

Chapter 4

Women's Participation in the Political Process

A. Introduction

Yemeni political leaders, almost universally male, frequently refer with pride to the legal provisions that guarantee women equal access to the political process. Compared to nearby states in the Arabian peninsula, Yemen's political process in 1993 can indeed be characterized as relatively inclusive. For example, Saudi Arabia and most of the Gulf states have never conducted a participatory election. Kuwait has held parliamentary elections, most recently in 1992, although women are not allowed to vote and only a minority of their adult male counterparts possess this right. Numerous facts, however, indicate that the formal equality provided in Yemen's election law is not fully realized in practice.

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Very few women occupy leadership positions in Yemen. No women served on the post-unification five-member Presidential Council or were named to ministerial positions. Only a few women currently serve as deputy ministers. Ten women served in the 301-member transitional parliament (established upon the merger of North and South Yemen in 1990), although they were selected in the non-competitive single-party elections conducted in the pre-unification South. The 17-member Supreme Election Committee (SEC), which was created to administer the legislative elections, included only one female member. In addition, only one woman (in the city of Ibb) was named to the three-member supervisory committees established by the SEC in each of the 18 governorates.

Women's participation in the April 27 elections was modest. Less than 500,000 women registered to vote as compared to more than 2 million men. (See Appendix XXV.) This figure suggests that only 16 to 20 percent of eligible women registered. By contrast, an estimated 87 percent of eligible men registered to vote. Only two women won seats; both were elected from areas of the former South Yemen where the Yemeni Socialist Party remains strong.

In general, female candidates were not supported by the principal political parties. On the initial list of registered candidates for parliament (before many candidates withdrew their names), only 44 of the approximately 4,000 candidates were women. The majority of these few women were independents, presenting themselves to the voters without any organizational backing or noteworthy financing. Of the three major parties, the People's General Congress (PGC) nominated two women, the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) nominated four women and the al-Islah party nominated none. Interestingly, the traditional Islamist party, al-Islah, organized women to register and to vote more assiduously and more effectively than any other party, while at the same time making clear to their supporters that women ought not present themselves as candidates for office. Indeed, leaders of al-Islah told women voters in public meetings that to vote for women would be "un-Islamic."

B. The Survey Mission

In order to understand this aspect of democratic development in Yemen, NDI organized a pre-election assessment to explore the participation of women in Yemen's political process. The mission

took place from March 30 to April 7. The specific objectives of the survey mission were: 1) to determine the extent and quality of female involvement in the formal political process; 2) to identify and analyze political and socio-economic factors that impede women's active involvement in the political process; 3) to inquire about indigenous organizations that promote women's inclusion in Yemeni politics and civic life; and 4) to determine the potential for coordination among NDI, the international community and Yemenis in order to enable women to enjoy more fully their rights as citizens. (See Appendix XXVI.)

The assessment mission comprised Farida Rahman, a member of Parliament from Bangladesh; Chilufya Kapwepwe, a member of Parliament from Zambia; Patricia Reilly, a former senior attorney at the Federal Election Commission and deputy legal counsel to the 1992 Clinton-Gore campaign from the United States; Emine Usakligil, business development manager of the Istanbul Film Agency and former managing director of the *Cumhuriyet* newspaper from Turkey; and Yesim Arat, associate professor of political science from Bogazici University in Turkey. Accompanying the delegation were Melissa A. Estok, who had previously visited Yemen twice for NDI, and NDI Program Assistant Palmer Kiperman. Fatima al-Huraibi, assistant to the president of Yemen's Agricultural Cooperative Union, served as interpreter and advisor to the NDI team.

The NDI team spoke with a wide range of individuals and organizations. Those interviewed included: government and election officials; leaders of the People's General Congress (PGC); leaders of the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP); leaders of several small parties; female independent and political party candidates; members of the Yemen Women's Union; journalists; voter registration committee members; and many female citizens, some of whom had registered to vote and some who had not. The NDI team conducted interviews in the capital of Sana'a, the southern cities of Taiz and Ibb, and the village of Khowlan. (See Appendix XXVII.)

A set of six general questions formed the core of the interview format. (See Appendix XXVIII.) These questions related to women's impressions of the electoral process as a whole; women's participation in the registration process; the extent to which women currently occupy leadership positions and the obstacles to their attainment of such positions; and the impact that the movement

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toward a multiparty, democratic political system in Yemen would have on women.

The all-female composition of the NDI delegation and the use of a female Yemeni interpreter elicited a frankness and candor by the women interviewed not always manifest with men present. Moreover, three of the international visitors were Muslims from predominantly Muslim countries. Many women remain fully veiled in the presence of men, but with the NDI team they were able to remove their veils to share tea or a meal and speak openly about their experiences. These conditions greatly enhanced personal communication.

