

Tens of thousands rally in Yemeni capital

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Rival demonstrations of tens of thousands took place Thursday in Sanaa, the capital city of Yemen, called by opposition parties and by the ruling party of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The rallies took place the day after Saleh, in power for 32 years, promised he would leave office when his current term expires in 2013.

Both the government and the bourgeois opposition parties were evidently seeking to avoid an uncontrollable political explosion on the Egyptian model. Saleh initially appealed to the opposition parties to call off their scheduled rallies after he gave a speech to parliament Wednesday outlining a series of political concessions.

When the opposition groups, including the Islamic Party Islah, Nasserites and social-democrats, went ahead with the protests, they found the capital's main Tahrir Square occupied by tens of thousands of government supporters mobilized by Saleh's National Congress Party. In order to avoid a confrontation, the opposition rally was moved to the campus of Sanaa University, where it was held without incident.

The pro-Saleh demonstrators were mainly bused into the capital from rural areas, including the president's stronghold of Khowlan province. They were set up in Tahrir Square overnight to forestall the opposition protest and prevent a more-or-less permanent occupation of the central plaza, as has taken place in Cairo.

The opposition rally was billed as a "day of rage," and the mostly youthful crowd chanted solidarity with the Tunisian and Egyptian revolts and called for the immediate ouster of the Saleh government. "The people want to topple the regime," they chanted. "No to corruption, no to dictatorship."

However, the political program advanced by the alliance of opposition parties, called the Common Forum, was conciliatory in the extreme. Speakers called for dialogue with the regime, leading to a

peaceful replacement of Saleh. A Member of Parliament from the Nasserites told the British newspaper the *Guardian*, "These demonstrations will continue until the government and the president come to a consensus with the people of Yemen."

Students from the university set up a "human wall" around the protesters to ward off attacks, while soldiers watched from nearby rooftops but did not intervene. Military roadblocks were set up throughout the capital to keep the protesters well away from government buildings. Helicopters buzzed the city, and most businesses were closed for the day.

If the dueling demonstrations in the capital appeared to be a standoff—observers said the two crowds were of about equal size—the weakness and isolation of the regime were shown by a wave of protest rallies in regional cities, particularly in southern Yemen, which was a separate state until merged with Saleh's North Yemen in 1990.

There were large protests in the cities of Ibb and Taiz, and fistfights broke out in Aden, the country's main port and the former capital of South Yemen, when security forces attacked demonstrators with teargas. Two people were wounded and dozens arrested as police swept through crowds of demonstrators.

A report in the *Wall Street Journal* noted the conservative posture of the opposition coalition, quoting Mohammed Al Mutawakal, president of the Common Front, as saying that immediate departure of the president "is not the subject now."

"We are calling for change," he told the *Journal*. "It's not about specific people, it's about moving toward real democracy and human rights."

"Our goal is to keep it peaceful," said Mohammed al-Sabri of the Islah Party, boasting that the protests were completely under control. "The opposition lead everything," he said. "Whatever they say, their followers will do." He added, emphasizing the contrast,

“Egypt is chaos.”

The Saleh government recognizes the anti-revolutionary posture of the Common Front and seeks to take advantage of it. Abubaker al-Qirbi, the foreign minister of Yemen, told BBC Radio that the government wanted “serious dialogue” with the opposition. “We have never closed the door for their participation” in the government, he said.

In language intended for the ears of British and American imperialism, he continued, “Any instability, not only in Yemen, whether it is in Egypt or Tunisia or in any other country, will play into the hands of extremists and terrorists. This is really why it is important to work with governments and opposition parties to make them realize that the objective of change is to create stability and not to create anarchy.”

In his speech Wednesday, delivered to a joint meeting of parliament—where his party holds 240 out of 301 seats—the Shoura Council, a consultative body, and military officers, Saleh publicly rebuffed efforts to rescind constitutional term limits and allow him to continue in office after his term expires in 2013. He also pledged that his son Ahmed, a brigadier general who heads the presidential guard and the elite special forces, would not succeed him.

The president said that parliamentary elections set for April would be postponed by several months, in response to opposition complaints that the registration rolls had been closed too soon, depriving more than 1 million Yemenis of the right to vote. He concluded by calling on the opposition to join him in a national unity government to prevent “chaos.”

Saleh has previously made and reneged on pledges to end his more than three decades of rule, but the Obama administration immediately praised his latest promise. State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley welcomed Saleh’s “positive statements.”

President Obama telephoned Saleh to express his support, telling him, according to the Yemeni news agency Saba, “You have handled the situation well, and I look forward to working with you in a good partnership between the two countries.”

Over the past five years, the US has provided \$250 million in military aid to the impoverished country, which shares a land border only with Saudi Arabia and Oman. In return, Saleh has permitted CIA Predator drone and cruise missile strikes against alleged Al

Qaeda targets that have killed many civilians.



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