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UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: ERITREA

August 2019

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USCIRF's Mission

*To elevate and promote
international religious
freedom as a norm
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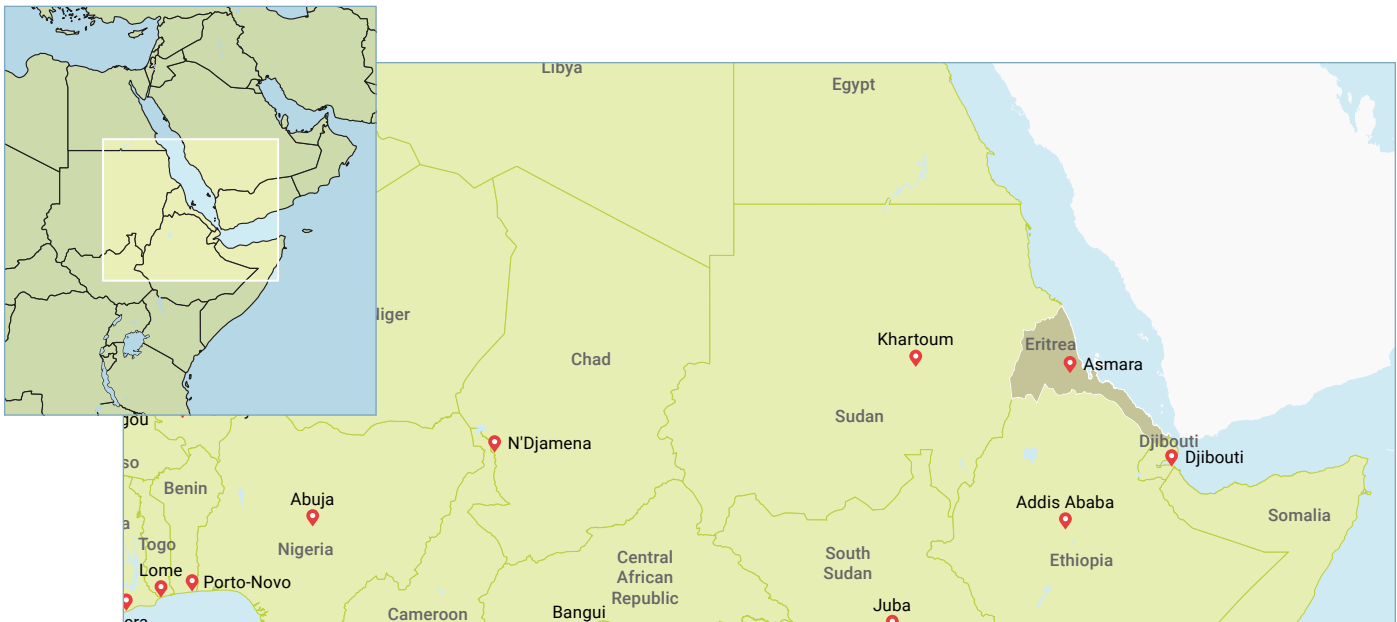
By Ferdaouis Bagga, Policy Analyst

Background

On July 9, 2018, Eritrea crossed a new milestone in its history—the signing of the “Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship” agreement with Ethiopia. In September, the two countries reaffirmed their commitments in Saudi Arabia. The signing of the agreement marked the beginning of renewed engagement within East Africa and the international community after decades of being heavily isolated and militarized, in a constant state of conflict. Swift changes brought the opening of borders and restoration of diplomatic relations, economic exchange, transportation, and communications that had been blocked for nearly two decades. The political deals brought fresh hope and joy to many Eritreans who were able to reconnect with loved ones outside the country. Yet almost a year later, practices of isolation and militarized control linger. Between December 2018 and April 2019 Eritrea again closed border crossings. At the same time, the government has not announced any plans to demobilize and end the indefinite national service predicated on the state of war. Moreover, it continues to violate religious freedom.