Among the sensitive topics discussed were physical and psychological repercussions experienced by women for their participation in the election process, whether as candidates, registration officials or voters; discrimination directed against women in the work place; and the impact on women of the recently enacted Personal Status Law, Presidential Decree No. 20, which outlined terms for family law in unified Yemen. The NDI team was persuaded that many women would have been reluctant to discuss these issues had male colleagues or family members attended the interviews or if men had been members of the international delegation.

The presence of three Muslims on the NDI delegation contributed an understanding and affinity otherwise not possible. They had struggled individually with issues relating to Islamic law in the context of democratizing political systems in their own countries and could share their impressions with Yemeni women. In Bangladesh, for example, a woman has been prime minister since 1991, while another woman is leader of the parliamentary opposition. Moreover, delegation members' experiences with Islamic law lent credibility to the delegation and provided a level of comfort for the Yemeni women to express themselves. The Yemeni women recognized that the delegates had shared similar experiences and were therefore more willing to discuss Islamic law as it is applied in their society.

Yemeni women expressed appreciation for the opportunity to meet and learn from such a wide range of female leaders from abroad. A group of female teachers in the city of Taiz, while offering various perspectives on the situation of women in Yemen,

also thoughtfully questioned the international visitors about their lives and status. The answers prompted revealing statements. One of the teachers exclaimed, "It is so good for us to know that we are not alone." She was extremely enthusiastic to spend more time "learning from the experience of women in other countries." It was clear that most Yemeni women enjoy very few opportunities to meet people from other nations.

Women and the Electoral Process

The April 27 elections were regarded by all of those interviewed as an important first step toward building accountable, responsive democracy in Yemen. In general, Yemenis were optimistic that democracy would bring about a positive change and that life would improve. When asked to discuss problems, though, several matters arose repeatedly. Women who were interested in the process almost universally believed that a large part of the election results had been pre-determined during negotiations among the principal political parties. In this respect, as in some other ways, women seemed as informed and opinionated as many men.

The women interviewed by the NDI team expressed differing views toward the pre-election negotiations. One woman was comforted by her belief that "the PGC and the YSP are responsible for unification and the election process. There exists some agreement. They will solve problems together." In contrast, another woman referred to the electoral process as "children's play" and argued that "nothing is going to change. The only outcome is that they [political parties] have divided the country." There was also a strong sentiment that districts were drawn and the military was mobilized to favor the ruling parties. These allegations notwithstanding, women expressed pride in the process as an essential learning experience for Yemenis. As one civic leader observed, "People have big hopes for the election. They are ignoring corruption because they believe after the election things will be different."

The election law, which was drafted by a transitional parliament and approved by the Presidential Council on June 8, 1992, stipulates that women have the right to vote and to be candidates. At the initiative of the parliamentary deputies of al-Islah, who persuaded the legislature to amend the election law before final enactment, the SEC was directed to provide separate registration committees and polling

sites for women. Article 5 of the election law states that the SEC "shall take all appropriate measures to encourage women to exercise their voting rights and shall set up women's committees that shall be entrusted with registering the names of female voters..." As suggested by this excerpt (and many discussions with male and female Yemenis), the premise of this modification was to facilitate the participation of women by segregating them from men. Otherwise, it was asserted that women would have been reluctant to stand with men in the same registration and voting lines or to have their photographs stored alongside those of men.

Many women maintained that the greatest achievement of the election process was the formal incorporation of women into the election law, even while practical problems remained to inhibit full participation. The election system provided women with a legal guarantee of equal status that they rarely enjoy in other fields of endeavor. Before the 1993 elections, women in North Yemen were permitted to vote but not to be candidates. (Though one woman did register herself as a candidate for the General Assembly in 1988 as a form of protest.) In South Yemen, women were allowed to run for seats in the legislature, as well as to vote, although voter preference and meaningful choice played no role in these Soviet-style one-party elections.

There was significant concern expressed during interviews that women were not knowledgeable voters. One factor limiting access to information was the high rate of illiteracy among women. Official estimates suggest that 85 percent of women are illiterate, compared with 46 percent of men. Thus, most women are unable to read the growing number of party newspapers that have appeared in recent years, significantly negating much of the potential utility of press freedoms that emerged following unification.

A second factor restricting more political awareness by women relates to informal political debate conducted at meetings where *qat*, a plant chewed for its stimulating effect, is used. The *qat* session is a daily social ritual in which virtually all Yemeni men participate. Much of the pre-election discourse took place at afternoon *qat* sessions, from which women are almost universally excluded. During the gatherings politics is discussed; and a great amount of business, both informal and formal, is conducted. Though women do

chew *qat*, it is not as pervasive a habit as with men; and it is practiced in all-female groups.

Voter Registration

As previously stated, fewer than 500,000 women registered to vote, which represents between 16 and 20 percent of the eligible female voting population. Almost everyone interviewed, both women and men, characterized this percentage as significant and positive considering these were the first multiparty elections for the newly unified country. The registration of women, therefore, was perceived as a glass 20 percent full rather than 80 percent empty. Nonetheless, there is evidence that the rate of participation could have been significantly higher if the SEC and political leaders had made a concerted effort to encourage women's participation in the electoral process.

