CHAPTER SIX

AN IMPERIAL BORDERLAND AS COLONY?
THE DAʿĀN AGREEMENT AND THE REAFFIRMATION OF COLONIAL OTTOMANISM, 1905–19

In the course of the 1904–7 uprising, policy makers in Istanbul and Ṣanʿāʾ realized that the empire’s human and financial resources were insufficient to eliminate what at the time seemed to be the most serious challenge to Ottoman rule in southwest Arabia—the coalition of forces in the northern highlands led by Imām Yaḥyā. Perhaps more than at any other point during the previous thirty years of Ottoman rule, the power equations were against the imperial government. Objectives that had appeared realistic to some senior bureaucrats during the governorship of Ḥūseyn Ḵīlmi Paşa (1898–1902)—reducing the degree of differentiation, for instance, by taking tax collection out of the hands of local shaykhs—were now considered well beyond the reach of an indebted and overstretched imperial power. Increasingly, officials recognized not only that the politics of difference was there to stay, but also that it needed to be refashioned in a way that included a Zaydi community leader.

The years between 1905 and 1911 were marked by various initiatives on the part of Sultan ʿAbdūlhamīd II, successive cabinets, members of parliament, and Imām Yaḥyā himself to end the long-standing conflict between the imperial government and this local opposition leader through a negotiated settlement. These attempts, however, were only successfully concluded with the agreement signed by Ahmed ʾĪzzet Paşa, the representative of the Ottoman government, and Imām Yaḥyā at Daʿān in October 1911—after the end of ʿAbdūlhamīd II’s autocratic rule in July 1908, another uprising led by the ʾimām in 1910–11, and in response to the specific political constellation prevailing at the local and imperial levels. Historians of Yemen have interpreted the Daʿān agreement as Imām Yaḥyā’s first step toward building an independent Yemeni state, a goal that he eventually realized in the years following the withdrawal of the Ottomans from southwest Arabia in the aftermath of World War I.¹

In this chapter, I demonstrate that this agreement, as well as the political struggles, controversies, and alternative schemes that preceded it, also tell us something important about imperial governance in the late Ottoman Empire. More specifically, I argue that the political arrangements laid down in the agreement marked an unprecedented degree of institutionalizing of difference in Ottoman Yemen. Indeed, they constituted a comprehensive and elaborate attempt to create a form of governance for the Province of Yemen that was in accordance with the “nature and dispositions” of the indigenous people, and thus formalized their perceived cultural inferiority. It is my contention that the issue of how to integrate Imām Yahyā into the structures of provincial government posed, in a particularly acute form, the problem of how to accommodate local specificity and give local leaders a stake in Ottoman rule, without the imperial government undermining it. The question of how different Yemen could be, became more pressing not only as a result of Ottoman military defeats during the 1904–7 uprising, but also in light of the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the independence of Bulgaria (both in 1908), and the emergence of nationalist voices among the empire’s Arab and Albanian populations. These events, along with the end of the Hamidian regime, prompted (and allowed) Ottoman bureaucrats to become bolder and more daring in experimenting with combinations of different administrative approaches. On the one hand, indirect rule through local leaders in different parts of the British Empire seemed to offer a highly attractive model of governing “backward” peoples in remote parts of the Ottoman lands without the extensive cost in funds and human lives that previous attempts at mastering Yemen had caused. On the other hand, the Ottomans’ own experience with local autonomy and indirect rule over the previous one hundred years raised serious doubts as to how suitable this approach was for an empire that faced the combined pressures of European imperial expansion and separatist movements. After all, for the leaders of Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Egypt autonomy and the devolution of power had been little more than a thin veil of Ottoman suzerainty over de facto independence which, except in the case of Egypt, had eventually evolved into formal independent statehood.