

Muhammad ‘Abd al-Malik al-Mutawakkil: A Political Biography

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Muhammad ‘Abd al-Malik al-Mutawakkil (1942-2014), professor of political science at Sanaa University, deputy secretary-general of the Union of Popular Forces, and pioneer of the human rights movement in South Arabia, was one of the few *homme de lettres* in Yemen whose intellectual clout extended far into the Arab world. As an outstanding figure of political and scholarly life in the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, his *vita* exemplifies the ups and downs of Yemeni politics in

the post-imamic, republican era up to the fall of ‘Ali ‘Abdallah Salih, just as his writings are an enlightening guide to the understanding of the latter and the Yemeni social fabric as a whole. This article seeks to provide a political biography of a man whose calm and sensible voice many will find missing in these times of turmoil.

Keywords: Al-Mutawakkil; Yemen; Intellectual; Opposition; Human Rights; Joint Meeting Parties

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A rather popular hadith in Yemen attributed to the prophet reads as follows: “The people of Yemen have come to you and they are more gentle and soft-hearted. Belief is Yemenite, and so is wisdom [...]” While many European observers today may take pains to reconcile its meaning with the current imbroglio of Yemeni affairs, the hadith seems perfectly apt to characterize one of the most formidable Yemeni thinkers and human rights activists of the last half century: Muhammad ‘Abd al-Malik al-Mutawakkil, a pious and highly critical mind whose main endeavor was to build bridges, though he was never at a loss for drawing the line when necessary. In his memoirs, Sinan Abu Luhum, once a big gun in Yemen after the overthrow of Yemen’s last imam, noted that “he was a well-versed politician, distinguished by his wisdom, rationality, and flexibility, and one of those rare figures that were accepted by all political parties. We considered him to be a true peacemaker” (Abū Luḥūm 169).

Fitting as they are, Abu Luhum’s words did not refer to al-Mutawakkil but to Jarallah ‘Umar, the deceased leader of the Yemeni Socialist Party with whom al-Mutawakkil was compared immediately after his death

(Glosemeyer and Wuerth) and with whom he shared some striking traits, important periods of his political life, and, unfortunately, the same fate. Like Jarallah ‘Umar, who was shot down when reaching out to Yemen’s Islamist Islah party in December 2002 (Carapico, Wedeen, and Wuerth), al-Mutawakkil was assassinated on political grounds in the Yemeni capital near his home on 2 November 2014. Like in Jarallah’s case, the precise motives behind the murder remain in the dark, although it was quickly surmised that he was killed by extremists too (“Mā warā’ al-khabr?”). This presumption, however, might be premature. While al-Mutawakkil was always uncomfortable in that he insisted on freely speaking his mind, he had made many enemies toward the end, even amongst his former fellow oppositionists. Yet it is worthwhile to recount his life from the beginning.

From Imamate to Republic

Muhammad ‘Abd al-Malik al-Mutawakkil was born in 1942 in the northwestern governorate of Hajja to a father serving in the court of imam Yahya Muhammad Hamid al-Din (1869-1948). Roughly two decades before, Yahya had seized the chance provided by World War I to get rid of Ottoman suzerainty and reinstate a Zaydi imamate which had been in place since the end of

the 9th century. In 1918, he declared the northern part of Yemen a sovereign kingdom. Born in a Zaydi imamate as son to a Hashemite father, al-Mutawakkil hence had an auspicious destiny. Under the tenets of the Zaydiyya, arguably the oldest branch of the Shia, descendants of the prophet Muhammad took an eminent position, both theologically and socially. Accordingly, it does not come as a surprise that he received a profound theological education from which he would benefit throughout his life.

Yet he also grew up in a country with sharp social boundaries that were arranged in a triadic order. On the top were the Hashemites, who had exclusive access to higher religious positions and political leadership, as well as the scholarly *quḍā*-families (“judges”; sing. *qāḍī*); then came those of a tribal origin and, at the bottom of the social ladder, the *ahl al-thulth*, i.e. non-tribal people of “low birth” offering “lower services” that were needed, but despised by both the tribes and the Hashemites. Descent was thus a crucial prerequisite for the definition of a person’s social status, and this al-Mutawakkil learnt in early life. He later recalled one experience in his childhood that critically informed his perspective on Yemeni society:

My mother was of a tribal origin, and the secondary wife [of my father, *ḍarra*]

was a Hashemite. [...] I had not yet reached the age of six when I grew upset because my mother was used to be called by her name, while the secondary wife was called ‘noble one’ [*sharīfa*] (“Al-Duktūr Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Malik al-Mutawakkil fī suṭūr”).

