Yémen: Another Middle East tyrant at the brink

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David Whitehouse analyzes a struggle that may be about to topple Yemen’s dictator.

A YOUTH revolt based around Sanaa University in Yemen’s capital has spearheaded a nationwide movement that is on the verge of bringing down another U.S.-backed strongman, Ali Abdullah Saleh.

The continued protests, which surged following the fall of Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak on February 11, have drawn support from Shia rebels in the country’s north and have refocused the demands of many southern secessionists on the immediate goal of Saleh’s ouster.

The official opposition parties, several of them led by rich Yemenis who benefited from the policies and corruption of Saleh’s 32-year rule, initially stuck to demands of electoral and institutional reform, until the pressure of growing protests forced them to call for Saleh to step down. This includes the al-Ahmar brothers, one who heads up the North’s largest tribal federation and another who runs Islah, a broad opposition Islamist party.

Then, following a massacre of 50 protesters after Friday prayers in Sanaa on March 17, Saleh’s top military commander, Ali-Mohsen al-Ahmar (no relation to the al-Ahmar brothers), defected from Saleh’s camp and promised to use the forces under his command to defend the protesters.

Demonstrators generally see the defection of Mohsen—who has been Saleh’s ruthless henchman in carrying out decades of repression—as a cynical move to get on the right side of the movement before Saleh goes down.

With U.S. backing, the Saudi royal family has helped to broker discussions between Saleh and the official opposition over terms of his departure. The U.S. did not signal until March 24 that it might be looking for a new client in Yemen to replace Saleh.

U.S. officials and liberal analysts such as the International Crisis Group (ICG) have played up fears of a tribal civil war if Saleh leaves power “too hastily”—an outcome that could expand the space for al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP), the local franchise of the group led by Osama bin Laden. Saleh himself has tried to hold onto domestic and international allies by putting out the same story that “chaos” would ensue if he resigned now.

The protesters themselves, known as the “chebab” (Arabic for “youth”), have nevertheless stuck to their demand for Saleh’s immediate ouster. They have pointed out to Western reporters that tribal affiliations are playing little role in the revolt. It is Saleh himself who has sought to set tribal forces against one another over the years—while leading members of the opposition parties play up their own prominent tribal positions when they want to throw their weight around.

“Tribal division” in this context represents a fight within Yemen’s elite over who will hold power when Saleh leaves office. Although the chebab have not united around a social program, they have mobilized with the rhetoric of a revolt of the poor against all of the country’s corrupt elite. Tawakul Karmen—a charismatic 32-year-old woman from Islah’s younger generation, who may be the movement’s best-known leader—told the Guardian, “This revolution is inevitable. The people have endured dictatorship, corruption, poverty and unemployment for years, and now the whole thing is exploding.”
YEMEN IS the poorest country in the Arab world—and the youngest, with a median age of 18. The World Bank estimates that 42 percent of the population lives in poverty. Unemployment, according to the IMF, runs at about 35 percent and ranges up to 50 percent for those between the ages of 18 and 28.

As the ranks of the poor have grown, the rich have grown still wealthier in the past 20 years of privatization and Western-imposed “structural adjustment.” They share the same jet-set life as neoliberal ruling classes around the world, marked by four-star hotels and palatial air-conditioned shopping malls that look the same the world over—even in Yemen, where the World Bank estimates per capita income to be $2.90 a day.

Those on the gravy train include the al-Ahmar brothers who now call for Saleh’s ouster. Gen. Mohsen is another, as the U.S. ambassador wrote in 2005 in a cable exposed by WikiLeaks [1]: “A major beneficiary of diesel smuggling in recent years, [Mohsen] also appears to have amassed a fortune in the smuggling of arms, food staples, and consumer products.”

Yemen’s poor thus see that “the wealth of the few is the result of corruption and private plunder of public resources,” according to the ICG. Much of the country’s dwindling oil revenue goes to servicing the national debt, but it is widely suspected that Saleh diverts a portion of the revenues to fund his widespread patronage payments, according to Paul Dresch, author of A History of Modern Yemen.

A Yemeni poet once described Saleh’s General Popular Congress as “the party of government employees,” says Dresch. Its cohesion has come not from any political principles, but from its members’ role as cogs in the president’s patronage machine.

Saleh has held onto power for three decades through a series of shifting alliances, which are more strictly economic than tribal. “Tribal blocs on the map coincide only partially with the personal and family networks that structure politics,” Dresch writes. “Rather than great solidary blocs of persons, aligned with each other on ‘traditional’ grounds, one [is] dealing in day-to-day politics with networks of individuals who control both trade and real estate.”

