

ERITREA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The law and unimplemented constitution prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and the freedom to practice any religion. The government recognizes four officially registered religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea. It appoints the heads of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and the Sunni Islamic community. Places of worship other than those of the four registered religious groups remained closed, but most buildings were unharmed and protected, including the Jewish synagogue. The government continued to refuse approval for most foreign financing of religious organizations. Jehovah's Witnesses, who were stripped of citizenship in 1994 due to their refusal to vote, continued to be unable to obtain official identification documents because of their religion. The government did not recognize conscientious objectors to military service and singled out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment.

Government lack of transparency and intimidation of sources made it difficult to report accurately on specific religious freedom cases. According to the international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, all religious groups were to varying degrees targeted by government restrictions. They reported that the government subjected members of unauthorized religious groups to arbitrary detention, torture, forced recanting as a condition of release, and other ill-treatment. According to the June 5 report of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Human Rights in Eritrea, the COI found that authorities prohibited religious gatherings; confiscated religious materials; arrested, subjected to ill treatment, tortured, and coerced religious adherents to recant their faith; and "disappeared" or killed many religious followers over the course of its reporting period between 1991 and 2015. The COI's findings relied primarily on testimony from victims and witnesses, thematic discussions, and written submissions. The government did not grant the COI access to the country.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

U.S. embassy officials raised religious freedom concerns with government officials, including the imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses and the lack of alternative service for conscientious objectors to mandatory national service that includes military training. Embassy officials also met with leaders and other

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representatives of religious groups, both registered and unregistered. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom on a regular basis with a wide range of interlocutors, including visiting international delegations, members of the diplomatic corps based in Asmara as well as in other countries in the region, and with UN officials.

Since 2004, Eritrea has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On February 29, 2016, the Secretary of State redesignated Eritrea as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.5 million (July 2015 estimate). The Eritrean government estimates the population at 3.5 million. There are no reliable statistics on religious affiliation. Government, religious, and local UN sources estimate the population is approximately 48-50 percent Christian and 48-50 percent Sunni Muslim. The Christian population is predominantly Eritrean Orthodox. Catholics, Protestants, and other Christian denominations, including the Greek Orthodox Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Pentecostals, total less than 5 percent of the Christians. Some estimates suggest approximately 2 percent of the population is animist, and there is a small Bahai community of approximately 300 members. The Jewish population numbers fewer than five individuals.

The ethnic Tigrinya live in the highlands and are predominantly Christian. In the eastern and western lowlands as well as in coastal regions the population is predominantly Muslim and non-Tigrinyan.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The law and unimplemented constitution prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and the freedom to practice any religion.

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A longstanding proclamation requires religious groups to register with the government or cease activities. Members of religious groups that are unregistered or otherwise not in compliance with the law are subject to penalties under the provisional penal code. Such penalties may include fines and prison terms. The Department of Religious Affairs has authority to regulate religious activities and institutions including approval of the applications of religious groups seeking official recognition. Each application must include a description of the religious group's history in the country, an explanation of the uniqueness or benefit the group offers compared with other religious groups, names and personal information of the group's leaders, detailed information on assets, a description of the group's conformity to local culture, and a declaration of all foreign sources of funding.

The government has registered and recognizes four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea. It also has appointed the heads of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and the Sunni Islamic community.

Groups must renew their registration every year. In 2002, the minister of information issued a decree requiring all religious groups, except the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea (affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation), to submit registration applications and cease religious activities and services until these applications were approved. Since 2002, the government has not approved the registration of additional religious groups.

Religious groups may print and distribute documents only with the authorization of the Office of Religious Affairs, which routinely approves such requests only for the four officially registered religious groups. If a religious institution disseminates a publication or broadcast through the media without government approval, the author of the publication or director of the broadcast is subject to a fine of up to 10,000 nakfa (\$667) and/or two years' imprisonment.

Religious groups must obtain government approval to build facilities for worship.

