From Protest, to Committee, to Consensus:
Co-optation of the 2011 Revolutionary Movement in Yemen

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The concept of co-optation within social movement theory tracks the ways in which elites manage to influence and alter social movements in a non-violent manner. As a concept, it analyses how institutional actors, and the institutions themselves, can adopt the language and tactics used by spontaneous movements to their own ends. During the 'Arab Spring' protests in 2011, many social movements went through a process of co-optation as revolutionary impulses were slowed or reversed. In the case of Yemen, traditional political actors co-opted protest movements on the street and through the institutional framework of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). This paper utilises Coy and Hedeen's four-stage model of co-optation to analyse the development of the 2011 protest movement and the transitional period. First-hand interviews with Yemen experts and activists present during the events in question, combined with research of the scholarly literature, provide the foundation for this study. It will argue that Yemen's failed transition period can in part be understood with reference to the co-optation of the revolutionary movement.

"*The amazing thing that took place at that time was that you would find tribes from Marib, you'll find people from Sa'ada, you'll find people from the south… In the yards we felt nothing could divide us, nothing could split us. We had one goal.*"[1]

This year marks the tenth anniversary of widespread and frequent protests in several countries in the Middle East. What was dubbed the "Arab Spring" had led to the ousting of "president for life" Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia by January 2011 and inspired similar protests in Egypt, Libya, Syria and Bahrain. However, in no country were the protests as widespread, persistent and inclusive as in Yemen, where they geographically covered most of the country and included participants from all regions, demographics and social backgrounds. Before Yemen descended into civil war and Operation Decisive Storm was launched by Saudi Arabia and its allies on 26 March 2015, the only republic on the Arabian Peninsula was considered a success story. Amidst the ongoing violence and devastating humanitarian crisis, it is easy to forget that between 2011 and 2014, Yemen seemed to be on a path to reconciliation. The peaceful protests had succeeded in ousting president Ali Abdullah Saleh — who had been in power for over three decades — and initiated Yemen's transitional period. The National Dialogue Conference (NDC),which was part of this transitional period, was a promising opportunity for an unprecedented debate over Yemen's future.

I believe that a reconsideration of this period in Yemen's history is necessary to address overlooked aspects of its political transition. Well-versed scholars have written about the political crisis which Yemen was in, prior to the popular movement forming in 2011. Stephen Day examines the complexities of the newly unified state post-1990 while Susanne Dahlgren analyses Southern grievances and the separatist movement that re-

[1] Bushra Kretschmer, interview by Aylin Junga, October 6, 2020.

emerged in 2007.[2] The difficult task of illuminating the complex history and dynamics of the Huthi conflict in Yemen is undertaken by Marieke Brandt whose detailed analysis of the conflicts' "grassroot dynamics" allow for a better and more accurate understanding of the Huthi's role in Yemen's politics.[3] Laurent Bonnefoy's analysis of Yemeni Salafism contributes to a greater understanding of its embeddedness and grassroots origins in Yemen thus de-emphasising state-centric explanations.[4] Other scholars have examined Yemen's spiral into civil war specifically tracking the government's increased patronage leading to the disenfranchisement of Yemen's population[5] and the economic and resource crisis the country faces.[6] An interesting contribution to understanding the shifting dynamics prior to, during, and following Yemen's 2011 protests was made by Jens Heibacha and Mareike Transfeld in their study of relations between regime and opposition in the authoritarian context of Yemen.[7] Non-state actors in Yemen have also been scrutinised in Sheila Carapico's detailed account of civil society organisations in North and South Yemen and the unified republic.[8] Regarding the social movement that formed in response to these grievances, scholars have mostly focused on its composition and the demands voiced.[9] Building on these scholars' work, it is my aim in this study to examine a distinct dynamic taking place within the framework of the revolutionary movement of 2011: the co-optation of social movements.

Social movement theorists gained a renewed incentive to focus on case studies originating from the Middle East, a region that had previously been neglected. When Gregory Gause asked 'Why Middle East Studies missed the Arab Spring'[10], it made apparent how scholars had previously viewed the region only through the lens of authoritarian resilience and the notion of "'Middle East exceptionalism".[11] This notion stems, in part, from the idea that there is no viable civil society in the Middle East[12]; or

[2] Stephen W. Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union,* Cambridge Middle East Studies 37 (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Susanne Dahlgren, "The Snake with a Thousand Heads: The Southern Cause in Yemen," *MERIP* 256, (Fall 2010), accessed October 18, 2020, https://merip.org/2010/09/the-snake-with-a-thousand-heads/.

[3] Marieke Brandt. *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict*. (London: Hurst & Company, 2017).

[4] Laurent Bonnefoy. *Salafism in Yemen: Transnationalism and Religious Identity*. (London: Hurst, 2011).

[5] Isa Blumi, *Chaos in Yemen: Societal Collapse and the New Authoritarianism,* Routledge Advances in Middle East and Islamic Studies (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2010).

[6] Helen Lackner, "Water Scarcity: Why Doesn't It Get the Attention it Deserves" in Helen Lackner, ed., *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition,* SOAS Middle East Issues (London: Saqi, 2014), 161 ff.

[7] Heibach, Jens, and Mareike Transfeld. "Opposition Dynamism Under Authoritarianism: The Case of Yemen, 1994–2011." *Democratization* 25, no. 4 (2018): 597–613.

[8] Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen: The Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia,* Cambridge Middle East Studies 9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[9] Sheila Carapico, ed., *Arabia Incognita: Dispatches from Yemen and the Gulf* (Charlottesville, Virginia: Just World Books, 2016).

[10] Gregory F. Gause, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 4 (2011), https://shibbolethsp.jstor.org/start?entityID=https%3A%2F%2Fidp.soas.ac.uk%2Fentity&dest=https://www.jstor.org/stable/23039608&site=jstor.

[11] Salame Ghassan, *Democracy Without Democrats: The Renewal of Politics in the Arab World* (London: I.B Tauris, 1994).

[12] Francesco Cavatorta, ed., *Civil Society Activism Under Authoritarian Rule: A Comparative Perspective,* Routledge/ECPR Studies in European Political Science (London, New York: Routledge, 2013).

as Sheila Carapico puts it "Arab civil society" is an oxymoron".[13] Thus research on the Middle East is often focused on the functioning of authoritarian regimes and heavily state-centric.[14] Understanding the Arab Spring in a social movement framework emphasises agency and choice as a catalyst for collective action in the context of groups. This is in contrast to structuralist views of Yemen's 2011 protests as merely a response to wider economic factors, as held by Isa Blumi.[15] It also challenges some of the assumptions inherent in "Middle East exceptionalism" which present Islam as the dominant explanatory factor for Muslim behaviour and as somehow distinct from other religions' motivational capability.[16] Building on the important work done by some of the aforementioned scholars in refuting such claims, I will review one of the more neglected cases of the "Arab Spring".

I will focus on proving that political elites co-opted the popular movement that emerged in Yemen in 2011. By appropriating activists' tactics, discourse, and symbols, elite actors utilised the challenge to the political system to pursue their own programmes.

Although still an under-researched field of study, the concept of co-optation of social movements is more relevant than ever as social movements are forming in response to an increase in authoritarian politics and perceived or existing social injustices. technological innovations have not only changed the way we communicate but have made organised collective action easier and shared grievances more visible.[17] I argue that understanding the co-optation process is crucial, especially in authoritarian contexts where the emergence of a social movement is unexpected, and its success evaluated by the degree of coercion and violence the movement faces from the state and vested interests. As I will discuss later, co-optation has mostly been studied in the context of liberal democracies. Yemen presents a new and important opportunity to understand social movement co-optation in a new and relevant context.

In this study, I will not analyse elites' decision to employ co-optation mechanisms, nor the specific outcomes of that process. Instead, I will use a model for co-optation, tracking the process itself. To do so, I will first review the relevant literature on the subject. This will set the foundation for introducing the four-stage model, which I will use to analyse the Yemeni case. Each stage will provide a framework to understand the processes occurring in Yemen.

The Concept of Co-optation

Co-optation is generally agreed within the field of social movement theory (SMT) to have been pioneered by Philip Selznick in his study of the Tennessee Valley Authority's relationship with communal actors and local elites[18] as the "elite strategy of using apparently cooperative practices to absorb those who seek change — to make them work

[13] Carapico, *Civil society in Yemen*, 4.

[14] Heibach; Transfeld, "Opposition Dynamism Under Authoritarianism: The Case of Yemen", 598.

[15] Isa Blumi, *Destroying Yemen: What Chaos in Arabia Tells Us About the World*. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 185f.

[16] Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004); Anne Baylouny "Social Movement Studies and the Middle East," in *Routledge Handbook of Middle East Politics*, (New York: Routledge, 2019).

