

Yemen's Saleh seeks deal with bourgeois opposition

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Faced with mass opposition in the country and a split in ruling class circles, the US-backed president of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, entered negotiations with his political rivals on Saturday.

As protests continued across the country, the government of Saleh is still holding out for a deal with some opposition parties and powerful figures from the national elite that will allow the president to remain in office for the remainder of the year.

Saleh, whose dictatorial regime receives millions of dollars of aid as well as military training from Washington, has repeatedly launched vicious attacks on protests, which broke out in the Middle Eastern country in late January. In the most recent massacre, Saleh's forces killed an estimated 52 demonstrators on the streets of the capital, Sanaa, on March 18.

The crackdown failed to quell the mass protest movement, with hundreds of thousands pouring onto the streets of Sanaa in the following days, joined by contingents of tribesmen from the surrounding countryside. Outside the capital, the regime has almost no authority. Anti-government forces have taken over government buildings and driven Saleh's representatives from office in towns and districts across the country, including the major port city of Aden.

Fresh clashes took place on Sunday in the southern province of Abyan. An Islamist group, alleged to be associated with Al Qaeda, took control of several government buildings, including a munitions factory, in the towns of Jaar and Lowdar. Yemeni troops retook the area in fighting that left six soldiers and an unknown number of Islamists dead.

Massive protests against the government are continuing in Sanaa. Tens of thousands marched through the capital on Friday, chanting anti-Saleh slogans and demanding democratic government and improved living conditions. Al Jazeera reported that at least one demonstrator was shot on Friday. Onlookers told the news agency that police snipers, who were responsible for most of the March 18 deaths, were still on the roofs of buildings in the city.

An armed pro-Saleh mob attempted to attack anti-government protesters near Sanaa University on Friday, but was dispersed by soldiers from units that have mutinied against the government.

In order to head off mass popular opposition to the regime, a

section of the military top brass and senior figures from government broke with Saleh last week. Voicing support for the "youth revolution," these members of the ruling class, who for decades collaborated in the repression and exploitation of the Yemeni people, are now jockeying to secure their interests.

Of particular significance was the defection of Major General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, one of the most powerful figures in the military and formerly a close ally of Saleh. The general, who has fallen out of favor with Saleh in recent years, sent his forces to take control of large parts of Sanaa last week, under the guise of protecting demonstrators from police attacks.

It was the defection of some military commanders—not the weeks of protests on the streets—that gave the signal to other powerful figures to split from Saleh. Among the new supporters of the "revolution" are several former ambassadors, government ministers and the head of the Yemen Oil Company, Omar al-Arhabi, who is Saleh's brother-in-law.

On Saturday, representatives of this "opposition" met with the Saleh regime in Sanaa to strike a deal to end the crisis. One of the key figures negotiating with the government was Mohammed al-Sabri, leader of the Nasserite Unionist People's Organization. A nationalist party that sits on the opposition benches of the country's toothless parliament, the Nasserites have been an established fixture in Yemeni politics since the organization was legalized in 1989.

The Nasserites have worked loyally with Saleh ever since, even praising supposed attempts by the president to act against corruption in the armed forces. Al-Sabri, in an interview with the *Yemen Post* in 2008, described the Yemeni army as a "national institution and property to all Yemeni citizens."

That the Nasserites should now be in league in figures such as Major General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar—one of the wealthiest and most corrupt leaders in the military—speaks volumes about their democratic principles.

In a further expression of the anti-democratic nature of the negotiations between oppositionists and the regime, the US ambassador to Yemen, Gerald Feierstein, was present at Saturday's talks. Washington has backed Saleh throughout the mass protests, with the US State Department offering only the most muted criticism of the slaughter of unarmed demonstrators by Saleh's forces.

Feierstein has previously voiced opposition to the protests in Yemen. In comments made to Reuters earlier in the month, the ambassador said that the US did not “believe that the demonstrations are the place where Yemen’s problems will be solved.”

