Voicing Grievances and Hope through Art: Yemen's Youth Empower Themselves

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Abstract

With a reputation for terrorism and state failure, for many Yemen is not the first place that comes to mind when speaking about a new art scene in the Middle East. Yet, in the course of the Arab uprisings, Yemen's youth used various forms of art as a medium to voice their demands and spread messages of resilience and peace. Carving out a new space in civil society, they continue to lobby for peaceful coexistence at times of violent elite struggles and political bargaining that does not accommodate the ordinary Yemenis' needs or the 2011 youth protesters' demands. Although quietly, this counter-movement takes on various forms, ranging from music and theatre to photography, filming and graffiti. A key aspect in most of these zero-budget projects is the participation of the ordinary population. Murad Subay's much-respected graffiti campaigns turned the capital Sana'a into an open-air studio for many who might not have touched a brush or spray can ever before, but discovered the powerful voice of art as a means to express both discontent with the current situation in Yemen and hopes for the future. The media collective #SupportYemen gives a voice to neglected issues through their videos that are available to everybody inside and outside the country. Yemen's very own TEDx events give a platform for artists to present their work and activists to spread the messages of their campaigns. This paper sheds light on these three cases of a new civic entrepreneurship in Yemen and demonstrates the inclusiveness of their working mechanisms and the emanation their work has in the country and abroad.

1. Introduction

Art might not be the first theme that comes to mind when thinking about Yemen. Better known for weak state structures, tribalism and the presence of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Yemen was largely ignored by Western observers prior to the protest movements of the so-called Arab Spring that swept through the Arab World in 2011. Inspired by Tunisians and Egyptians, Yemenis took to the streets in late January 2011 to protest against the 33-year rule of incumbent president Ali Abdullah Saleh. While the first few weeks of the protests were largely dominated by calls for reform – Yemen's economy has been in a severe crisis for years, while the Arab World's poorest state also grapples with high rates of illiteracy, unemployment, water scarcity, a rising population and political malfeasance among elites – the unrest soon echoed the demands that could be heard in neighbouring countries: *Irhal, ya ra'is!* (President, leave!)

This demand came at a crucial time. Parliamentary elections had been scheduled for April 2011 and presidential elections were due in 2013. Over the course of the last decade Yemenis, as well as outside observers, had witnessed how Saleh had undertaken measures to groom his son, Ahmad Ali, as his successor - a process loathed by many in the population, as well as by a number of elites. Thus, when Saleh addressed the masses in February 2011, assuring neither him nor his son would stand for elections and promising reforms, few among the population believed him. After the ousting of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak in Tunisa and Egypt respectively, Yemen's political opposition parties believed that they were in too much of a strong position to simply accept few vague promises by the incumbent regime. As a result, the protests swelled in size over the following months, affecting every larger city in Yemen, with Taiz, Sana'a and Aden becoming particular focal points for peaceful marches and tent cities on and around the 'Freedom' and 'Change' squares. At the same time, however, the protests also resulted in violent repression from the regime. One particularly violent incident occurred in Sana'a on 18th March when gunmen opened fire on the protest camp, killing 45 and wounding more than 200. This 'Friday of Dignity', as it was dubbed, eventually led to a regime split, with a number of regime officials defecting and joining ranks with the protestors, including considerable parts of the army. (HRW 2013a; BBC 2011a)

Fighting between government forces against defected military and armed tribesmen dominated the summer of 2011, raising the fears for a full-blown civil war. The elite fighting was only ended by the so-called GCC initiative, a deal brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and assisted by the EU, U.S. and UN that essentially froze the conflict. The initiative stipulated Saleh's resignation from power under the condition of immunity for him and his family; a National Dialogue Conference (NDC) that would address the country's most pressing issues; a new constitution and presidential elections after a two-year transitional period. Many of the protestors who had spent most of the year in the streets

were extremely unhappy, not only about the immunity granted to the president but also the marginalisation of their demands in the final agreement and their exclusion from the NDC.

Since then, the focus on Yemen has largely been concerned with the proceedings of the NDC; the power vacuum in Sana'a; the calls for secession in southern Yemen and the rising dominance of the Houthi movement in the North; and the U.S. drone attacks targeting areas in eastern and south-eastern Yemen. The proliferation of U.S. drone strikes are the result of the merging of the Yemeni and the Saudi branches of al-Qaeda, which occurred in 2009 following a crackdown by Saudi security on al-Qaeda elements in the kingdom. In Yemen the group benefits from hideouts in the Eastern region's thinly populated rough terrain and the political instability in the country. It is considered the most active branch of al-Qaeda and is responsible for a number of prominent attacks such as the attempted assault on Saudi prince Muhammad bin Nayif in 2009; the Christmas Day bomb plot later that same year; and the attack on Yemeni security personal in May 2012. One of the group's most significant strikes included the targeting of the Yemeni Ministry of Defence in December 2013. (Alles 2014:44-48) Despised by the Yemeni public, the drone attacks are said to target AQAP members but also involve a staggering number of civilian casualties. (Amnesty International 2013; Human Rights Watch 2013b) This is not to say that AQAP enjoys any sympathy among the Yemeni population but the devastating effect of the drone program is thought to have caused an upsurge in Yemenis joining AQAP. Hence, the international community is largely concerned with the volatile security situation and the political instability of the country.

