Youth Activism in the Yemeni Civil War

Internet Mitigates Effects of Violence as Local Factors Shape Activism Scene
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Mareike Transfeld
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# Contents

The Yemen Polling Center...............................................................1  
Author.........................................................................................2  
Acknowledgement .........................................................................3  
Abbreviations ...............................................................................4  
Graphs .........................................................................................4  
Main Findings ...............................................................................5  
Report Objectives .........................................................................6  
Legacy of the Yemeni Revolt..........................................................7  
Local Dynamics Take Centre Stage...............................................11  
  Graph 1: What is your position within your community? ............14  
  Graph 2: Which group of people do you think is the most important group to keep in close contact with within your community? ........15  
Responsiveness of Local Leaders ..................................................15  
  Graph 3: How often in a week do you meet or speak with members of your community to understand their opinion and living situation? ....18  
Threats against Youth Advocacy Compound ..................................18  
Consequences of Economic Collapse ..........................................23  
Social Media: A Channel for Advocacy? ......................................24  
  Graph 4: Social media use among decision makers........................26  
Online Campaigning in Conflict.....................................................27  
Recommendations .........................................................................29  
References ....................................................................................31
The Yemen Polling Center

The Yemen Polling Center (YPC) is an independent organization providing social science research services. The YPC was established in 2004 as the first polling center in Yemen. We received our registration certificate No. 147 from the Ministry of Social Affairs & Labor in December 2005.

YPC is the 2010 recipient of the Best Partner in the Middle East and North Africa award from Gallup International. We design and implement opinion polls, household and other surveys, and provide other services that fulfill research needs of national and international institutions, non-profit organizations, corporations, government agencies, and professional associations. YPC conducts public attitude surveys, focus groups, interviews, demographic studies, and market research employing quantitative and qualitative methods for development projects, international organizations and foundations, publications, business groups, and banks.

As a member of the World Association for Public Opinion Research and the American Association for Public Opinion Research, YPC is committed to excellence in social science. Since its inception, YPC has conducted dozens of research projects on issues ranging from satellite television and radio consumption patterns and consumer attitudes, to human rights, women’s rights, political reform, corruption, public health, and other governance-related studies.

In addition to public opinion surveys and research projects, YPC has implemented several economics surveys and studies covering all governorates in Yemen. We have surveyed nearly 100,000 Yemeni citizens in face-to-face interviews. YPC has a dedicated and experienced team. The center cooperates with dozens of experts, consultants and university professors within Yemen and abroad. The personnel and technical resources at our disposal allow us to conduct surveys of any size in Yemen while adhering to international standards in data quality.

Yemen is a religious and conservative society and male-female interactions are limited. Around half of our enumerators are women, which makes it easier to interview women respondents. The YPC has implemented many internationally-funded projects; it has cooperated with the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program, the U.S. National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy, the PanArab Research Center, the United States Agency for International Development, and the Yemeni Ministry of Local Administration.
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Abbreviations

NDC  National Dialogue Conference
SPC  Supreme Political Council
CSO  Civil society organization
GPC  General People’s Congress

Graphs

Graph 1  What is your position within your community?
Graph 2  Which group of people do you think is the most important group to keep in close contact with within your community?
Graph 3  How often in a week do you meet or speak with members of your community to understand their opinion and living situation?
Graph 4  Social media use among decision makers.
Main Findings

• The conditions for political activism and advocacy have become extremely difficult in Yemen. Restrictions are most severe in areas under Houthi control, where there is pervasive surveillance and a crackdown on civil activism, academia, human rights organizations and the media. Security threats are not limited to Houthi-controlled territory, but arise from an array of actors, in line with the break-up of the Yemeni state. The lack of security, deteriorating economy and loss of donor funding have caused many youth groups to cease their work.

• Opportunities for youth activism abounded in the transitional period after the 2011 uprising, although youth political participation did not significantly increase. Yemeni policy makers became receptive to the ideas of Yemen’s young generation. The international community supported youth activism with funding, training, networking events and travel opportunities. With the collapse of the political process in 2014, these opportunities began to dwindle.

• Access to social media has blunted some of the restrictions on political activism and advocacy placed by the armed factions. A steady proportion of youth retain access to the Internet. The YPC survey found that one third of 15- to 25-year-olds have access to the Internet. Crackdowns across the country have not stifled the Internet as a significant political tool. Eighteen percent of 15-25-year-olds with Internet access use the Internet frequently to discuss politics. Those who describe themselves as using social media occasionally for political purposes number 28 percent.

• In a survey of 300 influential figures (mainly tribal sheikhs, military officers and local council representatives), 90 percent said they believe it is important to consider the opinion of their communities. Almost all of the 300 rely on social media for information.

• Eleven percent of young Yemenis between 15 and 25 years old say they are in contact with their community leaders and have relayed their needs to them. Forty-one percent of the decision makers find it important to consider the opinions of youth, but only few meet with youth.

• The war reinforced gender gaps. Women continue to lag in access to the Internet and remain more sidelined within their communities when compared to their male peers.
Report Objectives

The report is part of the project Youth Voices in Policy, which the Yemen Polling Center (YPC) ran from 2015 to 2017. The project was funded through the Sharaka Shabab program of the Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Yemen. The project aimed to set up Youth Lobby Groups (YLG) at the community level and to involve them in policy debates. Realizing that communication was key, the project hoped to link these groups and their local and national representatives to highlight issues dealing with women’s and youth’s rights. In 2013, when the project was initially designed, the time seemed ripe in Yemen to try to take a rights- and institutions-based approach to push for better conditions for Yemeni youth. The new environment, however, with the demise of national level institutions, made advocacy increasingly difficult. Violence ruled the political scene and the transitional process failed.

