

# YEMEN

## “Yemen’s History of Women in Power”

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I am from Yemen and am pleased to share with you some thoughts on the role of Yemeni women during peace and conflict... their challenges, their successes, and their setbacks. Despite the fact that the Yemeni society is conservative, Yemen has a history of women in power. Two women have ruled Yemen: Queen Balqis in 2000 BC, and after Islam, Queen Arwa in the late 1090s ruled for fifty years. Their reigns were some of the most stable and prosperous periods in all of Yemeni history.

As for the period of the fifties and sixties of the last century, Yemeni women fought together with men against the British colonialism in the South and stood alongside the men who resisted the unjust monarchy in the North. However, despite their critical resistance roles, after the revolutions in the North and South in the 1960s, women in the North were prevented from participating in political life and the labor market. While entrenched in a strong patriarchal society, this can also be attributed to a lack of education, ingrained traditional customs, longstanding historical traditions, and conservative religious factors. There were only a few women allowed opportunities to work in television and radio or in public administration positions. However, women in the South were more fortunate. During the rule of the Socialist Party in the South, women won ten seats in the first election for the People's Assembly in 1987, and Southern Yemeni women became the first in the Arabian Peninsula to hold positions such as deputy minister, dean of a college, TV presenter and judge.

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After the Yemeni unity between North and South in the 1990s, the international community pressured the previous regime to empower Yemeni women and support them in leadership positions, as well as in the military and security fields. Therefore, the regime in 2003 allocated a 15% quota, but in fact one woman got membership in Parliament and one or two women assumed ministerial portfolios from one period to the next, often in the Ministry of Human Rights and Social Affairs. Only 1.7% of women joined Yemeni army and police, and in 2006 a special unit of 20 women was established in the counterterrorism forces. While highly trained by the U.S., their work remained limited to the inspection of women suspects and little else. Moreover, women did not often join political parties, either because the political parties did not pursue or encourage their participation or because of the public's negative stereotypes associated with women working in politics.

The turning point for Yemeni women came during the Arab Spring, when the whole world took notice that Yemeni women were at the forefront of the demonstrations that eventually ousted the previous regime and brought in a new government. A large number of Yemeni women activists emerged, and some of them won international recognition prizes – most notably Tawakkol Karman, who won the Nobel Prize, and most recently lawyer Huda Al-Sarari, who won the Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders in 2020.

Despite these internal setbacks, Yemeni women have stayed actively involved. In 2012, women participated in the Yemeni National Dialogue Conference under the auspice of the United Nations and the international community. The Conference adopted an initiative establishing a 30% inclusion quota for women in all government positions, as well as in delegations and committees. These goals were in line with the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820, which address the importance of the inclusion of women in peace and security. Women also participated in drafting the new Yemeni constitution, where four women and 17 men participated

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in preparing the constitution for the first time in Yemeni history. They were able to include in it many articles that were of particular interest and impacted Yemeni women and family affairs.

Just as Yemenis were celebrating the first step towards democracy, building a new Yemen, and women were about to participate in the political process for the first time, in late 2014, the Iran-backed Houthi militia seized control of several Northern provinces and forced the internationally-recognized government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi out of the capital Sanaa. In 2015, war officially broke out.

In 2018, the Office of the Special Envoy to Yemen and UN Women collaborated to create Tawafaq, or the Yemeni Women's Pact for Peace and Security. In mid-2018, the Yemeni women's Technical Advisory Group (TAG) was created by the Office of the Special Envoy with the support of the UN Women and the Pact. The TAG is currently comprised of eight Yemeni women. Delegations from Pact and TAG were invited by the Special Envoy to attend several rounds of negotiations in Kuwait, Geneva, and Stockholm in a consultative capacity, though women still were not allowed or invited to participate directly in the negotiations. While the UN Special Envoy for Yemen failed to persuade the Houthi militia to include women in their negotiating delegation, two women in the government delegation participated in the rounds of negotiations: Rana Ghanem and Nihal Al-Awlaqi.

While women have limited official roles in government, many Yemeni women, especially young women, participate in civil society and lead local organizations. They have succeeded in providing for the local communities that international organizations cannot reach with humanitarian aid. As a result, they have successfully created many new peace initiatives, and participated in many peace seminars, events, and meetings around the world.

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Despite all these challenges, Yemeni women have continued to actively engage in peace, security, and governance, whether by helping to evacuate civilians and the wounded from conflict-affected areas, negotiating humanitarian access, opening roads and crossings, or working on the release and exchange of prisoners. Three to four women took ministerial positions in each of the governments that were formed, and three female ambassadors were appointed. Unfortunately, in November 2019, when the new government was formed under the Riyadh Agreement with a representational quota system between the North and South, and after years of tension between the recognized government and the Southern Transitional Council, no woman has been appointed to a ministerial position. Political parties now prefer to nominate only men claiming “exceptional circumstances” for this decision.

Despite Yemeni women’s successes and failures, in the end the war has taken many women’s and children’s lives. In the cities under the control of the Houthi militia, the violence and discrimination against women is appalling and the abysmal increase in the number of underage marriages reflects the complete lack of respect for women’s rights. The only way to ensure the rights of women as outlined in UN Resolution 1325 and the rights of all Yemenis is a sustainable peace based on the three references: the Gulf Initiative, the outcomes of the Yemeni National Dialogue, and International Security Resolution 2216. It is only then that women can celebrate the true spirit and intent of UN Resolution 1325 – freedom and equality.