

# CDDRL

## WORKING PAPERS

Number 126  
October 2012

### *Democracy, Political Parties, and Reform: A Review of Public Opinion in Yemen*

Chris Miller, Hafez al-Bukari, and Olga Aymerich  
Yemen Polling Center (YPC), Yemen



Center on Democracy, Development, and The Rule of Law  
Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies

Additional working papers appear on CDDRL's website: <http://cddrl.stanford.edu>.

Working Paper of the Program on Arab Reform and Democracy at CDDRL, published as part of the “Political Reform Prospects in Yemen” series edited by April Longley Alley and Nadwa al-Dawsari.

**About the Program on Arab Reform and Democracy:**

The Program on Arab Reform and Democracy examines the different social and political dynamics within Arab countries and the evolution of their political systems, focusing on the prospects, conditions, and possible pathways for political reform in the region.

This multidisciplinary program brings together both scholars and practitioners - from the policymaking, civil society, NGO (non-government organization), media, and political communities - as well as other actors of diverse backgrounds from the Arab world, to consider how democratization and more responsive and accountable governance might be achieved, as a general challenge for the region and within specific Arab countries.

The program aims to be a hub for intellectual capital about issues related to good governance and political reform in the Arab world and allowing diverse opinions and voices to be heard. It benefits from the rich input of the academic community at Stanford, from faculty to researchers to graduate students, as well as its partners in the Arab world and Europe.

Visit our website:  
[arabreform.stanford.edu](http://arabreform.stanford.edu)

Center on Democracy, Development,  
and The Rule of Law  
Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies  
Stanford University  
Encina Hall  
Stanford, CA 94305  
Phone: 650-724-7197  
Fax: 650-724-2996  
<http://cddrl.stanford.edu/>

**About the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL)**

CDDRL was founded by a generous grant from the Bill and Flora Hewlett Foundation in October in 2002 as part of the Stanford Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. The Center supports analytic studies, policy relevant research, training and outreach activities to assist developing countries in the design and implementation of policies to foster growth, democracy, and the rule of law.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

**Chris Miller** holds a MA in Political Science from the American University in Cairo (Egypt) and a BA in Political Science and Spanish from the University of New Mexico (USA). He worked as Senior Research Analyst at the Yemen Polling Center from 2010 to 2012. Previously, he worked as a consultant for the World Bank, held a fellowship at the Department of Political Science at the American University in Cairo and gained experience as a research assistant in The Institute for Social Research- Center for Applied Research and Analysis, New Mexico (US).

**Hafez al-Bukari** specializes in media and public opinion research. From 1995-2005, he worked as a journalist for several Yemeni and foreign media outlets before being elected as the General-Secretary of the Yemeni Journalists Syndicate. Between October 2006 and September 2007, Mr. al-Bukari was a research fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in Washington, D.C. where he conducted research on measuring free press environments and practices in the Arab World. He still contributes to a number of Yemeni and foreign publications.

In 2004, al-Bukari founded the Yemen Polling Center (YPC). As president, he has designed and managed a large number of projects focusing on public opinion research, including but not limited to: democracy, elections, political parties, media, governance, human rights, social development and corporate governance. Several of these projects included research publications and training for respective stakeholders.

**Olga Aymerich** holds a MA in International and Intercultural Relations (Middle East) and a BA in Media and Communication from Autonomous University of Barcelona. She has gained previous professional experience in several international organizations such as NATO (Political Affairs and Security Policy), OSCE (External co-operation), and the EU (EU Delegation to Lebanon), as well as in think tanks such as Carnegie Middle East Center.

Ms. Aymerich has worked at the Yemen Polling Center since 2012. As a senior research analyst, she has contributed to the design, implementation and analysis of information on several projects related to security sector reform, political transition, civil society, media and governance.

### **Yemen Polling Center (YPC)**

The Yemen Polling Center's mission is to set the highest professional standards for public opinion and social science research in Yemen, as well as to advance the understanding among citizens, the media, and general public on how polls can bring about positive social, economic and political change. At the forefront of social science and civil society training, YPC partners with local and international organizations to research and advise on Yemen's most pressing issues.

Since its inception in 2004, YPC has implemented dozens of qualitative and quantitative research projects on electoral, media, social, economic, political, development and humanitarian issues. YPC has interviewed more than 100,000 Yemenis in face-to-face household surveys, conducted dozens of focus groups, and completed hundreds of in-depth and elite interviews for local, national and international research partners.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The demands and priorities of an increasingly active public must be addressed to prevent further instability and deterioration of the security, economic and social situation in Yemen. This paper presents five public opinion surveys conducted between 2006 and 2010 by the Yemen Polling Center. The surveys provide preliminary insights into the attitudes and preferences citizens that can help to inform current debates over political and institutional reform.

Survey data confirms that Yemeni citizens have long desired a well-functioning and responsive democracy, with strong state institutions capable of addressing their demands and priorities. The results suggest that Yemenis have a strong desire for decision-making to take place through formal, legal processes rather than informal institutions or unofficial means. They would like direct, popular elections at all levels of government and greater transparency and fairness in the electoral processes. The data provides limited insight into preferences regarding institutional design. Nonetheless, it does speak to the need to raise public awareness regarding the different types of electoral system options. In fact, there is weak awareness of electoral rights and procedures. Civil society may prove a useful mechanism for disseminating information regarding existing rights as well as institutional reform options.

The findings also underscore the need for increasing the responsiveness of political parties. Parties should develop institutionalized mechanisms to gain a better understanding of popular demands through public surveys, arranging town-hall style meetings and extending their reach into all areas of the country. Finally, as civil society and international actors proceed with gender programming, it may be useful to consider the framework in which such initiatives are presented. Rather than an adversarial approach of affirming women's rights based on principle, an alternative is to emphasize the benefits of female empowerment to women and the rest of the society.

## **I. Introduction**

Popular uprisings across much of the Arab world in 2011 toppled a number of seemingly invincible leaders and shattered the myth of a docile, apathetic public. Protests demonstrated that leaders in one of the most authoritarian regions could not forever insulate themselves from the demands of their people. This is as true in Yemen as in other Arab states.

The Yemeni uprising, which started in January 2011 and resulted in early presidential elections in February 2012, presents an opportunity for substantial reform that could initiate a new chapter in the country's modern history.<sup>1</sup> Survey data gathered prior to the uprising confirms that Yemeni citizens have long desired a well-functioning and responsive democracy, with strong state institutions capable of addressing their demands and priorities. At the same time, they expect electoral fraud to occur and have limited knowledge of basic electoral rights and institutional reform options. Public opinion surveys also show that political parties are not widely trusted and that they are viewed as out of touch with the needs of citizens.

Whoever leads Yemen into the next decade must immediately implement serious reforms that foster greater accountability and responsiveness. To ignore the aspirations of an increasingly active public could lead to further instability and unrest. As Yemen prepares for a process of national dialogue and constitutional reform, the public opinion data presented below provides an important window into the demands and priorities of citizens.

## **II. Background: Governance and Reform in Yemen**

Today Yemen faces a litany of interrelated security, economic, development and governance challenges, which frame the context for reform. More than twenty years after the unification of north and south Yemen in 1990, and after more than thirty-three years of Ali Abdullah Saleh's rule, the state

---

<sup>1</sup> The presidential election of 2012 was uncontested. Abdo Robo Mansour Hadi was the consensus candidate as part of a transitional agreement.

remains weak.<sup>2</sup> This background section briefly reviews some of these challenges, before delving into a more detailed discussion of the recent history of reform debates that culminated in the 2011 uprising.

### *Security Challenges*

The 2011 uprising aggravated a number of persistent security challenges including the country's struggle with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the southern separatist movement, the Houthi rebellion in the far north, as well as intermittent tribal conflict,<sup>3</sup> maritime piracy<sup>4</sup> and increasing crime.<sup>5</sup>

In the south, AQAP and its local affiliate, Ansar al-Sharia (Partisans of Islamic Law) took advantage of the security vacuum left when government troops were pulled back to the capital due to the uprising, and wrested control of large areas of Abyan Governorate, including the capital Zinjibar, which remained under AQAP control from May 2011 to June 2012. In January 2012, AQAP took control of Radda, in Baydah Governorate. Although the seizure lasted only for one week, the incident was remarkable as Radaa is only 120 miles south of Sana'a and is a main connection point between the capital and the country's southern governorates.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally in the south, the government and the Southern Movement--a loose alliance of organizations and individuals calling for greater autonomy or outright independence for the areas of the former South Yemen<sup>7</sup>--have repeatedly clashed in increasingly violent confrontations since 2007.<sup>8</sup> The

---

<sup>2</sup> Until 1990, Yemen was divided into the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the socialist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen). Ali Abdullah Saleh came to power in North Yemen in 1978 and then became president of the Republic of Yemen in 1990. On 24 November 2011 Saleh signed a transition agreement and stepped down as president after new elections on 21 February 2012.

