

“Spaces in the Making:” Peripheralization and Spatial Injustice in Southern Yemen

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By using the concept of peripheralization as defined by Fischer-Tahir and Naumann (2013), I examine how processes of change in economy, demography, political decision-making, and socio-cultural norms and values have marginalized Southern Yemen after 1990, and especially after the war of 1994. I will argue

that politically produced spatial injustice has strengthened the desire for Southern Yemeni independence.

Keywords: Peripheralization; Spatial Injustice; Southern Movement; Southern Yemen

Introduction

When the protests of the Southern Movement (*al-Hirak al-Janubi*) started in 2007, activists called for solutions to the precarious socio-economic situation in the country and for an end to the marginalization of southern Yemenis in the centralized state after unity. After Yemeni state security forces reacted with violence, the social movement seeking economic integration transformed into an umbrella movement of various groups, organizations and NGOs with a concrete political objective, that of state independence of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). During the so-called Arab Spring, the Southern Movement perceived new opportunities for mobilization against (northern) “Yemeni Occupation,” as relations between north and south are often described in the southern political discourse.

Drawing near Fischer-Tahir and Naumann (2013), I examine the factors contributing to peripheralization (change in economy, demography, political decision-making, and socio-cultural norms and values) and how they have marginalized Southern Yemen after 1990, and especially after the war of 1994. These selected examples are the very often discussed themes in political discourses of Southern Movement activists that encourage political mobili-

zation in the south. Furthermore, some of the cases had enormous relevance on a national scale and were therefore discussed within the National Dialogue Conference.¹ I will argue that politically produced spatial injustice (Soja, "Seeking") as the result of unequitable distribution of resources and opportunities has strengthened the desire for Southern Yemeni independence.

In taking a critical geography perspective, I will show how spaces are socially produced on different scales. This article² is based on field work in Aden, Abyan and Radfan (in the Lahij governorate), and a series of interviews with grassroots actors of the Southern Movement between March and May 2014 and in early 2015.³

Peripheralization in Yemen's South and the Emergence of the Southern Movement

This section contributes to an understanding of the emergence of the Southern Movement in 2007 by showing that its development is connected to processes of peripheralization of Southern Yemen that predominantly began after the war in 1994.

The term "peripheralization" describes the process of becoming disconnected from, and dependent on, centers. In this sense, a *periphery* is "the outcome of complex

processes of change in the economy, demography, political decision-making and socio-cultural norms and values" (Fischer-Tahir and Naumann 9). Peripheralization refers to a spatially organized inequality of power relations and access to material and symbolic goods that construct and perpetuate the precedence of centers over areas that are marginalized (18). High levels of poverty associated with political and economic dependence on centers or other regions, decline or disconnection with respect to infrastructural networks and services, marginalization and stigmatization, as well as loss of opportunities and life chances articulate peripheralization (21). All of these dimensions are expressions of social injustice, produced and perpetuated by structures that uphold the unequal distribution of power and inequitable access for some segments of society to economic and political decision-making bodies on a local, regional, national, supra-national, or global scale (22). In the following, I will analyze—based on selected examples—processes of change that lead to peripheralization of Southern Yemen and that show expressions of "spatial injustice" (Soja, "Seeking"). Spatial (in)justice refers to an intentional and focused emphasis on the spatial aspects of justice and injustice. It involves the fair and equitable distribu-

tion in space of socially valued resources and the opportunities to use them.

Processes of Change in the Economy

The discovery of oil in Hadhramaut and Marib was an influential factor in calls for Yemeni unity in the late 1980s. Oil had been found in the south in 1982 (Dresch 161), but oil production in the southern region started on a commercial scale only after Yemeni unity in 1990 and has since been the driving force of Yemen's economy. Approximately 80 percent of Yemen's oil fields are situated in the southern governorate of Hadhramaut (EIA). However, according to Bafana, the local residents have had no benefits in the form of the economic development of their region and, conversely, have suffered from polluted ground water due to contamination from oil production. Southern oil has been exploited by the regime in Sanaa to the benefit of the patronage networks and associates of leading figures in that regime. As a result, and following the killing of the influential tribal Sheikh Saad bin Habrishi al-Hamumi by a Yemeni soldier in late 2013, the Hadhrami Tribal Alliance mounted a limited insurgency against the Yemeni regime, its supporters in the region, and the army, claiming that they had all profited from Hadhrami oil revenues for many years at the expense of

