

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	170
Land:	Eritrea
Kilde:	US Department of State
Titel:	2012 Report on International Religious Freedom - Eritrea
Udgivet:	20. maj 2013
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	12. september 2013

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Publisher [United States Department of State](#)

Publication Date 20 May 2013

Cite as United States Department of State, *2012 Report on International Religious Freedom - Eritrea*, 20 May 2013, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/519dd4c87d.html> [accessed 28 August 2013]

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Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies provide for religious freedom, but the government partially implemented these laws and policies only 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's overall record on religious freedom was poor and that trend did not change significantly during the year. The government continued to detain members of unregistered religious groups, although there were reportedly fewer such detentions than last year. The government retained influence over the four registered religious groups.

There were no reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Citizens generally accepted limited religious pluralism.

Political authorities discouraged government officials responsible for religious affairs from meeting to discuss religious freedom with U.S. embassy representatives. In an effort to promote religious tolerance, embassy staff worked with representatives of religious groups on multiple cultural, educational, and charitable activities. 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 most recently in August 2011. The CPC-associated assistance restrictions continue.

Section I. Religious Demography

A 2012 UN study estimates the population at 5.6 million. Other observers report the population is lower due to emigration. There are no reliable statistics on religious affiliation. The government reports that 50 percent of the population is Christian and 50 percent Sunni Muslim. According to a

2010 international nongovernmental organization (NGO) estimate, the population is 63 percent Christian and 36 percent Muslim. The same NGO asserts that Orthodox Christians make up approximately 57 percent of the population, Roman Catholics 4 percent, and Protestants – including the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Baptists, Presbyterians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, and others without international affiliation – 1 percent. It is possible that 2 percent of the population is animist. There is a small Bahai community. Numbers of Muslims and Protestants reportedly have increased over the past 10 years.

The population is predominantly Muslim in the eastern and western lowlands and mainly Christian in the central highlands. There are high levels of participation among all religious groups.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies provide for religious freedom, but the government partially implemented these laws and policies only for the four officially registered religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea.

By law, religious groups must register with the government or cease activities. 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. All registrations require the president's signature for full approval. No religious groups applied for registration during the year.

The government requires all young people who are physically and mentally capable to perform a term of national service, including military training. The law does not provide for conscientious objector status, nor are there alternative activities for persons willing to perform national service, but unwilling to engage in military activities. The penalties for noncompliance include lengthy detention and physical abuse, as well as withholding government documents and entitlements, such as passports and ration cards.

A new government civilian militia program requires most males and some females between the ages of 18 and 70 not currently performing military portions of national service or not serving in the military to attend militia training and accept government-provided weapons. The penalties for nonparticipation in militia training include detention and hard labor.

The government limits foreign financing for religious groups, based on its stated policy of fostering national self-reliance.

Religious groups must obtain government approval to build facilities for worship and must observe strict rules governing relations between religious groups and foreign donors and sponsors.

The Office of Religious Affairs must authorize religious groups to print and distribute documents. It routinely approved such requests, but only for officially recognized religious groups.

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

The government prohibits any involvement in politics by religious groups and restricts the right of religious media to comment on political matters. There is only one political party in Eritrea and no independent media.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Eritrean Orthodox (Ge'ez) New Year, Islamic New Year, Epiphany, Moulid Al-Nebi (the birth of the Prophet Muhammad), Good Friday, Easter, Meskel, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom, including reports of imprisonment and detention.

Only the four officially recognized groups were registered. The government continued to detain members of unregistered religious groups. The government held persons associated with unregistered religions in detention without due process, occasionally for long periods of time, sometimes by informally charging them with threatening national security. Prison conditions were reportedly harsh, but there was no independent confirmation because the government did not allow international monitoring.

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 were often unreported. Information from outside the capital was extremely limited.

At year's end, international faith-based NGOs estimated the population of those imprisoned because of their religious beliefs at 1,500. Although this was lower than the number reported in previous years, it was not possible to verify numbers of those still detained or numbers of those released. One NGO reported that 31 Christians detained since 2006 were released in December and that 31 Christians had died in prison camps in previous years, but this could not be verified.

In January the Jehovah's Witnesses' Web site asserted that 48 members of the group remained imprisoned in the country. In December Human Rights Watch asserted that 56 Jehovah's Witnesses were incarcerated, including 12 arrested during the year while attending a funeral and three who had been held since 1994. Eleven were reportedly in their 70s and 80s.

Human Rights Watch claimed that one Jehovah's Witness incarcerated for religious reasons died from heat prostration in an underground cell.