Levels of female registration varied among governorates throughout the country. For example, in the southern cities of Aden and Taiz, women accounted for 35 percent and 20 percent of registered voters respectively. However, in the northern city of Hajja, the number of females who registered represented only 9 percent. In Sadah this figure was 3 percent. A more conservative, tribal culture in Hajja and Sadah may partially explain the variance, but figures in nearby constituencies within the same governorates were equally discordant. Within some districts in the governorate of Taiz, for instance, female registration reached 30 percent, whereas only 5 percent of eligible female voters registered in other districts.

The NDI delegation concluded that efforts by certain political parties and candidates to recruit female voters represented the strongest determinant in creating the disparate registration levels within a governorate. Yemeni women frequently mentioned al-Islah as the most active and effective party in this respect. Some such initiatives were clearly permitted under the law, while others appeared to violate the election code. Frequently, the "get-out-the-vote" efforts depended on the passivity, compliance or ignorance of the women involved. The NDI team heard from registration officials, two female independent candidates and an eligible voter that the three major political parties (most frequently al-Islah) had purchased thousands of citizen identification cards from Civil Ministry employees who had personal affiliations with the various parties.

Eventually, these cards were used to illegally register both men and women who were either from another district or under the legal voting age.

Two different groups of women who had worked as officials at registration sites told stories about women who were bused to sites to register. Though female registration officials recognized that these women either were not from the district or were younger than the legal voting age, men accompanying the women, often a village leader or a political party representative, insisted they be registered. The registration officials complied.

One group of female registration officials who had worked in a district outside of Sana'a strongly believed that the majority of women who registered were manipulated by either the political parties or candidates. They related accounts of women asking where they could pick up food rations that had been promised to them in exchange for registering. Other women arrived at the registration center prepared to vote for a certain candidate, whose name their husband or father had given them. A third group of women, government workers, were allegedly told by superiors in the work place that their salaries would be withheld until they produced proof of registration.

All of these accounts suggest that the low level of comprehension of the election process by women may have made the exercise less than meaningful for them even when they did participate. While the same is true of many men, it does seem that women were more vulnerable to manipulation and misunderstanding due to their disadvantaged social status.

Mobilizing citizens to vote is a standard campaign endeavor. Nonetheless, evidence suggests that many Yemeni women voted solely at the prompting of other people or parties and not as a free expression of interest or preference. Al-Islah successfully recruited female members to vote but later asked its women members to withdraw their candidacies as well as their support for other female candidates. One al-Islah leader, with whom the NDI team met, proudly spoke of the party's success in involving large numbers of women in the political process. Upon hearing that claim, a female civic leader claimed that al-Islah "merely used the women as tools."

The women who worked on registration committees often faced significant obstacles, beginning with the manner in which they were

trained. Male registration officials were trained directly by government officials. These local men were in turn asked to teach the women. Women interviewed believed that their training, once removed from the professional source, was of lower quality than that provided to men. Two women also told the NDI delegation that they were threatened with the loss of their jobs if they worked on the committees. Several female registration officials stated that they had tolerated verbal harassment from soldiers stationed at registration sites. Incidents of physical violence against women at two sites in the Sana'a area were also reported.

After assessing the barriers to women's registration, the NDI delegation divided them into two categories, institutional and cultural. Institutional impediments arise from the structure of the election system itself. Cultural obstacles relate variously to misogynous interpretations of religious tradition, tribal customs, and habits of social and economic organization.

Institutional Obstacles to Women's Participation as Voters

It is not clear whether the separate facilities legally prescribed for women's participation in the elections would necessarily encourage or discourage female participation. The delegation heard conflicting views, although most people agreed that there is a comfort level associated with gender segregation that probably would have eased women into the process. However, it was equally clear that separate was not equal. In fact, the provision of opportunity to women was distinctly inferior to the opportunity afforded to men.

Many registration centers for women opened after more than two weeks into the four-week registration period, and some sites were not established until three days before the period ended. The tardy opening of women's registration sites undoubtedly led to lower female participation than would have otherwise been the case.

When asked about this belatedness, two members of the SEC acknowledged the problem. By way of explanation they told the delegation that they "were not able to recruit an adequate number of women" to staff the registration sites. However, the Yemen Women's Union and some of the political parties claimed they had submitted to the SEC lists of "hundreds of women" who were willing to work on the registration process. Staffing a registration site was a popular job, as it included a daily salary regarded quite ample by

Yemeni standards. Apparently, very few of these women had been contacted by the SEC officials. One female member of the YSP asserted that the "SEC has played a great role in inhibiting women's participation in the process." This statement reflects the attitude of a large number of women interviewed toward the SEC's role in administering the elections.

One member of the SEC affirmed that women's registration was not a priority for the majority of SEC members and suspected that ulterior motives caused the procedural delay. Three female candidates interviewed by the delegation alleged that, by the time the SEC was politically forced to address the problem (in part because the SEC and the government were embarrassed by international scrutiny), the funds originally allocated for this purpose had already been spent.