Ongoing Religious Freedom Limitations

The ruling regime in Eritrea, in power since the country's independence in 1993, directly limits freedom of religion or belief, such as through its exclusive registration requirements and the recognition of only four faith communities, the marginalization and persecution of non-registered religious groups, and heavy interference in the affairs of registered religious groups. Within the country's repressive prison system hundreds of Eritreans are believed to remain religious prisoners of conscience. Among these are Jehovah's Witnesses, imprisoned for exercising their beliefs and conscientiously objecting to military service. The government has not provided names or other information on individuals' charges, treatment, or access to basic rights such as medical care. Many are believed to be denied care and tortured. [*The United Nations \(UN\) Commission of Inquiry \(COI\)*](#) assessments on Eritrea in [2015](#) and [2016](#) described widespread torture, forced labor, and inhumane conditions in prisons. The government has repeatedly expressed fear of outside influence and fundamentalism in religions, citing these fears to justify persecution and restrictions. Since the signing of the peace agreements, the government has continued to interfere in the activities of religious communities and to strictly limit their independence.



Only four religions are officially recognized* in Eritrea:

1. Eritrean Orthodox Church (Coptic)
2. Roman Catholic Church
3. Evangelical Church of Eritrea (Lutheran-affiliated)
4. Sunni Islam

**In 2002 the government issued a decree requiring all other religious groups to apply for registration and cease religious activities until they are approved. Religious facilities of unauthorized groups were forced to close.*

Examples of 2019 Incidents

- In January, Sheikh Ibrahim Younis, a leader of the Al Diaa Islamic school board, died in prison. He had been detained for protesting government interference in the school's affairs (which included demands that the school cease its religious teachings and remove religious symbols such as the wearing of the hijab by girls—similar to undue demands the government also made on Christians institutions).
- In March, a mosque in Keren was reportedly closed by authorities over structural issues, while the Muslim community was prevented from making repairs to the building.
- In April, a new video of Patriarch Abune Antonios, the head of the Eritrean Orthodox church deposed by the government in 2007, was [published online](#). This had a significant impact as more Eritreans at home and abroad were able to hear the first-hand account of his experience and thus question the government narrative and decision to keep him under house arrest for 13 years.
- On May 10 in Asmara, Eritrean authorities conducted another mass arrest of Christians meeting in a house church: 104 women, 23 men, and 14 children, from different Evangelical churches, were detained without charge. The children and 50 adults were reportedly released while others remained imprisoned.
- On May 17, another 30 Christians were arrested as they gathered for worship in homes in Godaif, south of Asmara.
- In June, bishops of the Roman Catholic Church reported that the government closed all of its 22 church-run health centers, reportedly in retaliation for the church calling for reforms.

Since the death in 2017 of the last Mufti in Eritrea, Sheikh Alamin Osman Alamin, as well as the death of the last government-appointed Patriarch Abune Dioskoros in 2015, the Eritrean government has not appointed new Muslim or Orthodox Christian leaders. Abune Lukas, the Secretary General of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, has been leading in the interim. Eritrean Muslims continue to express concern over the marginalization of Arabic, saying this restricts their religious practices. In addition, they have reiterated concerns over the government's discrimination against Muslims and minority ethnic groups, the fostering of distrust between religious groups, as well as the potential for future conflict over land. As the predominantly Christian highlands have become densely populated, the government has supported the resettlement of many Christians to the lowland and coastal regions of Eritrea, previously occupied by Muslims. If political changes create space for returns to Eritrea, and Muslim refugees attempt to move back to their former land, conflict could emerge.

Prospects for Future Change

Eritrea remains under close scrutiny by international and regional actors, and since the signing of the peace agreements faces increased pressure to make demonstrable improvements on human rights and religious freedom. Rather than hoping the government will improve conditions, more Eritreans abroad are calling for political change and democratization. For Eritrea to move forward from its continued isolation and to achieve its economic and security goals, the government will also need to improve religious freedom conditions as part of its reform efforts. As raised in USCIRF's 2019 [Annual Report](#), some initial steps the government could take in this regard would be to:

- 1) release [Patriarch Abune Antonios](#) from detention;
- 2) make public the law regarding registration of religious groups, and publish clear instructions for religious groups to follow to apply for registration or to appeal decisions; and
- 3) begin a dialogue with Jehovah's Witnesses to address the restoration of their citizenship and other human rights concerns.

For more information on USCIRF's recommendations and review of religious freedom conditions in 2018, see USCIRF's latest annual report [here](#).



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