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The book attempts to elucidate the catalyst(s) to the grievances of the main protagonists of the “rebellion in Yemen” — the Southern Movement, the Huthis, and urban youth — which are commonly subsumed under the umbrella term of Yemen’s Arab spring. According to the author, the book’s main purpose is to explain “the broader background to the remarkable events of 2011 in Yemen” (xvi). Interestingly, the title articulates the thesis that frames the discussion throughout the book, seemingly putting all of Yemen’s political problems down to a single cause. Simply put, “regionalism” is endemic to Yemen’s social-geographical landscape, and thus constitutes an inauspicious foundation for a unitary nation-state, hence its “troubled national union”, which is now coming apart because of “rebellion”. The question this thesis raises is whether regionalism can satisfactorily account for the distinct historical trajectories, the complex motivations, and the divergent demands of each of the “rebelling” protagonists identified above? Alas, the author engages in considerable interpretive violence to coerce the recalcitrant facts of Yemen’s political history into his regionalism thesis, insisting on a causal relation between geography and polity formation, to explain Yemen’s multiple “rebellions”.

Furthermore, the author makes a series of rather immodest claims regarding his book, which, in combination with the question posed above, provide the criteria by which to assess his text: First, he claims a perspectival advantage over “leading Western scholars”
whose work betrayed the regional bias of their research domains; while in contrast, he was able to venture “outside the highlands to become familiar with all the regions of the country” (p. 13, emphasis added), and therefore he is “without bias toward one side” or the other (p. 6). Second, he insists that “an analysis of the country’s multiple regional divisions” is the most fruitful approach “to explaining Yemen’s internal political dynamics” (p. 6); as it undermines the “conventional wisdom in the 1990s [which] presumed that Yemen was truly one nation, and that its people represented a unified national body” (p. 8) — a figment of the authors’ imagination. Third, he asserts that his book proposes “a new framework for understanding the first two decades of Yemeni national unity” (p. 17).

3 What are the constitutive elements of this “new framework”? These seem to be a combination of incongruous analytical resources. At the theoretical level, the author uses Fredrik Barth’s theory of ethnic group formation as a by-product of state policy, especially in terms of resource distribution. The author seems to have substituted region for ethnicity and reformulated Barth’s hypothesis of ethnic boundary formation into a geographical region formation: “the balance vs. imbalance of resource distribution is what strengthens, respectively, national vs. regional identities among the population” (p. 14). This is complemented by his recourse to Benedict Anderson’s notion of the nation as an “imagined community” partly constructed through a mass-mediated socio-political discourse. The empirical grounding of this unwittingly reductionist theory of nation-building, which reduces the aspirational horizon of the citizenry to state largesse, is attempted through a survey of local administrators appointed between 1985 and 1997 in all of the provinces of the unified state in order to discover “patterns in the appointment of local government officials before and after unification” and to identify whether individuals from one or more regions were over-represented at local and provincial levels in the public administration system (p. 17). The last pillar of this “new framework” is the assumption that Yemen’s endemic social-geographical fragmentation has resisted attempts at integration. As he puts it, by means of a rather sophomoric generalization given its applicability to many countries around the world, that are now viable nation-states: “Across the span of three thousand years, the territory of Yemen has more often been fragmented into separate regions, each with its own ruling authority”; henceforth, Yemen “always has been difficult to unite under a common ruling system acceptable to all members of society” (p. 21).

4 This teleological assumption seems to undermine the coherence of the book’s theoretical scaffolding — which combines a dynamic model of polity formation with the static notion of geographic determinism — as it suggests that regionalism has sedimented into an ontological fatality of Yemen’s polity. Let us briefly examine whether or not the author’s claims about the advantages of his analytical standpoint are justified. Chapter 1 turns out to be a contrived debunking of Yemeni history designed to prove wrong the imagined “conventional wisdom” noted above. His historical reconstruction ends with a trivial summation that resonates with a process of nation-state formation common the world over: “Yemen was never united in a national sense by the will of the people... [until] a ruling dynasty in one region had the ability to forcibly extend its authority over people in other regions” (p. 28). This banal observation authorizes the author to castigate Yemenis for deluding themselves about the basis of national unity through — what he derisively refers to as — a “unionist mythology”: that is, “the myth of [the sons of] Qaḥṭān to develop a common historical narrative of their people, glorifying Yemeni unity from
ancient to modern times” (p. 41). However, explaining the “sons of Qaḥṭān” as nationalist ideology is a contrived interpretation, as the expression was deployed primarily as a political slogan, after the 1962 Revolution, to delegitimize the former ruling class of the Zaydi imamate (the Sāda), descendants of ‘Adnān, and thus inauthentic Yemenis.

