

This is how Houthis Are Building a Parallel Judicial System Within Yemen's Courts



In a scene that has repeated itself since the Houthi Movement seized control of Yemen's capital, Sana'a, the group continues to transform the judiciary into a security arm serving its political objectives and targeting dissidents and activists. In the latest episode of this trend, a court loyal to the Houthis issued

death-by-firing-squad sentences against 17 individuals accused of collaborating with foreign states it also handed two men ten-year prison sentences, and acquitted another.

According to Houthi media, the verdicts were based on allegations that the defendants had used encrypted messaging apps to transmit information on the locations of Houthi leaders and their missiles. Observers contend these accusations have become a ready-made formula for trials that lack even the most basic guarantees of justice.

These rulings come within a long series of decisions by Houthi courts, which in previous periods have targeted politicians, activists, and journalists. Human-rights lawyers agree that these trials lack all legal prerequisites from the right to defense and review of evidence to independent investigations leaving fundamental rights of the accused vulnerable to violation, and calling into serious question the integrity of the judicial process.

One of the sons of a man sentenced to death told “Noon Post” what his father went through. He said his father a medical laboratory technician with no political involvement was arrested at his home in Amran during a campaign that also rounded up several family members. He then disappeared forcibly for four months.

The son explained that the Houthis justified the charges by claiming his father was recruited during a trip for medical treatment in Egypt, followed by a return to Saudi Arabia when in fact the travel was for medical reasons and supported by official documents. The family was not permitted to see him until after the prison suffered a rocket strike.

He added that the prosecution presented no tangible evidence, the case file rested solely on “confessions extracted under duress,” and the court rejected all defense motions making the verdict, in his view, ready long before the trial began.

Violations and Breach of Justice Principles

In a strongly worded statement, the Yemeni Network for Rights and Freedoms described the verdicts as “sham” and “prearranged.” The organization pointed out that the trial occurred across five sessions over eight days, with lawyers denied access to the case files.

The court also refused to investigate the torture allegations raised by the defendants during hearings. The network considers these abuses tantamount to war crimes including arbitrary detention, torture, unlawful trials, and targeting humanitarian workers.

Speaking to “Noon Post,” attorney and international human rights law expert Khaled Al-Rimi, vice president of the Lawyers’ Syndicate in Marib, said the trial in question suffered from grave fundamental violations a clear breach of fair trial guarantees and the constitutional provisions safeguarding defense rights and personal liberty (particularly articles 47 and 48 of the Yemeni constitution).

Al-Rimi explained that among the most egregious violations was the denial of counsel during the evidence-gathering phase: suspects were interrogated by national and political security agencies with no legal representation a flagrant breach of defense rights.

He added that the defendants, based on recorded footage, had been subjected to physical and psychological torture from their days in custody, held in solitary confinement, and cut off from the outside world a method amounting to psychological and moral torture.

He further highlighted that security authorities exceeded the legal time limits for pre-prosecution detention, defined under the constitution as not more than 24 hours, which amounts to coercion and legal torture.

The publication of video recordings containing defendants’ “confessions” before trial constituted a serious legal violation, undermining the presumption of innocence and damaging procedural transparency also exposing the defendants and their families to social risk and possible reprisals.

According to Al-Rimi, the public prosecution and the court hinged their rulings primarily on “confessions” extracted under duress, which are legally null and void; by law, this would invalidate all subsequent proceedings.

He described the defense process as merely perfunctory, given the court’s total disregard for substantive legal arguments submitted by the lawyers a clear sign that the trial served political ends, devoid of fairness or transparency.

He noted that the specialized criminal court issuing the sentences has been defunct since 2019 following a republican decree yet the group continues to exploit it. The current body in control is neither recognized domestically nor internationally and lacks any legal legitimacy.

The Houthis have replaced the nationally mandated judicial system with sectarian standards of their own, in outright contravention of legal norms and undermining judicial independence. Consequently, rulings issued by these courts are void and unrecognizable under law.

Al-Rimi pointed out that these verdicts extend earlier politically motivated cases, such as sentences against nine individuals from Hudaydah, among others, all characterized by similarly flawed procedures and political underpinnings.

He said the objective of these verdicts is to intimidate society, silence dissent, restrict freedoms, and leverage such cases for political gains especially within evolving regional dynamics, including the developments in Gaza.

Legally Void Sentences

The recent trials led by the Houthis expose the systematic control they exert over Yemen's judicial institutions. Since the group's coup and seizure of Sana'a in September 2014, they have worked to sideline qualified judges, weaken the role of the Higher Institute of Judiciary, and replace them with individuals referred to as "Sharia scholars and jurists."

