Reflecting on what socialism had in his opinion achieved ten years after the South Yemeni revolution against British colonialism, Faysal al-'Attas famously quipped: “We’ve made the Mahris speak Arabic, made the Hadramis think they’re Yemeni, and made the people ask for a lower salary”. But as controversial and short-lived as these achievements were, what proved more contentious was al-'Attas’s own political career. In essence, his life reflects the tumultuous historical period during which he lived, and the frustrations of a generation that sought the answer to the underdevelopment of its homeland in an alternative socio-political organisation.

Sayyid Faysal bin ‘Ali bin Muhammad al-'Attas was born in 1938 in the village of Nu‘ayr in Wadi ‘Amd, Hadramaut, to which he owes the nickname al-Nu‘ayri. The region formed part of the Qu’aiti Sultanate of Shihr and Mukalla in the British Eastern Aden Protectorate. A scion of the distinguished al-'Attas family of the Ba ‘Alawi sayyids, he was born into a family and social group which has provided Hadramaut and the Hadrami diaspora in Southeast Asia with a number of important political, religious and scholarly figures. Traditionally, the sayyid families of Hadramaut stand at the top of an elaborate, but well-defined, social structure, which has endowed them with spiritual, and at times temporal leadership over

1 Information for this article was collected during fieldwork in Hadramaut in April 2010. The author would like to thank the Bin Dohry family of Mukalla, especially Muhammad Mubarak Bin Dohry and Khaled Salim Bin Dohry, and the poet Najeeb Sa‘id Ba Wazir and his family in Ghayl Ba Wazir for their kind hospitality, and indefatigable support during what were difficult conditions for research.


3 Although, obituaries in Arabic place his year of birth in 1934, 1938 is reported in the Who’s Who in the Arab World (Beirut: Publitec, 2006); this is more consistent with the actual dates of his schooling and graduation.

4 Notable examples are the Mansabs of the towns of Huraydha and Mashad; the last Qu’aiti wazir Ahmad bin Muhammad al-'Attas; the former president of South Yemen and first prime minister after unification Haydar bin Abu Bakr al-'Attas; the Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas; et al. More on the al-'Attas family in: Kazuhiro Arai, Arabs who Traversed the Indian Ocean: The History of the al-'Attas Family in Hadramawt and Southeast Asia, c. 1600 - c. 1960 (Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of Michigan, 2004).
Clockwise from top left: Faysal al-‘Attas; The Madrassah al-Wusta in Ghayl Ba Wazir (photo Thanos Petouris); Modern replica of the Western Gate (photo Thanos Petouris); Mukalla: a wali’s tomb (photo Thanos Petouris)
local communities because of their claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad. Although their social standing did not necessarily translate into material wealth, the exclusive character of the group, and the prohibition of their womenfolk from marrying outside their ranks was a constant source of resentment in Hadramaut and the diasporic communities during al-ʻAttas’s childhood. This resentment, exemplified by the Irshadi-ʻAlawi rivalry, spilled over to the homeland from the communities in the Dutch East Indies, and was fuelled by the increasing contacts of Hadramis with the egalitarian tenets of Communism and Maoism in Zanzibar and Southeast Asia.

In this evolving socio-political environment, al-ʻAttas received his elementary schooling at the Madrasah al-Wusta (Intermediate School) in the town of Ghayl Ba Wazir. By the time of his graduation in 1955, the school had become a hotbed of anti-British, and anti-establishment activity, and a recruiting ground for the Movement of Arab Nationalists (MAN) among members of the student group al-Zaytuna (The Olive Branch), with the tacit support of the teaching staff. Among them were also other sayyids, including Abdullah Ba Faqih, and the Sudanese Ahmad Niqdala, who was eventually deported by the British because of his communist leanings. Thereafter, al-ʻAttas continued his secondary education at Aden College, where he spent four years without, however, sitting the O’ Level GCE Exams. Instead, by the end of the 1950s he was in Cairo and a member of the Yemeni nationalist contingent of the MAN, set up by the Palestinian George Habash.