[17] Victoria Carty, *Social Movements and New Technology*. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2015).

[18] Philip Selznick, *TVA and the Grass Roots: A Study of Politics and Organization*, (New Orleans, Louisiana: Quid Pro Books, 1949).

with elites without giving them any new advantages".[19] It becomes possible through the instigation of a social movement that opposes or challenges existing social or political structures, thus creating Sidney Tarrow's moment of "contentious politics". Subsequent studies have contributed different components to the concept of co-optation. However, at its core, it remains the process of "absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy-determining structure of an organisation as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence."[20] The movement's original character is being altered by elites within the existing social or political environment.[21] How co-optation comes about and what this "change of character" entails, have been significant lines of inquiry for scholars in the field. Selznick proposes that elites may resort to co-optation when their formal authority is called into question and when they lack the consent of the governed that is necessary to maintain power. In this case, they may use coercive measures to ensure the consent of the people.[22] The response to a challenge posed by a social movement and the resulting outcome, which may be a mix of social control, institutionalisation, co-optation, and policy changes,[23] is the main focus of co-optation literature.

To summarise, the concept of co-optation examines a change and broadening in the leadership of a social movement; that there is an adaptive response; and that this change is of consequence for the character, organisation, and goals of the movement. Moreover, while co-optation may target any of these aspects of a social movement — goals, tactics, or discourse — it is a process that might best be understood as a progression of stages, all of which are processes themselves. Therefore, I will briefly lay out the analytical framework I have chosen to understand the process of co-optation in Yemen.

A Stage Model for Co-optation

Drawing on the literature on co-optation I have presented above, Patrick G. Coy and Timothy Hedeen developed a four-stage model of the co-optation process to aid their analysis of the evolution and co-optation of the community mediation movement in the late 1970s in the United States.[24] Bringing about some conceptual coherence "to what is a complicated process of social interaction" and the "multifaceted nature of co-optation" is a further goal of their study.[25] To do so they have determined key parts of the process which they describe as stages. However, stages are not meant to be understood as one-time events or consequences of a particular action.[26] Every stage further consists of multiple steps. These do not necessarily form a linear process as "there are often loop-backs, mutually or unilaterally aborted processes, and both short-term as well as extended periods without significant new developments".[27] The model considers the actions and reaction of both the "challenging movement" and "the state and

[19] Markus Holdo, "Cooptation and Non-Cooptation: Elite Strategies in Response to Social Protest," *Social Movement Studies* 18, no. 4 (2019): 444.
[20] Philip Selznick, "Foundations of the Theory of Organization," *American Sociological Review* 13, no. 1 (1948): 34.
[21] Patrick G. Coy and Timothy Hedeen, "A Stage Model of Social Movement Co-Optation: Community Mediation in the United States," *The Sociological Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2005): 406.
[22] Selznick, "Foundations of the Theory of Organization," 34.
[23] Coy and Hedeen, "A Stage Model of Social Movement Co-Optation," 406.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Coy and Hedeen, "A Stage Model of Social Movement Co-Optation," 409.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.

vested interests", actors that I have previously referred to as elites or co-opting elites.[28]

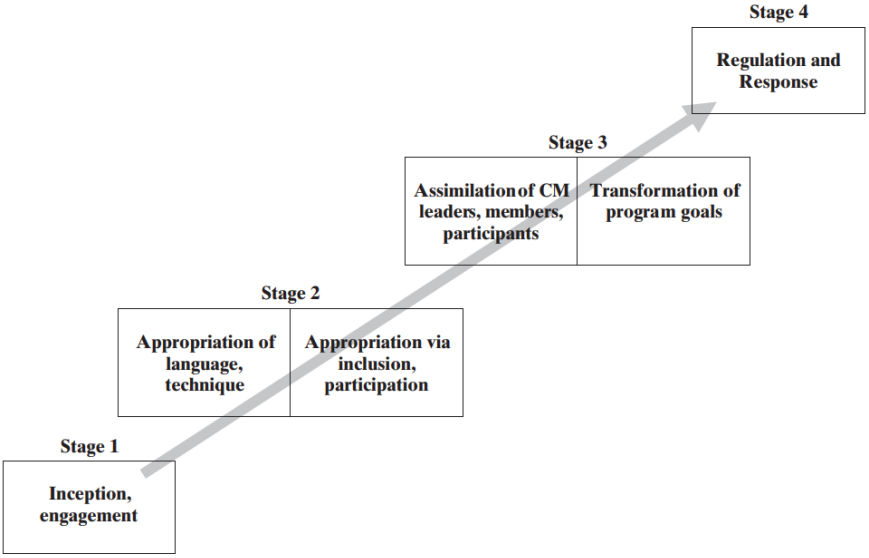

FIGURE 1. A Stage Model of Co-optation.
CM = challenging movement.

Coy and Hedeen aim to make their stage model useful to the analysis of other movements either in whole or in part. However, their observations which are generalised to create a conceptually cohesive model, were made in the cultural context of a liberal democracy — the United States in the 1970s. As stated earlier, the Middle East is generally neglected in social movement research and therefore in the study of co-optation. If a social movement is discussed in an authoritarian context such as Yemen, the government's coercive and violent response often takes precedence over other elite strategies.[29] This failure to consider authoritarian contexts is reflected in some aspects of Coy and Hedeen's model. I will discuss issues that arise specifically in stage four of the model hereafter. However, first I believe it is necessary to address other notable elements of the model. As the social movement arises in response to grievances, elites may try to co-opt it by appropriating the movement's tactics and language or including it in their own organisational structure. Distinguishing between when elites act in such a manner and when their support for a movement is genuine can be problematic. Although Coy and Hedeen specify that the state and/or those vested in the status quo rarely have a detailed plan to co-opt a popular movement step by step[30], questions of intent and agency naturally arise. The distinction between participation and co-optation can be difficult to determine when similar actions stem from different motivations or intentions. If movement members engage with state provided institutions for deliberation, are they being co-opted or willingly participating in a particular setting to achieve their

[28] Ibid.
[29] *International Crisis Group. "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (II): Yemen Between Reform and Revolution."*, 2011. Accessed October 19, 2020.
[30] Coy and Hedeen, "A Stage Model of Social Movement Co-Optation," 409.

own ends? The stage model helps identify common actions within the notion of co-optation but struggles to clear up ambiguities around the import of those actions.

In the same way that determining actions as co-optation can be difficult, determining which actors are the co-opting elites can be equally challenging. In Yemen, youth organisations of several opposition parties joined the protests at an early stage, seemingly out of genuine support. When their party leadership joined at a later stage to co-opt the movement, as I will argue, youth organisers were made to align with their leadership. In this instance, are party youth organisations those co-opting or those being co-opted?

As mentioned above, the model has not been developed with authoritarian contexts in mind. This becomes especially evident in stage four which explores the state's final response to the movements demands. By codifying the demands of the movement, which have already been amended by co-opting elites, the state and vested interests have the opportunity to regulate them further. Although codification is often among the goals of movements as they want to enact permanent change, the outcome most often includes substantial changes made to the original demands. While this stage is applicable in a context like the United States, Yemen's political instability and lack of security do not allow for the peaceful adoption of legislation as laid out in the model. As I will further discuss in my analysis the unraveling of the transitional process into civil war shows a lack of the institutional stability and democracy associated with stage four. Despite these issues, the model aims at facilitating a greater understanding of the co-optation process by providing a guideline of which processes and dynamics to look out for.[31] There is no singular stage which in and of itself proves co-optation happened. As the model describes a social dynamic, it is flexible and provides a helpful framework even for analysing the revolutionary social movement that formed in Yemen, as I will discuss in my analysis.

Methodology

As previously stated, it is not my aim in this study to prove that the Yemeni case fits the concept of co-optation. Instead, I will utilise Coy and Hedeen's model to better understand the case's specific contextual realities. To do that, I will apply the model to the case study to understand Yemen's 2011 popular movement in this framework and draw new concepts from the case study, as is done when research on a topic is still sparse.[32] To better understand Yemen's unique context, I will draw upon the aforementioned literature.

To build a detailed picture of the process of co-optation, I conducted interviews with activists and experts to gather primary source material. I was able to interview Helen Lackner, a leading academic and expert on Yemen with over four decades of research experience, and Maysaa Shuja Al-deen, a non-resident fellow at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. They contributed, above all, to my analysis of the Yemeni context and the way it resembled and differed from other popular movements that were happening in the region at the same time. Helen Lackner, who participated in several working groups in Yemen's NDC, also provided valuable insights for the third section of this paper. For the first and second section, which describe the formation of the protests movements as well as the process of elite co-optation on the ground, I relied on information from activists who were on the ground during the protests in 2011. I reached out to them though various social media channels, after becoming aware of their contributions to Yemen's pro-

[31] Coy and Hedeen, "A Stage Model of Social Movement Co-Optation," 405.