<sup>3</sup> For more on tribal conflict see National Democratic Institute, *Yemen: Tribal Conflict Management Program. Research Report*, (2007).

<sup>4</sup> For more on maritime piracy in Yemen see Alexander Atarodi, *Yemen in Crisis - Consequences for the Horn of Africa* (Stockholm: FOI Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> For more on increasing crime in Yemen see Hakim al-Masmari, "Crimes in Yemen: Increasing year by year," *Yemen Observer*, November 4, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Swift "Arc of Convergence: AQAP, Ansar al-Shari'a and the Struggle for Yemen," *CTC Sentinel* 5 no. 6 (June 2012).

<sup>7</sup> The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY).

<sup>8</sup> See Stephen Day, "Updating Yemeni National Unity: Could Lingering Regional Divisions Bring Down The Regime?" *Middle East Journal* 62:3 (2008): 417-436 and April Longley and Abdul Ghani Al-Iryani,

Southern Movement saw in the uprising an opportunity to advance their claims and to renegotiate Yemen's territorial organization. However, their marginalization from the transitional process further ignited secessionist sentiments and prevented a potential peaceful negotiation of the Southern Movement demands. As of end of March 2012 the UN reported that there are 157,192 internally displaced persons in the south, the bulk of whom come from Aden, Lahj, and Abyan.<sup>9</sup>

In the northwest, the Yemeni government and the Houthis,<sup>10</sup> a Zaydi Shiite<sup>11</sup> rebel group, have been engaged in an on-again, off-again conflict since 2004. The Houthis, led by the al-Houthi family, were critical of the Saleh regime's foreign policy and have effectively sought greater regional autonomy. The conflict has caused thousands of casualties,<sup>12</sup> displaced 277,404<sup>13</sup> individuals and drained already dwindling state coffers. As of late 2011, the Houthi rebels and Sunni Salafis<sup>14</sup> clashed periodically

---

"Fighting Brushfires with Batons: An Analysis of the Political Crisis in South Yemen," *The Middle East Institute Policy Brief* 7 (2008): 1-12.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Refugees and New Arrivals Statistical Overview," April 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Mainly active in the provinces of Sa'ada and Amran, the Houthis are mainly a Zaydi Shiite population of Northern Yemen. The origins of the group are found in the mid-1990s in a group called the Believing Youth founded by Hussein al Houthi. The Houthis claim against the economic and social exclusion by the government of the northwestern provinces, state corruption, and against the close links between Yemen and US and Yemen and Saudi Arabia, as well as against the Wahhabi influence in education and state policy. The Houthi movement particularly stood against former president Saleh starting from 2001, when the latter aligned himself with the US. For more on the Houthi movement see Katherine Zimmerman and Chris Harnisch, "Profile: al Houthi Movement," *Critical Threats* (January 28, 2010), <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/profile-al-houthi-movement>.

<sup>11</sup> Significant differences can be found between Zaydi Shiites in Yemen and Twelver Shiites, the latter found in Iran and Iraq. Zaydi Shiites are not organized following a clerical hierarchy, and mostly they do not seek the instauration of state ruled by a jurisconsult (*wilayat al-faqih*), one of the main ideas supported by Khomeini during the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979). In addition, Zaydi Shiites see the early Sunni caliphs as erroneous--since Sunnis did not recognize 'Ali as the legitimate successor of the Prophet--but not sinful. That allows a high degree of tolerance towards other branches of Islam. For more on Zaydism, its origins and differences between Zaydi Shiites and Twelvers Shiites see Barak A. Salmoni, Brice Loidolt and Wells Madeleine, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Barak A. Salmoni, Brice Loidolt and Wells Madeleine, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Numbers from the Hajja, Al-Jawf, Sa'adh and Amran governorates. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Refugees and New Arrivals Statistical Overview," April 2012..

resulting in dozens of deaths.<sup>15</sup> With the central government focusing its efforts in the capital Sana'a, the Houthis entrenched their power in Sa'ada governorate. They also expanded their influence towards the neighboring governorates of Al-Jawf and Hajjah, where they found the fierce opposition of Sunni tribesmen aligned with the Sunni Islamist party, Islah.

During the uprising, heavy clashes occurred in formerly quiet urban areas such as Sana'a<sup>16</sup> and the southern city of Taiz. Sana'a was divided between armed forces loyal to the Saleh regime and those associated with defected general, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar.<sup>17</sup> In Taiz, numerous civilian casualties resulted from armed clashes.<sup>18</sup>

### *Economic and Development Challenges*

In addition to the prevalent security concerns, Yemen's economic and political situation often appears untenable, raising fears of partial state collapse. The formal institutions of the state remain weak and corruption is widespread and endemic. Virtually every indicator available demonstrates the dire situation of the country. Ranked 133 out of 169 countries on the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index (HDI), nearly one-third of the population is undernourished. Furthermore only 63 per cent of the population is literate. The average number of years of schooling among the adult population is 2.5 and nearly half of all school-age children do not attend school.<sup>19</sup> Yemen is also ranked 146 out of 178 countries in terms of corruption according to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index for 2010.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Kareem Fahim, "Power Ceded, Yet President of Yemen Declares Amnesty," *The New York Times*, November 27, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Heavy clashes occurred particularly in the northern Hasaba neighborhood of Sana'a and further north in Arhab, a district housing a Republican Guard base.

<sup>17</sup> Ali Mohsen, as he is commonly referred to, announced his support for the pro-democracy protestors in March after more than 50 protestors were killed by snipers alleged to be associated with the Saleh regime. Since then the First Armored Division offered protection to the protestors.

<sup>18</sup> Human Rights Watch Report, "Yemen: Spate of Killings Defy UN Order," November 25, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations Development Programme, "Yemen: Country profile of human development indicators," 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Transparency International Research Report, "Corruption Perceptions Index 2010 Results," 2010.



In addition to severe under-development, the situation is exacerbated by a continuing influx of refugees and migrants from East Africa. Official numbers indicate that Yemen has an estimated 203,000 refugees, primarily from Somalia, Ethiopia and other East African countries.<sup>21</sup>

### *Electoral Reform*

Added to the unstable security environment and development woes, an electoral crisis has gripped Yemen since the 2006 presidential and local council elections. Parliamentary elections scheduled to take place in 2009 were postponed until April 2011 after the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP),<sup>22</sup> the primary opposition coalition, threatened to boycott the election.<sup>23</sup> At that time, the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) party and the JMP agreed to discuss electoral and possibly constitutional reform, as well as updating of the voter registration lists. To this end, in July 2010, President Saleh, along with the GPC and the JMP, established a 200-member committee evenly divided between the two parties.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, reconciliation efforts failed and the GPC vowed to unilaterally move forward with the April 2011 elections, a move that further inflamed tensions between the two sides.

The GPC and JMP disagreed on three main points. On the issue of the electoral system, the GPC supported a single member district plurality (SMDP) electoral system, while the JMP advocated for a party list proportional representation (PR) system. The SMDP system generally leads to a two-party system whereas PR systems provide for a wider array of parties to be represented. The JMP argues that a proportional representation system, or some hybrid rather than the current single member district plurality system, would achieve better representation and distribution of power.

---

<sup>21</sup> United Nations High Commission for Refugees report, "Country Operations Profile – Yemen," 2011.

<sup>22</sup> The JMP is a coalition of five opposition parties including the Islamist party, Islah, the Yemen Socialist Party, al-Haqq, the Nasserist Popular Unionist Party, and the Union of Popular Forces. In recent years the JMP has been the primary opposition coalition with Islah commonly seen as the lead partner in the coalition.

<sup>23</sup> Marine Poirier, "Score One for the Yemeni Opposition?" *Arab Reform Bulletin* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Nasser Arrabyee, "Demonstrations intensify, opposition recant to talk with government in Yemen," Nasser Arrabyee Blog, February 14, 2011.

The second point of disagreement concerned the composition and independence of the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendum (SCER), the organization that administers elections.<sup>25</sup> In the 2006 elections, the SCER was comprised of four GPC members, four JMP members and one independent. Despite this arrangement, and according to the European Union's Election Observer Mission, "there remained a clearly prevalent pattern of partisanship within the election administration towards the GPC and against the JMP".<sup>26</sup> Thus, when the SCER's term ended in 2007, the JMP requested the new commission to be formed by members of all parties in Parliament by equal percentage. The GPC suggested, as an alternative, that the SCER to be comprised of judges nominated by the Parliament.<sup>27</sup> Despite the JMP's rejection of this proposal, in late December 2010, Saleh restructured the commission of the SCER and appointed nine judges as new members.<sup>28</sup> While ostensibly designed to remove partisanship from the SCER, this move raised concerns that the judiciary would become politicized in the process.