Yet, largely unnoticed by the international public and overshadowed by enormous efforts to stabilise the failing state, Yemen's youth, amidst the political instability and violence, have demonstrated an ability to exercise their own agency. This trend, which has been witnessed in many countries of the Arab uprisings[1] and found expression in various fields, can be summarised under the term 'civic entrepreneurship'. Usually relating to some form of economic activity, this paper broadens its definition according to Jamshidi (2013:1-2), to understand civic entrepreneurship 'as any citizen-driven effort to mobilize communities to respond to opportunities or crises in order to advance the collective good'. It occurs in fields as diverse as politics, society, technology start-ups, art, and culture. This paper looks at civic entrepreneurship in the field of arts in Yemen, and how this served as a tool for youth empowerment.

Tracing the emergence of a new section of civil society from the protest squares in Yemen in 2011, the paper explores three case studies that illustrate how Yemen's youth are expressing their voices through different forms of art. Three projects or platforms that document this diversity of voices are investigated, beginning with famous street artist

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[1] A comprehensive overview and first endeavor in this phenomenon can be found in Jamshidi, M. (2013), *The future of the Arab Spring: Civic entrepreneurship in politics, art, and technology startups* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann).

Murad Subay, who articulates social and political criticism through graffiti. Secondly, the paper considers the media collective '*#SupportYemen*', which produces video clips in which Yemen's everyday men and women speak about how they are affected by problems, such as the drone strikes and what they expect from political elites. Finally, since 2012, Yemen has held its own TEDx events[2], providing a new platform for youth engagement, which includes creative forms of art. In considering these three forms of art, the paper demonstrates how the Yemini youth have, unlike the country's political elites, exercised their social and civic responsibilities through the medium of art.[3]

Research for this paper was undertaken in Yemen in 2013, which included meeting Subay and documenting parts of his graffiti at that time. Since media and academic documentation of Yemen's art scene is rare, following the scene and the artists' own documentation on Facebook is another method of accessing the broad array of activism that is occurring in Yemen. In fact, Yemeni artists have turned social media into a multi-facetted tool of recruiting participants, documenting the progress of their work and eventually disseminating it. This allows the researcher to circumvent travel restrictions; follow events in real time; establish new contacts; and conduct interviews without being physically present in Yemen.

2. A civil society born in Change Square

The protests and subsequent uprising in Yemen in 2011 as part of the wider Arab revolts, found a number of manifestations apart from almost daily demonstrations and mass-rallies. One such manifestation was the 'tent cities' on and around the 'Change' and 'Freedom' squares in Sana'a, Taiz and many other Yemeni cities. These tent cities proved to be a fertile ground for a myriad of civil society actions. They encompassed political and entrepreneurial activities, human rights and educational campaigns on various topics, and many of the primarily young people discovered new talents and interests that they started to pursue, or new ways to exercise what they had been doing before.

The tent city also proved to be a vital environment for artists and a flourishing art scene developed. Film and photography, music, dance, theatre and painting turned into important vehicles for the protesters to speak and exercise their rights. In a highly conservative society, many young artists had previously been confined to their homes. Musicians were frequently chased from public places by both state security and citizens who perceived their forms of art as 'un-Islamic'. This situation was compounded by an entrenched social

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[2] Initiated in 1984 in California under the slogan 'Ideas worth spreading', TED events provide a forum to present ideas in 18 minutes talks. The talks cover everything from technology, science, entertainment, business, design, arts etc. Since 2009, independently run TEDx-conferences have taken place all over the world. Many TED and TEDx talks are made available online.
[3] This chapter can only cover a handful of examples from Sana'a. It does not do justice to the many active artists and their remarkable work in other parts of the country such as Taiz, Aden and Hodeidah. In the future, there will be hopefully more research on this important part of Yemen's changing civil society.

class system, which attributed low social standing to artists. Hence, artists have often been looked down upon by others and performing art could thus be perceived as 'shameful' by traditional parts of society. (Wiacek 2011)

The months of the uprising over the course of the year 2011 gave artists a new arena to finally show their talents and further develop them under the overarching theme of the revolution. The various forms of art proved to be both a channel to voice the demands of the protesters, as well as a means to entertain the people; of whom many camped out in the squares for weeks if not months. At the same time, 'creative activity on the streets […] offered Yemeni demonstrators a form of catharsis for their increasing fear, anger and frustration' over the repressive actions of the Saleh regime (Hennessey 2014:68). Slogans of the revolution were turned into songs, such as '*Irhal ya ra'is*' (Leave, president!) or '*Ana galis hatta yaskut an-nizam'* (I am staying until the regime falls),[4] and events of the revolution were documented on the city's walls. Asserting control over public spaces was a revolutionary act in itself in a country dominated by a regime heavily entangled with the military-security apparatus and resembled the protesters larger goal of controlling government and institutions. As one protester explained, 'there are demonstrations and meetings of the revolutionary committee, but a lot of our time is spent building connections with other people, discussing what kind of country we want, what sort of future we envision.' (Mohsen 2012) Many considered art to be an important tool of encouragement and 'Change Square' a place safe enough to pursue it. (BBC 2011b) Newly formed art groups run workshops to improve each other's skills, gave advice and promoted their members' work. (Alwazir 2013) Hence, 'one of the outcomes of the Yemeni uprising has been an extraordinary efflorescence of artistic and intellectual production.' (Sheline 2014) Many of the young artists believe that society would accept them and their work more easily if the regime had supported modern art in the recent years, beyond the production of traditional images. With the uprising, these artists hoped for more than just regime change but for a profound change in society, that would open up to various forms of art and where artists could express themselves and perform freely. (Wiacek 2011)

