

Yemen May Be the Next Regime to Fall

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Brief Analysis

On March 21, several key figures reportedly defected from Yemeni president Ali Saleh's ruling coalition, including Maj. Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, commander of the 1st Armored Division and Northwest Military District. Saleh has faced growing criticism since March 18, when as many as fifty-two protesters were killed and hundreds more injured at Sana University. The U.S. government needs to carefully consider its options; its ally Saleh may not be able to stay in power much longer.

Background

After Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak resigned on February 11, antiregime protests in Yemen began to expand beyond the main cities of Sana, Aden, and Taizz and became markedly more violent, largely in response to regime crackdowns. The character of the demonstrations also shifted, as younger protesters unaffiliated with any political group took the lead from the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP). Additionally, Houthi rebels and members of the opposition Southern Mobility Movement joined calls for Saleh's resignation, as did Sheikh Abdul Majid al-Zindani, the founder of Iman University in Sana and a former mentor to Usama bin Laden.

In response, Saleh has made several concessions to the opposition, firing the governors of Taizz and Aden following violence against protestors there, proposing a new constitution that would allow some transfer of powers to the parliament, and dismissing his entire cabinet. These moves were in addition to previous pledges that he would not seek another term as president in 2013 or transfer power to his son, Ahmed Ali, along with a series of tax decreases for the general population and pay increases for civil servants and the military.

None of these concessions have fully met the opposition's demands, however, and the violence of March 18 further exacerbated the situation. The Sana University shootings, which were carried out by groups associated with the regime, brought the total number of deaths to more than 100 since protests began in January.

Increasing Defections

Over the past three months, Saleh's ruling coalition has experienced a number of resignations and shifts of allegiance. At least twenty parliamentary members of the president's General People's Congress Party have left the government, along with a number of cabinet ministers and diplomats.

Yet Saleh's problems grew substantially with the announcement that General al-Ahmar would support and protect protesters seeking to remove the president from power, potentially signaling the regime's final chapter. In addition to commanding one of Yemen's four military districts, al-Ahmar -- like Saleh -- is a member of both the dominant Hashid tribal confederation and the Sanhan tribe. The announcement might indicate that Saleh's tribal confederation wants to distance itself from the president in order to facilitate his departure and maintain its own political position. Al-Ahmar's declaration was supported by Gen. Muhammad Ali Muhsin and Gen. Sayf al-Baqri -- commanders of the Eastern Military District and the Central District in Sana, respectively -- and followed by further military defections in and around the capital.

U.S. Options

As the crisis in Yemen deepens, Washington should weigh its next steps carefully rather than reflexively sticking with Saleh. Various options have emerged, some of which could be pursued in tandem:

Support Saleh's departure. Since the protests began in Yemen, U.S. policy has principally focused on promoting peaceful dialogue between Saleh and opposition leaders in order to reform the government along constitutional lines. Additionally, Washington has urged Saleh to resist violence and protect protestors from both government security services and pro-regime groups. Yet given the widespread nature of the protests and the recent military defections, the United States should actively call for Saleh's resignation and support a peaceful political transition. Although Washington has previously had to maintain positive relations with the regime in order to facilitate efforts against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the situation has reached the point where the United States is increasingly perceived as affiliating itself with Saleh at the expense of the Yemeni people.

Consult with Saudi Arabia. Riyadh has a strategic interest in Yemen's stability, and any U.S. policy changes must take Saudi interests into account. The kingdom has historically used dollar diplomacy to maintain positive relationships with tribal leaders and influence events in Yemen. In the 1980s, Riyadh leveraged those relationships to fight the Marxist government of South Yemen. Given its recent military intervention in Bahrain, Riyadh is clearly interested in taking an active role to stabilize neighboring countries. Although the kingdom has long had a tense relationship with Saleh, they are more likely to support him when the alternative is unclear. Accordingly, Washington should consult with the Saudis on possible steps toward smooth transition, reassuring them that Yemeni stability and U.S. calls for Saleh's resignation are not mutually exclusive.

Actively engage the political opposition. The United States should increasingly reach out to key opposition groups, including tribal leaders and political parties, in order to develop a greater understanding of their concerns and demands in a post-Saleh Yemen. This includes reaching beyond the capital and meeting with leaders in the governorates, including areas that have an AQAP presence. Washington should continue to press for peaceful evolution versus violent revolution, presenting itself as a guarantor of constitutional changes that would make the government more inclusive. Although Yemenis themselves must determine the leadership of their country if Saleh leaves, the United States should play an active behind-the-scenes role to ensure that the government does not fracture along regional, ethnic, sectarian, or tribal lines. Toward this end, the U.S. embassy should actively reach out to members of the JMP, the Islah Party, and the Southern Movement, as well as the Houthis and tribal leaders.

Expand the fight against al-Qaeda. The United States has relied heavily on the Yemeni security services in its efforts to defeat AQAP. Many of these units are led by members of Saleh's immediate family or tribe, so his departure could impair their ability to operate or put them out of commission entirely. Accordingly, the United States should prepare to take on a more robust training effort within Yemen. It should also increase its ability to act unilaterally if a power vacuum emerges and Yemeni efforts against AQAP suffer.

In addition, if General al-Ahmar becomes a more important figure, Washington will need a better understanding of

his views on pursuing AQAP. Historically, he has adopted a softer line on targeting al-Qaeda and was noticeably unhelpful during U.S. efforts to capture or kill the perpetrators of the 2000 USS *Cole* bombing. Yet many of his attitudes likely reflected Saleh's thinking with respect to negotiating with al-Qaeda versus fighting it. With the merging of al-Qaeda elements from Saudi Arabia and Yemen in early 2009, the new AQAP organization has been quite willing to attack the Yemeni state. This change in al-Qaeda strategy may have prompted some members of the regime, including al-Ahmar, to shift from tolerating the group to actively fighting it.

Daniel Green is a Soref fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Yemen, al-Qaeda, counterinsurgency, and stability operations. ❖

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