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Yemen's Independent Youth and Their Role in the National Dialogue Conference

Triggering a Change in Political Culture

Atiaf Zaid Alwazir

In March 2013, a six-month National Dialogue Conference (NDC) began. It has brought together 565 diverse participants, among them representatives of Yemen's independent youth, who were essential in starting the 2011 uprising. The Conference is tasked with putting forward decisions on major topics related to Yemen's future. In July, a majority of participants adopted the decisions and recommendations of six of the nine working groups. Youth and other independent participants were crucial in pushing for recommendations promoting equal citizenship for men and women in the decisions adopted. Yet, their impact on decision making remains limited. In addition, amidst continued insecurity and economic crisis, the working groups on the structure of the state and long-lasting conflicts in the north and south have not reached agreement. While failure of the NDC is thus not unlikely, the participation of independent youth has already triggered positive changes in the country's political culture. Europeans should support this trend and provide technical assistance and skills-building to independent youth groups.

Although independent youth actors played a significant role in the 2011 revolution in Yemen – and faced the harshest attacks by government security agencies – they were sidelined in the political negotiations that led to the signing of a power-transfer deal. The deal, brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the US and the EU, and signed in November 2011, foresaw the resignation of then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh in exchange for immunity; the formation of a national unity government; and a six-month National Dialogue Conference to discuss major contentious issues and amend

the constitution. The youth were also sidelined in the formation of the national unity government, and did not profit from a reshuffling of positions in various ministries. Those positions were evenly divided between the former ruling party, the General People's Congress (GPC) and the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) – the latter being a coalition of six opposition parties founded in 2002, dominated by the Islamist Islah party and the Socialist party, i.e., the former ruling party of South Yemen before unification in 1990.

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Yemen's independent youth

Members of the “independent youth” are defined by the NDC as those men and women between the ages of 18 and 40, from various parts of the country, who were heavily involved in the 2011 revolutionary movement in Yemen. As a rule, they are not affiliated with any established party, nor with any movements such as the Southern Movement or Ansar Allah, usually referred to as the Houthis. Some are, however, members of new parties that have not been registered yet. Others, while not official members of political parties and movements, are closely linked to them. At least half of the NDC's youth members fit the definition of independent youth.

While these youth do not have a uniform political agenda, they share a collective identity built around certain ideas, including challenging militarism and tribalism, and calling for equal citizenship, the rule of law and inclusiveness. They focus on peaceful resistance and activism as the methods of achieving change. For some, this is a matter of principle, while for others it is a pragmatic choice, as they simply do not possess the arms that the political parties, the Houthis and the Southern Movement have.

During the 2011 uprising many independent youth groups emerged. In February 2011, the umbrella group called the Coordinating Council of the Youth Revolution of Change (CCYRC) was established. It became one of the largest independent coalitions – with local buy-in and consensus from over 100 movements and groups. The coalition still exists and many from its leadership are involved in the NDC, either as official delegates, members of the secretariat, staff or volunteers.

One of the members of CCYRC, the Sanaa-based al-Watan group, for example, put special emphasis on equal citizenship. They took the initiative of preparing a “youth plan,” which was presented in April 2011. In one month of extensive daily meetings, the independent youth leaders managed to bring together diverse youth

groups – including independents, members of the JMP, the Southern Movement and the Houthis – in order to agree on the main ideas for the future and to articulate them in 13 concise demands, including equal citizenship, a restructuring of the military within a unified and transparent structure, and independence of the judiciary.

Indeed, these efforts showed the strong ability of the youth to build consensus between various political and ideological groups of Yemeni society due to their credibility and leverage, in addition to the willingness of some individual members of traditional political parties to engage with these new actors. Although the youth do not have financial resources or arms, they have strong street credibility. Even those Yemenis who opposed the revolution have a positive view of the youth; those who cite failure of the revolution mostly link it to the involvement of traditional political parties rather than the failure of youth. Across society, many believe that the role of youth should be enhanced and that change might come about if they were given more space in politics. For those who sympathize with the movement for change, the youth have become the symbol of the civic bloc that protects the demands of the revolution and advocates for national demands rather than personal self-interest.

