

Dancing on the Heads of Snakes in Yemen

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As I write this essay there are daily protests across North Africa and the Middle East, a tsunami of political protest that has already brought down dictatorial regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, embroiled Libya in a civil war and taken Yemen to the brink of civil war. The pillars of autocratic rule across the region are collapsing. Kings, Emirs, Sultans and Presidents for Life beware, your days are numbered. That number is coming up fast for Yemen's Ali Abdullah Salih. While the breaking news focuses on bombing raids in Libya, a different scenario has been unfolding in Yemen, which would be the first country outside of North Africa to lose its long-term strongman. Salih has been a clever politician, coming to power only a decade after a protracted civil war ended in North Yemen. His two predecessors were assassinated. It is not surprising that Salih has observed that being in charge of Yemen's diverse population is like dancing on the heads of snakes.

His dance is over. The snakes have bitten.

I have the newspaper pictures of Salih when he first assumed power in 1978. My wife, Najwa Adra, and I had recently arrived in the Yemen Arab Republic (sometimes known as North Yemen to distinguish it from the socialist state of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south) to conduct ethnographic research. We were still living in the capital, Sanaa, waiting for our research permits and traveling throughout the country to find a suitable field site. On June 24, 1978 we were walking to the center of town and passed the *qiyada*, the military headquarters at the time. There was an extra army tank outside and more soldiers bustling about than usual, but I continued on.

When I stopped by a grocer for a bottle of water, he took me aside and asked if I knew what had happened. Yemen's president, Ahmad al-Ghashmi, had just been assassinated by a suitcase bomb brought by an emissary from South Yemen. Newly arrived anthropologists do not generally relish such regime changes. But the army quickly settled on a young colonel, the governor of Taiz at the time, named Ali Abdullah Salih. He was appointed president and commander of the armed forces on July 17 and has been in control ever since, including after the unification of North and South Yemen which he engineered in 1990. As I write this he is currently the second longest serving Middle Eastern leader, nine years behind Libya's Qaddafi. How ironic that both imitators of the eminent pharaoh Ramses II should be upended in the same historic sweep of protests.

After spending over a year in a rural valley and studying the cultural ecology of local irrigation and water rights, I returned to Yemen over a dozen times both as a development consultant and conducting historical research on the history of Yemeni agriculture. Like President Salih, I have seen much change since that first visit. In the late 1970s Yemen had finally become a beacon for cultural anthropologists: Brinkley Messick, Jeff Meissner, Martha Mundy, Shelagh Weir, Paul Dresch, Cynthia Myntti, Andre Gingrich, Steven Caton, Tom Stevenson, Susan Dorsky and more; we were a vanguard in a country that had experienced a grueling civil war in the 1960s and had only recently opened up to foreign research. Less work had been done in the south. During the British protectorate of Aden, R. B. Serjeant had collected much valuable folkloric information and historians like Fred Halliday had well documented the socialist regime that took over in 1969. But at the time Yemen was still very much terra incognita, no doubt attracting anthropological interest for that very fact.

As an anthropologist I have written extensively about Yemeni culture, from methods of agriculture to the

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symbolic dimensions of chewing the leaves of the *qat* (*Catha edulis*) plant. As a historian I have translated Yemeni agricultural texts and written about the history of the vibrant 13th–14th centuries Rasulid period, when one of the sultans of Yemen was praised by Marco Polo as one of the richest rulers in the world. As a development consultant I have advised on projects in Yemen on agriculture and irrigation, sanitation, education, environmental conservation and development strategy.

When the recent protests swept into Yemen, I instantly became a “Yemen expert.” Drafted into a role of commentary writer for CNN and interviewed on radio and cable tv, the seemingly narrow focus of my area expertise flashed momentarily into the public sphere. It is perhaps my own fault for creating and maintaining an academic blog on the Middle East and Islam over the past five years. I often responded to news reporting on Yemen, the Iraq War and Islam that I found demeaning or wrong-headed.

