

Qualitative Case Study of Governmental Communication and Media Strategy in Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) employs governmental communication and media strategy to exercise authority in a conflict-affected, non-electoral governance context. Through a systematic qualitative analysis of official statements, media interviews, and diplomatic engagements conducted between April 2022 and December 2025, the study shows that the PLC relies fundamentally on communication as a performative mechanism of authority construction. In the absence of electoral mandates, the council continuously invokes procedural, performance-based, and normative legitimacy claims to justify its authority. However, this communicative authority remains inherently fragile. It is undermined by structural fragmentation that produces contradictory messaging and uneven circulation across a highly fragmented media landscape comprising more than 200 faction-aligned outlets, as well as predominantly crisis-driven, reactive communication patterns. The findings demonstrate that coordination failures stem not from technical or strategic deficiencies, but from the political structure itself. When authority is dispersed among multiple power centers backed by competing external patrons, unified communication becomes structurally impossible as a sustained and routinized practice. Under these conditions, crisis communication normalizes as the primary mode of governance, constraining the capacity of non-electoral authorities to project coherent legitimacy or articulate long-term governance visions.

Keywords : Governmental; Non-Electoral Governance; Conflict Governance; Legitimacy Construction; Yemen Presidential Leadership Council

INTRODUCTION

Governmental communication, defined in this study as the planned use of official statements, media engagement, and public messaging by governing authorities to coordinate action, project authority, and maintain legitimacy, serves a fundamentally different function in conflict-affected settings than in stable democracies. In democratic contexts, communication operates through established institutional channels supported by electoral mandates and bureaucratic structures (Bennett et al., 2018; Popovych & Marakin, 2024). In protracted conflicts, however, where authority is contested, institutions are fragmented, and formal legitimacy is absent, communication becomes the primary mechanism through which governing bodies construct and exercise authority rather than merely transmit information (Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021; von Billerbeck & Gippert, 2017). Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) exemplifies this dynamic acutely. Established in April 2022, the PLC is a collective, non-electoral executive body comprising eight members from diverse political and regional backgrounds, created to navigate Yemen's protracted conflict and facilitate political transition (Ardemagni, 2022; Armed Conflict Survey, 2022). The council governs amid one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises, over 21.6 million people requiring assistance as of 2024, without direct electoral legitimacy, relying instead on international recognition and strategic messaging to project authority across a deeply fragmented political landscape (Basahi & OCHA, 2024). This paper examines how the PLC employs governmental communication and media strategy to exercise authority under these conditions, contributing to political communication theory by analyzing how authority is communicatively constructed when institutional foundations and electoral mandates are absent. Addressing this question requires engaging four interconnected bodies of scholarship: communication and legitimacy in fragile governance, media fragmentation in conflict settings, strategic governmental communication, and crisis communication in protracted conflicts, each illuminating distinct dimensions of the PLC's communicative challenge.

Research on communication in fragile and transitional governance demonstrates that when formal institutional structures are absent or contested, communication functions as a performative practice through which authority is enacted rather than derived from pre-existing mandates (Clausen, 2015; Vásquez et al., 2018). Governing actors must continuously stage authority through managed visibility, ritualized settings, and symbolic repertoires, with non-elected representatives accepted as authoritative based on expertise, procedural correctness, and performance claims rather than constituency linkage (Baturó & Tolstrup, 2024; Fossheim, 2022). Legitimacy theory provides a framework for understanding these practices, distinguishing input legitimacy deriving from participation, output legitimacy stemming from effective service delivery, and throughput legitimacy flowing from accountability and transparency (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2021; Schmidtke, 2019). In non-electoral contexts where input legitimacy through elections is absent, governing bodies rely disproportionately on output and throughput dimensions, continuously constructing legitimacy through communication rather than securing it through periodic mandates (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2021; von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017). At the same time, humanitarian actors frequently overshadow domestic governmental messaging in crisis settings, enjoying higher public trust due to perceptions of neutrality and service delivery capacity, which inadvertently reinforces the communicative marginalization of governing authorities (Dureab et al., 2021; Mena & Hilhorst, 2022). However, existing scholarship has not adequately examined what happens when these legitimation strategies must operate simultaneously under conditions of internal political fragmentation, external patron dependence, and protracted crisis, the precise conditions defining the PLC's governance context.

