



Freedom in the World - Yemen (2006)

Polity:
No polity available

Political Rights:
5

Civil Liberties:
5

Status:
Partly Free

Population:
20,700,000

GNI/Capita:
\$590

Life Expectancy:
61

Religious Groups:
Muslim [including
Sunni and Shia],
other

Ethnic Groups:
Arab [majority],
Afro-Arab, South
Asian

Capital:
Sanaa

Additional Info:

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Overview

Yemen continued to suffer from a crackdown on press freedom at the hands of its government in 2005, with several prominent journalists intimidated, beaten, and arrested by government security forces. Continued conflict in the northern region of the country and summer riots over the lifting of fuel subsidies made for a volatile year.

As part of the ancient Minaean, Sabaeen, and Himyarite kingdoms, Yemen has a long history stretching back nearly 3,000 years. For centuries, a series of imams controlled most of northern Yemen and parts of southern Yemen. The Ottoman Empire ruled many of the cities from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, and the British Empire controlled areas in the southern part of the country, including the port of Aden, in the first part of the twentieth century. Yemen was divided into two countries—the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen)—that ultimately became 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 radical Islamist terrorism, Yemen has managed to take some limited steps to improve its record on political rights and civil liberties in the 14 years since unification.

In 1999, President Ali Abdullah Saleh won a five-year term in the country's first nationwide direct presidential election, gaining 96.3 percent of the vote. Saleh's only opponent came from within the ruling General People's Congress (GPC), and his term in office was extended from five to seven years in a 2001 referendum.

Yemen's April 2003 parliamentary election, its third in the last 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. On the surface, the elections were competitive, with the opposition Islah party taking seats in constituencies that were former strongholds of the ruling party. However, voter registration was characterized by widespread fraud, and underage voting was a pervasive problem.

In July 2005, President Saleh, in a speech marking 27 years since he came to power, shocked the country by announcing that he would stand down when his current term of office expires. However, by the end of November, Saleh had shifted his stance and was positioned to secure the GPC's nomination for the 2006

presidential elections.

Yemen continues to be plagued by serious economic problems, including widespread poverty. More than 40 percent of Yemenis live below the poverty line, and economic growth has been slow. In March 2005, Yemen experienced two days of demonstrations over the introduction of a sales tax. In July, dozens of Yemenis were killed in riots when the price of fuel increased by nearly 150 percent because fuel subsidies were lifted as part of an International Monetary Fund (IMF) reform program.

Yemen has faced challenges from terrorist and secessionist movements over the past decade. Throughout 2005, Yemen continued to experience unrest in the northern region of Saada, as part of an uprising led by members of Yemen's Shiite Zaidi community. Hundreds have been killed in clashes since fighting broke out in 2004. Fighting was temporarily stemmed after the September 2004 death of Hussein Badruddin Al-Houthi, a Shiite cleric who organized the Zaidi community; a second round of violence broke out in the spring of 2005.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Citizens of Yemen cannot change their government democratically. On the surface, Yemen appears to have a relatively open democratic system, with citizens of Yemen voting for president and members of parliament. In reality, Yemen's politics is monopolized by the ruling party, the GPC, which has increased the number of parliament seats it holds from 145 in 1993 to 237 in the current parliament. Yemen's government suffers from the absence of any real system of checks and balances of power and any significant limits on the executive's authority.

Yemen is headed by a popularly elected president, with a bicameral parliament composed of a 301-seat, popularly elected House of Representatives and a 111-member Majlis al-Shura, or Consultative Council, 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. Although local council members are popularly elected—the most recent local election was held in 2001—President Ali Abdullah Saleh appoints all local council chairpersons, who wield most of the decision-making authority.

Yemen is one of the few countries in the Arab world to organize regular elections on national and local levels, with 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 increase efforts to fight corruption and institute a civil service reform program, Yemen lacks most legal safeguards to protect against conflicts of interest. Chief auditing and investigative bodies charged with fighting corruption are not sufficiently independent of the executive authorities. In October, the Ministry of Justice began an investigation into alleged corruption in the Ministry of Oil and Minerals. Yemen was ranked 103 out of 159 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2005 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 government reportedly blocks websites it deems offensive. The government pursued a concerted campaign to restrict press freedom, continuing a negative trend from 2004. Journalists continue to face threats of violence, death, and arbitrary arrest, and often encounter unclear judicial processes. In December 2004, five journalists received suspended prison sentences for various offenses, including publishing articles that criticized the royal family of Saudi Arabia and articles that detailed corruption among Yemeni political leaders.

