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2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Eritrea

Executive Summary

The law and unimplemented constitution prohibit religiously motivated discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, as well as the freedom to practice any religion. The government recognizes four officially registered religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Sunni Islam, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea.

During the year, the government arrested individuals on the basis of religion. Christian nongovernmental organization (NGO) Release International reported the arrest of 17 women and 12 men after police raided a prayer meeting in Asmara on March 29. According to this NGO, the government continued to imprison more than 300 Christians, as of November 17. Other NGOs estimated authorities continued to detain from 130 to more than 1,000 persons due to their faith, including 20 Jehovah's Witnesses for refusing to participate in military service or renounce their faith. In October, according to Catholic and other media sources, government security forces arrested an Eritrean Orthodox bishop, an Eritrean Orthodox priest, and a Franciscan priest, reportedly for highlighting government human rights violations in their homilies. They were released on December 29, according to international media. On February 9, former Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Abune Antonios, confined to house arrest since 2006, died while still in detention. On May 20, officials from several NGOs and from the Eritrean Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom wrote to the Eritrean ambassador to the United Kingdom and Ireland to express concern about the government's continuing "unjust, arbitrary, and indefinite detention" of many citizens, including Christians imprisoned "solely on account of their faith." Unregistered religious groups lack the privileges of registered groups and their members risked arrest, mistreatment, and renunciation of their faith as a condition of their release. The government allowed some unregistered groups to operate and tolerated their worship activities. International NGOs and international media continued to report that members of all religious groups were, to varying degrees, subjected to government abuses and restrictions. The government continued to deny citizenship to Jehovah's Witnesses after stripping them of citizenship in 1994 for refusing to participate in the referendum that created the independent state of Eritrea. In September, the beginning of the 2022 school year, the last two remaining Catholic schools were closed or converted to public schools.

The government's lack of transparency and intimidation of civil society and religious communities continued to create difficulties for individuals who wanted to obtain information on the status of societal respect for religious freedom. International observers, however, continued to state that

religious tolerance appeared to be widespread between different groups within society. Churches and mosques are in close proximity to each other, and most citizens congratulated members of other religious groups on the occasions of religious holidays and other events. There were no reports of sectarian violence, and most towns and ethnic groups included members from all the major religious groups.

U.S. officials in Asmara and Washington raised religious freedom concerns with government officials throughout the year, including the imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses, lack of alternative service for conscientious objectors, and the death of Patriarch Antonios while in detention. U.S. embassy officials further discussed religious freedom on a regular basis with a wide range of individuals, including members of the diplomatic corps based in Asmara and UN officials. Embassy officials used social media and outreach programs to engage the public, highlight the commitment of the United States to religious freedom, and rebut the government's argument that it does not persecute people based on their religious beliefs.

Since 2004, Eritrea has been designated a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 30, 2022, the Secretary of State redesignated Eritrea as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the ongoing denial of licenses or other approvals for exports or imports of defense articles and services as referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(n) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.2 million (midyear 2022). The UN estimates a population of approximately 3.75 million. Reliable population data in the country are difficult to gather. There are no reliable figures on religious affiliation. The Pew Foundation reported the population to be 63 percent Christian and 37 percent Muslim in 2010 (most recent reliable information), but many local sources estimate the population to be more evenly divided between Christians and Muslims. The Christian population is predominantly Eritrean Orthodox. Catholics, Protestants, and other Christian denominations, including Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals, constitute less than 5 percent of the Christian population. Some estimates suggest 2 percent of the population is traditionally animist. The Baha'i community reports approximately 500 members, half of whom reside in the capital, Asmara. Only one Jew is known to remain in the country and resides in the country on a part-time basis.

A majority of the population in the southern and central regions is Christian, while the northern areas are majority Sunni Muslim. A majority of the Tigrinya, the largest ethnic group, is Christian. Seven of the other eight principal ethnic groups, the Tigre, Saho, Afar, Bilen, Hedareb, Nara, and the Rashaida, are predominantly Sunni Muslim and reside mainly in the northern regions of the country. The Kunama are diverse, with Christians, Muslims, and animists.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The law and unimplemented constitution prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and the freedom to practice any religion.