These communication challenges are compounded by the media fragmentation characteristic of conflict settings. Media systems theory examines how political institutions interact with partisan outlets, digital platforms, and competing narrative infrastructures that fracture along factional lines, creating parallel information ecosystems where official communication circulates unevenly and faces constant contestation (Mellor, 2020; Van Aelst et al., 2017). Yemen exemplifies extreme fragmentation: approximately 235 media outlets operate across the country, with the majority producing biased content aligned with competing factions, while external funding from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, and Qatar ensure media pluralism reflects geopolitical interests rather than journalistic independence (Almahfali, 2020; Internews, 2023; Noman et al., 2018). The International Crisis Group (2019) has noted that Yemen's deeply polarized media narratives reflect and reinforce the country's political fragmentation. Strategic communication, understood here as the planned, coordinated use of messaging, channels, and spokespersons to align government action with public understanding (Curtis et al., 2020; Savoia et al., 2023), faces structural rather than merely technical barriers in such environments. Coordination remains partial due to divergent institutional mandates, politicization of communication functions, and the proliferation of partisan channels that increase selective exposure as audiences gravitate toward preferred sources (Gruszczynski, 2020; Van Aelst et al., 2017). Scholars diverge on the effectiveness of strategic communication under these conditions: some argue that inclusive rhetoric can partially compensate for weak institutional legitimacy (Elayah, 2025; Elayah et al., 2020), while others caution that such strategies risk being perceived as performative when unsupported by tangible governance outcomes (Qirbi & Ismail, 2017; Salim et al., 2017). This raises a question central to the present study: whether communication coordination in fragmented conflict governance is a solvable technical challenge or a structural impossibility embedded in the political architecture itself.

Crisis communication scholarship introduces a further dimension critical to understanding the PLC's communicative environment. Traditional frameworks distinguish between acute, episodic emergencies with clear temporal boundaries and "permanent" crises characterized by ongoing instability and shifting meanings over extended periods (Dillingham, 2024; Ihlen et al., 2024). Crisis communication, defined here as reactive, emergency-driven messaging in response to acute threats, ceases to be episodic in protracted conflicts and instead normalizes as the primary mode of governance communication (Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021). In such settings, governments must address overlapping and unresolved challenges, security threats, economic collapse, and humanitarian emergencies, without clear resolution points. Crisis fatigue and declining trust erode public responsiveness to official messaging over time (Savoia et al., 2023; Wodak, 2021), while misinformation spreads rapidly in environments characterized by low institutional trust and fragmented media systems (Al-Aghbari et al., 2023). Furthermore, crisis framings themselves become contested, as governments may emphasize certain threats to expand authority while deflating others to avoid responsibility (Ardemagni, 2020; Boin et al., 2009). This study argues that these dynamics create a performative trap for non-electoral authorities in protracted conflict: they must simultaneously emphasize crisis to maintain international support while demonstrating governance capacity to claim legitimacy, imperatives that fundamentally contradict each other.

ability to present a unified front to both domestic and international audiences (Nasser, 2024). The PLC has been paralysed by internal rivalries since its formation, with meetings frequently stalled and key reforms repeatedly delayed (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). The Middle East Institute has documented that the PLC's communication has been marked by ad hoc messaging and limited capacity to counter Houthi propaganda amid its fragmented authority (Mahli, 2024), while Reporters Without Borders (2024) ranks Yemen 169th out of 180 countries in press freedom, further underscoring the severity of the communication environment under examination.

This study contributes primarily to political communication theory by demonstrating how communication functions as the central mechanism of authority construction in non-electoral conflict governance, where it substitutes for electoral mandates and institutional enforcement capacity. In doing so, the analysis extends legitimacy scholarship by showing that legitimation operates as perpetual crisis management rather than progressive accumulation of accepted authority, and challenges strategic communication frameworks by revealing that coordination failures can be structurally embedded in political architecture rather than technically remediable. The study therefore asks: How does the Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) use governmental communication and media strategy to exercise authority in a conflict-affected, non-electoral governance context?

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018), selecting Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council as a critical case in which the theoretical tensions under examination converge within a single governing body. Data collection relies exclusively on secondary sources, which is appropriate given Yemen's security constraints and the ethical challenges of conducting primary research in active conflict zones. The study covers April 2022, when the PLC was formally established, through December 2025, encompassing the full arc of the council's authority construction from inception through consolidation attempts, key crises, and international engagements. Table 1 summarizes the data sources and selection strategy.

Data collection proceeded through three complementary strategies. First, a bibliometric keyword co-occurrence analysis using Scopus mapped the scholarly landscape on governmental communication (2015–2025). From 3,008 identified articles, 126 keywords (minimum occurrence threshold of fifteen) were analyzed using VOSviewer to generate a co-occurrence network (Figure 1), revealing five thematic clusters. When filtered for Yemen-affiliated authors, only one article appeared and none addressed the PLC, empirically confirming the research gap. This bibliometric exercise functioned as a preliminary mapping tool, not a core analytical method. Second, 32 structured thematic queries yielded 78 peer-reviewed articles grounding the theoretical framework. Third, 34 policy reports, institutional analyses, media sources, and primary PLC communications were systematically identified from international organizations, regional think tanks, credible media outlets, and official PLC channels. AI-assisted tools (Consensus.ai and Grok) facilitated source discovery only; all coding, interpretation, and synthesis were conducted manually by the authors. The reliance on policy, media, and official PLC documentation for the empirical base reflects the near-complete absence of peer-reviewed scholarship on PLC communication, as the bibliometric analysis confirmed. Sources were included if they documented verifiable PLC communicative practices or institutional governance analyses and excluded if they lacked attribution or originated from sources with undisclosed factional affiliations. Where sources published in early 2026 directly corroborate patterns

identified within the primary study period, they are incorporated as supplementary contextual evidence rather than as events under analysis.

