Yemen's "unity" cabinet provides immunity for Saleh regime

Will Morrow
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Yemen's power-sharing "unity" cabinet, composed of the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) and opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) coalition, approved laws on January 8 to give sweeping legal immunity to President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime.

Rather than shielding Saleh's family members as had been expected, the legislation protects Saleh and those who worked with him, including in civilian, military and security institutions, during his lengthy presidency. Since protests emerged in Yemen last January, the regime has killed hundreds of demonstrators.

Newly-appointed Prime Minister Mohammed Basindwa defended the laws, declaring there was "no other option" to prevent "civil war." The legislation was expected to pass parliament immediately, but the vote was postponed several times because the interim legal affairs and justice ministers failed to attend parliamentary sessions. This week, Prime Minister Basindwa requested that another parliamentary discussion scheduled for Wednesday be delayed and ruling officials now claim the vote will be held on Saturday.

There are clearly concerns within the GPC and JMP coalition—which includes the Yemeni Socialist Party that ruled South Yemen until unification with the North in 1990, and the Islamist Al-Islah ("Reform") party—about provoking further popular opposition. After the JMP raised a limited proposal to prevent those officials granted immunity from taking future government posts, a joint meeting this week decided to allow ex-regime officials to be charged for corruption, but not the killing of protesters.

The immunity guarantee is part of a US-brokered agreement, signed by Saleh in November, which maintains most of Saleh's regime, even though without Saleh himself. A national "unity" cabinet has taken office, with equal numbers of GPC officials and JMP members. The country's security apparatus remains in the hands of Saleh's relatives.

Saleh is meant to step down in time for token presidential elections on February 21, in which Vice President Mansour Al-Hadi will stand on behalf of both the JMP and GPC. It remains unclear if Saleh will meet the deadline. Underscoring the anti-democratic character of the unity government, interim foreign minister Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi asserted on January 17 that the presidential elections could be postponed. "Unfortunately, there are a couple of events relating to security, and if they are not solved ... it will be difficult to run the elections," he said. Al-Hadi quickly sought to deny this suggestion, and Qirbi has since retracted his statement.

Reflecting the fears within Yemeni political establishment over the political crisis in Sana'a, the *New York Times* reported the comments of Justice and Building Party leader Mohammed Abulahoum, who declared that elections must go ahead. "We're out of time… There is a vacuum of power all over the country. We don't know where we are right now."

Last month, protests by several hundred thousand people rejected the power-transfer agreement and the immunity clause. The Associated Press reported that a further protest march in Sana'a on January 8 was blocked by troops as marchers moved toward the parliament. The news agency reported that the troops may have been acting under the command of defected army general Ali Mohsen. Mohsen had previously provided limited protection to protesters but is now supporting the power-transfer plan.

On January 9, the AFP reported that in the south-eastern city of Taiz, "thugs in civilian clothes fired on

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thousands of protesters demonstrating in front of the regional governor's office, killing one and injuring three." Protests have been reported in up to 18 regions, but the numbers involved have decreased since late last year. Some "revolutionary" youth coalitions tied to the JMP had previously taken part in the protests, but now support the power-transfer agreement.

US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland defended the immunity law in a daily press briefing on January 9, declaring: "The immunity provisions were negotiated as part of the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] deal to get Saleh to leave power. They have to be codified in law."

The hypocrisy of the Obama administration is stark. While supporting the Saleh regime, the US, along with France and Britain, is stoking a possible intervention into Syria in the name of protecting protesters, as part of broader efforts to isolate Syria's ally Iran.

The US is concerned that ongoing protests in Yemen could destabilise the country, which borders Saudi Arabia, and is determined to maintain the security apparatus with which it has cemented close ties in the past decade. The US has carried out an unknown number of drone strikes in the country with the support of Saleh, including the killing of Anwar Al-Awlaki, a US citizen, last year.

During a press briefing on Tuesday in the Ivory Coast, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued the first public US call for Saleh to leave Yemen. "There have been agreements with respect to the way forward that have not been fulfilled," she asserted. "We regret that the president has thus far failed to comply with his own commitments to leave the country, to permit elections to go forward that give the people a chance to be heard and be represented."

Clinton ominously warned: "We remain focused on the threat posed by Al Qaeda in Yemen and will continue to work with our partners there and elsewhere to ensure that AQ does not gain a foothold in the Arabian peninsula through actions that would undermine the stability of Yemen and the region." These comments make clear that, under the guise of the "war on terror," the US is determined to retain its foothold in Yemen which is strategically located adjacent to the Arabian and Red Seas.

Last weekend Al Qaeda militants allegedly captured the town of Rada'a, 100 kilometres south of Sana'a. The details are unclear. According to the social networking news page "Yemen Revolution News," thousands of people held a protest on Monday and chanted: "Leave you liar [Saleh], there is no AQAP [Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula] in Rada'a." Security forces have in the past used false claims of an Al Qaeda presence to launch their crackdowns.

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