

## **Arab Jacobins? The Yemeni Revolutions in Historical Perspective**

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*Abstract:* Walter Benjamin once said that if the enemy wins, even the dead shall not be safe. When counterrevolution succeeds so thoroughly, on local and global scales, even the memories of what once had been a great revolutionary uprising in a small defenceless place are erased, and that erasure gets reflected in even the leftwing writings of a later time. Amidst the chronicles of modern revolutions, and, not least, of modern Middle Eastern revolutions, from Iran in 1905-6 Turkey in 1908 to Afghanistan in 1978, the revolutions of what can broadly be termed ‘Yemeni’, that is North Yemen, South Yemen, occupy a normally marginal when not almost wholly unrecognised place. Separated from the mainstream of Middle East politics in the period of the Cold War, and framed by regional and internal concerns that few observers, even those from elsewhere in the Middle East, analysed, the events that spanned over three decades, from the September 1962 revolution in North Yemen, to the final subjugation of the South by Northern forces in the war of 1994, were of immense importance both in the history of the Arabian Peninsula and of the modern Middle East, but also in the annals of twentieth century radical upheavals, and revolutions, themselves. Much of this history may remain obscure, for lack of reliable documentary and other evidence, many of those involved are now silent, dead, or reincorporated into local states. The memory of these radical years may mean little to younger generations, but, both to restore historical accuracy about this period of modern Arab history, and to draw out the lessons of these three decades, a retrospective analysis of these revolutions is certainly called for. The relevance of these revolutions is, however, based on something more important than these considerations, which is simply the fact that these revolutions remain of immense importance today, that none of the tasks which these revolutions set themselves, and few of the issues they were intended to resolve, have been settled. The same applies to the revolutions in Yemen of the period 1962-1994: state formation, the relation of state to society in its class, clan and tribal forms;; the role of religion in state and society; the position of women; the economic context of social activity and the economic base of the state; the character of education; the very definition of the nation. All of these issues, posed first in dramatic form in the September 1962 revolution in Sanaa remain on the agenda of the twenty-first century in South Arabia. Much as contemporary authorities, and public opinion, may seek to escape from the memory and legacy of that first explosion in South Arabia, the agenda it posed, pertinent and unfulfilled, lives on. My paper is thus a timely attempt to understand the roots of the current uprising(s) in Yemen, initiated against the former dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh in the unfulfilled promise of the old revolutions in both the former North (1962) and South (1967) of the country, on the occasion of the centennial of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the 50th anniversary of the Marxist revolution in south Yemen (1967). It also focuses on revolutionary upheaval and state consolidation in revolutionary Yemen (1962-1994) and on analytic issues following from these events and from a retrospective analysis of the events of these years. These observations may serve, along with other recuperations of the upheavals of a social and ideological kind that have marked modern Middle Eastern history, to provide a corrective to prevalent ahistorical accounts of Yemen rife in the mainstream media today, resting as the latter do on simplifications about Islam, deserts, Arab resistance to reform and the like, portraying

Yemen as some sort of Orientalist fairyland, part beautiful and part dangerous, caught in some sort of time warp, each man armed with multiple weapons, each tribe and group at every one else's throat.

*We must support the workers,  
We must support the peasants,  
We must support the fishermen,  
And the beduin and nomads!*

*We must eliminate illiteracy,  
We must liberate women,  
We must arm the women,  
And we must eliminate illiteracy!*

### **South Yemeni revolutionary song, early 1970s**

Amidst the chronicles of modern revolutions, and, not least, of modern Middle Eastern revolutions, from Iran in 1905-6 Turkey in 1908 to Afghanistan in 1978, the revolutions of what can broadly be termed 'South Arabia', that is North Yemen, South Yemen, Dhofar, occupy a normally marginal when not almost wholly unrecognised place. Separated from the mainstream of Middle East politics in the period of the Cold War, and framed by regional and internal concerns that few observers, even those from elsewhere in the Middle East, analysed, the events that spanned over three decades, from the September 1962 revolution in North Yemen, to the final subjugation of the South by Northern forces in the war of 1994, were of immense importance both in the history of the Arabian Peninsula and of the modern Middle East, but also in the annals of twentieth century radical upheavals, and revolutions, themselves. Much of this history may remain obscure, for lack of reliable documentary and other evidence, many of those involved are now silent, dead, or reincorporated into local states. The memory of these radical years may mean little to younger generations, but, both to restore historical accuracy about this period of modern Arab history, and to draw out the lessons of these three decades, a retrospective analysis of these revolutions is certainly called for. The most elementary obligation of the history is, as the fifth century BC Herodotus put it, 'to ensure that great and marvellous events are not forgotten'. More recently the English radical historian Edward Thompson wrote that it was a duty 'to rescue the past from the immense condescension of the present'. Both of these wise, and enduring, observations apply to the Arabia of today, and may serve, along with other recuperations of the upheavals of a social and ideological kind that have marked modern Middle Eastern history, to provide a corrective to prevalent ahistorical accounts of the region, resting as the latter do on simplifications about Islam, deserts, Arab resistance to reform and the like.