TABLE I. DATA SOURCES AND SELECTION OVERVIEW

Data Category	Source Types	Search / Identification Strategy	Identified	Cited	Final Use in the Study
Bibliometric Mapping (Broad Field)	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Scopus keyword search (2015–2025); VOSviewer co-occurrence analysis	3,008 articles; 126 keywords; 5 thematic clusters	—	Preliminary landscape mapping and gap identification (Figure 1)
Bibliometric Mapping (Yemen-Specific)	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Scopus search with Yemen affiliation filter	1 article; 0 PLC	—	Empirical evidence of research gap
Peer-reviewed Academic Literature	Journal articles, book chapters	Structured thematic queries (32 questions)	78 articles	32	Theoretical framework and literature grounding
Think Tank and Policy Reports	Institutional analyses, policy briefs	Systematic identification from major policy institutions	34 high-relevance sources	11	Contextual and policy analysis
International Organization & Humanitarian Reports	UN, IRC, Internews publications	Targeted retrieval from official organizational databases	—	4	Humanitarian data and impact validation
News and Media Sources	Regional and international outlets	Manual screening of credible international and regional media	—	10	Event verification and timeline reconstruction
Primary PLC Communications & Official Sources	Statements, speeches, interviews, communiqués	Direct retrieval from official government channels	—	7	Analysis of official justifications and narratives
Press Freedom & Media Monitoring	Index reports, media landscape assessments	Targeted retrieval	—	2	Media environment contextualization
Total References Cited	—	—	—	66	—

Analysis followed an iterative thematic coding process structured around six dimensions derived from the theoretical framework: authority construction, legitimation claims,

coordination patterns, media strategy, crisis-driven communication, and silence or non-communication. Coding proceeded in two stages: first deductively, applying theoretically derived categories (e.g., performative authority, output legitimacy claims, fragmented coordination); then inductively, refining categories as empirical patterns emerged (e.g., crisis framings, delayed response, enforced silence). Analytical consistency was maintained through triangulation across academic, policy, and official PLC sources, with divergences noted and interpreted rather than resolved through selection. Several limitations warrant acknowledgment: reliance on secondary sources limits access to internal PLC deliberations and informal processes, and regionally funded media carry factional biases. Al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabia reflect Saudi and Emirati editorial interests; Al Jazeera operates within Qatari state frameworks; Western outlets carry their own geopolitical and editorial orientations toward the Yemen conflict. These limitations are partially mitigated through triangulation and exclusion of unattributed sources but cannot be fully resolved without primary fieldwork.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Governmental Communication and Authority Construction in Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council

This section examines how Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council uses governmental communication to exercise authority in a conflict-affected, non-electoral governance context. Drawing on systematic analysis of official statements, media interviews, diplomatic engagements, and reports from international organizations and credible regional media outlets covering the period from April 2022 through December 2025, the analysis interprets the PLC's communicative practices and structural constraints shaping authority projection. The focus addresses two interrelated questions: how communication functions as a mechanism of authority when electoral mandates are absent, and how media strategy operates within Yemen's deeply fragmented information environment. Rather than separating empirical description from theoretical interpretation, this section integrates observable patterns with analytical frameworks to demonstrate how the PLC's communication reveals fundamental dynamics of non-electoral governance in protracted conflict settings. The six analytical dimensions and their core empirical patterns are summarized in Table 2, which structures the discussion that follows.

TABLE 2. EMPIRICAL PATTERNS IN PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP COUNCIL COMMUNICATION ACROSS SIX ANALYTICAL DIMENSIONS

Analytical Dimension	Empirical Result	Analytical Implication
Authority Construction	The PLC primarily asserts authority through official statements, speeches, and international appearances rather than through institutional enforcement.	Authority is communicatively constructed in the absence of electoral or consolidated state power.
Legitimation Claims	Communication emphasizes peace commitments, service provision, and collective leadership.	Legitimacy is pursued through discursive claims rather than stable institutional performance.
Coordination Patterns	Public messaging frequently lacks consistency across PLC members.	Fragmentation reflects structural governance

		divisions rather than communication mismanagement.
Media Strategy and Circulation	Communication prioritizes international and regional media platforms.	Media strategy is oriented toward external recognition and diplomatic legitimacy.
Crisis-Driven Communication	Communication activity intensifies during humanitarian, security, or political crises.	Governance communication is reactive and crisis-dependent.
Silence / non-communication	Sensitive political and economic issues are often met with delayed or absent messaging.	Silence functions as an indicator of institutional constraint and limited agency.