local people. This was accompanied by pressure on Yemeni and international oil companies in the region demanding that they employ more Hadhramis and offer supply and service contracts to local companies. The Hadhrami Tribal Alliance also demanded that all security services for oil companies operating in the region should be provided by Hadhramis and demanded the withdrawal of the army (Bafana). When the government did not comply with these demands, there was an escalation of violence reaching the level of uprising. Geographically uneven “development”⁴ and “underdevelopment” provide a frame of reference for understanding the processes that produce injustices (Soja, “The City” 3). This is well exemplified by the Port of Aden. In the 1950s it was the second busiest harbor in the world after New York. As a British colonial port, Aden was conceived by the British as a central point for trade between Europe and Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and East Africa. Six months before the independence of South Yemen in 1967, the port’s activity decreased by 75 percent when the Suez Canal was closed during the Six Day Arab-Israeli War and it did not reopen until 1975 (Halliday 239). In 1990, the Aden Container Terminal and the Aden Free Trade Zone were established to attract international investment. In 2008, Dubai Ports World took over man-

agement of the Port of Aden. However, its ambitious aims to develop the economic growth of the port were never achieved, not least because Dubai Ports World did not keep its investment promises. Many in Aden perceived the contract as a bargain basement sale that only served the international strategy of Dubai Ports World. At the end of September 2012, the Yemeni government terminated the contract (Augustin). Despite being one of the biggest natural harbors of the world, Aden operates well below its potential due to inaction in Sanaa on essential structural reforms, establishing effective legal protection and developing infrastructure to adapt to changes in shipping requirements. Added to this is the piracy and lack of security in the Horn of Africa. Terrorist attacks such as the one on the USS Cole in 2000 led to an increase in insurance premiums and deterred shipping companies from using Aden. More recently, the terrorism of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has exacerbated the problem: for several months in 2011 and 2012, *Ansar al-Sharia*, an AQAP offshoot, set up an Islamic Emirate in the governorate of Abyan, a mere fifty kilometers east of Aden.⁵ As a result, and due to competition from ports such as Dubai, Salalah and Djibouti, Aden has lost its former significant position as a crucial harbor city and will

struggle to restore it given that, due to its significant geographical position, it became the main battleground of the 2015 war in Yemen.⁶

Processes of Change in the Demography

At the time of Yemeni unity in 1990, there was an enormous population imbalance between northern and southern regions. Though the two regimes agreed to share power equally during a transition period, southerners represented only approximately one quarter of the entire population of the country. This imbalance reinforced peripheralization of the south and came into political relevance in the 1993 elections. Despite the fact that the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) came in first by landslide in Southern Yemen, it only finished third behind President Ali Abdullah Salih’s General People’s Congress (GPC) and the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah) (Al-Bab). These election results helped precipitate the crisis between the northern and southern leaderships that led to the 1994 war, in which northern forces with the support of southern allies defeated the remnants of the PDRY armed forces. In April 2014, southern Facebook groups headlined the news that in Abyan, northerners tried to obtain locally issued passports and identity cards (Alomanaa). The news presented it as an attempt to change

the demographic composition in the south prior to the holding of the referendum on the planned new constitution that ultimately—due to the war—did not take place. There are doubts as to whether this actually happened and, indeed, if it happened, whether a change of population composition was its aim. The demographic imbalance between northern and southern Yemen stokes fears that go back to the trauma of the 1993 elections, when the YSP lost its position as leading party. This story shows that anxieties of “occupation” and of marginalization are profoundly ingrained in southern Yemeni memories and discourses.

