Arabia without Sultans

David McKnight

This article was originally intended as a review of that excellent book by Fred Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans*. However, I realise that there is not much point in commenting on a book about a situation of which many Australians are ignorant. Hence, my "book review" has, as its main task, an account of some very important developments in the south of Arabia (defined as the peninsula including Saudi Arabia, North and South Yemen, Oman and the Trucial or Gulf States).

This little-known area of the Arab world has come into increasing importance with veiled threats of Kissinger and others to secure oil-producing areas by military intervention. Halliday's book is invaluable in learning about the very crucial situation in South Yemen, a near socialist country, and about the guerrilla war in Dhofar, province of Oman. Certainly, the Shah of Iran with all his mini-imperialist ambitions, has agreed with us: in 1973 he sent 12,000 troops into Oman to stem the war there.

The area has also been crucial in resolving - favorably - the dialectic between purely Arab nationalist practice ("nasserism") and revolutionary socialist practice.

Accordingly, I will concentrate on three areas: North Yemen (the Yemen Arab Republic, to give it its correct name), South Yemen (since 1967, the People's Republic of South Yemen), and Dhofar, in Oman.

NORTH YEMEN

In 1962, a coup led by Abdullah as-Sallal and army officers took place in Sanaa, North Yemen. These officers were influenced by the anti-imperialist, "progressive" demagogy of nasserism. They overthrew the barbaric, feudal regime of the Imam and proclaimed the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). The impetus for this action came from the staggering underdevelopment of the country (illiteracy, disease, hunger) which was actually cultivated by the Imam and the religious and tribal leaders he represented.

Although this coup aroused popular, spontaneous feeling from the people, it was not carried through by implementing thorough-going social reform. Rather, the intervention of the United Arab Republic (UAR) armies, basically Egyptian, were relied on to defeat the Imam who had set about rallying tribal armies and traditional supporters. This civil war lasted six years, during which time the bureaucratic dead hand of the Egyptians stopped any development of the revolution. Parallel to this, the nationalist leadership found useful allies in the merchants and incipient bourgeoisie of Yemen.

The Sallal nationalist leadership remained undifferentiated until the withdrawal of Egyptian forces from Yemen after the June '67 Middle East defeat.

In 1967, in some ways because of the withdrawal of Egyptian support, a left began to emerge and challenge the petit-bourgeois nationalism of Sallal. The main city of Sanaa was besieged by royalists and tribesmen - and for the first time, in an organised, although desperate way, people's militias were formed. The royalists were repulsed and the people's militias spread to other towns - a highly important lesson in possibilities once armed power is placed in the hands of the masses. This lesson neatly dovetailed the left's encouragement of Lejan Fellahia, peasant leagues, which challenged the old tribal structure and divisions.

This development was, however, quickly nipped in the bud when the traditional Yemeni
nationalist leadership (Sallal) turned on the left when it demanded that some newly arrived Soviet arms be handed over to the people's militias.

Centrally involved with the left was the MAN, the Arab Nationalist Movement, (this was its formal title, not a description) a pan-Arab organisation which, through experiences like those in Yemen, broke with nasserism and has since adhered to marxism-leninism.

Halliday correctly sees how the dynamic of the revolution either expresses its full social (i.e. class) content, or stagnates at the nationalist level (development of the indigenous bourgeoisie, anti-imperialism, which finally reduces to demagogy):

"The defeat of the left in 1968, particularly the militia and junior officers, repeated a pattern often seen in other revolutions: in the first phases of the struggle the masses are armed and defend themselves waging their own battles. But a new state, once consolidated, seeks to disarm the people, take initiative from them and incorporate guerrillas and irregulars into the new army. This was the core of Bonapartism in its original form in France; it was equally clearly so in Egypt, where the army was the key to the regime's parasitic operation (jobs, privileges) and mystification of the people and where nothing angered the regime more than the call for a popular militia." (p. 125).

