

Yemen regime massacres dozens as Saleh considers immunity deal

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Thousands participated in funerals on October 19 for more than 30 protesters killed by the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh over the previous week. President Saleh remains recalcitrant, refusing to sign a power transfer initiative backed by the US and European powers that would grant him immunity from prosecution.

The recent wave of killings began on October 15, when an estimated 300,000 people marched beyond their encampment in the capital Sana'a. The protest base, dubbed "Change Square", consists of a stretch of road of several kilometres, where thousands of anti-government demonstrators and opposition tribesmen have slept in tents since February.

Witnesses told the *Guardian* that plainclothes police officers fired on the protesters as they reached a key intersection on Al-Zubeiri Road, which marks the dividing line between areas of the capital controlled by the government and sections held by troops who have defected to the opposition. "We didn't hear any soldiers, we just heard gunshots coming from the houses all around us," said Ahmed Bin Mubarak, a professor at Sana'a University. Mohammed Al Qubati, a surgeon at Change Square, told the *Guardian*: "Most of the protesters were shot in the back of the head or neck."

Despite the regime's repressive response, protesters continued to march beyond their encampment over the following three days. People have reportedly begun to write their names on their bodies for identification in case they are killed. According to Associated Press, another four people were killed in a march on October 16, while 12 people were killed and 70 injured on October 18.

The protests, and the self-sacrifice involved in them, unquestionably reflect genuine opposition to the regime and social discontent over the conditions facing the population. Since January, the price of bread has risen by more than 50 percent in Yemen, which has an official poverty rate of 40 percent. The malnutrition rates for

children under five are as high as 30 percent, according to the United Nations.

The leadership of the anti-Saleh movement, however, is dominated by elements seeking to exploit the popular unrest for their own purposes. Alongside the unarmed protesters, troops loyal to the former Saleh general, Ali Mohsen, are fighting against government forces.

Mohsen led the Saleh regime's repressive war against a Shiite rebellion in the North in 2004 and is considered one of the most powerful figures in Yemen. Since defecting to the opposition in March, he has consistently appealed to the imperialist powers to militarily intervene on the same fraudulent humanitarian grounds used to justify the war on Libya and overthrow of the Gaddafi regime. On October 16, Mohsen declared: "We are calling for an urgent intervention by the international community to bring an immediate stop to the massacres by this ignorant murderer."

On the same day, fighting also erupted in the Northern Hasaba district of Sana'a, between tribesmen loyal to the Saleh government and members of the Hashed tribe, led by Sadeq and Hamid Al-Ahmar. The Hashed leaders only withdrew their support from the government several months ago, after having been key props of the regime. The two sides exchanged mortar fire and used anti-aircraft missiles, according to reports.

Saleh's escalating use of his regime's remaining security forces against the opposition indicates that he intends to attempt to remain in power, in defiance of the power transfer agreement drafted by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and backed by the US and other imperialist powers.

Saleh alleged on October 16 that the protests were a "military coup d'état" by the opposition Islamist Islah party, in coordination with Al Qaeda. According to *Al-Arabiya*, government officials attempted to persuade the GCC to amend the agreement to allow Saleh to remain in

office until elections were held. In recent months, Saleh has repeatedly pledged to sign the agreement and then backed out.

Under the proposed agreement, Saleh and members of his family would receive immunity from prosecution for handing over power within one month to the vice president, who would form a transitional government. This government would include current regime ministers, as well as members of the official opposition—the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) coalition.

The five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—the US, Britain, France, Russia and China—last week discussed a draft resolution on Yemen drafted by Britain. According to news reports, they are expected to come to an agreement this week and circulate the resolution to the full 15-member council.

According to Reuters, which obtained the draft, the resolution “stresses that all those responsible for human rights violations and abuses should be held accountable.” The hollowness of this statement is underscored by the fact that the resolution also calls on Saleh to “immediately sign and implement a political transition on the basis on the [GCC] initiative,” which guarantees him immunity from prosecution.

US State Department spokesman Mark Toner told reporters last Wednesday: “We would just urge that President Saleh fulfil his pledge to sign the GCC agreement without further delay (and) arrange for presidential elections to be held before the end of the year within the framework of that agreement.”

There is a stark contrast between the imperialist powers’ attitude to the repressive measures utilised by the government in Yemen and those of the Gaddafi regime in Libya.

In Libya, the US and European powers utilised the pretext of potential massacres by Gaddafi loyalists in Benghazi and Misrata to justify an imperialist bombing campaign aimed at the installation of a more pliant proxy government in the form of the National Transitional Council. The neo-colonial operation included the use of the International Criminal Court as a tool of war, with the court dutifully issuing arrest warrants against Gaddafi to pressure other members of his regime to defect to the opposition.

In Yemen, where nearly 200 people have been killed since protests escalated in September, the US and European powers are intent on maintaining the present regime, only without Saleh. They see providing Saleh with immunity from all his crimes as the best means to

achieve this aim.

Saleh’s government has been a staunch ally of the US “war on terror” since 2001 and has supported the use of US drone strikes in Yemen. Yemen’s security apparatus, which has been trained by US forces, has been built around figures in the present regime, including members of Saleh’s family.

At the same time, there are indications that the US has exploited the political crisis facing Saleh to gain even greater cooperation from the Yemeni government. The Obama administration has increased US drone attacks in the south of the country, in the name of targeting the local affiliate of Al Qaeda.

CIA director David Petraeus noted approvingly on September 13 that “counter-terrorism cooperation with Yemen has, in fact, improved in the past few months.” On September 30, the US carried out the assassination of US-citizen Anwar Al-Awlaki. Yemeni officials claimed the killing was the result of “better intelligence from an army of Yemeni informers” as well as Yemeni cooperation with Saudi Arabia, according to the Voice of America. On October 14, a US drone killed another nine people. Among them was 16-year-old Abdulrahman—the son of Al-Awlaki and also an American citizen.

The primary concern of the Obama administration and other major powers is maintaining political stability in Yemen. The country’s northern region of Sa’ada borders Saudi Arabia and harbours a Shiite rebel grouping that the Saudi monarchy fears could destabilise its rule. Yemen’s southern port of Aden overlooks a key shipping route at the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Under the GCC agreement, all protests are expected to end once Saleh has agreed to step aside for substitute puppets of imperialism.



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