Later on, he began to reflect on the so-perceived humiliation of his mother and connected such deliberations to Yemen’s social realities, wondering how they were to be brought in line with the value of equality which to his mind was a central tenet of Islamic teachings. In his later writings as well as in personal conversations, al-Mutawakkil thus often cited hadiths such as the one according to which “human beings are as equal as the teeth of a comb” to highlight the equality of humans irrespective of their denomination, race, and sex. As a six-year-old, however, he stubbornly decided to never again be called ‘noble one’ but insisted on everyone using his given name.

The (northern) revolution of 1962 and the ensuing civil war, which lasted until 1970 and quickly opened out into a full-fledged proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Nasserist Egypt, saw the end of the imamate and the creation of the Yemeni Arab Republic (YAR). Henceforward, the long-standing differences of Yemen’s social status groups were abolished, at least in

formal terms. Gabriele vom Bruck has provided a fascinating account of how the formerly ruling families grappled with adapting to the new political and social environment. Al-Mutawakkil, who had spent most of the revolutionary days in Egypt studying journalism, obviously felt little regret about this newly established order. Even before the revolution, Ahmad Muhammad Nu'man (1909-1996), a prominent leader of the Free Yemeni Movement and prime minister under 'Abdallah al-Sallal and 'Abd al-Rahman al-Iryani, had become a spiritual mentor to him. Many years later al-Mutawakkil would indicate the enormous influence Nu'man had exerted on him, stating that it was him "from whom we learnt the spirit of tolerance and moderation, the principle of equality, and that we shall never bow to anyone but God" ("Al-Duktūr Muḥammad 'Abd al-Malik al-Mutawakkil fī suṭūr").

In 1968, when the war between republican and royal forces was still ravaging northern Yemen, al-Mutawakkil was appointed to his first political position as the First Secretary of the YAR's embassy in Cairo—a quite remarkable development given his family background. Many appointments followed suit, most in the public media sector due to his learnt profession, and in 1976 he became Minister of Trade and Supply. Owing to his multi-talented na-

ture, though, he did not limit himself to the strictly political sphere in this period of life but engaged in diverse activities. In the 1970s he co-founded, amongst others, the Local Development Association of Hajja;² he was a member of the national board of the UNESCO; and he co-founded the first Yemeni theater as well as the Center for Yemeni Studies and Research, reportedly the only institute in the whole Arabian Peninsula that had an elected board of administration between 1974 and 1977.

The year 1977, however, not only brought an end to the center's democratic experiment but also witnessed the murder of de facto president Ibrahim al-Hamdi (1943-1977). Since the end of civil war in 1970, the YAR had all but consolidated power, and in many respects was republican in name only. The murder of al-Hamdi, who had sought to truly enforce the equality of all of Yemen's social status groups, was probably the last straw to al-Mutawakkil. With the YAR becoming increasingly authoritarian after the coming into power of 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih in 1978, he turned his back on politics for the time being and instead resumed his studies, which brought him first to the US and then to Egypt, where he received a doctorate from the faculty of communication of Cairo University in 1983.

Opposition in a United Yemen

Al-Mutawakkil fully re-emerged on the political stage only after the unification of the YAR with its southern socialist counterpart, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), in May 1990. There are many reasons to account for why unity was reached at this specific point in time, most notably perhaps the collapse of the Soviet Union. Intriguingly, regime elites on both sides had simultaneously opted for introducing a parliamentary system with a substantial catalog of basic rights, at least compared to regional standards at that time. Many scholars retrospectively agree that the decision to embrace democracy "was largely a strategic choice by which each [i.e. elites of the YAR and the PDRY] intended to prevent the other from dominating" (Schwedler 48). Yet such deliberations were all the same to most Yemenis who readily took advantage of the newly gained liberties. Within months, some three dozen political parties were founded and eagerly prepared for the first competitive elections.

Among these was the Union of Popular Forces (UPF), a somewhat left-leaning party with a Zaydi character that was mostly run by Zaydi intellectuals (Dorlian 13-14). Al-Mutawakkil significantly contributed to the party's set-up and orientation and in 2001 became its deputy secretary-general.

