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KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Eritrea worsened, with increasing interference in and restrictions on religious groups. In spite of the significant regional political changes and the 2018 peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, Eritrea continues to have one of the worst religious freedom records in the world, and has shown little interest in concretely improving the situation. No new religious institutions were officially registered, and thus only four religious communities remain legally permitted to operate: the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea, a Lutheran-affiliated denomination.

During 2019, there was an increase in political activism and calls for democratic reform by secular and religious Eritreans. The government responded harshly to both registered religious groups as well as unrecognized ones, such as the Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian communities, and accused religious actors of political interference for defending their beliefs and human rights. Christians were arbitrarily arrested and detained, including in waves of arrests in May of more than 171 adults and children gathering for worship around Asmara. In August, another 80 were reportedly arrested for practicing their faith. In April, Eritrean Catholic bishops wrote a joint letter calling for national truth and reconciliation. Throughout the year,

the government forcibly took over and closed multiple faith-based schools as well as 22 additional Catholic Church-run health centers. In 2017 and 2018, security forces had conducted mass arrests of protestors of government interference into a prominent Islamic religious school—Al Diaa—including senior members of the school board. In 2019, some of those arrested died in prison, including a second member of the executive committee, Hajji Ibrahim Younes.

In addition to being denied the right to freely practice their faith, Jehovah’s Witnesses were denied basic citizenship rights. Authorities explain this exclusionary policy as a result of Jehovah’s Witnesses’ abstention from voting in the referendum for Eritrea’s independence from Ethiopia in 1993, which was in adherence to their beliefs. Fifty-two Jehovah’s Witnesses remained imprisoned for observing their religion, in ways such as participating in religious meetings, preaching, or conscientiously objecting to military service.

The Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, [Abune Antonios](#), remained in detention throughout 2019. In April, a secretly recorded video of Patriarch Antonios was published online. Hundreds of individuals were believed to be imprisoned for their faith in Eritrea, and USCIRF included some of those cases in its new [Victims List](#). Some prisoners, such as leaders of the Full Gospel Church and the Orthodox Church, have been in prison for more than 15 years.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Eritrea as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Eritrean government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Use bilateral and multilateral diplomatic channels to urge the government of Eritrea to:
 - Release unconditionally detainees held on account of their religious activities, including Patriarch Antonios;
 - Publish the registration law for religious groups along with clear guidelines for applying for or appealing decisions;
 - End religious persecution of unregistered religious communities, and grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah’s Witnesses;
- Extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Red Cross; and
- Encourage the African Union to establish an accountability mechanism to investigate, prosecute, and try individuals accused of committing crimes against humanity in Eritrea, as recommended in 2016 by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea and the UN Human Rights Council.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Eritrea](#)
- **Special Report:** [Apostasy, Blasphemy, and Hate Speech Laws in Africa](#)
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project adoption:** [Patriarch Abune Antonios](#)

Background

Eritrea is under the authoritarian rule of President Isaias Afwerki and his political party, the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). The government views human rights and political expression by the population as threats and thus strictly represses them. Many Eritreans cite violations of political and human rights as key reasons for fleeing the country, and, according to humanitarian actors, in 2019 an average of at least 200 people arrived in Ethiopia and Sudan on a daily basis. The government continued to maintain an indefinite requirement of citizens to participate in national service, and restricted religious expression during that service. Human rights organizations reported that prayer, possession of religious books, and preaching also continue to be prohibited in prisons. Although the 1997 Constitution pledges freedom of conscience, religion, expression of opinion, movement, assembly, and organization, the constitution has not been implemented. The government uses [Proclamation No. 73 of 1995](#) as its basis for limiting religious freedom, including the freedom of religious actors to express political views that differ from government-approved positions.

Some sources estimate Eritrea's population to be divided evenly between Muslims and Christians, while [Pew Research](#) estimates almost 63 percent to be Christian and 37 percent Muslim, with less than 1 percent comprising other faith groups. Most Eritrean Christians are members of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. Only four religious entities are officially recognized and permitted to operate to any extent in the country: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. The government has not permitted any other groups to register since the requirement to do so went into effect in 2002. The government has published neither the registration law nor any procedures regarding applying for or appealing decisions. Authorities closely monitor the activities of the officially recognized groups, and also appoint leaders to key religious positions.

Tightening the Grip on the Orthodox Community

In April 2019, a secretly recorded video of Patriarch Antonios was [released](#), which allowed Eritreans around the world to hear Antonios' personal account of his removal from his position and forcible detention, and led many of them to question the government's narratives and decisions. Eritrean Orthodox Christians increasingly began to call on their church's Holy Synod to cease its compliance with government demands. The Eritrean government reportedly heightened pressure on the Holy Synod to excommunicate Patriarch Antonios from the church, which it ultimately did in July in a letter accusing the patriarch of heresy and of engaging with heretics. Nevertheless, many Eritrean Orthodox Christians still view Patriarch Antonios as the lawful leader of the church. Throughout 2019, authorities continued to detain him unlawfully, and reportedly have warned religious leaders not to mention his name in sermons. Many Orthodox Eritreans have denounced the government's actions against Patriarch Antonios and others, such as forcing monks to participate in military service against their religious beliefs. Multiple monastic fathers were also reportedly imprisoned in 2019 for expressing disagreement with the excommunication of Patriarch Antonios.

International Human Rights Reviews

In January 2019, at Eritrea's [Universal Periodic Review](#) before the UN Human Rights Council, more than a dozen states raised religious freedom issues in their statements, and specifically highlighted the need for Eritrea to allow conscientious objection and to release prisoners held on account of their beliefs. In May, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights published its [Concluding Observations and Recommendations](#) on Eritrea's implementation of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which included specific attention to religious freedom issues such as the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses and the need to ensure the right to registration and appeal for religious groups that seek to register officially. Furthermore, in May, the UN Human Rights Committee released its [Concluding Observations](#) on Eritrea's adherence to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). This report highlighted the detention of religious actors—including Patriarch Antonios for more than a decade—among other religious freedom violations.

Key U.S. Policy

Eritrea and the United States have not exchanged ambassadors since 2010. Diplomatic engagement improved during 2019 with several high-level U.S. official visits to Eritrea. In April, Acting Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Ambassador Donald Y. Yamamoto traveled to the country. In March, Representatives Karen Bass (D-CA), Joe Neguse (D-CO), and Ilhan Omar (D-MN) [completed](#) a congressional delegation to Ethiopia and Eritrea, and raised human rights and religious freedom concerns during their visit. Other State Department officials from the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor and the Office of International Religious Freedom also [visited](#) Eritrea in 2019 and raised human rights issues. The United States continued to support regional efforts for improving peace and security in the Horn of Africa. In addition to the broader diplomatic engagement, in May the United States removed Eritrea from its [list](#) of Countries Not Cooperating Fully with United States Antiterrorism Efforts. The State Department has designated Eritrea as a CPC repeatedly since 2004, most recently [redesignated](#) it in December 2019, and as a consequence maintains an arms embargo on Eritrea under 22 CFR 126.1 of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations.