Yemen's Socialist Experiment Was a Political Landmark for the Arab World

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South Yemen, one of the poorest countries in the Arabian Peninsula, gave birth to its most radical government in the 1960s and '70s. The achievements and failings of Yemeni socialism are a vital case study as Yemen seeks to recover from a catastrophic war.

Yemeni children gathered in the street in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, 1970. (Keystone-France / Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)

In mid-2022, the war in Ukraine has dramatically worsened a humanitarian crisis around the world. Although there may be an easing of the blockade preventing Ukrainian and Russian wheat traveling through the Black Sea, both world demand and the inadequate harvests in India and other places suggest that prices will remain high and availability limited for the foreseeable future. These developments will compound the many problems already facing the peoples of the Middle East.

For twenty-three years toward the end of the last century, there was an avowedly socialist state in the Arabian Peninsula. Indeed, it was the only such state anywhere in the Arab world as a whole. How did this come to happen? And why did the experiment end? What kind of system was it for the two million Yemenis who lived in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY)?

Very little is known about the PDRY today, for a number of reasons. There has been a deliberate effort at obscuring its history by the regime which took over the whole of Yemen at unification in 1990 and eliminated all traces of PDRY rule after the 1994 short civil war. Moreover, the vast majority of Yemenis from the region alive today were born after it ended. In a wider context, there have been dramatic changes in international worldviews which have suppressed the positive aspects of socialist experiences everywhere, demonizing them and focusing any reference on their most negative aspects.

This article outlines the main events of the PDRY's history and the problems it confronted. As the international context fundamentally affected its policies as well as internal struggles, I will begin with a brief summary of the main features of that context, before focusing on internal politics and the PDRY's economic and social policies.

The International Context

In the 1960s, the world was a very different place, divided by the Cold War between a socialist east, commonly described as "communist" and led by two rival powers, the USSR and the People's Republic of China, and a largely welfarist capitalist West, led by the United States and the states of western Europe.

Two main issues dominated Middle East politics: the question of Palestine, and the rivalry between competing forms of "Arab Socialism" on the one hand — from Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt to the rival Baathist regimes of Syria and Iraq, which were loosely aligned with the USSR — and on the other hand the monarchies and other

regimes (such as Lebanon's) that were firmly aligned with the West. Nationalism and secular issues dominated the region's political discourse.

The 1960s were also the peak decade of formal independence for most former British and French colonies in Africa, following similar changes at an earlier stage in Asia. There were still ongoing anti-colonial struggles in the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique. After Algeria gained independence from France in 1962 following six years of a brutal war, the most prominent fight against Western domination was in Vietnam. It ended in 1975 with the victory of the socialist North and the final disgraceful exit of the US from the roof of the US embassy in Saigon.

Nationalism and secular issues dominated the Middle East's political discourse in the 1960s.

Meanwhile, having taken power in 1959, Fidel Castro was building a socialist system in Cuba. He did so in the face of explicit attempts by the United States to overthrow his government. During the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, the world narrowly avoided nuclear war after the USSR installed missiles in Cuba.

In what became known as North Yemen, republican army officers had ousted the Imamate regime in 1962 and replaced it with the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). A seven-year civil war followed. The Imam's supporters, who wanted to reinstate the monarchy, had support from the Saudi kingdom and the UK among others, while Nasser's Egypt backed the republican government both administratively and militarily, with up to seventy thousand troops deployed in Yemen during those years.

The Egyptians were forced to withdraw after their defeat in the June 1967 war against Israel, but the YAR did not fall. By 1970, a compromise was reached which maintained a formal republic but excluded both the left-wing elements among the republicans and those closest to the Imam in the monarchical camp.

Colonization and Decolonization

Britain took over Aden in 1839. By the end of the century, after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the British authorities had turned it into a major port and staging post on the route to their main imperial possession, India. To avoid incursions from the Sanaa-based Imamate and the Ottoman Empire on the one hand, and rival claims by France on the other, Britain established a series of Protectorate treaties with a wide range of microstates and entities in the hinterland of Aden.

