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Massive protest in south Yemen

By Jane Novak March 27, 2008 7:34 AM

A rally in the southern Yemeni governorate of Dhalie on Monday drew several hundred thousand protesters from the governorates of Hadramout, Aden, Abyan, and Shabwa. Some estimates put the crowd at more than a half million.

The speeches included calls for “southern liberation” from the northern dominated regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Thousands of the orange flags of the former People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) were openly flown. A statement issued by the rally’s organizers blamed Saleh’s regime for undermining national unity, demanded the return of plundered land, and called for an international investigation into political murders and arbitrary detention practiced against southerners.

Protests have gathered steam in the southern Yemeni governorates since they began a year ago. The movement was started by former southern military officers who were punitively discharged after Yemen’s 1994 civil war on below sustenance pensions; more than 100,000 civil and military workers lost their livelihoods following the war. Protesters’ grievances also include widespread land theft by influential northerners, employment discrimination, exclusion from the political process, and omnipresent military camps and checkpoints.

The demonstrations adopted an increasingly separatist tone as the Yemeni regime reacted to the mounting civil unrest with increased repression and cosmetic gestures that failed to address the underlying issues. Since August, 17 protesters were killed by security forces. Hundreds were arrested. Reinstated southern military officers were forced to sign pledges to refrain from all political activity. The regime blocked Internet access to news sites, blogs, and YemenPortal.org, a Yemen-specific news aggregator. Many editors and journalists have been assaulted. Gunmen attacked the offices of al Ayyam, a popular independent newspaper in the South, and one person was killed. At a February 2008 meeting in Dubai, leading southern Yemeni personalities, sultans, and sheiks proposed a constitutional monarchy in the former PDRY. A national rescue plan issued by the southern opposition had been entirely dismissed by Saleh's regime months earlier. Tensions arose shortly after the hurried unification in 1990 of the southern PDRY and the northern Yemeni Arab Republic (YAR); the official name today is the Republic of Yemen. The Document of Pledge and Accord signed in Jordan in February 1994 was an effort to avert civil war. The document called for the expulsion of foreign terrorists and the trial of those terrorists who committed crimes (against southern personalities). Local rule was to be enhanced and the official media depoliticized. Another requirement was the removal of military checkpoints in the South and the pull back of military forces. The document envisioned the reorganization of the Yemeni military as a politically neutral national defense force. Yet, the articles of the document were never implemented. In May 1994, the southern PDRY declared succession. President Saleh's northern forces

included a substantial number of Afghan Arabs and Islamic extremists. Aden, the capital of the former PDRY, was extensively bombed. The UN security council issued declarations 924 and 931 calling for a cease-fire. Saleh's forces won the civil war in July 1994, and unity was reimposed militarily on the South.

After the defeat of the southern forces, Saleh consolidated his power with a series of constitutional amendments, alliances with terror groups, control of the state media, and by installing his relatives as the heads of the military branches and security forces. The northern elite's hegemony was a "red line," undiscussable for more than a decade.

Resentment and humiliation festered and now threaten to explode in the southern governorates, where over the last year, the Yemeni regime has been gradually losing control.

Currently, there is a strain of southern sentiment that maintains the PDRY was not unified with the North, but rather was illegally occupied by Saleh's forces following the civil war. Undeniably, the former states never reconciled as equal partners and development of a pluralistic system was arrested. Tribal relations became the basis for the evolving concentration of political, economic, and military power. For example, the current governor of Aden has been implicated in numerous land scandals. Most of the southern protesters would be satisfied with a national system that established equality and dispensed justice. But pluralism is anathema to Saleh's brand of tribal elitism, and northern citizens are just as effectively excluded from the political system as their southern brothers. Parliamentary elections are due in 2009, and the voter rolls inflated and inaccurate. The regime refuses to discuss proportional representation as advocated by the opposition coalition, the Joint Meeting Parties, and the make up of the

Electoral Commission remains unclear.