

TRACING THE FAILURE OF YEMEN'S POST-ARAB SPRING DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION: SECTARIANIZATION, ELITE FRAGMENTATION AND CIVIL WAR

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Abstract

This article examines why Yemen's post-Arab Spring democratic transition failed, asking how civil war reshaped political outcomes in a fragile democratization context. While existing studies often treat civil war as a consequence or background condition, this article advances the novel argument that armed conflict functioned as a decisive causal mechanism that transformed political incentives, eroded institutions, and displaced democratic competition with coercive power. Drawing on Democratic Peace Theory, the study argues that in systems marked by weak institutions and fragmented elite coalitions, incomplete democratization may intensify conflict rather than constrain it. Methodologically, the article employs a Comparative Historical Analysis that combines longitudinal data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset (2010–2025) with qualitative evidence from policy reports and academic sources. Process tracing is used to reconstruct critical junctures, including the 2011 transition agreement, the failure of the National Dialogue Conference, and the 2014 Houthi takeover. Yemen is analyzed as a negative case in comparison with post-Arab Spring transitions that avoided civil war. The findings demonstrate that Yemen's democratic failure was not driven solely by elite bargaining failures or sectarian polarization, but by civil war itself, which reconfigured elite strategies, accelerated institutional collapse, and produced path-dependent authoritarian outcomes.

Keywords: Civil War, Democratization, Yemen, Elite Fragmentation

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji mengapa transisi demokrasi Yaman pasca Arab Spring mengalami kegagalan, dengan menanyakan bagaimana perang saudara membentuk ulang hasil politik dalam konteks demokratisasi yang rapuh. Berbeda dari studi-studi sebelumnya yang memosisikan perang saudara sebagai konsekuensi atau kondisi latar, artikel ini menawarkan kebaruan dengan memandang konflik bersenjata sebagai mekanisme kausal utama yang mengubah insentif politik, melemahkan institusi, dan menggeser kompetisi demokratis ke arena koersif. Berlandaskan Teori Perdamaian Demokratis, penelitian ini berargumen bahwa dalam sistem dengan institusi lemah dan fragmentasi koalisi elite, demokratisasi yang tidak tuntas justru dapat memperbesar konflik alih-alih meredamnya. Secara metodologis, penelitian ini menggunakan Analisis Historis Komparatif dengan menggabungkan data longitudinal Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) periode 2010–2025 dan bukti kualitatif dari laporan kebijakan serta literatur akademik. Pendekatan process tracing diterapkan untuk merekonstruksi titik-titik kritis, termasuk kesepakatan transisi 2011, kegagalan National Dialogue Conference, dan pengambilalihan Sana'a oleh Houthi pada 2014. Yaman dianalisis sebagai negative case melalui perbandingan dengan transisi pasca Arab Spring yang tidak berujung pada perang saudara. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kegagalan demokrasi di Yaman tidak semata-mata disebabkan oleh kegagalan perundingan elite atau polarisasi sektarian, melainkan oleh perang saudara yang merekonfigurasi strategi elite, mempercepat keruntuhan institusional, dan menghasilkan lintasan otoritarian yang bersifat path-dependent.

Kata kunci: Perang Saudara, Demokratisasi, Yaman, Fragmentasi Elite

Background

Since the early 21st century, Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) has provided a central framework for explaining the relationship between democracy

and peace, arguing that democratic institutions constrain violence through accountability, transparency, and public oversight.¹ However, scholarship on fragile and postcolonial states has

¹ Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

shown that democratization under conditions of weak institutions, fragmented legitimacy, and elite competition may instead generate political instability. Yemen exemplifies this paradox: its post-Arab Spring transition did not lead to democratic consolidation but to renewed authoritarianism and civil war.² Yemen exemplifies this paradox, as its transition following the 2011 Arab Spring did not result in a stable democracy but in renewed authoritarianism and civil war.

Yemen's failed transition reflects the limits of democratization in contexts shaped by sectarian identity and political Islam. The country's Zaydi Shi'a-Shafi'i Sunni divide intersected with competing political projects,³ including the Houthi movement and Sunni-based parties such as al-Islah, linking religious identity to elite patronage networks.⁴ As a result, democratization unfolded along sectarian and regional lines rather than through inclusive institutional pluralism, producing fragile and fragmented governance structures.⁵

Following the 2011 uprising, the GCC-brokered transition transferred power from Ali Abdullah Saleh to Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi and was initially celebrated as a peaceful model of reform.⁶ Yet entrenched elites retained control over state resources, marginalized key actors such as the Houthis and the Southern Movement, and failed to implement substantive institutional reforms. The National Dialogue Conference (2013–2014), intended to build consensus, excluded major stakeholders and reinforced polarization, undermining the legitimacy of the transitional government.⁷

Economic mismanagement accelerated this decline. The 2014 IMF-backed removal of fuel subsidies sparked mass protests and unrest, which the Houthis exploited to expand their military and political influence.⁸ In September 2014, they seized Sana'a, forcing President Hadi to flee first to Aden and later to Saudi Arabia. By March 2015, the conflict had escalated into a regional proxy war, with a Saudi-led coalition intervening militarily to contain Houthi expansion and alleged Iranian influence.⁹ This externalization of Yemen's conflict entrenched sectarian narratives Sunni-led coalition versus Shi'a-aligned Houthis further entangling religious identity in the country's political and military structures.¹⁰ As humanitarian and economic crises worsened, the promise of democratic transition gave way to prolonged conflict and institutional collapse.

The outbreak of civil war thus marked a critical juncture, transforming pre-existing fragility and elite fragmentation into a path-dependent trajectory of militarized authoritarianism. In this context, Yemen illustrates DPT's diagnostic insight: when democratic institutions fail to channel political competition, incomplete democratization may amplify conflict rather than prevent it.¹¹

This study employs a Comparative Historical Analysis (CHA) integrated with process tracing to identify the causal mechanisms linking civil war, elite fragmentation, and democratic failure in Yemen. Although the analysis focuses on a single country, the CHA framework is applied through implicit comparison with Middle Eastern post-Arab Spring transitions that did not descend into

² Robert H. Bates, "The State of Democracy in Fragile States," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 4 (2022): 25–39.

³ D. Krause, "Why Is There So Little Shia-Sunni Dialogue?," *Religions* 10, no. 10 (2019): 567.