The third point of contention concerned presidential term limits. On 1 January 2011, despite strong opposition from the JMP, the GPC unilaterally initiated a process of changing the constitution. The proposed constitutional amendments aimed at reducing the presidential term from seven to five years. The move was interpreted by the JMP as a strategy to allow President Saleh two more five-year terms, after which he would attempt to transfer the presidency to his son.<sup>29</sup>

Prior to the 2011 popular uprising, negotiations between the JMP and the GPC over electoral reform were stalled.

---

<sup>25</sup> The SCER oversees twenty-one supervisory committees at governorate level, and 333 main district committees at district level. It is overseen by a nine-member commission appointed by the president from candidates suggested by Parliament.

<sup>26</sup> European Union Election Observation Mission, "Yemen: 2006 Presidential and Local Council Elections. Final Report", 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Moneer al-Omar, "GPC Presents Proposals for Forming SCER; JMP not Pleased Yet," *Yemen Post*, June 23, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendums, "Presidential Decree forms SCER," December 15, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Hammoud Mounassar, "Yemen adopts principal of constitutional amendment," *AFP*, January 1, 2010.

### *The Saleh Regime's Reaction to the 2011 Uprising*

In 2011, developments in the region changed the terms of reference for the debate between the ruling party and the opposition. Alarmed by the prospect of facing popular uprisings like those in Egypt and Tunisia, Saleh addressed a joint meeting of the Parliament and the Shura council in early February, vowing not to run in the 2013 elections or pass power to his unpopular son, Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh. Furthermore, Saleh promised to halt the proposed constitutional amendments and to postpone the elections beyond April 2011 to allow time for dialogue on electoral reforms.<sup>30</sup> In the weeks following the speech, large popular demonstrations, protests, and violent confrontations between regime opponents and pro-regime forces occurred through much of the country. For its part, the opposition refused to resume dialogue with a president that they alleged had lost credibility.<sup>31</sup>

A significant change occurred on 18 March 2011 when more than fifty pro-democracy protestors were killed by sniper fire in Sana'a, resulting in a flood of resignations from the GPC, Parliament and military services, most notably the commander of the northwest regional division and member of Saleh's tribe, General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar. Protests continued through April as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) attempted to broker a deal to resolve the impasse. After agreeing to sign a GCC brokered deal, which would provide for a political transition in exchange for domestic immunity, Saleh failed to sign the agreement on a number of occasions. His third refusal to sign precipitated an armed confrontation between government forces and those loyal to the powerful al-Ahmar clan – a tribal clan that gave its full support to the uprising following the killing of dozens of unarmed protesters on 18 March in the al-Hasaba area of Sana'a. Shortly thereafter, on 3 June, an attack on the presidential palace injured Saleh, along with several other senior officials, and resulted in seven officers dead. Saleh returned to Yemen on 23 September after nearly four months of treatment in Saudi Arabia. Following his return, fighting inside the capital, the southern city of Taiz, and a number of other regions continued, as did alleged targeting of non-violent protestors.

---

<sup>30</sup> "Opposing protestors rally in Yemen," *Al-Jazeera*, February 3, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Nasser Arrabyee, "Demonstrations intensify, opposition recant to talk with government in Yemen," Nasser Arrabyee Blog, February 14, 2011.

On 23 November, the president at long last signed the GCC initiative and an accompanying set of implementation mechanisms. The deal resulted in Saleh ceding formal powers to then Vice President, Abd Rabbo Mansour al-Hadi, while maintaining the title of president until early elections on 21 February 2012. The agreement likewise called for the formation of an opposition-led national unity government comprised of 50 per cent from the GPC and JMP respectively. In addition, it mandated a broadly inclusive national dialogue process to review and revise the existing constitution and address long-standing grievances. Thereafter, elections will be held in accordance with the new constitution.

Though it remains to be seen if the GCC agreement will be fully implemented, the transitional period 2012-2013 has the potential to be a period of unprecedented reform. Several options for institutional reform under consideration include a shift to a Parliamentary system, in which the power of the president would be reduced. The Shura council, with its members currently appointed by the president, could be transformed into a popularly elected body with meaningful legislative authority. It could also provide equal representation for each governorate, acting as a balance to the lower house, which provides representation in proportion to population. Demands for greater fiscal and political decentralization, and even the possibility of a federal model, may now be considered more seriously than any time in recent Yemeni history.<sup>32</sup> This is a crucial moment for potential change in which Yemenis have the opportunity to restructure their political institutions. In light of this opportunity, the following sections present public opinion data exploring preferences and priorities of citizens' vis-à-vis reform options.

### **III. Methods**

This paper provides the public opinion survey results from five polls conducted in 2006, 2007 and 2010.<sup>33</sup> The five surveys included in the analysis are:

- Survey 1: Local Election Survey (September 2006). Sample size: 1000 respondents. Universe: 6 governorates: Sana'a city, Aden, Taiz, Hadramout, Dhamar and Amran.

---

<sup>32</sup> This being said, any discussion of reform in the context of unity may be challenged by some groups part of the Southern Movement supporting the independence of the territories of the former PDRY.

<sup>33</sup> The Yemen Polling Center (YPC) conducted all surveys through face-to-face interviews and used a random selection procedure to ensure the representativeness of the samples.

- Survey 2: Presidential Election Survey (September 2006). Sample size: 994 respondents. Universe: 6 governorates: Sana'a city, Taiz, Ibb, Al-Hudeidah, Hadramout and Sa'ada
- Survey 3: Decision Making Process Survey (October 2007). Sample size: 535 respondents from specific social categories as follows: academics, businessmen, civil society organizations activists, journalists, Members of Parliament, human rights activists, politicians, government officials and members of the Shura Council.
- Survey 4: Electoral Rights Survey (April 2010). Sample size: 1000 respondents. Universe: 12 governorates: Sana'a City, Taiz, Ibb, al-Hudeidah, Dhamar, Hajjah, Aden, Hadramout, Mareb, Lahj, Abyan and Amran.
- Survey 5: Woman Political and Electoral Rights (October 2010). Sample size: 1014 respondents. Universe: 12 governorates: Sana'a City, Taiz, Ibb, al-Hudeidah, Dhamar, Hajjah, Aden, Hadramout, al-Mahweet, al-Jawf, Lahj and Amran.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face with respondents in their respective governorates by Yemenis native to that governorate. In all surveys, samples were evenly split between male and female respondents, with the exception of Survey 3, owing to the disproportionate number of males among the categories included in the survey. However, in Survey 3, efforts were made to ensure that representatives from all governorates of the country were included and that as many female respondents as possible were interviewed.

All responses are considered as totals for the sample with no disaggregation by demographics or other variables. Nonetheless, it is important to note that responses to political, economic and social survey questions often vary significantly by gender, urban/rural status, education level, employment status, income, and region. Future research would benefit from hypothesis testing employing regression analysis to explore causal relationships between perceptions of politics, development and social issues and socio-economic, gender and regional variables. The need for more extensive research on public opinion in

Yemen is vast and this paper only serves as a starting point. Due to limited available funds for such surveys, YPC was not able at that time to conduct larger representative surveys that could be shared publicly.

#### **IV. Presentation of Survey Data: 2006-2010**

This review of findings examines perceptions and attitudes towards democracy in general, knowledge and awareness of electoral rights and systems specifically and levels of popular trust in electoral results and political parties. It then assesses attitudes towards a range of formal and informal institutions and key political figures. Finally, it begins to explore attitudes towards political reform options.

#### **Democracy**

One guiding premise of this paper is that reform in Yemen should come under the broader purview of improving democracy. This section considers knowledge, awareness and evaluation of democracy and democratic rights more generally, noting the broad popularity of democracy among Yemeni citizens. It also reviews perceptions of electoral irregularities and the confidence in election results. Finally, it considers a number of drivers of political (non) participation. What emerges is an image of a populace enthusiastic for the potential and promise of democratic change.

#### *Evaluation and Interest in Democracy*

Yemenis strongly support democracy as a mode of governance. Opposing culturalist arguments<sup>34</sup> that claim Arabs or Muslims do not support democracy, data shows that the overwhelming majority of

---

<sup>34</sup> Examples of the culturalist approach include Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (London: Frank Cass, 1994); Francis Fukuyama, "The West Has Won: Radical Islam Can't Beat Democracy and Capitalism," *The Guardian*, October 11, 2001; and Bernard Lewis, "Islam and Liberal Democracy," *Atlantic Monthly* 271:2 (1993): 89-98. Authors opposing this approach include Fares al-Braizat, "Muslims and Democracy: an Empirical Critique of Fukuyama's Culturalist Approach," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 43 (2002): 269; and Ibrahim al-Badawi and Samir

Yemenis are supportive of democratic institutions. Eighty-six per cent of respondents in Survey 1 (September 2006) stated that they thought their “vote was very important”. In Survey 4 (April 2010), more than three-quarters of respondents fully agreed with the statement that “democracy is important for Yemen” (76 per cent) and a further 10 per cent at least somewhat agreed with the statement. Similarly, in the same survey, 79 per cent agree or somewhat agreed with the statement that “democracy is the solution to Yemen’s problems, even if it takes time”.