Patronage politics

This is in sharp contrast to the traditional political parties – including the traditional opposition, composed of JMP and tribal elements – many of whom have long been co-opted by the regime. As the Yemeni state does not possess a monopoly over the means of violence, former President Saleh heavily relied on co-optation of the “power centers” or “political elite.” These included the Hashed tribal confederation, the military leadership (most generals were from the Hashed), the Islah party and other smaller parties in the JMP. The former President's patron-client networks also extended to Parliament, NGOs, political parties

and local councils. Co-optation took place through patronage and granting power and control as well as access to resources, while at the same time creating divisions and punishing those who crossed certain red lines, such as criticizing the corruption and the patronage system.

Independent youth, who went to the streets in 2011, were not among the inner elite circle and openly called out against corruption. In contrast, traditional power centers could not move beyond generic calls for change because they would have been negatively impacted by that change. Many Yemenis trust youth precisely because they stem from outside this inner circle. And they fear that the large presence of members from the inner circle in the new government and the NDC will mean a return to the previous *modus operandi*.

Thus, the term “independent youth” has become synonymous with demanding a new political reality, rather than reforming the current one. However, the advocacy for a completely new political structure has placed some youth in a conundrum. Many youth revolutionaries opposed the NDC as an extension of the GCC agreement, seeing it as an acceptance of half-solutions and refusing to negotiate with representatives of the former regime. Other youth members, even if they opposed the GCC agreement, felt that they should not boycott the NDC to avoid the self-exclusion of the youth. This latter group decided to join the NDC, even if, at the outset, they did not necessarily believe in its success.

The National Dialogue Conference

The NDC was decided upon as an element in a two-year transition process that began on 23 November 2011, when then-President Saleh signed the GCC initiative in Riyadh. The dialogue was intended to begin a year later but began, after several delays, on 18 March 2013. It was to last for six months, its 565 delegates tasked with providing recommendations on major issues of contention, culminating in the writing of a

new constitution. According to the relevant presidential decree, the Conference has a daunting list of goals, such as: determining the constitution-drafting process; settling long-held grievances and impacts of wars in Saada province and the south; and determining measures for national reconciliation and transitional justice. The sheer size of these issues and the lack of a clear definition of concrete objectives to be achieved by the NDC have created a range of diverse expectations, which hold the risk of disappointments.

The technical committee and the selection of participants

In July 2012, the NDC technical committee was established. Its 31 members were selected by President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi from the main parties, movements and independent youth. This committee was charged with defining the scope of the dialogue, the internal rules and regulations, the mechanism for selecting members of the NDC, group sizes, quotas and the time frame.

In the end, selection of NDC participants followed criteria and (complicated) procedures established by the technical committee, including provisions that each list should have a representation of 30 percent women and 20 percent youth. The main political parties (JMP and GPC) and movements (Houthis and Southern Movement) were asked to propose a list of names to the technical committee.

After many disagreements among members of the committee over the allocation of seats, members of the JMP and GPC agreed to make Jamal Benomar, Special Adviser on Yemen to the UN Secretary-General, the main person responsible for selecting the independent representatives (i.e., the lists of civil society, women and youth). With regards to these lists, individuals were asked to fill out a one-page application, which was submitted to the technical committee. The technical committee then shortlisted 40 candidates (20 each from the

north and the south) and submitted that list to President Hadi, who had the final say in selection based on input from Benomar.

The youth selected were not informed of their participation until two days prior to the Conference. Some never received the call and found out by reading their name in the newspaper. Many believe this late communication was intentional in order not to allow for ample time to scrutinize the independent lists – as well as President Hadi’s own list, for which he appointed 63 NDC members without any transparent criteria.

Indeed, the question of representation became a major issue of contestation, among other factors because the selection of youth NDC members was not necessarily based on their constituencies or their standing in society, but rather on whether they were “known” to members of the technical committee. Hence, many who applied did not even get their applications reviewed. This might have been partially due to the youth’s lack of unified leadership and the lateral structure of the youth movement. Still, it increased the fear among some that the NDC might only be a gathering of traditional elites.