Throughout this period, he developed his political ideas, positioning himself on the radical left after experiencing Maoism during visits to

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8 Interview with Hadrami historian, and graduate of the Madrasah, Abd al-Rahman al-Milahi in Shihir, 13.04.2010.
9 Interview with former PDRY president, and graduate of the Madrasah, Haydar bin Abu Bakr al-ʻAttas in London, 28.02.2011.
10 E-mail communication with former schoolmate at Aden College, Ashraf Girgirah, 02.07.2014.
Hadrami communities in Zanzibar, and via contacts with Third World Communist parties. Opting to drop the honorific ‘sayyid’ from his name, he took up the nom de guerre ‘Abu Khalid’. By the 1960s al-'Attas had worked as a bank clerk, and subsequently became a teacher at the Western Intermediate School in Mukalla, the capital of the Qu‘aiti State. Together with Abbas al-'Aydarus, another prominent Maoist sayyid and teacher, he was able to infiltrate the Hadrami trade unions, and promote Maoist ideology among the students. Soon, red flags and Maoist placards became increasingly visible during demonstrations in Hadramaut. In Mukalla, he was also secretary of the short-lived Arab Socialist Party (1965-66), whose membership eventually split because of disagreements over the use of armed struggle. He joined the radical wing of the party following Ali Salim al-Bidh into the People’s Democratic Front (PDF), but its moderate contingent formed the Ba‘athist Union of Popular Forces. About the same time, the PDF declared its support for the National Liberation Front (NLF), thus joining the nationalist struggle.

At the NLF’s Second Congress in Jibla (June 1966) he was elected to the fifteen-member General Command, and the five-member Executive Committee, which was tasked with working with local organisations. He originated from the so-called Secondary (or Internal) Leadership (al-Qiyada al-Thaniyyah): a group of young, educated cadres that had risen through the rank and file, and joined the organisation by way of its numerous constituent movements. They were disillusioned with the ideological emptiness of Nasserism, and its inability to provide a realistic framework for the expansion of the anti-colonial struggle throughout South Arabia. A shift within the MAN leadership towards Marxism reflected similar disillusion. At the Third Congress in Khamr (November 1966), the Secondary Leadership was successful in defining the nature of the nationalist movement by effectively blocking the attempted merger between the NLF and the Egyptian-backed FLOSY (Front for the Liberation of South Yemen), and reaffirming its radical, and popular character. This shift towards Marxism, and guerrilla warfare, modelled on

Chinese and Vietnamese paradigms, facilitated the NLF’s ability to win control of the British Protectorates over the summer of 1967.

On 31 August of that year the British abandoned their Residency in Mukalla in the “heat of the post-lunch rest-period, without any notice”, in response to which the Qu’aiti, Kathiri, and Mahra sultans hastened back to their states from Geneva, via Jeddah. The resultant power vacuum allowed al-‘Attas, at the helm of sixty NLF men, to initially take control of the town of Qatn in the Wadi, and eventually of Mukalla on 16 September. This was expedited by early negotiations between the Hadrami Bedouin Legion (HBL) commanders and Abbas al-‘Aydarus. Subsequently, on 2 October with a group of twenty militants he seized the initiative in raising the revolutionary flag above the Kathiri government secretariat in Say’un. This unilateral action, in contravention of NLF arrangements, upset his comrades, but gave an early indication of the manner in which al-‘Attas was going to use political power.

Heading the Supreme People’s Council that was set up after liberation in Hadramaut, his position was such that he was able to realise his radical programme of social and economic reform even before the whole of the South became independent. One of his first moves was to nationalise the few local economic institutions such as cinemas, the power and fuel supply companies, and trading houses, and confiscate the property of the former sultans and their ministers. This Hadrami exceptionalism, which went as far as attempting the redistribution of land, continued well into the first two years of the nascent People’s Republic of South Yemen (PRSY) insofar as al-‘Attas, who controlled both the party and government apparatus in what became the Fifth Governorate, openly defied central authority. He purged the local civil administration, marginalised moderate NLF leaders,

19 cf. al-Sarraf, op. cit., p. 214.
and deported from Mukalla the officially appointed governor, Salim Ali al-Kindi.21

