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Freedom in the World 2012 - Eritrea

2012 Scores

Status: Not Free

Freedom Rating: 7.0

Civil Liberties: 7

Political Rights: 7

Overview

The Eritrean government's suppression of the basic political rights and civil liberties of its citizens continued in 2011. Plans for national elections remained on permanent hold 18 years after independence, and a ban on independent media and foreign organizations remained in place during the year. Meanwhile, a UN report accused Eritrea of planning a terrorist attack against neighboring Ethiopia.

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. Formal independence was achieved in May 1993 after a referendum supervised

by the United Nations produced a landslide vote for statehood. EPLF leader Isaias Afwerki was chosen by the Transitional National Assembly to fill the position of president until elections could be held; these elections were eventually scheduled to take place in 2001 but were postponed and have yet to take place.

War with Ethiopia broke out again in 1998. In May 2000, an Ethiopian offensive made significant gains. The two sides signed a truce the following month, and a peace treaty was signed that December. Both countries accepted an independent ruling that set the common border, but Ethiopia later reneged on the agreement. The war and the unresolved grievances stemming from the broken peace deal have driven the Eritrean government's fixation with national security and perpetuated the militarization of the state.

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. The small independent media sector was also shut down, and a number of journalists were imprisoned. Many of the jailed dissidents and journalists were subsequently reported to have died in custody, but the government steadfastly refuses to divulge information about their whereabouts or wellbeing.

The government clamped down on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in 2005, and ordered the U.S. Agency for International Development to end its operations in the country. In 2006, reports emerged that hundreds of followers of various unregistered churches were being detained, harassed, and abused. The government has continued this pattern of suppressing civil society, religious practice, and political dissent. Arbitrary detention remains the authorities' most common method of stifling independent action by citizens.

A border dispute with Djibouti that led to a military confrontation in 2008 was resolved in 2010 when both sides agreed to a negotiated settlement. But tensions with Ethiopia escalated once more when a UN report in July 2011 accused Eritrean officials of masterminding a failed plot to bomb the African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa in January 2011. The report also claimed that Eritrea was continuing to fund and organize Islamist militant groups in Somalia, including Al Shabaab. Eritrea denied the claims and made some efforts to re-engage with its neighbors by applying to rejoin the regional organization, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). IGAD members stalled on making a decision and instead pushed for tightening sanctions against Eritrea, including an arms embargo, which were agreed to by the UN Security Council in December.

The worst drought to affect the Horn of Africa in 60 years has affected more than 12 million people throughout the region. However, President Isaias claimed that the drought stopped at his borders, and continued to limit access to food and humanitarian organizations. Meanwhile, approximately 900 Eritreans risked their lives to flee the country each month.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Eritrea is not an electoral democracy. Created in 1994 as a successor to the EPLF, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) is the only legal political party. Instead of moving toward a democratic system, the PFDJ government has become harshly authoritarian since the end of the war with Ethiopia.

A new constitution was ratified in 1997, calling for "conditional" political pluralism and an elected 150-seat National Assembly, which would choose the president from among its members by a majority vote. However, this system has never been implemented, as national elections planned for 2001 have been postponed indefinitely. The Transitional National Assembly is comprised of 75 PFDJ members and 75 elected members. In 2004, regional assembly elections were conducted, but they were carefully orchestrated by the PFDJ and offered no real choice to voters. The PFDJ and the military, both strictly subordinate to President Isaias, are in practice the only institutions of political significance in Eritrea.

Corruption continued to be a problem in 2011. 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 profit from the smuggling and sale of scarce goods such as building materials, food, and alcohol. According to the International Crisis Group, senior military officials are the chief culprits in this trade. They have also been accused of enriching themselves by charging fees to assist the growing number of Eritreans who wish to flee the country, and using conscript labor for private building projects.

There are no independent media in Eritrea. The government controls all broadcasting outlets and banned privately owned newspapers in its 2001 crackdown. A group of journalists arrested in 2001 remained imprisoned without charge, and as many as half of the original 10 are believed to have died in custody; however, the government refuses to provide any information on their status. In 2009, the entire staff of the Asmara-based broadcaster Radio Bana was detained; at least 11 of them remained in custody without charge at year's end. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, at least 28 journalists were in prison in 2011. Eritrea's treatment of the media drew a rebuke from the European Union, which in September 2011 passed a resolution condemning its

detention of independent journalists and calling for the release of a dual Swedish-Eritrean national who was among those arrested in 2001. The government controls the internet infrastructure and is thought to monitor online communications. Foreign media are available to those few who can afford a satellite dish.