⁴ Panos Kourgiotis, "Moderate Islam' Made in the United Arab Emirates: Public Diplomacy and the Politics of Containment," *Religions* 11, no. 1 (2020): 43, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/11/1/43>.

⁵ Vincent Durac, "Yemen's Arab Spring: Democratic Opening or Regime Maintenance?," *Middle East Journal* 66, no. 3 (2012): 345–368.

⁶ Helen Lackner, *Yemen's 'Peaceful' Transition from Autocracy: Could It Have Succeeded?* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2016).

⁷ Irena Jalal, *Yemen's Incomplete National Dialogue* (Yemen Policy Center, 2022).

⁸ David Montgomery, "Economic Crisis and Fuel Subsidy Removal in Yemen: The Road to Instability," *Middle East Economic Review* 14, no. 2 (2021): 56–72.

⁹ Thomas Juneau, "No End in Sight in Yemen's Civil War," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2022.

¹⁰ Tarek Ladjal, "Sectarianism and the Arab Spring: Rethinking Identity and Political Fragmentation," *Religions* 12, no. 2 (2021): 91. <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/2/91>

¹¹ Bertelsmann Stiftung, "BTI 2024: Yemen Country Report," June 29, 2025, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/YEM>.

civil war, such as Tunisia and Morocco, where elite cohesion and institutional continuity mitigated democratic breakdown. Yemen thus functions as a negative case within a broader comparative logic of democratization outcomes. The CHA framework enables the study to trace temporal sequences of political transformation while accounting for subnational variations between northern and southern Yemen.¹² The study combines primary quantitative data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset covering the period 2010–2025 with secondary qualitative sources. Key V-Dem indicators include *v2x_polyarchy* (electoral democracy), *v2x_jucon* (judicial constraints on the executive), and *v2x_partip* (party participation), which are used to trace longitudinal patterns of institutional erosion before and after the outbreak of civil war. These indicators allow for the systematic assessment of democratic decline across time and political arenas.¹³

Qualitative data are drawn from the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI, 2024), UNDP governance assessments (2021), and field-based reports by the International Crisis Group (2023) to contextualize quantitative trends and address reliability concerns related to conflict-period data gaps. Process tracing is employed to reconstruct causal sequences linking critical junctures such as the National Dialogue Conference, the 2014 Houthi takeover of Sana'a, and subsequent elite fragmentation to institutional collapse and democratic reversal.¹⁴ Through this mixed-method approach, the study conceptualizes civil war not merely as a background condition but as a decisive causal mechanism shaping political incentives, institutional trajectories, and claims to legitimacy. By combining periodization, critical junctures, and causal sequencing, the Comparative Historical Analysis employed in this study enables

an explanation not only of why Yemen's democratic transition failed, but how the temporal interaction between elite fragmentation and civil war produced a path-dependent authoritarian outcome

Within this analytical framework, structural fragility conditioned elite behavior, elite fragmentation undermined institutional authority, and civil war intervened as a catalytic mechanism that reordered incentives, displaced political competition from institutional arenas to coercive ones, and locked in path-dependent outcomes.

Existing studies on Yemen's post-Arab Spring political transition have advanced important explanations for democratic breakdown, most notably emphasizing structural state fragility, elite bargaining failures, sectarian polarization and external intervention.¹⁵ While these accounts provide valuable insights, they frequently treat these factors as discrete or parallel variables, rather than organizing them into a systematic causal framework that explains how they interact over time. As a result, the relationship between structural conditions, elite coalition dynamics, and institutional performance in shaping democratic outcomes remains insufficiently integrated.¹⁶ More importantly, civil war is commonly conceptualized in the literature as either a consequence of democratic failure or a contextual background condition, rather than as an active causal mechanism that reshapes political incentives, institutional trajectories, and claims to legitimacy. Much of the literature on Yemen focuses on elite exclusion, sectarian identity, or foreign intervention, while under-theorizing how the onset of armed conflict itself transforms political competition from institutional contestation into militarized coercion. As a result, the causal role of civil war in converting fragile democratization into

¹² Matthew Lange, *Comparative-Historical Methods* (London: SAGE Publications, 2012).

¹³ UNDP, *Assessing the Impact of War in Yemen: Pathways for Recovery* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2021).

¹⁴ Hussein Solomon, "Political Islam, Identity, and State Fragility in the Middle East," *Religions* 14, no. 6 (2023): 757, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/14/6/757>.

¹⁵ Al-Dawsari, N. (2012). The Houthis and Yemen's war: Sectarian narratives and power politics. *Middle East Journal*, 66(4), 529–546.

¹⁶ Gause, F. G. (2014). Beyond sectarianism: The new Middle East Cold War. *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper*, No. 11.

authoritarian and fragmented governance remains undertheorized over time.¹⁷ Furthermore, existing explanations often rely on static or episodic approaches that obscure the historical sequencing through which democratic collapse unfolds. Few studies apply Comparative Historical Analysis to systematically trace how critical junctures such as the 2011 GCC-mediated transition, the failure of the National Dialogue Conference, and the 2014 Houthi takeover of Sana'a interacted over time to produce path-dependent outcomes.¹⁸ Without explicit periodization and process tracing, it remains difficult to explain why some post-Arab Spring transitions in the Middle East, such as Tunisia or Morocco, avoided civil war, while others notably Yemen descended into prolonged conflict and democratic reversal.

This article addresses these gaps by employing a Comparative Historical Analysis that integrates longitudinal democracy indicators with process tracing to model civil war as a decisive causal mechanism. By organizing explanatory factors into structural constraints, elite coalition fragmentation, and institutional erosion, the study demonstrates how civil war mediated and amplified their interaction across critical junctures, ultimately reshaping Yemen's democratization trajectory. Analyzing Yemen as a negative case in comparison with non-civil war transitions in the region, this article contributes a historically grounded explanation of how armed conflict alters democratic pathways in fragile and Muslim-majority states.

