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2018 REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: ERITREA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The law and unimplemented constitution prohibit religiously motivated discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief as well as the freedom to practice any religion. The government recognizes four officially registered religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea. Unregistered groups lack the privileges of registered groups, and their members can be subjected to additional security service scrutiny. The government appoints the heads of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and the Sunni Islamic community. International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and media continued to report members of all religious groups were, to varying degrees, subjected to government abuses and restrictions. Members of unrecognized religious groups reported instances of imprisonment and deaths in custody due to mistreatment and harsh prison conditions, and detention without explanation of individuals observing the recognized faiths. In March Al Diaa Islamic School President Hajji Musa Mohamed Nur died of unknown causes in police custody, where he had been kept since October 2017. Reports indicated police arrested hundreds of protesters, including minors, at or soon after his funeral. In 2017, the government closed a secondary school sponsored by an Islamic organization but later allowed the school to reopen for one year; in contrast, a private school sponsored by an Islamic organization remained closed. NGOs reported two elderly Jehovah's Witnesses died early in the year in Mai Serwa Prison outside of Asmara. International media and NGOs reported authorities conditionally released some Christians from unregistered groups from prison during the year after they had renounced their faith in 2014. Authorities continued to confine Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Abune Antonios under house arrest, where he has remained since 2006. The government granted entry to prominent Ethiopian television evangelist Suraphel Demissie in June as part of the first set of flights between Addis Ababa and Asmara after the airways reopened; onlookers filmed him preaching on the streets of Asmara. NGOs reported the government continued to detain 345 church leaders and officials without charge or trial, while estimates of detained laity ranged from 800 to more than 1,000. Authorities reportedly continued to detain 53 Jehovah's Witnesses for conscientious objection and for refusing to participate in military service or renounce their faith. An unknown number of Muslim protesters remained in detention following protests in Asmara in October 2017 and March 2018. The government continued to deny citizenship to Jehovah's Witnesses after stripping them of citizenship in 1994. Some religious organization representatives reported an improved climate for obtaining visas for foreign colleagues to visit Eritrea and increased ability to call their counterparts in Ethiopia.

The government's lack of transparency and intimidation of civil society and religious community sources created difficulties for individuals who wanted to obtain information on the status of societal respect for religious freedom. Religious leaders of all denominations and the faithful regularly attended celebrations or funerals organized by the recognized religious groups.

U.S. officials in Asmara and Washington continued to raise religious freedom concerns with government officials, including the March protests surrounding the death of Hajji Musa Mohamed Nur, the imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses, lack of alternative service for conscientious objectors to mandatory national service that includes military training, and the continued detention of Patriarch Antonios. Senior Department of State officials raised these concerns during a series of bilateral meetings with visiting senior Eritrean officials in Washington on multiple occasions during the year. Embassy officials met with clergy, leaders, and other representatives of religious groups, both registered and unregistered. Embassy officials further discussed religious freedom on a regular basis with a wide range of interlocutors, including visiting international delegations, members of the diplomatic corps based in Asmara and in other countries in the region, as well as UN officials. Embassy officials used social media and outreach programs to engage the public and highlight the commitment of the United States to religious freedom.

Since 2004, Eritrea has been designated a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 28, 2018, the Secretary of State redesignated Eritrea as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act. Restrictions on U.S. assistance resulting from the CPC designation remained in place.

SECTION I. RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

The U.S. government estimates the total population at six million (July 2018 estimate); a population census has not been conducted since 2010. There are no reliable figures on religious affiliation. Some government, religious, and international sources estimate the population to be 49 percent Christian and 49 percent Sunni Muslim. The Pew Foundation in 2016 estimated the population to be 63 percent Christian and 37 percent Muslim. The Christian population is predominantly Eritrean Orthodox. Catholics, Protestants, and other Christian denominations, including Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals, constitute less than 5 percent of the Christian population. Some estimates suggest 2 percent of the population is traditionally animist. The Baha'i community reports approximately 200 members. Only one Jew reportedly remains in the country.

