



The Peace Dilemma in Yemen: **The Houthi Claim of “Divine Selection” Rule**

Farida Ahmed

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*“The Welaya story has become the deep hole in the way of peace,” Yemeni writer and poet
Taha Al-Janad*

By: Farida Ahmed

The cover photo is taken from a Houthi ‘Welaya Day’ event in Rada in Al-Bayda, in August 2018 from the Al-Thawra newspaper which is affiliated with the group.

Contents

Title	Page No.
Introduction	3
Background on the emergence of the Houthis	4
Aspects of racialism and violations	8
Persecuting minorities	13
Is the government heading toward a peace that lacks citizenship?	16
For achieving peace	19
Recommendations	20

Introduction:

Since the declaration of the UN-mediated truce between the internationally-recognized government of Yemen (IRGY) and the Houthis on April 2, 2022, concurrently with the Riyadh consultations sponsored by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to announce a power transition in Yemen, the political atmosphere in the conflict-wracked nation became more conducive. The UN-led peace process came amid endeavors by regional parties, especially Oman, to play a mediation role to pave the way for direct talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis. In a boost to the truce process, the UN Envoy to Yemen Hans Grundberg negotiated a deal between the two sides in Switzerland for the exchange of nearly 900 war prisoners.¹ This facilitated the release of prominent leaders from both parties, including former Defense Minister Mahmoud Al-Subaihi.

However, the Houthis have been accused of violating the truce repeatedly by launching attacks, and through military mobilization against the forces affiliated with the government in Marib and some other lines of contact such as Taiz, the western coast, Al-Dhalea, and Shabwa. Though the truce ended in October 2022, it continued in a de-facto manner, and saw the Houthis suspend their cross-border attacks against Saudi Arabia. However, the Houthis continued with violating the truce within the country. They claimed responsibility for bombing the ports in Hadramout and Shabwa provinces, and stepped up attacks in other areas. On the other hand, the IRGY kept giving concessions to the Houthis, notwithstanding their unreasonable demands, and also sometimes under Saudi pressure. Despite this, the Houthis accuse their rivals of not being serious about achieving peace.

Since the beginning of the Houthi coup against the state in 2014, the group has tried to revive a legacy of class racism that was left behind by the Yemenis decades ago, particularly since the September 26 Revolution in North Yemen in 1962 against the imamate rule. The Houthis have also resorted to relentless moves to impose their ideological messaging in an attempt to prove that the “Wilaya” is their divine racial right. They claim that they have a political, military, social, and economic mandate to celebrate the day in a big way.

¹ The Houthis and the government reach an agreement for exchanging war prisoners, Swissinfo

This paper is an attempt to shed light on the possibility of reaching a sustainable peace in Yemen even as the Houthis stick to their theory of “divine right” to rule and their notion of superiority. If the IRGY engages with the Houthis for a comprehensive political settlement, it should set forth conditions related to citizenship equality, especially since the Houthis lean towards ethnic discrimination based on their theory of ‘divine selection’ through which they seek to consolidate their clout.

The paper has sought to gather all relevant details of the “racial acts” perpetrated by the Houthis under the garb of “divine selection”. The paper puts forth all available information gathered by South24 Center, including through exclusive interviews and by citing media and human rights reports. The information gathered demonstrates the absence of citizenship equality from the peace agenda – a topic on which the Houthis apparently don’t accept dialogue.

A background on the emergence of the Houthis



A Houthi celebration in the Military Academy in Sanaa on the so-called “Wilaya Day”, July 6, 2023, where the participants held banners on which they wrote “Imam Ali”, referring to Imam Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the fourth of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. (Houthi media)

The Houthi movement grew from an armed group that countered government forces in Saada in 2004 to an “armed militia” seeking to run the state. They managed to launch a coup against the state and bring the densely-populated Northern governorates under their control from September 2014. The group

was not politically known before it created a political entity under the name of ‘Ansar Allah’ during the National Dialogue Conference in 2013. The Houthis managed to consolidate their authority, militarily and politically, by leaning on doctrinal religious notions related to the Twelver Shi’ism, which is practiced in Iran. They introduced these ideas to Yemen’s Zaydi sect, which is considered an extension of Shia Islam and the closest to Sunni Islam. They believe that they are eligible to rule based on the notion of “divine right”, which simply means that God selected a certain race for tasks that can’t be done by others, according to the Houthi theory.²

Going back a little more, the Imamate State was established in North Yemen during two different eras. The first one emerged in the era of Imam Al-Qasim bin Mohammed in 1598 and lasted till the Ottomans came to Yemen in the second half of the 19th Century. The second Imamate state emerged in 1904 during the reign of Imam Yahya bin Hamid al-Din al-Mutawakkil, who is a descendant of the Al-Qasimia family. It lasted for 44 years till the outbreak of the Yemeni Revolution in 1962.³ Currently, the Houthis are seeking to set up the third Imamate State but they are trying to give it the colour of a republic regime. They highlight the importance of the Hashemite families, while disregarding the other components of the Yemeni community -- with the aim to establish total control of the institutions.

