

**Book Review of 'P.D.R. Yemen:
Outpost of Socialist Development
in Arabia'**

Dale F. Eickelman

P.D.R. Yemen: Outpost of Socialist Development in Arabia, by Helen Lackner. London: Ithaca Press, 1985. vi 4–207 pages. Map. Chron. to p. 210. Appends, to p. 211. Bibi, to p. 214. Index to p. 219. £ 18.00.

Reviewed by Dale F. Eickelman

The PDRY is the only Arab state with a Marxist government. Since the discovery of oil in the Yemen Arab Republic, it is also the only Arabian Peninsula state devoid of oil. Its lack of resources has severely constrained development; only remittances from emigrant workers—an estimated one-fifth of the total workforce (p. 129)—serve to maintain deficits at acceptable levels.

The first third of this book deals with the colonial period, the struggle against the British, and the first ten years of independent rule. This ground has been covered previously by other writers, although Lackner adds interesting commentary upon the contrast in political styles between the “populist” Salim Rubai Ali and the “formalist” Abd al-Fattah Ismail in the 1970s. Linking the debate within the PDRY’s party elite to wider analytical perspectives, Lackner sensibly cautions against applying, as do the “formalists,” notions of class in the European sense to the “basically pre-capitalist” Yemeni social structure (p. 73). She recognizes the organizational shortcomings of the PDRY’s political leadership; thus she comments upon the bloody events of June 1978 which culminated in the summary execution of the president, Salim Rubai Ali: “Why he could not be allowed to retire abroad, as his successor later was, is not clear to me.” Referring to a subsequent secret execution in 1981, she notes a “deplorable absence of acceptable methods of political retirement” (p. 91), a shortcoming reaffirmed by the struggle for leadership in January 1986 which left thousands dead.

The remaining chapters, which concern the PDRY in the 1980s, are the most original and interesting. The author is handicapped, however, by her emphasis, which follows official PDRY ideology, upon a central role for the “dialectical relationship” between the ruling party and the “masses,” and the “in-built inertia” of pre-existing social relations (p. 108) in everyday social and economic concerns. The strength of Lackner’s approach is that she comments in detail, and with acerbity when “East European” rhetoric is rigidly adhered to (for example, pp. 84, 97), in documents produced by party congresses and for other formal occasions. Unfortunately, little attention is paid to how ordinary citizens make economic and personal decisions, or how they take initiatives independent of state authority, and on occasion resist it or work around it.

In her discussion of “urban-rural” differences, the role of women, health and medicine, education, and the decline of agriculture and fishing, Lackner describes the dilemmas and situations not dissimilar to those faced by the other countries of the Arabian Peninsula. The author acknowledges the continued importance of family, tribal, and regional ties (p. 102), but rarely invokes them. There are references to such ties in her discussion of the first years of the post-independence army, a 1982 plot to sabotage the oil refinery, tribal “solidarity networks” used to get jobs, and the “traditional” marriage choices and sex-role expectations of party members (pp. 57, 108, 112). Yet there is no discussion of how such “solidarity networks” work in the context of internal politics

and ordinary administrative dealings, although regional support for the executed Salim Rubai is obliquely mentioned (p. 77). Islam is declared to be “healthy and doing well,” with emigrant workers contributing for the upkeep of mosques in many cases (p. 109), another case of unofficial initiative, but it is discussed in only two pages.

The author lived and worked as a teacher in the PDRY for five years. Unfortunately, her almost unparalleled first-hand knowledge, acquired in a state which possesses what she terms an “absurd oversensitivity” (p. 93), is invoked only sparingly. Nonetheless, this book constitutes essential reading for scholars concerned with the contemporary PDRY.

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Middle East Journal, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Winter, 1987), pp. 98–99.

jstor.org/stable/4327490

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