These recruits typically undergo short training courses of three to six months before being appointed as judges an unprecedented move that threatens the integrity and impartiality of the judiciary.

This month, Houthi media reported the deployment of the first batch of 83 newly trained judges across courts in eight provinces under their control, with the aim of replacing graduates of the Higher Institute of Judiciary.

Information indicates that nearly 1,600 individuals have enrolled in these sectarian training programs, while 24 institute graduates remain waiting assignment for more than five months despite an acute shortage of qualified judicial staff.

Remarkably, most recruits hail from what the group calls the "Hashemite lineage," and will serve under the supervision of Houthi-appointed judges without meeting the legal requirements for judicial appointments. This illustrates the extent of institutional manipulation: the group is using the judiciary to secure its rule and implement its political goals.

Salah Taher Al-Qumairi, chief military prosecutor in Marib, told "Noon Post" that Yemeni law distinguishes clearly between fixed "Hudud" punishments mandated by sharia and discretionary "ta'zir" penalties, where both the judge and legislature may adjust penalties depending on the severity of the crime and its circumstances.

Regarding the specialized Houthi courts, Al-Qumairi emphasized they have no legal mandate or legitimacy, as their judges were appointed by an "uprising militia exercising de facto authority without constitutional or legal basis."

He reminded that the Houthi Movement is designated as a terrorist group locally, regionally, and internationally and its judicial bodies are not recognized even as political entities.

Al-Qumairi explained that the highest judicial council transferred the specialized criminal court to Marib, which annulled the rulings issued by its counterpart in

Sana'a. He added that courts under Houthi control have turned into tools for political repression prosecuting journalists and opponents on fabricated charges. He noted that espionage cases are among the gravest, given their ties to the state's military, political, and economic security. Under Yemeni law, such charges require strict safeguards and meticulous procedures starting from the moment of arrest, grounded in principles of fair trial and defense rights.

Any violation of these safeguards undermines the legality and legitimacy of the verdict.

According to Al-Qumairi, authentic and explicit confessions must be presented directly before the court. Confessions extracted outside it are subject to stringent scrutiny; courts have full authority to reject any confession tainted by physical, moral, or unverified coercion.

He also described how the political and security environment in Yemen undermines judicial independence: security interference has created a climate of fear and threat, directly or indirectly affecting judges; budget constraints and executive control over funding have weakened judicial impartiality.

Under such conditions, judges often prioritize personal safety over duty a grave danger to the independence of the judiciary.

Espionage as a Tool to Terrorize

Political analyst Hassan Maglis, speaking to "Noon Post," explained that the Houthi Movement has consistently exploited the Palestinian cause and used the war in Gaza as a cover to conceal its abuses in Yemen. With a relative decline in the intensity of that war, the group lost a key pretext for its internal repression.

Consequently, the recent surge in expedited verdicts appears to serve multiple purposes: responding to external pressures and military setbacks, while simultaneously tightening control internally demonstrating decisiveness against those it labels "foreign agents."

He said that the "espionage" narrative now serves as a political and security tool to justify waves of arrests, expedited trials, and mass detentions. Concurrently, this narrative is directed toward the Houthi grassroots to persuade them of internal threats that purportedly require heightened security measures.

According to Maglis, this tactic accelerated after the group was hit by external blows, as noted in reports from both international and local sources.

Maglis added that among the Houthi security apparatus there appears to be growing tension: one faction favors a more administrative and open approach, while another pushes for greater securitization and repression.

This internal struggle intensifies the divide between civil society and Houthi security institutions, leading to growing silent resistance and prompting qualified individuals to flee.

He noted that detaining local staff and international humanitarian workers has become common practice a tactic the group uses for political pressure, negotiation leverage, and retaliation against external pressure.

This comes despite the devastating humanitarian consequences: a deepening crisis affecting millions, including countless children suffering malnutrition all happening under what he described as the silence of United Nations and the international community.

Analyst Ehab Al-Qurashi observed that these campaigns predate October 2023, when the alliance between the Houthis and corrupt insiders in certain aid organizations began to unravel a shift that coincided with reduced international funding.

With those financial interests gone, the scope of restrictions, detentions, and death sentences expanded, disproportionately affecting ordinary citizens and humanitarian staff alike.

He added that the Houthi Movement has intensified pressure on aid organizations in order to obscure what he called their “intelligence and security failures” following recent Israeli strikes.

They scapegoat these organizations and their workers even though these groups had operated for years under Saudi, Gulf, and international funding without previous accusations.

Al-Qurashi said many organizations have now had to move their offices to Aden after losing nearly 80 percent of their funding, and he urged relocating all offices of OCHA and the United Nations to Aden, while deploying alternative mechanisms to sustain humanitarian work in non-liberated areas.