

Advancing Freedom and Democracy Reports – 2008
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Part 1

Yemen is a republic headed by President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has ruled the country since 1978. In September 2006 citizens re-elected President Saleh to another seven-year term in a generally open and competitive election, characterized by multiple problems with the voting process and use of state resources on behalf of the ruling party. Although there is a multiparty system, overwhelming power rests with the president and the ruling party, the General People's Congress. Significant human rights problems continued to exist in some areas. Weak governmental institutions, tribal patronage networks, and pervasive corruption continued to undermine civil liberties. There were reports that government forces committed arbitrary and unlawful killings, and that torture and poor conditions existed in prisons. Prolonged pretrial detention, judicial corruption, and executive interference continued to undermine due process. Arbitrary arrest and detention increased, particularly of individuals with suspected links to the rebellious al-Houthi movement in the Saada governorate. Restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, and peaceful assembly increased significantly. Pervasive discrimination against women and southerners also occurred, as well as child labor and child trafficking.

Part 2

To help correct the institutional weaknesses that impede the country's movement towards becoming a truly democratic state where the rule of law prevails, the U.S. government works with government officials, human rights and civil society actors, and diplomatic interlocutors to encourage the government to implement meaningful political and economic reforms. U.S. officials, including the chief of mission, meet with political party members (both ruling and opposition), the Supreme Commission on Elections and Referenda (SCER) secretariat, and with members of parliament to advocate for the needed electoral reforms in the run-up to the 2009 parliamentary elections. The U.S. government also supports programs to improve the functioning of the country's democratic political parties, its parliament, and elections. The United States speaks out publicly in support of press freedom and raises violations of this fundamental right with government officials. U.S. officials meet with civil society activists and journalists who support democracy and human rights in an effort to empower their initiatives. In the areas of human development and economic reform, the U.S. government remains particularly focused on anticorruption and poverty reduction efforts. To achieve these goals, the United States coordinates with other major donors to unite in pressing the government to implement its delayed reform commitments and to maximize the benefit of limited resources.

Part 3

The United States implements numerous programs to support democratic principles, practices, and values and human rights. In an effort to promote good governance, the United States supports decentralization at the national and district levels. This resulted in the development of the National Decentralization Strategy (NDS) by the Ministry of Local Administration. The United States provided technical input and supported the initial groundwork for stakeholder discussions held between June and December 2007 on the NDS. The United States is currently implementing an intensive electoral reform program in preparation for the 2009 parliamentary elections, which focuses on increasing the capacity of the electoral commission to implement its responsibilities efficiently and transparently. The program works with the government and the opposition to establish impartial electoral district boundaries and campaign financing regulations, while promoting women's political participation. In March 2008 the ambassador met with the SCER secretariat to encourage its efforts and convey U.S. support for its goal of free and fair elections.

The United States also works to strengthen reform-oriented parliamentarians and political party members. An ongoing U.S. program is designed to enhance the ability of parliamentarians to fight corruption and strengthen their ability to legislate and establish and adhere to sound administrative procedures. The program also focuses on enhancing the electoral competitiveness of political parties through structural and policy development. The United States maintains a dialogue with opposition parties to further promote democratization efforts. For example, in February 2008 the ambassador and other U.S. officials met with the opposition Joint Meeting Parties coalition to hear its views and concerns about the electoral process.

The United States supports programs focused on dispute resolution that assist tribal leaders to resolve longstanding conflicts, promote development in their governorates, and better integrate traditional dispute resolution practices with contemporary forms. The key objective of one such ongoing project is to assist the government, tribal leaders, and other influential social figures in their efforts to resolve longstanding violent conflicts that delay needed reforms. To promote accountability and transparency in government, the United States and the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation are developing new activities to build institutional capacity within the government and selected private institutions and organizations. Activities in this ongoing project include supporting the implementation of reforms designed to strengthen the newly elected High Tender Board, capacity-building for the Supreme National Authority for Combating Corruption, building investigatory capacity in the Central Organization for Control and Audit, and developing media expertise to investigate and report on corruption. This, along with other U.S. anticorruption efforts, helped pass the Public Procurement Law in July 2007. The United States provided technical assistance to the High Tender Board through a U.S. consulting firm to develop procurement by-laws and implement the law.

Part 4

U.S. officials routinely meet with individual journalists who experience harassment and speak out against press freedom abuses. In September 2007 the United States released a press statement decrying harassment of journalists. In January 2008 the ambassador held a press round table with

a group of female journalists from the Media Women Forum to demonstrate publicly U.S. commitment to the essential role played by a free press in a democracy. It also provided an opportunity to praise women's professional contributions and encourage the education of women and girls. The United States also is funding a program aimed to support independent media through an international organization.

The United States actively engages civil society, including journalists, and encourages them to press for needed reforms. The United States continues to support domestic NGOs, specifically focusing on the areas of judicial and political reform, women's political empowerment, and human rights. One program, for example, brings together a group of Imams for training on the values of democracy and human rights. The United States also implements a small grants program aimed at providing capacity-building support to civil society organizations working in a variety of sectors. Through these and various other programs, the United States empowers civil society organizations and improves their capabilities to become a more effective voice in political processes. A long-term U.S.-funded initiative on adult illiteracy is establishing women's literacy classes. In addition, the United States funds an education activity that supports the formation and operation of mother and father councils for schools in the northern governorates.

The United States supports a local NGO in its efforts to implement a project aimed at empowering women economically by providing them with competitive skills.

The United States remains a significant contributor to antitrafficking projects by funding awareness and education programs to combat child trafficking to Saudi Arabia. U.S. funds assist in maintaining a rehabilitation center for children who are repatriated to Yemen. The United States continues to fund programs to combat child labor, an endemic problem in the country. For example, the United States is working with an international organization to provide care for at-risk children and assistance to their families. More than 115,000 Somali and Ethiopian refugees reside in the country, some of whom live in a camp run by the government. The United States provides funding to an international organization to assist these refugees and supports efforts to encourage the government to permit improvements to living conditions in the camp. The United States also provides operational and training support to the Coast Guard in its attempts to target human smugglers crossing the Gulf of Aden while ensuring humane treatment of refugees. In addition, the United States seeks to enhance respect for human rights within all of the country's security agencies through training programs that include human rights components.