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International political and security risk updates

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Africa

Rejection of census proposal weakens President Kabila's position in Democratic Republic of Congo; regional task force to fight Boko Haram needs Nigerian support; ongoing operations against al-Shabaab in Somalia reaching pivotal phase.

Andrine Skjelland and Derek Crystal

Rejection of census proposal weakens President Kabila's position in Democratic Republic of Congo

On 23 January, the senate of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) rejected President Joseph Kabila's proposal to carry out a national census before the presidential elections in 2016. The census would have taken 12 months, as it would have had to cover DRC's population of 67.5 million spread across a vast, poorly connected country. Critics saw it as an attempt by Kabila to extend his constitutionally-limited presidential term. The lower house of parliament initially approved the proposal on 17 January, sparking four-day protests in the capital city, Kinshasa, and the eastern cities of Goma and Bukavu. Witnesses claimed security forces fired teargas and live rounds at unarmed demonstrators. It is believed at least 36 people were killed in Kinshasa and another four in Goma. However, government spokesman Lambert Mende Omalanga insisted that only 15 people had been killed, 10 of which were shot while looting. On 20 January, the government shut down internet connections and text messaging services in Kinshasa. Meanwhile, opposition parties reported that they were prevented from joining demonstrations by security forces surrounding their offices. Opposition leader Jean-Claude Muyambo was arrested at his residence in the capital on 20 January.

The demonstrations highlighted divisions within Kabila's ruling coalition, as legislators gave in to pressure from the public, supported by Western powers and the country's Catholic church, unanimously voting to abandon the census proposal. This marked the first time DRC's senate decided against parliament since 2010. Its decision to reject the proposal was a significant victory for DRC's opposition parties, who have struggled to present a united front and mobilise large groups of supporters in the past. The United Nations, United States and DRC's Catholic church condemned the government's repressive response, which has fuelled criticism of the president, whose position has been considerably weakened. A number of coalition members have left Kabila's administration in recent months, including Moïse Katumbi Chapwe, the popular governor of his home province, Katanga.



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Kabila has neither confirmed nor denied his intention of stepping down after the presidential election in 2016. His party is increasingly divided into two camps: one supportive of Kabila staying in power and the other in favour of finding an alternative. As a result of the protests, the latter group is likely to grow in numbers. Chapwe's decision to distance himself from Kabila has put the president in danger of failing to secure enough support from within the party to stand in the next election. There is also simmering discontent with the government over its perceived failure to curb poverty, promote economic development and tackle the threat of the M23 rebels. However, a popular uprising along the lines of that which ousted Blaise Compaoré in Burkina Faso last October is unlikely in the DRC, as the opposition lacks unity and still struggles to mobilise mass support. Nevertheless, there is a risk that people could take to the streets should Kabila try to force through an extension of his term without constitutional or democratic backing.

Regional task force to fight Boko Haram needs Nigerian support

The African Union (AU) has endorsed a plan by Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Benin and Cameroon to set up a regional task force of 7,500 troops to fight the militant Islamist group Boko Haram. The West African countries will now seek approval and international assistance for the mission from the UN Security Council. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MJTF) would have an initial mandate of one year. The initiative comes amid escalating concerns over the increased frequency of attacks by Boko Haram in Nigeria's neighbouring countries, particularly in northern Cameroon, where suspected members of the group kidnapped 80 people on 18 January. On the same day, Chadian troops deployed to the country to assist local forces in their fight against the Islamist insurgency. The governments of Chad, Niger and Cameroon have expressed scepticism over Nigeria's ability to contain the Boko Haram threat, particularly after the group's attack on a multinational military base near the town of Baga earlier this year, during which Nigerian forces reportedly fled the area after it was overrun. Niger and Chad withdrew their forces from the country prior to the attack on Baga.

Previous attempts to establish a regional taskforce have stalled, partly due to Nigeria's perceived inability and reluctance to take action against Boko Haram. Recently, efforts by France to coordinate a response between the Lake Chad countries proved fruitless – with Niger claiming Nigeria had failed to meet its troop commitments. Nigeria has been opposed to international military intervention, insisting that its army is capable of tackling the insurgency on its own. Furthermore, there is underlying tension and mutual mistrust between the governments of Nigeria and Cameroon, which has made it difficult for the countries to agree on a command structure and strategy. However, there are signs that Boko Haram is developing growing regional territorial ambitions, and international pressure is mounting on the Nigerian government to accept outside assistance. The number of cross-border attacks from Nigeria is on the rise, and the group has stated its intention to establish a caliphate in the region. The flood of refugees from Nigeria into other Lake Chad countries further threatens regional stability.

