

Freedom in the World 2021 - Yemen

NOT FREE

11

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 1 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 10 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

11 / 100 Not Free

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

Overview

Yemen, home to a long-running series of 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 government of President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi 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 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.

Key Developments in 2020

- In January, the Southern Transitional Council (STC)—a separatist group backed by the UAE—pulled out of a 2019 Saudi-brokered agreement that had ended an outbreak of fighting between the Hadi government and the STC in a number of southern cities. The STC declared self-rule in the city of Aden in April, but reached a new cease-fire with the government in June and returned to the original agreement in July. In December, Hadi formed a new power-sharing government that included STC representatives and other anti-Houthi factions.
- Yemen's humanitarian crisis worsened during the year, with civilians facing hardships including cholera, growing malnutrition, and an ongoing fuel shortage in addition to the new COVID-19 pandemic. The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in April, and reported infections surged over the summer. By year's end at least 611 deaths had been confirmed, though the country's capacity to track the spread of the coronavirus was extremely limited, and both the Hadi government and the Houthi rebels allegedly withheld data related to the pandemic.

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

Under the existing constitution, the president is elected for seven-year terms. In 2011, after sustained pressure from the United States, the United Nations, and the Gulf Cooperation Council, longtime president Ali Abdullah Saleh signed a Saudi-brokered agreement that transferred his powers to then vice president 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 September 2014. The Houthis subsequently refused to evacuate the capital as part of a tentative power-sharing agreement, leading Hadi and his cabinet to flee into exile in early 2015. Meanwhile, 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 control over the country.

In keeping with the Saudi-brokered Riyadh Agreement of 2019, a power-sharing government was formed by anti-Houthi factions in December 2020. Hadi loyalists retained control of the most powerful ministries, but the government included representatives from the STC, the Islamist party Al-Islah, and other political blocs. Maeen Abdelmalek Saeed, Hadi's prime minister since 2018, kept his post.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

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 has yet taken place. The incumbent Parliament was disbanded after the Houthis seized control of the capital.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 0 / 4

Presidential and legislative elections are now many years overdue, and no side in the civil war has been able to assert enough territorial control to implement any electoral framework.

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

Political parties continue to exist in Yemen, 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.

In 2019, after clashes broke out in the southern city of Aden between the Saudi-backed Hadi government and the STC, an ally of convenience against the Houthis that enjoys UAE support, the STC detained dozens of progovernment politicians, clerics, and activists. The Saudi-brokered Riyadh Agreement, reached in late 2019, temporarily ended the infighting, but in January 2020 the STC pulled out of the deal, and in April it declared self-rule in Aden, leading to a new round of clashes in the southern governorates. A cease-fire was reached in June, and the STC returned to the Riyadh Agreement process in July.

The power-sharing government formed by anti-Houthi factions in December included Hadi's General People's Congress (GPC), the STC, Al-Islah, the Socialist Party, and a number of smaller parties and independents. It remained unclear whether the arrangement would lead to a meaningful decrease in political persecution for the participating groups in areas outside Houthi control.

B2 0-4 pts

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

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 2020, and peaceful political opposition has been suppressed in the context of the civil war.

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? 0 / 4

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, Hadi government troops, and local or partisan militias.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, 0 / and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 4

All segments of the population lack political rights under current conditions in Yemen. 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 has been on hold since the outbreak of war. Only one woman won a seat in the last parliamentary elections, and no women were appointed to the December 2020 power-sharing government. A caste-like minority group with 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 0-4 pts

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

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 Hadi government 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.

C2 0-4 pts

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

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. In June 2020, STC forces seized a convoy that was reportedly carrying 64 billion riyals (\$255 million) in banknotes to the central bank in Aden. Food aid is often stolen and sold illegally by officials on all sides of the conflict, including Houthis and armed forces linked to the Saudi military coalition, exacerbating a food-security crisis that has left millions at risk of malnutrition. The obstruction of aid also increased the difficulty of international efforts to contain and treat COVID-19 in the country.

C3 0-4 pts

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

Government transparency, already limited prior to 2015, has deteriorated along with state institutions during the war. The only truly national institution that had initially continued to function during the conflict, the central bank, has been split between a government-backed version in Aden and a rebel-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 Hadi government allegedly undercounted COVID-19 cases and withheld related data during 2020.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

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. The Houthis, the Saudi-led coalition, and Hadi government forces have also harassed and detained reporters.

In April 2020, the Houthi-controlled Specialized Criminal Court in Sanaa issued death sentences against four journalists accused of espionage; they remained in custody at year's end. Six journalists who had been arrested with the others in 2015 were convicted on lesser charges.

Journalists endure violent attacks and enforced disappearances committed by all sides in the conflict. In June 2020, Nabeel Hasan al-Qaety, a photojournalist, was assassinated in front of his house in Aden by unidentified gunmen. In December, television reporter Adeeb al-Janani was killed

in an attack on Aden's airport while attempting to cover the arrival of the newly appointed power-sharing government.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public 1 / and private? 4

Islam is the official religion, and the constitution declares Sharia (Islamic law) to be the source of all legislation. Yemen has few non-Muslim religious minorities; their rights have traditionally been respected in practice, though conversion from Islam and proselytizing to Muslims is prohibited. Members of the Baha'i community in the north have reported increased persecution under Houthi rule. In March 2020, Houthi officials ordered the release of six Baha'i men, one of whom had been arrested in 2013 and later sentenced to death; the five others had been among a group of 24 Baha'is arrested in 2017. All six were released and expelled from the country in July, but legal proceedings against the larger group arrested in 2017 apparently continued at year's end.

