

Yemen's president blames US for Arab world's revolt

Former US ally rebukes White House for meddling

McClatchy-Tribune in Sanaa

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Yemen's embattled president Ali Abdullah Saleh blames Israel and the United States for destabilising the Arab world, saying the anti-government protests in his capital were being run by the White House

Saleh's accusations marked a departure for the president, a long-time ally of the US in the war against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the recipient of hundreds of millions of dollars in US military aid.

"Every day we hear a statement from (President Barack) Obama saying, 'Egypt you can't do this, Tunisia don't do that'," Saleh told a meeting at Sanaa University. "What do you have to do with Egypt? Or with Oman? Are you president of the United States or president of the world?"

White House press secretary Jay Carney rebuked Saleh's criticism, saying he should instead focus on political reforms in his country. "We don't think scapegoating will be the kind of response that the people of Yemen or the people in other countries will find adequate."

The remarks coincided with an anti-government protest on Tuesday that drew about 10,000 to the streets of Sanaa, where an influential cleric, Sheik Abdul Majeed Zindani, called for the people of Yemen to replace the government with an Islamic state, raising both cheers and concerns from a crowd representing a diverse cross-section of the country.

Zindani, a cleric with a henna-dyed beard whom the US considers a terrorist, was a spiritual mentor to Osama bin Laden but has publicly rejected terrorism. He called on Saleh to grant the protesters' "legitimate demands and rights".

The events in Yemen developed as unrest and political change continued to grip much of North Africa and the Middle East, from Libya to the Arabian Sea.

Yesterday the opposition presented Saleh with a road map for a smooth transition of power this year, offering him a graceful exit as street pressure grew for him to leave now.

However, illustrating the potential for rifts among his diverse opponents, young activists who have taken the lead in swelling street protests demanded immediate change in the Arabian Peninsula state.

"Get out. Get out. Get out," protesters chanted near Sanaa University, where small student-led protests have grown into daily rallies of 10,000 or more. "No negotiation and no dialogue until the regime leaves."

The opposition which, just two days ago, had said it would not retreat from demands that Saleh leave power immediately, agreed with religious and tribal leaders to ask him to take steps towards a transition.

These included changing the constitution, rewriting election laws and removing his relatives from leadership positions in the army and security forces, all while guaranteeing the right of peaceful protest.

"What was presented was a road map for departure within a time frame of a month or two, or six months," said Mohammed al-Sabry, a spokesman for Yemen's main opposition coalition which includes Islamists and leftists.

"As for the people's demand for the departure of the regime, there is no going back on that," he added.

The rotating opposition chairman, Mohamed al-Mutawakil, said the coalition was asking for guarantees of the right to peaceful protest and for trials of those responsible for a harsh crackdown in which 24 people were killed in two weeks.

"We have to start the transfer of power from the person to civil society organisations, and this is a needed step to ensure a safe and peaceful exit to the situation Yemen is living in," he said, saying a transition should be completed by the end of the year. Political analysts say it remains unclear who really has the upper hand in Yemen, where tribal allegiances are strong. Young people have given street protests their momentum but the opposition is able to draw bigger crowds.

With the protests swelling gradually, there has been a series of defections among his allies to those seeking a change in the Arabian Peninsula state teetering on the brink of failure.

Samia al-Aghbari, a student leader in Sanaa, said: "The agreement bypasses the youth revolution and is not acceptable. Our demand is one: The departure of the regime."

Where once the protests were the domain of students and activists, they have also attracted a broader segment of society into the streets that last week began to include children, some wearing headbands emblazoned with the word: "Leave".

Zindani's appearance at the rally on Tuesday was important because he is a well-known head of Iman University, an ultraconservative Islamist institution in Sanaa, and a cofounder of Yemen's Islamic Brotherhood, the largest opposition party in Yemen. Although he has been a supporter of Saleh for many years, he is the latest of several leaders to defect from the embattled president. At one point, he joined in with protesters chanting, "Leave, leave, leave!"

The rally came a day after key opposition figures refused Saleh's offer to form a "unity government." The offer, which was widely considered the president's last-ditch effort at reconciliation, promised to include opposition leaders as well as members of ruling party. Saleh also promised "intensifying anti-corruption investigations" and other political reforms.

Additional reporting by The New York Times, Reuters