[32] Donatella Della Porta, *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*, First Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 233.

democracy struggles. This included the Nobel Peace Prize-winning women's activist and journalist Tawakkol Karman, the independent activist and protester Nabil Albaydani, the lawyer and human rights activist Tawfik Alhamidi, and the youth organiser and advisor Bushra Kretschmer. Their insights into the early protest movements were immensely valuable in reconstructing the day-to-day activities of protesters, their motivations, tactics and co-optation strategies employed by elites. I also interviewed Baraa Shiban, a human rights activist who served as a youth representative at the NDC. He was very helpful in understanding the role played by independent youth activists in the Conference.

Most of the interviews were conducted over video call and through the creation of an interview guide which included a consistent set of questions for all interviewees. It allowed me to digress and guide the conversation based on the interactions during the interview. This flexibility of a semi-structured interview is particularly useful in gathering data about the motives of people who participate in social movements, as it provides the "opportunity to discover the respondent's experience and interpretation of reality".[33] Although less useful when the goal is a systematic comparison of the answers, as is often done in structured interviews and surveys, this method is often utilised in social movement research to interpret complex social events, or "investigating research questions or propositions derived from social movement theory"[34]. By asking interviewees to recount their experiences and analyses candidly, I refrained from asking leading questions aimed at receiving a specific answer but rather used the information given to me to build into my analysis. This was done to ensure that the analysis that follows is as free of bias as possible.

Grievances, Identity and Social Movement Formation in Yemen

To understand the formation of the revolutionary movement in 2011, it is important to briefly review the context in which it came about. Yemen is unique in many ways. It is the only republic on the Arabian Peninsula, and the second largest but poorest among its neighbours. One of the oldest irrigation civilisations in the world[35], it has a rich history which in modern times has been marred by colonialism and foreign interference, but also includes civil society action, political resistance and a continuous push for democratisation. The Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in North Yemen was established after an internationalised revolution in 1962, which overthrew the last Shi'a Zaydi imam[36] of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom which had independently ruled in Yemen since 1918.[37] The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) was a socialist state established in South Yemen after it won independence from Britain in 1967. Before the Unification of the YAR and the PDRY in 1990, there had never been a unified Yemeni state.[38] Both states were governed very differently before their unification, and naturally, unity was fragile from the onset. After only four years, the south of the country, which had previously been the

[33] Bert Klandermans and Suzanne Staggenborg, *Methods of Social Movement Research,* Social Movements, Protest, and Contention v. 16 (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 93.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Gerhard Lichtenhäler, "Customary Conflict Resolution in Times of Extreme Water Stress: A Case Study of a Document from the Northern Highlands of Yemen" in *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition,* ed. Helen Lackner (London: Saqi, 2014), 183.

[36] Yahya b. al-Husayn had established a Zaydi community in 897 CE. Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict*, 101.

[37] Paul Dresch. *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen*. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 3.

[38] Lisa Wedeen. *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen*. (Chicago: University Presses Marketing, 2008), 2.

PDRY, declared secession from the Republic of Yemen. In the unification process, each government had hoped to impose its system on the other. However, the disparity in power favoured the former North Yemen. Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had been president of the YAR since 1978, remained president of the united Yemen, the capital was declared to be Sana'a, and against the hopes of many, the laws of the YAR were extended to the South.[39] From the onset, the Yemeni state struggled with the formation of a national state-centered identity.[40] Although it initially allowed for active civic association, critical public debate, a relatively free press, and a weak but multiparty system, election fraud, increasing accumulation of power by the ruling party, and civil war, changed the democratic conditions.[41] The nationwide protest movements are therefore all the more notable.

The grievances that initially inspired the protests in 2011, namely the poor living standards, the looming economic and humanitarian crisis with oil and water fast running out,[42] and the continually increasing corruption, had led to a significant mass opposition movement active in cities as well as rural areas as early as 2005.[43] Although both the Huthi rebellion — a shia revivalist movement that began in 2004 in the northern governorate of Sa'ada[44] — and the resurfacing of the southern separatist movement in 2007[45] were in part results of the overall neglect of those areas, they were exasperated by targeted politics enacted by the Saleh regime. The government paid little attention to the development and political inclusion of the Sa'ada area while its selective financial and economic patronage of few tribal leaders shifted and distorted the previously functioning tribal order.[46] Forcible retirement of members of the army from the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) had further increased unemployment. Concurrently,the tight patronage system and flourishing corruption led foreign donors to withdraw their assistance on which the government in Yemen depended.[47] Additionally, since 2008 armed Islamist rebel movements with ties to al-Qaeda had increasingly targeted Yemeni security forces throughout the country. While during most of the 1990s, the government and jihadis had entered into a loose agreement of mutual toleration, the second half of the 2000s saw that agreement continually breached. Southern Yemen suffered, in particular, from ongoing violence as well as weekly, sometimes daily, American drone strikes.[48] All in all, Yemenis experienced much hardship, including the many years of globalisation and neoliberal policies that economically deprived many groups within the country.[49] Although peaceful protests continued between 2006 and 2011[50], the situation only worsened. In

[39] Helen Lackner, *Yemen in Crisis: Autocracy, Neo-Liberalism and the Disintegration of a State* (London: Saqi Books, 2017), 118.

[40] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen*, 2f.

[41] Ibid. 69 f.

[42] Sarah Phillips, "Foreboding about the Future of Yemen" in *Arabia Incognita: Dispatches from Yemen and the Gulf,* ed. Sheila Carapico (Charlottesville, Virginia: Just World Books, 2016), 160.

[43] Helen Lackner, "The Change Squares of Yemen," in *Civil Resistance in the Arab Spring*, ed. Adam Roberts et al. (Oxford University Press, 2016), 152.

[44] Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict*, 153ff.

[45] Dahlgren, "The Snake with a Thousand Heads"

[46] Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict*, 72f.

[47] Phillips, "Foreboding about the Future of Yemen", 161.

[48] Laurent Bonnefoy, "The *Shabab,* Institutionalized Politics and the Islamists in the Yemeni Revolution" in *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition,* ed. Helen Lackner (London: Saqi, 2014), 90f.

[49] Blumi, *Destroying Yemen: What Chaos in Arabia Tells Us About the World*, 170f.

[50] Tawfik Al-Hamidi, interview by Aylin Junga, September 25, 2020.

short, the grievances held by the population were numerous, with Sarah Phillips stating as early as 2006 "it is hard to overstate the urgency of Yemen's situation."[51] The political opportunities for the expression of these grievances, presented themselves by early 2011.

Political opportunities occur when fundamental assumptions of the political order are destabilised. Thus, they allow for the translation of grievances into social action. The unilateral decision by Saleh to postpone parliamentary elections scheduled for 2009, followed by an attempt to change the constitution — for the sixth time — in a way that would allow him to run for an unconstitutional third term in the 2013 presidential elections, further increased tensions with the opposition.[52] Moreover, it caused restlessness in Saleh's ranks. His apparent intention to ordain his son, whom he had already made commander of the nation's Republican Guard,[53] unsettled some of Saleh's former allies, including his former close associate and military leader Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar. Prior to the 2011 protests, Mohsen had been considered Saleh's right-hand man and held a prominent position in Yemen's political landscape as commander of the First Armoured Division. On top of being a distant cousin of Saleh and a member of the Sanhan tribe, Mohsen was part of the Islah party and thought to be Saleh's successor if he were to be killed.[54] Saleh's intention to hand over the presidency to his son further called into question the assumption that the presidency would be won through elections. The shifting alliances within the political elite further created space for political opportunity. Injustices were also rampant. The appropriation of the land of a whole village for the benefit of a sheikh whose poetry Saleh liked, had led to a long-term encampment by those villagers from Ja'ashin in Ibb Governorate in Sana'a.[55] They were soon joined by others, such as the Women Journalists Without Chains, led by Tawakkol Karman who started regularly protesting in Sana'a outside the prime minister's office.[56]

In my interview with Karman, she discussed her motivation to protest:

> Saleh's quest to pass power to his son Ahmed [is] in stark contrast to the republican system sacred to Yemenis, increasingly high level of corruption in state institutions, poor government efficiency, and dishonest dealing with major national security issues like the war on terror and the counter-insurgency policy in Sa'da governorate [necessitated a revolution].[57]

The active participation of women in public protest was remarkable not only due to their significant contribution to the civilian and peaceful nature of the protests[58] but also as it signalled the ties they had been able to forge as civil society actors.[59] As a prelude