The relevance of these revolutions is, however, based on something more important than these considerations, which is simply the fact that these revolutions remain of immense importance today, *that none of the tasks which these revolutions set themselves, and few of the issues they were intended to resolve, have been settled*. All revolutions set a long term agenda that is, in some measure, frustrated, and which, in various forms, lives on into the future. This is as true of the western revolutions of two

centuries ago, those of America and France, as it is of the major revolutions of the modern Middle East, Egypt 1952, Iraq 1958, Iran 1979 and, perhaps most important, influential and unfulfilled of all, Turkey 1908. The same applies to the revolutions in South Arabia of the period 1962-1994: state formation, the relation of state to society in its class, clan and tribal forms; the role of religion in state and society; the position of women; the economic context of social activity and the economic base of the state; the character of education; the very definition of the nation. All of these issues, posed first in dramatic form in the September 1962 revolution in Sanaa remain on the agenda of the twenty-first century in South Arabia. Much as contemporary authorities, and public opinion, may seek to escape from the memory and legacy of that first explosion in South Arabia, the agenda it posed, pertinent and unfulfilled, lives on .

*Revolutionary Upheaval and State Consolidation, 1962-1994*

The events that constituted the over three decades of revolutionary change in southern Arabia can be summarised as follows. In the period from the early eighteenth century, and prior to the early 1960s a state system, involving at least minimal military and administrative structures, and a rough delimitation of frontiers, had been created in the Arabian Peninsula and, not least, in the south. In contrast to the unformed beduin and tribal regions of central and eastern Arabia, with the exception of the coastal trading cities of Kuwait, Bahrain and Dubai, the south was the site of long-standing coastal cities, settled agriculture, transnational migrant and trading links, and enduring social, class and religious institutions. In the early eighteenth century the state of Yemen, which had endured in one form or another for three millennia, the longest in the world along with China, Persia and Egypt, broke once again in different parts, with what became south Yemen, based on the Sultanate of Lahej, and the Hadramaut, separating from the Imamate based in Sanaa. The intrusion of global politics at the end of the eighteenth century, most notably through the encroachments of both France, into Egypt and the Gulf ( Napoleon signed a treaty with the Sultan of Muscat in 1798), and of Russia into the Caucasus, annexing part of Qajar Iran, led to the first territorial intrusions of European colonialism into the region, the British taking Aden, the base for later expansion into South Arabia, in 1839, and the Turks returning to North Yemen, where they had been first established in the sixteenth century, in 1870. Imprecision between the British and the Turks was resolved by the 1913 boundary agreement which, from then till 1994, defined the frontier between North and South Yemen.

At the same time, and again in response as much to global as to regional developments, the British were emplacing themselves along the Gulf coast, from Kuwait to Muscat, a process that included naval and political support for the appropriation by the Sultan of Muscat of the southern province of Dhofar, in the 1880s. The rise of the Wahhabi movement in Arabia during and after World War I, and the subsequent departure and relocation of the Hashemites from Hijaz, completed the state formation and border delimitation process. All that remained was for the Saudis, who aspired to rule the whole of the Peninsula, to be checked by local and British power, a process completed in the 1920s and 1930s: two-thirds of Kuwait ( Treaty of 'Uqair, 1922) and three provinces of Yemen ( Treaty of Taif, 1934) were allocated to Ibn Saud, who had, in 1932, proclaimed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Major border issues remained unresolved, notably between Oman, the Amirates and Saudi Arabia (Buraimi) and between, the two Yemens and the Saudis ( at its time of resolution, in 2000, the largest undelimited border in the world). These ill defined frontiers occasioned some conflict,

and much litigation and profit for lawyers and compliant historians, but the issue of frontiers was, arguably, secondary to the continued prevalence of non-state, 'transnational', links, of an economic, social and religious kind across the borders of the modern states. Throughout the twentieth century, through migration, trade, family, clan and tribal ties, and, not least, through connections established by modern politics, ideas, people, guns and money continued to flow from one part of the Arabian Peninsula to the other.

