

KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Eritrea trended the same as in previous years, in spite of hopes raised with the historic July 2018 Eritrea-Ethiopia peace deal and again with the September 2018 signing of a second peace agreement in Saudi Arabia. The agreement led to the opening of border crossings in September 2018, and trade, commercial flights, and phone calls between the two countries resumed. However, with no improvement in religious freedom and other human rights conditions in Eritrea, the opening enabled a surge in Eritrean refugees freely crossing into Ethiopia. Only four religions are officially recognized in Eritrea: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. But even these official religious groups are unable to practice their faith freely because the Eritrean government regulates and interferes in their affairs. The government does not allow any other religious groups to register and treats them as illegal. It also continues to forcibly conscript Eritreans and deny their rights to practice their religion or belief while in civil or military service.

Conscientious objection to service is prohibited, ultimately denying the religious freedom of Jehovah's Witnesses and others. The government continues to arrest and detain individuals who disagree with its actions, including Patriarch Abune Antonios of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, who has been under house arrest since 2007. U.S. and United Nations (UN) officials estimate that hundreds of people are currently imprisoned for their religious beliefs, but in the extremely secretive and closed-off society there are no official figures.

In light of these violations, USCIRF again finds in 2019 that Eritrea merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State has designated Eritrea as a CPC repeatedly since 2004, most recently in November 2018. USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate Eritrea as a CPC under IRFA and maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1 of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Use bilateral and multilateral diplomatic channels to urge the government of Eritrea to:
 - Release unconditionally and immediately detainees held on account of their peaceful religious activities, including Patriarch Antonios;
 - End religious persecution of unregistered religious communities, register such groups, and grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah's Witnesses; and
 - Extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, the UN

Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Red Cross;

- Seek a meeting for U.S. Embassy officials with Patriarch Antonios; and
- Encourage the African Union to establish an accountability mechanism to investigate, prosecute, and try individuals accused of committing crimes against humanity in Eritrea, as recommended in 2016 by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea and the UN Human Rights Council.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Contribute to the international community's information-gathering efforts about Eritrea by:
 - Requiring a report from the State Department on the United States' relationship with Eritrea and to evaluate efforts to address religious freedom and other human rights issues; and
 - Sending a congressional delegation to Eritrea to focus on religious freedom and other human rights issues.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

State of Eritrea

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic

POPULATION*

5,970,646

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY**

48–50% Christian

48–50% Muslim

*Estimate compiled from the CIA World Factbook

**Estimates compiled from the U.S. Department of State

BACKGROUND

The Eritrean government highly regulates religious practice, and there is little to no freedom of religion or belief for people outside of the four officially recognized faith communities: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. President Isaias Afwerki, leader of the only political party permitted in the country—the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ)—vigorously suppresses dissent and has ruled Eritrea with absolute authority since its independence from Ethiopia in 1993. Policies toward religious communities are made with the purported goals of avoiding conflict between religious groups and secularizing society; but in effect the government harshly represses religious freedom. Individuals who protest government actions or follow unapproved religious beliefs may be reported on by their neighbors, dismissed from their jobs, have their bank accounts closed, and be arrested, tortured, or forcibly disappeared. Also, freedom of the press, assembly, association, and speech are as restricted as the freedom of religion or belief. While the constitution, in text, guarantees these rights, it has not been applied in practice since its ratification in 1997. Thousands of Eritreans are imprisoned without formal charges; the 2015 and 2016 reports of the [UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea \(COI-E\)](#) describe extensive use of torture and forced labor of prisoners.

Since breaking from Ethiopia in 1993, the Eritrean government has required indefinite national service of all physically and mentally capable adults between 18 and 70 years old. The COI-E and human rights organizations have deemed this service equivalent to slavery. Religious practice is prohibited in the military, and conscripts are punished for possessing religious materials or participating in religious gatherings. President Afwerki's government has justified this service as necessary due to the state of conflict with Ethiopia.

