

ERITREA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The law and unimplemented constitution prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief as well as 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. Most places of worship other than those of the four registered religious groups remained closed, but most of those buildings were unharmed and protected, including the Bahai center and Jewish synagogue. The government continued to limit financing of religious organizations and only allowed contributions from local followers or from government-approved foreign sources. Jehovah's Witnesses, who were stripped of citizenship in 1994 due to their refusal to vote, were unable to obtain official identification documents as in previous years. The government did not recognize a right to conscientious objection to military service, continued to single out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment such as arrest and detention, and denied them the opportunity to obtain a national identity card required for most forms of employment, government benefits, and travel.

The government's lack of transparency and intimidation of sources made it difficult to obtain accurate information on specific religious freedom cases. According to the international nongovernmental organization (NGO) Human Rights Watch, all religious groups were to varying degrees targeted by government restrictions. Amnesty International reported the government subjected members of unauthorized religious groups to arbitrary detention, torture, forced recanting as a condition of release, and other forms of ill-treatment. January marked the tenth year of Patriarch Abune Antonios's house arrest. The UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (COI) corroborated reports that more than 10 Orthodox priests were detained in April for protesting his continued detention and expressing concern about government plans to appoint a new patriarch following the death of Abune Dioskoros, who was appointed by the government following the detention of Patriarch Abune Antonio. According to international representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Saron Gebru, a 28-year-old woman, began serving a six-month sentence in April after "being convicted for attending the 2014 Memorial of Christ's death." She was released on October 5. Meraf Seyum Habtemariam, a 53-year-old female Jehovah's Witness, remained imprisoned after being arrested for taking part in a "religious activity" in October

2015. The COI reported in June 2015 that authorities prohibited religious gatherings; arrested, subjected to ill-treatment, beat, and coerced religious adherents to recant their faith; and “disappeared” many religious followers between 1991 and 2015. The COI’s findings relied primarily on testimony from victims and witnesses, thematic discussions, and written submissions. The June 2016 report concluded, “There are reasonable grounds to believe that Eritrean officials have and still continue to deprive Eritrean “Pentes,” (members of Protestant evangelical and Pentecostal religious groups) and some Muslims, of fundamental rights contrary to international law on religious grounds. Jehovah’s Witnesses have been targeted since May 1991, and other nonauthorized religious denominations since no later than 2002.” The COI also concluded, “Persecution on both religious and ethnic grounds has been an integral part of the Eritrean leadership’s plan to maintain its authority in a manner contrary to international law. Thus, the Commission finds that Eritrean officials have committed the crime of persecution, a crime against humanity, in a large-scale and routine manner since May 1991.” The COI found “that, at a minimum, the persecution of members of nonauthorized religious denominations persists.” The government continued to deny the COI access to the country.

Refugees outside the country reported that neighbors in the country sometimes turned in to local authorities members of unregistered religious groups that met together in homes to worship.

U.S. embassy officials continued to raise 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 clergy, leaders, and other representatives of religious groups, both registered and unregistered. Embassy officials also 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 and in other countries in the region, and UN officials. Embassy officials used social media platforms and outreach programs to engage the public and highlight the U.S. commitment to religious freedom.

On October 31, the Secretary of State redesignated Eritrea as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act. Restrictions on U.S. assistance resulting from the CPC designation remained in place.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.8 million (July 2016 estimate). The Eritrean government estimates the population at 3.5 million. There are no reliable figures 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. There is a very small Jewish community.

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.

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 Office 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 appoints 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 Lutheran 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; information on how many registrations are pending is not available.

Religious groups may print and distribute documents only with the authorization of the Office of Religious Affairs, which has only approved requests from 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.

By law all citizens between 18 and 50 must perform national service, with limited exceptions, including for health reasons such as physical disability or pregnancy. 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 prohibits religiously affiliated media outlets from commenting 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.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Government lack of transparency and intimidation of sources made it difficult to obtain accurate information on specific religious freedom cases. According to the international NGO Human Rights Watch, all religious groups, to varying degrees, continued to be subject to government restrictions. Other observers noted that the government continued to impose restrictions on proselytizing, accepting funding from NGOs and international organizations, groups selecting their own religious leaders, gathering for worship, constructing places of worship, and teaching religious beliefs to others. Amnesty International 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 2016 COI report, individuals stated that members of nonauthorized religious groups continued to suffer acute discrimination, detention, beatings, and coercion to renounce their religion. There was a reported incident where military police forced individuals to sign documentation stating their commitment to Eritrean Orthodox Church in 2014 and 2015. A witness who reported being detained several times, including from 2014 to November 2015 for practicing a nonauthorized religion and who fled the country this year, told the COI that “Protestants detained are only released after denouncing their faith and promising to worship in the Eritrean Orthodox Church.” Authorities reportedly sometimes released detainees who promised to renounce adherence to an unregistered religious group.

The June 2016 COI report concluded that “there are reasonable grounds to believe that Eritrean officials have and still continue to deprive Eritrean ‘Pentes,’ and some Muslims, of fundamental rights contrary to international law on religious grounds. Muslims were targeted, in particular in the 1990’s, in 2007-2008, and after the Forto incident in 2013. Jehovah’s Witnesses have been targeted since May 1991, and other nonauthorized religious denominations since no later than 2002.” The COI also concluded, “Persecution on both religious and ethnic grounds has been an integral part of the Eritrean leadership’s plan to maintain its authority in a manner contrary to international law.” This caused the commission to conclude “that

Eritrean officials have committed the crime of persecution, a crime against humanity, in a large-scale and routine manner since May 1991.” The COI found “that, at a minimum, the persecution of members of nonauthorized religious denominations persists.” The government continued to deny the COI access to the country.