Overall, events in Hadramaut reflected the power struggle within the NLF between the radical left wing, and its more moderate leadership. They were also indicative of the challenges faced by a new and inexperienced government in running a hastily set up unitary state. Situated at its eastern corner, Hadramaut had enjoyed a comparatively independent socio-economic development under British rule, which reinforced existing state structures and institutions. Local conditions maintained and strengthened a sense of identity and separation from the rest of the South Arabian Protectorates. Coupled with the ideological differences between revolutionaries in Aden and Mukalla, incorporating the region into the new state was to prove challenging. Moreover, its relative geographical proximity to Dhofar at the height of the local revolution meant that Hadramaut came to the forefront of the revolutionary process in the peninsula. Nayef Hawatimah of the MAN extolled its early accomplishments, and the socialist credentials of its population.22 It was at this time that the Chinese-built Aden to Mukalla road was conceived as ‘a strategic path to revolution’23 to help support the Dhofari rebels, though it was completed in the late 1970s, after the uprising was defeated.

After the Fourth NLF Congress in Zinjibar (March 1968), at which al-‘Attas supported the radical left under Abd al-Fattah Isma‘il, he began unilaterally implementing his Maoist revolutionary programme by setting up Popular Councils in Hadrami towns, and Popular Guard units. At the same time, his visits to China prompted fears of a leftist coup.24 The region gradually became a refuge for the NLF radicals, a few of whom hailed from there. The local NLF newspaper al-Shararah (The Spark) set out what was to come in its first editorial, explaining that to make a revolution means among others ‘to transform the existing social relations and establish

revolutionary ones’. 25 With Chinese political support al-‘Attas set up the short lived People’s Democratic Republic of Hadramaut, which lasted for two months (May-June 1968) before being quashed by Qahtan al-Sha‘bi’s government, sending him fleeing back to his village, where he was arrested alongside the dismissed Minister of Defence al-Bidh. 26 Although this “Chinese adventure born of Cultural Revolution politics, and a phenomenon never duplicated elsewhere in the Middle East”27 did not affect relations with China, al-‘Attas was unsurprisingly not a member of the first South Yemeni delegation to the People’s Republic.28

Competition between the moderate and radical wings of the NLF continued to plague the party throughout the history of the PDRY, but first came to a head in 1969, when the left took over both party and country through the Glorious Corrective Move of 22 June. As his comrades came to power, al-‘Attas was released from prison, returned to the General Command, and was appointed governor of the Fourth Governorate (Shabwà) for 1969-70. He then became governor of the Fifth Governorate (Hadramaut) until 1973, after which time physical attacks on sayyids and religious men started to subside.29 He maintained close ties with the communist party of China, occasionally leading delegations of Yemeni peasants to the country.30 To this day, the legacy of his own ‘cultural revolution’ is remembered in Mukalla for the unannounced demolition of the Western Gate of the city, known as al-Siddah, and his attempts to level the cemeteries both there, and in the al-‘Attas seat of Huraydha. More importantly, for a region with deeply rooted religious traditions, under his leadership the ziyarat to the tombs of local walis were banned, a few mosques and tombs were destroyed, and members of sayyid families persecuted in the name of scientific socialism, and fighting Islamic influences.31

27 Harris, op. cit., p. 116.
31 According to Knysh the pilgrimages lost their spiritual essence and were gradually transformed into secular folk festivals used by the regime for the propagation of socialist ideas; Alexander Knysh, “The Cult of Saints in Hadramawt: An Overview”, New Arabian Studies I (1993), pp. 147.
Although the Move brought to power the radical left under the premiership of Salim Rubai’a ‘Ali, known as Salmín, al-‘Attas was viewed with suspicion in Aden because of his prominence and influence in Hadramaut due to his social origins, his role during and after the anti-colonial struggle, as well as his cavalier attitude towards central authority. In the words of one of his former comrades, he was lucky to have escaped with his life during the Salmín years. Instead, he was kept ‘under control’ by joining the government as deputy minister of Housing and Public Works, a portfolio then held by his kinsman Haydar Abu Bakr al-‘Attas. As inter-regime rivalries intensified during the last decade of the PDRY, he spent this period in relative political obscurity, never to regain his earlier influential role.