This process of state formation and enduring transnationalism was, moreover, accompanied by continued contestation of the modern political system by forces within the Peninsula. Nothing could be further from the truth than the image portrayed by writers of east and west as to the timeless, unchanging, static character of these societies. The establishment of Saudi Arabia was not a peaceful affair, but involved the forcible conquest of the Hijaz, a region of greater economic and political modernity than the Najd from which the Saudis came, most notably the massacre of many inhabitants of Taif in 1926. In 1929 Ibn Saud moved, with British help, to crush a rising by his more militant followers, the Ikhwan. In 1934 his son, Amir Feisal, led the attempted conquest of Yemen, which led to the Treaty of Taif. Earlier, an independent state in 'Asir was crushed. After World War II, the first liberal, elite (Free Princes, *al'umara al-ahrar*), and popular, working class, protests became to be heard, first as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, and then after Suez in 1956. In Gulf states, there was significant merchant opposition in Kuwait from the 1930s, trades union and middle class protest in Bahrain from the same period, while in Oman, opposition to the encroachment of the Sultan of Muscat into the interior, in violation of the 1920 division of legitimacy and territory embodied in the Treaty of Sib, led to the Green Mountain revolt of 1957-1959.

The Yemens were far from being immune to these processes. The establishment of the Imamate, under the Hamid al-Din family, after the Turkish withdrawal in 1918 represented the emergence of the first independent Arab state in modern times. But it was a conservative, isolated, entity, based on rule by a Zeidi elite over a population that was at least half Shafei. In the 1930s there began to emerge a critical, modernising, opposition, the Free Yemenis, or *al-yamaniin al-ahrar*, calling for an end to the tyranny of the ruling family, for a more liberal interpretation of Islam, and for an opening to the modern world. In 1948 a large scale revolt occurred, when, in conjunction with peasant uprisings, the Imam was assassinated and a Constitutional Movement, *al-haraka al-dastouria*, attempted to take power. In the end, the movement was crushed, and the Imam's son, Ahmad re-established control. But dissent continued, within Yemen and among Yemenis abroad, and the revolution in Egypt in 1952 had a major impact on the country. It was only a matter of time before revolt would emerge again, and, in September 1962, this came about. In a move that had widespread popular backing, and which brought crowds into the streets of the major cities, a group of nationalist army officers, with as their figurehead the senior officer Abdullah al-Sallal, took power in Sanaa and proclaimed the Yemeni Arab Republic. It was this event above all which broke the power of the old political system in Arabia, challenging the British in the south, the Sultan in Muscat and greatly alarming the ruling family in Saudi Arabia. It was from this date, 26 September 1962, known in Yemen as *thawra sitta wa ashrin sibtimbr al-majida*, that the modern revolutionary history of South Arabia begins.

The effects of the Yemeni revolution were not long in the maturing. In North Yemen itself, the overthrow of the monarchy was incomplete and an eight year civil war

ensured, ending only in July 1970 with a compromise peace. The Republic, backed until 1967 by up to 70,000 Egyptian troops was battling a royalist opposition that received support, in arms, finance and some covert forces, from Saudi Arabia, Britain, Iran and, to a small degree at least at the beginning, from Israel. The Yemeni Arabic Republic issued calls for the overthrow of the Saudi ruling family and, in the unionist idiom of the time, called for the creation of a 'United Republic of the Arabian Peninsula'. At first Egypt's support was whole-hearted, but from 1965 Nasser began to look for a way out and, after the defeat of Egypt in the 1967 June Arab-Israeli war, all Egyptian forces left the country. The president of the Republic, Abdullah al-Sallal, protested at this 'betrayal' but on 5 November 1967 he was himself deposed. A dramatic period then ensued in which royalist forces backed by the Saudis and British laid siege to the capital, Sanaa, and for seventy days appeared to have isolated the city. But, with the departure of the Egyptian forces the Yemeni republican and radical units acquired a new lease of life. Relying on socialist militias, rapidly assembled groups of Yemenis without tribal affiliation, elements of the republican army, and a resolute Soviet airlift of arms, the Sanaa government, under General Hassan al-Amri, successfully fought off the counter-revolutionary forces. In the end, the siege was broken, in part by a force of Chinese road engineers who continued working throughout the fighting, and, two years later, Prime Minister Muhsin al-Aini signed a peace agreement. The republican left within North Yemen was defeated, again by al-Amri, in clashes in August 1968, the royalists and Saudis lost hope of victory, and a compromise was reached. But the Republic survived. In this sense, and amidst all the conventional arguments that Egypt had been defeated in Yemen, or that the September revolution had failed, it was the Republic which survived. The aim of the Egyptians, to allow the Republic to survive, was also achieved.

