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FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2019 - ERITREA

Not Free

2 / 100

Overview:

Eritrea is a militarized authoritarian state that has not held a national election since independence from Ethiopia in 1993. The People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), headed by President Isaias Afwerki, is the sole political party. Arbitrary detention is commonplace, and citizens are required to perform national service, often for their entire working lives. The government shut down all independent media in 2001.

Key Developments:

KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN 2018:

- Political reforms in Ethiopia led to a thaw in relations with Eritrea, which had been frozen since the war of 1998–2000. Ethiopia's new prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, reached out to President Isaias Afwerki in April. In July, they signed a deal to officially end the war.
- The rapid improvements to Eritrea's external relations had little discernible impact on internal conditions, and authorities continued to deprive citizens of basic rights.
- Mass emigration continued, with tens of thousands of Eritreans risking their lives to seek asylum in neighboring countries or in Europe. Nearly 4,000 Eritreans claimed asylum in Ethiopia in a single week in September.
- In March, protests erupted following the death in custody of the former board chairman of an Islamic school, who had resisted government interference in its management. Hundreds of people were reportedly detained.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 1 / 40

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 0 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

Following Eritrea's formal independence from Ethiopia in 1993, an unelected Transitional National Assembly chose Isaias to serve as president until elections could be held under a new constitution. He has remained in office since then, without ever obtaining a mandate from voters.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

A constitution ratified in 1997 calls for an elected 150-seat National Assembly, which would choose the president from among its members by a majority vote. However, national elections have been postponed indefinitely, and the transitional assembly has not met since 2002. Local and regional assembly elections have been held periodically, but they are carefully orchestrated by the PFDJ and offer no meaningful choice to voters.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 0 / 4

The 1997 constitution calls for an electoral commission whose head is appointed by the president and confirmed by the National Assembly, but it has never been implemented, and national elections have never been conducted. Subnational elections are controlled by the ruling party.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 0 / 16

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 0 / 4

The PFDJ is the only legally recognized political party in Eritrea. Alternative groups must operate from abroad among the diaspora community. Many such groups were hosted by Ethiopia. However, in July 2018, following the rapprochement between the two countries, the Ethiopian government ordered all Eritrean opposition parties in the country to cease operations. In August, an adviser to President Isaias said the PFDJ was examining ways to broaden political participation, but did not offer details.

In September, former finance minister Berhane Abrehe was arrested; he had recently written a book calling for a democratic transition, and had released an audio recording challenging President Isaias to a public debate.

The government has refused to divulge information about a group of prominent dissidents held incommunicado since 2001. Reports in February 2018 suggested that one member of the group, former foreign minister Haile “Durue” Woldensae, had died in detention.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 0 / 4

President Isaias and the PFDJ have been in power without interruption since independence, and since multiparty elections have never been allowed, opposition groups have had no opportunity to compete or enter government.

B3. Are the people’s political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 0 / 4

Eritrean society is dominated by the military, with most citizens required to perform open-ended military or other national service. The authorities’ intolerance of dissent and the absence of elections or opposition parties leaves individuals with no political options other than loyalty to the PFDJ, imprisonment, or illegal emigration.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 0 / 4

Women and various ethnic groups are nominally represented within the PFDJ, but they have no practical ability to organize independently or advocate for their interests through the political system.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 1 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 0 / 4

Power is concentrated in the hands of the unelected president, who reportedly determines policy with the help of an informal circle of advisers, leaving the cabinet and security officials to merely carry out his decisions. A 2016 UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) commission of inquiry noted that military personnel are overrepresented among the president’s closest associates.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 1 / 4

Petty bribery and influence peddling are thought to be endemic, and larger-scale corruption is a problem among some party officials and military leaders. The government’s control over foreign exchange effectively gives it sole authority over imports, and those in favor with the regime are allowed to profit from the smuggling and sale of scarce goods such as food, building materials, and alcohol. Senior military officials have allegedly profited from

smuggling Eritreans out of the country. There are no independent agencies or mechanisms in place to prevent or punish corruption. Special anticorruption courts overseen by the military nominally exist, but are mostly inactive.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 0 / 4

The government operates without public scrutiny. Basic data about the state budget and its appropriations are not publicly disclosed, and officials are not required to disclose their assets.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 1 / 60 (−1)

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 0 / 16

D1. Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

The government shut down all independent media outlets in 2001, leaving only state-controlled news services in operation. Several foreign-based organizations try to provide coverage to Eritreans who can receive it, including the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which launched internet news services in local languages in 2017. However, internet penetration is low.

At the end of 2018, 16 journalists were behind bars because of their work, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ); almost all of had been imprisoned since 2001. Additionally, according to Radio Erena, an Eritrean news outlet based in France, two reporters working for newspapers put out by the Information Ministry were detained in March, without explanation. They were not included in CPJ's count and their status was unknown at year's end.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 0 / 4

The government places strict limits on the exercise of religion. Eritrea officially recognizes only four faiths: Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and Lutheranism as practiced by the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. Followers of other denominations are subject to arrest. Jehovah's Witnesses face severe persecution, including denial of citizenship and travel papers. Religious practice is prohibited among members of the military. The patriarch of the Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios, has been held under house arrest since 2006, when he called for political prisoners to be released. In February 2018, five Catholic-run clinics were shuttered as part of a government process to assume direct control of all health facilities and places of education.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 0 / 4

Academic freedom is greatly constrained. Students in their last year of secondary school are subject to obligatory military service at the Sawa military training center, where conditions are harsh. Academics practice self-censorship, and the government interferes with their course content and limits their ability to conduct research abroad.

