

# From Power to Opposition, Coup and War: Transformations of the General People's Congress in 40 Years

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# Table of Contents

Summary .....	3
Founding the GPC .....	3
From Coalitions to Single-Party Rule .....	5
Revolution and War .....	7
One Party, Multiple Factions One Party, Multiple Factions .....	9
The Saleh-Houthi Conflict .....	12
The GPC in the Present Debacle .....	13
Southern People's Congress .....	15
The Political Bureau of National Resistance .....	15
Other Factions .....	16
Future of the GPC .....	17
Conclusion .....	19
References .....	21

## Summary

Forty years after founding the General People's Congress (GPC), observers raise questions about the future of the party in light of the current divisions within its ranks, five years after the murder of the GPC founder and leader, former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, following the collapse of his alliance with the Houthis.

This study attempts to trace key transformations in GPC history over four decades, during which the country witnessed major historical and political events. The GPC – the ruling party in most of this period – was predominantly present and affected and was affected by those transformations, beginning with the establishment of the GPC as a political umbrella organization encompassing diverse intellectual currents and political forces, through the declaration of unity and introducing political pluralism and the multi-party system. The GPC held a series of alliances, first with the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) and then with Islah Party. It did not take it long to dominate the electoral scene and win an absolute majority in the House of Representative elections. During this phase, the party monopolized power until the outbreak of the revolution in February 2011, when President Saleh was forced to surrender his powers to Vice-president, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi. A 50-50 government of the GPC and the opposition was formed before the Houthi takeover in late 2014, and the outbreak of the large-scale war that divided the GPC into two main factions, one allied with the Houthis and the other supporting the legitimate government.

This study attempts to anticipate the future of the GPC in light of its current status and in view of the several factors affecting the political scene, both specifically internal party factors and national ones generally.

## Founding the GPC

On August 24, 1982, the General People's Congress was established in former northern Yemen (before unity), following a political dialogue in which most Yemeni political forces took part. The GPC comprised the various intellectual and political forces and currents in its ranks. Political pluralism was banned by the constitution at the time,

so the GPC encompassed all clandestine currents that operated in secrecy. The GPC emerged as the ruling party, headed by President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who seized power in northern Yemen in July 1978.

The GPC did not have any special organizational or ideological character. It served as a political umbrella for all political forces: Islamic, leftist and nationalist alike. In addition, the GPC included numerous independent figures, military leaders, tribal sheikhs and merchants who benefited from its broad and loose structure.

It is noteworthy that the GPC was founded as President Saleh's regime began to experience stability in the early 1980s, especially after Saleh's agreement with the ruling regime in southern Yemen to end armed conflicts. Saleh undertook to accommodate armed opponents supported by the Aden regime and all political currents, including the leftist movement that launched offensives against the Sana'a regime in the central region of the country.

The armed conflicts that took place in the central region in the late 1970s revealed some weakness in the structure of the Sana'a regime and its military, that goes hand in hand with an intellectual and political vacuum, as opposed to the Aden regime's ideological and political project which adopted Marxism and sought to propagate and impose it on both sides of the borders. This constituted a sufficient ground for finding a comprehensive political formula that bridged this gap and filled the void. Therefore, based on President Saleh's direct orders and support, dialogue and meetings were commenced. The aim was to create an intellectual and political project and an organizational framework that brings together political forces on the basis of shared foundations and common views.

A National Dialogue Committee was formed and assumed the task of preparing the draft National Charter, which would serve as the theoretical guide of the overarching political framework. The General People's Congress was held in August 1982, and approved the draft National Charter. Founders of the GPC included political figures, independent intellectuals and other figures from diverse ideological backgrounds and political affiliations.

Dr. Abdulmalik Mansour Al-Masa'abi, one of the most prominent founders of the GPC, states: "The General People's Congress at the time met the needs of the new political system that we were working on. The GPC came in response to the needs of the Yemeni society at the time." <sup>1</sup>

In addition to the party chairman, the leadership structure of the GPC includes the General Committee, which is the highest organizational organ of the party, and the General Secretariat comprising the Secretary-General and his assistants. The party also has a Permanent Committee which serves as the party parliament. Initially there was only a national permanent committee, but later permanent committees were created at the branch (governorate) levels.

