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BRIEFING PAPER:

YEMEN/Presidential Elections: a new country or not?

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February 21st, election day in Yemen, was a day of contrasts. Many Yemenis expressed their euphoria on emerging from polling stations, proudly revealing the finger stamped in ink that proved they had taken part, whereas in cities such as Aden or Al Muqalla tension was high throughout the day. Confrontations were reported between security forces and armed factions opposed to the elections, with a total of seven dead and some 50 percent of voting stations closed in the provinces of Aden and Saada. However, both reactions were foreseeable, as too was the barely-contained joy of many of those congregated in Change Square in Sanaa. The truth is that the 21 February election was hardly controversial. On the one hand, there was only one candidate, Abed Rabu Mansour Hadi, whose identity was agreed upon as part of the Gulf Initiative between the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) and the ruling General People's Congress party (GPC). On the other hand, that candidate had been Saleh's vice-president since 1994 and thus, forms part of the regime.

On the streets of the capital Sanaa a large number of voters vaunted their enthusiasm proclaiming the birth of a "New Yemen." However, in other provinces many other citizens expressed their doubts that these elections were going to change anything for the country. What is true is that this ballot constitutes a turning point for Yemen, in that they spell the end of thirty three years in power for Ali Abdallah Saleh. However, Saleh's recent declarations that he intends to return to the country and continue in politics, as well as the fact that Hadi as vice-president never once challenged Saleh, make it more likely that Yemen is doomed to continuity rather heading for the dawn of new era.

The implementation mechanism of the Gulf Initiative traces a detailed plan for Yemen's transition. Once Hadi has been sworn in as president he will have to call a National Reconciliation Conference to deal with various issues, including three of the most contentious issues of the moment: Saada, the south, and the anti-government movement that gave rise to the 'Yemeni Revolution'. During Hadi's transitional presidency, a new constitution must also be adopted and the anachronistic current electoral law must be modified. Elections for a new parliament, which will in turn elect a new president, will not take place before then. Given the extremely complicated situation in which the country currently finds itself, including increasing discontentment in the south, the loss of state control over several regions and the strength of the Houthis, this is certainly no easy task. Hadi has already demonstrated his inability to detach himself from Saleh's influence when he became acting president following the 3 June attack which saw Saleh depart Yemen until 23 September. He has also publicly admitted his difficulty in controlling members of Saleh's family who control key posts in the military. If Saleh does stay in the country as he has declared he wishes to, he will attempt to influence his former vice-president and take part in the country's political decisions. On top of that, it is unknown what role Saleh's relatives will play and this will, inevitably, be decisive in the evolution of the country's political process.

The head of Yemen's Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendums, Judge Mohamed Hussein al-Hakimi, declared that the elections surpassed all expectations given that despite the ongoing conflicts in provinces such as Aden and Saada, turnout was 80%. It is important to note however, that turnout was calculated using the number of voters that appear on the 2008 electoral roll and did not include newly registered voters. But it is true that some polling stations had to remain open a further two hours given the crowds of voters. Others however, remained open two extra hours until 8pm without any voters actually turning up during those hours.

While the turnout rate was very high, possibly the most salient point of these elections was the significant increase in the number of non-registered voters. Called just three months ago, the special circumstances of these elections made it necessary to use the 2008 electoral roll. For this reason, on an exceptional basis, four types of electors were accepted:

- First time voters: it is estimated that some 2 million Yemenis not enrolled in 2008 had the right to vote for the first time in the 21 February elections, namely the population aged between 18 and 21 who had come of age in the interim. This group were allowed to vote in any polling stations showing an identity card featuring photograph and year of birth.
- Internally displaced persons: It is estimated that there are roughly 250,000 internally displaced persons in Yemen, although only some 30% have a photo identification card. The SCER set up 902 special voting centres across the country in which the internally displaced could vote. Voters were registered on a computer network in these centres.
- Non-resident voters: Due to the internal migration which has taken place in the last four years, many Yemenis have changed their place of residence since the previous enrollment process. This type of voter was also able to vote at any one of the 902 special polling stations, although many did in fact register and vote manually (not electronically) outside of these stations.
- Registered voters: The number of registered voters according to the electoral roll of 2008 was 10,334,000.

Some voting centres ran out of voting papers due to the huge turnout of voters. At the time of writing, only provisional data has been made public but SCER sources have revealed that the results could be announced on 24 or 25 February and that Hadi's inauguration could take place on 26 or 27 February.

These elections were designed so that Abed Rabu Mansour Hadi could not lose and thus, to legitimate the transfer of power agreed upon by the opposition and ruling parties. Hadi however, has yet to convince those Yemenis excluded from the Gulf negotiations and prevented from fielding their own candidates in these elections.