Despite the clear support for democracy in survey data spanning nearly half a decade, there is also evidence that faith in democracy and democratic development were on the wane prior to the 2011 protest movement. In Survey 1 (September 2006), 69 per cent of respondents agreed that “elections are able to create a better future for Yemen”. Four years later, when asked the similar question of whether “elections in Yemen help to change the situation for the better” (Survey 5, October 2010) to a similar sample size, only 55 per cent responded in the affirmative, a drop of 14 percentage points. Admittedly, these questions are not identical and therefore cannot be directly compared. Yet, they do offer some evidence that faith in democracy as a source for positive change may have been decreasing prior to the uprising. It is of course notable that the 2006 survey was conducted prior to the presidential elections of that year and the 2010 survey took place amid frustrations over the delay in Parliamentary elections of 2009. In Survey 5 (October 2010), among those who do not feel that elections provide a mechanism for positive change, the most common reason given was that “elections are not fair” (43.3 per cent).

New data should be collected to assess if this trend persists in the post-uprising era.

#### *Knowledge and Awareness of Electoral Rights and Systems*

Understanding of electoral rights and procedures is weak in some respects. For example, in Survey 5 (October 2010), less than three-fifths of respondents (59 per cent) correctly stated that the voting

---

Makdisi, *Democracy in the Arab World: Explaining the Deficit* (New York: Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Politics, 2011). This paper follows the latter trend.

age is 18. When asked whether a variety of factors would render a citizen ineligible to vote, only three quarters (75 per cent) understood that having a non-Yemeni spouse would not cause a forfeiture of the right to vote. The remaining quarter stated they either did not know or that this would be grounds for forfeiture. Similarly, more than one in ten erroneously responded that either it was forbidden to vote, or they did not know if one retained voting rights, if they were not a member of a political party (13 per cent) or belonged to a “marginalized group” such as *al-Akhdam* (12 per cent).<sup>35</sup>

Many misconceptions concerning electoral procedures exist. In the same 2010 survey, Survey 5 (October 2010), a full 10 per cent stated that a husband can vote in lieu of his wife, with a further 6 per cent reporting they did not know if this is permitted. A similar number of respondents mistakenly claimed that if a family member, friend or acquaintance is unable to vote, another person can vote as their proxy (13 per cent). Again, 6 per cent said they did not know. More than one in ten respondents likewise stated they would acquiesce if someone insisted on entering the voting booth to observe how they cast their vote (12 per cent).

These findings suggest that among a substantial portion of the populace there is a lack of understanding of the importance of each individual casting their vote privately and as they wish; a fundamental component of a well-functioning democracy.

As previously seen in Section II, the type of electoral system is a subject of debate among political parties. However, evidence suggests that this debate is not well understood by the public. In Survey 5 (October 2010), respondents were asked if they were familiar with the SMDP and PR electoral systems. Roughly 6 per cent responded in the affirmative and even fewer were able to correctly explain each option. While perhaps not surprising, as these are rather technical matters generally in the domain of electoral experts and political scientists, the type of electoral system ultimately adopted will have

---

<sup>35</sup> Colloquially referred to as *al-Akhdam* (literally: servants), this is social group of East African origin that has been present in Yemen for generations and often occupies menial labor positions such as street cleaner. In recent years, human rights groups have raised concern about unequal treatment and discrimination of *al-Akhdam*. Official estimates from the last census, conducted in 2004, suggest there are roughly 500,000 *Akhdam* in Yemen.



important representational implications for the country. As such, a better-informed public would certainly contribute to a more robust national debate.

### *Perceptions of Electoral Interference and Popular Trust in Electoral Results*

Though the great majority of Yemenis are supportive of democracy as a form of governance, many also express concerns about irregularities in the administration of elections and interference in the electoral process. They also express doubts about the accuracy of electoral results. Fifteen per cent of respondents in Survey 1 (September 2006) responded that they thought their ballots were kept secret only sometimes or not at all. In the same survey, which was conducted prior to the 2006 presidential elections, nearly half of respondents stated they at least somewhat expected fraud to occur in the election (48 per cent). Likewise, 41 per cent believed bribes are paid during elections.

Significant numbers also have concerns about interference in the election through a variety of means. In Survey 1 (September 2010), two-fifths of respondents state they felt either insecure or only somewhat secure during elections (40 per cent).<sup>36</sup> One-fifth of respondents in Survey 4 (April 2010) disagreed with the statement “one can choose the candidate they would like for elections freely” (21 per cent), with a further 17 per cent only somewhat agreeing with the statement. Furthermore, more than half of the respondents from the same survey disagreed with the statement “any group of people can form a political party easily and without government interference”.

Perceptions of irregularities, insecurity and interference in the electoral process could diminish faith in electoral results overtime. Indeed, when asked in Survey 5 (October 2010) whether they believed the candidate with the most votes for a variety of elected offices won the election, anywhere between 18 per cent to a full quarter of respondents said “no”, as reflected in Table 1 below.

---

<sup>36</sup> The data does not include reasons for feelings of insecurity.

**Table 1. Faith in Elections: “Is the candidate who wins the election for ... the one with the most votes?”  
Per cent Reporting “No” (Survey 5, October 2010)**

| <b>Elected Office</b>   | <b>Per cent Reporting “No”</b> |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| President               | 18 per cent                    |
| MP                      | 22 per cent                    |
| Member of Local Council | 22 per cent                    |
| Governor                | 25 per cent                    |

### *Political Participation and its Drivers*

A lack of faith in election results may become a de-motivator for political participation in the future. Yet, turnout in the 2006 presidential and local council elections appeared to be quite strong. Two surveys conducted in 2010 found that 66 per cent (Survey 4, April 2010) and 71 per cent of respondents (Survey 5, October 2010) reported voting in that election. When those who had not voted were asked why they did not vote, only around 3 per cent in both surveys cited either lack of fairness or that the results are known beforehand.

In the same surveys, respondents were asked if they planned to vote in the next elections.<sup>37</sup> Again large majorities said they would or would likely to vote, with 71 (Survey 4, April 2010) and 76 per cent (Survey 5, October 2010) responding in the affirmative. Furthermore, about half of the remaining respondents stated they had not yet decided.<sup>38</sup> In Survey 5 (October 2010), among those who said they did not plan to vote (11 per cent of the total respondents), the reasons were: a sense that “elections are useless” (34 per cent), the “results are known beforehand” (8 per cent) and general lack of interest in politics (31 per cent).

All respondents in the other survey from 2010 (Survey 4, April 2010) were asked “what is the most important thing that would keep people from participating in the next election?”. The most common responses had more to do with the candidates rather than a frustration with the electoral process. For example, 31 per cent cited the lack of quality candidates and 12 per cent (the next most common response)

---

<sup>37</sup> At the time of the survey, this would have been the 2011 parliamentary elections.

<sup>38</sup> As these results are from the period prior to the monumental changes that shook the region in early 2011, there is a good possibility that such apparent enthusiasm to vote in the next elections are largely contingent upon continuing developments and perceptions that any electoral reforms are substantial and effective.

noted the sense that “candidates do not keep their promises”. In contrast, only 6 and 7 per cent noted perceptions of unfairness of elections or that “there is no use to elections”.

### **Parties, Institutions and Political Figures**

Moving beyond a general discussion of democracy and elections, the surveys address the need for important reforms of political parties and state institutions. First and foremost, formal state institutions such as the Parliament and local councils enjoy little popular trust and a large majority of surveyed social groups lament the weakness of formal decision-making institutions. Second, popular awareness and evaluations of political parties indicate that when respondents are aware of a party’s existence, they tend to view them as distant and unresponsive to the needs of people. Finally, awareness of the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendums (SCER) is very low, though those who had heard of it generally evaluated it quite well.

A key component to an effective reform process is to gain an understanding of popular assessment of existing political parties, state institutions and main political figures. However, prior to that, it is useful to consider the extent to which informal institutions contend for authority and power.