The law does not address religious education in public school. Religious education is allowed in private schools.

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By law all citizens between 18 and 50 must perform national service, with limited exceptions. In 2012 the government instituted a compulsory citizen militia, requiring persons not already in the military, including many who were demobilized, elderly, or otherwise exempted from military service in the past, to carry firearms and attend militia training. Failure to participate in the militia or national service could result in detention. Militia duties mostly involve security-related activities, such as airport or neighborhood patrolling. Militia training primarily involves occasional marches and listening to patriotic lectures. The law does not provide for conscientious objector status for religious reasons, nor are there alternative activities for persons willing to perform national service but unwilling to engage in military or militia activities.

The law prohibits any involvement in politics by religious groups and restricts the right of religiously affiliated media outlets to comment on political matters.

All citizens must obtain an exit visa prior to departure. The application requests the applicant's religious affiliation, but the law does not require that information.

The law limits foreign financing for religious groups. The only contributions legally allowed are from local followers, from the government, or from government-approved foreign sources

Government Practices

Government lack of transparency and intimidation of sources made it difficult to report accurately on specific religious freedom cases. According to the international NGOs Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, all religious groups were, to varying degrees, targeted by government restrictions. They stated that the government subjected members of unrecognized religious groups to arbitrary detention, torture, forced recanting as a condition of release, and other ill-treatment.

According to the June 5 report of the COI, authorities prohibited religious gatherings; confiscated religious materials; arrested, subjected to ill treatment, tortured, and coerced religious adherents to recant their faith; and "disappeared" or killed many religious followers over the course of its reporting period, between 1991 and 2015. The COI's findings relied primarily on testimony from victims and witnesses, thematic discussions, and written submissions. The government did not grant the COI access to the country.

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Government secrecy and intimidation of sources made it impossible to determine the precise number of those imprisoned because of their religious beliefs. Releases and arrests often went unreported. Information from outside the capital was extremely limited. Independent observers noted that many people remain imprisoned with no charges.

International religious organizations reported that authorities interrogated detainees about their religious affiliation and asked them to identify members of unauthorized religious groups.

In the latter part of the year, two priests from Orthodox monasteries were arrested and others fled to Ethiopia. Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios, appointed by the Orthodox Church leadership in Cairo and put under house arrest in 2006 for protesting government interference in church affairs, remained under house arrest and was said to be in poor health.

The government detained persons associated with unregistered religious groups without due process, occasionally for long periods of time, sometimes on the grounds of threatening national security. The majority of the pastors who were arrested after the government began to crack down on banned religious groups in 2002 remained in arbitrary detention. None have been charged with a crime or brought before a court.

The government singled out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment because of their blanket refusal to bear arms. Jehovah's Witnesses estimated that 54 members were in detention during the year, including three men who have been imprisoned without charges for over 20 years. Authorities detained a foreign member of the Jehovah's Witnesses in October for proselytizing and held her in detention for a week before releasing her. Other NGO sources corroborated reports of such detentions. Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports of large numbers of Jehovah's Witnesses being detained as a group during the conduct of a religious service.

The government generally considered Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious prisoners as being held for religious/national security reasons. Prisoners held for national security reasons were not allowed visitors, and families often did not know where they were being held. Authorities generally permitted family members to visit prisoners detained for religious reasons only. Released prisoners

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who had been held for their religious beliefs reported harsh detention conditions, including solitary confinement, physical abuse, and inadequate food, water, and shelter.

There continued to be reports that police forced some members of unregistered religious groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals who were being held in detention, to sign statements recanting their religious beliefs. Authorities reportedly sometimes released detainees who promised to renounce adherence to an unregistered religious group.

Members of the Orthodox Church of Eritrea living outside the country reported that authorities on occasion detained expatriate Church members while visiting Eritrea; authorities generally interrogated and released such persons.

