

## NGO: EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR LAW AND JUSTICE (ECLJ)

# UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW 46<sup>TH</sup> SESSION

STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF YEMEN FOR THE 46<sup>TH</sup> SESSION OF THE UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW

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#### Introduction

1. The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) is an international, non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights around the world. The ECLJ also holds Special Consultative status before the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This report discusses the status of human rights in the Republic of Yemen (Yemen) for the 46<sup>th</sup> session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

#### **Background**

- 2. Yemen is located in the Middle East and has a population of approximately 31.6 million people. Yemen's official religion is Islam, with 99.1% of the population identifying as such. Religions such as Judaism, Hinduism, and Christianity make up the remaining 0.9 percent. Of the Muslim population, 65% are Sunni and 35% are Shia. In its 2023 World Watch List, Open Doors ranked Yemen as the 3rd worst place for Christians to live in. This ranking stems from the fact that Yemen's laws restrict religious freedom and the presence of militant Islamic groups that target Christians.
- 3. Yemen's previous review was held on January 23, 2019.<sup>7</sup> Yemen supported 201 of the 252 recommendations it received.<sup>8</sup> It was recommended by Italy, and supported by Yemen, that the government "[i]ntensify efforts to protect and promote freedom of religion or belief and the rights of persons belonging to religious minorities." On the issue of child marriage, Yemen received and supported a number of recommendations from Germany, Chile, and France to end child marriage.<sup>10</sup> Further, Yemen received a recommendation from Egypt to "[p]ursue efforts to fight human trafficking." Yemen supported this recommendation as well as the numerous others it received encouraging greater efforts in combating human trafficking.<sup>12</sup>

### **Legal Framework**

## Religious Persecution

- 4. There is no specific provision in the Yemeni Constitution for religious freedom or protection of religious groups. <sup>13</sup> Islam is denoted as the official State religion, <sup>14</sup> and Article 3 names the source of all legislation as Islamic Shariah. <sup>15</sup> Article 52 lists religious education as among the disciplines that Yemeni schools are to teach. <sup>16</sup> In order to serve as a member of the Yemeni House of Representatives, a man must "fulfill his religious duties" among other requirements. <sup>17</sup> Additionally, the President is required to fulfill his "Islamic duties."
- 5. The Yemeni Criminal Code classifies apostasy as a capital offense.<sup>19</sup> The accused is questioned three times as to whether or not they will repent from their actions, then—if the accused has not after a period of 30 days—they are sentenced to death.<sup>20</sup> Imprisonment of up to five years is possible for anyone who "distorts willfully the Holy Quran in a manner which changes its meaning with the purpose of harming the natural Religion [Islam]."<sup>21</sup>

6. Yemen is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).<sup>22</sup> Article 18 of the ICCPR states: "No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice."<sup>23</sup>

#### Child Marriage

- 7. Yemeni law does not have a minimum age requirement for marriage.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, while a male guardian's signature is required in order to ratify a marriage contract, the woman being married does not need to be present at the signing for the contract to take effect.<sup>25</sup>
- 8. Yemen is a party to both the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Article 9 of the CRC defines a child as "every human being below the age of eighteen years," and Article 16 of CEDAW prohibits child marriages. <sup>28</sup>

## Human Trafficking

- 9. Slavery is banned by the Yemeni Constitution.<sup>29</sup> It is punishable by imprisonment of up to ten years.<sup>30</sup> A person who prostitutes someone else out can face imprisonment of up to three years.<sup>31</sup> Someone who prostitutes a minor of fifteen years or younger who is under their guardianship, may face imprisonment of up to ten years.<sup>32</sup> Human trafficking is punishable by five to ten years imprisonment and a fine of at least one hundred thousand Riyals and no more than one million Riyals.<sup>33</sup>
- 10. According to Article 6 of CEDAW, "States Parties shall take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women."<sup>34</sup>
- 11. Further, under Article 8 of the ICCPR, "[n]o one shall be held in slavery; slavery and the slave-trade in all their forms shall be prohibited." Additionally, Article 19 of the CRC requires States Parties to take appropriate measures to "protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse . . . . "36"
- 12. Moreover, Yemen is not a party to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.<sup>37</sup> This Protocol requires that States Parties, among other things, establish polices that prevent and combat human trafficking as well as protect the victims.<sup>38</sup>

#### **Religious Persecution**

- 13. According to Open Doors' World Watch List, Yemen is the third worst country for Christians to live in, surpassed only by Somalia and North Korea.<sup>39</sup> Not only are Christian converts at risk of being ostracized or expelled, they face potential death or imprisonment by families, clans, or tribes.<sup>40</sup> In certain detention centers, Christians have even faced mental or physical torture.<sup>41</sup> Most Christian converts must practice their faith in secret, and even the open display of Christian symbols such as crosses could result in imprisonment, physical abuse, or death.<sup>42</sup>
- 14. In one instance, two Christians, whose faith had become publicly known were stripped of personal belongings such as their vehicle, furniture in their home, and personal savings after their faith was discovered.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, various Christians were detained for faith-related

reasons during 2022.<sup>44</sup> A number of Christians have had to flee Yemen and seek sanctuary in other nearby countries due to fear of assassination.<sup>45</sup> Dozens of Christians have also faced persecution in the form of sexual harassment, kidnapping, rape, or forced marriage.<sup>46</sup>

