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Executive Summary

The constitution, which the government has not implemented through legislation or in practice, prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and the freedom to practice any religion. However, the government provided only partial protections for the four officially registered religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea. The government appointed the head of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and the Islamic community. It continued to refuse approval for most foreign financing of religious organizations. Most places of worship other than those of the four recognized religious groups remained closed. The government continued to detain or harass members of other religious groups, including large numbers of Jehovah's Witnesses. The government did not recognize conscientious objectors to military service and singled out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment because of their refusal to bear arms or participate in the citizen militia program. The government declined to respond, positively or negatively, to a sharply critical letter from Roman Catholic bishops. Government lack of transparency and intimidation of sources made it difficult to report accurately on specific religious freedom cases.

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

U.S. embassy officials raised religious freedom issues 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 regularly with leaders and other representatives of religious groups, both registered and unregistered. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom as well as other human rights issues 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. The Charge d'Affaires gave a public talk on multiculturalism in the United States, during which he highlighted the importance of respecting religious freedom. The Secretary of State designated Eritrea as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in 2004, based on particularly severe violations of religious freedom, and renewed the designation in July. 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 6.4 million (July 2014 estimate). The Eritrean government, in its published official documents, estimates the population is currently 3.5 million. There are no reliable statistics on religious affiliation. Government, religious, and local UN sources estimate that the population is approximately 50 percent Christian and 50 percent Sunni Muslim. The Christian population is predominantly Eritrean Orthodox, with Catholics, Protestants, and other denominations, including the Greek Orthodox Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals, represented in small percentages. The Jewish population numbers fewer than five individuals.

Some estimates suggest approximately 2 percent of the population is animist, and there is a small Bahai community constituting of approximately 300 members, which has been present for 60 years.

The population is predominantly Muslim in the eastern and western lowlands as well as in coastal regions and mainly Christian in the central highlands.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for "freedom of thought, conscience, and belief," and "the freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practice." However, the government has not implemented the constitution, through additional legislation or in practice, since its ratification in 1997.

By law, religious groups must register with the government or cease activities. Groups must renew their registration every year. 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 reviews the applications of religious groups seeking official recognition. Applications 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 only the four religious groups it officially recognizes – the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea.

The law prohibits any involvement in politics by religious groups and restricts the right of religious media to comment on political matters. There are no independent media operating within the country.

Religious groups may print and distribute documents only with the authorization of the Office of Religious Affairs, which routinely approves such requests only for officially recognized 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.

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.

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

The law requires all young people who are physically and mentally capable to perform a term of national service that includes military training. The government civilian militia program requires most males and some females between the ages of 18 and 50, not currently performing military portions of national service and not serving in the military, to attend militia training, to carry out various public works projects, and to accept government-provided weapons. The law does not provide for conscientious objector status for religious or other reasons, nor are there alternative activities for persons willing to perform national service but unwilling to engage in military or militia activities. Noncompliance is punishable under the National Service Proclamation by up to two years' imprisonment and a fine. However, the proclamation does not preclude more severe punishment under the Transitional Penal Code. In cases deemed to involve issues of national security, the government may impose extrajudicial punishment that exceeds the limits prescribed by law.

Exit visa applications require a designation of religious affiliation. Christians must also indicate their specific denomination.

Government Practices

The government detained persons associated with unregistered religious groups, without due process, occasionally for long periods of time, sometimes after informally charging them with threatening national security. Members of several religious groups whose tenets did not permit bearing arms faced much harsher reprisals than those prescribed by law, including detention for years or decades, hard labor and physical abuse, inadequate food, water and shelter, and the withholding of government documents and entitlements such as passports and ration cards.

There was no independent confirmation of these conditions because the government did not allow international monitoring, although contact with some individuals with direct knowledge of the situation was possible.

The government singled out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment because of their blanket refusal to bear arms. Jehovah's Witnesses were collectively stripped of citizenship in 1994 after their refusal to participate in the country's 1993 independence referendum. According to the Jehovah's Witness headquarters, there were an estimated 73 Jehovah's Witnesses in detention, including three men detained for 20 years.

