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Freedom House (Author)

Freedom in the World 2023 - Djibouti

NOT FREE

24

/ 100

Political Rights 5 / 40

Civil Liberties 19 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

24 / 100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

Djibouti is a republic ruled by a powerful president, Ismail Omar Guelleh, who has been in office since 1999 and is not subject to term limits. While Djibouti technically has a multiparty political system, the ruling Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP) uses authoritarian means to maintain its dominant position. The opposition's ability to operate is severely constrained, and journalists and activists who air criticism of Guelleh or the UMP are regularly harassed or arrested.

Key Developments in 2022

- In March, authorities held regional and communal elections that the UMP won while facing almost no competition; the only area where other party lists competed was Ali Sabieh. Opposition parties were either limited in their activities or simply boycotted the polls, which they did not perceive as free or fair.
- Also in March, the deputy director of materials, Farah Mohamed Osman, and director of the general treasury, Sahal Said Awaleh, were arrested over an alleged money laundering operation. However, critics claim their arrest was driven by the desire to silence voices opposing the Guelleh regime, rather than as part of larger efforts to clamp down on political corruption in Djibouti.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

The president, who holds most executive power, serves five-year terms without term limits. President Guelleh was elected to a fifth term in April 2021 with 97 percent of the vote, according to the Interior Ministry. Of the nearly 215,000 citizens registered to vote, more than 80 percent cast ballots, according to the African Union (AU) observation mission. The AU monitors also reported that the polls were conducted competently, though the main opposition parties boycotted the contest, alleging that the election administration would be neither free nor fair.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

The 65 members of the unicameral National Assembly are directly elected for five-year terms. Constitutional changes in 2010 called for the creation of an upper house, which had yet to be established as of 2022.

Most of the opposition boycotted legislative elections held in 2018, citing the government's failure to honor a 2014 political agreement that provided for electoral reform. The 2018 polls were marked by irregularities, and the ruling UMP increased its majority to 57 of 65 seats. The opposition Union for Democracy and Justice–Djiboutian Democratic Party (UDJ-PDD) won seven seats, and the Center of Unified Democrats (CDU) took one.

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A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 1 / 4

A core element of the 2014 political agreement—meant to end the opposition's boycott of the legislature following deeply flawed elections in 2013—was a pledge to reform the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI), which the opposition has accused of bias. These reforms had not been carried out as of 2022. Other electoral provisions favor the dominant party, for example by awarding at least 80 percent of the seats in each multimember parliamentary district to the party that wins a majority in that district.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 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 / 4

While Djibouti technically has a multiparty political system, parties must register with the government to operate legally. The authorities have denied recognition to a number of opposition parties; members of such parties have been periodically harassed, arrested, and prosecuted, and their offices have been raided by police. The law requires the leaders of political parties to have clean criminal

records, and the government has pursued spurious charges against opposition figures to disqualify them or their parties.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 0 / 4

President Guelleh has been in power since 1999, when he succeeded his uncle, the only other president since independence in 1977. The 2013 elections marked the first time that the opposition had won any seats in the National Assembly. Opposition parties have traditionally been disadvantaged by Djibouti's electoral system, media controls, abuse of state resources to favor incumbents, and arrests and harassment of opposition leaders and supporters.

B3 0-4 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? 1 / 4

The ruling party dominates the state apparatus and uses security forces and other administrative resources to marginalize, disrupt, and suppress independent political activity.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 1 / 4

The constitution prohibits political parties based on gender or on ethnic, religious, or regional identity. Minority groups, including the Afar, Yemeni Arabs, and non-Issa Somalis, are represented at all levels of the government, but the president's majority Issa group holds paramount positions in the ruling party, the civil service, and the security forces. Members of the Afar community are marginalized and in response have formed groups such as the militant FRUD-Armé, a splinter group of the Front for the Restoration and Democracy political party that has attacked government installations throughout Djibouti.

Women are underrepresented in leadership positions. A legal quota ensures that women hold at least 25 percent of the seats in the National Assembly, and the actual number is only slightly above that level. In practice, the authoritarian political system restricts the ability of women and members of ethnic and religious minorities to organize independently and advance their respective interests.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 0 / 4

The president, who is not freely elected, effectively controls policymaking and governance, and the UMP-dominated parliament does not serve as a meaningful check on executive power.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 0 / 4

Corruption is a serious problem that is enabled and sustained by the dominant position of President Guelleh and his ruling party in every aspect of public administration. All significant business deals reportedly go through the president himself.

State bodies tasked with combating corruption lack the resources and independence to function effectively. Prosecutions of senior officials are rare. When senior officials are prosecuted, cases are often pursued selective and politicized. The deputy director of materials, Farah Mohamed Osman, and head of the treasury, Sahal Said Awaleh, were arrested over an alleged money laundering operation in March 2022. However, critics claim their arrest was driven by the desire to silence voices opposing the Guelleh regime rather than as part of larger efforts to clamp down on political corruption in Djibouti.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 0 / 4

The government operates in an opaque manner and resists attempts to shed light on its policymaking, budgetary, and procurement decisions.

There is also little transparency on President Guelleh's investment deals with the Chinese government and other foreign entities, which have resulted in a massive amount of public debt and spread discontent among local communities that were not consulted on the location or terms of foreign development projects.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

Despite constitutional protections, freedom of expression is not upheld in practice, and journalists engage in self-censorship. Defamation and distribution of false information are criminal offenses. The National Communication Commission distributes licenses to media outlets; the National Security Service reportedly has a role in approving such licenses. The government owns the dominant newspaper, television station, and radio broadcaster, as well as printing presses.