On the organizational level, the GPC organized a number of general conferences and special sessions, starting with the First General Conference in 1982 and ending with the Seventh General Conference in 2005, as well as the Extraordinary Conference in 2006, all of which were held in Sana'a, except for the seventh conference, which was held in Aden.

## From Coalitions to Single-Party Rule

This state of affairs persisted until the Yemeni unification was declared in May 1990. The ruling GPC in northern Yemen entered into a bilateral alliance with the Yemeni Socialist Party that was ruling southern Yemen. Based on this alliance, both parties shared positions and government institutions during the transitional period that followed the declaration of unification. As many members of the GPC were affiliated with other political forces and parties, most of them left the GPC and joined their parties when political pluralism was introduced. However, the GPC retained a strong base of popular support, especially encompassing non-partisan figures, and military and civil leaders in the northern governorates. Moreover, the GPC succeeded in containing a large number of the population of southern and eastern governorates, particularly those who were affected by the rise of the socialist party to power, such as the sons of sultans and princes who lost their positions after independence of southern Yemen from British colonialism in 1967.

The transitional period ended with the parliamentary elections held in April 1993, which resulted in the GPC winning more than 120 of the 301 seats, the Islah Party winning 63 seats, and the Socialist Party coming in the third place with 56 seats.

The three parties formed a coalition government and entered into parliamentary coordination, but their democratic honeymoon lasted only for a few months before differences began to surface. Differences soon snowballed into a political crisis in late 1993, and culminated in a war between the partners of the Unification Agreement (the GPC and the YSP). Saleh and his allies were able to decisively win the war which lasted for two months. In the post-war phase, the GPC and the Islah party entered into a bilateral coalition, which lasted for nearly three years. In the parliamentary elections held in April 1997, the GPC managed to achieve a landslide victory. The Islah Party exited power and the GPC unilaterally formed the government and exercised absolute control over the state.

For the GPC, the 1997 elections were the beginning of a unilateral rule. Several subsequent electoral rounds followed and all of them were won by the GPC, starting with the first presidential elections in 1999, local authority elections in 2001, parliamentary elections in 2003 and the second presidential elections in 2006, with this latter being the last mass elections held in Yemen, except for the parliamentary by-elections in a number of electoral districts in 2009.

The GPC unilaterally ruled over Yemen since 1997. However, its rule was characterized by a failure chain, including the persistent failure of its successive governments, the low performance of state institutions, and the dismal failure in fighting corruption and achieving financial and administrative reform, in addition to failure in the security, development and provision of services. Moreover, the various rounds of dialogue between the GPC and the opposition parties that joined within the framework of the Joint Meeting Parties reached a dead end. All these developments led to a series of successive political and economic crises manifested in the price doses policy due to lifting government subsidies of oil derivatives. These crises were further intensified by the outbreak of the war in Saada and the escalation of the popular secessionist movement in the southern governorates.

Nevertheless, the GPC remained an attractive haven for those greedy for getting a share of the spoils of power in terms of jobs, privileges, and other benefits, especially in light of GPC absolute control over all state institutions and its monopoly of public office and official media. In this way, the GPC became mostly a gateway for achieving private gains for those who joined it. This patronage system was more facilitated by the fact that GPC affiliation cost members nothing in terms of intellectual and ideological commitment in return for the benefits a member could garner due to his membership. The GPC espouses only a general discourse that is easy to partake to, not to mention its close association with the personality of its founder, President Saleh, which presupposes the members' personal loyalty to the president more than loyalty to the party. This is expressed by a GPC leader, who states: "The Congress Party is associated with President Saleh alone, and those affiliated with the party are merely looking for spoils and private gains." <sup>2</sup>