Proclamation 73/1995, which serves as the guiding law on religious issues, calls for separation of religion and state; outlines the parameters to which religious organizations must adhere, including concerning foreign relations and social activities; establishes an Office of Religious Affairs; and requires religious groups to register with the government or cease activities. Some members of religious groups that are unregistered or otherwise not in compliance with the law reportedly continue to be subject to the former provisional penal code, which sets penalties for failure to register and noncompliance. A revised penal code, pending implementation since 2015, does not directly address penalties for religious groups that fail to register or otherwise comply with the law, but includes a punishment of between one- and six- months' imprisonment and a fine of 5,001 to 20,000 nakfa (\$330 to \$1,300) for "unlawful assembly."

The Office of Religious Affairs has authority to regulate religious activities and institutions, including approval of the applications of religious groups seeking official registration. Each application must include a description of the group's history in the country; an explanation of the uniqueness or benefit the group offers compared with other registered religious groups; names and personal information of the group's leaders; detailed information on assets; a description of the group's conformity to local culture; and a declaration of all foreign sources of funding.

The Office of Religious Affairs has registered four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Sunni Islam, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea (affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation). While the Baha'i faith is not one of the four officially recognized religious groups, the group has registered every year since its establishment in the country in 1959 and has "de facto" recognition from the government. A synagogue exists in Asmara, but there are not enough adherents for regular services. A decree requires all other religious groups to submit registration applications and to cease religious activities and services prior to approval.

Religious groups must obtain government approval to build facilities for worship.

While the law does not specifically address religious education in public schools, Proclamation 73/1995 outlines other permitted activities by religious organizations, such as undertaking "spiritual teachings and preaching" and assisting the poor and needy. The proclamation does not include education in general as an approved activity, therefore religious groups are barred from operating private schools.

By law, all citizens between ages 18 and 50 must perform 18 months of national service, with limited exceptions, including for health reasons such as physical disability or pregnancy. In times of emergency, the government may extend the length of national service indefinitely, and the country officially has been in a state of emergency since the beginning of the 1998 war with Ethiopia. There is also a compulsory militia for all men not in the military, including many who had been demobilized from National Service, otherwise exempted from military service in the past, or are elderly. The government may detain those who fail to participate in the militia or national service. Militia training primarily involves occasional marches and listening to patriotic lectures. The law does not provide for conscientious objector status for religious reasons, nor are there alternative activities for persons willing to perform national service but unwilling to engage in military or militia activities.

The law prohibits any involvement in politics by religious groups.

The government requires all citizens to obtain an exit visa prior to departing the country. The application requests the applicant's religious affiliation, but the law does not require that information.

The law limits foreign financing for religious groups, including registered groups. The only contributions legally allowed are from local followers, the government, or government-approved foreign sources.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

During the year, the government again arrested individuals on the basis of religion. The NGO Release International reported new arrests of 17 women and 12 men after police raided a prayer meeting in a home in Asmara on March 29. According to the NGO, as of November 17 (latest information available), the government continued to imprison more than 300 Christians, including those arrested in March and another 98 arrested in another raid in Asmara in September. There was no information on the whereabouts of the detainees, the conditions under which they were being held, or the charges against them, if any. In its most recent *World Watch List* report, Christian NGO Open Doors stated that Christians in the country who were not members of the four recognized religious groups are “at risk of severe persecution” including government raids of their gatherings and detention under conditions that “can be inhumane.”

According to Catholic online daily *La Croix International* and other Catholic news agencies, government security forces arrested Eritrean Catholic Bishop Fikremariam Hagos on October 15 at Asmara International Airport as he returned from a visit to Europe. The media outlets also reported that authorities arrested Father Mihretab Stefanos, an Eritrean Catholic priest, and Franciscan Father Abba Abraham three days earlier. *La Croix* said that all three were held in the Adi Abeto Prison. Media in Kenya reported that the government told the church it was “holding” Hagos but did not explain why. On October 19, *The National Catholic Register* said the three had been accused of highlighting government human rights violations in their homilies. The government provided no reason for, or details about, their detention. On December 29, Hagos and Stefanos were released from prison, according to *BBC News*. The government did not provide a reason for their release.

NGOs estimated authorities continued to detain from 130 to more than 1,000 persons due to their faith. Determining more precisely the number of persons imprisoned for their religious beliefs was difficult due to lack of government transparency and what multiple sources stated was intimidation of those who might come forward with such information.

On February 9, former Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Abune Antonios, confined to house arrest since 2006 for protesting government interference in church affairs, died; he was 94 years old and in poor health. The church and public, via social media, expressed support for the Patriarch and condemned the government for detaining him for years.

