

CONTEMPORARY YEMEN:

POLITICS AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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15 THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF THE PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF YEMEN: AN ANALYSIS OF ITS STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

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The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) has been governed by a militant, Marxist-oriented regime since June 1969. Although a local communist party, the People's Democratic Union (PDU), has existed for two decades, the party has never been the dominant power in South Yemeni (PDRY) politics. Throughout the past decade the PDU's status and role in national affairs have been highly circumscribed by the practical necessity, both legal and political, for it to operate in close association with a substantially larger organisation.

In 1983, the party enjoyed official status in the prevailing larger organisation — the Yemen Socialist Party (YSP). Communist party members hold one of five posts in the YSP's Politburo — which is both the YSP's and the government's highest policy-making body — and several seats on the YSP's 47-member Central Committee. In addition, party representatives sit in the non-party 111-member Supreme People's Council, which serves as a consultative body and debating forum for the government. These positions, in addition to other, less formal ones within the national power structure, accord the party a degree of influence in PDRY politics far beyond what its limited membership (estimated at less than five hundred) would suggest.

Evolution of the Communist Party

The party's headquarters, both before and since national independence in late 1967, have always been in the South Yemen capital of Aden. It has always been led by one of three sons of the Ba Dhib family, which comes from the Hadramawt region in eastern PDRY. The party's rank-and-file membership, moreover, has long been identified with support for the poorest and most disenfranchised among the country's working-class elements. Yet many of these

elements have their roots not so much in Aden or in the tribal-oriented regions of the country's interior as in the villages of the neighbouring Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen). These distinguishing characteristics of the party are from time to time the cause of difficulties between the party and some of the more nationally oriented, indigenous organisations. Similarly, the party's perennially close identification with youth and student groups has been at times a source of strength, certainly in terms of the social importance accorded those two constituencies, just as, at the level of real power, it is often a source of weakness.

The party was officially founded in October 1961 under the name of the People's Democratic Union (PDU) by Abdallah bin Abd al-Razzaq Ba Dhib — the first communist in Aden and eventually the foremost communist in all Arabia. Regarded from the outset as a communist organisation, the PDU supported a variety of groups that sought to cater to the needs of labourers and students. Given the severe restrictions placed on trade union organisations by British colonial authorities a year prior to the PDU's establishment, the party chose to establish a youth group instead: the Shabiba (Youth).

In October 1975, the ruling National Front Party (NF), in a major reform, aligned itself with both the PDU and al-Tali'a (the Vanguard), a comparatively small, pro-Syrian, Ba'athist group. With the NF retaining its position as the predominant group, they formed a new, much larger party, the United Political Organisation of the National Front (UPONF). The Shabiba retained, as it had since its merger with the NF in 1970, its official status, accorded in the 1970 constitution, in the 111-member Supreme People's Council. In addition, its members were permitted to retain previously held Ministerial posts — the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Information and/or the Ministry of Culture and Tourism — in the government's Council of Ministers. Shabiba had been allotted portfolios after the 'Corrective Movement' of June 1969 and Abdallah Ba Dhib held such posts at different times in the 1970s, providing the Shabiba a degree of visibility and respectability that was highly valued by PDU members. As PDU leader, and as journalist, poet, administrator and teacher, his numerous cultural and educational contributions would leave their mark on other PDRY citizens as well. After his untimely death on 16 August 1976, the PDU leadership passed, in accordance with a previous agreement, to his younger brother and party co-founder, Ali Ba Dhib. Involved in PDU affairs from the beginning, and long identified with the

Shabiba, Ali Ba Dhib brought his own impressive credentials to the post of party leader. He was, in addition, a high-ranking PDRY government official in his own right.

During the next four years Ali Ba Dhib headed the PDU in a period of deepening Soviet influence in the country. The period was one when, largely because of that influence, a temporary *rapprochement* with Saudi Arabia, which had begun in 1976, lost momentum; when UPONF Secretary-General Abd al-Fattah Isma'il increased the frequency of contacts between the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the UPONF; and when a Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation between the Soviet Union and PDRY was signed on 25 October 1979 at the end of an official visit by Isma'il to Moscow.

Of even greater significance, however, were events on the domestic front. In October 1978, for example, Isma'il and his supporters oriented the UPONF more directly along the path of 'scientific socialism'. At its First Congress, the UPONF changed its name to Yemen Socialist Party (YSP) and reorganised itself along the lines of Soviet-style Marxist-Leninist organisations found elsewhere. Moreover, the YSP constitution adopted at the congress accorded PDU members official status in the YSP's Politburo and Central Committee.

