

Expected role of Yemeni Parliament in the ongoing war

Case Analysis

Political Analysis Unit

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Preface

Yemeni President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi called for an extraordinary session of the Parliament, which was held on April 13, 2019, in Sayoun city of Hadramout. It was the first session of the Parliament after it was suspended for four years following the Houthis-Saleh coup against the state and taking control of the capital Sana'a on 21 September 2014.

The last parliamentary elections were held in 2003. The General People's Congress (the ruling party) won 238 seats, an overwhelming majority, while the Islah Party won 46 seats, the Socialist Party won eight seats, the Nasserite Unionist Party won three seats, the Baath Party won two seats and four seats for independents. The Parliament's term was extended more than once through political consensus until 2011 when the Gulf initiative made the decisions of the Parliament consensual, not by voting.

In February 2015, the Houthis disbanded the House of Representatives and the Shura Council, but they resumed their activities in 2016 consensually with Ali Abdullah Saleh, leader of the ruling party, who allied with the Houthis before they killed him in December 2017 and put end to their alliance. Most of members of the Parliament, who were loyal to Saleh, left the country, and a few of them remained in Sana'a under the authority of the Houthis.



The split of the General People's Congress Party's majority in the Parliament since the Houthis' coup in September 2014, was one of the reasons that hampered the return of the Parliament's sessions despite repeated calls for them to meet in areas under the control of the legitimate government.

The Houthis called for parliamentary elections in 33 constituencies to fill the vacant seats of members who have passed away, 24 of them in the Houthi-controlled areas, in an attempt to raise the number of members of Parliament who are loyal to them and hold their meetings in Sana'a- they are almost 50 members.

The House of Representatives held an extraordinary session in the city of Sayoun in Hadramout (eastern Yemen) on Saturday, 13 April 2019, with presence of the President, his deputy, his government and Gulf and foreign diplomats.

This paper aims to read the dimensions of the Parliament's first session and the possible role the Parliament may play in the coming period.

The Opening Session

Outside the room of the meeting, Saudi and Yemeni forces were imposing a large security cordon around the meeting venue. Saudi Arabia sent military units and Patriot batteries to the city days before the meeting and shut down two unmanned aircrafts in the sky of the city. No organization claimed responsibility or ownership of those aircrafts while the Houthis denied responsibility.

The Parliament launched its round by electing a new presidency, as the old presidency, headed by Yahya Al-Raei, is located in Sana'a. The parliamentary blocs, political parties and President Hadi, had already agreed, before the session, that Sultan Al-Barakani (head of the General People's Congress Party's bloc in the Parliament), would be Speaker of the Parliament in addition to three deputies including Mohammed al-Shaddadi (GPC), Mohsen Basura (Islah) and Abdul Aziz Jubari (independent).

The meeting was attended by 138 deputies, slightly more than the required quorum (half+1). The current entire number of members of the Parliament is 267 deputies, out of 301 deputies, as 34 deputies have died to make the quorum (135 deputies), which means that the session, according to the Constitution and law, was absolutely legal. The session will restore the life of the longest Parliament that was elected by the people. The new presidency of the Parliament derives its legitimacy from the legitimacy of Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, president of the transitional period in Yemen since 2012 until it ends in accordance with the Gulf initiative, which removed Ali Abdullah Saleh from power and developed a map for transition.

During the coming period, the Parliament will prepare its own internal constituencies and then discuss the general budget of the State, submitted by the Government, after which the agenda will begin.



Boycott and absentees

Despite the importance of holding the Parliament session as a legitimate authority that all acknowledges its legitimacy, including the Houthis, there are interests and fears from the return of Parliament that strengthens the internationally recognized government.

- **The Houthis:** The Houthis announced the start of elections in 24 constituencies, attacked the Parliament's session in Sayoun and vowed to implement article (125) of the Penal Law, which states the execution and confiscation of property and funds against the crimes of "high treason". The Houthis have already raided houses of several members of the Parliament a few days before the Parliament session in Sayoun. The completion of the quorum in the Parliament session in Sayoun makes the Houthi elections illegal, but the Houthis hope to invest this step in future in case of a political agreement.
- **The Southern Transitional Council:** A body supported by the UAE presents itself as a military and security de facto authority in the southern cities and has repeatedly refused to convene the Parliament in Aden and confirmed that it will forcibly prevent the convening of the Parliament in the southern provinces, but Saudi plan to hold the Parliament session in Sayoun and deploying military forces to Sayoun to tighten security in the city in coordination with Emiratis has limited the ability of the Southern Transitional Council to implement its threats. The southern council-along with Abu Dhabi- has fears that holding the parliamentary sessions may weaken their claims that they are representatives of the people in the southern provinces.
- **Supporters of "Saleh family":** A number of MPs refused to attend the Parliament session in Sayoun demanding the lifting of international sanctions on "Ahmed Ali," son of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who stays in Abu Dhabi, as a condition before attending the session.

- **Traders and businessmen MPs:** Some members of the Parliament, who are traders and businessmen, were unable to attend the session in Sayoun because of fears of any retaliation by the Houthis against their interests in areas under their control.

New phase

The return of the Parliament, the longest among all the world's parliaments, came late but it is very important amid attempts to target the legitimate government and to delegitimize it by its enemies- the Houthis, the Southern Transitional Council and the United Arab Emirates.

