

Yemen moving towards civil war

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Thousands took to the streets of Yemen's capital city of Sana'a on Saturday to demand both the resignation of the country's President Abed Rabo Mansour Hadi, and the removal of Houthi militias from the city's streets.

The protests against the Hadi regime and the Houthis come amid a deteriorating economic, political and security situation that threatens to descend into outright civil war between several factions—government forces, forces allied to Saleh, the Houthis, the Muslim Brotherhood linked Islah Party, the Sunni tribes and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)—all amid tribal disputes and secessionist movements in both the north and south.

The Saudi-dominated Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) installed Hadi to replace long-time dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh after mass protests in 2011 and head off the fall of the entire rotten regime. While in power, Saleh and his family had amassed a \$32 billion fortune. Only agreeing to cede power in return for immunity from prosecution, he is now in exile in Ethiopia where he remains a power broker in Yemen.

The Houthi insurgency that began in 2004 as the result of long-standing grievances over their marginalisation gained wider currency as opposition to the government that replaced Saleh grew and has now become enmeshed in the broader regional and geopolitical power struggles.

US imperialism has long played a major role in the region, stoking the sectarian and tribal divisions that have fuelled the various conflicts between the Yemeni government and armed opposition groups over the last decade.

Yemen is of crucial importance to US geostrategic and economic interests, with its strategic position along the shipping lanes to Suez and the Mandeb strait through which much of the region's oil passes, as well as the Horn of Africa.

The US and its Gulf allies, Saudi Arabia in particular, have backed the government against the Shia rebels, who they claim, without evidence, have support from Iran and Hezbollah.

According to the US State Department, the US committed more than \$221.4 million in assistance to Yemen in 2014, in addition to \$316.23 million in 2013 and more than \$353 million in 2012. It focused “on bolstering its unmanned aerial surveillance capabilities and training its armed forces.”

The US has launched attacks using drones and other weapons systems, including conventional jet aircraft and cruise missiles. While the US has acknowledged some of these attacks, the Yemeni government forces prefer to take responsibility for other strikes even though all the evidence pointed to them being launched by Washington.

According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, there were about 36 reported strikes in 2014, leading to the deaths of between 158 and 214 people. These have only served to increase hostility to the Yemeni government and support for Al-Qaeda.

Saudi Arabia has over the years given considerable military and economic support to its southern neighbour, intervening militarily in support of the government against the Houthis and Al-Qaeda. It has provided an estimated \$4 billion to keep the Yemeni economy afloat since early 2012. Last July, Riyadh provided \$1.2 billion in cash to help pay for fuel and another \$435 million to help the government make welfare payments.

However, since the Houthi takeover in September, the Saudis have provided no new aid, including withholding \$700 million in military aid agreed as part of the bailout package in July. As government officials and advisors admit, the Hadi government faces imminent financial collapse without external intervention.

Last September, following mass opposition to the government's removal of fuel subsidies that doubled prices at the pump, the Shia Houthi militia, also known as Ansar Allah, took control of Sana'a. President Abed Rabo Mansour Hadi's army collapsed in the face of the Houthi attacks.

As a result Hadi was forced to sign a United Nations-brokered agreement with the Houthis, including them in the government, largely at the expense of the Islah Party. Hadi claimed that the Houthi takeover was a "conspiracy" with "external and internal" backers.

Despite the formation of the new government Houthi fighters are manning checkpoints around the city and guarding many state institutions in the capital. The Houthis are believed to have the support of about 70 percent of the army and are said to have backing from a surprising source, the former dictator Saleh, against whom they fought six wars between 2004 and 2010.

The Houthis have now extended their influence beyond the capital to other provinces in the central and western parts of the country, including the port city of Hodeida, threatening to capture the oil-rich province of Marib.

They face fierce opposition from some of the Sunni tribes and AQAP members in the central and eastern parts of the country that have also opposed Hadi's government. AQAP has derided the Houthis as heretics for being members of the minority Zaydi sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam.

A car bomb exploded outside a police academy in the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, on Wednesday, targeting student cadets outside the college. It killed at least 38 and wounded another 90 people.

A few days ago, a suicide bombing in Ibb, a town in the centre of the country, killed around 26 people. Yemeni militants linked to the Houthis killed 22 tribesmen from the northern Arhab region, where the Houthis have been mounting an aggressive campaign against AQAP. It came a day after a roadside bomb killed two Houthi militants in the same area.

On January 4, at least four people were killed and 25 wounded in an explosion that targeted a group of Houthi militiamen in Dhamar, a mainly Shiite city south of the capital, where they were meeting fierce resistance from the Sunnis. AQAP later claimed responsibility for the attack.

According to a study conducted by the Abaad Studies

and Research Centre, a Yemeni NGO, more than 7,700 Yemenis were killed in armed clashes during 2014. This was a threefold increase since the 2011 popular uprising that led to the ouster of Saleh. The study claimed that the Yemeni military lost more than 1,000 men during 2014, of which at least 600 were killed during clashes with Houthi militia and 400 at the hands of Al-Qaeda militants and other armed groups.

The civil strife and armed clashes are bound up with Yemen's desperate economic plight. Its main source of revenue is its small and declining oil reserves. Formerly accounting for one third of economic output and 75 percent of government revenues, oil has fallen to less than 10 percent of GDP and is set to fall further with the slump in oil prices. Since the 2011 protests, numerous attacks on oil and gas pipelines, electricity lines, and Internet and telephone cables have further affected economic output.

More than half of Yemen's population of 25 million lives below the poverty line. Unemployment rates are around 40 percent for the country as a whole and a massive 60 percent among the youth. As of 2004, just 75 percent of primary school age children went to school. Nearly 60 percent of Yemen's 25 million population needs food assistance and access to clean drinking water, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, while 8.6 million do not have access to basic health care.

Bad as these conditions are, Yemen is home to nearly a quarter of a million refugees, most of whom are from Somalia and more than 500,000 internally displaced persons and returnees, who fare even worse. The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated the cost of Yemen's humanitarian needs in 2014 at more than \$704 million.

None of these conditions have been addressed by the government of President Hadi, which has only exacerbated the ongoing social crisis by following the dictates of the International Monetary Fund, cutting oil subsidies and firing public sector workers.



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