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Are Catholics allowed to practice their religion freely in Eritrea?

The Executive Summary (paragraph 1) of a report published by the *Institute on Religion and Public Policy* states:

> "The status of Religious Freedom in Eritrea is atrocious. While a 1997 Constitution provides protections for freedom of religion and conscience, this Constitution has not been implemented. The country only recognizes 4 religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea, Islam, and the Roman Catholic Church. Members of unregistered religious groups face harassment, imprisonment, torture, and, in some cases, death at the hands of state authorities. Even members of registered religious groups face harassment, imprisonment, and interference from the government. The religious freedom situation in Eritrea is widely recognized by both governmental and non-government actors and agencies to be among the worst in the world." (Institute on Religion and Public Policy (2009) *Religious Freedom in Eritrea,* p.1)

In a section titled "Government Interference and Abuses of Registered Religious Groups" (paragraph 8) this report states:

> "The government interferes in the everyday workings of registered religious groups at the highest levels. The Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Muslim community in Eritrea have all faced abuses and interference in their religious affairs at the hands of the government. The government required all four of the officially registered to submit reports on the sources of their funding as well as complete list of personnel and property." (ibid, p.2)

Paragraph 9 states:

> "The government required all of the registered religious communities to provide the government with a list of religious leaders and clergy in order to enroll them in national military service. The Muslims, Lutherans, and Orthodox turned in their lists. A percentage of their clergy were granted ID cards which delayed their entry into the military. The rest were enrolled in national military service. The Catholic Church refused to comply. Catholic clergy were given special temporary exemption cards which permitted them to avoid service." (ibid, p.2)

A report originating from the German-based pastoral charity *Aid to the Church in Need* and republished in English by the *Catholic Information Service for Africa* states:

> “March 2007: Eritrea's Catholic bishops announced their refusal to comply with government demands for clergy to carry out military service. Alone in their defiance among religious leaders, the bishops cited Church law in their opposition to the scheme for clergy under the age of 50 to serve as soldiers, rather than as chaplains. Church leaders stressed their concerns at the government's refusal to impose a time-limit on the conscription period.” (Catholic Information Service for Africa (14 November 2008) *Eritrea: Special - Report On Religious Freedom in the World*)

This report also states:

> “Meanwhile, the Catholic Church's refusal to comply with the government's demands to release clergy for military service was met with a firm riposte: orders requiring the church to hand over the schools, clinics and other welfare operations.” (ibid)

See also report from the *Catholic Information Service for Africa* which states:

> “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.” (Catholic Information Service for Africa (16 January 2009) *Eritrea: Religious Persecution Still Persists, New Report Says*)

In a section titled “Restrictions on Religious Freedom” the 2009 *US Department of State* religious freedom report for Eritrea states:

> “By December 2008 the Government evicted the remaining foreign missionaries by either refusing to renew their work permits or simply ordering them to leave; the policy had been ongoing for years. During the reporting period, reportedly more than 18 Italian monks and several Catholic nuns were asked to leave.” (United States Department of State (26 October 2009) *Eritrea: International Religious Freedom Report 2009*)

This section of the report also states:

> “The Government continued its involvement in the affairs of the four approved religious groups and required them to provide a list of religious leaders for enrollment in military/national service. The Government maintained control over the operations of the Eritrean Orthodox Church; a government-appointed lay administrator managed church operations and controlled all church donations. The Government continued to provide the Catholic Church with limited duration national service exemption cards for all religious workers and seminarians. There continued to be reports that the Government seized religious property during the reporting period. In June 2008 the military expropriated property of the Catholic Church in Asmara.” (ibid)

An *Amnesty International* report states:

> "The Roman Catholic Church in Eritrea is currently appealing against an order to hand over all its social welfare organizations – schools, medical clinics, orphanages and women's training centres – to the Ministry of Social Welfare and Labour, and it has made repeated requests for exemption for priests from military service, which is compulsory and indefinite." (Amnesty International (5 September 2007) *Urgent Action 234/07 - Eritrea: Prisoners of Conscience/Fear of Torture or ill-treatment/Incommunicado detention (protestant pastor and 10 churchgoers arrested and held incommunicado*)

A *Catholic News Service* article on the expulsion of missionaries from Eritrea states:

> "Four Comboni priests, two Comboni sisters and a member of the Daughters of Charity expelled decided that they would speak out once they returned to Rome. They told Vatican Radio Nov. 18 that they were given two official explanations for being expelled: their refusal to serve in the military and the fact that foreign employees of nongovernmental organizations can stay in the country a maximum of two years. The Combonis said the real reason was the government's desire to control the Catholic Church like it controls every other sphere of life in Eritrea." (Catholic News Service (19 November 2007) *Religious expelled from Eritrea want to tell tale, but hope to return*)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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