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Freedom in the World 2009 - Eritrea

Capital: Asmara

Population: 5,000,000

Political Rights Score: 7

Civil Liberties Score: 6

Status: Not Free

Overview

The government of Eritrea continued its long-standing suppression of democratic and human rights in 2008, and a group of independent journalists imprisoned in 2001 remained behind bars. The country also maintained its aggressive foreign policy in the region, initiating border-related clashes with Djiboutian forces in June.

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. Internationally recognized 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 territorial gains. The two sides signed a truce in June 2000, and a peace treaty was signed that December. The agreement called for a UN-led buffer force to be installed along the Eritrean side of the contested border and stipulated that further negotiations should determine the final boundary line. The war had dominated the country's political and economic agenda, reflecting the government's habitual use of real or perceived national security threats to generate popular support and political unity.

In May 2001, 15 senior ruling-party members, known as the Group of 15, 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 dissident group were arrested for treason in September 2001 and remain incarcerated. The small independent media sector was also shut down, and 18 journalists were imprisoned.

The government in 2005 clamped down on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) by withdrawing tax exemptions, increasing registration requirements, and ordering the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to end its operations in the country.

Separately, tensions with Ethiopia remained high, as Eritrea objected to the inconclusive results of international mediation on its long-standing border dispute. The government claimed that the Ethiopians were not respecting the 2000 agreement, and the authorities banned UN helicopter flights in Eritrean airspace, restricted UN ground patrols, and expelled some of the peacekeepers.

In 2006, reports emerged that hundreds of followers of various unregistered churches (mostly Protestant) were being detained, harassed, and abused. The government that year also expelled several development NGOs. Given evidence of Eritrea's support for Islamist rebels in Somalia, the U.S. government in 2007 considered placing Eritrea on its list of state sponsors of terrorism.

In 2008, the Eritrean leadership showed no sign of relaxing its iron grip on the country's political and social structures. This long-standing suppression of democratic and human rights included the continued imprisonment of the independent journalists arrested in 2001.

Also during the year, Eritrea maintained its aggressive foreign policy in the region, which has included tension with Yemen and involvement in Sudanese civil conflicts. In June, Eritrean forces attacked Djiboutian army units on the disputed border between the two countries. Separately that month, a rebel group claimed to have killed 12 Eritrean soldiers in the remote Afar region.

The UN Development Programme's 2007/2008 Human Development Index ranked Eritrea at 157 out of 177 countries measured. Per capita gross domestic product (GDP) was \$1,109. According to the 2008 CIA World Fact Book, Eritrea has the ninth highest ratio of per capita military expenditure as a percentage of GDP.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Eritrea is not an electoral democracy. Created in February 1994 as a successor to the EPLF, the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) maintains complete dominance over the country's political life. Instead of moving toward a democratic political system, the PFDJ has taken significant steps backward since the end of the war with Ethiopia. The 2001 crackdown on those calling for greater political pluralism and subsequent repressive steps clearly demonstrate the Eritrean government's authoritarian stance.

In 1994, a 50-member Constitutional Commission was established. A new constitution was adopted in 1997, authorizing "conditional" political pluralism with provisions for a multiparty system. The constitution calls for the 150-seat legislature, the National Assembly, to elect the president from among its members by a majority vote. However, national elections have been postponed indefinitely. Regulations governing political parties have never been enacted, and independent political parties do not exist. In 2004, regional assembly elections were conducted, but they were carefully orchestrated by the PFDJ and offered no real choice.

Eritrea long maintained a reputation for a relatively low level of corruption. In recent years, however, graft appears to have increased somewhat. Eritrea was ranked 126 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index. Citing World Bank information, the Heritage Foundation Index of Economic Freedom reports petty corruption within the executive branch, based largely on family connections.

Government control over all broadcasting outlets and the repression of independent print publications have eliminated the vehicles for dissemination of opposing or alternative views. In its September 2001 crackdown, the government banned all privately owned newspapers while claiming that a parliamentary committee would examine conditions under which they would be permitted to reopen. Journalists arrested in 2001 remain imprisoned, and other journalists have subsequently been arrested. The Committee to Protect Journalists lists Eritrea as one of the five worst

jailers of journalists in the world. Internet use remains limited but growing, with an estimated 100,000 users in 2007.

The government places significant limitations on the exercise of religion. It officially recognizes 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 in recent years, particularly for Jehovah's Witnesses, who were stripped of their basic civil rights in 1994, and evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Amnesty International cites Abune Antonios, patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, as a prisoner of conscience; he has been under house arrest since January 2006. According to Amnesty, members of other churches have been jailed and tortured or ill-treated to make them abandon their faith, and about 2,000 are currently imprisoned. Some Muslims have also been targeted. In 2008, the U.S. Department of State renewed its classification of Eritrea as a "country of concern" with regard to its restrictions on religious liberty. The U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom stated in 2008 that conditions for religious minorities had apparently worsened over the previous year, citing arbitrary detentions and hundreds of cases of abuse, some of which resulted in death.

Academic freedom is constrained. Secondary school students are required to comply with a highly unpopular policy of obligatory military service, and they are often stationed at bases far from their homes, such as the training camp in Sawa, in the far western part of the country near the Ethiopian border. The conscription periods can be open-ended, and no conscientious-objector status is recognized.

Freedom of assembly does not exist. The government continues to maintain a hostile attitude toward civil society. Independent NGOs are not allowed, and the legitimate role of human rights defenders is not recognized. In 2005, Eritrea enacted legislation to regulate the operations of all NGOs, requiring them 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 from the country, and the government expelled three remaining development NGOs in 2006.

The civil service, the military, the police, and other essential services have some restrictions on their freedom to form unions. In addition, groups of 20 or more persons seeking to form a union require special approval from the Ministry of Labor. The military conscription of men aged 18 to 40 has created a scarcity of skilled labor.

A judiciary, which was formed by decree in 1993, has never issued rulings significantly at variance with government positions. Constitutional guarantees are often ignored in cases related to state security. The provision of speedy trials is limited by a lack of trained personnel, inadequate funding, and poor infrastructure.

According to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, torture, arbitrary detentions, and political arrests are common. Religious persecution and ill-treatment of those trying to avoid military service are increasing, and torture is systematically practiced by the army. Prison conditions are poor, and outside monitors such as the International Committee of the Red Cross have been denied access to detainees.

The Kunama people, one of Eritrea's nine ethnic groups, reportedly face severe discrimination. Historically, the Kunama, who reside primarily in the west, have resisted attempts to integrate them into the national society.

Official government policy is supportive of free enterprise, and citizens generally have the freedom to choose their employment, establish private businesses, and operate them without government harassment. However, critics have alleged that the system of military conscription constitutes forced labor. In addition, according to the 2009 Heritage Foundation Index of Economic Indicators, "the overall freedom to start, operate, and close a business is seriously limited by Eritrea's burdensome regulatory environment."

Women played important roles in the guerrilla movement prior to independence, and the government has worked to improve the status of women. In an effort to encourage broader participation by women in politics, the PFDJ in 1997 named 3 women to its executive council and 12 to its central committee. Women participated in the Constitutional Commission of the 1990s, filling almost half of the positions on the 50-member panel, and they continue to hold some senior government positions. Equal educational opportunity, equal pay for equal work, and penalties for domestic violence have been codified. However, traditional societal discrimination against women persists in the largely rural and agricultural country.

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