The outbreak of revolution in the North, in September 1962, leading as it did to military, financial and political, including radio and propaganda, support for the south, led to upheaval in the neighbouring British colonial region of South Arabia, later known as 'South Yemen': years of trades union and political conflict had preceded the events of 1962, and, a day before the 26 September revolution in the North, the South Arabian rulers had agreed to form a Federation of South Arabia, joining the colony of Aden to the 17 Western Arabian and three East Arabian Sultanates and Amirates. Had the events been in reverse order, many doubt if the Federation would ever have come into existence. A year later, and as an extension of the fighting in the North, guerrilla combat broke out in South Yemen, first in the mountains of Radfan, Yafa' and Shu'aib, and then, in late 1964, in Aden itself. Three years of war followed, in which two rival nationalist forces, The Front for the Liberation of South Yemen ( FLOSY, generally known in Arabic as *jabhat al-tahrir*) and the more radical National Liberation Front (NLF, in Arabic *al-jabha al-qawmiya*), competed for local allies and against the British. FLOSY remained generally loyal to Egypt, but the NLF, antagonised by what it and many North Yemeni radicals saw as an Egyptian betrayal of their revolutionary commitment to support the Republic, and increasingly influenced by the 'Marxist-Leninist' trend within Palestinian nationalism before and after the June 1967 war, came out in opposition to Egypt and other Arab 'petty bourgeois' regimes.

In the end, amidst the dramatic events of June 1967 and their aftermath in the north, and the escalating crisis in the war in North Yemen itself after the Egyptian withdrawal in the latter part of 1967, it was the NLF which took power in the South, in the weeks

preceding and leading up to the final British withdrawal from Aden and the Protectorates on 30 November 1967. The independent radical guerrillas then came to power, ruling first as the NLF, then, from 1978, as the Yemeni Socialist Party (*al-hizb al-ishtiarki al-yamani*). Although first vaguely sympathetic to China and critical of 'capitulationist' forces in the region, the NLF/YSP came, for lack of any other plausible external military and economic support, and as the initially independent Cuban revolutionaries had done a decade earlier, to be increasingly aligned with the Soviet Union, the only case of a clearly pro-Soviet Arab socialist regime, and presiding over the most radical social and economic programme seen anywhere in the region. This state, first the People's Republic of South Yemen, then the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen initially, true to its Yemeni, Arab and socialist internationalist character sought to spread the revolution beyond its frontiers: to North Yemen where the state issued from the 1970 peace was regarded as illegitimate, to Saudi Arabia, to Eritrea, a short distance across the Red Sea, and, most importantly, to the south Omani province of Dhofar, across the border from eastern regions of South Yemen, where guerrilla war, even more radical in ideological tone than that of its supporter, raged from 1965 to 1975. At the same time South Yemen adopted radical stands on Arab issues, backing its fellow 'Marxist-Leninist' elements within the Palestinian movement, the PFLP and the PDFLP, at the expense of al-Fatah, the existence of which it refused initially to acknowledge, denying legitimacy to the United Arab Emirates, when it became independent of Britain in 1971, and seeking, ineffectually, to block the entry of a new Omani regime into the UN and the Arab League in 1971. In what were also ruptures with inter-Arab diplomatic convention, the PDRY recognised the secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 and, in the mid-1970s, backed POLISARIO against the Moroccan government.

