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CTC SENTINEL

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About the CTC Sentinel

The Combating Terrorism Center is an independent educational and research institution based in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The CTC Sentinel harnesses the Center's global network of scholars and practitioners to understand and confront contemporary threats posed by terrorism and other forms of political violence.

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The Unraveling of the Salih Regime in Yemen

By Christopher Boucek and Mara Revkin



Yemeni anti-government protestors demonstrate in Sana`a on March 27, 2011. - Photo by Ahmad Gharabli/AFP/Getty Images

THE WAVE OF popular uprisings sweeping across the Arab world has caught the region's most entrenched authoritarian regimes off guard. Yet unlike Tunisia, Egypt, and other custodians of an undemocratic status quo, Yemen is no stranger to instability. Long before protesters took to the streets of Sana`a on January 20, 2011 to demand political reforms, the 32-year-old regime of President Ali Abdullah Salih was already struggling to contain a daunting array of security, economic, and governance challenges.

In the south, Yemen faces a rising secessionist movement, while a separate rebellion by Zaydi Huthis rages in the northern province of Sa`da. Meanwhile, al-Qa`ida has made Yemen its most active operational node, finding sanctuary in the Arab world's poorest state. The resurgent al-Qa`ida organization based

in Yemen—al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)—is arguably the most dangerous and immediate terrorist challenge threatening U.S. interests today. Compounding these destabilizing forces is a wide range of systemic problems, including a failing economy, rampant corruption, endemic unemployment, widespread governance deficiencies and abuses, rapid resource depletion, and one of the highest population growth rates in the world. This is exacerbated by the extraordinary abundance of small arms in Yemen, where guns reportedly outnumber people by a ratio of three to one.¹

¹ Mohamed al-Qadhi, "Yemen MPs Back End to Presidential Term Limit," *The National*, January 2, 2011. The exact number of small arms in Yemen is unknown, and may in fact number fewer than is commonly believed. See Ahmed Zein, "Armed and Dangerous: Arms Proliferation Inside Yemen," *Arab Insight* 2:1 (2008). A more realistic figure is 10 million small arms, or one per every two Yemenis.

Whereas neighboring Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are confronted by limited and relatively one-dimensional opposition movements, Yemen's current political crisis has been heightened by the convergence of numerous security threats, the cumulative effect of which may soon overwhelm the government in Sana`a. With government security forces already overextended by the challenge of containing mass demonstrations, AQAP is taking advantage of the opportunity to consolidate its position in Yemen by proclaiming solidarity with anti-government protesters and intensifying its attacks on security targets.² Preventing imminent state failure in a country that is already viewed as an incubator for extremism will require policy solutions as multifaceted as the problems currently facing Yemen's government.

If the current political system is to survive, the regime will have to engage with opposition and civil society actors to reach a negotiated resolution to the country's paralyzing political crisis. Resuscitating stalled negotiations will not be easy, and Yemen's major opposition bloc—known as the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP)—has explicitly sworn off dialogue with the regime and the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) party in response to the government's recent violent crackdown on protesters. President Salih has already promised that he will not seek reelection in 2013, but additional concessions will be needed. The Yemeni regime is clearly on the ropes, and Salih's downfall could be imminent. The question now is how, and when, Salih leaves office.

The Downfall of a Regime

Economic and political grievances have been festering for years in Yemen, where approximately 43% of the population subsists on less than two dollars a day and residents of the formerly independent south accuse the central government of monopolizing the country's oil revenues.³ By

See Gavin Hales, "Fault Lines: Tracking Armed Violence in Yemen," Yemen Armed Violence Assessment, Small Arms Survey, May 2010.

² According to sources in Yemen, the regime has redeployed a variety of security assets to protect government and public facilities in Sana`a.

³ Marisa L. Porges, "Saving Yemen: Is Counterterror-

ism Enough?" *Foreign Affairs*, November 16, 2010. It is thought that the vast majority of Yemenis live on less than one dollar per day.

January 2011, rising frustration with government corruption and ineptitude—and exacerbated by events in Tunisia and Egypt—brought Yemen's simmering political crisis to a boil. Shortly after the fall of the Ben Ali government in Tunisia on January 14, 2011, the Salih regime attempted to pacify the discontent with economic concessions. It sought to maintain the allegiance of the military and security forces by announcing pay raises and providing free food and gas. It addressed the concerns of civil servants by putting immediately into effect salary increases for the lowest paid civil servants originally scheduled for October 2011. It cut the national income tax by half, waived university tuition fees for currently enrolled students, and announced a scheme to help new university graduates find employment. It also reportedly increased some subsidies and introduced new price controls. Finally, it extended social welfare assistance to an additional half million families. Left unsaid, however, was how Sana`a would fund these programs.

