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The Square of Change in Sana'a: an Incubator for Reform

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Yemen has witnessed widespread protests and sit-ins throughout the squares of change for the past three months. These squares became incubators for change and the birthplace of a new political culture. The time spent at the square has given protestors the time to network, organize, engage in awareness raising activities and honest dialogue, and agree upon general principles. While the focus at the beginning was solely on political reform, the interplay between different actors on the ground has forced individuals to begin discussion on social and cultural change as well, as a holistic approach. These terminologies are being tested on the ground. While this gave the movement an opportunity to mature, the longer this political deadlock lasts, the higher the chance of violence, especially by the circle around the President who will try to protect their own interests. The interplay between various actors on the ground will determine the future of the movement, and the country's future direction.

This eyewitness report is by a Sana'a based researcher who was involved in the protests since late January 2011. While the protests are nationwide, the paper will focus only on the square of change in Sana'a.

Background:

Peaceful calls for change are not a new phenomenon in Yemen. In 1962, two months before the military coup, high school students led the first modern day peaceful demonstration in the capital Sana'a. In Aden, numerous protests calling for independence from the British were held. In late 1990's, Jarallah Omar, deputy secretary general of the Yemeni Socialist Party continuously called for "peaceful struggle through

sacrifice" which resonated for years after his assassination in 2002. In 2008, numerous strikes by port workers, teachers, laborers and professors took place in many cities throughout Yemen. Activists, journalists and lawyers held continuous demonstrations for the release of political prisoners and detained journalists. In addition, the Southern Movement led many peaceful demonstrations calling for reforms which later escalated to calls for separation from the north. Today's peaceful protests

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nationwide, calling for an end to the regime, absorbed much of these demands for secession and planted the seed for a new environment.

What makes this current movement unique is that it is a youth-led peaceful initiative with mass participation nationwide, with one common demand: an end to the regime. I remember my feeling the first time I chanted: “the people want the end of the regime.” As soon as I uttered these words, I turned around to check who is watching me, but I quickly realized there were hundreds of people shouting the same thing. It was a liberating feeling to know that fear is now finally broken.

Embracing a peaceful protest movement is remarkable for a tribal and well-armed society. Tribesmen who are frequently engaged in revenge killings have joined the peaceful movement and even when attacked with tear gas, beaten, and even murdered at the hands of security forces and pro-regime elements, they maintained the peaceful nature of the movement and did not pick up arms that are readily available to them. Despite all the attempts to drag this struggle to clashes with thugs and security personnel, the movement insists to remain peaceful so far.

Different protests began in Taiz and then in Sana'a starting from mid January, when youth inspired by the fall of Ben Ali's regime, took the streets. The protests were not daily until the night of Mubarak's resignation on February 11th. The next day pro-Saleh loyalists occupied Tahrir square in Sana'a, in the central business district, in an attempt to block any pro-change protests there. In response, a very small group of youth, held sit-in on February 20th outside the gate of Sana'a University and vowed not to leave the area. The next day tents were put up. Day by day, more people joined, until it transformed into a tent-city with thousands of inhabitants.

Tent city in the square of change

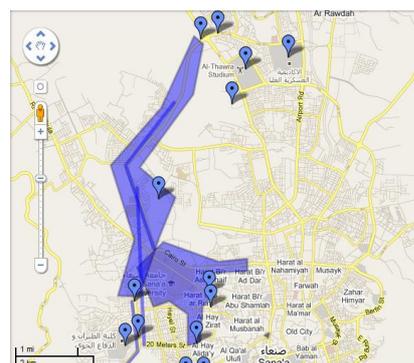
The pro-change sit-in is located outside Sana'a University's eastern gate, in an area now called Square of Change because entering the square feels like a new Yemen. From one entrance, a large sign greets people “Welcome to the first kilometer of dignity.” On the other side, a sign reads “Welcome to the land of liberty.” Coincidentally, at the heart of the square is an obelisk engraved with a *hadith* “Faith is Yemeni, and wisdom is Yemeni” and the streets surrounding the area are *al-'adl* (justice) and *al-Huriya* (freedom) streets. With time protestors expanded to cover three kilometers. Colored tents represent the diversity of backgrounds present. To identify the tents, most have signs of their affiliation with a youth coalition, movement, family name, and/or organization.



