

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

2004



2009

Delegation for relations with the Gulf States, including Yemen

Delegation Bureau visit to Yemen

**Sana'a, Hajjah
22-26 February 2009**

Report by Mr Tobias Pflüger, acting Chair of the delegation

Brussels, 27 April 2009

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The Bureau of the Delegation for relations with the Gulf States, including Yemen visited Sana'a from Sunday, 22 to Wednesday, 25 February 2009. The delegation was made up of Mr Tobias Pflüger, acting chair, Mr Călin Cătălin Chiriță and Mr José Manuel García-Margallo y Marfil. This was the sixth interparliamentary meeting between the European Parliament and Yemen, the last one having taken place from 20 to 26 May 2006.

The poorest country on the Arabian Peninsula, with very small oil reserves, unlike its rich neighbours, Yemen's recent political history has also been difficult, as it was unified only in 1990 and experienced a particularly unpleasant civil war. It is now trying to establish democracy by balancing modern ways of life with tribal social structures.

Despite the short duration of the visit, the members of the delegation met and spoke to a very wide range of people, including representatives of the government (the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, Minister for Human Rights and Minister for International Cooperation), of the Yemeni Parliament (the Speakers of both houses, leaders of the political parties, members of the Committees on Foreign Affairs and Civil Liberties, representatives of the different political parties and individual members) and many associations and non-governmental organisations, particularly those involved in defending human rights and promoting gender equality. The last day was devoted to a field visit to the Hajjah region, where the delegation also met representatives of local authorities and non-governmental organisations and visited projects funded by the Commission.

The discussions focused on three topics:

- Fixing of the date for the parliamentary elections and the general political context
- Human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the development of traditional society in Yemen
- The economic and social situation, relations with the European Union.

1) Fixing of the date for the parliamentary elections and the general political context

From the very first official meetings with the Speaker of the House of Representatives (Majlis al-Nuwaab), Mr Yahya Ali Al-Ra'ai, and then with the president of the Shura Council, Dr Abdul Aziz Abdul Ghani, the delegation was faced with the most pressing issue in Yemeni politics at the time of the visit: the fixing of the dates for the next parliamentary elections.

Constitutionally, the elections should have been held in April 2009 since the last elections took place in 2003 and a parliamentary term is six years long. However, after the presidential elections which re-elected President Saleh, observed by a European Union election observation mission under Ms Emma Nicholson, a broad consensus (majority/opposition) emerged concerning the need to implement the reforms outlined in the observation mission's report. These proposals included improving the registration process, increasing female participation in the voting process, strengthening the role of the media and introducing proportional representation into the voting system. For two years after the presidential election, however, no attempt was made to draw up legislative proposals on any of the proposed reforms. Given that the substance of the reforms had been widely accepted, civil society and the opposition 'took advantage' of this

period of inaction to request a postponement of the parliamentary elections so that the reforms could be tabled, voted into law and implemented.

Since the reforms had been largely based on the comments made by the EU's election observation mission, the European Parliament delegation, like the Commission representatives in Sana'a, were seen as parties to the reform process and to the decision on whether the parliamentary elections would be postponed. In addition, two weeks before the Parliament delegation arrived a fact-finding mission to prepare the election observation work had visited Yemen and had also met representatives of most of the country's political authorities.

When the delegation met political party leaders and members of several committees at the House of Representatives, discussion concentrated generally on that topic and in particular on the views of the delegation members. However, the delegation was in a delicate situation. Firstly, it was out of the question that European representatives should intervene, even indirectly, in a strictly domestic political debate, one, moreover, on which the majority and opposition disagreed. Secondly, as regards the real point at issue it was difficult to make a clear choice for or against postponing the elections. On the one hand, the fact that the proposed reforms of the electoral system stemmed from a report by an election observation mission which was intended to consolidate the rule of law could have provided an argument in favour of postponing the parliamentary elections. On the other, encouraging the postponement of parliamentary elections not just for a few weeks, but for one or two years when voters elected their leaders for a term of just six years, could have been perceived very badly in terms of the rule of law and respect for the Constitution, particularly in a country where the government party, the General People's Congress, held a very large absolute majority (238 seats out of 301). The opposition had previously indicated that it would not take part in the legislative elections if they went ahead as planned in April 2009. In that event, the results of the elections would have been distorted and, furthermore, would have tarnished Yemen's image abroad and might have given rise to problems at home.