- The Houthis also pose a significant risk to Christians living in Yemen. The Houthis are Zaydi Shia Muslims who have been engaged in conflict against the Sunni majority government.<sup>47</sup> In April 2022, a cease-fire was negotiated between the Houthis and the Yemeni government.<sup>48</sup> However, it is estimated that approximately 70% to 80% of Yemenis are living in Houthi-controlled areas.<sup>49</sup> Recently, the Houthis have begun targeting Christians more directly.<sup>50</sup> One Christian priest, Musheer Khulaidi, was imprisoned by the Houthis in 2017 and remained imprisoned and was subjected to torture until he was released in February 2021.<sup>51</sup> During that time, he was subject to intermittent torture.<sup>52</sup> His family even refused to communicate with news organizations out of fear of further torture to him.<sup>53</sup>
- 16. Bashir Al-Bakari, another Yemeni Christian was imprisoned for more than two months and was at risk of being executed because he was accused of preaching and spreading Christianity.<sup>54</sup> Despite being released when the charges went unproven, he was subject to numerous social punishments such as ostracization and even death threats.<sup>55</sup> This eventually prompted Al-Bakari to flee the area for his own safety.<sup>56</sup> Following that, officials issued warrants for his arrest and, when unable to find him, they detained his 14-year-old son for a day and later Al-Bakari's brother in an attempt to pressure him into surrendering himself.<sup>57</sup>

#### **Child Marriage**

- 17. Yemen has one of the highest child marriage rates in the world, with thirty-two percent of girls being married before the age of eighteen, while nine percent are married before the age of fifteen. Sh As of 2019, there are four million child brides in Yemen. Sh Of that number, 1.4 million were married before 15 years of age. The intercourse or pregnancy that these young girls often experience soon after marriage can lead to health complications up to and including fatality. It also stifles their educational prospects because parents often pull their daughters out of school to focus on preparing for early marriage. Furthermore, parents are incentivized to marry off their daughters as soon as possible either to ease the financial burden of caring for a girl, or because they receive a sum of money as a bride price.
- 18. When she was only twelve years old, SA found herself engaged—against her will and without her knowledge—to a rich cousin twenty years her senior. ASA says her mother suffered from serious mental illness and believed the only way to secure SA's future was to marry her off at a young age. Soon after she took her place as her cousin's second wife, her mother passed away leaving her with only her husband to rely on. Her husband became abusive before long, and took to dragging her around their house in a collar, beating her with a stick until she would lose consciousness, and chaining her up to a pillar. After two years of this abuse, SA fled to stay with her older sister, though still fearing retribution from her husband. Eventually, in October 2020 he came to reclaim her by force and when she resisted he threw what doctors believe to be sulfuric acid at her face. Though she has undergone numerous skin grafts and other procedures, she still suffers from severe burns and psychological trauma. When asked her thoughts on her own story, she replied: "What happened to me is what other women also went through... [w]e're not slaves. No matter how young we are, we all have our own thoughts."
- 19. The biggest roadblock to establishing a minimum age for marriage has come from the Sharia Legislative Committee. Since 2009, the Sharia Legislative Committee has blocked two proposals that attempted to establish a legal minimum age for marriage. The stable of the