This research also adopts a line of reasoning such as:

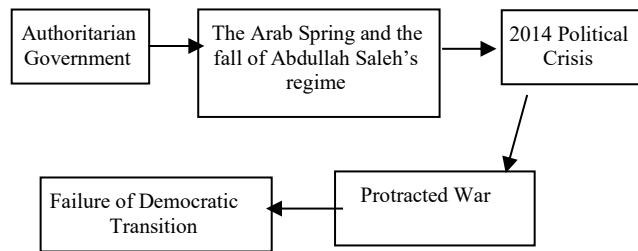


Chart 1. Line of Reasoning

Initial Democratic Opening and Institutional Fragility

During the presidency of Ali Abdullah Saleh, political stability in Yemen rested primarily on personalized rule, military coercion, and tribal patronage rather than institutionalized democratic governance.¹⁹ Saleh portrayed himself as the guarantor of national unity amid Yemen's fragmented social structure, but his rule was marked by systemic corruption, elite capture of state resources, and chronic economic mismanagement. Oil revenues, Yemen's main source of foreign exchange, were routinely channeled through patronage networks, while weak accountability mechanisms undermined state capacity and political legitimacy.²⁰ By the late 2000s, nearly 40 percent of the population lived below the international poverty line, reflecting the absence of inclusive political and economic institutions. This configuration produced a structurally fragile political order dependent on elite bargains and coercion, rendering the state highly vulnerable once personalized authority eroded.²¹

These conditions shaped the initial institutional landscape of Yemen's attempted democratic opening. Although the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 formally expanded political participation, democratic

¹⁷ Mahoney, J., & Thelen, K. (2015). *Advances in comparative-historical analysis*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁸ Capoccia, Giovanni, and R. Daniel Kelemen, "The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism", *World Politics*, 59.3 (2007), 341–369.

¹⁹ Carapico, S. (1998). *Civil society in Yemen*. Cambridge University Press.

²⁰ Lackner, H. (2019). *Yemen in crisis: Autocracy, neo-liberalism and the disintegration of a state*. Saqi Books.

²¹ World Bank. (2010). *Yemen poverty assessment*.

institutions remained shallow, personalized, and susceptible to elite manipulation.²² Civil institutions lacked autonomy, and political competition was mediated largely through military and tribal alliances rather than constitutional procedures. As a result, Yemen entered the Arab Spring period with weak institutional capacity to absorb mass political mobilization or resolve elite conflict through rule-based mechanisms. The Arab Spring protests of 2011 constituted a critical juncture that appeared to open space for democratic reform. Mass mobilization brought together diverse social actors, including youth activists, civil society organizations, tribal leaders, and religious figures, around demands for political accountability and social justice. However, this moment of convergence unfolded in the absence of robust institutions capable of translating popular demands into durable political reforms. The erosion of centralized authority during the transition instead generated an institutional vacuum that intensified elite competition and facilitated the rise of armed actors.²³

One such actor was the al-Houthi movement, which emerged from long-standing political and religious marginalization in northern Yemen. Repeated military confrontations with the central government, combined with declining state legitimacy, contributed to the group's gradual militarization.²⁴ The transitional breakdown enabled the Houthis to convert social grievances into organized coercive power, exploiting institutional weakness rather than operating within formal political arenas. While external involvement later influenced the conflict's escalation, the Houthis' transformation into an insurgent force was rooted primarily in domestic governance failures and exclusionary state practices.²⁵

Consequently, Yemen's initial democratic opening did not consolidate institutional legitimacy but instead exposed structural fragilities that were later activated and intensified through civil war

The Geopolitical Stakes of Yemen's Civil War

External intervention transformed Yemen's internal conflict into a regional power struggle, significantly altering the trajectory of its democratic breakdown. On 25 March 2015, Saudi Arabia and its allies *launched Operation Decisive Storm* with the stated objectives of weakening the Houthi movement, restoring President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi's government, and securing regional stability. Beyond these immediate goals, the intervention reflected broader strategic concerns, including safeguarding Saudi borders, protecting maritime trade routes, preserving Sunni regional influence, and countering perceived Iranian expansion in the Arabian Peninsula.²⁶

The Houthi movement, rooted in Zaydi Shi'a Islam, received political, logistical, and limited military support from Iran, aligning the Yemeni conflict with Tehran's broader regional strategy.²⁷ However, as Thomas Juneau notes, Iran's involvement represented "a limited return on a modest investment," suggesting that its leverage in Yemen was more symbolic than decisive. In contrast, Saudi Arabia's intervention signaled a high-stakes commitment to preventing the emergence of a hostile, Iran-aligned actor on its southern border.²⁸ As a result, Yemen's civil war became embedded in a wider Saudi–Iranian rivalry,

²² Carothers, T. (2002). The end of the transition paradigm. *Journal of Democracy*, 13(1), 5–21.

²³ Al-Dawsari, N. (2012). *Yemen's tribes and the Houthis*. Middle East Institute.

²⁴ Bonnefoy, L. (2018). *Yemen and the world: Beyond insecurity*. Hurst.

²⁵ Day, S. (2012). *Regionalism and rebellion in Yemen*. Cambridge University Press.

²⁶ Agus Purwono and Achmad Sholihul, "Faktor Pendorong Intervensi Militer Arab Saudi Dalam Konflik

Yaman," *Interdependence Journal of International Studies* 4, no. 1 (2023): 3, <https://doi.org/10.54144/ijis.v4i1.59..>

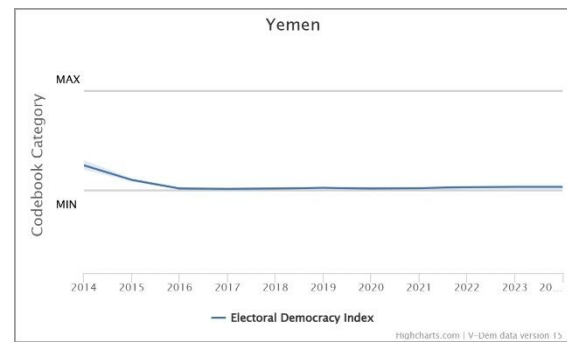
²⁷ Ahmad Nur Farras, "Balance of Power Dalam Intervensi Arab Saudi Pada Konflik Yaman Yang Terjadi Pasca Arab Spring," *Journal of International Relations* 6, no. 1 (2020): 144–155.