Yemen is rich in various forms of art, whether it is its famous tradition of *'oud* music and poetry or artistic craftsmanship such as the ornamental decoration of houses and the colourful *qamariyyat* (fanlights with coloured glass). (Dresch 2000; Caton 2013) But there has also been a history of visual art and painting in particular, that has been practiced in Aden since the 1930s and spread from there to other cities like Taiz and Sana'a. A number of workshops developed over the decades of the twentieth century with varying degrees of state support. Until unification of North and South Yemen in 1990,[5] the state heavily regulated visual arts and used it for portraying political figures or to produce material for

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[4] *Cf.* Music band '3 Meters Away' Facebook page https://www.facebook.com/3MetersAway (accessed 20/03/15) and YouTube channel https://www.youtube.com/user/3metersawayband/videos (accessed 20/03/15).
[5] For a comprehensive overview of Yemen's political and cultural past, see Dresch, P. (2000) *A history of modern Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

political parties. (Alviso Marino 2014:3) But it is only since the 2011 uprisings that various experimental art forms in Yemen spread in non-governmental art centres and in the streets, often with a distinct socio-political tone. One such example is the 'Basement', a cultural centre in Sana'a that was founded by young artists in 2012. It provides space to perform music and hold art exhibitions. Above all, it turned into a space, particularly for young people, to meet, present their work, and generate new ideas. It understands itself as a civil society organization that 'aspires to create an open society in Yemen and in the region that is steeped in tolerance, acceptance, and diversity. [...] there are many people in Yemen who see this as a good forum for change and community building.'[6]

Another form of artistic expression is theatre, which dates back to the early twentieth century in Yemen and has been used to draw attention to contentious social issues, such as corruption, economic hardship or society's conservatism. The plays of the late 2000s, just before the uprising, had already touched on the political and social dissatisfaction in the country. During the violent weeks of the summer of 2011, those involved in theatre in the squares expressed their belief that their work could bring relief to the population and promote liberal–democratic values, while discouraging people from turning to extremism and violence. (Hennessey 2014:73-74)

In more recent years, Yemen's young, urban population, exposed to different cultural influences mainly through the Internet, developed new styles of music, paintings, and photography, thereby merging their cultural heritage and contemporary social and political issues with global trends. Concepts that are usually attributed to modern art or particular subcultures such as rap or graffiti were re-invented by Yemeni artists. Their work carries important messages about how these artists see their country; messages that they want to convey to their own population as well as communities abroad.[7]

3. Civil society activism in Yemen

This trend of activism of Yemeni youth comes out of a civil society that is much older than many contemporary observers would suspect. The prevalence of 'tribal structures' and religious conservatism is often used as an argument against the existence of a civil society in general. (Carapico 1998:1) Yet, just because civil society is not formalised or has an official legal status, does not mean that it is non-existent. Apart from that, both North and South Yemen look back on decades of activism of labour unions, community projects, local development associations and political organizations before unification in 1990. (Carapico 1998:9) Rather than understanding civil society as a set of institutions, it is more beneficial to understand it as a way of 'how people act on their own history' (Carapico

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[6] Self-description on their Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/pages/Basement-Cultural-Foundation/180297705496354?sk=info (accessed 22/06/2014).
[7] Whilst little writing of this process exists beyond journalistic accounts, it is possible to follow this trend via social media websites that constitute important tools for presentation, dissemination and discourse of artists' work. For a more general overview of the phenomenon during the Arab uprisings, see e.g. Khalil (2011).

1998:18). Furthermore, in an environment where formal institutions or organisations are most often heavily monitored or co-opted by the state, it is rather semi-formal and independent activism that puts pressure on the government. In her study of the rather open atmosphere of the time between Yemeni unification in 1990 and the 1994 civil war, Sheila Carapico (1996) describes how institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms of activism flourished in Yemen.

This found an abrupt end when South-Yemen declared independence again in 1994 due to its discrimination in the unified republic. The North under Saleh responded militarily and within three months of a short but violent war between May and July 1994, the southerners were defeated. This was the onset of the South's effective marginalisation through a regime dominated by northern forces around Saleh that fuelled severe discontent, and renewed calls for secession were coming from Yemen's south since the late 2000s. After the civil war, crackdowns on anti-government organisations, newspapers and individuals meant that it was not until 2011 that civil society could significantly expand the 'autonomous space of mass expression' (Lefebvre in Carapico 1996:289) that it had carved out before but had always been limited by the threat of state harassment. (Phillips 2008:172) Protests on human rights issues in previous years had been small and were not considered threatening by the regime. Anti-regime protests in the south, particularly Aden since 2007 had regularly been met with force by the security agencies. But none of these had ever met the size, expansion and persistence that the protests in 2011 featured throughout the country. It is hard to find better examples than the activism in the civic sphere of the Yemeni uprising, and how it developed into its own voice of the transition period. It is often the less institutionalised form of activism that encourages people to join and pursue their projects as part of a wider cluster of activities but without an explicit institutional affiliation.