Given the new political conditions in Yemen, it was unclear whether youth advocacy was still possible, how it could be supported and whether Yemeni policy makers valued the opinion of community members at all. The goal of this report is to better understand the conditions for youth activism. To this end, the YPC conducted a survey of 300 local-level decision makers and influential social and political figures from across the country in the July 2017. The objective was to determine how receptive these figures were to their communities’ opinions.

Many of the 300 were tribal sheikhs, local council members and military or police officers. We used data collected through a representative nationwide survey of youth (implemented in May 2017) to assess how valued youth feel by their community leaders and whether and how they are in contact with them. The respondents are between the ages of 15 and 25; half female and half male. The youth survey was conducted in most of Yemen’s governorates, except for Socotra and Saada, the Houthi stronghold. The implementation of surveys has become difficult in Saada since the Houthis seized power in the 2014 coup. The decision-maker survey was conducted in 15 out of Yemen’s 22 governorates. Further data was collected in six focus group discussions held in Sanaa, Marib, Ibb, al-Hodeidah, al-Dhali’ and Aden, and interviews with 72 of the 120 members of the YLGs in the same governorates.

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1 These are Sanaa city, Taiz, Aden, Hadhramout, Ibb, Dhamar, Lahj, Amran, Hajjah, Al-Hodeidah, Rayma, Al-Dhale’, Al-Mahweet, Abyan and Marib.
Legacy of the Yemeni Revolt

In 2011, masses of youth mostly untainted by political affiliation emerged as a driving force behind the demonstrations demanding the end of the 33 year-rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh. Hopes for a better future ran high, until young Yemenis found themselves disenfranchised again.\(^2\) The Gulf Cooperation Council’s (GCC) Initiative in November 2011 defined a formal transition process for the country, marginalizing the ‘independent youth’ who had forced change through nonviolence. Next to the GCC Initiative, the traditional parties with their divide-and-rule strategies posed an obstacle to youth political participation.\(^3\) Nevertheless, the transitional period initiated with the GCC agreement provided some space for political involvement and advocacy. This marked a short-lived but important period in which youth and civil society activism had at least some tangible impact on politics. Youth activism did not impact government policy to improve living conditions across the country, and youth participation did not increase substantially. Yet it was a historic time for Yemeni youth to work toward political change within the complex institutional environment that Yemen’s political system provided.\(^4\)

The role the youth had played during the 2011 protests and their image as an agent for democratic change made policy makers receptive to the ideas of youth activists and relatively open to meeting with them. At the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in 2013-2014, youth accounted for 40 out of 565 delegates.\(^5\) They contributed to conference debates on the future structure of the state and discussed ways to resolve

\(^2\) Ala Qasem looks at the barriers of youth participation in political parties in the context of the transitional period in Qasem, Ala (2013): Five barriers to youth engagement, decision-making, and leadership in Yemen’s political parties; Saleem Haddad and Joshua Rogers analyze youth participation during the transitional period in Haddad, Saleem & Rogers, Joshua (2012): Moving beyond promises. Perceptions, priorities and participation of youth in Yemen’s transition. Saferworld; and Atiaf Alwazir analyzes youth groups and their impact on politics during the transitional period in Alwazir, Atiaf (2016): Yemen’s enduring resistance: youth between politics and informal mobilization, Mediterranean Politics; also see Alwazir, Atiaf (2013): Yemen’s Independent Youth and Their Role in the National Dialogue Conference. SWP Comments 2013/C23, for an analysis of the independent youth movement in the NDC.


\(^4\) See Alwazir (2016) for examples of youth activism during the transitional period.

Activists with connections to international organizations and to elites throughout Yemen rose in political stature.

Street Art

Graffiti and street art developed since the 2011 uprising to become successful means for advocacy. In political messages displayed in public spaces, decision makers were not the direct addressees; instead the goal was to raise community awareness and thereby increase pressure on political elites. In an interview street artist Murad Subay described how easy it was to mobilize activists for his street campaigns during the transitional period: “It was a time of revolution, people had the freedom to do this. It wasn’t even necessary for me to get a permit. This changed in phases.”

According to Subay, the conditions for street-art activism became difficult before the war started, and fluctuated in relation to the theme of the activities, but there was still support to be garnered within government institutions. “The first time I needed a permit was for the 2012 graffiti campaign ‘The Walls Remember Their Faces,’ when trucks filled with soldiers approached us to prevent the campaign,” he said, referring to a project highlighting the thousands who had been disappeared in Yemen since the 1960s.

The issue of the disappeared was a difficult one for the security apparatus to stomach, because of their own involvement. But with support from other activists and the media as well as families of the disappeared, Subay got a permit from the mayor

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6 The NDC outcomes said Yemen should "take the necessary measures to achieve a wider youth participation in social, economic, cultural and political development of the country." Specifically, this entailed the establishment of a number of institutions, which could have improved the lives of young Yemenis. Examples include the “Supreme Council for Youth,” which would oversee and steer public policy on youth issues. The “Skills Development Fund” would have been tasked with alleviating unemployment. Moreover and the state was to make available funds for youth projects, facilitate loans and ensure that Yemeni citizens are prioritized over foreign nationals in the private sector and install a 20 percent quota for youth in government bodies.

7 Mohammed al-Shami, civil society activist, interview with the author (April 2018).
Youth Activism in the Yemeni Civil War

February 2018

of Sanaa and pressed on with the campaign. The campaign raised awareness on forced disappearances, and the media attention helped make an impact, with pressure reaching both international organizations and the Yemeni government.