The MJTF agreement could signal a shift in the Nigerian government's policy on international military intervention, though it is not yet clear whether troops would be deployed as a border force, or operate from within Nigeria. Chadian troops have reportedly assisted Nigerian forces inside Nigeria in the week ending 1 February, which could be a sign of President Goodluck Jonathan's willingness to receive outside assistance. However, Nigeria may not be willing to accept high numbers of foreign troops stationed within the country over an extended period of time. Jonathan has previously insisted that operations in Nigeria will have to be under Nigerian command, a measure that the governments of neighbouring countries have been opposed to. An international force would, with the right mandate, be able to fight Boko Haram more effectively; however, its success depends on the ability and willingness of the Lake Chad countries, in particular Nigeria, to cooperate and provide the necessary troops. For now, attacks outside Nigeria's borders will continue, particularly in northern Cameroon and potentially in Diffa, Niger. As the group's capacity grows stronger within Nigeria, its ability to stage attacks on neighbouring countries will increase. Without Nigeria at the centre, and in full support of an international response, the armies of other Lake Chad countries will only be able to deter and repel attacks.

Ongoing operations against al-Shabaab reaching pivotal phase

On 27 January, al-Shabaab's former intelligence chief, Zakariya Ismail Hersi, denounced the extremist Islamist insurgent group, citing concern over human rights abuses and distorted ideological interpretations of sharia law and jihad. Hersi's denouncement, which followed his capture by AMISOM forces on 27 December 2014, is illustrative of the growing internal divisions within al-Shabaab. As the denouncement represents a direct challenge to group's ideological interpretations, it may have a significant effect on low-level al-Shabaab fighters – many of whom have responded positively to the government amnesty offered to individuals turning away from the group. The amnesty augments operations targeting the al-Shabaab leadership, which has been weakened by African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces, with US drone support, and a number of high-level defections.

Also, on 27 January, Somalia's new prime minister, Omar Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke, announced the appointment of a 20-member cabinet in a bid to shore up Somalia's fragile political apparatus. The Federal Government of Somalia has not had a working cabinet, as protests from lawmakers over the reappointment of former cabinet members scuppered previous attempts. Sharmarke's move to formally establish a working cabinet may demonstrate recognition of the urgent need to provide political and social solutions to the grievances that generate support for al-Shabaab, allowing the government to reduce the organisation's remaining support base.

It is likely that AMISOM forces and the federal government will seek to capitalise on the weakened condition of al-Shabaab. However, although al-Shabaab's capacity for conventional operations has waned, the group continues to espouse an uncompromising radical Islamist narrative that is highly likely to allow it to retain at least a core membership of loyal fighters. The ability of the group to retain its hardline elements, together with a conspicuous shift towards the adoption of more asymmetric tactics, is likely to continue to pose a significant challenge. While progress has been made in countering the al-Shabaab insurgency, continued success will be dependent on the ability of the Somali government to address the socio-economic issues that have contributed to a steady flow of young recruits for al-Shabaab. The successful establishment of the proposed cabinet would at least be a first step in this regard.

Americas

Economic and political crises will likely create turmoil in Venezuela in 2015; new security strategy in Michoacán, Mexico, mirrors historic approaches.

Petr Bohacek

Economic and political crises will likely create turmoil in Venezuela in 2015

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's international tour of oil-producing countries, which began on 5 January, is considered to have been largely unsuccessful. The tour was intended to bolster financial support and create a unified OPEC strategy to combat the effects of low oil prices. Venezuela has been hit hard by severe shortages in food supplies and base products, causing large queues at supermarkets and governmental restrictions on sales. The Venezuelan opposition, led by the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) movement, has proved successful in mobilising the electorate, and thousands marched in protest against the current economic situation on 24 January. In order to mitigate the crisis, Maduro announced new economic measures, including a three-tier dollar exchange system and vast investments into education and youth employment for 2015.

