

Eritrea (93)

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Eritrea

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricted this right in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses and instituted new restrictions on other religious groups that do not have a long history in the country.

Respect for religious freedom deteriorated during the period covered by this report. The Government instituted new restrictions on religious groups known collectively as "Pentes." Pentes include all groups that do not belong to the four principal religions—Orthodox Christian, Muslim, Catholic, and Evangelical Christian—such as Pentecostals, Born Again Christians, Seventh-Day Adventists, Baha'is, Buddhists, and other Protestants. In 2001 the Government began closing Pente facilities. Following a May 2002 government decree that all religious groups must register or cease all religious activities, all religious facilities not belonging to the four principal religions were closed by the end of the period covered by this report. The Government also continued to harass, detain, and discriminate against members of the small community of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Citizens generally are very tolerant of one another in the practice of their religion; however, societal attitudes toward Jehovah's Witnesses are the exception to this widespread tolerance. During the period covered by this report, there was a continued reduction in societal hostility toward Jehovah's Witnesses.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 48,489 square miles, and its population is approximately 3.5 million. Although reliable statistics are not available, approximately 50 percent of the population are Sunni Muslim, and approximately 40 percent are Orthodox Christian. The population also includes a small number of Eastern Rite and Roman Catholics (5 percent), Protestants (2 percent), smaller numbers of Seventh-Day Adventists, and fewer than 1,500 members of Jehovah's Witnesses. A small minority, perhaps 2 percent, practices traditional indigenous religions. Also present in very small numbers are practicing Buddhists, Hindus, and Baha'is. Generally the population in the eastern and western lowlands predominantly is Muslim and in the highlands predominantly is Christian. There are very few atheists. Religious participation is high among all groups.

Within the country's geographic, ethnic, and political concentrations, the majority of members of the Tigrinya ethnic group are Orthodox Christian, with the exception of the Djiberti Tigrinya, who are Muslim. The majority of the Tigre, Saho, Nara, Afar, Rashaida, Beja, and Blen ethnic groups are Muslim. A majority of the Kunama are Roman Catholics or Muslims, and some practice traditional indigenous religions. Approximately 40 percent of the Blen are Christian, the majority of whom are Catholic. The majority of members of the Kunama ethnic group are Catholic, Muslim, and practitioners of traditional indigenous religions. The central and southern highland areas, which generally are more economically developed than the lowlands, predominantly are populated by Christian Tigrinyas and also some Muslim Djiberti and Saho. The Afar and Rashaida ethnic groups, and some of the Saho and Tigre ethnic groups, live in the eastern lowlands. The Blen live on the border between the western lowlands and the central highlands and are concentrated in the Keren area, which also includes a significant minority of Tigre and Tigrinya speakers. The Beja, Kunama, Nara, and the majority of Tigre live in the western lowlands.

Some foreign missionaries operate in the country, including representatives of the Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim faiths. There also are several international religious nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) that provide humanitarian aid, including Caritas, Dutch Interchurch Aid, Norwegian Church Aid, Lutheran Church Aid, Catholic Relief Services, and the Mufti's Relief Organization, the relief arm of the Muslim religion.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, including the freedom to practice any religion and to "manifest such practice," and Islam and Christianity are practiced widely and largely are tolerated throughout the country with persons free to worship at the mosque or church of their choice; however,

the Government restricted this right in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses and instituted new restrictions on Pente groups. The Government also does not respect fundamentalist forms of Islam.

In May 2002, the Minister of Information issued a decree that all religious groups must register or cease all religious activities. A government committee plans to review the applications received for registration, which will be approved if they conform to local culture. No decisions were made by the end of the period covered by this report; however, comments from senior government officials indicate that groups without significant historical ties to the country will not be licensed to operate.

The Government owns all land, and any religious organization that seeks facilities for worship other than private homes must seek government approval to build such facilities.

Religious organizations, including religious NGO's, do not receive duty free privileges, although they sometimes are allowed to import items under the reduced duty structure used for corporations.

The Government prohibits political activity by religious groups, and the Government's Directorate of Religious Affairs in the Ministry of Local Government monitors religious compliance with this proscription against political activity.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In 2001 the Government began closing Pente facilities—those churches not belonging to the four principal religions in the country. Following a May 2002 government decree that all religious groups must register or cease all religious activities, all religious facilities not belonging to the Orthodox Christian, Muslim, Catholic, or Evangelical Christian faiths were closed by the end of the period covered by this report. Authorities also informed Pente groups that a standing law would be used to stop political or other gatherings in private homes of more than five persons; however, there were no reports that the standing law was enforced during the period covered by this report.

In a 1995 proclamation, the Government described specific guidelines regarding the role of religion and religiously affiliated NGO's in development and government, stating that development, politics, and public administration are the sole responsibility of the Government and citizens.

The 1995 proclamation bans religious organizations from involvement in politics and restricts the right of religious media to comment on political matters. Pursuant to the 1995 proclamation, religious organizations are permitted to fund, but not initiate or implement, development projects; however, this proclamation was not enforced in practice—several religious organizations executed small-scale development projects without government interference. The proclamation also set out rules governing relations between religious organizations and foreign sponsors.

