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Yemen

Political Rights: 5*

Civil Liberties: 5

Status: Partly Free

GNI per capita: \$450

Population: 19,400,000

Life Expectancy: 60

Religious Groups: Muslim [including Sunni and Shi'a], other

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

Capital: Sanaa

Ratings Change: Yemen's political rights rating improved from 6 to 5, and its status from Not Free to Partly Free, due to the holding of parliamentary elections that were legitimate but flawed.

Ten Year Ratings Timeline (Political Rights, Civil Liberties, Status):

1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
5,6,NF	5,6,NF	5,6,NF	5,6,NF	5,6,NF	5,6,NF	5,6,NF	6,6,NF	6,5,NF	5,5,PF

Overview

Yemen took a small step forward in improving the mechanisms and structures for continuing its transition to democracy in 2003 by holding parliamentary elections. However, the ruling party's lack of confidence in its own ability to compete in a fully democratic system impeded more substantial progress. The status of detainees held incommunicado remained an issue of concern during the year.

As part of the ancient Minaean, Sabaeen, and Himyarite kingdoms, Yemen has a long history stretching back nearly three thousand 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 in the first part of the twentieth century, including the port of Aden. Yemen was divided into two countries, the Yemen Arab Republic of the north and the People's Republic of South Yemen, which ultimately unified in 1990 after decades of conflict and tensions.

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 13 years since its 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

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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, there were numerous problems with the election. Voter registration was characterized by widespread fraud and cheating, and underage voting was a widespread problem. Rather than opening the door for increased political pluralism, Yemen's parliamentary election was a missed opportunity, marred by cheating on the part of all major political parties and by reports of intimidation, use of state resources, and control of certain media outlets by the ruling party.

In addition to the parliamentary elections, another leading story in Yemen in 2003 was the continued incommunicado detention of individuals suspected of having ties to Islamic extremist groups such as al-Qaeda. Authorities in the government estimated the number of detainees at 200 to 300 individuals. The minister of the interior told parliament that a number of these individuals had been released because they had changed their views, while others remained in detention because they still held on to their militant views. Some of the releases were part of an Islamically oriented approach to rehabilitation, begun when President Saleh asked Judge Hamood Al-Hitar to form a "Dialogue Committee" to persuade fundamentalists to renounce violence and their fanatical views.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Citizens of Yemen cannot change their government democratically. Yemen is a republic headed by a popularly elected president, with a bicameral parliament composed of a 301-seat popularly elected House of Representatives and an 111-member Majlis Al-Shura or Consultative Council appointed by the president. The House of Representatives has legislative authority, and the Majlis Al-Shura serves in an advisory capacity.

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 (YSP); and a handful of other parties. On the surface level, Yemen appears to have a relatively open democratic system. In reality, Yemen's politics are 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. 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.

Corruption is an endemic problem at all levels of government and society. Despite recent efforts by the government to step up 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.

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 newspapers have some degree of freedom, the print media do not seem to have a strong impact across much of society, which has a high rate of illiteracy, estimated at 54 percent. The state maintains a monopoly over the media that matter the most—television and radio. Access to the Internet is not widespread, and the government reportedly blocks Web sites it deems offensive.

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 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 these organizations. 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.

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. One prominent example of the latter from 2003 was the arrest inside the presidential building and detention without charge of members of the Jahm tribe. The Jahm tribal leaders reportedly had a dispute with officials while in the presidential office, and they were subsequently detained, initially in a military prison. They were ultimately released after mediation from another tribal leader, not because of any procedure related to the courts or the rule of law.

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. Women are vastly under-represented 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. At the local government level, women won only 38 seats out of 6,676 in the 2001 local elections. 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 woman who seeks to travel abroad must obtain permission from her husband or fathers to receive a passport and travel. A woman does not have the right to confer citizenship on her foreign-born spouses, 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.

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