By the middle of the twentieth century, Aden had become one of the world's busiest ports, with a large labor force demanding better working conditions and increasingly influenced by the anti-colonial movements of the region. After the 1956 Suez crisis, Nasserist ideology spread through the medium of Cairo's "Voice of the Arabs" radio station. This encouraged Adeni workers to escalate their political demands.

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Aden's population and its labor force were primarily composed of rural migrants from the surrounding areas, both in the Protectorates and the then Imamate. Britain engaged in a number of maneuvers to contain the increasing nationalism which threatened its control over Aden. This culminated in the creation of the Federation of South Arabia in 1963, which brought together a number of the hinterland statelets and Aden in an uneasy alliance that lasted barely five years.

During the 1950s, a few men from the Protectorates and Aden studied at the American University of Beirut where they joined the Movement of Arab Nationalists (MAN). This was the organization from which most of the left-wing liberation movements in the Arab world emerged, most prominently the Palestinian People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), as well as movements in Kuwait and the People's Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG). Yemenis from all parts of the country who joined the MAN participated in discussing and observing events within the movement and around it.

During the late 1950s, tensions developed within the MAN between a "left" faction focused on class struggle and closer to the region's communist parties, and a "right" one with a more nationalist approach. This eventually led to a split in the movement in 1964. In 1962, Yemenis formed the National Liberation Front for the Liberation of South Yemen (henceforth NLF) in association with other local organizations and launched a campaign of armed struggle against Britain and its "Federation of South Arabia" in October 1963.

In the following years, the NLF's rivalry with the Nasserite Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen (FLOSY) was the most visible and active military confrontation between these two tendencies in the Arab world. Armed conflict between the two organizations was focused on Aden, where FLOSY had a real presence. However, by mid-1967, the NLF had taken over the majority of the hinterland, and in August of that year it comprehensively defeated FLOSY in Aden.

British government officials regarded Nasser as the closest thing to the devil incarnate, so they preferred to hand over power to anyone not associated with Nasserism.

These developments led Britain to hastily negotiate its departure from Aden with the NLF. It was an organization about which the British knew little, other than the fact that it was against Nasser. At the time, British government officials regarded Nasser as the closest thing to the devil incarnate, so they preferred to hand over power to anyone not associated with Nasserism.

The NLF in Power

The NLF renamed the country over which it ruled the PDRY in 1970. In the twenty-three years of that state's existence, the NLF and its successor organization, the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), controlled the government. It was the only state in the Middle

East aligned with the socialist bloc in the Cold War. It is also worth noting that, although most factional differences ended in military confrontations, the leadership was political and its differences were political, with the military implementing them, rather than directing the decision-making process as in many other countries.

This experience is important to recall half a century later, as it provides lessons for the many thousands of people who have demonstrated for a better, more equitable, and more just world throughout the Middle East at different times since 2011. While there is no longer a socialist bloc in the twenty-first century, and explicitly socialist ideology is widely demonized, the PDRY's experience provides both positive and negative elements which are important for anyone today hoping for a world governed in the interests "of the many, not the few."

Prior to achieving independence, the NLF held three congresses in the YAR. Only the first, in Taiz in 1965, produced a policy statement, the National Charter. It evoked the radicalism of the period, describing the NLF as a revolutionary movement opposed to colonialism and imperialism, and called for Yemeni unity.

From its earliest days, the NLF's program addressed the deep gap in development between Aden city and the hinterland.

Throughout the pre- and post-independence period, Yemeni unity was a fundamental policy for the NLF/YSP, though its factions debated both the mechanism through which it should be achieved and the form it should take. Some leaders, often those who originated in the YAR region, supported a more active strategy to achieve unification, including the use of military intervention. Others favored negotiations and a looser, less centralized form of unity, if it were to be achieved.

From its earliest days, the NLF's program addressed the deep gap in development between Aden city and the hinterland and urged the "building of a national economy on a new and healthy basis compatible with the principles of social justice, and achieved through popular control over primary products and the means of production" in which the private sector could "play an important role . . . provided it avoids exploitation and monopoly and limits itself to the areas allocated to it by the law."

