

## CHAPTER II

### SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IN YEMEN

#### 2.1 Yemen in a Glance

Demographically, the Republic of Yemen is located in the Arabian Peninsula border with Saudi Arabia to the North and Oman to the Northeast.



**Figure 2.1 Map of Yemen**

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As Figure 2.1 illustrates, the Red Sea is located to its east and the Ocean lays to its south. Its strategic location in the Arabian Peninsula makes Yemen be exposed to national and international interests since ages. Politically, the republic of Yemen is a constitutional republic where ‘the people are the owner and the source of power’ (Article 4), and presidents come to power through election process (Al-Yemeni, 2003, p. 13).

Historically, the Othmani and British colonialism separated Yemen into two parts, namely the Kingdom in the North which gained its independence in 1918 and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the South which gained its independence in October 1967, respectively. It is very important to note that since its dependence from Othmani colonialism in 1918, the *Mutawakelite* kingdom on Yemen ruled the northern parts until 1962 where then the republicans revolutionized the Imamate and inspired the revolutionary figures in the southern parts of Yemen to fight and demand independence from the British colonialism in 1967 (Feierstein, 2019; Manea, 1996, p. 2; Save the Children Sweden, 2011). Two-independent-systems were established after the independence, namely a republic in the north and a democratic in the south by which each of which has its own capital and governmental system. The two states were then united under the Republic of Yemen (Yemen) in 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1990.

## **2.2 The Tribe (Qabila) and the State**

Tribe or *Qabila* constitutes an important part in the structure of the Yemeni society and its politics, however, many scholars attempt that tribalism plays a negative role in the political life and exacerbating the problems in the country (Al-Yemeni, 2003; Clausen, 2020, p. 918; Feierstein, 2019, p. 4; Manea, 1996, p. 4; A. A. Orkaby, 2014, p. 89; Setiz, 2019, p. 168), and in most Yemeni areas, the tribes' leaders (Shaykhs) dominating the politics (Brandt, 2017, p. 34). Researchers recorded that the Yemeni tribes, in ancient Yemen, constituted the structural foundation of the state such as the '*Ma'ien*, *Sheibah*, and the *Himiar* kingdoms and even "can form a stronger powerful confederation tribe" (Manea,

1996, p. 1). During the colonialism, however, the role of the tribes varies in the Southern parts of Yemen to tribes in the northern parts. Tribes in the south were divided into small entities by the British colonialism (Sharp, 2019, p. 6), whereas tribes in the north were unified and formed a strong federation under the leadership of Imam Yahia, a *Zaydist* who created the *Mutawakliat* kingdom that gain its social and political support from the Zaydi Shi'a tribes of the northwestern highlands (Manea, 1996, p. 3), to take military actions against the Othmani government.

In the north, after winning the Othmani war *Imam Yahya* applied the old principle “divide to rule” (Manea, 1996, p. 4) by creating constant wars between the tribes and played one off against the other mainly the *Hashisd* and *Bakil* tribes. Research concludes that during the *Mutawakliat* kingdom, even though the tribes were used as a mean of political ends with the existence of tangible boundaries between the institution of the state and the tribes, the tribes continued to be independent entities led by their *Shiekh*. In contrast, tribes in the south were less powerful than in the north due to the modernization brought by British colonialism with an exception of some tribes in *Hadhramout* where they remain strong due to the fact that the British paid more attention to Aden and ensuring signing treats with tribal Sheiks to secure control in their areas.