The majority of urban women interviewed characterized as ineffective the SEC's attempt to use the media to encourage women's participation. Moreover, women from rural areas told the NDI delegation that they were completely uninformed about the registration process; they did not know where, how or why to register. Even those who reported having seen the television appeals targeted to women considered them too infrequent and unconvincing. One independent candidate wrote a newspaper article questioning the SEC's sincerity. She urged SEC members and political party leaders to put their own wives and daughters on television as examples of women's participation. Her entreaty went unheeded.

A modest grassroots effort to encourage women to vote was initiated by the Yemen Women's Union. The leadership instructed branch leaders to talk to women about registration, but the officials told the NDI delegation that "funding was limited, and we could not do what was needed for women."

The great distances required of citizens to travel to reach registration sites posed an additional obstacle to women's registration. Each constituency, averaging 21,000 eligible voters, comprised four to six registration centers, usually located in schools or other public buildings. The complaint about inferior proximity and accessibility was repeated by men as well as women. However, given the cultural restraints imposed upon women's mobility outside the home, the faraway sites undoubtedly affected women's registration more than men's.

The requirement that two photographs be taken of each registrant represented another important procedural barrier to women's registration. The election law requires that one photo be provided for the identification card. Instant cameras were part of the registration equipment, and photos were taken on-site. However, due to the short period of time remaining before the April 27 elections, the SEC required registrars to produce two photos. One was to be used as a temporary registration card, which was to remain with the voter to be used on election day. The other photo was to be kept with the SEC in order to be used when issuing permanent registration cards for future elections.

There exists in Yemen a rigid social stigma against photographing women, most of whom customarily wear full veils, (*lithma*), in public. Rumors spread about possible "abuses" that could occur with the extra SEC photo. One woman told the delegation, "Most husbands will not even allow the names of their wives to be uttered in conversation. How can we expect them to accept that their wife's picture will be taken and kept in an unknown place?"

An SEC official who spoke with the NDI team claimed that the extra picture issue was an irrelevant matter. She explained that men do not object to the photographs of their wives required for driver's licenses or passports. She suggested that the same parties that mobilized women to register simultaneously spread rumors about the photos so that other parties would bar their female relatives and associates from registering to vote.

Cultural Obstacles to Women's Participation as Voters

The cultural obstacles to the registration of women, as well as to any kind of political participation by women, were extensive. One female independent candidate told the NDI team that "traditions are against women. I am treated like a citizen from the second degree, although this is not written anywhere." This perception of inferiority, recognized by both men and women, affects not only the role of women in society but also relations between men and women. Since cultural traditions forbid virtually any male-female interaction in the public realm, women are excluded and ultimately isolated from many aspects of civic and political life. "People are still not convinced that

women should have lives outside of their home," professed one female member of the PGC.

Public segregation of men and women forces women to seek authority and respect in the private domain; the role of women in society is confined to domestic activities. Social networks are important channels through which women define and implement their role. These networks, such as neighborhood groups and *qat* sessions, are frequently based on friendship and familial relations. It is within this context that women are able to express their authority and articulate their opinions. One independent female candidate dismissed her husband as "no good" when describing the management of her household. However, given the cultural restrictions placed on male-female relations in public, "men can not even say women are qualified, even when the men think the women are. People would say 'there is a love affair.' People are afraid of rumors."

Not surprisingly, the NDI team noted a feeling of indifference toward the electoral process among many of the women interviewed. Many did not feel included in the process, nor did they believe that they would be affected by it. As one woman put it, "Why should women be any more involved in the elections than they are in making decisions in their own homes — or anywhere else in this country?"

A government official, who surveyed women in villages where she works, recounted the most common reason given by women for not registering: "My husband is away. I cannot register without his permission. He would divorce me." Indeed, the NDI team was told of three cases in Taiz where husbands divorced their wives because the women had registered without spousal permission. Many women who registered of their own accord spoke about the physical and mental repercussions of taking such a step. The chairman of an SEC supervisory committee in Ibb summed up the situation when he noted, "There is a perception that women are involved in domestic work and do not have time to think about political activities. The husband's responsibility is to participate in the political process for both of them."

Women in Leadership

Discussions regarding women currently in leadership positions provoked references to several female leaders of the Arab world including Yemen. Yemen's first female ruler was Queen Belgiza of

Sheba who ruled approximately 2,000 years ago. Her belief in the democratic principle of popular participation led to the establishment of an informal consultative structure of government; citizens were consulted before policy decisions were made. Another well-known female leader was A'isha, the wife of the Prophet Mohammed. After the death of the Prophet, A'isha led an armed revolt in AD 632 against the caliph who ruled at that time. Her leadership skills eventually contributed to the downfall of the fourth caliph during what is called the "Battle of the Camel," referring to the camel ridden by A'isha. These women, historically significant in Yemen, demonstrate that women not only have rights but also serve as reminders of strong female leadership.

