

From Arabia Felix To Modern Yemen

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

In late 1990, when the U.S. government of the senior George Bush was preparing to go to war against Iraq, there were a handful of countries which resisted the drive. Jordan, the Palestinians, Sudan, and Yemen were those few which, despite massive arm-twisting, bribery, and outright blackmail at the United Nations, refused to capitulate to a war policy they considered wrong. All these forces were severely punished for what was considered insubordination; their citizens, who had found employment in many of the rich Gulf countries, like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, were sent back home. Hundreds of thousands flooded into Jordan, and an estimated 850,000 Yemeni workers were expelled from the neighboring Saudi kingdom.

The question rises: How could a relatively weak country like Yemen, with relatively small oil reserves and no strategic arsenal, stand up politically to what presents itself today as the world's remaining superpower?

The answer lies, at least in part, in the sense of national identity of the country, which stretches back over 3,000 years, at least.

In the ancient world, the area that includes Yemen was referred to by historians and geographers as Arabia, divided into three zones: Arabia Felix in the south, which is Yemen today; Arabia Petraea (named after Petra, the Nabatan kingdom's capital); and Arabia Deserta, in the center of the Arabian peninsula.

Arabia Felix was said to be the home of the Queen of Sheba (or Saba), who is cited in both the Bible and the Koran. Sheba travelled to Jerusalem, with a caravan carrying spices, gold, and precious stones, and put the famed wisdom of King Solomon to the test. On her return she ruled over the Kingdom of Saba, and, according to some accounts, in Ethiopia.

Saba was the most ancient and most powerful state in southern Arabia, and had its capital at Ma'rib, in modern Yemen. The southern Arabians held a monopoly over the precious commodities frankincense and myrrh, which were traded over the land route from Arabia to Gaza and Palestine. The sea route to India went through the ports of Aden and Hadramawt. Caravans carried goods then to the Mediterr-



A city street and buildings in Old Sana'a give a sample of some of the beautiful architecture in the Yemen capital city.

anean, where contact was made with the Greeks.

Although there is controversy regarding the dating of Sabeian civilization, there are references to it in Assyrian sources in 716 B.C. At the same time, recent archaeological studies have shown that artificial irrigation, for which the Sabeans were famous, began as early as the middle of the third millennium B.C. in Ma'rib, and became systematic by the end of the millennium. The Ma'rib Dam, which was a magnificent technical achievement known as a wonder in Arabia, was built in the 6th Century B.C. It provided irrigation for an area of 25,000 acres. The dam lasted for a thousand years, and collapsed in 600 A.D., leading to massive emigration out of southern Arabia, into nearby lands, like modern Saudi Arabia. It is said that all Arabs and the Arabic language originate from Yemen.

Another landmark of Sabeian civilization, were high-rise buildings, the first in history; one private home was eight storeys high. Such high-rise buildings are to be seen all over the country today.

When a direct sea route was established by Greek seafarers, between Egypt and India, the role of the port of Aden was greatly reduced. In the First Century B.C., the ancient kingdoms which had lived on the trade monopoly with India, started to decline. A new kingdom, that of Himyar, grew up

to the west, on the Red Sea coast, with its capital at Zafar, near modern-day Ta'izz.

Northern Yemen came under the Himyaritic dynasty, and by the Sixth Century A.D., embraced Judaism. Several times, outside forces tried to take over the country: the Ethiopians in 525 A.D. and the Persians in 570 A.D. With the advent of Islam in 628 A.D., the country became predominantly Muslim (although the Jewish community remained); indeed, the entire Arabian peninsula was united under Islam. The Muslim Zaidi sect emerged, and in 879 A.D., al-Hadi Yahya became the first Zaidi Imam, setting up a dynasty which was to rule in northern Yemen until 1962.

Ottoman, British Occupation

In the modern era, the Turks attempted to occupy Yemen, in the 16th and again the 17th Century, and were fiercely resisted by the Imamate. After the British occupied Aden in 1839, cementing the division between south and north, the Ottomans invaded northern Yemen in 1848, and occupied it, until, at the end of the First World War in 1918, it regained its independence. Once the Ottoman Empire had collapsed, North Yemen remained under the control of Imam Yahya. This feudal leader was assassinated in 1948 in a palace coup, but his son, Ahmad, succeeded in maintaining power, as the new Imam.

In 1958 North Yemen joined the United Arab Republic (of Syria and Egypt). Three years later, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser moved against the reactionary Imam. Imam Ahmad died in September 1962, and was succeeded by his son, Muhammad, but days later, Yemeni Army officers under the leadership of Col. Abd al-Salal, with Egyptian backing, took power, and declared the Yemen Arab Republic. A period of civil war between the royalists, backed by Saudi Arabia, and the republicans, supported by Egypt, went on until the latter prevailed in 1967.

South Yemen was under British occupation for 120 years. After an initial foray in 1839, Britain established control over what was called the Aden protectorate, in 1842, which it held until 1962. The protectorate was established through treaties between the United Kingdom and local tribal leaders. The last British contingents left in 1967.

Civil Wars and Reunification

In the early 1970s, South Yemen turned to a Marxist direction, which led to massive emigration into the north, and considerable hostility between the two parts. Fighting broke out in 1971, and by October 1972, had developed into a full-fledged war, with outside backing. The Saudis supported the Yemen Arab Republic, while the Soviets armed the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south.

Mediation through the Arab League halted the fighting, and paved the way for unification, which, after fits and starts, finally took place in May 1990. The two Yemens were united, under the leadership of President Ali Abdullah Saleh (who



A panoramic view of Sana'a. Yemen has a history of resistance to foreign domination, and has experienced a republican revolution—keys to the strength of the character of its people.

had been President of the north), into the Republic of Yemen.

In August 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait. This had an immediate impact on Yemen, as it was dependent on trade with Iraq, as well as aid. Yemen also had close ties with Saudi Arabia, where large numbers of its citizens worked as guest workers. As rotating chairman of the United Nations Security Council, in December 1990, the Yemeni government tried to prevent a war, and in January 1991, presented a peace plan, which failed. As noted earlier, Yemen was punished for its opposition to the war, as masses of guest workers from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries were expelled. Some 850,000 workers were expelled from Saudi Arabia in October and November, creating an unemployment crisis in Yemen, as well as a financial crunch due to the lack of remittances. U.S. aid to the country was suspended, and only partially resumed in August 1991.

In 1994, civil war broke out after a southern rebel group sought secession, but it was rapidly put down. In April 1997, the General Congress Party won a landslide victory in legislative elections, allowing President Ali Abdullah Saleh's GCP to rule alone, rather than continue its coalition with the Islamic Reform Grouping, or Islah, which had existed since the end of the civil war in 1994. President Saleh has followed a policy of national reconciliation, pardoning the leaders of the secessionist movement. He put down an Islamist insurgency led by Hussein Badruddin al-Houthi, in 2004, and has been working to rehabilitate and reintegrate followers of the insurgent, especially among youth.

Despite its relative poverty, Yemen is a proud country, which has a rich culture, marked by certain absolutely unique characteristics, like its architecture, especially in the old city of Sana'a. Most importantly, it has a history of resistance to foreign domination, whether by the Turks or the British, and the experience of a republican revolution in the modern period. Herein lies the strength of character which one sees both in its political leadership, and its youth.