

YEMEN AFTER SALEH

© Yin Ke/Xinhua/Sipa Press



An army officer participates in a rally demanding the immediate stepdown of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in Sanaa, Yemen, 24 March 2011.

It now seems inevitable that Yemen's president, Ali Abdallah Saleh, will soon leave office. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on 25 March that he is now negotiating over the terms of his departure. The question to be considered here is: what will happen in Yemen after his departure? This question, of course, is not just important for Yemen, but for its oil rich but vulnerable neighbour, Saudi Arabia, and all who depend upon the Kingdom for oil supplies.

The potential for things going badly in Yemen after Saleh's departure is great. There are already many conflicts and problems there. In the South (which had been ruled by the British and then existed as an independent, Marxist-ruled state from 1967 until unification with the North in 1990), a strong movement has arisen in favour of restoring its independence. In the far north of the country, there has been armed rebellion by the Houthis – a Shi'a group with links to the imamate that ruled North Yemen from the departure of the Ottomans at the end of World War I until the 1962 revolution that established an Arab nationalist "republic" there. In addition, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula – arguably the most active of the Al Qaeda regional affiliates – has a strong presence in Yemen. Finally, the authority of the Yemeni government is weak outside the major cities where the tribes are well armed. Add all these factors together, and the potential not just for conflict, but for long-lasting conflict appears great.

But escalating conflict is not inevitable. Much of the conflict that is taking place is in reaction to Saleh's rule. The ongoing southern secessionist movement can be traced to Saleh's failure to keep his promise to share power as was elaborately negotiated between North and South prior to unification in 1990, and to the dominance of northerners over the South ever since the latter's failed rebellion in 1994. With Saleh gone, it is possible that the southern leadership may be persuaded to remain inside a unified Yemen that is democratic. Or if not, secession may be negotiated peacefully as it has been elsewhere – especially since the old border between North and South does not need to be renegotiated, but can simply be restored.

Similarly, the Houthi rebellion is very much focused on Saleh himself. It too may be more amenable to peaceful conflict resolution with Saleh gone. In order to obtain Western sympathy, Saleh and the Saudis have claimed that the Houthis are linked to Iran. It

* Mark N. Katz is Professor of Government and Politics at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, USA.

must be remembered, though, that even though the Houthis are Shi'as, they practice Za'idi Shi'ism and not the Twelver Shi'ism prevalent in Iran. Saleh and the northern ruling class are also predominantly Za'idi Shi'a (albeit not especially observant), so the Shi'ism of the Houthis should not be made too much of.

The current protest against Saleh is led by students and other urbanites. Some predict that these groups will not get along well with the heavily armed tribes in the rural regions, which also dominate the security services. But the tribes and the urban middle classes (or aspiring middle classes) must not be seen as mutually exclusive groups. Many of the powerful shaykhs have sent their sons –and even some of their daughters – to be educated in the West. Many of these have developed strong Western connections which they maintain for business, professional, and other purposes. Tribes, then, must not be seen as anti-modern forces. Indeed, many in the tribes have embraced modernisation not only to benefit themselves and their families, but also their tribes and their country. If post-Saleh Yemen attempts democracy, tribal leaders can be expected to play a major role in this process. Indeed, democracy will allow them a much greater say than Saleh has.

This leaves Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) – an organisation that is hostile both to democracy and to the West. According to numerous media reports, the US is reluctant to lose Saleh since he is a “key ally” against Al Qaeda. What these reports – and apparently the current US government officials who may be the sources for them – overlook is that Saleh has not always supported the West (as during the 1990-91 conflict over Kuwait during which he backed Saddam Hussein), and that Saleh has had a strong interest in exaggerating his willingness to aid the US vis-à-vis

AQAP in order to obtain American resources. While AQAP will not disappear along with Saleh, dealing with it may actually become somewhat easier. The strong AQAP presence in Yemen is mainly possible because tribes opposed to Saleh have protected it for their own parochial purposes. If their grievances with the central government can be resolved, then they may well be persuaded to turn against AQAP in return – especially if AQAP opposes this reconciliation process, as is highly likely.

Revolutions everywhere involve two elements. The first is the overthrow of the old regime. The second is the rise of a new one. But it often takes considerable time for the nature of the new regime to be defined. This, of course, is because while the revolutionaries all agree that they want to overthrow the old regime, their views about what the new regime should be like usually differ – often sharply and violently.

While this process of shaping the nature of the new regime is primarily an internal one, external powers can play an important role – for good or for ill. External powers can play a positive role if they focus on supporting not just what is good for themselves, but for the nation in question. With the US government – even under President Obama – fixated on Al Qaeda and the War on Terror and not on democracy and human rights in Yemen, it risks pursuing a counter-productive policy that alienates Yemenis and results in the new regime there being hostile to Western interests. America, though, is preoccupied with Afghanistan, Iraq, and its own domestic concerns. These two factors together have created both the need and the opportunity for Europe to take the lead in formulating a policy toward Yemen that furthers the long term interests both of the people of that country as well as the West as a whole.

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the EUISS