According to Abdul-Malik Mansour, one of the GPC founders, "many goals of the GPC were achieved, but this did not last due to several factors that combined to make the GPC a mere public platform, while all its leaders built their own organizations." <sup>3</sup>

## Revolution and War

Due to these internal crises and to external circumstances, the Yemeni popular revolution erupted in early 2011, demanding the overthrow of the Saleh regime. The GPC was violently shaken as huge numbers of its members, at the leadership and grassroots levels, including top military leaders, politicians, ambassadors and ministers, dissented and joined the revolution. However, the GPC under Saleh's leadership managed to wither the storm, and managed to land on both feet over time. It soon indulged into maneuvering with the political forces, taking advantage of the stalemate that dominated the political scene a few months after the outbreak of the revolution, until Saudi Arabia and the other GCC countries intervened and exerted efforts towards reaching a political settlement in the country. Indeed, Saudi efforts payed as the parties to the crisis signed the mechanism of transfer of power based on which Saleh surrendered his powers to vice-president, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, and a national accord government divided equally between the GPC and the opposition was formed. The agreement also provided for organizing a comprehensive national dialogue conference in which various Yemeni political forces would take part.

Despite the assurances by former president Saleh and his party leaders to support President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who was considered the second man in the GPC, since he held the position of First Deputy Chairman and Secretary-General of the GPC, Saleh's statements in his media and public meetings, and the coverage of the media loyal to him, were evidently unsympathetic to the new authority, in which the GPC held more than 50% of portfolios. This stance surfaced as early as March 2012, just a few days after President Hadi assumed his office following the consensual elections that were held on February 21, 2012, in accordance with the Transfer of Power Agreement (the Gulf Initiative), which provided Saleh and his supporters with immunity from any legal accountability for any acts during his tenure as president. The Immunity Law was passed by Parliament in January 2012.

The National Dialogue Conference was held in the duration March 2013 to January 2014. The GPC and its allies - five small parties - participated in this event and had the lion's share of representatives in the conference, 112 members out of a total number of 565 members. Participants agreed on a set of proposed solutions to the various problems and issues inflicting the country, including political conflicts and obstacles to building the state, in addition to consensus on the form of the state and laying the necessary foundations in this respect, particularly the constitution. A committee was set up to prepare a draft constitution and started working on this task.

By the end of the National Dialogue Conference, the pace of events accelerated, and things took a different course, especially as the Iranian-backed armed Shiite Houthi group began to expand outside its base and control new areas in Saada governorate. The Houthis fought a series of wars aimed at sweeping areas in the northern governorates, benefiting from Iranian support, which included expertise, armament and training. They took advantage of the conflicts and intrigues among the various political factions. Their incursion culminated in their takeover of the capital, Sana'a, in late 2014, and controlling state institutions, including the army, the security forces, the Central Bank of Yemen and all other state resources.



During the period of Houthi militia's consolidation of its control, early signs of division in the ranks of the GPC were emerging. While some GPC elements participated in the legitimate government which was under Houthi attacks, a large segment of the party, led by former President Ali Saleh, took part in attacking the government and provided political and media support to the Houthis. Some GPC leaders also joined the Houthi movement. It turns out that Saleh supported the Houthis to irritate his opponents. His alliance with the Houthis was also partially an effort in his embattled attempt to return to power, even by concluding an alliance with the group that launched six wars against his regime between 2004 and 2010.

In November 2014, the UN Security Council passed a resolution imposing sanctions on GPC leader, Ali Saleh, and two Houthi leaders on charges of obstructing a peaceful settlement and threatening peace and security. Immediately, the pro-Saleh faction of GPC leadership dismissed Hadi and his political counselor, Abdulkareem Al-Iryani, from their positions in the party, where the former served as deputy chairman and secretary-general of the GPC, and the latter as deputy chairman of the GPC. Leadership of the GPC accused President Hadi of being behind the UN Security Council resolution.<sup>4</sup>

After the Houthis took control of Sana'a, Saleh's alliance with the Houthis became more evident, especially in the wake of the Security Council resolution that classified Saleh and Houthi leaders among the obstacles to political settlement. When the war broke out and the Saudi-led coalition intervened in support of the legitimate government in March 2015, Saleh and his supporters who allied with the Houthis became a target of coalition raids, especially since they constituted a substantial component of the Houthi forces. On the other hand, some GPC leaders declared their support for President Hadi and the internationally recognized government against the Houthi coup.