Processes of Change in Political Decision-Making

Concerning southern Yemen, processes of change in political decision-making are the most profound reasons why Southern Yemen became peripheralized after unity. Thus, this section is the longest, although I selected only some examples. Despite the analytical value of Fischer-Tahir and Naumann’s conceptualization, ‘political decision making’ is not clearly defined. I therefore suggest that processes of change in political decision-making refer to large-scale institutionalized discrimination of southerners by Sanaa-ruled state bodies and institutions. After the 1994

war, the institutionalized marginalization of southerners increased and became a source of spatial injustice. After its defeat over the south in 1994, the Sanaa regime decided to force most of military officers and soldiers as well as many civil servants from the south into retirement. Many of these southerners did not receive the appropriate pension;⁷ they and their children became the basis of the Southern Movement in 2007. In 2013, Yemen established a \$1.2 billion fund to compensate southern state employees and soldiers for their financial losses after their retirement or dismissal following the 1994 war (Ghobari). This followed acceptance by the government—highlighted by discussions within the NDC—that southerners had justifiable grievances that had to be addressed. The compensation fund was only a partial, short-term response but was nevertheless important, even though it does not solve the deep economic problems of Yemen, which need long-term solutions and radical reform. By 2014, it seemed nearly impossible to solve all of the socio-economic problems in the poorest country of the Arab world. As noted above, the “southern cause”⁸ up to 2007 was essentially one of economic marginalization. According to an economist of Aden University, the Southern Movement would not exist today had the

state reacted immediately in 2007 with measures to reintegrate into the army and civil service the southerners who had been forced to retire after the 1994 war (University scholar, personal conversation). This locational discrimination is essential in the production of spatial injustice and the creation of lasting spatial structures of privilege and advantage (Soja, “The City” 3). Furthermore, institutionalized marginalization took place at governorate levels, where senior positions were awarded to northerners. Southerners had less access, in general, to jobs than northerners, because during and after 1994, the army of the Sanaa regime looted and closed down most southern public sector companies and factories,⁹ thus increasing unemployment (Dahlgren, “Southern Movement” 50). Even today businessmen complain that an investor who wants to establish a business or a factory in Southern Yemen faces more difficulties than he or she would find in the north. According to an influential Abyani, inducements have to be paid to government officials or a partnership has to be offered to influential northern businessmen (Influential Abyani, personal conversation).

The political formation of space is a notably powerful source of spatial injustice (Soja, “The City” 3), which is observable in

the concentration of political decision-making in Sanaa and which, for example, occurs in the educational sector. Before unity, many southerners had obtained scholarships from the PDRY government to study abroad; after unity, scholarships were limited (Dahlgren, "Southern Movement" 51) and southerners found that it was very difficult to access them. They surmised that this was largely because northern elites corrupted the process. The same applied to civil service positions, including teachers. Teaching positions in today's Yemen are principally obtained through an intermediary in Sanaa, who may want a bribe. Most young people wait for years after their university graduation to get jobs as civil servants, and the private sector is too weak to absorb them in a country where youth unemployment exceeds 50 percent.

One of the most hotly debated issues concerns land grievances in Southern Yemen. Problems of land ownership rights emerged after unity in 1990 and caused a great deal of conflict which is still ongoing today. The PDRY, following the takeover of power by the left wing of the National Liberation Front in the "Glorious Corrective Move" of 1969, issued laws that dispossessed influential families and former sultans and benefited small holders and landless households. After 1990, much

nationalized land was returned to previous owners or people pretending to be so. In addition, new decrees and investment regulations reorganized land ownership. The 1991 "September Directive" facilitated the distribution of state land, but in some cases different government departments, such as the Ministry of Construction, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the General Investment Authority, distributed the same land plots to different people. Furthermore, these ministries and the regime distributed much land in the southern areas to supporters of the Sanaa regime, state employees, army officers, and civil servants (Pritzkat 66-67).¹⁰ The before-mentioned Abyan War in 2011-2012 destroyed much of the governorate's capital Zinjibar and its surrounding areas. Grievances in Abyan were further exacerbated by a slow and inadequate government program to repair the damages to Zinjibar and other areas and to relieve the plight of the people. The Yemeni government promised to pay the refugees to help them rebuild their houses. However, according to a refugee from Zinjibar, some of the engineers responsible for assessing the damages to houses and calculating the amount of money that was to be paid to affected households demanded bribes to record the actual, or higher, costs of reconstruction for the houses on their lists

(Zinjibar refugee, personal conversation). The government payments were to be made in three instalments. People received the first instalment but are still waiting for the second and third instalments. Given their bad living conditions, on April 15, 2014, angry Abyanis blocked the road between Zinjibar and Aden to protest and demonstrate their resentment at the delay and the procedures used (Al-Shair).

