

ARAB SPRING CONTINUES

## Now Yemen on Boil

*[At end of July, Lalkar interviewed Mohammed Hassan from the Belgian Workers' Party, previously an Ethiopian ambassador and a person who is extremely knowledgeable about the Middle East. Mohammed Hassan was specifically asked to enlighten people at large on the situation in Yemen, on which he provided some eye-opening information. Excerpts:]*

**Will Saleh be coming back? And has his departure made any difference to who is ruling Yemen?**

Saleh himself was attacked by part of the Republican Guard who were guarding him in his palace. The Republican Guard is led by his son and for the most part remains loyal to the Saleh regime. In the Yemeni army as a whole there has been a split and much of the army is siding with the popular revolt. This has come about as a result of the failure of negotiations proposing that the popular revolutionary committee and the government should sit together and discuss a transitional government. However, neither Saudi Arabia nor the US were prepared to support this initiative, which failed as a result. The consequence is that several army generals have sided with the popular revolt. On top of that Saleh has lost the important support he used to have from the highly influential Al-Ahmar family which also sided with the popular revolt. This weakened Saleh severely.

The US and Saudi Arabia became worried that all this would lead to his final overthrow, and had decided it was better he should go so that his pro-imperialist regime could survive. This is how it came to pass that the Republican Guard shot him with the result that he was badly wounded which enabled him and several others to be whisked out of the way to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment.

The Saleh government remains *in situ*, claiming that Saleh will come back soon. It has been weakened by his departure, and its members are also squabbling among themselves. It was Ali Abdullah Saleh who had previously kept them together, which is why they now try to revive him from a distance.

But basically he is too badly wounded and he cannot continue his function. Even though the hospital is releasing, news saying he is no longer in danger, it is unlikely he will be coming back or that he would be able to function as before if he did return.

**What is the response of the Yemeni people to Saleh's departure?**

The demand of the people is for a transitional government, as per the Qatar agreement. The US is opposing this, and the puppet regime is therefore refusing to back down. As a result the Yemeni people see only one choice and that is to continue with their peaceful mass demonstrations, and these demonstrations are taking place all over the country. A massive demonstration in Taiz led to confrontation between the popular opposition and the Republican Guard, while the police and part of the army, including army officers, joined the demonstration

alongside the popular opposition. It is only the Republican Guard, established in the name of fighting terrorism and led by Saleh's son, that the existing regime can rely upon.

This Republican Guard tried to incite tribal conflict: they didn't succeed. They tried also to incite a Shia/Sunni conflict—they didn't succeed in that either.

From the side of the popular opposition, the Yemenis, in spite of having weapons in their hands, have refrained absolutely from using their weapons. The demonstrations to date have been peaceful, and this is the case all over Yemen, from the North to the South. All are united now. There is no question of secession of the south. All are united as one to overthrow the Saleh government.

### **And how is the government responding?**

This unity is alarming imperialism and its allies. Saudi Arabia is frightened of the situation and is trying to do its best to defuse it. They are using two main tactics. The first is to bring money into the country for use in order to divide the people, and the second is to make life very hard for the population. In spite of that, the Yemeni people continue to resist. The solidarity among the Yemeni people, including the business people and Yemenis abroad, is very, very strong. The tactic of dividing the popular forces has not succeeded and the popular forces have become very mature. It should be noted that all prominent religious figures are supporting the popular opposition.

The Yemeni people are under attack economically. For example the price of oil and food especially, have increased. Oil is not available. Petrol in the gas stations is very difficult to find. Yet in spite of these hardships the population cannot be broken and the demonstrations are continuing. The United States and Saudi Arabia are really having problems. They don't know what is going to come out of it and they don't know what is happening inside the army. Most of the generals have sided with the popular opposition, as have the officers.

So it will be difficult to divide the Yemenis. They have tried all these tactics and failed.

The same thing is happening in Egypt. The popular revolt in Egypt for a while subsided but has now suddenly again erupted because people can see no difference following the concessions that were made to their demands. There are still Mubarak people sitting there in government. And now the demand is for the whole Egyptian government to resign. The same is happening in Tunisia. The popular revolt is gradually coming back. The strategy of imperialism and its puppets is to let the people go on protesting, but not to make any significant concessions to them. Their hope is that the population will get tired.