In 1991, the Faithful Youth organization was established in some areas of Saada as a forum for cultural activities. This came after its founders defected from ‘The Party of Truth’ (Hizb al-Haqq), which was established in 1990 or after the declaration of Yemeni unity. This was prompted by Badr al-Din al-Houthi, politician and scholar of Zaydi Shia Islam, with an aim to gather the Zaydi scholars in Saada and others under his banner⁴. Gradually, the ‘Faithful Youth’ grew as its leader Badr al-Din al-Houthi and his sons devoted themselves to organize it and attract a big number of young men who mostly belonged to the Hashemite families, the Zaydi sect, the tribes, and dignitaries in Saada. Later, his son Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi was able to expand the activities of the group outside Saada to establish similar centers in several governorates.

² The Houthis and Theory of “Divine Selection”, Artiles. Awsat

³ A Research Study/ The Truth of the Hashemite Affiliation to Ahl al Bayt in Yemen and the their Real Home (Yelive.org)

⁴ The Houthi Movement, the Emergence, the Expansion and the Relationship with Iran- Articles(dd-Sunna.net)

The group built its ideas more broadly upon the so-called "Malazim Al-Houthi" or "the Houthi teachings" (about 60 publications)

comprising of transcriptions of Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi's recorded lectures. He was killed during the first war with the Yemeni army in 2004 and the leadership moved to his younger brother Abdulmalik Al-Houthi, the current leader of the group.⁵

The entire "Houthi teachings" are based on the supremacy of "Ahl al-Bayt" (the Family of the Prophet) and the need to obey them. These include Quranic culture and other issues, especially ideas that match the Iranian approach in belief and doctrine.

On February 13, 2012, the so-called "Zaydi Intellectual and Cultural Document" was proclaimed by the Houthis causing widespread controversy due to its ethnic dimensions based on racial discrimination. The document claimed that "after the death of Prophet Mohammed, his successor Imam was entitled to his cousin, son-in-law, and trustee Commander of the Faithful Ali Ibn Abi Talib". The latter, according to the document, had to be succeeded by his sons Al-Hassan and Al-Hussein and their sons".⁶ This was in effect a rejection of the principle of Shura and the people's right to elect their ruler. The Houthis consider governance as their divine right, and not a secular affair. This pretext allowed the Houthis later to capture power by force.

Despite disagreements among some Zaydi scholars and politicians on many details related to the Houthis and the "Houthi teachings", they believed, especially those who backed the Houthi project, that the continuous disputes among the Zaydi wings in Saada would weaken the Houthis and give their rivals justification to question them, especially since the majority in Saada believed in the Zaydi doctrine and the Imamate state for about 1,000 years. They refused to doubt the main issues on which the 'Al-Hadawiyya' political theory was based, foremost of which is Ahl al Bayt's "divine selection" and the obligatory imamate and limiting it to the "two lineages"⁷ as well as considering this a religious

⁵ The Houthi Writings. A Sectarian Curriculum to Bomb the Yemeni Society and Change its Identity and Ideology (Independent Arabia)

⁶ The Comprehensive National Dialogue in Yemen. The Zaydis' Intellectual and Cultural Document

⁷ The Welaya in the two lineages means to make rule eligible only to the sons and grandsons of Al-Hassan and Al-Hussein (the sons of Imam Ali bin Abi Talib and Fatimah al-Zahra, the daughter of the Prophet Mohammed)

principle. This was also confirmed by the Zaydi intellectual document that "God selected his prophet's Ahl al-Bayt and made them guides of the nation and heirs of Quran till the Hereafter."⁸

Political analyst and writer ⁹ Abdulsattar Al-Shamiri" said: "The Houthi notion is derived from Jarudiyah which is an extremist ideology of Zaydism. It was one of the intellectual jurisprudence problems in the Zaydi doctrine as it engaged in earlier conflicts. However, it turned into a political project in the modern era, especially in the 1980s when Badr al-Din al-Houthi visited Iran and met with a group of Qom references. There, the mentality of rapprochement between the Jarudian and Khomeinist ideas developed. The latter is part of the extremist Shia ideology." Al-Shamiri added that "Shiites are not all Khomeini and that most Shiites don't consider Khomeinism a right idea".