These proposals are remarkably similar to those made by Yemeni revolutionaries in 2011. Others, such as the advocacy of central planning and liberation from "foreign exploiting capitalism and colonialist companies," are more reminiscent of Eastern bloc visions of the time.

Factional Struggles

The 1968 Zinjibar congress, held after independence in November 1967, made significant ideological proposals. It marked the first major internal upheaval within the NLF which was won by the left tendency in a landslide, with language reminiscent of Leninism, calling for the "building of a vanguard revolutionary organization" and attacking the petty bourgeoisie.

The struggle between right and left factions continued for a year and included attempted coups, arrests, and other indicators of an unwillingness to negotiate political differences. It culminated in the "22 June Corrective move" of 1969 which ousted the right and created a five-man Presidential Council in which rivalry would continue over the following years.

By 1971, the Presidential Council had been slimmed down to a triumvirate which remained in charge until 1978, with the three main factions included. President Salem Rubaya Ali, known as Salmine, represented the most left-wing element. Salmine was often described as a Maoist because he supported direct popular involvement and was suspicious of bureaucratic institutions, including those of a party.

He initiated the most revolutionary initiatives of the PDRY, in particular the 1972 "Seven Days" when demonstrators in Aden demanded reductions of their salaries at a time of financial constraint for the state. While this episode remained notorious, the implementation of the Agrarian Reform Law through uprisings of peasants and fishermen had a deeper impact on relations between the different social strata in the rural areas.

By contrast with Salmine's politics which focused on direct involvement of ordinary citizens, Secretary General Abdul Fattah Ismail's policies were institutional. He explicitly followed the directives and guidance presented by the Soviet and East European models which were based on a hierarchical party structure with a decision-making leadership, leaving little room for popular initiatives.

The 1972 NLF fifth congress renamed the movement the National Front Political Organization after absorbing two other political groups, the People's Democratic Union (PDU), the local communist party, and the People's Vanguard Party (PVP), a Baathist grouping. This congress also established the trappings of a centralized political party with a Central Committee and a Political Bureau. There were few ideological changes other than the removal of attacks on the petty bourgeoisie, masking what was an increasingly bitter internal struggle between Salmine's more populist "Maoist" faction and Abdul Fattah Ismail's more bureaucratic, East European–style vision.

The USSR and the People's Republic of China had lost much of their positive mystique on the international stage as their many negative features became known.

Two congresses in 1975 merely continued this struggle and the gradual weakening of Salmine's position with further integration of the two other organizations. They included references to the petty bourgeoisie as a positive force, a step encouraged by the Soviet Union's advice to its friendly regimes in the Third World. By that time, both the Sino-Soviet struggle over the leadership of world communism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution were reaching their end. The USSR and the People's Republic of China (PRC) had lost much of their positive mystique on the international stage as their many negative features became known.

One of Salmine's last attempts at strengthening his own position was a visit planned in October 1977 by the widely admired president of the YAR, Ibrahim al-Hamdi. The two leaders were expected to reach an agreement for unity of the two states, an action

which would have been very popular throughout the country. But it never happened: Hamdi was assassinated in the YAR's capital, Sanaa, on the eve of his trip.

The struggle against Salmine culminated in June 1978. Following the assassination of the short-lived YAR president Ahmad al-Ghashmi in Sanaa, supposedly by an envoy from Salmine, his rivals used this opportunity to arrest and execute him. This left the road open for the establishment of the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) in October of that year.

After the defeat of Salmine, there was a political battle between the two remaining leaders. Lacking any clear ideological position, Ali Nasir Muhammad, who had been prime minister since the beginning of the decade, worked to oust Abdul Fattah Ismail. In 1980, the latter departed for exile in Moscow after only two years at the helm of the country, leaving Ali Nasir to hold all titles: president, secretary general of the YSP, and prime minister.