Government attempts to nationalize an Islamic school in Asmara as part of a broader policy to assert state control of the education system led to rare demonstrations in late 2017. The former chairman of the school board, 93 year-old Musa Mohammed Nur, was arrested for opposing the new policy, and died in custody in March 2018. His arrest and death both prompted protests, which security forces violently dispersed.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 0 / 4

Freedoms of expression and private discussion are severely inhibited by fear of government informants and the likelihood of arrest and arbitrary detention for any airing of dissent. While access to the internet is limited, the authorities attempt to monitor online communications. According to reports received by the UNHRC, internet cafes are required to register customers and track their activity.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 0 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

Freedom of assembly is not recognized by the authorities. Those who take to the streets to protest face the threat of deadly force at the hands of the state security forces, or arbitrary detention. In 2017 and 2018, reports emerged indicating that rare public protests were met with such repression. By one account, over two dozen people were killed by the security forces during the October 2017 demonstrations in support of Musa Mohammed Nur. His funeral in March 2018 prompted mass protests that erupted into clashes between protesters and police; news sources reported that protesters were arrested, with numbers ranging from a handful, to close to a thousand.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? 0 / 4

The law requires all nongovernmental organizations to undergo an onerous and arbitrary annual registration process, and limits their activities to providing humanitarian relief. In reality, there are no independent civil society organizations based in Eritrea. The government continues to deny permission for external human rights organizations to enter the country.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 0 / 4

There are no independent trade unions in Eritrea. The only union umbrella group, the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers, is affiliated with the ruling party. Relatively autonomous student and teachers' unions operated during the early years of independence but were gradually shut down in the late 1990s and early 2000s. According to reports to the UNHRC, the government has prevented new unions from being formed.

F. RULE OF LAW: 0 / 16

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

The judiciary has no independence from the executive branch. The Supreme Court called for in the constitution has never been established, nor has a Judicial Commission tasked with appointing judges. Instead, the president controls the appointment and dismissal of all judges; even nominally elected judges in local community courts are controlled by the Justice Ministry, according to UN investigators. Many judges are military officers.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 0 / 4

Basic principles of due process are systematically violated. Arbitrary arrests and detentions are common; targets include those who evade military service, try to flee the country, or are suspected of practicing an unauthorized religion. Eritreans who offend high-ranking government or party officials are also reportedly subject to arbitrary arrest.

Prisoners are routinely held incommunicado for indefinite periods without charge or trial, with the authorities refusing even to inform family members whether they are still alive. There is no operational system of public defense lawyers. Thousands of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience remain behind bars.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4

UN investigators have described the routine and systematic use of physical and psychological torture in both civilian and military detention centers. Deaths in custody or in military service due to torture and other harsh conditions have been reported. Security forces employ lethal violence arbitrarily and with impunity. Individuals attempting to escape military service or flee the country have been fired on by soldiers.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 0 / 4

There are allegations that two of Eritrea's nine recognized ethnic groups, the Kunama and Afar, face severe discrimination.

Efforts have been made to promote the rights of women, who played a critical role in Eritrea's independence struggle. Laws mandate equal educational opportunity and equal pay for equal work. However, traditional societal discrimination against women persists in the countryside, and the deeply flawed legal system does not effectively uphold their formal rights.

Same-sex sexual relations are criminalized, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people enjoy no legal protections from societal discrimination.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 1 / 16 (-1)

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 0 / 4

Freedom of movement is heavily restricted. Eritreans young enough for national service are rarely given permission to go abroad, and those who try to travel outside the country without the correct documents face imprisonment. Individuals also require permits to travel within the country. Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers who are repatriated from other countries are subject to detention under harsh conditions.

The opening of the border with Ethiopia in September 2018 raised hopes that conditions could improve in the future. However, tens of thousands of Eritreans continued to flee the country, risking their lives to seek asylum in neighboring countries, or in Europe. Nearly 4,000 Eritreans claimed asylum in Ethiopia in a single week in September.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 0 / 4

The national conscription system denies much of the working-age population the opportunity to establish and run their own businesses. Both the authorities and private actors with regime support are able to confiscate property and evict occupants without due process. Hundreds of small businesses were forced to close at the end of 2017 after the authorities accused them of breaking laws restricting foreign currency transfers. They were permitted to reopen in January 2018 after paying large fines.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 1 / 4 (-1)

Men and women have equal rights under laws governing marriage, nationality, and other personal status matters. However, girls in rural areas remain vulnerable to early or forced marriage. Rape of women and sexualized forms of violence against men are common in detention and in military service. Sexual assault of female conscripts is endemic and has not been thoroughly investigated by the authorities. The government has banned and attempted to reduce the practice of female genital mutilation, but it remains widespread in rural areas.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because women performing their national service, particularly in the military, face the threat of rape and sexual assault, and because there is widespread impunity for such attacks.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 0 / 4

Eritrea's conscription system ties most able-bodied men and women—including those under 18 who are completing secondary school—to obligatory military service, which can also entail compulsory labor for enterprises controlled by the political elite. National service is supposed to last 18 months but is open-ended in practice. UN human rights experts have described this system as enslavement. Following the signing of a peace deal with Ethiopia, the government said it was reviewing the national service system with a view to reducing the number of citizens in military uniform and boosting those engaged in development activities. No demobilization plan had been introduced by year's end.

Cash withdrawal limits imposed in 2015 have hampered citizens' ability to buy food and other essential goods.