A majority of the population in the southern and central regions is Christian. A majority of the Tigrinya, the largest ethnic group, are Christian. The Tigre and the Rashaida, the largest minority ethnic groups, are predominantly Muslim and reside mainly in the northern regions of the country.

SECTION II. STATUS OF GOVERNMENT RESPECT FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The law and unimplemented constitution prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and the freedom to practice any religion.

Proclamation 73/1995 calls for separation of religion and state; outlines the parameters to which religious organizations must adhere, including concerning foreign relations and social activities; establishes an Office of Religious Affairs; and requires religious groups to register with the government or cease activities. Members of religious groups that are unregistered or otherwise not in compliance with the law are subject to penalties under the provisional penal code. Such penalties may include imprisonment and fines. The Office of Religious Affairs has authority to regulate religious activities and institutions, including approval of the applications of religious groups seeking official recognition. Each application 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 Office of Religious Affairs has registered four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea (affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation). A 2002 decree requires all other religious groups to submit registration applications and to cease religious activities and services prior to approval. The government has not approved the registration of additional religious groups since 2002.

The government appoints the heads of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the Sunni Islamic community.

Religious groups must obtain government approval to build facilities for worship.

While the law does not specifically address religious education in public schools, Proclamation 73/1995 outlines the parameters to which religious organizations must adhere, and education is not included as an approved activity. In practice, religious instruction is commonplace within worship communities.

By law, all citizens between 18 and 50 must perform national service, with limited exceptions, including for health reasons such as physical disability or pregnancy. A compulsory citizen militia requires persons not in the military, including many who had been demobilized, elderly, or otherwise exempted from military service in the past, to carry firearms and attend militia training. Failure to participate in the militia or national service could result in detention. Militia duties mostly involve security-related activities, such as airport or neighborhood patrolling. Militia training primarily involves occasional marches and listening to patriotic lectures. The law does not provide for conscientious objector status for religious reasons, nor are there alternative activities for persons willing to perform national service but unwilling to engage in military or militia activities.

The law prohibits any involvement in politics by religious groups.

The government requires all citizens to obtain an exit visa prior to departing the country. The application requests the applicant's religious affiliation, but the law does not require that information. Starting in September, an exit visa or other travel documents are not required to cross the newly opened land border with Ethiopia.

The law limits foreign financing for religious groups. The only contributions legally allowed are from local followers, the government, or government-approved foreign

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

The UK-based religious freedom advocacy group Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and the Jehovah's Witnesses news service reported two elderly Jehovah's Witnesses died early in the year in Mai Serwa Prison outside Asmara. Both had been in detention since 2008 without charge. The organizations stated that 76-year-old Habtemichael Tesfamariam died on January 3, and Habtemichael Mekonen, age 77, died on March 6.

In March Al Diaa Islamic School President Hajji Musa Mohammed Nur died of unknown causes while in police custody. He was reportedly in his late 80s or early 90s when he died. He had been in custody since October 2017. NGO and international media reports indicated police arrested hundreds of protesters (including minors) at his funeral. It was not clear how many protesters remained in detention at year's end, although sources indicated authorities released many of them.

CSW reported in October that authorities continued to imprison without charge or trial 345 church leaders, including three men who had been imprisoned without charge for 22 years, while estimates of detained laity ranged from 800 to more than 1,000. Authorities reportedly continued to detain 53 Jehovah's Witnesses for refusing to participate in military service and renounce their faith. An unknown number of Muslim detainees remained in detention following protests in Asmara in October 2017 and in March.

Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Abune Antonios, who appeared in public in July 2017, remained under house detention since 2006 for protesting the government's interference in church affairs.

Determining the number of persons imprisoned for their religious beliefs was difficult due to lack of government transparency and reported intimidation of those who might come forward with such information.

The government did not recognize a right to conscientious objection to military service and continued to single out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment because of their blanket refusal to vote in the 1993 referendum on the country's independence and subsequent refusal to participate in mandatory national service. The government continued to hold Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious prisoners for failure to follow the law or for national security reasons. Authorities prevented prisoners held for national security reasons from having visitors, and families often did not know where the government held such prisoners. Authorities generally permitted family members to visit prisoners detained for religious reasons only. Former prisoners held for their religious beliefs continued to report harsh detention conditions, including solitary confinement, physical abuse, and inadequate food, water, and shelter.