²⁸ Thomas Juneau, "Iran's Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment," *International Affairs* 92, no. 3 (2016): 647–663.

reframing domestic political competition through the lens of regional sectarian geopolitics.²⁹

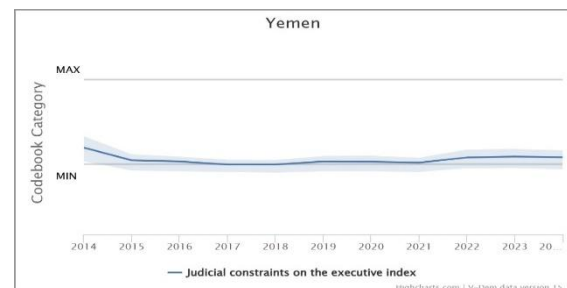
From the perspective of Democratic Peace Theory, this externalization of the conflict illustrates how fragile democratization collapses when domestic legitimacy is displaced by transnational sectarian alignments.³⁰

Foreign intervention did not merely intensify violence but restructured political incentives by rewarding coercive capacity and external patronage over institutional compromise. As Tarek Ladjal argues, sectarian polarization in Yemen functioned less as a product of theological division than as a geopolitical instrument through which regional powers justified strategic competition.³¹ This dynamic reinforced Yemen's internal fragmentation, deepening the divide between northern Zaydi-based movements and southern Sunni-aligned actors, including the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the al-Islah Party.³² Within the study's comparative historical framework, external intervention thus operated as an amplifying mechanism rather than an autonomous cause of democratic failure. By embedding Yemen's civil war within regional power rivalries, foreign involvement entrenched militarized politics, weakened incentives for elite accommodation, and further displaced political contestation from institutional arenas to coercive ones. In doing so, geopolitical intervention locked in path-dependent outcomes of fragmentation and authoritarian reversal, reinforcing the broader argument that civil war once internationalized became a decisive mechanism reshaping Yemen's post-Arab Spring political trajectory.³³



Source: V-Dem Institute, 2025.

According to data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, Yemen's Electoral Democracy Index and Liberal Democracy Index show a sharp decline between 2014 and 2016, characterized by the absence of genuine electoral competition and legislative independence. Between 2016 and 2024, both indices stagnated at their lowest levels, illustrating the collapse of democratic governance and the erosion of representative institutions.



Source: V-Dem Institute, 2025.

The 2024 V-Dem dataset confirms that Yemen's Electoral Democracy Index has remained below 0.05 since 2016, indicating the near-complete collapse of electoral democracy following the outbreak of civil war and foreign military intervention. Similarly, the Liberal Democracy Index shows that Yemen's already fragile procedural democracy in 2014 deteriorated rapidly after the 2015 Houthi takeover and the

²⁹ Peter Salisbury, "Snakes and Ladders: The Regional and International Dimensions of Yemen's Civil War," PeaceRep, 2024.

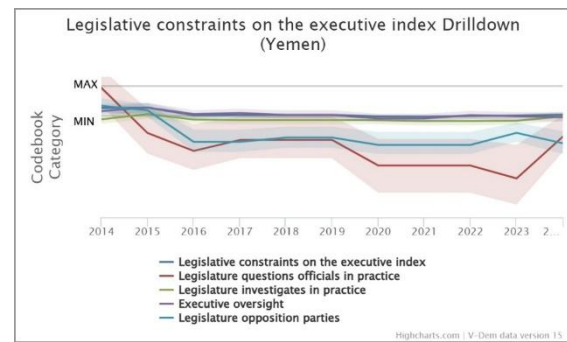
³⁰ Thomas Juneau, "Iran's Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment," *International Affairs* 92, no. 3 (2016): 647–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12599>.

³¹ Robert H. Bates, "The State of Democracy in Fragile States," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 4 (2022): 25–39.

³² Tarek Ladjal, "Sectarianism and the Arab Spring: Rethinking Identity and Political Fragmentation," *Religions* 12, no. 2 (2021): 91. <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/2/91>

³³ M. Clausen, "Decentralization as a Strategy of Regime Maintenance: The Case of Yemen," *Journal of Political Studies* 26, no. 2 (2018): 120–145.

Saudi-led intervention, underscoring the inability of formal institutions to withstand sustained armed conflict. These trends demonstrate how civil war did not merely coincide with democratic decline but actively eroded the institutional foundations necessary for electoral competition and accountability.³⁴ Judicial institutions exemplify this process of institutional hollowing. Under Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen's judiciary operated within a pseudo-democratic framework in which formal legal institutions existed but were subordinated to executive authority and tribal patronage networks. As reflected in the V-Dem indicator on judicial constraints on the executive, judicial independence remained consistently low and failed to recover during the transition period. As Sheila Carapico notes, legal processes in Yemen were neither transparent nor impartial, as judges were politically appointed and dependent on regime loyalty rather than constitutional authority. The judiciary thus functioned as an instrument of regime control rather than a check on executive power, reflecting rule by law rather than rule of law.³⁵ The outbreak of civil war transformed existing institutional weakness into systemic collapse. Armed conflict replaced judicial authority with coercive power, rendering legal institutions ineffective across much of the country. As a causal mechanism, civil war converted judicial fragility into irreversible institutional erosion, reinforcing authoritarianism and closing remaining channels for peaceful political contestation.³⁶



Source: V-Dem Institute, 2025

Following the outbreak of civil war, legislative constraints on executive power collapsed entirely. V-Dem's Legislative Constraints on the Executive Index shows a sharp decline after 2014, indicating the disappearance of parliamentary oversight, investigation, and opposition in practice. The Houthi dissolution of parliament in 2015 constituted a critical juncture in which legislative institutions ceased to function as arenas of political competition.³⁷ In both northern and southern Yemen, formal legislative authority was replaced by coercive governance. The Houthis governed through revolutionary committees in Sana'a, while the Southern Transitional Council exercised de facto control through militarized administrative structures. In this context, executive authority operated without constitutional constraint, relying on armed patronage rather than institutional accountability.³⁸ This pattern demonstrates that civil war did not merely weaken representative institutions but displaced them altogether. Consistent with Democratic Peace Theory, Yemen's experience shows that democratization cannot survive once coercive authority supplants legislative oversight, confirming civil war as a decisive causal mechanism in democratic collapse.

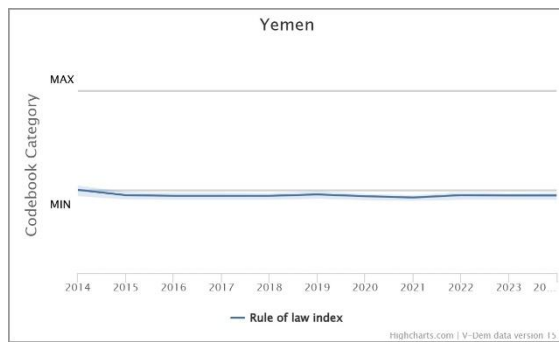
³⁴ Robert D. Burrowes, *Historical Dictionary of Yemen* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 177.