In July 2018—a few months after Abiy Ahmed was confirmed as Ethiopia's new prime minister—Eritrea and Ethiopia celebrated a historic shift in relations toward peace in the Horn of Africa and made a Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship. Signing the peace agreement resolved the border conflict and opened crossing points between Ethiopia and Eritrea in September 2018. Many Eritreans and international actors became hopeful that the peace would naturally obligate the end of indefinite national service, but this and other key reforms had not yet occurred by the end of the reporting period. Indefinite national service, in addition to other human rights abuses, is a primary driver of mass emigration from Eritrea. According to the UN Refugee Agency, in the first month after the opening there was an immediate surge in Eritreans crossing into Ethiopia; around 10,000 new refugees arrived, the majority of whom applied for asylum. By

the end of the reporting period, Ethiopia was hosting at least 173,000 Eritrean refugees, and at least 118,000 were reported in Sudan. Without a significant effort to halt human rights violations, steady migration flows are likely to continue.

Following the signing of peace agreements in July in Asmara and in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in September the UN Security Council unanimously voted to lift arms embargoes and targeted sanctions on Eritrea. Eritrea rapidly changed its reclusive and closed status and began repairing diplomatic relations with Somalia and Djibouti.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2018

Registration

The government uses difficult registration requirements as a tool to limit the freedom of religion or belief and to control messages and narratives that do not favor the party in power. The government of Eritrea requires all religious group to apply for registration, but only the four approved communities—the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea—are allowed to operate since the policy change in 2002, and even then within certain restrictions. President Afwerki is reportedly a member of the Orthodox Church, and has only supported the recognition of more established faith groups. Other religious communities, including Baha'is, the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, and the Seventh-day Adventists, have submitted applications in the past. Without formal registration, other faith groups' rights are denied; they are prohibited from building or owning houses of worship or engaging in religious practices such as praying in groups. In 2018, the government did not approve any additional religious groups and continued its repression of nonofficial religious groups, including Muslims and Christians.

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Arbitrary Detention and Torture of Religious Prisoners of Conscience

Individuals, including children, are regularly arrested and detained for their religious beliefs and practices

and not afforded due process under the law. Members of approved religions are regularly arrested for protesting government interference in their activities, and members of unregistered religious groups can be arrested if found to be observing the illegal religion. In March 2018, the honorary president of the Al Diaa Islamic School in Asmara died in detention, having been arrested and detained in 2017 along with other colleagues for opposing government interference in the school. Muslims protested following his arrest as well as upon his death, and hundreds were reportedly arrested and remained in detention at the end of the reporting period.

In prison, praying aloud, singing, preaching, and possessing religious books are also banned. Arrested individuals have reported being asked to sign documents certifying that they renounce their faith or that they join or return to the Eritrean Orthodox Church, and if they do not, face transfer to worse conditions. First-hand accounts documented by the [UN](#) and human rights groups describe physical abuse, sexual violence, and torture as normal and ongoing

practices. Authorities neither inform family members when someone is arrested, nor provide cause of arrest, access to the prisoner, or information on their health. Prisoners are often denied medical treatment and many have

died in prison due to severe human rights abuses. Many prisons, including Mai-Serwa, reportedly use metal shipping containers to hold large numbers of people. The Meitir Prison Camp is notorious for subjecting prisoners to cruel and inhumane treatment. Because of extensive government secrecy and suppression of access to information, accurate numbers of prisoners are unknown. Worshippers are arrested in waves each year and it is unknown how many remain detained or have been released. International religious and human rights groups work to independently and discreetly verify the location and number of prisoners. In 2018, reports offered various estimates of imprisonments, ranging from 300 to more than 1,000 religious leaders and laity imprisoned.

