

Freedom in the World 2024



header1 Overview

Yemen, previously home to smaller internal conflicts, has been devastated by a civil war involving regional powers since 2015. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and their allies intervened that year to support the internationally recognized government against Ansar Allah (Supporters of God), also known as the Houthis—an armed rebel movement that is rooted in the Zaidi Shiite community, which forms a large minority concentrated in northwestern Yemen. The civilian population has suffered from direct violence by both sides, as well as from hunger and disease caused by the interruption of trade and aid. Elections are long overdue, normal political activity has halted, and many state institutions have ceased to function.

header2 Key Developments in 2023

- Although a series of cease-fire agreements brokered by the United Nations (UN) had expired in October 2022, there was no resumption of major military activity during 2023, and UN officials announced in late December that the parties to the civil conflict had committed to implementing a new cease-fire and engaging in a broader peace process.
- Separately, in November, the Houthis began attacking international shipping in the Red Sea, prompting limited US-led air strikes against Houthi forces in response. The Houthis' stated objective was to punish Israel for its invasion of the Gaza Strip following a massive October 7 terrorist attack by the Palestinian militant group Hamas.
- Arbitrary arrests and other human rights abuses persisted throughout the year, and millions of Yemeni civilians continued to suffer from displacement and shortages of basic supplies.

PR Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

0.000
4.004

Under the existing constitution, the president is elected for seven-year terms. In 2011, under international pressure, longtime president Ali Abdullah Saleh signed a Saudi-brokered agreement that transferred his powers to then vice president Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi in exchange for immunity from prosecution for his role in a violent crackdown on antigovernment protests. In 2012, Yemeni voters confirmed Hadi, who ran unopposed, as interim president with a two-year term. In 2014, the multiparty National Dialogue Conference (NDC), a months-long initiative in which more than 500 delegates aimed to reach agreement on Yemen's political future, concluded with a plan to transform the country into a federated state of six regions. The NDC also extended Hadi's term by one year so that the proposed reforms could be finalized in a new constitution.

However, the constitutional drafting process and election schedule were thrown into disarray by the Houthis, who took over large swaths of the country, eventually occupying Sanaa in late 2014. Hadi and his cabinet fled into exile in early 2015, and the Houthis assumed control of state institutions in the areas they held. Hadi retained international recognition as president but had no clear mandate and little direct control over the country.

In April 2022, the UN announced a truce agreement between the Houthis and the internationally recognized government. Later that month, Hadi announced that he was removing his vice president, resigning, and transferring his powers to an eight-member body, the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), that was elected by delegates in Riyadh under the auspices of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Maeen Abdelmalek Saeed, the prime minister since 2018, remained in place as of 2023.

A2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

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4.004

According to the constitution, the president selects 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. The original six-year mandate of the last Parliament expired in 2009, and elections were put off again in 2011 amid the popular uprising against Saleh. In January 2014, the NDC declared that parliamentary elections would occur within nine months of a referendum on the new constitution then being drawn up. The constitutional drafting committee completed its work in January 2015, but due to the outbreak of the civil war and the Saudi-led intervention in March of that year, no vote took place. The incumbent Parliament was disbanded in early 2015 after the Houthis seized control of the capital.

A3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

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4.004

Presidential and legislative elections are now many years overdue, and no side in the civil war has been willing or able to implement any electoral framework in the areas under their control.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?	1.001 4.004
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Political parties continue to exist, but they face severe repression by different authorities and armed groups across the country.

The Houthis have harshly suppressed political dissent in areas under their control since 2015. Yemeni forces associated with the UAE have used arbitrary arrests, detentions, and enforced disappearances to persecute certain political groups, including members of Al-Islah, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen.

A power-sharing cabinet formed by anti-Houthi factions in 2020 included Hadi's General People's Congress (GPC) party; the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a separatist group backed by the UAE; Al-Islah; the Socialist Party; and a number of smaller parties and independents. The PLC established in April 2022 was headed by Rashad al-Alimi, who served as interior minister under former president Saleh and maintained close relations with Saudi Arabia. Other members of the council included Tariq Saleh, nephew of the former president; Sultan Ali al-Arada, governor of Marib Governorate and a member of Al-Islah; and Aidarous al-Zubaidi, head of the STC. With its representatives holding three seats as of 2023, the STC was the largest single faction on the PLC.
B2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?	0.000 4.004
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Parliamentary elections have not been held in Yemen since 2003 and were last due in 2009. The most recent presidential election, in 2012, featured only one candidate. No date had been set for future elections as of 2023, and peaceful political opposition has been suppressed in the context of the civil war.

