

Yemen's President to Be Reelected As Terrorist Plots Revealed

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Sep 20, 2006

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



Brief Analysis

On September 20, amid reports of al-Qaeda plots against local American targets, the people of the strategically important but impoverished Arabian Peninsula state of Yemen go to the polls to elect a president. The president will not be new -- the incumbent Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has been in power for twenty-eight years, is expected to be reelected. Apart from last-minute doubts about the poll caused by the security crisis, the main question is how sweeping his victory will be. The last time elections were held, in 1999, President Saleh polled 96 percent, including the vote of his only opponent, a member of his own political party who said he considered Saleh more worthy. This time the field includes four other candidates. Saleh's main rival is Faysal bin Shamlan, a former oil minister who is backed by an alliance of opposition parties and whom Saleh has linked to an arrested "major terrorist."

Just one day before the election, President Saleh personally announced that terrorist operations against unspecified American installations and a major hotel in Sanaa, the capital, had been thwarted. The news culminated a week of growing anxieties. On September 12, dozens had died at an election rally when a crowd stampeded in panic as a platform fell. Two days later, near-simultaneous suicide attacks on two different oil installations had killed a guard and caused minor damage, prompting the U.S. embassy to advise against travel to the country and ask the local American community not to leave their heavily guarded residences. On September 16, Yemeni security forces arrested four al-Qaeda suspects after a seven-hour siege in Sanaa, in which more than 1,200 pounds of explosives were also seized. The terrorist suspect -- described as "a companion of Osama bin Laden" as well as one of Shamlan's bodyguards -- was arrested the next day.

Saleh's Military Constituency

The drama by chance encapsulates Washington's twin concerns about Yemen: the reform agenda and the war on terrorism. President Saleh's contested bid for reelection for a third term and simultaneous local elections suggest an active democracy. The reality is a country where the military and tribal interests dominate politics even though Saleh has sought to broaden his support by encouraging public participation in government. Saleh remains a typical strongman. A career soldier, he was once an active participant in a military coup against a previous Yemeni leader

who was killed. Perhaps mindful of the risks a Yemeni leader could face, he has made his son, Ahmed, commander of both the Republican Guard and the Yemeni special forces. Ahmed has been reported as being a possible future contender for leadership, but not yet. Saleh, who had originally vowed not to stand for reelection but then reversed his decision, has campaigned on a platform of national unity, security, and stability.

By contrast, Shamlan, backed by an opposition alliance including Islamists and socialists, has accused Saleh of trying to preserve a "monopoly of power." He has promised to install parliamentary democracy. The current parliament is viewed as having a limited role. The opposition also accuses Saleh of economic mismanagement and poor government. Yemen produces less than half of 1 percent of the world's oil but has the largest indigenous population by far of the Arabian Peninsula countries, most of which are substantial oil exporters with large populations of temporary expatriate workers. Many Yemenis live in poverty. Saleh has countered opposition by claiming that any "great progress" inevitably has its flaws. The president's main achievement is seen as having unified the country ("reunified" in local political parlance) in 1990, when North Yemen and South Yemen combined. The move was controversial -- leaders of the south tried to secede in 1994 but were forced to flee into exile. Shamlan himself comes from the south. An economist by training, he resigned as oil minister in 1995 in protest over corruption.

President Saleh has built up a rapport with President George W. Bush, last visiting Washington in November 2005. But the relationship with the United States has often been problematic. As a member of the UN Security Council in 1990, Yemen voted against military action after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, prompting a cutoff of U.S. aid. In 2000, after the USS Cole was attacked by al-Qaeda in Aden port, the investigation was hampered by Yemeni sensitivities. In 2003, the ten chief suspects in the attack escaped from a Yemeni prison. Two of them were eventually rearrested nearly a year later. In December 2002, Western naval forces interdicted a North Korean ship carrying Scud-type missiles to Yemen. Saleh insisted on taking delivery of the missiles and was eventually allowed to do so. His relations with neighboring Saudi Arabia have been even more tense. A border dispute has been resolved although the deal is not recognized by all local tribes. And Riyadh has occasionally involved itself in exacerbating Yemeni domestic tensions.

Nevertheless, Washington is grateful for Yemen's role in safeguarding the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the passage from the Arabian Sea to the Red Sea, and hence the southern approach to the Suez Canal. If this route were jeopardized, tankers would have to go round the southern tip of Africa, adding considerably to voyage times and cost. A French tanker was damaged in an al-Qaeda attack off Yemen in 2002. Earlier this month, Osama bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, called for attacks on oil facilities in the region.

Challenge of Saleh's Reelection

U.S. Middle East policy would be further challenged if Saleh's expected reelection is not accepted by parts of Yemeni society. Indeed, his reelection will only postpone discussion on how to ensure a peaceful transition when his eventual departure takes place. Now sixty-four years old and the second-longest-surviving Middle East leader after Muammar Qadhafi of Libya, Saleh himself has predicted that his reelection for the next seven years will make a peaceful transition of power easier in the future.

The apparent al-Qaeda threat of the last few days has probably helped Saleh depict himself as the safer option for Yemenis concerned about security. Indeed, in the longer term, little doubt exists that al-Qaeda-type terrorism will continue to cast a shadow over the mountainous country that is bin Laden's ancestral home. What Washington does not need, however, is another Middle Eastern election with a vexatious result. President Saleh's first task after reelection should be to minimize any such controversy.

Simon Henderson is a Baker fellow and director of Gulf and energy studies at The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Gulf & Energy Policy (/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