#### *Formal vs. Informal Institutions*

Recent scholarship on Yemen contends that Ali Abdullah Saleh ruled Yemen through a neopatrimonial system.<sup>39</sup> One of the qualities of a neopatrimonial regime is the existence of weak formal

---

<sup>39</sup> Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective* (New York: Palgrave-Mac Millan, 2008); April Longley, *Shifting Light in the Qamarriya: The Reinvention of Patronage Networks in Contemporary Yemen*, PhD Dissertation, Georgetown University, 2008. Neopatrimonialism refers to an ordering of power relations that incorporates components of traditional patron-client relations with the apparatus of a modern (or at least semi-modern) state. In this formulation, while a formal state ostensibly governing and distributing public goods through efficient, impersonal procedures exists, the rational-legal institutions/norms mediating relations between the state and its citizenry are weak. Instead, government ministries and bodies become conduits through which to distribute resources, goods, and awards for personal allegiance to the regime. “In contemporary neopatrimonialism, relationships of loyalty and dependence pervade a formal political administrative system and leaders occupy bureaucratic offices less to perform public service than to acquire personal wealth and status” (Michael Bratton and Nicolas Van der Walle, “Neopatrimonial Regimes and Transitions in Africa,” *World Politics* (1994): 453-489).

institutions that hold limited decision-making power. Rather, unofficial, personal relations and forums, or informal institutions, predominate and it is through these that consequential decision-making is exercised. While other scholars have theorized and offered considerable qualitative evidence of the importance of such informal means of decision-making and other aspects of neopatrimonialism in Yemen,<sup>40</sup> the quantitative record was still lacking.

An empirical nod to the importance of both informal institutions and neopatrimonialism comes from data gathered in Survey 3 (October 2007) from respondents including academics, businessmen, civil society organizations activists, journalists, Members of Parliament, human rights activists, politicians, government officials, and members of the Shura Council. The 535 respondents were asked whether they agreed with the statement “official institutions are not involved in decision-making”. More than half (54 per cent) agreed, while an additional 17 per cent at least somewhat agreed.

Moreover, survey data indicates that there is an apparent desire among the groups surveyed to strengthen state institutions. When asked to assess whether they support the statement “decisions should be made by the state institutions”, 96 per cent said they strongly support the statement, with a further 3 per cent saying they at least somewhat support the statement.

#### *Evaluation of Institutions, Parties, and the Former President, Ali Abdullah Saleh*

Perhaps as a partial result of the weakness of formal institutions, trust in the official state institutions and confidence that they can provide the best services is low. Results from Survey 4 (April 2010), and as noted in Table 2, indicate that religious leaders are trusted at nearly twice the rate of all other institutions and social figures.<sup>41</sup> Respondents rate their trust in tribal sheikhs<sup>42</sup> and the government

---

<sup>40</sup> Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment*; Longley, *Shifting Light in the Qamarriya*.

<sup>41</sup> The type of religious leader in the survey was unspecified and could include state sponsored and non-state sponsored religious leaders. We assume that these leaders were likely evaluated independently of the state, however, follow-up surveys should be conducted to verify this assumption.

<sup>42</sup> It should be noted that trust in tribal sheikhs varies considerably by region with much of the south (Lahj, Abyan, and Aden) as well as Taiz, Ibb, and Mareb rating their trust in sheikhs lower than those in Hadramout and the governorates closer to the northern and mid highlands as well as the Tihama (Sana'a, Hajja, Hodeidah, and to some extent Amran).

writ large about the same. Thereafter, as specific institutions are named, fewer and fewer Yemenis express trust, with nearly half of all respondents saying they do not trust political parties.

**Table 2. Trust in Institutions and Community Figures (Survey 4, April 2010)**

|                            | <b>Trust Completely</b> | <b>Trust to Some Extent</b> | <b>Do Not Trust</b> | <b>Don't know</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| <b>Religious Leaders</b>   | 70%                     | 21%                         | 8%                  | 2%                | 100%         |
| <b>Security and Police</b> | 36%                     | 30%                         | 32%                 | 2%                | 100%         |
| <b>Tribal Sheikhs</b>      | 34%                     | 25%                         | 37%                 | 4%                | 100%         |
| <b>Government</b>          | 33%                     | 29%                         | 36%                 | 2%                | 100%         |
| <b>Local Councils</b>      | 23%                     | 27%                         | 43%                 | 7%                | 100%         |
| <b>Parliament</b>          | 22%                     | 28%                         | 42%                 | 8%                | 100%         |
| <b>Judiciary/Courts</b>    | 19%                     | 26%                         | 47%                 | 8%                | 100%         |
| <b>Shura Council</b>       | 16%                     | 18%                         | 36%                 | 29%               | 100%         |
| <b>Political Parties</b>   | 12 %                    | 27 %                        | 48%                 | 12%               | 100 %        |

Survey 1 (September 2006) showed a lack of satisfaction with government institutions. The survey, conducted in six governorates from all regions of the country, asked respondents which institution or figure could best provide the necessary services for citizens in their district. The most common response cited was the sheikh (32 per cent). The next most common response was that none of the mentioned officials (MPs, members of local councils, other government officials) could provide the necessary services (21 per cent).

**Table 3. Which among the following can best provide services in your district? (Survey 1, September 2006)**

|                                  |      |
|----------------------------------|------|
| <b>Sheikh</b>                    | 32%  |
| <b>Member of Local Council</b>   | 17%  |
| <b>Member of Parliament</b>      | 15%  |
| <b>Other Government Official</b> | 8%   |
| <b>None of the Above</b>         | 21%  |
| <b>Don't know</b>                | 5%   |
| <b>Refused to Answer</b>         | 2%   |
| <b>Total</b>                     | 100% |

Although not as widely trusted as religious figures, nor deemed as competent in service provision as sheikhs, official government institutions are still deemed important for the majority of citizens. For example, Survey 4 (April 2010) found that 64 per cent of Yemenis feel that Parliament is important, with a further 20 per cent stating they do not know.

**Table 4. Do you think the Parliament is important or not important? (Survey 4, April 2010)**

|                      |      |
|----------------------|------|
| <b>Important</b>     | 64%  |
| <b>Not important</b> | 16%  |
| <b>Don't know</b>    | 20%  |
| <b>Total</b>         | 100% |

Forty-two per cent of those respondents stating the Parliament is important said it is because it discusses people's issues.<sup>43</sup>

**Table 5. Please, tell me why you think the Parliament is important (only respondents stating the Parliament is important in the previous question). (Survey 4, April 2010)**

|  |      |
|--|------|
| <b>To Discuss people's issues</b>              | 42%  |
| <b>To provide projects and services</b>        | 17%  |
| <b>To legislate laws</b>                       | 12%  |
| <b>Because MP represents the people</b>        | 11%  |
| <b>To oversee the government's performance</b> | 5%   |
| <b>It is necessary for any country</b>         | 4%   |
| <b>I don't know</b>                            | 4%   |
| <b>Other</b>                                   | 3%   |
| <b>It is necessary for democracy</b>           | 2%   |
| <b>Total</b>                                   | 100% |

Despite the perception that Parliament is important, satisfaction with both the institution and individual Members of Parliament (MPs) remains low. Results from the same 2010 survey indicate that only 16 per cent are satisfied with the parliamentary performance and a further quarter are somewhat satisfied. One-fifth of respondents state they are satisfied with the performance of their MP and nearly another fifth report being somewhat satisfied. The most common response in both cases, however, is “dissatisfied”, as noted in Table 6.

**Table 6. Satisfaction with Parliament and MPs (Survey 4, April 2010)**

|   | <b>Satisfied</b> | <b>Somewhat Satisfied</b> | <b>Dissatisfied</b> | <b>Don't know</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|---|------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| <b>Performance of Parliament</b>                | 16%              | 25%                       | 47%                 | 12%               | 100%         |
| <b>Performance of MP representing your area</b> | 20%              | 19%                       | 51%                 | 10%               | 100%         |

<sup>43</sup> This response was given in an open question where respondents could answer a desired response.

Evidence from Survey 3 (October 2007) suggests that a fundamental reason for the lack of satisfaction could be the perception that the Parliament is not responsive to the needs of the people. Only 27 per cent of interviewees responded in the affirmative when asked whether Parliament addresses the people’s concerns. As such, taking actions to address responsiveness may boost Parliament’s approval ratings.

In Survey 4 (April 2010), respondents were asked what the priorities for the Parliament should be. At nearly four times the rate of the next most common demand, improving living conditions and job opportunities was the most common answer.

**Table 7. Priorities for Parliament (Survey 4, April 2010)**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>Improving Living Conditions/Job Opportunities</b>                   | 39% |
| <b>Improving Public Services (Water, Electricity, Education, etc.)</b> | 11% |
| <b>Sa’ada Conflict</b>   | 10% |
| <b>Fighting Corruption</b>   | 9%  |
| <b>Southern Issue</b>  | 8%  |
| <b>Security</b>  | 5%  |
| <b>Human Rights</b>  | 2%  |
| <b>Don’t know</b>  | 8%  |
| <b>Other<sup>44</sup></b>  | 8%  |

The importance placed on improving living conditions and job opportunities should come as no surprise. Yemen has a massive youth bulge with around half of the population under the age of 15. The country’s unemployment rate is approximately 35 per cent<sup>45</sup> and 45.2 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line.<sup>46</sup> Survey 2 (September 2006) further confirms the population’s prioritization of economic concerns, with 71 per cent of respondents stating poverty and 52 per cent unemployment as one of the three most pressing issues facing Yemen.

