

The Western media usually refers to issues in Yemen in familiar terms, with the occasional exotic twist. Thus the political sphere is cast as a zero sum game, in which a metaphorical swingometer measures one side's loss as the other side's gain. The apparent divisions between the parties are presented in stark contrast: the President against the al-Hashid "tribe"; the al-Hashids allied with the rebellious Generals.

Yet the President comes from the same village and the same tribe – the Sanhan – as the rebellious Generals, and both groups are part of al-Hashid confederation. Three months ago, they were all allies. In three months time, they might be allies again. That – and violence – is the nature of elite politics in Yemen.

Rather than being a linear sum, the Yemeni power arena is more like a stock market: the worth of different factions might go up relative to one another, but the headline index itself might plunge. Too many Yemeni power-players have eyes only for their stocks, and their opponents'; they think little about the big picture.

The rebel Generals recently released a televised "Announcement No 1" – as if they were in control. While one general looked uncomfortable, Ali Muhsin (the President's cousin by marriage) was obviously relishing the experience. He is keeping his powder dry, while watching the martial power of both the President's family and al-Hashid's leading family (the al-Ahmars) diminished by the clashes. He may throw his lot in with al-Hashid, or back in with the President – whoever offers him the most.

Not long ago, Pres Salih tried to reduce the (relative) power of Ali Muhsin, so that the President's son Ahmed would be in a better position to inherit the Presidency. This included failing to resource Ali Muhsin properly in his campaign against the Huthi rebels, and trying to have Muhsin's headquarters bombed by the Sa'udi Air Force – such is the shifting nature of Yemeni alliance.

Rarely mentioned currently is the other main tribal confederation, the Bakil, or the remaining political parties and movements (the amorphous and peaceful Street has now been relegated to the media sidelines.) The Bakil don't want to see Pres Salih's family remain in power, but the prospect of the leaders of Hashid running the country also appals them. Most Bakil tribes (politically less coherent than Hashid anyway) are thus waiting – watching the others' stock go

down. The Street, who bought much of the impetus for Change with their blood, have little say in the matter since they are resolutely peaceful.

The 1994 violent showdown between the North and the South in Yemen is usually termed a Civil War. Yet while it affected many civilians (mostly as "collateral damage"), it was elite power politics. Then it was the President's party (allied with the al-Ahmars) against the Socialists. Now, the Salih Regime is holding Yemen on the brink of another such conflict. This time, it's the core of the President's party against the al-Ahmars, who are loosely allied with the Socialists (who no longer have fighting forces.)

While most reports of the explosion that injured the President and senior members of his Cabinet attribute it to indirect fire, a few suggest an IED. (Given the explosion appears to have happened inside the building, any round must have been fuzed for delay – possibly not a capability of Yemeni tribesmen.) Pres Ali Abdullah is very security aware – his predecessor was killed by an IED in 1978 – which suggests that there may have been some inside assistance to smuggle in a bomb. If correct, this might denote in-fighting within the core of the regime ("regicide" is not unknown in the Middle East), or an act of the dissenting Gen Ali Muhsin.

The sons and nephews of Pres Salih are trying to fend off a hostile take-over bid by the al-Ahmars, who have the backing of some of the political opposition. Before being wounded, Salih tried to fend off the al-Ahmars, to stall over the Transition Deal offered by the GCC, and then to pre-empt their potential coup before it was ready. His – and his family's - final stratagem is to invoke the Samson Option: to threaten to destroy Yemen, so that even if the al-Ahmars and their allies succeed, they will get a broken shell, empty coffers and multiple enduring problems: in particular, diminishing water and oil supplies, a failing economy and a growing, discontented labour pool.

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