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2017 Report on International Religious Freedom - Eritrea

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 Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea. It appoints the heads of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and the Sunni Islamic community. International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and media reported that members of all religious groups were to varying degrees subjected to government restrictions. Members of minority religious groups reported instances of imprisonment and deaths in custody due to mistreatment and harsh prison conditions, and individuals observing the recognized faiths were detained without explanation. In February several NGOs reported Tsehay Tesfamariam, a Jehovah's Witness arrested in 2009 and imprisoned at the Me'eter Prison Camp until 2015, died in November 2016 from an illness contracted in prison that authorities reportedly refused to treat. According to *Erimedrek News*, on March 17, two Pentecostal Christians died after staging a hunger strike to protest their alleged abuse while imprisoned in the Wi'ia Military Camp. Their bodies reportedly showed signs of sexual abuse. In August Human Rights Concern Eritrea reported the death of Fikadu Debesai, a member of an unregistered Christian group who was reportedly arrested in May. In late October demonstrators gathered in Asmara to protest the October 27 arrest of Al Diaa Islamic School president Hajji Musa Mohamed Nur, who opposed government efforts to close the school. Security forces dispersed the demonstrators and many persons were arrested. Nur remained in prison at year's end. Police arrested and later released the director of the Roman Catholic Medhanie Alem Secondary School and the school's secretary. Both schools resisted government attempts to mandate the Ministry of Education curriculum. According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and Human Rights Watch, between May and December, the government arrested approximately 210 evangelical Christians in house-to-house raids throughout the country reportedly for belonging to an unregistered religious group and imprisoned them on Nakura Island under harsh conditions. On July 16, Patriarch Antonios participated in a Mass at Enda Mariam (St. Mary's) Orthodox Church in Asmara, his first public appearance since being placed under house arrest in 2006. According to Jehovah Witnesses, 53 of their members remained in prison for their conscientious objection to obligatory military service. Most places of worship unaffiliated with the four registered religious groups remained closed, but many of those buildings were protected and undamaged. Jehovah's Witnesses, who were stripped of citizenship in 1994 due to their refusal to

vote in the independence referendum, were largely unable to obtain official identification documents. Without official identification documents, many Jehovah's Witnesses were effectively barred from most forms of employment, government benefits, and travel. The government did not recognize a right to conscientious objection to military service, and continued to single out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment such as arrest and detention.

The government's lack of transparency and intimidation of sources made it difficult to obtain accurate information on interfaith coordination of religious freedom issues. Government officials, religious leaders, and the faithful regularly attended celebrations organized by the recognized religious groups.

U.S. embassy officials continued to raise religious freedom concerns with government officials, including the imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses, lack of alternative service for conscientious objectors to mandatory national service that includes military training, and the continued detention of Patriarch Antonios. The Acting Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs met with visiting government officials in October and November in Washington D.C. and discussed on the subject of religious freedom. Embassy officials also met with clergy, leaders, and other representatives of religious groups, both registered and unregistered. Embassy officials further discussed religious freedom on a regular basis with a wide range of interlocutors, including visiting international delegations, members of the diplomatic corps based in Asmara and 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.

Since 2004, Eritrea has been designated as 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 December 22, 2017, the Secretary of State redesignated Eritrea as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act. 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 5.9 million (July 2017 estimate). There are no reliable figures on religious affiliation. Government, religious, and local UN sources estimate the population is approximately 48-50 percent Christian and 48-50 percent Sunni Muslim. The Christian population is predominantly Eritrean Orthodox. Catholics, Protestants, and other Christian denominations, including the Greek Orthodox Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals, are less than 5 percent of the Christian population. Some estimates suggest 2 percent of the population is animist, and there is a Bahai community of approximately 200 members. Only one Jew reportedly remains in the country.

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 calls for separation of church and state; outlines the parameters to which religious organizations must adhere, including foreign relations and social activities; establishes an Office of Religious Affairs; and requires religious groups to register with the government or cease activities. Members of 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 has authority to regulate religious activities and institutions, including approval of the applications of religious groups seeking official recognition. Each application 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 recognizes and has registered four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea (affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation). A 2002 decree required all other religious groups to submit registration applications and to cease religious activities and services until these applications were approved. Since 2002, the government has not approved the registration of additional religious groups.

The government appoints the heads of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and the Sunni Islamic community.

Religious groups may print and distribute documents only with the authorization of the Department of Religious Affairs, which has only approved requests from the four officially registered religious groups.

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

While the law does not specifically address religious education in public school, Proclamation 73/1995 outlines the parameters to which religious organizations must adhere, and education is not included as an approved activity. Government attempts to enforce the proclamation have been sporadic over the years, occurring in 1998, 2007, 2001, and in October.