On April 14, authorities arrested more than 90 Jehovah's Witnesses at a service in a private residence in Asmara. Those arrested included males and females ranging in age from 16 months to 85 years. Authorities released them without charge approximately one month later. On April 27, authorities arrested 31 Jehovah's Witnesses who were meeting together for Bible study at a private residence in Asmara. The detainees reportedly were later released.

The government detained Jehovah's Witnesses and other prisoners held for religious/national security reasons at Me'eter prison, near Nakfa and other locations. Prisoners held for national security reasons were not allowed visitors and families often did not know where they were being held. There continued to be unofficial 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 give up adherence to an unregistered religious group. Released

prisoners who had been held for their religious beliefs reported harsh detention conditions, including solitary confinement.

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.

The government continued to require students in their final year of high school to attend the Sawa Training and Education Camp, which included six months of military training. Authorities at the Sawa Camp reportedly administered harsh treatment to trainees, particularly those whose religious beliefs included objections to bearing arms. Students who did not want to attend military training at Sawa, including some conscientious objectors, sometimes fled the country, despite an official shoot-to-kill policy for illegal emigrants.

Most religious facilities not belonging to the four officially recognized religious groups remained closed. The government allowed Muslims to practice only Sunni Islam. Several religious structures used by unregistered Jewish and Greek Orthodox groups still stood in Asmara. The government protected the historic Jewish synagogue, even though there were not enough Jews remaining in the country to hold services. Other structures belonging to unregistered groups, such as Seventh-day Adventists, remained shuttered, although the government allowed the Bahai center to remain open, but not for worship services. There were reports of other Protestant denominations holding services in homes, but not openly.

Official attitudes toward members of unregistered religious groups, who worshiped in homes or rented facilities, differed by location. Some local authorities tolerated unregistered groups, while others attempted to prevent them from meeting. The national government continued to disrupt home-based worship and arrest those who hosted prayer meetings. Local authorities sometimes denied community-based services, such as water and gas, to Jehovah's Witnesses and members of Pentecostal groups.

Individuals who were members of the four officially recognized, registered groups were generally able to practice their religious beliefs freely.

The government permitted military personnel to possess legally printed religious books.

Some church leaders stated the government's restriction on foreign financing reduced church income and religious participation by preventing the churches from training pastors or priests or building facilities.

In May four Catholic bishops published a pastoral letter sharply criticizing the government about its human rights record. There was no public government response, positive or negative, or even acknowledgment of the letter.

The sole political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), appointed both the mufti (head) of the Islamic community and the patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, as well as some lower-level Islamic and Orthodox religious officials. PFDJ-appointed lay administrators managed some operations of the Orthodox Church, including disposition of donations and seminarian participation in national service. Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios, appointed by the Orthodox Church leadership in Cairo and arrested in 2006 for protesting government interference in church affairs, remained under house arrest and was said to be in poor health.

The government permitted a limited number of Muslims, mainly the elderly and those not fit for militia 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 permitted 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, however, 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. The government permitted the church to receive financing from the Holy See. In October the visiting Apostolic Nuncio was refused permission to visit parishes outside of Asmara.

The government did not permit the Evangelical Lutheran Church to receive foreign funding.

Reportedly, persons who acknowledged membership in unregistered religious groups generally had difficulty obtaining passports and exit visas.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives met periodically with government officials to discuss religious freedom issues, including the detentions of Jehovah's Witnesses and the lack of alternative service for conscientious objectors to bearing arms. Embassy officers raised issues of religious freedom and broader human rights concerns 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. The Charge d'Affaires also spoke to a public audience on multiculturalism in the United States and highlighted the religious diversity and religious freedom there. 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. In an overall effort to promote religious tolerance, embassy staff worked with representatives of religious groups on several cultural, educational, and charitable activities, although U.S. participation was discreet and unacknowledged.

The U.S. Secretary of State designated Eritrea a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act in 2004, 2009, 2011, and, most recently, in July for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In connection with this designation, the Secretary of State ordered the continuation of the existing arms embargo. The country receives no U.S. development, humanitarian, or security assistance.

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