When economic measures failed to quell the discontent, President Salih turned to political concessions on February 2. In a speech to the parliament and *shura* council—likely encouraged by the United States—he announced that he would not stand for reelection in 2013 and that his son and presumed heir, General Ahmed Ali Abdullah Salih, commander of the Republican Guard, would also not run for president. He "froze" the implementation of a recent controversial constitutional amendment eliminating term limits on the presidency. Salih also stated that regional governors would henceforth be directly elected—while little noticed, this change is important because the future of Yemeni stability will depend on greater local autonomy and a de-evolution of control from the capital to the provinces. Finally, he called for the formation of a national unity government, the re-launching of the stalled National Dialogue process, and the postponement of the parliamentary elections scheduled for April to allow proper preparations.

⁴ Laura Kasinof, "Opposition in Yemen Supports Protesters," *New York Times*, February 28, 2011.

Although the regime nominally met almost all its demands, the opposition promptly rejected the concessions, not trusting the president to keep his promises. Salih had previously pledged not to seek reelection, but had backtracked on that promise. Moreover, the 2013 date was too distant for the

"The Yemeni regime is clearly on the ropes, and Salih's downfall could be imminent. The question now is how, and when, Salih leaves office."

faction of protesters seeking immediate change. Initial protests were modest in size, but as Yemenis began to mimic the tactics and slogans of protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square, crowds swelled dramatically and quickly spread from their focal point at Sana`a University to the cities of Aden, Ibb, Taiz, and remote northern provinces. Crowds that gathered in Sana`a in mid-March have been estimated to exceed 100,000 people.

While protesters explicitly demanded regime change from the earliest days of the uprising, Yemen's formal opposition—represented by the JMP parliamentary bloc—was initially hesitant to call for Salih's resignation. The JMP's demands focused on reforming the existing political process through dialogue and consultation, rather than overhauling the system altogether. The regime's reluctance to yield substantive concessions coupled with its increasingly violent crackdown on peaceful protesters eventually pushed the opposition away from the negotiating table. On February 28, the JMP flatly rejected Salih's invitation to form a national unity government. For the first time, the JMP endorsed the street protests and called for an immediate end to Salih's 32-year rule.⁴ The JMP hardened its stance against Salih's government on March 20, when it announced that the opposition parties would officially participate in the demonstrations.⁵

⁴ Laura Kasinof, "Opposition in Yemen Supports Protesters," *New York Times*, February 28, 2011.

⁵ Laura Kasinof and J. David Goodman, "Senior Yemeni

Violence Against Protestors Brings Regime to the Precipice

Despite Salih's explicit assurances that his government would not use violence against protesters, as demonstrations escalated throughout the month of February police and security forces fired rubber bullets, tear gas, and eventually live ammunition at massive crowds in Sana'a and other cities. On February 25, protesters in Aden were outraged after a 17-year-old was fatally shot by police.⁶ In a separate incident on March 8, uniformed security forces attacked protesters with guns and bats as they were setting up tents in front of Sana'a University, killing at least one person and wounding 80 more.⁷ In addition to this sustained, state-sanctioned crackdown on civilian protesters, bands of armed regime loyalists—apparently acting with the tacit consent and complicity of state security forces—have attempted to suppress demonstrations with unrestrained thuggery and lethal force.

Violence escalated to unprecedented levels on March 18, when government supporters in plainclothes took up positions on rooftops near Sana'a University and began firing at tens of thousands of protesters following Friday prayers. Not only did state security forces refuse to intervene to prevent bloodshed, but they allegedly joined government loyalists in firing directly at protesters, killing at least 30 people.⁸ The use of lethal force galvanized the resolve of protesters and solidified the opposition's refusal to resume negotiations with the regime. The violence on March 18 changed the situation for many protesters. By late March, the opposition publicly stated that it had definitively ruled out the possibility of dialogue, accusing Salih's government of perpetrating crimes against humanity.⁹

Officers Call for Ouster of President," *New York Times*, March 21, 2011.

6 "Yemeni Fatally Shot by Police During Anti-Government Protesters," *al-Arabiya*, February 25, 2011.

7 Khaled Yacoub Oweis and Mohammed Ghobari, "Killing Hardens Opposition Resolve in Yemen," Reuters, March 9, 2011.

8 Laura Kasinof and Robert F. Worth, "Dozens of Protesters Are Killed in Yemen," *New York Times*, March 18, 2011. Other reports claim more than 50 were killed and over 200 wounded.

