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Freedom in the World 2011 - Eritrea

Capital: Asmara

Population: 5,073,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 7 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

The political system remained frozen in 2010, with no plans for national elections despite 17 years of independence and 10 years of tense peace with Ethiopia. The government continued to use the threat of arrest and an onerous conscription system to maintain control over the population. Diplomatic friction with neighboring Djibouti eased during the year after Eritrea withdrew its forces from contested territory and agreed to a negotiated settlement.

Britain ended Italian colonial rule in Eritrea during World War II, and the country was formally incorporated into Ethiopia in 1952. Its independence struggle began in 1962 as a nationalist and Marxist guerrilla war against the Ethiopian government of Emperor Haile Selassie. The seizure of power in Ethiopia by a Marxist junta in 1974 removed the ideological basis of the conflict, and by the time Eritrea finally defeated Ethiopia's northern armies in 1991, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) had discarded

Marxism. Formal independence was achieved in May 1993 after a referendum supervised by the United Nations produced a landslide vote for statehood.

War with Ethiopia broke out again in 1998. In May 2000, an Ethiopian offensive made significant gains. The two sides signed a truce in June 2000, and a peace treaty was signed that December. Both countries accepted an independent ruling that set the common border, but Ethiopia later reneged on the agreement. The war and the unresolved grievances stemming from the broken peace deal have driven the Eritrean government's fixation with national security and perpetuated the militarization of the state.

In May 2001, a group of 15 senior ruling-party members publicly criticized President Isaias Afwerki and called for "the rule of law and for justice, through peaceful and legal ways and means." Eleven members of the group were arrested for treason in September of that year. The small independent media sector was also shut down, and a number of journalists were imprisoned. Many of the jailed dissidents and journalists were subsequently reported to have died in custody, though little official information about their whereabouts or well-being was disclosed.

The government clamped down on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in 2005, and ordered the U.S. Agency for International Development to end its operations in the country. In 2006, reports emerged that hundreds of followers of various unregistered churches were being detained, harassed, and abused.

The government continued this pattern of suppressing civil society and political dissent over the next several years, and arbitrary detention remained the authorities' most common method of stifling independent action by citizens.

Eritrea took measures to reduce tensions with its neighbors in 2010. A border dispute with Djibouti that had led to a military confrontation in 2008 was resolved when both sides agreed to a negotiated settlement, and Eritrea had withdrawn its forces from the contested territory by July. The United Nations welcomed the move, but said it was not sufficient to justify lifting international sanctions on Eritrea, citing persistent concerns about the country's alleged support for Islamist insurgents in Somalia.

A serious drought across the Horn of Africa placed an estimated one million Eritreans at risk of hunger in 2010. UNICEF said that 17 percent of children in some regions suffered from acute malnutrition, though the figures were rejected by President Isaias.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Eritrea is not an electoral democracy. Created in 1994 as a successor to the EPLF, the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) is the only legal political party. Instead of moving toward a democratic system, the PFDJ government has become harshly authoritarian since the end of the war with Ethiopia.

A new constitution was ratified in 1997, calling for "conditional" political pluralism and an elected 150-seat National Assembly, which would choose the president from among its members by a majority vote. However, this system has never been implemented, as national elections have been postponed indefinitely. President Isaias Afwerki has remained in office since independence. In 2004, regional assembly elections were conducted, but they were carefully orchestrated by the PFDJ and offered no real choice to voters. The PFDJ and the military, both strictly subordinate to Isaias, are in practice the only institutions of political significance in Eritrea.

Corruption appears to have increased in Eritrea in recent years. The government's control over foreign exchange effectively gives it sole authority over imports. At the same time, those in favor with the regime are allowed to profit from the smuggling and sale of scarce goods such as building materials, food, and alcohol. According to the International Crisis Group, senior military officials are the chief culprits in this trade. They have also been accused of enriching themselves by charging fees to assist the growing number of Eritreans who wish to flee the country, and using conscript labor for private building projects.

There are no independent media in Eritrea. The government controls all broadcasting outlets and banned all privately owned newspapers in its 2001 crackdown. A group of journalists arrested in 2001 remain imprisoned without charge, and as many as half of the original 10 are believed to have died in custody. In 2009, the entire staff of the Asmara-based broadcaster Radio Bana was detained. At least six of them remain in custody without charge. Two more journalists were detained in 2010, including a reporter with the state-owned radio station Dimtsi Hafash, who was arrested as he tried to cross the border into Ethiopia. At least 17 journalists were known to be behind bars at the end of 2010, according to the U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists. The government controls the internet infrastructure and is believed to monitor online communications, though only a small fraction of the population has internet access.