In general I have little regard for the parade of talking heads that flutter across cable network screens. There are the usual suspects, an aging Fouad Ajami here and a cogent Juan Cole there, but most of the designated experts talk without having done the walk. I have no desire to be a journalist, but as an anthropologist I also have no interest in holing up in an academic ivy-ivoried tower. I am certainly no expert on everything Middle Eastern or Islamic, but there are times when my experience urges me to take pen in hand. I take the moniker “social scientist” seriously: social in the dual sense of what I study and who I should be communicating to; scientist as someone who believes the ethnographic mode of “being there” demands the same kind of rigor that a biologist brings to the lab.

So what can I say about the current situation because I am an anthropologist with over three decades of experience living in, reading and writing about, and teaching students about Yemen, the Middle East and Islam? First, there is no substitute for living with people cheek by jowl and conversing with them in their own language, indeed in their own dialect. All else is derivative, important at times but not the immediate contact with a reality that can be observed and engaged dialogically. “Being there” does not guarantee being astute, but it provides the context for detail and nuance that otherwise would be very difficult to tease out of social relations and ever changing cultural values. There are other caveats, of course. Ethnographic presentism pervades my discipline. Every published ethnography is a photograph of a distinct time frame, yet it can all too often become “the” representation of a particular society or group. The Yemen I wrote about from the late 1970s is not the Yemen of today, although the interweaving of ongoing cultural values with inevitable change is best served by tracing the genealogy of such culture change. Hindsight can heal even the rashest of predictions.

A second point is the absurdity of disciplinary reductionism. My training is both as an anthropologist and a historian, including Arabic at the graduate level and years of work on texts and manuscripts. We speak of multiple identities when we teach sociology or cultural anthropology, but often do not reflect on the mix of intellectual identities each of us carries. I do not see any particular discipline, specifically in the range of social sciences, as superior to another. In almost every class I offer the wonderful Hindu fable of the blind men and the elephant. We hardly need contemporary philosophical critics to remind us that we all are blind when it comes to the whole. We only really know what we touch and what touches us. This does not rule out grand theories and surveys, but it does call for more humility than most publications indicate and talking heads are willing to admit.

The current protests that began earlier this year have dominated the news cycle, even with the break on the horrific human tragedy of the Japanese tsunami. Much of the news media tends to generalize from superficialities; it is, perhaps, the nature of the beast. Thus, the fact that young people with Facebook and Twitter accounts took to the streets in Tunisia and Egypt leads to the idea that we are seeing a digitalized youth rebellion. The underlying challenges facing educated as well as under-educated youth in the Middle East and North Africa extend across boundaries: lack of jobs, outdated and corrupt institutions, generational clash over values. The youth came out in Yemen, too, even though very few Yemenis have internet access. Students at Sanaa University staged protests, including a sit-in that was displaced only with a murderous attack by pro-government forces. Considering that 46% of Yemen’s population is under the age of 15, the problems facing the upcoming generations will only be exacerbated.

Yemen also has powerful tribal affiliations, a factor not relevant in either Tunisia or Egypt, and relevant in a different way from Libya. Although Salih has been in charge of Yemen’s government for three decades, he has never been able to establish effective control over the country as a whole, even with one of the highest military budgets in the world. The local autonomy of tribes has been a counter to any attempt by the central government to assert a Syrian or Iraqi type dictatorship. Back in 1978 it was the local civil society within tribal and non-tribal areas that promoted the country’s growth. In 1978 about a third of the male Yemeni workforce lived outside the country and sent back remittances, which were applied at the local level to build roads, schools, houses, buy automobiles and start up businesses. This community orientation, although disrupted by recent political maneuvering and the import of more conservative Wahhabi religious views, remains the glue that holds the country together.