As for the features of the Houthi project, Al-Shamiri explained that it began with the son "Hussein al-Houthi" through his “teachings” and the adoption of the "chant” (the Houthi cry). The project was then taken forward with all forms of Iranian support (intellectual, financial, political, and military later). Bit by bit, the Houthi idea turned into a political project, known as political Zaydism. While Zaydism is a wider term than Houthism, the latter became with all its features a mix of the extremist Jaroudi Zaydi ideology with radical Khomeinist thought. They believe in the concept of the Wali al-Faqih in Iran – or the supreme political and religious authority as vested in the Ayatollah. They sought to replicate the theory of Wali al-Faqih in Yemen. The idea attracted many followers who rallied behind it. They sacrificed and defended it with their blood. Moreover, the Houthi idea began taking more than one turn. They believe there is a guardian jurist who derives his ideas, rule, and references from God through the lost Imam, as known by Shiites. These tangled thoughts have made dismantling the Houthis a hard task.

On the ‘two lineages’ concept of Wilayah, writer and political researcher Adel Al-Ahmadi¹⁰ said: “It is the main pillar of the Zaydi doctrine, as is the case with Shiism in general. However, Zaydis adopt a more extremist approach regarding the political dimension that requires, according to their theory, the presence of

⁸ Al-Hadaweya and the Houthis.. The Imamate in the Two lineages.. Abaad Studies and Research Center

⁹ A previous source

¹⁰ An interview conducted by the author with writer and political analyst Abdulsattar Al-Shamiri on May 20, 2023

an imam from a particular progeny at all times. They consider everyone else beneath him, as an illegal authority because it contradicts the essence of their notion." He added: "Every group stemming from the dynastic Zaydi idea is basically based on this belief. However, demonstrating and declaring this to people depends on their political and military status. When you are in a weak position, you have to wait until you find the opportunity to announce it. This is what exactly happened in the case of the Houthis."

In general, the Houthi notion has been based on the principle of the supremacy of a particular race over others in order to monopolize the imamate and the right of governance. The Iranian support, dedicated to exporting the revolution to Yemen, contributed to building the Houthi religious system. According to the divisions based on the racial and geographical preference of the Houthis, dynastic families descending from the Saada governorate are now the ones that hold the sensitive reins of government, while the Hashemite families residing in the rest of North Yemen come second, while the families that live in the Southern regions come in the lowest positions".¹¹

Moreover, the month of Dhu al-Hijjah (12th month of Islamic calendar) annually represents an opportunity for the Houthis to commemorate the so-called "Al-Ghadir Day" or "Welaya Day". It is a Shia feast that celebrates the day when Prophet Mohammed delivered a speech in which he appointed Imam Ali bin Abi Talib as the guardian of the Muslims after him. Thus, Shiites believe that Prophet Mohammed appointed Ali as a caliph after him. During the days that precede the event, the Houthis collect donations from employees, traders, street vendors, and others¹² despite having been deprived of their salaries for years. They force them to pay sums of money described by many as "illegal" under the name of supporting and commemorating the event.¹³ The Houthis exploit this event to stamp their eligibility to rule.

Aspects of racialism and violations

The first goal of the revolution of September 26, 1962, which took place against the rule of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom in North Yemen, was "liberation from

¹¹An interview conducted by the author with researcher and political analyst Adel Al-Ahmadi on May 20, 2023

¹² Saba news agency affiliated with the Houthis (Twitter)

¹³ The Welaya Day.. A Houthi Tool for More Blackmail against Traders and Street Vendors (Awsat.com)

tyranny and colonialism and their remnants, the establishment of a fair republican rule and the elimination of discrimination and privileges between classes." Indeed, after the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic, racial and class discrimination was removed. Before this, classification among citizens was based on granting specific social positions according to lineage. The highest status was granted to "the master". There was an inferior status such as 'Al-Mazayna' which was a discriminatory term used by some Yemenis to call some segments of people with some manual professions such as barbers, butchers, and servants. There were more inferior classes including black people (the servants or the marginalized) and those who sing in weddings (Al-Dawashin).

The Houthis launched a coup on September 21, 2014, a date they deliberately chose because of its symbolic and historical significance -- to recall the day when Imam Al-Badr bin Ahmed Hamid Al-Din was installed as the Imam of Yemen, days before the outbreak of the 1962 September revolution.¹⁴ Since then, many Houthi social ideas based on ethnic discrimination returned to North Yemen. The idea of the "master race" has reemerged as well as professing one dynasty to be superior to others. Besides, belittling other professions and exploiting black people as human shields in the war too reemerged. For example, in July 2020, the Houthis buried 715 corpses claiming they belong to anonymous people. However, human rights sources confirmed later that these corpses were of Yemenis from the marginalized classes and African refugees. The Houthis used them in several fighting fronts.¹⁵ Furthermore, many political rights of the Yemeni people have been revoked since the Houthi coup in 2014. The citizens are barred from holding some of the higher positions as they are reserved for a certain race.