There are reports that Zinjibar, Jaar and Hawta have been captured by Islamic militants. The militants who captured the first two of these towns are operating under the signboard of Ansar-al-Sharia and are said to be from AQAP. It is further thought that these Islamic militants are poised to capture Aden. And furthermore that the Yemeni army is, with the exception of General Muhammad al-Somli, largely ignoring this fundamentalist advance. Can you say

whether all this is true, and, if so, how such an advance can be explained in an area that has traditionally been progressively inclined?

There are two types of Islamist movement. The first type emerged when the Saleh regime in 1994 unilaterally decided to bring about unity of the country. At this time everybody was united under Saleh and the Ahmar family, especially Ahmar the father (who has since died) who was the speaker of Parliament at that time. To bring about this unity, Saleh also allied with Al Qaeda to fight against the secessionist movement in the south. This is how Al Qaeda forces have been brought into the South. They are a very small, armed group in the South, but they are not influential in Yemen as a whole. The Saleh regime also mobilised Al Qaeda against the Houthis in the North who are also fighting against the government and also against the intervention of Saudi Arabia.

This is one side.

The other side is that Saudi Arabia also wants a type of Salafist reactionary Muslim Brotherhood movement. They have given a lot of money for that purpose with the aim of eliminating anti-Saudi elements within Yemen. Great anger was felt in Yemen when unilaterally Saleh agreed with the Saudis a few years back that the Yemeni province of Jidan would be ceded to Saudi Arabia. Most Yemenis refuse to recognise the Saudi-Yemeni border because they consider that the province of Jidan is part of Yemen. The popular movement is demanding the nullification of this agreement hatched up by Saudi Arabia and Ali Abdullah Saleh. Therefore from Saudi Arabia's point of view, it is very important that Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime remains in power to defend that border. In any event, Saudi Arabia considers Yemen to be its backyard and expects to influence what happens there. The stability of Saudi Arabia is in turn very important for the United States as it is one of the biggest oil-producing countries, the richest in the region, with about 25% of the world's oil reserves. The Saudi ruling class is panicking that any revolution in Yemen might have a domino effect in Saudi Arabia because in Saudi Arabia there is also an opposition to its pro-imperialist puppet regime.

In Yemen all political forces on the ground are united. The young people who are leading this - the intellectuals, different social classes, the businessmen and so on - are all united. This unity spells danger to Saudi Arabia. So in order to disrupt it and create a chaotic situation, they are now subsidising the reactionary Salafist movement. They hope to use religious extremism in order to create divisions among the Yemeni people, but it is not likely to have a very big effect on the masses because the consciousness of the Yemeni people is much, much higher than that of these ragtag fundamentalist elements.

Of course, Al Qaeda has been around for a very long time fighting in the south. The Yemeni government is now engaged hyping up propaganda to the effect that Al Qaeda is the danger, in the hope this will keep the US propping up its unpopular regime, but what they don't speak about is the popular revolt which is the real force in the south. In all the Yemeni cities of the south there are demonstrations, hand in hand with the north. The demand all over Yemen is for a united Yemen, a democratic Yemen. And this of course frightens the United States and

frightens Saudi Arabia. So they write a lot about these people who are armed and sometimes effect a military attack here or there, but the major aspect of what is happening is that it is a popular and peaceful revolt - demonstrations which are well organised. Sometimes it is even the case, that the Republican Guard attack and claim that the attack was carried by Al Qaeda, all to prove that the country is in danger from that organisation.

**Can you say something more about the demands of the opposition?**

Whereas previously the Yemeni opposition was seeking to set up a transitional government that would include people from the Saleh camp, today the opposition parties are negotiating among themselves for the adoption of a second line, that is, to establish a transitional government without participation of the present government. The government tactic, on the other hand, is to wait for the people to get tired.

Today the Yemeni people have become urbanised, educated people— medical doctors, teachers, etc. The revolution has been an educational experience for them. Even Yemeni women— the way they were speaking at the demonstrations, one cannot imagine. □□□