B3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?	0.000 4.004
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Ordinary political activity is impeded by the presence of multiple armed groups throughout Yemen, including Houthi-led rebel forces, extremist groups, southern separatists, foreign troops from the Saudi-led coalition, government troops, and local or partisan militias.

B4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?	0.000 4.004
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All segments of the population lack political rights under current conditions. Thirty percent of the NDC's delegates were women, and its final agreement called for similar representation in all branches of government under a new constitution, but the draft constitution was put on hold after the outbreak of war. Only one woman won a seat in the last parliamentary elections, and no women were appointed to the 2020 power-sharing cabinet or the 2022 PLC. A caste-like minority group with possible East African origins, known as the Akhdam or Muhamasheen, accounts for as much as 10 percent of the population but has long been marginalized in politics and in society. The group had one representative at the NDC.

C Functioning of Government

C1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

0.000
4.004

Yemen has no functioning central government with full control over its territory, and any state institutions that continue to operate are controlled by unelected officials and armed groups. The PLC established in 2022 is largely dependent on its foreign patrons, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which also have parallel relationships with other anti-Houthi groups. The Houthis receive at least some support from Iran.

Saudi and Emirati military forces have occupied several strategic portions of Yemeni territory during the war, including Al-Mahrah Governorate and the island of Socotra, respectively. In July 2022, the PLC appointed an STC figure as Socotra's governor, apparently confirming the local dominance of the UAE and STC.

C2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

0.000 4.004

Government probity was minimal even before the outbreak of war in 2015, as a network of corruption and patronage established under Saleh remained entrenched in public institutions, and formal anticorruption mechanisms were largely ineffective. The disruption to legal commerce caused by the civil war has increased the role of smuggling and created further opportunities for graft. Food aid is often stolen and sold illegally by officials on all sides of the conflict. In an effort to address perceived corruption, the PLC in July 2022 reshuffled the cabinet, replacing the oil and defense ministers.

C3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

0.000 4.004

Government transparency, already limited prior to 2015, has deteriorated along with state institutions during the war. Following the path of other national institutions, the central bank has been split between a government-backed version in Aden and a Houthi-backed version in Sanaa since 2016. This has caused politicized disruptions to public-sector salaries, aid, and commerce, and further reduced the transparency of state finances and monetary policy. Both the Houthis and the Yemeni government have allegedly withheld public health data in recent years.

CL Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?

0.000 4.004

The state has historically controlled most terrestrial television and radio, though there have been several privately owned radio stations. Since the outbreak of the war, the belligerents have either taken over or enforced self-censorship at any surviving media outlets in the country. Houthi-backed authorities reportedly block certain news websites, online messaging and social media platforms,

and satellite broadcasts. In October 2023, a coalition of Yemeni and international human rights organizations condemned ongoing blocking efforts and politicized local internet shutdowns.

All sides in the conflict have subjected journalists to harassment, arbitrary arrests and detentions, violent attacks, and enforced disappearances. No journalists were killed in 2023, but two French journalists on Socotra were arrested in May 2023, held under house arrest, and forcibly deported in June after publishing articles on the UAE's de facto control of the island. Separately, as part of a larger prisoner exchange with the government in April, the Houthis released four journalists who had been arbitrarily arrested in 2015 and sentenced to death in 2020.

D2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	1.001 4.004
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Islam is the official religion, and the constitution declares Sharia (Islamic law) to be the source of all legislation. A small number of Yemenis belong to non-Muslim religious groups; their rights have traditionally been respected in practice, though conversion from Islam and proselytizing to Muslims is prohibited. Christian converts and members of the Baha'i and Jewish communities in the north have encountered increased persecution under Houthi rule. In May 2023, Houthi forces arbitrarily arrested 17 Baha'i residents in Sanaa, and five remained in detention at year's end.

