

ERITREA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The law and unimplemented constitution prohibit religiously motivated 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 Tewahedo Church, Sunni Islam, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea. Unregistered groups lack the privileges of registered groups; their members have been arrested and mistreated and their eventual release from detention has sometimes been conditioned on a formal renunciation of their faith. Some unregistered groups are allowed to operate, and the government tolerates their worship activities. International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international media continued to report that members of all religious groups were, to varying degrees, subjected to government abuses and restrictions. During the year, the government both arrested and released individuals imprisoned on the basis of religion. According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), officials released 70 individuals imprisoned on the basis of religion in the first two months of the year: six on January 27, and 64 on February 1. On April 5, the Christian NGO Release International reported two new sets of arrests, one set of 23 persons in Asmara and the other of 12 persons in Assab. On April 12, the BBC reported that 36 Christians were released on bail, including 22 from the previous group in Asmara reported by Release International and 14 who had been in prison on the Dahlak Islands for four years. According to *Christian Today's* September reporting, authorities arrested 15 Christians, all of whom had previously been imprisoned for their religion. NGOs estimated authorities continued to detain from 130 to more than 1,000 people due to their faith. Authorities reportedly continued to detain 24 Jehovah's Witnesses for refusing to participate in military service or renounce their faith. At least 20 Muslim protesters reportedly remained in detention following protests in Asmara in October 2017 and March 2018. Authorities continued to confine former Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Abune Antonios to house arrest, where he has remained since 2006. The government continued to deny citizenship to Jehovah's Witnesses after stripping them of citizenship in 1994 for refusing to participate in the referendum that created the independent state of Eritrea.

While the government's lack of transparency and intimidation of civil society and religious communities created difficulties for individuals who wanted to obtain information on the status of societal respect for religious freedom, religious

tolerance appeared to international observers to be widespread within society. Churches and mosques are located in close proximity to each other, and most citizens congratulated members of other religious groups on the occasions of religious holidays and other events. There were no reports of sectarian violence, and most towns and ethnic groups included members from all the major religious groups.

U.S. officials in Asmara and Washington raised religious freedom concerns with government officials throughout the year, including the imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses, lack of alternative service for conscientious objectors, and the continued detention of Patriarch Antonios. Embassy officials further discussed religious freedom on a regular basis with a wide range of individuals, including members of the diplomatic corps based in Asmara, in other countries in the region, and UN officials. Embassy officials used social media and outreach programs to engage the public and highlight the commitment of the United States to religious freedom and rebut the government's argument that it does not persecute people based on their religious beliefs.

Since 2004, Eritrea has been designated 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 November 15, 2021, the Secretary of State redesignated Eritrea as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the ongoing denial of licenses or other approvals for exports or imports of defense articles and services as referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(n) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.1 million (midyear 2021). The UN estimates a population of approximately 3.5 million. Reliable population data in the country is difficult to gather. There are no reliable figures on religious affiliation. The Pew Foundation in 2016 estimated the population to be 63 percent Christian and 37 percent Muslim. Some government, religious, and international sources estimate the population to be 49 percent Christian and 49 percent Sunni Muslim. The Christian population is predominantly Eritrean Orthodox. Catholics, Protestants, and other Christian denominations, including Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals, constitute less than 5 percent of the Christian population. Some estimates suggest 2 percent of the population is traditionally animist. The Baha'i community reports approximately 500 members, half of whom reside in the

capital, Asmara. Only one Jew is known to remain in the country and resides in Eritrea only on a part-time basis.

A majority of the population in the southern and central regions is Christian, while the northern areas are majority Muslim. A majority of the Tigrinya, the largest ethnic group, is Christian. Seven of the other eight principal ethnic groups, the Tigre, Saho, Afar, Bilen, Hedareb, Nara, and the Rashaida, are predominantly Muslim and reside mainly in the northern regions of the country. The Kunama are diverse, with Christians, Muslims, and animists.

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.

Proclamation 73/1995, which serves as the guiding law on religious issues, calls for separation of religion and state; outlines the parameters to which religious organizations must adhere, including concerning foreign relations and social activities; establishes an Office of Religious Affairs; and requires religious groups to register with the government or cease activities. Some members of religious groups that are unregistered or otherwise not in compliance with the law reportedly continue to be subject to the former provisional penal code, which sets penalties for failure to register and noncompliance. A new penal code was promulgated in 2015 that does not directly address penalties for religious groups that fail to register or otherwise comply with the law, but it includes a punishment for “unlawful assembly” of between one and six months’ imprisonment and a fine of 5,001 to 20,000 nakfa (\$330-\$1,300); however, the new code has not yet been implemented.

The Office of Religious Affairs has authority to regulate religious activities and institutions, including approval of the applications of religious groups seeking official registration. Each application must include a description of the group’s history in the country; an explanation of the uniqueness or benefit the group offers compared with other registered 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 Office of Religious Affairs has registered four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Sunni Islam, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea (affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation). While Baha'is are not one of the four officially recognized religions, they have registered every year since 1959, the year the chapter was established, and have “de facto” recognition from the government. A synagogue exists in Asmara, but there are not enough adherents for regular services. A 2002 decree requires all other religious groups to submit registration applications and to cease religious activities and services prior to approval.