Though *sharia* (Islamic law) does not explicitly prohibit women from holding leadership positions in Yemeni society, it is undeniable that impediments exist. The 1993 elections reduced the number of women in parliament from 10 to two, a common phenomenon internationally when countries move from one-party systems to multiparty elections. There are no female ministers or deputy ministers; women have only been appointed to the level of assistant deputy minister. There are several female judges in southern Yemen but none in northern Yemen, and there is apparently only one practicing female lawyer in northern Yemen.

Many Yemenis attribute the under-representation of women in positions of leadership to the conservative, tribal social structure. Most women, particularly in northern Yemen are not encouraged to complete their education, a status that disqualifies them from many jobs. Promoting education for women was a government priority in the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the South, although that commitment is not yet apparent in the unified government. Even for women who do join political, professional or civic organizations, domestic responsibilities often preclude qualified women from seeking leadership positions. Several women spoke of the reluctance on the part of many men to associate professionally with women in the work place due to a social stigma that discourages friendships between unrelated men and women.

Once women attain certain positions of leadership, cultural tradition often limits their effectiveness. For instance, SEC meetings conducted during Ramadan did not include the only female member of the Committee. These meetings were held either after dark when

women generally do not leave their homes or during *qat* sessions from which, as previously stated, women are effectively excluded.

Male political party leaders often argue that women “choose” not to seek positions of leadership in politics, despite male support and encouragement. A PGC leader and member of the Presidential Council reiterated this view to the NDI delegation. Even though Yemen’s constitution grants equal access to all professions, the political parties do not appreciate that they should, nor do they understand how they can, increase women’s participation. The PGC, for instance, nominated only the two women, whom they “thought would have a chance to win.” However, the PGC also requested that several high-ranking female members of the party withdraw their candidacies in other districts on the grounds that “the competition would be too much trouble for them.” A leader of the al-Islah party was ambivalent about the necessity of including women in leadership positions. He explained, “Women don’t have to be in the party leadership to be taken care of.” Even high officials of the avowedly egalitarian Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) appeared to share the view that women should not be exposed to the rough and tumble of electoral politics.

When asked whether the YSP would present women as candidates, one senior official responded in the affirmative (at which point his wife, who was present, smiled in amusement and apparent disbelief). He then offered a caveat. The YSP would only nominate women in those districts where they stood a good chance to win — so as not to subject women to “the humiliation of failure.” In response to further questioning, the official then said that he did not think women stood a good chance in urban areas, nor in rural areas — and he could not identify one place where he believed that a woman could realistically expect to win a competitive election.

PGC leaders who spoke with the NDI delegation lauded their own party’s support for several independent female candidates, one of whom the delegation subsequently interviewed. She explained, however, that the PGC’s “support” was a simple agreement whereby the party would allow her to be a candidate and not directly attack her. Meanwhile, the PGC nominated a male candidate in the same district, and provided him with both political and financial support. This male candidate eventually won more than 50 percent of the vote,

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whereas the independent female candidate "supported" by the PGC won less than 2 percent.

Deciding whether or not to run for parliament was a difficult choice for Yemen's few prominent women, as the prospects of winning a seat were remote. They were openly discouraged by party leaders from running on the party lists, which obliged them to run as independents relying on personal resources. One independent female candidate, when acknowledging the support of her husband, told the NDI team, "If I win a seat in parliament, at least he will know where I am everyday." Women who have some experience in public affairs expressed frustration. They professed: "If I'm not going to win, why should I contest?" and "The effect is minimal compared to the effort. I'm tired." At the same time, men of promise and prominence were actively recruited by the principal parties to align with them rather than contest the elections as independents.

Several female candidates, however, told the NDI team that they were involved principally to demonstrate that women were interested and able. If women declined the challenge at this juncture, they insisted, male leaders would label them passive. One said, "Women should have stood as candidates as a principle — even if they thought they would lose." Two others proclaimed, "If we are still living, next time we will run for local council."

Some male leaders interviewed by the delegation insist that there are currently no women who are experienced and well-educated enough for high-level positions. However, several women with whom the delegation met, claimed that they frequently possessed higher formal qualifications and more years of experience than their male superiors at the government departments or ministries where they work.

Several women interviewed spoke of tokenism as a tactic used by the current political leaders to appease local and international groups concerned about the meager representation of women in leadership positions. Indeed, when the NDI delegation broached the subject of barriers to women's political leadership, male leaders tended to recite the names of the same four or five women as proof that there are no obstacles other than "Yemeni cultural backwardness" and that the majority of women "are not used to" or "not qualified for" such work. But several women countered that argument by explaining that "80 percent of the problem [impediments

to women in leadership] is tradition. Men don't want their women to work, to leave the house." Those women who do hold leadership positions are perceived to be part of the "democratic decoration." One female civic leader complained, "I don't want to be part of the decor. I want my real rights." Another civic leader, who had watched parliament in session on television for six weeks and never heard a woman speak, lamented, "I can do more for women in the field than those women sitting in parliament."