As in other Arab countries, the use of social media was an important tool for this new form of civil society activism, and it continues to be essential in the mobilisation for and dissemination of activities. However, social media is not exclusively responsible for the success of mobilising people and sustaining the protest over the course of several months. The country average for Facebook user penetration on the eve of the uprisings in late 2010 was below 8% for the Arab World (Arab Social Media Report 2012:7), whilst in Yemen, the user penetration was just 2.2% (ASMR 2012:10). Only 1.6% of the Yemeni population were using the Internet at the time (UNDP 2010:213) and the Twitter user penetration in Yemen constituted only 0.02% (ASMR 2012:16). These numbers rose during 2011, for example the Facebook user rate in Yemen doubled between January and April 2011 and YouTube views jumped 150% in 2011 when compared with the previous year. (ASMR 2012:8;23) Yet, when comparing all countries affected by the Arab uprisings, a direct positive correlation between the use of social media and collective action within the framework of the uprisings could not be observed, and some countries with a lower rate in access to Facebook have actually seen a higher degree of collective action. (Rane

2014:118) Hence, it is remarkable that despite the low internet penetration, the communication among protesters was rather effective and spread widely. This is partly due to the far better coverage through mobile phones (68% as of 2010 (UNDP 2010:213)), but the example of Murad Subay's graffiti campaigns also shows how important public action and its observance by bystanders is. Many people joined his campaigns because they felt inspired when passing by the young people colouring the walls of the capital Sana'a (see below).

Social media platforms were, nonetheless, a crucial tool during and after the uprisings as a communication facilitator and channel to pass on information, facilitate the mobilisation of protesters and enable communication between them, as well as constituting an important platform for 'citizen-journalists'. (Rane 2014:120) In countries with no freedom of expression and severe limits on the freedom of assembly, social media tools enabled people to gather and participate in discussions about change, 'making it possible for virtual and actual participation of people in the affairs of their communities' (Monshipouri 2014:58). In fact, prior to the uprisings, social media had enabled people to circumvent state media, which the various regimes had monopolised and exercised full control over. The new virtual platforms allowed activists to take agency and youths could be mobilised around concrete political issues rather than rallied behind ideological agendas, generating 'a new kind of Arabism by a feeling of a common Arab destiny that transcends state frontiers' (Brynen 2012:233). Otherwise unaffiliated groups coalesced around particular events and issues, often connected through social media platforms. In other words, technology served as a tool for empowerment that enabled people to take up what Della Ratta and Valeriani call 'connective leadership' (2014:293). This, on the one hand, connects a movement to the outside world, and, on the other, facilitates connections within the movement 'by connecting activists who work in both online and offline contexts, and creating bridges between traditional social networks (trade unions, mosques and so on) and the virtual ones (particularly Facebook […])' (Della Ratta, Valeriani 2014:293). Apart from connecting people, a key task for connective leadership is framing the information about a group and its activities by placing it within a broader context. This is essential in order to achieve credibility and gain national and international attention. (Della Ratta, Valeriani 2014:295) This is particularly pertinent to the first two case studies of this paper since the street artist Murad Subay and the media collective #*SupportYemen* illustrate this phenomenon of connective leadership.

In Yemen social media has enabled, therefore, the networking and mobilisation of protesters, and provides a means for information sharing and the coordination of events. Every protester could turn into a reporter, producing content with the help of a mobile phone and Twitter, reporting in real-time government abuses and protesters' activities. (Brynen 2012:239) Tech-savvy youths from Tunisia and Egypt emphasised the importance of involving the artistic community 'and having them generating politically themed creative works, or remixes of existing ones' in order to attract more media and public attention.

(Della Ratta, Valeriani 2014:297-298) Not only, but especially since 2011, art is serving as a vehicle to voice people's concerns and thus as a tool for empowerment. The transition period in Yemen is dominated by elite power struggles, and the demands of the youth from 2011 are effectively marginalised. International media attention has focused on the state of AQAP and the confusing political landscape. At the same time, the future for young people looks darker than ever in Yemen, with a high unemployment rate, extreme difficulties surrounding provision of education, including options to study abroad, and a distribution of jobs often based on connections rather than qualifications.[8]

Through various forms of art – painting, photography or filmmaking – young people take back their voices that had dominated the squares of the 2011 protests, but were overlooked in the GCC initiative and the National Dialogue Conference following the uprising. They express their criticism of political and social circumstances, denounce the ills of the country, and report on issues that are easily forgotten in the bigger power games. But they also use art as a means to show their country through their eyes and lead their audience beyond the stereotypes of terrorism, poverty or a romanticised land of the Queen of Sheba. Yemeni modern art criticises both the country's socio-political issues and the behaviour of elite actors, documents positive and negative events, and presents the diversity of the country through the eyes of ordinary Yemenis without a purely political motive. It is probably the most diverse range of voices portraying Yemen these days.