Breakdown of seats

Seats in the NDC are divided between political parties, movements and independents, including representatives of civil society, independent youth and women (see table 1). Forty seats are allocated to independent youth, giving them 7 percent of the seats. The allocation of seats is clearly in favor of political parties and traditional actors, who received 46.5 percent of the seats. The only two new political parties included in the NDC are the Salafi Al-Rashad party and the Justice and Development party, a newly formed party with strong tribal links. However, none of the new youth parties were selected to participate. This led eight newly established parties to file a case against the NDC against their exclusion.

Table 1: Allocation of seats in the NDC

<i>Group</i>	<i>Seats</i>
<i>Political Parties (263)</i>	
GPC (former ruling party)	112
JMP (traditional opposition coalition)	137 (divided among 8 parties, with the Islah party having the majority of 50 seats, followed by the Socialists with 37 seats)
Al-Rashad party and Justice and Development party	14 (7 seats each)
<i>Movements (120 total)</i>	
Southern Movement	85
Ansar Allah (Houthis)	35
<i>Independents (120 total)</i>	
Women	40
Youth	40
Civil society	40
<i>President Hadi’s list (62)</i>	62

NDC structure

The NDC is made up of five formal bodies: the general assembly, the general secretariat, the presidium, the consensus committee, and the order and standard committee (see table 2).

The presidium and the consensus committee have a lot of leverage in decision making and in the flow of the meetings. The presidium consists of President Hadi as the chair, six deputies, a rapporteur and a deputy rapporteur. Its role is to facilitate and moderate the proceedings of the Conference. The consensus committee – made up of the entire presidium, the heads of the working groups and the members of the technical committee – is in charge of mediating if voting fails to achieve the necessary threshold. It is also in charge of devising principles for the constitutional drafting committee, which is scheduled to start working in August. The constitutional drafting committee shall translate the out-

Table 2: NDC Structure

<i>Formal bodies</i>	<i>Number of members</i>	<i>Number of youth</i>
General Assembly	565	40
General Secretariat	3	2
Presidium	9	0
Consensus committee	24	2
Order and standard committee	20 (10 lawyers and 10 judges)	0

come of the working groups into articles of the new constitution.

One of the problems is that there are not enough independent voices – of youth or others – represented in these three bodies. In contrast, the general secretariat, which was established to provide logistical, administrative and organizational support to the NDC, is composed of three individuals, and supported by many other staff and volunteers, many among them independent youth. It is headed by the secretary general of the Conference, Ahmed Awad Bin Mubarak, an independent. Although Bin Mubarak is not a “youth” member by age, he is linked to the youth movement in many ways, mainly because he is a member of the CCYRC youth coalition. The secretariat has the power to decide the agenda, and thus indirectly influence the discussions. However, it does not have decision-making powers.

Decision making

In the general assembly, nine working groups have been formed to address Yemen’s most pressing challenges: security and military; sustainable development; rights and freedoms; good governance; transitional justice; independence of institutions. This is in addition to the three most sensitive issues: the structure of the state; the Saada issue, which concerns the root causes of the six rounds of war between the Houthis, a Zaidi revivalist movement in the northern region of Saada, and the central state; and the southern

issue, which deals with grievances of the south prior to the civil war and afterwards, as well as the demands of the Southern Movement, an umbrella group of factions calling for a return to autonomy of Yemen’s south.

Each working group is charged with writing draft recommendations. In order for the NDC to adopt a recommendation, the internal regulations state that at least 90 percent of the general assembly’s members present must agree. If this threshold is not reached, then agreement among 75 percent of attendees will be accepted. If this does not work, the consensus committee will present the issue to President Hadi, as head of the NDC’s presidium, who shall then personally work with the various groups on reaching an agreement. The fact that the President has the final say is of concern, as it reinforces autocratic tendencies. In addition, it might render the work of NDC members obsolete.

In the first round of voting in July 2013, six of the working groups managed to pass their decisions with 90 percent approval. Yet in the case of the transitional justice working group, the consensus committee transcended its given mandate and changed a text related to the date of the transitional justice law. The other more sensitive working groups have delayed submitting their reports because of internal conflicts and inability to reach consensus.

The independent youth in the NDC

If the participation of the independent youth in the NDC was intended to be a merely decorative feature, youth members took the opportunity to challenge that. By doing so, they have pushed social boundaries and for changes in the flawed process.