The NDI delegation explored with the Yemen Women's Union the possibility of the Union serving as a potential voice for the particular interests of women and as a source of female political leaders. Before unification, the Yemen Women's Union in the North comprised a loose configuration of politically and economically disparate groups. The structure of the Yemen Women's Union in the South, however, was more cohesive. It occupied ministry status, and its executive board enjoyed full-time, paid positions. The leadership was both appointed and supervised by the governing party. Although the board designed projects to meet the needs of women and solicited funding from international development organizations, it was greatly influenced by the governing Yemeni Socialist Party.

At times this arrangement was viewed in a positive light. For example, the Union worked in conjunction with the YSP to implement projects for women such as conducting literacy campaigns and establishing technical training and skills/crafts centers. On other occasions, the Union was constrained and regulated by the YSP and was unable to act independently. The YSP was successful, however, in encouraging women to participate and to become actively involved in the Union's activities, which gave credence to its work. It is important to note that despite the active involvement of many citizens, the leadership of the Yemen Women's Union was never democratically elected.

Since unification, the potential power and influence of the Yemen Women's Union has been steadily reduced by the political parties. A long-time member of the Union sadly reported, "We lost many things after unification." Women who formerly served in the leadership of the Women's Union in the South were dispersed among various ministries. The Union was placed under the control of the Ministry of Planning and the Ministry of Social Affairs, through which the executive board must channel all activities and requests for

international assistance. The Ministry of Planning administered new elections for the unified Union. Several members claimed that the results of these elections were predetermined and were conducted in the presence of a selected audience. In order to address the threats to the integrity of the organization, one woman argued, "The leadership of the Yemen Women's Union has to be changed and selected by the women in the Union at the grassroots level."

Islamic Law, Democracy and Women

Islamic law (*sharia*) is explicitly the foundation for Yemen's judicial system. Yemen's leaders interpret the *sharia* to formulate laws and define the legal rights of the citizen. The fact that Yemen's leadership is universally male means that women generally do not have a voice in influencing the way the *sharia* is interpreted and hence do not participate in shaping their own legal rights. In fact, the increasingly restrictive interpretation of the *sharia* by the government may be the dominant factor limiting women from full participation in Yemeni civic and political life.

Specific to Islamic law, the NDI delegation was interested in learning women's opinions on two questions: Can there be democracy in an Islamic state? In an Islamic state, could or should the *sharia* be interpreted in a more egalitarian manner than is currently realized in Yemen?

One woman interviewed held that Islamic law itself subjugates women and, for this reason, there could be no genuine democracy in Muslim Yemen. Yet, only one woman of the dozens interviewed directly criticized the negative effects of Islamic law on women. Neither men nor women were prepared to discuss the sociological implications of Islam with respect to the role of women in society and politics. When a member of the delegation asked a Yemeni woman for her opinion on polygamy she turned to her friend and asked, "Why is she pressing on with polygamy, what has it got to do with political participation?"

The vast majority of those interviewed maintained that democracy is possible in an Islamic state. However, they agreed that the type of democracy would depend on the interpretation of the *sharia* used to formulate law. An independent female candidate for parliament offered, "The *sharia* originally meant justice for all, but now it needs reinterpretation."

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Many women believe that Islam is, and can be, flexible with respect to specific policy issues. They acknowledge that the *sharia* has been interpreted differently throughout the world. They believe that, if there were to emerge a popular consensus regarding equal rights for women, the *sharia* can and should accommodate popular opinion.

It is important to note that official interpretations of the *sharia* have varied throughout Yemeni history. Many male and female Yemenis interviewed mentioned that a tendency toward religious conservatism in northern Yemen has been increasingly apparent since the 1979 revolution in Iran. The more frequent use of the veil by women represents the most obvious manifestation of this direction. Government and religious leaders strongly encouraged the use of the veil through the educational system and television. Simultaneously in the South, the opposite was being promoted as the communist government encouraged women to remove the veil. Since unification, northern influences have dominated the cultural climate, and more and more young women wear veils.

During NDI's various meetings in Aden and elsewhere in southern Yemen, it was not uncommon for mother and daughter to arrive together, the mother in Western clothing with no veil and the daughter fully covered. Women who were once influential government officials from the South arrived to work in the unified government in the new capital of Sana'a only to find that they were expected to conform to new, conservative standards of dress and demeanor. One female government official from South Yemen recounted the extensive harassment she encountered in the work place when she began a job in northern Yemen in 1990; until she relented, stopped wearing makeup and put on the veil.

Before unification, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDY) established a Family Law that delineated conditions for marriage contracts. This law prohibited pre-arranged marriages by the parents of the bride-to-be. The bride was required to be at least 16 years old at the time of marriage, and the groom was to be at least 18 and not more than 20 years older than the bride. This law also obliged the registration of marriages, limited the price charged for the bride and restricted polygamy. The husband's right to divorce his wife by simple repudiation was abolished, and grounds for divorce were equalized for husbands and wives. Finally, divorced mothers

gained the right to retain custody of their children until the son was at least 10 years old and the daughter at least 15 years old, at which time the courts could ascertain the child's wishes in the matter.