Muslims and Roman Catholics were required to pay a Rehabilitation Tax to recover properties that were expropriated by the previous regime; however, the tax was not enforced as rigorously against the Orthodox Church properties.

In 1998 the authorities informed all religious organizations that all schools run by religious denominations providing general education would be incorporated into the public school system. At the time, it was not made clear whether the clerical authorities would continue to administer the curriculum with government oversight or whether the school faculty would be absorbed into the Ministry of Education. However, no action has been taken to implement this initiative. In 1998 the Government decreed that religiously affiliated organizations were prohibited from running kindergartens; however, this decree was not carried out. According to officials in the Religious Affairs Office, the Government allows religious schools to operate independently as long as they adhere to a standard curriculum.

There are no chaplains in the military; however, military personnel are free to worship at nearby houses of worship.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Jehovah's Witnesses have several churches, and members are not barred from meeting in private homes; however, the Government continued to harass, detain, and discriminate against members of the small community of Jehovah's Witnesses. In 1994 in accordance with a presidential decree, the Government revoked the trading licenses of some members of Jehovah's Witnesses and dismissed most of those who worked in the civil service. This governmental action resulted in economic, employment, and travel difficulties for many members of Jehovah's Witnesses, especially former civil servants and businessmen. In 1997 the government labor office issued a form to all employers in Asmara and the surrounding area requesting information regarding any government personnel who were members of Jehovah's Witnesses. In addition to these measures, members of Jehovah's Witnesses also often are denied identification cards, passports, exit visas, trading licenses, and government housing unless they hide their religion.

Most members of Jehovah's Witnesses have refused on religious grounds to participate in national service or to vote, which has led to widespread criticism that members of Jehovah's Witnesses collectively were shirking their civic duty. Some Muslims also have objected to universal national service because of the requirement that women perform military duty. The Government does not excuse

individuals who object to national service for religious reasons or reasons of conscience, nor does the Government allow alternative service. Although persons from other religious groups, including Muslims, reportedly have been punished in past years for failure to participate in national service, only members of Jehovah's Witnesses have been subject to dismissal from the civil service, revocation their trading licenses, eviction from government-owned housing, and denial of passports, identity cards, and exit visas. However, there were no reports that Jehovah's Witnesses who performed national service and participated in the national independence referendum were subject to discrimination.

There is no indication that any persons are detained or imprisoned solely because of their religious beliefs or practices; however, the Government has singled out members of Jehovah's Witnesses for harsher treatment than that received by members of other faiths for similar actions. At the end of the period covered by this report, four members of Jehovah's Witnesses remained in detention without charge and without being tried for failing to participate in national service. The individuals have been detained for varying periods of time, some for more than 5 years. The maximum penalty for refusing to do national service is 3 years. Ministry of Justice officials have denied that any members of Jehovah's Witnesses were in detention without charges, although they acknowledge that some members of Jehovah's Witnesses and a number of Muslims were in jail serving sentences for convictions on charges of evading national service.

The army resorted to various forms of extreme physical punishment to force objectors, including some members of Jehovah's Witnesses, to perform military service.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Citizens generally are very tolerant of one another in the practice of their religion. Mosques and Christian churches of all orders coexist throughout the country, although Islam tends to predominate in the lowlands and Christianity in the highlands. In Asmara Christian and Muslim holidays are respected by all religions. Some holidays are celebrated jointly.

Societal attitudes toward Jehovah's Witnesses are the exception to widespread religious tolerance. Members of Jehovah's Witnesses generally are disliked and face some societal discrimination because of their refusal to participate in the independence referendum in 1993 and to perform national service, a refusal that is seen widely as unpatriotic. However, during the period covered by this report, there was a slight reduction in societal hostility towards Jehovah's Witnesses.

Church leaders of most denominations, in particular leaders of the Orthodox Christian, Catholic, Islamic, and Protestant denominations, meet routinely and engage in ongoing efforts to foster cooperation and understanding among religions, with the exception of Jehovah's Witnesses. Leaders of the four major religious organizations enjoy excellent interfaith relations. In July 2000, in Oslo, Norway, the leaders met with their Ethiopian counterparts for the fourth time in an ecumenical peace effort to resolve the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict. In February 2002, the leaders and Foreign Ministry officials met with their Ethiopian religious counterparts in Eritrea. The religious leaders then traveled to Ethiopia to continue their discussions. They issued statements appealing for peace and reconciliation between the two countries. The two groups of religious leaders also met in July 2002 and vowed to continue their work on this issue.

In 1999 leaders of the Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Muslim faiths created Good Deeds in Unity, an organization to help ethnic Eritrean expellees from Ethiopia, Eritreans displaced by the war, and other needy persons in the country. This organization works with the government relief agency, the Eritrean Relief and Refugee Affairs Commission.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. The U.S. Embassy meets regularly with leaders of the religious community and the Government's director of religious affairs.

The U.S. Ambassador and other Embassy officers have raised the case of Jehovah's Witnesses with government officials in the President's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the High Court, the Ministry of Justice, and in media interviews.

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