

Rebels kill Yemen's former president Ali Abdullah Saleh as alliance collapses

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Sanaa (Yemen): Yemeni rebels on Monday killed their onetime ally Ali Abdullah Saleh, the country's former president, as they gained the upper hand in days of fighting with his forces for control of the capital, Sanaa. The tumult threw the country's three-year civil war into an unpredictable new chapter just as Yemen's Saudi-backed government had hoped the Shiite rebels would be decisively weakened.

Former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen's most powerful leader, who played a central role in the country's civil war, has been killed, according to several Yemeni officials and a militia's video which showed the man dressed in a dark suit, motionless, and carried in a blanket.

Saleh's recent defection from the rebel camp and now his death shattered the alliance that had helped the Iranian-backed rebels, known as Houthis, rise to power in 2014 – giving the government and the Saudi coalition supporting it with airstrikes hope for a turning point in a stalemated war that has brought humanitarian disaster.

But with Saleh's forces seemingly in disarray, it was not immediately clear if the Saudi-led coalition fighting the rebels will be able to turn the split to its advantage in the war.

It was a grisly end for Saleh, who ruled Yemen for more than three decades until an Arab Spring uprising forced him to step down in 2012. He later allied with the Houthi rebels hoping to exploit their strength to return to power. That helped propel Yemen into the ruinous civil war that has spread hunger and disease among its 28 million people.

Saleh's death was announced by the Houthis and confirmed by two Saleh associates and a Yemeni government official. The exact circumstances were unclear: Houthi officials said their fighters killed him as he tried to flee the capital for his nearby hometown of Sanhan. The Houthi's top leader said Saleh paid the price for his "treason," accusing him of betraying their alliance to side with the Saudi-backed coalition.

A video circulated online showed Saleh's bloodied body with a gaping head wound as he was carried in a blanket by rebel fighters chanting "God is great!" as they dumped it into a pickup truck. The images recalled the death of another Arab leader slain in the midst of his country's uprising: Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi, whose body was shown in a video being abused by rebels who killed him in 2011.

Saleh's killing appeared to stun members of his camp and to help consolidate the position of the Houthis at least for now.

Houthi and Saleh-loyalist forces have been fighting in Sanaa since late last week. In response, the Saudi-led coalition threw its backing behind Saleh, hitting Houthi positions with airstrikes, hoping that having Saleh on its side could provide a foothold in the capital for the forces of the Saudi-backed president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi.

But by Monday evening, hours after Saleh's death, witnesses said his forces had abandoned some of their positions in Sanaa and that Houthi fighters had moved into one of the most heavily contested districts, seizing Saleh's house and those of some of his family members. Saudi airstrikes hit several Houthi positions in the evening, but otherwise the city saw the first easing of fighting in days.

In a televised speech, the Houthi's top leader, Abdul-Malek al-Houthi, called Saleh's killing a "dark day for the forces of the coalition." He said he had known Saleh was communicating with the coalition and had warned him to

stop.

Hadi, in turn, gave a televised speech of his own from the Saudi capital, Riyadh, where he has been in self-imposed exile for most of the war. He tried to rally Saleh's allies to keep up the fight against the Houthis.

"Let's put our hands together to end this nightmare," Hadi said. He said his government forces would support any uprising against the Houthis in Sanaa.

An official in Hadi's government told The Associated Press that members of Saleh's political party and military forces were cooperating with the coalition and would provide coordinates for airstrikes against the Houthis. He said strikes will intensify so that the closest pro-Hadi ground troops "located at Nihm about 30 miles northeast of Sanaa" can push toward the capital. The hope is that as the forces advance, tribes in the area will be encouraged to rise against the Houthis, he said, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the plans.

One of Saleh's sons, Salah Saleh, posted a call on his Facebook page for his allies to take up the fight against the rebels. He also urged the United Arab Emirates to allow Saleh's most prominent son, Ahmed Saleh, who headed the elite Republican Guard under his father's rule, to return to Yemen and lead forces against the Houthis. It has been reported that the UAE had been preventing his return throughout the conflict

"Revenge for my father and for every Yemeni," Salah Saleh wrote. "Fight them wherever you find them. God bless you, my father."

But it was unclear whether the break with Saleh weakens the Houthis.

When Saleh left power, he stayed in the country and kept the loyalty of many military commanders, splitting the armed forces between himself and Hadi. Saleh's forces were key to helping the Houthis overrun Sanaa in 2014 and then much of the north and center of the country.

But over the past year, the Houthis appear to have undermined Saleh, wooing away some of his commanders, strengthening their own fighters and reducing their need for him. It appears that pushed Saleh into flirting with the coalition, ultimately leading to the breakdown of the alliance with the Houthis and the recent outbreak of clashes.

The fighting has brought new suffering to Sanaa's residents as Houthi forces battled Sunday and into Monday morning to uproot the Saleh loyalists centered in the southern part of the city, battering buildings with artillery.

Suze van Meegen, the Sanaa-based protection and advocacy adviser for the Norwegian Refugee Council, said the violence left aid workers trapped inside their homes and was "completely paralyzing humanitarian operations."

"No one is safe in Sanaa at the moment. I can hear heavy shelling outside now and know it is too imprecise and too pervasive to guarantee that any of us are safe," she said.

"Massive urban clashes with heavy artillery and airstrikes. Yemenis stuck in their homes, too scared to go out. Reduced access to water, health care, food and fuel," Robert Mardini, the regional director of the International Committee of the Red Cross, posted on his Twitter account.

Residents said the night was shattered by the sounds of gunfire and children screaming.

"It's like horror movies," said Bushra, a local woman who asked that her last name not be published for fear of retribution. "I have lived through many wars but nothing like this."

Witnesses said the bodies of slain civilians and fighters littered the streets as no ambulances were able to reach the area. The ICRC said at least 125 people had been killed and some 240 wounded in Sanaa since the fighting began last week.

- AP