This did not end the factional conflict at the top of the PDRY. Ali Nasir Muhammad successfully eliminated his main remaining rival, Mohammed Saleh Muti', in early 1981. However, some of the other remaining NLF leaders finally managed to bring back Ismail and his allies from exile and forced Ali Nasir Muhammad to relinquish the prime ministership in 1985.

Civil War

Seeing the writing on the wall, Ali Nasir attempted a preemptive coup on January 13, 1986, during which his guards assassinated the majority of Political Bureau members. This led to the most violent internecine struggle, with about five thousand deaths in the following weeks, the destruction of much of Aden and some surrounding areas, and the exile of Ali Nasir and about sixty thousand of his supporters, including significant military units.

The "victors" of these events were the rump of the YSP, but the party now had a weakened leadership and was suffering from deep popular discredit. The population at large saw the struggle for what it was, namely a mere fight for positions, at the expense of the people and their welfare, without any basis in meaningful policy disagreements.

Having just published my book on the PDRY at the time, I was invited to prepare an update on these events for an Arabic edition and spent a month interviewing leaders on both sides about their differences, focusing on foreign policy issues, the role of cooperatives in the economy, and differences in social policies. Having taken pages of notes, I was forced to conclude that this waste of thousands of lives was no more than a power struggle for leadership positions.

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This brief review of the internal factionalism within the NLF/YSP demonstrates the extraordinary level of instability and the inability of its leadership to negotiate

political disagreements in a democratic and constructive manner. Although there is little doubt that the conflicts within the world Marxist and communist movements played a part in the PDRY's internecine struggles, its own internal factional and, at times, ideological differences were equally if not more relevant.

We should remember that all of this was taking place in an environment where the state was under constant attack from hostile neighbors, including two open wars between the PDRY and the YAR in 1972 and 1979, along with systematic incursions and political undermining of the regime from both the oil-rich peninsula states and the West. Second, the regime still achieved some major improvements for the lives of its citizens in terms of social and economic development, despite having to operate with extremely limited natural resources and very constrained finances.

Achievements

As we have seen, direct involvement in politics in the PDRY could pose a serious challenge to one's personal longevity. In contrast, citizens of the state who simply focused on their personal lives and social and economic development achieved living conditions which compared favorably with those of most developing countries. A basic salary enabled a household to live at a reasonable standard, provide education to children, and benefit from good medical services.

At the time, people who lived in the PDRY often did not appreciate this as they compared their living conditions with those of neighboring oil-rich states. After 1973, those states were able to provide their citizens with free access to the most expensive and high-quality social services, in exchange for their political compliance and the acceptance of autocracy and obscene wealth among their leaders.

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The British left the PDRY with a particularly difficult economic legacy. The country's two main resources were Aden's port and the British base and administration. The latter obviously shut down with the British departure, while the former effectively ceased to function with the closure of the Suez Canal after the June 1967 war. Britain promised a small £12 million aid package in its negotiations before departure but failed to deliver on this commitment.

The hinterland economy consisted of little more than artisanal fisheries and subsistence agriculture. Only the British-designed and British-financed Abyan and Tuban irrigation schemes produced cash crops, mainly cotton for export and vegetables for the ships transiting through Aden port. There was also some tobacco cultivation in coastal Hadramawt. Moreover, within months of independence, the country lost its capitalist trader and industrial class, who left with the British or under threat from the proposed nationalization of their assets.

Foreign Assistance

Given its socialist orientation, the new state was met with hostility from its wealthy Gulf neighbors. Only Kuwait provided aid in the 1980s. Western governments were equally disinclined to support a state aligned with the USSR in the Cold War. For its part, the Soviet Union provided about a third of the total amount of aid received by the regime. While significant, this was less than the NLF/YSP administration hoped for, given the country's small population and great needs.

One reason for Soviet reluctance to provide more support was that the PDRY was only "socialist-orientated" rather than a fully-fledged Soviet-style system. Another may have been Moscow's encouragement to its Third World allies to diversify their sources of support and earn more hard currency.