During the Yemen Arab Republic 1962-1990 the central government tried to penetrate society and break the resistance of the tribes. In 1960s the republicans, who were back by Egypt during the Naseer regime, led and won a revolution ending the Imamate regime (A. A. Orkaby, 2014, p. 25) and this move

was not appreciated by the neighboring countries especially the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where president Abdullah Sallal confirmed that “We have defeated the rotten monarchy” (A. Orkaby, 2015a, p. 4, 2015b, p. 10; A. A. Orkaby, 2014). According to Orkaby (2014) al-Salal confirmed that the revolutionary regime is recognized by 20 countries adding that “anyone who tries to restore the monarchy in Yemen is the enemy” (A. A. Orkaby, 2014, p. 85). Our troops entered *Sa’dah*. They have defeated the enemy and send King Saud and King Hussein retreating” (Orkaby, 2014, p. 85). Consequently, a bloody civil war that lasted for ‘six years’ (A. Orkaby, n.d., p. 2) broke out between the republicans aided by the Egyptian and the royalists aided by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In this conjunction, the tribes were separated into two, namely, tribes in support of the royalists and tribes in support of the Republicans, each of which received money and weapons from Saudi Arabia and Egypt respectively. The war continued for years and the tribes became well weaponed and economically strong, and powerful enough to influence the political system. The internationalization of the Yemeni conflict in the 1960s and 1970s, two presidents were assassinated due to the interventions of foreign countries, namely Egypt and the Soviet Union, who supported the republicans against the royalist, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, who supported the Royalist (A. A. Orkaby, 2014, p. 126). Although tribes continued to be powerful for years, unlike the former presidents Abdullah al-Sallal (1962-1967) and Abdul Rahman al-Eryani (1967 -1974), the President Ibrahim Alhamdi 1974-1977 tried to “eliminate the power of the tribes and build a modern state instead”. Al-Hamdi’s mission cost his life due to the fact that “the influential tribes resisted

at attempt to create a strong state” (Manea, 1996, p. 4) even though the role of the tribes were eliminated to some extent. In contemporary Yemen, the president Ali Abdullah Saleh describes the strategy of integrating tribes, mainly tribesmen, in the central government as “dancing on the heads of snakes”, for more details see (Varisco, 2011; Victoria Clark, 2010).

### **2.3 Political Rulers in Yemen**

In order to understand the Yemeni conflict, it is an essential to discuss who ruled and is ruling Yemen in the Northern parts of Yemen and the Southern Parts of Yemen.

#### **2.3.1 The Mutawkiliat Kingdom in the North**

First, at the northern parts of Yemen, after the Othmani withdrawal from the northern parts of Yemen, the Imam Yahya (1918- 1948) and then Imam Ahmed (1948-1962), the Son of Imam Yahya, a *Zaydist* created the *Mutawakliat* kingdom that gain its social and political support from the Zaydi Shi'a tribes of the northwestern highlands (Manea, 1996, p. 3), who took military actions against the Othmani government. To rule the country, the *Imam Yahya* applied the old principle “divide to rule” (Manea, 1996, p. 4). During the Imamate kingdom, the Shiekhs (a powerful persons who rule their tribes based on the tribe traditions and norms) are important entities within the Imam government. The Imamate regime ended in 1962 by which the ruling system was changed from kingdom to republican.

### **2.3.2 The Yemen Arab Republic**

In 1962, a revolution took place in the north of Yemen against the kingdom ending the regime of Imam Ahmed and establishing the Yemen Arab Republic (1962-1982). This period of time witnessed a serious conflict between the Loyalist (who supported and in favor of the return of the Imamate Regime) and the Republicans (supporters of the new born Republic in the Arabic Peninsula) and many witnessed six-presidential appointment. Preceding the establishment of the Yemeni democracy, six-presidents who ruled Yemen in this period came from army background and they don't represent any party, these presidents are:

1. Abdullah Al Salal (27 September 1962 – 05 November 1967);
2. Abdulrahman Al Eriyani (05 November 1967 – 13 June 1974);
3. Ibrahim Al Hamdi (13 June 1974 – 11 October 1977);
4. Ahmed Al Gashmi (11 October 1977- 24 June 1978);
5. Abdulkareem Al Arashi (24 June 1978- 18 July 1978); and
6. Ali Abdullah Saleh (18 July 1978 – 24 August 1982).