**Amplifying Youth Voices**

Mohammed al-Shami, a youth activist and then-project manager for Saferworld, said in an interview that the targets of advocacy campaigns in Yemen need to be considered depending on location, because different authorities are relevant in each locality, with tribal authorities holding sway in one area and state representatives in another.

Shami worked in 2012 on the project ‘Amplifying Youth Voices’ involving the Yemeni organization Resonate! Yemen, as well as the international organization Saferworld: “Youth activists sponsored by us were able to have successes because of their flexible approach, particularly when it comes to local level advocacy,” Shami said.

Citing the project’s success in connecting with prominent local figures, Shami said youth activists implementing the project worked with then-governor of Taiz Shawqi Hayel Saeed to set up a youth unit within the governor’s office.

Large numbers of youth aspired during the transitional period to play an active role in civil society or politics, hoping their civic engagement would lead to work opportunities. Youth activists volunteered to gain experience and participated in training workshops. However, except for the well-heeled, they had little access to

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8 Murad Subay, street artist, interview with the author (25. October 2018).
10 Mohammed al-Shami, civil society activist, interview with the author (April 2018).
elaborate networks and international organizations. Most struggled to reach decision-makers. In fact, despite training and volunteering, many youth activists still lacked the necessary education, training and experience for effective advocacy campaigns. Youth who became active in groups were often divided by their differing political attitudes, and not all groups were able to acquire funding. Some were discouraged by lack of immediate results. The limited political change that did occur had little effect on the daily lives of youths in regard to jobs, basic services, infrastructure and the humanitarian situation. Yet, observers and international organizations took notice of youth activism despite these challenges, including the lack of funding, inexperience, political infighting and disorganization.

A needs-assessment survey with 485 youth activists from seven governorates conducted by YPC in September 2012 found that youth activists believed the government should focus on the economy and public services (25.5 percent), and on providing security (19.7 percent). However, the momentum unleashed by the transitional period failed to spur the government to raise youth participation in politics or improve conditions for youth education and employment. Politics in Yemen was instead shaped by infighting among the elite. The youth, similar to most of the population, basked in neglect. The ill-designed formal transition process and the failure of the NDC contributed to escalating violence. The Houthis seized power, prompting the military intervention of the Saudi-led coalition and plunging livelihood indicators to new lows. The state broke apart, with various factions hijacking or replacing central institutions and complicating the political landscape.

Opportunities for youth activism abounded in the transitional period after the 2011 uprising, although youth political participation did not significantly increase. Yemeni policy makers became receptive to the ideas of Yemen’s young generation. The international community supported youth activism with funding, training, networking events and travel opportunities. With the collapse of the political process in 2014, these opportunities began to dwindle.

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11 Funck, Lydia & Transfeld, Mareike (2013): Supporting Youth Activism in Yemen: Challenges, Priorities and Needs. Yemen Polling Center. The survey mentioned in the study covered Ibb, Sanaa city, Al-Baidha, Taiz, Houdeidah, Hadramout, Aden and Marib. The sample consisted of the leaders of organized youth groups who were active in the protest squares of the respective cities.
12 The NDC was seen by outside powers as an inclusive forum and a model for a peaceful transition in the Middle East and North Africa. But the conference failed to be truly inclusive. The southern Hirak movement and Yemeni civil society were underrepresented. Traditional political forces dominated the proceedings. The conference failed to empower the range of voices included, while the timeframe for the deliberation was unrealistic and elite infighting and violence surrounding the conference ultimately contributed to its failure. For an analysis of the conference see Transfeld (2016).
Local Dynamics Take Centre Stage

The violent takeover of the capital by the Houthi movement in September 2014 and the military intervention of the Saudi-led coalition in March 2015 resulted in the disintegration of national-level institutions, altering the institutional environment for youth activism. Two authorities arose, claiming to represent the Yemeni state. Both were at the same time challenged by local actors.

The internationally recognized government of President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, to its supporters, symbolizes some of the legitimacy of the Yemeni nation state. Hadi is seen as the only political figure with any sort of democratic legitimacy. In February 2012, Hadi was confirmed in a referendum as transitional president for two years. His term was extended by a vote in the NDC for two more years in 2014. However, since 2015 the Hadi government has been largely restricted to operating from exile in Saudi Arabia. It retains limited reach inside Yemen, mainly in the southern and eastern governorates, with some central government institutions replicated outside Houthi-controlled territory. On top of the Houthi challenge, the Hadi government has been losing authority in favor of the southern independence movement and other locally supported groups.

The Houthis enjoy more hands-on control. In February 2015, the Houthis formed the Supreme Revolutionary Committee, which was from then on to rule the country. The group came to power a few months earlier through a coup, which the Houthi called a ‘popular revolution’. The Houthis allied with former president Saleh, whom Houthi militia killed in December 2017 after he had signaled to Saudi Arabia that he was ready to switch sides. Currently, the group controls the northwest of Yemen on their own. They exercise power through the Supreme Political Council (SPC) and outfits dating to the central government, as well as the local authorities. In addition, the Houthis set up the so-called revolutionary sub-committees, which exert broad influence over public institutions, despite having no formal status.

On the national level, parliament is split between the two main factions of the conflict. Those loyal to the Houthis assemble in Sanaa, but their meetings lack quorum. President Hadi has not been able to bring loyal parliamentarians together for sessions. (the last parliamentary elections were held in 2003). Parliamentary elections meant to be held during Saleh’s rule in 2009 were postponed due to disagreements between the political parties. The 2011 revolt prevented elections scheduled for the same year. During the transitional period, parliament functions were dictated by the GCC
Youth Activism in the Yemeni Civil War

Initiative. It has been widely acknowledged that the Yemeni parliament lacks legitimacy.\(^{13}\) Currently, there are no national-level state institutions that are seen as legitimate and representative within Yemeni communities.

