



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Yemen

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, there were some restrictions. The constitution declares that Islam is the state religion, and that Shari'a (Islamic law) is the source of all legislation.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. Muslims and followers of religious groups other than Islam are free to worship according to their beliefs; however, the Government prohibits conversion from Islam and proselytization of Muslims.

Although relations among religious groups remained generally amicable and continued to contribute to religious freedom, there were some attacks on Jews. Government actions lessened political, tribal, and religious tension caused after it took action against armed insurrections by the "Shabab al-Moumineen," or "Believing Youth" movement, which the Government believes is linked to Twelver Shi'ism of Iran.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 328,080 square miles, and its population is approximately 20 million. Virtually all citizens were Muslims, belonging either to the Zaydi order of Shi'a Islam or to the Shafa'i order of Sunni Islam, representing approximately 30 percent and 70 percent of the total population, respectively. There were a few thousand Ismaili Muslims who reside mainly in the north.

Nearly all of the country's once-sizable Jewish population has emigrated. Less than 500 Jews were scattered in the northern part of the country, primarily in the vicinity of Raida and Saada.

There were approximately 3,000 Christians throughout the country, most of whom were refugees or temporary foreign residents. There were approximately 40 Hindus, who traced their origins to India, living in Aden. There were four churches in Aden, three Roman Catholic and one Anglican. Aden also had one Hindu temple. There were three known functioning synagogues in the north of the country.

Although there were some non-Muslim public places of worship known to exist in the area of the former North Yemen, they were discreetly located so as not to draw attention. No officially recognized non-Muslim public place of worship existed in areas of the former North Yemen. This was largely because it had no history of a large, resident foreign community such as existed in the south.

Christian missionaries and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) affiliated with missionary groups operated in the country, and most restricted their activities to the provision of medical services; others were employed in teaching and social services. Invited by the Government, the Sisters of Charity ran homes for the poor and persons with disabilities in Sana'a, Taiz, Hodeida, and Aden. The Government issues residence visas to priests so that they may provide for the community's religious needs. The Swedish Free Mission (SFM), financed by the Government of Sweden and churches in Sweden, ran a technical school for the disabled and poor in Taiz. There was also a Dutch Christian medical mission in Saada. An American Baptist congregation affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention maintained an affiliation with a hospital in Jibla, which it ran for more than thirty years before transferring management to the Government in 2003. The Anglican Church ran two charitable clinics in Aden.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. During the reporting period, the Government began efforts to ease religious tension between it and some members of the Zaydi-Shi'a establishment. This tension began as a result of government action against the "Shabab al-Moumineen's" (The Believing Youth) armed insurrection that erupted in the summer of 2004 and again in April 2005. The Government maintains that the Shabab are adherents of Twelver Shi'ism, a variant of Shi'ism which differs from that of the country's predominant Zaydi-Shi'as. The Shabab follow the teachings of rebel cleric Hussein Badr Eddine al-Houthi, who was killed during a ten-week rebellion that he led in June 2004 against the Government in Saada. The Government's actions against the group in 2005 were politically, not religiously, motivated.

Among religious minorities, approximately 1,000 Christians and most Jews actively participated in some form of formal religious service or ritual, although not always in a public place of worship.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, there were some restrictions. The constitution declares that Islam is the state religion and that Shari'a is the source of all legislation. Followers of religious groups other than Islam are free to worship according to their beliefs and to wear religiously distinctive ornaments or dress; however, Shari'a forbids conversion and prohibits non-Muslims from proselytizing, and the Government enforced this prohibition. The Government requires permission for the construction of new places of worship and prohibits non-Muslims from holding elected office. The Muslim holy days of Eid al-Adha, Muharram, and Eid al-Fitr are public holidays. Other religious groups in the country are not negatively affected by their celebration.

The Government does not keep track of an individual's religious identity, and there is no law that requires religious groups to register with the state. After the ruling party tried to put forward a Jewish parliamentary candidate, the General Election Committee adopted a policy barring all non-Muslims from running for Parliament. Chapter 2, Article 106 of the constitution further notes that the president of the republic must "practice his Islamic duties."

Public schools provide instruction in Islam but not in other religions; however, Muslim citizens can attend private schools that do not teach Islam. Almost all non-Muslim students in the country are foreigners and attend private schools.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion; however, there were some restrictions.