In July and August international media and NGOs reported the release from detention of more than 30 Christians from unregistered groups. Reports stated the government released 35 Christians after they renounced their religion four years earlier. Another individual reported that one Jehovah's Witness was transferred from prison to house detention but was still surveilled by security authorities.

Christian advocacy organizations reported the detention of 19 members of the Full Gospel Church in Godaif, Asmara, in July, and of 21 Christians at a gathering in Asmara in August. The status of the members was unknown at year's end.

Religious groups were able to print and distribute documents only with the authorization of the Office of Religious Affairs, which continued to approve requests only from the four officially registered religious groups.

The government continued to impose restrictions on proselytizing, accepting external funding from NGOs and international organizations, and groups selecting their own religious leaders. Unregistered religious groups also faced restrictions in gathering for worship, constructing places of worship, and teaching religious beliefs to others.

The government permitted the Al Diaa Islamic secondary school, which the government had closed in 2017, to reopen in September. Al Mahad, another school originally founded as an Islamic-based primary and secondary school, remained closed since 2017. Al Mahad reportedly faced increasing government pressure, including to deemphasize the religious aspects of its curriculum; in recent years, the government permitted the school to teach only elementary school-age children.

Jehovah's Witnesses were largely unable to obtain official identification documents, which left many of them unable to study in government institutions and barred them from most forms of employment, government benefits, and travel. The government also required all customers to present a national identification card to use computers at private internet cafes, where most individuals accessed the internet. This identification requirement rendered Jehovah's Witnesses generally unable to use the internet.

Arrests and releases often went unreported. Information from outside the capital was extremely limited. Independent observers stated many persons remained imprisoned without charge. International religious organizations reported authorities interrogated detainees about their religious affiliations and asked them to identify members of unregistered religious groups.

The government continued to detain without due process persons associated with unregistered religious groups, occasionally for long periods, and sometimes on the grounds of threatening national security, according to minority religious group members and international NGOs.

When the government opened the land border with Ethiopia in September, the government did not require exit visas or other travel documents for Eritreans crossing into Ethiopia. How long this procedure would remain in effect was unclear. The government continued to require all citizens to obtain an exit visa prior to airport departure. The application requests the applicant's religious affiliation, but the law does not require that information. Religious observers continued to report the government denied many exit visa applications for individuals seeking to travel to international religious conferences.

The government continued to allow only the practice of Sunni Islam and continued to ban all other practice of Islam.

Official attitudes toward members of unregistered religious groups worshipping in homes or rented facilities differed. Some local authorities reportedly tolerated the presence and activities of unregistered groups, while others attempted to prevent them from meeting. Local authorities sometimes denied government coupons (which allowed shoppers to make purchases at discounted prices at certain stores) to Jehovah's Witnesses and members of Pentecostal groups.

Diaspora groups noted authorities controlled virtually all activities of the four formally recognized groups. The leaders of the four groups continued to state their officially registered members did not face impediments to religious practice, but individuals privately reported restrictions on import of religious items used for worship. Whether authorities used these restrictions to target religious groups was unclear, since import licenses remained generally restricted. Individuals also reported restrictions on clergy meeting with foreign diplomats.

The government permitted church news services to videotape and publish interviews with foreign diplomats during the public celebration of the Eritrean Orthodox holiday Meskel.

Most places of worship unaffiliated with the four officially registered religious groups remained closed to worship, but many of those buildings remained physically intact and undamaged. Religious structures used by unregistered Jewish and Greek Orthodox groups continued to exist in Asmara. The government protected the historic Jewish synagogue building, maintained by an individual reported to be the country's last remaining Jew. Other structures belonging to unregistered groups, such as Seventh-day Adventists and the Church of Christ, remained shuttered. The government allowed the Baha'i center to remain open, and, according to reports, the members of the center had access to the building except for prayer meetings. The Greek Orthodox Church remained open as a cultural building, but the government did not permit religious services on the site. The Anglican Church building held services but only under the auspices of the registered Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Some church leaders continued to state the government's restriction on foreign financing reduced church income and religious participation by preventing churches from training clergy or building or maintaining facilities.