The lack of funds caused by the drop in oil prices has limited the ability of the government to subsidise food and other critical imports – halving its usual \$4 billion a month in subsidies. As the new economic measures have failed to address the structural faults of the government's economic model, it cannot continue to fund the vast social and welfare programmes that constitute a major pillar of its public support. The opposition is taking advantage of these shortcomings, building political momentum around the discontent in order to gather the necessary support for the 2015 national assembly election. As such, the opposition is likely to continue to project a unified position and to distance itself from the heightened levels of violence within the country.

Maduro's government will continue to accuse the United States and the West of waging an economic war on Venezuela, while criticising the opposition for fuelling discontent. The unsolved economic situation will continue to exert pressure on the population and drive increasing levels of support for the opposition. An oil price stabilised at approximately \$50 per barrel will prevent Venezuela from experiencing complete economic failure. However, should the price of oil fall below \$40 per barrel, Venezuela will experience a lack of financing that will prevent it from maintaining the import of essential goods. This is highly likely to strengthen the position of the opposition. However, should the opposition become fragmented, with some factions calling for a violent removal of the government, escalating violence between more radical opposition groups and the government could prevent legitimate elections from taking place. This could cement Maduro's rule over Venezuela and provoke increased violence within the country.

New security strategy in Michoacán, Mexico, mirrors historic approaches

The security situation in the Mexican state of Michoacán has worsened in last few weeks with renewed attacks on the security forces by various armed groups. As a response, President Enrique Peña Nieto has dismissed the security and development chief of Michoacán, Alfredo Castillo Cervantes, after complaints of inadequate security strategies by the state's governor, Salvador Jara Guerrero. The new security commissioner, General Gurrola Ramirez, will work together with the new Secretary of State for Government, Jaime Esparza Cortina, and the new federal prosecutor, Berta Paredes Garduno, to stabilise the security situation in Michoacán and prepare for the state election on 7 June 2015.

The new security strategy announced by the governor will be built around investing more than \$6 million in crime prevention and society reconstruction programmes. Most importantly, it will also rekindle cooperation with local self-defence groups – a strategy dismissed by the previous security commissioner. The role of military and federal forces will be to coordinate with the state in operations against criminal groups in order to create a sufficiently safe environment for the elections to take place. The previous security chief opposed cooperation with local self-defence groups due to the illegal arms trade supplying these units and in order to prevent criminal forces from infiltrating the police. These fears have not disappeared, and the decentralised nature of the criminal groups and the links between self-defence groups and narco-trafficking remain issues.

A well-functioning security force, including 6,000 additional federal officers working with state forces and local self-defence groups, should be able to create a sufficiently stable environment for the June Michoacán state election. However, narco-traffickers and other criminal groups will continue to pose a threat as they are well funded and difficult to identify and dismantle due to their decentralised organisational structures and inherently clandestine nature. Despite the unstable security situation, the election will be held, but is likely to be plagued by corruption and notably influenced by the criminal organisations colluding with, or controlling, electoral candidates.

Asia and the Pacific

Philippine government dealing with renewed violence from multiple insurgent groups; increased extremist Islamist violence has potential to heighten tensions in Kashmir region; China increases efforts to crackdown on separatist violence in Xinjiang province.

Neville Rodavic

Philippine government dealing with renewed violence from multiple insurgent groups

On 19 January, five rebels from the National People's Army (NPA) were killed in clashes with Philippine government forces. Then on 25 January, 44 police commandos from the Special Action Force (SAF) were killed in a 12-hour clash with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). The unit was in pursuit of two bomb makers, including the senior Jemaah Islamiyah figure, Zulkifli bin Hir, who is suspected of being behind the 2002 Bali bombings that killed 202 people. Authorities believe that bin Hir was killed during the fighting, though that is not yet confirmed. Elsewhere, the government has gained ground against the militant Islamist group Abu Sayyaf, capturing two camps in Basilan province on 21 January, killing six militants in the process.

While both sides honoured the Christmas/Papal visit truce between the Philippine government and National People's Army, the renewed violence heralds the end of the agreement. In contrast, while the clash with MILF resulted in the largest number of police officers killed on duty in Philippine history, both the government and MILF have issued public statements reaffirming their commitment to peace and describing the clash as a misunderstanding.