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

While the law does not specifically address religious education in public schools, Proclamation 73/1995 outlines the parameters to which religious organizations must adhere, and education is not included as an approved activity.

By law, all citizens between ages 18 and 50 must perform 18 months of national service, with limited exceptions, including for health reasons such as physical disability or pregnancy. In times of emergency, the length of national service may be extended indefinitely, and the country officially has been in a state of emergency since the beginning of the 1998 war with Ethiopia. There is also a compulsory militia for all men not in the military, including many who had been demobilized from National Service, otherwise exempted from military service in the past, or are elderly. Failure to participate in the militia or national service may result in detention. Militia duties mostly involve security-related activities, such as airport or neighborhood patrolling, and agricultural work. 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.

The government requires all citizens to obtain an exit visa prior to departing the country. The application requests the applicant's religious affiliation, but the law does not require that information.

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

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

Government Practices

During the year, the government both arrested and released individuals imprisoned on the basis of religion. According to CSW, officials released 70 Christian prisoners in the first two months of the year, six on January 27, and 64 on February 1. On April 5, Release International reported two new sets of arrests, one set of 23 persons in Asmara and the other of 12 persons in Assab. On April 12, the BBC reported that 36 Christians were released on bail, including 22 from the previous group in Asmara reported by Release International and 14 who had been in prison on the Dahlak Islands for four years. According to *Christian Today's* September reporting, authorities arrested 15 Christians, all of whom had previously been imprisoned for their religion.

NGOs estimated authorities continued to detain from 130 to more than 1,000 people due to their faith. Determining more precisely the number of persons imprisoned for their religious beliefs was difficult due to lack of government transparency and the reported intimidation of those who might come forward with such information.

Authorities reportedly continued to detain 24 Jehovah's Witnesses, more than half of whom had been in prison for more than 20 years, for refusing to participate in military service or renounce their faith. At least 20 Muslim protesters reportedly remained in detention following protests in Asmara in October 2017 and March 2018.

Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Abune Antonios, who last appeared in public in July 2017, has remained under house detention since 2006 for protesting government interference in Church affairs.

The government continued to single out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment because of their blanket refusal to vote in the 1993 referendum on the country's independence and subsequent refusal to participate in mandatory national service, for which the government stripped them of their citizenship in 1994. The government continued to detain Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious prisoners for failure to follow the law or for national security reasons and continued to deny them citizenship. Authorities' treatment of religious prisoners appeared to have been inconsistent. In some prisons, religious prisoners reportedly were not allowed

to have visitors, but in others, visitors were allowed. Some former prisoners held for their religious beliefs continued to report harsh detention conditions, including solitary confinement, physical abuse, and inadequate food, water, and shelter. Other former religious prisoners reported acceptable conditions, adequate food, and no physical abuse.

Government authorization remained necessary for any organization to print and distribute documents; for religious groups, that authorization needed to come from the Office of Religious Affairs, which continued to approve requests only from the four officially registered religious groups.

The government continued to impose restrictions on proselytizing, accepting external funding from international NGOs and international organizations, and groups selecting their own religious leaders. Unregistered religious groups also faced restrictions in gathering for worship, constructing places of worship, and teaching their religious beliefs to others, although they reported that in many cases the government unofficially allowed them to worship in private homes as long as it was done discreetly.

The government, which has not approved the registration of additional religious groups since 2002, again approved no new religious groups during the year. Unrecognized religious groups expressed fear that applying would open them to further repression.

Jehovah's Witnesses were largely unable to obtain official identification documents, which left many of them unable to study in government institutions and barred them from most forms of employment, government benefits, access to bank accounts, and travel.

Arrests and releases often went unreported. Information from outside the capital was extremely limited. Independent observers stated many persons remained imprisoned without charge.

The government continued to detain without due process persons associated with unregistered religious groups, occasionally for long periods, and sometimes on the grounds of threatening national security, according to minority religious group members and international NGOs. Their eventual release from detention was sometimes conditioned on a formal renunciation of their faith.

Religious observers continued to report the government denied many exit visa applications for individuals seeking to travel to international religious conferences. According to a 2019 report by the European Asylum Support Office, the issuance of exit visas was inconsistent and did not adhere to any consistent policy; members of unrecognized religious communities could be denied exit visas solely on the basis of their religious affiliation.

The government continued to ban all other practices of Islam other than Sunni Islam.

Official attitudes differed toward members of unregistered religious groups worshipping in homes or rented facilities. Some local authorities reportedly tolerated the presence and activities of unregistered groups, while others attempted to prevent them from meeting. Local authorities sometimes denied government ration coupons to Jehovah's Witnesses and members of Pentecostal groups. Some religious prisoners reported they were allowed to worship together in prison as long as they did so quietly.

