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Ramadan in Bani Matar

How the Houthis disrupted a community's social fabric

■ Luca Nevola

Just a few kilometers south-west of Sana'a lies a village, perched on the hillside, whose valley used to be famous for growing delicious pears. Its inhabitants used to describe it as a paradise, saying, "trees were covering our valley like an umbrella, not a single ray of light could pass and reach the land." It must have been, indeed, a wonderful place. Historically, the village was also considered a hijrah, a sacred enclave within Bani Matar's tribal territory that allowed religious scholars to live under the protection of the tribesmen. These religious scholars were Sayyids, northern Arabs and descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. The tribesmen, on the other hand, had a different line of descent: they considered themselves offspring of Qahtan, and thus southern Arabs. Until today, these two groups, both of whom are traditionally Zaydi (Shia), live side by side in the village.

As an anthropologist, I arrived in this village almost by chance, while I was searching the countryside for a tasty bundle of qat. I immediately found myself impressed by the good manners of the villagers, their outstanding demonstration of hospital-

ity and the astonishing luxuriance of the valley. After an initial period of negotiations, I rented a small room, acquainted with my host, the Sayyid Ali Abdulhameed, and finally moved in. It was Aug. 1, 2012, and Ramadan had already begun.

I still remember the first day in the village with the greatest delight. Ali Abdulhameed had a big, old pestle and mortar in his kitchen. We smashed garlic, Adeni pepper, leek, and tomatoes, to prepare "sahawiq". We also prepared "shafut" with small pieces of bread, yoghurt, and fresh vegetables.

Right before sunset we reached the mosque, where all the people of our neighborhood had brought food: dates, figs, and home-made sambusa. We broke fast together, with three dates—as the Prophet Mohammed is said to have done—and then moved inside to have our prayer.

From then on, every day I was invited for dinner in a different house, following the most pleasant of routines: breakfast in the mosque, "maghreb prayer," dinner, "isha prayer," and a night-long qat chewing session.

The people of the village, at that time, were one community. "One hand, one heart, and one mind," as one of the villagers told me. One observation I made captures that

community spirit nicely: since one of the village's quarters was devoid of a mosque, people used to gather in a private courtyard in order to pray together since, especially during Ramadan, they wished to pray as one community.

One year later, during Ramadan 2013, the mosques were desolate. Each family was praying in its own home, gathering close relatives for "iftar" (the breaking of the fast). The community was split in two halves: on the one hand the Houthis, mainly Sayyids; on the other hand the southern Arabs, simply referred to as "Arabs" by Sayyids, many of whom had joined the Islah Party. The social fabric of the village was completely disrupted. In the period of a year the presence of Houthis in the village had increased, which brought a rise in discrete yet symbolic violence, reshaping the everyday life practices and mindset of the villagers.

The recent clashes in Amran—as well as previous minor but pervasive clashes between the Houthis and tribesmen associated with the Islah Party—are just the tip of the iceberg of these developments. What lies beneath the surface of overt violence is something more subtle: a perverted use of language that dehumanizes the "other."

The Houthi movement is well-

known for its political motto, which famously begins with "God is great, death to America, death to Israel." This slogan first emerged in the wider framework of conferences held by Hussein Al-Houthi, right after the American intervention in Afghanistan. The shape of his discourse was clearly "occidentalistic." He was using distorted, timeless and highly negative images of the West, as a means to criticize Yemeni society itself. His main antagonist, and the recipient of his critique, was the Yemeni government, which he depicted as a submissive accomplice of the US and as an incompetent administrator of the Yemeni republic.

When Hussein Al-Houthi passed away, his speeches were gathered in political pamphlets. Right after the 2011 uprising, these pamphlets gained a widespread audience. As happens to any influential texts, the pamphlets gained an autonomous semantic life.

If, initially, the Houthi motto was a political instrument, a tool to criticize not only Western politics but also the Yemeni government, it subsequently turned into a common sense tool to categorize and condemn Westerners at large.

In the village where I was living, the minor Sayyid faction which joined the Houthi movement re-

structured their lives in accordance with a daily schedule of religious practices called "The Program" (Al-Barnamaj). The core of this program was the study of political pamphlets that, along with the media, provided them with new linguistic categories and altered their interpretive framework. As a result, as soon as I arrived in the village, Houthis living there deployed these new categories to construct my identity and my whole person. They accused me of being a spy (jasus), a new Lawrence of Arabia, a secret agent hired by Mossad in order to divide their community. This is, somehow, ordinary. Yet they went further, deploying a dangerous (and wrong) syllogism: they described me as a Westerner and—as such—a Christian or a Jew and—as such—an infidel (kafir); an enemy.

As is well known, within Islamic discourse, Christians and Jews are considered "people of the book" (ahl al-kitab). They fall under the protection of the Muslim State and in return they must pay a special tax called jizyah. Within this discourse, identity and "otherness" are mutually constitutive and dialogical.

In Al-Houthi's discourse, often circulated in Houthi pamphlets, they are not. Here, politics, religion, ancestry and personal identities are

conflated. "Death to America" is not just a trope, a critique of the US government. The subordinated yet legitimate "other" in Islamic discourse is turned into a threat the Houthis believe must be removed by indiscriminate violence. The right to be different is denied.

