

Yemen's national dialogue: the challenges and opportunities ahead

Posted on Monday 18th March 2013

After several months of delay, Yemen's National Dialogue Conference will begin on Monday 18 March 2013 amid tight security in a country that is beset by multiple crises—from a humanitarian crisis to two ongoing insurgencies, and the active presence of an al-Qaeda affiliate, to name but three.

Among the insurgencies, the southern movement remains deeply divided, not merely over the future of Yemen but also over whether to participate in the National Dialogue at all. While insurgents in the north are committed to the dialogue process, their campaign has been linked to Iranian involvement as have some elements in the south, where al-Qaeda, while diminished in a US drones campaign throughout 2012, remains a potentially serious threat, not least because of its likely links with the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood who have significant influence in Islah, one of the parties participating in the National Dialogue.

All this poses significant challenges for the National Dialogue that is to conclude the country's transition with fundamental constitutional reform and elections in 2014. In order to create strong foundations for sustainable social, economic, and political development in a new Yemen, the National Dialogue needs to accomplish a number of distinct yet ultimately inseparable tasks.

(1) The territorial structure of the state in Yemen needs to undergo fundamental reform. Insurgents in the north and south are unlikely to accept a continuation of a highly centralised state. Their vision of a more federal Yemen, however, is not universally popular across the whole country, and difficult negotiations lie ahead on how to keep Yemen united while giving southerners and the al-Houthis in the north greater levels of meaningful self-governance and avoiding the country's disintegration.

(2) Holding Yemen together and creating the prospect of a sustainable political process without violence will also require reforms of the institutions of central government. This concerns among others the composition and powers of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government and the relationship between them. The direction and outcome of this particular reform process will determine how transparent and accountable politics in Yemen will be in the future and it will shape the incentives that the insurgents will perceive to lay down their arms and engage politically with the centre.

(3) Restructuring of the military and security forces is another crucial task in the National Dialogue. In a situation of prolonged and heightened insecurity for individuals and communities, the key dilemma is that many will be unwilling to give up their arms and trust the ability of the state to provide for their safety, but without such trust the state will not be able to restore even a modicum of law and order.

(4) Given the depth of historically founded mistrust, based on decades of human rights violations, political repression, and injustice, reconciliation as a basis of building trust cannot be accomplished without transitional justice. This is a particularly sensitive area, but one that needs to be addressed urgently in an equitable and fair manner to allow Yemeni society to move forward.

(5) While Yemen's natural resource wealth has been dwindling over the years, wealth and revenue sharing will be another issue that the national dialogue will have to confront. Most of the country's oil resources are located in the south, water shortages are a serious problem for the country's agricultural sector, and without sincere efforts at equitable economic development across the whole country, recovery and continued unity will be difficult to accomplish.

(6) Last, but by no means least, the transition process will need to acknowledge Yemen's diversity and establish credible and enforceable guarantees for the rights and identities of individual citizens and groups. This is perhaps most easily accomplished on paper, but will pose a tough challenge in implementation as it requires the acknowledgement and toleration of religious, political, and cultural differences.

Yemenis themselves, and their supporters in the Friends of Yemen group, have a real, and quite possibly the only, opportunity now with the National Dialogue to bring about sustainable change in a country of the Arab Spring that is not achieved at the barrel of a gun but through pain-staking negotiations among all stakeholders. This will not be an easy process, nor will it be from setbacks and attempts to derail it. It may not even produce all the outcomes its participants envisage but even less-than-optimal process and imperfect outcomes will ultimately be better than descent into civil war or sliding back into yet another period of authoritarianism.

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