Pentecostals and Evangelicals

In 2018, the Eritrean government took extreme measures to address its perceived fears of social discord, international religious and political interference in the country, and potential growth of religious fundamentalism. It vigorously and systematically suppressed freedom of religion or belief of groups outside of the approved and controlled four. This included Pentecostal and Evangelical communities, which have been heavily targeted and reportedly comprise the majority of religious prisoners of conscience.

Authorities have not provided information on conditions or charges of the estimated hundreds of Christians detained

through door-to-door searches in 2017. Security forces continued to arrest Pentecostals and Evangelicals for participating in prayer meetings and religious ceremonies. In

March 2018, authorities reportedly arrested 32 Christians. In July, after flights resumed between Ethiopia and Eritrea, Ethiopian Pentecostal preacher Suraphel Demissie traveled to Asmara to meet with Evangelicals and was seen preaching publicly. Security forces arrested more than 40 Christians whom they believed to be greeting or meeting with the preacher. Also in July, 35 Christians belonging to unapproved denominations were reportedly released. The Christians had been detained for at least four years and were forced to sign promises that they would no longer attend meetings or worship services of their churches.

Many Evangelicals and Pentecostals have been detained for more than 13 years, including several pastors: Pastor Kidane Weldou (since 2005) and Reverend Haile Naizghi (since 2004) of the Full Gospel Church, Pastor Kiflu Gebremeskel of the Southwest Full Gospel Church (since 2004), and Pastor Meron “Million” Gebreselasie of the Massawa Rhema Evangelical Church (since 2004). In June, Pastor Ogbamichael Teklehaimanot of the Kale Hiwot Church was released after being detained since 2005.

Jehovah’s Witnesses

Since 1994, Jehovah’s Witnesses have been denied both basic citizenship rights and religious freedom. In

a report to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (ACHPR) released in 2018, the government attempted to justify its treatment of Jehovah’s Witnesses, alleging that the community causes discord and politicizes their religion. Upon coming to power, President Afwerki quickly revoked citizenship for all Jehovah’s Witnesses because of their political neutrality during the war for independence and the 1993 referendum and for their continued conscientious objection to military service. As a result, Witnesses have been denied government identity documents, business and marriage licenses, and land purchases. In addition, Witnesses reportedly do not register for the 12th-grade due to the

requirement that high school students complete that year of education in tandem with military training, and are therefore unable to complete their education.

Witnesses have been arrested without charge for practicing aspects of their religion, such as holding religious services or Bible study meetings in private homes, and have been detained in poor conditions and denied fair representation or public trial. Witnesses’ family members of different faiths have also been arrested and allegedly tortured. Three Witnesses have been in prison since 1994. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, of all prisoners for whom they have accounted, only one has ever been tried in court and sentenced. In January and March 2018, Witnesses Habtemichael Tesfamariam and Habtemichael Mekonen, respectively—both of whom authorities arrested 10 years prior—died while imprisoned at the Mai-Serwa Prison, where all but two Jehovah’s Witnesses are known to be held.

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Recognized Religious Communities

The Eritrean government does not respect the religious freedom of the officially permitted religious denominations and strictly controls their administration and activities. Most Christian Eritreans are part of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church (part of the Oriental Orthodox church family), which estimates a global membership of two million. Eritrea’s Muslim population is predominantly Sunni, and the government does not

recognize other forms of Islam. Much of the government's justification for controlling Islam—including religious education—is based on fears of any religious expression changing or challenging the state, or of religious fundamentalism.

The government appoints leaders to key positions and closely monitors their activities both in Eritrea as well as in the Eritrean diaspora religious communities, although the Eritrean government denies interfering in religious institutions and hierarchies. The Eritrean government has appointed the patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and the mufti of the Eritrean Muslim community, as well as other lower-level religious officials. Patriarch Antonios, who was replaced for not complying with government interference, has been held under house arrest since 2007 and has not been seen in public

since 2017. His case has been highlighted by USCIRF's [Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project](#). The incident resulted in a split among church members, with some aligning to the newly appointed church leadership and others remaining loyal to Patriarch Antonios.

