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YEMEN: Sheikhs and shekels - the real cost of patronage



Photo: Adel Yahya/IRIN

Political patronage and corruption are hampering Yemen's development

SANA'A, 12 October 2012 (IRIN) - Sheikh Nasser Shareef grimaced as he described the state of public services in his tribal area in Marib Governorate, about 100km east of Yemen's capital Sana'a. "Very bad. We don't even have a police station. And hospitals and schools are empty. There's no one and nothing inside them, no services," he told IRIN.

For three decades former president Ali Abdullah Saleh used development projects in tribal areas as a way of securing loyalty, but with a new government in place, alliances are shifting, and many hope corrupt practices may be replaced by sound development planning.

"Now there are not a lot of [public service] projects. The new government is taking responsibility," tribal leader Hasan Ali Bin Abkr, a sheikh in the northern al-Jawf Governorate, told IRIN.

The situation there is even worse than in Marib. A 2009 report by the state-run [Yemen News Agency \(SABA\)](#), known for its conservative estimates of the country's poverty and

development, said only about 4 percent of its more than 500,000 residents have access to electricity, while 49 percent of school-aged children do not go to school and the remainder face shortages of books, teachers and classrooms.

Ali Al Munifi, a sheikh from Marib and head of Dar Al Salam, a tribal conflict resolution organization, told IRIN the Arab Spring-inspired revolts last year may have brought in a new president, but the rampant corruption of the Saleh era remains.

He explained how a typical Sana'a development project used to work: "The government awards a contract to a particular tribal sheikh. Contractors receive the money to carry out the project, but because the contractors have a relationship with the tribal leaders, the money disappears."

Despite such examples, "it is possible for the government to come into Marib and implement projects, if the government is serious. But as long as engineers, for example, continue to take bribes to say a project is fine, there's no chance for development," said Munifi.

Saudi role

Patronage also extends beyond Yemen's borders. Saudi Arabia has long doled out gifts to Yemeni sheikhs in an attempt to [buy security](#), and stem the spread northwards of instability in the poorest country in the Arab world.

The effect of Saudi largesse has been to enrich a small cadre of tribal leaders and promote tribal conflict in areas where there is no rule of law. It is not surprising, therefore, that many observers do not share Bin Abkr's hope that newly-appointed President Abd Rabu Mansur Hadi can or will institute responsible governance in tribal areas.

Fernando Carvajal, an expert on Saudi-Yemeni relations at the University of Exeter in the UK, told IRIN he believes the handouts to sheikhs will continue. "Saudi Arabia cuts and raises stipends as it pleases. Under the princes Sultan and Nayef [former Saudi crown princes who died in October 2011 and June 2012], some sheikhs disappeared from the payroll while others were added. This is politics."

“The existing patronage system creates negative competition between tribal leaders and creates conflict”

Indeed, recent reductions in Yemeni government payouts to tribal chiefs have "more to do with a huge budget deficit that the Joint Meeting Parties [JMP, Yemen's tribal and Islamist-based opposition party] have used as an excuse to pick and choose which sheikhs they will support through the Tribal Affairs Committee," said Carvajal.

One consequence of the Yemeni government's tribal influence strategy is the growing number of sabotage incidents. Younger generations of tribesmen, alienated by their leaders' corruption, have been attacking oil and electricity

infrastructure “to create problems for their sheikh because they think he’s corrupt, that he’s receiving money from the government in their names,” said Sheikh Munifi.

Tribal structures under strain

Nadwa Al Dawsari, a former head of Partners Yemen, a think-tank in Sana’a, told IRIN that tribal structure is coming under increasing strain as a consequence of corruption.

“When you talk to people in tribal areas they say it’s been weakening in recent years because of increasing poverty, lack of opportunities, increasing unemployment and dwindling resources. All of these things have put a lot of pressure on the social security system in tribal areas,” she said.

Part of the reason is that “the tribal leadership is not able to fulfil their expected role in tribal areas as they used to,” she said, noting that sheikhs obtain legitimacy primarily through an ability to resolve conflicts and protect the tribe’s interests without having to resort to violence.

“The existing patronage system creates negative competition between tribal leaders, and creates conflict,” which further destabilizes tribal regions and hinders efforts at development, she added.

At the “Friends of Yemen” meeting in New York last month, donor states committed to helping President Hadi implement sweeping government and military reforms in preparation for multiparty elections in 2014, pledging US\$7 billion, some of which is slated for development projects in tribal areas.

Sheikh Munifi sees the aid as a big opportunity for change. “Donors can do best for the tribes by meeting people in Marib directly, not by going through the government. Corruption there is widespread. They must meet the good people of Marib,” he said.

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