

Yemen “unity” government shaken by mass protests

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At least 13 people were killed on December 24 when Yemeni security forces cracked down on a protest of more than 100,000 people in the capital Sana’a. Demonstrators were opposed to the power-sharing arrangement sponsored by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that gave President Ali Abdullah Saleh legal immunity and preserved the regime that has brutally suppressed opposition protests that first erupted in January.

Under the GCC agreement signed last month, Saleh’s vice president Abraduh Mansour Hadi takes over presidential powers. Hadi has formed a coalition government between the ruling General People’s Congress (GPC) and the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP). Both the GPC and JMP are backing Hadi as the unity candidate in upcoming presidential elections. The deal leaves intact the state apparatus, including the key security forces that are still under the control of Saleh’s close relatives.

Protesters, many of them youth, were bitterly hostile to the deal and chanted “No to immunity!”. Activist Ahmed Ghilan told Associated Press: “We are fed up with this tragic farce that gives immunity but is impotent to force Saleh’s troops out of the main streets.” Fathi al-Rawdi said: “The situation will not stabilise, since Saleh’s relatives and supporters are still holding sensitive positions in the army and government.”

The protest began on Tuesday as a “March of Life” in the city of Taiz, more than 250 kilometres to the south of the capital. By the time it reached Change Square in Sana’a, where protesters have been camped out since February, the numbers had swelled to at least

100,000. One estimate put the number of demonstrators as high as 500,000.

Security forces attacked the march, using live rounds, water cannon and tear gas. In addition to the 13 dead, including one woman, 61 people received gunshot injuries. Another 150 were suffering breathing difficulties from tear gas inhalation. In an attempt to distance his government from the crackdown, recently appointed Prime Minister Mohammed Basindwa called for an official investigation into the killings.

The protest on Saturday coincided with the beginning of the first session of parliament called to rubberstamp the new government’s agenda, including the GCC agreement. The JMP’s support for the deal has provoked angry reactions from protesters. Reflecting this sentiment, an editorial in the *Yemen Post* declared: “The opposition [coalition] in Yemen is just as dirty as President Saleh’s party, and their turn will come. No one is excluded from the wrath of the people.”

The US strongly backed the GCC agreement as a means of salvaging as much of the Saleh regime as possible. Washington has relied heavily on Saleh as a defender of American strategic interests in Yemen and adjacent strategic waters near the Horn of Africa. The deal was meant to end all protests and stabilise the country, but it has led to further political unrest.

Speaking to the media on Saturday, the US ambassador to Yemen, Gerald Feierstein, justified the state repression, declaring that the Life March was intended “to generate chaos and provoke a violent response by the security forces.” He then added: “The government has the right to maintain the law.” The

remarks provoked angry responses from demonstrators and calls for his expulsion from Yemen.

Hours after last Saturday's crackdown, Saleh announced that he intended to travel to the US, ostensibly for medical treatment. The move is also to bide time, or as he explained, to "get out of sight and the media to calm the atmosphere for the unity government to hold the presidential election." It is not clear whether Washington is prepared to provide a visa.

An editorial in the *New York Times*, however, advised Obama to grant a visa, arguing that any political damage from harbouring the dictator was outweighed by the need to establish stability in Yemen. Underscoring the close cooperation between the US and the Saleh regime, ambassador Feierstein again met with Hadi last Sunday.

Also on Sunday, tens of thousands of people marched from Change Square to Hadi's office to protest against the previous day's killings. The protesters shouted: "The people want to bring the slaughterer to trial," and, "We don't want Abraduh [Hadi], Ali Saleh controls him." Further protests took place on Monday and Tuesday.

Fears in Washington over a continued political upheaval in Yemen have been magnified by a series of strikes by workers, particularly in state-owned industries, calling for the removal and trial of managers associated with the Saleh government.

Pilots, engineers and other employees of Yemenia Airlines staged a two-day strike from December 20, stopping all flights in and out of the country's two main airports in Sana'a and Aden. Associated Press reported: "Thousands of striking workers wanted to see [airline director Abdel-Khalq al-Qadhi] put on trial over charges he misused the company's assets and drove it into bankruptcy." Al-Qadhi, who is Saleh's son-in-law, was forced to resign on Thursday to end the strike.

Cement factory workers in Hodeida also struck last week for at least three days, calling for the sacking of the factory head who they alleged had embezzled

funds. An Associated Press article on December 29 commented: "The strikes are following a pattern. Workers lock the gates to an institution, and then they storm the offices of their supervisors, demanding their replacement with bosses who are not tainted with corruption allegations. So far the scenario has played out in 18 state agencies."

Strikes are also underway at the state TV news agency, while hundreds of striking workers protested on Wednesday outside the headquarters of the Military Economic Institution, which is linked to the Defence Ministry.

The industrial unrest is also being driven by deteriorating living standards. Some 40 percent of the population lives below the official poverty line. Unemployment is estimated to have increased to 50 percent, up from 35 percent in 2010, according to Reuters. The news agency noted: "Some staples such as rice saw prices jump by up to 120 percent, while the price of the volume of water which a family needs to cover basic needs for one week quadrupled."

At this stage, the continuing oppositional movement is politically amorphous. As well as young people who are hostile to both Saleh's party and the JMP, it includes members of the opposition coalition whose aims are more limited—to pressure the regime to fully implement the GCC agreement.

At the same time, some of the opposition leaders continue to promote the dangerous illusion that the US and its European allies are agents for democracy in the Middle East. As in Libya, the Obama administration is intent on establishing a regime in Sana'a that will support US interests in the region. The remarks of US ambassador Feierstein should serve as a warning that Washington will back whatever repressive measures are needed to achieve its objectives in Yemen.



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