

YEMEN

Executive Summary

The constitution neither protects nor inhibits religious freedom, but other laws, policies, and government practices restrict these freedoms. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. The constitution declares that Islam is the state religion and Sharia (Islamic law) is the source of all legislation, and effectively limits the presidency to practicing Muslims, while not imposing similar restrictions to other government offices. The constitution generally allows Muslims and followers of religious groups other than Islam to worship according to their beliefs; however, the government prohibits conversion from Islam and efforts to proselytize Muslims. Some Zaydi Muslims--especially in the northern Saada Governorate--reported that they continued to feel targeted by government entities for their religious affiliation.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Reports of societal abuses and discrimination increased between adherents of Shia and Sunni Islam. The rapid spread of Salafi-Sunni Islam in traditionally Zaydi-Shia areas of the country and the increasing radicalization of the Zaydi-Shia Houthi rebels resulted in more reports of violence between the Zaydi and Salafi communities. This stood in contrast to the historically amicable relationship between the Zaydi-Shia and Shaf'i-Sunni communities, the country's two predominant Islamic sects. The Arab Awakening protest movement encouraged religious tolerance among its participants, while in some instances the resulting political crisis provided a context that stoked existing religious tensions.

The U.S. government regularly conducted discussions with officials at relevant ministries and civil society on issues of religious freedom. The U.S. embassy sponsored a program where Yemenis travelled to the United States to participate in an interfaith dialogue. The embassy maintained regular contacts with religious leaders, including those representing religious minorities. The embassy also supported programs that included discussions on the importance of tolerance among Yemeni religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

Most citizens are Muslims, officially belonging to either the Zaydi order of Shia Islam or the Shaf'i order of Sunni Islam. While there are no available statistics, Zaydis make up an estimated 45 percent and Shaf'is 55 percent of the population. There are reports that a significant percentage of Muslims are now adherents to Salafi-Sunni Islam, but statistics are unavailable to confirm these reports. There are a few thousand Ismaili Muslims, an unknown number of Ethnasheria (Twelver) Shia who reside mainly in the north, and a significant but indeterminate number of Sufis. Groups that comprise less than .05 percent of the population include Jews, Christians--many of whom are refugees or temporary foreign residents and which include Roman Catholics and Anglicans--Baha'is, and Hindus. Jews are the only indigenous non-Muslim religious minority. Nearly all of the once sizable Jewish population emigrated following the establishment of the state of Israel.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution neither protects nor inhibits religious freedom, but other laws and policies restrict these freedoms. The constitution declares that Islam is the state religion and that Islamic law is the source of all legislation. In practice this meant that the local interpretation of Islamic law is used as a basis for all law, although Islamic jurisprudence coexists with secular common law and civil code models in a hybrid legal system. The government prohibits the proselytizing of Muslims. Under Islamic law as applied in the country, the conversion of a Muslim to another religion is considered apostasy, which is a capital offense, though one that is rarely enforced. Followers of religious groups other than Islam are free to worship according to their beliefs and wear religiously distinctive ornaments and dress.

A non-Muslim can run for Parliament, though the constitution restricts candidates for president to those who practice their "Islamic duties." The government does not maintain records of an individual's religious identity, and no law requires religious groups to register with the state. Government officials have stated that such records are not kept in order to avoid sparking sectarian rivalries. The law punishes public "ridicule" of any religion, though the maximum sentence is higher if the ridiculed religion is Islam.

Some local customs, codified in various laws and policies, discriminated against women and persons of non-Muslim religious groups. Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslims. The law prohibited men from marrying non-

Muslims (except for Jewish and Christian women) or those who have renounced Islam.

The government requires permission for the construction of new places of worship.

There were no reports of religious workers being denied visas during the year, and residence visas to Roman Catholic priests were issued. Christian clergy who minister to the foreign community are often also employed in teaching, social services, and health care sectors.

Public schools provide instruction in Islam but not in other religions; however, Muslim citizens could attend private schools that did not teach Islam. Almost all non-Muslim students were foreigners and attended private schools.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Mouloud, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Muharram.

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country.

The government sporadically enforced legal and policy restrictions on religious freedom. Low-level hostilities between the Houthis and the government's tribal proxies continued early in the year, although clashes between Houthis and non-governmental Salafis became more prominent through the year.

The government maintained that the Houthis are adherents of Twelver Shiism, a variant of Shiism that differs from that of the country's predominant Zaydi Shia school of Islam. Houthi leaders generally denied the contention, claiming to be Zaydi Shia. The Houthis follow the teachings of the late cleric Hussein Badr Eddine al-Houthi, who was killed during a 10-week rebellion in 2004 against the government in Saada. Some Zaydis continued to report harassment and discrimination by the government because they were suspected of sympathizing with the Houthis. Human rights groups reported that hundreds of Zaydis remained in jail because of their religious affiliation and not because they had any connection to the fighting. The government denied this, claiming that individuals were detained for violent activities. It appeared the government's actions against the group were politically, not religiously, motivated.

Although there were no specific reports of forced religious conversion, according to Zaydi community advocates, some Zaydi soldiers reportedly felt significant pressure to convert to Sunni Islam while in the military.