After this defeat, the royalist tribes gradually swung back to the nationalists. However, by that time the politics of the YAR were firmly pro-Saudi Arabia which at present covers the YAR's balance of payments deficit.

**SOUTH YEMEN**

As a schoolchild I remember the word "Yemen" splashed across the front pages of the newspapers. I wondered where it was - it seemed a rather obscure sort of place.

I found Halliday's description of the struggle in South Yemen one of the most inspiring that I have read, combining the most diverse forms of struggle, clandestine trade union work, armed struggle, work among peasants and, most interesting of all in an Arab country, work amongst women.

A combination of nationalism and class consciousness developed in Aden, capital of South Yemen during the period of British rule. Trade union federations and papers such as The Worker were established - and banned by the British. Spurred on by the formation of the YAR, a national liberation front was formed in South Yemen in 1963. Crucial in its formation again was the Arab Nationalist Movement (MAN), as well as tribal groups and Yemeni ex-officers from the Saudi army. Armed struggle was combined strategically within the hinterland beyond Aden - until that time, political work was non-violent, within the unions in urban areas.
The NLF's guerrilla war from the Radfan mountains followed the classic form of harassing the enemy, over-extending his army and building a support-network amongst the peasants. The British reaction (with a Labor government) was forced "clearing" of areas, torture, arbitrary jailings, and encouragement of the most backward tribal divisions. The British finally decided to wind up operations in Aden and South Yemen in 1966.

After four years of guerrilla war, a number of important things had happened: the urban Arab "bourgeoisie" was discredited and could not form a credible pro-British "neo-colonial" leadership; NLF cadres had begun to be "infected" with marxist and socialist ideas and a growing disenchantment with nasserist solutions. Halliday fills out my brief sketch of the turmoil, disenchantment and ideological differences from which was thrown up the most revolutionary leadership seen in the Arab world.

The response of Egypt as independence from the British neared was to help create and throw its support behind a bourgeois outfit, FLOSY, which, it insisted, the NLF had to join. The marxist ideas of the NLF, cause of this forced fusion; made the alliance with FLOSY a reluctant and stormy one. In 1967, two important events in recent times in the Middle East occurred: the massive defeat of Egypt at the hands of Israel ... and the occupation of the town of Crater in South Yemen. This occupation was the spark for many other NLF seizures throughout South Yemen. The country was rising in revolt.

The British hastily and unceremoniously "handed over" South Yemen on November 29, 1967. The People's Republic of South Yemen was proclaimed the same day.

Halliday makes a very fruitful comparison with Cuba:

"In both countries the guerrilla movement was begun by a non-communist grouping, which only later declared an adherence to marxism. In both, the struggle was brief enough to leave predominantly intact the social and ideological system created by colonialism; in both too, the economy was badly hit by the break with the world capitalist market; as a consequence tens of thousands of class enemies fled to vengeful exile in Taiz and Miami. Both had to some extent slipped through the net of world counter-revolution." (p. 221).

A GENUINE ARAB SOCIALIST COUNTRY

After the formation of a new government, the NLF decreed that "the socialist revolution will now begin". For doctrinaire and determinist "marxist" analysis, things were topsy-turvy: a relatively small revolutionary force had taken over state power from the British and were proceeding to remake the economic base of the society, and conduct a cultural revolution while at the same time changing the nature of the bourgeois state itself.

As can be seen with other examples of what has been called "the permanent revolution" - where the struggle for national independence and democracy flows irresistibly over into social revolution - there was a danger that the state and its personnel, now in the hands of a mixture of nationalists and socialists, would become rapidly bureaucratised, distorting and constricting the social revolution which had been unleashed.

And indeed, this very question was one cause of factionalism within the NLF itself: the left took as its text Lenin's The State and Revolution, according to Halliday. It took a number of years, during which temporary stabilisations took place, for the left to triumph: the dynamic of the struggle was encouraged by the NLF, in or out of actual state positions.

