

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD

Yemen

Yemen | [Freedom in the World 2012](#) |

OVERVIEW:

Hundreds of thousands of Yemenis demonstrated throughout 2011 to demand democratic change and an end to the 33-year rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Security and military forces loyal to Saleh used brutal violence in repeated attempts to crush the pro-democracy movement. Amid the political uncertainty, Yemeni and U.S. officials warned that Islamist militants, including an affiliate of Al-Qaeda, were growing in strength. The United States began a series of airstrikes targeting alleged Al-Qaeda operatives in May. After months of international pressure, Saleh finally signed a Saudi-brokered agreement in November that transferred his powers to Yemen's vice president, though he formally remained president at year's end. Clashes continued after the pact was announced. The humanitarian costs of Yemen's political conflict and related violence were high, with hundreds killed and thousands displaced.

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 exercised some influence over Yemeni territory from the 16th to the early 20th century, and the British controlled the southern portion of the country, including the port of Aden, beginning in the 19th century.

After the reigning 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, and northern forces put down a southern attempt to secede in 1994. In the face of widespread poverty and illiteracy, tribal influences that limited the central government's authority in certain parts of the country, a heavily armed citizenry, and the threat of Islamist terrorism, Yemen took limited steps to improve the status of political rights and civil liberties in the years after unification.

In 2006, Yemen held its second presidential election since unification. President Ali Abdullah Saleh was reelected with 77 percent of the vote, and the ruling General 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.

In May 2008, Yemen held its first-ever elections for 20 provincial governorships, which had previously been appointed. Opposition groups refused to participate, claiming electoral manipulation by the government. Progovernment candidates were elected in 17 of the 20 provinces that participated, and independents won in the remaining three. One province did not hold elections due to protests by unemployed Yemenis.

2012 SCORES

STATUS

Not Free

FREEDOM RATING

6.0

CIVIL LIBERTIES

6

POLITICAL RIGHTS

6

Tensions between the government and opposition escalated in late 2008, and the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP)—a coalition that included the Yemeni Socialist Party and Islah, an Islamist party—threatened to boycott parliamentary elections scheduled for April 2009. The two sides agreed in February 2009 to postpone the vote by two years pending the outcome of a national dialogue. Yemen's opposition grew increasingly frustrated in 2010, as Saleh ignored calls for electoral reform and appeared set on installing his son Ahmed as his successor.

Any possibility for elections in 2011 was upended after Yemenis launched a sustained protest campaign in January to call for Saleh's immediate ouster. The demonstrations started in the capital, Sanaa, and quickly spread to Aden, Hodeidah, and other parts of Yemen. In March, the parliament approved a set of emergency laws that gave the president sweeping powers to imprison critics and censor speech. The laws suspended constitutional protections, outlawed protests, and gave security forces the power to arrest and detain without judicial review. The most intense periods of protest were between February and June, and in September, as hundreds of thousands of Yemenis repeatedly took to the streets in opposition to the regime. The protests, led by young activists, were not coordinated by the JMP, although the latter eventually supported them.

In spite of high-profile defections from the government and military, the president retained some pillars of support. Pro-Saleh security services and military units used deadly violence in attempts to break up opposition protests, including sniper fire, shelling, and even airstrikes. Yemen's Ministry of Human Rights estimated that 2,000 people were killed as a result of the political crisis over the course of the year. Tribal groups, urban militias, and other anti-Saleh forces, including rogue army general Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and his troops, also resorted to violence to oust Saleh and protect their own interests. The president was gravely wounded in an explosion at his presidential compound in June. He was evacuated to Saudi Arabia, where he was treated for severe burns.

Saleh returned to Yemen in September, but under sustained pressure from the United States, the United Nations, and the Gulf Cooperation Council, he signed a Saudi-brokered agreement in late November that transferred his powers to Yemen's vice president. A unity cabinet with both GPC and JMP ministers was formed in early December, and a single-candidate election designed to officially install Vice President Abed Rabbo Mansour al-Hadi as president was scheduled for February 2012. However, clashes between pro- and anti-Saleh forces continued through year's end, and Saleh formally remained president.

The lengthy political crisis of 2011 seriously exacerbated existing centrifugal forces within Yemen, including autonomous tribal groups, a southern secessionist movement that had grown increasingly militant in recent years, a seven-year-old rebel movement rooted in the Zaidi Shiite Muslim community of the northern province of Saada, and Sunni Islamist militant groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda. All four of these elements asserted themselves more openly during 2011, in many cases clashing with government forces and seizing territory.

