

Anti-government protests erupt in Yemen

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28 January 2011

At least 16,000 and, according to some reports, many more protested in Yemen calling on Ali Abdullah Saleh, president for more than 30 years, to step down.

Demonstrators gathered in at least four locations in the capital, Sanaa, including the university, in an effort to thwart the police and security services. Protests also took place elsewhere.

At least 10,000 were involved in the university protest and 6,000 elsewhere in the capital.

Demonstrators chanted, “Enough being in power for 30 years!” and added “Gone in just 20 years!” referring to the insurgency that toppled Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Other demands included “No to extending [presidential tenure]! No to bequeathing [the presidency]!” and “Enough playing around, enough corruption, look at the gap between poverty and wealth.”

A heavy police presence was mobilised, but no clashes were reported.

A series of smaller protests took place leading up to Thursday’s mass demonstrations, prompting the arrest of rights activist Tawakul Karman. This sparked further protests in Sanaa, and she was released on Monday.

Saleh heads a widely hated regime. A US ally, he has been in power for 33 years. He became leader of North Yemen in 1978, and has ruled the Republic of Yemen—the merger of the north and south—since 1990.

He was last re-elected in 2006, for a seven-year mandate. But a draft amendment of the constitution was under discussion in parliament that could allow him to remain in office for life. He is also accused of wanting to hand power to his eldest son Ahmed, who heads the elite Presidential Guard.

In an attempt to head off opposition, Saleh promised in a televised address on Sunday, “We are a republic. We reject bequeathing” the presidency. He then

proposed constitutional amendments, including presidential term limits of two terms of five or seven years. Saleh also promised to raise salaries for the army and civil servants, by \$47 a month in an attempt to buy their loyalty, and to cut income taxes in half. He has ordered price controls.

This will do little or nothing to placate public opposition.

Saleh is widely hated. He rules over one of the poorest states in the world, with almost half its 23 million population living on less than \$2 a day. One third suffer from chronic hunger. Illiteracy stands at over 50 percent, and unemployment is at least 35 percent. More than two thirds of the population are under the age of 24.

The country has dwindling oil reserves and falling revenues and suffers from an acute water shortage.

Saleh’s government is brutally repressive and is waging a war in the north of the country against dissident Shia tribes that has resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians and over 130,000 being displaced. His war is supported by Saudi Arabia, which has joined him in claiming that Iran is behind the Shiite revolt. The Huthis are Shiite Muslims, but of an entirely different sect than the Shiites of Iran. Yemeni Shia comprise about 40 percent of the country’s 23 million citizens. The majority of the population are Sunni.

The government is waging another repressive campaign against an armed secessionist movement in the south, where until 1990 a Moscow-backed regime was in power.

To secure US backing for his regime, Saleh has cast himself as a leading ally of Washington in the “war on terrorism,” directing his efforts against Islamist elements that were once his allies.

The US has been given free rein to wage military operations in Yemen, with the military and the CIA

mounting daily drone attacks and organising death squads. Yemen's strategic importance for the US is determined by its bordering of Saudi Arabia, the world's leading oil exporter, and the Bab al-Mandab strait, through which 3 million barrels of Middle East oil pass every day.

Such is the public hostility to the US operations that Saleh was even forced to publicly declare his opposition to foreign military intervention and to refuse permission for some US missile strikes.

Though those involved were clearly inspired by Tunisia's "Jasmine Revolution", the protest in Yemen was organised, as opposed to the spontaneous upsurge that took place in North Africa. Its architect was an opposition coalition that is seeking US backing for its actions, just as surely as is Saleh.

The US has made clear that it is at least amenable to some role being played by the opposition parties. Earlier this month, during a visit to Yemen, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton urged Saleh to open a dialogue with the opposition, saying it would help to stabilise the country.

The *New York Times* noted that on that trip, she was asked "by a Yemeni lawmaker how the United States could lend support to Mr. Saleh's authoritarian rule even as his country increasingly becomes a haven for militants. 'We support an inclusive government,' Mrs. Clinton said in response. 'We see that Yemen is going through a transition.'"

There is every reason to suppose that Yemen's opposition leaders were as emboldened by this supportive statement by Washington as they were by events in Tunisia.

Saleh's deputy finance minister, Jalal Yaqoub, utilised Reuters to make an appeal to the opposition, to behave responsibly in order to avoid a revolutionary upheaval. "I believe that President Saleh remains the only one who can maintain the stability of this country," he said. "I fear that if the majority of people go down to the street neither we nor opposition will be able to control the situation. It could get ugly very quickly.... I'm still somewhat optimistic that things will not get out of control. If they do, we all lose, both the government and opposition, and Yemen will turn into something close to chaos."

Under the headline, "Are Yemen's protests going to bring another revolution?" the *Christian Science*

Monitor commented, "No parties involved want to see clashes in Yemen like there have been in Tunisia and Egypt, particularly not the United States government, which has an vested interest in keeping Yemen stable."

Unfortunately for Washington and its current and aspirant allies, the class tensions being unleashed in Yemen, Tunisia and Egypt cannot be turned off at will. A mass movement is sweeping the Middle East that threatens the survival of all the region's oppressive, pro-Western regimes.



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