By law, all citizens between 18 and 50 must perform national service, with limited exceptions, including for health reasons such as physical disability or pregnancy. A compulsory citizen militia requires persons not already in the military, including many who were demobilized, elderly, or otherwise exempted from military service in the past, to carry firearms and attend militia training. Failure to participate in the militia or national service could result in detention. Militia duties mostly involve security-related activities, such as airport or neighborhood patrolling. 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.

All citizens must obtain an exit visa prior to departure. The application requests the applicant's religious affiliation, but the law does not require that information.

The law limits foreign financing for religious 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

Summary paragraph: There were reports of deaths of members of minority religious groups imprisoned for their religious beliefs as well as physical mistreatment of persons in custody. In October the government's enforcement of its ban on religious groups operating schools sparked demonstrations that led to the arrest of an Islamic school director and at least 40 other persons. In May international NGOs reported the government arrested approximately 210 Christians in house-to-house raids, and they remained imprisoned, reportedly under harsh conditions. The patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church made his first public appearance since 2006, and he reportedly remained under house arrest. According to international NGO Human Rights Watch, members of all religious groups, to varying degrees, continued to be subject to government restrictions. Observers stated the government continued to impose restrictions on proselytizing, accepting external funding from NGOs and international organizations, groups selecting their own religious leaders, gathering for worship, constructing places of worship, and teaching religious beliefs to others. The government's lack of transparency and intimidation of sources continued to make it difficult to obtain accurate information on specific cases. The government did not make available information on how many registrations for religious groups were pending.

In February the Jehovah’s Witnesses news service, JW News, and Human Rights Concern Eritrea, reported that Tsehay Tesfamariam, a Jehovah’s Witness, who was arrested in 2009 and imprisoned at the Me’eter Prison Camp until 2015, died in November 2016 from an illness contracted while in prison that authorities reportedly refused to treat.

According to *Erimedrek News*, on March 17, two Pentecostal Christians died after staging a hunger strike to protest their alleged abuse while imprisoned in the Wi’ia Military Camp. Their bodies reportedly showed signs of sexual abuse.

According to CSW, since May the government arrested approximately 210 evangelical Christians in house-to-house raids throughout the country, reportedly for belonging to an unregistered group, and sent them to a prison on Nakura Island, where they were reportedly imprisoned under harsh conditions. According to CSW’s June report to the UN Human Rights Council’s Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea, authorities detained 122 Christians: 45 in Adi-Quala, 15 in Ghinda, and 45 and 17 in two separate incidents in Asmara. In August Human Rights Concern Eritrea reported that Fikadu Debesai, a mother of four who was among those reportedly arrested in May, died in prison. Her husband and 18-year-old son were reportedly held in the Merkel Abiet Prison and Gergera Labor Camp, respectively.

On October 27, authorities arrested Al Daa Islamic School board president Hajji Musa Mohamed Nur, who had opposed government efforts to close the school. On October 31, demonstrators gathered in Asmara to protest his arrest. Security forces dispersed the protesters with gunfire and arrested approximately 40 persons. Nur remained in prison at year’s end. According to diaspora opposition groups, the government’s effort to close the school was part of an effort to enforce a 1995 proclamation banning religious groups from operating religious schools and an unwritten 2014 Ministry of Education policy to secularize schools and follow the ministry’s curriculum. The government issued similar orders to the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches to close the Eastern Orthodox Edna-Mariam School and the Roman Catholic Medhanie Alem Secondary School. The Edna-Mariam School complied with the order while the Medhanie Alem School refused. In response, authorities arrested and later released the Medhanie Alem School’s director, a priest, and its secretary, a nun. Other schools across the country run by religious groups did not receive such orders.

It remained very difficult to determine the number of persons imprisoned for their religious beliefs given the lack of government transparency and reported intimidation of those who might come forward with such information.

Arrests and releases often went unreported. Information from outside the capital was extremely limited. Independent observers stated many persons remained imprisoned without charge. International religious organizations reported authorities interrogated detainees about their religious affiliation and asked them to identify members of unregistered religious groups.

On July 17, Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Abune Antonios attended Mass at Enda Mariam Orthodox Church, his first public appearance since 2006. Authorities placed Antonios under house arrest in 2006 for protesting government interference in Church affairs and subsequently prevented him from engaging in religious activities or appearing in public. Authorities also removed him as patriarch and replaced him with a government-chosen leader. Church leaders, international NGOs, and foreign governments raised concern about his poor health and called for his release. The government refuted claims that Antonios was under house arrest, stating that church leaders imposed his seclusion from the public. CSW and other observers characterized the patriarch's brief appearance as a government attempt to counter international concern about his detention and stated government-backed Eritrean Orthodox Church leaders and Antonios had reconciled their differences.

The government continued to detain without due process persons associated with unregistered religious groups, occasionally for long periods, and sometimes on the ground of threatening national security, according to minority religious group members.