[51] Phillips, "Foreboding about the Future of Yemen", 162.
[52] Helen Lackner, *Yemen in Crisis: Autocracy, Neo-Liberalism and the Disintegration of a State*, 35.
[53] Sheila Carapico, "Yemen Between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism" in *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition,* ed. Helen Lackner (London: Saqi, 2014), 31.
[54] al-Dawsari, N., Nasser, S. (2020) "The Role of 'legitimacy,' Hadi, and the Islah Party". In: Stephen Day & Noel Brehony, eds. Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis, 212f.
[55] Lackner, *Yemen in Crisis*, 35.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Karman, Tawakkol. Interview by Aylin Junga. December 20, 2020.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Stacey P. Yadav, "Tawakkul Karman as Cause and Effect" in *Arabia Incognita: Dispatches from Yemen and the Gulf,* ed. Sheila Carapico (Charlottesville, Virginia: Just World Books, 2016), 191.

to the inclusivity of the popular movements that kept increasing in size in multiple Yemeni cities, it indicated the collective consciousness that was developing among large parts of the population. "As in Tunisia and Egypt, the experience of a collective, contentious mobilization 'from below' energized a veritable cultural transformation."[60] The collective action was further triggered by the successful ousting of "presidents for life" in Egypt and Tunisia.[61] Common grievances shared with protesters in these countries, such as the frustration with corrupt, ageing regimes "that have fed for decades at the through of US military assistance"[62] further created a sense of collective identity.

Demonstrations in Sana'a grew, and people began organising formally. As Saleh had pre-empted the protesters setting base at Sana'a's Midan al-Tahrir, he filled it with his supporters.[63] Instead, protesters set up tents in the square in front of Sana'a University, renaming it "Midan al-Taghyir" or "change square". Initially, the independent "youth" — a term I will be using to refer to independent members of the popular movement— dominated the protests . However, considering that one remains a part of the "youth" in Yemen until the age of 40, and 80 per cent of the country's population is under the age of 35,[64] the description of the movement as youthful is unsurprising. Individual members of political parties most often their youth organisations, joined the protests early, whereas the oppositional parties' leaderships and influential tribal leaders remained on the side-lines.[65]

Daily, peaceful protests were staged by a highly mobilised but not very organised movement whose main demands revolved around the downfall of the regime, borrowing slogans from Egypt and Tunisia — "Irhal" (leave!) and "al-Sha'ab Yuridh Isqat al-Nizam" (The people want the downfall of the regime).[66] They further demanded the establishment of a "civil state",[67] which is not to be confused with a secular state; it challenges the patronage system which is based on tribal loyalties as well as military ranks. About 75 percent of Yemen's population are tribespeople[68] and thus the protesters were concerned with the divide and rule strategy which the Saleh regime had long utilised along tribal lines.[69] Furthermore, due to Yemen's unique brand of praetorianism, the military had played a significant role in the country's political and institutional culture.[70] Although the protest movement was not shaped by one single ideology, protesters focused on shared grievances, goals, and identities.

To streamline demands and coordinate tactics, protesters organised nationwide youth-coalitions and by the end of March formed the Coordination Council for

[60] Carapico, "Yemen Between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism", 31.
[61] Nabil Albaydani, interview by Aylin Junga, September 22, 2020; Maysaa Shuja Aldeen, interview by Aylin Junga, October 8, 2020; Helen Lackner, interview by Aylin Junga, October 9, 2020.
[62] Carapico, *Arabia Incognita*, 174.
[63] Carapico, "Yemen Between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism", 33.
[64] Lackner, "The Change Squares of Yemen," 154.
[65] *International Crisis Group, "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (II): Yemen Between Reform and Revolution,"* 2011, accessed October 19, 2020, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/popular-protest-north-africa-and-middle-east-ii-yemen-between-reform-and-revolution, 3.
[66] Carapico, "Yemen Between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism", 33.
[67] Maysaa Shuja Aldeen, interview by Aylin Junga; Baraa Shiban, interview by Aylin Junga, October 12, 2020.
[68] Lackner, *Yemen in Crisis*, 36.
[69] Phillips, "Foreboding about the Future in Yemen", 163; Bushra Kretschmer, interview by Aylin Junga.
[70] Adam C. Seitz, "Ties That Bind and Divide: The 'Arab Spring' and Yemeni Civil-Military Relations" in *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition,* ed. Helen Lackner (London: Saqi, 2014), 50.

Yemeni Revolutionary Youth (CCYRC).[71] By distributing 1000 questionnaires to protesters in the squares, the CCYRC created groups responsible for drafting an official list of demands. The final product included ten demands that covered the removal of the current regime, the establishment of a Presidential Transitional Council, a six-month transitional period, and the establishment of a representative Transitional National Board. Furthermore, the CCYRC demanded solutions for the issues in Sa'ada, and the South — specifically the Huthi rebellion and separatism.[72]

Faced with protests in all major Yemeni cities and beyond, Saleh announced on 2 February that he would cancel the planned amendment to the constitution, postpone parliamentary elections due in April, and increase the salary for military and security personnel by thirty-three percent. He further offered the establishment of a government of national unity and the decrease of centralisation for the benefit of local governance in governorates,[73] a frequent demand among some opposition parties. According to Piven and Cloward, political leadership, specifically when political alignments are unstable or shifting, cannot ignore a challenge to its authority.[74] As mentioned above, Saleh's relationship with the opposition, although never particularly good, had become increasingly tense, and he was facing a falling-out with some of his previous allies. The granting of concessions to remedy some of the immediate grievances, both symbolic — as with the increase in security and military personnel's salary to ensure their loyalty — and tangible, were swiftly followed by violence and oppression.

To summarise, Yemenis had felt the same grievances for almost a decade; however, the political opportunity present due to political realignments, continuous demonstrations and the successful revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, paired with a sense of shared identity, allowed for the creation of Yemen's revolutionary popular movement.

The government initially met increased organisation and the articulation of protester's demands with an attempt to appease them, quickly followed by counter-revolutionary tactics. Opposition parties were mostly represented by their youth leaders in the protests, however, "at the beginning, political parties were not that excited to encourage their members to join".[75] In fact, the party leadership of a coalition consisting of Yemen's main opposition parties, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP)[76], remained on the side-line and open for dialogue with the government until late February. "At the end, the political parties used the youth as well. So, they have the youth on the ground, but they also are negotiating at the table."[77]

[71] Atiaf Z. Alwazir, "Yemen's Enduring Resistance: Youth Between Politics and Informal Mobilization," *Mediterranean Politics* 21, no. 1 (2016): 173.

[72] The Coordinating Council of the Youth Revolution of Change, "The Declaration of Youth Revolution Demands: Declaration Articles." https://www.facebook.com/CCYRC/photos/a.170147653034903/176541389062196/?type=3&theater.

[73] Lackner, *Yemen in Crisis*, 35.

[74] Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage books, 1979), 28.

[75] Maysaa Shuja Aldeen, interview by Aylin Junga.

[76] A cross-ideological alliance of opposition parties consisting of the the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (al-tajammu' al-yamani li-l-islah, or Islah), the Yemeni Socialist Party (al-hizb al-ishtiraki al-yamani, YSP) – as well as several smaller parties either with a Zaydi revivalist background, like the Party of Truth (hizb al-haqq), or Arab nationalist leanings, like the Nasserist Unionist People's Organisation (al-tanzim al-wahdawi al-sha'bi al-nasiri, NUPO) Heibach; Transfeld, "Opposition Dynamism Under Authoritarianism: The Case of Yemen," 601.

[77] Bushra Kretschmer, interview by Aylin Junga.

Co-optation of Protest Movements on the Ground

By the end of February, the movement had grown considerably. Partly due to the regime's excessive use of violence, tens of thousands demonstrated in at least eight cities on the 18th of February.[78] The JMP and Huthi leaderships both officially joined the movement on the 20th of February encouraging their members' participation. This was followed by further political parties and influential tribal leaders officially siding with the protesters after the government's brutal attack on peaceful protesters on the18th of March,[79] signalling a move into the second stage of the co-optation process.

The killing of fifty peaceful protesters by government forces sparked outrage and "solidified the protests into a nationwide movement"[80] which crossed pre-existing social and political divisions. The aftermath of the massacre saw the largest ever defection from the ruling party and parts of the military. Additionally, the al-Ahmar family, the influential leaders of the Hashed tribal confederation that Saleh himself belonged to, officially broke with the government and joined the movement along with General Ali Mohsen. Their engagement in the protests made visible the elite's attempts at appropriation. Anticipating regime change, established political elites embraced the protesters' reformist rhetoric.[81] The popular movement presented an opportunity for influential parties to shape Yemen's future according to their own vision. The opposition had attempted and failed to reform the political- and electoral systems[82] over the last decade. By April, the conflict was internationalised, with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) attempting to broker a proposal for a peaceful transition of power.[83] Furthermore, the regime's violence towards the protesters, who remained peaceful, made it increasingly difficult for the opposition to remain neutral. Thus, they joined as reformers.

