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FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2020 - ERITREA

NOT FREE

2

/ 100

Political Rights 1 / 40

Civil Liberties 1 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

2 / 100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

OVERVIEW

Eritrea is a militarized authoritarian state that has not held a national election since independence from Ethiopia in 1993. The People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), headed by President Isaias Afwerki, is the sole political party. Arbitrary detention is commonplace, and citizens are required to perform national service, often for their entire working lives. The government shut down all independent media in 2001.

KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN 2019

- Eritrean authorities closed the border's country with Ethiopia in April. Eritreans crossed the border, which was previously opened in 2018, to seek asylum or refuge elsewhere, and continued to do so after the government's decision.
- The government continued to interfere in the activities of religious groups during the year. In June, it closed health facilities operated by the Roman Catholic Church, after bishops called for the creation of a truth and reconciliation commission; that same month, the government reportedly arrested five Orthodox Christian priests for criticizing government interference in their church.
- The authorities also continued moves to restrict academic freedom. Seven secondary schools operated by religious organizations were seized by security forces in September.

POLITICAL RIGHTS

A ELECTORAL PROCESS

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

Following Eritrea's formal independence from Ethiopia in 1993, an unelected Transitional National Assembly chose Isaias to serve as president until elections could be held under a new constitution. He has remained in office since then, without ever obtaining a mandate from voters.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

A constitution ratified in 1997 but never instituted calls for an elected 150-seat National Assembly, which would choose the president from among its members by a majority vote. National elections have been postponed indefinitely, and the transitional assembly has not met since 2002. Local and regional assembly

elections have been held periodically, but they are carefully orchestrated by the PFDJ and offer no meaningful choice to voters.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 0 / 4

The 1997 constitution calls for an electoral commission whose head is appointed by the president and confirmed by the National Assembly, but it has never been established. Electoral laws have not been finalized. National elections have never been conducted; subnational elections are controlled by the ruling party.

B POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 0 / 4

The PFDJ is the only legally recognized political party in Eritrea. Alternative groups must operate from abroad among the diaspora community. Many groups were hosted by Ethiopia, but that government ordered many of them to cease operations after the two countries sought rapprochement in 2018.

The Eritrean government has also held prominent dissidents and family members in detention; a group of 11 have been held incommunicado since 2001. Reports in 2018 suggested that one of these individuals, former foreign minister Haile “Durue” Woldensae, died in detention. In late 2012, the government captured and held Ciham Ali Abdu, daughter of former information minister Ali Abdu Ahmed, while she tried to flee to Sudan; she was still detained incommunicado at the end of 2019. Authorities detained former finance minister Berhane Abrehe in 2018, and he also remained in custody at year’s end; his wife, Almaz Habtemariam, was arrested in 2018, and was released in August 2019.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 0 / 4

President Isaias and the PFDJ have been in power without interruption since independence, and since multiparty elections have never been allowed, opposition groups have had no opportunity to compete or enter government.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people’s political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 0 / 4

Eritrean society is dominated by the military, with most citizens required to perform open-ended military or other national service. The authorities’ intolerance of dissent and the absence of elections or opposition parties leaves individuals with no political options other than loyalty to the PFDJ, imprisonment, or illegal emigration.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 0 / 4

Women and various ethnic groups are nominally represented within the PFDJ, but they have no practical ability to organize independently or advocate for their interests through the political system.

C FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 0 / 4

Power is concentrated in the hands of the unelected president, who reportedly determines policy with the help of an informal circle of advisers, leaving the cabinet and security officials to merely carry out his decisions. In 2016, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) noted that military personnel are overrepresented among the president's closest associates.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 1 / 4

Petty bribery and influence peddling are thought to be endemic, and larger-scale corruption is a problem among some party officials and military leaders. The government's control over foreign exchange effectively gives it sole authority over imports, and those in favor with the regime are allowed to profit from the smuggling and sale of scarce goods such as food, building materials, and alcohol. Senior military officials have allegedly profited from smuggling Eritreans out of the country. There are no independent agencies or mechanisms in place to prevent or punish corruption. Special anticorruption courts overseen by the military nominally exist, but are mostly inactive.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 0 / 4

The government operates without public scrutiny. Basic data about the state budget and its appropriations are not publicly disclosed, and officials are not required to disclose their assets.

