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A Dying Cause: The Lost Gains of the Muhammasheen

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Cover photo: A man from Yemen's muhammasheen community building a shelter with his son in Hudayah's Bayt al-Faqih district in February 2024 // Sana'a Center photo by Abdu Al-Dhahw.

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Historically relegated to the bottom of Yemen's social hierarchy, the *muhammasheen* (marginalized ones) are a minority group that has endured decades of systematic marginalization and exclusion. The surge of activity by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) following Yemen's 1990 unification brought greater attention to their struggle, leading to meaningful advocacy efforts from both local and international organizations and creating momentum for the community. But the outbreak of war in 2015 and the ensuing protracted conflict threaten to undermine these hard-won gains. As international support for Yemen recedes, the plight of the muhammasheen is once again being relegated to the margins, leaving the community increasingly vulnerable.

Although there are no officially recognized statistics, UN reports and other studies estimate the population of muhammasheen to be anywhere from 500,000 to 3.5 million. If the latter figure is correct, it would mean they comprise roughly 10 percent of Yemen's population. The erosion and collapse of the community's organizations thus place huge numbers of people at renewed risk, without the necessary representation or recourse for redress.

Shedding A Stigma

Discrimination has defined the experience of the muhammasheen throughout Yemen's historical and political contexts. Although the origins of the community remain debated, a widely cited narrative among Yemeni historians traces their lineage to the remnants of the Banu Najah dynasty, founded by Najah the Abyssinian, which ruled large parts of Yemen between 1012 and 1158. After the dynasty's downfall at the hands of Imam Ali bin al-Mahdi in 1158, Al-Mahdi retaliated against the surviving Banu Najah by forcing them into servitude, stripping them of key social and economic rights such as land ownership and dignified employment, and confining them to the peripheries of urban areas.

Until recently, *akhdam* (servants) was the derogatory term more commonly used to describe the muhammasheen. Debates over their origin, along with negative connotations associated with servitude, have persisted over time and fail to acknowledge that the muhammasheen are first and foremost Yemeni. There have been efforts at integration. South Yemen's socialist government offered a degree of integration through housing, education, and public employment, but in northern Yemen, social and economic exclusion prevailed. Lacking tribal affiliation in a predominantly tribal society, members of the community were systematically deprived of power and influence, excluded from the calculations of dominant groups, segregated in shanty towns and slums on the peripheries of urban areas, and confined to sanitation and cleaning work.

Following Yemen's 1990 unification, a narrow but significant political opening for democracy and pluralism prompted international human rights organizations to increase their activities in the country. The plight of the muhammasheen community received particular attention. With support from INGOs, along with assistance from local researchers, the community's leaders began to establish alternative centers of influence to compensate for their lack of tribal support. Approximately 80 local associations, unions, and organizations across the country were formed by the muhammasheen starting in 1999, with backing from the international community. In 2007, these organizations formed the National Union for the Muhammasheen, uniting local initiatives under a single national platform that gave the community a more prominent voice in decision-making circles.

A Turning Tide

While systemic discrimination endured, international support and unionization empowered the muhammasheen to advocate more effectively for their rights. In Aden, Taiz, and Sana'a, they secured representation on local councils for the first time. Some even obtained seats on the central committees of political parties.[1]

Across the country, community associations opened health centers and schools providing services for the muhammasheen. In Taiz, for instance, the Al-Wadi Al-Jadeed Association established a health unit, an educational center, and a women›s rehabilitation and training center. It also launched water initiatives and flood protection projects, significantly improving health, education, and economic conditions. Similar initiatives were established across the country with support from organizations such as the European Union, the French organization DIA, Care International, and others. Following Yemen's 2011 uprisings, the muhammasheen secured one seat at Yemen's National Dialogue Conference, and a number of the NDC's recommendations specifically addressed the muhammasheen, urging state authorities to take all necessary legal measures to ensure their participation in public, civil, and political life.

Lost Ground

Much of this progress unraveled with the outbreak of war in 2015. Interviews conducted for this article with community representatives paint a grim picture. With the shift of international aid towards emergency humanitarian relief at the beginning of the war, many organizations and NGOs ceased operations in Yemen, including those working with the muhammasheen. Leaders of local associations reported that donors imposed increasingly stringent conditions that grassroots organizations could not meet, effectively cutting them off from funding. Many of these local organizations and associations are now inactive. The National Union is now fragmented across the lines of control, with branches in Sana'a andAden, and is barely able to sustain its operations.

[1] Interviews conducted with leaders of local organizations and representatives of the National Union for the Muhamasheen. These include interviews with Saeed Qaed Mohammed, April 5, 2025; Akram Abdul Ali Al-Sharaabi, April 6, 2025; and Nu'man Qaed Mohammed, the President of the National Union for the Muhammasheen, April 7, 2025.

Na'man Qaed Mohammed, head of the National Union for the Muhammasheen,[2] represented the community at the NDC. He pointed out that, unlike political parties and members of the government whose activities were supported in exile, displaced political leaders from the muhammasheen community have had to fend for themselves. Many were forced to abandon their advocacy roles and take on menial jobs just to survive.

The collapse of representative organizations and the displacement of the community's leaders have had catastrophic consequences, including widespread loss of education opportunities for the community, severe gaps in healthcare, increased sexual and human rights violations, extrajudicial killings, forced displacement, malnutrition, exploitation of youth by conflict parties, forced recruitment into armed groups, and soaring poverty and unemployment. If this situation persists, the plight of the muhammasheen risks regressing to its original point of profound marginalization.

Reclaiming the Cause

The deteriorating situation of the muhammasheen must be brought back into the national conversation. Yemen's internationally recognized government must re-establish channels of communication with exiled leaders and support the resumption of their advocacy efforts. Additionally, the government must hold law enforcement bodies accountable for addressing the increase in violations being committed against the community, as current enforcement is weak and inconsistent. International organizations should reassess their funding policies for Yemen to account for the community's unique circumstances and the urgent needs of affected organizations. This could help these organizations regain their prior capacity and enable them to adapt to current challenges. In parallel, research institutions should conduct more in-depth studies on the impact of the war on the muhammasheen, investigating the consequences of the collapse of local organizations and how this affected the community's societal integration and access to equal rights. Lastly, given that they represent a significant portion of Yemen's population, the muhammasheen must be included in any dialogue processes or discussions of a negotiated settlement.

[2] Interview with Na'man Qaed Mohammed, the President of the National Union for the Muhammasheen, April 7, 2025.

Jawhar Mokhtar Ahmed is a Yemeni researcher writing under a pseudonym.

This commentary was produced as part of the Yemen Peace Forum, a Sana'a Center initiative that seeks to empower the next generation of Yemeni youth and civil society activists to engage in critical national issues.

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