

## **Yemen's short spring season**

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Events in Yemen have been occurring at a dizzying pace, but it is all still somewhat clouded in mystery, and the ultimate fate of that country remains uncertain.

President Ali Abdullah Saleh and a number of his closest advisers were allegedly seriously injured during an attack on the mosque in the presidential palace on Friday, necessitating Saleh's evacuation to Riyadh for medical treatment. Exactly what caused the blast and who was responsible for it are still not known. Still, it sounds like the perfect way of removing the obstacle to political reform and another page in the extraordinary story of the Arab Spring.

But the issue with the Arab Spring has always been the fear that the spring may end up being more about simply removing the long-term autocrat and less about truly democratising. And Yemen may be a case in point for a variety of reasons. First is the issue of whether Saleh's departure is temporary or permanent. One would think the latter given how hard people have been trying to get him to leave the scene, but you don't survive as the ruler of Yemen for over 30 years without a certain feel for southern Arabian politics. But if it is permanent, is it just a changing of the names as the rest of his family take over the reins, or will one of the higher profile tribal sheikhs reinforce traditional rule by assuming control with the support of General Ali Mohsen and his 1st Armoured Division ?

Whoever takes over control in Yemen will have a raft of problems to address. The northern province of Sa'ada now has a governor whose loyalty lies with the rebel Houthi movement after the president's man fled the scene, Islamic militants were able to take over the city of Zinjibar in the south and hold it for a number of days, keeping the Yemeni army locked up in its barracks. The southern secessionist movement continues to fester, while government control over vast swathes of the country has all but collapsed. Not to mention the virtual collapse of the economy, which has been teetering even before the current political crisis.

Most crucial to the political future of Yemen, particularly its chances of transitioning to a democracy, is the attitude of Saudi Arabia. Riyadh has already shown itself capable of intervening militarily when their interests are threatened, as happened in Bahrain, and their invitations to fellow Sunni monarchies in Jordan and Morocco to join the Gulf Cooperation Council show how reluctant they are to support any moves towards democratisation. The same will hold true in Yemen. While Saudi Arabia has led GCC efforts to broker a power transition solution to Yemen, which included elections in the future, it is unlikely that such elections would have yielded a result that wasn't sympathetic to Saudi Arabia's interests in promoting a stable southern neighbour.

So long as Western interests in Yemen are largely defined by security – US aid is predominantly security related – then a post-Saleh political system will be dictated to more by Riyadh's counter-reformist political ideology than the west's desire for political liberalism. The massed protestors in Sana'a might not know it yet, but their window of opportunity for true democratic change may close much more quickly than they realise. And that's even if Saleh doesn't manage to make a dramatic return from Riyadh. The Arab Spring isn't likely to result in much democratic flowering in Yemen.

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