The government places significant limitations on the exercise of religion. Since 2002 it has officially recognized only four faiths: Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and Lutheranism as practiced by the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. Persecution of minority Christian sects has escalated, particularly for Jehovah's Witnesses, who were stripped of their basic civil rights in 1994, and evangelical and

Pentecostal churches. Abune Antonios, patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, has been under house arrest since speaking out against state interference in religion in 2006. According to Amnesty International, members of other churches have been jailed and tortured or otherwise ill-treated to make them abandon their faith. As many as 3,000 Christians are currently in prison because of their beliefs. Muslims also complain of discrimination. In February 2010 a leading Islamic organization published a document accusing the government of marginalizing Muslims, closing traditional Muslim schools, persecuting religious leaders, and appropriating Muslim-owned land.

Academic freedom is constrained. Secondary-school students are subject to the highly unpopular policy of obligatory military service, and are often stationed at bases far from their homes. The official 18-month service period is frequently open-ended in practice, and conscientious-objector status is not recognized. The government imposes collective punishment on the families of deserters, forcing them to pay heavy fines or putting them in prison. Eritrea's university system has been effectively closed, replaced by regional colleges whose main purposes are military training and political indoctrination.

Freedom of expression in private discussions is limited. People are guarded in voicing their opinions for fear of being overheard by government informants.

Freedom of assembly is not recognized. The government maintains a hostile attitude toward civil society, and independent NGOs are not tolerated. A 2005 law requires NGOs to pay taxes on imported materials, submit project reports every three months, renew their licenses annually, and meet government-established target levels of financial resources. International human rights NGOs are barred and only six international humanitarian NGOs are present in the country. Eritrea in 2010 accepted a recommendation by the UN Human Rights Council to establish an independent national human rights institution, but nothing had been set up by year's end.

The government controls all union activity. The National Confederation of Eritrean Workers is the country's main union body and has affiliated unions for women, teachers, young people, and general workers.

The judiciary, which was formed by decree in 1993, has never issued rulings significantly at variance with government positions. Constitutional due process guarantees are often ignored in cases related to state security. The International Crisis Group describes Eritrea as a "prison state" for its flagrant disregard of the rule of law and its willingness to detain anyone suspected of opposing the regime, often without charge. According to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, torture, arbitrary detentions, and political arrests are common. The police are poorly paid and prone to corruption. Prison conditions are poor, and outside monitors such as the International Committee of the

Red Cross have been denied access to detainees. In some facilities, inmates are held in metal shipping containers or underground cells in extreme temperatures. Prisoners are often denied medical treatment. The government maintains a network of secret detention facilities and frequently refuses to disclose the location of prisoners to their families.

The Kunama people, one of Eritrea's nine ethnic groups, reportedly face severe discrimination. They are viewed with suspicion for having backed a rival group to the EPLF during the war of independence and for resisting attempts to integrate them into national society. Members of the Afar ethnic group have also been targeted. In May and June 2010, several hundred Afars were arrested, according to Human Rights Watch. Sexual minorities face legal discrimination due to the criminalization of homosexual conduct.

Freedom of movement is heavily restricted. Eritreans under the age of 50 are rarely given permission to leave the country, and those who try to travel without the correct documents face imprisonment. Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers who are repatriated from other countries are also detained. These strict penalties fail to deter many thousands of people from risking their lives to escape the country each year.

Government policy is officially supportive of free enterprise, and citizens are in theory able to choose their employment, establish private businesses, and operate them without government harassment. However, few private businesses remain in Eritrea. This is largely because of the conscription system, which ties most able-bodied men and women to an indefinite period of national service and can entail compulsory labor for enterprises controlled by the political elite. The enforced contraction of the labor pool, combined with a lack of investment and rigid state control of private enterprise, has crippled the national economy. The Heritage Foundation ranked Eritrea as the fourth least free economy in the world in its 2010 Index of Economic Freedom.

Women hold some senior government positions, including four ministerial posts. The government has made genuine attempts to promote women's rights, and laws mandate equal educational opportunity, equal pay for equal work, and penalties for domestic violence. However, traditional societal discrimination against women persists in rural areas. Female genital mutilation was banned by the government in 2007, but the practice remains widespread.

** Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

