Assessing the Situation in Yemen

It is extremely difficult to predict how the situation is going to evolve in Yemen, which is caught in a systemic crisis. Only one thing can be said with confidence — the country is beginning a long period of political transformation like what took place in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. However, the presence of a powerful tribal factor, serious economic problems and persistent interference from outside may, if not reversed, significantly slow the process.

Like other Arab Spring countries, the key factor in Yemen’s political transformation has been the struggle for power and influence in the military. By a miracle, the country has managed to avoid a civil war, thanks to the signing of intra-Yemeni agreements on November 23, 2011 in Riyadh. Under those arrangements, Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi, who served as vice president in the Saleh government, ran unopposed and was elected transitional president on February 21, 2012. He announced that the chief objective of his two-year term in office is to prepare for the lawful election of a new head of state, which should take place in February 2014. The new president has also been attempting to solve the country’s virtually unsolvable socioeconomic problems and has been engaged in getting his predecessor’s close relatives and associates out of the military.

Hadi lacks real support from the military, the tribes and the political circles in Yemen. The coalition government of national consensus formed to govern the country during the two-year transition period is functioning in a very inefficient and unprofessional manner. Its only support comes from the group of 10 state sponsors, which include both permanent members of the UN Security Council and countries belonging to the Gulf Cooperation Council and the European Union.

Yemen currently is involved a standoff between the Hashid tribal federation, which is led by the al-Ahmar clan, and close associates of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The power of the tribal leaders is concentrated in the northern part of the country, which has little in the way of natural resources. This asymmetry in the balance of power, with the bulk of natural wealth concentrated in southern Yemen and most of the power in the north, boosts the separatist mood of the people living in the south. That makes it highly likely that Southern Yemen will demand to regain its independence.

This already difficult situation is exacerbated by the country’s deteriorating economic condition, particularly rising unemployment, poverty, reduced oil revenues, food problems and depletion of water resources. Therefore, the worsening economic situation will probably be accompanied by an increased separatist mood in the country.

External factors — whether US actions against al-Qaeda or Saudi Arabia’s traditional interest in Yemen — also have a significant impact on the country’s domestic politics.

Russia’s reduced influence in Yemen is especially evident here; relations with Russia have traditionally been important to Sanaa. That is reflected in the sharp decrease in military sales and the lower numbers of physicians and other medical personnel working under public and private contracts who are now being replaced by immigrants from the CIS Central Asian Republics. There are about 50,000 graduates of Soviet and Russian universities in Yemen; they held important government posts during Saleh’s reign and still do. Empty niches in the system of foreign economic and foreign policy cooperation are being actively filled by the United States, which is unceasing in its attempts to temporarily deploy military personnel, particularly in areas important to its interests where Islamist
forces have intensified their efforts.

It is virtually impossible to predict with any degree of accuracy how the situation in Yemen, which is caught in a systemic crisis, will develop over the next 2-3 years. It is unlikely that the southerners will abandon their demands to regain independence for Southern Yemen.

Should the worst case scenario come to pass, i.e., Yemen collapses or is partitioned — which would be bad for all parties concerned — Northern Yemen would be economically unviable. Virtually all of the country’s natural resources are located in Southern Yemen, making a new civil war highly likely if that scenario emerges, and that would lead to the secession of the already de facto independent northwestern Shiite province of Sa’dah and the eastern province of Hadramaut, which is gravitating to Saudi Arabia. It is difficult to predict what Saleh, who was president for 33 years, would do in that situation. He still has a great deal of influence with the army and the other security agencies.

Thus, Yemen’s political situation will depend primarily on the interests of the Yemenis themselves, who favor a national dialogue and compromise among the political forces. At the same time, we can hardly ignore external factors and their influence on the transformations taking place in the country or the effects of the increased activities by Islamist forces in several provinces. Russia favors a dialogue between the current government and opposition forces in order to preserve the country’s integrity and stability and to implement socioeconomic and political reforms.

Olga Yefimovna Trofimova, Candidate of Economic Sciences, is a Senior Fellow at the Center for European Studies of the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Institute of the World Economy and International Relations. Exclusively for New Eastern Outlook.