Despite the intensity of the clash between government forces and MILF, the peace deal is likely to hold. However, an important aspect of the incident is that MILF fought alongside BIFF, which is not a signatory to the peace deal. This may imply that MILF provides a safe haven to BIFF and wanted terror suspects, such as bin Hir, being pursued by government forces. If this is proven to be the case, it may further complicate the situation and potentially be a breach of the peace deal. In terms of the NPA, government forces are likely to be increasingly drawn into clashes in the coming weeks, and despite the truce, no permanent peace deal is likely to be reached in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, it is extremely likely that Abu Sayyaf will launch further bomb attacks, as it grows increasingly frustrated by the loss of numerous camps to government forces.

Increased extremist Islamist violence has potential to heighten tensions in Kashmir region

There has been an increase in border fighting between India and Pakistan, with reports suggesting that 10 Indian and Pakistani soldiers were killed in January of 2015. There has also been an increase in clashes between Indian security forces and militants in the city of Sopore in India's Baramulla district, with two militants killed on 18 January. Sopore's location in the north of Kashmir makes it prone to violence, as many militants infiltrating the border from Pakistan often transit through the city.

While cross border exchanges of fire are not uncommon, the latest round of hostilities were more intense, and Indian officials stated that some 10,000 civilians close to the border have left their homes in response to the fighting. Despite this, exchanges of fire between Indian and Pakistani forces have long been a defining feature of the border region, and are unlikely to abate as long as no meaningful diplomatic accord is reached. The increased activities of extremist Islamist groups, however, present a more worrying development, as these organisations are able to launch major terrorist attacks within Kashmir and within broader India.

Diplomatic relations between India and Pakistan have continued to deteriorate since India's cancellation of scheduled talks, citing Pakistan's ceasefire violations. While a full-scale conflict is unlikely, the increase in hostilities between India and Pakistan may see the latter increase its support to militants operating within India as a proxy for more direct forms of action. Should Pakistan seek to substantially bolster militant operations along the border, the corresponding increase in violence may present a substantial threat to the regions stability.

China increases efforts to crackdown on separatist violence in Xinjiang province

On 12 January, Chinese police reported that they had foiled an attempted suicide bombing, killing six suspects in the process. The incident occurred in the business district of Shule, Xinjiang province. On 13 January, Chinese authorities banned residents in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, from wearing the burqa, stating that the burqa is not traditional dress for Uyghur women and that it serves to promote extremism. Furthermore, on 19 January, two Uyghur men from Xinjiang province were shot and killed by Chinese border guards as they attempted to illegally cross over into Vietnam. It is believed that the men were attempting to reach the Middle East in order to receive jihadi training and join the ranks of either Islamic State or al-Qaeda.

The flow of Uyghur men to Syria and Iraq in order to join Islamic State is the greatest security threat to Xinjiang province. Over 800 Uyghur Muslims were prevented from traveling abroad to join jihadist groups in 2014 alone. The Chinese authorities have arguably increased measures intended to combat extremism within the Uyghur population. The banning of the burqa is the most recent and publicly visible component of these measures. As these measures affect the wider Uyghur population, they are likely to be perceived as an attempt to marginalise the Uyghurs, fuelling already heightened levels of civil unrest in Xinjiang province.

The likelihood of further attempted suicide bombings and other terrorist attacks remains particularly high in Xinjiang province. Increasing perceptions of marginalisation may serve as a catalyst to further radicalisation of elements of the Uyghur population, and hence may generate a corresponding increase in the levels of separatist violence within the province. While it is unlikely that militants will receive any concessions from the Chinese government, Uyghur fighters with combat experience will pose a much greater separatist threat should they manage to successfully return to Xinjiang.

Europe

Recent violence in Ukraine is deadliest since September 2014.

Claudia Wagner

Recent violence in Ukraine is deadliest since September 2014

Fighting and mortar attacks throughout January centred around three strategic points for the Ukrainian army and the Russian-backed separatists: the Donetsk airport (controlled by both sides), checkpoints in Luhansk, and from 30 January, near Debaltseve, a town located near a strategic railway junction between Donetsk and Luhansk. On 23 January, the United Nations reported that at least 5,086 soldiers and civilians had been killed since April 2014, with 262 deaths occurring in only nine days – thus making this fresh burst of violence the deadliest since September 2014. On 29 January, European Union foreign ministers announced that the EU sanctions would be extended until at least September 2015, and that new sanctions may be added.