---

<sup>44</sup> Includes all categories with <2 per cent: Elections, Freedom of Expression, Women’s Rights, Reforming the Judiciary, Implementing Current Legislation, Terrorism, and Refuse to Answer.

<sup>45</sup> CIA World Factbook, “Middle East: Yemen profile,” 2012.  
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

**Table 8. Mentioned as one of the three most important issues facing Yemen (Survey 2, September 2006)**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>Poverty</b>                                 | 71% |
| <b>Unemployment</b>                            | 58% |
| <b>Administrative and Financial Corruption</b> | 45% |
| <b>Education</b>                               | 21% |
| <b>Lack of the rule of law</b>                 | 21% |
| <b>Illiteracy</b>                              | 17% |
| <b>Health</b>                                  | 14% |
| <b>Lack of Potable Water</b>                   | 13% |
| <b>Security</b>                                | 8%  |
| <b>Transportation</b>                          | 8%  |
| <b>Lack of democracy</b>                       | 4%  |
| <b>Terrorism</b>                               | 4%  |
| <b>Sewage/Sanitation</b>                       | 4%  |
| <b>Tribalism</b>                               | 2%  |

Turning now to local councils, the trend is similar to perceptions of the Parliament. As noted in Table 2 above, 23 per cent trust the local councils entirely with an additional 27 per cent stating they trust them to some extent. Similarly, when respondents were asked whether local councils succeed in providing the necessary needs for citizens in Survey 1 (September 2006), only 15 per cent say yes with an additional 29 per cent saying “to some extent”. Despite this finding, nearly three-quarters of respondents from the same survey stated that local council elections are useful (73 per cent), with a further 14 per cent saying they are at least somewhat useful. The same survey indicates that only one-fifth of respondents believe that the financial resources of the local councils go to economic and social development projects in their area.

A final institution considered here is the SCER, as its composition is at the heart of the debates about electoral reform. Survey 5 (October 2010) indicates that only 29 per cent of citizens are aware that the SCER is responsible for organizing and administering elections. A small majority of those who do know this, however, tend to be satisfied with the SCER’s performance. Three-fifths of those who know that the SCER oversees elections report being satisfied with its performance.



Among the institutions and personalities included in the survey, trust was lowest for political parties,<sup>47</sup> as indicated in Table 2. Indeed, respondents of Survey 5 (October 2010) are divided over the importance of political parties. While two-fifths stated they believe parties are important, a third said they were not and just over a quarter said they did not know (27 per cent).

**Table 9. Do you think political parties are important or not important? (Survey 5, October 2010)**

|                      |      |
|----------------------|------|
| <b>Important</b>     | 40%  |
| <b>Not important</b> | 33%  |
| <b>Don't know</b>    | 27%  |
| <b>Total</b>         | 100% |

Among the respondents who stated that parties are not important, the most common reason given was because parties are divisive (48 per cent). Other common responses were that parties are ineffective (22 per cent) or that parties are unresponsive to people's concerns (14 per cent). When asked whether they agreed with the statement "party leaders are interested in the opinions of people like you?", 58 per cent disagreed. Also, when asked whether there is "any party which addresses the issues and concerns of greatest concern to you", 58 per cent responded "no".

When discussing particular political parties, the prevailing trend is a lack of awareness about which parties, other than the GPC, are active in Yemen. In Survey 1 (September 2006), while 91 per cent had heard of the GPC, only 52 per cent had heard of the JMP. In Survey 4 (April 2010), 68 per cent of respondents stated they knew which parties were active in Parliament. When those respondents were then asked to identify the parties active in Parliament, 5 per cent failed to name the Islamist party, Islah, 24 per cent did not mention the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP); more than half did not mention the Nasserite Unionist Party, and two-thirds did not mention the Baath Party.

---

<sup>47</sup> While the authors do not have any survey data to evaluate the claim, there is some concern that when speaking about "political parties" in Yemen, including with respondents to surveys, what are really being considered and assessed are opposition parties. Whereas the GPC is the ruling political party, its apparent permanency in the seat of power (at least until the events of 2011), has meant that in popular lexicon and thinking the GPC is not actually a party. Rather, it is a larger institutional structure comprising part of the regime.

When asked which party does the most to address the important issues in the country, in the same 2010 poll, the most common response was “I don’t know” (33 per cent), followed by the GPC (31 per cent), no party (19 per cent), Islah (9 per cent), the JMP as a whole (3 per cent), the YSP (2 per cent), and the Nasserite party (1 per cent). To investigate whether the GPC’s higher rating is a function of respondents’ lack of knowledge of other parties, ratings of parties were cross tabulated with indicators of public awareness. According to the early 2010 survey (Survey 4), the GPC is consistently rated higher than other parties by both those demonstrating stronger awareness of political parties and those who do not. Among those who stated they knew which parties are in Parliament in the same 2010 survey, 37 per cent said the GPC does the most to address important issues facing Yemen, followed by “No party” and “I don’t know” (both 21 per cent), Islah (12 per cent), JMP as a whole (4 per cent), refused to answer (3 per cent), YSP (2 per cent), and the Nasserites (1 per cent).<sup>48</sup>

**Table 10. Evaluation of Parties by Knowledge of Parties in Parliament (Survey 4, April 2010)**

| <b>Do you know which party or parties are in Parliament? / Which party does the most to address important issues facing Yemen?</b> |       |       |
|--|-------|-------|
|  | Yes   | No    |
| GPC  | 36.7% | 20.4% |
| JMP  | 4.4%  | 0.4%  |
| Islah  | 11.7% | 3.9%  |
| YSP  | 1.6%  | 2.9%  |
| Nasserite  | 0.6%  | 0.4%  |
| No Party   | 21%   | 16.5% |
| I don't know   | 21%   | 54.5% |
| Refuse to Answer   | 3%    | 1.1%  |
| Total  | 100%  | 100%  |

Despite this finding, there is some evidence that those who are aware are more critical of the GPC. As noted previously, in the same survey respondents were asked to identify the parties in Parliament, without having the list of active parties read to them. As this requires respondents to more fully

<sup>48</sup> Does not total to 100 per cent due to rounding.

demonstrate their knowledge, this is likely a better indicator of awareness. Those who could identify opposition parties unprompted tended to rate the GPC lower than other parties, while those who did not identify opposition parties unprompted were much more likely to rate the GPC higher. For example, 35 per cent of those who identified Islah as a party active in Parliament, stated that the GPC is the party which best addresses existing important issues, followed by “No party” (22 per cent) and “I don't know” (21 per cent), followed by other parties. In contrast, 73 per cent (i.e. more than twice as many) of those who did not identify Islah as a party active in Parliament stated the GPC was the party which best addresses important issues in Yemen.<sup>49</sup>

In Survey 1 (September 2006) and 2 (September 2006), both prior to the 2006 elections, respondents were asked for which parties they would vote in the upcoming presidential and local council elections. In both surveys, 42 per cent said the GPC, which was also the most common response. In the local elections (Survey 1, September 2006), 22 per cent said they would be voting for Islah, 5 per cent said an independent, 2 per cent for the YSP, 22 per cent reported undecided, 5 per cent refused to answer, and the remainder responded they would vote for someone from another party.

For the presidential election (Survey 2, September 2006), 42 per cent said the GPC candidate, 11 per cent said the JMP one, 7 per cent an independent candidate, with the remainder being undecided, stating they did not know, or refusing to answer. Though in Survey 2 only 42 per cent said they would vote for the GPC candidate, when the question was phrased differently in Survey 1, carried out in the same month as Survey 2, support for the GPC's presidential candidate, Ali Abdullah Saleh, rose<sup>50</sup>. When asked who the respondent planned to vote for in the 2006 presidential elections, 52 per cent said Saleh.

---

<sup>49</sup> This pattern holds true among all respondents surveyed. That is, those who identified different opposition parties in Parliament tended to state the GPC was the best party to address important issues in Yemen, but those unaware of opposition parties were more likely to rate the GPC as the best.

<sup>50</sup> Respondents in Survey 1 were asked “Who do you prefer to be the president from these candidates? Ali Abdullah Saleh (the candidate of GPC), Faisal Bin Shamlan (the candidate of JMP), Ahmad al-Majeadi (independent candidate), Fathi al-Azab (independent candidate), or I have not decided yet”. Respondents in Survey 2 were asked “Which one of the following candidates you will vote for in the event of your participation in the upcoming presidential election? The candidate of GPC, The candidate of the opposition parties (JMP), the candidate of the other opposition parties, independent candidate (if any), I have not decided yet, or the suitable candidate”.

Faisal Bin Shamlan, the JMP presidential candidate, garnered the support of 28 per cent of voters at the time of polling. Fathi al-Azab, an independent candidate, received slightly more than 1 per cent of respondents' support and another independent, Ahmed al-Maja'idi, received 0.4 per cent support. Thirteen per cent of respondents remained undecided at the time of the survey (Survey 1, September 2006).<sup>51</sup>

As with popular enthusiasm to participate in the next elections, these results have quite likely changed considerably since 2006. The 2011 uprising demonstrated significant frustration with Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime and its party, the GPC. More recent survey data on the popularity of the former President Saleh and the GPC is not yet available.