In May 1992, the unified Presidential Council under President Saleh bypassed the legislature and issued a Personal Status Law, Republican Decree No. 20. This law revoked a woman's right to sue for divorce unless she could prove that her husband was abusive (though many women related accounts of a woman waiting years for the court to make a decision only to have her request be denied); allowed husbands to divorce their wives without justifying it to the court (and in some cases of divorce, the family home and children are automatically awarded to the husband); re-introduced the acceptance of polygamy; and eliminated the PDRY ceiling on the price of the bride. Various parliamentarians and jurists objected to this decree, as well as to the manner of its enactment, which prompted a curious instance of civil disobedience by judges. A group of jurists from Aden in Southern Yemen refused to implement the law and questioned the constitutionality of the decree.

Interpretations of the *sharia* adopted in Iran, Turkey, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh and other Muslim countries were discussed during interviews with the NDI delegation. They were all viewed by Yemeni women differently — too strict, too lenient, or inappropriate for Yemen's situation. Several Yemeni women referred vaguely to "enlightened interpretations" of the *sharia* that encourage women to participate in political life. But efforts to ascertain what these enlightened interpretations could mean to specific issues in Yemen led to vague discussions.

While examining the topic of the *sharia* as it affects women's rights, one male leader of al-Islah repeated several times that "there would be no debate if only everyone understood the true meaning of the *sharia*." Yet he was unable to explain who should interpret the *sharia* and whether one interpretation should prevail over another. He was also unclear about how the "true meaning" of the *sharia* would affect women. However, his answers to a series of questions implied that the status of women would most likely worsen. For instance, when pressed about the issue of divorce rights, the political leader acknowledged that he does not approve of the right to an equal divorce process for men and women. His reasoning was based on his

belief that "women are too emotional" and might request a divorce "without thinking it through properly."

Questions specific to divorce rights, inheritance law, polygamy, marital age and other areas were answered differently by everyone, depending on personal beliefs. For example, regarding the issue of polygamy, many men and one woman viewed it simply as an integral part of Islam. But the vast majority of women who spoke with the delegation believed that it should be prohibited in practice. They reasoned that the Koran states that a man is allowed to have more than one wife, *provided he treats them equally*. According to these women, logic and experience dictates that it is impossible to treat more than one wife equally, and therefore polygamy should not be practiced.

When pressed to make a comparison between the former PDRY's Family Law and the more recent Personal Status Law, all of the women interviewed by the delegation, with the one exception, preferred the former law because of its more egalitarian treatment of women. Those women originally from the South were particularly adamant in their responses and were incredulous that unification "has taken us backward." One woman, however, who was part of the committee that wrote the compromise that was implemented in Decree No. 20, believed it was an appropriate compromise and represented at least a positive first step for women in the North.

Several women who spoke to the NDI delegation expressed the view that Islam is used by certain political parties and religious leaders to justify tribal conservatism and the oppression of women. An election official declared, "Islam becomes an excuse to keep women down and keep them passive." However, she argued, it is the sacred nature of Islamic law that prevents the majority of women and men from reaching that same conclusion; as Islam is sacred, it cannot be linked to oppression. This special standing prevents individuals from questioning or challenging certain aspects of the law that oppress women.

If women were to unite and demand a reinterpretation of the *sharia* in order to reach social equity, they would certainly clash with very powerful, conservative tribal factions of society. An even more serious question is whether any legal consensus on reinterpretation of the *sharia*, or a reworking of the Personal Status Law, could ever be enforced given the dubious independence of the judicial system. As

one female government official told the delegation, the judiciary currently "applies the law as it suits men."

The delegation concluded that there is a strong relationship between the manner in which Islamic law is interpreted in Yemen and the extent of women's participation in civic and political life. Religious leaders, and politicians influenced by them, have used conservative interpretations of Islam to inhibit women from assuming responsibilities and positions of leadership outside the domestic realm. NDI team member Arat stated, "I believe the fundamental problem is not Islam but patriarchal authoritarianism that Islam helps legitimize..." The male leadership's interpretation of Islamic law places restrictions on women's lives. The lack of visible, active women in political and social life contributes to predominant social doubt regarding the appropriateness and qualifications of women to be leaders. This apprehension creates an ominous force to prohibit women from having a voice in the country's newfound multiparty political system.

C. Conclusions

- 1) There was a widely held belief among women interviewed that the principal political parties predetermined the results of the elections through political deals. Nevertheless, the introduction of a multiparty system and the 1993 elections, with all of its imperfections, inspired a notable public optimism for the possibility of true democracy in Yemen.
- 2) Illiteracy, which disproportionately affects women, was a significant obstacle to becoming an informed voter.
- 3) Women's participation in the Yemeni election process was significant relative to nearby countries, although it remained far from realizing its full potential. Registering 20 percent of eligible female voters appears to be an impressive first experience for Yemen. However, it is equally clear that the SEC substantially failed to fulfill its legal mandate to incorporate women as full participants in the election process. Had the SEC conducted an educational program targeted toward women and their specific concerns regarding the registration process, the registration figure would have undoubtedly risen.