#### **Human Trafficking**

- 20. Yemen's information minister, Muammar Al-Eryani, is quoted as saying, "[the Houthi militia's] policy of child soldier recruitment, disappearance of women in secret prisons, sexual abuse, enforced waves of internal and external displacements, and high rates of poverty and unemployment, have made the areas under Houthi control the largest hotbeds of human trafficking in the world." <sup>74</sup> Due to the ongoing civil war in Yemen, obtaining precise numbers as to the level of human trafficking is difficult. <sup>75</sup> Furthermore, because of Saudi Arabia's thriving economy, many migrants from various countries attempt to travel there for better economic prospects. <sup>76</sup> While doing so, they pass through Yemen and put themselves at the mercy of smugglers and traffickers to attempt the voyage. <sup>77</sup>
- 21. Ras Al-Arah has become a haven for human traffickers and serves as an entry point due to its proximity to the Bab Al-Mandab Strait. In this region, African migrants are held captive by human traffickers in warehouses where they are beaten, raped, and denied food and clothing in order to extort ransom money from their families. In August 2023, authorities in Lahih province conducted a security campaign to target human and drug trafficking along the Red Sea's coastal area of Ras Al-Arah. Over two days, authorities were able to free 450 African migrants who were being held in dilapidated shacks as well as arrested fifty-two suspected smugglers. Local security leader, Brig. Ja'ar Al-Kalwli, stated that his forces would continue to conduct patrols in the area in order to locate more smugglers. Yemen's success in combatting human traffic relies on whether or not the government commits to continue conducting these types of operations in order to protect victims and arrest perpetrators.
- 22. Another victim of human trafficking is a woman named Zahra. <sup>83</sup> As she struggled to the shore of Yemen, she found herself in the power of a trafficking group nicknamed by locals *Abdul-Qawi*: The Worshippers of the Strong. <sup>84</sup> She and the three hundred other migrants she traveled with were driven to a ramshackle compound outside of a coastal town called Ras al-Ara. <sup>85</sup> Instead of being given passage to Saudi Arabia, she and the other female migrants were imprisoned and raped nightly by these traffickers for over a month. <sup>86</sup> The traffickers forced them to make daily phone calls to their families pleading for \$2,000 as ransom money. <sup>87</sup>
- 23. The Yemeni government does little to nothing about these traffickers, allowing trucks full of migrants to pass completely unchallenged through military checkpoints for a simple bribe. Representation of prolific traffickers in their communities by name. The male victims also suffer extreme mistreatment with one man being so badly beaten that his leg had to be amputated. Many of the migrants are also intentionally starved, with Zahra herself suffering malnutrition, rashes, diarrhea, and vomiting. Eventually, the traffickers gave up on getting ransom money for her and let her go to make room for more trafficking victims.
- 24. Furthermore, trafficking in persons in Yemen manifests in the uncommon form of child soldiers. Since the start of the civil war in 2014, the use of child soldiers has grown to be used by every major military group and militia in Yemen including the official government. <sup>93</sup> The Houthi armed group *Ansar Allah* alone has recruited and utilized thousands of child soldiers. <sup>94</sup> Despite promises to the U.N. to end child recruitment, they have used images of armed children in uniform as propaganda and have recruited hundreds of children just in 2022. <sup>95</sup> Wielding a gun is seen as a symbol of power and prestige, which is often used to entice fifteen and sixteen year olds into these armed forces. <sup>96</sup> But one of the greatest unifying factors among child soldiers is that they all tend to come from destitute and starving families. <sup>97</sup> These children are lured with the promise of 20,000 Yemeni rials as well as accommodations and other benefits. <sup>98</sup> Children believe that this will allow them to improve their economic prospects and be able to send money to their families. <sup>99</sup>

25. Sadly, "[a]lthough the enrollment of children into the armed forces and/or various militias now involved in Yemen's conflict is deplorable, it does not quite cover the extent of Yemen's trafficking crisis. . . . "100 Girls as young as fifteen have been exploited in commercial sex hotels and clubs in places like Aden. Some Saudi men have contracted "temporary marriages" with girls as young as ten. These girls are sold to them out of Yemen and some later end up abandoned on the streets of Saudi Arabia. Describing the rampant sale of children into sex slavery, an anonymous former official under the Mayor of Aden said "this happens in refugee camps, villages . . . everywhere, and there is nothing we can do to stop them because [the militias] control everything in the south." Furthermore, despite the blockade that Yemen is under, ships engaged in human trafficking are often ignored. They are even given occasional military escorts as they carry trafficked children to the Gulf countries. Because of the impunity and anonymity all the conflict affords, Yemen has become a human trafficking haven for not just Saudi Arabia but much of the Middle East. 107

#### Recommendations

- 26. Yemen should act in greater congruence to the numerous international agreements that prohibit religious discrimination and persecution and pursue greater religious liberty for its non-Muslim citizens especially Christians who face the worst treatment. Religious liberty is the root of every thriving society and if Yemen wants to take strides in that regard, it should follow suit.
- 27. Yemen should prohibit child marriage as well as set a minimum age requirement for marriage in order to help protect its young girls from the many negative side effects of early marriage and put a stop to the stifling of education for these young kids.
- 28. Yemen should take steps to end the rampant human trafficking taking place within its borders by more robust anti-trafficking legislation as well as greater enforcement of the laws currently in force. Further, efforts and resources should be directed towards the Ras Al-Arah area which is known to be a major hub for human trafficking. Additionally, Yemen should prohibit the act of child soldier recruitment and immediately cease their use of child soldiers in their own military to protect children from the horrors of war and attempt to raise up a thriving generation free from such tragedies. Further, we ask that Yemen ratify the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and immediately begin implementing its policies to protect victims and prosecute traffickers.

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 $<sup>^{2}</sup>$  Id.

 $<sup>^{3}</sup>$  Id.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> *Id*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> World Watch List 2023, OPEN DOORS, https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/ (last visited Aug. 31, 2023).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Yemen, OPEN DOORS, (last visited Aug. 31, 2023).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> *Universal Periodic Review*– *Yemen*, OHCHR, https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/ye-index (last visited July 25, 2023).

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<sup>14</sup> Id. art. 2.
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<sup>16</sup> Id. art. 54
<sup>17</sup> Id. art. 64.
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<sup>27</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child art. 9. adopted Nov. 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3.
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<sup>28</sup> Id.
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<sup>36</sup> CRC art. 19, supra note 27.
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