For a period, the state was under the control of a section of the army and the centre-right of the NLF: an "Algeria" looked very much on the cards. The reason for this development was the disregard by President Qahtan ash-Sha'abi of the left's programmatic victory at the Fourth Congress.

Dominating the whole of this struggle was the fact that the PRSY was impoverished and isolated even within the Arab world and that rapid increases in staple products and export commodities were needed to be able physically to ensure the development of the revolution.

The left that finally took power in the "corrective move" of 1969 had, as one of its main spokespeople, Abdul Fatah Ismail, whose speech at the vital Fourth Congress, is described by Halliday:

"The petty-bourgeoisie" (Abdul Fatah argued) "was unable in this epoch of world history to fight imperialism and carry through necessary social and economic development against the opposition of imperialism; namely, a free economy, agrarian development,
industrialisation. He ranged over the historic failures of the petty-bourgeoisie in the European revolutions of 1848 and 1870 ...." (p. 232).

The critique of Abdul Fatah was not abstract - he singled out, on the above basis, Sukarno's Indonesia, and Egypt, Algeria, Syria and Iraq. He went on to call for the flooding of the country with revolutionary literature, the creation of a huge popular militia and for power in the hands of workers', poor peasants' and partisans' councils.

"This was a speech of a kind rarely heard in the Arab world", comments Halliday: certainly no Arab communist party has grasped and stated clearly many of the revolutionary goals outlined by Abdul Fatah. In fact, the modus operandi of many CPs in the Third World is to make an alliance with the petit-bourgeoisie (as represented by army officers for example), or the party of the indigenous bourgeoisie (e.g. the Congress Party in India).

THE LEFT IN POWER

A series of moves and counter moves followed the Fourth Congress, with the left triumphing in the "corrective move" already mentioned. In the following period, the country's name was changed to the People's Democratic Republic of South Yemen, and a very good model of a People's Parliament was outlined. The bulk of the seats in this body were to be held by elected delegates from local councils, with a fixed minority group from the trade unions. A special quota of delegates' positions were reserved for women.

But in the first Council (and Halliday makes no mention of any successive Councils) the local delegates' positions were nominated by the NLF. Why was this? Halliday's account is unclear.

WOMEN OF ARABIA

The depth of the revolution may perhaps be judged by the extent to which women's oppression is shaken and uprooted. In the PDRSY, Halliday notes: "Women were for the first time trained to form part of the militia, and in 1971-72 mass women's demonstrations took place in the rural areas in opposition to the wearing of the veil, for long a symbol of traditionalist Islamic oppression of women. The Women's Union was given power to adjudicate divorce proceedings. The call for the freeing of women from traditional social structures during the liberation struggle had been bitterly denounced by the chief religious leader of Aden ....." (p. 241).

This concentration on the women question is shown also in the struggle in neighbouring Dhofar, part of Oman, a British colony. The atmosphere of an NLF congress was described by Eric Rouleau in Le Monde (May 27, 1972):

"Aden had been filled for days with demonstrating workers and peasants; crowds of militants chanting "Long Live Marxism-Leninism" greeted the delegates. The average age of the delegates was between twenty and thirty - most of them from poor backgrounds - and many were hardly able to read or write; but despite these difficulties involved, the sessions were long, serious and highly politicised."

OMAN

Dhofar is a tropical enclave on the southern coasts of Arabia within the nominally independent state of Oman. It is within this area that the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman operates. It is against British imperialism and its puppet regime of Sultan Qabus that the struggle is being primarily conducted. Dhofar has no structure of landlordism or any native bourgeoisie. Although Dhofar has some cultural specificity that could form the basis of a separatist movement, the leadership has consciously subsumed this within a general struggle for the liberation of the whole of Oman.

The guerrilla revolt began on the classical pattern: small quantities of arms were used to capture more arms; support was built up from among the people; and, just as classically, the British responded: indiscriminate repression and bombing of civilians.

