



KAFF Kaff India

Free Standing Coffee Machines

India's most trusted brand Kaff has launched free standing coffee machine. Book now

Open

[Print subscriptions](#) [Sign in](#) [Search jobs](#) [Search](#) [International edition](#)

Support the Guardian

Available for everyone, funded by readers

Support us →

The Guardian

News **Opinion** **Sport** **Culture** **Lifestyle** **More**

World [Europe](#) [US](#) [Americas](#) [Asia](#) [Australia](#) **Middle East** [Africa](#) [Inequality](#) [Global development](#)

Yemen

Brian Whitaker

Mon 4 Dec 2017 17:57 GMT



Obituary

Ali Abdullah Saleh obituary

President of Yemen for 34 years whose refusal to leave the political stage plunged his country into further turmoil

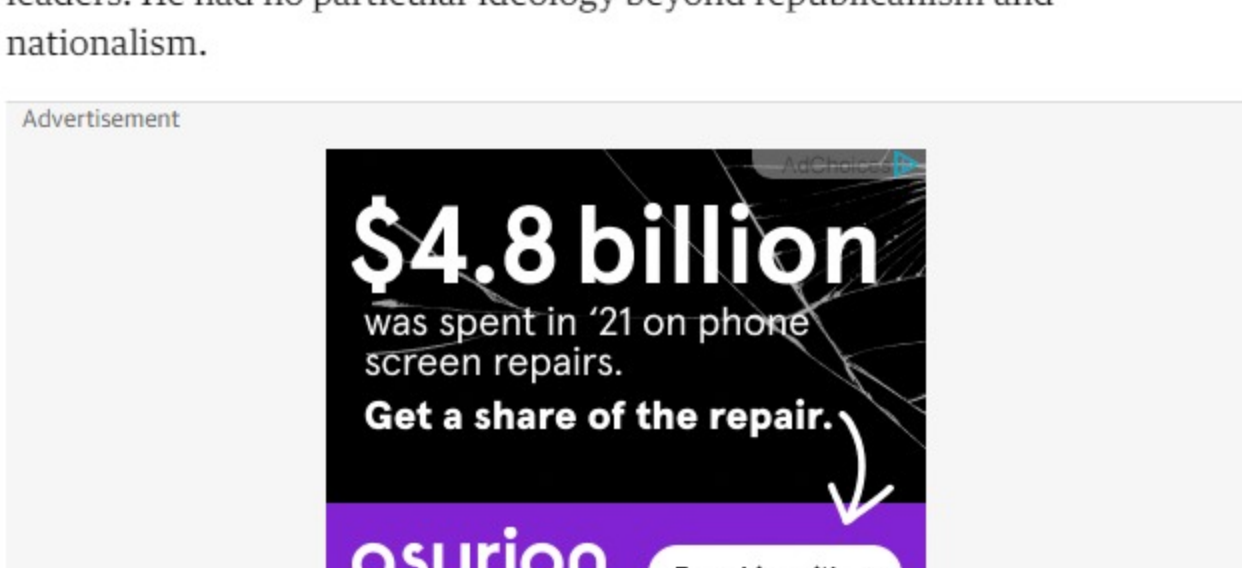


Ali Abdullah Saleh at a press conference in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, in 2011. He likened his survival technique to 'dancing on the heads of snakes'. Photograph: Khaled Abdullah/Reuters

Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has been killed aged 75, held power in **Yemen** for almost 34 years – an extraordinary feat in one of the world's most fractious countries. He likened his survival technique to “dancing on the heads of snakes” and his political career ended much as it had begun, in turmoil.

Between 1974 and 1978, the Yemen Arab Republic had three presidents in quick succession. Two were assassinated and the third fled after less than a month in office. A four-man presidential council then took over, in which Saleh soon emerged as leader. In July 1978, the People's Assembly elected him president of the republic and commander of the armed forces, but there were few who expected him to last very long.

Coming from a lesser branch of the Hashid tribal grouping, he was born in the village of Beit al-Ahmar, near the capital Sana'a. With minimal education, he had risen through the military but had little in the way of a political base – a problem that he set about correcting during his first few years in office. What he lacked in education he made up for with his shrewd handling of people, gradually building a consensus which, besides the military, embraced businessmen and technocrats along with tribal and religious leaders. He had no particular ideology beyond republicanism and nationalism.