A civil servant told the ICG of the bitterness that has grown under this regime:

“There is a growing gap now between those who are very rich and those who have nothing. What is worse, those who are very rich often do not work hard for what they have. They get their wealth through corruption or nepotism. How is a man supposed to feel when he sees a young boy in a nice car with everything he wants, yet the man who works hard cannot get ahead and take care of his family?” [2]

Tawakul Karmen herself highlights the connection between economic inequality and political corruption. As the Guardian reported:

«Karman has many grievances against her government, but it was a sheikh’s tyranny against villagers in Ibb, a governorate south of the capital, that ignited her activism. “I watched as families were thrown off their land by a corrupt tribal leader. They were a symbol to me of the injustice faced by so many in Yemen,” she says. “It dawned on me that nothing could change this regime, only protest.”» [3]

As a woman leader, Karmen’s prominence in the movement is another sign that the protesters are looking to make bigger changes in society than the mere replacement of a president. She told the Guardian: “If you go to the protests now, you will see something you never saw before: hundreds of women. They shout and sing, they even sleep there in tents. This is not just a political revolution, it’s a social revolution.”

Just as Saleh’s domestic alliances have shifted over the years, so have his relations with the U.S.—and with Saudi Arabia, the U.S.-backed oil giant to Yemen’s north. After the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington in 2001, Saleh decided to align with the U.S. and the Saudis.

He even went so far as to support the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, reversing the support he offered to Saddam Hussein in the first Gulf War in 1991—a stance for which Yemenis paid dearly, as Gulf oil states
expelled some three quarters of a million Yemeni guest workers.

In the decade since September 11, Saleh’s connection to the Saudis has deepened since he went to war in 2004 to put down a revolt of a Shia minority known as Zaydis. The Zaydis, a sect to which Saleh himself happens to belong, span Yemen’s northern border with Saudi Arabia. The revolt, in which thousands have died and a quarter million have been displaced—under the iron fist of Mohson—is named after the family of a leader, Hussein al-Houthi, who was killed in the first round of fighting.

On both sides of the border, the Zaydis have the same grievance—economic and cultural marginalization from the two countries’ Sunni mainstream—and Saudi rulers are frightened that the Houthi revolt could spread to Shiias in the Saudi east, where most of the country’s oil is found. Saleh has claimed that Iran supports the Houthi revolt, but this claim seems to be calculated to inflame Saudi and American interest, since there is no credible evidence of it, and Zaydism is distinct from the brand of Shia Islam practiced in Iran.

In December 2009, Saudi armed forces crossed into Yemen and mounted air strikes to support the latest offensive against the Houthis. The Saudi royal family is no doubt concerned that any successor government to Saleh’s should be committed to the same fight.

The Houthis themselves have chosen sides in support of the chebab movement. After the movement launched protests in eight cities on February 18, a spokesperson of the Houthi movement announced that its members had helped put together the demonstrations in several of the cities, according to the ICG.

At Sanaa University’s “Square of Change,” the encampment that forms the organizing center of the chebab movement, organizers estimated on March 6 that half the participants were “tribesmen,” 40 percent were students and 10 percent were Houthis and others.

Houthi rebels claimed on March 25 to have taken control of Sadaa city, the main city in the northern border area, “for the sake of toppling this regime,” a spokesman told the Financial Times.

THE TOP public priority of the U.S. government—and a major concern for the Saudis—is the fight against al-Qaeda, which is mainly based east of Sanaa and in the country’s south. The U.S. ambassador to Yemen told reporters on March 12 that “our concern is that the situation inside of the country will become more and more chaotic...Of course, we believe that the uncertainty and the instability is helpful to al-Qaeda.”

The al-Qaeda branch in Yemen, numbering somewhere between 100 and 200 members, according to specialists, was founded in early 2009 when Saudi members consolidated their organization with militants in Yemen. Official U.S. alarm about al-Qaeda in Yemen began with the attack on the USS Cole in 2000, but it was publicly renewed on Christmas Day in 2009 when the failed attack over Detroit by the “underwear bomber,” Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, was traced back to AQAP.

But the U.S. was already secretly at war in Yemen. In the two weeks before the Christmas Day attack, U.S.-led attacks on “al-Qaeda targets” killed upwards of 150 Yemenis, according to local reports. The U.S. initially claimed that Yemen had led the attacks, but WikiLeaks revealed the U.S. role that most observers suspected.

Since then, the U.S. has ramped up its yearly aid to the Saleh regime to $300 million, including $170 million in military assistance.

In the past, Saleh has formed political partnerships with radicals of the Salafi tradition, the Islamist trend that includes Osama bin Laden and his followers. Especially in the 1980s, Saleh found it useful to ally with Yemen’s homegrown Salafists against the left. This includes Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, an ideologue on the far right wing of Islah who now supports the call to remove Saleh.

Despite receiving the infusion of U.S. aid, Saleh is rumored to have made an informal truce with al-Qaeda and used his U.S.-provided firepower in the fight against the Houthis.
As the Christian Science Monitor noted on March 25, the current revolt has not boosted fortunes of AQAP:

"[T]he group has done little to capitalize on the momentum of the protest movement so far. The prolific organization, which puts out a bimonthly Arabic publication and a quarterly English magazine, has only issued two statements on the topic of Arab revolutions, neither of which dealt directly with Yemen.