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Ali Abdullah Saleh, the fourth president in the North of Yemen thought that it is essential to establish a forum that combines the government and opposition parties. He came with the establishment of the General People’s Congress (GPC) which was the first party in the northern parts of Yemen Arab republic (YAR) on August 24, 1982 (Al-Yemeni, 2003, p. 24). It was established as a cement to bridge the tension between the government and the opposition groups (e.g., Nasserites, Ba’ath, and Muslim Brotherhood) through a “national political conference” aimed at ending the national upheaval and rebellions mainly after the assassinations of the president Ibrahim Al Hamdi and Ahmed Al-Ghashmi. This step was welcomed by national and international political organizations and received much encouragement to provide an umbrella under which all groups could operate and cooperate with each other (Al-Yemeni, 2003,

p. 25). Ali Abdullah Saleh remained the president of the North of Yemen until the Unification of Yemen in 22 May 1990.

### **2.3.3 The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (1967–1990)**

Second, in the southern parts of Yemen. The southern parts of Yemen was a British Colonialism. The Yemen People's Democratic Republic was established in 1967 under the National Liberation Front, a revolutionist movement against the British Colony, mainly in Aden. Qahtan Muhammed Al Sha'bi (30 November 1967 – 22 June 1969) was the first president for the Yemen People's Democratic Republic PDRY. he has been arrested and replaced by the president Salem Rabi' Ali (23 June 1969 – 26 June 1978), who he belongs to the same movement. The later has been assassinated due to his involvement of the assassination of President Al Ghashmi in the North. Salem has been replaced by Ali Nasir Mohammed (26 June 1978 – 27 December 1978), who also a member of the National Liberation Front and later a member of the Yemeni Socialist party (YSP), which was established by Abdul-Fatah Ismail in the southern parts of Yemen on October 11, 1978 which combines a number of parties including the Ba'ath movement, the Marxist Party, and six other parties in the south and the north (Al-Yemeni, 2003, p. 60). The party encountered an internal severe conflict during 1981 until 1986 where thousands of its members fled to the north of Yemen and joined the GPC party, for more details read (Al-Yemeni, 2003, p. 60). The leadership of the party was appointed to Ali Nasser Mohammed, a man who wanted to bring the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) closer to the West and the GPC, by developing good relations with north Yemen, Saudi



Arabia, and Syria. Due to the tribal and regional cleavages that divided the North Yemen, he fled for the North and then to Syria.

Ali Salim Al-Beidh took over the leadership of the party and the north Yemen (24 January 1986 – 22 May 1990). It is he who signed the Unification with the North Yemen in 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1990. However, due to the secessionist movement in 1994 he was driven into exile in Oman by the forces of Sana'a (Al-Yemeni, 2003, p. 61).

The leadership of the GPC and the leadership of the YSP deteriorated and the Islah party surprised the YSP party by forming a coalition government with the GPC party to anticipate the 1994 war between Forces in the South demanded a separation from the north and the Yemen Army (Al-Ganad, 2022; Al-Yemeni, 2003; Azharuddin, 2023; Sarah Philips, 2008; Varisco, 2011; Victoria Clark, 2010). To divide roles, the Islah party acted through demanding “Prominent religious scholars within Islah used religious rhetoric to provide legitimacy to President Saleh and the GPC’s propaganda against the former South.” (Phillips, n.d., p. 140). The party lost most of its power in the South after the secessionist movement in 1994 by which the party leader is exiled. Jarallah Omar, who was an enemy to the GPC party and then assassinated in Sana'a, took over the lead of the party and participated in the elections as opposition (along with the Islah party and other small parties and form a Joint Meeting Parties JMT) of the ruler party, the GPC (Al-Ganad, 2022, p. 12).

