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Middle East

Former Yemeni leader Ali Abdullah Saleh has died amid escalating fighting, aides and rebels say

By Ali Al-Mujahed and Kareem Fahim December 4 at 5:05 PM

SANAA, Yemen — The violence that had long stalked his country — and that he had often stoked — finally caught up with Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen's deposed president, who was killed Monday, apparently by a band of rebel fighters, Saleh's aides and rebel officials said.

Murky reports of his death indicated that Saleh's vehicle had come under attack by rebel gunfire, or else that he had been executed as he fled a rebel ambush. Graphic pictures of the former president circulating on social media showed a gaping wound in Saleh's head, his body cradled in a floral blanket and surrounded by fighters.

His death removed one of the Arab world's most resilient and cunning strongmen, a onetime U.S. ally who ruled Yemen for more than three decades before being toppled six years ago during the Arab Spring protests. Unlike other autocratic leaders who were swept aside by the uprisings, such as the leaders of Tunisia and Egypt, Saleh managed to retain his dominant influence

over Yemen, which he wielded from behind the scenes.

But Saleh, who had survived assassination attempts, outmaneuvered rivals and defied efforts by powerful nations, including the United States, to sideline him, was ultimately undone by Yemen's ruinous, ongoing civil war. Since the conflict began in earnest in March 2015, it has ravaged the country, killing more than 10,000 people while leaving millions to face starvation and disease. It has also become a regional conflagration, involving Iran and a Saudi-led military coalition backed by the United States.

Saleh played a central role in the war, deploying his trademark guile. He and forces that remained loyal to him entered an alliance of convenience with the rebels, known as the Houthis, even though Saleh's government had once fought a succession of wars against the rebels.

The march across Yemen by their combined forces led to the fall of the government led by Saleh's successor and stunned the country's neighbors, including Saudi Arabia, which viewed the Houthis as a proxy force for Iran, its regional enemy.

Over the past year, the multisided conflict settled into a bloody stalemate. No serious effort to negotiate an end to the crisis has been undertaken for months.

Then, last week, the alliance between Saleh and the Houthis fell apart. The breakdown was cast by some as the result of long-running efforts by the Saudis and their allies, including the United Arab Emirates, to turn Saleh against the rebels. But it was also inevitable, said Nadwa Dawsari, a fellow with the Project on Middle East Democracy in Washington.

The partnership was "flawed from the beginning," Dawsari said. "Saleh and the Houthis were fierce enemies. They both saw in their alliance a chance to take revenge on their enemies."

Clashes between the two camps have raged for days in Sanaa, the Yemeni

capital, stranding thousands of residents in their homes and killing more than 125 people, according to the International Committee for the Red Cross.

While the breakdown in the alliance was predictable, the violent death of Saleh, and the gruesome pictures that accompanied it, shocked many Yemenis, including critics of his rule. “A lot of what is happening now is because of his policies, the things he’s done over the past 40 years,” said Dawsari, referring to the civil war. But people also recalled a time when Saleh brought a semblance of stability to Yemen, after a period of civil wars.

And, for many, Saleh was “all that Yemenis have known,” she said. “A part of our life is gone.”

His death left Yemen — chronically impoverished, riven by violence and in the throes of a catastrophic war — facing even greater uncertainty.

In the past few days, the Houthis have solidified their hold on the capital, framing their military advances, and now the killing of Saleh, as an important victory. In a televised speech Monday after Saleh’s death, the Houthi leader, Abdulmalik al-Houthi, said the group had defeated a “large-scale conspiracy that posed a threat to the security and stability of the country, aimed at supporting the forces of aggression.”

In a sign of their soaring confidence, the Houthis planned a victory rally for Tuesday in the capital.

Saleh’s death has raised new doubts about the military strategy of the Saudi-led coalition, which is backed by the United States. Since entering the war in the spring of 2015, the coalition has failed to dislodge the Houthis from territory the rebels hold in northern and central Yemen or to prevent ballistic missile attacks on Saudi territory. At the same time, coalition airstrikes have killed thousands of Yemeni civilians, according to the United Nations.

Saleh’s break with the rebels, shortly before his death, appeared to provide the coalition with a rare opening. On Saturday, in a televised speech, the

former president denounced the Houthis and called on the coalition to start “a new page,” in comments that were repeatedly played on Saudi news channels.

By Monday, their coverage was dominated by the pictures of Saleh's death.

Fahim reported from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Brian Murphy in Washington contributed to this report.

 **36 Comments**

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