

Mass protests continue in Yemen, as official opposition conspires with US, Gulf states

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Yemen witnessed massive protests April 13, some of the largest yet in the wave of anti-government demonstrations that began in mid-January. Hundreds of thousands took part in rallies Wednesday in this nation of 24 million people, the poorest in the Arab world.

Until recently the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh was strongly backed by the Obama administration. Various negotiations are now under way involving the venal official opposition that are aimed at maneuvering Saleh from power, while maintaining the existing oppressive political and military structures.

Attacks by Saleh's security forces over the past several months have resulted in hundreds of deaths in Yemen's major cities, including the massacre of 60 and wounding of hundreds when plainclothes gunmen opened fire on unarmed demonstrators in the capital, Sana'a, on March 18.

Six more people died Wednesday, including several soldiers as rival factions of the military opened fired on one another at a checkpoint outside Sana'a.

Also on April 13, 17 protesters were injured in fighting with police and pro-government thugs in Ibb (population 166,000), the capital of an inland southern province of the same name. An eyewitness told Xinhua, the Chinese news agency, "The two sides clashed near Ibb University, as protesters demanding an immediate end to the long time rule of Saleh defended themselves by throwing stones.... [A]t least four protesters were wounded by gunshots and were now in hospital."

In Al Bayda province, also in Yemen's south, anti-government forces took part in protests for the first time. Demonstrations also occurred in the southern provinces of Dhamar, Taiz, Hadramawt and Aden. The latter has been the scene of some of the most violent and deadly clashes. Three protesters were shot dead by police and dozens more wounded in the seaport on Wednesday.

Tens of thousands also took to the streets April 13 in the northern Yemeni provinces of Sa'dah and Al Hudaydah, as well as in Sana'a. The protesters, according to the media, called for "more freedom, and less poverty."

On the same day, 10,000 members of the armed and security forces announced their defection from the camp of Saleh to join the anti-government forces.

The gun battle between the military factions, who reportedly exchanged AK-47 and rocket-propelled grenade fire for an hour, erupted when forces loyal to Saleh attempted to take over a checkpoint being operated by rebel soldiers under the command of Maj. Gen. Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar. One of the most powerful figures in the Yemen military, as well as Saleh's half-brother and longtime ally, Ahmar joined the opposition following the massacre on March 18.

The presence of Ahmar, fully implicated in Saleh's past acts of repression, including the brutal suppression, in "Operation Scorched Earth," of the Houthi Shiite insurgency in Yemen's north in 2009-10, gives some indication of the character of the official opposition, a disparate group of former government officials, tribal leaders and opportunists of one stripe or another.

Ahmar's forces, organized in the First Armored Division (he also commands the "Northwest Military Area"), have begun taking over control of sections of Sana'a, according to media accounts, "setting up checkpoints along the main road running to the country's main airport and the state television station." (*Christian Science Monitor*)

While masses of Yemenis courageously continue to risk their lives in the struggle to bring down Saleh, the Obama administration, its reactionary allies in the Gulf states and elements within Yemen's elite are attempting to seamlessly remove the president from power.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC—representing the monarchies of United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar and Kuwait) has offered a plan for the "transition of power" from Saleh to his vice president, Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi and the formation of a government of "national unity" under the chairmanship of the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP).

The GCC plan bases itself on a number of "principles," whose essence is the defense of the Yemeni state and

security apparatus. While briefly paying lip service to “the aspirations of the Yemeni people for change and reform,” aspirations similar to those the Bahraini, Omani and Saudi authorities are currently repressing in their own countries, the GCC urges a solution that will “lead to maintaining the unity of Yemen and its security and stability” and will “be carried out in a smooth and safe way saving Yemen from slipping into anarchy and violence within national consensus.”

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton hailed the GCC initiative, noting hypocritically, “We strongly encouraged all sides to engage in a dialogue to reach a solution that would be supported by the Yemeni people.”

The response of the Yemeni opposition to the GCC plan has been confused. A spokesman for the JMP, Mohammed Qahtan, first indicated that “The Gulf states need to clarify the meaning of the transition of power.... We have not received [a date], we are awaiting their call, [to see] if there is a new suggestion from them.” The opposition also complained that the Gulf states’ plan hinted at immunity for Saleh.

Opposition leaders met the ambassadors of Saudi Arabia, Oman and Kuwait on Tuesday “seeking clarification” from the rulers of their much richer and more powerful neighbors. A prominent opposition leader, Mohammed al-Mutawakkil, told the media that “nothing new” emerged from the meeting and that the JMP was giving Saleh two weeks to leave office.

However, on Thursday, JMP spokesman Qahtan told Xinhua that the opposition “accepted” the GCC plan. He explained that “we have met with the ambassadors of the GCC in Sana’a and then we made sure of everything regarding the final statement of the GCC, including the guarantee of Saleh’s step down in detail.”

On Wednesday, perhaps significantly, Maj. Gen. Ahmar announced his support for the GCC initiative, as did multimillionaire and leading opposition figure Hamid al-Ahmar.

A recent event reveals a good deal about the Yemeni opposition. On April 5, a number of its leaders, including Qahtan and Tawakkol Karman, head of Women Journalists Without Chains, appeared at a video press conference hosted by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), two CIA- and US government-funded outfits. When asked how the transition from Saleh to the opposition would occur, Qahtan offered a brief answer: “The mediation terms were started by the US ambassador to the region.”

The US has supported the Saleh regime to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars in military equipment and training, and operated covert teams and set up bases in

Yemen. The official reason is Washington’s concern about the growth of Islamist forces in Yemen, organized in Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The latter group owes its ultimate origin to the US-supported war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, aimed at destabilizing the Soviet Union, in which thousands of Yemenis participated. For his own cynical purposes, Saleh has made use of the jihadists in internal conflicts.

While Washington no doubt considers Islamic fundamentalism a threat, the ranks of AQAP are estimated to number no more than 100 to 400 “hard-core militants,” according to a recent report issued by the Congressional Research Service (March 22, 2011). The same CRS study points out that “some observers anticipate that the AQAP threat to the US homeland is not nearly as dire as advertised.”

The Congressional Research report also observes that commentators “note that instability in Yemen would affect more than just US interests—it would affect global energy security, due to Yemen’s strategic location astride the Bab al Mandab strait between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.” Oil tankers “carrying an estimated 3 million barrels” pass through the strait each day. Yemen’s neighbor to the north is Saudi Arabia, a critical US ally and asset.

The Obama administration has taken a particular interest in arming and propping up the Saleh dictatorship. The CRS comments, “Over the past two years, US military and economic assistance to Yemen has dramatically increased.” For fiscal year 2011, the administration “is seeking \$106.6 million in foreign assistance for Yemen, a request well above previous amounts (\$42 million in FY2009 and \$67 million in FY2010).” Pentagon assistance “to Yemen also has increased in recent years.” In fiscal year 2010 the US Department of Defense “is providing an estimated \$150 million in assistance to Yemen, well above” the \$66.8 million in fiscal year 2009.

This may help account for the reluctance of the administration to part company with Saleh. The position of the US government has been to refrain from calling for his departure. As one unnamed American official declared, the administration would not “speculate or try to predict the outcome” —not the policy Washington has adopted in Libya, for example, where it is doing something more than “speculating” or “predicting.”



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