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Freedom in the World 2024 - Eritrea

NOT FREE

3

/ 100

Political Rights 1 / 40

Civil Liberties 2 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

3 / 100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

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 in 2023

- Despite the November 2022 peace agreement ending the war between the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian government, Eritrean troops supporting the Ethiopian government continued to occupy parts of the Tigray region in northern Ethiopia during the year. Eritrean forces have been accused of perpetrating mass atrocities in the region.
- Since 2022, Eritrean authorities have engaged in a nationwide forced conscription campaign in order to send more troops to Tigray, with security forces deployed to track down those attempting to escape being drafted. A February report by Human Rights Watch (HRW)

noted that Eritrean authorities had attempted to coerce individuals who were allegedly hiding from conscription by detaining their family members.

- Followers of unapproved religious denominations continued to face arbitrary arrest and imprisonment during the year, including in March, when 30 Christian worshippers were reportedly arrested during a raid in Keren.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

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 Afwerki 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 0-4 pts

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

A constitution ratified in 1997, but never instituted, calls for an elected 150-seat National Assembly, which would choose the president from among its members by a majority vote. National elections have been postponed indefinitely, and the transitional assembly has not met since 2002. National elections have never been conducted. Periodic local and regional assembly elections are carefully orchestrated by the PFDJ and offer no meaningful choice to voters.

A3 0-4 pts

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 established. Electoral laws have not been finalized.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

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. Groups were hosted in Ethiopia in the past, but its government ordered many of them to cease operations after the two countries sought rapprochement in 2018.

The Eritrean government holds prominent dissidents and family members in detention; a group of 11 individuals has reportedly been held incommunicado since 2001. In September 2021, Amnesty International noted that nine may have died in detention. In addition, Ciham Ali Abdu, the daughter of former information minister Ali Abdu Ahmed, was detained in 2012 when she tried to flee to Sudan. Former finance minister Berhane Abrehe, meanwhile, was detained in 2018. Ciham and Berhane remained in custody in 2023.

B2 0-4 pts

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. Since multiparty elections have never been allowed, opposition groups have had no opportunity to compete or enter government.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 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 leave individuals with no political options other than loyalty to the PFDJ, imprisonment, or illegal emigration through often dangerous routes.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, 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 have no practical ability to organize independently or advocate for their interests through the political system.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

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. The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has noted that military personnel were overrepresented among the president's closest associates.

C2 0-4 pts

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. 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 0-4 pts

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

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

The government shut down all independent media outlets in 2001. Several outlets provide coverage to Eritreans from outside the country, including the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Paris-based Radio Erena, and satellite station Asena TV. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), as of late 2023, 16 journalists remain imprisoned for their work in Eritrea; none have ever been charged.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 1 / 4

The government places strict limits on the exercise of religion. Eritrea officially recognizes only four faiths: Sunni Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and Evangelical Lutheranism. Religious practice is prohibited among members of the military.

Asmara interferes in the practice of recognized faiths. The patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church (EOC), Abune Antonios, was deposed in 2006 and expelled from the EOC for "heresy" in 2019. He remained under

house arrest until his death in February 2022. In May 2021, Asmara announced the election of Abune Qerlos as patriarch. Qerlos died in December 2022 and his replacement had not been announced as of year-end 2023.

Followers of other denominations are subject to arrest, imprisonment, and the loss of property. Jehovah's Witnesses face severe persecution, including detention and denial of citizenship. Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians also face arbitrary arrest. In March 2023, police arrested 30 Christian worshippers in a house in Keren. Nine other religious prisoners, including pastor Abenet Yemane, who has been jailed several times, were released from prisons across the country that same month, while an additional 13 prisoners were released in July.

D3 0-4 pts

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

Academic freedom is greatly constrained. Students in their last year of secondary school must perform military service at the Sawa military training center. In 2019, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that widespread physical and sexual abuse took place at Sawa. Academics practice self-censorship, and the government interferes with their course content and limits their ability to conduct research abroad.

The government has also closed down universities in the country, prioritizing smaller colleges and technical schools. In August 2022, Eritrean authorities took over the Hagaz Agricultural and Technical Boarding School, a Catholic-run institution; another Catholic-run technical school was set to be taken over by the government that September.

D4 0-4 pts

**Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or 0 /
other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 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. The authorities regularly block access to social media platforms and shutter internet cafés.

Members of the Eritrean diaspora are, by comparison, better able to express dissent online. However, members of the diaspora are also subject to government surveillance and harassment.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

Freedom of assembly is not recognized by the authorities. Public gatherings of more than seven people require a permit. Those who

protest face the threat of deadly force at the hands of state security officers or arbitrary detention.

E2 0-4 pts

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

E3 0-4 pts

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

While the Eritrean government has ratified the International Labour Organization's eight fundamental conventions, no independent trade unions function in Eritrea. The only union umbrella group, the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers, is affiliated with the PFDJ. According to reports to the UNHRC, the government has prevented new unions from being formed.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

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. 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 0-4 pts

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, including children, former members of the government, and their family members, 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 imprisoned.

F3 0-4 pts

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, though authorities do not investigate such incidents. 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.

Eritrean forces continued to operate in Ethiopia during 2023 despite a November 2022 peace agreement which should have prompted their withdrawal from Tigray. Eritrean forces engaged in violence against civilians during their deployment. Eritrean troops have been accused of committing war crimes and perpetrating mass human rights violations both during their campaign in Tigray and after the peace deal was signed.

In 2021, Human Rights Concern-Eritrea reported that boys were being pressed into military service and sent to the Tigray region of Ethiopia. In October 2022, Eritrean authorities intensified forced conscription campaigns, with security forces violently tracking down those attempting to escape the draft. In February 2023, international rights organization HRW reported that the government had detained the family members of people avoiding conscription in order to coerce alleged "draft evaders" out of hiding.

F4 0-4 pts

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, including exclusion from the government's poverty alleviation programs.

Laws mandate equal educational opportunity for women 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 relations are criminalized, and LGBT+ people enjoy no legal protections from discrimination.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

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 obtaining an exit visa 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.

G2 0-4 pts

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 the regime's support can confiscate property and evict occupants without due process.

G3 0-4 pts

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

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 the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), though it remains widespread in rural areas.

G4 0-4 pts

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, unpaid 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.

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