Among the young, the role of the state as a provider of opportunities, education and basic services has sunk into oblivion. The YPC 2017 survey indicates a widespread sense among young people that the state had seized to exist in the regions where they live. Asking if the ‘state’ (ad-dawla) was present in their area, only five percent of the youth interviewed said the state was ‘very present’ in their area. A majority of 42 percent said the state was absent.\(^{14}\) The view of an absent state was strong in the capital, where the Houthis have taken control of the institutions. Ninety-three percent of the youth in Sanaa city and 96 percent of those residing in Sanaa governorate say that the state was not present. Other areas where a clear majority (70 percent or more) who saw the state as being absent comprise Taiz (70 percent), al-Baydha’ (73 percent), Abyan (73 percent), Lahj (82 percent), and al-Jawf (83 percent). Areas where youth residents said the state was rather present comprise Ibb, Hajja, Hadhramawt, al-Mahra and Amran.

The fragmentation extends to the local level and is felt when looking at the perceptions of young people regarding security. Demonstrating a security vacuum created by the absence of the state, 19 percent of the youth said no one brought security to their area. Overall, only 9.7 percent of the youth mentioned state institutions (police and the military) when asked who provides security in their area.

In the south, respondents were more inclined to name state institutions as providing security, with 30 percent saying it was the army and 19 percent saying it was the police. This may be due to the presence of the internationally recognized government, which generally more associated with ‘legitimate statehood’ than the Houthis controlling the north. However, the survey found that the community itself or local actors provide security in many cases instead of state institutions. Twenty-one percent nationwide


\(^{14}\) It is difficult to determine what exactly is understood as “state” by the youth. However, results from surveys, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with civic figures, youth activists, decision-makers and members of the security establishment collected by YPC between 2017 and 2019 indicate that the more the respondent identifies with the state and its basis of legitimacy, the more present the state is perceived to be. Further, the state is understood in terms of its functions. The absence of state services is thus associated with the absence of the state.
said it was the citizens themselves who provide security. Twenty percent said it was the aqil (neighbourhood authority)\textsuperscript{15} or the local sheikh.

The youth survey shows sharp shifts of power to local figures from state institutions and representatives. Thirty-four percent consider the aqil to be the most important community leader, followed by tribal sheikhs (28 percent). Military commanders, political party leaders or state representatives were named by only 7 percent. Civil society organizations (CSOs) are also perceived by youth to be active in more beneficial ways when compared to state institutions. A majority of 45 percent of youth regard the CSOs as active in their areas, with a third regarding their activism as being positive, and another third having an indifferent view. One factor that may have contributed to the favorable view of CSOs is that they have continued to provide some basic services, filling vacuums created by the absence of the state. They have done so despite suffering from lack of financing and protection.\textsuperscript{16} Local state institutions, namely the local councils, are looked at with disregard among the youth. The councils were set up as part of the country’s nominal moves to decentralization during Saleh’s rule in 2000. They were tasked with the provision of basic services, including water, sanitation, electricity, roads, education, health, or agriculture development.

Most youth (60 percent) had heard of local councils in their area; 20 percent consider the council’s work to be positive, 15 percent find their work negative and 25 percent say it is neither positive nor negative. Twenty percent said local councils in their area were inactive. Especially in Houthi-controlled territory, the local councils along with other local-level institutions were taken over by informal groups. The loyalties of the local councils are thus divided. Many who were initially appointed by the state shifted their allegiance to the de facto power in their respective governorate. Since the beginning of the war, each party to the conflict has cultivated loyalty through appointments to public positions and local councils.

In the city of Aden, focus group discussion participants said in February 2018 that the population is disappointed and frustrated because their dreams of living under a strong state built on justice and equality have not been fulfilled. They said the deterioration of government services—particularly health, water and electricity—is one of the main concerns of the city’s inhabitants. They described the poor performance of the government as well as corruption hindering service provision as causes for conflict at the community level.\textsuperscript{15}

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\textsuperscript{15} The aqil is a social figure selected to act as an informal connection between communities and government institutions. Usually, they are figures with social influence and are members of one of the political parties.

\textsuperscript{16} See al-Shami (2015).
Shifting to the perspective of decision-makers, it becomes clear that the closer the respondents were linked to the state, such as government officials or the military and police, the more present they perceived the state to be. Overall, 20 percent said the state was very present, compared with 14 percent who said the state was not present at all. A majority (28 percent) were undecided. Members of the security apparatus tended to overstate the reach of the state while ordinary citizens and societal figures did not see the state in similar manner.

As a result of the Houthi coup and the Saudi-led military intervention, the state has fragmented and is considered absent by the majority of Yemen’s youth. This absence changes the conditions for youth activism. As demonstrated by the data, local social figures are more influential than state representatives. Because of these new circumstance, targets of youth advocacy campaigns need to change from the national to the local level.

**Graph 1: What is your position within your community?**
Youth Activism in the Yemeni Civil War

February 2018

Graph 2: Which group of people do you think is the most important group to keep in close contact with within your community?

Responsiveness of Local Leaders

With the seizure of the capital by the Houthis and the Saudi campaign came deep fragmentation of the Yemeni state. Self-reliance among local communities with regard to the provision of services helped diminish the importance of state institutions and drove youth to look to local figures, altering the dynamics of youth activism. Activist Mohammed al-Shami said that since the war the aqil has in some localities become more influential than the governor. But just as on the national level, there is a disconnect between the youth and leaders at the local level.