Processes of Change in Socio-Cultural Norms and Values

According to its socialist principles, the PDRY government implemented a number of social policies and provided a range of services to the population that became part of the daily life of PDRY citizens. At unity in 1990, the PDRY and Arab Republic of Yemen (YAR) had different levels of development with respect to their education and health care systems, as well as on subsidies for food, jobs and housing. The socialist southern state had tried to abolish tribalism, but after unity, the Sanaa regime encouraged tribalism fostered by the return of some of the previous ruling families of the pre-PDRY sultanates. In the PDRY, the influence of religion was restricted: it was not a matter for the state but for private individuals. Particularly after the 1994 war, southerners started to dis-

cover and experience conservative Islam (Dahlgren, "Contesting Realities"). This notably manifested itself through the wearing of full veils and abayas for women and long beards for men. Sheikh 'Abd al-Majid al-Zindani and his followers partly induced this change by asserting that southerners were infidels.¹¹ People were afraid of being molested in the streets, attacked, or even killed; the murder of at least 150 socialists between 1990 and 1993 was probably the work of religious extremists (Brehony 188). Al-Zindani travelled to Southern Yemen after unity to spread his ideas among the youth in Friday prayers. Young people were especially open to advice on the nature of the right path at a time of huge social transformations in the south. Changes in lifestyle took place: in 1994 Islamists demolished the Aden brewery. By contrast, the government did not maintain the PDRY restrictions on qat consumption (it was allowed only on weekends in Aden), and as qat became available on a daily basis, its use spread to parts of the south where it had previously not been used. The progressive Family Law of the PDRY was replaced by the YAR's conservative law right after unity, and women's rights were also rigorously restricted (Dahlgren, "Contesting Realities"). The Ministry of Education abolished school subjects such as

music, sports and arts, and the two subjects of Qur'anic and Islamic studies replaced the subject religious studies. After the war, the ministry abolished mixed-sex schools as well. Furthermore, cinemas and theaters closed, as the state no longer subsidized cultural activities (Al-Khatib).

The "southern cause" is an identity issue in addition to being a socio-economic and political one. With the emergence of the Southern Movement, the conception of the "South Arabian identity" became a basic discursive means to claim independence. Among activists of the Southern Movement, the term "Yemeni" nowadays is only used with reference to northern Yemenis and is equated with backwardness and conservative thinking (Rogler 28). "South Arabian identity" is based on the representations of the past and experiences made during the period of British rule when it was commonly known as South Arabia. Narratives from the PDRY, for example, emphasize southerners' ability to create a civil state. The socialists of the PDRY tried to rid the country of its colonial heritage by introducing the term "Yemen" into the state's appellation, which activists of the Southern Movement reject today. The pan-Arab nationalism of the 20th century is for many, especially young southerners, an outdated morass of con-

ceptions and ideas that brought the south to the present-day situation, in which southerners' right to self-determination is ignored, as they are considered southern "Yemenis." It is in this context that southerners go back to the appellation of "South Arabia." This identity construction is predicated on the perception of being "occupied" by the north since the lost war of 1994. According to activists, it is the experience of large-scale marginalization after 1994, including spatial injustice, and the widespread perception in the south that the state is absent, as state structures and institutions are inactive, passive and ineffective, which promote the will for a return to independence (Southern Movement activists, interviews).

Conclusion

Referring to Fischer-Tahir and Naumann, the developments in Aden and in the entire south designate the process of becoming disconnected from and dependent on centers, as seen in changes in economy, demography, political decision-making, and last but not least, in processes of change in socio-cultural norms and values. High levels of poverty, decline of infrastructural networks and services, marginalization and stigmatization of southerners, as well as loss of life opportunities and insecurity

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are part of the daily life of most southerners and have thus contributed to the emergence and consolidation of the Southern Movement in Yemen. All of

these dimensions express spatial injustice, produced by structures of unequal power distribution and inequitable access for most southerners to economic

and political decision-making bodies on various scales.