Houthi authorities reportedly enforce their interpretation of the Zaidi Shiite faith among Muslims. The militant group Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) poses a threat to non-Sunni Muslim residents, particularly in the southeast.

Since the civil war began in 2015, assassinations and other violent attacks on religious clerics have increased, and combatants on all sides have destroyed many religious buildings across the country. Progovernment forces have allegedly seized or destroyed Shiite religious sites.

D3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?	0.000 4.004
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Since 2015, Houthi officials have been accused of skewing the curriculum in schools and universities to promote their political ideology. Houthi authorities have also dismissed and replaced faculty and administrators who are deemed politically disloyal, and repeatedly detained and prosecuted scholars and students as part of their crackdown on dissent. Outspoken academics face a heightened risk of physical violence from the Houthis as well as other armed groups and progovernment forces, and some scholars have been killed by unidentified assailants in recent years.

The war has caused damage to educational facilities across the country, suspension of classes and other activities at many schools and universities, and deaths of children caught in either errant or deliberate military attacks on schools. Millions of students no longer attend school due to the war, and thousands have been recruited by armed groups.

D4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?	1.001 4.004
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Freedom of personal expression and private discussion is limited due to intimidation by armed groups and unchecked surveillance by the Houthi authorities, who have detained critics of their rule and used courts under their control to issue harsh penalties, including death sentences, for some perceived opponents.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? | 1.001 4.004

Yemenis have historically enjoyed a degree of freedom of assembly, limited by periodic restrictions and at times deadly interventions by the government. Demonstrations against both the internationally recognized government and Houthi authorities have occurred in recent years, resulting in arrests and alleged torture of detainees in some cases. In September 2023, Houthi authorities violently suppressed demonstrations commemorating the 1962 revolution against Yemen's Zaidi monarchy. Following the outbreak of fighting between Israeli and Palestinian forces in Gaza in October, pro-Palestinian protests were reported in several Yemeni provinces.

E2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? | 1.001 4.004

A number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) work in the country, but their ability to function is restricted by interference from armed groups. Houthi forces have closed or raided NGO offices and detained workers, and both main sides in the civil war have blocked or seized humanitarian aid. Human rights defenders risk arrest and detention by both Houthi and anti-Houthi forces, and further arrests were reported during 2023. Five UN staff members who were allegedly abducted by AQAP in early 2022 were released in August 2023. In December, a Houthi-controlled court sentenced women's rights activist Fatima Saleh al-Arwali to death on espionage charges.

E3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? | 1.001 4.004

The law acknowledges the right of workers to form and join trade unions, but in practice these organizations have had little freedom to operate. Virtually all unions have historically belonged to a single labor federation, and the government is empowered to veto collective bargaining agreements. Normal union activity has been disrupted by the civil war and the related breakdown of the economy. In February 2023, STC forces expelled the Yemeni Journalists' Syndicate from its Aden headquarters and handed the building to a rival group, the Southern Media and Journalists' Syndicate.

F Rule of Law

F1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? | 1.001 4.004

The judiciary, though nominally independent, is susceptible to interference from various political factions and armed groups. Authorities have a poor record of 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 and customary law. Criminal courts in Houthi-controlled areas remain active, but they are used as a political instrument by the Houthi leadership, according to UN experts. The judicial system is mostly inoperative in some other parts of the country.

F2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? | 0.000 4.004

Arbitrary detention is common, with hundreds of cases documented in recent years. Many amount to enforced disappearances, and detainees are often held at unofficial detention sites. Human rights lawyers have faced detention or intimidation by both Houthi and internationally recognized government authorities, particularly when they attempt to represent high-profile defendants.
F3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? | 1.001
4.004

The civil war has included periods of acute violence across the country. Saudi-led coalition air strikes regularly failed to distinguish between military and civilian targets, and artillery fire from Houthi forces has been similarly indiscriminate. Other armed factions, including foreign military units and extremist groups like AQAP, operate with impunity for any abuses. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), by the end of 2023, more than 160,000 people had been killed in the conflict.

