

On Jan. 22, 2015, the UN-supported Yemeni President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi and his technocratic government resigned suddenly amid Houthi pressure to make changes to the draft constitution published days earlier. The Shiite Houthis, an armed movement from northern Yemen, rejected a central aspect of the draft: the division of the country into six federal regions. The government's forced resignation demonstrates not only the powerlessness of the political leadership in the capital, it also marks the breakdown of the transitional process as outlined by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative.

With the most recent escalation of violence on Jan. 19, 2015, the Houthis pushed President Hadi into a dead end. Had the president given in to the pressure and changed the constitution, all the gains of the transitional period would have been lost. Remaining in office while not giving in to the pressure would have led to more violence. Resignation was Hadi's only option to keep the last flicker of legitimacy he had by preventing the Houthis from violently imposing their demands.

That the Houthis were in a position to exert this kind of pressure on the government was on the one hand due to the weaknesses inherent to the GCC initiative. After having been excluded from the negotiations of the GCC initiative and the unity government formed in December 2011, the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) was the first instance the Houthis had to contribute to the transition. While there was a general agreement by the end of the conference in January 2014 that the future state should be federal, a final consensus failed regarding the number of federal regions the country should be divided into. Since then the Houthis have violently expanded their territorial control in northern Yemen and established themselves as de facto rulers in Yemen's capital.

Stalemate in Yemen

President Hadi's resignation was the only chance to preserve democratic gains – but risks fragmenting the country | By Mareike Transfeld

But their rise to power was also the consequence of the Houthi's uncompromising attitude in the face of the state's weakness. Time and again, the Houthis engaged in negotiations with the government and agreed to deals brokered by the UN. Paying lip service only to those agreements, the movement repeatedly showed that it was not willing to compromise or agree to a power sharing arrangement.

After Houthi fighters violently took over control of Sanaa, the government and Houthi representatives signed the National Peace and Partnership agreement on Sept.

21, 2014. The agreement was supposed to put an end to the Houthi's violent campaign, but in reality it gave the Houthis a legitimate cover for their unilateral drive to control the state.

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 also entail 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 Houthi's rise to power, opposition against the movement came particularly from central and southern Yemen. In contrast to the Houthis, who adhere to the Zaydi tradition of Shia Islam, in these regions the majority of the population follows the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam. The fragmented Hira-

movement and tribes exist next to an ever-stronger al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which gains strength due to the Houthi's incursion. The lines between the tribes and AQAP become increasingly blurry, as both are violently engaging the Houthis and are trying to put an end to the group's military expansion in the south.

The fear that the Houthi's grab of power will make the establishment of federal regions in the south impossible led to a wave of Hira leaders declaring independence in the wake of Hadi's resignation. This could be the beginning not just of division, but of a fragmentation of Yemen. Given the Houthi's aggression and their unwilling-

ness to agree to a federal solution, a radicalization of Hira becomes ever more likely. Only through a genuine inclusion of the Hira and other southern leaders in the political process in Sanaa, can the radicalization of Hira the fragmentation of the south and the risk posed by AQAP be effectively countered.

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 former President Ali Abdullah Saleh 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 Saleh and the Houthis continuing to influence the transitional process negatively.

The little influence the international community has is restricted to its ability to legitimize actors through recognition. The international community should not accept any unilateral steps taken by the Houthis, and should insist on an inclusive process and the validity of political agreements. Only political unity in Sanaa will enable the Yemeni state to effectively tackle political reforms and the security situation.

International military interventions will only be counterproductive in this volatile environment, as it is impossible for foreign forces to remain neutral in this complex network of actors and interests. There is a risk of disenfranchising supporters of the UN-supported transitional roadmap. Moderate Shafi'is who see themselves stuck between Houthis and AQAP find it hard to perceive the international community, but particularly the US, as a genuine partner in the transition.

For that reason, AQAP benefits immediately from foreign military intervention, particularly the US drone campaign. AQAP not only uses the high number of civilian casualties, but also American interference to mobilize support and recruit fighters.

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Fractured land