Notes

¹ The NDC resulted from the Gulf Cooperation Council's Initiative that initiated the transitional processes in Yemen in late 2011. The NDC started on March 18, 2013 and ended in January 2014. The principal stakeholders of the Southern Movement rejected their participation in the NDC, because the Sanaa regime under President Hadi and the international community excluded the right for self-determination of southerners before the talks began.

² I discussed parts of this paper during the workshop "The Future of Yemen: Between Fragility and Freedom" of the *German Orient Institute* in December 2013 and during the workshop "Future of Yemen" at the *Gulf Research Meeting* in Cambridge in August 2014.

³ Other than open structured and narrative interviews with Southern Movement activists of various ages originating from all southern Yemeni governorates, I undertook participant observations during their demonstrations, lectures, as well as during private meetings. These observed demonstrations and lectures took part in Aden's quarters of Crater, Tawahi, Qallu'a, al-Mu'alla, Khor Maksar and al-Mansura.

⁴ In *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (1984), Neil Smith conceptualizes the production of spatial and temporal unevenness. He calls "uneven development [...] the concrete manifestation of the production of space under capitalism" (90). Uneven development results from the investment of capital in the built environments in certain areas, while investment in other areas remains absent.

⁵ *Ansar al-Sharia*—a group linked to AQAP—took over the city of Jaar in Abyan for close to a year in 2011-2012 following the withdrawal of security forces to the north as a result of the confrontation between President Salih on the one hand and Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar (Salih's former senior Yemeni military commander and close associate who, on March 18, 2011, declared his opposition to him) and the al-Ahmar faction (a family which belongs to the northern Yemeni Hashid tribal confederation and is strongly involved with ruling the Islah party) on the other came close to civil war. Salih needed his troops closer to the capital. The *Ansar al-Sharia* grasped the opportunity of this power vacuum to establish its Emirate of Waqar in Jaar. As a result, more than 100,000 people were displaced, and most of them sought refuge in Aden. Those without money stayed in schools;

others rented flats. More were forced to flee as a result of the fighting that took place when the Yemeni armed forces—supported by US drone and missile strikes—re-captured the territory.

⁶ The military intervention in Yemen began on March 26, 2015, with Saudi Arabia's air strikes under the name "Decisive Storm," with support from a coalition of GCC states (except Oman), Pakistan, Jordan, Sudan, Egypt, and Morocco. The Houthis forced President Hadi to resign from office in January 2015 and put him under house arrest. Six weeks later, in February 2015, he fled to Aden, where he withdrew from his resignation. Internally, Houthi militias and loyalists of Ali Abdullah Salih advanced southward to take over all of Yemen. Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia, when the Houthi and Saleh militias entered Aden. There, he asked for support and the coalition began to bomb Yemen. Aden and

the surrounding southern governorates became the principal battleground of this war. The southern resistance, in which the segments of the Southern Movement are integrated, liberated Aden from the Houthi and the Salih militias on July 14, 2015.

⁷ For further details, see International Crisis Group, "Yemen's Southern Question," "Breaking Point?"; Dahlgren, "The Snake," "The Southern Movement."

⁸ The "southern cause" (*al-qadiyya al-janubiyya*) refers to the resistance to the marginalization of southern Yemenis after the PDRY's unification with the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in 1990. Both the marginalization and the subsequent resistance intensified after the war between the north and south in 1994 in which the north won.

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→ ⁹ For further details, see *Southern Issue Working Group* 4.

¹⁰ Southern grievances over land issues were recognized at the NDC and a special committee was established to find solutions.

¹¹ Before April 27, 2014, Southern Movement mouthpiece *Aden Live TV* screened an audio recording of Sheikh Abd al-Majid al-Zindani with subtitles as part of a documentary in 1994. Southerners often mention his speech in talks.

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