³⁵ Sheila Carapico, *Yemen Between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism* (London: Hurst, 2010), 56.

³⁶ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2014 Country Report—Yemen* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014), 8.

³⁷ International Crisis Group, "Yemen: Challenges for the Presidential Leadership Council," 2025.

³⁸ Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).



Source: V-Dem Institute, 2025.

Following the 2015 Houthi seizure of Sana'a, civil war became a critical juncture that restructured Yemen's political order. The dissolution of parliament and the creation of a Revolutionary Committee constituted an institutional rupture that shifted political competition from constitutional arenas to coercive ones, reflected in the stagnation and decline of V-Dem's Rule of Law Index after 2014.³⁹ The emergence of dual authorities in Sana'a and Aden illustrates how civil war mediated the interaction between structural fragility, elite fragmentation, and institutional erosion. By eliminating elite bargaining as a viable mechanism of governance reinforced by the collapse of the Houthi-Saleh alliance in 2017 armed conflict locked Yemen into a path-dependent trajectory of fragmented sovereignty and authoritarian rule.⁴⁰

Deepening Power Fragmentation and the Collapse of Political Competition

Between 2016 and 2020, Yemen's political crisis deepened amid escalating power fragmentation and a worsening humanitarian emergency. The conflict was dominated by clashes between the Houthis who consolidated control over most of northern Yemen, including Sana'a and the internationally recognized government of President Hadi. The emergence of the Southern

Transitional Council (STC), which temporarily seized Aden and advocated southern agenda, further fractured territorial authority and introduced horizontal rivalries alongside the vertical conflict between state and insurgent forces.⁴¹ A critical juncture occurred in late 2017 with the collapse of the Houthi-Saleh alliance and the assassination of Ali Abdullah Saleh. This episode marked the definitive breakdown of elite coalition politics and accelerated Yemen's transition from fragmented governance into a path-dependent condition of political disintegration. With no unified executive authority and no functioning national legislature, state institutions lost their coordinating and legitimizing capacity, producing a prolonged constitutional vacuum.⁴²

This fragmentation was reinforced by the sectarianization of political competition. Houthi governance increasingly relied on Zaydi religious narratives and revolutionary legitimacy, while the STC and allied southern actors mobilized Sunni-oriented and regionalist discourses emphasizing autonomy and resistance to northern dominance. As Abdulaziz Al Fahad argues, identity-based governance in the Middle East often substitutes institutional legitimacy with sectarian solidarity, accelerating democratic failure when religious narratives replace civic representation. In Yemen, civil war institutionalized this dynamic, transforming sectarian identity from a social cleavage into a governing principle.⁴³ In Yemen, this dynamic solidified fragmented authority structures and entrenched the division between the northern and southern political orders, preventing the reestablishment of a unified democratic framework.

Legislative collapse exemplifies this causal process. After the Houthis dissolved parliament

³⁹ Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "A Fragile but Enduring Truce in Yemen," May 28, 2025.

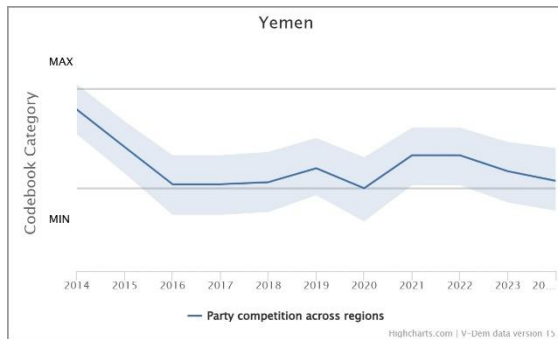
⁴⁰ Zuhairi Misrawi, "Yaman di Ambang Kehancuran," Detik News, May 23, 2017.

⁴¹ Syarif Alhadar, "Perang Yaman Dan Separatisme Selatan," Kompas, May 23, 2018, <https://www.kompas.id/baca/opini/2018/02/05/perang-yaman-dan-separatisme-selatan>.

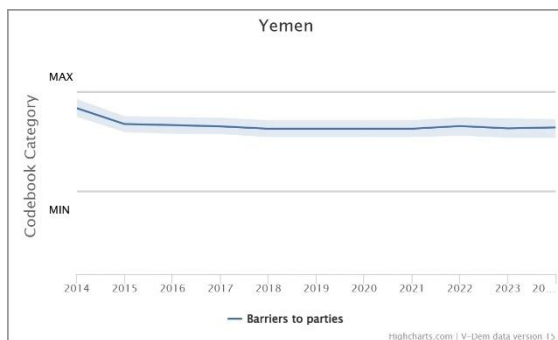
⁴² Zuhairi Misrawi, "Yaman Di Ambang Kehancuran," Detik News, May 23, 2017, <https://news.detik.com/kolom/d-3758602/yaman-di-ambang-kehancuran>.

⁴³ Abdulaziz Al Fahad, "Identity Politics and Democratization in the Middle East," *Social Sciences* 11(9): 423 (2022). <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/11/9/423>

and rival authorities emerged, Yemen lost a functional national legislature capable of executive oversight. Dual governance entrenched coercive rule, displaced institutionalized political competition, and restructured incentives in favor of militarized actors, locking Yemen into a fragmented and authoritarian trajectory.



Source: V-Dem Institute, 2025.



Source: V-Dem Institute, 2025.

V-Dem indicators on *Party Competition Across Regions* and *Barriers to Parties* show a sharp decline in Yemen between 2014 and 2016, followed by prolonged stagnation at minimal levels. While political parties remained relatively active during the 2014 National Dialogue Conference, the Houthi seizure of Sana'a and the collapse of the Hadi government eliminated the institutional arena for party-based competition. The outbreak of civil war thus marked a critical juncture in which political contestation shifted from electoral and organizational channels to coercive and territorial control. The emergence of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in 2017 further reinforced this fragmentation. Backed by the UAE,

the STC established parallel governing structures in southern Yemen, adding horizontal rivalries to the vertical conflict between the Houthis and the internationally recognized government. As a result, party competition no longer operated at the national level but was subordinated to armed authority and regional loyalties.⁴⁴

The “Barriers to Parties” indicator reflects not political liberalization but institutional collapse. After 2015, the decline in formal barriers indicates the absence of a unified legal framework capable of regulating party activity. In Houthi-controlled areas, opposition parties were suppressed, while in STC-held territories, political participation was conditional on support for secessionist objectives. Civil war therefore did not merely restrict party competition; it dismantled the institutional conditions that made pluralism meaningful.

