

# Yemen president torpedoed agreement to leave office

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President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen backed off on an agreement last weekend to leave power after 32 years, refusing to sign the deal brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council, the organization of Persian Gulf oil states dominated by Saudi Arabia.

The GCC agreement had been accepted by representatives of Saleh and the coalition of bourgeois opposition parties, although representatives of the youth and students who have spearheaded the anti-government protests in the capital, Sanaa, and other cities rejected it because of a provision for amnesty for Saleh and his family.

Saleh was supposed to travel to the Saudi capital Riyadh Sunday for a formal signing, but he refused, and the secretary general of the GCC, Abdullatif al-Zayani, came back from a visit to Sanaa without having persuaded the Yemeni president to sign the document.

The plan proposes the formation of a government of national unity, in which Saleh would transfer power to his vice president, opposition politicians would join the government, and Saleh would resign his office within 30 days. This would be followed two months later by a new presidential election.

Saleh reversed himself and rejected the deal—which had the backing of the United States and the European Union, as well as Saudi Arabia—but it is not clear whether he will seek to hold onto power outright, or simply wants a higher price for his departure.

His ruling party, the General Peoples Congress, demanded an end to opposition sit-ins and other protests as part of the agreement, although that is not one of the provisions proposed by the GCC.

There was new violence April 27 in the capital city when plainclothes security forces and supporters of Saleh shot 12 protesters to death. Tens of thousands joined new protests on April 29 in response to the latest

massacre, chanting, “The people want the trial of the murderer,” and other slogans demanding that Saleh be held personally liable for the crimes committed by his regime.

The deal has foundered at least in part because the opposition parties with whom Saleh and the GCC are negotiating have no credibility among the millions of youth, workers and rural tribesmen who have taken part in anti-government protests. For years, the leaders of these parties have played the role of a tame and subservient opposition in the Yemeni parliament, and in some cases have held positions in Saleh’s dictatorship.

In addition to at least 100,000 people marching Friday in Sanaa, there were tens of thousands of anti-government demonstrators in Ibb, Baydah and Hudaida, as well as other cities in southern Yemen.

The militancy of the opposition movement has intensified since the March 18 massacre in which government snipers shot and killed as many as 55 people who were marching in anti-Saleh protests after Friday prayer services.

Besides rejecting immunity for Saleh for such atrocities, demonstrators have voiced skepticism that the president will actually carry out any agreement to leave power. There are plenty of loopholes in the deal brokered by the GCC. For example, Saleh’s resignation, delayed for 30 days, must be accepted by the parliament, in which the ruling party has a huge majority. He could easily submit his resignation and see his political stooges reject it and demand that he stay in office.

The conflict over the GCC agreement portends a radicalization in the anti-government movement, particularly among the youth and students, who regard the opposition parties, both Islamist and social-

democratic, as little better than collaborators with Saleh.

For their part, the opposition parties effectively admitted they gave in to the political pressure of the Saudis and the US embassy—which has been sitting in on the talks—and the threat of violence. Ahmed Bahri, a top opposition leader, said, “We accepted the GCC proposal after a long debate from within for the sake of Yemen. It was either that or a civil war.”

Saleh’s trump card throughout the political crisis that erupted in Yemen in February, after the collapse of the Mubarak dictatorship in Egypt, has been Washington’s backing for his regime. The Yemeni dictatorship has deliberately hyped the danger of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, a terrorist group with an estimated 200 members that operates freely in some of the rural parts of eastern Yemen.

Top US officials such as Defense Secretary Robert Gates and chief White House counterterrorism coordinator John Brennan have repeatedly declared the importance of the Saleh government’s cooperation with US forces against AQAP. According to one diplomatic cable made public by WikiLeaks, Saleh went so far as to approve US bombing of remote areas of Yemen, while telling his own parliament that it was the Yemeni military, not the Pentagon, that was carrying out the air strikes.

According to a report by journalist Nick Turse, a fellow at Harvard’s Radcliffe Institute, US military aid to the Saleh government is playing a direct role in the suppression of anti-government demonstrations. Turse cited eyewitness accounts of the use of military helicopters supplied by the Obama administration since the beginning of 2011, under the Pentagon’s “1206” program.

New Bell UH-1H helicopters, the advanced version of the “Huey” chopper that was the principle gunship and troop transport during the Vietnam War, have been overflying demonstrations in Sanaa and other cities, possibly providing targeting information for government snipers.

Yemeni pilots and maintenance personnel are trained at Bell’s facility in Alliance, Texas. According to Brandon Denecke of the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “The swift execution of the Yemen Huey II program demonstrates that the military departments—in this case the US Army—can quickly deliver defense

articles and services to US partners with the cooperation of US industry.”

Yemen is the largest recipient of US military aid under the 1206 program, named after a section in the national defense legislation that authorizes such funding. It has received \$253 million in equipment, one fifth of the worldwide total. According to the Congressional Reserve Service, this includes “light airplanes, helicopters, small arms, ammunition, light tactical vehicles, trucks, radios, surveillance cameras, computers, body armor, patrol boats, and helicopter parts, among other materiel.”



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