The high point of his presidency came in 1990 when, after years of on-off negotiations, Saleh's Yemen Arab Republic united with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen – the southern part of the country that had been ruled by Marxists since the British withdrawal from Aden in 1967. This initially resulted in a power-sharing agreement for the unified state – a coalition in which the ruling party from each side shared power and a presidential council chaired by Saleh with Ali Salem al-Beidh, the southern leader, as his deputy.

At the same time, Yemen opened up its political system; new newspapers and magazines proliferated and more than 20 parties competed in the 1993 parliamentary elections – the first to be held in the Arabian peninsula under universal suffrage. Promising as this seemed at the time, it was something of a mirage. The former regimes of north and south had unresolved differences which were allowed to persist under the guise of democratic differences rather than using democracy as a means to resolve them. Most important of these differences was the failure to properly merge the armies of the former northern and southern states, which led to them coming to blows during a brief war in 1994 that was won by Saleh's forces.

With his southern rivals out of the way and the whole army under his command, Saleh had an opportunity to consolidate Yemen's national unity but instead he allowed grievances in the south to simmer, leading to a revival of separatist activism. From 2004, at the opposite end of the country, Saleh also fought an intermittent war against Zaidi rebels known as the Houthis, as well as militants linked to al-Qaida in various parts of the country. Saleh's relationship with the jihadists was always somewhat ambivalent. They had helped him defeat the southern forces in 1994, and though he always claimed al-Qaida was an enemy, he had an interest in not eradicating it. Without the threat from al-Qaida, western countries would have been far less interested in giving him aid.

For years, Saleh was reputedly a regular chewer of qat – Yemen's national drug – and, since it causes wakefulness, would often follow it up with tipples of whisky in order to sleep. It was at the whisky stage that Saleh got most of his worst ideas, according to one former prime minister who used to unplug his phone at 10pm to avoid presidential calls.

Saleh was also happy to play the democratic game so long as he kept on winning. In 1999 he submitted his own presidency to the electorate for the first time – and won easily, though it undoubtedly helped to have an opponent from his own party (whose campaign expenses Saleh had promised to pay). In 2005, he announced that he was stepping down. “Let's transfer power peacefully,” he said. “People are fed up with us, and we are fed up with power.” Naturally, his party pleaded with him to stay and Saleh, feigning reluctance, remained in his palace.

Had he left office at that point, he would have done so with a fair record of achievements. He had unified the two halves of the country, had overseen the introduction of a multiparty system and had finally settled Yemen's borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman, as well as the maritime border with Eritrea.

Like **Hosni Mubarak** in Egypt, Saleh was widely thought to be grooming his son, Ahmad, to succeed him in the presidency. Legally, he was due to retire in 2013, though he had been making moves to change the constitution and continue for longer. His rule had also become increasingly repressive, with the local media in particular under almost constant attack. Then came the Arab spring.

At the start of 2011, popular uprisings broke out in Tunisia and Egypt, giving Yemenis ideas about political change, too. It soon became clear that the northern rebels and southern separatists were not the only malcontents; in fact almost the entire country had turned against Saleh's rule.

While claiming that he was willing to leave office if allowed do so “with dignity” his behaviour suggested otherwise. Despite being abandoned by many within his own ranks, he clung on regardless while his power evaporated all around him.

There was a narrow escape in June 2011 when a bomb exploded in the private mosque of his presidential palace. Several of the worshippers were killed and Saleh, seriously injured, was flown to Saudi Arabia for treatment.

Protest demonstrations in Yemen continued and it was not until February 2012 that Saleh was finally cajoled into leaving office. Under a deal brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council, he was replaced by his deputy, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, but the deal also allowed Saleh to stay in Yemen and granted him immunity from prosecution.

This proved disastrous because it allowed Saleh to make mischief from the sidelines. He still had a considerable support network and used it relentlessly to undermine his successor.

In pursuit of that goal he also formed a surprising alliance with his former enemies, the Houthi rebels. It was only because of Saleh's support that the Houthis were able to seize control of the capital, Sana'a, in 2014, causing Hadi to flee. This later resulted in a Saudi-led military intervention aimed at restoring Hadi's government – and a continuing humanitarian catastrophe.