Taken together, these trends demonstrate how civil war functioned as a causal mechanism that displaced political competition from institutionalized arenas to militarized ones. Rather than reflecting elite bargaining failure alone, the collapse of party competition illustrates a path-dependent outcome in which fragmentation and coercion replaced democratic contestation.⁴⁵

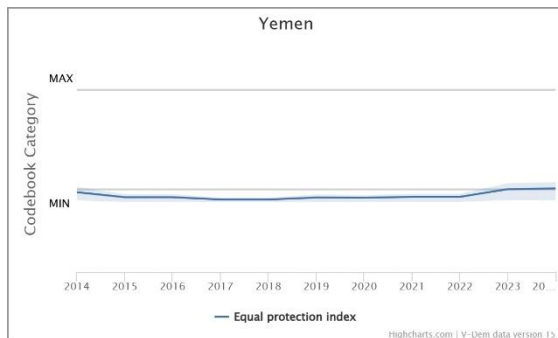
Persistent Conflict and the Deadlock of Democratic Institutions

According to the V-Dem Dataset Version 15, Yemen’s Electoral Democracy Index and Barriers to Parties indicators from 2021 to 2024 remained among the lowest globally, confirming a prolonged institutional deadlock rather than a temporary democratic setback. According to the V-Dem Institute, “no measurable recovery has occurred in Yemen’s electoral or participatory institutions since the onset of the civil war,” a finding reinforced by the International Crisis Group, which notes that the conflict has entrenched parallel authorities and paralyzed formal state institutions.”

⁴⁴ Institute, “Yemen Electoral Democracy Index 2014–2024, V-Dem Dataset V15.”

⁴⁵ V-Dem Institute, “Yemen Barriers to Parties 2014–2024, V-Dem Dataset V15,” May 24, 2024, <https://www.v-dem.net>.

These trends indicate that Yemen's democratic collapse has become path-dependent. Since 2015, key indicators of electoral competition, political pluralism, and participation have stagnated near zero, reflecting the dismantling of institutional mechanisms necessary for democratic accountability. Rather than stemming from leadership failure alone, this persistent stagnation demonstrates how civil war functioned as a causal process that locked Yemen into a condition of institutional paralysis, foreclosing meaningful democratic recovery.



Source: V-Dem Institute, 2025.

From 2021 to 2024, Yemen remained trapped in protracted civil war with no meaningful progress toward political settlement or democratic recovery. Renewed offensives, particularly the Houthi assault on Marib and escalation with the Saudi-led coalition, entrenched violence, replaced negotiation with coercive bargaining, and marginalized diplomatic initiatives. V-Dem's Equal Protection Index remained at its lowest level, indicating the absence of uniform legal guarantees. This stagnation reflects the consolidation of fragmented, militarized authority, where governance relied on selective enforcement, armed patronage, and sectarian loyalty rather than universal legal principles.

The persistence of extremist actors such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) further illustrates how civil war restructured political

space. By exploiting institutional collapse and territorial fragmentation, these groups thrived in the absence of centralized authority, reinforcing the erosion of state sovereignty. As confirmed by V-Dem's 2024 update and International Crisis Group assessments, Yemen's political system during this period lacked the basic conditions for pluralistic competition or centralized governance.⁴⁶

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Yemen's democratic failure between 2021 and 2024 was not the result of stalled reform efforts alone, but of a path-dependent process in which civil war entrenched non-democratic forms of rule. Armed conflict functioned as a self-reinforcing mechanism that dismantled legal equality, displaced institutional authority, and foreclosed the re-emergence of democratic institutions.⁴⁷

The Presidential Leadership Council and Identity Politics: Sectarian Tensions within Yemen's Transitional Political Structure

The transfer of executive authority from President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi to the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) in April 2022 was intended to stabilize Yemen's fragmented political order by unifying anti-Houthi factions under a collective executive. Brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council, the arrangement aimed to revive the stalled transition process. However, rather than consolidating authority, the PLC exposed persistent elite fragmentation. Its heterogeneous composition including southern separatists, tribal leaders, military elites, and Islamist actors lacked institutional coherence and a shared national vision. The inclusion of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which continues to pursue secession, further weakened centralized decision-making and reinforced institutional disunity.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ International Crisis Group, "The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives" (Brussels: International Crisis Group, May 24, 2021), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/truce-test-huthis-and-yemens-war>.

⁴⁷ International Crisis Group, *Yemen: Challenges for the Presidential Leadership Council* (July 1, 2025),

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemens-troubled-presidential-leadership-council>

⁴⁸ Al Jazeera, "Yemen's President Transfers Powers, Saudi Calls for Houthi Talks," *Al Jazeera*, July 1, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/7/yemen-president-transfers-powers-saudi-calls-for-houthi-talks>

Empirical evidence from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Dataset (Version 15, 2024) indicates that the PLC failed to restore democratic pluralism. Yemen's Party Competition Across Regions index declined from 0.22 in 2022 to 0.08 in 2024, while barriers to party activity remained among the highest globally. These trends suggest not democratic recovery, but the consolidation of exclusionary and fragmented governance. Decentralization under the PLC deepened regional power asymmetries rather than fostering accountability or inclusive political competition.

This outcome reflects a longer historical pattern. As Clausen (2018) argues, decentralization in Yemen has functioned less as a mechanism for empowering local governance than as a strategy for managing elite competition.⁴⁹ This logic persists in the post-2014 conflict environment. The Houthis continue to dominate the north while rejecting the PLC's legitimacy as externally imposed, whereas the STC maintains de facto military control over Aden despite its formal participation in the council. As a result, the PLC operates as a fragile coalition of rival actors competing for authority and external patronage rather than as a unified executive capable of mediating national interests.