Only gradually was the revolutionary dynamic of these commitments contained and ended. Support for Eritrea continued until the revolution in Ethiopia in 1974, diplomatic relations were established with Saudi Arabia only in 1975, relations with Oman remained frozen for years after the effective termination of the guerrilla war in Dhofar in 1975, and relations with the North were only normalised after two border wars, in 1972 and 1979, and with the defeat of the independent socialist guerrillas, backed by the South, who had fought the Sanaa regime on and off since the late 1960s in the 'middle region', *al-mantaq al-'usta*, in the North, in 1982. This curtailment of its regionally radical role had its impact on the situation within the PDRY itself. With increasingly violent internal conflicts, faced with reduced Soviet support after the onset of and confined to an impoverished and economically unviable southern region of the Yemen as a whole, the YSP regime had come by the late 1980s to realise that it had to abandon the hope of a socialist transition in the south, what one critic termed 'Socialism in Half a Yemen', and seek an accommodation with the North. In a series of meetings between the Presidents of the two sides in late 1989 and early 1990 agreement was reached on a merger of the two states, this to be initiated by a 'transitional period' and all-Yemeni elections, followed by the full fusion of the two states. The first step on this road was taken in May 1990 with the proclamation of a new entity, the Republic of Yemen, fusing YAY and PDRY, with its capital in Sanaa.

The third region where revolution broke out after the events of September 1962 was in Dhofar. Although politically part of the Gulf state of Oman, Dhofar was, in ecological, geographical and, in these times at least, political terms part of the South Arabian

region. A mountainous province, bounded on north and south by desert, it enjoyed an unusual tropical climate, with rainfall three months in the year, and a population speaking a variety of pre-Islamic South Arabia languages, akin to the Mahri and Socotri spoken in parts of South Yemen. Here, what had begun as a revolt on tribal and regional bases in 1965 was soon transformed by a 'Marxist-Leninist' leadership influenced by South Yemen and Palestine into a revolutionary guerrilla war, whose leadership, named from 1968 to 1974 the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf, PFLOAG ( *al jabha al sha'abia li tahrir al khalij al 'arabi al muhtall*) presented itself as the vanguard, or 'liberated area', of a social and anti-imperialist revolution that would spread throughout Oman, the Amirates, Bahrain and, it seemed, also Qatar and possibly even Kuwait. Although China itself was urging its South Arabian supporters to avoid rhetorical excess and be realistic about the region and social conditions within which they had to work, PFLOAG adopted many of the slogans of the South Yemeni revolution, of the radical Palestinian factions of that epoch and, for a few years when China was its main arms supplier and ideological model, of the Chinese Communist Party, including the slogan 'Down with Revisionism!', *tasqut al tahrifia!*

Dhofar was, in the early 1970s, presented as the focus or epicentre of a revolutionary movement that was spreading throughout the Peninsula, linked on one side to the struggles in North and South Yemen, and, on the other, to social and political opposition in the Gulf. Along with the ongoing conflict in Palestine, involving Israel, Jordan and, in time Lebanon, Dhofar was presented by its supporters as the second part of the contemporary radicalisation of the Arab world, following the defeat and discrediting of the military Arab socialist regimes in the war of 1967. Yet the international conjuncture did not favour the movement in Dhofar: Britain and Jordan provided substantial military assistance, and special forces, to the Sultan of Oman, and, in late 1973, several thousand Iranian forces were despatched to Dhofar as well. PFLOAG fought resolutely in the mountains, seeking to extend its struggle on at least two occasions ( 1970, 1974) to northern Oman, and, in 1974, reducing its strategy to one of liberating Oman alone ( hence its name, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman, PFLO). By the end of 1975, however, significant military operations in Dhofar had ceased, government forces occupied the mountains, with a series of barriers and newly established encampments, and the guerrilla forces were driven back into South Yemen. A few units remained, and military incidents were reported for some years later. But, in effect, the revolutionary wave that had begun in North Yemen in September 1962, and had spread to South Yemen in 1963 and to Dhofar in 1965, had been stemmed. The process that culminated in the implosion of the South Yemeni socialist regime from 1986 onwards, and the entrapment and then subjugation of the South in the unity process itself, from 1990 to 1994, followed from this earlier containment of the revolutionary expansion of the 1960s and early 1970s and from the countervailing consolidation and increasing domination of the pro-western, and oil producing, monarchies of the region.

### *Analytic Issues*

Four major questions follow from these events and from a retrospective analysis of the events of these years. In the first place, the upheavals of North and South Yemen, and of Dhofar, were, in their origins and character, of a revolutionary character, and should be included in any comparative analysis of major social upheavals in the modern Middle

East. In each case radical and armed social movements, with a range of revolutionary ideas from the Arab and global context, mobilise significant numbers of people for their political ends. There is much that is obscure about these events, not least the relationship of these autonomous armed groups to broader social forces, e.g. in the South Yemeni mountains from 1963, or the significance to sometimes isolated and illiterate peoples of the radical slogans of the time. But these were not ‘revolutions’ made by coup d’etat or foreign occupation, revolutions from above, but, including in the case of North Yemen, where the civil war did much to reshape the country, movements that drew sustenance from popular participation on a significant scale. Along with the Iranian revolution of 1978-9 they were, probably, the Middle Eastern revolutions with the greatest degree of popular involvement.