Government actions to counter the increase in political violence restricted some practice of religion. In January 2006, for the second year, the Government banned the celebration of Ghadeer Day (a holiday celebrated by Shi'a Muslims) in parts of the Saada Governorate. During the reporting period, the Government reportedly also intensified its efforts to stop the proliferation of Houthism by limiting the hours that mosques were permitted to be open to the public, closing down what the Government believed to be extremist or Twelver-based Zaydi religious institutes, reassigning Imams who were thought to espouse radical doctrine, and increasing surveillance of mosque sermons.

The Government prohibits the proselytization of Muslims. During the period covered by this report, there were reports of persons being temporarily detained for possession of religious materials with the intent to proselytize.

The Government did not allow the building of new public places of worship without previous authorization. At the end of the reporting period, Catholic officials were still waiting for a decision from the Government on whether it would allow an officially recognized Catholic establishment to be built in Sana'a. Church officials did not attribute government action to discrimination.

Weekly services for Catholic, Protestant, and Ethiopian Christians were held throughout Sana'a, Aden and other cities without government interference. Throughout the country, Christian church and Jewish synagogue services were held regularly in private homes or facilities, such as schools, without harassment, and such facilities appeared adequate to accommodate the small numbers involved.

The country maintains regular diplomatic relations with the Vatican. In December 2005 Archbishop Vladimir Goydiv of the Russian Orthodox Church visited in an effort to promote Islamic-Christian dialogue. During his visit, Goydiv met with Vice President Hadi Abd Rabo Mansour, as well as other Government officials and scholars. Public schools provide instruction in Islam but not in other religions; however, Muslim citizens can attend private schools that do not teach Islam.

The ruling General People's Congress (GPC) and the Islah opposition 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 are Islamic in nature, although it was not clear if they restricted their membership to Muslims.

During the previous reporting period, the Government significantly increased its efforts to prevent the politicization of mosques and schools in an attempt to curb extremism and increase tolerance. Efforts concentrated on monitoring mosques for sermons that incite violence or other political statements that it considers harmful to public security. Private Islamic organizations may maintain ties to international Islamic organizations; however, the Government sporadically monitored their activities through the police and intelligence authorities.

During the reporting period, the Government also continued efforts to close unlicensed schools and religious centers. By the end of the period covered by this report, more than 3,000 unlicensed religious schools had been closed. The Government expressed concern that these schools deviated from formal educational requirements and promoted militant ideology. The Government also deported foreign students found studying in unlicensed religious schools. Private and national schools are prohibited from teaching courses outside of the officially approved curriculum. The purpose of these actions was to curb ideological and religious extremism in schools.

There were reports that both the Ministry of Culture and the Political Security Office (PSO) monitored and sometimes pulled books that espoused Zaydi-Shiite Islamic doctrine from store shelves after publication. There were also credible reports that authorities banned the publishing of some materials that promoted Zaydi-Shiite Islam. The Government denied that the media was subject to censorship by any security apparatus.

Following the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990, owners of property previously expropriated by the communist government of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen were invited to seek restitution of their property. However, implementation has been extremely limited, and very few properties have been returned to previous owners. In exchange for its confiscated property, the Catholic Church requested from the Government a small plot of land in Sanaa on which it would build a Catholic establishment. It was awaiting action on the request at the end of the period covered by this report.

The constitution declares that Islamic Shari'a is the source of all legislation. Some local customs, believed to be part of Shari'a as practiced in the country, are codified in various laws and policies. Some of these laws discriminate against women and persons of other religious groups.

According to the Government's interpretation of Shari'a, Muslim women are not permitted to marry outside of Islam. Under 1992 Personal Status Law No. 20, men are permitted to marry as many as four wives, although very few do so. The law also forbids men from marrying non-Muslims (except for Jews and Christians) or apostates (those who have renounced Islam).

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Government policy does not prohibit or provide punishment for the possession of non-Islamic religious literature; however, on occasion there were credible reports that persons were harassed by members of the PSO, an organization which reports directly to the President's Office, and by police for possessing such literature (see Restrictions on Religious Freedom). There were also reports that some members of the PSO monitored, harassed, and occasionally censored the mail of missionary groups and those associated with them, ostensibly to prevent proselytizing.