With the unification of Yemen in 1990, Faysal al-‘Attas joined President Saleh’s General People’s Congress (GPC) as a member of its Standing Committee. Like many former southern politicians, he was also appointed adviser to the Yemeni president. This seemingly opportunistic and uncharacteristic shift in political allegiances has been rather typical of former southern leaders, and a testament to the ideological bankruptcy of the later years of the PDRY, and the disappointments generated by its failures. Co-optation by the Saleh regime, and membership of the GPC was a way of remaining politically relevant and gainfully employed in united Yemen. At the same time, al-‘Attas remained a staunch defender of the achievements of the South Yemeni revolution and his role in it.32

Today, al-‘Attas’s legacy in Hadramaut remains contentious. He is widely remembered for the high-handed, arbitrary, and callous treatment of others, even his own NLF colleagues.33 During his time in office, the region witnessed an unprecedented wave of authoritarianism and violence particularly against the old social institutions and religious elites.34 As a young revolutionary, al-‘Attas tried to push his nationalist agenda of bringing Hadramaut into the twentieth century.35 However, this programme of

34 Engseng Ho recounts in his Graves of Tarim (op. cit., pp. 311) an incident whereby, during a visit by the then PDRY president Salmín to the town of Say‘un the presidential motorcade was dragging along tied in ropes the bodies of local sayyids, a sight which left many ill for days.
35 Characteristic of the spirit of the time are the decrees on the ‘Regulation of Social Customs and Traditions in the Fifth Governorate’ issued by the People’s Committees, a collection of which can be found in: Mikhail Rodionov & Hanne Schönig, The Hadramaut Documents, 1904-51: Family Life and Social Customs under the Last Sultans (Beiruter Texte und Studien No 130) (Beirut: Ergon Verlag, 2011), pp. 245.
forced and rapid modernisation not only left local society in a state of suspense, but it also precipitated the return of old traditions once the socialist regime disintegrated. Al-‘Attas’s own trajectory bears witness to this. Towards the end of his life he reasserted his Islamic credentials, and readopted the title of ‘sayyid’, even wearing the characteristic white amamah, a symbol of his descent from the Prophet Muhammad. And he did so with the same heartfelt fervour that he had embraced Maoism during his youth.

The paradox of a Hadrami sayyid championing Maoism, however unconventional, is not unique, as quite a few young sayyids of al-‘Attas’s time participated in the anti-colonial struggle albeit in different political movements. What set those young sayyids apart from the rest of Hadrami society, was their unusually high levels of education.\(^\text{36}\) In forging a popular movement, the NLF succeeded in attracting the support of the majority of hitherto un-mobilised social groups, such as the educated youth, which had an interest in overturning the existing traditional social order.\(^\text{37}\) As happened with al-‘Attas, membership of the sayyid class was not in itself enough to fulfil the aspirations of a literate generation which saw in the ‘Anglo-Sultanic’ establishment the source of its privations. Still, it found in Maoism the ideological language and practice that promised to uproot the very traditions and social norms which obstructed the application of its modernising plan. The resurgence of South Yemeni identity experienced in the country today is the manifestation of a similar set of grievances and frustrations, but lacking a comparable political leadership with a vision for their resolution. It has also led to uncritical considerations of both the colonial and socialist pasts. Already, al-‘Attas appears to have found a posthumous place in the pantheon of southern heroes among the modern secessionists.

Faysal al-‘Attas died in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on 28 March 2014 in his late 70s, and is survived by three sons: Akram, a Colonel in the Yemeni Army, Anwar, and Muhammad.

\(^{36}\) This is particularly exemplified in the case of the al-‘Attas family, where according to Abdullah Bujra male literacy was as high as 80%, compared to 45.5% in other sayyid families. cf. Abdullah S. Bujra, *The Politics of Stratification: A Study of Political Change in a South Arabian Town* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 30.