

YEMEN 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of thought “within the limits of the law,” identifies Islam as the state religion, and declares sharia to be the source of all legislation. In September the Houthi movement (consisting of Zaydi Shia) expanded from its base in the northwest and established control over large portions of the country, including Sana’a. Prior to this military campaign, members of the Zaydi Shia community reported government harassment and discrimination, including detention, based on allegations of sympathizing with the Houthis. Because religion and political affiliations are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many of the incidents as being solely based on religious identity. The government continued to detain a Bahai, originally arrested by security forces in December 2013, on suspicion of proselytizing, apostasy, and spying for a foreign government. The individual, who had not been formally charged at year’s end, reported being beaten and electrocuted for the initial 45 days of his imprisonment.

There were reports of Houthi attacks on Quranic schools in Amran, although Houthis claimed the schools were being used to house Sunni fighters and weapons. Public commemoration of Shia holy days occasionally resulted in clashes with Sunni groups. Salafi and Zaydi political and religious leaders continued to use charges of apostasy to target opponents and incite anger among their followers. Jewish leaders reported that the harassment of the Jewish community in Amran increased, following the resumption of fighting between Houthis and militant Sunni groups. There were instances of anti-Semitic print material. For example, the broadly disseminated Houthi banner included the phrase, “A curse on the Jews.”

Terrorist groups, including al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), regularly carried out attacks against government representatives and installations, members of the Southern Mobility Movement (Hirak) group, and other individuals accused of “immoral” behavior.

Embassy officers stressed the importance of religious tolerance in bilateral engagement with government officials responsible for religious affairs. The Ambassador and other embassy officers engaged with religious leaders and other members of civil society concerned with religious freedom through programs designed to promote religious tolerance and productive dialogue among religious groups. In November the embassy organized a workshop for religious leaders of

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different faith traditions, both male and female, to discuss “The Violence and Extremism among Yemeni Youth: Reasons and Solutions.” The embassy continued to support interfaith dialogue through outreach programs focused on local religious leaders, including English language training and exchange programs for imams.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population is 26 million (July 2014 estimate). Most citizens are Muslim, belonging either to the Zaydi order of Shia Islam or the Shafa’i order of Sunni Islam. While there are no official statistics, 65 percent of the population is estimated to be Sunni and 35 percent is estimated to be Shia. According to Ismaili sources, there are nearly one million Ismaili Muslims, with the largest group of approximately 14,000 concentrated in the Haraz district near Sana’a. There is an indeterminate number of Twelver Shia (residing mainly in the north) and Sufis. Groups together comprising less than 1 percent of the population include Jews, Bahais, Hindus, and Christians, many of whom are refugees or temporary foreign residents. Christian groups include Roman Catholics and Anglicans. The once-sizable Jewish community is the only indigenous non-Muslim minority religious group. Fewer than 200 Jews remain after decades of emigration to Israel; they reside mainly in Sana’a and the Rayda district of Amran Governorate.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of thought “within the limits of the law” and declares adherence to international human rights law. The constitution also states Islam is the state religion and sharia is the source of all legislation. Local interpretation of sharia serves as a basis for all law, although Islamic jurisprudence coexists with secular common law and civil code models in a hybrid legal system.

Denouncing Islam or converting from Islam to another religion is considered apostasy, which is a capital offense. The law allows those charged with apostasy three opportunities to repent; upon repentance they are absolved from the death penalty. Family law prohibits marriage between a Muslim and an apostate. By law, apostates have no parental or child custody rights. There have been no reported convictions for apostasy in recent years.

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The government prohibits proselytizing directed at Muslims. The law punishes public “ridicule” of any religion, and the maximum sentence is higher if the ridiculed religion is Islam.

A non-Muslim can run for parliament, although the constitution states the president must be Muslim. The law does not prohibit political parties based on religion, but states that parties cannot claim to be the sole representative of any religion, be against Islam, or restrict membership to a particular religious group.

Some local customs, codified in law and followed in policies, discriminate against members of non-Muslim religious groups. For example, by law Muslim women may not marry non-Muslims and Muslim men may not marry women who are not Muslim, Jewish, or Christian.

The government must authorize construction of new places of worship, including mosques.

Public schools must provide instruction in Islam but not in other religions. Islamic instruction is mandatory for all public school students. Shia and Sunni students are taught from the same curriculum in public schools. The government is unable to verify the religious curriculum taught in some private schools. Muslim citizens may attend private schools that do not teach Islam. Most non-Muslim students are foreigners and attend private schools.

Government Practices

The transitional government eased restrictions on various religious practices and on religious speech in the last several years. Many secularists posted anti-religious opinions online without repercussion.

A Bahai taken into custody in December 2013 by security forces in Shabwa remained in prison without charge and was provided limited contact with lawyers or family members. Family members stated that when they inquired as to the basis of his arrest, they were told “he is a destroyer of Islam and religion.” At year’s end, the individual had not been formally charged, but reportedly government officials had accused him of proselytization of the Bahai Faith, spying for Israel, and apostasy. The individual, who remained imprisoned in Sana’a, reported to his family that during the first 45 days of his imprisonment he was beaten,

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electrocuted, and forced to sign documents while blindfolded. The individual's spouse reported she was threatened with charges of proselytization and imprisonment.

Prior to the establishment of Houthi control in the north, including Sana'a and its environs in September, members of the Zaydi Shia community reported government harassment and discrimination, including detention, based on allegations of sympathizing with the Houthi movement. Zaydi activists reported members of their faith were seized from a mosque in Sana'a in late 2013 and early 2014, and detained either due to their religious affiliation or connections to sectarian fighting. Because religion and political affiliation are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Christian charity workers reported the government denied visas to Indian and Filipino priests and nuns who operated orphanages and other charity organizations, presumably based on their religion; however, there was no evidence this was the result of a policy decision by the government.

