

Title	Freedom in the World 2012 - Djibouti
Publisher	Freedom House
Country	Djibouti
Publication Date	17 August 2012
Cite as	Freedom House, <i>Freedom in the World 2012 - Djibouti</i> , 17 August 2012, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/50336548.html [accessed 5 February 2013]
Disclaimer	This is not a UNHCR publication. UNHCR is not responsible for, nor does it necessarily endorse, its content. Any views expressed are solely those of the author or publisher and do not necessarily reflect those of UNHCR, the United Nations or its Member States.

Freedom in the World 2012 - Djibouti

2012 Scores

Status: Not Free

Freedom Rating: 5.5

Civil Liberties: 5

Political Rights: 6

Overview

Djibouti's president, Ismail Omar Guelleh, won a third term in office in April 2011 following an opposition boycott of the election. Popular disquiet at his decision to run led to street protests, which were met with mass arrests and a crackdown on civil liberties. Meanwhile, Djibouti continued to suffer from the worst drought to hit the Horn of Africa region in six decades.

Djibouti gained independence from France in 1977. Its people are divided along ethnic and clan lines, with the majority Issa (Somali) and minority Afar peoples traditionally falling into opposing political camps. An Afar rebel group, the Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy (FRUD), launched a guerrilla war against Issa domination in 1991. In 1994, the largest FRUD faction agreed to end its insurgency in exchange for inclusion in the government and electoral reforms.

President Hassan Gouled Aptidon controlled a one-party system until 1992, when a new constitution authorized four political parties. In 1993, Gouled won a fourth six-year term in Djibouti's first contested presidential election, which was considered fraudulent by international observers.

Gouled stepped down in 1999, but his nephew, Ismail Omar Guelleh, won the 1999 presidential poll with 74 percent of the vote. It was regarded as Djibouti's first fair election since independence. In 2001, a peace accord was signed with the remaining Afar rebel groups. A four-party coalition, the Union for the Presidential Majority (UMP), ran against a four-party opposition bloc, the Union for a Democratic Alternative (UAD), in the 2003 parliamentary elections, and won all 65 seats.

In 2005, Guelleh won a second six-year term. The only challenger withdrew from the election, citing government control of the media and repression of the opposition. Legislative elections in 2008 were also boycotted by the main opposition parties, which complained of government abuses including the house arrest of opposition leaders and manipulation of the electoral process.

Unresolved grievances among the Afar led to a revival of the FRUD insurgency, with sporadic violence in 2010. In April, Guelleh, a member of the Issa majority, pressured the parliament into passing a constitutional amendment that overturned the two-term limit for presidents; the change cleared the way for him to run for a third term in 2011.

On January 28, 2011, a series of protests by university students against failures in the education system quickly broadened into antigovernment demonstrations. In the largest rally, which started on February 18, several thousand people gathered outside Djibouti's national stadium to protest against Guelleh's decision to stand for the presidency. Cars were burned and stones thrown at the police, who responded with tear gas. At least two people were killed and at least 100 others were arrested, including the leaders of three political parties.

The presidential election campaign was marred by harassment of opposition candidates and a clampdown on public gatherings. Opposition parties argued that the restrictions made it impossible to fairly contest the election, and chose not to select candidates for the presidential race. As a result, Guelleh faced only one challenger on April 8, independent candidate Mohammed Warsama, although he ultimately gained the support of one of the main opposition coalitions on April 3. Guelleh won with 81 percent of the vote. An African Union election observer mission declared the election process peaceful, fair, and transparent.

Guelleh has used Djibouti's strategic location on the Gulf of Aden to generate millions of dollars in state revenue by renting military bases to his allies. Since 2001, Djibouti has been home to large U.S. and French bases, and Japan opened a naval facility in July 2011.

The fourth consecutive year of drought placed an estimated 150,000 people in need of emergency assistance. Further, Djibouti faced the added burden of an influx of almost 20,000 refugees from famine-struck areas of Somalia.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Djibouti is not an electoral democracy. The ruling UMP coalition party has effectively usurped the state. The constitutional amendment passed by the parliament in 2010, in addition to removing the two-term limit for presidents, reduced presidential terms from six years to five, and specified that candidates must be between the ages of 40 and 75. The changes allowed President Ismail Omar Guelleh to stand for a third term in 2011.

