

Yemenis on the Houthi ascent to power

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The Houthis took control of Sana'a on 21 September, striking a deal with the government after weeks of protests. Yemenis have mixed feelings about their rising power.

When we visited the Military Museum on Jamal Abdul Nasi street in Sana'a, late Friday evening, we were greeted by the [Houthis](#) at the gates. "It's closed, come tomorrow," said 20-year-old Atul Hassan, manning the entrance door.



Atul Hassan guarding the military museum. Image: Amal Shaybani. All rights reserved.

These days, it's not unusual to see buildings that were once guarded by government security forces occupied by the rebel militia. They also man key security checkpoints and government institutions in the capital.

Donned in Yemeni clothing, a *thawb*, and carrying a *jambiya* (Yemeni sword) and rifles, the group were recently seen sporting new military uniforms at a security check point on Haddah street.

The Houthis or ‘Ansar Allah’ (Partisans of God) as they prefer to be called, are like many Yemenis [Zaidi](#) Shi’a. After several uprisings in the last decade, the Houthis have managed to gain control over Saa’da, parts of Amran, Al Jawf and Hajjah provinces in Yemen.

Hassan joined the rebel group after finishing high school, during his year off. “We are with the people, we want what the people want. With Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, we can be assured of a stable and powerful government,” he said, adding, “Before the Houthis, people were voiceless, and lacking rights.”

This was late on the evening of 10 October—the evening following the suicide bomb [explosion](#) in Tahrir square, which killed nearly 47 civilians, including many children.

The odour of dead bodies lingered in the air, and sandals and scarves drenched in blood were still strewn on the streets. A group of witnesses standing in the area pointed to the dents in the asphalt, marking where the explosion had occurred just as hundreds of people arrived in Tahrir Square for a demonstration called by the Houthis.

Like Hassan, Mohammed Al-Anesi, who runs a construction business in Sana’a, sees the group’s political appeal. “Houthis have gained the trust and support of the majority of Yemeni people because they know how to fulfil the people’s demands,” he said.

“A very telling example is how they got the government to reduce the fuel prices not once, but twice,” said 29-year-old Maryam Al-Junaid, a Hospital Administration student at the University of Science and Technology in Sana’a.

However, unlike Hassan, Al-Anesi did not join the Houthi movement because he is strongly opposed to the rebel group’s ideology and [slogans](#).

Zakariya Dhaman, a presenter with a local radio station in Sana’a who dreamed of becoming a film director after finishing university said, “Since 2011, I have been going backwards. I’m afraid, in the midst of this unending crisis, we young people are stuck. With the

Houthis in control, I don't see political stability anytime soon. It's becoming just like Iran.”

The Houthis' ascent in the capital

Months of political strife and a lack of government have paved the way for the Houthis' dominance in the capital since 21 September.

When asked about the group's rise to power, Al-Junaid remarked, “In the past people didn't follow the Houthis. But ever since they took over government buildings in the capital, people trust them.”

Al-Anesi, however, refutes the idea that the rebels are in control of the government, saying they only control the streets.

Commuters travelling by *dhabab* (local bus) said it's not uncommon to hear conversations on why many Yemenis support the rebels.

“The Houthis are gaining more power on the ground, they have Hashemite support and they are pushing the new government as much as they can. I fear like Kurdistan we will become a ‘Houthistan’,” said another source on condition of anonymity.

A majority of Yemenis, feeling trapped by current political events, have turned to the rebels because they are tired of the violence, unrest and waiting. “By allowing the Houthis to take over, the Yemenis are saying, show us who you are,” the source added.

Another Sana'a-based resident, also on condition of anonymity said, “The Shi'a rebels have garnered so much power in recent times that government military officers abandoned their positions and left them in the hands of the Houthis during the fighting. Where is this coming from? Definitely, they are being influenced by another power.” By ‘another power’, the resident was referring to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Both Dhaman and M.O, a student at University of Science and Technology, are apprehensive about Yemen's future in the hands of the Houthis. Dhaman said that while Abdul Malik Al-Houthi's

speeches appeal to him, he condemns the group's activities, especially in Sana'a.

News reports showed the rebel group [forcefully](#) entered and plundered homes, mosques, medical and engineering colleges, including the houses of several TV station employees in the capital.

Another reason why M.O. opposes the Houthis is because of their widespread use of guns. "Previously, only tribal sheikhs would carry guns. With the Houthis in control, everyone seems to own a gun as an excuse for self-defence," said M.O.



Houthi member with 'sarkha' (slogan) on gun. Image: Mohamed Al-Qalisi. All rights reserved.

Yemen, another 'Syria or Libya'?

“It looks like we are moving in a similar direction to Libya or Syria,” said Al-Anesi, fearing a situation where the country could split into six semi-autonomous regions.

Despite [approval](#) by the presidential panel in February to transform Yemen into a six-region federation, no referendum has been held.

“The south is the real issue. Without a real agreement in the south, Yemen cannot establish stability, and this will leave room for AQAP (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) and tribes to operate on their own,” said London-based Yemen analyst, Fernando Carvajal.

Commenting on the current state of political events, he said, “The problem is, the longer this unofficial system works, the less incentive any of the ruling group have to engage in democratic elections.”

Moving forward, Yemenis fear a similar rise in attacks to the one seen on Thursday, and are desperate for a new leader.

“At this moment the picture is unclear. It’s more than two weeks since the agreement, and they haven’t appointed a Prime Minister. How can they form a long-term government? It’s difficult to say,” said Dhaman.

“In Yemen there are a lot of sheikhs who are snakes because they don’t believe in the Republic of Yemen, but they believe in their tribal ideologies,” he added.

“I don’t object to Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, the Houthis or Ahmed Saleh, as long as I see a better future for myself, and the country,” Dhaman said.

Al-Junaid is of the opinion that Yemeni people don’t want to think and want other people to do the thinking for them. “The sad thing is Yemeni people are illiterate and ignorant.”

As most Yemenis await the appointment of their next prime minister, the Sana’a resident said that it doesn’t matter now if it’s a dictatorship or democracy—they just need some stability, peace, and justice.

“All we can do is wait and watch, and see what happens next.”