

Teim



TEIM Election Watch Analysis

BRIEFING PAPER:

YEMEN / 27th April – Not election day, again

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April 27th is an ill-fated date both for Yemen's parliamentary life and the country's democratic development. In 2009, the parliamentary elections set to take place on April 27th were cancelled, and history has repeated itself in 2011, albeit with one major difference. In 2009 the elections were called off following a political agreement between the opposition and the government, and a new date was set. This time however, the elections have been simply set aside, without any official statement regarding their cancellation.

The disagreement between the opposition and the government over these elections was one of the factors that triggered the wave of demonstrations taking place at present in almost every city in the country demanding the immediate departure of the president after 32 years in power.

Unlike what is happening in other Arab and Islamic countries, where anti-government movements are demanding that elections be called, in Yemen the political crisis between the government and opposition arose precisely the other way round. It was the government that insisted on holding elections despite the outright rejection of the opposition, which threatened to boycott any elections that were held if a reform of the electoral laws was not carried out first.

The controversy has its origins some five years ago, when President Saleh pledged to initiate a dialogue with the opposition to carry out electoral reforms. This had been a longstanding demand of the opposition, who for years had denounced serious lacunas and shortcomings in the legislation. Despite the opposition and the international community's commitment, the dialogue floundered. The arrogance and intransigence of the government led to the political deadlock in which Yemen has been stuck ever since.

When the demonstrations began in February, Saleh immediately try to calm social unrest by yielding to three of the opposition's main demands: withdrawing an initiative that would have made him president for life, promising not to compete in the 2013 presidential election, and postponing the 27th April elections. The opposition however, continued to raise the threshold of their demands, demanding henceforth the immediate departure of the president, encouraged by the flight of Tunisia's Ben Ali and the strong international impact of Egypt's protests. Faced with continuing protests, Saleh then announced that he would set in motion the process of revising and correcting the electoral roll in order for elections to take place. He additionally urged the political parties to submit their party lists, clearly backtracking on his own initiative to call off the elections. The opposition paid no heed to these entreaties and quite simply ignored the call for elections.

Although both the government and opposition parties this week agreed to an initiative by the Gulf Cooperation Council providing for a peaceful transition of power, the demonstrations continue as students and those taking part in the anti-government sit-ins reject one of the main principles of the agreement, namely that Saleh and his collaborators be granted immunity from prosecution. Instead they demand the immediate departure of President Saleh, who they suspect may be simply maneuvering so as to cling to power. The truth is that the Yemeni president has repeatedly announced his resignation, and not just since the beginning of this crisis. In 2005 he declared that he would not run for re-election again, only to declare his candidacy months later, following a series of mass demonstrations urging him not to abandon political life. The opposition has always contested the alleged spontaneity of these mobilizations.

Nowadays, protesters are referring to this episode to back their demand for Saleh's immediate departure, in the belief that during the month of

transition provided for in the Gulf Agreement, Saleh could devise another maneuver to stay in power, presenting himself as the only alternative to chaos – his usual pretext. In addition, the anti-government students are accusing the opposition parties of having marginalized them, of negotiating without paying heed to their demands and trying to kidnap 'their' revolution. Indeed, contrary to what is often said, this anti-system movement does have its own programme of reforms for Yemen.

Faced with the students' refusal to abandon their sit-in, Saleh has declared that he will not accept the "coup" that anti-government protesters are attempting to carry out. Furthermore, if the protesters really want to overthrow the government, Saleh says they should do so at the polls, urging them to form a political party. But in his statements Saleh has not said when these elections will be held or if he has withdrawn his acceptance of the Gulf Initiative. The president has also again reminded protesters that he still has many followers around the country, a fact reflected in the mass demonstrations in his favour convened every Friday now for the last three months. Moreover, the deaths of three demonstrators, this time in Ibb, in al-Bayda and in Taiz, even further removes the possibility that the students accept the clause of immunity from prosecution, especially considering the more than 130 victims who have died in the revolution.

In the interval, April 27th has gone by without parliamentary elections. The parliament itself is an institution ever more weakened and discredited, racked by absenteeism and whose current members were elected just on eight years ago, even though constitutionally their mandate was for just five years. And it is these same members who allowed an initiative to slip away only one month ago, that among other things was intended to revitalize the legislative chamber, and move Yemen from a presidential to a parliamentary political system, a model that would undoubtedly have contributed to the country's democratic progress.