International assessments reinforce this diagnosis. The International Crisis Group (2025) observes that the PLC's fragmented composition has generated governance paralysis, with council members prioritizing factional interests over policy coordination.⁵⁰ Similarly, Al Jazeera (2022) reported that Hadi's resignation was welcomed by regional sponsors but met with domestic skepticism, highlighting the council's dependence on external mediation rather than internal consensus. This reliance reproduces Yemen's structural dependency on foreign actors and

undermines domestic ownership of the transition process. Consequently, sovereignty remains contested among three competing authorities: the Houthis, the PLC, and the STC.⁵¹

Between 2021 and 2024, Yemen's democratic stagnation deepened as no legitimate national elections were held and political authority continued to rest on armed power and foreign backing. Consistent with Levitsky and Way's (2010) concept of competitive authoritarianism, formal institutions persisted without functioning mechanisms of accountability.⁵² The stagnation of the *Equal Protection Index* reflects profound legal inequality, as rival authorities operate distinct judicial systems that condition access to justice on political affiliation. In this context, the PLC has not advanced democratization but has instead institutionalized a multipolar order sustained by coercion rather than representation.

Beyond its administrative weaknesses, the PLC also illustrates the entrenchment of identity-based and sectarian politics within Yemen's transitional governance. The council's hybrid composition exemplifies what Omar Mahmoud describes as the "hybridization of religious governance,"⁵³ where political legitimacy derives less from civic consent than from confessional and factional representation. Rather than building inclusive institutions, this arrangement substitutes negotiated coexistence among elites for democratic legitimacy.⁵⁴ In Yemen, sectarian and regional identities thus continue to structure access to power, preventing the consolidation of a unified democratic framework. This analysis underscores the central contribution of this study: Yemen's democratic failure is not merely the result of regime weakness, but of civil war-driven fragmentation that reconfigures political

⁴⁹ M. Clausen, "Decentralization as a Strategy of Regime Maintenance: The Case of Yemen," *Journal of Political Studies* 26, no. 2 (2018): 120–145.

⁵⁰ International Crisis Group, *Yemen: Challenges for the Presidential Leadership Council* (2025).

⁵¹ Peter Salisbury, "Snakes and Ladders: The Regional and International Dimensions of Yemen's Civil War" (PeaceRep, 2024).

⁵² Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁵³ Omar Mahmoud, "Religious Governance and Political Conflict in the Arab World," *Religions* 13(4): 321 (2022). <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/4/321>

⁵⁴ Abdulaziz Al Fahad, "Identity Politics and Democratization in the Middle East," *Social Sciences* 11(9): 423 (2022). <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/11/9/423>

competition along sectarian and militarized lines, rendering democratic institutions structurally nonviable.

Ceasefire and Peace Dialogue

The 2023 ceasefire initiative and renewed peace talks in Yemen provide a critical test of the long-term effects of civil war on democratic transition. Mediated by the United Nations and supported by Saudi–Houthi negotiations, the ceasefire marked the most significant diplomatic engagement since 2014 and briefly raised expectations of a shift from armed confrontation to political dialogue.⁵⁵

However, viewed through a comparative historical and process-tracing perspective, the ceasefire reflects continuity rather than rupture. As noted by the International Crisis Group (2025), the diplomatic progress was largely symbolic, lacking enforceable mechanisms and inclusive political arrangements. Reports on the Riyadh talks similarly indicate the absence of binding agreements on power-sharing, institutional reconstruction, or security governance. These outcomes suggest that the ceasefire functioned as a tactical de-escalation rather than a substantive political settlement.⁵⁶ From a causal standpoint, this episode demonstrates how prolonged civil war has restructured political incentives in Yemen. Armed conflict has displaced democratic bargaining from institutional arenas into coercive and externally mediated negotiations, while eroding trust and legitimacy among political actors. As a result, even periods of de-escalation remain constrained by the self-reinforcing effects of militarization, limiting the prospects for meaningful democratic compromise.

This dynamic aligns with Democratic Peace Theory in contexts of fragile and incomplete democratization. While DPT argues that democratic institutions constrain violence through accountability and oversight, Yemen's main conflict actors the Houthis, the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) lack electoral legitimacy and effective checks and balances. Negotiations thus occur without a shared social contract, generating mistrust and strategic uncertainty. As Doyle (1983) emphasizes, the restraining effects of democratic norms on violence presuppose institutionalized legitimacy, a condition absent in Yemen's post–Arab Spring political order.⁵⁷ Longitudinal indicators from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset reinforce this interpretation. Yemen's Electoral Democracy Index (v2x_polyarchy) and Participatory Component Index (v2x_partip) remained below 0.10 throughout 2023–2024, placing the country among the bottom five percent globally. These values indicate not merely democratic stagnation but the near-total collapse of institutionalized political competition. Corroborating this pattern, the BTI 2024 Country Report on Yemen observes that *“no effective checks and balances exist among political elites, and peace initiatives are shaped primarily by regional power calculations rather than democratic negotiation.”* Together, these data demonstrate that the ceasefire unfolded within a political environment fundamentally incompatible with democratic conflict resolution.⁵⁸ Elite fragmentation further compounded these constraints. The establishment of the Presidential Leadership Council in 2022 was intended to consolidate authority and facilitate a unified negotiating position. Instead, the PLC institutionalized factional competition by incorporating actors with divergent and often

⁵⁵ Associated Press, “Saudi Arabia Praises ‘positive Results’ after Yemen’s Houthi Rebels Visit Kingdom for Peace Talks,” *Associated Press*, May 28, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/saudi-arabia-yemen-war-peace-talks-d2a9ad9efe1ab0b4f5d51597098f46a2>.

⁵⁶ International Crisis Group, *Yemen: Challenges for the Presidential Leadership Council* (July 1, 2025), [https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-](https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemens-troubled-presidential-leadership-council)

[and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemens-troubled-presidential-leadership-council](https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemens-troubled-presidential-leadership-council)

⁵⁷ Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, “A Fragile but Enduring Truce in Yemen,” May 28, 2025, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/a-fragile-but-enduring-truce-in-yemen/>.