CIVIL LIBERTIES**D FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF****D1 0-4 pts**

Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

The government shut down all independent media outlets in 2001. Several organizations provide coverage to Eritreans from outside the country, including the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which provides internet news services in local languages. Radio Erena operates in France with the support of Reporters Without Borders (RSF), while satellite station Assenna TV (ATV) is based in the UK. Internet access is available to one percent of the population.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 16 journalists were imprisoned for their work in Eritrea; almost all had been imprisoned since 2001.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 0 / 4

The government places strict limits on the exercise of religion. Eritrea officially recognizes only four faiths: Sunni Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and Evangelical Lutheranism. Followers of other denominations are subject to arrest. In May 2019, over 140 Christian worshippers were arrested by security forces; while approximately 50 were later released, the remainder were still detained by that June according to the UN.

The government also interferes in the practice of faiths it recognizes. The Eritrean Orthodox Church's patriarch, Abune Antonios, was deposed and placed under house arrest in 2006. In June 2019, the government reportedly arrested five Orthodox priests for criticizing government interference in their church. In July, church bishops expelled Antonios for "heresy."

In June 2019, the government seized health facilities managed by the local Roman Catholic Church, after Catholic bishops publicly called for the formation of a truth and reconciliation commission.

Jehovah's Witnesses face severe persecution, including denial of citizenship and travel papers. Religious practice is prohibited among members of the military.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 0 / 4

Academic freedom is greatly constrained. Students in their last year of secondary school must perform military service at the Sawa military training center. In August 2019, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that widespread physical and sexual abuse took place at the facility. Former students say they were given insufficient food and were forced to perform manual labor.

Government attempts to nationalize an Islamic school in Asmara as part of a broader policy to assert state control of the education system led to rare demonstrations in 2017. Musa Mohammed Nur, the former school board chairman, was arrested that same year for opposing the government's policy, and died in custody in 2018. In January 2019, another board member, Hajji Ibrahim Younus, died in custody. The government took control of another seven schools operated by religious organizations in September.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 0 / 4

Freedoms of expression and private discussion are severely inhibited by fear of government informants and the likelihood of arrest and arbitrary detention for any airing of dissent. The authorities regularly block access to social media platforms and shutter internet cafes.

Members of the Eritrean diaspora who live abroad are, by comparison, better able to express dissent on social media platforms. Activists have used those platforms and protests to oppose the government as part of the *Yiakl* (Enough) campaign through much of 2019. However, members of the diaspora are also subject to government surveillance and harassment; in June, Amnesty International reported that activists living abroad faced harassment from government employees and the ruling PJDF.

E ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

Freedom of assembly is not recognized by the authorities. Those who take to the streets to protest face the threat of deadly force at the hands of the state security forces, or arbitrary detention. In 2017 and 2018, reports emerged indicating that public protests were met with such repression. By one account, over 24 people were killed by security forces during 2017 demonstrations in support of Musa Mohammed Nur. His 2018 funeral prompted mass protests that erupted into clashes between protesters and police; news sources reported that protesters were arrested, with numbers ranging from a handful to nearly a thousand.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? 0 / 4

The law requires all nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to undergo an onerous and arbitrary annual registration process, and limits their activities to providing humanitarian relief. In reality, there are no independent civil society organizations based in Eritrea. The government continues to deny permission for external human rights organizations to enter the country.

E3 0-4 pts**Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 0 / 4**

There are no independent trade unions in Eritrea. The only union umbrella group, the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers, is affiliated with the ruling party. Relatively autonomous student and teachers' unions operated during the early years of independence but were gradually shut down in the late 1990s and early 2000s. According to reports to the UNHRC, the government has prevented new unions from being formed.