In June 2020, the Houthis issued an executive order for imposing the 'Zakat Law', or the so-called 'Fifth Law, which citizens decried as an example of racialism. This law allows the Houthi families and the Hashemite dynasty to tax a fifth of all money, properties, and privileges owned by Yemenis. The 'Fifth Law' is the most distinctive feature of the Shiite Islamic economy. It imposes a 20% tax (one-fifth) on natural resources for all followers of the doctrine. It also collects a fifth of war spoils, minerals, treasures, divind (fishes), land, and profits

¹⁴ A brigadier in the Guards reveals why the Houthis selected September 21 to invade Sanaa(alraipress.com)

¹⁵ The Houthis deeply persecute the marginalized(awsat.com)

including trade earnings and salaries of employees or workers. The IRGY described this law as being “based on dynastical and racial discrimination” and that it not only reveals the deep Houthi intention, to not only tear the fabric of society but also their rejection of citizenship equality. It shows to what extent the Houthis belittle people, the world, and all peace calls¹⁶ and opportunities.

Moreover, during the first years of the coup, the Houthis appointed the so-called “Houthi supervisors” in all public institutions. They are considered the actual ruler of each public or private institution with powers which sometimes exceeded that of ministers and the President. Hashemite figures, mostly from Saada, were appointed as supervisors. Some of them committed crimes against people akin to terrorist crimes.¹⁷ These crimes by Houthi supervisors have violated the rights of hundreds of women in the areas under their control. The case of the Yemeni model ‘Intisar Al-Hammadi’ is not the only one. (She has been jailed for five years by Houthi authorities after being convicted of “indecent”).

Noura Al-Jarwi, the Head of Women for Peace Alliance¹⁸, said that the current number of women detained in Houthi prisons is about 2,000.

Commenting on how the Houthis racially discriminate against women, she said: “They replaced 90% of school principals and deputy managers with Hashemite women in the areas under the Houthi control. Only those belonging to the Hashemite families are released from jail, and those below them who belong to Yemeni tribes remain in prisons.” Regarding indecent assaults, Al-Jarwi said: “The Houthis don't assault Hashemite women but they do that to women of other tribes. They tarnish their reputation and force them to take virginity checks, besides committing other heinous attacks against women and girls in the Houthi areas”.

This is in addition to the systematic violation of the rights of women and girls, including their right to freedom of expression, health, and work. Moreover, discrimination against them has spread through restricting the freedom of movement, especially in the last two years, by imposing the presence of

¹⁶ 20% of Yemen Wealth in the Pockets of the Hashemites.. What is the Fifth Law Passed by the Houthis(raseef22.net)

¹⁷ A tweet by Prime Minister of the legitimate government Maeen Abdulmalik, published on June 8, 2020

¹⁸ A Houthi supervisor decapitated an old man in a mosque in Dhamar(alarabiya.net)

"mahram" (male guardian) for their movement.¹⁹ They deal with women as if they are incapacitated. Such a condition has become a sort of discrimination based on gender.

Additionally, racism was similarly seen in the systematic bombing of the homes of opponents of the Houthi group, especially in the early years of the war. However, the percentage decreased due to the influence of human rights organizations and local civil societies which documented hundreds of houses that the group got rid of. For example, the Houthis bombed more than 810 houses in 17 Yemeni governorates between 2014-2020.²⁰ The house bombings were not a direct result of battles but rather took place in the context of deliberate campaigns using booby-trapping and dynamite. In addition to terrorizing their political rivals and acting as a message to anyone who contravenes their ideas or instructions, the bombing matter is linked to their dominant historical vision to cut off any attempts by the opponent families to return to their homes. This is something that was always practiced during the decades of the Imamate rule in Yemen on anyone who opposed the idea of being ruled by the Hashemite dynasty. According to historian researcher Bilal Al-Tayeb",²¹ Imam Bin Abdullah Bin Al-Hamza (1166-1217) pursued the Al Mutarifa sect for two years. He committed horrific crimes against them, killing tens of thousands, capturing their women, enslaving their children, demolishing their homes and mosques, destroying their farms, and confiscating their property. This was done despite the Al- Mutarifa being the first to pledge allegiance to him as an imam and as one of the Zaydi sects such as the Al-Hadaweya to which he belonged. However, he decided to eliminate them because of their disagreement with him regarding the religious legitimacy and pre-eminence accorded to the "two lineages" practice, which is considered by Al-Hadaweya as a condition of Islam.

The Houthis, as a movement, are known for the glorification of Hadawi's thought. They seek to reproduce it through a series of racial practices. They only glorify the Hashemite soldiers killed during fighting within their ranks. They

¹⁹ An interview conducted by the author with Noura Al-Jarwi, the Head of Women for Peace Alliance on June 27, 2023