That the party was rather insignificant in terms of membership and resources did not cause him a headache as, apparently, he was bent on political content, not posts. To this end the UPF was a perfect match. Al-Mutawakkil would frankly confess that the UPF was hardly capable of becoming a governing party but instead embarked on an educational mission with the aim of turning Yemenis into democratic citizens. Connected to this, he considered gender equality and tolerance toward different faiths to be core principles of the party's platform. The Zaydi nucleus of the UPF meshed well with his political convictions. To him, reason (*'aql*) was one of the main pillars of the Zaydiyya that provided for the possibility of a steady reinterpretation of Islamic principles, adaptability in general, and, most importantly, the necessity of discrete thinking. The importance of the latter for a sound functioning of democratic institutions was essential, he would argue, and concomitantly substantiated by the Zaydi doctrine of the *khurūj 'alā al-ḥukm al-zālim*, i.e. standing up to oppressive rule, which was also affirmative of the principle of opposition a democratic system could not dispense with (al-Mutawakkil, Personal Interview A).

Democracy in Yemen, however, stood on shaky grounds. After former regime elites of the YAR and PDRY had fallen out with

one another over questions pertaining to the distribution of power in the aftermath of the 1993 parliamentary elections, a military conflict was looming on the horizon. In an effort to avert war, several politicians, intellectuals, and notables from southern and northern Yemen promptly organized a National Dialog Conference in November 1993. In on the committee sat not only Jarallah 'Umar but also al-Mutawakkil, who by then had become a professor of political science at Sanaa University, and both contributed to the passing of a document that can be considered a hallmark of democratic political culture in Yemen. This Document of Pledge and Accord (*wathīqa al-'ahd wa-l-ittifāq*) suggested plenty of reforms on good governance, the security sector, and the judiciary. Above all, it called for a limited executive, a bicameral parliament, and extensive political, administrative, and financial decentralization (Carapico 178-80). Eventually, though, it was of no avail. In May 1994, a war broke out that was short-lived but had devastating and lasting effects on Yemen's polity and social fabric.

From the very beginning, al-Mutawakkil was clear in his mind about the ramifications of war:

Imbalance usually generates a totalitarian regime and arbitrary rule. If there were democratic remainders, then the-

se would be little more than décor adorning the regime's face to the external world and misguiding public opinion at home. [...] After the war over power in 1994, the [political] equilibrium collapsed [...] and the opposition parties had no choice but to embark on coordination in order to re-establish at least some balance ("Al-āfāq" 156).

Developments in post-war Yemen are here accurately put in a nutshell. With his power consolidated, the regime under 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih became increasingly authoritarian in nature, rolling back political and civil rights in an ever more blatant way. Counter-balancing by peaceful means seemed to be the only viable option, which, as a matter of course, presupposed oppositional cooperation. That said, this was arguably highly unrealistic as Yemen's two most powerful opposition parties, the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) and the Islamist Islah, considered themselves archenemies. Again, bridge-builders were needed, and again it was al-Mutawakkil who played a key role in bringing together parties that shared an utterly hostile past. In this context, al-Mutawakkil's standing and personal background was quite meaningful. As Michaelle L. Browsers notes, he managed "to communicate with all sides not only because of his personal demeanor [...] but also because of the in-

tellectual position he occupies: he is at once highly religious and consistently liberal in perspective" ("Origins and Architects" 577).

The oppositional alliance which arose due to the engagement of committed individuals such as al-Mutawakkil was called the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP). It encompassed a range of various Socialist, Nasserist, Zaydi, and Sunni Islamist parties, and, most importantly, the YSP and Islah. The JMP was soon characterized as an unusual example of oppositional cooperation which "both puzzlingly and pleasantly deviates from theoretical expectations about the difficulty of launching and maintaining strategic alliances among ideological diverse political groups" (Glosemeyer and Sallam 327). It was often met by harsh criticism, even by al-Mutawakkil himself who in 2010 became its rotating head for six months, but by all accounts contributed significantly to the fall of the Salih regime in 2011. The JMP's shortcomings notwithstanding, al-Mutawakkil strongly believed in the necessity of Islamist and secular forces cooperating in order to face authoritarianism—not only in Yemen but in the whole Arab world. He thus engaged in scores of regional conferences aiming at their rapprochement, and he served as general coordinator to four such National-Islamic Conferences organized by the

Center for Arab Unity Studies in Beirut in the 1990s and 2000s (Browsers, *Political Ideology* 86). After all, engaging with Islamists was also one practical way to strengthen the parties' moderate forces and contain their radical fringes—the need for which he could recognize in his daily work as human rights activist.

