Stalemate in Yemen

President Hadi’s resignation was the only chance to preserve democratic gains – but risks fragmenting the country

By Mareike Transfeld

On Jan. 22, 2015, the UN-appointment Yemeni President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi and his technocratic government resigned suddenly amid Houthis pressure to make changes to the draft constitution published days earlier. The White Houthi, an armed movement from northern Yemen, rejected a central aspect of the draft: the division of the country into six federal regions. The government resigned suddenly the next day, but the Houthis control in northern Yemen and the government violent took over control of Sanaa, the Yemeni capital. The Houthis are now in a position where they must show their true face. They can either work within the framework of the political institutions and adhere to the agreements reached in the transitional period, which would entail ending coming to terms with the federal structure of the future Yemeni state. Or the Houthis can unilaterally grab power by forming a presidential council. But they would then be held accountable by the public and risk losing the legitimacy they have in the population.

Since the Houthis’ rise to power, opposition against the movement came particularly from central and southern Yemen. In contrast to the Houthis, who adhere to the Zaidi tradition of Shia Islam, in these regions the majority of the population follows the Hanafite school of Sunni Islam. The fragmented Hirak movement and tribes exist next to an ever-stronger al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which gains strength due to the weakness of the Yemeni state. Or the Houthis can unilaterally grab power by forming a presidential council. But they would then be held accountable by the public and risk losing the legitimacy they have in the population.

The fear that the Houthis’ grab of power will make the establishment of federal regions in the south impossible led to a wave of Houthi leaders declaring independence in the wake of Hadi’s resignation. This could be the beginning not just of divisions, but of a fragmentation of Yemen. Given the Houthis’ aggressions and their unwillingness to agree to a federal solution, a radicalization of Hizbullah becomes ever more likely. Only through a genuine inclusion of the Hirak and other southern leaders in the political process in Sanaa, can the radicalization of Hizbullah the fragmentation of the south and the risk posed by AQAP be effectively curtailed.

Although it is a major power broker in Yemen’s transition, the international community has little influence on these developments. This became particularly clear after the UN Security Council issued sanctions against President Ali Abdullah Salih and two Houthi leaders for obstructing the implementation of the GCC initiative. The sanctions had no positive impact on the political situation in Sanaa, with both faults and the Houthis remaining unaffected. A genuine inclusion of the Hirak and other southern stakeholders is needed to be able to establish a federal solution in Yemen.

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