

# Yemen, underdeveloped by global capitalism

Christopher Newcombe Tue, 19/01/2010 - 17:49

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With the world's eyes focused on Haiti, where a natural disaster has been grossly magnified by years of imperialist-inflicted poverty, it is fitting to look at another state where US interference threatens to unleash social catastrophe - Yemen.

Since North and South Yemen were unified into a single state in 1990, a series of internal conflicts, exacerbated by interference from regional powers, have reduced Yemen to being the poorest Arab state. The weak economy and infrastructure, along with depleted natural resources, mean that the growing population (almost 30 million, with half under 16), face 40 per cent unemployment and growing poverty. Conditions there are so bad there is also a severe water shortage.

Outside of the capital Sana'a, president Ali Abdullah Saleh's government has little authority, and is only able to 'control' the country by sending in troops or, where that is impossible, by using heavy weaponry against the population. Currently, there are two main conflicts - a civil war in the north, around the border with Saudi Arabia; and a growing rebellion in the south that threatens to escalate.

The central government accuses the southern movement of having links with Al Qaeda. This claim makes little sense, and is obviously meant to smear the campaign by provide an excuse for military attacks. This is the background against which the USA is mounting a growing intervention in Yemen.

The roots of the northern conflict go back to the first Gulf war (1990-1), when a million Yemeni workers were expelled from Saudi Arabia because of their support for Iraq. The dispute also disrupted the local smuggling trade so that, combined with neglect by the Yemeni government, conditions gave rise to a radicalized population. Serious fighting broke out in 2004, and has gone through several episodes since.

Today, the few thousand Houthi fighters face the central government's tanks, rockets, MiG planes and helicopter gunships. Around 250,000 civilians have been displaced. The Houtis, followers of Zaidism which is a branch of Shia Islam popular in Yemen, also face hostility from Saudi Arabia. It is claimed the latter allow Yemeni forces to attack Houthis from their side of the border to the north. The Saudis have also bombed Houthi territory and blockade the coast to cut off supplies.

In the south, deep resentment goes back to the 1994 civil war, which followed unification of the very different halves of the country. The islamist North defeated the 'socialist' south, and since then southerners claim they have been politically and culturally marginalized and the region neglected, with its oil wealth only benefiting a northern elite.

The most recent dispute originated when president Saleh summarily retired 100,000 military officers and civil servants. In 2007, the officers began protests, complaining that their pensions were not being paid, and demanding reinstatement. This small-scale movement of a former privileged caste has broadened, feeding on widespread resentment among ordinary southerners. Since 2009 the movement has been

demanding secession, and the reestablishment of a southern state.

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