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. Members of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches face persecution, but the most severe treatment is reserved for Jehovah's Witnesses, who are barred from government jobs and refused business permits or identity cards. Abune Antonios, patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, has been under house arrest since speaking out against state interference in religion in 2006. According to Amnesty International, members of other churches have been jailed and tortured or otherwise ill-treated to make them abandon their faith. As many as 3,000 people from unregistered religious groups are currently in prison because of their beliefs; the majority are Pentecostal or Evangelical Christians. According to Christian news service, Compass Direct, three Christians incarcerated at a military detention center died from mistreatment during 2011. Muslims also complain of discrimination. In 2010, a leading Islamic organization accused the government of marginalizing Muslims, closing traditional Muslim schools, persecuting religious leaders, and appropriating Muslim-owned land.

Academic freedom is constrained. Students in their last year of secondary school are subject to the highly unpopular policy of obligatory military service and are often stationed at bases far from their homes. Academics practice self-censorship and the government restricts course content. Eritrea's university system has been effectively closed, replaced by regional colleges whose main purposes are military training and political indoctrination. Freedom of expression in private discussions is limited. People are guarded in voicing their opinions for fear of being overheard by government informants.

Freedoms of assembly and association are not recognized. The government maintains a hostile attitude toward civil society, and independent NGOs are not tolerated. A 2005 law requires NGOs 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 and only six international humanitarian NGOs are present in the country. In September 2011, Eritrea accused Amnesty International of infiltrating the country to try to foment a North African-style revolution. Amnesty denied the claims, saying that it has been refused access to Eritrea for more than a decade by the government.

The government controls all union activity. The National Confederation of Eritrean Workers is the country's main union body and has affiliated unions for women, teachers, young people, and general workers.

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. The International Crisis Group has described Eritrea as a "prison state" for its flagrant disregard of the rule of law and its willingness to detain anyone suspected of opposing the regime, often without charge. According to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, torture, arbitrary detentions, and political arrests are common. The police are poorly paid and prone to corruption. Prison conditions are harsh, 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.

The Kunama people, one of Eritrea's nine ethnic groups, reportedly face severe discrimination. They are viewed with suspicion for having backed a rival group to the EPLF during the war of independence and for resisting attempts to integrate them into national society. Members of the Afar ethnic group have also been targeted. Several hundred Afars were arrested during 2010, according to Human Rights Watch. Sexual minorities face legal and social discrimination due to the criminalization of same-sex sexual conduct.

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; a number of repatriated Eritreans disappeared while in custody in 2011. These strict penalties, however, fail to deter thousands of people from risking their lives to escape the country each year. In July, one Eritrean refugee died and another was seriously injured after they jumped off a truck that was forcibly returning them from Sudan.

Government policy is officially supportive of free enterprise, and citizens are in theory able 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 obligatory military service and can also entail compulsory labor for enterprises controlled by the political elite. The official 18-month

service period is frequently open-ended in practice, and conscientious-objector status is not recognized. The government imposes collective punishment on the families of deserters, forcing them to pay heavy fines or putting them in prison. The enforced contraction of the labor pool, combined with a lack of investment and rigid state control of private enterprise, has crippled the national economy. The government levies a compulsory two percent tax on income earned by citizens living overseas, and those who do not pay place their relatives back home at risk of arrest.

The U.S. State Department describes Eritrea as a source country for human trafficking for the purposes of forced labor and sexual exploitation. It is believed that the Eritrean government has not taken any measures to address this problem.

Women hold some senior government positions, including four ministerial posts. The government has made attempts to promote women's rights, with laws mandating equal educational opportunity, equal pay for equal work, and penalties for domestic violence. However, traditional societal discrimination against women persists in the countryside. While female genital mutilation was banned by the government in 2007, the practice remains widespread in rural areas.