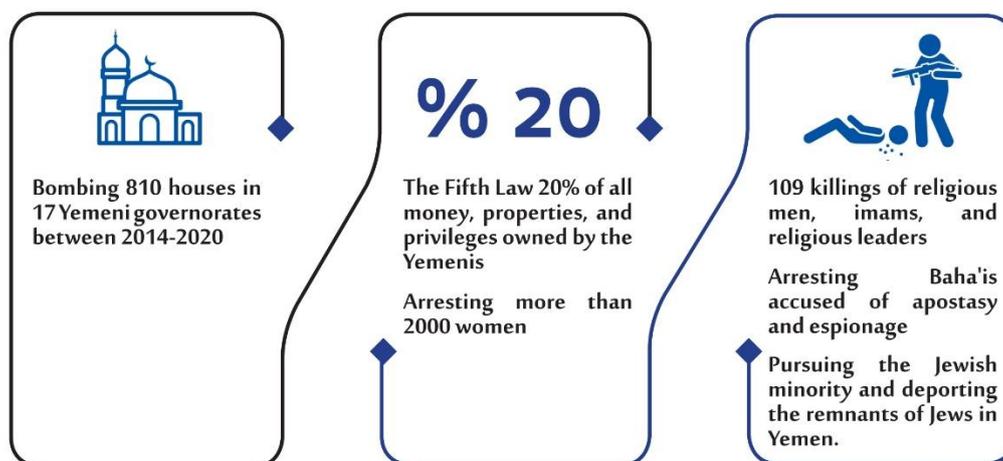
²⁰ Yemen: the Houthis tighten the screws on women by imposing the presence of "mahram"(amnesty.org)

²¹ A human rights body: The Houthis bombed 810 houses in 17 Yemeni governorates (alarabiya.net)

honor them at the official events and by installing their pictures in galleries.²² Many families of soldiers who are killed but don't belong racially to the group have expressed their resentment at this obvious racial and class discrimination. These discriminatory practices occur at the war front and during the burials and funerals or even during the granting of financial and food privileges. This is similarly seen during their dealing with war prisoners. The Houthis give priority to those who belong to the Hashemite families in the exchange deals. The other war prisoners are not given any attention and are not included in such exchange deals except if there are long exchange lists. The Spokesman of the negotiating government delegation for war exchange²³ previously said: “The Houthis deny much of their war prisoners. This is due to their indifference to their fate.”

Moreover, the local organizations that operate in the geographical scope of the group's domination, and are run by Hashemite persons, are not subjected to closure or inquiry as long as they serve the survival of the Houthi idea or conceal their human rights violations or at least mitigate their severity. Furthermore, other local organizations are also subjected to checking of the loyalty of their founders through recommendations from leaders in the group according to informed local sources.

The Houthi violations for religious reasons



²² A Reading in the book “the Maze” authored by historian researcher Bilal Al-Tayeb (ydn.news)

²³ The Houthis transformed the biggest square in Sanaa into a gallery for the photos of their killed clansmen (awsat.com)

Persecuting minorities

Since the Houthi group seized control of Sanaa in 2014, their practices have endangered religious freedom and belief. They have carried out violent discriminatory and racist practices against religious and ethnic minorities in Yemen. This was not only confined to the period of Houthi control. It goes back more than 15 years when the extremist group began to pursue the Jewish minority in Saada, the stronghold of the militias. They expelled the Jews from the governorate and seized their assets although this minority existed only in a small village and in limited numbers.²⁴ The same applies to the rest of the other minorities, such as the Baha’is, the Ismailis, the refugees, and the marginalized from the countries of the Horn of Africa in different regions of North Yemen.

On December 5, 2022, the US Department of State in its Report on International Religious Freedom, on the section on Yemen classified the Houthis as a rights violator group along with a number of organizations in the Arab region and Africa, including Al-Nusra Front, Boko Haram, and ISIS.²⁵ The report said that “since 2015, the Houthis “had committed more than 3,000 abuses against mosques and other places of worship and “were involved in 109 killings of religious men, imams, and religious leaders. Incidents of religious repression in Houthi-controlled areas increased by 52 percent from 2020 to 2021”. According to the same report, “the Houthis recruited children under the age of 18 with an aim at inculcating Houthi militia’s ideas in the children’s minds and swaying them into the importance of fighting in the ranks of the group”.

Back to the Yemeni Constitution²⁶, the post-unity state between South and North confirmed that Islamic law is the source of all legislation in 1989. However, it stressed that it works according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A special law for the punishment of apostasy was added after 1994 to satisfy some Islamic parties as part of a political settlement between them and the Saleh (Ali Abdullah Saleh of North Yemen) regime as this penalty didn’t exist before.²⁷ This exemplified the penetration of the extremist ideology in the religious groups that participated in invading South Yemen. This was despite the

²⁴ The Spokesman of the negotiating government delegation “The Houthis deny much of their war prisoners. The deal includes exchanging corpses also(france24.net)

²⁵ The Houthis Break Record numbers in the violations against minorities(awsat.com)

²⁶ Yemen-United States Department of State

²⁷ The Constitution of the Yemen Republic (Yemen-nic.info)

capital, Aden, in particular, hosting many different religions and sects. There were many religious and historical facilities in Aden, such as mosques, churches, and Jewish and Hindu temples. However, after the 1994 civil war, many of them were demolished.