Government actions to counter an increase in political violence in Saada restricted some religious practices. Government officials reportedly limited the hours that Houthi mosques were permitted to be open to the public. The government maintained that it was only enforcing existing tradition that mosques should be used primarily for prayer and not for political activities. The government continued to close what it claimed to be extremist Shia religious institutes, reassigned imams it deemed to have espoused radical doctrine, and continued to monitor mosque sermons. Local human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported that the government replaced Zaydi imams with Sunni (including Salafi) imams in mosques throughout northern Yemen, including the capital of Sanaa. Some Zaydi leaders claimed that elements in the government were engaged in a concerted effort to insert Salafi traditions, mosques, and imams into traditionally Zaydi regions.

Weekly services for Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians were held throughout Sanaa, Aden, and other cities without government interference. Throughout the country Christians and Jews held services regularly in private homes or facilities such as schools without harassment, and such facilities appeared adequate to accommodate the small numbers involved.

The two largest political parties, the General People's Congress (GPC) and the moderate Islamist Islah party, both drew on Islam as a basis for law in their platforms. The ruling GPC did not exclude members of any religion from its membership. Islah required that a member must be "committed" to Islamic teachings. There were other minor political parties that were said to be Islamic in nature, although it was not clear if they restricted their membership to Muslims.

During the year the government continued its efforts to prevent the politicization of mosques and schools, as well as to curb extremism and increase religious tolerance. The government's efforts concentrated on monitoring mosques for sermons that incited violence or espoused political statements it considered harmful to public security. Private Islamic organizations could maintain ties to international Islamic organizations; however, the government sporadically monitored their activities through the police and intelligence services.

According to human rights groups, the Ministry of Culture and the Political Security Office (PSO) monitored and sometimes removed from stores printed materials that espoused Zaydi-Shia doctrine. There were also reports from Zaydi scholars and politicians that authorities continued to ban the publishing of some materials that promoted Zaydi-Shia Islam.

The Catholic Church requested from the government a small plot of land in Sanaa on which to build a Catholic church. At the end of the year the church was still awaiting formal authorization for the transfer of the land title initiated in 2007.

Government policy generally did not prohibit or punish the possession of non-Islamic religious literature for personal use; however, reports existed during the year that foreign individuals in possession of amounts of non-Islamic religious materials deemed too large for personal use were expelled from the country, ostensibly to prevent proselytizing.

The government continued efforts to close unlicensed schools and religious centers. In 2005 the Ministry of Religious Endowments (al-Awqaf) conducted a study that assessed that there were 4,568 unlicensed religious schools and institutions. The government expressed concern that these schools deviated from formal educational requirements and promoted militant ideology. During the year, the al-Awqaf reportedly continued the process of evaluating these schools and closing those deemed to be potentially contributing to a security threat. The government prohibited some private and national schools from teaching courses outside the officially approved curriculum, ostensibly to curb ideological and violent extremism and intolerance in schools. Human rights organizations reported, and the government denied, that the ministry distributed grade school textbooks that described the Zaydi manner of prayer as incorrect.

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

Zaydi-Shia Houthis, a rebel group which control Sa'ada governorate and parts of al-Jawf governorate, continued a long-running, low-level conflict with Sunni Salafists. The Salafists have an intellectual home in Damaj's Dar al-Hadith religious school--commonly referred to as the Damaj Institute--a leading center of Salafist learning and home to an estimated 10,000 Salafist students and their family members. In October the Houthis imposed a blockade on the town and obstructed the delivery of food and medicine, claiming that the thwarted deliveries contained weapons. The Houthis demanded that the Salafists in Damaj give up their weapons and expel the estimated thousands of non-Yemeni students studying at the

Damaj Institute. In the weeks following the siege, fighting in and around Damaj led to dozens of deaths and injuries on both sides.

Shia Houthis were subjected to attacks following a January declaration of war issued by the deputy leader of al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP). In August an explosives-rigged car was driven into a gathering of Houthis in al-Jawf governorate. AQAP took credit for the attack in a press release.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of increased societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice between adherents of Shia and Sunni Islam. The rapid spread of Salafi-Sunni Islam in traditionally Zaydi-Shia areas of the country and the increasing radicalization of the Zaydi-Shia Houthi rebels resulted in more reports of violence between the Zaydi and Salafi communities. This stood in contrast to the traditionally amicable relationship between the Zaydi-Shia and Sunni communities, the country's two historically predominant Islamic sects. The ongoing conflict in Saada Governorate and increasing violence between government forces and the Houthi rebels continued to enflame political, tribal, and religious tensions during the year.

Though instances of anti-Semitism were rare, in the September 15 issue of the official newspaper *October 14*, the columnist Ali Abdallah Taher accused Jews of instigating the uprisings in the Arab world based on the "instructions" in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the Tsarist anti-Semitic forgery.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy engaged in efforts to increase religious tolerance in the country through programs designed to promote tolerance of religious diversity and productive dialogue among religious groups. In response to an observed drift toward sectarianism in the North--particularly between Salafis and "Twelver" Shia--the embassy pressed the government and opposition groups to avoid sectarian rhetoric and to encourage respect for the country's long history of tolerance.

Senior embassy staff maintained good working relationships with government entities with responsibility in religious affairs, leaders of religious organizations, and interfaith groups. Embassy officials met with government officials, including those from the Ministry of Human Rights and the al-Awqaf, to discuss ways to

support religious freedom. U.S. embassy officers periodically met with representatives of the Christian, Jewish, Zaydi, and Shaf'i communities to discuss their concerns, if any, and to build interfaith partnerships. The embassy organized several roundtable discussions on religious freedom with religious leaders.