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Ali Abdullah Saleh plans his comeback

By Nasser Arrabyee

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Since August Sanaa, Yemen's capital, has been besieged by armed Houthi followers demanding the government's resignation after a decision to cut fuel subsidies, the latest in a series of grievances they hope to settle. Yemen's prime minister, Mohammad Salem Basindwa, resigned last weekend. Meanwhile, Yemen's former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, is using the crisis to re-establish his influence on the country's politics.

Some protesters carry the flag of the General People's Congress, the party of Yemen's former president, who is widely seen as supporting the Houthis. The confrontation between the Shiite Houthis and the government – currently headed by the Sunni Islah party, the Houthis' main adversary – provides Saleh with a good chance to restore his popularity and potentially pave the way for General Ahmad Ali, his eldest son and Yemen's current ambassador to the United Arab Emirates, to take power.

Seeking to appear above the fray, Saleh keeps denying claims that he supports Houthi fighting in Amran, Jawf and Sanaa. "We will not stand with a party against the other," he told supporters from Amran on Sept. 9, calling for dialogue to save Yemeni blood after more than 10 pro-Houthi protesters were killed and 60 were injured in a confrontation with government forces near the Cabinet building. Saleh has made a show of ignoring the unrest, instead receiving tribal and

religious leaders from all over Yemen who came to show support after an alleged assassination attempt.

If Saleh opts to throw his weight behind the Houthis, it would significantly weaken their shared rivals, Gen. Ali Mohsen and tribal leader Hamid al-Ahmar. Both men hold leadership positions – unofficially in the case of Ali Mohsen – in Islah. Though former allies of Saleh, they have come to resent his efforts to groom his son and exclude them, and in 2011 they joined the popular protests against his rule.

The Houthi grievance against Ali Mohsen remains strong despite their victory over him in the sporadic six-year war that led them to eventually gain control of Saada governorate. Many see Saleh as using the Houthi uprising to settle accounts with Mohsen and Ahmar, who were already weakened last month when Amran, the symbolic stronghold of the Hashid federation, fell completely under the control of the Houthis.

Saleh has found other ways to target his rivals. On Aug. 11, Saleh's security staff discovered an 88-meter tunnel dug from a nearby hangar to his palace. The tunnel, he claimed, was to assassinate him, and Saleh has been telling supporters that those behind this tunnel (referring to Ali Mohsen and Hamid al-Ahmar) were also behind an earlier assassination attempt on June 3, 2011.

The pro-Saleh media coverage of the tunnel story has garnered the support of a number of tribal and religious leaders. Many of Saleh's supporters were seen shouting and chanting against Mohsen and Ahmar and in favor of the Houthis in a big tent erected in the middle of a courtyard in Saleh's palace. "With soul and blood we protect Ali," they said, referring to the former president.

These daily rallies in Saleh's palace are extensively covered by Azal, a private television channel owned by Saleh's ally Mohammad Shayef, the top leader of the Bakil tribal federation, of which the Houthis are also members. Bakil, Yemen's second most influential federation, would also benefit from the weakening of Mohsen and Ahmar, as both are prominent figures in the Hashid federation, historically Bakil's main rival. Since the Houthis took Amran in July, Mohsen and Ahmar have lost support among many in Hashid to Saleh's rival faction within the same federation. Saleh's supporters from Amran province have since poured into Sanaa in larger numbers and with greater frequency, to congratulate him for surviving the latest alleged assassination attempt.

Although Houthis have some degree of support within the liberal and leftist camps, the backing they need most is Saleh's. Sayyid Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the leader of the Houthi movement, needs the help of Saleh and his party even if he wins militarily. "Without the support of Saleh and his party's members everywhere in the country, [the Houthis] would not have won in Amran and come over to Sanaa," said Hamid Ahmad, one of the leading protesters camped outside the capital.

The liberals and leftists supporting the Houthis feel that as a religious minority concerned about protecting their rights and liberties, Houthis would support a more secular state (in contrast to the current government led by the Islamist Islah Party). Although they participate in the Houthis' demonstrations in Sanaa, these supporters would not provide the Houthis assistance if the current conflict turns more violent, as Saleh's supporters might. "When it turns to war, we would go home and leave everything to Abu Ali al-Hakem," said Talal Aklan, a leading leftist protester, referring to the Houthis' top military official.

Whatever its strength or motives, Saleh's potential overt support for the Houthis would likely help their cause in the short term, giving them political backing – particularly from pro-Saleh tribal leaders and his supporters within the army. However, even an informal alliance risks enflaming the tensions in Sanaa and may lead to further violence. But Yemen can avoid all-out war if the Houthis opt for a political solution, and in recent days they signed on to a U.N.-sponsored agreement that would ensure the Houthis leave Sanaa. If they form a party and maintain the backing of Saleh and his supporters, they will be able to make stronger demands, and President Abed Rabbou Mansour Hadi, who depends mainly on international support that would be lost if Yemen went to war, is keen to ensure such a resolution.