

Yemeni government cracks down on opposition protesters

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At least 26 people have been confirmed dead and several hundred wounded in the Yemeni capital Sana'a, after government forces fired live ammunition and tear gas at tens of thousands of protesters calling for the removal of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The president is currently in Saudi Arabia after surviving a bomb attack in June and last week agreed to begin negotiations over a transfer of power, but many protesters believe that the move is just another delaying tactic.

Associated Press reported that more than 100,000 protesters massed on Sunday around the state radio building and government offices in Sana'a. Anti-government demonstrations have been taking place for months at Change Square in the centre of the capital, but Sunday's protest was the first in other parts of the capital. Security forces opened fire when demonstrators began to move toward the Presidential Palace.

Eyewitnesses told Associated Press that the security forces had used snipers and shot tear gas canisters. Plainclothes Saleh supporters armed with automatic rifles, swords and batons also attacked the protesters. Demonstrators took control of a main bridge, closed off the entrances and set fire to tents in a camp used by pro-government forces.

To justify the unprovoked attack, the country's interior ministry accused protesters of wounding members of the security forces, throwing petrol bombs and burning government vehicles. Opposition spokesman Mohammed al-Sabri responded by declaring: "This peaceful protest was confronted with heavy weapons and anti-aircraft guns." He told the media that the protests "will not stop and will not retreat."

Protests also occurred yesterday in other major cities,

including Taiz, Saada, Ibb and Damar.

The attack on the opposition demonstration underlines the sharpening political tensions in Yemen after months of anti-government protests demanding that Saleh step down. Saleh issued a decree last Monday authorising negotiations with the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) after seeing a delegation of government ministers in Riyadh the previous day.

The talks would centre on a proposal by the regional Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that envisages a gradual transition to a government without Saleh, through the involvement of the opposition parties. The proposal is backed by the US and European powers as a means for defusing the current political turmoil and establishing a regime that still defends their strategic and economic interests.

The GCC proposal was recently amended to give Saleh additional time—now 90 days—to step down after signing the agreement. He would hand over to Vice President Al-Hadi, who would form a transitional administration—half would come from the current government and 40 percent from the JMP.

The agreement would leave a period of two months for elections to be held. On September 17, Sultan Al-Barakani, assistant secretary general of the ruling party, said the president would sign the agreement within 10-15 days. He cast doubt on early elections, however, saying: "We're used to these things taking six months."

The JMP rejected Saleh's decree and accused him of manoeuvring to hold on to power. Saleh has three times promised to sign the transition plan, before backing out at the last minute. JMP spokesman Mohamme Qahtan

demanded that the president resign immediately, saying “any talk of dialogue” before that was “a waste of time”. More than 100,000 protesters rallied across the country last Tuesday under the slogan, “No more manoeuvring, Saleh must go.”

The JMP, however, has already signed the GCC agreement and is quite prepared to play a junior role in a transitional regime in order to end the protests. Composed of longstanding bourgeois parties, the JMP coalition fears that the unrest will spin out of its control.

Many protesters are hostile to the GCC plan. Hussein Moghram told the *New York Times* last week: “From the beginning, we reject any dialogue... Our demand is clear that Saleh and his family need to go without any negotiations. The JMP is doing political work that we don’t have any relationship with.”

The JMP is clearly appealing for the support of the major imperialist powers, following the lead of the NATO-backed National Transitional Council in Libya. Former general Ali Mohsen, who defected to the opposition in March, issued an ultimatum to Saleh on August 30, warning that he would face the same fate as “the devil”—former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

The NTC in Libya is establishing a regime that will be nothing but a client of the US and European powers. Reports of summary executions, torture and arbitrary imprisonment by NTC forces are a sharp warning of the ruthless methods the NTC will use to stay in power. A JMP government in Yemen backed by the major powers would be no different.

While it is far from certain that the president will step aside, the US has exerted pressure on him to sign the GCC agreement. After he declared on August 16 that he would return to Sana'a “very soon”, Washington quickly stepped in.

On August 30, White House counterterrorism chief John Brennan bluntly told the media: “I’ve told Saleh that I do not believe that it’s in his interests, Yemen’s interests... or our interests to go back to Yemen.” He phoned Vice President Al-Hadi last Thursday to emphasise the need for negotiations on the GCC proposal to proceed as quickly as possible.

The US has backed Saleh since 1978, when the military强人 came to power in what was then North Yemen, and has supported his rule during and since unification with the South in 1990. Saleh has headed a dictatorial regime that has not hesitated to ruthlessly suppress any political opposition, including armed Zaydi Shia rebels in the north and southern separatists.

Under the pretext of the “war on terrorism,” the US has been transforming Yemen into a new base of operations. As well as having proven petroleum reserves, Yemen is an important strategic outpost. Its southern-most port city, Aden, overlooks the shipping lane via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean Sea, through which 3 million barrels of oil pass per day.

The US already has military “advisers” and CIA agents in Yemen. On September 2, the *Washington Post* reported that the CIA was constructing a new runway for its remote-controlled drones to strike against alleged Al Qaeda fighters. The Saleh regime has routinely branded its opponents as “Al Qaeda terrorists” to justify bloody repression against them.

Several cities in the southern region of Abyan, including the provincial capital Zinjibar, have been largely under the military control of opposition groupings since March. Ongoing fighting in the area has killed at least 250 of the government’s Republican Guard, and led to a mass exodus from the area. On September 11, the government announced it had driven southern militants from their positions in Zinjibar, and thanked the US and Saudi governments for their support.

Far from supporting “democracy” in Yemen, the US and its allies will assist any new administration to suppress political opposition in a similar manner.



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