



Freedom in the World - Yemen (2008)

Capital: Sanaa

Political Rights Score: 5

Population:
22,400,000

Civil Liberties Score: 5

Status: Partly Free

Overview

Yemen's government continued to clash with Zaidi Muslim rebels in the north in 2007. The authorities also continued their crackdown on the press and free speech, prosecuting journalists who criticized the state and especially its northern military campaign. Also in 2007, the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation pledged more than \$20 million in aid to fight accelerating corruption in the government.

For centuries after the advent of Islam, a series of dynastic imams controlled most of northern Yemen and parts of the south. The Ottoman Empire ruled many of the cities from the 16th to the early 20th centuries, and the British controlled areas in the southern part of the country, including the port of Aden, beginning in the 19th 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. 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 taken limited steps to improve the status of political rights and civil liberties in the years since unification.

In September 2006, Yemen held its second presidential election since unification. President Ali Abdullah Saleh was reelected with 77 percent of the vote, and the ruling Grand People's Congress (GPC) party won by a similar margin in concurrent provincial and local council elections. The 2006 presidential race 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 other opposition parties and received 22 percent of the vote. The elections, which international observers deemed free and fair despite opposition allegations of fraud, 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. Clashes in the northern region of Saada as part of an uprising by some members of Yemen's large community of Zaidi Shiite Muslims continued in 2007; hundreds of people had been killed in the fighting since it broke out in 2004. The government faced other sources of opposition as well. In September 2007, police killed two army veterans who participated in protests aimed at government discrimination against communities in southern Yemen. In ongoing tensions between tribes and the government over poor social conditions, tribesmen near Sanaa blew up an oil pipeline in October. Revenues from oil exports make up 70 percent of Yemen's national budget.

The country continues to be plagued by serious economic problems, including widespread poverty. Economic growth has been slow, and unemployment hovers around 40 percent.

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 its share of elected parliament seats 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, and President Ali Abdullah Saleh has been serving continuously since 1978, when he became president of North Yemen in a military coup.

The president of Yemen is elected for seven-year terms, and appoints the 111 members of the bicameral parliament's largely advisory upper house, the Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council). The 301 members of the lower house, the House of Representatives, are elected to serve six-year terms. Local council members are also elected. There is limited competition among the ruling GPC party, two main opposition parties (the Islamist party Islah and the Yemeni Socialist Party), and a handful of other parties.

Corruption is an endemic problem. Despite recent efforts by the government to fight graft, Yemen lacks most legal safeguards against conflicts of interest. Auditing and investigative bodies are not sufficiently independent of the executive authorities. In February 2007, the U.S. government's Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) reinstated Yemen's eligibility for assistance under its Threshold Program after a two-year suspension. In September, the MCC approved \$20.6 million in programs for Yemen to fight corruption and improve the judiciary, elections, and the investment climate. Yemen was ranked 131 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2007 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 block websites they deem offensive. 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." Government authorities have used the Press and Publications Law to restrict press freedom, especially in recent years.

In May 2007, the Ministry of Telecommunications blocked two websites for their critical coverage of the government's war on Zaidi rebels in the north, and in June the Ministry of Information began censoring SMS text messages for criticism of the president. In May 2007 the Yemeni Centre for Training and Protecting Journalists issued a report claiming 500 violations against journalists in the last five years. Journalists continue to face threats of violence, kidnapping, death, and arbitrary arrest. The opposition journalist Abdul Karim al-Khaiwani was sentenced in June 2007 to one month in prison on charges of conspiring with rebels in the north. In August, masked gunmen abducted al-Khaiwani, beat him, and threatened to kill him and his family if he continued to criticize the president.

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, and several thousand nongovernmental organizations operate in the country. 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 susceptible to interference from the executive branch. Authorities have a spotty record on 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. 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.

Arbitrary detention occurs, partly because law enforcement officers lack proper training and 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 homogeneous ethnically and racially. The Akhdam, a small minority group, live in poverty and face social discrimination.

In 2007, almost 19,000 refugees seeking relief from war and poverty in the Horn of Africa were smuggled into Yemen. Refugees, who pay smugglers between \$50 and \$100, are routinely subjected to theft, abuse, and even murder, with over 1000 people reported dead or missing in 2007 alone, including the drowning of 200 in December.

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 citizenship for a child of a Yemeni mother and a foreign-born father is more difficult than that for a child born to a Yemeni father and a foreign-born mother. Yemen's penal code allows lenient sentences for those convicted of "honor crimes"—assaults or killings of women for alleged immoral behavior. Laws requiring that a wife obey her husband were abolished by presidential decree in 2004.

Women are vastly underrepresented in elected office, and 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 a 2005 UNESCO estimate, 26 percent of children of primary school age are not enrolled in school. According to the UN Development Programme in 2005, Yemen has one of the largest gaps in the world between boys' and girls' primary-school attendance rates.