#### **2.3.4 The Republic of Yemen (1990-2024)**

The unification of Yemen marked a new political change in Yemen, that is

democratization. It's essential to understand that a successful democracy needs a fertile democratic culture; a society that not only understands and practices the procedures of democracy but also values the democratic institutions of that democracy (Al-Yemeni, 2003, p. 14). The new established constitution ensures the rights for Yemenis to elect their political rulers in the presidential, the parliament, and the local councils' elections. Research believed that the structure of the Yemeni society welcomes democracy in their political life

“... the impulse towards autonomy and independence are dominant characteristics that have created a rich social and cultural tapestry as well as the Islam and the traditions of tribesmen, dialogue, debate and discussion are patterns of interaction that are strong and thriving in Yemen (Al-Yemeni, 2003, p. 16)”.

This new born democracy that focuses on the economic and human development fascinates many researchers to study “this dynamic and the role of the main political players” (Al-Yemeni, 2003, p. 16). Although the Yemeni democracy was a success example in the Arabic peninsula, researchers estimated that this democracy has been “evaporated” (Sarah Philips, 2008, p. 2) because it was built on a “weak foundation and people are more worried about the unification than the democracy itself” (Suswa, 1994, p. 7) .

To ease practicing the democracy in Yemen, the Yemeni constitution allows Yemenis to establish political parties to contribute in building the new born democracy and ensures smooth and fair elections that may represent all people in the north and south parts of Yemen. Because Yemen is a democratic country, it is said that political parties are the most important core elements for any democracy especially new emerging democracy like in Yemen (Al-Yemeni, 2003).

Beside the GPC and the YSP, the new born democracy allows the establishment of new parties, like the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (The Islah Party) and other small parties. The Islah party was a joint with the GPC. The unification of Yemen in 1990 under the new Republic of Yemen (ROY) lifted the “official legal ban on opposition parties” (Al-Yemeni, 2003, p. 43) by which Islah party split from the GPC and become an independent party by itself on September 13, 1990 with the leadership of the Abdulwahab Al-Ansi (1990 – 1994) who is succeeded by Mohammed Abdullah Al-Yadoumi (1995 – 2024) through election. Al-Yamani (2003, p. 44) confirmed that the fact is that the most powerful leader of the party is Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussain Al-Ahmar, who is considered as the primary representative of the tribesmen in Yemen. In addition, the party came the second in the parliamentary elections in 1993 winning 66 seats out of 301 and 64 seats in 1997. The party’s relation with the GPC party was not an ‘unfriendly and combative’ (Al-Yemeni, 2003, p. 45) and it supported the GPC’s presidential candidate in 1993 and 1997. Gradually, the party lost its popularity among its followers due to a change in the leadership and the aggressive actions towards the GPC especially after the 2011 due to “losing allies” (Al-Ganad, 2022, p. 29) . The peak of the Arab Spring in Yemen witnessed a missile attack targeted the president Ali Abdullah Saleh (the chairman of the GPC) and many members of the GPC party while he was praying a Friday prayer in the palace’s mosque including the former MP Abdulaziz Abdulghani who he was killed in that attack. The GPC suspected the Islah party as it is standing behind the assassination of the president. In addition, due to its support for the Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt

during the president Mursi, a hard consequences and pressure were and still conducted against the party by regional powers such as Sudi Arabia (the biggest supporter for the party since its establishment) and the United Arab Emirates (Al-Ganad, 2022, p. 30)

The GPC remained the strongest party, with 123 seats in the parliament (Durac, 2011, p. 348), due to the fact that it was the ruling party and had 2.15 million members in 1998 and 7 million by the 2011.

The uprising of the Arab spring in 2011 in Yemen marked the beginning of the weakness and division of the long-ruling party when the party's chairman Ali Abdullah Saleh stepped down as president of Yemen and the increase division between him and Hadi as the second leader in the party. The division became more critical when former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and his loyalists aligned with the Houthis forces in their takeover of the Capital of Yemen, Sana'a in September 2014

#### **2.4 The Emergence of the Houthis**

Some information concerning the Houthis have been discussed in chapter one. However, it is very essential to bring a clear and complete picture of who are the Houthis, how did they emerge, what are their purpose of occupying Yemen.

