Protests in Yemen: President Saleh Promises Change

by Daniel Green **(/experts/daniel-green)**

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Brief Analysis

On February 2, Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has been in power since 1978, declared that he would not press for a constitutional amendment allowing him to seek another term during the next election, currently scheduled for 2013. He also pledged that he would not pass power to his son, Ahmed, head of the country's Republican Guard. His remarks were apparently intended to preempt a "day of rage" in the capital, Sana, scheduled by opposition groups for February 3. In addition to parallels with Tunisia and Egypt, Washington will be watching with great attention given Yemen's reputation as a sanctuary for al-Qaeda and its supporters.

Background

Since mid-January, demonstrators have staged large protests in Sana and other major cities such as Aden and Taizz, calling for Saleh's removal from office. Meanwhile, Yemen continues to face domestic insurgencies in the north and the potentially secessionist south, as well as threats from al-Qaeda elements that have found refuge in the country's crowed cities and rugged hinterland. The government is desperately poor, with inadequate water supplies and diminishing oil revenues, so its writ barely extends beyond the country's relatively few paved roads.

Saleh is known for his toughness. In the 1970s, he reportedly helped gun down Yemen's military leader and has himself survived several assassination attempts. He is now taking a proactive, even humble, approach to dealing with potential protests. During a televised speech on January 23, Saleh stated, "I would ask for pardon from the people if I made mistakes or I fell short of my duties, only God is perfect." He also emphasized that "Yemen is not like Tunisia," calling his country a land of "freedom and democracy" while simultaneously warning the people against "chaos and demagogy."

He then addressed accusations he was seeking to remain president for life and install his son as successor: "Talking about hereditary rule is an impudent symphony, we are a republican and democratic system and we are against hereditary rule.... We are against the hereditary rule of the village, of the tribe, of the power, of the unity, of the ministry, we are against hereditary rule." In fact, Saleh reneged on similar promises in 2006, when he pledged to abstain from that year's presidential election but then changed his mind.

Since last week's speech, Saleh has cut individual income taxes, raised military salaries, and imposed price controls to reduce inflation. He also ordered the government to absorb 25 percent of college students into government

institutions and exempt them from remaining fees for the 2010-2011 academic year, in addition to reconsidering tuition fees for parallel education and calling on the Supreme Universities Council to establish a college graduates' fund to help former students find jobs.

On the political front, Saleh has repeatedly called for dialogue with the opposition to resolve the issues prompting the crisis. And in his February 2 address to parliament, he announced that the legislative elections slated for April 27 would be rescheduled to allow for better compilation of voter records, a key opposition demand.

Yemen Is Not Tunisia or Egypt

A number of domestic and international factors suggest that Saleh is unlikely to be toppled by Tunisia-inspired protests. Although Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen are all Muslim-majority countries with long-serving leaders, the contexts within which their protests are taking place are quite different. Saleh prides himself on his ability to balance and divide different groups within Yemeni society while maintaining his position. He often likens this to "dancing on the heads of snakes," permitting a certain level of political give-and-take with those who oppose him and his policies.

Saleh also uses government patronage to co-opt potential opposition elements and incorporate them into the state's system of largesse, diluting their ability to confront the regime. When he does order arrests of opposition figures, it is often for narrowly confined reasons, and the individuals in question are quickly released. This tendency was evident most recently in late January, when Tawakkol Karman -- a noted journalist, human rights activist, and head of Women Journalists Without Chains -- was arrested for inciting protestors and then released a few days later. Saleh's January 23 speech and subsequent targeted concessions further illustrate his recent strategy of deflating opposition via carrots rather than sticks.

Moreover, unlike Tunisia and Egypt, which are essentially one-party states, Yemen has a viable though weak opposition faction called the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), which participates in parliamentary elections and is generally permitted freedom of speech and assembly. This has served as a safety valve for discontent, giving the opposition a means to contest the policies of the majority General People's Party. In fact, the JMP has spearheaded the current protests, giving them an element of organization and preventing more chaotic elements from taking the lead.

Additionally, opposition protestors are not unified on the question of whether Saleh should leave office, and their goals are inconsistent and, in some cases, hostile to one another. Some protestors are interested in dialogue, while others want Saleh to step down; some want to split the country in two, while others want to keep it unified. These divisions have allowed Saleh to claim that some of the demonstrators seek *tatasawmal*, or the "Somalization" of Yemen. This claim plays on Yemenis' tendency to favor dialogue over conflict, given the negative effects of the 1994 secessionist civil war and the ongoing operations against al-Qaeda and insurgents in the north and south.

Another key distinction is that Yemen does not have the sort of middle class seen in Tunisia and Egypt. Its population is substantially poorer and much more reliant on the state for jobs, which makes the people less likely to protest. Additionally, because the Yemeni government is largely confined to the cities, where most of Saleh's patronage system and security forces are located, he is better able to influence urban protests to his benefit.

U.S. Policy

From a security perspective, the United States (along with other countries such as Saudi Arabia) believes it has an enduring interest in maintaining Saleh in power, if only to ensure that Yemen remains inclined to confront al-Qaeda and address its separatist movements in a constructive manner. One indicator of this support is the U.S. State Department's relatively muted response to the protests. On January 28, departmental spokesman P. J. Crowley

stated, "We support the right of the Yemeni people to express themselves and assemble freely, and we will continue to monitor the situation there," noting that "the solution in Tunisia is not the solution in Egypt is not the solution in Yemen." He also emphasized that all three countries needed to "take advantage of this opportunity to expand their dialogue with their populations and respond to the aspirations of their people."

Going forward, Washington should use the Yemeni protests as an opportunity to encourage the Saleh government toward political and economic reforms, which could in turn bolster its legitimacy, capacity, and efficacy. U.S. advice may have spurred Saleh's new announcement that he is forsaking an extension on his term -- now Washington should press for more government transparency to address corruption and ensure that the political process is as inclusive as possible. U.S. officials should also couch anticorruption requests in terms that Saleh can understand, perhaps by stating that international donors will withhold further aid to his government until they are assured that the funds will not be squandered. Finally, the United States should reiterate its overall strategy for Yemen, emphasizing partnership between America and the Yemeni people while seeking to address the country's many political, economic, social, and security problems together, as well as al-Qaeda.

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

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