

New effort to force Yemeni president from office

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Yemen's president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, has reportedly accepted a deal to leave office, handing over power to his deputy, Vice President Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi, and a new coalition government.

The agreement, which was brokered by the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and backed by the United States, could see Saleh resign with 30 days of signing a formal agreement that would grant him and his family immunity from prosecution and protect their substantial economic interests.

Washington and the GCC have been in talks with Saleh and various opposition groups for several weeks, looking to strike a deal that will allow them to wind down the anti-government demonstrations that have seized the country for three months.

The deal brokered by the GCC and Washington to protect Saleh and ensure the continuation of the existing repressive regime in Yemen exposes the utter hypocrisy of the US, the European powers and the Gulf sheikdoms. An almost identical arrangement was proposed to the Gaddafi regime in Libya by the government of Turkey, backed by Greece and the African Union. That deal offered Gaddafi a negotiated settlement that would lead to a power-sharing coalition government.

That arrangement was rejected immediately by Washington, France, Britain and their allies in the Libyan "rebel" leadership in Benghazi because it did not demand the immediate resignation of Gaddafi as a precondition for the start of talks. No such precondition is necessary when the major powers and the GCC are dealing with *their* man in Yemen.

The agreement would require the opposition groups to take responsibility for shutting down the mass street protests. Millions of Yemenis have taken to the streets in towns and cities across the country, demanding the

ouster of Saleh and his hated regime, as well as jobs and improved pay for workers. Yemen, located in the southwest of the Arabian Peninsula, is the poorest Arab state, with a poverty rate close to 50 percent and extremely high youth unemployment.

The Saleh regime, backed by Washington, has met the demonstrations with deadly force, killing and wounding hundreds of demonstrators. Thousands of protesters have been abducted and tortured by the regime and by pro-Saleh gangs. Medical personnel and news reporters have been subjected to violence and intimidation for recording the atrocities committed by the regime.

The rulers of Saudi Arabia are especially worried about instability in Yemen. In recent years, Riyadh has launched military strikes into Yemen in an effort to put down a tribal insurgency near its border. Moreover, the Saudi royal family is fearful that the mass street protests, mainly comprised of working class youth, could spread to the kingdom. Millions in Saudi Arabia are chafing under conditions of brutal dictatorship and an economy that offers very limited economic prospects for young people, women and the Shiite religious minority.

However, it is far from clear that the opposition parties in Yemen can shut down the protests. The bourgeois opposition, which includes ex-officials of the Saleh regime and the leaders of parties with a long history of collaboration with the president, has very little authority on the streets.

The *New York Times* reported one opposition leader, Yassin Saeed Norman, as saying that the opposition lacked the power to force protesters from the streets. It has called for this precondition to be dropped.

The weakness of the opposition has been seized upon by the Saleh regime to present itself as the guardian of

order in Yemen. A spokesman goaded the opposition for quibbling about a deal that has already received the backing of Saudi Arabia, the US and the European Union.

“This will be good for the president, because it’s clear that the opposition has refused everything,” one Saleh insider told the *New York Times*. “The opposition has shown that they fear going into coalition and they are not ready to deal with international initiatives. They are divided and weak.”

Saleh has made similar concessions in the past in an effort to maintain his rule. He had already offered to step aside after fresh elections, possibly to take place in September, and promised that his son would not stand to replace him. These offers, and the current claim that he will step aside in 30 days if certain conditions are met, are viewed with skepticism and hostility on the streets of the capital, Sanaa, and other cities.

The working class, youth and many from the tribal areas who have protested for months in the face of savage repression recognize that no word from this despotic regime can be trusted. Moreover, even if Saleh does step down, immunity for him and the transfer of power to his long-term vice president means the essential continuity of the old regime and the cover-up of its crimes.

Beholden to the major powers, especially Washington, and as fearful of the uprising of the impoverished masses as the Saudis and the imperialist powers, the bourgeois opposition in Yemen can only force the protesters from the streets by joining a national unity government with Saleh’s People’s General Congress party. The principal task of such a regime would be to crush any remaining signs of resistance, as the post-Ben Ali regime in Tunisia and the post-Mubarak regime in Egypt are attempting to do.

The role of Washington throughout the recent events in Yemen has been especially insidious. While calling for “restraint” and backing negotiations, the US ambassador to Sanaa, Gerald Feierstein, has condemned the street protests, and the Obama administration has continued to back the Yemeni dictator despite the mass killings carried out by his forces.

Saleh has been a US asset for decades, going back to the Cold War, when Yemen was divided into US-backed North Yemen, which Saleh ruled from 1978,

and the Soviet-sponsored People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen. Washington has supported Saleh ever since and has developed very close military ties with his regime under the guise of the “war on terror.”

Unmanned US Predator drones and Special Forces troops have launched dozens of attacks on groups and individuals reportedly associated with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and other Islamist tribal groups opposed to Saleh. But beyond its operations against Islamist militants—whose numbers are reportedly only in the low hundreds—Washington has supported Saleh as a regional policeman to violently suppress the working masses of the region and a bulwark of US interests in a geo-strategically vital area.

Yemen sits on the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, the waterway between the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea through which most of the oil from the Persian Gulf is shipped, en route to the principal markets of western Europe. Vital to world trade and the economic interests of the major powers, the lands around the strait have been fought over throughout the twentieth century by the US, Britain, the USSR, France and Italy.



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