## One Party, Multiple Factions

Indications of division within the GPC appeared for the first time after the transfer of power by Hadi was instated as president. The GPC began to appear as if it were a two-headed entity, one ruling and the other opposing.

Hadi represented the first head, and Saleh represented the second one. This division was reflected at the party leadership and grassroots levels. Whereas some leading figures chose to support President Hadi, others joined the Houthi movement, and worked hard to undermine the political settlement, overthrow the government and thwart the Gulf Initiative while maintaining that they were combatting what they called "Saudi tutelage". They received open Iranian support, through which Tehran sought to target its opponents in Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states.

Although the Houthi movement targeted the government and the new president, its rhetoric was mostly directed against the Islah Party and its allies represented by the tribes and military leaders who supported the revolution in 2011. Therefore, Saleh found in the Houthis his long-sought goal, because they would willingly undermine his opponents: the Islah party and its allies, who supported the revolution, particularly the prominent military commander, Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, and Al-Ahmar family, the sheikhs of Hashid tribe.

Clashes between government forces and the Houthis, who benefited from the Iranian external support and the internal support provided by Saleh's supporters, escalated. However, the declared GPC position remained one of neutrality in what was considered to be a conflict between "political and military factions" even when the battles between the army and the Houthis were being fought in the immediate vicinity of the capital, Sana'a. In its statements, the GPC continued to call on the "Yemeni Gathering for Reform [Islah Party] and Ansar Allah [the Houthis] to act rationally reason and avoid fighting"<sup>5</sup> while asserting that "they stand at the same distance from all parties."<sup>6</sup>

Although Saleh adopted an evasive position, directly supportive of the Houthis at times, and indirectly at others, some GPC leaders, such as former governor of Aden, Abdul Aziz bin Habtoor, adopted an anti-Houthi position and expressed their rejection of the alliance with the Houthis. Bin Habtoor took the initiative to organize a meeting of the governors in Aden to adopt a rejectionist attitude towards the Houthi coup in the name of the local authorities of the various governorates. Bin Habtoor, however, later changed his position and joined the alliance with the Houthis. Since August 2016, he has been serving as prime minister in the Houthi government. Other GPC leaders who opposed the Houthis include former Minister, Ahmed Al-Maisari, and a number of GPC leaders in Aden, Lahj and Abyan, including members of Parliament, executive officials and military and security leaders.

Every advance the Houthis made on the ground revealed the support of Saleh and his supporters to the Houthis. The alliance became clearly recognizable after President Hadi left Sana'a for Aden, when Saleh declared - as did the Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi - war on the central and southern governorates under the pretext of fighting ISIS and al-Qaeda. Speeches of the two leaders coincided with the offensive launched by allied Houthi-Saleh forces in the governorates of Taiz, Ibb, Al-Dhali', Lahj, Aden and Abyan in March 2015. This large-scale operation led to the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition, which launched Operation Decisive Storm to support the internationally recognized government and thwart the coup.

Saleh and his loyalists within the GPC became part of the coup alliance led by the Houthis. Forces loyal to Saleh fought side by side with the Houthi forces to control new governorates. After President Saleh's house was targeted by Saudi-led coalition fighters, Saleh formally declared his alliance with the Houthis in a televised speech. Statements confirming this alliance were issued. The pro-Saleh GPC leadership considered the position of GPC members who supported the legitimate government as a violation of the party regulations, stating that such a position "contravenes the National Charter, the provisions of the party rules and regulations, the positions of the GPC and the decisions of its regulatory bodies." <sup>7</sup> The leadership of the GPC issued a decision stating that "no one is entitled to speak in the name of the GPC, or to represent it at home or abroad, regardless of his leadership capacity, unless he is commissioned by Party organs in Yemen represented by the GPC General Committee and Permanent Committee."<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, these decisions by the pro-Saleh wing of the GPC were meant as a preemptive measure to cut off any efforts by party leaders who sided with the internationally recognized government. Therefore, these latter leaders promptly held a meeting chaired by President Hadi in Riyadh in late October 2015. The meeting approved the decision to dismiss former president, Ali Saleh, from his office as chairman of the GPC. Hadi was nominated new chairman of the party, Ahmed bin Daghar first deputy chairman of the party, and Abdulkareem Al-Iryani (died in November 2015) second deputy chairman. <sup>9</sup>