Simultaneously with our meeting with members of the Yemeni Parliament, the main parties agreed to postpone the parliamentary elections for two years, in particular in order to implement the proposed electoral reforms. When asked by the members of the House of Representatives for their comments on the terms of the agreement and its implications, the delegation requested a full copy of the written text of the agreement. Discussions continued during the lunch organised by the Yemeni Parliament. The same question also arose with the ambassadors of the Member States in Sana'a, who were quite divided over the attitude that the Union should adopt.

Asked once again to comment on the agreement, the delegation finally agreed to do so as soon as it was provided with a written copy on which to base its assessment. This resulted in the acting chair of the Delegation for relations with the Gulf States, including Yemen making a declaration which was published after the Bureau's visit. The text, annexed to this report, in no way constitutes interference by the European Parliament delegation in the internal politics of the country, but is rather a response to repeated calls made by the various parties represented in parliament. In addition, the declaration merely notes the agreement and that it offers a solution to the crisis, even if two years is a long postponement. The declaration also notes that the proposed electoral reforms reflect the main points made in the observation mission report on the presidential elections in 2006 and that these points would clear the way for the implementation

of the necessary electoral and constitutional reforms. In return for the delegation's comments, the Yemeni Parliament undertook to keep the EU, and in particular the European Parliament, regularly informed about the reform process.

To the members of the delegation (as well as to the representatives of the Commission), this episode in Yemeni politics seemed to reflect the state of democracy in Yemen, which is in its infancy, but developing, nonetheless. Admittedly, the overwhelming majority which the governmental party enjoys in parliament, like the results of the last presidential elections in which President Saleh won 78% of the vote, could give the impression that democracy is weak in Yemen. However, this background merits a more in-depth analysis. The majority party, the General People's Congress, is not homogeneous in the way that single parties are in other countries. It is made up of representatives from the different tribes that support President Saleh. It would be more accurate, therefore, to talk about a majority coalition based on the model that has developed in certain other countries on the Arabian Peninsula. Furthermore, a parliamentary opposition does exist, even if has few seats and is itself composed of diverse elements, whether it be the socialist party or the Islamist party which holds about 15% of the seats. This opposition is also particularly active, as shown by the discussions on the date of the parliamentary elections. Finally, it must be added that civil society's role as an agent of reform in traditional Yemeni society is not insignificant, as will be seen later with regard to the role of women and women's rights.

Prior to its departure, the delegation's attention had been drawn to the growing threat posed in Yemen by increasing numbers of al-Qaeda-influenced groups, as illustrated by the attacks which had been carried out a few months earlier on the US embassy and certain European companies. Most of the Yemeni representatives and foreign observers the delegation met were keen to play down the influence of the fundamentalist movement. They argued that the country is very traditional, especially in religious matters, and that this should not be confused with the fundamentalism, and consequent religious extremism, of al-Qaeda supporters. Although it was acknowledged that certain tribes in northern Yemen, particularly near the Saudi Arabian border, might be harbouring al-Qaeda elements, this was more a statement of political opposition to the government than genuine support for the fundamentalist movement.

2) Human rights, fundamental freedoms and development of traditional society in Yemen.

This aspect of the situation in Yemen has been highlighted by numerous reports published over recent years on examples of young female minors being forced to marry, some of whom were only around ten years of age. Indeed, this forms part of one of the fundamental problems that Yemeni society must face: the place, role and rights of women.

The delegation had the opportunity to examine these issues very specifically and via numerous discussions with women's rights organisations. Firstly, on the morning after their arrival, the members of the delegation attended the inauguration of the national civil education programme,

aiming to encourage women to take part in the electoral process as a whole. This programme was organised by the UNDP and received considerable funding from the European Commission. The seminar brought together over fifty Yemeni women, the majority of whom were wearing the veil according to Yemeni tradition. They appeared highly interested and played an active role in the meeting which aimed to encourage women to get involved in politics not only standing for election. The delegation members intervened on several occasions during the seminar and were able to observe the commitment and determination of the young female students to participate in Yemeni politics.

In the province of Hajjah, the delegation also met with representatives of local Yemeni women's organisations, which supported various pro-women campaigns e.g. for women's rights to benefit from their earnings if they work or for intervention in cases of very early marriage. The organisations also benefitted from the support of the local authorities. A meeting organised with around ten NGOs representing human rights in various ways provided an opportunity to witness the fact that civil debate is open, which ostensibly highlights the development of an otherwise very closed society. It was clear from the liveliness and rather chaotic nature of the discussions that less traditional trends can express themselves and have a significant following (it is worth pointing out that such groups, including Vice and Virtue committee are extremely active).