Secondly, these movements were shaped and in the longer run exhausted by their very radicalism, something that often alienated them from the peoples they sought to liberate. On the one hand, the social and economic conditions for radical change were prevalent in South Arabia, with mass illiteracy, many tribal and religious affiliations, and economies very vulnerable to the lessening of outside contacts. The NLF took over a largely bankrupt economy in 1967, a state compounded by the closure of the Suez Canal after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and in the years after independence many tens of thousands of people, including many of the most qualified, left the country. At the same time, the South Yemenis, like others around the world in that period, became addicted to radical rhetoric and methods. On one occasion, during negotiations on Yemeni unity in 1972 President Salem Robea Ali of the PDRY told his northern counterpart, President Al Iryani, that he would agree to unification of the Yemens on two conditions: that the North liquidate ‘the state’ and liquidate ‘the bourgeoisie’ – to which President Al Iryani, not a Marxist but a wise man, replied that first he had to be given either a state or a bourgeoisie and then he would think about liquidating them. All revolutionaries, from the French Jacobins onwards, conceive of themselves as a special, enlightened, elite, with authority to impose change, and, if necessary, use violence in pursuit of their goals. The twentieth century saw many examples of this, from the brutalities of Stalin, Mao and the Khmers Rouges, to the FLN in Algeria, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and, across the water from South Arabia, the revolutionary elites of both Ethiopia and Eritrea. In the case of South Arabia these groups, using and to some degree also inspired by ideologies of revolutionary struggle and transformation taken from other countries ( Palestine, Vietnam, Cuba, China) sought to mobilise support through a combination of political appeal and coercion.

If the guerrilla struggles, e.g. in Aden up to 1967, or in Dhofar in the late 1960s, were largely matters of small military elites using the population as a support, these elites sought, once in power, in the case of Dhofar in the ‘liberated zones’ of the mountains, to bring about radical social reform. Much of this was, on any reasonable criteria, justified e.g. health education, literacy campaigns, promotion of women’s participation in the economy, elimination of status and other social inequalities, development of agricultural or animal husbandry resources. But these, in themselves, positive and to some degree welcome reforms, like the rejection of foreign, colonial or regional, domination of the countries concerned was too easily and too often accompanied by threats of violence and coercion, by discrimination against those who did not take part in the revolutionary activities, and by a simple authoritarian lecturing of the population, in the name of the ‘oppressed’ (*al kadihin* ). In time even many of those who had initially supported the revolutionary movements tired of their rhetoric and lack of contact with reality and



popular sentiment. They also inexorably involved extreme forms of factionalism, this latter often blamed on foreign influences (Russia, China, Palestinians, in the case of the YSP the Lebanese Communist Party). None of this was, of course, in any way specific to South Arabia, the Yemens or Arab politics in general: such authoritarian reforms, and the factionalism associated with them, were seen across the revolutionary world, from Russia and China to Albania and Cambodia. They were very much of the shared record and character of twentieth century revolutions as a whole.

Thirdly, and in keeping with much politics in other Arab states at that time, the revolutions of South Arabia had a too easy, and at times dangerous and criminal, attitude to the use of violence. In a rhetorical combination of the ideological fashion of the time, which exalted 'armed struggle' and guerrilla war, exemplified in Vietnam, Cuba and South Africa, with more indigenous Arab and tribal patterns of warfare and cult of the gun, the South Arabian revolutions espoused the view that military action was the key to overthrowing oppressors and ousting foreign invaders. Insofar as this referred to war against military foes, this was no doubt the case, but this espousal of violence also affected the manner in which these groups related to each other, and, when they came to power, to those they ruled over. This was most evidently the case in South Yemen. In the period from 1963 to 1967, i.e. prior to independence, the situation in Aden and the Protectorates was increasingly dominated by a war between the two main guerrilla groups, FLOSY backed by the Egyptians, and the more independent, increasingly radical and 'Marxist-Leninist' NLF. On one occasion, the NLF blew up the house of the FLOSY leader Makkawi, killing several of his sons. Such a culture of violence did not, of course, cease with independence, but continued thereafter. In 1969, when the more moderate leaders Qahtan al-Shaabi and Feisal al-Shaabi were overthrown, without bloodshed, in June, in what became known, echoing a similar development in Syria, as 'The Corrective Move', *al khitwa al tashihia*, the defeated leaders were imprisoned. The death of Feisal al Shaabi a few months later was widely seen to have been the work of the new government. North Yemen and Dhofar also saw forms of violence that alienated support and weakened these movements: in the North the reforming and pro-Yemeni unity President al Hamdi was assassinated in October 1977, by assailants whose identity has never been officially confirmed, and his successor President al Ghashmi, was killed in a suitcase bomb sent from Aden in June 1978. In Dhofar, the response of PFLOAG to government counteroffensives in 1971 was to tighten authoritarian control of the population.

