

Thousands protest, clash with police in Yemen and Algeria

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Major protests took place in Yemen and Algeria over the weekend, as thousands took to the streets in rallies against government corruption, poverty and unemployment. Unrest continues to simmer in many parts of the Middle East and North Africa, including in Tunisia, Jordan, Iraq and, most recently, Bahrain.

In Yemen, Sunday's demonstrations in the capital Sana'a were the largest so far in three days of continuing protest, which began Friday with a celebration of Hosni Mubarak's downfall in Egypt.

On Saturday, a march of several hundred students on the Egyptian embassy swelled to several thousand people, according to the BBC, chanting, "After Mubarak, it's Ali's turn," referring to President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The latter, a thoroughly despised despot, is a key ally in the US "war on terror."

Pro-government elements attacked the demonstrators Saturday with knives and sticks, forcing them to flee.

By Sunday the protests in Sana'a had grown larger, and demonstrators, many of them young, scuffled with police and pro-government thugs. The Associated Press reported that "Yemeni police armed with sticks and daggers beat back thousands of protesters marching through the capital ... uniformed police used truncheons to stop protesters, many of them university students, from reaching the capital's central Hada Square. Witnesses said plainclothes policemen wielding daggers and sticks also joined security forces in driving the protesters back."

The Xinhua News Agency reported that the security forces beat protesters in "the massive anti-regime demonstration" with electric batons and rifle butts. Many people were injured, commented a Xinhua reporter, and some 120 people arrested.

According to the Chinese news service, demonstrators were attempting to march on the presidential palace Sunday. They called for the ouster of Saleh and the expulsion of his family members from the military and security apparatus, including Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali, who heads the secret police.

The crowd shouted, "The people want the regime to fall. After Mubarak, it's Saleh's turn."

Police have ringed Sana'a's Tahrir (Liberation) Square with barbed wire and brought in government supporters to set up a tent camp in an effort to forestall protesters from occupying the area.

In southwestern Yemen, 5,000 people also took part in a protest in Taiz (population 460,000), near the Mandab Strait that connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden. Taiz and Aden (140 kilometers away) have been the scene of numerous protests in recent weeks.

Predictably, the Yemeni interior ministry, which presides over the brutal internal security forces, accused the mostly youthful demonstrators of "spreading sabotage and chaos" and "threatening security and stability."

The caliber of the official opposition in Yemen can be gauged by its acceptance Sunday of a token political reform initiative offered by Saleh earlier in February, stipulating that he would step down in 2013 and not pass rule on to his offspring. The opposition coalition indicated as well its willingness to re-enter negotiations with Saleh.

Reuters reports that one of the coalition leaders is a former foreign minister, Mohammed Basindwa, and cites his conciliatory comment, "The opposition does not reject what came in the invitation by the president and is ready to sign an agreement in no more than a week."

Poverty and wretchedness are the reality for wide layers of the Yemeni population, even as Washington continues to finance and arm the Saleh regime. More than 45 percent of the population lives on less than \$2 a day. The International Food Policy Research Institute reports that some 32 percent of Yemenis lack access to sufficient food and nearly 58 percent of all children are malnourished. The UN ranks Yemen 151st out of 177 countries on the human development index (HDI), a measure of life expectancy, education, and standard of living. Yemen has the lowest HDI rank of any Arab country.

Protest in Algiers

Government and opposition claims as to the size of Saturday's demonstration in Algiers varied wildly, but the Associated Press (AP) reported that some 10,000 people rallied in Algeria's capital Saturday before being dispersed by police. Demonstrations are banned in Algeria under a state of emergency in place since 1992.

The regime of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika dispatched some 30,000 police and security forces in a massive show of force aimed at intimidating the protesters. Armored vehicles were located at "strategic points" across Algiers, commented the BBC, "with water cannons on standby and a helicopter circling above" the city's center.

Heavily armed police attempted to prevent any demonstrators from gathering in Algiers, lining up along the march route and setting up roadblocks to stop busloads of people from reaching the city. However, thousands managed to evade the police and express their opposition to the government in May 1 Square.

The Algerian newspaper *El Watan* described the scene at 3:30 in the afternoon: "The police are carrying out a veritable manhunt in May 1 Square. They have forcefully dispersed the demonstrators and seized many of them. The police are attempting to chase the demonstrators whose number is continually growing, but they have not counted on the determination of these young people, who have succeeded in taking back the field. The police and the protesters are playing cat and mouse. Groups of demonstrators stay on the move so as not to be caught between police units."

El Watan also described a scene earlier in the day in blunt terms: "Blows from police clubs rain down on many demonstrators. No one is spared."

The protesters shouted "Ouyahia thief!" referring to Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia, as well as "No to the police state!" "The people want the fall of the regime," and "Bouteflika out!" They also chanted, "We remain revolutionaries!"

Opposition spokesmen declared that some 400 people were arrested in the protest. Ali Yahia Abdenour, head of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights, asserted that women and foreign journalists were among those detained Saturday.

This weekend's rally was called by the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (CNCD), the bourgeois opposition that includes political parties, human rights organizations and trade unions.

"This demonstration is a success because it's been 10 years that people haven't been able to march in Algiers and

there's a sort of psychological barrier," declared Ali Rachedi, the former head of the Socialist Forces Front, a social democratic formation. "The fear is gone," he added.

Said Sadi, head of the opposition Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), a member of the CNCD, asserted that the size of the police mobilization showed "the fear of this government, which is in dire straits.... We're going to continue to demonstrate and to defy the authorities until they fall." The opposition has not called for the resignation of Bouteflika, who was returned to office for a third term in 2009 in a rigged election.

Smaller demonstrations were also held in Oran, Annaba and Constantine.

The CNCD has issued an appeal for a mass demonstration February 19 and agreed in principle on the call for a general strike in the coming days.

In another development in Algeria, more than 400 unemployed youth organized a sit-in Sunday morning at a government office in Mezaourou, 480 kilometers southwest of the capital. Protesters also blocked the main road between Mezaourou and Telagh with old tires and debris. The youth demanded jobs and denounced corruption.

An unemployed man of 36 died of self-inflicted burns in the town of El Oued, in eastern Algeria, near the Tunisian border. Lofti Maamir, father of six, doused himself with gasoline in a government office January 17, where he had gone to look for work and housing. Four individuals are known to have died by this method in Algeria since the crisis began in January. (In another desperate protest, an unemployed Iraqi man set himself on fire in the northern city of Mosul on Sunday and died from his injuries.)

Some 23 percent of the Algerian population lives below the official poverty line. Algerian youth in particular suffer from mass joblessness. The official poverty rate for young people is 23 percent (and estimated to be much higher), and 70 percent of the unemployed are under 30 years of age.



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