Astonishingly, while I was in the village, the same excluding politics of language was applied to "Muslim others," notably the so-called "Arabs." It all started gradually, unreflexively, almost by chance, for offensively banal practical reasons. With the rise of the Houthis, "being Zaydi" was no longer considered a given but turned into a contested identity.

Zaydi ritual practices are slightly different from those of Shafaites, the most widespread Sunni school in Yemen. Contrary to Shafaites, Zaydis pray with open arms, they do not raise their index finger while they pronounce the final testimony, and they do not pronounce the word "amen" during the prayer. These are minor differences, and they have always been tolerated. The symbolic language of the prayer has always been loose, its borders fuzzy. Praying in one way or another was simply a variation of the same theme: being a Muslim, being a servant of God.

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The contested space of Saleh Mosque



An increasing number of visitors use the steps, open spaces, and green areas surrounding the Saleh Mosque as a park.

Story by **Mohammed Al-Khayat**
Photo by **Brett Scott**

The Saleh Mosque in Sana'a is a highly contested space, both politically as well as culturally. As its name indicates, the mosque has kept its association with Yemen's ousted president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, serving as a constant and visible reminder of his continued power.

Although it was agreed last month that the Saleh Mosque would be su-

pervised by the Endowment Ministry, no such changes have come into effect yet, leaving the mosque under the auspices of the Saleh Association.

The Saleh Mosque made headlines in June, when it was surrounded by Presidential Guards allegedly reacting to rumors of a weapons cache belonging to pro-Saleh factions inside the mosque.

In addition to such open political confrontation, the usage and meaning of the Saleh Mosque is contested by changing practices of Sana'anis inside and around the mosque. An

increasing number of visitors use the steps, open spaces and green areas surrounding the Saleh Mosque as a park, for entertainment and relaxation.

While the Saleh Mosque opened in 2008 as a place of worship and religious contemplation, it has now become a place where families spend their free time during holidays and weekends.

The total area of the mosque is 224,831 square meters, encompassing the mosque itself, as well as gardens, squares, steps, and parking lots. The mosque accommodates

over 45,000 male worshippers in the main, majestic looking prayer hall, and 4,000 female worshippers in a separate and far more modest room.

In a warm summer evening, hundreds of people sit in the mosque's open area, chatting with friends and family members, having picnics, and enjoying their free time. They often come as tourists, not as worshippers.

Jamal Al-Tamimi, a private sector employee, said, "when I visit the Saleh Mosque, I enjoy staying in its squares and green areas. However, the high number of visitors, especially the girls, affects the spirituality of this place. It feels as if you enter a park, not a mosque."

Indeed, calm spirituality is often absent in the areas surrounding the Saleh Mosque. Children play soccer in the mosque's squares, yelling and running. At times they are chased by the mosque's guards who demand they stop and threaten to deflate their balls.

"It is a big problem that visitors are accompanied by all their family members. We are particularly concerned about the lawn, which gets damaged, and about the cleanliness of the place. We also do not want children to play in the yard. Otherwise, this whole area will turn into a park," said Abdullah Al-Haimi, a guard at the Saleh Mosque.

The number of families visiting the mosque ranges from 100 to 120 per day, estimates Al-Haimi. In the summer, that number soars during weekends and official holidays.

Hani Al-Haji, a regular visi-

tor, said, "I always visit the Saleh Mosque. It is regretful that some only come to see the mosque or to take photos, and not to worship God."

What mainly angers Al-Haji are the children who accompany older family members to the larger mosque area. "They dirty the clean yard and remove the grass from the ground. When one advises them against this, they respond rudely," he explains.

Others do not oppose families, particularly children, in the surroundings of the Saleh Mosque, as long as they respect the place and treat it with care.

"I often visit the Saleh Mosque with my family for entertainment purposes. We just have a good time there and breathe in the beautiful air," said Badr Al-Mikhlaifi, a government employee.

"When I visit the mosque, I do not take food with me or eat in the square. It is a mosque, and it should be respected as such," he adds. Considering that the Saleh Mosque is widely viewed to be unique, a visit there leaves many with the exciting and pleasant feeling of having been on a trip, Al-Mikhlaifi said.

Mohammed Abdullah, who regularly visits the mosque with his family and five children, does not see any conflict between using the mosque's surrounding as a park and its inside as a mosque. "When I come to the mosque with my family, I sit in the square. Once we enter the mosque, we stop chatting and pray," he said.

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Ramadan Around

MOROCCO
Starzeus Hassan, 24



Ramadan in Morocco expresses its uniqueness during iftar. The compassion and generosity of my people is shown fluently: many restaurants, cafes, households and mosques offer free food to all. We all eat and pray together as a family—all nationalities, from the young to elderly.

In Morocco the majority of the population is Muslim. However, tourism is very high here and the locals love to teach and share our religion and culture with the travellers. The tourists are most accommodating to our differences, mainly because of the amazing food we share.



My favorite Ramadan memory: when I was a child I lived in Mbera refugee camp in Mauritania. Based in the camp was a humanitarian hospital. One of the nurses, Khadija, came to our orphanage weekly to offer her assistance. For Eid she gave me my first toothbrush. I didn't know how to use it or what the purpose of it was, so it became my new tool for scratching my mosquito bites.