Local decision makers claim to value the opinions of the youth within their communities. This is reflected in the results of YPC’s survey of the 300 decision-makers. Ninety percent of the community leaders interviewed by YPC stated that they believe it is important to consider the opinion of members of their communities. 41 percent said it is important to keep in close contact with the youth. Interestingly, with that

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17 Mohammed al-Shami, civil society activist, interview with the author (25. October 2018).
number, youth rank higher on the priority list of the local decision makers than elite members of the community. The survey attempted to break down the groups who leaders think they should stay in contact with. When asked if directors and sub-district directors matter, 40 percent agreed, while 31 percent said it is important to consider the governor or his staff. Religious figures were important to 29 percent of the decision-makers, political parties were important to consider according to 23 percent; and journalists receive the lowest interest, as they are considered important only by 9 percent.

The high interest in the youth is most likely a legacy of the 2011 uprisings and the spread of the mantra of the youth as forming the country’s future. However, the rhetoric of Yemeni politicians does not resonate among the youth or translate into a sense of inclusion. Thirty-seven percent of youth said community leaders do not understand their needs and ‘do not try their best’ to satisfy them. Fourteen percent said they do not know if the leaders understand their needs or try to satisfy them. In an indication of marginalization, 20 percent said community leaders somewhat understand their needs and try to satisfy them.

The numbers of decision makers who meet youth may explain the disconnect. While community leaders value the opinions of youth and believe it is important to stay in contact, they don’t actually solicit their opinions on a regular basis. Roughly half of the sample (53 percent) meet with members of their communities at least one to five times a week, while two percent do not meet members of their communities.

These numbers should be viewed against the backdrop of Yemen’s strong tradition of communal meetings. Of the decision-makers who meet with members of the community regularly, 75 percent gauge the opinions of the community in qat sessions. Qat is a mild stimulant that is particularly consumed by male Yemenis in the afternoon. Traditionally, community leaders invite to their homes members of the community to chew qat and discuss relevant matters. Rather than allowing new actors access, these meetings often reinforce existing hierarchies. Almost 80 percent of decision makers said they meet equally with different groups making up their community. While the decision-makers thought it was important to consider the youth’s opinion, they actually meet with other elites more often than with youth. These elites mainly comprise tribal figures (70 percent), other social figures (45 percent), local council members (59 percent) or the security apparatus (44 percent). Youth outside these circles do not have access to the qat sessions, leaving a majority of them excluded.
Nevertheless, 11 percent of 15-to-25-year-olds are in direct contact with their community leaders and have communicated their needs to them. The majority of those who are in contact with these leaders talk with them face-to-face at qat sessions, the mosque or the market. Nine percent are in contact with community leaders by phone and four percent visit these leaders in their office, while two percent are connected with them through social media. Yet, 40 percent of the youth say community leaders do not give them the opportunity to communicate their needs and 13 percent say they do not know of any such opportunities. Fourteen percent said they “somewhat do not believe” that community leaders offer the youth opportunities to communicate.

Among the decision makers surveyed, seven percent do not think it is important to consider the opinions of the community. The decision makers who do not believe this to be important are located mostly in Abyan, Hadhramawt and Marib. The three areas are rather remote governorates that are tribally organized and mostly rural. These respondents perceive the members of the community to be illiterate and lacking in awareness (36 percent). Others are disinterested in the opinions within the community because they understand their position as not requiring consideration of public opinion. Eighteen percent said they do not have to gauge the opinion of the community because they were chosen by the people to represent them. Fourteen percent believe there is no suitable way to gauge public opinion.

Marginalization is acute when it comes to young women. Only nine percent of the 300 decision makers find it important to consult women. Two percent of females, as opposed to 20 percent of males, are in contact with community leaders. Participants in the focus groups frequently mentioned discrimination between males and females and activists of the YLG often reported about the disadvantaged position of women within the communities. The activists underlined the limited educational opportunities for women, forced marriage and the highly conservative norms which restrict women’ opportunities. Sixty-three percent of the females said they were “somewhat valued” by their communities compared with 76 percent of males.

The feeling of neglect by community leaders run high among youth, although knowing youth opinion ranks high on the priority list of decision makers. Eleven percent of the youth are in contact with community leaders and opportunities for youth advocacy campaigns have not vanished. However, the opportunities are limited. Advocacy thus needs to build on pre-existing communication channels, while carefully crafting new ones.
Graph 3: How often in a week do you meet or speak with members of your community to understand their opinion and living situation?

Threats against Youth Advocacy Compound

Although opportunities for youth activism remain, with local decision-makers at least presenting themselves as interested in the opinions of their communities’ youth, the scope for youth activism plummeted after 2014. State institutions faded and the warring parties regarded most activism as hostile and a threat.\(^{18}\) Peace campaigns were viewed as targeting one faction but not the other, putting participants in these campaigns in danger of arrest or kidnap. Activists launched some less controversial

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campaigns as not to invite a violent backlash, but opportunities for youth to shape their communities fell sharply. A sense of hopelessness set in, intensifying mental health issues among young Yemenis.

The Badihi Campaign

Activists in the YLGs, which are part of the YPC’s Youth Voices in Policy project, implemented a campaign in 2017 to spread messages on 1) building community and bridging divides within society; 2) raising awareness on the humanitarian situation and 3) de-radicalization. Four films focusing on these themes were at the heart of the campaign. The films avoided contested language and symbolism in order to unite Yemenis and avoid angering the parties to the conflict in various parts Yemen. An offline component entailed the distribution of the films on DVD along with brochures. During the implementation, participating youth activists were temporarily arrested and held in custody, campaign material was confiscated and authorities on all sides of the conflict tried to hinder the offline activities of the campaign. Yet, the material reached more than 20,000 people.