Halliday's personal experiences with the PFLO are exciting and encouraging. Through them he learns that, although the military war began in '65, it wasn't until the Second Congress in 1968 when a new leadership and ideology were adopted, that it was decided to launch a political and social revolution within the liberated areas.

Pieces of observation such as the following lend an insight into the level of the PFLO cadres:

Through the transistor radio the people were in touch with world events; while we were there Bertrand Russell died and this led to several discussions about his life.
and work, his pacifism, and later, anti-imperialism." (p. 330).

In December 1973, the situation took an unexpected turn: the Shah of Iran sent in thousands of Iranian troops which have since been increased. Two things were achieved by this manoeuvre: Arab nationalist feelings were not exacerbated, as they would have been by British ground troops, and the Shah could begin to try in practice the role of a sub-imperialist "policeman" in the Gulf.

A whole chapter is devoted to the ideology of the PFLO: its nationalist beginnings and its development towards a clear socialist anti-imperialism. Of particular interest is their analysis of the role of the indigenous bourgeoisie in the revolution. It is of interest because of the many notions within Third World revolutionary organisations, in particular the communist movement, that it is possible to separate quite distinctly the "national democratic revolution" from the socialist revolution. It is argued that at least part of the bourgeoisie and bourgeois parties can legitimately be anti-imperialist. Clearly, in many countries where independence has been achieved the situation has gone beyond that and what was once a nationalist and progressive leadership has degenerated into a military/bureaucratic/bourgeois dictatorship.

Be that as it may, the following excerpt from "What do we understand by scientific socialism?", a PFLO statement, reveals that, independent of any western revolutionary influence, the PFLO has arrived at the theory of permanent revolution, first outlined by Trotsky in 1906 and a lasting contribution to modern revolutionary theory:

"The bourgeoisie have carried through the national, democratic revolution in the advanced capitalist countries; but in the colonial world they have not and cannot, and this necessitates 'permanent or uninterrupted revolution'. The colonial world will not go through a bourgeois stage and the tasks of the bourgeois revolution will be carried out by the working class." (p. 368).

Once again, in this area, we see the emancipation of women taken up as a real issue within the revolutionary movement. The specific oppression of women is taken up in the following manner:

"If we name a human being in whom, in all class societies, all forms of oppression and exploitation are centred, that being is woman".

She suffers "from her position inside marriage and in the family she was in before that. Moreover, she suffers from the oppression of society in general, since society imposes on her traditions and old customs which paralyse her activity ...." (p. 377).

It is indeed ironic, as the PFLO go on to point out, that the reason women participate more in the revolution in Dhofar is that "they are somewhat less persecuted than women in the Gulf. In Dhofar, women have preserved some of the autonomy that disappears with development of the division of labor and property relations: women within marriages possess cattle and are often the owners of the family's means of livelihood; women can divorce easily and remarry, without being stigmatised ...." Ironic, because Dhofar is so undifferentiated by class, in fact so underdeveloped that the long historical process of the subjugation of women has only just begun. Included in this section of the book are interviews with female comrades of the PFLO.

Within the liberated areas a slow process of settling the previously nomadic tribes is going on. Agriculture has been collectivised and such institutions as a roaming judiciary have been established to sort out tribal conflicts which have traditionally led to corrosive feuding. It is significant that one of the international delegations to visit the Dhofaris was the NLF of South Vietnam; a statement of mutual support was issued by both Fronts. ...  

Naturally, one of the topics within the book is the role of oil in both Iran and Arabia and the plans of imperialism to stabilise and secure these and other oil-producing areas. A smallish chapter on Iran is tucked in amongst a series of analytical articles on the future of the Gulf area.

It is in the context of such analysis that one realises the importance of the beginnings of the revolution with the PFLO and the PDRY at its head.

Halliday has done an excellent job in managing to get such information available for general consumption. His selection and analysis of the really revolutionary dynamics of the struggle in the Gulf can only be praised.