According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses Religious Freedom Report for Eritrea, authorities reportedly continued to detain 20 Jehovah’s Witnesses, more than half of whom had been in prison for more than 20 years, for refusing to participate in military service or renounce their faith.

On October 14, a spokesman for Jehovah’s Witnesses said the organization was concerned about the health of 80-year-old Tesfazion Gebremichael, one of those in prison. The spokesman said that due to Gebremichael’s age and “poor prison conditions,” he “may not live long enough to ever be reunited with his family and friends.” The spokesman added that four imprisoned Jehovah’s Witnesses aged 62 to 77 had died in government custody since 2011.

The government continued to single out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment because of their blanket refusal to vote in the 1993 referendum on the country's independence and subsequent refusal to participate in mandatory national service, for which the government stripped them of their citizenship in 1994. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that the government continued to detain their members and other religious prisoners for failure to follow the law or for alleged national security reasons and continued to deny them citizenship.

Authorities' treatment of persons imprisoned because of religion continued to appear inconsistent. In some prisons, religious prisoners continued to report they were not allowed to have visitors, but in other prisons, visitors were allowed. Some former prisoners held for their religious beliefs continued to report harsh detention conditions, including solitary confinement, physical abuse, and inadequate food, water, and shelter. Other former religious prisoners reported acceptable conditions, adequate food, and no physical abuse.

Many arrests and releases were unreported. Information was extremely limited. Independent observers stated many persons remained imprisoned without charge.

The government continued to detain without due process persons associated with unregistered religious groups, occasionally for long periods, and sometimes on the grounds of threatening national security, according to minority religious group members and international NGOs. Their eventual release from detention was sometimes conditioned on a formal renunciation of their faith.

On May 20, officials from NGOs Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Church in Chains – Ireland, Release Eritrea, and Human Rights Concern – Eritrea and from the Eritrean Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom wrote to the Eritrean ambassador to the United Kingdom and Ireland to express their concern “at the continuing unjust, arbitrary, and indefinite detention of tens of thousands of Eritrean citizens in harsh conditions, including hundreds of Christians imprisoned solely on account of their faith.”

In September, the government called for mass mobilization of the militia. Deployment locations and length of deployment were not specified.

The government reportedly raided a church service to round up worshippers to serve their mandated military duty, as part of its nationwide roundup of those who had failed to appear for duty. Catholic priest Mussie Zerai told *Catholic News Service* that such a raid took place on September 4 in the village of Akrur in the parish of Medhanie Alem. Zerai said soldiers arrived during Mass and surrounded the church, then took away any young people present, including all the boys of the choir in their uniforms. Zerai said the incident was widely circulated on social media.

Government authorization remained necessary for any organization to print and distribute documents; for religious groups, that authorization needed to come from the Office of Religious Affairs, which continued to approve requests only from the four officially registered religious groups.

Government restrictions on registered and unregistered religious groups remained in place regarding proselytizing, accepting external funding from international NGOs and international organizations, and groups selecting their own religious leaders. Unregistered religious groups also faced restrictions in gathering for worship, constructing places of worship, and teaching their religious beliefs to others,

although they reported that in many cases the government unofficially allowed them to worship in private homes as long as it was done discreetly.

Official attitudes differed toward members of unregistered religious groups worshipping in homes or rented facilities. Some local authorities reportedly tolerated the presence and activities of unregistered groups, while others attempted to prevent them from meeting. Local authorities sometimes denied government ration coupons to Jehovah's Witnesses and members of Pentecostal groups. Some persons imprisoned because of religion reported they were allowed to worship together in prison as long as they did so quietly.

The government, which has not approved the registration of additional religious groups since 2002, again approved no new religious groups during the year. Unrecognized religious groups expressed fear that applying would open them to further repression.

Jehovah's Witnesses remained largely unable to obtain official identification documents, which left many of them unable to study in government institutions and barred them from most forms of employment, government benefits, access to bank accounts, and travel.

According to a 2019 report by the European Asylum Support Office (most recent data available), the issuance of exit visas was inconsistent and did not adhere to any policy; members of unrecognized religious communities could be denied exit visas solely on the basis of their religious affiliation.

The government continued to ban all non-Sunni practices of Islam.

Diaspora groups reported authorities controlled directly or indirectly virtually all activities of the four formally recognized groups. Local observers continued to say officially registered members of the four religious groups generally did not face impediments to religious practice. Individuals also reported restrictions on clergy meeting with foreign diplomats.