Source: Author's qualitative synthesis based on analysis of official PLC communications, media interviews, policy reports, and academic literature

1. Communication as Performative Authority in the Absence of Electoral Legitimacy

The PLC consistently constructs its authority through three observable communication practices that reveal how non-electoral governance bodies must perform legitimacy discursively rather than derive it from popular mandates. First, peace-oriented language pervades official discourse, with Chairman al-Alimi's September 2024 statement that "we are seeking peace, we are not a war council" exemplifying repeated framings positioning the council as committed to ending conflict rather than prosecuting war (Al-Alimi, 2024a). This framing appears systematically across international forums, creating a deliberate contrast with Houthi militarization. The rhetorical choice to emphasize peace-making reveals a core tension in non-electoral conflict governance: the PLC cannot claim authority through democratic process, so it must claim authority through normative positioning as the reasonable, peace-seeking alternative to armed rebellion. This demonstrates what Baturo & Tolstrup (2024) identify as performative authority, where the right to rule is enacted through communication itself rather than through institutional foundations. However, the analysis extends this insight by revealing a critical vulnerability: when communication becomes the primary site of authority construction, any disruption to communicative coherence directly threatens the council's central basis for its claims to rule.

Second, service provision narratives feature prominently across interviews and statements, systematically highlighting "salaries, pensions, social security, and health care" in government-controlled areas. Al-Alimi's December 2022 Al-Arabiya interview detailed court rebuilding, military integration, and anti-corruption measures like reducing diplomatic staff while praising Taiz's resilience as evidence of governmental effectiveness (Al-Alimi, 2022). A content review of major PLC statements and interviews (2022–mid-2025) shows that performance and service-provision themes (salaries, pensions, health services, and court rebuilding) appear frequently (Mahli, 2024). These narratives reference concrete governance activities in areas under PLC control, functioning as performance-based legitimacy claims in the absence of electoral validation. This aligns with von Soest & Grauvogel's (2017) framework, which shows that non-electoral regimes rely heavily on performance claims, demonstrating effectiveness through service delivery, security, and material achievements, rather than on procedural legitimacy derived from elections. Yet the PLC case complicates this framework

significantly: when the council operates primarily from Riyadh rather than Yemeni territory, performance claims face immediate credibility challenges. The gap between rhetorical emphasis on service provision and the reality of limited territorial control and enforcement capacity suggests that performance legitimacy in conflict settings operates less as achieved credibility and more as an aspirational narrative constantly vulnerable to contradiction by material conditions.

Third, appeals to international recognition structure much of PLC communication, with diplomatic engagements with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Russia, and Western powers systematically publicized (Mokha Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). Al-Alimi's appearances at the UN General Assembly in September 2025 and the Council on Foreign Relations in September 2024 showcase the council's cultivation of global presence (Al-Alimi, 2024a, 2025). Official communiqués consistently identify speakers by formal titles such as "Chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council" and reference enabling documents like the Riyadh agreement, establishing procedural legitimacy through formal presentation (Coombs, 2022). This pattern reveals how international recognition becomes a substitute legitimation mechanism when domestic popular support cannot be demonstrated, creating what can be understood as externally-oriented performative governance, authority that exists more in international diplomatic space than in Yemeni public opinion, directed primarily at international actors whose recognition confers legitimacy rather than domestic populations whose consent would do so in electoral contexts.

However, this communicative construction of authority reveals fundamental fragility. The September 2025 crisis, where Southern Transitional Council leader al-Zubaidi publicly stated there was "a failure within the PLC to achieve consensus" on Sky News Arabia, directly contradicted collective statements reaffirming partnership and exposed how internal divisions threaten communicative coherence (Al-Shadli, 2025). When authority rests primarily on successfully maintained communication rather than institutional foundations or popular mandates, internal contradiction becomes an existential threat rather than routine political friction. What distinguishes the PLC from many existing accounts of performative governance (Baturu & Tolstrup, 2024; Ding, 2020) is the degree of this vulnerability. Because performative authority is inherently precarious and requires constant renewal through coherent communication, silence or public internal dissent poses a far greater danger than in systems with electoral legitimacy or strong coercive capacity. In the PLC's case, this renders the entire communicative architecture susceptible to collapse from a single sustained rupture in message coherence.