BANGLADESH
Nabila Ishrat Jahan, 25



A month of religious festivity, mouth-watering traditional iftar bazaars on every corner of the streets, and hectic traffic due to shopping frenzies more or less summarizes Ramadan in Bangladesh. Ramadan rekindles Islamic virtues all around the country—mosques fill up, work hours are reduced, schools close down for a month, loud music is silenced, and so much more.

The most amazing part of Ramadan in Bangladesh is how people rush home fighting terrible traffic to have iftar with their families, how special iftar platters are sent to neighbors and relatives, and how even non-Muslims join in this festivity with full respect; some would even wake up for suhoor and have iftar with Muslim friends. A new tradition has been growing in the new generation of hitting various eateries for suhoor, which I believe undermines the essence of Ramadan. All in all, Ramadan in Bangladesh brings people close, regardless of religion, race and rituals.



Brett Scott

According to a 2010 study by the Pew Research Center, almost 25 percent of the world's population is Muslim. Although most people tend to associate Islam with the Middle East and North Africa, the large majority of Muslims do not live in this region. Given that it's the birthplace of Islam, the spot of much religiously-inspired violence, and has the highest proportion of Muslims per capita, it's certainly not wrong to view Islam through the lens of the Middle East. However, Islam is not defined by any one region, and to appreciate its diversity, one has to look at around the world.

One can look at the United King-

dom, which has more Muslims than Lebanon, or China, which has more Muslims than Syria and about the same number as Yemen. Or one can compare the practices of Muslims living in Europe, who make up only six percent of the continent's population, to those of the Middle East and North Africa, where 93 percent of the population adheres to the Islamic faith. One could also compare the influence of pre-Islamic religions on the lives of Muslims in South and Southeast Asia, where more than three-fifths of all Muslims live, to that of the Middle East.

Ramadan, the ninth and holiest month in the Islamic calendar, is the perfect time to observe Islam in all its diversity. For four weeks, about 1.6 billion Muslims from around the globe observe one of

the five pillars of their religion, fasting from sunrise to sunset. Why they fast, when they fast, and what they get out of it, partially has to do with where they fast.

Wherever they are, the central idea of Ramadan for Muslims around the world remains the same: the month, which is believed to be when the first revelation was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed, is a time for increased prayer, charity, and recitation of the Quran, in addition to abstaining from food, drink, and sexual activity during daylight hours.

While many do treat the month as a spiritual endeavor and increase their religiosity, others simply stay out late at night and sleep through the day. Perhaps this is the result of a youthful generation—the median age for all Muslims is

23, compared to a global average of 28—living in an increasingly urbanized and multicultural world. However, the observation that many people don't practice Ramadan as they are supposed to is as old as the tradition itself. Indeed, the Prophet Mohammed himself is reported to have said, "some people will practice Ramadan, but all they will get out of it is hunger and thirst."

The Yemen Times asked Muslims around the world about their Ramadan experience. From Canada to Bangladesh, Germany to South Africa, people wrote about what makes Ramadan unique in their country, the obstacles they face, their favorite Ramadan memory, and how their traditions are received by non-Muslims in their community.



SOUTH AFRICA
Ebrahim Deen, 28



When describing Ramadan in a country like South Africa, which has a Muslim minority (1-2 million out of a population of 50 million), it is difficult to ignore the solidarity that the month engenders: solidarity from political parties, fellow South Africans, and internal community solidarity. The daily iftar meals do much in promoting this, especially on weekends when mass iftars are usually held, and people are able to partake in the iftar at their local mosque.

Ramadan also engenders a sense of generosity amongst South African Muslims. Sadaqa (charity) is given in abundance and weekend soup kitchens are operated. This is important in a country like South Africa, where many people suffer from chronic shortages of basic amenities. Furthermore, it also rekindles the bond between rich and poor, and allows South African Muslims to truly be South African.

A challenge, however, is maintaining one's productivity. Unlike in many Middle Eastern countries, and countries with a majority Muslim population, Ramadan does not lead to alterations in work and sleep patterns. This is challenging especially in the summer where temperatures reach the mid-thirties, humidity increases, and the fasting period can extend to 17 hours. However, this year the duration is around 12 hours, and temperatures are on the lower end as a result of July being a winter month.

All in all, Ramadan engenders a different atmosphere amongst South African Muslims. The challenge ultimately is to continue carrying out the actions participated in during Ramadan throughout the year. In this way not only will the person and Muslim community benefit, but the country as a whole.



INDONESIA
Hana Kamilia Basjir, 20



Ramadan's atmosphere in Indonesia is very strong as 88 percent of Indonesia's total population identifies as Muslim. A few things change during this holy month in my country: Mosques become very crowded because they have become the most frequent place to visit; most restaurants are closed during the day; all advertisements change their theme to Ramadan; and some food companies advertise their foods in a very delicious way so that people who are fasting crave the foods from their company.

People tend to go home faster from work than the usual time. They take this opportunity to break fast together with family or closest friends.



Things are a bit more difficult since I am the only one who fasts there, and so many people asked me why I should fast.

Some families, like mine, do not usually have dinner together; and it is only during Ramadan we that can sit together in our home to have dinner together. I spent most of Ramadan in Russia last year and it was very different. In Indonesia, I fast for 13 hours, and in Russia I had to fast for 20 hours.