This change could be observed in the very recent law which fixed the minimum age for marriage at 17, on which the delegation had extensive discussions with members of the Yemeni parliament and the Minister of Human Rights, Dr Huda Al-Ban. Admittedly, although they voted for it, some members considered the age agreed upon too high in respect of the country's traditions, whilst others, many of whom were women, held the opposite view and would have preferred the age requirement to be aligned with Western laws, namely 18. This situation may seem somewhat paradoxical given that extremely young marriages of young girls between 10 and 14 are frequently exposed. Some Yemeni political representatives said that the problem was restricted to practices in certain remote regions, whereas others admitted that, beyond these traditions, such situations were often the result of poverty. The most extreme (and severely criticised) cases cited by the Yemeni representatives were where Saudi Arabian men had come to Yemen to arrange a week-end or month-long marriage, often with prepubescent girls. It is also worth mentioning that the courts are not always passive when cases of young marriages are referred to them; the workings of the legal system in general were not the subject of specific criticism.

The delegation came across one rather more complex example of a human rights violation. Two representatives of the 'Yemen Observatory on Human Rights' were met by the delegation and reported the situation of a person who was apparently in a condition of slavery, his freedom having been 'purchased' by a Yemeni family. Another example was given of a man sold along with the land where he worked. The delegation was not able to confirm the reliability of this information; however, many people considered of an impartial viewpoint were questioned on the subject and were both highly sceptical and completely unaware of such practices.

The discussions with the Minister of Human Rights were interesting and of great value. The Yemeni Government's signing of several international human rights treaties was highlighted as well as the initiation of many positive actions supporting women's rights in different areas of society such as encouraging participation in the country's political and economic life. However,

some aspects, such as a woman's right to travel abroad without her husband's permission, were not clarified. Details were not forthcoming on the cases of arbitrary arrests and torture in the province of Sadah; access to this part of the country was not authorised for foreigners due to fear of uprisings.

The social and economic situation, external relations and relations with the European Union

The global financial crisis has deepened the social and economic problems of the country despite its lack of exposure to the international financial system and the narrowness of its capital markets. Already hampered by limited oil resources due to run out in the medium-term, the fall in barrel prices has stunted an already weakened average growth rate. The international aid on which the country partially depends is also likely to be affected by the financial crisis.

The meetings with Prime Minister Ali Ahmed Mujawer, the Minister of Planning and International Cooperation and Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Kareem Al-Arahabi enabled the delegation to understand the measures which should be taken to handle the country's economic situation. The parliamentarians, like the international community, support the government's approach which will mean introducing significant economic reforms and modernising the legal system and the economic environment to attract foreign investors, thus fostering growth which does not solely depend on the oil sector.

Another aspect of the plan of action to be introduced by the government is the cessation of (very popular) subsidies which ensure that oil prices remain extremely low, thus directly benefitting the population. This budgetary policy made sense when Yemen was producing a significant proportion of oil for domestic consumption, but will now cost the country more and more, accounting for 30% of the total budget - a luxury the country cannot afford. Public sector salaries also take up a large portion of the budget, although reducing them could be difficult and have negative effects on consumption as well as increasing an already considerable unemployment rate (estimated at 35% of the working population).

Today Yemen relies on large amounts of aid from various sources (the European Union, the USA, Japan, the UNDP, UNICEF, the World Bank and NGOs) which accounts for 10% of the country's gross national product.

As a country traditionally dependent on its agricultural and fishing resources, despite its limited industrialisation Yemen has not escaped the phenomenon of rural depopulation and urbanisation (affecting 31% of the total population), both being causes of increasing poverty.

The extremely high birth rate (42 births per 1000 inhabitants) means an age structure in which 46% of the population are under 15, making the average age under 17; evidently this poses a further difficulty for the future of the country.

The country's poverty is also demonstrated by both an inadequate level of education and limited access to healthcare, particularly among rural populations.

The delegation became aware of this situation during its time in the region of Hajjah where it visited a medical and healthcare training project for women and children financed by the Commission and set up by the organisation Médecins Sans Frontières. During discussions with both the team running the project and the local population, the delegation members encountered the chronic diseases affecting the country (malaria, tuberculosis and often fatal diarrhoea due to the use of contaminated water), the scarcity of medication and absence of distribution networks and the lack of medical staff and hospitals outside the capital.