Last week, in what seems to have been a planned move, Saleh turned on his Houthi allies and attempted to wrest control of the capital from them. He had clearly lost none of his political ambition but, for once, his snake-dancing skills failed him and Yemen's wildest politician came to a brutal and humiliating end.

He is survived by several children, including Ahmad, a former military commander.

● Ali Abdullah Saleh, politician, born 21 March 1942; died 4 December 2017

... as you're joining us today from India, we have a small favour to ask. Tens of millions have placed their trust in the Guardian's fearless journalism since we started publishing 200 years ago, turning to us in moments of crisis, uncertainty, solidarity and hope. More than 1.5 million supporters, from 180 countries, now power us financially – keeping us open to all, and fiercely independent. **Will you make a difference and support us too?**

Unlike many others, the Guardian has no shareholders and no billionaire owner. Just the determination and passion to deliver high-impact global reporting, always free from commercial or political influence. Reporting like this is vital for democracy, for fairness and to demand better from the powerful.

And we provide all this for free, for everyone to read. We do this because we believe in information equality. Greater numbers of people can keep track of the events shaping our world, understand their impact on people and communities, and become inspired to take meaningful action. Millions can benefit from open access to quality, truthful news, regardless of their ability to pay for it.

Whether you give a little or a lot, your funding will power our reporting for the years to come. **Support the Guardian from as little as \$1 – it only takes a minute. If you can, please consider supporting us with a regular amount each month. Thank you.**

Single

Monthly

Annual

\$5 per month

\$13 per month

Other

Continue →

Remind me in January

VISA

MasterCard

Amex

PayPal

Topics
Middle East and north Africa / Hosni Mubarak / obituaries



More from Headlines



China / Authorities bring in 'emergency' level of censorship over zero-Covid protests

4h ago



Donald Trump / US court strikes down appointment of special master to review ex-president's records

10h ago



Live / World Cup 2022: joy for Japan, German despair and final group games

32m ago



Live / Russia-Ukraine war: up to 13,000 Ukrainian soldiers killed; Russian missiles hit Zaporizhzhia, mayor says

48m ago



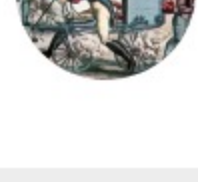
1h

Most viewed

Across The Guardian

- 1** Kanye West suspended from Twitter after posting swastika inside Star of David
- 2** Jerry Jones, Little Rock and the photo the Cowboys owner juiced for decades
- 3** Obama heads to Georgia as Herschel Walker faces new violence claim
- 4** Republicans delete tweet that appears to support Kanye West after he praises Nazis
- 5** Patient allegedly turned off roommate's ventilator because sound annoyed her

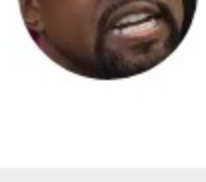
Most commented
My wife says pursuing my hobby will end our marriage. Let's call it, hypothetically, motorcycling



Most shared
Kanye West suspended from Twitter after posting swastika inside Star of David

In World News

- 6** Finland PM Sanna Marin says Europe is 'not strong enough' without the US
- 7** Trader Joe's workers upset about new work schedule policy: 'a veiled threat'
- 8** Japan shock Spain in dramatic style to send Germany tumbling out of World Cup
- 9** US court strikes down appointment of special master to review Trump records
- 10** Jimmy Kimmel on Trump's taxes: 'Six years of "I didn't pay any tax" returns'



World [Europe](#) [US](#) [Americas](#) [Asia](#) [Australia](#) **Middle East** [Africa](#) [Inequality](#) [Global development](#)

News **Opinion** **Sport** **Culture** **Lifestyle**

Original reporting and incisive analysis, direct from the Guardian every morning

Sign up for our email →

Contact us

Complaints & corrections

SecureDrop

Work for us

Privacy settings

Privacy policy

Cookie policy

Terms & conditions

Help

All topics

All writers

Digital newspaper archive

Facebook

YouTube

Instagram

LinkedIn

Twitter

Newsletters

Advertise with us

Search UK jobs

Support the Guardian

Available for everyone, funded by readers

Support us →