F RULE OF LAW**F1 0-4 pts****Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4**

The judiciary has no independence from the executive branch. The Supreme Court called for in the constitution has never been established, nor has a Judicial Commission tasked with appointing judges. The president controls the appointment and dismissal of all judges; even nominally elected judges in local community courts are controlled by the Justice Ministry, according to UN investigators. Many judges are military officers.

F2 0-4 pts**Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 0 / 4**

Basic principles of due process are systematically violated. Arbitrary arrests and detentions are common; targets include those who evade military service, try to flee the country, or are suspected of practicing an unauthorized religion. Eritreans who offend high-ranking government or party officials are also reportedly subject to arbitrary arrest.

Prisoners, including children, former members of the government, and their family members, are routinely held incommunicado for indefinite periods without charge or trial, with the authorities refusing even to inform family members whether they are still alive. There is no operational system of public defense lawyers. Thousands of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience remain imprisoned.

F3 0-4 pts**Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4**

UN investigators have described the routine and systematic use of physical and psychological torture in both civilian and military detention centers. Deaths in custody or in military service due to torture and other harsh conditions have been reported. Security forces employ lethal violence arbitrarily and with impunity. Individuals attempting to escape military service or flee the country have been fired on by soldiers.

F4 0-4 pts**Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 0 / 4**

There are allegations that two of Eritrea's nine recognized ethnic groups, the Kunama and Afar, face severe discrimination, including exclusion from the government's poverty alleviation programs.

Eritrea has also been accused of violating the rights of prisoners of war. In September 2019, UK-based NGO Human Rights Concern–Eritrea (HRCE) warned that the government was likely holding 13 Djiboutian prisoners of war, who were captured during a 2008 border conflict between the two countries, incommunicado.

Laws mandate equal educational opportunity for women and equal pay for equal work. However, traditional societal discrimination against women persists in the countryside, and the deeply flawed legal system does not effectively uphold their formal rights.

Same-sex sexual relations are criminalized, and LGBT+ people enjoy no legal protections from societal discrimination.

G PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 0 / 4

Freedom of movement is heavily restricted. Eritreans young enough for national service are rarely given permission to go abroad, and those who try to travel outside the country without obtaining an exit visa face imprisonment. Individuals also require permits to travel within the country. Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers who are repatriated from other countries are subject to detention under harsh conditions.

The opening of the border with Ethiopia in 2018 prompted tens of thousands of Eritreans to flee the country, risking their lives to seek asylum in neighboring countries and in Europe. The Eritrean government closed the border in April 2019, but Eritreans have continued in their attempts to leave the country since.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 0 / 4

The national conscription system denies much of the working-age population the opportunity to establish and run their own businesses. Both the authorities and private actors with regime support are able to confiscate property and evict occupants without due process. Hundreds of small businesses were forced to close in 2017 after the authorities accused them of breaking foreign currency transfer laws. The businesses were permitted to reopen in early 2018 after paying large fines.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 1 / 4

Men and women have equal rights under laws governing marriage, nationality, and other personal status matters. However, girls in rural areas remain vulnerable to early or forced marriage. Rape of women and sexualized forms of violence against men are common in detention and in military service. Sexual assault of female conscripts is endemic and has not been thoroughly investigated by the authorities. The government has banned the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), but it remains widespread in rural areas.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 0 / 4

Eritrea's conscription system ties most able-bodied men and women—including those under 18 who are completing secondary school—to obligatory military service, which can also entail compulsory, unpaid labor for enterprises controlled by the political elite. National service is supposed to last 18 months but is open-ended in practice. UN human rights experts have described this system as enslavement. Following the peace deal with Ethiopia, the government announced a review of the national service system with a view to reducing the number of citizens in military uniform and boosting those engaged in development activities. However, no changes were announced by year's end.