



Eritrea

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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The Constitution, ratified by the National Assembly in 1997, provides for religious freedom; however, the Government has yet to implement the Constitution. Following a 2002 government decree that religious groups must register, the Government closed all religious facilities not belonging to the country's four principal religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church of Eritrea, Islam, and the Roman Catholic Church.

The Government severely restricts freedom of religion for groups that it has not registered and infringes upon the independence of some registered groups. During the reporting period, the Government's record on religious freedom remained poor. The Government continued to harass, arrest, and detain members of unregistered minority religious groups and sought greater control over the four approved religious groups. The Government failed to register religious groups, and it restricted religious meetings and arrested individuals during religious gatherings. There were reports of forced recantations of faith and torture of religious detainees, who were held in harsh conditions.

Citizens generally were tolerant of one another in the practice of their religion, with the exception of societal attitudes toward Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostal groups. Some individuals viewed failure to perform military service as a sign of disloyalty and encouraged harassment of religious groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, whose faith precludes military service. Individuals have been known to report the activities of these religious groups to the Government.

The U.S. Government was unable to obtain meetings during the reporting period to discuss religious freedom with the Government. The Government routinely dismissed U.S. government concerns, citing the absence of conflict between Christians and Muslims within the country and its concerns about alleged disruptive practices of some religious groups that it feared would upset the country's "social harmony." In November 2006 the U.S. Secretary of State redesignated the country a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 48,489 square miles and a population of 3.6 million. Although reliable statistics are not available, it is estimated that 50 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, 30 percent is Orthodox Christian, and 13 percent is Roman Catholic. Groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Protestants, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Hindus, and Baha'is. Approximately 2 percent of the population practice traditional indigenous religions. The population in the eastern and western lowlands is predominantly Muslim and predominantly Christian in the highlands. Religious participation is high among all ethnic groups.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides the freedom to practice any religion; however, the Government has yet to implement the Constitution since its ratification in 1997.

The Government officially recognizes only four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Islam, and the Roman Catholic Church. Other religious groups must register with, and be approved by, the Government before they are permitted to conduct religious services or other activities. Registration requirements include a description of the history of the religious group in the country, an explanation of the uniqueness or benefit that the group offers compared with other religious groups already present, names and personal information of religious leaders, detailed information on assets and property owned by the group, and sources of funding from abroad. A government committee reviews the applications, which in theory are to be approved only if they conform to local culture.

The Government recognizes Christmas, Epiphany, Eid al-Adha , Good Friday, Easter, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, New Year, Meskel, and Eid al-Fitr as national holidays.

The law does not provide for conscientious objection to military service, which is a problem for Jehovah's Witnesses. A presidential decree declared that Jehovah's Witnesses had "forsaken their nationality" because they refuse to vote or perform required military service. This decree resulted in economic, employment, and travel difficulties for many members of the group, especially civil servants and merchants.

Any religious organization that seeks facilities for worship other than private homes must obtain government approval to build such facilities.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government severely restricts freedom of religion for groups that it has not registered and infringes upon the independence of some registered groups. During the reporting period, the Government's record on religious freedom remained poor.

The Government forbids what it deems to be radical forms of Islam and severely restricts numerous small Protestant churches, Baha'is, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Following the 2002 government decree that all religious groups must register or cease all religious activities, religious facilities not belonging to the four officially recognized religious groups were forced to close. In the past, authorities in the Office of Religious Affairs told religious groups that home prayer meetings would be permitted, although the Government did not fully respect this guidance. Treatment of unregistered religious groups often varied by locale. Reports indicated that the Government continued to disrupt home-based worship, arresting individuals hosting home prayer meetings. Some local authorities allowed unregistered groups to worship in homes or rented spaces, whereas others did not allow them to meet at all. Religious groups were informed that a standing law would be used to prevent unregistered religious groups from holding political or other gatherings in private homes of more than three to five persons. In practice, authorities enforced this law.

The Government approved no registrations during the period covered by this report. In 2002, Meherete Yesus Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Faith Mission Church, and the Baha'i Faith fully complied with registration requirements; however, by the end of the reporting period, they were not approved by the Government.