The government continued its confiscation and nationalization of nearly all private schools, including Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim-owned schools, citing Proclamation 73/1995's prohibition on religious institutions providing social services, which includes education. In September, the beginning of the 2022 school year, the last two remaining Catholic schools were closed or converted to public schools. In October, the government allowed one private school to reopen, limited to international non-Eritrean students only.

Most places of worship unaffiliated with the four officially registered religious groups remained closed to worship, but many of those buildings remained physically intact and undamaged. The government continued to permit the last Jew known to remain in the country to maintain the synagogue in Asmara as an historic site. The Greek Orthodox Church remained open as a cultural building, and members of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church sometimes held religious services on the site. Other structures belonging to unregistered groups, such as the Church of Christ, remained shuttered. The government allowed the Baha'i center in Asmara to remain open, and the members of the center had unrestricted access to the building. A Baha'i temple outside of Asmara was allowed to operate. There were indications other unregistered groups, including Seventh-day Adventists and the Faith Mission Church, operated to some degree. The Anglican church building held services, but only under the auspices of the registered Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Some church leaders continued to state that the government's restriction on foreign financing reduced church income and religious participation by preventing churches from training clergy or building or maintaining facilities.

Government control of all mass media, as well as a fear of imprisonment or other government actions, continued to restrict the ability of unregistered religious group members to bring attention to government actions against them, according to observers. Restrictions on public assembly and freedom of speech severely limited the ability of unregistered religious groups to assemble and conduct worship in a designated place of worship, according to group members.

Although none were appointed during the year, observers continued to state that the government exerted significant direct and indirect influence over the appointment of heads of recognized religious communities, including the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the Sunni Islamic community; some international NGOs said that authorities directly controlled the appointments. The government denied this, stating these decisions were made entirely by religious communities. However, the sole political party in the country, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, led by President Isaias Afwerki, appointed both the head of the Sunni Islamic community and the head of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, as well as some lower-level officials for both communities, in 2021.

While the overwhelming majority of high-level officials, both military and civilian, were Christian, four Ministers in the 17-member cabinet and at least one senior military leader, were Muslim.

The government continued to say its official party doctrine promoted national citizenship above religious sectarianism and that it did not officially prefer any religion. As evidence of its doctrine, the National Service program continued to require all 12th graders to attend Warsay Yikealo Secondary School at the Sawa military camp (colocated with a defense training center) where all 12th grade students from across the country studied and received military training.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Continued government control of all media and public discourse limited information available concerning societal actions affecting religious freedom. International observers continued to note, however, that religious tolerance appeared to be widespread within society. Churches and mosques are in close proximity to each other, and most citizens reportedly congratulated members of other religious groups on the occasions of religious holidays and other events. There were no reports of sectarian violence, and most towns and ethnic groups included members from all major religious groups.

Some Christian leaders continued to report Muslim leaders and communities were willing to collaborate on community projects. Formal ecumenical and interreligious committees did not exist, although local leaders met informally. Some shrines were venerated by both Orthodox and Muslim believers. Some Muslims continued to express privately their feelings of stress and scrutiny in professional and educational settings because of their religion.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives met with government officials to raise religious freedom concerns, including seeking ways to accommodate unregistered groups. They also advocated the release of Jehovah's

Witnesses, including the remaining 20 known to remain in prison, and for an alternative service option for conscientious objectors refusing to bear arms for religious reasons. Embassy representatives also expressed concern over the death of Patriarch Abune Antonios, whom the government had held under house arrest for 16 years for protesting government interference into church affairs. Officials in Washington shared similar concerns with the Eritrean embassy.

Embassy officials raised issues of religious freedom with a wide range of partners, including Asmara based and regionally based diplomats accredited to the government, UN officials, and other international organization representatives. Embassy officials used social media to highlight the importance of religious tolerance and employed public diplomacy programs to engage the public and highlight the commitment of the United States to religious freedom and rebut government statements denying persecution. For example, on June 6, the embassy posted a message on Facebook criticizing the lack of freedom to worship for all religions, calling for the government to allow all religious groups to register so that all Eritreans could worship freely, and seeking the release of those imprisoned for exercising their religion.

Since 2004, Eritrea has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, section 402(b), for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 30, 2022, the Secretary of State redesignated Eritrea as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the ongoing denial of licenses or other approvals for exports or imports of defense articles and services as referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(n) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the act.

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