

Yemen: Saleh Has Gone, but His Regime Remains

Written by Mark N. Katz

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MARK N. KATZ, FEB 2 2012

Ali Abdallah Saleh—who first came to power in North Yemen in 1978 and who has ruled over united Yemen since 1990—has finally left office and left the country. Elections to replace him as president are due to be held on February 21. After toppling the long-time authoritarian rulers of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya in 2011, the Arab Spring appears to have achieved its fourth victory (and its first of 2012) in Yemen.

Appearances, though, may be deceiving. For although Saleh has left Yemen, his regime remains very much intact—especially in the form of his son and his three nephews who retain control over the security services. Given the regime's previous success managing elections, it appears likely that the upcoming ones will be won by Saleh's vice president, Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi. Hadi, though, has no independent power base. He will remain dependent on Saleh's appointees in the security services and the armed forces to carry out his orders. And should he try to assert his own authority by replacing Saleh's allies (and most especially, Saleh's relatives), it is highly doubtful that he would succeed in achieving anything other than his own precipitous downfall.

After the upcoming presidential elections, then, not only will Saleh's regime remain in power, but Saleh himself might remain in charge of it—much like Deng Xiaoping in China and Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore after they formally relinquished power. Indeed, if Saleh remains outside of Yemen, he could continue to run the country without the risk of being arrested and tried (like Egypt's Mubarak), or meeting an even worse fate (like Libya's Qaddafi). A better analogy, then, might be to a crime boss who, even after being tried and convicted, continues to run his organization from the relative comfort and safety of his prison cell. Saleh, though, has stated repeatedly that he plans to return to Yemen. Either way, the new president does not stand much chance of wresting power from the Saleh clan.

Not everyone would be dissatisfied with this outcome. Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Cooperation Council governments have been urging Saleh to step down not because they want to see Yemen become democratized, but merely stabilized. Many Western governments might have similar aims, even if they claim that they want Yemen to become democratic. What they fear is that a democratic Yemen might not be a stable Yemen—or even a democratic one for very long.

There are, however, many inside Yemen who will not be satisfied with the election of Saleh's hand-picked successor and the continuation of the Saleh family's rule in actuality. There are those—such as the Yemeni Nobel laureate, Tawakkul Karman—who want to see Saleh put on trial in Yemen and who are vociferously opposed to the Yemeni parliament's recent decision to grant him immunity in exchange for relinquishing the presidency.

It is this deal that might also indicate why Saleh agreed to step down. Immunity is not so important to him either if he remains president or if he relinquishes the presidency but remains in control. His opponents, though, have been sharply divided over this issue. While Ms. Karman and the younger generation generally want to put Saleh on trial, the older opposition leaders were willing to grant him immunity just to get rid of him—and, of course, increase their own prospects for gaining some authority.

By agreeing to step down, Saleh has tried to do once again what he has previously done ever since he first came to power in 1978: taken action that focuses the attention of his opponents on the differences they have with each other rather than on the ones they have with him. He may calculate that the differences among them are so great that at

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least some of his opponents will prove willing to ally with him against the others.

Whether Saleh can do this successfully, of course, is not clear. One serious problem he and his relatives face is the growing opposition from within different branches of the security services. Should he be unable to halt this, the security services may no longer be a reliable means of coercion for him and his relatives.

Two things seem certain: 1) despite whatever he may say to the contrary, Saleh is going to do whatever he can to retain power for himself and his family; and 2) the fact that it has survived for so long already suggests that the Yemeni opposition is unlikely either to be co-opted or suppressed by the Salehs. Instead of coming to fruition with the upcoming presidential elections, then, the Arab Spring in Yemen is likely to be (paraphrasing Thomas Hobbes) nasty and brutish, but not short.

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