## **Political Reform**

This section addresses public awareness and opinion on (suggested) reform efforts.<sup>52</sup> First, it presents the available data concerning the general opinion towards the postponement of the 2009 parliamentary elections. Then, the section examines public preferences regarding the type of electoral system, the means of selecting political leaders, and reforms impacting women's political rights and participation.

As noted in the introduction, the 2009 Parliamentary elections were postponed to allow for negotiations regarding an electoral system and to consider changes to the constitution, including shifting

---

<sup>51</sup> The final election results of the presidential elections of 20 September 2006 were as follows:

- Ali Abdullah SALEH (GPC): 4,149,673 valid votes (77.17%)
- Faisal Bin SHAMLAN (JMP): 1,173,025 valid votes (21.81%)
- Fathi Mohammed Al-AZAB (Independent Candidate): 24,524 valid votes (0.46%)
- Yassin Abdo Saeed NO'AMAN (National Opposition Council – NOC): 21,642 valid votes (0.40%)
- Ahmed Abdullah Majeed AL-MAJIDI (Independent Candidate): 8,324 valid votes (0.15%)

International Foundation for Electoral Systems. "Election Wide - Yemen country profile", <http://www.electionguide.org/results.php?ID=1039>.

<sup>52</sup> As the data is limited to surveys prior to the popular uprising of 2011, the reform options considered may be more limited in scope than what may be considered in Yemen's near future. Nonetheless, the data provides unique insight into reform initiatives that may still be part of future debates.

to a Parliamentary system and/or adopting a popularly elected bicameral legislature. Knowledge of the rescheduling of elections is quite low. In Survey 4 (April 2010), respondents were asked when the next Parliamentary elections were to take place. Just over a quarter correctly stated that they were to be held in 2011 (26 per cent). Those who knew the date of the next election were then asked if this was the original date on which the election was scheduled to take place. More than 90 per cent of respondents knew that the elections had been rescheduled.

Similarly, and as noted above, the differences between the single member district plurality (SMDP) and proportional representation (PR) systems are not well understood. In Survey 5 (October 2010), less than 6 per cent of respondents stated that they knew the difference. After differences were briefly explained, respondents were then asked if they felt they understood the difference. The 54 per cent who said they did understand were then asked what their preference was: SMDP or PR. Responses were fairly evenly split with 40 per cent favoring SMDP and 45 per cent favoring PR. A further 6 per cent suggested some sort of combination and 9 per cent said they did not know which they preferred. As such, a few conclusions can be drawn. The Yemeni public does not have adequate information or understanding of electoral reform options. Further, when explained the differences, there is little consensus on which system would be better. Perhaps a hybrid electoral model with some combination of PR and SMDP at different levels of government would be a potential solution amenable to the preferences of the people.

When asked in the same survey the way they would prefer to select their leaders, the majority of respondents said they prefer direct election of all major government posts. This ranges from 89 per cent for the post of president to 57 per cent for vice-president.

**Table 11. How Yemenis Desire Leaders to be Selected (Survey 5, October 2010)**

|                               | <b>President</b> | <b>Vice-President</b> | <b>Governor</b> | <b>MP</b> | <b>Member of Local Council</b> |
|-------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|-----------|--------------------------------|
| <b>Direct Election</b>        | 89%              | 57%                   | 72%             | 87%       | 85%                            |
| <b>Selected by President</b>  | N/A              | 21%                   | 10%             | 3%        | 3%                             |
| <b>Selected by Parliament</b> | 2%               | 8%                    | 2%              | N/A       | 2%                             |
| <b>Other</b>                  | 2%               | 2%                    | 5%              | 2%        | 2%                             |
| <b>Don't Know</b>             | 8%               | 11%                   | 12%             | 9%        | 9%                             |
| <b>Total</b>                  | 100%             | 100%                  | 100%            | 100%      | 100%                           |

The issue of equal gender rights is particularly controversial. According to the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report, an index of political, economic, educational, and health gender disparities, Yemen has the greatest gender gap in the world.<sup>53</sup> As such, making reforms to offer greater power and political agency to women should be at the forefront of establishing a more egalitarian, democratic state and society in Yemen. When asked in Survey 4 (April 2010) whether they support stronger political rights for women, just under half of the interviewees responded in the affirmative (49 per cent). An additional 26 per cent say that they would support some additional rights for women, without further specification. When these two groups--the respondents supporting stronger political rights for women and the respondents supporting some additional rights--were asked the best way to enhance rights, little consensus was found. The most common responses were focused on education: educating women and providing more resources towards women’s education (29 per cent), educating society more generally (17 per cent), and educating men on gender issues (12 per cent).

Among the remaining respondents, nearly one-fifth do not support enhanced political rights for women (19 per cent) and 6 per cent do not know.

**Table 12. Best way to support or enhance the political rights of women (Survey 4, April 2010)**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>Provide Education to women/Increase resources for women</b> | 29% |
| <b>Educate society</b>   | 17% |
| <b>Educate men on the issue</b>                                | 12% |
| <b>Greater support to women in elections</b>                   | 6%  |
| <b>Passage of laws to protect women’s rights</b>               | 5%  |
| <b>Allocate a number of seats in Parliament for Women</b>      | 5%  |
| <b>Support the right of women to work</b>                      | 3%  |
| <b>Other<sup>54</sup></b>                                      | 23% |

When all respondents were asked whether they would support establishing a quota of 20 to 30 female members in Parliament, a small majority expressed their support (53 per cent). A further 14 per

<sup>53</sup> Ricardo Hausmann, Laura D. Tyson, and Saadia Zahidi, “The Global Gender Gap Report,” (Insight Report, The World Economic Forum), 2011.

<sup>54</sup> All “other” responses at 3 per cent or less.

cent were undecided. Just over a quarter would oppose the initiative (27 per cent) and 5 per cent said they do not know.

### *Review of Key Findings*

1. Knowledge and awareness of basic electoral rights and procedures is weak (Survey 5, October 2010).
  - **Voting age:** Two-fifths of respondents do not know the legal voting age.
  - **Non-Yemeni spouse:** Three quarters of respondents believe that having a non-Yemeni spouse makes one ineligible to vote.
  - **Non-party voters:** More than one in ten believes they cannot vote if they do not belong to a party.
  - **Marginalized groups:** 12 per cent believe marginalized groups, such as *al-Akhdam*, cannot vote.
  - **Proxy voting:** 10 per cent believe a husband can vote in his wife's place and 13 per cent state a friend, family member or acquaintance can vote as a proxy.
2. Knowledge and awareness of different electoral systems is weak (Survey 5, October 2010).
  - Only 6 per cent stated they knew the difference between SMDP and PR list electoral systems; fewer could explain the differences.
3. There is strong support for democracy in Yemen (Survey 4, April 2010).
  - 76 per cent agree that “democracy is important for Yemen” and 79 per cent agree or somewhat agree that “democracy is the solution to Yemen's problems, even if it takes time”.
4. Many Yemenis suspect electoral fraud, irregularities or other interference in elections.
  - **Fraud and bribery:** 48 per cent expected fraud to occur in the election; a further 41 per cent believed bribes are paid to influence the vote (Survey 1, September 2006).
  - **Interference:** To the statement “one can choose the candidate they would like for elections freely”, 21 per cent disagreed and 17 per cent only somewhat agreed (Survey 4, April 2010).
  - **Secrecy of ballots:** 15 per cent stated that they thought their ballots are kept secret only sometimes or not at all (Survey 1, September 2006).
5. Informal institutions strongly influence decision-making in Yemen, sidelining civil society and state institutions (Survey 3, October 2007).

- **Power of informal institutions:** To the statement “official institutions are not involved in decision-making”, 54 per cent of surveyed specific social groups agreed and a further 17 per cent somewhat agreed.
  - **Desire for stronger formal institutions:** 96 per cent of surveyed specific social groups support the statement “decisions should be made by state institutions”.
6. Trust in the government and its institutions is low (Survey 4, April 2010):
- Roughly one-third to one-half of respondents say they do not trust the government, security and police, Parliament, local councils, judiciary/courts, and political parties, with most of the remainder stating they only trust these institutions “to some extent”.
7. Yemenis feel government institutions, such as Parliament and local councils, are in general important for the country but they have been unresponsive.
- **Parliament:** 64 per cent agree that Parliament is important, yet only 41 per cent were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with its performance (Survey 4, April 2010). The 2007 survey found that only 27 per cent of the selected social groups agreed that Parliament addresses the public’s concerns (Survey 3, October 2007).
  - **Local councils:** When asked whether local councils address the needs of citizens, only 15 per cent said “yes” and 29 per cent said “to some extent”. But, only one-fifth of respondents feel the local councils have sufficient resources (Survey 1, September 2001).
8. Trust in political parties is low, as they are seen as unresponsive to popular priorities.
- **Lack of trust:** Only 12 per cent trust parties, and a further 27 per cent state they trust them only “to some extent” (Survey 4, April 2010).
  - **Unresponsiveness:** 58 per cent of respondents say no party addresses the “issues and concerns of greatest concern” to them (Survey 5, October 2010).
9. Reforms for greater gender equality remain controversial (Survey 4, April 2010)
- Just under half the respondents support stronger political rights for women, while an additional 26 per cent stated they support stronger rights in some areas.
10. Poverty and unemployment are the most important priorities for Yemenis.