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 Saleh called for an end to imprisonment penalties for press offenses in June 2004, government authorities continued to use the Press and Publications Law to restrict press freedom. In October 2005, two journalists with Al-Hurriya newspaper, Abdulkareem Sabra and Abdulqawi al-Qubati, were convicted of publishing an article that criticized Saleh. By the end of the year, the Ministry of Information had presented a new draft press law to the Majlis al-Shura. The Yemeni Journalist Syndicate objected to the draft law, saying that it aimed to place more restraints on the press and further restrict press freedom in Yemen.

In the spring of 2005, several journalists in Ta'izz and Ad Dali' governorates were beaten by government security forces, including Mohammad Abdu Sufian, editor of the newspaper Taiz, Mohammad Mohsen al-Hadad, general manager of Taiz Radio and Television, Abu Bakr al-Arabi, general manager of Taiz Media Center, and Abdulqader Abdullah Sa'ad of the weekly paper Al-Wahdah. In August, Jamal Amer, editor of the newspaper Al-Wasat, was abducted and beaten by armed men who said they were acting on behalf of military officers. Government security forces ransacked the office of Associated Press journalist Ahmed al-Haj, taking files and a computer. In October, Yemeni police beat a television crew from the Arab satellite channel Al-Arabiya covering a strike by textile workers in Sanaa. Al-Thawra, the government-run daily newspaper, ran several editorials in 2005 accusing reporters critical of the government of being foreign intelligence agents.

Article 2 of the constitution states that Islam is the religion of state, and Article 3 declares Sharia (Islamic law) to be the source of all legislation. Yemen has few religious minority groups, and their rights are generally respected in practice. 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 the viability and independence of these groups. Yemenis also enjoy some freedom of assembly, though the government restricts this from time to time. In January, dozens of journalists staged a demonstration in front of the presidential palace to protest the continued detention of Abdulkareem al-Khaiwani, editor of the opposition weekly newspaper Al-Shoura, who had been jailed in September 2004 on charges of incitement, insulting the president, publishing false news, and contributing to tribal and sectarian tensions for the

newspaper's reporting on Hussein Badreddin al-Hawthi's rebellion in Saada. In May, several journalists held a public demonstration to protest attacks on journalists in the Taiz and Ad Dali' governorates. Hundreds of journalists staged a sit-in protest at the Yemeni Journalist Syndicate in August to protest the beating of Al-Wasat editor Jamal Amer. The National Authority for Defending Rights and Freedoms criticized the government's treatment of demonstrators who protested against the decrease in fuel subsidies in July, saying that government security forces used excessive force.

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. The lack of a truly independent judiciary impedes progress in all aspects of democracy and good governance; without an independent arbiter for disputes, people often resort to tribal forms of justice or direct appeals to the executive branch of government.

In January, the Higher Judicial Council, which oversees the judiciary and is headed by President Saleh, appointed 25 new judges, dismissed 22 judges without compensation and benefits, ordered more than 100 judges into early retirement, and moved several judges to different positions in an attempt to further advance judicial reforms. In addition, the Higher Judicial Council appointed 24 people to the Judicial Inspection Commission, a body that monitors the performance of judges. The new appointees included Abdullah Farwan, former chairman of the Central Organization for Control and Audit. These changes represented one of the largest shifts in a judicial reform program begun with support from the World Bank in 1997. Arbitrary detention occurs, sometimes because of a lack of proper training of law enforcement officials and at other times because of a lack of political will at the most senior levels of government. Security forces affiliated with the Political Security Office (PSO) and the Ministry of 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, lives in poverty and faces social discrimination.

Women are afforded most legal protections against discrimination and provided with guarantees of equality. In practice, women 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 in practice more difficult than that for a child born of a Yemeni father and a foreign-born mother. Yemen's penal code allows for 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, out of 301 total seats. The number of women registered to vote increased nearly sevenfold in the past decade, from half a million in the 1993 parliamentary elections to more than three million in the 2003 parliamentary elections. A study produced by the National Committee of Women found that women represented less than 3 percent of all government employees. According to the United Nations Development Program, Yemen has one of the largest gaps in the world between boys' and girls' primary school attendance rates.