In the negotiations of the internationally recognized government and the putschists, Saleh's supporters participated with the Houthis as members of Houthi delegations to the first round of Geneva Talks in June 2015, the second round of Geneva Talks in December 2015, and Kuwait negotiations in 2016.

In July 2016, the pro-Saleh faction of the GPC signed an agreement with the Houthis to enhance coordination, and to "form a ten-member supreme political council with equal representation of the GPC and Ansar Allah (the Houthis), with the aim of uniting efforts to confront the Saudi aggression and run state institutions."<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to Saleh's alliance with the Houthis, high-ranking GPC leaders, along with a large number of the party grassroots supporters, sided with the internationally recognized government headed by Hadi. In spite of the attempts of the pro-Saleh faction to abduct the GPC, the pro-Hadi faction viewed themselves as the legitimate representatives of the GPC and had formerly held high party positions, such as former Prime Minister, Dr. Ahmed Obaid bin Daghar, who is currently the Speaker of the Shura Council and deputy chairman of the GPC, and Sheikh Sultan Al-Barakani, Assistant Secretary-General of the GPC and Speaker of the anti-Houthi House of Representatives. Since the formation of the Presidential Leadership Council in April 2022, Dr. Rashad Al-Alimi became the most important GPC figure opposing the Houthis in his capacity as Chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council.

The pro-legitimate government wing of the GPC is a constituent of the National Alliance of Yemeni Political Forces, established in April 2019, with the aim of supporting the legitimate government and restoring the state. This alliance consists of sixteen parties, including the GPC, the Islah party, YSP and the Nasserite Party.

## The Saleh-Houthi Conflict

Disputes grew within the Houthi-Saleh alliance, after the Houthis took control of power and state institutions, including the army, the police, and economic resources. GPC officials complained of being marginalized by their Houthi allies.

Although the alliance persisted in the midst of persistent GPC complaints, the Houthis continued to treat their partners as subordinates rather than allies and partners in the administration of state institutions, according to in the agreement signed between the two parties in July 2016, which was disregarded by the Houthis. This Houthi position angered many GPC affiliates at the leadership and grassroots levels.

In late 2017, the Houthis apparently decided to rob their ally, Saleh, of the traces of power associated with his name. By then, he only had the mosque that bore his name, Al-Saleh Mosque. Hundreds of Houthi gunmen stormed the mosque, fired RPGs and grenades, and surrounded the mosque guard with the aim of taking control of the mosque. Houthi gunmen were also deployed in the vicinity of the former president's residence, where he stayed with his family members and besieged several GPC organizational offices. Clashes erupted between the two parties, leaving a number of casualties.<sup>11</sup>

During the first three days of December 2017, clashes spread in the streets of Sana'a. The Houthis mobilized all their forces to finish off the ally turned enemy, and launched a massive attack on the sites and locations of Saleh and his supporters. Saleh was ultimately killed on 4 December. There were two accounts of the incident of his death. According to one account, Saleh was killed in his residence which was raided and stormed by Houthi fighters. The Houthi account maintained that he was killed in a skirmish with his aides when his convoy was intercepted during his escape to his birthplace in Sanhan district, south of the capital, Sana'a.

Although a large segment of the GPC leaders, especially those close to Saleh, were convinced of the necessity to end the alliance with the Houthis and to fight them, some GPC leaders chose to carry on this alliance, even though they became merely dependents and subordinates of the Houthi group, which controls all state institutions and resources.

