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TEIM Election Watch Analysis

OCCASIONAL ANALYSIS:

YEMEN / Political protests – contagion from Tunisia?

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Even before the fall of Tunisia's President Ben Ali had taken place, following nearly a month of continuous public protests on the streets of that country, Yemen's political parties and activists were already meeting to plan a series of peaceful demonstrations in their country. This new wave of protests was ignited by the blockage in political negotiations between the ruling party and the opposition over several issues of major national interest: constitutional amendments, the reform of the Electoral Law, the procedure for forming the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendums (SCER) and approval of the electoral roll for next April's parliamentary elections. These four items once again constituted the major sticking point between opposition and government. In 2009, parliamentary elections had to be delayed in a last-minute agreement to avoid one-party elections taking place, that had already discredited the democratic process. The opposition, at that time, just as it did a few weeks ago, threatened not to participate in the elections if the GPC continued to legislate single-handedly, without the aid of the other parties that make up the Yemeni political scene. At a time of uncertainty following the Electoral Act's passage through parliament without any amendments, as well as the naming of a non-consensual SCER, the differences and tensions between the opposition and the government intensified over the course of the summer of 2008 and appeared to reach a dead end. However, despite an increasingly hostile rhetoric in public, government and opposition did reach an agreement on 24 February 2009, two months before the election. According to this agreement, the elections would be postponed until April 2011 and both sides stated that they were committed to jointly negotiate and approve a new legal framework for holding the elections. The new Electoral Reform however, was never passed.

With three months to go before the new date set for parliamentary elections to take place, the same situation as in 2009 is being repeated again. This time however, there is an additional snag: a new government proposal to grant Ali Abdallah Saleh the title of president for life - a proposal which has been received with great indignation by the Yemeni opposition and by much of the electorate. According to the constitution, President Saleh, in power since 1978 (twenty-two years as president of the North and eleven as president of the newly unified Yemen), has exhausted his presidential mandates and cannot run again in 2013, the year when presidential elections are due to be held. By granting him the title of president for life, and making the changes to the Constitution proposed by the government so as to reduce presidential terms from seven to five years, this limitation could be avoided. Last week parliamentary debates began to carry out the constitutional amendments, that among other reforms, proposed the fore-mentioned change to the duration of mandates. The opposition has refused to participate in the debate, considering the proposed amendments highly retrogressive for the country's democratic development.

Moreover, just like in 2008, the deadline for presenting candidates for the new SCER went by on Sunday without any member of the opposition officially presenting their candidacy. Another point of disagreement between the opposition and the government is the electoral roll of voters registered for the parliamentary elections. According to the government, the same roll as was drawn up for the 2009 elections, that were ultimately postponed, should be used. The opposition meanwhile contends that some one and a half million new voters have reached voting age over the last two years and that this decision would violate their constitutional rights. The government argues that it cannot update the electoral roll as that would suppose an unnecessary delay and that donors' help, it will instead correct the 2009 lists so as to eliminate double-ups

and errors such as the enrolment of minors, as well as those killed during the intervening period.

However, more important than all of these differences, is the government's non-compliance with the February agreement, and especially, the fact that two years later, there is still no new electoral law. Both the government and the opposition accuse each other of intransigence, unwillingness to reach an agreement and arrogance.

Against this backdrop of mistrust and tension, news arrived of Ben Ali's fate in Tunisia. Although the protests were already underway before the Tunisian president's flight to Saudi Arabia, with a calendar of protests across Yemen already established, what happened in Tunisia only fuelled even more the hopes of activists advocating political change in Yemen.

The first demonstrations took place the day after Ben Ali's departure and were concentrated mainly outside the Tunisian Embassy in the capital. The protests were intended to show solidarity with the Tunisian people at the same time as demanding changes in Yemeni national politics. The wave of arrests that took place at subsequent public protests, with as many as 50 detainees, some of them arrested arbitrarily and illegally, only inflamed spirits more. Among those arrested were the likes of Khaled al-Ansi, a member of the executive of the National Organisation for the Defence of Rights and Freedoms, Abdullah al-Sufi, a journalist from Al Arabiya news channel, the journalist Abdulkarim al-Khawaini, the Baath Party leader Naief Al-Kanis, and renowned activist Tawakkol Karman.

The government's policy has been to demand that to be legal, all protests must be announced three days in advance. It has likewise threatened to crackdown on any non-legal marches. The deployment of law enforcement vehicles as well as armed police in the city shows that the government will carry out its promise. For the time being, in the Yemeni capital the protests have gone ahead without any major incidents, but in Aden, where the secessionist movement is booming, the demonstrations have been more violent. The approach adopted so far by the government has been to fragment the convocations. But not allowing a major protest to take place on Thursday led the organisers to instead stage four simultaneous protests in the city of Sana'a.

Some of the arrested activists have already been released, and although they claim to have been warned that they face re-arrest if they continue with the demonstrations, they have already promised that they will continue to take to the streets to demand their rights, sometimes with incendiary slogans, as is usual with Karman, for example.

The opposition parties have also announced that they will continue to convoke protests, but making sure that these be peaceful and in accordance with the rules. Far from adopting a repressive stance, the government has chosen to go back on the measures that have prompted the country's social tension. Last Wednesday, President Saleh publicly promised to withdraw from political life when his term ends in 2013, while calling on the opposition parties and even those opposition leaders in exile to return to the country and initiate a national dialogue that might lead to reconciliation. He also announced a pay rise with immediate effect for all public servants and military staff, in an attempt to calm spirits and win supporters.

Although events in Tunisia are present on everyone's minds, it must be said that the social and political realities of the two countries are not the same. Perhaps the call for national dialogue is a new opportunity for another of the last-minute pacts between the opposition and the government that have become so common in Yemen.