Colorful tents fill the square of change in front of Sana'a University's Eastern gate (photo by Benjamin Wiacek)

This map shows the expansion of the sit-in in the capital Sana'a.

Map of protest area in Sana'a by journalist Jeb Boone¹



While the protestors at the university did not paralyze Sana'a by their presence as people did in Cairo's Tahrir square, the area proved to be a perfect place for the movement to blossom. Restaurants, photocopy machines, internet cafes, photography studios and vendors selling everything from cucumber snacks, sunglasses, and anti-government posters surround the university. This has proven very useful for the movement, and equally beneficial for the businesses.

Despite ongoing violence against protestors and despite the rainy season, with every new visit to the square, I notice new tents springing up, new signs, and more people. In fact, after the deadly attacks of March 18th on the Friday of dignity, many people joined the protests in large numbers. This day signified a turning point in the Revolution since afterwards, numerous defections from the ruling party, military, and various government establishments occurred.

Protesters have a strong will to stay still until their demands are met. Today, campers are not only prepared for the rainy season, but are also prepared for the long haul. What was once a cheap small tent has now transformed into a wooden "rooms".

Whose revolution is it anyways?

An ongoing question is whether this movement is really a youth movement or led by the opposition coalition, the Joint Meeting Party (JMP). The JMP was founded in 2002 as a coalition of opposition parties working towards political and economic reform. It includes the strongest political party, the Islamist party Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah), Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), Hisb Al-Haq, the Nasserite Unionist Party, and the Popular Forces Union Party.

The youth began the demonstrations, and the JMP joined afterwards and they provided support through mobilizing their basis. After they joined, the relationship between

the two began to develop at the square. While the youth are not heavily dependent on them, they are also not far from the influence of the political parties. This is because the JMP, and more specifically Islah, is very well organized and has great deal of funding, while the independent youth are less organized, scattered and unfamiliar with political rhetoric.

Both the JMP and the independent youth are caught in a tug of war. Youth have refused accusations that the JMP is controlling them with a "remote control" and on numerous occasions have defied JMP decisions to show that the JMP does not control the street. The most recent example is the youth's reaction to the latest Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative which the JMP had agreed to.

This makes it clear that there are currently two processes happening in parallel.

One is a political dialogue between the parties (GPC & JMP)

Second is the revolutionary work at the square that refuses political negotiations.

The future of Yemen "depends on the dynamics of these two processes and their outcome."² The JMP is facing the dilemma of how to reach a political agreement and at the same time not lose their legitimacy on the street.

While the youth began the sit-ins, the movement has transformed in the last three months from only a youth movement to a mass people's movement representing different groups in society. Like the various colored tents, the inhabitants of these tents come from very different backgrounds and share one space. The Houthis and liberals; men and women; children and the elderly; unemployed and academics... etc, are all eating together, chewing qat together, and strategizing for the future. After Saleh's 33 year policy of divide and conquer, the square has succeeded in unifying people.

Time is on our side, but not for too long

Some observers and protestors are complaining about the length of time this revolution is taking, especially as compared to events in Tunisia and Egypt. However, this period of “stalemate” is quite positive for many reasons.

First, this period is providing an opportunity to raise awareness on political concepts, and to engage in dialogue on what a future civic state really means. The square of change has become a great entity of civic engagement. Awareness-raising seminars in the tents and on stage are happening on a daily basis by academics, human rights activists and youth leaders. They spread information on topics such as women’s rights, legal rights, constitution, peaceful resistance, and citizenship ...etc.

Second, time is favorable for the revolution in that it provides a chance to reveal true feelings of players on the ground. Especially since ideologies, beliefs and affiliations were brought to the surface, which makes the dialogue between different players more honest.