## The GPC in the Present Debacle

GPC factions are entangled in a legitimacy contest because of the split in the party and the difficulty of holding a general conference to elect a new leadership. The last GPC conference was the Seventh General Conference held in 2015,

during which the party leadership was elected for the last time, including Party leaders, the General Committee and the Permanent Committee. The pro-Saleh wing had dismissed the two deputy chairmen, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi and late Abdulkareem Al-Iryani, and elected a new leadership body that includes the two deputy chairmen and a secretary general, in an extraordinary meeting of the Permanent Committee in November 2014. Ahmed Obaid bin Daghar became first deputy chairman of the GPC. Yet, he left Sana'a and joined the legitimate government in early 2015. Sadiq Amin Abu Ras was elected second deputy chairman and Arif Al-Zuka was elected Secretary-General of the GPC. This latter was killed with Saleh in December 2017. By contrast, in October 2015, the pro-Hadi wing fired Saleh from his office as chairman of the GPC, and nominated Hadi as new chairman, and Ahmed Obaid bin Daghar and Abdulkareem Al-Iryani as deputy chairmen.

Subsequently, major turning points occurred at the level of the GPC and the country as a whole, including the disappearance of the leaders of the two GPC wings from the political scene: Saleh was killed in December 2017, and Hadi declared the transfer of power to the Presidential Leadership Council in April 2022. Consequently, Sadiq Amin Abu Ras was nominated chairman and Ahmed Ali, President Saleh's son, deputy chairman of the Houthi-allied GPC wing, while the other wing is headed by chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council, Rashad Al-Alimi, and Speakers of the House of Representatives and the Shura Council, Sultan Al-Barakani and Ahmed Obaid bin Daghar.

In April 2020, the GPC wing allied with the Houthis issued a decision dismissing 31 of the pro-legitimacy GPC leaders on charges of “supporting the aggression,” in reference to the Saudi-led coalition. The Speaker of the House of Representatives commented on the decision, stating: “Those who undertook this nihilistic act are the ones who betrayed the GPC and conceded to the assassination of party leader [Ali Saleh] and secretary general [Arif Al-Zuka].”<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the two prominent wings of the GPC, new factions have also emerged, including the Southern People's Congress, the Political Bureau of National Resistance, and another faction that describes itself as neutral between the Houthis and the legitimate government.

## Southern People's Congress

In the same context, former Minister of Interior and member of the GPC General Committee, Ahmed Al-Maisari, leads a GPC faction called the “Southern People’s Congress,” which strongly supports the legitimate government and stresses the need to fight the Houthis. This faction emerged in late 2014 following the GPC decisions to dismiss President Hadi from his position as deputy chairman of the GPC. Party leaders in Aden, Lahj and Abyan held meetings in opposition to those decisions, and expressed their support for President Hadi. They also declared their anti-Houthi stance and refused to ally themselves with the Houthis.

This faction was the first to call for dismissing Saleh from his post as GPC leader after he allied himself with the Houthis. This proposition was made in November 2014. In several events, press conferences and statements, this faction also called for electing President Hadi as GPC chairman, a proposition that was realized a year later. Al-Maisari became a prestigious figure at the time for taking a stance against the GPC leadership in Sana'a.

In early 2018, this wing declared the formation of a preparatory committee headed by Al-Maisari, who was considered the most prominent legitimate government official in Yemen, especially during the period when clashes between government forces and UAE-backed militias, of which the January 2018 and August 2019 clashes were the most violent. When the last round of clashes was won by the UAE-backed forces, Al-Maisari left Aden. At present he lives abroad, and occasionally appears in the media. He is critical of the performance of the Saudi-led coalition, and in particular the UAE and its armed formations.

## The Political Bureau of National Resistance

After his departure from Sana'a following the armed confrontations with the Houthis in late 2017, the prominent military commander, Tariq M. A. Saleh, gathered commanders, officers and soldiers loyal to his late uncle Ali Saleh, and settled in Mocha on the Red Sea coast after receiving support from the UAE.