The 40 youth in the dialogue do not have a common demographic or educational background. In terms of regions, the youth come, at least nominally, from all the 18 governorates. Also, their qualifications vary significantly. While some are highly edu-

cated and articulate technocrats in their late 30s from the political elite, others are as young as 20, less educated and do not necessarily have knowledge of the political scene. They also have different political experiences. Some, like Mubarak Al-Bahhar, who gave the opening remark on behalf of the youth, are members of newly established parties. He, for example, is a member of Al-Watan party, which recently gained recognition but had not gotten the approval for registration at the start of the dialogue yet, and hence he was still considered an independent. But the majority have never been members of any political party, nor directly engaged in politics prior to the revolution.

Some youth delegates have informal links with political parties. In this sense, youth delegates can be divided into four main camps: those who are close to the Islah party, those who are close to the GPC, those linked to newly founded parties such as Al-Watan and those not linked to any party. These differences have made it difficult to form a united bloc. Yet, over time they have managed to create at least the foundations of a bloc. Approximately two months into the NDC, youth representatives agreed to vote as a bloc in most of the decisions, except on the southern issue, as strong differences arise there.

Independent youth have been involved in all of the dialogue's nine working groups. Each working group elected a chair, two deputies and a rapporteur. Working groups also have subgroups with a chair and a rapporteur each. The chairs and rapporteurs in a majority of the subgroups are from the youth, as is the chair of the important working group on state-building/constitution. In fact, despite the low overall representation of youth, they are represented in leadership positions in a majority of the working groups. Other independents from the women and civil society sectors also took many leadership positions in the working groups, emphasizing the trust that is placed in independent voices rather than partisan representatives.

Many of the youth, due to their credibility, commitment and ability to use modern technology, were voted to be in charge of drafting the subgroups' recommendations. While this is a purely administrative task, it comes with a lot of responsibilities and gave them the opportunity to directly engage with top-level politicians from all backgrounds.

The youth's impact

When the mid-term report with the recommendations of six working groups was published in July 2013, the independent youth celebrated an end of "a long advocacy struggle" to promote these recommendations. The youth had spent a lot of time and effort advocating and lobbying for "equal citizenship" in the various working groups. Despite their overall political inexperience, during the first four months of the NDC, youth representatives networked and lobbied their fellow delegates, independents and political party members. Yet they were not the only ones pushing for change. Other independents – from the women's, civil society and even from Hadi's list, in addition to liberals from traditional parties and movements – had also pushed for these decisions and celebrated some of the outcomes. This loose network of those working for change can be seen as the birth of new political alliances and a new civic bloc.

In addition, youth have been quite outspoken despite their limited number. They have openly addressed taboo subjects and sensitive issues, such as the immunity law and the Yemeni Guantanamo detainees, and have demanded an investigation into Yemeni and US airstrikes and their impacts on civilians.

Moreover, they have been constantly confronting the narratives and habits of traditional forces through protests, sit-ins, petitions and demands for equality among all Conference participants. These acts of resistance within the NDC have actually triggered processes of social transformation. For example, in the first week of the

Conference, some powerful traditional individuals were sitting in the front row of the assembly. These places had not been assigned to them, but it was an accepted tradition that high-level officials and sheikhs were to sit in the front facing the cameras. The youth decided that they also had the right to sit in the front row, thus, aiming at reaffirming their presence in the NDC, not simply as decorative figures. They organized to arrive earlier than usual and took over the front row, forcing the traditional players who arrived late to sit further back. This was an unprecedented act and forced the participants to view the youth not as “young” individuals that need to respect the elders, but rather as equal political players.

The NDC: An elite pact

Although the NDC gave the youth an opportunity to engage in direct politics, there is a concern that the 7 percent youth representation in the dialogue may make them easy targets of co-optation in the historically engrained system of patronage. In this sense, despite the youth being active in lobbying and networking inside the NDC, a major criticism leveled against them has been their lack of interaction with the youth outside the dialogue, who they are supposed to represent.

There are a number of reasons for this, including the informal structure of the youth movement, time mismanagement and fatigue stemming from months of intensive debates inside the NDC. In addition, some youth delegates have purposefully isolated themselves from the youth outside as a reaction to the harsh criticism they had received.

