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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2010 - Eritrea

Eritrea's social-political life remained highly state-controlled in 2009. HRW reported that the government has failed to implement the outcomes of the 1997 referendum that would have ushered in a new constitution, hold competitive elections or re-open the independent interim parliament suspended since 2002.

The government issued permits only to Orthodox Christian, Catholic and Lutheran churches, and Muslim communities, to practise their religion. While the recognized religious groups are allowed to operate, they too have not been spared. In 2006, for instance, the government forced out the patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church after he refused to interfere with a movement to reform the church and he remains confined to date. In 2008 the government revoked the exemption from military service for most Orthodox priests. USCIRF said that:

'In January 2009 the government reportedly carried out countrywide arrests of influential Muslims, describing the 60 Muslims arrested as 'radical Islamists.' Early in 2009, the government also began confiscating vehicles marked with license plates designated for religious groups. The mass confiscation severely limited the abilities of the religious groups to perform daily tasks.'

Consequent upon these systematic attacks on religious freedoms, Eritrea was designated one of the eight 'countries of particular concern' for serious violation of religious freedom by the US Commission. USCIRF also stated in 2009 that 'the government has also interfered with the Catholic Church, taking over church schools, health clinics, and other social service facilities. Since November 2007 it has expelled at least 14 foreign Catholic missionaries by refusing to extend their residency permits.'

Over 3,000 members of unregistered churches have been incarcerated in Eritrea since 2005 and many have been beaten or otherwise abused to compel them to renounce their faith, HRW's 2009 *World Report* said.

The use of torture to repress religious expression is widespread. Almost 3,000 of the estimated 20,000 Eritrean prisoners of conscience are Christians. According to a 2009 report in the UK national newspaper, *the Guardian*, they were detained pending denial of their faith.

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