In August the authorities arrested 17 Christians in Keren, reportedly for deserting national service, and held them at a military camp in Aderset, according to a faith-based UK charity.

In October the authorities reportedly arrested 17 persons attending a prayer and fasting program at an unregistered religious group member's home outside Asmara, according to an international faith-based NGO. Some were reportedly beaten.

Amnesty International's 2012 report on Eritrea asserted that 90 members of unregistered religious groups arrested in 2010 remained in prison without trial.

In November Amnesty International reported that Saudi Arabian authorities arrested an Eritrean citizen on charges of proselytizing and deported him to his home country, where the authorities held him incommunicado.

According to a November report, a Muslim convert to an unregistered evangelical group died after two years in an underground detention facility where 100 members of unregistered groups were also held.

The government usually detained religious prisoners at Me'eter prison, near Nakfa. There continued to be reports that police forced some members of unregistered religious groups who were being held in detention to sign statements declaring they had recanted their religious beliefs. Authorities reportedly sometimes released detainees who promised to give up adherence to an unregistered religion. Released religious prisoners reported harsh detention conditions, including solitary confinement.

The government's national service requirement, which included military training, and its new civilian militia program, put members of religious groups whose tenets did not permit bearing arms into conflict with citizenship requirements. There was no alternative nonmilitary service for conscientious objectors.

Although members of several religious groups faced reprisals for refusal to participate in military portions of required national service, the government singled out Jehovah's Witnesses to receive particularly harsh treatment because of their blanket conscientious objection to bearing arms. The government reportedly penalized Jehovah's Witnesses and others who did not participate in national military service on religious grounds by denying them government services and entitlements, such as ration cards.

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, and did not recognize conscientious objector status. Authorities at the Sawa Camp reportedly abused trainees, particularly those whose religious beliefs included objections to bearing arms. Students who did not want to attend obligatory military training at Sawa, including some conscientious objectors, sometimes left the country illegally, despite a shoot-to-kill order for attempting such action.

Religious figures sometimes expressed the view that national service prevented adequate numbers of seminarians needed to staff religious institutions from completing theological training. In December the news agency of the Catholic Church in Rome reported that the Eritrean government's practice of forced military conscription caused a personnel shortage for the Eritrean Catholic Church.

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

The country's sole political party, the Popular 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 persons in lower-level positions. PFDJ-appointed lay administrators managed some operations of the Orthodox Church, including disposition of donations and seminarian participation in national service. Former 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. Relations between the Orthodox hierarchy in Cairo and the Eritrean Orthodox Church continued to be strained over the manner in which the current patriarch was appointed.

The government allowed Muslims to practice only Sunni Islam, but permitted Muslims to take part in the Hajj, travel abroad for religious study, and receive 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, asserting that these contributions threatened to import foreign fundamentalist or extremist tendencies.

The Pope appointed the highest-ranking Catholic official. Catholic dioceses sometimes hosted visiting clergy from Rome, and Eritrean Catholic clergy were permitted to visit Rome for religious purposes and training, although not in numbers that church figures considered adequate.

Religious facilities not belonging to the four officially recognized religious groups remained closed. Several unoccupied religious structures formerly used by Jewish, Greek Orthodox, and Church of England groups – which fled repression in the 1970s – still stood in Asmara. The government permitted foreigners to worship at these sites. Other structures belonging to unregistered groups, such as the Seventh-Day Adventists, remained shuttered, although the government allowed the Bahai center to operate.

Persons who acknowledged membership in unregistered faiths generally had difficulty obtaining passports and exit visas.

Some church leaders asserted that the government's restriction on foreign financing reduced church income and indirectly reduced religious participation.

Military personnel were allowed to possess religious books associated with registered religions and to pray privately.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Citizens generally accepted limited religious pluralism. Relations among members of the registered religious groups were good. Christians and Muslims in Asmara often celebrated their holidays jointly.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The government did not permit the leaders of the four registered religious groups to meet officially with U.S. embassy representatives. Political authorities discouraged government officials responsible for religious affairs from meeting to discuss religious freedom with U.S. embassy representatives. Embassy staff met on a regular basis with working-level representatives of all religious groups. 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. Religious leaders made clear that embassy representatives were welcome to participate or observe any and all religious ceremonies. In an overall effort to promote religious tolerance, embassy staff worked with representatives of religious groups on multiple cultural, educational, and charitable activities.

The secretary of state designated Eritrea a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in 2004, 2009, and most recently in August 2011, 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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