

With full Houthi takeover of Yemen, civil war looms

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(The Christian Science Monitor) Yemen's Houthi rebels have declared political control over the fragile country, disbanding parliament and mapping out a transition that they claim will usher in an era of greater stability. But unless they secure political support at home and abroad, their experiment could prove short-lived and risks pushing the country into civil war.

"The way they did it, alienated everyone," said Charles Schmitz, a geographer who focuses on Yemen at Towson University in Maryland. "The political leadership of the Houthi movement wants to dominate the country and they don't want to play by the rules. The rule of law is lost on them.'

On Friday the Zaidi Shi'ite rebels dissolved parliament and announced the creation of a presidential council that will act as an interim government for two years. Yemen has lacked a functioning government since January 22, when President Abd-Rabhu Mansour and his cabinet resigned following a sharp standoff with Houthi fighters. Hadi remains incommunicado and under Houthi house arrest.

The Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council swiftly rejected the Houthi declaration as a coup. The U.S., which continues counterterrorism operations in Yemen despite the political upheaval, was more subdued in its criticism, saying that the Houthi take over did "not meet the standards of a consensus-based solution to Yemen's political crisis."

The United Nations hinted at possible sanctions and its envoy to Yemen Jamal Benomar rushed back to Sanaa in a bid to revive talks. (On Sunday, Benomar said he had convinced "all political parties" to enter into negotiations on the country's future.)

At home, Houthis have drawn sharp criticism, with the cities of Hodeida, Ibb, and Taiz witnessing protests over the weekend. Leaders in the south and the oil-rich east

warned they would not deal with the new government and there are few signs of buy-in from the political elite in Sanaa, with key parties rejecting the move and calling for renewed talks.

“If they are alone, there is a strong possibility that this could fall very easily,” said Hakim Almasmari, editor in chief of the *Yemen Post*. He also said it's possible that the Houthis have private "side deals" with other Yemeni political factions that could buy them more time in power.

The Houthis surprisingly appointed a long-time opponent, General Mahmud Al-Subaihi, as acting defense minister and Jalal al-Rowaishan as acting interior minister, posts they abandoned last month. Some speculate they were pressured into the positions.

Bigger war?

The takeover has raised concerns of open conflict between Houthi supporters and opponents. Yemen experts warn that al-Qaeda will likely play the sectarian card to fan opposition to the Houthis and recruit disaffected Sunni Arabs. Many critics allege Tehran is bankrolling the Shi'ite movement, which uses anti-American rhetoric but prioritizes the fight against al-Qaeda.

Sectarian logic, Schmitz argues, won't necessarily stick in Yemen, where regionalism remains the dominant threat to unity. “Nobody is going to shoot anybody on sectarian lines. They are going to shoot each other because one side is Houthi and the other side is anti-Houthi,” he predicts.

“The Houthis say they've come to town to save us from a failing political transition and achieve the goals of the 2011 uprising. Who's going to save us from them?” wrote a Yemeni columnist just days ahead of the coup. While many impoverished Yemenis have been attracted by the Houthis anti-corruption message, their low tolerance of dissent has eroded support in the capital.

Although the Houthis have a firm grip in Sanaa, which they seized in September, many areas of the country remain outside their control. Some fear Yemen's southern secessionists will see this as a good moment to break away, although splits in their own ranks have so far prevented them from taking such a step.

“The south is where the Houthis have already lost. If in Sanaa they have thousands of supporters, in the south they are only in the hundreds. That is not enough to rule a country,” said Almasmari.

The Shi'ite militia's chief Abdel Malek Al-Houthi tried to reassure the nation in a televised address on Saturday. “This historic and responsible initiative is in the interest of the country . . . because it fills a political vacuum,” he told supporters gathered in a northern Sanaa stadium.