GERMANY
Ussama Al-Khalil, 29



As a Muslim living in a non-Muslim society, I generally try to continue following my traditions and my religion, trying to feel comfortable and "at home." At the same time, I want to adapt to my new environment for exactly the same reason. Soon after my arrival in Germany from Syria, sports became a major theme in my life. To be honest, it helped me to overcome a difficult transition phase, channeling great confusion and all sorts of unsettling emotions. By now, I am a semi-professional triathlete, training on a daily basis.

Each year during Ramadan that new lifestyle confronts me with a real challenge: The prolonged fasting time in Germany, where the sun sets quite late in summer (around 9:30 PM), adds to the hardship of regular training. Taking



it the sportive way, I came to view Ramadan as a "match" for me and my will power. Last year, a new flat mate of mine could not believe I was cycling around 100km a day while fasting, declaring that to be absolutely impossible. The following day, he decided to fast with me and to accompany me on my bike trip. After we had iftar together, he felt proud and continued fasting with me for another week. "Out of solidarity," he said.

the World

Health and Ramadan

■ **Brett Scott**

It is a commonly held belief among Muslims that fasting during Ramadan is beneficial to one's health. Medical fasting, more so than Islamic and other religious-based fasting, does have numerous health effects. However, the fasting undertaken for Ramadan can pose certain health risks. Some of the negative health effects to note are dehydration, which can be particularly severe for manual laborers; migraines, which affect women much more than men; and daytime sleepiness, which results in impaired cognitive functioning. Overeating is also quite common—many families spend more on food during Ramadan than any other month. In addition, fasting increases the toxicity of commonly used medication. This is potentially harmful not only for people taking prescription medication, but also for commonly used and readily available pain-killers like Paracetamol. Toxicity from

Paracetamol is the most common cause of acute liver failure in many western countries, and fasting only increases the toxicity of the drug. Qat chewing during Ramadan may be an additional health concern, especially for Muslims in countries such as Yemen and Somalia, where the plant is ubiquitous. The Yemen-based Al-Najat Foundation for Qat Effects Awareness (NFQEA) reported last month that “the excessive consumption of qat during Ramadan nights for long hours causes many health hazards, particularly if the qat is sprayed with pesticides.” However, no scientific studies have yet been conducted on the issue of qat during Ramadan. There are reports across the Muslim world of worsened emergency services and less blood donations during Ramadan. Dr. Mohammed Al-Kamali, who works at the Yemeni state-run Al-Jamhuri Hospital, says he has noted a similar phenomenon during this year's Ramadan. In

fact, he said that blood donations are not allowed during Ramadan at all and that if someone wants to donate blood he or she must break their fast. This is especially concerning considering the rise of hospital patients during Ramadan. According to Al-Kamali, “the hospital sees an increase in violent crimes and car accidents during Ramadan, particularly before sunset. At such a time, people are angry and easily irritated.” The fact that fasting during Ramadan produces negative health effects need not be seen as a criticism of religious fasting in general. Indeed, for the healthy Muslim who hydrates sufficiently and eats a moderate amount of healthy food while the sun is down, there is little if anything to worry about. Rather, it is important to understand that Ramadan does have health consequences in order to mitigate their risks or avoid them altogether. * *Khalid Al-Karimi contributed to this article*



The Fanoos Ramadan, or Ramadan lantern, is a symbol of Ramadan in many countries. It is most notable in Egypt, where the tradition of decorating streets and houses with lanterns began. Legend has it that during the Fatimid Caliphate, primarily centered in Egypt, a caliph was greeted with lanterns to celebrate his arrival in Cairo. The lanterns are traditionally made of tin and tinted glass and lit by candle, though nowadays battery-lit lanterns are widespread.

Debate exists within the Muslim community on how to determine the sighting of a new moon. Traditional methods mentioned in the Quran require the slight crescent moon to be seen by eye, though others use technological means to determine the sighting. Also controversial is where exactly the sighting should occur. Many Muslims believe that sighting the new moon from their own country is the correct way, while others say the sighting should be from Saudi Arabia because it carries on the tradition of the Prophet and unifies Muslims worldwide. Alternatively, many people living in Muslim-minority countries look to the closest Muslim country for guidance on the matter.



Islamic holidays are determined by the lunar-based Islamic calendar. The lunar year moves back about 11 days each 365-day solar year, meaning that every 33 years the lunar year—and thus Ramadan—passes through the entire solar calendar. Therefore, when Ramadan occurs in the winter in a certain place, 16-and-a-half years later it will occur in that same place in the summer.

In an article in the New Scientist by Ziauddin Sardar titled “The astronomy of Ramadan,” Sardar says: “the adoption of the pure lunar calendar had many advantages for Islam. It made it easier for even the least instructed Muslim to calculate his time and observe Ramadan and go on a pilgrimage to Mecca (the Hajj), in the prescribed months, even if he lived in the desert and was cut off from the rest of the world. It enabled Ramadan and the Hajj, both of which require a certain amount of physical hardship, to rotate around the seasons so the old and infirm could choose a more appropriate time to go on Hajj.”