Drawing a distinction between reformist and revolutionary activism is important in understanding the process of co-optation, considering that partisan actors stepped in to organise the formerly independent movement.[84] The possibility of the revolutionary process being appropriated by institutionalised actors[85] could "diminish the scope for change and increased control over the various political and symbolic outcomes of the movements."[86] Karman notes that the joining of the opposition parties, although proving the weakness of the regime, "led to a reshuffling of the cards and slowing of the wave of change, as well as a weakening of the revolution's bargaining position and [emphasised] non-radical solutions. In practice, this meant moving from the idea of getting rid of the regime to rehabilitating it. In other words, the joining did more harm than good."[87]

[78] *International Crisis Group, "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (II),"* 2011, 3.

[79] *Human Rights Watch, "Yemen: Unpunished Massacre,"* 2013, https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/video/2013/02/12/yemen-unpunished-massacre-0.

[80] Carapico, "Yemen Between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism", 35.

[81] Tobias Thiel, "Governance in Transition: The Dynamics of Yemen's Negotiated Reform Process" in *Yemen and the Search for Stability: Power, Politics and Society after the Arab Spring*, ed. Marie-Christine Heinze (London: I.B Tauris, 2018), 139f.

[82] Zeinab Abdelkarim, Eric Hodachok and Danielle Monaco, "Yemen's Transition: Electoral Challenges and Opportunities for Reform" *CDDRL Working Papers* Vol. 139 (July 2013): 6f.

[83] Abdelkarim, Hodachok and Monaco, "Yemen's Transition", 5.

[84] Yadav, "Tawakkul Karman as Cause and Effect", 190.

[85] Bonnefoy, "The *Shabab*, Institutionalized Politics and the Islamists in the Yemeni Revolution", 88.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Karman, Tawakkol. Interview by Aylin Junga.

Independent actors and people who felt they lacked the necessary organisation particularly feared the joining of Ali Mohsen and his people. They knew it would increase the dominance of the Islah party within the movement[88] as it is the largest and most influential opposition party within the JMP in Sana'a, with an ideology closely resembling the Muslim Brotherhood. From its formation in 1990 to the 2011 protests, the Islah party has oscillated between opposition and support for the GPC guided by what Sarah Phillips identifies as an overarching desire for access to the patronage system rather than strict religious or ideological motivations. Despite its inclusion in the formation of the JMP in 2002, its opposition to the government has always been limited because "its preference was to work within the system for change".[89] As a result of its entanglement in the existing political framework, the Islah party presence in the protests limited formerly open spaces for dialogue and organisation.[90] "Many demonstrators blame the movement's stagnation on the JMP and General Ali Muhsin, who are believed to be collaborating against the youth."[91]

In what follows, I will show that the shift from what was a spontaneous mass movement, to a movement that was dominated by institutional actors[92] had an impact on the tactics, organisation, and demands of protesters. According to stage two of the co-optation model, elites can appropriate a movement in multiple ways. First, by appropriating their terminology, symbols, and tactics, elites are able to redefine their meaning and thus undermine the movement's "subversive and potential and the challenger's status as a platform for critique and protest"[93] or direct it in their favour.

Upon joining the movement, the JMP deployed various protest paraphernalia — "sashes, hats, posters, flyers and more — tinted in gradations of pink"[94] thus attempting to dominate and streamline the protest's symbolic output. The appropriation of ideas utilised in the movement's organisation and tactics further becomes evident when considering the following event, described to me by a member of the CCYRC. On the national day of unity, the CCYRC had planned to go out with Yemeni flags and symbols of the independent protests. However, they were discouraged by JMP parties' leaderships. The next morning, the party's representatives had coordinated their own march with flags — "wanting to market themselves."[95] However, the appropriation of ideas, tactics and symbols is only one step within the second stage of the co-optation process.

Another way for elites to exert control over a social movement is to include movement representatives in their organisational structures. Through 'channelling' the initial movement's leadership or participants into formal organisational structures "the dominant group [is able to] redirect […] substantive challenges to the dominant groups

[88] Maysaa Shuja Aldeen, interview by Aylin Junga; Helen Lackner, interview by Aylin Junga.
[89] Sarah Phillips. *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective: Patronage and Pluralized Authoritarianism*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 159.
[90] Helen Lackner, interview by Aylin Junga.
[91] Amel Ahmed, "Yemen: Tensions Rise After President's Speech," *Al Jazeera*, accessed October 10, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2011/7/9/yemen-tensions-rise-after-presidents-speech.
[92] Helen Lackner, interview by Aylin Junga.
[93] Holdo, "Cooptation and non-cooptation: elite strategies in response to social protest," 450.
[94] Stacey P. Yadav, "No Pink Slip for Salih: What Yemen's Protests Do (and Do Not) Mean" in *Arabia Incognita: Dispatches from Yemen and the Gulf,* ed. Sheila Carapico (Charlottesville, Virginia: Just World Books, 2016), 173.
[95] Bushra Kretschmer, interview by Aylin Junga.

or systems and toward more modest reforms."[96] This channelling of protesters' anger and energy into "more legitimate and less disruptive forms of political behavior"[97] can be perceived as beneficial by movement participants. The additional, often stronger, administrative structures and higher security measures can be incentives to movements, especially when faced with organised counter-revolutionary violence by the government.[98] Alongside the potential benefits of participation however, there are also costs involved for the challenging movement, which often faces a loss of its relative autonomy, the de-politicisation of issues, and the entrenchment of race and class disadvantages.[99]

The fear of diffusion and demobilisation of the movement in Yemen led to initial resistance of some independent protesters to the joining of political parties.[100] However, soon after their professed allegiance to the revolution, activists close to the Islah party controlled the main speaking platform in Sana'a.[101] They organised life in the sit-ins, enforcing strict segregation between men and women, with the latter being subjected to physical assault by conservative male protesters.[102] Echoing a speech Saleh gave, the Islah's more conservative wing was concerned with the "reputation of the movement".[103] Youth leaders, who had been participating as individuals early on, joined their official party lines, dominated the discourse and reduced the space for others who were not part of it.[104] The "'Islamist' sympathisers ended up imposing this political movement's own agenda and method, largely at the expense of what [independent youth leaders] perceived as the essential characteristics of 'their' revolution: individualism, gender equality, the free exchange of views, tolerance."[105]

> It caused a great political and popular momentum. But in return, it had a negative impact on the free will of revolutionaries and protesters and on their ability to move towards the complete overthrow of the regime. I went through a bitter struggle with those parties and interest groups, as I insisted on the importance for the revolutionary youth to have their independent decision making.[106]

Although street politics were side-lined for the benefit of established party network mobilisation,[107] the independent movement had relied to a certain degree on pre-existing networks and former movements.[108] However, the degree of organisation and

[96] Coy and Hedeen, "A Stage Model of Social Movement Co-Optation," 416.
[97] Piven and Cloward, *Poor people's movements*, 30.
[98] Baraa Shiban, interview by Aylin Junga.
[99] Coy and Hedeen, "A Stage Model of Social Movement Co-Optation," 417.
[100] Nabil Albaydani, interview by Aylin Junga; Maysaa Shuja Aldeen, interview by Aylin Junga; *International Crisis Group, "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (II)," 2011,*4.
[101] Bonnefoy, "The *Shabab*, Institutionalized Politics and the Islamists in the Yemeni Revolution," 98.
[102] Bushra Kretschmer, interview by Aylin Junga; Bonnefoy, "The *Shabab*, Institutionalized Politics and the Islamists in the Yemeni Revolution," 98; Lackner, Carapico, "Yemen Between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism", 37.
[103] Tawfik Al-Hamidi, interview by Aylin Junga.
[104] Helen Lackner, interview by Aylin Junga.
[105] Bonnefoy, "The *Shabab*, Institutionalized Politics and the Islamists in the Yemeni Revolution," 98.
[106] Tawakkol Karman, interview by Aylin Junga. December 20,2020.
[107] Bonnefoy, "The *Shabab*, Institutionalized Politics and the Islamists in the Yemeni Revolution," 99.
[108] Ibid., 101.

amount of funding the JMP, specifically the Islah, were able to offer, allowed them to exert influence even if the movement did not have to rely on them for basic structures.[109] In fact, the formation of a "Revolutionary Community", which had been coordinated with the help of parties and began competing with the CCYRC, attempted to channel movement members into their organisational structure. They began organising security, food, and logistics in the square. However, they also restricted the openness of discussions by determining speakers and topics for the main stages. Speakers would not openly affiliate with a certain party or organisation, rather they spoke about their ideologies which clearly informed their lectures. Emphasising common ground they spoke to protesters not as party idealogues but simply as fellow protesters.[110]