The Saleh government at times sought to highlight the Qaeda threat to bolster its international support. The United States, responding to the growing disorder, began a series of drone aircraft strikes against suspected Qaeda militants in May. The attacks killed a number of alleged terrorist operatives, including the U.S. citizens Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan in September. It was unclear how many civilians were killed in the U.S. strikes.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES:

Yemen is not an electoral democracy. Past elections, while more competitive than in many Arab countries, have been marred by flaws including vote buying, the partisanship of public officials and the military, and exploitation of state control over key media platforms. Moreover, the original six-year mandate of the current parliament expired in 2009, and elections were postponed again

amid the turmoil of 2011. The political system has long been dominated by the ruling GPC party, and there are few limits on the authority of the executive branch. President Ali Abdullah Saleh has been serving continuously since 1978, when he became president of North Yemen through a military coup. Under the political agreement signed in November 2011, Saleh's vice president is set to replace him through a single-candidate presidential election in February 2012.

The president is elected for seven-year terms, and appoints the 111 members of the largely advisory upper house of parliament, the Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council). The 301 members of the lower house, the House of Representatives, are elected to serve six-year terms. Provincial councils and governors are also elected. In the last parliamentary elections in 2003, the GPC took 238 lower house seats, and the two main opposition parties, the Islamist party Islah and the Yemeni Socialist Party, took 46 and 8 seats, respectively. There is also a handful of smaller factions and independent lawmakers. Yemen's relatively well-developed and experienced opposition parties have historically been able to wring some concessions from the government.

Corruption is an endemic problem. Despite some 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.

The state maintains a monopoly over the media that reach the most people—terrestrial television and radio. Article 103 of the Press and Publications Law bans 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 that “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.” *Al-Ayyam*, Yemen's most popular newspaper until its forcible closure by the government in 2009, remained out of operation in 2011, and its editor was on trial at year's end. It and other publications had been targeted for their reporting on the southern secessionist movement. The political crisis of 2011 led to multiple raids or attacks by progovernment forces on various news outlets, including the bureaus of foreign satellite television broadcasters like Al-Jazeera. Copies of print media were frequently seized during distribution, and a number of journalists faced intimidation, arrest, and physical violence. In March, Yemen expelled at least four foreign journalists who were covering the protest movement. Yemeni sources, including the Yemeni Journalist Syndicate and the Center for the Rehabilitation and Protection of Freedom of the Press, estimated nearly 500 cases of government harassment against local journalists during the first half of 2011; journalists staged demonstrations in Sanaa in July to protest the harassment. Access to the internet is not widespread, and the authorities block websites they deem offensive.

The constitution states that Islam is the official religion and 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 province 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 the opposition Islah party, infringes on academic freedom at universities.

Yemenis have historically enjoyed some freedom of assembly, with periodic restrictions and sometimes deadly interventions by the government. The 2011 protest movement posed a serious challenge to the government's tolerance for public dissent. In spite of brutal violence, protesters persisted in taking to the streets, and continuously occupied certain locations in the capital and other major cities. Over the past three years, southern Yemenis have mounted growing protests to challenge the government's alleged corruption and abuse of power, the marginalization of southerners in the political system, and the government's inability to address pressing social and economic concerns. The protest movement has increasingly called for secession by the south. The push for secession was partly subsumed in 2011, as many southerners joined the

broader anti-Saleh movement. Tens of thousands regularly protested in Aden and elsewhere. As in previous years, authorities responded with mass arrests of organizers and attempts to break up demonstrations by force. State security forces justified their harsh response by linking the southern movement to Islamist militant groups that also operated in the south.

Yemenis have the right to form associations under Article 58 of the constitution. Several thousand nongovernmental organizations operate in the country, although their freedom to operate is restricted in practice. The law acknowledges workers' 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. Virtually all unions belong to a single labor federation, and the government is empowered to veto collective-bargaining agreements.

The judiciary is nominally independent, but in practice it is susceptible to interference from the executive branch. Authorities have a poor 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 executive authorities.

Arbitrary detention occurs, partly because law enforcement officers lack proper training and senior government officials lack the political will to eliminate the problem. Security forces affiliated with the Political Security Office (PSO) and the Ministry of the Interior torture and abuse detainees, and PSO prisons are not closely monitored. As part of the November agreement for him to step down from power, Ali Abdullah Saleh was granted immunity from prosecution for his role in the country's deadly crackdown in 2011.

Yemen is relatively homogeneous ethnically and racially. However, the Akhdam, a small minority group, live in poverty and face social discrimination.

Thousands of refugees seeking relief from war and poverty in the Horn of Africa are smuggled annually into Yemen, where they are routinely subjected to theft, abuse, and even murder.

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 they can transfer Yemeni citizenship to their children only in special circumstances. Yemen's penal code allows lenient sentences for those convicted of "honor crimes"—assaults or killings of women by family members for alleged immoral behavior. In April 2008, the parliament voted down legislation that would have banned female genital mutilation. Women are vastly underrepresented in elected office; there is just one woman in the lower house of parliament. School enrollment and educational attainment rates for girls fall far behind those for boys. In a positive development, the protest leader Tawakul Karman, a journalist, rights activist, and member of the Islah political party, was a co-recipient of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize for her role in the Arab Spring.

RATINGS CHANGE:

Yemen's civil liberties rating declined from 5 to 6 due to the regime's violent response to public protests throughout the year and a deterioration of the rule of law amid the protracted effort to remove and replace President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

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