During the campaign, YLG activists tried to arrange meetings with decision-makers to advocate for issues that were relevant to their communities. The decision-makers selected were purposefully not part of the security establishments or the ruling authority. The YLG often sought to meet representatives from universities, who are appointed by the authorities. Organizing such meetings often proved difficult, however. Meetings with officials from Aden and Marib universities were not possible because the officials preferred not to be associated with the public advocacy nature of these meetings and did not have the permission to speak to newspapers and online outlets.

In Sanaa, members of the YLG met with intellectuals from higher education institutions and officials from the Ministry of Youth. The meetings focused on the question of why youth had not been appointed to governing bodies in Sanaa. This focus should
be understood against the backdrop of the NDC. One of the outcomes of the conference was to introduce a 20-percent quota for youth in all government bodies. In 2014, the YLG in Sanaa campaigned for the implementation of such quota. However, as is the case for all other NDC outcomes, it was not implemented.

In al-Hodeidah the youth took up the issue of prison conditions. Youth activists met with judges, with whom they found common cause. As the judges sought popular support for their push to improve prison conditions, they promised to support the youth campaign. After these meetings in al-Hodeidah, Houthi militia arrested members of the YLG and interrogated them about their meetings with the judges.

Across Yemen, youth have become active in filling the vacuum left by the state and begun providing security to members of their communities, often cooperating with (and at times being restricted by) armed groups. In Aden, the ‘Aden Security Alliance’ and the ‘Aden Without Arms’ initiatives are known to have contributed to the improvement of local security. Likewise, youth groups became active in the provision of security in smaller cities, such as Ibb and al-Hodeidah; in Sanaa youth groups are involved in the creation of safe spaces and the protection of children.

Still, focus group participants underlined fear from abduction as a risk. In Sanaa, CSOs and youth activists interviewed on their security concerns in early 2018 said it is safest to “stay at home and keep the doors shut.” They described Houthi rule as iron-fisted and deplored the arbitrary and pseudo-religious nature of Houthi police. Activism in Houthi-controlled territory thus has become mostly limited to the distribution of humanitarian aid.

“One day, I was walking in the street. When I reached Al Dhihar Market, a group of armed men intercepted me and pointed their guns at my head,” said a focus group participant from Ibb, in February 2018. “They took away my mobile phone and laptop and left the place. Then, I approached the police station and told them what happened to me. Although the perpetrators were arrested, they were shortly released from detention due to police complicity.”
In Aden, activists fear violence from ultra-nationalist and religious groups, which restrict freedom of speech and describe activists as “spies or missionaries.” According to media experts and activists in Aden, youth activists are not able to criticize the Saudi coalition or speak out against the cause of southern independence. Southern residents with family ties to northern Yemen feel threatened and excluded, as they are discriminated against by authorities. Southern activists feel marginalized within the Yemeni activist scene as well as by international organizations.

The marginalization harks to the legacy of northern dominance in Yemen. Sanaa has better infrastructure for youth in terms of training and education, which is why activists from Sanaa are prioritized in recruitment to local and international organizations.

According to seasoned activists, campaigns must be prepared in a manner that their messages and activities do not provoke any militias and that the work might not be exploited by the militias for their own agenda. “You cannot stop the media working for the militias from using your work and your material, but you can make sure that if they use your material, it does not hurt, but support your goal,” said media activist Abdulrahman Hussein. The first film released for the #Badihi campaign, titled “Badihi,” was aired on various TV channels belonging to the different parties to the conflict. The message of the campaign was amplified because the film was broadcast on all sides of the war, and the activists thus avoided having their work hijacked.

The various risks described in the survey have caused many youth groups to cease their activities. A majority of 54 percent of the youth interviewed in the 2017 survey were not aware of any youth groups being active in their area. Many groups stopped their activities due to the loss of funding. International donor organizations either focused on humanitarian aid or stopped working in Yemen. The activists regretted their inability to stay active in trying to encourage Yemen’s young generation to complete their education or improve the fields of health, environment and development. These kinds of activities are not just important because they allow young people to contribute to their communities, but they give young people a sense of purpose.

“It is interesting to work with children in this time, while the Houthis are attacking. Really, the children give us so much positive energy,” said Hanna, an activist from Sanaa working in a “safe space for children.” Some youth groups sought to mitigate

19 Civil society activist in Aden, interview with the author (25. October 2018).
20 Focus group discussions with youth and CSOs in Aden (February 2018) and civil society activist in Aden, interview with the author (25. October 2018).
the risks of activism by avoiding political themes. In Aden, a group of youth started a book club, held book fairs and cultural fairs to revive the reading culture in the city.\textsuperscript{22} Numerous student initiatives took off in the field of knowledge transfer and assisting the needy.\textsuperscript{23} Other youths are active in theater, comedy, media and film.\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{“Faces of War”}

Conditions for street art have deteriorated during the war. According to artist Murad Subay, militias that control the various territories in Yemen do not allow any alternative voices. Subay described moments of censorship in Aden, where he as a northerner is considered problematic, and where the southern independence movement controls the public sphere. In northern cities, Subay described harassment by the security forces: “I have been harassed by security and members of the militias during my campaigns; I have been held by security forces, and temporarily imprisoned,” he said in an interview.

Subay said he had learnt how to deal with the security situation in different parts of Yemen as it evolved and developed mechanisms to avoid trouble. However, he stopped mobilizing others to join him in the campaigns, as he deems it too dangerous. “I also can’t make the messages of my campaigns too direct and too clear. You have to be smart with how you transport what you want to say,” he said.