He formed a new faction which he called the "National Resistance" to fight the Houthis. He also formed military units under the designation "Guardians of the Republic". In March 2021, he declared the establishment of a political component called the "Political Bureau of National Resistance." The declaration statement asserts that the political bureau "is an authentic extension of the sacrifices of former President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, and his faithful companion, Arif Al-Zuka, and all the martyrs killed during the various stages of the struggle. The bureau will shoulder its nationalist responsibilities in a manner that preserves national and pro-Arab constants."<sup>13</sup>

Although leadership of the bureau detaches itself from the GPC, the majority of its members are known for their affiliation to, or support of, the GPC. The establishment of this entity causes the GPC to lose a segment of its grassroots supporters, especially since the Political Bureau absorbed a number of MPs affiliated with the GPC, in addition to political and civil leaders in several governorates.

## Other Factions

Some anti-Houthi GPC leaders live abroad, specifically in Cairo and Abu Dhabi; yet they are not in agreement with the legitimate government. They are closely related to the UAE which uses these leaders to forward its interests. Observers expect that these leading figures dance to Abu Dhabi's tune, and seek to forward the agenda of their supporters. This faction is headed by Ahmed Ali, former President Saleh's son, who has been living in the UAE for more than eight years. Other leading figures are Hamoud Al-Sufi and Ahmed Al-Kuhlani. Both are former ministers and enjoy a network of relations inside and outside the GPC. The latter is accused of being closely associated with Houthi leaders.

From time to time, some GPC leaders, such as Dr. Adel Al-Shujaa, adopt neutral positions, disassociating themselves from the two main GPC factions. In his writings and statements, Al-Shujaa strongly criticizes the Houthis, the Saudi-led coalition and the legitimate government. Former foreign minister, Dr. Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi, also does not take sides with any specific party to the conflict, and tends to adopt a neutral stance towards existing polarizations and disparities. While some leaders express a clear attitude towards the various developments, others prefer to keep silent, including officials who had held high-ranking party and government positions.



## Future of the GPC

Predicting the future of a political party necessarily requires examining its current status, the surrounding circumstances and the factors affecting its journey, negatively or positively. Currently, the GPC is officially involved in the two camps of the war that has been raging on in Yemen for more than seven years, with one faction supporting the internationally recognized authority, while the other is allied with the Houthis.

The future of the party seems to be tied to the outcome of the current war and the main actors involved in it. The GPC will be further weakened and exhausted by its persistent division between the two conflicting parties. More divisions and schisms in the ranks of the party are by no means excluded. In addition, the party might face new challenges and difficulties that could threaten its organizational structure, especially if it continues to be marginalized in Sana'a by the Houthis and abroad by several regional actors that seek to monopolize the party to serve their agenda in Yemen. According to the GPC leader, Dr. Adel Al-Shugaa, prior to the internal schism, the party "had been shaken by a number of rocking events, including the shock of 2011, and the subsequent mass resignations from the party. Then came the major shock represented by the GPC uprising against the Houthis in late 2017. All these shocks affected the GPC." <sup>14</sup>

The current reality of the GPC as a party and a political organization cannot be examined without considering the systematic targeting of the entire Yemeni political system in recent years. The political and public influence of Yemeni parties has receded, and their role has declined in recent years due to the armed conflict. By contrast, armed blocs and formations that have strictly functional roles determined by the dictates of their supporters and financiers, have emerged. Extensive bulldozing of political and civil life was initiated by the Houthi group immediately after its control of the capital, Sana'a, and is still practiced in the governorates under its control.

Each GPC faction still believes that it exclusively possesses organizational legitimacy. The last statement issued by the Sana'a faction of the GPC, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of founding the GPC, affirms that "the legitimate organizational and political leadership of the GPC is the one based in Sana'a,

and hence this leadership is exclusively authorized to determine GPC position towards the various issues.”<sup>15</sup> Such statements and positions reinforce divisions within the GPC. However, the fact that they are issued by the GPC wing in Sana'a reveals that they are issued under Houthi pressure and coercion, especially as the Houthis use the GPC faction loyal to them to discredit the faction supporting the legitimate government.