Yet, informally, a minority of youth delegates still meet with youth outside – directly or via Facebook – to get their input on a regular basis. Also, there have been several projects that link youth NDC members with youth outside the dialogue and the general public through social and traditional media. At the same time, many

youth NDC members still hold on to their revolutionary role by attending various protests. One such example is a May 28 demonstration at the central prison demanding the release of the imprisoned youth who were on hunger strike. The fact that the NDC representatives were present highlighted the issue in the media, and, vice versa, the ongoing protests allowed the NDC youth members to continue discussing the issue inside the Conference halls. This pushed other politicians, such as Hooria Mashour, the minister of human rights, to join the hunger strike demanding the release of the prisoners, which, in turn, led the President at the end of May to order their release within 48 hours – a decision that, to date, has not been implemented.

Opportunities and challenges

Irrespective of whether the NDC succeeds or fails, the process itself has proved to be empowering for the independent youth. Youth have established themselves as important actors who will surely be involved in the future political scene: although youth representatives may have little direct influence on outcomes, they have many indirect ways of exerting influence. By the end of the process, youth representatives will also have acquired political negotiation and networking skills, and will have had dealings with high-level political actors.

Indeed, the NDC, helped by the youth’s influence, has witnessed a shift in coalitions and in mentalities. Independent women, youth and civil society representatives have formed alliances formerly considered unlikely with some members of the GPC – the common denominator being their fear of hardliners controlling the process. This will also affect the traditional parties.

Despite these developments, there are challenges facing the independent youth in the NDC. One is the fear of youth co-optation. The NDC has channeled grassroots mobilization into a formalized process backed by the Persian Gulf States and

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the West with what some believe to be an agenda to control or suppress revolutionary aspirations. At the Conference, there has been a general sense among youth delegates that traditional political forces are trying to ride on their legitimacy. This has been attempted in a variety of ways, including providing financial support or employment or inviting them to top events, conferences and exclusive Qat sessions (i.e., social gatherings involving the chewing of Qat leaves), where important decisions are taken in an informal setting. There is a concern that, as a consequence of this unprecedented access, youth may adopt an identity of closed-door approaches and become disconnected from the people they are supposed to represent. Some already see indications of this, as some youth delegates have moderated their tone in dealing with the political parties over the last months.

There is also a fear that NDC participation may corrupt some who had very honorable reasons for joining the NDC. Each NDC participant receives \$100 or \$180 (for those coming from outside the capital) per day, in a country where 40 percent of the population lives on less than \$2 a day. This not only contradicts any sense of civic duty but it is also in contrast to the previous two years of civic engagement and volunteer activities during the uprising. Thus, the way the NDC has been organized is reminiscent of former President Saleh's patronage system. It creates what writer Ibrahim Mothana calls "Per-diocracy" rather than democracy.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

Germany, the EU and others in the international community have been backing the transition process in Yemen. A group of 10 ambassadors divided tasks related to the transitional process among themselves (initially without input from Yemeni officials) in their capacity as "facilitators of the GCC initiative." Still, there is a suspicion among many Yemenis that international support-

ers do not actually have an interest in far-reaching reform and democratization in Yemen, as that would run against Saudi interests.

Europeans should reassure Yemenis of their commitment to a democratic transition, rather than just the support of the NDC process. This includes ensuring that mechanisms are devised that guarantee implementation of decisions taken. Exerting pressure may come in many ways such as aid conditionality or sanctions (such as asset-freezes) being put on individuals attempting to disrupt the process.

In addition, Europeans should conduct an assessment of the impact of the aid spent in the transitional period to date and, on this basis, reassess priorities. Providing technical assistance and supporting skills-building among youth might prove much more fruitful than giving large amounts of unsustainable grants to notoriously corrupt government institutions, without consistent monitoring. In such support, Europeans should see to it that politically affiliated youth are not privileged over independent youth.

In addition, Europeans should lead an effort for a better coordination of international support in order to avoid confusion and overlap. For example, on the constitutional reform process, it is unclear what role the French will play, what role the German foundations involved in it are to play, and what the role of the Yemeni constitution-drafting committee shall be. The absence of transparent communication on such matters only exacerbates negative perceptions and worries by large segments of society about a regional and internationally imposed process.