According to Reporters Without Borders, domestic media content generally reflects government views. Journalists affiliated with outlets based abroad or small opposition publications are subject to harassment and arbitrary arrest. The websites of overseas opposition radio station La Voix de Djibouti, run by exiles in Europe, and the Association for Respect for Human Rights in Djibouti (ARDHD) are sometimes blocked by the state-owned internet service provider.

In July 2020, police arrested journalist Charmarke Saïd Darar, a reporter working for La Voix de Djibouti, while covering protests over the detention and alleged torture of an air force pilot. Darar was held without access to a lawyer until his release nearly a month later, during which time police interrogated him, physically assaulted him, and deprived him of food and water.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 2 / 4

Islam is the state religion, and 94 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. The Islamic Affairs Ministry oversees religious matters. Registered non-Muslim religious groups operate freely, and unregistered groups are able to worship in private, though public proselytizing is illegal.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 2 / 4

Academic freedom is not always respected. Teachers have at times been detained for alleged affiliation with opposition groups. The state oversees the curriculums of the secular public school system and private Islamic schools.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 2 / 4

Open discussion of sensitive political issues is impeded by restrictive laws on defamation and other such offenses. The government reportedly monitors social media and conducts surveillance on perceived opponents. Individuals are subject to arrest for posting critical content about the government online.

In March 2020, air force lieutenant Fouad Youssouf Ali fled to Ethiopia and called for an armed uprising in a video on social media in which he accused a military official of corruption and clan-based discrimination. After Ethiopian authorities deported him back to Djibouti in April, the government arrested him on charges of treason, defamation of the armed forces, and incitement to hatred and rebellion. In June, he released a video from prison, alleging he had been tortured while detained. In November 2021, Ali was referred to a criminal court, where he was convicted of attempting to incite a coup and attempted theft of military property. The court sentenced him to 10 years' imprisonment with an additional fine of 300,000 Djiboutian francs (\$1,700)—he had already been fined 2 million francs (\$11,254), payable to the state.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

Freedom of assembly is protected under the constitution but not respected in practice. Permits are required for public gatherings. Police regularly use violence to disperse unauthorized protests and arrest participants. In June 2020, antigovernment protests were held for several days after the arrest and alleged torture of air force lieutenant Ali. Over 200 people were allegedly arrested.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 1 / 4

Local human rights groups that work on politically sensitive matters cannot operate freely, face difficulties in registering with the authorities, and are subject to government harassment. Individual activists are regularly arrested for their work.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 2 / 4

While workers may legally join unions and strike, the union registration process is onerous and subject to government discretion, which the Labor Ministry has used to favor progovernment unions and deny registration to independent labor groups. The government has been known to intimidate labor leaders and obstruct union activities.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

The courts are not independent of the government and suffer from corruption. Supreme Court judges are appointed by the president, with the advice of a judicial council dominated by presidential and UMP nominees. The president and parliamentary majority also control appointments to the Constitutional Council.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 2 / 4

Security forces frequently make arrests without the required court approval, and lengthy pretrial detention is a problem, with detainees often waiting years to go to trial. Allegations of politically motivated prosecutions are common.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 1 / 4

Security forces regularly engage in physical abuse and torture during arrest and detention. Prison conditions are reportedly poor, with pretrial and convicted prisoners often held together due to overcrowding. In recent years, there has been an uptick in fatal violence committed by security forces with impunity, including the killing of at least two people in 2022.

In February 2022, security forces arrested top officials within the police and the army on suspicion of plotting a coup.

In October 2022, the FRUD-Armé, an armed opposition group that has been active since 1991, attacked a military base in Garabistan, killing 7 soldiers.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 1 / 4

Though the law provides for equal treatment of all Djiboutian citizens, Somali Issas control the ruling party and dominate government positions.

Women have fewer employment opportunities and are paid less than men for the same work. A law which requires at least 20 percent of upper-level public service positions be held by women is not enforced.

Same-sex sexual activity is not specifically banned, but such conduct has been penalized under broader morality laws, and there are no laws in place to prevent discrimination against LGBT+ people. Matters of sexual orientation and gender identity are not discussed publicly.

As of the end of 2021, Djibouti hosted roughly 34,700 refugees and asylum seekers. Slow processing of asylum claims leaves many asylum seekers at risk of deportation.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 2 / 4

The government has been accused of suspending the travel privileges of political opponents. Civilian movement is restricted in militarized border areas due to past activity by the FRUD-Armé and tensions with Eritrea.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 2 / 4

Private property protections are weak, and court proceedings on business and property matters are affected by corruption and political influence.

Customary practices and personal status rules based on Sharia (Islamic law) place women at a disadvantage regarding inheritance and property ownership.

G3 0-4 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 / 4

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is illegal, but most women and girls have undergone the procedure. Domestic violence is rarely reported and prosecuted, and spousal rape is not specifically criminalized. The Sharia-based family code requires women to obtain a guardian's consent to marry, among other discriminatory provisions surrounding marriage and divorce.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4

Many residents have difficulty finding employment in the formal sector, as the president and his allies tightly control all large-scale economic activity. Legal safeguards against exploitative working conditions are poorly enforced; migrant workers and refugees are especially vulnerable to abuse.

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