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 Eritrean independence and subsequent refusal to participate in National Service. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, 53 of their members were in detention as of February for their conscientious objection to military service, including three men imprisoned without charge for 22 years. Other NGO sources corroborated these reports. The government continued to hold Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious prisoners for failure to follow the law or for national security reasons. Prisoners held for national security reasons were not allowed visitors, and families often did not know where they were being held. Authorities generally permitted family members to visit prisoners detained for religious reasons only. Former prisoners who had been held for their religious beliefs continued to report harsh detention conditions, including solitary confinement, physical abuse, and inadequate food, water, and shelter.

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to report members were unable to obtain official identification documents, which meant they were generally unable to study in government institutions, find employment, or obtain an exit visa to leave the country. Authorities collectively stripped Jehovah's Witnesses of citizenship in 1994 after their refusal to participate in the independence referendum. The government continued to withhold documents and entitlements such as passports, national identification cards (required for employment), and ration cards. The government also required all customers to present a national identification card in order to use computers at private internet cafes, where most individuals access the internet. This identification requirement rendered Jehovah's Witness members generally unable to use the internet.

Official attitudes toward members of unregistered religious groups worshipping in homes or rented facilities differed. 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 coupons (which allowed shoppers to make purchases at discounted prices at certain stores) to Jehovah's Witnesses and members of Pentecostal groups.

Diaspora groups noted authorities controlled virtually all activities of the four formally recognized groups. The leaders of the four groups continued to state their officially registered members did not face impediments to religious practice, but there were private reports of restrictions on import of religious items used for worship. It was unclear whether authorities used these restrictions to target religious groups, since import licenses remained generally restricted. There were also reports of restrictions on clergy meeting with foreign diplomats.

Most religious facilities not belonging to the four officially registered religious groups remained publicly closed to worship. The government allowed only the practice of Sunni Islam and banned all other practice of Islam. Religious structures used by unregistered Jewish and Greek Orthodox groups continued to exist in Asmara. The government protected the historic Jewish synagogue building, maintained by an individual reported as the country's last remaining Jew. Other structures belonging to unregistered groups, such as Seventh-day Adventists and the Church of Christ, remained shuttered. The government allowed the Bahai center to remain open, and, according to reports, the members of the center had access to the building except for prayer meetings. The Greek Orthodox Church remained open, but there were no services. There were services held in the Anglican Church building, but only under the auspices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

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

Government control of all mass media continued to restrict the ability of unregistered religious group members to bring attention to government repression 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 their worship, according to group members.

The sole political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) led by the president, appointed both the mufti of the Sunni Islamic community and the patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, as well as some lower-level officials for both communities. PFDJ-appointed lay administrators managed some operations of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, including disposition of donations and seminarian participation in national service.

The government continued to permit a limited number of Sunni Muslims, mainly the elderly and those not fit for military service, to take part in the Hajj, travel abroad for religious study, and host clerics from abroad. The government generally did not permit

Muslim 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 continued to grant some visas permitting 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; they were also discouraged from attending certain religious events while overseas. Students attending the Roman Catholic seminary, as well as Catholic nuns, did not perform national service and did not suffer repercussions from the government, according to Church officials. Some Catholic 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.

While three ministers and at least one senior military leader were Muslims, foreign diplomats reported that individuals in positions of power, both in government and outside, often expressed reluctance to share power with Muslim countrymen and distrusted foreign Muslims.

Some Eritrean Orthodox clergy operating outside the country continued to state the government sought control over Eritrean Orthodox churches in foreign countries, including through pressure on adherents abroad designed to influence family members still inside the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Government control of all media, expression, and public discourse made it difficult to observe any societal actions linked to religious freedom. Churches and mosques are located in close proximity and reportedly most citizens congratulated members of other religions on various holidays and even celebrated them with neighbors and friends.

Some Christian leaders reported that Muslim leaders and communities were willing to collaborate on community projects. There were unsubstantiated reports that Christians joined the October protests of the arrest of a Muslim school board president. Others reported government pressure not to cooperate with members of other religious groups has increased over the last few years, whereas previously there had been joint events, such as common worship during church festivals. Ecumenical and interreligious committees did not exist, and while local leaders met informally, there were no public displays of ecumenism.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials to raise religious freedom concerns, including advocating for the release of Jehovah’s Witnesses and alternative service for conscientious objectors refusing to bear arms for religious reasons. Embassy officials raised issues of religious freedom with a wide range of discussion partners, including visiting international delegations, Asmara- and regionally-based diplomats accredited to the government, and UN and other international organization representatives.

Embassy staff met with clergy, leaders, and other representatives of most religious groups, including unregistered groups. Staff also attended religious celebrations, weddings, and funeral ceremonies of the four registered faiths as invitees of the government or of religious leaders and on an ad hoc basis. Some Embassy requests via the government to meet with religious leaders went unanswered, however.

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