Yemen to install “national unity” government

Will Morrow
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The first steps have been taken towards the establishment of a “national unity” government in Yemen under the terms of a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) agreement signed last week by President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Far from opening up a new era of democracy, the government’s first task is to put an end to the months of protests against the autocratic Saleh regime, by force if necessary.

Saleh only signed the GCC agreement after months of prevarication and under strong pressure from the US and European powers. The deal gives Saleh and his family members legal immunity from prosecution and preserves the repressive apparatus that he ruthlessly used to maintain his rule. His son and nephews continue to control the Republican Guard and other key security and intelligence bodies.

Saleh remains as president, but his presidential powers have been handed to Vice-President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. On Saturday, Hadi announced presidential elections for February 21. The election, however, is completely contrived. Hadi has the support of both Saleh’s ruling party, the General People’s Congress (GPC), and the bourgeois opposition coalition, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP).

Hadi appointed 76-year-old opposition politician Mohammed Basindwa as the new prime minister on Saturday. Basindwa had been proposed for the post by the JMP and is charged with forming the “national unity” government—half from the GPC and half from the JMP.

A JMP official told Reuters yesterday that the new cabinet had been decided and will be announced shortly. Other sources indicated that the GPC would hold the posts of defence, foreign affairs and oil, while the JMP would take interior, finance and education. The JMP has also submitted a list of nominees to Hadi for inclusion on a military council that will oversee and restructure the military.

Basindwa was a minister under Saleh between 1993 and 1994 before he broke with the government. He heads the National Coalition for Peaceful Revolutionary Forces, set up by the JMP in August to appeal for support from the major powers. Taking its cue from the US and its European allies, the JMP co-signed the GCC agreement and is now helping to shore up the Yemeni state apparatus.

In an interview with *McClatchy* press, Basindwa defended the JMP’s support for Hadi as a consensus candidate. “This is [a] critical stage in the history of Yemen and the government will face many obstacles. But I believe we have the will to overcome these things,” he said.

The chief political “obstacle” is the opposition of protesters who have denounced the GCC deal and the JMP’s support for it. They are demanding that Saleh be put on trial for his crimes and that his regime be dismantled. Hundreds of thousands rallied throughout the country last Friday and Saturday. A banner in the capital of Sana’a read: “Martyrs wrote with their blood, that Saleh must stand trial.”

According to Agence France Press, there were demonstrations in 17 of the country’s 22 provinces last Friday, including in the country’s second largest city, Taiz. In the capital, Sana’a, thousands attended a funeral for four of the five civilians killed the previous day by pro-regime thugs and security forces. One demonstrator, Mansoor Al-Sahabi, told the *Wall Street Journal*: “The agreements signed this week will not force us to go home... We have a mission and the millions marching today want a complete revolution and not a leader stripped from presidency.”

Demonstrators are demanding that the Saleh family be stripped of their control of the security forces. Khaled Anesi, a protester, told the media: “From today, no more families in control of the military.” The proposed restructuring of the military by a Hadi-appointed military council is regarded with contempt. The US, which has trained and armed many of the elite troops, is intent on maintaining the present military structures as part of its so-called “war on terrorism” in Yemen.

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The protests have been driven by the worsening economic and social crisis confronting working people, particularly youth. The country is the most impoverished in the Middle East. Official youth unemployment is more than 50 percent. According to an *Al Arabiya* article in March, a collapse in construction investment saw up to one million workers lose their jobs. The UN has reported that food prices have skyrocketed since January, with bread rising by more than 50 percent.

The regime is desperate to prevent the months of anti-government protests becoming the starting point of a broader movement that draws in workers and the urban and rural poor. Basindwa's supports a "peaceful revolution", but is, in reality, hostile to any opposition outside of the narrow channels of the official political establishment. He will not hesitate to authorise the use of force to contain and suppress ongoing protests.

Already there are signs of a crackdown on demonstrators. According to Associated Press, security forces in Sana'a fired rocket propelled grenades at protesters last Friday. An interior ministry official admitted that air raids had been conducted on the residential suburb of Nehn in the capital on Friday, killing at least one person and injuring 10. Sorties were also carried out in the Bani Hushauish district, 15 kilometres south of Sana'a.

Some attacks are bound up with ongoing fighting between the military and armed opposition, including breakaway army units led by former general Ali Mohen, as well as tribal fighters. In Arhab, to the north of Sana'a, the government claimed 80 opposition armed tribesmen were killed by airstrikes.

Last Saturday, fighting erupted between Mohsen's troops and security forces, leaving two soldiers dead. Mohsen has yet to indicate whether or not he supports the GCC plan. In a TV appeal on Sunday, Saleh promised an amnesty for all those who had "committed follies" throughout the year.

Yesterday, opposition protesters in Taiz alleged that the security forces shelled residential areas, killing at least five civilians. The military denied shelling, but acknowledged fighting between the army and opposition militia in which at least five soldiers and two opposition gunmen were killed.

Opposition activist Tawfeeq al-Shaabi, a lawyer, told Reuters: "Saleh's forces, which are concentrated in various parts of the city, fired shells on al-Manakh and al-Hasab and Bir Basha districts and the shelling continued into the early hours of Thursday morning." Like Sana'a, Taiz has been a hotbed of opposition and is divided between areas controlled by the government and opposition forces.

Both the UN and US have stressed the necessity of the new government moving quickly to end the protests. A UN Security Council on Monday welcomed "the new political agreement in Yemen… but stressed that the deal must be strictly implemented to end unrest and restore stability in the country."

In a similar vein, White House counterterrorism adviser John Brennan phoned Hadi on Saturday to reiterate US support for the government. He added that "all parties need to refrain from violence and proceed with the transition in a peaceful and orderly manner." Brennan's involvement on behalf of the White House only underscores Washington's determination to maintain Yemen as a base of operations for its drone attacks on alleged terrorists.

The US military and CIA's involvement in Yemen has far broader objectives. Washington has backed the dictatorial Saleh regime for decades as a means for protecting its interests in Yemen and the wider region. Yemen borders the key US ally, Saudi Arabia, and is adjacent to strategic shipping lanes into the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. Washington backed the GCC plan as a means of affecting cosmetic changes, while keeping as much of the regime as possible intact.

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