Government control of all mass media continued to restrict the ability of unregistered religious group members to bring attention to government repression against them, according to observers. Restrictions on public assembly and freedom of speech severely limited the ability of unregistered religious groups to assemble and conduct worship, according to group members.

The sole political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, led by President Isaias Afwerki, de facto appointed both the mufti of the Sunni Islamic community and the patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, as well as some lower-level officials for both communities. Lay administrators appointed by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice managed some Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church operations, including disposition of donations and seminarian participation in national service.

The government continued to permit a limited number of Sunni Muslims, mainly the elderly and those not fit for military service, to take part in the Hajj, travel abroad for religious study, and host clerics from abroad. The government generally did not permit Muslim groups to receive funding from countries where Islam was the dominant religion on grounds that such funding threatened to import foreign "fundamentalist" or "extremist" tendencies.

The government granted entry to the prominent Ethiopian Pentecostal Christian television evangelist Suraphel Demissie in June. Onlookers filmed him preaching on the streets of Asmara.

The government continued to grant some visas permitting Catholic dioceses to host visiting clergy from the Vatican or other foreign locations. The government permitted Catholic clergy to travel abroad for religious purposes and training, although not in numbers Church officials considered adequate; they were discouraged from attending certain religious events while overseas. Students attending the Roman Catholic seminary, as well as Catholic nuns, did not perform national service and did not suffer repercussions from the government, according to Church officials. Some Catholic leaders stated, however, national service requirements prevented adequate numbers of seminarians from completing theological training abroad, because those who had not completed national service were not able to obtain passports or exit visas.

Three ministers, the Asmara mayor, and at least one senior military leader were Muslims. Foreign diplomats, however, reported that individuals in positions of power, both in government and outside, often expressed reluctance to share power with Muslim compatriots and distrusted foreign Muslims.

SECTION III. STATUS OF SOCIETAL RESPECT FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Government control of all media, expression, and public discourse limited information available concerning societal actions affecting religious freedom. Churches and mosques were located in close proximity, and most

citizens congratulated members of other religious groups on various religious holidays and other events. Senior Muslim, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran religious leaders sat as honored guests alongside the ranking Eritrean Orthodox officials during the high-profile public celebration of Meskel on September 27.

Some Christian leaders continued to report Muslim leaders and communities were willing to collaborate on community projects. Ecumenical and interreligious committees did not exist, although local leaders met informally, and religious holidays featured public displays of interfaith cooperation. Representatives of each of the official religions attended the state dinners for several visiting foreign officials. Some Muslims expressed privately their feelings of stress and scrutiny in professional and educational settings because of their faith.

In January media reported that unknown persons vandalized the Jewish section of the main cemetery in Asmara.

SECTION IV. U.S. GOVERNMENT POLICY AND ENGAGEMENT

U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials to raise religious freedom concerns, including the protests and subsequent arrests in March; they also advocated for the release of Jehovah's Witnesses and an alternative service for conscientious objectors refusing to bear arms for religious reasons; and expressed concern over the continued detention of patriarch Abune Antonios. Senior Department of State officials raised these concerns during a series of bilateral meetings with visiting senior Eritrean officials in Washington on multiple occasions during the year. Embassy officials raised issues of religious freedom with a wide range of partners, including visiting international delegations, Asmara- and regionally based diplomats accredited to the government, UN officials, and other international organization representatives. Embassy officials used social media to highlight the importance of religious tolerance and public diplomacy programs to engage the public and highlight the commitment of the United States to religious freedom.

Embassy staff met with clergy, leaders, and other representatives of most religious groups, including unregistered groups. Some embassy requests via the government to meet with religious leaders went unanswered, however.

Since 2004, Eritrea has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, section 402(b), for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 28, the Secretary of State redesignated Eritrea as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act. Restrictions on U.S. assistance resulting from the CPC designation remained in place.