



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Eritrea

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The Government severely restricts freedom of religion for groups that it has not registered, and infringes upon the independence of some registered groups. The constitution, written in 1997, provides for religious freedom; however, the constitution has not been implemented. 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 institutions--the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church of Eritrea, and Islam. The membership of these four religious groups comprises a significant majority of the population.

During the reporting period, the Government's record on religious freedom did not improve overall, and in some areas deteriorated further. The Government continued to harass, arrest, and detain members of independent Evangelical groups (including Pentecostals), Jehovah's Witnesses, and a reform movement within the Eritrean Orthodox Church. The Government also intervened in procedural and administrative decisions of the Eritrean Orthodox Church by displacing the patriarch in favor of its own candidate. The Government failed to register any of the four religious groups who applied in 2002 for registration, and it restricted religious meetings and arrested individuals during religious ceremonies, gatherings, and prayer meetings. There were also reports of forced recantations. While there were no reports of torture of religious detainees during the reporting period, some religious detainees were held in harsh conditions that included extreme temperature fluctuations with limited or no access to family.

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. The Government requires citizens to perform national service in the military or face incarceration, but it had no programs for alternative national service that would permit Jehovah's Witnesses and others, whose faith precludes military service, to satisfy the requirement. Some individuals who viewed failure to perform military service as a sign of disloyalty encouraged harassment of these religious groups and reported their activities to the Government.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The Government regularly dismissed U.S. government concerns, citing the absence of conflict between Christians and Muslims within the country and its concerns about disruptive practices of some religious groups which it feared would disrupt the country's "social harmony." The Government further maintained that upon demarcation of the border with Ethiopia, it would implement the constitution and fully respect human rights. In November 2005 the U.S. secretary of state again designated Eritrea as 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 approximately 3.6 million. Although reliable statistics were not available, it was estimated that 60 percent of the population was Sunni and 30 percent was Orthodox Christian. The population also included a small number of Roman Catholics (about 5 percent), Protestants (about 2 percent), smaller numbers of Seventh-day Adventists, and fewer than 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses. Approximately 2 percent practiced traditional indigenous religions. Also present in very small numbers were practicing Buddhists, Hindus, and Baha'is (less than 1 percent). The population in the eastern and western lowlands was predominantly Muslim and in the highlands was predominantly Christian. There were very few atheists. Religious participation was high among all ethnic groups.

Within geographic and ethnic groups, the majority of the Tigrinya was Orthodox Christian, with the exception of the Djiberti Tigrinya, who were Muslim. Most members of the Tigre, Saho, Nara, Afar, Rashaida, Beja, and Blen ethnic groups were Muslim. Approximately 40 percent of the Blen are Christian, the majority being Roman Catholic. More than half of the Kunama were Catholic, with a large minority of Muslims and some who practiced traditional indigenous religions. The central and southern highlands, which were generally more developed than the lowlands, were populated predominantly by Christian Tigrinyas as well as some Muslim Djiberti Tigrinya and Saho. The Afar and Rashaida, as well as some Saho and Tigre, lived in the eastern lowlands. The Blen lived on the border between the western lowlands and the central highlands and are concentrated in the Keren area, which also included a significant minority of Tigre and Tigrinya speakers. The Beja, Kunama, Nara, and most Tigre lived in the western lowlands.

Foreign missionaries operated, including representatives of the Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim faiths. Some missionaries and representatives of the restricted unregistered religious groups were present but kept an extremely low profile for fear of abuse of their congregations. In some instances, the Government restricted missionary visas, and in one case, imprisoned a foreign missionary. Several international faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) provide humanitarian aid, including Caritas, Norwegian Church Aid, Lutheran World Federation, Samaritan's Purse, Catholic Relief Services, and the Islamic Mufti's Relief Organization. The Government asked Mercy Corps and several secular NGOs to cease operations during the reporting period.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Government drafted and approved a constitution in 1997 that provides the freedom to practice any religion; however, the Government had not implemented its provisions by the end of the reporting period. The Government severely restricted this right in the case of numerous small Protestant churches, the Baha'is, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

In 2002, the minister of information issued a decree that all religions except for the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church must fill out registration applications and cease religious activities and services until the applications were approved. Registration requirements include a description of the history of the religious group in the country, 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 approved no registrations during the period covered by this report, despite the fact that four religious groups fully complied with registration requirements more than four years ago and continued to inquire with the concerned government offices. Several religious groups have complied partially with the registration requirements, and some have chosen not to submit any documentation. In April 2005 the Government's representative at the U.N.'s Commission on Human Rights stated that the Seventh-day Adventist Church's registration application would be "finalized in the near future"; however, to date the Church's application had not been approved.

The four government-registered religious groups were not required to fill out the same registration forms as other groups, and their services and activities were allowed to continue. They have been requested to provide the Government with an accounting of their financial sources, as well as lists of personnel and real property, and have reportedly done so. However, the Government increased its involvement in the four major groups by appointing a lay administrator to run the Orthodox Church and instructing the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church to take over the administration and liturgy of the Evangelical Episcopalian congregation.

A presidential decree declaring that Jehovah's Witnesses had "forsaken their nationality" by refusing to vote or perform required military service continued to result in economic, employment, and travel difficulties for many members of the group, especially former civil servants and merchants.

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

Religious organizations, including faith-based NGOs, do not receive duty-free privileges, although they sometimes are allowed to import items under the reduced duty structure used for companies.

