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The Silent Reform Barrier:

Why Institutional Memory Is the Missing Link in Yemen Public Sector Reform

Mundher Mubarak



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Core Insights Consulting is a policy advisory and strategy firm focused on Yemen. We support governments, international organizations, and civil society with evidence-based analysis and context-driven solutions—strengthening institutions and translating complexity into clear priorities and actionable reform roadmaps.

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When discussions turn to reforming Yemen public sector, the conversation almost always stops at the war — its destruction, its fragmentation, and its prolonged toll on institutions. Conflict has undoubtedly reshaped governance in Yemen. But focusing solely on war risks overlooking a quieter, deeper constraint that continues to undermine reform: **the erosion of institutional memory.**

This loss is neither dramatic nor immediately visible. Yet it is one of the most consequential — and most overlooked — obstacles to meaningful, sustainable reform in Yemen today.

Institutions Built for a Different Era

Following unification in 1990, Yemen embarked on an ambitious process of state-building. A new system of ministries, authorities, and public bodies emerged — largely centralized in Sanaa, and deeply shaped by the political bargains of that period. Institutional mandates, legal frameworks, and organizational structures were not designed in a vacuum. They encoded negotiated compromises among policymakers, senior officials, and powerful stakeholders. They reflected the administrative realities, economic conditions, and power dynamics of the early 1990s.

Critical to this system was institutional memory — formal and informal alike. It lived in people, procedures, internal norms, and a shared understanding of why institutions existed and how they were meant to function.

A Changed Context, Frozen Frameworks

More than three decades later, the political, economic, and governance landscape of Yemen has fundamentally transformed. Yet much of the legal and regulatory framework governing public institutions still traces back to the 1990s — largely untouched, unrevised, and poorly calibrated to current realities.

More critically, the institutional memory underpinning these frameworks has eroded. Senior civil servants retired, relocated, or exited public service. Records were lost or scattered. The informal knowledge — why an institution was created, what problem it was designed to solve, which features were core versus which were political accommodations — has largely disappeared.

As a result, reformers today often struggle to answer even basic diagnostic questions:

Why does this institution exist in its current form? What was the original policy problem it was designed to address? Which functions were foundational — and which were simply political compromises?

Without these answers, reform becomes guesswork — well-intentioned but directionless.

Post-2015: Structures Copied, Context Lost

After 2015, many public institutions were reconstituted in Aden and other areas under the Internationally Recognized Government. This process unfolded under severe political and security pressure. Institutions inherited outdated legal frameworks — but not the institutional memory needed to interpret or adapt them.

Organizational charts were replicated. Mandates were reissued. But the political logic and historical rationale behind these structures rarely accompanied the transfer. New leadership was expected to make the system work without understanding why the system was designed as it was in the first place.

In practice: *structures were copied, but context was lost.* This disconnect continues to shape reform outcomes today.

What Institutional Memory Actually Does

Institutional memory is often mischaracterized as nostalgia or a barrier to change. In reality, it functions as a strategic compass. It allows reformers to distinguish between what is genuinely outdated and what remains structurally relevant. It clarifies which elements are foundational versus which were temporary accommodations. And it enables policymakers to learn from past failures without being paralyzed by them.

Without it, reform efforts are more prone to repeat historical mistakes, misdiagnose structural problems, and expend resources redesigning institutions rather than correcting the underlying incentives and accountabilities that actually drive behavior.

Most critically, reform becomes untethered from political reality — technically coherent on paper, but institutionally and politically unworkable in practice.

Reform Is Not Reinvention

Effective public sector reform is not simply a matter of rewriting laws, updating regulations, or importing international best practices. In the context of Yemen, reform must fundamentally be about re-aligning institutions with present realities: a fragmented governance landscape, stronger and more assertive local authorities, new economic dynamics, and emerging non-state actors who increasingly fill governance gaps.

Achieving that alignment requires understanding how existing institutions came into being — and precisely why they no longer fit the current context. Without that

understanding, reform risks becoming reinvention without direction: ambitious on paper, but unanchored in history and unlikely to endure.

Rebuilding Memory as a Reform Priority

For Yemen, rebuilding institutional memory should be treated as a core reform objective — not a peripheral or preparatory exercise. In practical terms, this means:

- Documenting institutional histories and the rationale behind key design decisions
- Systematically engaging former civil servants and senior officials as primary knowledge sources
- Embedding political economy analysis into reform design from the outset
- Treating institutional context with the same analytical rigor applied to technical capacity

Reform is not only about identifying what needs to change. It is equally about understanding what should be preserved, what should be adapted, and what should be consciously dismantled — and why.

From Institutional Survival to Institutional Transformation

The reform challenge in Yemen is not solely a product of war, fragmentation, or limited capacity. It is also the result of a broken link between institutions and their histories.

Institutional memory does not constrain reform — it enables it. Without it, reform efforts risk treating symptoms rather than causes, generating activity rather than impact.

If Yemen is to move from institutional survival to institutional transformation, rediscovering and rebuilding institutional memory must be recognized as a foundational step — not an afterthought.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 01 Institutional memory is a strategic asset, not nostalgia.** It tells reformers which elements of an institution are foundational and which are outdated — preventing costly misdiagnosis.
- 02 The 2015 reconstitution copied structures but lost context.** Replicating organizational charts without transferring institutional knowledge has left reform efforts disconnected from political reality.
- 03 Legal frameworks are frozen in a different era.** Much of the regulatory architecture governing public institutions still dates to the 1990s, yet the memory of why those frameworks were designed has largely disappeared.

04 Reform without historical grounding risks reinvention without direction.

Importing best practices or rewriting laws in isolation will not produce durable change.

05 Rebuilding institutional memory must be a core reform objective. This means documenting histories, engaging former officials, and embedding political economy analysis — not as preparation for reform, but as reform itself.

About the Author:

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