



State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - Yemen

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The year 2014 began with the completion of Yemen's ten-month-long National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in January. With 565 representatives invited to attend and the final outcomes of the process agreed for inclusion in the country's new Constitution, scheduled for a referendum by 25 January 2015, the NDC's conclusion was welcomed by many observers as an important milestone in the country's transition to democracy. However, the process was undermined by the failure to fully represent the country's various minorities, including Yemen's tiny Jewish minority, which was left out despite previous promises that they would be included. Also sidelined were Yemen's Muhamasheen, literally 'marginalized ones', a visible and much discriminated minority known commonly as Akhdam or 'servants'. Despite accounting for around 10 per cent of the population, they were represented by just a single delegate in the NDC proceedings. Nonetheless, one of the NDC outcomes stipulated the establishment of 'fair national policies and procedures to ensure marginalized persons' access to decent housing, basic public services, free health care, and job opportunities', including placement in 10 per cent of public jobs. The NDC Final Communiqué also affirmed the need to preserve elements of national heritage and cultural rights, such as the Mahari and Socotri languages.

However, the NDC received a fatal blow with the withdrawal of the Houthi movement from the process and the subsequent spread of its armed insurgency across Yemen. The Houthis, based in the north, are comprised overwhelmingly of Zaydis, a branch of Shi'a Islam that represents the country's largest minority group and accounts for a quarter to a third of the country's population. Houthis have presented their rebellion as an effort to challenge years of marginalization by the government in Sana'a, as well as an attempt to counter the growing influence of ultraconservative Sunni Salafism in the north. The uprising has tipped the country into a state of profound upheaval and led to the effective withdrawal of government control over large parts of the country.

The advance of the armed group in the months following their departure from the NDC saw Houthi forces overtake a number of key strategic positions in the centre and south of the country. By September, they had taken control of a number of cities including Sana'a, seizing ministries and other government buildings, and severely weakened the leadership of Yemen's president Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Their progress continued into 2015, with Houthi forces advancing through southern Yemen all the way to Aden, where they battled forces loyal to the president, whose government they had effectively deposed. With mounting air strikes on Houthi targets by a Saudi-led coalition of Arab states, by the beginning of April, Yemen – already the Arab world's poorest

country – was in the throes of a major humanitarian crisis. As of January 2015, an estimated 334,100 people were internally displaced, with numbers rising further in the months that followed.

Following their initial successes, Houthis were also targeted by suicide bombings and clashed with al-Qaeda-affiliated Sunni extremists towards the end of 2014. One of the deadliest attacks, however, took place on 20 March 2015, when two suicide bombings targeted Shi'a mosques in Sana'a frequented by Houthi supporters, killing 137 people in the first major attacks in Yemen claimed by ISIS. Incidents such as these have raised concerns about the threat of the country sliding into sectarian violence.

However, largely excluded from this picture are Yemen's other minorities, including its Jewish population. Long-established as a historical presence in the country, and reaching a peak population of more than 50,000 in the early-to-mid 20th century, Yemen's Jewish community has dwindled severely in recent years to less than 100 people, due in part to harassment and persecution. This situation has not improved in the wake of Houthi political gains due to the conflation among Houthi sympathizers, as well as Yemenis more generally, of the Jewish faith with Zionism. In a rare show of official support, however, Yemen's Minister of Culture, Arwa Othman, dedicated a major human rights award she received in September to Yemen's Jewish population and called for greater tolerance in the country.

Other religious minorities also continued to face discrimination during the year. A Yemeni Bahá'í named Hamed Kamal bin Haydara remained in prison throughout 2014, where he faced various forms of torture and abuse. In not the first case of its kind, he was accused of committing the crimes of proselytizing the Bahá'í faith and collaborating with Israel. It was not until January 2015 that he was finally indicted.

Muhamasheen continued to struggle during the year for greater political inclusion, access to justice and an end to discrimination. In April 2014, dozens of Muhamasheen staged a demonstration near Jabal Habshi, Ta'izz, to protest government inaction regarding the demolition and torching of 16 Muhamasheen homes eight months prior. According to the National Organization for Defending Rights and Freedoms (HOOD), the attacks were a response to the intended marriage of a young Muhamasheen man with a young woman from a nearby tribe, and were believed to be carried out as a gesture of disapproval by members of the girl's tribe. Following the demonstration, some Muhamasheen families fled the area due to fears of further attacks.

One factor in their ongoing exclusion is the lack of national identification cards and birth certificates issued to Muhamasheen who, when located at both the social and geographical margins of Yemen's urban centres, have faced difficulties accessing state institutions. While urban centres can offer opportunities for upward mobility and improved access to services such as education and health care, for Muhamasheen and other minorities they have often deepened existing forms of discrimination while also creating new patterns of exclusion. Urbanization in Yemen has been fuelled by the country's population growth, one of the highest rates worldwide, as well as rising investment, construction and labour migration in recent years. This has led to acute pressure on basic services and housing in major urban centres such as Sana'a, one of the world's fastest growing cities, with some projections suggesting it could be the first national capital to run out of a viable water supply.

In this context, minorities, migrants and other marginalized groups have been disproportionately affected. Yemen's Muhamasheen have been forced to make their homes overwhelmingly in slums, within or on the outskirts of the country's expanding urban centres, often in settlements housing many inhabitants in a single room and lacking basic amenities such as plumbing and electricity.

Squalid living conditions, including unsafe drinking water, with only nine per cent of Muhamasheen homes having a piped supply, have contributed to widespread health problems.

While there have been instances of integration into the Yemeni working and middle classes, Muhamasheen have largely faced protracted urban poverty and limited livelihood opportunities, with many engaged in menial labour such as street sweeping and trash collection. Yet as rural poor, other migrants and those uprooted by conflict have in recent years rushed to Yemen's urban centres in greater numbers, competition for even these low-level jobs is growing.

Yemen's Jewish community has also been forced to migrate to urban areas due to insecurity, with the majority having moved from the north to Sana'a in 2007 after being driven from their homes in the wake of the Houthi takeover of Sa'dah. Those in Sana'a are now living in a guarded compound, and at the end of 2014 the only other Jewish community in Yemen, numbering no more than a dozen or so families, remained in the town of Raida in 'Amran governorate.

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