Pragmatic Idealism

Despite his impressive record as a politician, to posterity al-Mutawakkil will perhaps be known first as human rights activist. This activism rested on several pillars. In his university lectures on human rights he taught many generations of students, and he was vice-president of the independent Yemeni Organization for the Defense of Liberties and Human Rights and president of the Jazeera Center for Human Rights Studies, both of which are amongst the most active and influential NGOs in Yemen promoting human rights and democratic reform. First and foremost, though, he wrote innumerable essays, editorials, and books on Yemen's stalled democratization and the inalienability of basic rights. In 2004, he published perhaps his most important study, which discussed the compatibility of human rights and Islam (al-Mutawakkil, *Al-islām wa-l-i' lānāt al-duwaliyya*) and which is frequently

cited online by human rights organizations all over the Arab world.

This book was of particular relevance for Yemen, as it contributed to the public dispute on *takfīr*, the discursive act of accusing someone of apostasy. Since the early 1990s, many radical forces inside and outside the Islah party had exercised *takfīr* in order to muzzle political opponents, leading to hundreds of assassinations of Socialist politicians (among these Jarallah 'Umar). Al-Mutawakkil argued out of the classical sources, compellingly dismissed the notion of an allegedly religious obligation of punitive measures against apostates, and strongly vindicated the freedom of religion and the freedom of expression.³ This was one of the countless instances of him publicly taking sides against Yemen's potent Salafi current, which only a few intellectuals would dare to do. In one of his last public quarrels with the Salafis, he had openly spoken up for the introduction of a "civil state" (*dawla madaniyya*) after the collapse of the Salih regime, which prompted a scathing reply and barely concealed threat from Yemen's ultra-conservative cleric 'Abd al-Majid al-Zindani ("Maktab al-Shaykh al-Zindānī").⁴ It bears some irony that his staunchest critics came from the radical wing of Islah, one of the JMP's founding members. Yet allying with Islah had not only been a stra-

tegic choice as outlined above, but ultimately a question of pragmatism. Al-Mutawakkil certainly was an idealist. At times, however, idealists also have to engage in pragmatism, especially politicians. Al-Mutawakkil was in no way exceptional in this regard. While, for instance, some twenty Arab political scientists during a 2001 conference in Beirut rejected the notion of opposition parties cooperating with Western powers, al-Mutawakkil preferred to criticize the parties' "totalitarian culture" as well as their ambition to "dominate the institutions of civil society."⁵ In a speech delivered some years later he soberly argued that "given the impossibility of effective opposition without resources, the Yemeni opposition has to go for external support."⁶ To cite yet another example, while he considered the tribal-military complex to be the biggest menace to Yemen's democratization, he consistently argued that the tribes were part and parcel of its traditional civil society (al-Mutawakkil, "Société civile" 195-96), holding that by way of their integration they would eventually merge into the modern civil society (Personal Interview A).

During the so-called Yemeni Revolution in 2011, he had to take some bitter pills. Already at the very beginning in February, he had admonished the protesting youth that an unbridled revolt could end up in

civil war and state failure. Still the rotating head of the JMP at that time, he was convinced that only negotiations with the regime could avert the latter. When a negotiated solution failed several times, he reminded the youth that "in politics, there is no such a thing as an irrevocable position" and that negotiations with the regime had to continue ("Al-Mutawakkil 'an mawqif al-mushtarak"). Evidently, such negotiations also had to include national power brokers the youth wholeheartedly rejected. On these grounds, he was therefore even criticized publicly by one of his daughters ("Jadal"). Al-Mutawakkil's political pragmatism notwithstanding, there were some red lines that he was not willing to cross. When Salafi militants obviously belonging to the Islah party attacked male and female protesters who had rejected protesting separately but had practiced what they called the "mingling of sexes" (*ikhtilāṭ*), he wrote a public letter threatening to withdraw from the coalition unless the heads of the JMP parties apologized and the culprits were held accountable. Otherwise, he noted, "we will lose all our credibility regarding our strife for freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights. And thereby we will also lose our self-respect" ("Al-Mutawakkil yu'alliq huḍūr").