A significant PDU achievement was the election of its new Secretary-General, Ali Ba Dhib, to the YSP's powerful, eight-man Politburo. In addition, Ba Dhib was appointed to two other important posts: Secretary of the Ideology Department of the Secretariat of the YSP's 47-member Central Committee, and Deputy Prime Minister (one of three) in the government's Council of Ministers. These achievements, the high point of official communist influence in PDRY politics, were short-lived however. Indeed, they lasted only until April 1980, when Isma'il, long-time collaborator with the PDU/Shabiba on ideological, cultural and foreign policy matters, was ousted from his positions as YSP Secretary-General and Head of State, and replaced by Prime Minister Ali Nasir Muhammad al-Hasani.

The Post-Isma'il Balance of Power

The transition from the Isma'il era to that of Ali Nasir has been swift, far-reaching and, in mid-1983, on-going. The process itself

was facilitated by Ali Nasir's use of his posts as *de facto* Head of State, Prime Minister, Member and Chairman of the YSP's Politburo and Central Committee, and Chairman of the Supreme People's Council eleven-man Presidium to convene an extraordinary congress of the YSP in October 1980. Elections for a new Presidium confirmed Ali Nasir in the YSP positions he had assumed upon the ouster of Isma'il.

One other revelation of the 1980 election was a substantial decline in popularity for Ba Dhib and other PDU/Shabiba stalwarts, largely due to their previous close association with Isma'il. Ali Ba Dhib has since remained active as a senior government official, YSP member and lecturer at the PDU-dominated Higher Institute for Scientific Socialism in Aden (also known as the Party School), but in recognition of the electoral results he was dropped from the YSP Politburo.

Abu Bakr Ba Dhib, Ali Ba Dhib's younger brother and an adviser to Ali Nasir, was appointed in his place. Some observers viewed this shake-up among the PDRY's political elites as a major setback for the pro-Soviet and pro-North Yemen factions in PDRY politics. Others, however, viewed the departure of the pro-Isma'il faction as having been offset by the appointment to what would henceforth be only a five-man YSP Politburo of two other (non-PDU) Marxists — one as a full member, the other as an alternate. Hence, depending on the issue before the Politburo and on which members were present, it remained theoretically possible that positions originating with the PDU representative could become government policy. Balanced against such a potential combination, however, were other Politburo members who placed less emphasis on ideological or pro-Soviet considerations than on personal, regional and factional variables. Nevertheless, although the two founding members of the PDU were no longer in the forefront, members of the PDU and a number of other prominent leftists previously unassociated with Isma'il retain an important measure of influence within the state's ruling councils.

The Role of the Communist Party

Besides the several reasons already mentioned, three other attributes explain the party's limited role in the PDRY: the party's less than fully nationalist credentials owing to its consistently pro-Soviet

orientation; its exceptionally small membership; and its geographic base, which, being centred mainly on Aden, compares poorly with the country-wide breadth and depth of the YSP. In 1983, these characteristics continued to constrain the PDU in terms of its overall acceptance and effectiveness in PDRY society.

Another factor dates from the pre-independence period. Many YSP members have remarked that it is difficult for them, in policy matters, to accord PDU leaders and members the kind of respect that others receive for the roles they played in liberating Aden from colonial rule. Many PDU members, to be sure, are too young to have participated in the independence movement. Others, however, are considered to have deliberately avoided the armed struggle that, from 1963 to 1967, was waged against the British and other groups in Aden and against the traditional, tribal-oriented rulers in the interior. Although local and Arab nationalist leaders urged Yemenis to side with one or another of the several guerrilla groups, the vast majority of PDU members remained in urban Aden and refused to join forces, either there or in the more rugged regions of the interior, with anyone. The PDU leadership, although never eschewing violence as an appropriate revolutionary tactic, thus produced few practitioners of violence within its own ranks and, in comparison with most other groups, suffered few casualties. In their defence, PDU leaders have explained that the revolutionary situation in the early to mid-1960s was one that called for tactical flexibility and a division of labour. Their strength, they emphasise, has never been in their numbers but, rather, in their organisational and journalistic skills, in their role as liaison with kindred organisations abroad, and in their proven ability to provide an ideological orientation for a given objective. It has been primarily these attributes, among others, that have earned the PDU its official status, its relative autonomy and its influence over policy matters and government activities.

In education and culture, as in national political life, the PDU has wielded a degree of influence far in excess of its numbers. As an example, PDU lecturers at the Higher Institute for Scientific Socialism in Aden have provided doctrinal and organisational training in accordance with Marxist-Leninist principles for many YSP members. In an effort to limit the role of Soviet-bloc instructors at the Institute, they have used their connections with other communist parties in Lebanon, Sudan and Iraq to recruit lecturers who are Arabs.

Not the least of the PDU's roles, however, have been those of obtaining scholarships for South Yemeni students seeking further training abroad and in obtaining medical help from socialist-bloc countries for government and other PDRY leaders. The PDU, in short, has played the role of agent and broker — material, ideological, cultural, educational, political — for both the Soviet Union and an important segment of the South Yemeni people.