In late May 2023, Houthi gunmen violently attacked the peaceful annual meetings of the Baha’is in Sanaa which aimed to establish a body that takes care of the spiritual and material needs of their community. The meeting was held in the house of a Baha’i figure. They arrested more than 17 of the participants including five women. The Houthi group also raided other houses and seized their assets and documents. Meanwhile, over 24 persons belonging to the Baha’i faith who entered Yemen in the early 1940s are being tried for espionage and apostasy. Baha’i human rights activist Rawhiya Thabet,²⁸ who was previously detained in the Houthi National Security Prison and was forcibly deported from Yemen along with her family, told South24 Center: “These ongoing attacks are just an example of the Houthi systematic persecution of Baha’is from 2014 until today.”

She added that “the ongoing and clear targeting of Baha’is and their desperate attempts to obliterate their cultural and social identity are part of the Houthis’ endeavors to eliminate Yemeni Baha’is from the core of the Yemeni society which historically and culturally embraces diversity. Although there are no accurate statistics, the number of Yemeni Baha’is is estimated to be some thousands.” Commenting on the suffering of Baha’i individuals and groups, she said: “We are witnessing, with deep sorrow and great concern, the escalation of confiscation of their money through illegal and unjust ways, as well as usurping their rights and restricting their sources of livelihood. This is in addition to the closure of licensed social and developmental institutions that serve the community as well as looting their assets. The Baha’is and people who deal with them are exposed to financial harassment and the freezing of their banking transactions. Arrests, interrogations and torture have become a grim reality for them.”

Thabet has accused the Houthis of committing flagrant violations of human rights and the principles of justice and freedom. She believes that this is opposite to the endeavors of the Arab region to achieve peace and peaceful coexistence among its peoples and different sects. She added: “We can’t remain silent in the

²⁸ Yemeni Baha’is.. A Religious Minority Seeking Peace while the Houthis are Hounding them, Jan 20, 2018(DW)

face of these flagrant violations of human rights, oppressing the Baha'is and depriving them of their basic rights in Yemen. It is a stain on our collective humanitarian conscience. In order to improve the level of human rights for all Yemenis, our moral duty requires us, including individuals, rights organizations, journalists, media figures and the international community, to stand firmly behind the Baha'is to confront merciless Houthi oppression and persecution. We have to unite to end those crimes against humanity and respect the core rights of all Yemenis. Otherwise, it will be a betrayal of our joint humanity.”

Eman Homaïd,²⁹ Head of the Insaf Center for Defending Freedoms and Minorities, said: “The violations and persecutions against minorities are practised by groups and militias with multiple ideologies and loyalties, which do not accept the existence of those who are ideologically different from them. Since the Houthis took control of Sanaa in 2014, violations against minorities have exacerbated; first as individual cases and then as systematic operations that target all Baha'is. The latter began with wide operations of arrests and trials and later, the Houthi Supreme House of Justice issued the so-called ‘black list’ which includes 24 Baha'is accused of apostasy, espionage, and communication with Israel. This included prominent Baha'i Hamed Haidara who was sentenced to death in 2018 by a Houthi court.”

The advocacy and condemnations by international rights organizations and activists have continued. This pushed the head of the Houthi Political Council, Mahdi Al-Mashat, to issue a pardon decree. However, it is conditional on the expulsion of the Baha'is out of Yemen, according to Homaïd. Indeed, seven Baha'is were deported on a UN plane. She concluded: “The Houthis didn't only deport the Baha'i minority but they did the same to the remnants of Jews in Yemen. They apparently insist that the Yemeni territories remain under their control with one color which is the Houthi color.” She believes that “whatever the differences in opinion, color or creed, the first sign of peace begins with the granting of rights to persecuted minorities”.

²⁹ An interview conducted by the author with Baha'i activist Rawhiya Thabet on May 30 2023

Is the government heading toward a peace that lacks citizenship?

If we want to speak about citizenship, it can be said that it is a legal relationship among the community members on one hand and between them and the authority on the other hand. According to the Yemen Republic Constitution, Articles 41-42 about the Basic Rights and Duties of Citizens stipulate that: "Citizens are all equal in rights and duties. Every citizen has the right to participate in the political, economic, and cultural life of the country. The state shall guarantee freedom of thought and expression of opinion in speech, writing and photography within the limits of the law."³⁰