Diaspora groups reported authorities controlled directly or indirectly virtually all activities of the four formally recognized groups. The leaders of the four groups continued to say that their officially registered members did not face impediments to religious practice. Individuals also reported restrictions on clergy meeting with foreign diplomats.

The government announced plans to continue its confiscation and nationalization of Catholic schools, begun in 2018. In June, it announced the scheduled closure of the remaining early childhood and intermediate primary schools, prompting the Eritrean Catholic Bishops collective to issue a letter denouncing the action, as "...explicitly detrimental to the most elementary principles of justice...." As of year's end, the schools remained open, according to Catholic sources.

Most places of worship unaffiliated with the four officially registered religious groups remained closed to worship, but many of those buildings remained physically intact and undamaged. Religious structures formerly used by the Jewish and Greek Orthodox communities in Asmara have been preserved. The government protected the historic synagogue, which was maintained by the last Jew known to be remaining in the country. The Greek Orthodox Church remained open as a cultural building, and as there is no longer a Greek Orthodox community; members of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church sometimes held religious services on the site. Other structures belonging to unregistered groups, such as the

Church of Christ, remained shuttered. The government allowed the Baha'i center in Asmara to remain open, and the members of the center had unrestricted access to the building. A Baha'i temple outside of Asmara was allowed to operate. There were indications other unregistered groups, including Seventh-day Adventists and the Faith Mission Church, operated to some degree. The Anglican Church building held services, but only under the auspices of the registered Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Some church leaders continued to state that the government's restriction on foreign financing reduced church income and religious participation by preventing churches from training clergy or building or maintaining facilities.

Government control of all mass media, as well as a fear of imprisonment or other government actions, continued to restrict the ability of unregistered religious group members to bring attention to government actions against them, according to observers. Restrictions on public assembly and freedom of speech severely limited the ability of unregistered religious groups to assemble and conduct worship in a designated place of worship, according to group members.

Observers noted that the government exerted significant direct and indirect influence over the appointment of heads of recognized religious communities, including the Eritrean Orthodox Church and the Sunni Islamic community; some international NGOs said that authorities directly controlled the appointments. The government denied this, stating these decisions were made entirely by religious communities. The sole political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, led by President Isaias Afwerki, de facto appointed both the head of the Sunni Islamic community and the head of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, as well as some lower-level officials for both communities. On May 12, the Synod of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church elected the fifth patriarch, Abune Qerlos, six years after the death of the fourth patriarch, Abune Dioskoros, (and 15 years after the arrest of third Patriarch Abune Antonios, still seen as the rightful patriarch by many followers). On July 10, Acting Mufti Sheikh Salim Ibrahim al-Muktar was elected Mufti of Eritrea, a position left vacant since 2017.

While the overwhelming majority of high-level officials, both military and civilian, were Christian, four ministers in the 17-member cabinet, the Asmara mayor, and at least one senior military leader, were Muslims.

The government said its official party doctrine promoted national citizenship above religious sectarianism and stated that it did not officially prefer any religion.

Programs in support of this doctrine included National Service and required attendance for all 12th graders at Warsay Yikealo Secondary School at Sawa (co-located with a defense training center) where students from across the country study and receive military training.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

While government control of all media and public discourse limited information available concerning societal actions affecting religious freedom, religious tolerance appeared to international observers to be widespread within society. Churches and mosques are located in close proximity to each other, and most citizens congratulated members of other religious groups on the occasions of religious holidays and other events. There were no reports of sectarian violence, and most towns and ethnic groups included members from all of the major religious groups.

Some Christian leaders continued to report Muslim leaders and communities were willing to collaborate on community projects. Ecumenical and interreligious committees did not exist, although local leaders met informally. Some shrines were venerated by both Orthodox and Muslim believers. Some Muslims expressed privately their feelings of stress and scrutiny in professional and educational settings because of their religion.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives met with government officials to raise religious freedom concerns, including seeking ways to accommodate unregistered groups. They also advocated for the release of Jehovah's Witnesses, including the remaining 24 still in prison, and for an alternative service option for conscientious objectors refusing to bear arms for religious reasons, and they expressed concern over the continued detention of Patriarch Abune Antonios. Officials in Washington shared similar concerns with officials at the Eritrean embassy. Embassy officials raised issues of religious freedom with a wide range of partners, including visiting international delegations, Asmara-based and regionally based diplomats accredited to the government, UN officials, and other international organization representatives. They used social media to highlight the importance of religious tolerance and employed public diplomacy programs to engage the public and highlight the commitment of the United States to religious freedom and to rebut government statements denying persecution, such as an embassy Facebook post on September

16 highlighting the recent arrest of Christians at the same time the government claimed it supported a “culture of tolerance.”

Since 2004, Eritrea has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, section 402(b), for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 15, 2021, the Secretary of State redesignated Eritrea as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the ongoing denial of licenses or other approvals for exports or imports of defense articles and services as referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(n) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.