PAKISTAN Bilal Qureshi, 25



People suddenly become very religious at the advent of Ramadan and you will see long queues of cars parked outside mosques, which are deserted in other months except for Friday prayers. Prices of general commodities sky rocket, thus the general idea of Ramadan gets buried somewhere in the human lust for profits and the government fails each time to control even as basic of a commodity as flour. No public restaurant is allowed to serve food in the day time which simply means if you are non-Muslim or even Muslim but not fasting then you either prepare your food at home or stay hungry, which is quite unfair. But between all this, I really enjoy some parts of our culture, as relatives and friends invite each other to their homes for iftar where we enjoy food together in the company of loved ones. Dinner is served later, mostly



prepared by women of the household. We play cricket under temporary lights in the street until dawn. This is a normal Pakistani routine during Ramadan

which I think is quite unique to Pakistan. All the youngsters enjoy it a lot and after the cricket match everyone goes for suhoor and then starts a new day of fasting.

SCOTLAND Awais Munawar, 25



The only thing unique about Ramadan in Scotland is the length of fast. It starts at 3:30 AM and finishes at 10:15 PM, which makes it tough. It is difficult to get in the spirit and beliefs. There isn't any change in the community during this season as most people do not follow the same faith. The people are accommodating of this and in my previous work the manager always used to give me extra break time and easier work, which was nice to see.



Practicing Ramadan in Pakistan is totally different to practicing it here. Everyone follows the same faith, which makes it easier to feel a sense of belonging. The festive feel and importance of religion becomes apparent which is nice to be a part of.

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ENGLAND Katerina Nordin, 25



Ramadan in the UK during the summer can be quite tough. Nineteen-hour fasts and the heat, combined with working a full-time, nine-to-five job can be grueling. In preparation I had read numerous articles that painted a glossy picture of Ramadan and prescribed what to eat, how to schedule your time, and how to maximize productivity. Within a few days of fasting and working full time, I was already feeling the strain. I would start work at 8:30 AM after a night of brief, punctuated sleep. I would be nearly useless by the afternoon, barely able to string along coherent sentences. By the time I had broken my fast and prayed as much as I could, it was time for the whole process to start again. Ramadan has a special way of highlighting the things that can otherwise go unnoticed, and of improving ourselves in both subtle and obvious ways. This to me manifested what Ramadan is about—supporting one another, embodying sincerity, having patience, and being grateful for every tiny blessing. The long hours and fatigue seem like nothing when compared to the benefits of the month.

Asma Rafiq, 24



Ramadan in the UK is pretty special. Not only are the majority of non-Muslims accommodating of our fasting, but some get actively involved. In every workplace I have ever worked in, there are always a few who will attempt to fast on one of the days to “see what it's like.” Then there are some who will eat the three meals but will avoid snacking in their diluted version of fasting. And then, of course, there are always the determined few who start the day fully intent on trying a Muslim fast, only to break it at breakfast, then again for their morning coffee, then again at lunch, and so on. But they do try! Ramadan is so special because it is so completely inoffensive. Even those most suspicious of Islam find it hard to spot something sinister in abstaining from food and drink during sunlight hours. This makes it a great month to engage in dialogue because people are generally curious—they want to know why and how it works, what Ramadan means for us and, most importantly, what we eat in our pre-dawn and post-dusk meals! Often, those not fasting will avoid eating or drinking around you. They will begin to abstain from cursing around you because they know you are too. Some will even go as far as to avoid talking about food in front of you if they know you're fasting. In that, Ramadan becomes a wonderful collective experience for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. And the UK establishes itself every year as being one of the best non-Muslim countries to be a Muslim in.

CANADA Ziad, 65



It is more difficult to fast in Canada, especially in the northern parts because the days are long in the summer. Within the community we live, we can meet Muslims only if we go to the mosque. We rarely go to the mosque, so we hardly notice changes in people's practices. Although I didn't observe Ramadan back in the old country [Syria], I used to enjoy the spiritual atmosphere and peoples' customs and activities during that holy month.



The Politics and Business of religious songs in Yemen

■ Dares Al-Badani

“The other day I went to buy a cassette with religious songs and was surprised when the vendor asked me whether I am associated with the Houthis, the Islah Party, or any other party so that he could pick an appropriate song for me,” says Omar Abdulaziz Naji, a 28-year-old resident of Sana’a.

Until that day, Naji, who is affiliated with neither the Islah Party nor the Houthis, did not know that religious songs are widely used for political purposes in Yemen. He had always associated Yemeni ballads and religious songs with festive occasions, such as weddings, Ramadan, or Eid. Songs like, “let’s laugh with the days for Eid,” “Sa’at Al-Rahman,” or “Ramadan has arrived” are a major component and characteristic of traditional celebrations in Yemen.

Saleh Al-Muzalam, a singer and a member of the Yemeni Singers Union’s Administrative Department, emphasizes that singing itself is a neutral act. Nevertheless, he explains, some singers in Yemen use music as a means to serve specific ideological and sectarian purposes.

The Yemeni Singers Union is an association of around 300 singers that collects songs, protects the original content of old traditional songs, and regulates the intellectual property rights of Yemeni singers.

According to Al-Muzalam, religious songs that promote certain political parties should only be sang at political events like elections. He regrets that some singers, who are clearly associated with specific political ideologies, use music to

express their views whenever they can.