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The international financial institutions (IFIs), including the World Bank and some Arab funds, also provided modest support, balancing the role of East European aid. Chinese aid was conspicuous in infrastructure and industry, in particular the Mansoura Spinning and Weaving factory which employed hundreds of women. In those days, the Chinese state justified its support for other countries on the grounds of socialist solidarity, rather than commercial profitability, unlike the situation today.

Cuban support to the PDRY focused on the area of medical services. Aid from Havana established Aden's medical school, which in the 1980s enabled the country to have a good supply of national and locally trained doctors and other medical staff.

The Evolution of Economic Policy

The economic policies implemented by the NLF/YSP fit well within the patterns of the socialist sphere. Their evolution over the two decades of the PDRY's existence reflected changes in international socialist strategies as well as internal Yemeni difficulties and perceptions. They also paralleled the political struggles within the state's leadership.

Following the 1969 shift, the NLF implemented its most radical economic policies, including blanket nationalization of the overwhelming majority of enterprises, whether small or large, productive or commercial. Only the Aden Refinery, the largest of all companies in the PDRY, remained under the control of British Petroleum until it was fully depreciated and handed over to the government in 1977.

Economic policies gradually shifted from an initial emphasis on the development of the state sector toward a greater role for cooperative and joint private-public enterprises.

Limited natural resources constrained the state's economic development. It was shortly after unification in 1990 that significant, though still modest, oil resources

were discovered. The YSP government never benefitted from oil exports to finance its development projects.

Economic policies gradually shifted from an initial emphasis on the development of the state sector toward a greater role for cooperative and joint private-public enterprises. The government eventually encouraged the private sector, hoping to obtain significant investments from Yemeni expatriates and others. By the late 1980s, the country had a number of industries, mostly in Aden and around Al Mukalla in Hadramawt, producing essential items, plastics, batteries, cigarettes and matches, tomato paste, dairy products, and fish canning, among others.

Throughout the industrial sector, the state's welfarist labor laws were widely applied. There were rules that regulated women's work to protect them and avoid night shifts or dangerous occupations. The laws also imposed salaries that enabled workers to maintain reasonable standards of living. Trade unions played the role of a state organization more than that of a negotiating one.

Rural Development

The rural areas, where the majority of the population lived, many in dispersed and remote settlements, were the focus of the Agrarian Reform Law of 1970. The most radical feature was its implementation mechanism. Rather than allocate land to smallholders and tenant farmers by taking it from the larger landholders, the NLF encouraged tenants and sharecroppers to take the lands themselves by force and expel the landowners.

Yemen has a type of ascribed or inherited social structure that bears some similarity to the caste system in India. *Sada*, who are descendants of the prophet and known elsewhere as Hashemites or Ashraf, stand at the top of this hierarchy. Below them there is a majority of tribespeople throughout the country and some low-status groups, including those who cultivate land but are not "allowed" to own it, known in the Hadramawt region as fellaheen (a term used in other Arab countries to describe all cultivators).

Yemeni perceptions of the Chinese Cultural Revolution inspired these revolutionary-induced "popular uprisings." The experience was meant to psychologically liberate sharecroppers and tenants who had suffered decades, even centuries of authoritarian domination from landowners born in the higher social stratum of *sada* who considered themselves superior to the low-status cultivating group. The PDRY leaders intended to build a more egalitarian society in this way.

Expulsion of the "feudal" landowners led to bitterness and a desire for retribution. Most emigrated to Saudi Arabia and the YAR, only to return after unification in 1990, seeking revenge over the "upstarts" who had deprived them of their privileges and properties.

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The state created three kinds of cooperatives, which were intended to progress toward full collectivization of land over time. However, this did not happen: they gradually became service and marketing institutions on a standard model, as Ali Nasir Muhammad's "pragmatic" approach dominated in the 1980s.

Elsewhere, the PDRY established state farms after the East European model on the large landholdings of the country's previous rulers and on newly reclaimed lands. Workers on these farms were paid salaries, rather than shares of the income, and cultivation processes were mainly mechanized. The government also grouped small-scale artisanal fishers into cooperatives, with marketing collectivized and operated rather inefficiently.

