

Yemen opposition says vote rigged, calls protests

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Yemen's opposition accused authorities on Friday of rigging the presidential election and said its supporters would march in the streets to protest early results showing President Ali Abdullah Saleh with a big lead.

Yemenis voted on Wednesday in a contest in which Saleh faced four other candidates, including Faisal al-Shamlan, who was nominated by a coalition of opposition parties.

Preliminary official results showed Saleh leading with more than 80 percent of the vote and Shamlan with 16 percent.

The opposition believes Shamlan has secured about 40 percent of the votes counted so far. Opposition politicians accuse the government of seizing polling stations, evicting candidates' representatives, stealing ballot boxes and committing irregularities in vote-counting for local councils.

"The results announced are rejected and not recognized at all," said Mohamed al-Qahtani of the opposition Islamist Islah party, accusing the election commission of carrying out a state decision to award victory to Saleh.

Qahtani said opposition leaders would urge their followers to stage street protests against the results and ask international observers to verify the tally.

Yemeni Foreign Minister Abubakr al-Qirbi, attending a U.N. General Assembly meeting in New York, insisted the election had been fair.

Despite widespread poverty and illiteracy, "Yemen continues to progress on the path to democracy," he told a news conference, accusing the opposition of seeking only to rule and not being interested in democracy.

The European Union Election Observation Mission said in a preliminary report on Thursday that although the polls were "open and genuine," there were shortcomings including overcrowding, breaches of secrecy of the vote, illegal assistance of voters and underage voter

Yemen is the ancestral home of al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and has cracked down on militants. It cooperated closely with Washington after the Sept. 11 attacks and al Qaeda attacks at home, including the bombing of a U.S. warship in 2000.