⁵⁸ Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post–Cold War World*.

incompatible objectives, particularly the STC's separatist agenda. During the 2023 ceasefire, these internal divisions combined with the continued influence of Saudi-Iranian rivalry undermined prospects for inclusive settlement. Rather than mitigating fragmentation, the ceasefire exposed how civil war had entrenched centrifugal elite strategies oriented toward territorial control and external patronage.⁵⁹

Viewed through a Comparative Historical Analysis, the 2023 ceasefire constitutes a critical episode in the causal sequence linking civil war to democratic failure in Yemen. Unlike post-Arab Spring transitions in Tunisia or Morocco, where elite cohesion and institutional continuity enabled negotiated reform, Yemen's prolonged conflict has eroded the institutional foundations necessary for democratic peace. Coercive bargaining, the absence of enforceable agreements, and the marginalization of participatory mechanisms demonstrate how civil war continues to shape political outcomes beyond active hostilities.⁶⁰

The limited results of the 2023 ceasefire should therefore be understood not as an isolated diplomatic failure, but as evidence of deeper structural constraints. Civil war has reordered political incentives, entrenched elite fragmentation, and foreclosed pathways toward inclusive institutional reconstruction. De-escalation without institutional rebuilding thus reproduces, rather than resolves, Yemen's democratic impasse.⁶¹

Factors the Failure of Democratic Transition

Yemen's post-Arab Spring democratic failure stems from the interaction of political instability, elite fragmentation, and institutional weakness,

which enabled civil war to emerge as a decisive causal mechanism. After Ali Abdullah Saleh's ouster, power transfer to President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi occurred without meaningful institutional reform. Lacking elite cohesion and territorial control, the transitional state remained highly vulnerable to collapse.⁶² This fragility became evident when the Houthis movement seized Sana'a in September 2014, forcing Hadi's resignation and creating a power vacuum that marked the breakdown of central authority.⁶³

Second, Elite fragmentation further undermined the transition. The National Dialogue Conference (NDC), intended to produce an inclusive settlement, excluded key armed actors such as the Houthis and the Southern Movement, leaving its outcomes politically illegitimate. Continued dominance of former regime elites reinforced exclusion, converting political competition into armed contestation. In the absence of a credible elite pact, violence became the primary mechanism for resolving political disputes.⁶⁴

Third, Institutional weakness formed a third reinforcing constraint. Core state institutions parliament, judiciary, and bureaucracy lacked the capacity to mediate conflict or enforce political rules, while decentralization was captured by local elites to preserve existing power structures.⁶⁵ This process culminated in what Cordesman describes as "structural state failure," in which the state lost its ability to perform basic governance functions. Civil war thus emerged not merely as a conflict between armed groups, but as a manifestation of comprehensive institutional collapse.⁶⁶

⁵⁹ Michael W. Doyle, 'Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 12.3 (1983), 205–235.

⁶⁰ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2024 Country Report—Yemen* (2024).

⁶¹ M. Clausen, 'Decentralization as a Strategy of Regime Maintenance: The Case of Yemen', *Journal of Political Studies*, 26.2 (2018), 120–145.

⁶² Bertelsmann Stiftung, "BTI 2024: Yemen Country Report," June 29, 2025, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/YEM>.

⁶³ Anthony H Cordesman, "The War in Yemen: Hard Choices in a Hard War" (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 29, 2025), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-yemen-hard-choices-hard-war>.

⁶⁴ Hani Albasoos and B. A.-H., 'Understanding the Root Causes of the Conflict in Yemen', *Bussecon Review of Social Sciences* (2020)

⁶⁵ Maria-Louise Clausen, 'Decentralization as a Strategy of Regime Maintenance', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 50.1 (2018), 31–34.

⁶⁶ Cordesman

Longitudinal data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset and the BTI 2024 Country Report corroborate this causal sequence. Yemen's Electoral Democracy Index declined from 0.28 in 2012 to below 0.05 after 2016, while indicators of rule of law and judicial constraints on the executive fell to near zero by 2024. These trends indicate that institutional degradation preceded and then reinforced the outbreak of civil war, supporting the argument that democratic failure in Yemen was structural rather than incidental.⁶⁷ These findings demonstrate that Yemen's democratic transition did not fail because democracy was socially rejected, but because the institutional and political conditions necessary to sustain it never consolidated. Civil war intervened in this fragile context as a catalytic mechanism, transforming exclusion, fragmentation, and institutional weakness into a path-dependent trajectory of authoritarianism and violence.⁶⁸

Conclusion

This study concludes that Yemen's post-Arab Spring democratic transition failed not primarily due to elite mismanagement or sectarian polarization, but because civil war functioned as a decisive causal mechanism that transformed political incentives, dismantled institutional authority, and blocked democratic consolidation. Emerging in 2014, armed conflict did not merely interrupt the transition; it restructured political competition by replacing institutional bargaining with coercion and territorial control, making democratic governance increasingly untenable. Using comparative historical analysis and process tracing, the study shows that Yemen's democratic failure was structurally embedded from the outset. Weak institutions, exclusionary elite arrangements, and fragmented legitimacy characterized the post-2011 transition. The Houthi takeover in 2014 marked a critical juncture that converted these vulnerabilities into a path-dependent trajectory of institutional collapse, elite fragmentation, and

authoritarian reconfiguration. Subsequent initiatives, including the Presidential Leadership Council and the 2023 ceasefire, failed to alter this trajectory because they operated within a political environment already shaped by prolonged militarization and institutional erosion.

Longitudinal evidence from the V-Dem dataset reinforces this causal sequence, showing a sustained collapse in electoral competition, rule of law, and judicial constraints following the outbreak of civil war. Political authority has since been exercised primarily by armed actors and de facto administrations, confirming that Yemen's democratic failure is structural and self-reinforcing rather than episodic.

Rather than invalidating Democratic Peace Theory, these findings extend its analytical scope. The Yemeni case demonstrates that in fragile states lacking institutional consolidation, incomplete democratization may intensify conflict rather than restrain it, rendering violence a rational mode of political contestation.

By positioning Yemen as a negative case within post-Arab Spring transitions, this study contributes to comparative democratization scholarship by highlighting the causal role of civil war, critical junctures, and path dependence in shaping democratic outcomes. For policymakers, the implication is clear: without inclusive institutions and deep structural reform, peace initiatives risk producing only superficial stability and perpetuating cycles of authoritarianism and violence.

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Declarations

Author Contribution Statement

The first author was responsible for the entire research process, including study conceptualization, research design, literature review, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, manuscript drafting, critical

⁶⁷ V-Dem Institute, *Yemen Electoral Democracy Index: 2014–2024, V-Dem Dataset V15* (2024).

⁶⁸ Vincent Durac, 'Yemen's Arab Spring – Democratic Opening or Regime Maintenance?', *Mediterranean Politics*, 20.1 (2015), 28–45.

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The authors declare no competing interests.

AI Use Statement

[1] During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly (version current at the time of use) and DeepL Translator (version current at the time of use) solely for language editing, including grammar, clarity, and readability. The authors reviewed, revised, and verified the final text and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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