By including members of the independent youth in this "Revolutionary Community", parties made sure that movement members felt a sense of ownership over the outcomes of discussions and the formulation of demands, even if the eventual outcomes were not, in fact, satisfactory.[111] This, in turn, contributed to their salience control; their ability to influence which demands and issues were considered more relevant over others. The main stage in the Midan al-Taghyir was at the heart of salience control once the movement had become more organised. The committee tasked with coordinating daily programs was accused of essentially being managed by the JMP, specifically the Islah party, resulting in a single ideological voice dominating the discourse. Furthermore, what was said on that stage became the focus of local, regional, and international news. By reportedly banning the distribution of written documents, party affiliates solidified their control over the discourse.[112] Representatives of the Huthis' political wing attempted a similar strategy, if not as well organised. After the 18th of March the level of the discussions and the debates were more circumscribed by the influence of the Islah and the Huthis than before, although there was still some space left for independent discussions on smaller platforms.[113]

In Yemen, party representatives utilised their organisational capacities to control space and discourse; their ideologies dominated the main stages for discussion. The appropriation of protesters' tactics, language and symbols are representative of the co-optation process. Although it may seem beneficial to movement activists to participate in elite organised channels, this often comes at the cost of independence and salience control. "By lecturing people, the parties wanted to control the protesting discourse itself."[114] However, seeking legitimacy, movements may choose to formalise their discourse. Often this is achieved through a notion of institutionalisation.[115]

The NDC and the Institutional Co-optation of Representatives

Such an opportunity for institutionalisation came with the establishment of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). While Yemeni activists occupied the Midan al-Taghyir for months on end, political parties were involved in negotiating a transition of power through the GCC initiative. As part of those negotiations, JMP representatives relied on

[109] Atiaf Z. Alwazir, *"The Square of Change in Sana'a: An Incubator for Reform," Arab Reform Brief* (Arab Reform Initiative, 2011), https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/the-square-of-change-in-sanaa-an-incubator-for-reform/, 3.

[110] Nabil Albaydani, interview by Aylin Junga.

[111] Coy and Hedeen, "A Stage Model of Social Movement Co-Optation," 418.

[112] Alwazir, "The Square of Change in Sana'a," 5–6.

[113] Helen Lackner, interview by Aylin Junga.

[114] Nabil Albaydani, interview by Aylin Junga.

[115] Coy and Hedeen, "A Stage Model of Social Movement Co-Optation," 419.

their organisational capacities to rent buses, organise security, transport wounded to hospitals, and shape the revolutionary narrative through their media outlets.[116] While independent protesters were not represented, some believed that "the JMP used [the] movement to pressure the regime into negotiations."[117] Although the final draft of the initiative was signed by all on the 21st of April, Saleh initially refused his signature and was only persuaded to sign, after several stalling manoeuvres, on the 23rd of November.[118] The final agreement entailed a transfer of the presidency to vice president Hadi, making him the first Southern-born president to hold power in Sana'a[119], new presidential elections to be called within sixty days, and drafting a new constitution to be approved by referendum.[120] However, against protesters' explicit demands, Saleh and his associates would be immune from persecution. The revolutionary movement aimed at more fundamental change to the political structure, reaching further than just the transfer of power from Saleh to Hadi, leaving the former still in a position of power and influence as the head of the GPC.[121] This reformist approach to the government's political disintegration fuelled protesters and grassroots organisers in their revolutionary movement.[122] According to Baraa Shiban —a youth representative at the NDC — the exclusion of the independent youth from the GCC initiative negotiations was the decisive factor that convinced movement members to join the NDC.[123]

Within the co-optation process, the institutionalisation stage represents the assimilation of movement participants and leaders into an institutional framework provided by the state and vested interests.[124] Essential to this institutional framework is the employment of challenging movement leaders as well as the attempt at reforming movement goals.[125] Due to the limitation of access to it, continued participation in the policy-making body may become a goal in and of itself for movement representatives.[126] As a result, other movement objectives can be subsumed under the goal of ongoing access to these bodies.[127] With regards to youth leaders' decision-making,the desire for access to institutionalised bodies —even if provided by the state — was crucial.

As an institution for conflict resolution, the NDC borrows some important elements of Yemeni customary conflict resolution as "Yemenis have experience in how to engage in dialogue with each other. It is part of the tribal custom. How to solve the problem through dialogue, through compromising."[128] While tribal leaders were traditionally

[116] Bonnefoy, "The *Shabab*, Institutionalized Politics and the Islamists in the Yemeni Revolution," 99.
[117] Ahmed, "Yemen".
[118] Carapico, "Yemen Between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism," 38.
[119] Ginny Hill, *Yemen Endures: Civil War, Saudi Adventurism and the Future of Arabia*, (London: Hurst, 2017), 248.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ginny. *Yemen Endures*, 242.
[122] Yadav, "Tawakkul Karman as Cause and Effect," 190.
[123] Baraa Shiban, interview by Aylin Junga.
[124] Coy and Hedeen, "A Stage Model of Social Movement Co-Optation," 420.
[125] Ibid., 421.
[126] Ibid., 417.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Maysaa Shuja Aldeen, interview by Aylin Junga. October 8, 2020.

responsible for solving problems and disputes within their tribes,[129] tribal communities often resort to a *marqum,* an Arabic word meaning "record" or "register", as was done to resolve resource conflicts peacefully.[130] In Yemen, a document qualifies as *marqum* when all those concerned witness the deliberation process of reaching consensus. It is signed by the people or representatives of the parties, endorsed by a trustee and then kept as a permanent and unchangeable record. It can be used to settle existing conflicts, usually with the help of a mediator or neutral person, or it can help regulate aspects of community life and clarify rights and duties.[131] The NDC attempted to perform a similar function.

The NDC sought to bring together the disparate political forces active in Yemen to resolve some of the core political problems. Working groups on good governance, state-building, military and security affairs, rights and freedoms, development, independent entities, reconciliation and transitional justice, the Southern question and the Huthi rebellion in Sa'ada were meant to be discussed. This process aimed to produce outcomes that lay the Constitutional Drafting Committee's foundation to begin work on developing a new constitutional order for Yemen. However, it is important to note that while the NDC was an effort towards an effective transition, it was not the entire transition process itself. As Helen Lackner emphasises in response to the widespread perception that the NDC was the transition, "this is simply wrong: the NDC was one element of the transition process."[132] So while in this section, I focus on the meetings and representation at the NDC, a wider transitional process was occurring across the country that included the ongoing protests and popular movement tactics referenced above. Nevertheless, the NDC remains a reference point for the transition process and —for the purpose of this study— the culmination of institutionalisation of the social movement in the co-optation process.

Positive aspects of the NDC included the successful exemplification of "indigenous precedents and activism",[133] and a breakthrough of a new political coalition that secured recognition from established political actors.[134] Although it is a highly institutionalised framework that bent towards favouring established political parties, it also provided a new setting for activists' demands to be articulated. To analyse this stage in the co-optation process, it is important to outline the formation of the NDC as an institution. Following that, I will briefly review how youth and civil society actors were hindered, influenced, and co-opted through participation within the NDC. Firstly, it is necessary to acknowledge that the allocation of seats favoured political parties, and those representing independent activists were cherry-picked without proper consideration of their relation to the wider movement.[135]

While the formation of the NDC officially began back in November 2011 with Saleh's signature on the GCC Initiative (mandating a transitional process without an explicit

[129] Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 73.
[130] Gerhard Lichtenhäler, "Customary Conflict Resolution in Times of Extreme Water Stress," 188 ff.
[131] Ibid., 190f.
[132] Lackner, *Yemen in crisis*, 46.
[133] Carapico, "Yemen Between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism," 47.
[134] Helen Lackner, *Yemen's "Peaceful" Transition from Autocracy: Could It Have Succeeded?* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2016), https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/yemens-peaceful-transition-from-autocracy.pdf, 53.
[135] Atiaf Z. Alwazir, "Yemen's Independent Youth and Their Role in the National Dialogue Conference: Triggering a Change in Political Culture," *German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)*, (2013), https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2013C23_wzr.pdf, 4.

design for it),[136] the idea of a National Dialogue Conference predates the 2011 popular movement. Initially conceived as a plan by the government and opposition parties to address Southern separatism and the Huthi issue in the north, it was made to fit demands articulated by protesters as well.[137] To provide a framework for this, Hadi appointed a Liaison Committee in May 2012 whose task was to prepare for the NDC by meeting with groups across the country. The Technical Committee replaced this Liaison Committee in July which inherited the same task from its predecessor but included a more representative membership. In August, the Technical Committee submitted twenty demands on issues relating to the Huthi and Southern movements as well as unresolved problems from Saleh's rule.[138] Although Hadi accepted these, his government's failure to implement demands before the NDC's commencement initially alienated independent groups from the process. Youth and civil society representatives on the Technical Committee resigned in protest, a move which "removed their representation from the NDC when it began."[139] While these actors eventually gained seats at the NDC, this period highlighted their tenuous place within the institution's processes. Seats were allocated to the youth representatives according to "whether they were known to members of the technical committee", a selection process reminiscent of "a gathering of traditional elites."[140] Regardless, the final allocation of the 565 seats included 40 seats for youth and civil society organisations. Women were represented with roughly 30 percent across all sections. Their participation in decision-making bodies had been explicitly mentioned in the GCC Initiative. However, it is important to note that at the NDC most women were expected to vote along party lines, thus limiting their collaboration on women's issues.[141] As the largest number of seats was going to the established parties, the representation of Yemenis not affiliated with parties was comparatively low.[142] By engaging in deliberation and the drafting process, youth representatives sought to overcome the lack of representation.