To discard once and for all “the illusory notion that one people, the sons of Qaḥṭān, ever lived in unison on a single territory” (p. 43) the author proceeds to a rather imperious reconfiguration of Yemen’s geographical landscape into seven ethno-regional formations. However, he provides an intellectually indolent, “simple summary of the defining characteristics of Yemen’s regions” (see p. 47-53) through a set of anecdotal descriptions based on a list of random markers: tribal, ethnic, dialectal, sectarian, culinary, and sartorial. Moreover, he admits that: “Yemen’s seven regions are based on loose social structures, inside which regional group bonds are weak compared to other social bonds like tribal and clan affiliations... [which] create the most powerful group bonds inside Yemen” (p. 44-45). In doing so, the author violates the key criterion of Barth’s theory of group formation, based on contingent factors rather than primordial ones (e.g., tribes). This leads to a call for a “primordial federalism” as a political adaptation to Yemen’s endemic regionalism (p. 309).

Having undermined the coherence of his “new framework”, his invented seven ethno-regional formations serve as the main interpretive grid for the discussion of the next five chapters (2 to 6). Space constraints allow only for a selective synopsis of some of the chapters, but what is striking about them is that while the author denies Yemenis the use of Anderson’s axiom regarding the nation as a discursively constructed community, he gives himself the right to do so on their behalf. For example, chapter 2 is a reinterpretation of the secondary literature on the politics of the post-revolution period in north and south Yemen through the deployment of his regionalist lexicon: a sectarian calculus (Zaydi vs. Shafi‘i), an equation between regional groups and distribution of government posts, and resource distribution in terms of tax receipts. The pedestrian, and debatable, conclusion is that the difference between the two states “is best explained by the different regional group dynamics... as well as the two states’ different distribution of economic resources” (p. 80). A brief look at chapter 4 is necessary as it is supposed to explain the catalyst to the “troubled national union” in the book’s sub-title which exacerbated the regionalism syndrome, ultimately leading to “rebellion”. Indeed, the author identifies the catalyst as an incompatibility in post-unity visions of governance emerging from two divergent administrative cultures: between the “northern anarchy” regime (al-fawdā al-shimālī), and the “southern order” (al-nizām al-jānūbī) (p. 123). Alas, his over-commitment to regionalism as the master explanation, has led him to minimize the importance of this factor. In sum, the “findings” of the first six chapters, in spite of the “new framework”, could be summarized in a prosaic axiom: bad governance at the central level undermines national cohesion and eventually fragments the national polity into default regional solidarities and situationally expedient identities.

In conclusion, the use of regionalism as a total paradigm to explain all of Yemen’s political dysfunctions is untenable, as regionalism is not intrinsic to Yemen’s geography but a contingent effect of state policies. Moreover, it is inadequate to explain the divergent motivations of the main protagonists’ political discontent, which can be summarized as follows: In the case of the Huthis — as a latter-day embodiment of the Zaydi’s doctrinal commitment to khurūjī, i.e., rising against an unjust ruler — it is the accumulation of political resentment from their cultural ostracism and the
non-recognition of their distinctive religious creed. This resentment was catalyzed into public protest by the regime’s collaboration with the US in the “war on terror”. For the South, it was their incorporation into the national polity through what they perceived as a colonization process, which relegated them to the status of second-class citizen, and the deliberate failure of the regime to address their demands for social inclusion. And finally, concerning the urban youth, it was their chronic exclusion from the state’s policy considerations that led to their “rebellion”.

Paradoxically, this is what the book’s last chapters (7 to 9 and the Conclusion) seem to argue; although muddled by the author’s fixation on the conceptual albatross of regionalism as mono causal explanatory framework. Alas, in spite of the book’s inadequately substantiated thesis, the author assumes the mantle of self-appointed prophet of Yemen’s political destiny as the book’s concluding sentence affirms a hubristic historical prophecy: “Yemen will endure as a fragmented polity, just as it has for millennia” (p. 311).