate (1990-2001)” pp.125-134, and ‘Abd al-Bari Tahir, “Huriyya al-sahafa fi al-Yaman, ‘awaiq wa amal [Freedom of press in Yemen: Obstacles and hopes]”, pp. 267-280, both in Sarah Ben Nefissa, Maggy Grabundzija et Jean Lambert (eds.), *Société civile, associations et pouvoir local au Yémen*, Op. Cit.

agencies (bilateral mostly but also linked to the United Nations or through World Bank projects) and NGOs as well as companies (mainly linked to the oil sector like Total) directly affects the agendas of Yemeni actors. For long, foreign influence in Yemen did not seem concerned with democratization<sup>87</sup>, yet a new trend has emerged. While governments may still focus on issues of security and stability, particularly in the post-9/11 context, a number of actors supported by these governments (the Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), the National Democratic Institute (NDI)<sup>88</sup>, etc.) are growingly involved in development projects with the explicit aim of empowering populations and of supporting democracy. Such concern has created a demand that different types of local actors are seeking to satisfy. The establishment of the Yemen Polling Center in 2005, an organization that works for different international organizations (World Bank, Gallup, National Endowment for Democracy, amongst others), is an example of such linkage between donors and Yemeni civil society actors.

As a result, different buzzwords (education, sustainable development, gender, health, etc.) and agendas now seem to be more efficient than others in providing associations with funding from Western donors, consequently affecting the way local actors frame different issues. For their part, Islamic charities (al-Islah Charitable society, al-Hikma and al-Ihsan for example), frowned upon by many International actors, receive support from Yemen's neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

One should notice the discrepancy that may exist between agendas and concrete achievements of organizations. Activities provided by "modern" NGOs may reveal inapt to answer people's demands, while "traditional" actors, notably tribal and religious, although deploying a register less attractive to Westerners, may prove more efficient, better suiting local's requirements and modes of organization.

Massive inflows of foreign money can become an important stake or even a sufficient reason for individuals or groups to establish an association without it necessarily being active at the local level. Such has for instance been the case of different gender oriented or local development organizations. The apparent dynamism of Yemeni civil society can then appear as misleading.

Another issue is linked to sub-contracting: local NGOs receive foreign funding provided they work on specific projects and issues and are placed under the authority of these donors. Through such a process, civil society actors may well lose much of their independence due to external funding and see their activities defined by international constraints rather than local needs<sup>89</sup>. In that context, an equilibrium needs to be found between much needed foreign support and autonomous and community based activities that effectively empower populations. Such empowerment is undoubtedly

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<sup>87</sup> In her study published in 1998, Sheila Carapico did not appear to consider that international actors played a central role in shaping Yemeni civil society and in advocating democratic reforms through that channel, she wrote: "Foreign influence has hardly promoted democratization: the British did not do so in Aden or the protectorates; the USSR and other donors did not do so during the cold war; regional donors are explicitly anti-republican and anti-democratic; and since the Gulf War Western donors have pressed for normalization of relations with repressive monarchies and rescheduling of debt more assiduously than they have clamored for elections or human rights." Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen*, Op. Cit., p. 211.

<sup>88</sup> On the National Democratic Institute's experience in tribal conflict resolution, see David Finkel, "US Ideals meet Yemen Reality", *The Washington Post*, 18 December 2005.

<sup>89</sup> Blandine Destremau, "Le système d'allègement de la pauvreté et le rôle des associations au Yémen", in Sarah Ben Nefissa. (ed.), *ONG et gouvernance dans le monde arabe*, Op. Cit., pp. 369-399.

critical in providing citizens with the necessary resources to participate in public affairs and alleviate democratic practices.

### C) *Insufficient Resources*

A third set of challenges may relate to a lack of experience of the actors and to the high politicization and personalization of the organizations, or what we might call insufficient human and social resources. In this regard, Yemeni civil society is in need of further training, capacity building and empowerment programs, networking, awareness and loyalty rising.