Then there is Islam. When I arrived in Yemen in 1978 there was virtually no discord between the various religious

perspectives in Yemen. The north was still predominantly Zaydi, a branch of Shi'a Islam that grew out of an imamate lasting from the 10th century until 1962. The majority of the rest of Yemen held to the Shafi'i school, although other views were represented. Religion was part of everyday life, but it was eclipsed by the politics of nation building. Over the years a far more conservative and anti-Western version of Islam was propagated in North Yemen, primarily with the influence of Wahhabi (often called Salafi) money from Saudi Arabia. The school teachers imported at the time to teach in the public schools altered the way in which Islam and the outside world were seen by youth in Yemen. Yemenis were told they were bad Muslims, backward and not as devout as their brothers abroad. This set up an inevitable conflict with existing family values and tribal loyalties.

One of the main political crises facing Yemen today is a rebellion dubbed the al-Huthi revolt. This began in 2006 with the murder of a prominent critic of the government and of Saudi Arabia. An attempt by President Salih to apply a scorched earth approach to resolving the dispute led to bitter feelings by the local tribes. The international media, encouraged by Salih, have labeled the Huthis as a proxy war of Iran, although there was originally no connection with Iran and no evidence of direct support. The grievance was local, not part of some imagined caliphate conspiracy. American media in particular have exaggerated the role of Yemen as a terrorist haven for al-Qaida. Indeed there were Yemenis who served in the Afghan jihad (including when it was supported by President Reagan as a liberation movement against the Soviets), but most of the leaders have been killed or arrested. There may be as many as 300–500 “operatives” in Yemen, but they are a minor issue for the government and have proved themselves quite inept at inflicting damage outside Yemen. Futile attempts like the underwear bomber show the weakness of self-styled Islamists that we foolishly took for strength. The fear of al-Qaida, however, has led the United State to add millions of dollars in military aid to fight the terrorists.

As I write this, I suspect it is only a matter of days before there is regime change in Yemen. I argued in several earlier commentaries that Yemen's president would probably weather the storm of protests. After all, he had a well equipped army and security apparatus in a country no one faction can easily control. But all bets are off. We the pundits trusted conventional wisdom over the sheer will

power of ordinary people to overthrow repression. The Middle East is emerging from the cocoon of dictatorial fatalism and no current regime can avoid the impact, even those that survive. The Yemen I have known is no exception.

Speaking as an anthropologist and more than an anthropologist, I see this as one of the major lessons from the wave of protests: liberation from oppressive dictators inspires ordinary people far more than the preaching of religious fanatics. It is our ignorance of the diversity of views in the Middle East that makes these protests seem so surprising and so similar. President Salih argued that only he could keep Yemen from stumbling back into tribal bedlam and an Islamic kingdom. But the tribal dynamics I saw in rural Yemen during the late 1970s were far more democratic and fair than the self-serving “peoples” party of the president and his cronies. The tribes have represented civil society in much of Yemen in the absence of a strong and sincere national government. In Yemen there is no monolithic anti-Western brand of Islam. Yemen has its outrageous clerics, as we do in America, but there will be no Iranian-style “Islamic revolution” here.

I once quoted President Salih's remark that Yemen was not Tunisia. Neither is Yemen Egypt, nor Libya, nor Bahrain. Yemen is Yemen, still a terra incognita for most Americans. Of all the countries with current protests, Yemen is the poorest. Once a bread basket of the Arabian Peninsula, it can no longer feed its growing population of 23 million people. Water for consumption and irrigation is running out, as wells must be dug deeper and deeper. There is no easy fix for the development problems facing Yemen. But the Yemeni people are resilient. Their country, however it is shaped politically in the coming months, will be a breeding ground for hope, not a staging area for terrorism.

Salih was wrong, despite his three-decade long dance in power. The people toppling him are not a pit of snakes, but the mouths of the hungry, the angry fists of those who have been shut out of a future. Snakes bite, but they also shed their skin in the spring when they come out of the ground after a long, cold winter of blindness. Spring has come to Yemen and there is dancing in the streets.

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