2. Legitimation as Continuous Crisis Management Rather Than Progressive Accumulation

The PLC's legitimation strategies operate across three distinct registers, each revealing how non-electoral governance in conflict settings transforms legitimacy from an achievable state into perpetual labor. Procedural claims emphasize collective leadership and legal continuity, with the April 2022 formation statement outlining the council's structure and supporting committees as evidence of formal authorization (Coombs, 2022). Subsequent communications reaffirm "collective leadership and partnership principles" and reference the Riyadh transfer agreement as a legal basis. This invocation of legal-rational authority follows Weberian logic, attempting to ground legitimacy in procedure and formal correctness. However, the absence of functioning executive bylaws, with PLC members Abdulrahman al-Mahrami and Faraj al-Bahsani using X posts on September 17, 2025, to publicly criticize "unilateral decisions" and call for working bylaws, reveals how procedural legitimacy claims unravel when formal structures remain incomplete (Al-Shadli, 2025). The gap between procedural rhetoric and institutional reality demonstrates that, in transitional conflict governance, procedural legitimacy cannot be

established once and then taken for granted; it must be continuously reasserted in the face of ongoing evidence of procedural breakdown. This argument does not suggest that legitimacy cannot stabilize in other governance contexts, but rather that in the PLC's conflict-affected and fragmented political environment, it remains provisional and does not reach a consolidation threshold.

Performance claims dominate the PLC's legitimation efforts, with statements and interviews systematically documenting governance outputs. Al-Alimi's March 2025 *Der Spiegel* interview and Tareq Saleh's statements calling for "broader international cooperation" and strategies to "isolate the Houthis and cut their funding" position the council as proactive on security and governance (Habor, 2025; Koelbl, 2025). September 2025 statements approved "legal review of all decisions since 2022," signaling procedural accountability and responsiveness (Al-Shadli, 2025). Yet these performance claims face structural credibility challenges. When PLC officials complain that "it does not make sense for Saudi Arabia to negotiate our oil revenues on our behalf" and that they are often sidelined or informed of major outcomes only after decisions have been made in Saudi-Houthi negotiations, the performance of sovereignty is directly contradicted by their exclusion from key decisions affecting Yemen's economic future (Ali-Khan, 2023). This contradiction illustrates how legitimation discourse can systematically undermine itself when structural conditions, external patron dominance, limited territorial control, and exclusion from critical negotiations contradict the authority being claimed. The theoretical implication extends Dellmuth & Tallberg's (2021) framework on international organization legitimacy: in fragmented conflict governance, legitimation operates as ongoing crisis management rather than progressive accumulation of authority, with each legitimacy claim needing to overcome not just skepticism but active contradiction from the governance context itself.

Normative claims invoke unity, responsibility, and peace advocacy, framing Houthi actions as threats "not linked to Gaza but rooted in Iranian influence" while presenting the PLC as the steward of Yemeni sovereignty (Al-Alimi, 2024b). Transitional framing appears throughout, with the council repeatedly characterizing its role as temporary, exceptional, and oriented toward eventual elections or political settlement. This normative legitimation strategy attempts to position the PLC as defending national interests against external interference and internal rebellion. However, the reliance on transitional framing creates its own legitimacy trap: through continuously emphasizing temporary status and future elections, the PLC implicitly acknowledges that its current authority is incomplete and provisional. This differs fundamentally from authoritarian regimes that claim permanent legitimacy through ideology or performance; the PLC's legitimacy claims are explicitly time-limited and contingent, making them simultaneously more democratically appropriate and structurally weaker. If taken together, the combination of procedural, performance, and normative claims does not create cumulative legitimacy but rather reveals how non-electoral conflict governance requires simultaneously deploying multiple legitimation strategies, none of which proves sufficient alone, and all of which must be continuously reasserted against the very conditions they are meant to overcome.

3. Structural Fragmentation and the Political Impossibility of Communication Coordination

The PLC's communication patterns reveal that coordination failures stem not from technical inadequacy but from structural political fragmentation that makes unified messaging systematically impossible. Multiple spokespersons produce divergent messages on key issues, with the September 2025 crisis demonstrating how internal divisions generate contradictory public communication. On 10 September 2025, STC leader and PLC member Aidarous al-Zubaidi issued 11 unilateral appointments across southern governorates, ministries, and state companies, bypassing PLC Chairman al-Alimi. One week later, on 17 September 2025, PLC members Abdulrahman al-Muharrami and Faraj al-Bahsani publicly criticised these “unilateral decisions” and demanded the immediate adoption of executive bylaws (Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). While collective PLC statements reaffirmed partnership principles, STC leader al-Zubaidi simultaneously declared consensus failure publicly, and the STC conducted a coordinated media campaign accusing northern members of obstruction, complete with demonstrations and implicit threats (Al-Shadli, 2025). This parallel communication operated independently of collective PLC messaging, revealing not poor coordination protocols but competing communication centers reflecting Yemen's underlying political fragmentation.