9 "Teargas Used on Yemen Protesters," Associated

Dozens of government officials and members of the ruling party's parliamentary bloc have resigned their posts in part in protest of Salih's heavy-handed response to the uprising.¹⁰ When prominent members of Yemen's two largest tribal federations, the Bakil and Hashid, publicly endorsed the anti-government demonstrations, it appeared that some of Salih's most reliable allies were turning against him.¹¹ Indeed, on March 21, Yemen's most powerful military commander, General Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar, announced that he was siding with the protesters. Ali Mohsen is commander of the 1st Armored Division and head of the North West Military Region.¹² Additionally, roughly 20 MPs have resigned and approximately half the country's ambassadors abroad have also resigned. Protests continued on March 25, although a planned march on the presidential palace in Sana'a did not materialize.

For years, Salih skillfully exploited divisions among key constituencies to neutralize potential threats to his rule. The current unrest is destabilizing this delicate balance of power, and Salih's regime faces a serious crisis as key constituencies withdraw their support.

AQAP Capitalizes on Discontent

In addition to alienating the opposition, the violent crackdown may exert a radicalizing effect on protesters, particularly in areas of the north and south where there is strong historical precedent for violent rebellions. At present, AQAP is seeking to capitalize on the growing unrest and is attempting to consolidate its influence in Yemen. Saudi national and former Guantanamo Bay detainee Ibrahim al-Rubaysh endorsed anti-government protests across the Arab world in an AQAP audio release on February 26.¹³

Press, March 18, 2011.

10 For a comprehensive overview of those individuals who have withdrawn their support and left the GPC, see "Updated List of Resignations," Waq al-Waq, March 20, 2011, available at www.bigthink.com/ideas/31661.

11 Oliver Holmes, "The Tribe Has Spoken: Yemen's Power Brokers Step In," *Time Magazine*, February 27, 2011.

12 "Salih and the Yemeni Succession," *Jane's Intelligence Digest*, August 28, 2008.

13 "Al-Qaeda's Offshoot in Yemen Calls for Revolt Against Arab Rulers," Associated Press, February 26, 2011. In an audio recording posted to several militant websites on February 26, former Guantanamo Bay de-

One day after al-Rubaysh's recording appeared on several militant websites, the radical cleric Abdul Majid al-Zindani explicitly urged Yemenis to overthrow Salih's regime and establish an Islamic state in its place.¹⁴

Taking advantage of the unstable security situation, AQAP fighters have staged a flurry of attacks on Yemeni security forces and checkpoints in the provinces of Marib, Abyan, and Hadramawt, killing well over a dozen security personnel.¹⁵ It is feared that the frequency and magnitude of these attacks will only escalate as AQAP exploits the current unrest to further challenge the Yemeni government. During the weekend of March 25-27, there were signs of increased AQAP activity in the south, including reports that the group seized an arms factory in Jaar.

U.S. Counterterrorism Operations in Yemen at Risk?

President Salih's government, however flawed, has been a vital partner in U.S. counterterrorism operations in the Arabian Peninsula, and U.S. officials are understandably apprehensive about the possibility of regime change. A post-Salih government would likely be more responsive to Yemeni public opinion, including anti-American sentiment, which was substantially inflamed by a U.S. airstrike in 2009 that reportedly resulted in more than 80 civilian casualties.¹⁶

tainee and leading AQAP figure Ibrahim al-Rubaysh urged Muslims to revolt against Arab authoritarian rulers and establish governments based on Islamic law. In the 10-minute recording, al-Rubaysh applauded the overthrow of former Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and harshly criticized the Saudi government for offering him sanctuary.

14 Laura Kasinoff and Scott Shane, "Powerful Cleric Urges Islamic Rule in Yemen," *New York Times*, March 1, 2011. Al-Zindani has been listed by the U.S. government as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. Only weeks before al-Zindani had a different position, and some Yemeni sources have suggested that his switch has more to do with self-interest and his relationship with the regime, rather than a genuine change.

15 "Al Qaeda Men Shoot Down Six in Yemen," *Gulf News*, March 7, 2011; "Suspected Qaeda Gunmen Kill Four Yemen Police," Agence France-Presse, March 11, 2011; "One Soldier Killed and Three Wounded in Abyan," *Yemen Post*, March 13, 2011. Around March 7, AQAP allegedly staged three attacks in one day, marking a worrisome escalation in their attack tempo.