It is expected that the role entrusted to the Parliament during the coming phase is "to communicate with the world, to observe the government performance and to fulfill the role stipulated in the Constitution,"^[1] which makes them represent the Yemeni people. "The Parliament will also work with the government and the presidency, and be supportive of the government in any files of the upcoming negotiations with the Houthis."^[2]

The return of the Parliament to exercise its constitutional and legal missions re-identifies the parties of the current conflict as legitimacy and coup, as the "legitimacy" has been recently getting weak. So the legitimacy of President AbdRabbo Mansour Hadi and the internationally recognized government have found a new support from representatives of the Yemeni people as well as the political and social assemblies in the Parliament, which increase the strength and legitimacy of President Hadi and his government. It is also a message that the ambitions of other actors, who grew up during the years of war – without patronizing their role in the coming phases, negatively or positively – can be contained and they can be given their real size as branches after some countries and bodies have tried to present them as principals.

There are some issues that will be affected by the return of the Parliament:

- **The Houthis:** The Parliament has a full "quorum" that makes the Houthi complementary elections worthless and may prompt them to form their own parliament. At the same time, the limited effectiveness of the remaining parliamentarians in Sana'a and the closure of an important window of contact, for the Houthis, with the international community make the Houthis' partnership with the "remnants of the People's Congress Party" in Sana'a useless, which in part makes the overthrow of that partnership a matter of time. At the same time, the Houthis can hold the opportunity to stop the war by supporting the activation of the Parliament to be a consensus authority in the UN-brokered peace plans. But the group will face the dilemma of their limited representation in the Parliament, even members who hold sessions in Sana'a – without complete quorum - most of them are members of the People's Congress Party and the Houthis group does not guarantee their loyalty.
- **The Congress Party:** The session and the limited boycotts of members of the House of Representatives by supporters of the family of Saleh showed that the influence of the family on the party has faded up and that those who support its control of the party- and the ambition to return to power - are much less than what the family hopes. Otherwise, the People's Congress Party can take the advantage and use the Parliament to unify its members under a unified new leadership.
- **The Government of Yemen:** In addition to supporting and assisting the government's plans externally, the Parliament can be used as a cover to address the breakthrough situation in relation to sovereignty, the state of disorder and attacks by local militias, the political frameworks that face the Government, the political transition process and the establishment of the Federal Union project in the liberated areas. The Parliament could also be a front for military operations by the Yemeni government against the Houthis and movement towards the capital Sana'a, if the coalition supports it.
- **The file of peace:** Some major countries and their ambassadors to Yemen supported the return of the Parliament, as part of their support for the peace process, led by the United Nations, because the Parliament is the only remaining institution and is still valid and legitimate according to the legitimacy of the President and the Gulf initiative.

According to the Constitution and the law in force, members of the Parliament will be able to influence both the Yemeni government and the Houthis. The parliament can also play a major role in a transitional phase, which the United Nations aspires to establish, to fix the ceasefire or to monitor it as members of the Parliament have influence in their regions. Most of members of the Parliament are tribal leaders or, at least, the long period in the Parliament gave them influence and popularity in their regions. They have become reformers in issues and differences between the people that they represent after the collapse of the judicial system and the prosecution. The activation of the Parliament will be a semi-homogeneous influential power.

Some of the coalition countries may try to undermine the legitimacy of President AbdRabbo Mansour Hadi in favor of the Parliament, and other countries may support this move to improve relations with the Houthis. That may happen under US and European pressure on Riyadh, which has recently increased, along with military pressure from the Houthis, who are stepping up attacks on Saudi border areas through drones and ballistic missiles.

- **The Southern Transitional Council:** With the return of the Parliament, the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) loses an important cover, since the council always presents itself as a body that got a popular “mandate”^[3], and it has fears of the return of the domination of the "northern forces" despite the Parliament session was held in a southern city and most members who attended the session are from the southern provinces. This puts the council and its affiliated bodies in a domestic and international isolation again after visits by STC’s delegates to European capitals and Moscow.
- **Regional Influence:** The government and Riyadh are expected to use the Parliament to counter the growing influence of the UAE in southern Yemen, so Abu Dhabi sees that it is targeted by the return of the Parliament. At the same time, Riyadh can use the Parliament to establish its influence, military presence and economic plans in the southern governorates, specifically Al-Mahara, Socotra and Hadramout.



Summary:

Therefore, by convening of the Parliament in Sayoun of Hadramout, the government of President Hadi won the most important political paper, which allows it to maneuver against the Houthis and the Southern Transitional Council locally, and before the coalition regionally, and before the United Nations internationally.

The Parliament has big files, the most important of which are the economic aspect, such as approving the state budget, overseeing the economic administration and the performance of the Central Bank and sources of national income, restoring the state institutions, paying salaries for government employees and controlling the performance of ports, airports and crossings, and normalizing the life of citizens in the liberated areas, especially main services including health, education, electricity, drinking water, roads and telecommunications, and the restoration of imports and exports activities.

The Parliament has also political files, including the restoration of confidence in the political action and parties, supporting large political alliances in order to restore the state against the coup, monitoring the performance of the President and the government, redefining relationship between the Yemeni government and the Arab Coalition according to understandings and agreements, stopping violations against sovereignty and any support for militias outside the state, reviewing any new political or economic or military or security agreements with any country according to the tactical and strategic interests of the Republic of Yemen. The Parliament can also play a major role in the peace process and putting an end to the ongoing war, if it is recognized by all parties of the conflict as a legislative and watching body.

Margins

[1] Interview by the Russian Spotnek with Deputy Speaker of the Parliament AbdulAziz Jubari in 13 April 2019

<https://arabic.sputniknews.com/interview/201904131040444916>

[2] Previous source

[3] In May 2017, when the South Transitional Council was announced after the expulsion of two government officials, the former governor of Aden Aidaros al-Zubaidi and Minister of State, Hani bin Buraik, and other officials from their government positions. The UAE supported the establishment of the council with money and politics. The Council declared it has got a popular "mandate" to restore the southern state that existed before 1990.



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