

US strives to engineer post-Saleh regime in Yemen

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Heavy fighting between government forces and opposition militants in the south of Yemen continues to claim scores of lives and force thousands of civilians to flee the area.

The Yemeni armed forces, backed by United States warplanes and Predator drones, are waging a war against armed rebel groups that have taken control of two southern cities, Zinjibar and Jaar, while the government appears to have limited authority in the large cities of Aden and Taiz.

While the focus of the civil conflict is in southern Yemen, there are ongoing protests against the regime in the capital, Sanaa, large sections of which are held by tribal militias opposed to the government. Mass anti-government protests broke out in Sanaa and other Yemeni cities in January of this year, inspired by the revolutionary developments in Tunisia.

There is an acute shortage of fuel in the capital due to a blockade by militiamen, and the regime's authority, which rests on elements of the military and the police, is limited to key government compounds. The conflict between the government and various rival groups has left much of Yemen with acute shortages of oil and electricity.

Despite the profound unpopularity of the regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has been receiving medical treatment in neighboring Saudi Arabia since a blast in the presidential compound in Sanaa seriously injured him on June 3, Washington continues to back the government's efforts to maintain control of the country.

Washington has justified its involvement in the civil conflict in Yemen with claims that the country might become a "safe haven" for Al Qaeda. The US has intensified its military support for the Yemeni

government since Saleh's departure to the Saudi capital, Riyadh.

The Yemeni regime, backed by Washington, attributes most of the opposition in the south of the country to Al Qaeda. On Monday, the Yemeni state news agency, Saba, reported that the armed forces had foiled a plot by Al Qaeda to attack government buildings in the main southern port city of Aden.

The actual level of Al Qaeda involvement in the anti-government militias in southern Yemen is unclear, however. There are many groups, with disparate ideologies and goals, operating in the south of the country.

As well as various Islamic groups—most with no established link to Al Qaeda—there are many tribal militias, as well as a large secular nationalist-secessionist movement based in Aden. The US government has acknowledged that there may be only a few hundred Al Qaeda fighters in Yemen, a country of 24 million people, where anti-government protests by students and workers have regularly numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

Washington has backed Saleh since he came to power in 1978, in what was then North Yemen. Both the US and its Saudi allies saw Saleh as a bulwark of their interests in the country. With the massive Saudi oil fields to its north and major oil shipping lanes to its south, Yemen has long been prized as a strategically important state.

Only when Saleh failed to put down the protests and tribal disputes did his position become untenable for Washington and Riyadh, who withdrew their backing for the dictator while continuing to support the remnants of his regime.

Over the past two months, the US and the Saudis have worked to engineer a post-Saleh regime that will

continue to serve their interests. US Assistant Secretary of Near East Affairs Jeffery Feltman paid a visit to Yemen and Saudi Arabia last week, during which he called for “an immediate, peaceful, and orderly transition” of power in Yemen.

A few days after Feltman’s trip, spokesmen for Saleh announced that the president would make a speech “within days” on the political situation in Yemen. It is widely believed that Saleh will use the address to announce the terms on which he plans to retire from the presidency, including possible dates for elections.

Washington has been working for months to ensure that the fall of Saleh will not change the essential character of the regime in Yemen, especially its longstanding relations with the Pentagon and the CIA. The Yemeni armed forces—the mainstay of the Saleh regime—have received hundreds of millions of dollars in aid from Washington in recent years, as well as anti-terrorism training from US Special Forces.

There are US armed forces personnel still embedded in the Yemeni military, even as it conducts a civil war within the country, and Pentagon and CIA aircraft are engaged in missions reportedly aimed at assassinating Al Qaeda targets in the south.

The US ambassador in Sanaa, Gerald Feierstein, has been in talks with the Saleh regime and various bourgeois opposition leaders since March about the possible formation of an interim coalition government. Feierstein has also maintained close contact with the top brass in the Yemeni military, and the US ambassador held talks on Monday with Yemen’s Chief of the General Staff Ahmed Ali al-Ashwal and Brigadier Mujahid Ghashim, the chief of military intelligence.

Despite the best efforts of Washington to cobble together a pliant successor regime to Saleh, there is deep hostility between the ruling clique and the main bourgeois opposition bloc, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP). Last week, a spokesman from the Yemeni Interior Ministry accused the JMP of terrorist attacks on oil pipelines and electricity stations.

Also, the JMP enjoys very little support among the working class and youth who have demonstrated on the streets of Sanaa for months. These protests have called not just for the removal and prosecution of the dictator and his cronies, but for jobs, social rights and a fairer distribution of national wealth. To the largely young

protesters, the sclerotic “opposition” parties—Nasserites, pseudo-socialists, Baathists and Islamists—hold no appeal.

Most of the leadership of the JMP has collaborated with Saleh for years, even praising him as a “reformer.” Faced with demands from the regime that they bring the mass demonstrations to a halt, the JMP leadership has repeatedly declared that this is not a task they are capable of carrying out.

The US would have no compunction about sponsoring a military regime in Yemen, as it did in Egypt following the ouster of Hosni Mubarak, should it prove impossible to form a nominally civilian government. However, even if the Saleh regime and the JMP can form a coalition, the US-backed military would remain the power behind the throne.

Any regime born with Washington acting as midwife, and with US aircraft bombing the country, will be every bit as anti-democratic and hostile to the social aspirations of the masses as that of Saleh.



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