During the reporting period, security officials arbitrarily arrested, detained, and tortured some individuals suspected of proselytizing. There were also credible reports that security officials harassed and detained Muslims affiliated with missionary elements in the Ibb and Jibla areas. Unconfirmed reports attributed such incidents to followers of conservative Salafi Islamic doctrine within the security apparatus.

Under Shari'a as applied in the country, the conversion of a Muslim to another religion is considered apostasy, which the Government interprets as a crime punishable by death. During the period covered by this report, there were no reported cases in which persons were charged with apostasy or prosecuted for it by government authorities.

During the reporting period, most detained Shabab were reportedly released, but police and security forces continued to detain suspected members of radical Islamist groups. Since 2001 the Government has detained several hundred Islamists who returned to Yemen from Afghanistan and/or Iraq "for questioning." Although most persons were released within days, some reportedly continued to be detained beyond the maximum detention period as terrorist or security suspects.

In May 2006 President Saleh pardoned two imams, Yahia Hussein al-Dailami, sentenced to death, and Muhammed Ahmad Miftah, sentenced to eight years' imprisonment. The two were originally convicted of establishing contacts with Iran for the purpose of harming the country. The two men publicly opposed the Government's action in Saada and formed the Sana'a Youth Organization, a Zaydi religious-based group that supported Houthism. Both men maintained that they only advocated peaceful dissent against government action in Saada.

During the same month, the Government released more than 200 Houthi rebel detainees. It was unclear how many of those detained participated in the renewed March 2005 rebellion against the Government. Although some of those detained were held for their affiliation with Houthi's religious teachings, the arrests appeared to have been politically, not religiously, motivated. All released detainees pledged not to participate in any future rebellion. The release followed a September 2005 general amnesty and promise of compensation for all detainees held as a result of the Saada conflict. In March 2006 state-run media announced the release of 630 Houthi supporters after 80 members of Parliament had visited the war-affected areas in Saada.

Throughout the reporting period, the Government continued to sponsor a dialogue with the Shabab and Islamist detainees. The dialogues were led by Islamic scholars in an attempt to arrive at an understanding by which detainees are released in exchange for repentance of past extremism; denunciation of terrorism; and commitments to obey the laws and government, respect non-Muslims, and refrain from attacking foreign interests. The program has had limited success.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

The country is predominantly Muslim. Apart from a small but undetermined number of Christians and Hindus of South Asian origin in Aden, Jews are the only indigenous religious minority. Religious minorities generally lived in harmony with their Muslim neighbors. On April 23, 2006, President Saleh met with a delegation of Yemeni Jews from the Amran governorate to discuss their concerns. According to official media, President Saleh also ordered "concerned bodies" to help ease their plight.

Isolated attacks in recent years by anti-Jewish extremists have convinced most of the country's Jews to relocate to the town of Raida for safety and to sustain their community. The Jewish population has diminished significantly over the last fifty years from tens of thousands to a few hundred due to voluntary emigration.

There were no reported incidents of violence or discrimination between the adherents of Zaydi and Shafa'i Islam, the two main orders of Islam practiced in the country. There has been a decrease in tensions between the Government and mostly Zaydi population after fighting subsided in the northern governorate of Saada. The Government also made attempts to reconcile with the citizens of Saada through reconstruction efforts and dialogue. Religiously motivated violence was neither incited nor tolerated by the Islamic clergy, except for a small,

politically motivated clerical minority, often with ties to foreign extremist elements.

During the reporting period, there were sporadic reports of violence initiated by Salafi elements who were attempting to take control of moderate and Sufi mosques around the country. In September 2005 an unidentified German citizen living in the Hadramaut Governorate was accused of proselytizing and had his home and car set on fire. There were also unconfirmed reports that followers of Ismaili Islamic teachings were occasionally harassed and forbidden entry to mosques affiliated with Salafi followers.

As part of its campaign against religious extremism, the Government also took action to improve conditions that affected societal attitudes on religious freedom. In May 2006 the Ministry of Endowment and Guidance conducted a six-day training course for 500 imams to promote principles of moderation and religious tolerance.

Christian clergy, who ministered to the foreign community, were employed in teaching, social services, and health care.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy maintained an active dialogue on human rights concerns with the Government, NGOs, and others. Embassy officers, including the ambassador, met periodically with representatives of the Jewish and Christian communities during the reporting period. During the year, the U.S. government also sponsored a prominent judge involved with religious dialogue to participate in a program in the United States on promoting interfaith dialogue.

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