While nations move forward and achieve progress by activating citizenship equality on the ground, in terms of rights and duties without distinction or discrimination due to peoples' origins, religions or sects, the situation in Yemen has degenerated to its lowest levels. This is seen in particular with regard to the issue of ethnic and class discrimination practised by the Houthis. However, one of the interesting aspects is that the international community ignores the Houthis' "racist and discriminatory" ideas, despite international laws that prohibit this, and despite the group's massive violations against the people of Yemen. Turning a blind eye to their violations is not limited to the international community or the UN Envoy to Yemen, but includes the Yemeni government which apparently accepts dealing with the Houthis despite the group's discriminatory policies against citizens. The stance of the Yemeni government towards the Houthis is somewhat similar to America's position, rejecting the idea of al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan by fighting them and losing billions of dollars in their wars in the process. Later, the US accepted the two Islamist groups as a *fait accompli* and reconciled with the idea of their presence in Afghanistan. According to Al-Shamiri: "The Yemeni government is unable to impose the conditions of the civil state, citizenship equality, and the constitution. Its military position is not strong. It doesn't have an army by which it can protect the constitution and these ideas. Thus, it is not unexpected that the government is heading towards an incomplete peace agreement which gives the Houthis a military presence on the ground as well as allows them to spread their intellectual presence.""

In December 2021, while participating in the Rome Forum for Mediterranean Dialogues in its seventh session, Yemeni Foreign Minister Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak spoke at a special session about the future of Yemen: "The Houthi militia should give up the notion of their divine right to rule. They should stick to

³⁰ An interview conducted by the author with Iman Humaid, the Head of Insaf Center to Defend Freedoms and Minorities on May 25, 2023

citizenship equality as a constitutional article and a basic condition for sustainable peace”.³¹ Such statements seem strong and decisive. However, the government’s continued tepid reaction toward any Houthi violations suggests that it will go for a peace deal that has no conditions related to this aspect, especially in the face of persistent regional pressure.

Political researcher Saleh Al-Dawil believes that “The Yemeni government has revealed a strategic inability to deal with this challenge. The influence of the Northern component in the IRGY is politically and militarily weak. The reason for this weakness is that the political and ideological awareness of the Northern areas is based on the idea that the rule is limited to the ‘two lineages’ from the Ahl al Bayt and that this is part of religion.”³² The government will likely accept the conditions offered by the Houthis because most elites are dominated by sectarian Zaydis. Their disagreements with the Houthis are over governance not over the basics and the branches of the doctrine”.

In this regard, it is important to state that the presence of extremist religious movements in Yemen serves the Houthi group. This was confirmed in several stages of the conflict. Other liberal or leftist Yemeni parties reject the idea of political Islam. However, the Houthis believe that any party opposing the presence of political Islam is opposed to them as well. The Houthi collaboration and identification with extremist Islamic ideologies will help to strengthen their influence. Thus, the Islamic groups despite their different ideologies are allied together for their self-interest. When there is a need to protect themselves, they will ally with others. When the role of others comes to an end, they will return to their internal conflicts.

Accordingly, the IRGY needs to set conditions and guarantees before embarking on any peace process with the Houthis. They have to stress on the importance of “citizenship equality” and the guarantee of “political rights” as well as rule out any elements that contradict that. Political researcher Adel Al-Ahmadi believes that “the essence, not the appearance is more important. Political solutions usually require more flexibility but in a way that guarantees the minimum desired goals in any peace agreement. The answer to the question of how this can happen will be related to the content and context of the peace agreement as well as the most prominent obstacles and challenges. However, every Yemeni, except those who believe that their presence is tied to the war, wants a peace that achieves the minimum degree of rights, brings displaced persons

³¹ The Constitution of the Yemen Republic (Yemen-nic.info)

³² The government: The Houthi commitment to citizenship equality is a main condition to end the war in Yemen(pressn.net)

back to their cities, and includes clear and applicable guarantees”.

A peace deal in this form between the IRGY and the Houthis could lead to retaliatory measures against re-settled people, especially those who have opposed the Houthis due to their racial and class discrimination, unless these sensitive issues are resolved in advance as part of clear governmental or maybe international conditions. Throughout Yemeni modern history, no actions against political assassinations have been taken. The judiciary has not decided on any such acts, or even issued a mere condemnation or revealed those responsible for the political crimes. By the way, these acts are not limited to the Houthis. There has been mobilization against all Yemeni Hashemites by some youth movements that emerged as a reaction against the Houthi coup, such as ‘Al-Aqyal’ (which is not an institutional movement and has no known leadership. Its activities and promoting it are limited to a number of social media activists). The Houthis and their affiliates may be subjected to similar reprisals, and this matter on both sides could have serious political and social repercussions.

The Houthis know well the points of weakness in the IRGY and how to exploit these and how they would affect the region, especially with Saudi Arabia accepting the Houthi conditions, that clearly paves the way for more. Thus, it won’t be a surprise following a political settlement deal in Yemen to see the Houthi participation in presidential elections along with other political parties. However, the important question is what will be the form of these elections? It is more likely that the Houthis will select a presidential nominee to compete with rivals. However, their nominee will be inferior to the authority and powers of ‘Abdulmalik Al- Houthi’ as a “master”, which is not derived from elections or the constitution. It is the same model currently in practice, with regard to the Head of the Houthi Supreme Political Council, Mahdi Al-Mashat.