4. Walls as billboards of resistance – One man's idea gives a voice to many

The intra-elite conflict that had erupted from the events of the uprising in Yemen in mid-2011 left its marks in many parts of the capital Sana'a in various forms of destruction. But it was the bullet holes that inspired Murad Subay to take his work from the canvas at home to the streets of the city. As a self-taught artist he started with a simple call on his Facebook page to gather people in order to bring life back to the city's bullet-ridden walls. What started on 15 March 2012 as a community project turned into Subay's first campaign called 'Color the walls of your street'. A surprising amount of people joined him quickly, some just as they were walking by those expressing themselves with paint and brushes. "'Hundreds showed up and by-standers joined in. It was like a carnival!" recalls Subay. "There were friends, families, kids… even soldiers put their weapons down and took brushes instead.'" (Palet 2014)

The colourful images covered not only the holes but also the slogans of the uprising that were sprayed by opposing sides of the protests and expressed feelings of hatred. (Faraj 2012) For the first time, Sana'a featured street art. Other than in the southern city of Aden, for example, where slogans in support of the southern movement and secession, and the

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[8] This had been the case already before the 2011 uprising, but the economic situation for youth had deteriorated since then. (Author's field visits in 2009/10 and 2013.) The unemployment rate for the 15-24 years old is at 33.7%. Note that the average age in Yemen is 18, with over 60% of the population being below 24 years. (CIA World Factbook 2014)

southern flag featured on various spaces in the city, Sana'a's walls had been blank. More importantly, the campaign turned into a form of community project. The participation of friends was crucial, but interestingly, even passers-by felt inclined to spontaneously take up a brush and join the painters. Subay stated that: 'The goal of this initiative is "to make art the common denominator between all people, and to give them hope for the future".' (Alwazir 2012) The participants were free in their choice of what to paint. While some expressed their emotions, others used the medium of painting to transfer messages such as the demand for women's rights, tolerance, or the needs of marginalised communities. Not only did the participants feel proud of their work, but also viewers expressed a feeling of appreciation of the talents on display. Hence, not only those who were actively part of the campaign but also their viewers became part of this form of community. The campaign spread to other Yemeni cities such as Taiz (Haddash 2012), Aden, Ibb and Hodeidah, and inspired further campaigns in Sana'a.[9]

The success encouraged Subay to launch a second campaign in late 2012 called 'The walls remember their faces'. Different from the first campaign, this time it was not about the therapeutic use of colours to make the city more attractive, but to expose an issue that has been neglected in Yemen over the last decades.

Over the past forty years, hundreds of people disappeared or were kidnapped because of actual or presumed opposition to regime policies or members of the regime. The exact reasons for their disappearance as well as their whereabouts have not been disclosed. Thus the fates of the disappeared remain unknown to their families who until this day have no information about what happened to their relatives. Ruling elites from both northern and southern Yemen have prevented any form of disclosure of this subject due to their alleged involvement in these crimes. (Farhat 2013)

In a seven month project, Subay and his supporters collected the photos of numerous people who disappeared between the late 1960s and 2012 in the course of various conflicts in North and South Yemen, notably after the assassination of president Ibrahim al-Hamdi in 1977, the rebellion of the National Democratic Front, the failed coup attempt against then-new president Saleh in 1978 and the 1994 civil war between North and South Yemen. The photos of the disappeared were turned into stencils and then sprayed on the walls in Sana'a, Ibb, Taiz and Hodeidah, together with the names and the date of their disappearance.

The campaign helped the families of the disappeared in counteracting the neglect of the issue by the authorities. '"We feel now that their pictures on the walls speak," says a relative of one victim.' (Farhat 2013) The reactions of the families affected showed that the campaign gave them back their dignity. It made visible a crime that nobody had talked about and that was actively pursued by those in power. 'The walls remember their faces'

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[9] Author's interview with Murad Subay, 11 November 2014.

raised awareness of this issue again and made it visible to the broader public.

Subay's campaign had very practical consequences for the former leftist activist Mathar al-Iryani. When asked for his picture to be added to the campaign, his family in the Red Sea coast town of Hodeidah took up their efforts to search for him again. They found him in a retirement home not far from their home. Paralyzed and suffering from amnesia, Iryani cannot remember the events of his disappearance or his name, but sometimes he is screaming of people who allegedly belonged to the security apparatus. In an effort by state authorities to eradicate the identity of opponents and replace them with fabricated ones, he was abducted by forces of then president Ali Abdullah Saleh in 1982. His condition is most probably a result of torture. Iryani's family is however glad to have regained their father. (Subaye 2013)

The campaign came to an official close in June 2014 with a conference in the Cultural Centre in Sana'a, with Subay speaking about his action along with journalist Sami Ghaleb, who had first raised the issue of the disappeared in 2007 when editor in chief of the national newspaper *Al-Nidaa* without being able to further pursue the issue. Small booklets were distributed with the stencil pictures of all those whose portraits could be also seen at Sana'a's walls. The closing ceremony was accompanied with a small exhibition of belongings of the disappeared that they had left behind.

The media collective *#SupportYemen* (see below) picked up the issue of the disappeared and in 2014 made a video entitled 'They have not returned' (#SupportYemen 2014b). Whilst accompanying Subay, the victims' families asked members of *#SupportYemen* to make a video regarding their cases. *#Support Yemen* recruited ordinary Yemenis to speak in the documentary, rather than a number of experts with whom only few people would be able to identify.[10] In the six-minute documentary, relatives of the disappeared recount their memories of the events, when they saw their fathers or brothers for the last time. But they also describe why the loss of their fathers and brothers is still difficult even several decades later. Although the memories are painful, the women in front of the camera tell their stories with great strength. They clearly refuse to declare their loved ones dead and still hope for them.