- When asked what the most important priority for Parliament should be, improving living conditions and job opportunities was the most common answer (Survey 2, September 2006).
- When asked to identify the three most important issues facing Yemen, 71 per cent identified poverty and 58 per cent identified unemployment as among the three most important issues (Survey 4, April 2010).

## **V. Implications for Reform**

### *Institutional Reform*

The Yemeni transition opens an array of unanswered questions: Will the Houthis, the Shia Zaydi rebels in the north, who fought intermittently with Saleh's government for nearly a decade, feel a greater sense of loyalty to a new system and/or leaders? What about the Southern Movement? Will this fragmented group of opposition organizations continue to push for an independent state? Or, will reforms and changes in leadership be sufficient to unify Yemen in a way Saleh could not?

At the heart of these questions and possibilities is an ongoing debate over the structure of the state and other institutional arrangements. The GCC transition deal signed on November 23, 2011 calls for a constitutional review.<sup>55</sup> As Yemenis debate and deliberate the appropriate institutional framework for the country, they face a wide array of options. The data presented suggests several priorities that should inform this debate.

The growth of the modern state and its accompanying professional institutions is stunted in Yemen. Both specific group surveys (Survey 3) and nationwide surveys (Surveys 1,2,4,5) demonstrate: (1) a strong desire for improvement of the formal institutions that comprise a modern, efficient state, and (2) a strong demand for decision-making to take place through formal, legal processes rather than informal institutions or unofficial means. As such, reform efforts should focus on creating a professional civil service, strengthening official decision-making mechanisms, and strengthening the rule of law.

A second clear popular desire is for popular election at all levels of government. Strong majorities support direct election of the president, governors, MPs, and members of local councils. Today, governors

---

<sup>55</sup> "UN tells Yemen to implement transition," *United Press International*, November 29, 2011.

are indirectly selected by local council members who, in their turn, have been only popularly elected since 2001. Also, the president currently appoints members to the Shura Council. For these institutions to enjoy popular legitimacy, members should be subject to direct popular election.

A third priority is greater transparency in elections and fairness in the elections process. Nearly half of those surveyed prior to the 2006 presidential and local council elections expected or somewhat expected fraud. Additionally, more than one-fifth from a 2010 survey felt that they could not choose the candidate they would like freely. Furthermore, the EU's report regarding the 2006 elections noted the SCER's bias toward the GPC. As such, future elections would benefit from more robust observation by both national and international observers. In the same report, the EU also called for the SCER to implement clear guidelines when counting and publishing election results and to improve its transparency at all levels of operation.<sup>56</sup> More transparency and a clear framework of operations by the SCER will increase the confidence of voters and the credibility of the election process.

Beyond these three broad reform principles is the more specific question of institutional design. The data presented above provides limited insight into this specific issue and further research should be conducted. Nonetheless, the data does speak to the need to raise public awareness on the choice between SMDP and PR electoral systems. The prevailing finding is that Yemenis are not aware of the difference between the two systems. Once the differences between the two systems are explained, Yemenis appear quite divided over which they prefer. As such, Yemeni decision-makers and international actors supporting the transition should focus on raising awareness around institutional options.

The data also suggests the need to further empower governorate and local level authorities. Theoretically, local authorities are better able to assess local needs. As of 2010, 43 per cent of Yemenis do not trust their local councils and a 2006 survey found that only 17 per cent believe that local council members can best provide services for their communities. Only one-fifth of respondents to a 2006 survey believed that resources of the local council go to development projects in their area. Strengthening the

---

<sup>56</sup> European Union Election Observation Mission Final Report, "Yemen: 2006 Presidential and Local Council Elections," 2006.

local councils through technical training and ensuring local council members and governors are popularly elected in competitive elections will likewise encourage greater accountability.

### *Political Party Reform*

The findings also underscore the need for increasing the responsiveness of political parties. Part of the normative appeal of democracy is that it institutionalizes relations between the people and the state in a way that requires accountability and responsiveness to popular demands. Clearly this ideal is failing in Yemen and electoral reform is needed to ensure true consequences (i.e. loss of power) for those politicians and parties who fail to meet popular demands.

Political parties have the opportunity to become powerful forces through which citizens can prioritize and address their greatest concerns. Moving forward, the responsiveness of parties will ultimately be a function of the degree to which party members are held accountable to popular demands (through consequences at the polls) and the efforts of parties to reach out to and understand the needs and desires of citizens. Parties should develop institutionalized mechanisms to gain a better understanding of popular demands through public surveys, arranging town-hall style meetings and extending their reach into all areas of the country.

### *Role of the Civil Society*

As in much of the region, the strong impetus for reform is coming from the grassroots in the form of popular protests. This energy should be harnessed to nurture and strengthen civil society development. Civil society could help raise public awareness about electoral rights and procedures, and different forms of democratic governance. Specifically, as debates proceed regarding institutional reform, it is important that the public understand the terms of reference in the debate. A series of civil society initiatives to improve public understanding of the differences between SMDP and PR systems, as well as between Parliamentary, presidential, and mixed systems would be a useful starting point. International donors

could play an important role by funding public awareness campaigns that are implemented through local civil society organizations.

### *Closing the Gender Gap*

Yemen has the greatest gender gap in the world according to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index. A majority, albeit a small one, of Yemenis polled in a 2010 survey, support creating a quota for women in Parliament. Yet this is only one step and other efforts should focus on improving girls' and women's access to education and economic opportunities.

Gender equality remains controversial in Yemen. As civil society and international actors proceed with gender programming, it may be useful to consider the framework in which such initiatives are presented. Rather than an adversarial approach of affirming women's rights based on principle (though this is admirable), an alternative is to emphasize the benefits of female empowerment to women and the rest of the society. Economic and social development will likely remain stagnant so long as half the population remains significantly under-educated and marginalized. As such, it is in the interest of all Yemenis to provide greater educational, economic, and political opportunities for women in the country.

## **VI. Unanswered Questions and Future Research**

While this paper presents convincing evidence that Yemenis desire stronger formal institutions that are responsive to popular demands and supportive of democracy, it does not bring new evidence to bear on the specifics of new institutional arrangements. A multitude of models and possibilities are under debate. In terms of the structure of the state, Yemenis are debating a wide range of options, from making current institutions more responsive, to dividing the country into federal states and even independence for the South. There are also active debates over the political system, presidential or parliamentary, as well as over the electoral models, PR and SMDP.

Many of the institutional options under consideration seek to bolster checks and balances, especially between the central government and the local authorities. Yemen has suffered from a

centralization of power in the capital under the Saleh regime. This centralization has, at times, undermined the authorities and influence of local institutions and power centers. As Yemenis debate future institutional arrangements, attempts to promote balance must not paralyze decision-making at the center, making it impossible to create and pass legislation and enact national public policies.

Original research exploring public awareness and preferences regarding these issues will be essential for decision-makers who are debating and engineering new institutions.

## **VII. Conclusion**

This paper uses survey data spanning nearly half a decade to better inform the ongoing debate about reform in Yemen. At times, culturalist approaches were challenged: Yemenis, though generally very religious, have a strong desire for effective democracy, and direct elections of leaders at all levels of government. A small majority even support creating quotas for women in Parliament. The evidence also reminds us of enduring trends in Yemeni politics: official institutions are weak, untrustworthy and rife with corruption. Yemenis see the government and parties as unresponsive to their needs and economic issues such as unemployment and poverty remain the greatest concerns for average citizens.

The findings indicate a strong need and desire for effective institutional reform. The public wants a strong state comprised of accountable, democratic institutions. Beyond this, the particular form of new institutions remains an urgent issue for public policy research and debate.

The next several years will be a pivotal moment in Yemeni history, in which popular demands and public opinion cannot be ignored. The 2011 uprising underscores the urgent need for decision-makers to listen to the demands and preferences of the Yemeni people. Survey research allows a wider range of voices to inform the policy debate and it provides a better understanding of popular demands. It also offers rare window into the priorities, concerns and perceptions of societies often ignored by their governments. The surveys presented here provide a small, yet valuable starting point for connecting popular demands to national reform priorities and choices.