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Yemen: What Could Saleh Be Thinking?

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Of all the embattled leaders that have faced prolonged domestic opposition during the “Arab Spring” of 2011, the behavior of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh has been the most erratic and confusing. Unlike Tunisia’s Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, Saleh has not relinquished power. Like Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi, Syria’s Bashar al-Assad, and Bahrain’s King Hamad, Saleh has instead used deadly force in an attempt to suppress his opponents. But unlike these other three leaders who have used force, Saleh has indicated that he would step down from office.

In response to mounting popular opposition to his rule, Saleh first said that he would not run for re-election when his current term expires in 2013. When this did not satisfy his opponents, he offered to step down at the end of 2011. And when this did not satisfy them, he agreed—three times—to a GCC plan whereby he would step down after thirty days in exchange for immunity for himself and his closest associates. But after raising expectations that he would step down in accordance with the thirty-day GCC plan, he has reneged on his offer all three times.

Why doesn’t he either step down, or forthrightly state that he has no intention of doing so? What is the point of announcing his willingness to step down soon, but then not do so? What, in short, does he hope to gain by such erratic behavior?

Absent the ability to pose these questions directly to Saleh (and uncertain of how frankly he would answer them even if we could), the best that can be done is to attempt to view the situation he is facing from his viewpoint. Performing such an exercise is useful because it suggests that there may well be a rationale for his seemingly erratic behavior.

The first and most important thing that can be observed about Saleh is that he undoubtedly has no intention of stepping down if he can avoid it. He has ruled North Yemen since 1978 and united Yemen since 1990. He has faced challenges to his rule before and overcome them. It is highly likely that he thinks he can do so again.

Then why would he repeatedly express his willingness to leave office—even within thirty days? He may calculate that this is actually the best way to defuse both internal and external demands that he resign. He knows that his domestic opponents are deeply divided on what they want for Yemen. By offering to resign, Saleh may seek to focus attention on their disagreements over who should succeed him. He may even hope that there are factions within the opposition who may prefer that Saleh to remain in office to one of their rivals replacing him.

Since Western and GCC governments have called upon him to step down, Saleh’s announcement that he is willing to do so may be designed to project an image of himself as cooperative and responsive. He may also hope that the fractiousness of the opposition—as well as the Western and GCC fear that Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula may be his most likely replacement—will result in their seeing Saleh’s remaining in power “for the time being” as their least worst alternative.

Above all, Saleh wants to avoid external military intervention—especially like the Arab League-sponsored and UN Security Council-authorized variety now being undertaken against Libya’s Qaddafi—aimed at removing him from power. Stating his willingness to leave office may well be aimed at convincing Western and GCC governments (as well as Western public opinion) that—unlike Qaddafi—Saleh is reasonable, and so intervention against him is unnecessary.

Ironically, Qaddafi’s truculence probably benefits Saleh. So long as Qaddafi puts up resistance to the Security Council-authorized intervention against him, it is highly unlikely

that Western powers will want to intervene in Yemen simultaneously. And while the GCC governments have called for Saleh to step down, he is undoubtedly confident that they will not intervene in Yemen on their own the way they did in Bahrain.

If indeed Saleh hopes that these maneuvers of his will allow him to cling to power, the question that then arises is: Will he be able to do so?

It is certainly possible that he will. The opposition against him may indeed fracture. And as has happened so often before, the higher priority of other issues—as well as Yemen's reputation for being a quagmire for external powers—may serve to limit the willingness of the West and the GCC to actively involve themselves in Yemeni affairs.

On the other hand, Saleh may be miscalculating. The opposition to him seems to be getting stronger, not weaker. While external powers may not intervene to oust him, they are not likely to intervene to protect him either. Furthermore, repeatedly announcing that he will step down and then backtracking on this only increases the belief that he has no intention of leaving office voluntarily. Instead of dividing the opposition, these tactics may serve to unify it in the belief that Saleh can only be removed forcibly.

In this case, Saleh may soon confront the stark choice of remaining in power only through the indefinite use of massive force (which he may be unable to sustain), or being forcibly removed from office without any guarantee either of immunity or personal safety. Leaving office voluntarily with immunity, then, may no longer be an option for him since his own previous actions have undermined any confidence that he is serious about doing so.

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