Third, the revolution has become a school for skills building and talents. Many protestors engaged in new activities that are not necessarily in their field. When protestors realized that the youth have no voice in the media because regional and international outlets have focused mainly on JMP or government for their reporting, they decided to create a third outlet to let their voices heard. More than 20 newspapers are published and distributed at the square, including at least two dailies. Many of those working on these newspapers are not journalists by training, but have become citizen journalists during the revolution. Those involved in the rapidly-growing newspaper scene envision the role of unbiased media as a critical long-term component to future of Yemen. In addition to newspapers at the square, the role of social media has been on the rise. Many are

using facebook to spread information and engage in dialogue and discussions. More activists have begun using twitter to spread information to the world, and more are turning to blogging.

Artists are also using their talents for social change. Well-known musicians joined, street theater on human rights are performed, CDs with revolutionary songs are being sold, poetry recitals are heard daily, photographers and filmmakers are documenting history as it unfolds, and art therapy workshop are taking place for children of martyrs.

While this time is beneficial for the political, social, and cultural maturity of the movement, it nevertheless is debilitating in some ways. Yemenis are now asking themselves when will this end? One cannot underestimate the patience of the movement, but how much longer can they stand peacefully against violence? Especially, if the circle around President Saleh, for self-preservation; continues to push the country towards a spiral of violence.

Ongoing challenges

Violence: despite the peaceful nature of the revolution, the government's response has been brutal. Physical attacks against protestors by gunshots, rocks, and batons have resulted in the death of at least 150 and the wounding of thousands. In an escalation of violence, security reportedly kidnapped some of the wounded to unknown places and this is likely to continue to increase. Intimidation, threats, beating, and kidnapping of activists have also been very common. While this did not necessarily lead to fear and anxiety, it nevertheless increased paranoia and mistrust amongst protestors due to fear of infiltration of national and political security.

Economic woes: Over two months of unrest in Yemen has more than doubled the price of some basic items including food and

cooking gas. Anger about the price increases have been building for weeks. At the same time, the value of the Yemeni Riyal has plummeted, deepening the economic strain. Banks are very low on dollars. New Yemeni currency is floating around, a terrible sign of possible future inflation. Saleh will leave the country with no money, high inflation, and dwindling oil resources. Will average citizens blame the current government for the economic crisis and price increases or will they blame pro-change protestors?

Impact on ordinary citizens: Sana'a University is still closed and may remain so until the end of the year. Many schools have also been closed, and some wealthy families have left Yemen in so that their children can continue their education. The closure of important roads leading to the presidential palace has created traffic problems. There is also oil and cooking gas shortage, in addition to frequent electricity and internet cut. This has led to increased frustration amongst people. This might be another tool used by the regime to increase tension and chaos in the country.

Polarization of Sana'a: Many of the pro-government supporters are paid supporters, but not all are exchanging loyalty for financial gains. Friday pro-change marches have been matched with pro-Saleh marches. The commitment from both sides is portrayed through the names given to each Friday. For example on April 15, pro-change supporters called for "Friday of persistence" while pro-government supporters called for "Friday of dialogue". The polarization is also seen through the graffiti wars fought on the walls of many buildings. These walls have become a battlefield of expression. Each day, the same wall is transformed. One day there is a pro-change slogan, the next day that same slogan is covered with paint or eliminated by pro-regime slogans and vice versa. Another major polarizing force is the split in the military. When General Ali Mohsen joined the protests with his 1st brigade, he vowed to protect protestors. The

tension between the 1st brigade and other military factions is high. Thugs and security forces are attempting to instigate clashes between the military in order to push the country into a spiral of violence. Their attempts so far have been unsuccessful.