Since the outbreak of the war 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.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political 1 / indoctrination? 4

Strong politicization of campus life, including tensions between supporters of the ruling GPC and Al-Islah, which had long been in opposition, historically infringed on academic freedom at universities. Since 2015, Houthi forces have repeatedly detained scholars as part of their crackdown on dissent, and Houthi officials have been accused of skewing the curriculum in public schools and promoting their political ideology.

The war has caused damage to educational facilities across the country, suspension of classes and other activities at 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 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics 1 / without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4

Freedom of personal expression and private discussion is severely limited as a result of 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 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 1 / 4

Yemenis have historically enjoyed a degree of freedom of assembly, with periodic restrictions and at times deadly interventions by the government. Demonstrations against both the Hadi government and Houthi authorities occurred during 2020, resulting in arrests and alleged torture of detainees in some cases. In September, UAE-backed security forces fired live ammunition to disperse demonstrators in the governorate of Hadhramaut who were protesting a breakdown in public services. Also that month, STC forces that had taken over the Yemeni island of Socotra in June used live fire to suppress protests against their presence and alleged plans for an Emirati military base.

E2 0-4 pts

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

A number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) work in the country, but their ability to function is restricted by interference from armed groups, and the spread and politicization of COVID-19 has made their work even more dangerous. Houthi forces have closed or raided NGO offices and detained workers, and both 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.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 1 / 4

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 belong 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.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts**Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4**

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—practices that have increased as state institutions continue to deteriorate. 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 other parts of the country.

F2 0-4 pts**Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 0 / 4**

Arbitrary detention is common, with hundreds of cases documented in recent years. Many amount to enforced disappearances, with no available information about the victims' status or location. Detainees are often held at unofficial detention sites. As with other state institutions, security and intelligence agencies like the Political Security Organization have been split into parallel structures aligned with the different sides in the civil war. In areas that lie within the UAE's sphere of influence in southern Yemen, Emirati special forces have operated a network of secret prisons and detention centers where torture is said to be rife.

F3 0-4 pts**Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4**

The civil war has included periods of acute violence across the country. Saudi-led coalition air strikes have failed to distinguish between military and civilian targets, and artillery fire from Houthi forces has been similarly indiscriminate. A number of other armed factions, including foreign military units and extremist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), operate in the country with impunity for any abuses. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, some 130,000 people have been killed in the conflict since the beginning of 2015, including more than 19,000 in 2020. Among other flashpoints of fighting during the year, a number of attacks took place in Aden, including an assault at the airport in December that killed at least 25 people and wounded 110 as ministers from the newly formed power-sharing government arrived. The government blamed the Houthis, who denied responsibility.

In addition to reports of torture and other abuse in prisons and detention centers, detainees faced a heightened risk of disease due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Both the government and the Houthis released hundreds of prisoners to ease crowding, though a number of journalists and political opponents remained behind bars. In October the warring parties agreed to exchange 1,081 prisoners, including 15 Saudis, in what amounted to the largest such exchange since late 2018.

F4 0-4 pts**Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 1 / 4**

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 face severe social discrimination and poverty. Women also continue to face 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. Roughly 283,000 refugees and asylum seekers remained in Yemen as of September 2020, according to UN data. Many of those entering were seeking work in the Gulf states but faced harsh conditions, violence, and barriers to further travel once in Yemen. The combination of war and the pandemic in 2020 worsened conditions for migrants. In April, Houthi forces expelled thousands of Ethiopian migrants from northern Yemen, blaming them for spreading COVID-19; dozens were killed, and the others were forced to the Saudi border.

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? 0 / 4**

There were 3.7 million internally displaced people (IDPs) in Yemen as of June 2020, according to figures released by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in December. Movement within the country is impaired by combat, landmines, damage to infrastructure, and checkpoints at which a variety of armed groups engage in harassment and extortion. IDPs in 2020 were disproportionately affected by loss of livelihood due to the COVID-19 pandemic, since most performed unskilled jobs in the informal economy, and many were blamed for spreading the virus.

Even in peacetime, a woman must obtain permission from her husband or father to receive a passport and travel abroad.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private 1 / businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 4

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. Women do not have equal rights in inheritance matters.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and 1 / size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 4

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 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 0 / 4

The war has increased the risk of human trafficking, and after 2015 the government was no longer able to pursue antitrafficking efforts it had previously begun. Migrants, refugees, and the internally displaced are especially vulnerable to exploitation. Children have reportedly been recruited as fighters by all sides in the war. Border controls and naval blockades imposed by the Saudi-led coalition have contributed to shortages of food, medicine, fuel, and other essential imports, leaving the public more exposed to famine and disease as well as coercion and deprivation by armed groups and illegal traders. The World Food Programme reported in December 2020 that 16.2 million people were food insecure in Yemen and 24.3 million were in need of humanitarian assistance. A cholera outbreak continued in 2020. As of the end of the year, the World Health Organization had reported 2,101 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 611 deaths, though limited testing and other factors meant that both cases and deaths were likely undercounted.

ecoi.net summary:

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