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# ERITREA

## USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Eritrea remained extremely poor. The government continued to systematically persecute individuals for their religious beliefs. It did not register any new religious organizations, and individuals practicing religions other than the four that the government officially recognizes faced intimidation and prosecution. The government only recognizes the Tewahedo Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and evangelical Lutheran churches, along with Sunni Islam. Without formal registration, the government can prohibit religious communities from building or owning houses of worship or engaging in religious practices such as praying in groups. Members of officially recognized religions also faced restrictions and government backlash for practicing their religion, including stripping of citizenship. The government used its diplomatic missions to intimidate members of the Eritrean diaspora who criticize its human rights abuses, including restrictions on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

The Eritrean government continued to incarcerate FoRB prisoners under egregious conditions in dozens of facilities across the country, including police stations, civilian and military prisons, and undisclosed detention facilities. FoRB prisoners in Eritrea endure particularly severe mistreatment, including physical abuse, sexual violence, torture, and denial of medical treatment, sometimes resulting in death. Additionally, prison authorities pressure arrested individuals to renounce their faith and ban praying aloud, singing, preaching, and possessing religious books. Many facilities are severely dilapidated concrete structures, while others are metal cargo containers that hold hundreds of prisoners or are simple holes in the ground.

As of May, over 350 Christians were imprisoned, including more than 80 whom authorities arrested during the first five months of the year. Another estimate places 10,000 prisoners of conscience of all types in over 300 facilities around the country. Government authorities targeted several communities, including Baptists, Pentecostals, and others, for persecution and arrest, calling them “agents of the West.” As in prior years, the government encouraged community surveillance of nontraditional Protestant Christians, labeling them “unpatriotic.” The state sometimes temporarily releases prisoners but re-arrests them if they do not renounce their faith and regularly report to authorities. Police at times arrest entire Christian families, including children, during the early morning hours. The month of May marked the 20th anniversary of the arrests of Pastors [Kiflu Gebremeskel](#) and [Haile Naizghe](#), both associated with the banned Full Gospel Church of Eritrea.

Sixty-three Jehovah’s Witnesses remained in prison as of October. The government incarcerates Jehovah’s Witnesses in both Mai Serwa or Adi Abeto prisons but rarely formally charges or sentences them. Authorities refused to meet with Jehovah’s Witnesses representatives to discuss the status of prisoners from that community. In September, police raided a private residence during worship and arrested 24 Jehovah’s Witnesses, including two children. Authorities sent three men over 80 years old and a pregnant woman from this group to Mai Serwa Prison. In October, Jehovah’s Witnesses marked the 30th anniversary of the Eritrean president’s 1994 revocation of Jehovah’s Witnesses’ citizenship, which resulted in the group’s subsequent ban and mass imprisonment for refusing on religious grounds to participate in the country’s independence referendum.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Eritrea as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Eritrean government officials, including those in the police, judiciary, and correctional system, who are responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities;
- Engage with the Eritrean government specifically to end religious persecution of unregistered religious communities with the return of a nonmilitary, national service option for Jehovah’s Witnesses as a path toward gaining full citizenship; and release the remaining detainees held on account of their religious activities; and
- Support the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Committee of the Red Cross in their missions to advance the situation of at-risk religious minority communities in Eritrea.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Highlight religious freedom issues in Eritrea, with an emphasis on FoRB prisoners, through legislation, hearings, briefings, delegations, and other activities.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** [Two Decades of Violations in Eritrea](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

## Background

Eritrea has an estimated [population](#) of 6.3 million people. Approximately 51 percent of the population identifies as Sunni Muslim, 41 percent as Eritrean Orthodox, and five percent as Roman Catholic. Protestant and unaffiliated Christians, atheists and nonbelievers, indigenous practitioners of traditional religion, Shi'a Muslims, and Baha'is make up less than five percent of the population. The government allows the only known Jew in the country to maintain a historic but nonfunctional synagogue in Asmara.

Eritrea acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in January 2002. The Eritrean constitution nominally protects citizens' rights to FoRB, while the law and constitution both ostensibly prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief as well as the freedom to practice any religion and to change one's religion. However, the government regularly violates these rights in practice, favoring certain denominations when applying registration requirements and obstructing the religious practices of minority groups. The ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice party engages in coercion, intimidation, imprisonment, torture, and killing as part of a strategy to divide and control different religious groups.

Proclamation No. 73 of 1995 permits the government to exert full control over religious activities in the country by separating political and faith-based affairs, and it grants the state the right to regulate religious institutions. The law also strictly limits foreign financial resources for churches, only allowing local donations. Furthermore, the law institutionalizes formal scrutiny of faith-based groups using an Office of Religious Affairs, which itself requires religious groups to register with the government or cease activities.

## Conscientious Objection

The government justifies some detentions of Jehovah's Witnesses on the basis of their refusal to serve in the military and imposes egregiously long sentences on community members who conscientiously object on religious grounds. Eritreans between the ages of 18 and 50 are subject to forced conscription and must serve in the military for 18 months, and there is no national service alternative to military duty. Authorities, however, grant exemptions to service to pregnant women and people with a physical disability. The government uses military draft mobilization drives, called *giffas*, in or near larger cities. Authorities often make conscripted young people serve far longer than their 18 months of mandatory service, and they harass the family members of those who seek to evade military service by enforcing severe penalties on them.

## Multilateral Observations of Religious Freedom Violations in Eritrea

International organizations confirm the presence of particularly severe religious freedom violations in Eritrea. In February, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Ilze Brand-Kehris reported that the Eritrean government holds an "iron grip on its people using widespread repression and systematic impunity for grave human rights violations." She [delivered](#) a statement to the UN Human Rights Council, reporting that "our office continues to receive credible reports of torture; arbitrary detention; inhumane conditions of detention; enforced disappearances; restrictions of the rights to freedoms of expression, of association, and of peaceful assembly." Brand-Kehris raised further concerns over "numerous reports of dissenting voices being subjected to systematic repression and silencing, including through the detention or enforced disappearance of thousands of religious leaders and members of religious groups . . . evading mandatory and indefinite military service." In March, the Eritrean government responded to the speech, claiming without evidence that the reports were unsubstantiated. In June, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea Mohamed Babiker [reported](#) to the Human Rights Council that the Eritrean government continues to "use arbitrary and incommunicado detention, ongoing enforced disappearances, indefinite military or national service that amounts to forced labor and is linked to torture, and systemic repression of fundamental freedoms."

## Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government has diplomatic relations with the Eritrean government and maintains an embassy in the capital Asmara, but the two governments have not exchanged ambassadors since 2010. At the same time, the Eritrean economy remained [closed](#) to American investment and trade due to existing economic sanctions, the lack of an Eritrean commercial code, little connectivity with international financial systems except for government-to-government transactions, and strict government control of all imports and exports. In 2024, the regime continued to maintain strong bilateral ties with China and Russia, reflected in a five-day Russian naval delegation visit to the Massawa port in April. That same month, the Eritrean government declared that the United States used UN resolutions to prevent the Eritrean anti-colonial independence movement for decades because independence "overrode U.S. strategic interests." In May, in its official statement at the Universal Periodic Review of Eritrea, the U.S. government [recommended](#) that Eritrea "allow country visits by the Special Rapporteur for Human Rights and cooperate with international human rights mechanisms" and release those arbitrarily detained for exercising their freedom of religion or belief, "including the[ir] inability to conscientiously object to Eritrea's compulsory, indefinite national service."

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) Eritrea as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.