The Houthis will follow the Iranian model of elections. In Iran, there is a religious reference (Khomeini) while in Yemen among the Houthis there is a religious reference (the master). Regardless of the results of elections, whether in favor of the Houthis or IRGY party, the Houthis will stick to the need to get the sanctity of “their master” as a religious reference who grants political powers. The IRGY’s acceptance of the status quo means acknowledging ‘the master’s’ supremacy over everyone. In such a scenario, what is the need therefore for parties to compete politically and engage in an electoral process that would eventually lead to the withdrawal of mandate from an institution to an individual? This could eventually lead to new waves of violence and raise the conflict to more dangerous levels.

For achieving peace

There is no exaggeration in saying that the Houthi coup against the state isn't the main dilemma in Yemen. The dilemma is the permanence of the Houthi idea related to the divine right to rule. There have been many coups throughout modern history that led to ideas being strengthened and ideologies dying out and vice versa. However, it seems that the dispute in Yemen is a very complicated matter, especially as it is related to the Houthi fanaticism regarding their race and placing an aura of sanctity over it. They take this as allowing them to control everything in the light of their notion of the divine right. They have thus erected many barriers between themselves and the rest of the people. This is not only related to the fanaticism of the group itself. It is also linked to the presence of a significant percentage in Yemen who serve the idea of “sanctifying the Hashemite race”, even though they don't belong to it. They accept the sanctification of the Houthis' notion of divine right, along with "ethnic discrimination" and "dynasty". This is a major dilemma that cannot be resolved without mandatory constitutional laws for citizens encompassing all their differences. This would guarantee accepting the concepts of democracy, general elections, and popular will. These will serve as the determinants to achieve institutional governance which is not based on claims of divine rights.

It is important for international and local parties that support peace efforts in Yemen to discuss the issue of a sustainable peace with guarantees of citizenship equality. Moreover, the continued disregard of the deep fissures in the Yemen issue may lead the peace process to collapse. The Houthis set a condition to postpone discussions on the military arrangements, to after the political understanding is achieved. This suggests that the Houthis have a preconceived plan of action in case of the failure of the political talks. Therefore, if the IRGY goes for peace talks by demanding the basic precondition for guaranteeing equal political rights to citizens and their participation in the political process in the future, (away from the dark shadow of the concept of "ethnic discrimination" and "the divine right to rule"), it will definitely help in resolving the whole peace dilemma in Yemen.

Recommendations

Accordingly, to attain sustainable peace, especially in the part related to citizenship equality, the paper proposes a number of recommendations as below:

- It is important that the Houthis issue a document in which they renounce concept of the ‘two lineages’ ‘divine right to rule’ and their notion of racial superiority, as a condition for governance. This would serve as a prelude for them to enter a peace process that guarantees equal political rights for all citizens.
- Any peace process should include constitutional guarantees that criminalize claiming political privileges on the basis of race. It is also important that the political agreement to ensure "citizenship equality" conditions should have the signatures of all parties to the conflict, foremost of whom are the Houthis.
- The IRGY should set a precondition that Houthi leader, Abdulmalik Al-Houthi, must leave Yemen, especially as his followers believe in his "divine right to rule". Since 2004, there have been generations of Houthis who have been brought up on this notion of devoutness. The continuous presence in Yemen of who they consider as the ruler and the religious reverence associated with him, may endanger the issue of peace in Yemen.
- There is a need to put in place strict laws that prevent reprisals on the basis of race without damaging the principle of transitional justice. There are accumulated violations by the Houthi policies which harmed many people on the ground. This has created a building up of resentment within a wide section against certain lineages and vice versa. Therefore, it is important to criminalize violators and to hold them accountable through the judiciary and transitional justice institutions.
- Education curricula in the Houthi areas should be amended, especially as they attempted to spread the idea of ethnic differentiation among a large

number of children in schools, scientific institutions, and summer camps. The discriminatory policy upon which the Houthi idea is based and which led them to commit crimes and violations requires accountability and international sanctions as they violated international laws and charters.

- It is important to enact laws that require the return of minorities who were deported by the Houthis and prevent any harm caused to them. These legislations should guarantee all their rights, including enjoying their own cultures or professing their religion or performing their religious rites. Additionally, they must be compensated for the moral and material harm they suffered, as per the principles of transitional justice.

- The political agreement should include women's rights and freedoms and ensure that they won't be subjected to any discrimination based on gender under religious and sectarian pretexts. They have to be guaranteed the right of political participation by the different parties of the conflict in Yemen.

- There is a need to support and encourage local initiatives working towards enhancing toleration, accepting coexistence, and nonviolence. This would help in merging those who suffered from religious or ethnic discrimination with the community again.

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The Peace Dilemma in Yemen: **The Houthi Claim of “Divine Selection” Rule**

Farida Ahmed

Executive Director of South24 Center for News and Studies

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