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Responses to Information Requests

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5 June 2019

DJI106307.FE

Djibouti: The Union for National Salvation (Union pour le salut national, USN) coalition, including the political parties in the union, its objectives and activities; treatment of USN members and supporters by the authorities (2015-June 2019)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

The USN is a coalition of opposition parties in Djibouti (*Political Handbook of the World* 2019, 443; RFI 1 Mar. 2019). For general information about the USN, from its establishment in 2013 until February 2014, see Response to Information Request DJI104771 of February 2014.

Sources report that following the 2013 legislative elections, during which the coalition officially won [10 (Freedom House 4 Jan. 2018; RFI 1 Mar. 2019) or 16 (*Political Handbook of the World* 2019, 443)] seats, the USN accused the government of electoral fraud and boycotted the parliament (*Political Handbook of the World* 2019, 441; Freedom House 4 Jan. 2018).

According to the same sources, the USN agreed to end its boycott in late 2014 (*Political*

Handbook of the World 2019, 441; Freedom House 4 Jan. 2018), after entering into an agreement with the government on the enactment of “democratic reforms” (Freedom House 4 Jan. 2018). According to Freedom House, the USN later accused the government of not enacting these reforms, in violation of the agreement (Freedom House 4 Jan. 2018). According to sources, no reform of the Independent National Electoral Commission (Commission électorale nationale indépendante, CENI) was undertaken before the 2016 elections (Freedom House 4 Jan. 2018; EIU 26 Jan. 2016).

According to sources, the USN was divided over the 2016 legislative elections (RFI 1 Mar. 2019; *Political Handbook of the World* 2019, 443). Sources report that two USN candidates ran in the 2016 presidential election (*Political Handbook of the World* 2019, 443; Xinhua News Agency 19 Apr. 2016). In an interview with *Le Monde*, Cassim Ahmed Dini, founder of opposition political party Republican Alliance for Development (Alliance républicaine pour le développement, ARD), stated that [translation] “the opposition’s credibility was ruined by the implosion of the USN during the 2016 presidential election” (*Le Monde* 1 Nov. 2017).

Sources report that the leader of the USN, Ahmed Youssef Houmed, died in September 2017 (Freedom House 4 Jan. 2018; AFP 12 Sept. 2017). According to Freedom House, his death “add[ed] to uncertainty” about the opposition’s preparations for the parliamentary election planned for February 2018 (Freedom House 4 Jan. 2018). Sources state that the opposition continued to be divided during the 2018 legislative elections (*Political Handbook of the World* 2019, 443; France 26 June 2018). According to the *Political Handbook of the World 2018-2019*, most USN coalition member parties boycotted the election, with the exception of the ARD and the Centre for United Democrats (Centre des démocrates unifiés, CDU), which ran independently, and the Union for Democracy and Justice (Union pour la démocratie et la justice, UDJ) and the Djibouti Development Party (Parti djiboutien pour le développement, PDD), which ran as a coalition (*Political Handbook of the World* 2019, 443). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the president of the Association for Respect of Human Rights in Djibouti (Association pour le respect des droits de l’homme à Djibouti, ARDHD), an NGO based in Paris that gathers information about democracy and human rights in Djibouti (ARDHD n.d.), stated that, following this election, [translation] “the USN gradually lost its authority [a]nd has virtually become an afterthought” (ARDHD 30 May 2019, ellipsis in original).

2. Structure and Program

The Indian Ocean Newsletter [1] reported in July 2016 that the USN had to close its headquarters because of a lack of financial resources (*The Indian Ocean Newsletter* 1 July 2016). The same source indicates that a [*The Indian Ocean Newsletter* English version] “handful of activists” remained in the USN, and that its leaders were Ahmed Youssouf Houmed, its chairperson; Abdourahman Mohamed Guelleh, its secretary general; Omar Elmi Khaireh, the USN candidate in the April 2016 presidential election; and Omar Chirdon Abass, the former minister of Agriculture (*The Indian Ocean Newsletter* 1 July 2016). *The Indian Ocean Newsletter* adds that Abbate Ebo Adou, vice-president of the Movement for Democracy and Liberty (Mouvement pour la démocratie et la liberté), one of the parties that make up the USN, was continuing to meet with its leaders [*The Indian Ocean Newsletter* English version] “against the advice of his own party and its president” (*The Indian Ocean Newsletter* 1 July 2016). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to report published on Alwihda Info, a Chadian news website, at a meeting held in Lyon, France, in March 2017, Djibouti opposition representatives discussed the USN’s [translation] “shortcomings” and “how to restore credibility and relaunch a true united Djiboutian opposition, how to find the right compromise between the members of a coalition by learning from past experience” in order to “continue thinking about a new opposition coalition,” considered to be the “only way of influencing democratic change in Djibouti” (Opposition activists 13 Mar. 2017). Another meeting report, prepared by the same author and published on the same website, of a conference of the opposition held on 30 June 2018 in Paris, states that Ismaïl Ahmed Assoweh, a former USN parliamentarian, announced that the opposition was working on [translation] “preparing a summary of the USN’s mistakes and failures before planning and proposing a restoration project” (ARD 20 July 2018).