Foreign missionaries operate with some restrictions. Missionaries and representatives of the restricted unregistered religious groups were present but kept an extremely low profile for fear of abuse of their congregations.

Faith-based organizations experienced the same difficulties in initiating and implementing development projects as did other non profit organizations. During the reporting period, some foreign missionaries were not allowed to renew their visas to work on social programs. Several religious groups executed small-scale development projects without government interference. A government proclamation also set out rules governing relations between religious organizations and foreign sponsors.

All religious entities must receive authorization from the Office of Religious Affairs to print and distribute

documents. The Office of Religious Affairs routinely approved requests from approved religious organizations; however, unregistered churches occasionally were unable to obtain authorization to print documents for distribution within their congregations.

The Government bans religious organizations from involvement in politics and restricts the right of religious media to comment on political matters.

The government-controlled media continued to characterize evangelical religions as being imperialistic entities, promoting religious intolerance among its citizens.

The military has no chaplains. Military personnel were free to worship at nearby houses of worship of the four approved official religious groups. Military members reportedly were sometimes allowed to possess certain religious books to pray privately although not in groups. This rule continued to be inconsistently enforced. Several members of unregistered religious groups reportedly were detained for violating this rule in the summer of 2006, and there were reports that while Muslims were able to have the Qur'an, Bibles were confiscated from Christian members of the military.

The Government did not excuse individuals who objected to military conscription for religious reasons or reasons of conscience, nor did it provide for alternative national service. Some Muslims objected to universal national service because of the requirement that Muslim women must perform military duty.

The Government requested that the four approved religious groups provide an accounting of their financial sources, as well as lists of personnel and real property, and the religious groups reportedly complied. There were reports of the Government seizing religious property during the reporting period. The Government remained in control of donations made to the Orthodox Church.

The Government continued its involvement in the affairs of the four approved religious groups and required them to provide a list of religious leaders and clergy so they can be enrolled in military/national service. At the end of the reporting period, the Muslim, Orthodox, and Lutheran faiths turned in the requested lists and were given identification cards for a percentage of their religious officials, delaying their entry into military/national service. The remainder of their religious officials were taken into service. The Government provided the Catholic Church with limited duration national exemption cards for all religious workers and seminarians.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Authorities regularly harassed, arrested, and detained members of minority religious groups. The Government closely monitored the activities and movements of unregistered religious groups and members, including nonreligious social functions attended by members. Individuals arrested were often detained for extended periods of time without due process. On occasion, charges were levied; however, generally individuals were held without charges.

During the reporting period, there were reliable reports that authorities detained at least 125 members of unregistered religious groups without charges. Some were released after detentions of several days or less, while others spent longer periods in confinement without charge and without access to legal counsel. Government restrictions made it difficult to determine the precise number of religious prisoners at any one time, and releases sometimes went unreported; however, the number of long-term prisoners continued to grow. At the end of the reporting period, NGO reports indicated there were more than 3,225 Christians from unregistered groups detained in prison. These reports included 37 leaders and pastors of Pentecostal churches in detention, some for more than 3 years without due process.

Of the 450 individuals detained during the previous reporting period, more than 300 remained incarcerated. Many of them were held in military prisons for not having performed required national military service, but most belonged to unregistered religious groups. Several pastors and dozens of women were among the imprisoned. Many refused to recant their faith and continued to be detained in civilian and military detention facilities across the country. Several were released after recanting their faith.

Reports circulated in late May 2008 of the Government planning to place three prominent pastors on trial for

treason. The three pastors had been imprisoned since 2004; one of the pastors had a health condition requiring periodic hospitalization. No further information concerning the possible trial was available.

In May 2008 police reportedly arrested 34 evangelical Christians in Keren during a house raid. This number included 10 women, one of whom was reportedly pregnant. Of the 10 women, all but 4 were released soon after. All remaining prisoners were reportedly transferred to the Adi Abeto military prison.