In addition, the government tightly controls their interaction with international groups and members have been denied travel abroad to participate in religious education or events sponsored by international religious organizations. Foreign travelers to Eritrea are required to obtain special permission to visit religious institutions. When Eritrean clergy abstain from joining indefinite military service, the government has reportedly retaliated with additional collective restrictions on the group. Protests of government appointments and other interferences have been met with mass arrests, and security forces routinely fire live ammunition on demonstrators. An unknown number of Muslims and Christians remain in detention for protesting the government appropriation of their institutions.

In 2017, the government began another crackdown on religious educational institutions based on a 1995 proclamation that government should control all social services. The 1995 proclamation was also made following the closure of Islamic schools and organizations as

well as the arrests of teachers, based on the government's claims the schools were promoting fundamentalism. In a purported effort to prevent exclusionist teachings or discrimination based on religion, the government sent a letter in September 2017 to heads of Orthodox, Catholic, and Islamic schools stating the schools must report to the public school administration and comply with the state education system. Some private Christian and Islamic schools were reportedly closed either at the end of 2017 or early 2018, while others were forced to become public or change religious teachings and policies, such as being closed on a holy day. Along with the letter, the govern-

ment also demanded lists of students and directed schools to remove religious symbols, such as wearing the hijab by Muslims or crosses by Christians. Authorities arrested many school officials and students for

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protesting these changes as a violation of their schools' and students' freedom of religion or belief. Leaders of the Al Diaa Islamic School, including honorary president Hajji Musa Mohamed Nur, resisted the transformation of their school and were arrested in October 2017. Hundreds of people protested these arrests, and were in turn also arrested. In March 2018, Nur's body was delivered to his family—he died in detention and no cause of death was provided. According to human rights groups and the UN, more than 800 people, including children, were arrested following his funeral.

U.S. POLICY

Relations between the United States and Eritrea remained poor in 2018. Eritrea and the United States have not exchanged ambassadors since 2010. The United States provides no security or development assistance to Eritrea, and the government of Eritrea expelled the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in 2005. Eritrea remains extremely closed off to international actors, and access to information is extremely limited; U.S. Embassy officials are highly restricted in their movements within the country. Eritrea has frequently accused the United States of smearing its reputation, spreading fabricated

information about its human rights situation, and being responsible for UN sanctions on the country.

Due to Eritrea's longstanding security and border issues in the region, the United States has endorsed a variety of UN resolutions and sanctions on the government and key individuals. These include: [UN Security Council Resolution \(UNSCR\) 1907 \(2009\)](#), which imposed an arms embargo and sanctions on individuals due to Eritrean support for armed opposition groups and incitement of instability in the region; targeted sanctions of Eritrean officials under [Executive Order 13536](#); and [UNSCR 2023 \(2011\)](#) condemning destabilizing activity by Eritrea and expanding the mandate of the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea (SEMG). Until 2018 the United States consistently maintained support for the arms embargo and the work of the SEMG, although the SEMG was prevented from fulfilling its mandate and was unable to visit Eritrea for eight years due to Eritrean government barriers.

However, the 2018 peace negotiations between Eritrea and Ethiopia caused a major shift in international relations, with Ethiopia and other actors supporting the lifting of sanctions on Eritrea. Although the United States originally expected to—but did not—see Eritrea make progress on human rights issues as a precondition, it ultimately agreed to the lifting of UN sanctions. On November 14, [UNSCR 2444 \(2018\)](#) passed unanimously, lifting sanctions on Eritrea and ending the mandate of the SEMG. Many Member States supported this resolution on the basis that the original conditions for sanctions—including support for al-Shabaab and regional conflict—were no longer evident.

The United States first designated Eritrea as a CPC in September 2004, and when redesignating Eritrea as such in September 2005 the State Department announced specific restrictions under IRFA. The State Department most recently redesignated Eritrea as a CPC on November 28, 2018, and continued the associated arms embargo.