The Uncomfortable Peacemaker

After Salih's resignation in November 2011, al-Mutawakkil's relations with the JMP parties grew increasingly sour as he became more and more disillusioned by his former fellow oppositionists. According to the stipulations of the GCC agreement leading to Salih's abdication, the JMP had become part of the government for a transitional period that should have lasted for two years. Its governing record after one year in office, however, was sobering at best, irrespective of the huge challenges every new government in Yemen would have faced. Yet instead of getting down to work and at least attempting to tackle some of the most eminent problems, the JMP prioritized differently. Al-Mutawakkil, whose internal criticism was no longer paid regard to, once more appeared before the public while still recovering from a complex surgery. In an interview he blamed the JMP for "only [paying] attention to job distribution, and I criticize them for that because jobs are for all people. They have to pay attention to state construction [i.e. state-building] and development" (al-Mutawakkil, Interview). Yet there was another serious concern to him. After the fall of the Salih regime, Islah had evolved into the single most powerful force, which not only had a strong tribal backing, but by then had also gained sig-

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nificant influence in the military. Al-Mutawakkil's fear of political imbalance resurfaced, and it was far from ill-founded. He thus arrived at the conclusion that the former ruling party, the General People's Congress, which at that time was at the verge of falling to pieces, had to be kept alive and reformed so it could henceforth act as a counterbalancing force to Islah (Personal Interview B). Such calculations were shared by others, too, and they were in accord with Yemen's traditional formula that sought to establish a political equilibrium by integrating all social and political forces into the political realm. To many of his former co-oppositionists, however, this came close to treason. Once again al-Mu-

tawakkil had tried to build bridges, and once again he had offered some uncomfortable ideas and had spoken some uncomfortable truths to power. This time, however, he had antagonized too many sides—some of which had a vested interest in quieting him, while some of which left it at merely sidelining him. In the end, even his own party, the UPF, had deposed him from the office of deputy secretary-general, purportedly “on health grounds” (“I’fā”).

Muhammad ‘Abd al-Malik al-Mutawakkil died at the age of 72. Almost certainly, it will never be fully investigated who was responsible for his murder. He had lived to see imamic and republican Yemen, unifi-

cation of North and South, and many revolutions, coups, and counter-coups. His influence on Yemeni politics, its modern political culture, and its human rights movement was meaningful, although not always visible at first sight. He will first and foremost be remembered by Yemen's younger generation and, most notably, his students, all of whom have grown weary of party politics but nevertheless admired him as an incorruptible politician, as a teacher, an activist, and as a role model for integrity and farsightedness. It is in these days in which Yemen can find no peace that the country lost one of its major peacemakers.

Notes

¹ See Ibn Hajar al-‘Aslaqānī. *Fath al-bārī li-sharāḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1:658-59 and 3:204-05. For the introductory hadith, see Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī. *Kitāb al-maghāzī* [vol.5]: *Bāb qudūm al-ash‘ariyyin wa ahl al-Yaman* [book 59], hadith 671.

² Throughout the YAR, the Local Development Associations were community-based and non-governmental instances of grassroots state-building efforts and a splendid example of civil society activism in Yemen until they were integrated into the authoritarian regime under ‘Ali ‘Abdallah Salih in 1985 (Carapico 107-08).

³ For a discussion of Mutawakkil's arguments and his contribution to this debate, see Philbrick Yadao 151-54.

⁴ In order to undermine al-Zindani's call for the introduction of a caliphate, al-Mutawakkil had contrasted al-Zindani's views with a recently published fatwa of the al-Azhar. Al-Mutawakkil summarized and commented on al-Azhar's reasoning on the legitimacy of a political order that was

based on democracy, nondiscrimination, and freedom of religion. Following this interpretation, al-Mutawakkil's notion of a civil state came close to that of a secular state: Legislature was to be confined to popular representatives only, and the affairs of the state were to be run “in accordance with the [man-made, *al-qānūn*] law, and only with the [man-made] law.” See al-Mutawakkil, “Al-Azhar wa-l-Zindānī.”

⁵ The transcript of the discussion was published in Balqazīz 113-62. For this particular statement of al-Mutawakkil, see p. 137.

⁶ The speech, which was given during a meeting of the National Solidarity Council in Sanaa in April 2010, was published by al-Masdar Online, see “Al-Duktūr Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Malik al-Mutawakkil yushakḥḥiṣ.”

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ISSN: 2196-629X
urn:nbn:de:hebis:
04-ep0003-2015-108-32601