- 4) Women are under represented in the leadership of the political and social institutions of Yemen. In addition, many of the few women who do occupy positions of leadership have not been afforded full participation rights in the developing electoral process.
- 5) There is a widely held belief by male political leaders that women specifically choose not to be involved in the political process, particularly at higher levels, such as running for public office. The NDI delegation, however, met several apparently qualified women who have in fact unsuccessfully sought such positions. In instances where women have opted not to pursue leadership roles, the choice is often a function of their deep alienation from the system.
- 6) The practice of certain fundamental democratic rights guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (freedom of expression and association) is especially difficult for women in Yemen due to currently prevailing interpretation(s) of Islamic law.
- 7) There exists no current vehicle, including any genuinely non-governmental organization, through which women can participate in political and civic life.

D. Recommendations

- 1) In the future, the parliament and the Supreme Election Committee can and should encourage female registration through all available means and must make registration accessible to all women.
- 2) All social institutions, including the government, political parties and non-governmental organizations, should strive to eliminate barriers to women's participation in the election process. Before future elections, women should be targeted in campaigns to promote registration. Subsequently, there should be a public effort undertaken to educate registered women about the issues, candidates and election-day procedures.
- 3) All political education campaigns should consider the special needs of illiterate voters and emphasize the concept of a secret ballot.

- 4) Considering the much higher rates of illiteracy for women and girls, they should be targeted for adequate education by the government of Yemen and by the international donor community. The delegation strongly believes that the education of girls and boys should remain integrated in the interest of affording both groups the same quality education and opportunity for choice regarding all aspects of personal growth. Segregation in the schools, as has been proposed by some Yemenis, would likely lead to the further marginalization of women in society. Separate educational facilities would not be equal.
- 5) The education of women was considered vital by all interviewed, but education and professional experience alone are insufficient to afford women access to leadership positions in Yemen. Rather, there must emerge an institutional consensus that women belong in these positions.
- 6) Once women have reached positions of leadership, efforts must be made on the part of male leaders to ensure female presence at all levels, and in all forums, of decision-making.
- 7) International organizations should support those women currently in leadership positions as well as indigenous groups striving to support women at the local, regional and national levels. A special emphasis should be placed on training women to organize independent citizen groups that could influence the political process. For example, the delegation recommends offering a training program that acquaints women with political organizations and interest groups from other countries.
- 8) The delegation recommends conducting a more systematic and detailed survey to determine the attitudes of Yemeni women and men about issues of equity and citizenship. Such an initiative would help form the basis for properly focused civic education programs about democratic citizenship.
- 9) International groups should bring Islamic intellectuals to Yemen who could share and popularize information about how to reconcile democracy with Islamic tradition, not only in theory but in practice.
- 10) International groups, Yemeni citizens and the SEC should work together to establish a target figure for increased levels of female registration for the next elections. To achieve their objective,

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the SEC should sponsor and implement a long-term voter education and registration campaign in preparation for the next local or national elections.

- 11) At the request of several Yemeni leaders, this report should be widely disseminated, in both English and Arabic.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

After many years in which the two Yemeni states were buffeted and used by more powerful governments — both in the Arab world and at the superpower level — Yemenis now find themselves able to chart their nation's future free from decisive outside intervention. The future of democracy in Yemen will be determined by Yemenis.

Many Yemenis remain concerned that the monarchs of the Gulf want their democratic experiment to fail. Others are uneasy that pan-Arab movements, including both the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'athist parties and Islamists based variously in Sudan, Egypt and Iran, desire to control Yemeni politics. International relations for this rather isolated country have been complicated by the demise of the Soviet Union, which was for two decades the patron and financier of South Yemen, and the consequent diminishing of Western interest in the North. The Gulf War presented the united Yemen with difficult and costly choices — and led to its estrangement from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

The elections of April 1993 represent a significant step in the direction of democratic and accountable politics, despite the various

shortcomings that were manifest in the process. Unfortunately, internal political developments since then have not led to further consolidation of the nascent pluralist system. A confrontation between the leaders of the significant parties — the People's General Congress and the Yemeni Socialist Party — escalated to crisis proportion in the last few months of the year. The very unity of the nation, which was to have been sealed by the legislative elections, has been jeopardized. The unification of the two prior states' armies and other institutions has been stalled or reversed. In December, Vice President Ali Salim al-Bidh proposed that both he and President Ali Abdullah Saleh resign in order to defuse the crisis. While this development has not happened, Yemen's Foreign Minister Mohammed Basindwah told the press in early December that "there is an unannounced split. The only thing left is to declare the split."

So Yemen's democratic achievements to date remain precarious accomplishments. Those who support the process of democratization and internal Yemeni reconciliation should renew their willingness to respond to requests from the people of Yemen.