



## Freedom in the World - Yemen (2007)

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**Population:** 21,600,000  
**Capital:** Sanaa

**Political Rights Score:** 5  
**Civil Liberties Score:** 5  
**Status:** Partly Free

### Overview

**Yemen held presidential and local council elections in September 2006. President Ali Abdullah Saleh was reelected with 77 percent of the vote, and his party, the General People's Congress, overwhelmingly won the municipal elections. The balloting was marred by some violence and opposition accusations of fraud. Serious press freedom violations, including the closure of newspapers and detention of journalists, also accompanied the election season.**

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As the site of the ancient Minaean, Sabaean, and Himyarite kingdoms, Yemen has a history stretching back nearly 3,000 years. For centuries after the advent of Islam, a series of dynastic imams controlled most of northern Yemen and parts of southern Yemen. The Ottoman Empire ruled many of the cities from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century, and the British controlled areas in the southern part of the country, including the port of Aden, beginning in the nineteenth century.

After the imam was ousted in a 1960s civil war and the British left the south in 1967, Yemen remained divided into two countries, the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen). The two states ultimately unified in 1990 after decades of conflict and tension. In the face of widespread poverty and illiteracy, tribal influences that limit the central government's authority in certain parts of the country, a heavily armed citizenry, and the threat of Islamist terrorism, Yemen has managed to take limited steps to improve the status of political rights and civil liberties in the years since unification.

Yemen's April 2003 parliamentary election, its third in a decade, took place despite concerns that popular unrest resulting from the war in Iraq might lead to a postponement. International election observers noted that Yemen had made substantial improvements in electoral management and administration.

In September 2006, Yemen held its second presidential election since unification. President Ali Abdullah Saleh was reelected, receiving 77 percent of the vote. That year marked his 29th as president, since he had served as North Yemen's leader before unification. He had become Yemen's first directly elected president in 1999, winning more than 96 percent of the vote. The 2006 election was the first in which a serious opposition candidate challenged the incumbent. Saleh's main opponent, Faisal Ben Shamlan, was supported by a coalition of Islamist and opposition parties and received 22 percent of the vote. Final results for the concurrent local elections indicated that the ruling Grand People's Congress (GPC) party won more than 80 percent of the vote for the provincial councils and 70 percent for the district councils.

The election period was marred by a number of deaths. In September, 50 people were killed and more than 200 injured when a stampede broke out at a stadium packed with thousands of Saleh supporters. Days before the balloting, eight voters were killed in election-related violence.

The European Union's Election Observation Mission, which monitored the elections, characterized them as "free and fair" even though the opposition rejected the initial count and threatened to call

for large street demonstrations to protest alleged voter manipulation and fraud. The election secured Saleh's rule for another seven years, and opened the door for the possible political candidacy of his son.

Yemen has faced security challenges from terrorist and secessionist movements over the past decade. There were minor clashes in 2006 in the northern region of Saada as part of an uprising by some members of Yemen's large community of Zaidi Shiite Muslims. Hundreds have been killed since fighting broke out in 2004. The clashes temporarily declined after the September 2004 death of Hussein Badr Eddine al-Houthi, a Zaidi cleric who had led the movement, but a second round of violence broke out in the spring of 2005. Separately, in September 2006, five days before the presidential election, Yemeni security forces foiled two simultaneous suicide attacks on oil facilities. The authorities blamed the attempts on militants linked to the Sunni Muslim terrorist group al-Qaeda. Oil exports accounted for 70 percent of the national budget, and the loss of that revenue would have been catastrophic.

Yemen continues to be plagued by serious economic problems, including widespread poverty. Economic growth has been slow, and according to the World Bank, 42 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. In March 2005, Yemen experienced two days of demonstrations over the introduction of a sales tax. During that period, dozens of Yemenis were killed in riots when the price of fuel increased by nearly 150 percent. Fuel subsidies had been lifted as part of an International Monetary Fund reform program.

### **Political Rights and Civil Liberties**

Yemen is not an electoral democracy. The country appears to have a relatively open democratic system, with citizens voting for president and members of Parliament. However, Yemen's politics are dominated by the ruling GPC party, which has increased the number of elected Parliament seats it holds from 145 in 1993 to 237 in the current Parliament. The government structure suffers from the absence of any significant limits on the executive's authority.

Yemen is headed by a popularly elected president serving seven-year terms, with a bicameral Parliament composed of a 301-seat, popularly elected House of Representatives and a Majlis al-Shura, or Consultative Council, whose 111 members are appointed by the president. The House of Representatives, elected for six-year terms, has legislative authority, and the Majlis al-Shura serves in an advisory capacity. Local council members are popularly elected, with recent elections having coincided with the presidential vote. Yemen is one of the few countries in the Arab world to organize regular elections on national and local levels. There is limited competition among the ruling GPC party, two main opposition parties (Islah and the Yemeni Socialist Party), and a handful of other parties.

