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Yemen's response to brazen attacks inadequate

A transparent investigation into Defence Ministry attacks can contribute to success of political transition.

By Sevag Kechichian, Amnesty International's Researcher on Yemen

Yemen's capital, Sana'a, is still reeling after the brazen two-pronged attack on the Ministry of Defence, on December 5. Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula has claimed responsibility for the suicide bombings, which left at least 56 dead and more than 167 wounded.

As well as spreading panic across the capital, the assault has sparked a frenzied debate among Yemenis. But amid the swirling rumours and accusations, the Yemeni authorities need to get to the truth – it is vital that they carry out a prompt, thorough and impartial investigation. Those behind the attack must be brought to justice in proceedings that meet international standards of fairness, and without the imposition of the death penalty.

The attack was indiscriminate and showed a complete disregard for the right to life. Among those whose lives were taken were civilian patients, doctors, nurses and other staff in the Ministry of Defence hospital.

The authorities have said the attack was aimed at derailing the political transition that has been under way since November 2011. But now, more than ever, the success of Yemen's transitional process depends on how the authorities investigate and reveal the facts behind this attack and numerous other abuses dating back to before the 2011 uprising.

Within an hour after the attack, Yemeni authorities were declaring that they had successfully ended the threat and had everything under control. Yet the fighting continued for at least two more hours and broke out again that afternoon and night.

Video footage showing Yemeni President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi visiting the compound and meeting with the heads of military and security forces, emerged shortly after the attack as evidence of the army's ability to swiftly and forcefully restore public order. But the official narrative was exposed as mere window-dressing when the fighting resumed just hours later.

The Yemeni authorities' response to this latest attack is symptomatic of their broader approach to tackling human rights violations committed by the military or security forces, and violence perpetrated by armed groups. Before the attack was over, Hadi formed a high-level military commission to investigate and report its findings within 24 hours. The short report that emerged on December 6, added nothing new to the already existing speculations with the exception of the unsubstantiated claim that some of the attackers were Saudi nationals. The Yemeni authorities have persistently failed to act transparently or to carry out serious investigations.

Unabated violence

Violent incidents have haunted almost every corner of Yemen in recent weeks. Fighting has been raging in the north between armed groups who are also participating in the national dialogue. In the south and east, suspected members of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula have assassinated military and security officers and kidnapped foreigners. In the same areas, US drone strikes against alleged al-Qa'ida members have unlawfully killed civilians.

In Sanaa itself, over the past two years, activists, journalists and members of parliament have been harassed, physically assaulted, kidnapped and assassinated. Those accused of carrying out these acts range from government forces to a variety of armed groups. However, in none of these cases have the authorities been able to provide adequate answers about what happened, or bring perpetrators to justice.

Such failures erode public trust in the country's institutions and raise serious questions about whether the country's political elite is genuinely interested in seeking accountability and reparations for past crimes – a key sticking point as the national dialogue draws to a close.

Yemen's political transition has reached a critical phase, with six of the nine working groups in the national dialogue having already submitted their final report. But two core issues have driven opposing political forces into a stalemate. One is the future of the southern part of the country – opinions are sharply divided over the degree of autonomy it should enjoy.

The other is a proposed transitional justice law. The current draft promises to secure some form of reparation for the victims and survivors of past human rights violations. However, the law appears no closer to being enacted than when the first draft saw the light of day at the beginning of this transition period. The political elite have been dragging their feet, at the expense of the rights of the victims.

The text of the proposed law has never offered criminal accountability, but any commitment to exposing the truth about past crimes has been watered down in successive drafts. Some politicians have even gone so far as to want to throw the phrase "transitional justice" out the window altogether – favouring instead "reconciliation", a concept many in the country would say they value highly but want to know what underpins it. Any move that sacrifices justice and accountability risks transforming Yemen's transition into a sham.

The authorities still have a chance to gain the trust of the Yemeni people and deliver a transition that lays the foundation for effective justice and long-term stability, thereby breaking the cycles of bloodshed which have blighted Yemen's recent history. But this requires a genuine commitment to serious investigations – bringing in international expertise and support where required – that expose the truth about both current and past abuses and ensure that perpetrators – whatever their affiliation – are held to account for their actions.

The latest attack in central Sanaa merits a response that demonstrates this commitment transparently, and ensures that human rights are not held hostage to any political process.

This was originally published as an opinion piece on [Al Jazeera](#)'s website. [Read more about Amnesty International's work on Yemen here.](#)