Representing the government at the talks, Vice President Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi rejected calls for Saleh to step down. Presidential spokesman Ahmed al-Sufi said the demands placed on the government were “impossible to accept” and that “the president wants an honorable transfer of power according to the constitution through elections.”

Saleh has promised not to run in early elections proposed for later this year, and that his sons would not stand to replace him.

Political analyst Abdul-Ghani al-Iryani told Reuters that Saleh was now only “maneuvering for favorable exit terms. Still, with tanks on the streets of Sanaa, he is holding the city hostage.”

The mass protests have rejected Saleh’s offer to step down later this year, correctly realizing that even if the president honored his word, the intervening period would be used to ramp up repression of opposition forces while consolidating the power and wealth of the Saleh family and their coterie.

That Saleh is still able to cling to power and negotiate for a favorable outcome, despite the near collapse of his government, is testament to the support that he continues to receive from the US.

The presence of the US ambassador at the meeting on Saturday indicates that it is Washington calling the shots in the negotiations. The outcome of such a sordid compromise between Saleh, the bourgeois opposition and US imperialism will be an equally venal regime opposed to the most elementary demands of the Yemeni masses.

Speaking before the US-brokered talks, Saleh, whose elite Republican Guard forces still control key government and military installations in the capital, announced on the Al-Arabiya satellite television network that only he could prevent the fracturing of the country.

“Yemen is a ticking time bomb and if the political system collapses and there’s no constructive dialogue there will be a long civil war that will be difficult to end,” Saleh declared. Seeking to whip up sectarian backing for his rule, Saleh claimed that the Houthis, a Shiite Muslim tribal group based along Yemen’s boarder with Saudi Arabia, had influenced the protests. The Houthis have fought a protracted war with Saleh’s forces and the Saudi monarchy over their demands for autonomy.

Yemen had been divided during the Cold War, with Saleh ruling US-backed North Yemen from 1979 until he took over the unified state in 1990. There is a powerful secessionist movement in the south of the country, as well as numerous tribal and sectarian tensions.

The main concern for the parties to the negotiations is the preservation of bourgeois rule in Yemen and across the Arabian

Peninsula. To the extent that Saleh is seen as a liability, Washington is preparing sections of the opposition leadership to enter a future government in order to strangle the movement of workers.

The uprising across the Middle East and North Africa has seen the working class come into open conflict with the Arab bourgeoisie, which has for decades enriched itself from the region’s resources while brutally repressing any expression of the social and democratic aspirations of the masses.

In another US-backed dictatorship in the region, security forces in Bahrain used police batons and teargas to quell crowds still protesting against the regime on Friday. Al Jazeera reported that clouds of gas could be seen across the capital city, Manama. “People will march down the street and a helicopter will appear, police will move in, and people move indoors,” the news agency’s correspondent reported.

A 71-year-old man died of asphyxiation after police fired tear gas grenades into crowds gathered in the town of Maameer. At least 20 people have been killed since anti-government protests began in February, and hundreds more have been wounded.

Demonstrations in Bahrain have been smaller in recent days after the government of King Hamad al-Khalifa, backed by over a thousand troops from Saudi Arabia, launched a crackdown in Manama on March 17 that left at least six people dead. Pro-regime thugs have also been terrorizing working class neighborhoods, attacking businesses and entering the homes of Shiite Muslims, the religious majority of Bahrain who face discrimination from the Sunni al-Khalifa monarchy.

Workers and youth in Yemen and Bahrain and across the Arab world have sought the ouster of hated dictators and monarchs, but they have also demanded social and economic rights: job creation programs for youth, secure employment, an end to the privatization of state-owned assets, and the equitable distribution of oil revenues.

These demands for social equality cut directly across the interests of the ruling class in every country in the region. But the uprisings also threaten the interests of the imperialist powers, who for decades have backed these regimes in order to profit from the mineral wealth of the Middle East and North Africa.

In order to protect their predatory interests, Washington and the other major powers continue to back Saleh and al-Khalifa, as well as the other despots of the region—while utilizing feigned concern for “human rights” to justify a colonial war of plunder against Libya.



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