

# Yemeni president announces cosmetic changes to military

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Yemen's recently-installed President Mansour Al-Hadi announced a number of cosmetic changes to the country's military leadership on April 6, maintaining the repressive security apparatus responsible for killing hundreds of protesters in 2011.

Hadi was installed through a political agreement organised by the United States and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) aimed at ending mass anti-government protests and social unrest. As stipulated in the agreement, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh stepped down in February following a so-called presidential election, in which Hadi was the sole candidate. Hadi, who has been vice president under Saleh since 1994, will hold the post of president as well as commander of the country's armed forces for at least two years.

This deal has been supported by the entire political establishment—Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) and the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), which is an alliance of the Islamist Al-Islah party and the former Stalinist Yemeni Socialist Party. Both the GPC and the JMP nominated Hadi as their candidate, and now hold 14 ministerial positions each in the government.

Among the military figures dismissed by Hadi was General Mohammed al-Ahmar, who is Saleh's half-brother and the head of the country's air force, as well as Tarek Mohamed Saleh, who is Saleh's nephew and head of the Presidential Guard. The limited character of these changes was made clear by Hadi's decision to offer the post of assistant defence minister to Al-Ahmar.

The reshuffle did not affect Brigadier General Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, who is the former president's son and head of the Republican Guard, or Brigadier General Yahya Mohammed Abdullah Saleh, the former

president's nephew and head of Central Security Forces.

Earlier this year, the JMP and GPC voted to grant legal immunity to all security and government officials who ordered or carried out the killing of unarmed demonstrators during protests in the capital, Sana'a, the southern city of Taiz, and other regions. Saleh remains the leader of the GPC and has given no indication of retiring from political life.

Hadi announced the changes amid continuing hostility to the GCC deal and protests calling for the trial of Saleh and other officials. On April 6, tens of thousands protested in Sana'a and other regions, calling for Saleh to be prosecuted and for his relatives to be removed from leading posts in the country's military and security apparatus. They also called for the new government to release demonstrators arrested last year.

Similar demonstrations were held on March 23. The Associated Press reported protesters carrying "posters showing Saleh with a noose around his neck and many chanted demanding retribution for those killed in Saleh's crackdown on protesters."

Demonstrators remain camped out in Change Square in Sana'a, which has been a permanent protest site since February 2011. Marwa Al-Ariqi, a protester at Change Square, told the *Yemen Times* she did not vote in the elections and disagreed with the power-sharing agreement between the JMP and the "corrupt regime." She added: "I would consider myself a traitor to the blood of martyrs if I voted."

Living standards of the population have deteriorated in the past year. Official unemployment is estimated to be more than 50 percent. A November 2011 UNICEF report noted that the child malnourishment rate in the town of Hodeida exceeded 30 percent—more than

double the “critical limit.”

The announced changes to the military hierarchy will do little to placate the protesters. Hadi’s main aim was to settle ongoing tribal and factional disputes within the country’s military and unify the security forces under the new government. The reshuffle was also likely an attempt to prevent powerful members of Saleh’s family from turning against the new government.

The sharp tensions in the ruling elite were immediately evident. The day after the announcement, forces loyal to Mohammed Al-Ahmar and members of the Hamdan tribe took control of Sana’a airport. Ahmar reportedly refused to accept his dismissal as air force chief unless figures from the Hashed tribal federation were exiled. Ahmar also demanded that the recently appointed defence minister be dismissed, along with the General Ali Mohsen.

During the protests in 2011, sections of the military led by Ali Mohsen, as well as the Hashed tribal federation, defected from the Saleh regime and appealed to the major powers to back them. The First Armoured division led by Mohsen carved out a section of the capital, while the Hashed federation in the north of Sana’a fought with government security forces. According to Human Rights Watch, which visited Yemen between March 15 and April 3, “Sana’a and other cities remain divided into zones controlled by an array of military, paramilitary, and tribal forces.”

Notwithstanding the cosmetic character of Hadi’s announcement, Washington cynically hailed it. US State Department spokesman Mark Toner declared: “The changes signify the National Consensus Government’s commitment to fulfilling the aspirations of the Yemeni people and restoring stability to the country.” The overriding concern of the Obama administration has been to leave the Yemeni state apparatus intact in order to further US strategic interests in the Middle East.

A report by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism on March 29 detailed the escalation of US military involvement in Yemen over the past year. The report said at least six US drone strikes had taken place in March alone. Since May 2011, the bureau estimated that there had been up to 35 strikes, with between 55 and 105 civilians killed.



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