“It is not logical to go to a wedding and use a song that expresses my political ideology. People do not want to hear this at a wedding,” he explains.

Al-Muzalam says he is aware of the political responsibility that rests with professional singers in Yemen. In his opinion “a singer should care for the country’s national interest more than anything else.” He himself tries to sing mainly about problems which he views to be of national importance, such as corruption and bribery. His songs include “Revolution” and “I am the revolutionary.”

He does not oppose religious and political songs on principle; he just thinks there is a proper time and place. Al-Muzalam himself sings songs with clear political affiliations at times. One of his songs, “I am Islahi and committed to my principles,” goes:

*I am Islahi in my principles,
my religion is the foundation of
my life,
God protects those who raised me,
I am Islahi and you don't know
how firm I am,
Shura, freedom, Islah,
Future, homeland, Islah,
Go on you hero, build your
homeland,
Your steps have dimensions,
achieve glories for the nation,
I am Islahi and you don't know
how firm I am.*

Yemen’s various religious songs of ten commemorate events, figures, and themes important to specific religious sects and political ideologies.

Zaydism, a Shia sect that is particularly prevalent in northern Yemen, frequently refers to poems and songs that promote prominent religious figures, such as “I’m Zaydi,” “I love Ali,” or “For the Prophet’s family.”

According to Al-Muzalam, some singers sing songs which are political or religious in nature even though they were hired for weddings or other apolitical social events. Those who are associated with Zaydism, for example, would mention Ali Bin Abi Talib, thereby indicating their admiration for the prophet’s cousin, who plays a central role within Shia doctrine.

“Undoubtedly, religious songs, including Sana’ani, Tehami and Hadrami songs, are an integral part of Yemen’s history,” says Mohamed Handhala, a singer residing in Sana’a.

Essam Al-Hubaishi, a 30-year-old resident of Sana’a, sells cassettes with religious songs.

“I noticed that people select cassettes based on their political affiliation. A person who is affiliated with the Islah Party, for example, would want to listen to pro-Islah songs,” he says.

According to Al-Hubaishi, specialized shops that exclusively sell cassettes with songs supporting specific political and religious streams, are a new phenomenon in Sana’a.

“I have been working in this shop for about a year, selling Zaydi religious songs... that describe our love for the Prophet Mohammed and his family,” said 23-year-old Ahmed Abdullah.

Abdullah says that despite the low income he brings in, he loves his job because it allows him to work in a field that serves his personal reli-

gious and political convictions.

“I am happy doing this work because I contribute to the spread of my doctrine,” he explains.

According to Abdullah, the shop’s revenue has decreased as people began to use USB drives and MP3 players rather than cassettes.

Abdullah Yahya, a 20-year-old working in a cassette and video shop, says that his customers love the religious songs and lectures he sells.

“I can not sell religious songs that are against Sunni principles because my customers and I are Sunnis. This is the policy of the center and I can not violate it,” he explains.

Al-Hubaishi finds that religious songs must not be affiliated with a certain doctrine or political party. Instead, he argues, they should discuss the suffering of people at large, whether Sunni, Zaidi or Shia. He also wishes that the government would regulate the production and performance of songs.

Abduladheem Ezz Al-Deen is the head of the Habib Allah Singing Band, which specializes in Zaydi songs and sings at weddings, funerals, and other events. In his opinion, religious songs have long been used in politics.

“Several poems were set to music in the former Imamate to express political views,” he says.

According to Al-Deen, songs should discuss national issues, like Yemen’s current transition.

“I sing several songs discussing



Many stores in Sana’a specialize in selling cassettes with religious songs that support specific political and religious groups in Yemen.

the current situation and problems in Yemen, such as power cuts, fuel shortages and the weakness of the government,” he adds. One such song goes:

*Oh revolution go on, don't be
confused,
This government is corrupt, it is
of no use,
O people revolt, God helps you,
oust their thrones,
We lost sovereign airspace [ref-
erence to drones], and we lose
our land,
All jobs are reserved for Muslim
Brotherhood members.*

Ali Mohsen Al-Akwa, head of the Yemeni Singers Union in Sana’a and manager of the Religious Songs De-

partment at the Ministry of Culture, says that the union is trying to prevent traditional religious songs from being used for political purposes.

“In the union we do not allow any changes to or misuse of old poems and songs,” he says. In order to avoid traditional songs being used for political goals, the union developed specific rules and regulations, Al-Akwa explains. In case a singer fails to comply with existing rules, he is first warned and finally dismissed from the Union.

According to Al-Akwa, the Religious Songs Department, which was established in 2013, is currently working on developing laws that could regulate the production of religious songs and protect the intellectual property rights of singers.

OPINION

Pushing for pluralism in Tunisia

Karina Piser

Muftah.org
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After weeks of deadlock over a new electoral law and continued disagreement over the electoral calendar, Tunisia’s political class is gearing up for legislative and presidential elections that will be held this October and November, respectively. During the constitution-drafting process over the last two years, ideological tension stifled consensus. And while the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) approved a much-lauded constitution this past January, the transition’s volatile three years have left Tunisia with a fragmented political blueprint.

However, as politicians prepare for the upcoming electoral contest, partisanship in Tunisia hardly seems to have changed since first emerging after the fall of Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali in early 2011. Small parties from across the ideological spectrum remain unable to assert themselves or unite within a polarized political landscape dominated by the same parties that took the reins after Ben Ali’s ouster.