The renewed violence has significantly decreased the likelihood that Russia will cease arming the separatists in eastern Ukrainian, despite the falling oil prices and the impact of the sanctions on the Russian economy. There is increasing evidence that Russian troops and equipment are entering Ukraine. At the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko accused Russia of sending 9,000 troops into Ukraine to aid separatist operations. Moscow continues to deny any direct involvement, claiming that only Russian volunteers are fighting alongside rebels. However, Ukraine and NATO argue that the recent change in tempo of the conflict is similar to that in August, when Russia bolstered the rebels who were then on the verge of defeat. There has also been a notable change in the operational strategy of separatist forces, moving from the defence of occupied towns in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions to an offensive strategy. Aleksandr Zakharchenko, prime minister of the Donetsk People's Republic rebel group, has indicated that the separatists have abandoned the idea of dialogue with the Ukrainian government, and now intend to expand their occupied territory.

It is increasingly apparent that sanctions have had little impact on Russian strategy towards the conflict. Russia has allegedly increased support for the rebels in eastern Ukrainian, and has made little progress in promoting reconciliatory dialogue between both parties. Although expansionist rhetoric is commonplace from the rebels in eastern Ukrainian, the appearance of fresh Russian troops and equipment in Ukraine makes these statements a notably more realistic proposition. Although the United States has not indicated it has plans to introduce further sanctions on Russia in the near future, it is likely that it will aim to keep sanctions closely in line with those imposed by the EU. It is very likely that violent confrontation will continue to prevail in eastern Ukraine; however, any direct NATO intervention in the conflict is highly unlikely.

Middle East

Security crackdown on protests unlikely to provoke mass uprising in Egypt; peace talks in Libya stall amid fresh violence; political situation in Yemen unravels, spurring protest and domestic unrest.

Andrine Skjelland and Sophie Taylor

Security crackdown on protests unlikely to provoke mass uprising in Egypt

The fourth anniversary of the popular uprising that resulted in the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011 was marked on 25 January in Egypt. Anti-government protests took place in Cairo, particularly in the eastern district of Al-Matariyyah (a Muslim Brotherhood stronghold), and Alexandria, resulting in at least 25 deaths. Police moved quickly to disperse crowds, blocking the area surrounding Tahrir Square and reportedly firing teargas and live ammunition at demonstrators. In Alexandria, around 1,000 people marched in the funeral procession for liberal activist Shaimaa al-Sabbagh, who was shot by police during protests on 24 January. Interior minister Mohammed Ibrahim stated that 516 Muslim Brotherhood members were arrested in clashes across the country on the anniversary. Meanwhile, Mubarak's sons, Gamal and Alaa, were released from prison on 23 January. The brothers, who were granted a retrial on their embezzlement charges, are viewed by many Egyptians as symbols of the corruption that took place throughout Mubarak's rule, and critics are likely to see their release as another step towards the reversal of the pro-democracy uprising that ousted him.

President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi's security crackdown has faced heavy criticism from local activists and international organisations claiming that the basic rights of Egyptians are being violated. The government has signed new laws curtailing political freedoms, including one requiring police authorisation for demonstrations, arrested thousands of Muslim Brotherhood supporters and pushed for media self-censorship. On 29 January, Human Rights Watch published a report stating that the 'brutal reign of the general-turned-president, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi,' has led to 'unprecedented repression' in Egypt'. Nevertheless, a majority of the population remains supportive of the government, which has been able to restore relative political stability in the country after four years of unrest and economic downturn. Sisi's administration is viewed by many as effective in tackling the perceived threat posed by the rise of the Islamic State and increased regional instability. The government has also had some degree of success in bringing about economic reform, recovering tourism numbers and attracting foreign investment, particularly from Gulf countries.

The security crackdown on the anniversary demonstrations is therefore unlikely to provoke a popular uprising that threatens Sisi's rule in the short term. In the long term, Egypt's political stability depends on the government's ability to speed up economic progress, which has been slow to date; reduce unemployment (which currently stands at 13%); and reform the country's police force, which is accused of widespread human rights abuses. Furthermore, the opposition is sizable, especially in areas such as Al-Matariyyah, and signs of a more pronounced return to authoritarianism by Sisi could lead to a spread in resentment across the general population, which would raise the risk of a third mass uprising.

