

THE ZAIDI ADVANCE USHERS IN A NEW PERIOD OF UNCERTAINTY IN YEMEN

By André Burstin

Whilst the world's attention was focused on the barbaric atrocities committed by the "Islamic State" (IS) terrorist group in Iraq and Syria, the rapid advance of the Zaidi "Houti" insurgency – also known as "Ansarullah" – towards Sanaa also plunged Yemen on the verge of a new civil war.

On Sunday September 22, after three days of fierce battles in the outskirts and in the streets of the capital, rebels seized several government buildings, including the parliament, the central bank, the defense ministry, army barracks and the headquarters of the national radio station, forcing Prime Minister Mohammed Salem Bassindwa to resign. According to media sources present on the spot, rebels have since then installed numerous checkpoints across the city and strengthened their control over strategic locations, such as the compound of Islamist general Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar.

Following these events, Ansarullah's leader Abdelmalek Al Houthi proclaimed victory on Tuesday and praised a "popular revolution" which opens "a new era based on cooperation". In this respect, it is worth mentioning that the rebels formally stepped up their offensive in August because of the government's incapacity to address the people's problems, symbolized by the fuel subsidies cut.

The situation is however much more complicated than what Abdelmalek Al Houthi would like to present it.

First of all, this success is above all reflective of the failure of the democratization process started after the fall of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in February 2012. Indeed, United Nations' envoy Jamal Benomar declared on Monday on Al Arabiya television channel that the takeover of Sanaa had marked the "collapse of the Yemeni State and the end of the political transition". To recall, the Moroccan diplomat had succeeded to broker a short-lived ceasefire agreement on Sunday, in a desperate attempt to halt a conflict in which more than 200 people died in less than a week.

Secondly, it is legitimate to refer to the statement of Yemeni President Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi, who spoke out against a "foreign conspiracy". For several months, the

transition government has indeed constantly denounced the support of Iran and of the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah to the rebels. Many voices also questioned the role of ousted President Saleh, who is himself from Zaidi background.

Lastly, it is important to add that the fall of Sanaa could lead to a new wave of sectarian violence. Recent events have indeed triggered a harsh reaction from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which threatened to wage a “merciless war” if Ansarullah’s fighters don’t leave immediately the city and all the Sunni villages that are today under their control. On the ground, the terrorist group has already put these threats into effects with a deadly suicide car-bomb attack carried out in Kataf, in the Zaidi stronghold of Saada governorate.

Beyond the current situation, which could evolve very quickly in one direction or the other, the last developments demonstrate, in fact, the survival of ancient fault lines, including sectarianism, tribalism, radicalism, competition for natural resources and underdevelopment, to which we have to add the involvement of the two regional archrivals: Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Although they promised to remain faithful to the spirit of the revolution of 2011 and to support the formation of a technocratic and neutral government, their “victory” may therefore not be enough to prevent the resumption of violence.

In the coming days, it will thus be necessary to follow the reaction of the local population in Sanaa, as well as the ability of pro-government militias to rebuild their forces, in order to appreciate the risk of a larger Shiite-Sunni sectarian conflict. Moreover, the likely intensification of the combats between Zaidi fighters and AQAP terrorists will unquestionably spread the instability in a country which is already one of the main sources of Jihadism in the region.

In any case, such developments are particularly worrying at a time when the international community is attempting to join all necessary efforts to eradicate the “Islamic State” (IS) terrorist organization in Iraq and Syria.

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