Yemeni civil society suffers from the limited skills of its agents and the important personalization of its structures. Indeed, NGO employees are generally insufficiently trained regarding the charges they assume. This is partly due to the deficiencies of the public education system and further exacerbated by a hyper centralization and personification of NGOs. It seems that civil society suffers from difficulties regarding the transmission and circulation of knowledge. In general, skills are concentrated in the hands of a few individuals who often seem reluctant to ensure their dissemination within the structure. In spite of the development of training opportunities for NGO employees in Yemen (as proposed for instance by the Yemeni Observatory for Human Rights, the Human Rights Information and Training Center or the Media Women's Forum) and the possibility to travel abroad for specialized workshops funded by international NGOs (such as the Danish Institute for Human Rights, the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, Oxfam International or the National Democratic Institute), skills and resources have remained disproportionately distributed. Only a circumscribed circle of actors benefits from these programs, whereas "capacity-building" should target all members of the structure.

Excessive politicization might also be considered a limit to the development of civil society. Notably, Yemen lacks non-partisan and grassroots youth movements (sports clubs, cultural and artistic structures or training centers) that would encourage civic activism and favor practices of pluralism and collective deliberation outside of the public education sector. A notable exception could yet be the Youth Leadership Development Foundation (*Muassassa tanmiyyat al-qiyadat al-shabba*), offering various skill development programs and networking for young men and women, but it remains insufficiently developed. As mentioned earlier, most organizations tend to be branded politically, affecting their structures and activities. These affiliations may well provide important resources but weaken the possibilities for civil society to play as an autonomous third party and a buffer between state and citizens as much as between state and political parties. Political congruencies between actors reinforce civil society's segmentation: networks of associations sharing ideological proximities offer a range of activities (conferences, forums, sit-ins, petitions, lobbying or demonstrations) to a targeted audience. Competing networks of civil society actors seem to campaign quite independently, capitalizing on secure circuits of mobilization. Unfortunately, very few initiatives have, like the Political Development Forum, attempted to bridge these political divergences and enhance cooperation, gathering activists around common projects to discuss and advocate for. However, as trans-ideological cooperation was initiated between "Islamists" and "leftists"<sup>90</sup> and a joint platform

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<sup>90</sup> Jillian Schwedler and Janine Clark, "Islamist-Leftist cooperation in the Arab World", *ISIM Review*, n°18, 2006.

created between the relating political parties<sup>91</sup>, actors of civil society were also involved in a dynamic of dialogue and collaboration. Furthermore, as the Yemeni regime has engaged itself in a repressive spiral (against militant Islamist groups, Zaydi revivalists and Southern demonstrators), actors of different bend seem eager to build partnerships and enhance joint projects that represent as many shields to the state's authoritarian practices. In 2009, the Yemeni Network for Human Rights was established under the patronage of the Danish Center for Democracy. Gathering six Yemeni NGOs of different political orientations, this initiative could well develop new dynamics<sup>92</sup>. The question remains about the sustainability of such cooperation ventures.

Yemeni NGOs are marked by the stigma of personalization and revolve, much like press organs and political parties, around a small number of actors: this allows original initiatives but reduces the longevity of structures, which tend to be dependent on the inconsistent resources and ambitions of its leaders. In fact, as Sharon Beatty, Ahmad Al-Madhaji and Renaud Detalle argue, "While the term 'NGO' in Yemen shall be defined as organizations which are non-profit, and independent from government, the term should not, however, be considered synonymous with 'grassroot' or 'participatory'. The majority of Yemeni NGOs are not highly democratic or participatory, although rural NGOs tend to be grassroots."<sup>93</sup> Contrary to the myth of a spontaneous and informal civil society, the associative landscape is rather hierarchized, elitist and institutionalized<sup>94</sup>. Civil society leaders, although they should not be reduced to this aspect, tend to be atypical of Yemeni society. Generally benefiting from high levels of education and having experienced peculiar socialization processes (due to family environment, early politicization or studies abroad), these actors have been able to create vibrant organizations and launch major dynamics for change within the Yemeni society, certainly fostering democratic skills, attitudes and values. Yet these "little enterprises" sometimes loose their social dimension, and become propitious grounds for the formulation and emergence of political notabilities and careers. We might even argue that some actors give the impression of striving to "ensure themselves a sustainable development", as they develop a strong propensity to focus concerns on their carrier and practical interests enabling such a carrier<sup>95</sup>. In this regard, the nonetheless significant "social capital" of Yemeni actors should be further developed and activated in order to foster cooperation and civic engagement.