Reported coordination failures include irregular meetings, over five months between sessions in some cases, and the May 2022 STC veto of a Legal Committee draft, publicly justified through affiliated media, citing consensus issues (Al-Deen, 2023). These patterns extend beyond isolated incidents to systematic behavior: no evidence appears of unified messaging protocols, central communication units, or formal spokesperson coordination mechanisms. Instead, communications emerge reactively from individual members, factional platforms, and collective statements issued only after internal disputes become public. This structure reflects the PLC's formation as a coalition of competing factions backed by different external patrons — Saudi Arabia and the UAE, whose divergent interests manifest as parallel rather than unified communication (Ali-Khan, 2023).

This fragmentation carries significant theoretical implications for strategic communication theory. Savoia et al. (2023) emphasize that effective government communication requires centralized structures and shared protocols, but the PLC case demonstrates that such coordination may be politically impossible rather than technically inadequate in certain governance contexts. When authority disperses among power centers with divergent sponsors, constituencies, and strategic interests, coherent communication becomes structurally unachievable regardless of technical capacity. The eight-member council structure creates multiple legitimate spokespersons without hierarchical authority to enforce message discipline. The absence of executive bylaws means coordination remains ad hoc and voluntary, manifesting in inconsistent crisis responses and public disagreements over fundamental governance questions. The theoretical contribution here requires distinguishing between two types of coordination problems: coordination failures due to suboptimal implementation, which can be solved through better protocols, training, and infrastructure; and coordination impossibility due to political structure, which can only be resolved through fundamental governance redesign. The PLC exemplifies the latter, communication coordination is not failing in the PLC but is structurally precluded by the political architecture that created the council as a compromise among irreconcilable power centers, revealing that strategic communication scholarship cannot assume coordination is achievable given sufficient investment without first analyzing whether the political structure of the governing body permits it.

4. Navigating Fragmented Media Infrastructures: From Message Optimization to Visibility Management

Yemen's polarized media environment fundamentally reshapes what governmental communication can achieve, transforming the PLC's media strategy from optimizing messages to navigating fractured infrastructures where circulation itself becomes contested. The media landscape comprises approximately 235 outlets, with 60% producing "biased, one-sided content rife with hate speech and disinformation," creating immediate counter-narratives to any PLC statement (Internews, 2023). This fragmentation reflects Yemen's conflict geography: Houthi-controlled Al-Masirah TV dominates northern regions, portraying the group as "pious leaders combating Saudi aggression" and directly countering PLC framings (Qaid, 2024). Regional funding from Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran, and Qatar ensures media pluralism reflects geopolitical fragmentation rather than journalistic independence, with each external actor supporting media aligned with their respective proxies (Internews, 2023).

The PLC's constrained media strategy responds to this fragmentation through differential platform use, reflecting audience accessibility rather than preference. International media features prominently, with al-Alimi appearing at the Council on Foreign Relations in September 2024, giving interviews to Der Spiegel in March 2025, and delivering speeches at the UN General Assembly in September 2025 and the Munich Security Conference in February 2023 (Al-Alimi, 2024a; Koelbl, 2025; Yemen Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). Regional Arab outlets, particularly Al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabia, host PLC members for extended interviews addressing domestic audiences with pan-Arab reach (Al-Shadli, 2025). Domestic government-aligned channels, Yemen TV, Aden TV, carry official statements and presidential addresses, including the October 2025 October Revolution commemoration speech (yemenonline.info, 2025). This multi-platform approach reflects recognition that no single channel reaches all relevant audiences, requiring simultaneous communication across international, regional, and domestic tiers.

However, message circulation is structurally uneven regardless of platform strategy. Reports indicate PLC communications achieve visibility in southern government-controlled regions but face "systematic contestation or exclusion in Houthi-controlled areas" where de facto authority propaganda dominates. PLC statements circulate regularly through 12–18 government-aligned outlets in southern and eastern areas but are absent or heavily countered in more than 80 Houthi-controlled outlets in the northwest (Internews, 2023). Social media has become a contested terrain where competing narratives from the De Facto Authority (Houthis), the Southern Transitional Council (STC), and the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) vie for attention without any single actor holding a clear hierarchical advantage. Yemenis are regularly exposed to high levels of disinformation on military developments, peace processes, and governance issues (Internews, 2023).

This reality fundamentally challenges traditional government-media relations theory. Van Aelst et al. (2017) analyze how media systems shape political communication, but their framework assumes relatively unified media fields where governments can strategically place messages for circulation. The PLC operates in conditions where no such unified field exists; instead, multiple partisan media ecosystems simultaneously amplify, distort, or silence governmental messages according to factional and geopolitical alignments beyond government control. Rather than optimizing message content, tone, or timing for circulation across a shared public sphere, governmental communication becomes about achieving visibility within specific

echo chambers and managing how messages get refracted through competing narrative infrastructures. The PLC cannot communicate to "Yemen" as a unified audience; it can only communicate to southern government-controlled areas, international diplomatic circles, and regional Arab publics, while accepting that northern Houthi-controlled populations receive systematically distorted or absent PLC messaging (State Media Monitor, 2025), a condition that transforms media strategy from technical communication optimization to political infrastructure navigation, where the primary challenge is not what to say but where any saying can occur at all, and where the heavy reliance on elite-focused international and regional platforms reflects not preference but the structural necessity of reaching audiences without immediate counter-narrative displacement.