Political Conflict in post-Revolution Tunisia

The number of political parties in Tunisia skyrocketed in the days following Ben Ali’s ouster in January 2011. New alliances and shifts in partisan affiliation made the transition’s first three years a dynamic period of political self-discovery. Paradoxically, these diverse groups have yet to generate genuine or

meaningful political debate or encourage multiparty politics; Tunisia is still far from achieving the pluralism necessary to herald a democratic era.

When the Islamist Ennahda party returned to the political scene in 2011, Tunisia’s “progressive” parties defined themselves in opposition to its religious framework and failed to form unique platforms to energize voters. This early mistake, which diluted their presence in the assembly, has shaped the balance of power that has reigned ever since. Tunisia’s political class is divided between Ennahda and its opponents, perpetuating a religious-secular divide that does not reflect the reality of popular demands or national interests.

As the 2014 elections approach, this power dynamic remains mostly unchanged. Since 2011, former Bourguiba-era Minister Beji Caid Essebsi’s Nidaa Tounes (“Call for Tunisia”) party, which launched in 2012, has emerged as a potential secular challenger to Ennahda’s dominance. But some contend that the party, which unites a disconnected amalgam of leftists and members of the old guard, lacks its own platform and has instead constituted itself purely in opposition to Ennahda’s allegedly Islamic agenda, replicating the strategic mishaps that facilitated the Islamists’ electoral success in 2011. “The party is only adversarial,” Sihem Benseldine, a human rights activist and president of the newly formed Truth and Dignity Commission, explained during an interview in early June. “They make strategic errors, focusing on their fear of Islamism and ig-

noring their own objectives.”

The two parties have butted heads since Nidaa Tounes’ creation. In early October 2012, Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi publicly described Nidaa Tounes as “more dangerous than Salafists and harder to fight,” arguing that the party’s links to the former regime bestowed it with national networks that would push Tunisia back into authoritarian rule. Later that month, Lotfi Nagdh, Nidaa Tounes member and president of the Regional Farmers Union in Tataouine, was murdered. At a press conference, Essebsi immediately called the murder “planned ... by the Ennahda and the [Congress for the Republic’s] representatives in Tataouine, and approved by their central offices,” referring to the CPR, another member of the governing coalition. Similar accusations continued to fly throughout 2013 amidst mounting political violence.

Persistent Party Fragmentation

But tensions seem to have eased recently. In March, Essebsi declared his party’s willingness to cooperate with Ennahda, though some members—particularly those weary of melding religion and politics—continued to have reservations. During interviews I conducted earlier this month during a European Council on Foreign Relations research mission to Tunis, Salma Mabrouk, member of the leftist Al-Massar party, argued that while some members of Nidaa Tounes might be willing to form an eventual alliance with Ennahda, “the party continues to present itself as anti-Ennahda.” Chawki Gaddes, jurist and secretary

general of the Tunisian Association of Constitutional Law, cast doubt on whether Nidaa could sufficiently overcome its “competing internal camps” in order to truly engage in coalition politics, “which will be necessary to advance” in solidifying a democratic partisan landscape. “But it’s not happening,” he added, “nobody wants to get along, and the scene remains fragmented.”

Even if Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes were to join hands, however, some argue that an alliance between the country’s two major political forces is not necessarily the type of coalition that would strengthen democratic consolidation. “Their alliance would create a monopoly, destroying the potential for plurality,” Benseldine warned. “We need a strong democratic state that encourages partisan debate, not power concentrated in two big parties.” To resolve problems of political fragmentation, unity should be encouraged among the country’s smaller (and far less influential) parties or between larger and smaller parties, which have struggled to assert themselves over the last three years.

Writing for Foreign Policy’s Middle East Channel in February, I considered whether Tunisia’s next elections would obligate voters to choose between either Ennahda or the other political parties, limited by the contrived religious-secular polarity that has wracked transitional politics since their debut. Salma Mabrouk confirmed my fears, describing a polarized political sphere that enables powerful parties to monopolize power. “Ennahda managed to dominate NCA decision-making because the assembly was

so dispersed,” she explained. “I had hoped that this time around, smaller parties would coalesce as a counter-balance. But instead, they keep diversifying, trying to differentiate themselves from one another without searching for common ground.” Even though several center-left parties agreed to create a common platform in early June, few efforts have taken off.

Mabrouk described Al-Massar’s futile attempts to create a coalition, but lamented Nidaa Tounes’ lack of political will to work with parties like hers. “We have common points, but when they see their popularity in the polls, they don’t have any interest in cooperating.” Gaddes echoed this sentiment: “From Nidaa’s perspective, a party like Al-Massar won’t bring them anything. The conditions just aren’t there for coalitional politics, so the scene remains balkanized.”

Gaddes attributes this fragmentation to the new electoral law: “The NCA systematically ignored civil society’s recommendations,” notably to establish an electoral threshold that would ultimately force small parties to create coalitions. “Imposing a threshold is absolutely essential in parliamentary elections,” he stressed. Gaddes showed concern that the new electoral law’s relative continuity with the 2011 text, which regulated the NCA elections, will reinforce the dispersed political landscape that leaves parties like Al-Massar and others without a voice. “A mosaic landscape was okay for writing a constitution, but could be seriously destabilizing for governing the country.”