However, military activity declined in 2023 to its lowest level since the civil war began in 2015. The two sides refrained from large-scale combat despite the formal expiration of a series of UN-brokered cease-fires that had lasted from April to October 2022. Nearly 900 people were released in an April 2023 prisoner exchange as negotiations continued, and in late December UN officials announced that the parties to the conflict had committed to implementing a new cease-fire and engaging in a broader peace process. The Houthis began a campaign of attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea in November, ostensibly to punish Israel and its partners for the invasion of Gaza. While a US-led coalition launched limited air strikes against Houthi positions in response, Yemeni civilians overall experienced greater physical security during the year as a result of the reduction in fighting since 2022.

Score Change: The score increased from 0 to 1 because the UN-brokered truce that formally expired in late 2022 was largely upheld in practice, contributing to a substantial reduction in military activity and its associated effects on the civilian population.

F4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? | 0.000
4.004

Despite the growing sectarian rift between the Sunni Muslim majority and the large Zaidi Shiite minority, Yemen is relatively homogeneous in terms of language and ethnicity. However, the Muhamasheen are subject to severe social discrimination and poverty. Women also continue to encounter discrimination in many aspects of life, and their testimony in court is equivalent to half that of a man. Same-sex sexual activity is illegal, with possible penalties including lashes, imprisonment, and death. Due to the severe threats they face, few LGBT+ Yemenis reveal their identity.

Migrants and refugees fleeing war and poverty in the Horn of Africa continue to arrive in Yemen. Many of those who enter are seeking work in the Persian Gulf states but meet with harsh conditions, violence, and barriers to further travel once in Yemen. Human Rights Watch reported in August 2023 that hundreds of Ethiopian migrants and asylum seekers had been killed by Saudi border guards while attempting to cross from Yemen during the preceding year. Effective legal protections and basic supplies are also lacking for internally displaced persons (IDPs), most of whom perform unskilled jobs in the informal economy.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

0.000
4.004

There were more than 4.5 million IDPs in Yemen by the end of 2023, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. New displacements were recorded during the year, though apparently at a lower rate than in previous years.

Movement within the country has been impaired by combat, land mines, damage to infrastructure, and checkpoints at which a variety of armed groups engage in harassment and extortion. Even in peacetime, a woman must obtain permission from her husband or father to receive a passport and travel abroad.

G2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?

1.001
4.004

Property rights and business activity have been severely disrupted by the civil war and unchecked corruption, as well as the retreat of state authorities from large areas of Yemen and the division of the country into spheres of influence controlled by different armed groups. Land disputes in the Houthi-held areas are handled by Houthi-controlled courts, which can lead to the rejection of government-issued documentation and the seizure of land. Women do not have equal rights in inheritance matters.

G3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

1.001
4.004

Women face disadvantages in divorce and custody proceedings and require a male guardian's permission to marry. Child marriage is a widespread problem. There are some restrictions on marriage to foreigners; a woman can confer citizenship on a child from a foreign-born spouse if the child is born in Yemen. The penal code allows lenient sentences for those convicted of "honor crimes"—assaults or killings of women by family members for alleged immoral behavior. Although female genital mutilation is banned in state medical facilities, it is still prevalent in some areas. Extremist groups have attempted to impose crude versions of Sharia in territory under their control, harshly punishing alleged violations related to sexual activity, personal appearance, and other matters.

G4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

0.000
4.004

The war has increased the risk of human trafficking. Migrants, refugees, and IDPs are especially vulnerable to exploitation, and children have reportedly been recruited as fighters by all sides. The Houthis allegedly stepped up recruitment of children amid the conflict in Gaza in late 2023, despite a 2022 agreement with UN officials in which it pledged to curb the practice.

Border controls, naval blockades, internal controls on utilities, and other disruptions associated with the war have contributed to shortages of food, medicine, fuel, and other essential goods and services, leaving the public more exposed to famine and disease as well as coercion and deprivation

by armed groups and illegal traders. Although the 2022 truce allowed more supplies to enter the country, the World Food Programme reported that 21.6 million people required humanitarian assistance as of 2023, with half of them facing “acute hunger.” A long-running cholera outbreak continued during the year.