According to international representatives of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, on April 5, Saron Gebru, a 28-year-old female Jehovah’s Witness, began serving a six-month sentence after “being convicted for attending the 2014 Memorial of Christ’s death.” She was released on October 5. Jehovah’s Witnesses also reported on the case of Meraf Seyum Habtemariam, a 53-year-old female Jehovah’s Witness, who remained in jail after being arrested for taking part in a “religious activity” in October 2015.

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 remained imprisoned with no charges.

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

January marked the tenth year of Patriarch Abune Antonios’s house arrest. Patriarch Antonios was appointed by the Orthodox Church leadership in Cairo and put under house arrest in 2006 for protesting government interference in Church affairs. Church leaders and several NGOs, including Christian Solidarity Worldwide, raised concerns about his poor health and called for his release. The COI was also able to corroborate reports that more than 10 Orthodox priests were detained in April 2016 for protesting his continued detention and expressing concern about government plans to appoint a new patriarch following the death of Abune Dioskoros, who was appointed by the government following the detention of Patriarch Abune Antonio.

The government continued to detain persons associated with unregistered religious groups without due process, occasionally for long periods of time, and sometimes on the grounds of threatening national security. According to World Watch Monitor, the majority of the pastors arrested after the government began to crack

down on banned religious groups in 2002 remained imprisoned. None have been charged with a crime or brought before a court.

The government continued to single out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment because of their blanket refusal to bear arms. Jehovah's Witnesses estimated that 54 of their members were in detention as of October, including three men imprisoned without charges for more than 20 years. Other NGO sources corroborated reports of such detentions.

The government continued to consider Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious prisoners as being held for their religious affiliation or for 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 who had been held for their religious beliefs reported harsh detention conditions, including solitary confinement, physical abuse, and inadequate food, water, and shelter.

The government continued to require students in their final year of secondary school to attend the Sawa National Training Center where military training occurs. Students who did not want to attend military training at Sawa, including some conscientious objectors, sometimes fled the country, according to many media sources. The COI found that religious practice was "severely restricted" in the military; authorities informed conscripts that they were prohibited from practicing their religion. One refugee reported to an NGO that Muslims were allowed to pray in the army, but Christians were banned from reading the Bible and from praying or talking with others. He said that possessing a Bible was seen as a sign that the person was a Pentecostal Christian.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that members continued to be unable to obtain official identification documents. 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. In October the government began requiring customers to present a national identification card in order to use the computers at private internet cafes.

Official attitudes toward members of unregistered religious groups worshipping in homes or rented facilities differed. Some local authorities tolerated the presence

and activities of unregistered groups, while others attempted to prevent them from meeting. According to an NGO representative who spoke with refugees outside the country, members of some unregistered Christian groups continued to meet, worship, and evangelize despite the dangers. The refugee also reported that individuals known to be practicing Christians did not receive the water distributions when neighbors did, and that they did not receive special government coupons to purchase subsidized food as did others in their communities. 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.

The leaders of the four recognized religious groups stated that their officially registered members did not face impediments to religious practice.

Most religious facilities not belonging to the four officially registered religious groups remained closed. The government continued to allow the practice of Sunni Islam only and banned all other practices of Islam. Religious structures used by unregistered Jewish and Greek Orthodox groups 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, and, according to reports, the members of the center had access to the building for at least some forms of meetings. 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 also allowed funding from the Papal Foundation in the amount of \$90,700 to "subsidize the cost of the elderly priests' residence." The government did not permit the Evangelical Lutheran Church to receive foreign funding.

Government control of all mass media restricted the ability of unregistered religious group members to bring attention to religious persecution, which observers indicated was caused by government officials. Restrictions on public assembly and freedom of speech severely limited the ability of unregistered

religious groups to assemble and conduct their worship, according to members of these groups.

The sole political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), appointed both the Mufti 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 continued to permit a limited number of Sunni Muslims, mainly the elderly and those not fit for military service, to take part in the Hajj, travel abroad for religious study, and host clerics from abroad. The government generally did not permit Muslim 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; they were discouraged from attending certain events while overseas. Students attending the Roman Catholic seminary as well as Catholic nuns did not perform national service and did not suffer repercussions from the government, according to Church officials. Some religious leaders stated, 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 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

Government control of all media, expression and public discourse has made it difficult to observe any potential societal actions impacting religious freedom. Foreign diplomats have reported that individuals in positions of power were often

reluctant to share power with Muslim countrymen and were distrustful of Muslims outside of the country. Some Christian leaders, however, have reported that Muslim leaders and communities have been willing to work with them on community projects.

Refugees outside the country reported that neighbors in the country sometimes turned in to local authorities members of unregistered religious groups that met together in homes to worship.

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 refusing to bearing arms for religious reasons. 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 clergy, leaders, and other representatives of most religious groups, including unregistered ones. Embassy officials attended religious celebrations, weddings, and funeral ceremonies of the four registered faiths as invitees of the government or of religious leaders and on an ad hoc basis.

The embassy's social media platforms regularly posted articles that focused on tolerance of religious diversity in the United States and the U.S. commitment to human rights. The embassy hosted well-attended public events such as the public screening of President Obama's talk at the Islamic Society of Baltimore and a Muhammad Ali film festival tribute that allowed embassy staff to engage members of the public on issues of religious freedom and religious tolerance in the United States.

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 October 31, 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. Restrictions on U.S. assistance resulting from the CPC designation remained in place.