16 Robert Worth, "Airstrike in Yemen Said to Kill 80,"

The chaos of a post-Salih Yemen in which there is no managed transition may lead to conditions that could allow AQAP and other extremist elements to flourish. It is not known who would come to power after Salih were he to leave office. Moreover, it is doubtful that in such a scenario a new Yemeni government would be as accommodating to the United States and its allies on terrorism and security cooperation as the current government. While imperfect, Yemen under Salih has worked closely with Washington on counterterrorism issues, and a number of important relationships have been established.

Conclusion

There is no certainty about how events in Yemen will transpire. Salih cannot rule Yemen until 2013, and the regime has acknowledged that they are seeking an orderly way to transfer power. Even though Salih's most recent position appears to backtrack on earlier pledges to step down, sources close to the regime maintain that negotiations are ongoing.

Yemen's security situation will continue to deteriorate unless a campaign of sweeping political reforms is initiated immediately. One likely scenario is a negotiated settlement by Yemen's power elites resulting in a political transition, perhaps overseen by an informal association of senior Yemeni figures. There is always the potential for conditions to deteriorate into violence, although it appears that most parties want to avoid this. The question then becomes what mechanism will be created to oversee this process—an answer that will be revealed in the coming weeks.

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Using Google Insights to Assess Egypt's Jasmine Revolution

By Joshua Goldstein and Gabriel Koehler-Derrick

AFTER THE FALL of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, numerous commentators identified the prevalence of the Arabic chant "*al-sha`b yurid isqat al-nizam*" (the people demand that the regime be overthrown) in protests ranging from Morocco to Bahrain.¹ Scholars and journalists are on firm ground when they assert that the prevalence of this chant across the region is indicative of, in the words of Rashid Khalidi, "eminently reasonable demands for freedom, dignity, social justice, accountability, the rule of law, and democracy" across the Middle East and North Africa.² Opinion is far more divided, however, on what the future holds for countries such as Egypt and Tunisia where the old regime has fallen.

Identifying likely outcomes in fast-paced and dynamic situations like the unrest currently gripping the Middle East is always difficult. "Leaderless" revolutions, such as those in Egypt and Tunisia, are often particularly problematic because conventional tools of intelligence are of limited use: a satellite can estimate a crowd size, but it does not help to identify the ideas that will inspire and sustain protestors. Even high placed human intelligence sources may lack certainty as to who the political actors are that matter among the masses of demonstrators.

This article explores the use of a powerful tool of open source data analysis, Google Insights for Search, which offers unique advantages for gaining insight into these mass movements, and the ideas, thought leaders, and personalities driving revolution. The article applies Google Insights to the recent revolution in Egypt, showing how the tool allows analysts to gain intellectual purchase on three different facets of this

"Jasmine" revolution, namely: the role of religion in post-revolutionary Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, and an electronic straw poll of likely presidential candidates.

Why Google Insights?

One of the central challenges to assessing the likely outcome of a mass social movement as witnessed in Egypt is that researchers lack tools for understanding the impact of the ideas and thought leaders sustaining the social unrest. This problem is exacerbated by the fast pace of events and their unprecedented nature (the very facets that make them so important) because both factors limit the degree to which observers can rely on history to predict what the future holds. Furthermore, because these are mass movements, journalistic anecdotes or intelligence from individual sources may be misleading or a poor tool for intuiting what the masses want, and how much they want it. In this particularly challenging research environment, tools that quickly survey a large cross section of the Egyptian population should be of enormous interest to social scientists.

Google Insights is a free service and allows researchers to conduct near-instant analysis of the search terms typed into Google's search engine.³ While the search results of this new tool need to be more comprehensively tested and the robustness of its findings are open to discussion, an assessment of 30 days of searches from January 25, 2011 until February 22, 2011 provides some counterintuitive conclusions that are explored in more detail below.⁴

³ Yahoo Clues currently only offers data on U.S. searches. Bing's "social" is a comparable tool but follows social media sites Twitter and Facebook, not overall search trends. Bing also does not allow users to filter results by country.

⁴ All analysis was conducted exclusively on searches in Egypt, using Arabic script except where noted. According to Alexa (a website that measures traffic), google.com is the second most popular website in Egypt. Google.com is the fourth. It is important to note that the Egyptian government severed internet access in the country from January 25 to February 1-2. During that time period, no data could be collected.

¹ The authors would like to thank Nelly Lahoud, Arie Perliger and Steven Brooke who all provided substantive feedback and comments.

² Rashid Khalidi, "Reflections on the Revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt," *Foreign Policy*, February 24, 2011.