In late 1969 President Nasser of Egypt warned the Yemeni leaders that this would in the end devour them: he pointed to the example of his ousted political foe, Zakaria Mohieddin, who was housed in a villa near Nasser's outside Alexandria and, as a result, did not threaten him. The South Yemeni leaders did not, however, heed this advice. In 1972, during a particularly radical turn in the revolutionary process, a sort of imitation 'Cultural Revolution' led by President Salim Robea Ali, people suspected of opposition to the regime, including a number of clergymen, were killed in the Hadramaut. But the real escalation of violence was that within the regime itself: in 1978, following a failed coup attempt by the President, Salim Robea Ali and two of his closest associates were summarily shot, and, in the ensuing few years two other prominent leaders, the militia leader Hussein Qumata, and the popular foreign minister Mohammad Salih Mutia, were both executed in unclear circumstances. The culmination of all of this was, however, to come in 1986 when, after months of silent conflict within the regime between the factions of President Ali Nasir Mohammad and General Secretary Abdul Fatah Ismail,

the latter just returned from some years of political exile in Moscow, the President tried to eliminate his opponents by shooting them at a meeting of the Politbureau in the party headquarters in Khormaksar, Aden. Days of fighting between different political, personal and tribal factions in the Yemeni Socialist Party then followed, with the result, it is believed, that several thousand people lost their lives. To some observers this was a most bizarre event, since during the two or so weeks of fighting in Aden, the mass of the population were not involved, observers 'like watching Cowboys and Indians' as one Adeni put it.

The 1986 killings, in which Abdul Fatah was killed, and Ali Nasir Mohammad was forced to flee the country marked in effect the end of the South Yemeni revolution, depriving it of any remaining legitimacy in the eyes of the Yemeni people and greatly reducing its credibility with its foreign backers. In January 1987, at a conference of the Soviet communist party in Moscow, Fidel Castro, who had visited Aden in 1977 in a vain attempt to put together a federation of Ethiopia, Somalia, the PDRY and Eritrea, asked the YSP leaders: 'So what are you going to use next time, nuclear weapons?'. As for the main supporters of the PDRY, the Russians, they were, in keeping with the now dominant policy of Gorbachev and others to disengage from the third world and urge 'national reconciliation', i.e. compromise, on their allies, urging the South Yemenis to find an accommodation with North Yemen. On the last important meeting between a leader of the PDRY and that of the USSR, in 1988, Gorbachev informed Ali Al Bid that the Soviet Union could not continue to provide economic and military aid to Aden as before: this was to be an important step, along with the general international easing of Cold War tensions, that was to lead to the decision in 1989-1990 for the two Yemens to unite. In May 1990 the two Yemens duly federated, in 1993 the unification process went badly wrong and in May-July 1994 the North defeated and absorbed the South: power then moved decisively to the northern capital Sanaa. Thus ended the South Yemeni revolution and, more broadly, the Yemeni revolutionary process begun in September 1962.

Finally, and in keeping with their own radical internationalist ideology, the South Arabian revolutions were located within a broader regional, and global, context that both formed and directed them and, in the longer run, constrained them. The whole history of social, political and intellectual change in the Yemens over the twentieth century is one that is marked by the interaction of local with regional and international forces. Thus the conflicts that dominated the first two decades of the century, between British and Ottoman colonialisms, and, in the north, between the Hamid al-Din Imams and the Turks, were part of a broader context, the decomposition of the Ottoman empire that was also taking place in the Balkans, and was to be completed by the defeat of the Turks in World War I: Yemen became independent because the Russians and the British defeated the Ottoman armies. The political evolution of both countries in the ensuing decades was greatly influenced by intellectual and political trends elsewhere in the Arab and Muslim worlds: the Free Yemeni movement of the 1930s and 1940s was influenced by ideas of Islamic modernism, *salafi* in the usage of that time, indicating a reformist trend, while the movements that emerged in the 1950s in North and South Yemen, as in the interior of Oman, combined traditional forms of tribal resistance to the central state with ideas taken from the Arab nationalism of that time, following the Egyptian revolution of 1952.

