

Saleh urged to resign as Yemeni regime kills more protesters

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Sporadic fighting is continuing in Yemen's capital Sana'a amid a precarious ceasefire between security forces and those troops supporting the opposition, following a three-day crackdown on protesters. An estimated 80 people have been killed since Sunday, when protests escalated against attempts by President Ali Abdullah Saleh to cling onto power. Saleh is still convalescing in Saudi Arabia after a bomb attack on his compound on June 3.

Yesterday, government forces shelled opposition soldiers stationed around a recently-erected encampment of demonstrators. Witnesses said at least two protesters were killed by the shelling. More than 150,000 protesters, troops and armed tribesmen are camped out in an area stretching three kilometres from Change Square, according to protest organisers. Yesterday evening, pro-opposition troops and the regime's Republican Guards were reported to have agreed to a ceasefire demanded by Vice President Abedrabbo Mansour Al-Hadi.

The crackdown began on Sunday when security forces fired at an estimated 100,000 protesters marching along Al-Zubair road toward the centre of the city. According to Associated Press, regime forces used snipers stationed in apartment buildings and rooftops, as well as anti-aircraft guns, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars. Sunday's demonstration was the first in months to move beyond Change Square, where opposition groupings have been camped for seven months. CNN reported protests in every major street, while all roads leading to Change Square were closed off. On Sunday, pro-opposition troops expanded the camp's perimeter to include a major intersection on Al-Zubair road, bringing it within a kilometre of the office of Saleh's son Ahmed, the head of the Republican Guard.

On Monday, thousands of protesters and pro-opposition troops reportedly took control of a Republican Guard headquarters and seized abandoned weapons.

Up to 1,000 people have been wounded by gunfire since Sunday in Sana'a, 47 critically, according to the *Australian*. At least 23 people were reported killed on Tuesday, following the death of 27 people, including two infants, on Monday and 26 on Sunday. Security forces also put down protests in the southern city of Taiz on Monday, killing 5 people, including one woman, and injuring 50. Rallies were reportedly held in Ibb, Aden, Hadramout, Al-Hudayda, Shabw, Marib, Saada, Al-Dhalee and Al-Bayba province, in protest against the regime's suppression in Taiz and Sana'a.

The opposition troops are led by Ali Mohsen, a former general under the Saleh regime who defected to the opposition in March following a brutal wave of repression by the regime in which dozens of protesters were killed. Mohsen took his troops to Change Square on March 21 in the name of "protecting the revolution". One of the most corrupt figures in Yemen, he is widely seen to be seeking to exploit the political unrest for his own purposes.

On September 8, the *Global Post* reported that demonstrators had grown frustrated with opposition leaders after they "succeeded in diverting a protest and containing it within a security cordon" at Change Square. On Monday *Arab News* reported that Mohsen's troops attempted to block protesters advancing beyond the encampment "in an apparent attempt to defuse the situation."

Both Mohsen and the official opposition, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), are concerned that protests and fighting may spill out of their control. The *Los Angeles Times* quoted Mohammed Mutawakel, a leading JMP

figure, saying that “bloodshed from any side is completely wrong.” Saadalden Talib, a former minister for Saleh’s ruling General Peoples Congress, now supportive of an orderly transition, warned: “Complete disintegration and chaos might come very soon.”

The JMP and Mohsen support a power-transfer plan drafted by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in April. The plan envisages a transitional government, headed by the current vice president and composed of current ministers and some JMP members, that would grant Saleh immunity. Saleh agreed to sign the deal three times this year but backed out on each occasion at the last moment. Last week Saleh again refused to sign the deal, instead authorising Vice President Al-Hadi to continue negotiations with the JMP. The move, which was seen as an attempt to hold onto to power, fuelled protests throughout the week.

Last month, the JMP formed the National Coalition of Peaceful Revolutionary Forces (NCPRF), a 143-member council that includes Mohsen as well as Hamid Al-Ahmar, a billionaire and former supporter of Saleh. The grouping was formed to appeal to the major imperialist powers for support along the lines of the NATO-backed National Transitional Council regime being installed in Libya.

An NCPRF statement on Monday condemned the government crackdown and “urged the international community to act against Saleh’s regime.” It warned: “These crimes will not be forgotten and the regime will stand trial for international questioning.”

At present, the European powers and the United States are maintaining their support for the GCC plan as the most effective means for ending political instability. In contrast to their denunciations of Gaddafi, the major powers have made a muted response to the bloody suppression of protesters in Yemen, hoping to maintain, as far as possible, the existing servile regime via the GCC plan.

A US State Department release on Monday noted: “We remain hopeful that an agreement will be reached that leads to the signing of the GCC initiative within one week.” British Foreign Secretary William Hague restated his government’s support for “negotiations for a peaceful settlement to the crisis.”

The US has backed Saleh since 1978 and in recent years has extended its intelligence and military

presence in the country, through military “trainers” on the ground and increased CIA drone strikes, supposedly in the name of combating a local affiliate of Al-Qaeda. Many of the Republican Guard forces now killing protesters were almost certainly trained and armed by the US.

Reflecting behind-the-scenes US pressure on Saleh to sign the GCC proposal, the president met with Saudi Arabian King Abdullah on Monday. The same day, the UN envoy to Yemen, Jamal Benomar, and Gulf Cooperation Council chief Abdullatif al-Zayani arrived in Sana’a to press for an immediate resolution of the political deadlock.

In a sign that the Obama administration may be shifting its support, the US ambassador to Yemen, Gerald Firestein, met with Ali Mohsen on Monday, according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

Yemen is a strategic outpost that overlooks the key shipping lane that connects Europe to the Persian Gulf, through which 3 million barrels of oil pass each day. The country also has its own oil reserves. US Ambassador Firestein and British Ambassador John Wilkes met with the Yemen’s oil minister in Sana’a last Monday, and expressed interest in British and American involvement in Yemen’s petroleum industry.

Regardless of whether it comes to power through the GCC plan or in a military seizure of power, any new government in Yemen backed by the major imperialist powers will be just as ruthless as Saleh in suppressing demands for democratic rights and improved living standards.



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