'The walls remember their faces' is an excellent example of how civil society actors took a neglected political issue into their own hands. It shows how the collective effort of people brings themes otherwise abandoned to the attention of a wider audience. Subay's campaign attracted international media coverage and even brought the issue back to Yemen's Human Rights Minister who formed an investigative committee. (Alviso 2013) Unfortunately, it did not achieve significant results, partly because those responsible for the disappearances still hold positions of power. However, they cannot silence the issue completely, and although unknown actors covered some of the portraits with black paint,

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[10] Author's interview with *#SupportYemen* co-founder Rooj Alwazir, 23 November 2014.

the message had already travelled further with the activists of *#SupportYemen* giving the victims a voice through their filmmaking. Available online, it can be watched by everyone inside Yemen and abroad. Social media platforms like Facebook further facilitate the dissemination of the activists' message that the crime of enforced disappearance hampers the possibility of achieving reconciliation and justice in Yemen.

The campaign was a spark that other activists took up and created their own piece of work regarding the same issue. In this way, a much broader audience could be reached, both locally and internationally. Furthermore, the message could be understood through the murals without having to read and write, and non-Arabic speakers had a chance to understand the issue through English subtitles on the video. The young activists managed to challenge the country's power holders through exposing a long ignored crime and, at the same time to tell a story to a local and international audience. Subay himself describes the influence of this campaign on Yemeni society as hugely significant.[11]

Subay's third, and most elaborate campaign yet, deals with twelve ills that the Yemeni society is exposed to. '12 hours' features coloured stencil graffiti that illustrate the issues of the spread of weapons (Yemen has the second-highest distribution of guns per person in the world), sectarianism, kidnapping, tampering with/destructing the homeland, drone attacks, poverty, civil war, the AQAP attack at 'al-Ourdi' (the military hospital on the compound of the Ministry of Defence), child labour, treason, and corruption. The final round of graffiti sums up the previous issues and emphasises the aim of the activists to continue with their peaceful struggle. Subay does not distinguish between evils originating within the country or coming from abroad but depicts them as equally harmful to the Yemeni society.

Whilst some of the works demand action from the people – for example a man standing next to a trash can in which he put a Kalashnikov – others are open critique, such as the mural of two men, one in traditional dress, the other in Western clothing, bowing to U.S., Saudi and Iranian currency banknotes. This is an open reference to the continuous meddling of the three countries and their influence through patronage payments. Yet, not long after completion of Subay's '12 hours' graffiti, unknown actors vandalised this particular mural and white paint covers most of the original (Al-Absi 2014), a sign that street art is taken seriously enough to pose a threat. A number of people have an interest not to upset their patrons outside of Yemen. Saudi Arabia has held patron-client relationships to individuals in Yemen for most of the 20th and 21st centuries in the attempt to influence politics and policies beyond its southern border. Significant financial and military aid from the U.S., particularly since 9/11 contributed (among other factors) to the longevity of the Saleh-regime that allowed in turn drone strikes from as early as 2002. Other than in Tunisia and Egypt, the administration in Washington was thus cautious to back the protests in 2011. Accusations of Iranian influence vary and have been most

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[11] Author's interview with Murad Subay, 11 November 2014.

commonly made in relation to the Shi'ite Houthi rebels in northern Yemen who waged a war with the central government between 2004 and 2010. It was only after the Houthi takeover of the capital Sana'a in September 2014 that connections with Tehran were admitted. Former south-Yemeni president and proponent for South-Yemen's secession, Ali Salim al-Bidh is also said to be a long-time recipient of Iranian support. However, Iran's actual influence in Yemen has been nowhere near American or Saudi influence and the lines between propaganda and facts remain blurred. There has been instead a general feeling among ordinary Yemenis that politics in Yemen have been largely guided by foreign agendas on which the population has no impact.

The '8th hour' of the campaign is dedicated to the 56 victims of the al-Qaeda attack of the Military hospital al-'Ourdi on 5 December 2013. Here, the campaign reacted to an immediate incident, taking it as an example for the greater threat of terrorism. The faces and names of the victims were depicted in the same way as the portraits of the disappeared in Subay's previous campaign. He had decided to include this incident of terrorism in his campaign, not least since the Yemeni government has to date not shown any concern for an in-depth investigation into the attack, and there has not been an official record of the victims. Subay and his friends collected names and pictures at their own initiative. When the Ministry of Defence denied them to paint at the location of the attack, they just re-located these murals to another part of the city. For the artist and his volunteers, the murals of 'the 8th hour' are more than just an illustration of terrorism as part of a wider campaign, but also a form of protest for the absence of any memorial for the victims. (Al-Hamdani 2014)

Murad Subay's work has certainly been one of the most prominent examples of youth activism in Yemen since the 2011 uprising. His '12 hours' campaign was ranked fifth in a list of campaigns that promote change around the world. (Al-Oulaye 2013) But the importance of people's participation in the campaigns is even more significant, as he emphasises. (Al-Absi 2014) In this way, people take ownership of the work that they create and become advocates of its theme. Together with the people who are exposed to this work simply by passing by on the street, the notion of transformation through action is disseminated beyond a core group of artists.

5. Support Yemen – A story of collective frustration waged on imagination

Many protestors perceived the coverage of the uprising in Yemen by international mainstream media outlets as biased and insufficient. This provoked a number of young Yemeni activists with a background in photography, filmmaking, and blogging to create the hashtag *#SupportYemen* on Twitter and to ask their fellows 'to share their stories, dreams and needs […]. This hashtag quickly created and widely disseminated stories and countered the narratives that were being told by mainstream media,'[12] recounts co-founder

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[12] Author's interview with Rooj Alwazir, 20. November 2014.