In May 2008 the Government arrested 25 Protestant Christians in Asmara who were later incarcerated at the military camp in Wi'a.

In February 2008 there were reports of police arresting 38 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Ten of these were released soon after; however, the remaining 28 were reported in custody at the end of the reporting period.

In February 2008 authorities released 35 Christians in Massawa after imprisoning them for 6 weeks.

In February 2008 officials released 10 Christians on bail. They had been imprisoned for 5 years.

As of February 2008 the pastor of Kale Hiwot Church remained in prison after his arrest in October 2007; it was his third arrest in 5 years.

On Christmas Eve 2007 Eritrean officials reportedly imprisoned 35 men, women, and children belonging to the non-approved Faith Missions Church, eventually sending the prisoners to the Wi'a Military Camp.

In October 2007 during an approved Bible study class at the Orthodox Church, the Government arrested a priest along with a coordinator of the Bible study class. The coordinator was released after 75 days, while the priest's whereabouts remained unknown at the end of the reporting period.

In October 2007 authorities arrested 45 members of a non registered, non approved Christian church and beat the church leader severely.

In October 2007 a prominent evangelical singer was granted asylum in Denmark. During the previous reporting period, the Government released the woman for medical treatment for injuries sustained from severe beatings during 2 years in harsh detention conditions. She remains in a wheelchair as a result of her treatment in prison.

In July 2007 police invaded a home-based church service and arrested five individuals.

In late May and early June 2007 authorities arrested a Kale Hiwot Church pastor and 20 members of his congregation in Dekemhare region.

In April 2007 nearly 80 members of an unregistered religious group were arrested in Asmara while attending a worship service despite having received authorization from the Office of Religious Affairs to hold the service. All were reportedly released a month later.

In February 2007 police arrested ten members of an unregistered church at a party following a wedding. These members were later released on a bail of \$10,000 (150,000 Nakfa) after committing not to practice their religion.

In January 2007 police arrested eight members of the Medhane Alem congregation of the Orthodox Christian Church. They were employees of various government ministries and arrested while at work. They were reportedly interrogated by police and asked to name other members of the congregation.

Ten members of an unregistered church were released in 2008. They were part of a group of 25 whom police arrested in Assab in the previous reporting period and who had been detained at the Wi'a Military Camp.

In January 2007 the pastor of an unregistered church was arrested in Asmara. He remained in detention at the end of the reporting period.

During November 2006 the Government orchestrated a large-scale campaign to arrest members of unregistered religious groups in Mendefera region, in the heart of the predominantly Christian central highlands. Initial reports claimed that the Government arrested more than 150 Protestants from the Church of Living God, Kaile Hiwot, and other churches.

During October 2006 the Government incarcerated two members of an unregistered church.

In August 2006 police arrested 29 members of unregistered churches during raids on home prayer meetings in Asmara, Keren, and Massawa.

In 2006 there were reports that authorities detained three members of an unregistered church in Nefasit. One church member was released on bail.

In January 2006 a member of an unregistered church was arrested and detained in Asmara. Several weeks later his wife was also detained in a separate facility. Both reportedly were still being held as of 2007.

Over the Christmas 2005 holiday, 78 individuals were detained after raids on businesses owned by evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, and other members of unregistered churches. Two individuals were released after paying a bail of \$10,000 (150,000 Nakfa) and signing pledges not to practice their faith. During the raid, several church members managed to escape and depart the country or go into hiding. Authorities threatened their family members who remained in the country with arrest and detention if they did not turn in those who had escaped or gone into hiding. More than 50 of those detained remained in custody.

During September 2005 there were reports of the arrest of more than 200 evangelical Christians and members of unregistered churches, including 20 members of the Hallelujah and Philadelphia churches, for organizing a wedding party in Asmara. While the members of the Hallelujah and Philadelphia churches were reportedly released one month later, more than 75 were subjected to further detention and were being held at Sawa.

In August 2005 police arrested a bridal couple and 18 wedding guests from an unregistered church during the private wedding ceremony in the bride's home. The bridal couple was released on bail and the 18 guests remained in detention.