5. Crisis Communication as Normalized Governance Mode in Protracted Conflict

The PLC's communication exhibits pronounced crisis-driven temporal patterns that reveal how protracted conflict transforms crisis communication from episodic disruption to permanent governance mode. Communication volume spikes during humanitarian emergencies and security shocks, with the 2024 floods across Hajjah, Al-Hodeidah, Taiz, and Marib prompting immediate meetings between al-Alimi and the U.S. Ambassador, generating statements emphasizing "urgent international support to repair services and assist affected populations" (Khulasat, 2024). December 2024 UN statements renewed "calls for a donors' conference to fund the humanitarian response plan," noting how "floods combined with war and climate events have worsened conditions" (Yemen Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). The underfunded 2025 Humanitarian Response Plan, only 18% funded by September, generated repeated appeals at international forums calling for "coalitions to rebuild institutions and address Houthi-induced threats like using hunger as a weapon" (International Rescue Committee, 2025; United Nations, 2025).

This crisis-responsive pattern dominates PLC communication temporally and thematically. PLC official statements averaged 4–6 per quarter in stable periods but rose to 15–18 per quarter during major humanitarian or security shocks (e.g., 2024 floods and September 2025 internal crisis) (Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2026). Reactive rather than proactive messaging prevails, with communications responding to events rather than anticipating them and limited evidence of strategic communication planning or sustained campaigns outside crisis contexts. Crisis language repeats across contexts: humanitarian "catastrophe," "urgent needs," "international cooperation," and "Houthi threats" appear consistently, whether addressing floods, economic collapse, or security incidents. Al-Alimi's October 2025 televised address combined "humanitarian and economic challenges, reaffirmed openness to peace, and called for intensified international cooperation," exemplifying how crisis framing structures communication opportunities (yemenonline.info, 2025). Humanitarian framing dominates even when addressing governance or political issues, positioning the PLC as a crisis manager and international support seeker rather than a long-term state builder.

This pattern aligns with Ihlen et al. (2024), showing that protracted conflicts push authorities toward episodic, defensive messaging, but the PLC case reveals deeper dynamics. When a crisis becomes permanent rather than exceptional, crisis communication normalizes as the primary mode through which authority is claimed and governance is performed. The council operates under a performative trap: it must emphasize crises to maintain international support and humanitarian funding while simultaneously demonstrating governance capacity to establish

legitimate authority. These imperatives fundamentally contradict each other. For instance, the PLC must highlight the ongoing crisis to secure Saudi financial support — such as the \$368 million package in September 2025 and \$507 million in early 2026 (Arab News, 2026; Reuters, 2025) — yet it must also project effective governance. Emphasizing crisis undermines capacity claims, while emphasizing capacity risks losing donor support. Traditional crisis communication frameworks treat crisis as a temporary deviation from routine political communication. Yet the PLC reveals that in protracted conflict settings this temporal model fails entirely: there is no stable “normal” political communication to return to, and crisis communication must simultaneously serve as emergency response, governance performance, and authority claim, making proactive governance communication structurally unavailable rather than merely underutilized.

6. Strategic Silence and Enforced Non-Communication as Governance Constraints

Notable patterns of communication absence and delay reveal how silence functions both as a strategic choice and as an imposed constraint, requiring a theoretical distinction between varieties of non-communication. Internal disputes frequently generate delayed responses. For instance, following the STC’s unilateral appointments on 10 September 2025, the PLC required several days before issuing any collective statement, allowing the STC’s media campaign to dominate initial coverage and frame public understanding. A similar pattern occurred in the Hadramawt governor dispute (July–August 2025), where PLC members remained publicly divided for over three weeks while STC and tribal actors controlled the narrative (Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). The May 2022 STC veto of the Legal Committee draft also saw extended silence before public justification emerged through affiliated media (Al-Deen, 2023).

Sensitive issues receive minimal direct communication systematically. Revenue distribution, specific military strategies, and relations with coalition partners — particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE — are largely absent from public statements. One official described the council’s communication as “opaque” through “irregular consultations” where “no input” is provided to most PLC members. Key negotiations, particularly Saudi-Houthi talks since 2022, have produced no public PLC positioning until after outcomes emerge, with members learning results “post-facto” rather than participating in framing or decision-making (Ali-Khan, 2023). The PLC often relies on external actors to communicate on its behalf, with humanitarian appeals routinely routed through UN agencies rather than sovereign state planning (Yemen Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

These silence patterns require distinguishing strategic silence (choosing not to communicate to avoid exposing weakness or triggering conflict) from enforced silence (inability to communicate due to fragmentation, exclusion, or patron dominance). The PLC experiences both forms simultaneously. Strategic silence is evident in non-confrontational responses to STC expansions, with the council often “focusing on dialogue rather than strong public rebukes” to avoid escalation (Al-Deen, 2023). Enforced silence, on the other hand, is illustrated by the council’s repeated exclusion from Saudi-Houthi economic negotiations and its resulting inability to issue timely public positions.

