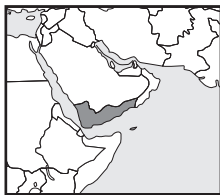


## ■ YEMEN

# Civil society gaining shape



In recent years the State has failed to honour commitments it has made to protect human rights. Its violations include authoritarian rule, increasing corruption, lack of transparency, failure of a majority of government officials to fulfil their responsibilities effectively, and failure to act on issues such as gender equity. Civil society organizations, although few in number and broad in focus, have recently helped shape new legislation by influencing the elite and decision-making institutions.

### Social Forum Yemenite Alliance<sup>1</sup>

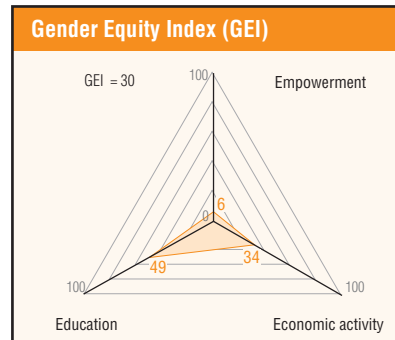
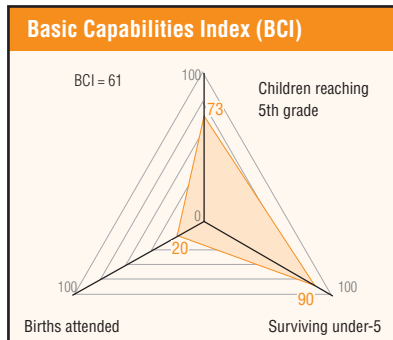
The Republic of Yemen has ratified most international and regional human rights agreements; respect for all human rights is also enshrined in the Constitution and legislation. The Government established a Ministry of Human Rights in 2003 and has permitted the creation of a variety of civil society organizations to defend these rights. However over the last few years the Government has restricted democracy by introducing a wide range of obstacles, hindrances, sanctions and prohibitions that severely limit free expression. Many independent newspapers have been taken to court and closed down. Demonstrations and peaceful marches are violently suppressed; participants have been arrested, taken to court and given harsh sentences – including the death penalty, imposed in special trials on some political prisoners (although the Supreme Court has then granted them clemency).

During election campaigns, the governing party mobilizes all the resources at the disposal of the State on its behalf, including finances, public employees, the military and the media. This heavily tilts the playing field. As a result, the governing party currently occupies 80% of the seats in both Parliament and local councils.

The UNDP Human Development Report 2007/2008 puts Yemen at 153 among the 177 countries listed. The Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2007 has Yemen in 131st place out of 180 countries.

### Economic and social situation

When North Yemen and South Yemen formed a unified country on 22 May 1990, the country's economic situation was poor. Since then it has deteriorated further. Among the many reasons have been:



- The return of more than 800,000 émigrés from neighbouring countries as a result of the second Gulf war in 1991.<sup>2</sup>
- The 1994 war between the two factions then in power (the General Popular Congress and the Socialist Yemenite Party).
- Security deficiencies and ethnic conflicts. The most devastating combat has been the war between an insurgent group and the central government in the northern Sa'dah governorate. This has dragged on since 2004, draining the economy and heightening public dissatisfaction.
- Government delays in introducing democratic reforms, economic reforms and measures to prevent the abuse of official financial and administrative power. This has provoked popular protest demonstrations and marches since 2007, particularly in the southern governorates.
- The state general budget has relied on income from oil extraction for 80% of its revenues in recent years. However reserves appear to be dwindling. Production plunged from 420,000 barrels per day down to 350,000 in 2005, and has continued to fall since.
- More than half the country's farmland is devoted to qat<sup>3</sup> cultivation, which requires large quantities of water. Aside from draining the country's

aquifers at an alarming rate, qat is an economic plague, sucking up more than USD 7 million and 20 million working hours per day. More than a quarter of the labour force is engaged in the qat industry (agriculture, transport and trade).

- Collapse of the official currency due to the country's weak economy. In the early 1990s USD 1 was worth YER 20; now it can buy YER 200.

These factors and others have left 42% of the population struggling to survive below the poverty line, according to estimates from the 2006 food programme. It is widely expected that this percentage will climb even higher in 2008 due to soaring global food price inflation (in Yemen's case, the price of wheat in particular). Most independent research institutions and organizations are in agreement that the Government does not follow standard economic principles in formulating its strategy. Instead, it develops and implements policies haphazardly for the benefit of a corrupt minority. These wealthy few siphon off the money and resources of the State and compel the poor majority of the population to shoulder the burden of so-called "economic reforms" that provide no visible benefits.

### The effect of trade agreements

Yemen liberalized all of its trade as part of an economic reform programme adopted with the assistance of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in 1985. The Government cut customs duties as low as 5%, with a maximum of 25%. These reductions have devastated farmers unable to compete with imported crops. The country runs a permanent trade deficit on a range of items integral to the national diet. Foods now make up 33% of total imports, a heavy

1 The Alliance is formed by the Social Democratic Forum, the Information Centre for Information and Facilitation of Human Rights and the Yemenite Observatory of Human Rights. The Social Democratic Forum made the proposal and coordinated the preparation of this report. The document was drawn up by the following committee: Nabil Abdelhafid Majad, Mohamed Yahia Assabri, Rena Ahmed Ghanim and Dr. Abdelbaki Chamsan.

2 This refers to the war between an international coalition and Iraq to expel the latter from Kuwait. This war, known as the First Gulf War, is in fact the second, since the first was the war between Iraq and Iran (1980-1988).

