

Zaydi Shi'a - Minority Rights Group

Zaydi Shi'a

About 40 per cent of the Yemeni population is Zaydi, mainly from Dhamar northwards. The Zaydis, known as Fivers, represent one of the branches of Shi'a Islam. Zaydism is distinct from Twelver Shi'ia belief, which is practised in Iran and elsewhere, and is often said to bear more similarities to Sunni than to Shi'a Islam.

The distinctions between Zaydism and Twelver Shi'a belief mean that Zaydis do not fall under the religious patronage of Iran, nor do they have the same cultural and spiritual links as some Shi'a communities elsewhere, in Lebanon for example. While all Shi'a confine the imamate to the lineage of Ali, different sects within Shi'a Islam differ on the genealogy, as to where to trace that lineage and where to terminate it. The Zaydis do so with Zaid bin Zain Al-Abideen.

In Zaydism, the image of the Imam is loaded with religious but also social symbolism. The Zaydi imamate in Yemen ended with the 1962 republican revolution, after almost one thousand years. The end of the imamate was followed by the marginalization of northern areas, such as the Sa'ada governorate, which are predominantly Zaydi. While Zaydis make up the majority of Houthi followers, it is not the case that all Zaydis are Houthis. Zaydism, which was once associated with the imamate, is today associated with the Houthis. This association has also partly exacerbated the sectarian divides that are currently emerging.

Historical context

Zaydism is traced from Zayd b. Ali, a grandson of the Imam Ali, martyred outside Kufa in 740. Zaydism recognizes as imams those of the Prophet's house who strove to assert the authority of the imamate, if necessary through armed struggle.

Apart from a small state on the southern Caspian shore that was expunged by the Safavids, Yemen was the sole region of Zaydi success. A succession of imams established themselves from the late ninth century in the mountainous northern part of Yemen, acting as arbitrators between tribes and thereby acquiring both a religious following and secular ascendancy. The imamate itself was overthrown in 1962, and subsequently died out, although Zaydism still predominates in the mountains.

Zaydi relations with Shafa'i Sunnis long tended to be free of difficulty. From the 1980s there was a rising tide of Sunni reformist propaganda against Zaydism and religious 'laxity'. Reformists condemn Zaydis as '*rafidin*' (religious renegades). It was widely feared that these reformists could prove a growing threat to Zaydis, Isma'ilis and the more tolerant tradition of Shafa'i Sunnism.

In 2004, dissident Zaydi cleric Hussein Badr Eddin al-Houthi launched an uprising against the Yemeni government in the north-western Sa'ada governate, seeking to re-impose Zaydi clerical rule in the north. Government forces killed al-Houthi the

following month, but the rebellion has continued under the leadership of his son.

Fighting in Sa'ada between al-Houthi militants and government forces intensified in late 2006 and early 2007 before Qatar brokered a peace agreement in June 2007. The agreement called for the al-Houthi faction to end the rebellion and the government to assist reconstruction efforts in Sa'ada. However, the peace process quickly collapsed, with each side blaming the other. First in the north and from 2011 spreading elsewhere across the country, support for their armed revolt and political rise have been made possible by tapping into grievances broadly shared with other Yemenis towards the government. By September 2014, the Houthi movement, presenting its aims as political, seized control of the capital Sana'a.

Current issues

At the time of its founding in the early 1990s, the Houthi movement, also known as Ansar Allah, claimed to be resisting both socio-economic and political marginalization by the central government as well as the growing influence of Salafism in their northern heartland. However, the Houthis were accused by President Saleh of attempting to overthrow the government and of seeking to revive the rule of the imamate in Yemen.

While Zaydis make up the majority of Houthi followers, it is not the case that all Zaydis – who comprise around a third of the country's population – are Houthis. Yet Zaydism, which was once associated with the imamate, is today associated with the Houthis. This association has also partly exacerbated simplistic framings of the conflict. Regional geopolitics have intensified this dynamic, particularly the Saudi military intervention in March 2015 in support of the Sunni-dominated government-in-exile against the Houthis, who have received various forms of support from Saudi Arabia's regional rival, Iran.

The declaration from Sana'a of a National Salvation Government by the Houthi-Saleh alliance in November 2016 has shown the extent of the Houthi movement's ascendance as a powerful actor in Yemen's political landscape. But with the Houthis' advance has risen religious extremism and sectarian rhetoric from all sides of the conflict, thereby heightening the prospect of deepening divisions and violence between Sunni and Zaydi Shi'a Muslims as the conflict has worn on.

Updated January 2018.