Regardless of social class, the population's widespread use of khat (not classified as a drug but considered closer to stimulants or amphetamines) appeared to be a major factor in the country's social and economic situation and not the insignificant tendency which it is normally made out to be. Economically speaking, khat growing is reputed to make up 50% of farmers' revenues but conversely to use up 60% of irrigation water. From the earliest years of adulthood, its daily use results in a significant and direct reduction of people's incomes, given the particularly low living standards (its daily cost can vary between 2 and 20 Euros, depending on the quality). It causes social problems such as the notable decrease in professional activity from 2 p.m. onwards and the increasingly apparent negative effects in terms of public health. The positive aspects of the use of khat often cited by Yemenis are that it contributed to moderation and social cohesion. International issues and particularly international relations were also broached with both the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Abo Baker al-Qirbi. One of the current topics was combating piracy in the Gulf of Aden. Yemen plays an active role in international coordinated strategies such as Operation Atalanta. In terms of relations with its immediate neighbours, despite belonging to the Gulf Cooperation Council, Yemen does not benefit from the geographic solidarity of the other members. Relations with Somalia and Ethiopia give cause for concern in view of the significant migratory movements towards Yemen, thus portending further extremely poor populations to aid. As a poor country with few natural resources and limited export-import trade relations, Yemen is not exactly a sought-after international partner even though the USA is involved in upholding its democratisation process and China is seeking to exercise its influence by bringing direct economic aid, though with some difficulty.

As it has been pointed out and must be emphasised here, the European Union is a leading and extremely active contributor through the extensive and growing efforts of the Commission delegation. The multiannual indicative programme (2007-2010) and the Yemen strategy paper for 2007-2013 have focussed on the fight against poverty, measures to improve living standards, the development of the private sector and principles of sound public governance.

There is a genuine desire on the part of the Yemeni authorities to benefit from further aid from the European Union, certainly on a financial level (needed at least in the area of healthcare), but also in the area of technology, politics (to encourage democratic development) and, more broadly, diplomatic support.

In conclusion and in light of the delegation's work during the next parliamentary term, the members who took part in this visit wish to recommend the following:

- to pay close attention to the developments in the political, economic and social situation in Yemen as an emerging democracy which needs encouragement and support in the

- reforms it undertakes, the establishment of the rule of law and modernisation of society, with particular regard to the role, place and rights of women;
- to monitor the process of constitutional and election law reform which has caused the postponement of the parliamentary elections; (on the basis of the data provided by the Commission Delegation in San'a).
 - to ensure that the aid supplied by the international community, and in particular from the European Union's budget, is used to finance projects which directly benefit as many people as possible and whose effectiveness will be evaluated on site;
 - to provide assistance (whose form remains to be determined) to the Yemeni parliamentary structures with a view to improving their democratic functionality and increasing their efficiency.
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Bureau visit to Yemen

**Sana'a, Hajja
22 - 26 February 2009**

Sunday, 22 February

*Hotel Sheba
Ali Abdolmoghni Street,
Sana'a, Republic of Yemen
Tel. +967-1-272372
Fax: +967-1-274129*

09.30

Inauguration of women's political empowerment programme (Female students voter education and awareness campaign)

Venue: Sheba Hotel

Monday, 23 February

07.45

Departure from the Hotel

08.00 - 08.45

Briefing Breakfast at Chargé d'Affaire's Residence

09.00 - 09.45

Speaker of Parliament, Mr. Yahya Ali Al-Ra'ai at Parliament

10.00 - 10.45

Shoura Council, Dr. Abdul Aziz Abdul Ghani (Chairperson) and Rights/Freedoms Committee at Shoura Council

11.00 - 11.45

Minister of Human Rights, Dr. Huda Al-Ban

at Ministry of Human Rights

- 12.00 - 12.45 Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Abo Baker al-Qirbi
at Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- 13.00 - 13.45 Minister of Planning and International Cooperation, Mr.
Abdul Kareem Al-Arhabi
at MOPIC
- 14.30 - 16.00 Briefing lunch meeting with Heads of Mission, hosted by
the EP
at Sheba Hotel
- 16.30 - 18.00 Round table discussion with Civil Society/Ministry of
Human Rights on human rights, followed by light buffet
(organized by Sharaka Yemen Programme)
at Sheba Hotel

Tuesday, 24 February

- 10.00 - 11.30 Meeting with members of the Assembly of
Representatives;
Foreign Affairs & Rights and Freedoms Committees, incl.
heads of parliament blocs and visit to Parliament in session
at Parliament
- 11.30 - 12.30 Vice President, Mr. Abdal-Rab Mansur Al-Hadii
at General People's Congress Headquarters
- 13.00 - 13.30 Prime Minister, Dr. Ali Ahmed Mujawer
at Prime Minister's Office
- 13.30 - 15.00 lunch hosted by Yemeni Parliament
at Police Officer's Club
- 15.00 - 16.00 meeting with Dr. Abdulqader Al-Benna, Yemen
observatory on Human Rights
at Sheba Hotel
- 16.30 - 18.00 Informal meeting with various Members of Parliament (Dr.
Abdulbari al-Doghaish, GPC; Dr. Aidaroos al-Naqeeb,
YSP; Mr. Shawqi al Qadhi, Islah; Mr. Ali Hussain Al-
Ashwal, Islah; Mr. Sakhr al-Wajeesh, independent),
organized and hosted by Friedrich Ebert Foundation
at FE Stiftung

