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2013 International Religious Freedom Report - Eritrea

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies provide for religious freedom, but the government only partially implemented these laws and policies, and 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. The government continued to detain members of unregistered religious groups, with the number of reported detentions going up from last year, due in part to an increase in arrests of persons who refused to participate in the new citizen militia program because of conscientious objection to bearing arms. The government retained influence over the four registered religious groups.

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

Political authorities discouraged some religious leaders from meeting with international diplomats, including U.S. embassy representatives, to discuss religious freedom. Embassy staff worked with representatives of religious groups on several cultural, educational, and charitable activities in support of religious tolerance. The U.S. Secretary of State designated Eritrea as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act in 2004, based on particularly severe violations of religious freedom, and renewed the designation most recently in August 2011. Restrictions on assistance resulting from the CPC designation continued.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population is six million (July 2013 estimate). There are no reliable statistics on religious affiliation. The government reports 50 percent of the population is Christian and 50 percent Sunni Muslim. According to a 2010 estimate by the Pew Charitable Trust, an international nongovernmental organization (NGO), the population is 62 percent Christian and 36 percent Muslim. The same NGO states Orthodox Christians make up approximately 57 percent of the population, Roman Catholics 4 percent, and Protestants, including Evangelical Lutherans, Baptists, Presbyterians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, and others, 1 percent. The number of Muslims and Protestants reportedly has increased over the past 10 years.

Some estimates suggest 2 percent of the population is animist, and there is a small Bahai community that constitutes less than 1 percent.

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

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for religious freedom, but current government policies and practices limit this right.

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.

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 government 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 70, 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, nor are there alternative activities for persons willing to perform national service but unwilling to engage in military or militia activities. The penalties for noncompliance include lengthy detention, hard labor, and physical abuse, as well as withholding government documents and entitlements such as passports and ration cards.

The government 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.

The government limits foreign financing for religious groups, based on its stated policy of fostering national self-reliance and desire to avoid foreign political influence.

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 approves such requests for officially recognized religious groups only.

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

Government Practices

Only individuals who were members of the four officially recognized, registered groups were able to practice their religious beliefs freely. The government continued to detain members of unregistered religious groups, many of them because of refusal to participate in the militia program or national service due to conscientious objection to bearing arms. 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.

Three persons detained for religious objections to military service were reported to have died in custody and some 300 individuals were reportedly arrested. At year's end international faith-based NGOs estimated the population of those imprisoned because of their religious beliefs to be between 1,200 and 3,000.

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.

There were unconfirmed reports that 12 participants at a New Year's prayer event were arrested in Dekemhare. In March unconfirmed reports stated the government had arrested 125 Christians from an unregistered group in

Barentu and another 17 in Keren. The same sources indicated one detained Christian had died at the Ala Military Camp.

In May 37 students at the College of Arts and Sciences in Adi Quiyeh who belonged to unregistered Christian groups were reported to have been arrested. Also in May authorities allegedly arrested five persons from the Church of the Living God in Asmara.

In July faith-based sources reported 39 high school students who belonged to an unregistered religious group had been arrested after completing training at the Sawa educational facility. Additionally, a recent convert to an unregistered Christian group was said to have died in Mendefera while in government detention during July.

In August government authorities were said to have arrested 30 members of the Church of the Living God who had gathered for an evening prayer outside Asmara.

According to Release Eritrea, a UK-based NGO, 150 adherents of an unregistered Christian faith found praying together in Maitemenai, a suburb to the north of Asmara, were arrested in October.

According to 2013 reports by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, 56 Jehovah's Witnesses remained incarcerated, including a number of people in their 70s or 80s.

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

Members of several religious groups whose tenets did not permit bearing arms faced reprisals for refusal to participate in military portions of national service or the new civilian militia program. The government singled out Jehovah's Witnesses for 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 military service on religious grounds by denying them government services and entitlements.

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 abused 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 left the country illegally, despite a shoot-to-kill order for attempting such action.

Some religious leaders stated that national service prevented adequate numbers of seminarians needed to staff religious institutions from completing theological training.

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 arrested those who hosted prayer meetings. Local authorities sometimes denied community-based services to Jehovah's Witnesses and members of Pentecostal groups.

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 individuals in lower-level religious 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.

The government allowed Muslims to practice only Sunni Islam, but permitted Muslims 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 that Church officials 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 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 discreetly.

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

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

The government permitted military personnel to possess religious books associated with registered religious groups 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.

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

Political authorities discouraged some religious leaders from meeting with foreign officials, including U.S. embassy representatives. Embassy staff met on a regular basis with leaders and 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. In an overall effort to promote religious tolerance, embassy staff worked with representatives of religious groups on several cultural, educational, and charitable activities.

The U.S. Secretary of State designated Eritrea a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act 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.