Nevertheless, enforced silence reflects structural incapacity rather than strategic calculation. Days-long delays responding to internal crises suggest communication constraints resulting from fragmentation. The council cannot respond quickly because achieving a collective agreement requires extended negotiation among competing factions. Learning of Saudi-Houthi negotiations "post-facto" represents enforced silence imposed by patron dominance: the PLC cannot communicate about negotiations it is excluded from, with silence reflecting powerlessness rather than strategy (Ali-Khan, 2023). Timeline analyses reveal extended periods without major statements or press conferences between crisis events, contrasting with communication spikes during emergencies, suggesting systematic communication constraints rather than deliberate strategic timing. Traditional political communication theory, developed primarily in contexts of relatively strong, stable states, tends to interpret governmental silence as strategic, governments choosing when to respond, when to delay, when to remain quiet for tactical advantage, yet the PLC demonstrates that in fragmented conflict governance, much non-communication reflects incapacity rather than sophistication, requiring scholars to develop frameworks that distinguish varieties of silence and recognize that in certain governance contexts the absence of communication indicates the absence of capacity to communicate rather than its deliberate withholding, with strategic restraint and structural incapacity frequently overlapping in ways that resist clean analytical separation.

7. Theoretical Synthesis: Communication, Authority, and Governance in Non-Electoral Conflict Settings

The analysis yields three primary theoretical contributions that collectively demonstrate why governmental communication in non-electoral, conflict-affected settings operates according to distinct logics requiring conceptual frameworks beyond those developed in stable democratic contexts. These contributions should be understood alongside the study's reliance on secondary data, which captures observable communicative outputs but cannot fully access internal strategic deliberations; future research incorporating elite interviews and primary fieldwork would strengthen and potentially complicate the patterns identified here.

First, the PLC demonstrates that performative authority is achievable without electoral mandates but remains qualitatively different from institutionally grounded authority, not simply weaker, but structurally dependent on continuous successful communication, where any sustained rupture threatens the central mechanism through which the right to rule is claimed. Second, the analysis establishes a necessary distinction between remediable coordination failure and structurally embedded coordination impossibility, revealing that strategic communication scholarship cannot assume coordination is achievable given sufficient investment without first analyzing whether the political architecture of the governing body permits it, a finding with direct implications for how media fragmentation transforms communication strategy from message optimization to infrastructure navigation. Third, protracted instability transforms crisis communication from a temporary emergency response into the permanent form governance communication takes, creating a performative trap between demonstrating need and demonstrating capacity that is not resolvable through communication strategy but embedded in the structural conditions of conflict governance itself. Together, these contributions advance political communication theory by demonstrating that fragmentation, performative precariousness, and normalized crisis are not peripheral complications but constitutive features of governmental communication in non-electoral conflict governance, requiring analytical frameworks sensitive to conditions that stable-state models treat as exceptional or remediable.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council uses governmental communication to exercise authority in a conflict-affected, non-electoral governance context. The findings demonstrate that communicative authority, while achievable without electoral mandates, remains structurally fragile: internal fragmentation produces contradictory messaging, Yemen's polarized media landscape limits circulation, and permanent crisis conditions create a performative trap in which emphasizing humanitarian need undermines governance capacity claims and vice versa. Coordination failures are not technical deficiencies, but structural impossibilities embedded in a governance architecture constituted among irreconcilable power centers, and crisis communication normalizes not as a temporary emergency response but as the primary mode through which governance itself is performed.

These findings carry direct implications for international actors supporting transitional governing bodies. Peacebuilding programs that treat communication as a technical problem solvable through training or coordination assistance will consistently underperform when the obstacle is political fragmentation rather than institutional weakness. Communication coherence requires prior political consolidation, not the reverse, and humanitarian organizations that routinely overshadow domestic governmental messaging should consider how that dynamic structurally marginalizes the very authorities whose legitimacy the international community formally recognizes.

This study's reliance on secondary sources limits access to internal deliberations and informal processes that remain opaque to public observation, and future research should examine public reception of PLC messaging and test whether the patterns identified here generalize to comparable cases such as Libya's Presidential Council or South Sudan's transitional arrangements. More broadly, this case advances the argument that communication in non-electoral conflict governance functions as a fragile substitute for institutional authority, one whose limits are defined not by strategic capacity but by the structural conditions of fragmentation, external intervention, and protracted crisis that governance communication must navigate but cannot itself resolve.

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