Rooj Alwazir. What started as a loose group tweeting under the same hashtag turned into a media collective of artists, filmmakers and photographers, activists, bloggers, journalists and videographers. Their aim is to achieve social and political change through the use of creative means:

> We came together and created a short video to convey our stories, hopes and struggles. Through videos with courageous underground voices we were able to tread on controversial political conversations. […] #SupportYemen is a story of collective frustration waged on imagination. Our resistance to mainstream media and our persistence to tell our own stories.[13]

Videos are a powerful tool in Yemen, a country with a high illiteracy rate.[14] They can reach a large number of people regardless of their educational background and disseminate perspectives of what is happening in the country and how people perceive it. The group started to make videos of various kinds. The majority are documentary style videos on contentious topics from the heart of Yemeni society. An important feature running through all videos is that the people affected get to tell their view of the issue in question, sometimes guided by a few questions. Almost all topics discussed are of a political or socio-political nature. The group wants to show honest and authentic stories. They are driven by the belief that reflecting on the pains of their society (i.e. the demand for the implementation of Human Rights (#SupportYemen 2012) or peoples' expectations from the NDC (#SupportYemen 2013)), and reflecting on the hopes and visions for a different future through film (i.e. the Yemeni version of Pharrell Williams' song 'Happy' (#SupportYemen 2014a)), they can make a positive impact on the development of the Yemeni society.

The strength of the activists and artists of *#SupportYemen* is their independence. They are working without a budget and make the best of the situation in which many Yemeni youth find themselves: having no money but a lot of time. 'We just need ourselves.',[15] explains Alwazir and hints to the activists' most precious resources, their ability to break down 'big' socio-political issues of the country onto the level of an individual, and their reservoir of ideas to convey their messages in captivating short films. Operating on a no-budget level, the activists use their own equipment and their surroundings, such as Sanaʻa's old city (and UNESCO world heritage site) as a studio. In doing so, the issues raised and messages conveyed in *#SupportYemen*'s work are accessible. The activists break the anonymity of statistics and reports without having to rely on external funding. The videos are produced without a special event or target audience in mind. Instead, they make their work available online for everybody to use them in workshops, organizations, show them

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[13] Author's interview with Rooj Alwazir, 20. November 2014.

[14] About 35% of the population over 15 years is considered illiterate with almost 70% of the population living in the countryside. 45% were living below the poverty line although this rate rose significantly since 2011 to well over 50%. (CIA World Factbook 2014)

[15] Author's interview with Rooj Alwazir, 20. November 2014.

on mainstream media or in meetings with policy makers. 'Our purpose is to create and produce stories and videos that help create a space for different perspectives, build community and create a movement.'[16]

Yet, the group thinks about how to build on and expand their work, and disseminate it particularly to those in the society that do not have access to Internet. They are thinking of setting up a pop-up cinema that can travel through the country, and for example show their documentary on drone attacks, host discussions with the audience, and sessions in which people can engage and develop ideas on how to help communities affected by the attacks. *#SupportYemen*'s projects can be as diverse as collecting accounts on the effect of drone attacks on people living in the respective areas (#SupportYemen 2014c), the photo project 'Inside Out Yemen' portraying young Yemenis in funny poses, or making the Yemeni version of Pharrell Williams's song 'Happy', that ends with the line 'Despite our difficulties, our happiness will never cease.' (#SupportYemen 2014a) Their strength is their independence and outreach to people who rarely get a chance to speak up for themselves.

6. Ideas worth spreading – TEDx as a platform for self-expression

Inspiration did not only come from the neglect that Yemen's youth faced in the immediate aftermath of the uprising. Mazen al-Hebshi, had been inspired by the power of TED talks and the effects they can have on a community. As a project coordinator for the Red Crescent during the time of the uprising, he was inspired by the changes happening around him but also shocked by the many difficult situations he encountered as a first aid worker. Thus he was trying to look for ideas to encourage himself and others around him to continue in their struggle for a new Yemen. A talk by Nadia al-Sakkaf (2011), editor in chief of the independent English language newspaper *Yemen Times* who presented Yemen 'through her eyes' on a TED event in Edinburgh in July 2011 particularly struck Hebshi. This was the moment when he decided that it was time to have TED events in Yemen.[17] Together with TED fellow Walid al-Sakkaf, he applied for the license to hold TEDx events in Yemen. The first event of its kind took place in Sana'a on 31 December 2012. The success was sufficient to hold subsequent TEDx events in Sana'a, Aden, Taiz and Mukallah in the years 2013 and 2014. By the end of 2014, Yemen had seven independent TEDx committees, including two at two different universities and a group calling itself 'TEDxYouthBabAlYemen'.[18] Although working independently, the groups support each other and hold workshops to improve future events and collaboration.

The organisers have two objectives in mind, '[giving] the youth hope by seeing good examples of success, and [sharing] ideas that can get them out of the negative situation

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[16] Author's interview with Rooj Alwazir, 20. November 2014.

[17] Author's interview with Mazen al-Hebshi, 13 November 2014.

[18] *Bab al-Yemen* (Gate of Yemen) is the last original city gate and a landmark in Sana'a.

we all felt we are in.'[19] TEDx Yemen serves as an example of the power and capabilities of the youth to reach a goal without any financial reward since the events are fully based on voluntary participation. What organisers and participants really strive for is sharing the ideas of Yemenis with the world and trying 'to decrease the stereotyping and labelling against us'[20], i.e. break up the picture of a failed state and terrorist heaven that prevails in the international community.