The 65 members of the unicameral parliament, the National Assembly, are directly elected for five-year terms. The 2010 constitutional changes provide for the formation of a bicameral parliament comprising the existing National Assembly and a newly created senate, though no steps were taken in 2011 to establish this body. Opposition parties are disadvantaged by the country's first-past-the-post electoral system, as well as the government's abuse of the administrative apparatus. In the last legislative elections contested by the opposition, in 2003, the UMP won 62 per cent of the vote but captured all the seats in the National Assembly, because the election law stipulates that the winner of the majority in each of the country's five electoral constituencies is awarded all seats in that district.

Political parties are required to register with the government. In 2008, Guelleh issued a decree that dissolved the opposition Movement for Democratic Renewal and Development OK party, whose leader had reportedly voiced support for that year's Eritrean military incursion.

Efforts to curb corruption have met with little success. Government corruption is a serious problem and public officials are not required to disclose their assets.

Despite constitutional protections, freedom of speech is not upheld in practice. There are no privately owned or independent media, though political parties are allowed to publish a journal or newspaper. The government dominates the domestic media sector and monopolized the airwaves during the 2011 election. The government owns the principal newspaper, *La Nation*, as well as Radio-Television Djibouti, which operates the

national radio and television stations. Strict libel laws lead journalists to practice self-censorship. Six radio journalists working for an opposition station, La Voix de Djibouti, were among the demonstrators arrested during antigovernment protests in February. They were charged with insurrection and held for four months before being released in June, pending trial. Two were rearrested in November and reportedly tortured for four days before being conditionally released. Some foreign radio broadcasts are available. The government places few restrictions on internet access, although the Association for Respect of Human Rights in Djibouti claims that its site is regularly blocked.

Islam is the state religion, and 99 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. Freedom of worship is respected. While academic freedom is generally upheld, higher educational opportunities are limited.

Freedoms of assembly and association are nominally protected under the constitution, but are not respected in practice. A ban was placed on public assembly by the Interior Minister during the February 2011 protests. Local human rights groups do not operate freely. Since 2007, Djiboutian League of Human Rights chairman Jean-Paul Noël Abdi has been arrested at least three times, the latest in February 2011, when he was charged with insurrection for reporting on the arrests of students during demonstrations that month. He was released weeks later, though the charges were still pending.

Workers may join unions and strike. However, the government discourages truly independent unions and has been accused of meddling in their internal elections and harassing union representatives.

The judicial system is based on the French civil code, though Sharia (Islamic law) prevails in family matters. The courts are not independent of the government. A lack of resources often delays legal proceedings. Security forces frequently make arrests without a proper decree from a judicial magistrate, in violation of constitutional requirements. Allegations of politically motivated prosecutions surfaced in 2010 following the conviction in absentia of Djibouti's richest businessman, Abdourahman Boreh, on charges of terrorism. Boreh, who received a 15-year sentence, had been considering a presidential bid in 2011. Following the arrests of more than 100 antigovernment protesters in February, about 80 suspects were brought to court and charged with assault and demonstrating without a permit. According to Human Rights Watch, a judge dismissed 40 cases and was promptly removed by the Justice Minister. His replacement then proceeded to convict and imprison 25 defendants. Prison conditions are harsh, but have improved in recent years. The 2010 constitutional amendments abolished the death penalty.

Minority groups including the Afar people, Yemeni Arabs, and non-Issa Somalis suffer social and economic marginalization.

Women face discrimination under customary practices related to inheritance and other property matters, divorce, and the right to travel. The law prohibits female genital mutilation, but more than 90 percent of women are believed to have undergone the procedure. An estimated 50 percent of girls are now receiving primary education following efforts to increase female enrollment. While the law requires at least 20 percent of upper-level public service positions to be held by women, women still hold just close to 14 percent of legislative seats.

Trend Arrow ↓

Djibouti received a downward trend arrow due to harassment and intimidation of opposition parties that resulted in President Ismail Omar Guelleh winning a third term in office, a crackdown on antigovernment protesters, and a ban on public demonstrations.

Copyright notice: © Freedom House, Inc. · All Rights Reserved