\textsuperscript{23} Abdulmalik, Weaam (2017) Student Initiatives in Taiz: Forms of Youth Effectiveness against the War and Ongoing Siege. 21.08.2017. Al-Madaniya Magazine; Mohammed al-Shami, civil society activist, interview with the author (April 2018).

Consequences of Economic Collapse

The deterioration of the economic situation has made youth activism extremely difficult and the youth themselves increasingly desolate. The manifold consequences of the war—price hikes, shortages of food, fuel and medicine, unpaid salaries, currency depreciation and diminishing job opportunities—hit families most directly. Two-thirds of the youth survey respondents said there were times in 2016 that their family did not have food. Forty percent of the families have received humanitarian aid at least once between January and May 2017.

Often, Yemen’s youth find their parents unable to feed them and their siblings, forcing the youth to contribute to their family’s income. The salary crisis and economic factors are the reasons that prevent them from completing their education. Thirty-five percent of those interviewed dropped out of school without a secondary school certificate. At the same time, most of the youth see little to no work opportunities for themselves in their communities. The opportunities that they do see are as day-laborers in construction, agriculture, transport or small jobs.

The war and salary crisis is driving young people into the hands of militias or criminal groups. In focus group discussions in August 2017, lack of opportunities and psychological problems and depression among youth were a main concern. In Ibb, focus group participants said youth were perceived as a cause for conflict within the community. They did not receive acknowledgment by members of the community because they do not have access to jobs and financial resources, or connections to influential figures.

Nevertheless, 42 percent of the young (15-25 years) feel valued by their communities, with 27 percent feeling somewhat valued. This may be indicative of overall communal loyalty that still exists within Yemeni society. During times of war, the youth’s reliance on their community has deepened.

The youth are losing hope, without hope their only option is to join the battles to feed their families. But there are stories of youth going mad, depression, they can’t leave their houses, they commit suicide. The war creates ugly people, but it is because of the war. Most people are good, but because of
these circumstances they become bad, not because they want to, but because they don’t have other options.

– Murad Subay, street artist (October 2018)

Youths with no educational or economic opportunities felt most abandoned by their communities, although they were eager to contribute. Limited financial returns from civil society activism forced many Yemeni youths to seek a daily living in ways that often harmed peace building and may have added to radicalization. However, opportunities to become active remain alive. Youth should receive the support they need to take up a meaningful role within their communities; even if it is confined online.

Social Media: A Channel for Advocacy?

Since the violence increased in 2014, Facebook and Twitter became spaces where war propaganda spread, involving bot networks. At the same time, the Internet has been seen as an important outlet to counter insecurity and limited opportunities. These websites comprised platforms for peace and community building campaigns, such as #KafayaWar, #Coexist and #Badihi. Activists have used social media channels to address Yemeni decision makers more directly, as they did with the campaign “Don’t return without peace to Yemen.”

After young revolutionaries found Twitter and Facebook indispensable during the 2011 protests, political and social elites began joining. Domestic media in Yemen is highly politicized and many activists and civil society organizations inside and outside of Yemen saw Facebook and Twitter not just as best way to reach and mobilize people, but also to access information.

Social media offers the potential for different social and political hierarchies to mix. It thus offers youth activists opportunities to connect with political and social leaders and communicate their needs. However, social media use in Yemen must be understood

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26 For insights into how social media was used during Yemen’s “Arab Spring” protests see for instance Alwazir, Atiaf (2011): Social Media in Yemen: Expecting the Unexpected. 30.12.2011. Al-Akhbar.
Youth Activism in the Yemeni Civil War

against the backdrop of a pronounced digital divide, both in terms of a rural-urban divide, a gender gap and class disparity.

The digital divide is related to the underdevelopment of internet infrastructure and Yemen’s cultural and social norms. Yet, after television and radio, social media is the medium Yemen’s youth use the most. One-third of the 15 to 25-year-olds have access to the Internet, with males in urban areas most likely to have access to the Internet. Females in rural areas are least likely to have access. Among decision makers, 71 percent of those surveyed have access to the Internet. Of the ones who have internet access, 75 percent have at least one social media account.

Most Yemeni users flocked to social media during the ‘Arab Spring’. However social media remains a medium predominantly for personal uses. The majority (82 percent) of youth who have Internet access and a social media account use the platforms to contact their friends and family. About one-third use social media to follow religious figures and their content statements. A majority (54 percent) of those with an account chooses not to discuss politics with family and friends over social media.

Social media remains a platform for political activism, however, with a steady number of youth using social media for political ends. In our survey, 18 percent of youth with Internet access and a social media account said they frequently or ‘very frequently’ use social media to discuss politics with their friends, while 28 percent said they use social media ‘at least sometimes’ to do so. Detailing their social media political use, 18 percent of the youth said they follow politicians ‘somewhat frequently’ and 29 percent said they sometimes do. Nine percent of youths frequently use social media sites to relay their needs to politicians while 23 percent sometimes do.

With tribal leaders having strong social and political influence, it is not surprising that they have joined the social media fray and are partly followed by young Yemenis. Eight percent of the youth follow tribal leaders on social media at least somewhat frequently and 20 percent sometimes do. Eight percent ‘somewhat frequently’ use social media to communicate their needs to tribal leaders. Nineteen percent do so sometimes.

The research shows that social media could be an effective channel for advocacy. Shifting to the perspective of the decision makers, most respondents claimed to use social media to understand the needs of members of their communities and to interact with them. While social media is mostly used for personal reasons, there is a constant number of youth who use social media to discuss politics and to connect with decision
Youth Activism in the Yemeni Civil War

February 2018

makers. Likewise, decision makers use social media to establish a communication channel with their constituencies. This is certainly a space that can be built on.