There were reports that 180 Muslims who opposed the Mufti appointed by the Government more than 15 years ago continued to be detained as they refused to honor his presence. This situation has been unchanged for 15 years.

The Government reportedly held individuals who were jailed for their religious affiliation at various locations, including facilities administered by the military, such as at Mai Serwa outside the capital and the more distant Sawa and Gelalo, as well as police stations in the capital and other cities. Often, detainees were not formally charged, accorded due process, or allowed access to their families. While many were ostensibly jailed for evasion of military conscription, significant numbers were being held solely for their religious beliefs, and some were held in harsh conditions, such as in shipping containers or underground, that included extreme temperature fluctuations. There were reports of torture and death while in official custody. Many detainees were required to recant their religious beliefs as a precondition of release.

In February 2008 a prominent Muslim leader was reported to have died in prison after being held by officials for 2 years for opposing the Mufti installed by the Government.

Authorities released two women Jehovah's Witnesses from the Mai Serwa Prison in December 2007 due to their deteriorating health. A third Jehovah's Witness was also released in October 2007 because of his deteriorating health.

In September 2007 a 33-year old woman, arrested at a church service of an unregistered denomination and

imprisoned for 18 months, died in the Wi'a Military Training Center reportedly after being tortured by officials for refusing to recant her faith.

In February 2007 there were credible reports another member of an unregistered religious group died at the Adi Nefase Military Confinement facility near Assab after enduring torture and illness.

In October 2006 there were credible reports that two members of an unregistered church died from injuries in a military camp in Adi Quala after being severely beaten and tortured.

In October 2006 police arrested 12 members of an unregistered church at a private home in Asmara. Two of the individuals reportedly died shortly after the arrests after being tortured and severely beaten.

There were credible reports that some detainees were required to sign statements as a condition of release renouncing or agreeing not to practice their faith or, in a small number of cases, to "return to the faith of their fathers," which some detainees understood to mean becoming a member of the Orthodox Church. In some cases in which detainees refused to sign such documents, relatives were asked to convince them to do so. In some cases authorities demanded letters from priests of the Orthodox Church confirming that the individuals returned to the Orthodox Church.

Students at military and private boarding schools were also subjected to governmental abuses of religious freedom. In 2006 at the Sawa Military School, school authorities conducted a check on the student conscripts and seized more than 100 Bibles. Seventy-five Christians were detained and punished for reading the Bible. After burning the Bibles, authorities subjected the students to severe punishment. They refused to recant at least three times and continued to be held at Sawa.

In August 2006 some evangelical Christian students enrolled at the Mai Nefhi boarding school were released from detention, but only after they signed documents recanting their faith. The released students were prevented from registering for school. The other students remain incarcerated, after being arrested and subjected to severe punishment since May 2006 by authorities, ostensibly for refusing to participate in events surrounding Liberation Day.

In conducting searches for national military service evaders, security forces targeted gatherings of unregistered religious groups at a greater frequency than those of other social and religious organizations.

Although members of several religious groups, including Muslims, reportedly were imprisoned in past years for failure to participate in national military service, the Government singled out Jehovah's Witnesses for harsher treatment than that received by followers of other faiths for similar actions. Jehovah's Witnesses who did not participate in national military service were subject to dismissal from the civil service, revocation of their business licenses, eviction from government-owned housing, and denial of passports, identity cards, and exit visas. They were also prohibited from having their marriages legalized by the civil authorities.

In early 2008 authorities fired a teacher of the Jehovah's Witness faith for refusing to perform military service.

Jehovah's Witnesses were jailed in harsh conditions for lengthy periods; at least three individuals were detained for more than 12 years, reportedly for evading compulsory military service. However, the maximum legal penalty for refusing to perform national service is 2 years. In the past, Ministry of Justice officials have denied that any Jehovah's Witnesses were in detention without charge, although they acknowledged that some of them, and a number of Muslims, were jailed for evading national service.