Central to institutionalisation within the co-optation process is the attempt to transform a challenging movement's demands towards either reformist or de-politicised goals. This is done initially by drawing from and capturing the legitimacy the movement members bring to the institution and later using this perceived legitimacy to undercut revolutionary goals with reformist compromises. Selznick refers to it as sharing responsibility for power and not power itself.[143] The institutional structure of the NDC "channelled grassroots mobilisation into a formalised process" which led youth delegates to feel "traditional political forces [were] trying to ride on their legitimacy."[144] Having caught a "ride" on the legitimacy gained from movement member's participation, partisan actors began to push their demands. For instance, the JMP cast themselves as representatives

[136] Abdelkarim, Hodachok and Monaco, "Yemen's Transition," 8.
[137] Baraa Shiban, interview by Aylin Junga.
[138] Lackner, *Yemen's "peaceful" Transition from Autocracy*, 43.
[139] Maged al-Madhaji, "How Yemen's Post-2011 Transitional Phase Ended in War," *Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies* (2016), http://sanaacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/k2_attachments_how_yemens_post_2011_transitional_phase_ended_in_war_en.pdf, 9–10.
[140] Alwazir, "Yemen's Independent Youth and Their Role in the National Dialogue Conference," 4.
[141] Nadia al-Sakkaf, "Negotiating Women's Empowerment in the NDC" in *Yemen and the Search for Stability: Power, Politics and Society after the Arab Spring*, ed. Marie-Christine Heinze (London: I.B Tauris, 2018),167f.
[142] Abdelkarim, Hodachok and Monaco, "Yemen's Transition," 9; Nabil Albaydani, interview by Aylin Junga.
[143] Selznick, "Foundations of the Theory of Organization," 34.
[144] Alwazir, "Yemen's Independent Youth and Their Role in the National Dialogue Conference," 8.

of the protest movement at the NDC while promoting their agendas. According to al-Madhaji, the JMP "justified this co-optation given how the two groups had worked together during the uprising" but neglected to recognise that "the protesters generally had very different visions for how to resolve Yemen's challenges,"[145] and instead simply pushed their vision for Yemen's future. Through this process of co-optation, the protest movement's legitimacy is repackaged and deployed by institutional actors at the NDC for their own goals, regardless of whether they overlap with movement activists' or not.

While other actors were able to capitalise on the independent representatives to push their own goals, the demands of movement representatives were influenced by their presence in the institution. As mentioned earlier, social movements may choose to formalise their discourse to gain credibility within the institution they are attempting to "successfully" participate in.[146] This process played out among the youth delegates at the NDC as they began to negotiate and gain access to closed-door meetings and traditional political circles. During the meetings, it was noted that "youth delegates have moderated their tone in dealing with political parties,"[147] a salient part of the trade-off of institutional access. Financial support, employment, and invitations to informal social meetings and political events create incentives making access a goal in itself. Regardless, youth representatives engaged in various symbolic acts, such as taking the front row seats at meetings to make themselves seen because they were "constantly confronting the narratives and habits of traditional forces [in service of] demands for equality among all conference participants."[148] Independent representatives became embroiled in struggles with the institution itself.

The continued provision of access and recognition subsumed the political goals that animated the initial protests. This "paradox of collaboration"[149] refers to activists seeking collaboration to achieve political goals, but the more collaboration is sought the less salient political goals become in the face of struggles over access. Furthermore, this influences how the movement is structured as it adapts to the institution to maintain better access. Administrative functions become a larger part of the social movement's organisation and movement leaders' channel oppositional action towards administrative functions defined by the institution.[150] In the case of the NDC, youth delegates tried to make up for their lack of overall representation through their representation at the heads of sub-groups. Utilising their skill with technology, many of them took on the role of drafting sub-groups' recommendations.[151]

To conclude, the NDC's planning and selection process, and the effect institutionalisation had on actors' tone and demands, shaped the actors to fit the institution. Part of this institutional structure worked in favour of independent voices. Due to their representation at the negotiation table, established political actors were forced "to engage in serious debate with these 'young upstarts'".[152] Although the representation of non-party-affiliated Yemenis was overall low, youth delegates were

[145] al-Madhaji, "How Yemen's post-2011 transitional phase ended in war," 8.
[146] Coy and Hedeen, "A Stage Model of Social Movement Co-Optation," 419.
[147] Alwazir, "Yemen's Independent Youth and Their Role in the National Dialogue Conference," 8.
[148] Ibid., 6–7.
[149] Coy and Hedeen, "A Stage Model of Social Movement Co-Optation," 417.
[150] Ibid., 423.
[151] Alwazir, "Yemen's Independent Youth and Their Role in the National Dialogue Conference," 6.
[152] Lackner, *Yemen's "Peaceful" Transition from Autocracy*, 53.

able to contribute to working groups on major political issues. But, as this section has shown, access and representation can be at the cost of meaningful political change. Representatives closely related to the protesters help lend a sense of legitimacy to traditional opposition voices and demands. Moreover, when the legitimacy of social movement representatives was not capitalised on by other actors, they exerted influence over their demands and redirected their efforts towards the challenges of the NDC procedure. Ultimately, the final document contained 1,800 agreed upon outcomes and was expected to provide the foundation for drafting a new constitution. However, persistent unresolved issues relating to federalism, security sector reform, and economic grievances threatened any future constitutional work, and the transition process more generally. These problems contributed to the transitional process's unravelling and the ultimate spiral into civil war that is the focus of the next and final section.

The Breakdown of Yemen and the Stage Model

The final stage of the co-optation model provides a unique challenge to the case of Yemen. Most co-optation models focus on social movements and political institutions in a stable political environment, such as Selznick's analysis of the Tennessee Valley Authority or Staggenborg's study of the Pro-Choice Movement.[153] The final stage of the four-stage co-optation model assumes some form of institutional or political codification into the wider system. By creating administrative rules or enacting laws that will mandate and codify some of the platforms and values of the challenging movement,[154]the challenge to traditional political authority is effectively resolved. These codified gains are subject to the concessions and changes implied by the previous stages of the co-optation model, as well as to the nature of the codification process itself. The extent to which movement activists' original demands are reflected as a result may differ and does not reflect the existence or lack of co-optation. Rather it is the process itself that reveals the elite's reaction to a popular challenge in Yemen's case — revolutionary movement.

As I have stated in earlier stages of this paper, I am seeking to regard Yemen's political context not as an obstacle to the model but as an opportunity to understand processes of co-optation within this specific context. Following the NDC, Yemen's political situation destabilised beyond the point where codification of rules and laws could be enacted. The optimism that sustained many during the transitional period and the possibility the NDC, regardless of its shortcomings, had provided for Yemeni activists, were dashed by the GCC Initiative's eventual collapse and the beginning of the civil war. However, I believe it is important to trace certain symbolic moments in order to identify when and how Yemen's hopeful transition unravelled.