The government continued to require students in their final year of secondary school to attend the Sawa Training and Education Camp, which included six months of military training. Students who did not want to attend military training at Sawa, including some conscientious objectors, sometimes fled the country. The COI report found that during its reporting period religious practice was "severely restricted" in the military.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that members continued to be unable to obtain official identification documents because of their religion. Jehovah's Witnesses were collectively stripped of citizenship in 1994 after their refusal to participate in the country's 1993 independence referendum. The government continued to withhold documents and entitlements such as passports, national identification cards (required for employment), exit visas, and ration cards.

Official attitudes toward members of unregistered religious groups who worshiped in homes or rented facilities, differed by location. Some local authorities tolerated the presence and activities of unregistered groups, while others attempted to prevent them from meeting. Local authorities sometimes denied government coupons (which allowed shoppers to buy at a discounted price at certain stores) to Jehovah's Witnesses and members of Pentecostal groups.

According to the government appointed leaders of the four recognized religious, members of the officially registered religious groups generally did not face impediments to religious practice.

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Most religious facilities not belonging to the four officially registered religious groups remained closed. The government allowed the practice of Sunni Islam only and banned all other practice of Islam. Religious structures used by unregistered Jewish and Greek Orthodox groups still continued to exist in Asmara. The government protected the historic Jewish synagogue building. Other structures belonging to unregistered groups, such as Seventh-day Adventists and the Church of Christ, remained shuttered. The government allowed the Bahai center to remain open, but not for worship services. The Greek Orthodox church remained open, but there were no services. There were services held in the Anglican church building, but only under the auspices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. There were reports of other Protestant denominations holding services in homes, but not openly.

Some church leaders stated the government's restriction on foreign financing reduced church income and religious participation by preventing the churches from training clergy or building facilities. The government permitted the Catholic Church to receive financing from the Holy See. The government did not permit the Evangelical Lutheran Church to receive foreign funding.

The sole political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), appointed both the mufti (head) of the Sunni Islamic community and the patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, as well as some lower-level religious officials for both communities. PFDJ-appointed lay administrators managed some operations of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, including disposition of donations and seminarian participation in national service.

The government permitted a limited number of Muslims, mainly the elderly and those not fit for military service, to take part in the Hajj, travel abroad for religious study, and host some clerics from abroad. The government generally did not permit Islamic groups to receive funding from governments of nations where Islam was the dominant religion on grounds that such funding threatened to import foreign "fundamentalist" or "extremist" tendencies.

The government sometimes granted visas permitting Catholic dioceses to host visiting clergy from Rome or other foreign locations. Catholic clergy were permitted to travel abroad for religious purposes and training, although not in numbers Church officials considered adequate. Students attending the Roman Catholic seminary as well as Catholic nuns did not perform national service and did not suffer repercussions from the government. Some religious leaders stated,

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however, that national service requirements prevented adequate numbers of seminarians from completing theological training in Rome or other locations, because those who had not completed national service were not able to obtain passports or exit visas.

Some Eritrean Orthodox clergy operating outside the country said that the government sought to control Eritrean Orthodox churches in foreign countries. Authorities reportedly pressured one such overseas Eritrean Orthodox church to send money to the government or risk preventing church members from visiting relatives in Eritrea and potential seizure of assets held by the church members in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Evangelical Lutheran Church reported that members of the Muslim community assisted them with funds, labor and materials to build churches in some remote locations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives met periodically with government officials to raise religious freedom concerns, including advocating for the release of Jehovah's Witnesses and alternative service for conscientious objectors to bearing arms. Embassy officers raised issues of religious freedom with a wide range of interlocutors, including visiting international delegations, Asmara- and regionally-based diplomats accredited to Eritrea, and UN and other international organization representatives.

Embassy staff met with leaders and other representatives of most religious groups, including unregistered ones. Embassy officials attended religious celebrations of the four registered faiths as invitees of the government or of religious leaders and on an ad hoc basis.

Since 2004, Eritrea has been designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On February 29, 2016, the Secretary of State redesignated Eritrea as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

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Restrictions on U.S. assistance resulting from the CPC designation remained in place.