

Protests spread throughout Arabian Peninsula

By Alex Lantier
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Renewed popular protests hit Yemen, Oman and Bahrain yesterday. In addition to the increasing instability of regimes already facing mass opposition, there are signs that the protests that spread from Tunisia and Egypt to the Arabian Peninsula may also overtake Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

In Yemen, mass protests took place throughout the country against US-backed President Ali Abdullah Saleh, while opposition parties—in an about-face from their position on Sunday—refused to participate in a unity government with Saleh. Protests have shaken the Saleh regime since February 11.

Tens of thousands marched in a “day of rage” protest in the capital, Sanaa, demanding an end to bloodshed against demonstrators and Saleh’s departure from power. According to Xinhua, roughly 5,000 people traveled 60 kilometers from Dhamar province to join the protests in Sanaa.

Government supporters reportedly organized another rally in Sanaa, attended by a few thousand people. It called for the resumption of dialog between the ruling party and the opposition to avoid further violence.

Demonstrations took place throughout the country, including in Dhamar, Ibb, Taiz, Aden, Abyan, Shabwa, Al-Bayda and Hadramout provinces. The Ibb protest reportedly gathered 10,000 people. Protests in Aden, the port city that has seen 24 of the 27 confirmed deaths at the hands of state forces, reportedly focused on commemorating those who had been killed.

Saleh simultaneously denounced the protests as orchestrated by Israel and the US and attempted to placate protesters’ anger. He ordered an investigation into the killing of demonstrators in Aden. He also sacked five provincial governors amid reports of violence against protesters in their areas. These included Aden Governor Adnan al-Jefri, Hadramout

Governor Salim al-Khanbashi, Al-Hodayda Governor Ahmed al-Jabali, Abyan Governor Ahmed al-Maisary, and Lahj Governor Muhsin al-Naqib. They all received other government posts, however.

Saleh was forced to postpone talks on a unity government with the Joint Meeting Parties. The bourgeois opposition coalition formed in 2006 includes the Islamist Islah Party, the nationalist Popular Nasserist Organization, and the Yemen Socialist Party (YSP), which ruled South Yemen prior to the reunification of Yemen in 1990.

On February 28, its spokesman, Mohammed al-Mutawakil, said the party would “be ready to take part in the joint unity government with the ruling party.” It demanded only that Saleh resign from posts in the army and finance ministry. Yesterday, the Joint Meeting Parties indicated that they would participate in government only if Saleh stepped down.

Tribal leaders and southern separatists are turning against Saleh. Sheikh Hamid ben Abdallah Al-Ahmar, a leader of both the Hached tribe and the Islah party, reportedly endorsed the call for the removal of Saleh last week, together with leaders of the Baqil tribe.

Yassin Ahmad Saleh Qadih, a leader of the separatist Southern Movement, announced that he would push for a referendum on separation after Saleh falls. Though it has only 5.5 million people, compared to 18 million in the north, the south is wealthier and produces most of the country’s daily oil output of 300,000 barrels. Saleh reportedly has warned that the partition of Yemen would break the country into many pieces.

Yemen specialist Gregory Johnsen told the *New York Times*: “A lot of people are really worried about what happens the day after Saleh is gone. No one knows where the different tribal groupings would land.” Saleh’s Sanhan tribe controls Yemen’s military and

intelligence agencies.

In the industrial and port city of Sohar, in northern Oman, the army yesterday again fired on protesters demanding jobs and reform of the absolute monarchy of Sultan Qaboos bin Said. Only one person was reported wounded. The reported death toll for Sunday's protests was increased to six, however.

Troops and armored vehicles occupied the Globe Roundabout in Sohar, which had attracted up to 2,000 people in previous protests. Protesters blockaded the Sohar port, however, and Westerners in the port management briefly left Sohar for the capital of Oman, Muscat. According to the *Tehran Times*, protesters demanded that "the benefits of our oil wealth" be "distributed evenly."

Protesters in Muscat gathered around the buildings of the Shura Council, an advisory body that counsels Sultan Qaboos, demanding jobs, higher salaries and freedom of the press.

Sultan Qaboos issued a statement promising to create 50,000 jobs, implement a \$390 per month unemployment benefit, and study the possibility of widening the powers of the advisory council. On Saturday he sacked six cabinet ministers and increased the minimum wage by 40 percent.

Oman is a strategic country located across the Arabian Sea from Iran and astride the narrow Strait of Hormuz, through which Persian Gulf oil exports must travel. The US has backed Qaboos. US State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said, "We have been in touch with the government and encouraged restraint and to resolve differences through dialog." There are no opposition parties in Oman because political parties are illegal there.

Thousands of protesters again demonstrated in Bahrain's capital, Manama, against the Al-Khalifa dynasty that has ruled Bahrain for 200 years. The protesters marched from Salmaniah district to Pearl Square, the central square around which anti-government protests have rallied in recent weeks. Demonstrators opposed attempts to divide them along sectarian lines, chanting: "We are brothers, Sunnis and Shiites. The people want the fall of the regime."

Bahrain hosts a major naval base for the US Fifth Fleet in the Persian Gulf and has close security ties with Saudi Arabia. The Saudi armed forces intervened in Bahrain after popular protests developed there in

1996.

Crude oil prices rose yesterday on reports that 30 Saudi tanks had been transported to Bahrain. Bahraini officials denied the report, though they confirmed the movement of tanks across the border.

"There are no Saudi Arabian tanks in Bahrain," the officials said. "Tanks identified on Monday evening were Bahraini tanks returning from Kuwait National Day celebrations, where military from several Allied countries participated."

There are indications that protests may also spread to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, two oppressive pro-US monarchies that are critical to the world oil trade.

In Kuwait, a youth group called the Fifth Fence has announced plans for a March 8 protest outside the country's parliament. Opposition parties in Kuwait have called for the ouster of Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser Mohammad al-Ahmad al-Sabah, the nephew of Kuwait Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah.

In Saudi Arabia, Internet activists have set up Facebook pages calling for protests on March 11 and March 20, largely based on demands for elections to the Shura Assembly. These pages have attracted 17,000 supporters. However, press reports point out that in 2004 Saudi security forces were able to disperse protests in Riyadh and Jeddah by force, and Saudi officials are monitoring the Facebook pages.

Protests could intensify divisions inside the ruling Saudi monarchy. The UPI press agency noted: "The kingdom faces a potentially touchy royal succession, complicated by the advanced age of the country's top leaders. King Abdallah, Crown Prince Sultan, Interior Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Prince Nayef, and Riyadh Governor Prince Salman are all in their 80s."

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