

## [How the U.S. Contributed to Yemen's Crisis](#)

**The tragic events unfolding in Yemen could have likely been prevented had the broad-based nonviolent pro-democracy movement that rose up against the U.S.-backed government of Ali Abdullah Salih in 2011 been allowed to come to power. There had been an impressive degree of unity forged between the various tribal, regional, sectarian, and ideological groups taking part in the pro-democracy protests, which included mass marches, sit-ins and many other forms of nonviolent civil resistance.**

Leaders of prominent tribal coalitions publicly supported the popular insurrection, prompting waves of tribesmen to leave their guns at home and head to the capital to take part in the movement. These tribesmen, along with the hundreds of thousands of city dwellers on the streets, were encouraged to maintain nonviolent discipline, even in the face of government snipers and other provocations which led to the deaths of hundreds of unarmed protesters.

This broad anti-government coalition formed a 143-member National Council, which they hoped would form a provisional government until multiparty elections could be held, representing a broad coalition of protest leaders, tribal sheiks, South Yemen separatists, opposition military commanders, former members of the governing party, as well as the Houthi militia from the Zaidi Shia minority in the north.

However, the Obama administration instead backed a plan by the autocratic regime of Saudi Arabia in which, while forcing Salih to step down, would not only grant him and other top officials immunity from prosecution for the murder of nonviolent protesters and allow him to remain in the country, but transfer power to his vice president, Major General Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi.

Supporters of the National Council denounced these foreign efforts as “only a plot to foil the revolution.” Protest leader Tawakul Karman, who had just been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, also criticized the Obama administration, noting “there shouldn’t be any place for tyrants in the free world. This is against all international agreements, laws and covenants [and] ... an insult to the values of the American people. ... This will tarnish the reputation of America among all those who support the Arab Spring revolutions.”

Indeed, Obama’s policy toward Yemen ended up alienating the very liberal youth who would otherwise have been the West’s most likely allies. For example, the prominent young pro-democracy activist Khaled al-Anesi noted “this revolution has been stabbed in the back.”

Throughout the pro-democracy struggle, U.S. Ambassador Gerald Feierstein kept pushing the vague idea of a “national dialogue” among elite sectors and criticized ongoing protests on the grounds that “we think that the problems have to be resolved through this process of dialogue and negotiations.” By contrast, he castigated the pro-democracy activists, saying “we’ve also been clear in saying we don’t believe that the demonstrations are the place where Yemen’s problems will be solved.”

In February 2012, Salih finally stepped down and Hadi was ratified as president in an “election” in which he was the only candidate on the ballot. Despite this, Obama said that Hadi’s coming to power constituted “a model for how peaceful transition in the Middle East can occur.”

It was this marginalization of Yemeni civil society, which had struggled for so many months nonviolently for democracy, and the failure to accept their plans for broad-based National Council to head an interim

government and multiparty elections which created the conditions that led to the dramatic rise of the armed Houthi militia last year.

In addition, the lack of credibility of the Hadi government, ongoing corruption and ineptitude, the mass resignation of his cabinet, and controversial proposes for constitutional change, combined with support from armed groups allied with the former Salih dictatorship, enabled the Houthis — despite representing only a minority of Yemenis — to nevertheless emerge as the most powerful force in Yemen and surprise the world by seizing the capital of Sana'a in August, consolidating power in January, and subsequently expanding southward.

It would be too simplistic to blame the current crisis in Yemen on the United States. However, one still has to wonder whether a U.S. policy which supported that country's civil society movement and its strong nonviolent pro-democracy impulse might have resulted in a more stable Yemen.

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