According to credible sources, 25 Jehovah's Witnesses remained in detention without charges or trial during the reporting period. Authorities detained 13 at Sawa, 8 for allegedly failing to perform national military service. Authorities detained those above the cut-off age for national service eligibility (54 for men and 47 for women) for attending religious meetings, preaching, or visiting families of escapees.

The Government deported foreign religious workers or forced their departure by refusing to renew residency documents.

In November 2007 the Government expelled 13 foreign missionaries from Colombia, Mexico, the Philippines, Italy, and Kenya in "unclear circumstances." Officials claimed it was an immigration matter, because the missionaries' visas had expired, yet the Government refused to renew their documents.

In September 2006 the Government ordered the departure of a foreigner who was an active member in the Evangelical Episcopalian Church and in the small school run by the Church.

In spring 2006 the BBC reported that a British missionary was detained for several days, and subsequently expelled, for distributing Bibles. In February 2006 a canon of the Evangelical Episcopalian Church, on a temporary visit from the United Kingdom, was ordered to leave.

In October 2005 the Government ordered the long-time pastor of the Evangelical Episcopalian Church to depart the country.

The Government continued to maintain a high degree of control over the operations of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, highlighting concerns regarding the independence and freedom of religious practice permitted within the Church by the Government. In August 2005, the Government appointed a lay administrator to manage and oversee church operations, in contravention of the Eritrean Orthodox Church constitution. Shortly after this appointment, the Holy Synod voted to remove church Patriarch Abune Antonios on putative charges that he had committed heresy and was no longer following church doctrine. A new patriarch, Abune Dioscoros, was selected by the synod. The deposed patriarch continued to be able to serve as a priest; however, he was forbidden to conduct church services. In January 2006, the deposed patriarch objected to his removal through a letter sent, and made public, to the Holy Synod. In the letter he denied the charges against him and excommunicated several synod members, as well as the lay administrator, stating that their actions, and those of the Government, violated the Constitution and bylaws of the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

Abune Antonios remained essentially under house arrest and was not seen. He suffered from health problems and was permitted limited visitors and no medical treatment. In January 2007 there were credible reports that government officials raided his home and removed all of his patriarchal vestments and personal religious items.

In June 2008 the Eritrean military expropriated property of the Catholic Church in the city's capital. The Government reportedly warned the Church in advance and expelled church employees when they failed to comply.

In January 2008 authorities reportedly relocated Patriarch Antonios to an undisclosed location in order to prevent him meeting with a visiting foreign official. Authorities allegedly returned Antonios to his home after the visitor departed.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were reports that police forced some adherents of unregistered religious groups held in detention to sign statements to abandon their faith and join the Orthodox Christian Church as a precondition of their release. These individuals typically faced imprisonment and/or severe beating until they agreed to sign the document. Reports indicated that these individuals were also monitored after they signed to make sure that they did not practice or proselytize for their unregistered religion.

There were no reports of forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuse and Discrimination

Citizens generally were tolerant of one another in the practice of their religion, particularly among the four official religious groups. Mosques and Christian churches coexisted throughout the country, although Islam tended to predominate in the lowlands and Christianity in the highlands. In Asmara, Christian and Muslim holidays were respected by all religions. Some holidays were celebrated jointly.

Jehovah's Witnesses generally faced some societal discrimination because of their refusal to participate in the 1993 independence referendum and to perform national military service, a position that was widely judged as unpatriotic. There was also some prejudice against other unregistered religious groups. Some persons reportedly cooperated with government authorities by reporting on, and harassing, members of those groups.

Religious leaders were unable to publicly advocate for freedom of religion for fear of being arrested.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government makes regular efforts to discuss religious freedom with the Government. Despite repeated attempts, U.S. embassy officials were not permitted by the Government to meet with religious leaders or government authorities responsible for religious affairs.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officers raised the cases of detention and restrictions on unregistered religious groups in prior reporting periods with officials in the President's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the leaders of the sole legal political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice.

In September 2004 the U.S. Secretary of State designated Eritrea as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The following year the Secretary applied sanctions under the Arms Export Control Act to prohibit the commercial sale of certain defense articles and services. The country remained a CPC as of the end of the reporting period.

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