Which Way Forward?

Tunisia’s transition to democracy hinges upon genuine plurality, necessitating a shift away from the concentrated power that has characterized the three years since Ben Ali’s fall. Still, small parties are in the process of replicating the strategy that led to their demise in the 2011 elections, reacting to Ennahda’s ideology rather than behaving pragmatically and adapting to the rules of the democratic game. As the elections approach, parties should recognize the strategic benefit of coalition building to avoid one-party dominance; purely adversarial posturing could facilitate Ennahda’s de facto monopoly.

Tunisia’s current political landscape bears striking resemblance to 2011. At the same time, three years of volatile transitional politics have weighed on the public’s confidence, as Tunisians become increasingly impatient with lack of growth, persistent unemployment and unreformed institutions. Against this backdrop, energizing voters this autumn will be difficult. Tunisian parties must offer credible platforms grounded in concrete measures to improve the economy, insulate the country’s porous borders from Libya’s increasingly precarious security climate and additional security threats, and remind citizens their efforts in toppling the former regime were not in vein. This pragmatic embrace is not impossible, but will require all Tunisia’s political players to search for common ground.

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Ramadan in Bani Matar

One day, during the Friday prayer, someone of the non-Sayyid "Arabs" pronounced the word "amen." Maybe it was provocative. But it was a legitimate religious expression, and one contained within the borders of Islam. As a response, right after the prayer, while the believers were still accomplishing their supplications, the Houthis screamed their motto, right in the middle of the mosque. Considering that their slogan is a political statement, it was completely inappropriate. A violent clash followed—a clash that split the com-

munity along its two lines of descent: on one side the Sayyids, the vast majority of whom supports the Houthis, and the southern Arabs on the other side.

In the village, the ritual language of the prayer had always been open to different interpretations. It was an inclusive language, one capable of legitimizing different ritual practices within the borders of Islam. The Houthis, however, narrowed the meaning of "being a Muslim." They changed the significance of long-established ritual practices.

They distinguished between "right" ones and "wrong" ones; they fixed a border. For offensively banal practical reasons, they turned a legitimate Muslim other—the Muslim that pronounces the word "amen"—into a non-Muslim, an infidel.

Many "Arabs" in the village reacted, joining Islah and emphasizing Sunni religious practices, in overt opposition to those held by the Houthis. The conflict proliferated, infecting Friday speeches and theological assumptions. It disrupted everyday forms of co-operation between the villagers. Wedding ceremonies and ritual occasions became breeding grounds for new tensions. Gradually, the village's predominant religious and social discourse did not leave any space for Muslims other than the Houthis.

Ramadan 2013 approached, along with the day of my departure. I visited my friends in the village and I went to the mosque for "iftar." I only found five other persons there: some old men and the Imam. Houthis were all gathered in the old mosque of the village, all others were scattered in their houses. The following day, I visited some friends in the quarter devoid of a mosque. The courtyard was empty and we prayed at home.

Physical violence always results from a process that has deep roots. It develops from a distortion, from a perversion of everyday practices and everyday language. It gradually narrows the spaces for "otherness," until no room is left. Eventually, when language fails, violence erupts.

Just a few days ago, a friend from the village, a Sayyid and a Houthi, contacted me online, commenting on the situation in Amran. He told

me, "that the governorate has never been under state control. This is a victory." The following day, I called one of my non-Houthi friends for Ramadan greetings and asked him for a brief comment on the situation, in the village and in Amran. He answered, "the Houthis are cowards. They are destroying the country." Since my last visit one year has passed, but apparently the situation in the village has not changed yet.

Luca Nevola is a PhD candidate in social and cultural anthropology at the University of Milano - Bicocca. Since 2009 he has undertaken long-term fieldwork in the Old City of Sana'a and in Bani Matar.

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The contested space of Saleh Mosque

He also appreciates "that women are not harassed like in parks, where they feel uneasy."

Abeer Saleh, a female student at Sana'a University, agrees. She says she prefers to go to the Saleh Mosque because she can sit there freely, "without harassment as in other parks." In Saleh's opinion, it is the small size of public parks that explains harassment against women there.

Inside Yemen's capital city, parks provide rare places of entertainment for Sana'anis. However, their limited number fails to accommodate the high number of visitors.

While there are 62 parks and gar-

dens in the capital, only five of them are public, said Hussein Al-Rawdhi, the manager of gardens and parks in Sana'a. They include the Al-Sabeeb Park, Al-Thwara Park, Al-Wihda Park, the Sana'a Zoo, and Berlin Park.

"If the visitors kept the square of the Saleh mosque clean, their presence would not cause any problem. However, they leave a lot of garbage behind, which is a problem common to all parks in the capital," said Al-Rawdhi.

From a religious standpoint, the mosque's "park-like" surroundings do not seem to represent a threat to



its status as a place of worship. Nasr Al-Salami, an imam and professor at Iman University, proclaimed that it was religiously legitimate to visit the mosque's squares for leisure activities.

Imam Abdullah Al-Dailami, a member of Yemen's Ulama Forum, confirmed that it is permissible for family members to sit around the mosque and for children to play because the squares are large and far from the mosque.

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