The global atmosphere of that era, one of anti-colonialism and third world revolt, as well as the more specific regional question of Palestine, shaped the demands of the new political forces, as was to become even more evident with the 1962 revolution in North Yemen and the outbreak of armed nationalist revolt in the South from 1963. Influential too was the overall Cold War context, into which the Yemeni events of the 1960s fitted, while the insurrection in Dhofar was shaped initially by the radicalisation of the Palestinians, through which there emerged, in Dhofar as among the Palestinians in Jordan, a 'Marxist-Leninist' trend, and a broad sympathy for the radicalism of Mao's China. Later developments were equally shaped by international context – the gradual crushing of the South Arabian revolutions by the newly enriched conservative monarchical states, and their allies, the rise from the late 1970s of an alternative form of social radicalism and anti-imperialism in the form of Islamism, and, from the mid-1980s onwards, the decline of the Cold War and the ending of Soviet support, material and ideological, for third world movements. Contrary to conventional myths about the Arabian Peninsula being insulated from the outside world, and governed by the norms of a timeless desert and nomadic culture, the history of the twentieth century showed how far global trends, in strategy, ideology, inter-state conflict and, not least, oil extraction, were to shape this region and its peoples.

Today little apparently remains of the revolutionary fervour, optimism and regional vision of those years. North and South Yemen, united in one state since 1990, as the Republic of Yemen, is ruled by a militarised family elite that has no relation in ideology or policy with the revolution of 1962. The main party, the General People's Congress, established in the early 1980s, is a government apparatus, espousing a form of diluted Nasserism and acting as an instrument of control and cooptation. The President is hailed in slogans across the country as *mowahhid al watan*, 'the Unifier of the Country', but under his rule Yemen has been the scene of great corruption, factionalism and social decline. The YSP retains a tolerated existence, as one of the three main parties in Yemen, along with the GPC and the Islamist Al Islah, but it lost nearly all its assets in the war of 1994, and has failed to win support among younger people. Its leaders, divided in 1978 and 1986 split again in 1994: some remain in exile, some have been absorbed into the Sanaa regime, some have, like the Sandinistas and many former members of the ruling communist elites in eastern Europe, become businessmen. In Aden there is a memory of the revolutionary years: partly in order to counter and discredit the YSP, the Sanaa government has encouraged the popularity of Salim Robea Ali, now presented as the victim of some communist plot, into which the British are also inevitably woven, thousands of professional people recall their years of training, often very happily, in Moscow and Leipzig, Kiev and Havana, among the two dozen or so districts of Aden two retain names of another era, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. But on the streets of Aden where, decades before, under socialism as under colonialism, many women went without the veil now covering is compulsory, alcohol is no longer on sale, and social mores, in employment, family and education have been turned to more conservative ways. In Salala and in Muscat one can easily meet former revolutionaries of the PFLOAG who have returned from exile and who have, by all accounts, been well treated: some are in government, some are in business.

Yet occasionally the past casts its shadow in unexpected ways. On Professor Fred Halliday's legal visit to Oman, in 1999, he was taken to meet a senior minister, himself a former member of the Dhofari guerrilla movement. When Halliday came into his

office, the minister, in flowing white robes and with his official *khan jar* or dagger in his belt, rose to greet him. 'We would have invited you sooner' he said, 'but the British would not let us. However, before you sit down, I have one question: is Communism really finished?'. 'Yes, minister' Halliday replied, 'it really is'. Yet while communism may be over, as an ideology, global movement and state system, social unrest and protest most definitely are not. In all of these countries, and despite the passage of the years and the defeats of the revolutionary left, the issues that were confronted in the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s remain. Of course, there are now alternative forms of social and political radicalism available, ones that appropriate a language of social justice, popular and honest government and anti-imperialism. They do have their own enthusiastic, brutal and destructive, forms of military action. But only when the questions of state, ideology, social organisation, and independence raised by the Yemeni and Omani upheavals have been addressed will it be possible to draw a line under the memory, and lessons, of these remarkable years in the history of Arabia and of the modern Arab world.

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