The aim of the TEDx committees in Yemen is to find inspiring ideas from fields as varied as technology, design or entertainment. They actively avoid political, religious or other affiliations. However, they are regularly confronted with negative reactions, denouncing the events as influencing the youth with 'Western ideas', stealing and wasting money for their personal gains, or coming up with unrealistic ideas that do not suit Yemen.[21] Much of that reflects a deep suspicion due to decades of foreign meddling in politics and strings of highly corrupt politicians and government officials.

The TEDx events have served as public platforms for youth engagement and featured a variety of topics. While some participants shared their own stories, others used the opportunity to perform art or raise awareness for a particular issue. One participant for example demonstrated the problems and health effects of qat[22] consummation in her talk at TEDx Aden in 2014. Her campaign against qat that took its beginning at Change Square in 2011 was subsequently discussed at the NDC. As a result, some supporters of her campaign had held weddings without qat.[23] The TEDx talk gave her the opportunity to disseminate the message of her campaign two years after the Change Squares of the country have been taken down. Furthermore, the availability of the talk online enables more people to see it and to use it as material for further events on the particular issue of qat.

Apart from talks with an "educational" purpose, a remarkably high number of participants share their own stories, something rare in Yemen's society, which makes a clear distinction between the public and the private. Socially conservative, Yemen's society is still very much marked by gender segregation on both public and private spaces. Codes of moral and honour are held high and women's space is considered to be at home. Public spaces are reserved for men. Parts of the younger generation have been pushing these boundaries in recent years, especially in urban centres and among more secular oriented groups. (Dresch 2000:17; Mundy 1995; Caton 2013:187-199) The months of the uprising enabled many to transgress these societal boundaries. Hence, the uprising was

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[19] Author's interview with Mazen al-Hebshi, 13 November 2014.
[20] Author's interview with Mazen al-Hebshi, 13 November 2014.
[21] Author's interview with Mazen al-Hebshi, 25 November 2014.
[22] Qat is a leave that is chewed for hours and as a mild narcotic, and represses feelings of hunger and tiredness. Sitting together chewing qat has a high social importance in Yemen, particularly among men.
[23] The chewing of qat is an essential for the men's part of a wedding and makes up most of the afternoon and evening hours of the celebration.

considered as an important step towards more gender equality in the society, although it remains to be seen how much of a lasting impact on society it will have. (Hussein 2013)

For the time being, the political turmoil seems to halt any significant development in this sector. Yet, the above-mentioned opening of some actors in the society serves as a tool of encouragement for others. A well-known female photographer chose to present her work along with her story under the theme 'Breaking through your fears' (Al-Mutawakel 2012). Her conclusion is that it is rewarding to overcome one's fears, but what is interesting is how she constructed the storyline of her talk along events of her life that challenged her to overcome her fears. It is still rather uncommon in Yemen's conservative society to tell private events in public, especially if they are considered breaking social taboos. (*cf*. The Economist 2012) She also discussed her photographic work challenging the notion of the hijab, including the veiling of a man next to an unveiled woman. Interestingly, she explains background details of why she was in doubt as if the audience was non-Yemeni. Yet, although the audience is familiar with the social expectations and preconditions of their society, they are exposed to a new perspective on these common issues.

Despite all odds, TEDx has proved to be a successful experience for many participants in gaining support for their projects and raising their profile in an environment where it is difficult for young people to show their talents and enhance their chances for a good education or job. In addition, the TEDx organisers in Yemen look proudly at three former speakers that were nominated ministers in the new technocratic government that was sworn in November 2014:[24] 'I won't say we succeeded in [showing the world the ideas of Yemenis] fully,' says Hebshi 'but at least we begin and I hope that the spirit and ideas of TEDx continue its way in Yemen besides all the difficulties and obstacles we face.'[25]

7. Conclusion

The uprising in 2011 opened up new spaces for various forms of civil society activism, and as part of that proved being a vital ground for artists. Yet, the demands of the protesters have been largely sidelined in the three years since then, marking a transition period that has been taken over by violent power struggles between various factions of the old elites. Yet, youth activists do not accept that what had been 'their popular revolution' has been simply taken over by the old guard. Instead, they claim back public spaces through forms of art. In doing so, they keep the discourses about political and social change that started in 2011 alive. They refuse to be silenced by those in power but occupy and mediate the space between the households and the power brokers around the weak government to convey their messages. In those self-funded, zero-budget campaigns, the artists-turned-activists strive to show a more diverse picture of Yemen, emphasising the perspectives,

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[24] Nadia al-Sakaf: Minister of Information; Raʿafat al-Akhali: Minister of Youth and Sports. The government resigned in January 2015 as part of the ongoing power struggle between Houthi forces and the government.
[25] Author's interview with Mazen al-Hebshi, 13 November 2014.

aims, hopes and actions of the Yemeni population and civil society actors as opposed to the agenda of political elite actors.

The strength of their activities is that they reach out to address both local and international audiences and create pieces of work that can be largely consumed and understood by people regardless their educational background. However, it remains uncertain how much influence their actions have on a political level, not least since policy makers remain entangled in an increasingly complex network of alliances and power struggles over basic authority in the country. It will be crucial for artists as other civil society actors to use the space left since the ouster of the previous regime to keep voicing the public's demands independently and not being overridden by increasing sectarianism and partisanship.

8. Acknowledgements

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