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Freedom in the World 2010 - Eritrea

Capital: Asmara

Population: 5,073,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 7 *

Status: Not Free

Ratings Change

Eritrea's civil liberties rating declined from 6 to 7 due to the government's persistent and intense repression of religious minorities, its dominance over the judiciary, and its harsh system of national service, which ties people to the state for much of their working lives.

Overview

The government of Eritrea intensified its suppression of human rights in 2009, using arbitrary arrests and an onerous conscription system to control the population. Religious minorities faced particular pressure from the authorities, who continued to use a pliant judicial system to detain political prisoners indefinitely. Meanwhile, Eritrea defied a UN Security Council resolution instructing it to withdraw its troops from the disputed border with Djibouti following clashes between the two countries' armies in 2008.

Britain ended Italian colonial rule in Eritrea during World War II, and the country was formally incorporated into Ethiopia in 1952. Its independence struggle began in 1962 as a nationalist and Marxist guerrilla war against the Ethiopian government of Emperor Haile Selassie. The seizure of power in Ethiopia by a Marxist junta in 1974 removed the ideological basis of the conflict, and by the time Eritrea finally defeated Ethiopia's northern armies in 1991, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) had discarded Marxism. Independence was achieved in May 1993 after a referendum supervised by the United Nations produced a landslide vote for statehood.

War with Ethiopia broke out again in 1998. In May 2000, an Ethiopian offensive made significant gains. The two sides signed a truce in June 2000, and a peace treaty was signed that December. The agreement called for a UN-led buffer force along the contested border and stipulated that further negotiations should determine the final boundary line. The war dominated the country's political agenda, reflecting the government's habitual use of real or perceived national security threats to generate popular support and justify the militarization of society.

In May 2001, a group of 15 senior ruling-party members publicly criticized President Isaias Afwerki and called for "the rule of law and for justice, through peaceful and legal ways and means." Eleven members of the group were arrested for treason in September of that year. One is thought to have died in custody, and the others remain in secret detention. They have never been formally charged. The small independent media sector was also shut down, and a number of journalists were imprisoned.

The government clamped down on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in 2005, and ordered the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to end its operations in the country. In 2006, reports emerged that hundreds of followers of various unregistered (mostly Protestant) churches were being detained, harassed, and abused.

The government continued this pattern of suppressing civil society and political dissent over the next three years, and arbitrary detention remained the authorities' most common method of stifling independent action by citizens. In 2009, Human Rights Watch released a report detailing Eritrea's practice of conscripting both men and women for mandatory and indefinite national service; a related article described the country as a "giant prison."

Eritrea maintained an aggressive stance toward its neighbors in 2009. Eritrean army units had attacked Djiboutian forces at the disputed border in June 2008, and there was no indication at year's end that Eritrea would comply with a UN Security Council resolution calling on it to withdraw its troops from the area. Eritrea was also accused of supporting rebel movements in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia. According to the CIA World Fact Book, Eritrea spends 6.3 percent of its gross domestic product on the military, the ninth-highest percentage in the world. By contrast, the UN Development Programme's 2009 Human Development Index ranked Eritrea 165 out of 182 countries measured, and the World Bank put the country's gross national income per capita at just \$630 for 2008, one of the worst figures in the world.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Eritrea is not an electoral democracy. Created in 1994 as a successor to the EPLF, the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) is the only legal political party in the country. Instead of moving toward a democratic system, the PFDJ has taken significant steps backward since the end of the war with Ethiopia. The 2001 political crackdown and subsequent repressive measures clearly demonstrate the Eritrean government's authoritarian stance.

In 1994, a 50-member Constitutional Commission was established. A new constitution was adopted in 1997, authorizing "conditional" political pluralism with provisions for a multiparty system. The constitution calls for an elected 150-seat legislature, the National Assembly, to choose the president from among its members by a majority vote. However, national elections have been postponed indefinitely, and President Isaias Afwerki has remained in office since independence. In 2004, regional assembly elections were conducted, but they were carefully orchestrated by the PFDJ and offered no real choice to voters.