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<sup>91</sup> Michelle Browsers, "Origins and architects of Yemen's Joint Meeting Parties", Op. Cit.

<sup>92</sup> It gathers the Yemeni Organization for the Defense of Democratic and Human Rights, Women Journalists Without Chains, the Yemeni Observatory for Human Rights, the HRTIC, Hood and the Democracy School. "6 munazamat yamaniyya tu'assis shabaka li-huquq al-insan bi al-musharaka ma'a al-ma'had al-Dinmarki [6 Yemeni organizations set up a network for human rights with the participation of the Danish Center], *Al-sahwa Net*, 5 November 2009: [http://www.alsahwa-yemen.net/view\\_news.asp?sub\\_no=1\\_2009\\_11\\_05\\_73989](http://www.alsahwa-yemen.net/view_news.asp?sub_no=1_2009_11_05_73989) (Accessed 7 November 2009).

<sup>93</sup> Sharon Beatty, Ahmad Al-Madhaji and Renaud Detalle, *Yemeni NGOs and quasi-NGOs*, Op. Cit., p. 86.

<sup>94</sup> Myriam Catusse, "Les charmes discrets de la société civile", Op. Cit, p. 311.

<sup>95</sup> Amin Allal, "Configurations développementistes internationales et évolutions de l'action publique au Maroc et en Tunisie. Des injonctions au *politics transfer* à portée limitée" (To be published).

## Conclusion

Civil society in Yemen has gone through various stages of development and regression, as windows of opportunity alternately open and close. Interestingly, the analysis formulated by Sharon Beatty, Ahmad Al-Madhaji and Renaud Detalle about the mutations of civil society organizations almost fifteen years ago remains particularly relevant: "With the revolutions of both the north and the south, NGOs underwent a transformation. In the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen [i.e. South Yemen], activities became government organized, and NGOs lost their independence. In the Yemen Arab Republic [i.e. North Yemen], the village self-help initiatives [...] grew into the cooperative movement. This movement [...] lost its effectiveness when it became part of the government bureaucracy in the 1980s. With unification, Yemen enjoyed greater democratic liberties than ever before in its history, and civil society expanded. Within this environment, political parties, free press, and NGOs began to flourish. Yemen is still in this phase, but since the 1994 civil war, the activities of political parties and the press have been restricted and many believe that the same might happen to NGOs. As such, the window [...] is closing again."<sup>96</sup>

Evidently, the window in 2009 is still not closed nor has it opened again. Civil society in Yemen, despite evident support by the international donor community and in spite of the development of many organizations and their transformation through the merger of "modern" and "traditional" means of mobilization, is forced to evolve in an uncertain and ambivalent environment. While not suffering from a standstill, civil society actors do not seem to have been able to durably and profoundly affect the equilibrium of power and to influence the government by imposing democratic reforms or allowing the participation of citizens. For example, after months of political crisis and the threat of the opposition to boycott the ballot, the decision to postpone for two years the parliamentary elections in February 2009 was taken without consultation of civil society actors<sup>97</sup>. On the issue, leaders of both the government and the opposition reached an agreement, while many civil society actors acknowledged that it was a set-back for democracy. Nevertheless, Yemen appears as a fascinating case-study in the sense that it encourages analysts to adopt a broad understanding of civil society and to take in account a wide number of actors, some attractive and some less pleasant, but which all take their share in limiting autocratic rule and in being an intermediary between the state and the citizens.

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<sup>96</sup> Sharon Beatty, Ahmad Al-Madhaji and Renaud Detalle, *Yemeni NGOs and quasi-NGOs*, Op. Cit., p. 84.

<sup>97</sup> Marine Poirier, "Score one for the opposition?", *Arab Reform Bulletin*, March 2009: <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/> (Access 28 June 2009).

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## About the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia

The paper is produced in the framework of the Knowledge Programme on Civil Society in West Asia. This is a joint initiative by Hivos and the University of Amsterdam with the purpose of generating and integrating knowledge on the roles and opportunities for civil society actors in democratization processes in politically challenging environments. This programme integrates academic knowledge and practitioner's knowledge from around the world to develop new insights and strategies on how civil society actors in Syria and Iran can contribute to various processes of democratization and how international actors can support this.

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