The risks associated with online activism are lower when compared with street politics. However, security threats to online activists should not be underestimated. In Yemen, freedom of speech within the digital space is at risk; the quality and diversity of information spread on social media is challenged. Activists who use social networking for political means, particularly those living in Houthi-controlled areas, are at risk of arrest, murder or kidnapping. Outside of Houthi territory, the space for free expression is wider, but only relatively. In these areas, the abundance of armed groups, some of which have extreme Islamist agendas, also limit freedoms. Repeatedly young men have been killed by unidentified gunmen for having spread ideas that extremists consider anti-Islamic.27

Graph 4: Social media use among decision makers.

Online Campaigning in Conflict

Examples of campaigns done by youth activists using social media include #LetsCoexist in early 2016, “Don’t return to Yemen without peace” during the peace talks in Kuwait in 2016, as well as the #Badihi campaign starting in summer 2017.

The campaign “Don’t return to Yemen without peace” was launched by the media activist Hind al-Eryani in the context of the peace talks in Kuwait held in 2016. The goal was to pressure the delegations to come to an agreement in Kuwait before returning to Yemen. The campaign took place on Twitter and received support from Yemenis, activists from the region, international media, and some Yemeni politicians. Hind al-Eryani states:

Many influential people reacted to this hashtag including the UN envoy to Yemen, who mentioned it in his press conferences, the British Foreign Office, the ambassadors of Germany and Britain, a spokesman for the British government, politicians representing parties to the conflict in Yemen, such as the Yemeni foreign Minister, chairman of the General People’s Congress. A number of artists reacted to the hashtag, such as superstar and Goodwill Ambassador Ragheb and Yemeni artist Fouad Abdul Wahid.

Al-Eryani said she managed to gain support from all political parties involved in the talks with the exception of the Houthis. Demonstrating that peace campaigns often provoke the parties of the conflict, journalists loyal to the international recognized government began to threaten the campaign, accusing al-Eryani of supporting the Houthis, once the campaign was launched.

The campaigns #LetsCoexist and #Badihi were conducted by Yemeni youth, respectively supported by the British NGO Saferworld and the Yemeni NGO YPC. The campaigns aimed to contribute to community building and de-radicalization by focusing on the commonalities of Yemenis, including landscapes, food, music, children or heritage. The campaigns were successful in reaching a high number and wide variety

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28 The General People’s Congress (GPC) is the former ruling party, which was headed by Ali Abdullah Saleh until his death in December 2017.
29 Al-Eryani, Hind (2016) Facebook post.
30 Hind al-Eryani, civil society activism, interview with the author (April 29, 2018).
of individuals across Yemen, generating positive feedback. However, both campaign teams set themselves the goal to build up large networks of activists, organizations and media to contribute and sustain their message. Neither of the campaigns were successful in doing so. Some of the challenges in this regard were that many of the youth involved in such campaigns work voluntarily. They had to prioritize other projects, because they were not paid for their efforts. The lives of these youths were very much in flux, with many pursuing personal opportunities abroad, fleeing from the war at home.

Violence in Yemen and its impact on the lives of youth weakened youth networks, which need to be rebuilt. Accordingly, it is very difficult to keep up motivation and enthusiasm within campaign teams, particularly with limited funding. Often team members are in different countries around the world, which makes coordination due to time difference difficult, while many activists are not aware yet of software and online tools that assist with remote communication and coordination.
Recommendations

Conditions for political activism and advocacy have become extremely difficult, especially in Houthi-controlled territories. Threats against the safety of activists emanate from an array of different armed actors. It is not recommended to conduct advocacy or campaigning, unless an organization is well-connected on the ground. International and national organizations must assess in detail the conditions at the location where activities are to take place. Organizations must factor in the risk of arrests and kidnapping of activists.

Due to the lack of experience and training, and the incoherence of youth groups, projects focusing on youth should be designed with a wider time-frame. The period of any project in which youth are to become active in groups must allow space for the participants to develop positive relations with each other. Given the current condition of Yemeni society, any group of people tends to have sharp political differences that may get in the way of project implementation. Developing a strong bond before the implementation of activities could help achieve project outcome.

Projects with a focus on knowledge transfer should get the lion’s share of support, rather than projects focusing on advocacy. Many youth in Yemen lack basic opportunities because they lack access to knowledge. Knowledge transfer may include training workshops on skills necessary for advocacy and campaigning, and could entail book clubs, self-organized knowledge transfer group or Internet resource training. Supporting research projects will not only enhance the awareness of youth, but of international observers as well. A focus on research often mitigates the risks, and is a way to build the capacities of young activists, by involving them in the research and writing process.

Funders should not assume that Yemeni youth can volunteer for projects for extended periods. Given the economic crisis and lack of salaries, youth are occupied with their own survival and support for their families. These abject financial conditions must be taken in consideration when crafting a project budget, with an eye toward minimal reliance on volunteers.

Channels of communication between youth networks must be reestablished. Communication between various youth organizations has collapsed over the last three years. Activists have been forced to spread out in different countries, making communication ever more difficult. A regional conference bringing youth activists
together in an effort to re-establish communication and enhance networks is an entry point.

Funders should support online activism and training workshops on remote collaboration to help counter fragmentation. Many activists have had to leave Yemen and have been occupied with important issues regarding their legal status in host countries. Others have suffered traumas due to the war. Many activists have resettled or adjusted to their new living situations. Training now needs to cover the basics to help activists adjust their working mode to their new living situation: communication platforms, collaborative platforms (for example: Trello and Doodle), collaborative word processing (Google Docs) and digital security. Other activities that could be encouraged online include knowledge transfer through the Internet, training on human rights, citizen and peace journalism, campaigning, and other civic activism tools.
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