When the NDC completed its outcome document and adjourned at the beginning of 2014, problems facing the average Yemeni remained what they were throughout the process. Living conditions during 2014 continued to deteriorate despite the hopes created for an equitable and fair economy during the 2011 protests. As part of international support for the transition $7.9 billion were pledged to help develop Yemen's economy, but these funds were held up as donors were fearful of corruption

[153] Selznick, *TVA and the grass roots*; Suzanne Staggenborg, "The Consequences of Professionalization and Formalization in the Pro-Choice Movement," *American Sociological Review* 53, no. 4 (1988).
[154] Coy and Hedeen, "A Stage Model of Social Movement Co-Optation," 423.

and weak state capacity to use the money effectively.[155] The worsening situation started to turn Yemenis against the Hadi government as Saleh manoeuvred behind the scenes. Although much of the reform rhetoric included anti-corruption demands, Hadi's transitional government looked rather like a continuation of Saleh's system of patronage than a break with it.[156] In his analysis, Tobias Thiel attributes the failings of Yemen's transition to Hadi's failure to introduce technocratic recruitment for public office and to strengthen the legal and institutional framework. Instead, continued elite patronage, political quotas, and heightened partisanship in the name of stability led to disappointed reform aspirations and an undermining of constitutional provisions, existing laws and institutions.[157] In our interview, human rights activist Tawfik al-Hamidi stressed the weakness of Hadi's government in navigating the challenges of Yemen's transition.[158] While his support was limited to moderate GPC members and the international community[159] and popularity of the transitional government continuously diminished among Yemen's population, the Huthi's were able to tap into rising frustrations further growing their following throughout the transitional period.[160] Since 2012, while their political representatives were participating in the NDC, Huthis had been increasing their power from their base in Sa'ada and expanding into neighbouring areas.[161] While their delegates at the NDC were calling for the equality of all groups and sects as well as for an end of corruption and the patronage system,[162] the Huthi's militia was utilising tribal allies in fierce fights to expand their military control further.[163] Additionally, the NDC allowed them to extend their political influence at the national level.[164] Riding on a wave of discontent among the Yemeni people, the military wing of the Huthi movement, Ansar Allah, took over Yemen's capital Sana'a on 21 September 2014. Symbolically, they occupied the home of the activist and member of the more progressive wing of the Islah party, Tawakkol Karman as well as that of Ali Mohsen.[165] After having participated in the NDC and having agreed to its outcomes, the Huthis now claimed to speak for the Yemeni population at large. As Nabil Albaydani puts it:

> How come [they] came to a Dialogue while having a militia leader who is controlling behind the scenes. It was not a reality. Rather, I am sorry to say, it was a kind of show. A simple show but it is not real. It

[155] Lackner, *Yemen in crisis*, 49.
[156] Thiel, "Governance in Transition", 147
[157] Thiel, "Governance in Transition", 139.
[158] Tawfik Al-Hamidi, interview by Aylin Junga, September 25, 2020.
[159] Thiel, "Governance in Transition", 140.
[160] Brandt,"The Huthi Enigma", 197f.
161 Baraa Shiban, interview by Aylin Junga. Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 339.
162 Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen,* 340.
163 *International Crisis Group. "The Huthis: From Saada to Sanaa." 2014,*Accessed February 21, 2021. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/huthis-saada-sanaa, 11.
164 Marieke Brandt, "The Huthi Enigma: Ansar Allahand the 'Second Republic'" in *Yemen and the Search for Stability: Power, Politics and Society after the Arab Spring*, ed. Marie-Christine Heinze (London: I.B Tauris, 2018), 174.
165 Stacey P. Yadav and Sheila Carapico, "The Breakdown of the GCC Initiative" in *Arabia Incognita: Dispatches from Yemen and the Gulf,* ed. Sheila Carapico (Charlottesville, Virginia: Just World Books, 2016), 263.

was just talking... and everyone wanted to use that Dialogue for his group or themselves.[166]

The Huthi representatives at the NDC had not been the truly influential ones making decisions for the group at large.[167] Instead, the conference's institutional body and, more importantly, the participation of members of the initial popular movement had lent legitimacy to the Huthis while their military wing continued its advance. Trying to balance different political forces against each other, Hadi oversaw his failing government's fall into the hands of the Huthi-Saleh alliance that had formed. His exclusionist selection of a special committee to draw up plans for a six-region federal system was strongly opposed by both Huthis and Southern separatists who saw the air of inclusion and consensus fading.[168] In one last effort to peacefully negotiate the transitional government, Hadi attempted to salvage the situation by signing the Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA) with Huthi representatives on 21 September. Among other things it called for a technocratic government, the appointment of a new prime minister, an amendment of the national body that was to implement the NDC outcomes, and a reinstatement of subsidies cut in late July in an effort to prevent financial collapse.[169] Although the PNPA was an attempt to help consolidate the Hadi regime, the Huthis secured effective control in Sana'a on the same day. On 17 January 2015, the transitional process received one more blow. As the final product of the Constitutional Drafting Committee was being delivered for approval by the NDC implementation body — which had not been reformed in accordance with the PNPA[170]— the Huthis kidnapped the director of the president's office as he was on his way.[171] Yemen's constitutional future was kidnapped with it. Later in 2015, Hadi fled to Aden, and after that, to Riyadh in the face of the Huthi-Saleh takeover. Finally, the intervention of Saudi Arabia and its allies with the first bombing campaign of Operation Decisive Storm marked the final stage of the unravelling of the conflict in Yemen.[172] By this point, Yemen's hopeful transitional process had become an internationalised civil war.

Whether the codification of the movement's demands would have been successful under different circumstances is impossible to answer. The fact is, several other factors contributed to Yemen's deteriorating political situation. While the Huthi-Saleh alliance's expansion and eventual takeover of Sana'a —in the eyes of some— has completely done away with the legitimacy of the NDC, the process of social movement co-optation can still be traced in Yemen regardless.

Conclusion

War and chaos are sometimes treated in scholarship — and more so in the media — as Yemen's *modus operandi*. The possibility of political change seems to be

166 *Nabil Albaydani, interview by Aylin Junga.*
167 Baraa Shiban, interview by Aylin Junga.
168 Hill, *Yemen Endures*, 264.
169 Thiel, "Governance in Transition", 143.
170 Thiel, "Governance in Transition", 144.
171 Lackner, *Yemen in Crisis*, 51.
172 John M. Willis, "Operation Decisive Storm and the Expanding Counterrevolution" in *Arabia Incognita: Dispatches from Yemen and the Gulf,* ed. Sheila Carapico (Charlottesville, Virginia: Just World Books, 2016), 272.

viewed as constrained to armed rebellion. Although it is important to be aware of the many challenges Yemen faces, collective action, encompassing a vast majority of the country's seemingly divided population, is also a present feature. Social movements and civil action matter. Which is why their co-optation matters.

In this study, I have tried to trace this process of co-optation, which I argue took place in the context of the Yemeni protests in 2011 and the following transitional period. My analysis of the Yemeni case reveals that political elites reacted to the challenge the political system faced by appropriating the movement's tactics, language, and symbols, as well as by integrating its members into elite organised channels. I have shown how party-affiliated activists used resources and networks to organise and thus shape the revolutionary discourse and enact salience control. Furthermore, through the institutionalisation into the NDC, discourse and tactics were channelled into state-provided structures making it harder for revolutionaries to pursue effective change.

Part of this discussion has been an attempt to highlight the importance of Yemen as a case study for the "Arab Spring" movements, redressing the neglect of the Gulf in general — and Yemen in particular — in the literature on social movements in the Middle East. Although I argue that elite co-optation contributed to the redirection of protesters' demands while allowing the elite to gain legitimacy through collaboration with movement participants, I do not claim that this alone explains why the peaceful transition of power and reshaping of Yemeni politics ended in a civil war. If there is one thing that has become even more evident to me during the writing of this paper and the interviews I have conducted, it is just how convoluted the situation is. There are so many contributing factors to how Yemen got here that it would be impossible for me to give them the attention they deserve in the scope of this study. However, by acknowledging the role elite co-optation has played in the 2011 popular movement, two things become clear. First, co-optation processes do occur within the Yemeni context. Elites do not necessarily resort to the coercion of movements, as was the case with the Yemeni government, but they can seek the opportunity to enact reforms according to their own programmes. By repositioning themselves in the context of a popular challenge they can try to gain legitimacy and control the movement's discourse and actions. Second, co-optation, as it occurred during this period of Yemen's political history, influenced and shaped the spontaneous protest movement.

Finally, Yemen's spiral into civil war is often understood to have undone the progress made up to that point. Although the horrors of the war and continuing humanitarian crisis cannot be overstated, the revolutionary movement contributed to challenging many of the preconceptions about Yemeni politics and society. It allowed for the exchange of ideas and the formation of connections between diverse social groups. New discussions and narratives were made possible by the development of a revolutionary moment, and while the realisation of a constitutional future was not achieved, its possible future was articulated.

Yemenis, and the international community, can look back at the popular movement of 2011 and the outcomes of the NDC and find an example on which a future political order can draw. Understanding what occurred during this period can highlight what is possible in the future and what can be done better. Fundamental changes that developed then are present today, and in the words of Nabil Albaydani:

"It was all the leaders who were fake, all the intellectuals at that time were fake and now I think it is really time. This time I think is more important than the past. Because the media, and social media and the network community truly affect and

change people's minds. And they will. I am very optimistic about the future."[173]

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[173] *Nabil Albaydani, interview by Aylin Junga.*

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