The Balance Sheet

Regardless of the different views and perceptions people had of the PDRY's economic strategies, the following points remain important. First and foremost, the system ensured that the majority of the population earned an income sufficient to maintain themselves and their nuclear families — a major achievement, given the difficult objective economic conditions it faced.

Second, there is little doubt that economic productivity suffered from some of the nationalization processes, particularly in agriculture and fisheries. A less bureaucratic approach, allowing for greater initiatives for smallholders and providing the kind of services offered by cooperatives worldwide, would have ensured better production and distribution.

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Another very important element, particularly by comparison with the situation in the YAR and beyond, was the absence of corruption in the PDRY. The government imposed severe penalties in any cases of corruption. Citizens could expect to obtain the services to which they were entitled without having to pay bribes, and the gap in living standards between ordinary people and the leadership was very small.

There is little doubt that the NLF/YSP's greatest successes were its social policies. Despite the enormous external and internal difficulties faced by the government, it provided its population with a quality and quantity of social services which were impressive and, indeed, significantly beyond its financial capacity. A new generation now remembers these levels of provision with nostalgia.

Education, Health, Housing

Education received massive attention. The state built schools and staffed them throughout the country, with eight years of compulsory education. Aden university opened in 1975 and soon had branches in the capitals of most governorates, focusing on education colleges for the training of teachers in all subjects.

After Egypt signed the Camp David Accords with Israel in 1978, the PDRY expelled Egyptian teachers, with the exception of political exiles. Secondary school graduates replaced them, sent on two-year national service stints to schools throughout the country. By the late 1980s, one could find foreign teachers only at the higher education level, and the vast majority of young people, both male and female, were involved in education.

This has had a significant impact on the future of the country. Until the early 2000s, the vast majority of women found in professional and administrative positions throughout the country had been educated in the PDRY. Starting with an illiteracy rate of 60 percent, the government initiated a series of literacy campaigns that culminated in 1980 when young people were given the responsibility of teaching literacy at home to the remaining illiterates in their families, mostly women.

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The health sector benefitted considerably from the establishment of the Institute of Health Studies and later the Aden University Medical School, which started producing local doctors in the mid-1980s. There were health posts, small medical centers, clinics, and hospitals built and staffed throughout the country, with the smaller ones having medical assistants or nurses. Medication and services were free, and of higher quality than in many other countries.

The 1972 Housing Law ensured that owner-occupiers in towns owned only the properties in which they lived. It nationalized second homes and rented them out, alongside new builds, at low cost to residents. In rural areas, people lived in their own homes.

Women's Rights and the Struggle Against Tribalism

One of the PDRY's major transformative social policies was the 1974 Family Law. Along with similar laws in Tunisia and Iraq, it gave women more rights than anywhere else in the Arab-Muslim world. Although the taking of second wives was not entirely forbidden, the conditions under which it could happen were very restrictive.

The law gave women and men equal responsibility in the maintenance of households and care for children. It also granted women equal rights in asking for a divorce. While legislation is not sufficient to change long-standing habits, the family law did empower women, as did their increasing levels of involvement in education and employment.

Women could call on the Women's Union to help them if they faced abuse or forced marriages and to obtain divorce.

If women appreciated this policy, the PDRY's enemies particularly detested it. They accused it of atheism and of being anti-Islam. After unification, the conservative YAR family law rapidly superseded it. Today, it is one of the features of the PDRY which many young people and women would like to see revived.

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Another important social policy sought to reduce allegiance based on ethnicity and family origin, commonly described as tribalism. The government initially declared a universal reconciliation and ending of all tribal disputes and feuds. It enforced this firmly, occasionally sending armed forces to prevent tribal conflicts.

One feature of the policy was ending the use of family or tribal names so that people would be known by their own first names and those of their fathers and grandfathers. Another was the numbering rather than naming of governorates. The state changed this practice in the mid-1980s but gave the governorates geographical or historical names and ensured that their borders did not coincide with tribal allegiances. Today, this legacy contributes to misunderstanding and confusion when discussing political issues and allegiances in Yemen.