According to sources, the USN was relaunched by the ARD, the UDJ, the Party for Merit and Progress (Parti pour le mérite et le progrès, PMP) and the National Democratic Party (Parti national démocratique, PND) in February 2019 (ARDHD 30 May 2019; USN 26 Feb. 2019; RFI 1 Mar. 2019). According to Radio France internationale (RFI), only [translation] “a faction” of the UDJ joined the USN (RFI 1 Mar. 2019). According to a contact consulted by the ARDHD, the UDJ has a [translation] “legalized” faction and a “non-legalized” faction; it is the non-legalized faction that joined the reconstituted USN in February 2019 (ARDHD 30 May 2019).

Sources add that Adan Mohamed Abdou, the leader of the ARD, was elected president of the USN (USN 26 Feb. 2019; RFI 1 Mar. 2019). According to the president of the ARDHD, [translation] “it seems that apart from President Adan Mohamed Abdou, there is an informal committee of the presidents of the other member parties,” namely,

Abdourahman Djama Andoleh, president of the PMP, Ismaël Abdillahi Doualeh, vice-president of the PND, and Daher Robleh Ibrahim and Houssein Robleh Dabar, 1st vice-president and 3rd vice-president, respectively, of the UDJ (ARDHD 30 May 2019).

According to RFI, Adan Mohamed Abdou has stated: [translation] “*We’ll tour our federations. If the people are ready, we’ll organize meetings and demonstrations*” (RFI 1 Mar. 2019). The contact consulted by the ARDHD made the following comments:

[translation]

The USN’s goal is to remobilize Djiboutians and the international community against Ismaël Omar Guelleh’s fifth term, on the one hand, by denouncing the historical and present situation in Djibouti under the 42-year reign of a family dictatorship ... be it on a political, economic, social, union or democratic level, [and] on the other hand[,] to provide Djiboutians with a report of the USN’s actions and the prospect of a societal project that is shared and developed by the people of Djibouti. (ARDHD 30 May 2019)

However, the president of the ARDHD noted that he was unaware of [translation] “a regional or other decision-making body having been designated” and added that “except for one or two rare press releases [and] renewed intentions, at conferences, to work on developing a common program, the reactivated USN, to date, does not seem to have been unable to produce concrete proposals” (ARDHD 30 May 2019). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Treatment of USN Members and Supporters

For information on the November 2015 arrest of USN members also linked to the Opposition Youth Movement (Mouvement des jeunes de l’opposition, MJO), see Response to Information Request DJI105976 of August 2017 on the MJO.

For information on the treatment of political dissidents in Djibouti, including members of the USN, from 2016 to May 2017, see Response to Information Request DJI105810 of June 2017.

In an interview given to the weekly publication *Jeune Afrique* in April 2018, the president of Djibouti answered the following in response to a question on why the opposition leader had not been granted the status conferred by [translation] “[t]he 2014 framework agreement”: “We’re ready. But the coalition with which we came to an agreement, [the USN], imploded. We’re waiting for it to rebuild” (*Jeune Afrique* 25 Apr. 2018).

According to the ARDHD's contact, two of the USN's founding parties in 2013, one of the factions of the UDJ and the PDD, [translation] "have preferred to stay close to" [the Union for the Presidential Majority (Union pour la majorité présidentielle, UMP)], [the coalition in power], and remain [translation] "legalized," which could result in them "claiming the USN name to cloud the national and international media's identification of the current USN" (ARDHD 30 May 2019). According to RFI, the four member parties that relaunched the USN in February 2019 are [translation] "illegal movements" (RFI 1 Mar. 2019). Freedom House notes that, to operate legally, political parties have to register with the government, which has denied recognition to some opposition parties (Freedom House 4 Jan. 2018),

The ARDHD's contact stated the following:

[translation]

Then and now, USN members and supporters cannot work in the public service or even hold a private official job, and be reasonably paid.

While the repression has not directly affected the USN's current leaders, it regularly targets Internet users sharing information disseminated by the coalition and whistleblowers described as a "new type of offender" by the Minister of Justice in March 2019.

The repression related to the USN also targets teachers, the profession that spearheaded support for the USN in 2013 and 2014.

But no official members of the current USN have been visibly repressed by the police or have had to deal with red tape in their day-to-day lives. (ARDHD 30 May 2019)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Note

[1] *The Indian Ocean Newsletter* is a fortnightly publication that covers politics and business networks in African countries bordering the Indian Ocean (Africa Intelligence n.d.).

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Date modified:

2018-06-25