Whether the PDU's new leader, Abu Bakr Ba Dhib, can match, let alone surpass, the influence and political longevity of his two older brothers is impossible to predict. It is significant, however, that he, like his predecessors, has become the leading communist in both the NF/YSP and government. Even so, the nature and extent of his role in the period ahead will depend, just as much as his brothers' did, on the personal relationships he and the PDU as a group can establish with the far more numerous, and at times quite differently oriented, members of the YSP mainstream.

Whether, also, the PDU would be able to maintain, let alone increase, its previous influence over national policy questions had, by 1983, come to depend on whether changes in the international environment would diminish its influence generally. Certainly, a less visibly prominent role seemed necessary if the regime's efforts to improve relations with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states — and, towards that end, with North Yemen and Oman — were to succeed.

During 1982, efforts to effect a *rapprochement* with San'a' and Muscat were more numerous and successful than any since the short-lived reconciliation with Saudi Arabia in 1976. An agreement between the PDRY and Oman concluded on 27 October signalled an end to nearly fifteen years of mutual enmity. A joint draft constitution calling for unity between the two Yemens, which pointedly made no reference either to 'socialism' or to the kind of economic system which might be adopted, was completed and submitted to their respective governments for discussion, debate and amendment prior to a referendum in each of the countries. And the YSP, during its sixth annual meeting in May, went to greater lengths than in previous years to stress peaceful co-existence with the PDRY's neighbours.

The pragmatic tone to YSP and PDRY government policy that these initiatives implied was evidence of a national need for financial assistance from the country's more economically endowed neighbours to the north. It was indicative, as well, of the force of two other factors: (1) an awareness, even among YSP and PDU stalwarts,

of the relatively limited political and diplomatic dividends produced by their more doctrinaire approach to international relations during the previous half-decade; and (2) Soviet encouragement of such overtures to the PDRY's wealthier Arab neighbours. Behind the latter phenomenon was Moscow's preference for avoiding the necessity of providing the level of additional financial assistance needed from its own funds and, also, a hope that Soviet Union-Gulf states relations might improve as a consequence.

In the PDRY's relationships with countries outside the Arabian Peninsula, however, a substantially different foreign policy tactic was pursued. Both the YSP and the PDU, as cases in point, not only retained but broadened and deepened their links with a dozen or more Arab, African and Asian communist parties, as well as European and Latin American parties. During the course of the year, YSP Chairman Ali Nasir Muhammad al-Hasani completed an extensive tour of the Soviet Union and several other Eastern-bloc countries, signing new agreements and solidifying bilateral party and governmental links at each stop along the way. He devoted special personal attention to increasing YSP co-operation with kindred political groupings in Syria, Lebanon, Algeria, Ethiopia, France and Cuba. In February 1982, on behalf of the World Peace Council, he hosted a major international conference in Aden devoted to 'the Middle East and the dangers of the imperialist military build-up'.

At the intra-regional level, the nucleus around which many of these activities revolved was the alliance, established in August 1981, which grouped the PDRY, Libya and Ethiopia as joint signatories to a Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation. The first meeting of the Tripartite Supreme Council, the highest organ of the alliance, was held in Aden in May 1982 and presided over by Ali Nasir Muhammad. In the discussions that ensued the parties reiterated the essentially strategic nature of the alliance, signifying that its specific purposes remained their joint opposition to the Camp David agreements, imperialism, reactionary regimes and Zionist designs on Arab lands, on one hand, and, on the other, the more general goal of making it difficult for their adversaries to attack or undermine them in isolation.

The YSP and PDU, as in previous years, were simultaneously active in developing bilateral relations with the CPSU. The frequency of visits between the two countries' party officials, functionaries of their supreme organs of state power, and representatives of

their respective parliamentary bodies reached an all-time high. At a less visible level, there occurred an equally impressive exchange of working visits between their respective youth groups, *World Marxist Review* journalists, and officials of their Ministries of Interior, Planning and Justice.

The event of most tangible relevance to the PDRY's pressing economic needs, however, was the third annual meeting in Aden on 6 April 1982 of the Soviet-PDRY Standing Committee on Economic Co-operation. The Committee, established at the time of the 1979 Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation, reached an agreement on launching a range of new activities aimed at strengthening industrial and agricultural development in the PDRY, as well as planning and technical training. The level of mutual interest and involvement that these visits manifested demonstrated how little in the PDRY's general foreign policy orientation had changed in terms of its relationship with Moscow. Some 1,500 Soviet military and technical personnel remained in the country alongside a similar number of East Germans in the state security apparatus and a comparable contingent of Cubans working as advisers in the popular militias and as physicians and paramedics at health centres throughout the country. The nature and extent of such a foreign presence provided ample testimony to the Eastern bloc's continuing stake in the PDRY's stability, security and development. It was an indication as well that the interests at stake for the bloc remained as strategic and ideological as before and — notwithstanding the changes in the PDRY's relationships with neighbouring countries — of how minimal were the immediate prospects for their lessening in any fundamental way.