Peace talks in Libya stall amid fresh violence

Violence in Libya was renewed with clashes in January as forces loyal to the internationally recognised government and elected House of Representatives (HoR) targeting the country's largest steel plant in Misrata. Reports emerged of warplanes striking the perimeter wall and training centre of the plant, interrupting the production of the nationalised Libyan Iron and Steel Company (LISCO). Misrata remains strategically problematic for Libyan Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thinni's government, given local authorities and tribal elders have aligned themselves with rival party Libya Dawn following their seizure of Tripoli the previous year. The airstrikes followed the destruction of a number of oil tankers at the port of As-Sider, Libya's largest port. On 15 January, state warplanes targeted a trawler carrying fuel to Benghazi. Hostilities continued to escalate during the month, and included the kidnap of deputy foreign minister Hassan al-Saghir by Ansar al-Sharia on 25 January, and the death of at least nine individuals following the armed siege of Tripoli's prestigious Corinthia hotel on 28 January. Members from both the House of Representatives and the self-styled General National Congress (GNC) blamed one another for the violence and destruction of infrastructure.

While the situation in Libya appears bleak, the United Nations made significant progress in initiating a further round of peace talks in Geneva, Switzerland, aimed at ending political violence and establishing a unity government in Libya. This latest diplomatic effort began on 14 January, led by the UN special representative in Libya, Bernardino León. León had announced his intention to secure a ceasefire agreement for the duration of negotiations – a position al-Thinni, the GNC and the HoR agreed to in principle. However, violence continued leading to the suspension of the talks by Tripoli's GNC, aligned with Libya Dawn, on 21 January. Following the breakdown, negotiations resumed on 26 January, with members of Libya Dawn and the GNC absent.

However frail the negotiations appear, they should nonetheless be viewed as a significant and positive step towards addressing unrest in Libya. Vice-President Mohammad Shoaib of the Tobruk-based government indicated that non-participation and breaches of the ceasefire could carry with them the threat of sanction on behalf of the UN Security Council. Later in the month, active parties agreed in principle to move the talks from the Swiss city to a location in Libya, appeasing the demands of the GNC and Libya Dawn. It remains to be seen if negotiations will, in fact, move or if any substantial progress will be made between the warring parties. Yet a demonstrable commitment to ceasefire agreement will go a long way in improving relations. However, a lack of engagement with the more hardline factions, such as the al-Qaeda linked Ansar al-Sharia and February 17 Martyrs Brigade, will remain problematic. Ultimately, any diplomatic progress made will depend upon securing the trust of rival administrations and securing transparency of actions. Without, this competition to fill the country's power vacuums and gain control of vital infrastructure will likely lead to the continuation of violence.

Political situation in Yemen unravels, spurring protest and domestic unrest

The political turmoil in Yemen heightened throughout January, moving rapidly from violence, kidnap and hostage situations through to power-sharing agreements and the resignation of the president. Thousands of protesters took to the streets of Sana'a, Ibb and Taiz on 10 January, forming the new 'rejection movement'. They demanded the resignation of Western-backed President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and the end of the capital's Houthi occupation. On 17 January, Houthi gunmen kidnapped Hadi's chief of staff, prime ministerial candidate Ahmad Awad bin Mubarak. Political violence then escalated, resulting in Hadi's residence and the presidential buildings being surrounded by gunmen, prompting the announcement of a power-sharing deal with the Houthi movement on 21 January.

Despite Houthi declarations praising Hadi's decision to enter a coalition government, the terms of the agreement have not been reached. Houthi rebels remained in Sana'a, holding Hadi under house arrest and keeping Bin Mubarak hostage. Hadi announced his resignation the next day, citing irreconcilable differences and unmanageable pressures from his political opposition. On 24 January, an estimated 10,000 people protested against the Houthi's takeover of national political institutions. Bin Mubarak was released on 27 January.

Yemen's demography is likely to cause greater instability in the coming months. Hadi's decision to agree to a power-sharing agreement with Houthi rebels will have angered southern separatists, who have campaigned for autonomy following their assimilation in the 1990s; Sunni tribesmen in the north have continued to clash with both government forces and Houthi rebels; and AQAP continue to amass support and target state infrastructure in the country's southern and port towns. The picture looks bleak should the country's power vacuums and diplomatic instability not be addressed and mutual agreements not reached. The United States and a number of former Western allies announced the closure of their embassies towards the end of January – an indication that the situation is likely to get worse. For now, the security situation remains extremely volatile, and it is unclear if a unity government will be formed.

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