Despite the dedication to non-violent protests, the movement faces a high risk. The longer this polarization continues, the higher the chances for violence because "The old fragmentation scenarios remain a potential threat to integrity and stability"³

Organizing the revolution, a unifying or divisive move? When protestors first began their sit-in, there was one small informal group working on logistics. As the numbers of protesters increased, so did the presence of political party affiliates who are known to be very well organized and with financial support. Independent youth welcomed their experience, as organizing and coordinating the movement was a top priority. Different bodies were created including medical, security, financial, service providing, and media task forces. Simultaneously more youth movements emerged in the scene, and each group created their own committees or task forces depending on their need. At the moment, it is almost impossible to do an accurate scan of the number of movements at the square. When I asked one youth activist at the media center, how many movements and coalitions are present at the square? His response was "before or after this question?" Indicating that groups keep emerging, and that it is difficult to document. The increase in number of youth movements has pushed many coalitions to work together to empower the movement. A document on revolutionary youth demands was drafted by 150 youth groups who worked closely together for over a month. This process strengthened their relationship and hence helped in coordination efforts.

As the stage is placed in the heart of the square near the obelisk, it is also at the heart of conflict. A committee tasked with

organizing daily programs for the stage between 8 am to 1 pm and then from 4 to 11 pm was created. This committee was accused of its close relationship with the JMP and its preference for one ideology over others. For many weeks, only one voice from the square was heard on stage and hence broadcasted on television to local, regional and international news. There was a deep sense of exclusion among independent youth and others in the square. This was compounded by other violations at the square including confiscation of private properties and banning certain groups from distributing written documents. Complaints increased against the JMP and more specifically against *Islah*. Protestors agreed to deal with these issues internally and not publicize them for fear of misuse by government officials.

President Saleh's speech denouncing mixing of men and women, proved to be the straw that unleashed public flow of debates and arguments on civil rights. The speech was a very clever way to discredit his opponents and give a green line to the *Salafis* at the square; something that he hoped would divide the protestors. After President Saleh's speech, certain extremist elements in the movement reacted by attempting to ban mixing, which then created divisions amongst protestors. When some female activists went against the "ban" on mixed marches, they were beaten by members of the square's organizational committee and assisted by some military personnel from the 1st brigade, who had joined the protestors to provide protection.

This was a shocking blow to everyone at the square, and created a fury amongst protestors. Due to the gravity of the situation, protestors broke the silence on these violations and went public. While this was not the first incident, it certainly was the most noticeable. It is important to note however, that the overwhelming reaction by people in the square against these internal violations is a positive indicator for the

future and for the potential of a real civic state.

Pro-change or anti-regime?

The beating of women under the pretext of mixing by people who claim to seek change is an indication that calls for change is one thing; internalizing and implementing change is another. It also highlights the fact that that calling for an end to the regime politically cannot be separated from calls for cultural and social change as well. For a civic modern state to take place, the current regime with all its buildings blocks needs to be dismantled. This includes the cultural and social aspects that have debilitated Yemen for so long.

The daily seminars and pamphlets at the square are great form of awareness-raising, but more important are the incidents at the square that force people to practice what they preach. These incidents challenged deep rooted convictions and cultural practices. In theory, most people will accept the other, but in reality, that is not always the case. A political, cultural, economic and social revolution has begun. What is happening now is that, terminologies and ideologies are being tested on the street.

Do people just want to overthrow the President? Or an end to the entire government structure that has hindered cultural, social, political, and economic development in Yemen? Are people just anti-President or pro-change as well? These two are not necessarily synonymous.

The following days are vital for the maturity of the movement. The interplay between various actors, along with other factors, will determine the future of the movement, and whether political change will bring about a social and cultural revolution as well.

1 Boone, Jeb. Journalist based in Sana'a. An American Southerner in the Imam's Mafraj. [Http://www.jebboone.wordpress.com](http://www.jebboone.wordpress.com)

2 Al-Sakkaf, Nadia. «Yemen's different scenarios. », The Yemen Times. March , 7, 2011. http://www.yementimes.com/defaultdet.aspx?SUB_ID=35720

3 How long will hungry Yemenis adhere to peaceful protests? Trust Law. <http://www.trust.org/trustlaw/blogs/the-word-on-women/how-long-will-hungry-yemenis-adhere-to-peaceful-protests>.