The government permitted public commemorations of the Shia holy days of Ashura and Ghadir, which attracted large crowds. Beginning in 2012, bans on such public commemorations were lifted, but public displays were limited to rural areas. Public commemorations of these religious holidays were held for the first time in Sana'a in 2013.

Customs and Ministry of Culture officials prohibited the importation of foreign publications after determining they were "religiously objectionable," because they were critical of Islam. Other religious books, i.e., the Bible, could not be imported for sale, but could be imported for personal use.

Although the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) highlighted that Jews were citizens and part of the society, there was no Jewish representation in the NDC. On November 20, Minister of Culture Arwa Othman called for tolerance and gave a human rights reward she had previously received to "her brothers and friends from the Jewish community." Certain Salafist groups subsequently initiated a campaign of hostile statements against her, citing her support for the Jewish community.

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Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Ethiopian Orthodox Christian weekly religious services took place without government interference throughout Sana'a, Aden, and other cities. The government permitted the use of existing church buildings for religious services of other denominations. Throughout the country, Christians and Jews held services regularly in private homes or facilities such as schools without harassment, and these facilities appeared adequate to accommodate the small numbers of attendees.

Representatives of the small Ismaili community in Haraz alleged their district was deprived of basic public services despite residents having to pay taxes, Ismaili students were excluded from government scholarships, and Ismailis were not represented in the Chamber of Commerce even though most Ismailis are involved in business.

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

Terrorist groups, including AQAP, regularly carried out attacks against government representatives and installations, members of the Southern Mobility Movement (Hirak) group and other individuals accused of "immoral" behavior. Jihadist websites characterized such actions as "warfare against apostates." In October AQAP posted a video online purporting to show the killing of 14 soldiers in Hadramawt whom it accused of "apostasy" for not fighting the Houthis' expansion. In Hadramawt, AQAP claimed responsibility for killing several individuals it accused of witchcraft.

In September following several months of protests and fighting that resulted in the deaths of hundreds, Houthi militants established control over Sana'a and critical government infrastructure. At year's end, the Houthis, who had for decades complained of discrimination and persecution by the government of former President Saleh, had seized control of large portions of the country. In northern areas traditionally under Zaydi control, there were unconfirmed reports that the Houthis imposed their religious beliefs on non-Zaydi residents, including by banning music and requiring women be fully veiled. Zaydi sources maintained, however, that such restrictions were the result of actions of individuals and not directed by Houthi leadership.

There were reports of Houthi attacks on Quranic schools in Amran, although Houthis claimed the schools were being used to house Sunni fighters and weapons. In January Salafists and Houthi fighters in Dammaj signed a ceasefire that required

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Salafi students and fighters to evacuate the area. In October 2013, following months of fighting in Dammaj during which time a Salafi mosque was bombed, Houthi fighters besieged the Dar al-Hadith Institute, a Salafi religious school with approximately 600 students accompanied by several thousand family members. The Houthis claimed residents of Dammaj supported violent extremism.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Radical religious leaders, both Zaydi and Sunni, evoked *takfir* (the practice of one Muslim declaring another Muslim to be an apostate) to target members of the opposition. The Facebook page of Ansar Allah, the political wing of the Houthi movement, made frequent references to *takfiriyyin* (apostates) and Sunni cleric Sheikh Zindani evoked *takfir* against opponents during the NDC and in speeches following the close of the NDC in January. Politically motivated usage of sectarian rhetoric by Houthi leader Abdulmalik al-Houthi and certain Sunni clerics fueled intersectarian tensions and conflict throughout the year.

Public commemoration of Shia holy days occasionally resulted in clashes with Sunni groups. During the weeks leading up to Shia holy days, including in early November, Salafi groups distributed fliers and posters describing Shia activities as “illegal” and against Islam. In November 2013, Zaydis attempting to travel to Sana’a to participate in Ashura commemorations were prevented from proceeding by Sunni militias, which resulted in armed clashes.

There were instances of anti-Semitic print material. For example, a broadly disseminated Houthi banner included the phrase, “A curse on the Jews.” Jewish leaders reported that the local population in Amran regularly harassed Jewish community members, including by throwing stones, pressuring them to convert to Islam, and harassing women. Such harassment led some Jewish men in Amran to avoid going out in public, leaving them unable to work. Members of the Jewish community in Amran reportedly were seeking government assistance to relocate to Sana’a. Community members in both Amran and Sana’a reported removing their students from public schools with Muslim students due to security concerns. To deter harassment, many Jewish males cut their distinctive beards and side curls to avoid unwanted attention.

Christian community representatives reported increased scrutiny since the Houthi takeover of the country and state they have been more discreet in their actions so as to not attract attention, though they continued to wear religious garb.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers stressed the importance of religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue in bilateral engagement with government officials responsible for religious affairs. The Ambassador and other embassy officers engaged with religious leaders and other members of civil society concerned with religious freedom through programs designed to promote religious tolerance and productive dialogue among religious groups. In November the embassy organized a workshop for religious leaders of different faith traditions, both male and female, to discuss “The Violence and Extremism Among Yemeni Youth: Reasons and Solutions.” The Ambassador met with representatives of religious minorities, including meetings with local and visiting representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, to discuss challenges their communities face. The embassy continued to support interfaith dialogue through outreach programs focused on local religious leaders, including English language training and exchange programs for imams.

In response to conflict between Salafis and Houthis, the embassy urged the dominant political parties to avoid sectarian rhetoric and encourage religious tolerance.