3 *Catha edulis*: A stimulant of vegetable nature, not unlike tobacco, which is chewed. Used in Yemen and other neighbouring Arab countries.

weight on the country's balance of trade and balance of payments.

The industrial sector is small and provides jobs for only a small part of the workforce. Manufacturing depends, to a great extent, on imported raw and semi-finished materials. Private investment has dropped, along with the participation of private investors in total production.

## The situation of women

### Education

The data we have on women's employment indicate it has dropped dramatically. Women constitute 25.7% of the total wage labour force; the rest work in traditional occupations (agriculture and shepherding). The education gap between men and women is vast. The illiteracy rate among females above age 10 is 65%, one of the highest proportions among developing countries; the rate is 78% in rural areas and 40% in urban areas.

Statistics show that for every 100,000 live births 366 women die from complications and lack of medical assistance. In rural zones, 55% of women receive no assistance during their pregnancy or labour. Most women have no access to family planning or reproductive health services; many marry at a very young age. The fertility rate is 6.2, according to the family budget census.

### Political participation

Although more than 42% of Yemenis on the electoral roll are women, they have made up only 0.5% of the candidates in parliamentary elections (1993, 1997, 2003) and local elections (2001, 2006).

Although the country has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the gender gap remains wide and steep. Some laws explicitly discriminate against women. Civil society organizations and leaders, both women and men, who believe in gender equity, are making great efforts to change attitudes, as well as to persuade government officials and political parties to adopt policies that promote increased participation of women in political life, such as quotas in elections and appointments.

## Enjoyment of social rights

### The right to education

The Constitution and the general education and teaching law affirm that basic education should be compulsory and free. However the Government has not introduced the policies and measures necessary to make this right a reality, let alone to ensure quality and equity in gender opportunities and between rural areas and cities, etc. The Government allocates 17% of the budget to education, while spending 26% on defence and security.

The third report on human development in Yemen concludes that levels of effectiveness in education are very low, based on a rise in drop-outs and academic failure and poor distribution of teachers. Most teachers are in the city; in rural areas, classes sometime have more than 100 pupils. The faculty education level is often low: 78.8% of schools heads have not been to university; 4.4% have no academic qualifications at all. Teachers who have a university education earn USD 150 at most, which compels them to seek other work to improve their standard of living. About 17.5% of all teachers are women.

Although the country has 14,632 schools, most of them lack essential equipment; a large fraction is unsuitable for educational purposes. Fully 20% are closed for refurbishing or function without roofs, or under trees, or are made of tin.

Teaching methods and curricula are outdated and do not prepare students for the job market. According to the Human Development Report, the methods and styles of teaching do not encourage intellectual development or critical thinking.

### The right to health

Only 3.5%-4% of the general budget – 1.2%-1.5% of the GDP – goes to health. Services are grossly inadequate to satisfy current needs, which are expanding rapidly due to demographic growth – which is itself due in part to the deterioration in family planning services. Other problems include poor distribution of health services, inefficient administration of human resources, insufficient training and qualification opportunities, poor sanitary conditions and a decline in staff awareness of sanitary precautions.

In 2006 Yemen had seven hospital beds per 10,000 inhabitants, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). It had approximately 6,700 doctors in 2004, an average of three per 10,000 inhabitants. These facilities and services are not evenly distributed. Although 75% of the population lives in rural areas, just 30% of the people there have access to health care.

WHO reports that 60% of Yemenites live in areas affected by malaria and three million people are infected each year. Around 12 million inhabitants suffer from diseases related to contaminated water, according to a study by the Parliament Water and Environment Committee; 10% of the population suffers from schistosomiasis, and three million have been infected with hepatitis. The study concluded that contaminated water is responsible for 50% of infant mortality (20% from diarrhea and the other 30% from malaria and typhoid fever).

## The right to work and social protection

The Constitution and labour and civil service laws conform to the international declarations regarding the natural right of every citizen to work and the right to a decent life based on fair wages. In recent years, government policies have ignored these commitments. The State employs only 20% of all graduates; the rest must seek work in the private sector, in most cases outside their specialization. Many end up joining the burgeoning ranks of the unemployed.

The social security system covers all government employees, but only 70,000 workers in the private sector. This leaves four million economically active adults without coverage. Yemen has no public health insurance system. The social welfare system is limited to coverage for the elderly, widows and orphans, an estimated number of 603,000 people in 2005. More than 500,000 children of school age (6-14 years old) drop out of the education system and in most cases help their parents by doing specific jobs reserved for them, such working in the field and shepherding. A good number of children end up begging. Many are taken to neighbouring countries to work in this capacity, or as domestic servants.

## The role of civil society organizations in defending human rights

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Work, which has responsibility for authorizing civil society organizations, lists around 6,000; more than 75% of them are charities established to offer a variety of services to poor families. Organizations involved in human rights activities are few, and have a broad focus. A single organization might work on women's rights and children's rights, or civil, political and economic rights. Despite their small numbers and lack of specialization, these organizations have provided a considerable number of training sessions for different sectors of society, as well as talks, activities and discussions on human rights issues. Their activities have generated a sort of movement, albeit one limited to the intellectual class – human rights issues are not yet part of the public discourse.

Despite its small size, this movement influences state decision-making institutions, such as Parliament and the Executive; their members have begun discussing human rights issues and problems. So far successes of this effort have been limited to a few reforms related to women, children and the disabled, along with legislation to promote transparency and combat corruption. Recently, groups working in the political, civil, social, economic and intellectual fields have begun forming alliances and activist networks, which could lead to greater civil society influence on human rights concerns in the future. ■