Lessons and Legacies

This brief analysis of policies enacted by the NLR/YSP during the PDRY period outlines some of the issues it faced. More than thirty years after its ending, what is now known as the "southern issue" remains a major political problem in Yemen. The current southern separatist movement has adopted the PDRY flag. However, it makes no claim to have a socialist orientation, and the majority of the population of that area are too young to have ever known the PDRY, even as children.

In addition to the sheer passage of time, ignorance of the nature and actual practices of that government colors people's visions of its record. Since the establishment of the Republic of Yemen in 1990, the education system has systematically suppressed information about and analysis of the socialist period, ensuring that both its achievements and its failures are left to the myths and (more or less distorted) memories of its supporters and opponents.

We can draw some lessons from the PDRY experience that should help younger generations seeking more egalitarian and equitable societies in Yemen, the wider Arab world, and elsewhere. Firstly, policy differences within a movement that is committed to social justice and good governance for the majority of the population should be addressed democratically and through dialogue. The murderous internecine struggles of the PDRY weakened it in the face of its many internal and external enemies, losing

much support that it could have gained from some social groups which ended up in exile and in active opposition.

Many rival policies and struggles within the PDRY rested on visions imported from different socialist experiences around the world. The states from which these tendencies drew inspiration did not have cultures or histories that closely resembled the social, economic, and cultural structures of the PDRY. It was a mistake to use their mechanisms and procedures of governance as models, and the application of those models largely proved unsuccessful, as in the cases of state farms, the nationalization of small enterprises, or the description of the earlier social structure as "feudal."

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If the PDRY had used a more sophisticated approach, based on Marxist analytical principles, this would have enabled the YSP to avoid some of its managerial mistakes and resulted in greater economic success despite the extremely difficult circumstances and limited natural-resource endowment of the state. Did the leaders not have the self-confidence to do so? Were they under pressure from Soviet and East European leaders? Did they genuinely believe that the Yemeni social structure was identical to the feudalism that could be found in Europe in earlier centuries?

The struggles in 1968–69 and 1978 did have a clear ideological basis and represented very different visions of the policies needed to bring about equitable development for the PDRY's citizens. However, this was not the case in 1986.

Ali Nasir had not manifested any distinct, identifiable ideological position, and was commonly described as a "pragmatist" who was aligned neither with the USSR nor with the more populist or "Maoist" vision. His main objective was to retain power. The 1986 struggle left the PDRY in complete disarray, lacking cohesion and a strong leadership, while being discredited among the population.

Yemen's Past and Future

Today, younger people rely on the (unreliable and biased) memories of their parents and even grandparents. People now perceive the PDRY either in a very positive or a very negative light, depending on their preconceptions. The politics of the period do not receive much discussion, even though some of the many mutually hostile factions of the southern separatist movement are direct descendants of PDRY tendencies. Indeed, some involve the very same individuals who were engaged in some of the earlier conflicts — in particular, that of 1986.

Certainly, some of the current supporters of southern separatism call for the restoration of social services at the level which the PDRY provided, before they were replaced by official or unofficial private-sector approaches to provision after unification. The restoration of a state providing free medical and education services, without corrup-

tion and with full employment, is certainly a widespread ambition amongst Yemenis, whether living in the area of the former PDRY or in other parts of the country.

However, in an age where neoliberalism dominates, with both political and financial corruption so widespread throughout the planet, these dreams are unlikely to be realized. In addition, those seeking social justice and equity must also struggle against further environmental deterioration and in particular for better water management, if Yemenis are not to become forced environmental migrants.

The current generation of southern Yemeni separatist leaders have manifested no concern for any of these urgent issues. Nor have they shown the will to develop a polity that would enable its population to live in equity and justice, in a democracy providing political, social, and economic rights for all.

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<jacobin.com/2022/08/socialism-arab-world-peoples-democratic-republic-of-yemen-history>