Wednesday, 25 February

	Visit Governorate of Hajja
07.30 - 10.30	Road travel Sana'a – Hajja
10.45 - 11.15	Vice Governor of Hajja, Sheikh Fahd Qa'ed Dahshash
11.30 - 12.30	Project visit with local partner organizations of "Judicial and Cultural VAW resisting integration within rural Yemen social System Projects" project, implemented by Civic Democratic Foundation (CDF)
12.30 - 13.15	Road travel to Bani Kayes district in Hajja governorate
13.15 - 14.15	Project visit to Toor city health center, under rehabilitation by Social Fund for Development and beneficiary of the "Improve the provision of primary health care in Yemen, in the governorate of Hajja" project, implemented by Médecins du Monde
14.15 - 15.00	Lunch - Hajja city
15.30 - 18.30	Road travel Hajja – Sana'a

Thursday, 26 February

09.30 - 14.00	Debriefing and assistance to the Chairman for the preparation and translation of the delegation's declaration
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Delegation for relations with the Gulf States, including Yemen

Bureau visit to Yemen Sana'a, Hajja 22 - 26 February 2009

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

<u>Delegation of the EP</u>	Group	Country	Committees
Mr Tobias PFLÜGER Vice-Chairman	GUE/NGL	Germany	Committee on Foreign Affairs
Mr Călin Cătălin CHIRIȚĂ	PPE-DE	Romania	Committee on Foreign Affairs
Mr José Manuel GARCÍA- MARGALLO Y MARFIL	PPE-DE	Spain	Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs

PPE-DE
GUE/NGL

Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats
Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left

Secretariat of the Delegation of the European Parliament

Mr Jean Louis Berton, acting director, interparliamentary delegations
Ms Kathleen Huygen, administrative assistant

Interpreters (3)

Ms Evelyn Hornik (team leader)
Mr Mohammed Abbas
Mr Bassim Saleh

Declaration by Tobias Pflüger, acting Chairman of the European Parliament Delegation for relations with the Gulf States, including Yemen, delivered after the visit by the Bureau of the Delegation¹, 22 – 25 February 2009

Whilst the European Parliament Delegation was in Yemen the ruling party, the General People's Congress (GPC) and the opposition parties represented in Parliament, finalized their discussions on the parliamentary elections scheduled for April 2009.

Given the timing of our visit, the European Parliament delegation was asked for its advice. Subsequently, an important agreement was signed by both the governing and opposition parliamentary parties of Yemen. The parties handed over the agreement to the acting chairman of the EP delegation, thus corroborating the binding character of the agreement and their commitment to its implementation.

The European Parliament Delegation for relations with the Gulf States, including Yemen would like to comment as follows on this agreement:

- 1) The EP delegation takes note of the fact that an agreement has been reached by the parliamentary parties in Yemen. Thanks to this agreement, the participation of the opposition parties represented in Parliament in the forthcoming elections now looks assured. Postponement of the Parliamentary elections became necessary to enable full participation in the elections of the opposition parties represented in Parliament.
- 2) A postponement of two years in holding the parliamentary elections is, however, a long time and will therefore be critically watched by the European Parliament delegation. Nonetheless, this agreement does at least mean that both EU and EP will now be in a position to monitor the evolution of the process.
- 3) The EP delegation welcomes the fact that the main points of the EU Observation Mission report on the 2006 Presidential election have been specifically taken into account in the agreement between the Yemeni parties; the point about proportional lists for the elections is expressly included.
- 4) The agreement also includes mention of the real need for constitutional and electoral reforms, as expressed by the EP delegation, to be undertaken within this period. The EP delegation would also like to see, as soon as possible, a blueprint for constitutional and electoral reform. Once such a blueprint has been elaborated, the EP delegation would ask the Commission to report back on a regular basis on the process of constitutional and electoral reform.
- 5) Finally, the EP delegation would like to thank all parties represented in the Yemeni Parliament for their confidence in the European Parliament in this very important process.

¹ The following MEPs took part in this delegation visit: Tobias Pflüger, Călin Cătălin Chiriță, José Manuel García Margallo y Marfil