Eritrea long maintained a reputation for a relatively low level of corruption. In recent years, however, graft appears to have increased. The government's control over foreign exchange effectively gives it sole authority over imports. At the same time, those in favor with the regime are allowed to smuggle goods into the country at great profit. Eritrea was ranked 126 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

There are no independent media in Eritrea. The government controls all broadcasting outlets and banned all privately owned newspapers in its 2001 crackdown, effectively blocking the dissemination of opposing or alternative views. A group of journalists arrested in 2001 remain imprisoned without charge; as many as four of the original 10 are believed to have died in custody. A fresh wave of arrests took place in February 2009, when 50 employees of Radio Bana, which produces educational programs for the

government, were detained. A total of 19 journalists were behind bars in Eritrea as of December 2009, according to the U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists, which did not count nonjournalist staff members. The government controls the internet infrastructure and is believed to monitor online communications, though only a small fraction of the population has internet access.

The government places significant limitations on the exercise of religion. Since 2002 it has officially recognized only four faiths: Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and Lutheranism as practiced by the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. Persecution of minority Christian sects has escalated, particularly for Jehovah's Witnesses, who were stripped of their basic civil rights in 1994, and evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Abune Antonios, patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, has been under house arrest since 2006. According to Amnesty International, members of other churches have been jailed and tortured or otherwise ill-treated to make them abandon their faith. Compass Direct, an NGO, estimates that up to 3,000 Christians are currently in prison because of their beliefs. At least two are believed to have died in custody in January 2009. In December, a group of 30 elderly women from a banned evangelical denomination were arrested while praying together in Asmara. Some Muslims have also been targeted for persecution.

Academic freedom is constrained. Secondary school students are subject to the highly unpopular policy of obligatory military service, and are often stationed at bases far from their homes. The official 18-month service period is frequently open-ended in practice, and no conscientious-objector status is recognized. The government imposes collective punishment on the families of deserters, forcing them to pay heavy fines or putting them in prison.

Freedom of assembly is not recognized. The government maintains a hostile attitude toward civil society; independent NGOs are not allowed, and the legitimate role of human rights defenders is not recognized. In 2005, Eritrea enacted legislation to regulate the operations of all NGOs, requiring them to pay taxes on imported materials, submit project reports every three months, renew their licenses annually, and meet government-established target levels of financial resources. International human rights NGOs are barred from the country, and the government expelled three remaining development NGOs in 2006.

The civil service, the military, the police, and other essential services have some restrictions on their freedom to form unions. In addition, groups of 20 or more persons seeking to form a union require special approval from the Ministry of Labor.

The judiciary, which was formed by decree in 1993, has never issued rulings significantly at variance with government positions. Constitutional due process guarantees are often ignored in cases related to state security.

According to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, torture, arbitrary detentions, and political arrests are common. Prison conditions are poor, and outside monitors such as the International Committee of the Red Cross have been denied access to detainees. In some facilities, inmates are held in metal shipping containers or underground cells in extreme temperatures. Prisoners are often denied medical treatment. The government maintains a network of secret detention facilities and frequently refuses to disclose the location of prisoners to their families.

The Kunama people, one of Eritrea's nine ethnic groups, reportedly face severe discrimination. They reside primarily in the west and have resisted attempts to integrate them into the national society. They are also viewed with suspicion for having backed a rival group rather than the EPLF during the war of independence.

Freedom of movement is heavily restricted. Eritreans under the age of 50 are rarely given permission to leave the country, and those who try to travel without the correct documents face imprisonment. Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers who are repatriated from other countries are also detained. Written permission is often required

even for internal travel.

Government policy is officially supportive of free enterprise, and citizens have the nominal freedom to choose their employment, establish private businesses, and operate them without government harassment. However, few private businesses remain in Eritrea. This is largely because of the conscription system, which ties most able-bodied men and women to an indefinite period of national service and can entail compulsory labor for enterprises controlled by the political elite. The 2009 Heritage Foundation Index of Economic Freedom cites other barriers to starting and operating a business in Eritrea, including burdensome regulations and the high cost of credit. It ranks Eritrea as the second-worst country in sub-Saharan Africa for economic freedom.

Women played important roles in the guerrilla movement prior to independence, and the government has worked to improve the status of women. Women hold some senior government positions. Equal educational opportunity, equal pay for equal work, and penalties for domestic violence have been codified. However, traditional societal discrimination against women persists in rural areas. Female genital mutilation was banned by the government in 2007, but there have been no arrests under the new law and the practice remains widespread.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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