

*Eritrea (93)**23***2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:
Eritrea**

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

The Government bans religious organizations from involvement in politics and restricts the right of religious media to comment on political matters. The Government discourages proselytizing by members of one faith among adherents of another and also discourages foreign religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) from proselytizing, as it believes that this could create unnecessary friction in the delicate balance between the Muslim and Christian populations. The Government continued to harass, arrest, detain, and discriminate against members of the small community of Jehovah's Witnesses. Citizens generally are very tolerant of one another in the practice of their religion; however, societal attitudes toward Jehovah's Witnesses are the exception to this widespread tolerance.

The U.S. Embassy meets regularly with leaders of the religious community and the Government's director of religious affairs. Embassy officers have raised the case of Jehovah's Witnesses with government officials.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion**Legal/Policy Framework**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in practice. The Constitution provides for the freedom to practice any religion and to "manifest such practice," and Islam and Christianity are practiced widely and tolerated throughout the country with persons free to worship at the mosque or church of their choice; however, the Government continued to harass, arrest, detain, and discriminate against members of the small community of Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Government does not require religious groups to register. However, because the Government owns all land, any religious organization that seeks facilities for worship other than private homes must seek government approval to build such facilities. There were no reports that the Government refused to approve the use or construction of facilities by any religious organization. Religious organizations, including religious NGO's, do not receive duty free privileges, although they sometimes are allowed to import items under the reduced duty structure used for corporations. The Government prohibits political activity by religious groups, and the Government's Directorate of Religious Affairs in the Ministry of Local Government monitors religious compliance with this proscription against political activity.

Religious Demography

Although reliable statistics are not available, approximately 50 percent of the population are Sunni Muslim and approximately 40 percent are Orthodox Christian. The population also includes a small number of Eastern Rite and Roman Catholics (5 percent), Protestants (2 percent), smaller numbers of Seventh-Day Adventists, and less than 1,500 members of Jehovah's Witnesses. A small minority, perhaps 2 percent, practices traditional indigenous religions. Also present in very small numbers are practicing Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and Baha'is. Generally, the eastern and western lowlands are predominantly Muslims, and the highlands are predominantly Christian. There are very few atheists.

Some foreign missionaries operate in the country, including representatives of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim faiths. There also are several international religious NGO's that provide humanitarian aid, including Caritas, Dutch Interchurch Aid, Lutheran Church Aid, and the Mufti's Relief Organization, the relief arm of the Muslim religion.

The Government's Directorate of Religious Affairs in the Ministry of Local Government encourages cooperation and interfaith dialog. The Directorate helps coordinate interdenominational relations among the four major religious groups (Muslim, Orthodox Christian, Catholic, and Protestant).

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government discourages proselytizing by members of one faith among adherents of another and also discourages foreign religious groups and NGO's from proselytizing, as it believes that this could create unnecessary friction in the delicate balance between the Muslim and Christian populations.

In a 1995 proclamation, the Government described specific guidelines on the role of religion and religion-affiliated NGO's in development and government, stating that development, politics, and public administration are the sole responsibility of the Government and citizens. The 1995 Proclamation bans religious organizations from involvement in politics and restricts the right of religious media to comment on political matters. Pursuant to the 1995 proclamation, religious organizations are permitted to fund, but not initiate or implement, development projects; however, this proclamation was not enforced in practice--several religious organizations executed small-scale development projects without government interference. The proclamation also set out rules governing relations between religious organizations and foreign sponsors.

Authorities informed all religious organizations in April 1998 that all schools run by religious denominations would be incorporated into the public school system. At the time it was not made clear whether the clerical authorities would continue to administer the curriculum with government oversight or whether the school faculty would be absorbed into the Ministry of Education. However, no action was taken to implement this initiative because of the outbreak of the border conflict with Ethiopia. In January 1998, the Government decreed that religiously affiliated organizations were prohibited from running kindergartens; however, this decree was never carried out. According to officials in the Religious Affairs Office, the Government is expected to allow religious

schools to operate independently as long as they adhere to a standard curriculum.

Governmental Abuses of Religious Freedom

Jehovah's Witnesses have several churches and members are not barred from meeting in private homes; however, the Government continued to harass, arrest, detain, and discriminate against members of the small community of Jehovah's Witnesses. In 1994 the Government revoked the trading licenses of some members of Jehovah's Witnesses and dismissed most of those who worked in the civil service. This governmental action resulted in economic, employment, and travel difficulties for many members of Jehovah's Witnesses, especially former civil servants and businessmen. In April 1997, the Government labor office issued a form to all employers in Asmara and the surrounding area requesting information on any government personnel who were members of Jehovah's Witnesses. In addition to these measures, members of Jehovah's Witnesses also often are denied identification cards, exit visas, trading licenses, and government housing unless they hide their religion.

Members of Jehovah's Witnesses have refused universally on religious grounds to participate in national service or to vote. This has spurred widespread criticism that members of Jehovah's Witnesses collectively were shirking their civic duty. Some Muslims also have objected to universal national service because of the requirement that women perform military duty. Although persons from other religious groups, including Muslims, reportedly have been imprisoned for failure to participate in national service, only members of Jehovah's Witnesses have been subject to dismissal from the civil service, had their trading licenses revoked, and been denied passports for this reason.

In 1998 several members of Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested for failure to comply with national service laws and some were tried, although there is no information available regarding the verdicts or sentences in these cases. In March 1999, representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses reported that three members of Jehovah's Witnesses had been detained without trial or charge for more than 4 years, allegedly for failing to participate in national service. The maximum penalty for refusing to do national service is only 3 years.

Ministry of Justice officials deny that any members of Jehovah's Witnesses were held without charges, although they acknowledge that some members of Jehovah's Witnesses and a number of Muslims are in jail serving sentences for convictions on charges of evading national service. The Government does not excuse individuals who object to national service for reasons of conscience, nor does the Government allow alternative service. There is no indication that any persons are detained or imprisoned solely because of their religious beliefs or practices; however, the Government has singled out members of Jehovah's Witnesses for harsher treatment than that received by members of other faiths for similar actions.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Citizens generally are very tolerant of one another in the practice of their religion. Mosques and Christian churches of all orders coexist throughout the country, although Islam tends to predominate in the lowlands and Christianity in the highlands.

In Asmara Christians and Muslim holidays are respected by all religions. Some holidays are celebrated jointly.

In 1999 leaders of the Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Muslim faiths created Good Deeds in Unity, an organization to help ethnic Eritrean expellees in Eritrea, Eritreans displaced by the war, and other needy persons in Eritrea. This organization works with the government relief agency, the Eritrean Relief and Refugee Affairs Commission.

Societal attitudes toward Jehovah's Witnesses are the exception to widespread religious tolerance. Members of Jehovah's Witnesses generally are disliked because of their refusal to participate in the independence referendum in 1993 and to perform national service, a refusal that is widely seen as unpatriotic.

Church leaders of most denominations, in particular, leaders of the Orthodox Christian, Catholic, Islamic, and Protestant denominations, meet routinely and engage in ongoing efforts to foster cooperation and understanding between religions, with the major exception of Jehovah's Witnesses. Leaders of the four major religious organizations meet routinely and enjoy excellent interfaith relations. In July 2000, in Oslo, Norway, leaders, these leaders met with their Ethiopian counterparts for the fourth time in an ecumenical peace effort to resolve the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy meets regularly with leaders of the religious community and the Government's Director of Religious Affairs.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officers have raised the special case of Jehovah's Witnesses with government officials in the President's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the High Court, the Ministry of Justice, and in media interviews.

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