Therefore, the future of the GPC is deeply entrenched in the current political reality, which is dominated by new armed groups and blocs that are mostly a byproduct of the war. Such new formations have nothing to do with the political process which has evolved over the past decades and witnessed intellectual, political and media debates that have developed since the early 1990s when pluralism and the multi-party system were introduced.

Apparently, the future of the GPC depends on its ability to shake off the constraints that bind it. While the pro-Houthi faction is unable to take any action outside the framework of the discourse and policy defined by the Houthis, the anti-Houthi faction faces many obstacles, most notably the multiplicity of party leaders, disparity of its various constituents, and the conflicting goals of its leaders, each of whom is linked to internal and external parties.

In the context of the ongoing war, it is difficult to talk about the possibility of restoring the organizational unity of the party, which has been divided between Sana'a, Aden and regional capitals. It is likely that the current factions will continue to be divided and will persist in contesting organizational legitimacy, with each faction claiming to be the sole legitimate entity, as has been demonstrated on many occasions. This fact is confirmed by some GPC members who believe that the war divided the party leaders into two factions: “One faction entered into an alliance with the Houthis under the pretext of fighting the aggression, and the other aligned with the [Saudi-led] coalition under the pretext of fighting the coup. From within these two factions, other sub-factions emerged with Emirati support and lined up with separatist and sectarian calls. Some leaders partially retained their independent decisions and bargained their stance with Saudi Arabia in exchange for financial benefits and administrative positions.”<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, some observers maintain that the GPC is likely to remain divided “because the partisan process was ended in Yemen by the Houthis and the [Saudi-led] coalition, which will continue to attract some personalities in the name of the GPC, to send a message that the GPC will return to power, so that hostility to the party will increase among its opponents. This will undermine the residual party cohesion at the grassroots level.”<sup>17</sup>

Many observers both from the ranks of the party and from outside its ranks agree that “the future of the GPC, like the future of other Yemeni parties and like the future of Yemen as a whole, is nebulous because the decisions of the political parties and of the country at every level are not an internal Yemeni nationalist decisions,”<sup>18</sup> and that “the GPC and all other Yemeni political parties have exited the political process and turned into militias.”<sup>19</sup>

Regarding the wings which are opposed to the Houthi coup, they do not agree on a unified position due to their noticeably disparate positions towards the legitimate authority, its components and allies. Some GPC members still view the legitimate authority as an opponent just like the Houthis, while others think that agreement with the internationally recognized government or some of its components is possible in order to fight the Houthis.

## Conclusion

GPC members today need to show a collective will that prioritizes the interests of the country and the unity of the party. They shall seek to strengthen the GPC and enhance its position to restore the GPC leadership role, in alliance and coordination with the forces that share the same goals on the basis of active participation in the battle to restore the state and end the coup.

The GPC still possesses huge material and moral capabilities and qualified leaders in both the public and partisan arenas. However, in its current state, the party lacks a leadership capable of containing the existing disparities and building a coherent organizational base. The GPC needs to unite under one leadership to regain its leadership role.

Regarding organizational legitimacy, no wing can dismiss the other wings as illegitimate. Clearly, leaders of these wings, or at least most of them, gained their positions and reached high levels of leadership in accordance with the party's organizational regulations before the emergence of these divisions which pushed the vying wings to justify their transgression of party regulations using the circumstances and impact of the war as pretexts of their contests. Therefore, the solution lies in going back to the party rules and regulations, and coming up with a new vision and leadership to keep pace with current and future challenges.

This solution makes the scenario of regaining the leading GPC political and popular role possible, despite the difficulties and complications created by the war that placed the GPC on a path of disintegration. However, the riskiest scenario that threatens the future of the party and the state is the return of the GPC to the forefront as a foreign-funded umbrella of anti-nationalist projects that are based on parochial sectarian or regional foundations.

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