Corruption is an endemic problem at all levels of government and society. Despite recent efforts by the government to fight corruption and institute a civil service reform program, Yemen lacks most legal safeguards to protect against conflicts of interest. Auditing and investigative bodies charged with fighting corruption are not sufficiently independent of the executive authorities. In November 2005, the U.S. government's Millennium Challenge Corporation suspended Yemen's eligibility for assistance under its Threshold Program, concluding that after the country was named a potential aid candidate in fiscal year 2004, corruption had increased. Yemen was ranked 111 out of 163 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The state maintains a monopoly over the media that reach the most people—television and radio. Access to the internet is not widespread, and the authorities reportedly block websites they deem offensive. The government has pursued a concerted campaign to restrict press freedom in recent years. Journalists continue to face threats of violence, kidnapping, death, and arbitrary arrest, and often encounter unclear judicial processes. These violations increased amid 2006 election disputes and due to the February 2006 publication of Danish cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad. The

latter controversy led to the temporary closure of three publications—the *Yemen Observer*, *Al-Hurriya*, and *Al-Rai al-Aam*—and the detention of three journalists. Also in February, three journalists were sentenced to prison and banned from writing for six months for offending the president with articles about government corruption. In the weeks after the September 2006 elections, over 50 rights violations against independent journalists were recorded.

Article 103 of the Press and Publications Law outlaws direct personal criticism of the head of state and publication of material that “might spread a spirit of dissent and division among the people” or “leads to the spread of ideas contrary to the principles of the Yemeni Revolution, [is] prejudicial to national unity or [distorts] the image of the Yemeni, Arab, or Islamic heritage.” Although President Ali Abdullah Saleh called for an end to prison sentences for press offenses in June 2004, government authorities continued to use the Press and Publications Law to restrict press freedom. By the end of 2005, the Ministry of Information had presented a new draft press law to the Majlis al-Shura that would end the jailing of journalists for press offenses. However, restrictions concerning criticism of the president or offense to the national interest would remain, and the requirements for practicing journalism would be stiffened. The Yemeni Journalists’ Syndicate objected to the draft law, saying it aimed to further restrict press freedom in Yemen. The government in May 2006 suspended the initiative until such objections could be resolved.

Article 2 of the constitution states that Islam is the official religion, and Article 3 declares Sharia (Islamic law) to be the source of all legislation. Yemen has few non-Muslim religious minorities, and their rights are generally respected in practice. The government has imposed some restrictions on religious activity in the context of the rebellion in the northern region of Saada. Mosques’ hours of operation have been limited in the area, and imams suspected of extremism have been removed. Strong politicization of campus life, including tensions between supporters of the ruling GPC and opposition Islah parties, places limits on academic freedom.

Yemenis have the right to form associations, according to Article 58 of the constitution. Yemen has several thousand nongovernmental organizations, although some observers question their viability and independence. Yemenis also enjoy some freedom of assembly, with periodic restrictions by the government. The authorities were accused of using excessive force against protesters and rioters demonstrating against fuel-price increases in 2005; more than 40 people were killed and hundreds were injured in the violence. However, opposition political rallies were permitted across the country during the 2006 election season.

The government respects the right to form and join trade unions, but some critics claim that the government and ruling party elements have stepped up efforts to control the affairs of these organizations.

The judiciary is nominally independent, but in practice it is weak and susceptible to interference from the executive branch. Government authorities have a spotty record of enforcing judicial rulings, particularly those issued against prominent tribal or political leaders. Lacking an effective court system, citizens often resort to tribal forms of justice or direct appeals to the executive branch of government. In 2006, Yemen restructured its judicial system to remove the president as head of the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC), which oversees the judiciary. It would instead be led by the chief justice of the Supreme Court, and the judiciary would have an independent budget under the new arrangement. Also that year, some three dozen judges were retired, suspended for possible disciplinary action, or referred for prosecution. In September 2006, a female judge was appointed to the Supreme Court, and another woman was appointed as the head of the civil court of appeals for Aden governorate. Meanwhile, five women were admitted to the Higher Judicial Institute. The various changes in 2006 were part of a larger judicial reform program begun with support from the World Bank in 1997.

Arbitrary detention occurs, partly because law enforcement officials lack proper training and partly because senior government officials lack the political will to root out the problem. Security forces

affiliated with the Political Security Office (PSO) and the Ministry of the Interior torture and abuse detainees, and torture remains a problem in PSO prisons, which are not closely monitored.

Yemen is relatively homogenous ethnically and racially. The Akhdam, a small minority group, live in poverty and face social discrimination.

Women are afforded most legal protections against discrimination and provided with guarantees of equality. In practice, however, they continue to face pervasive discrimination in several aspects of life. A woman must obtain permission from her husband or father to receive a passport and travel abroad. Unlike men, women do not have the right to confer citizenship on a foreign-born spouse, and the process of obtaining Yemeni citizenship for a child of a Yemeni mother and a foreign-born father is more difficult than that for a child born of a Yemeni father and a foreign-born mother. Yemen's penal code allows lenient sentences for persons guilty of "honor crimes"—assaults or killings committed against women for alleged immodest or immoral behavior. Laws requiring that a wife obey her husband were abolished by presidential decree in 2004.

Women are vastly underrepresented in elected office. Despite the best efforts of women's rights groups to increase the number of women in Parliament, only one woman won a seat in the 2003 parliamentary elections. The number of women registered to vote had increased nearly sevenfold in a decade, from half a million in the 1993 parliamentary elections to more than three million in the 2003 elections. A study produced by the Women's National Committee in 2004 found that women represented less than 3 percent of all government employees. According to the UN Development Program in 2005, Yemen has one of the largest gaps in the world between boys' and girls' primary school attendance rates.