

Yemen edges closer to civil war

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Delivering his first public speech in Yemen for more than three months, President Ali Abdullah Saleh on Sunday gave no indication that he was prepared to step down. Saleh's speech can only further inflame political tensions and the fighting in the capital, Sana'a, between government forces, opposition troops and tribesmen that is threatening to develop into civil war.

Saleh arrived in Sana'a on Friday after spending the previous three months in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, recovering from an assassination attempt in June. In Sunday's speech, the president repeated his previous calls for "dialogue, understanding and a peaceful exchange of power" through elections. He did not outline any plans for signing the power-transfer agreement drafted by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in April. Saleh has agreed to the plan on several occasions but each time backed out at the last moment.

The GCC agreement is supported by the US and the European powers, which want to maintain all the essential aspects of the authoritarian regime they have backed for decades. Under the agreement, Saleh would receive personal immunity from prosecution in exchange for handing power to his vice president to form a transitional government of current regime ministers as well as members of the official opposition—the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) coalition.

Far from promoting "understanding and a peaceful transfer of power," the regime has continued and intensified its attacks on opposition protesters.

On Saturday, security forces launched a before-dawn attack on anti-government demonstrators camped at Change Square, a stretch of road where thousands of people have remained since February. Associated Press (AP) described the assault: "Mortar shells blasted in the

square, setting a number of tents on fire. Snipers on nearby rooftops fired down methodically on protesters dashing for cover." AP estimated that 30 people were killed, including two opposition troops.

On Sunday, an estimated 6,000 protesters marched toward the centre of the capital, demanding justice for the previous day's killings. Security forces fired on the demonstrators, wounding 17 people and killing 4. At least 150 people, with some reports of more than 175, have been killed since September 17, when protesters moved beyond Change Square for the first time in months.

The opposition troops, estimated at 20,000, are led by a former general, Ali Mohsen, who defected from the regime in March. Mohsen brought his First Armoured Division to Change Square, where they continue to guard the perimeters of the camp.

Like the National Transitional Council in Libya, Mohsen has repeatedly appealed to the imperialist powers to remove Saleh and offered himself as their most reliable representative. Following the government's attacks on protesters on Saturday, Mohsen declared: "With [Saleh's] return, Yemen is experiencing sweeping chaos and the harbinger of a crushing civil war." He called on foreign powers to "stop his [Saleh's] irresponsible actions where he intends to ignite a civil war that would bring down the whole country and have repercussions on the whole region and on world peace."

Government troops shelled Mohsen's headquarters near Change Square on Saturday, reportedly killing 11 troops and wounding another 117. On Monday, opposition soldiers captured a base of the Republican Guard, killing the base commander and taking 30 more

government troops hostage. It was the second Republican Guard base to fall in a week.

Security forces are also fighting tribesmen in the northern Hasaba district of Sana'a near the residence of Sadiq Al-Ahmar, who heads the country's powerful Hashid tribe. Both Sadiq and his brother Hamid—a billionaire and leading figure in the opposition Islah Party, a major component of the JMP—have announced their support for the demonstrators. On Saturday, 18 Hashid tribesmen were killed in fighting with security forces.

US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland issued another pro-forma appeal on Saturday for Saleh to sign the GCC agreement and “address the democratic aspirations” of the population through a “peaceful and orderly transition.” She called on “all parties to cease violence and exercise maximum restraint.”

These comments are completely hypocritical. In the case of Libya, the US and European powers exploited the possible killing of civilians as the pretext to launch an imperialist war to oust Moammar Gaddafi. In Yemen, the same powers hope to salvage a regime that has served their interests well. They remain largely silent on the killings, thus giving tacit encouragement to Saleh to broaden his crackdown.

The US has backed Saleh since 1978, when he came to power in what was then North Yemen, and since unification with the South in 1990. Saleh has been a staunch ally of the US “war on terror” from 2001, supporting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the use of CIA drone attacks within Yemen.

Yemen's security forces were largely trained and armed by US officers, who remain on the ground directing drone strikes. Security relations between the two countries have been built up around the present regime, with two of Saleh's sons controlling the government's security agencies. On September 13, CIA director David Petraeus noted approvingly that “counterterrorism cooperation with Yemen has, in fact, improved in the past few months.”

The US routinely justifies attacks on a militant secessionist grouping in the south of Yemen by claiming that it is the local branch of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Washington's main concern is maintaining stability in Yemen, which is strategically located next to oil-rich Saudi Arabia and overlooking the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a key trade route connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and Arabian Ocean.

None of the contending bourgeois parties that threaten to plunge Yemen into civil war represent the interests of the working class and oppressed masses. These parties are indifferent to the elementary needs of the impoverished population, which has an official youth unemployment rate of 35 percent. If they came to power, the opposition formations would not hesitate to use the same repressive methods as Saleh to silence the demands of working people for basic democratic rights and improved living standards.



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