Yemeni president signs deal to step down

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Under intense pressure from the US and its allies, Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh signed a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) agreement on Wednesday to hand over power and eventually step down, in return for legal immunity. While the main opposition parties backed the deal, thousands of protesters took to the streets of the Yemeni capital Sana'a yesterday to denounce the arrangement. Five were shot dead by pro-government gunmen.

The GCC agreement by no means guarantees that Saleh will leave office. On at least three occasions he has publicly pledged to quit, only to renege. Moreover, under the arrangement, Saleh will retain a ceremonial role as president even after he has formally handed his powers to Vice President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi within 30 days. Presidential elections are due within three months.

Saudi Arabia's autocratic ruler, King Abdullah, gave his blessing to the agreement, which was signed in the Saudi capital, Riyadh. He hypocritically declared that it would "open a new page" in Yemen's history and lead to greater freedom and prosperity. In a similar vein, US President Obama hailed the "historic transition," saying the Yemeni people "deserve the opportunity to determine their own future."

These claims are a sham. The GCC agreement is a cynical deal patched together by the government and the opposition parties under Washington's tutelage in a bid to end months of protests demanding an end to the pro-US regime. Vice President Hadi, who was appointed by Saleh, is now charged with forming a "national unity" government prior to the presidential election.

Hadi, a former army officer, will also head a military committee to oversee the restructuring of the military. There is no guarantee, however, that the changes will end the grip of the Saleh family over the country's military and security apparatus. Saleh's son, Ahmed, commands the elite Republican Guard, which has been gunning down protesters and fighting street battles in Sana'a against rebel troops and tribal fighters. Three of Saleh's nephews hold key security and intelligence posts.

Under the agreement, Saleh will remain leader of the ruling General People's Congress, which has an overwhelming majority in the country's parliament. Elections scheduled for April 2009 were postponed for two years. The government also cancelled elections in April this year, using the anti-government protests as a pretext. No new parliamentary elections are planned until a review of the constitution takes place.

The GCC deal has provoked intense opposition among young protesters who have formed the backbone of months of anti-government demonstrations in Sana'a and other cities. Thousands took part yesterday in an angry march along Zubairy Street in the capital's centre. They chanted, "Our revolution will continue, so beware Saleh" and "No immunity for the murderers." Some held up photos of those killed in previous demonstrations.

A group of armed pro-government supporters, known as *baltigiya*, some of them holding pictures of Saleh, hurled rocks and fired into the crowd. Along with the five dead, at least 41 were injured, including 27 from gunshot wounds. Three are in a critical condition. Uniformed government troops on foot and in tanks stood by and did nothing to halt the attack.

Denouncing the killings, Mohammed Mosleh explained: "He [Saleh] is the reason for the deaths of more than a thousand innocent youth in Yemen this year and now the opposition wants to give him immunity. The government planned today's attacks. We will not stay quiet."

The protesters are demanding that all Saleh's family members be removed from office and put on trial along with the president himself. Fayez Ahmed told Reuters:

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"We did not go into the street and offer sacrifices so Saleh and his relatives are accorded immunity from legal pursuit. We want the killers tried." Hamza al-Kamaly explained to the *Independent*: "It's nowhere near over. Our revolution is not about getting rid of one man. Our goal is the end of the whole regime."

Sharp differences have erupted between the country's traditional opposition parties and protesters. According to the *Guardian*, speakers from the Islah party were forced to flee Change Square, the protest headquarters, after coming under a barrage of eggs, plastic bottles and stones from protesters chanting: "Our stage, our revolution, down with the opposition!"

The Islah party is part of the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), which countersigned the GCC agreement in Riyadh and expects to hold posts in the proposed "unity" government.

Sami Atfari told the *Guardian*: "We will not allow our revolution to be hijacked. The parties should leave the square." Protest leaders in Change Square said they were planning to burn their electoral ID cards and would refuse to vote until all Saleh's family members had been removed from power.

The ruling elites and their international backers fear that continuing protests in Sana'a could become the focus for a wider movement against the regime, drawing in sections of workers and the rural oppressed. Yemen is the most impoverished of the Arab countries, with 42 percent of the population living on less than $US2 a day.

Efforts are being made to end the protests. UN special envoy Jamal Benomar, who played a central role in patching the GCC deal together, made a special appeal to the anti-government opposition: "You have generated the momentum for change in Yemen. The door is now open for you to make a real difference in the transition."

The appeal was not directed so much to the young demonstrators but to Major General Ali Mohsen, who defected to the opposition with his troops, and the leaders of powerful Ahmar clan, who have also mobilised their fighters. These opposition figures, who control the northern and western suburbs of Sana'a, have yet to respond to the signing of the GCC agreement.

If Mohsen can be persuaded to abide by the deal, the anti-government protesters in Change Square would be more vulnerable. His troops have provided a measure of protection for the protests from attack. If the young demonstrators cannot be pressured to end their opposition, the "national unity" government will not hesitate to unleash the security forces against them.

US backing for the GCC agreement has nothing to do with supporting the democratic rights of the Yemeni people. As in Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan, the Obama administration is concerned to install a regime that will protect American interests. Above all, it is seeking to preserve the military on which the US has relied to prosecute a dirty covert war in Yemen against alleged members of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Even as the Yemeni military has been gunning down protesters, the Pentagon and the CIA have been forging closer links with it. In a statement issued on Wednesday, the Pentagon prided itself on being able "to preserve important counterintelligence relationships" with Yemen "despite the political instability." Referring to Saleh, it declared that "our shared interest with the Yemeni government in fighting terrorism... goes beyond specific individuals."

In reality, the US has backed Saleh to the hilt, relying on him to protect American interests in Yemen and the broader region. Yemen borders Washington's key ally, Saudi Arabia, and is adjacent to strategic shipping lanes into the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. The military strongman has been an important ally over the past decade in the so-called war on terror, collaborating with CIA drone strikes on AQAP suspects.

The Obama administration's efforts to end the opposition protests against what has been a reliable client regime are also driven by broader concerns about continuing social unrest throughout the Middle East, above all in Egypt where mass demonstrations are continuing against the US-backed military regime in Cairo.

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