Generally speaking, Badr al-Din Amir al-Din al-Huthi (1926 – 2010), the father of Husayn Al-Huthi who established the Huthi Movement (now *Ansar Allah*), belong to a family called Bayt Zayd al-Husniyyah which is originally from Amran Governorate, exactly in Huth suburbs in the northern parts of Yemen. During his youth, Badr al-Din al-Huthi moved to 'Dahyan' in Sa'dah governorate

in the north of Yemen to study religion science where then, due to health issues, he moved to another city called 'Marran', in which there are homonymous tribes that allowed him to thrive through teaching people, scribal work, reading, drafting documents, mediation, and arbitration. Utilizing his position between the tribes as spiritual man, he started to build connections with the tribes and Sayyids through marriage where he had four wives; two with sayyid background and two from tribal background and by this marriage he was granted thirteen children (male) numerous daughters. This intermarriage from strong tribes provide special protection for the al-Huthi family and their children (Brandt, 2017, p. 173). In return to what Badr al-Din al-Huthi has given them, "the Tribesmen honored him and granted al-Huthi sufficient land to provide sufficient income for his family" (Brandt, 2017, p. 137). The oldest child of Badr al-Din Al-Huthi followed the path of his father where he served the tribe with actions of "mediations, negotiations, and arbiters according to Islamic law in tribal conflicts" (Brandt, 2017, p. 183). In her book, Brandt (2017) conclude that the Huthis local reputation in their tribes is through two factors, first, their pedigree and noble decent, second, the services they provide to their community, their personal merits, and the modest lifestyle that boosted them among ordinary tribesmen comparing to shaykhs who have a prestige lifestyle. This modest lifestyle allows them to thrive socially and politically; socially through winning the majority over the Tribal shaykhs and politically through holding high positions in the government; that is two seats in the parliamentary elections in two periods.

Politically, Hussien al-Houthi, the oldest son of Badr al-Din al-Houthi and

a member of the Believing Youth, was influenced by the teachings of his teacher Muhammed al-Mansur, that ‘there are two ways to practicing *khuruj* that is through force or election’ (Brandt, 2017, p. 150). Consequently, Hussien al-Houthi ran for and won the parliamentary election to represent *Saqayn* (west of Sa’adah) in 1993 believing that ‘political change should result from free elections’ (Brandt, 2017, p. 150). This move received with disgrace by the local Shaykhs who usually won the elections and consider the *sayyid*’s victory as ‘a challenge of their shaykhs authority’ (Brandt, 2017, p. 150). In this conjunction, a conflict emerge between the Shaykhs, who are not sayyids, and the Zaydi revivalists led by Hussien al-Houthi and his family and Hussien’s actions in the tribes were linked by Shaykhs as similar as the actions of the royalists in 1960s by which Shaykh Husayn Mujalli confirmed to other Shaykhs in a meeting that ‘there is a risk of the end of the shaykhs’ influence and that the influence of the shaykhs is endangered by the Believing Youth and al-Haqq’(Brandt, 2017, p. 150). Hussien al-Houthi lost his parliamentary seat in the 1997 elections, however, he still remained active and strong in his tribe. His brother Yahya al-Houthi, a member of the Believing Youth and a Zaydi revivalist, sized a parliamentary seat in the 2003 elections (ran as independent) but after winning the elections he joined the GPC party (Brandt, 2017).

## **2.5 Conclusion**

The persistence conflict in Yemen passed through various stages which make it an interactable conflict. Tribes plays a significant role in defining and shaping the politics in Yemen by receiving funds from regional powers who have

interests in the Yemeni internal affairs. The chapter has addressed these issues and highlighted how did the political situation became more complex for the local and international mediators to take actions in transforming this conflict and bring stability and prosperity for its people. The next chapter will address the role of these international mediators who played a significant role in the Yemeni conflict including the United Nations, the European Union, the Sultanate of Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.