Though both statements broadly encouraged revolt, AQAP has advocated different goals from protest movements—notably the establishment of sharia, or Islamic law. Such messages are unpopular with many protesters, who are more focused on economic and political reform." [6]

The concern of the U.S. and the Saudis is not that AQAP could gain a footing among Yemen’s new activists, but that the anti-Saleh movement will give a lift to an already-existing movement for the independence of Yemen’s South, where al-Qaeda has its strongest base.

Although U.S. officials are eager to stop AQAP from making further attacks, they also are using AQAP as an excuse to bolster their position in Yemen, which is a key crossroads between Africa and the Gulf states. Southern Yemen also commands the east shore of the strait of Bab al-Mandab, which sits at the southern mouth of the Red Sea on the economically vital route north toward the Suez Canal.

According to Human Rights Watch (HRW) [7], AQAP officially endorsed the movement for southern secession in May 2009. That earned it a rebuke from bin Laden’s chief ideologists in Pakistan, who reminded AQAP that al-Qaeda does not back national movements, but seeks an international Islamic caliphate.

AQAP's endorsement didn’t seem to win them any friends in the Southern Movement, either. Political analysts and foreign diplomats interviewed by HRW in late 2009 dismissed the idea that there was any link between the movement and al-Qaeda. Southern Salafists who support the movement may be steering clear of the AQAP connection because they don’t want to raise the ire of the Americans or the Saudis.

**NORTH AND** South Yemen began to have separate histories as far back as 1904, when the Ottoman Turks and the British Empire agreed to divide the land into separate colonies. Since then, they have followed somewhat different paths of social and political development.

Under the British, the South’s economy grew faster than the North’s. The North became a monarchy in 1918 following the fall of the Ottomans, but the South remained under British rule until it became a republic in 1967—ruled by an independence movement that contained a strong left component. South Yemen aligned with the USSR in the Cold War, and the North was loosely aligned with the West.

The two countries united in 1990 following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the withdrawal of Soviet aid to the South. An election in 1993 divided along regional lines, with the North’s president Saleh taking the largest share of the vote. The two militaries were not yet integrated, and policy differences between the northern and southern parties led to a brief civil war in 1994.

After Saleh’s forces won the war, they sacked the southern capital of Aden, according to Dresch—looting everything from jewelry to bathroom fixtures. Saleh forced the retirement of southern civil servants and military officers, and the current movement for southern independence began when these groups organized to demand their full pensions in 2007.

Wide layers of southern society joined the protests, demanding employment opportunities for southerners, an end to corruption and a larger share of oil revenues for the southern provinces—where most of the country’s oil is located. By 2009, after two years of press censorship and violent repression of protests, the Southern Movement, or Hiraak, as it is called, began to demand independence.

From the beginning of this year’s movement in Sanaa, the northern capital, chebab leaders called for unity with the Southern Movement, according to the ICG. The coalition of official opposition parties, known as the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), also made a call for unity, but this was clearly an attempt to put
off southern demands for separation. One southern activist told the ICG: “We cannot coordinate with the northerners because our goal is southern independence. The JMP’s goal is unity. Their’s is an issue of rights. Ours is an issue of statehood.”

Another said:

“If the northern people are against the injustice that is happening in the South, why do they not take to the streets to protest this? Why are they not saying anything about what is happening in Radfan [a southern city under virtual siege since December]? If the South really is part of the same country, and we are all brothers, then why are there tanks and soldiers in Radfan and Aden and other places?”

The ICG says that Hiraak activists in Aden are the most willing to work with their northern counterparts, but the strong possibility of continued friction between the two movements is a sign of the political weakness of the young activists in Sanaa. As an impromptu political formation, the chebab have not had time to formulate a clear position on southern independence—let alone a position that supports the southerners’ right to self-determination.

A forthright defense of this democratic right would require the chebab make an additional break with politics at the JMP, but it would be the best guarantee of unity in the struggle against Saleh. It could also open the way, at least in the long run, toward voluntary reunion of Yemen on the basis of equality between North and South.

The question will only become sharper when Saleh leaves. At that point, the youth movement that drove him out will need to decide whether it stands with a successor regime that’s likely to keep up Saleh’s brutal campaign to hold onto South Yemen.

The unresolved “southern question” is only one sign that the challenges for Yemen’s movement have just begun. Nadia al-Sakkaf, editor of the Yemen Times, which supports the movement, posed the problem on the PBS News Hour:

"The problem is, after [Saleh is gone], what happens? We are going to face the legacy which Saleh has left us behind. He is going to leave us with no money. And there will be dwindling oil resources. There will be resentment among the youth. The common enemy that united them will be gone.

And so they will turn around them and see that there’s nothing left to fight for. And the jobs that they wanted, they are not going to be created overnight. So we’re going to be facing a lot of disappointed youth waiting for opportunities to happen."

Assuming that it can gain a political victory against Saleh, the movement that is named after Yemen’s youth will need to look to its roots among Yemen’s poor—the workers, farmers and unemployed. The movement’s organizational forms, such as the university encampment, and its political demands, centered around the resignation of the single hated figure, will need to give way to new forms and more-developed politics that can carry on the struggle of Yemen’s working classes against the country’s economic and political elite.

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P.S.

* From Socialist Worker:
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Footnotes


