

Yemeni political crisis set to escalate

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The government and opposition groups in Yemen are both preparing for an escalating confrontation after President Ali Abdullah Saleh announced last week that he would return to the country. Saleh has been convalescing in Saudi Arabia after he and other top government officials were injured in a bomb blast on the presidential compound on June 3.

In a further sign that the government intends to go on the offensive, spokesman Abdul Janadi accused two prominent opposition figures—business tycoon Hamid al-Ahmar and military leader Ali Mohsen—of planning the attack on Saleh. Janadi claimed that there were “strong accusations” against the two men, following a “long investigation.”

The bourgeois opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) warned the “international community” against believing the “fabrications” and promised to produce a statement refuting the allegations. Hamid al-Ahmar, who owns the satellite network Suhail TV, has reportedly spent millions financing the opposition after anti-Saleh protests first erupted in February. Ali Mohsen defected from the military to the opposition in March.

The government appears to have taken pre-emptive action against an escalation of protests, with an article in the Abu Dhabi-based *National* reporting that more than 60 tanks and armoured vehicles backed by heavily-armed troops have been stationed at key points in the capital, Sanaa, this week. “We watched closely the rapid fall in Libya, and are learning and preparing how to plan our upcoming steps,” a security official told the newspaper.

Fighting is continuing outside the capital, where significant areas of the country are under the control of various oppositional tribal militias. Government officials yesterday claimed that 30 Al Qaeda militants had been killed in airstrikes near the town of Zinjibar and six more in a further strike in the nearby Arkoub area. Eight

government soldiers were killed in ground fighting near Zinjibar.

The Saleh regime routinely demonises opposition militia as “Al Qaeda terrorists” to justify attacks that are carried out with the involvement both of US drones and American special forces “trainers” working with the Yemeni military.

The US has backed the strongman Saleh since he came to power in 1978, in what was then North Yemen, and became president of the unified Yemen formed in 1990. The US and its Saudi allies have regarded the autocratic Saleh regime as the means for safeguarding their interests in a country that is strategically located adjacent to important shipping lanes from the Middle East.

As opposition to the president has mounted, the US has sought to engineer a post-Saleh regime that preserves the state apparatus and continues to protect American interests. Washington has supported a proposal sponsored by the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council for Saleh to step down and hand power to a transitional administration headed by his vice-president.

Amid what was then speculation about Saleh’s return to Yemen, US State Department spokesman Victoria Nuland declared in early August that the transition process should not be “held hostage” while the president considered his options. “Our view is that Yemen needs to move in a democratic direction along the lines of the GCC report,” she said.

Washington is no more interested in “democracy” in Yemen than it is in Libya where NATO is preparing to install the Transitional National Council (TNC) as its pliable client to replace the tottering Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. Having backed Saleh for as long as possible, the US is now considering how to head off the continuing protests in Sanaa and other Yemeni cities and

towns.

The bourgeois opposition in Yemen is also making its political preparations. The JMP joined with various other opposition organisations last week to announce the formation of a National Council for Peaceful Revolution Forces. Its executive body, the National Council (NC), was to include 143 representatives of the major opposition groupings.

The NC is rather transparently modelled on the Libyan TNC, with the objective of appealing for the support of the major imperialist powers in replacing the Saleh regime. In a clear sign of the new organisation's class orientation, leading JMP figure Mohammed Basswindha, who chaired the founding meeting, declared the NC would form "popular committees" to protect "citizens' properties and state institutions."

The formation of the National Council for Peaceful Revolution Forces is aimed at consolidating opposition groups around the JMP, which has a limited social base of support. The JMP, which includes the Islamist Islah Party and misnamed Yemini Socialist Party, has collaborated with the Saleh regime for years.

The JMP alienated substantial sections of young protesters, who had conducted rallies and demonstrations for months, by backing the US-sponsored GCC plan for a transitional government issued in June. At the time, Tawakkol Karman, an Islah Party member cited in the media as a protest spokesperson, declared that "the JMP was part of the regime we are seeking to remove." Protest leaders also objected to the GCC's proposal for an amnesty for Saleh and his close family members.

Saleh, however, refused to step aside and negotiations between the government and the JMP for a transitional administration floundered. Last week's establishment of the NC was aimed at including other opposition groups, including elements of the Presidential Transitional Council formed by Karman in mid-July. The continuing divisions quickly became apparent last Saturday, when 35 of the 143 NC members withdrew from the body and rejected its legitimacy. These included 23 members of southern-based separatist groups who complained about inadequate representation for southern Yemen.

Karman was among the 35 who stepped aside, claiming

she had never agreed to be part of the NC. However, her political orientation is no different than that of the NC. In an opinion piece written for the *New York Times* in June, Karmen appealed to "American officials to engage with the leaders of Yemen's democracy movement and abandon their misplaced investment in the old regime's security apparatus... We have no objections to agreements that protect your security interests... We ask our friends in Washington and Riyadh to help us build a democratic future."

The Yemeni bourgeois opposition as a whole is just as hostile to the democratic aspirations and social needs of the majority of the impoverished population as the regime it seeks to replace. The call for support from Washington and the repressive regime in Riyadh is a pledge to form a client government that will protect their strategic and economic interests at the expense of the Yemeni people.

Sizeable opposition protests were held in Sanaa and other cities last Friday and again on Monday in support of the National Council for Peaceful Revolution Forces. *Bloomberg* reported that tens of thousands had taken part in demonstrations in Sanaa and the southern city of Taiz. According to the *National*, among the chants on Monday were "Oh Saleh, you will follow Gaddafi."

The chants reflect the political orientation of the Yemeni opposition for US support to replace its present political stooge with a new one.



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