The following holy days are recognized as official holidays by the Government: Christmas (both Orthodox and non-Orthodox), Epiphany (Christian), Eid al-Adha (Muslim), Good Friday (Christian), Easter (Christian), the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad (Muslim), New Year (Orthodox), Meskel (Orthodox), and Eid al-Fitr (Muslim).

Education is predominantly secular.

The Government made little effort to promote interfaith understanding or to coordinate interfaith dialogue.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Islam and Christianity were practiced widely and were for the most part tolerated, with persons allowed to worship freely. Christianity and Islam have a centuries-old history of tolerance and peaceful coexistence between them. Following the 2002 government decree that certain religious groups must register or cease all religious activities, religious facilities not belonging to the four government-approved religious groups were forced to close. Authorities in the Office of Religious Affairs told religious groups that home prayer meetings would be permitted, but the Government did not fully respect this guidance. They were also 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 arbitrarily enforced this law.

Authorities generally have not hindered the four groups that filled out their registration applications in 2002--the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Faith Mission Church, and the Baha'i Faith--in holding home prayer or private study meetings, although like other unregistered groups their houses of worship remain closed and they are not permitted to meet in public settings. Religious groups such as the Kale Hiwot (Baptists), Full Gospel Church, and Meserete Kristos (Mennonite) Church have complied with some, but not all, of the registration requirements. Treatment of these and other unregistered religious groups often varied depending on the locale. Some local authorities allowed unregistered groups to worship in homes or rented spaces whereas others did not allow them to meet at all.

The Government closely monitored the activities and movements of unregistered religious groups and members, including nonreligious social functions attended by members. In 2004 the Government also closed down an Orthodox congregation known as Medhane Alem, whose religious beliefs or services it did not approve of, and continued to harass its members, placing some in prolonged detention. In October 2004 three men that the Government considered to be organizers were jailed without charges and remained in detention at the end of the reporting period. In early 2006 the Government threatened more than sixty members of this congregation if they did not withdraw support for a petition protesting the Government's intervention in the Orthodox Church.

In 2003 the Government denied visa applications for representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses who applied to travel to the country to meet with their congregations or discuss religious freedom issues with government officials.

A 1995 proclamation bans religious organizations from involvement in politics and restricts the right of religious media to comment on political matters. No religious groups--registered or unregistered--were allowed to produce religious periodicals. The Office of Religious Affairs within the Office of the Presidency monitors compliance with these proscriptions.

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 for authorization from registered groups and four unregistered churches; however, in the past other unregistered churches were unable to obtain authorization to print documents for distribution within their congregations.

Faith-based organizations are permitted to fund, but not to initiate or implement, development projects; however, this proclamation was not enforced in practice. Several religious organizations executed small-scale development projects without government interference. The proclamation also set out rules governing relations between religious organizations and foreign sponsors.

The military has no chaplains. Military personnel were free to worship at nearby houses of worship for the four registered religions. Military members reportedly were sometimes allowed to possess certain religious books to pray privately although not in groups. This rule is inconsistently enforced. Several members of unregistered religious groups reportedly were detained for violating this rule.

The Government also forbids what it deems to be radical forms of Islam. Most foreign Muslim preachers were not allowed to proselytize, and funding of Islamic missionary or religious activities is controlled.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were numerous credible reports that several hundred members of unregistered religious groups were detained or imprisoned at various times since 2002. During the reporting period, there were reliable reports that authorities detained at least 450 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 charges and without access to legal counsel. Government restrictions make it difficult to determine the precise number of religious prisoners at any one time, and releases sometimes go unreported; however, the number of long-term prisoners continued to grow. Some NGOs reported as many as 1,700 prisoners of conscience in detention.

The Government reportedly holds individuals who are 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 inside Asmara 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 that include extreme temperature fluctuations. Many were asked to recant their religious beliefs as a precondition of release.

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. Based on their religious beliefs, most members of Jehovah's Witnesses refused to participate in national military service or to vote. Some Muslims also objected to universal national service because of the requirement that Muslim women must perform military duty. Some religious practitioners in the Catholic Church also objected.

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 conducting searches for national military service evaders, security forces targeted gatherings of unregistered religious groups with a frequency not characteristic of its treatment of other groups' social gatherings or religious services, including those of the four government-approved religions.

Arrests of individuals, ostensibly for noncompliance with national service requirements, yet apparently targeting certain religious groups, continued throughout the year. 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.

Of the 218 individuals reported as detained during the previous reporting period, 122 remained incarcerated. Many of them were held in military prisons for not having performed required national military service, and many belonged to unregistered religious groups. Several pastors and dozens of women were among the imprisoned. Many have 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. At least three received a legal sentence for violation of the government restriction on belonging to an unregistered religious group and were serving two-year prison terms. One was released after he was declared medically unfit for military service.

The Government singled out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment. According to credible sources, a total of thirty-one Jehovah's Witnesses were being held without charges or trial. More than a dozen were being detained at Sawa, eight for allegedly failing to

perform national military service. Detainees above the cut-off age for national service eligibility (forty for men and twenty-seven for women) were reportedly held for attending religious meetings, preaching, or visiting families of escapees.

Jehovah's Witnesses were jailed in harsh conditions for varying periods, at least three individuals were detained for more than eleven years, reportedly for evading compulsory military service. However, the maximum legal penalty for refusing to perform national service is two 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.

There were no reports that the security forces tortured those detained for their religious beliefs during this reporting period; however, in June 2005 there were credible reports that nineteen members of unregistered churches died at the Wia military camp after authorities bound them by the hands and feet and left them outside in extremely hot conditions. Detention conditions continued to be harsh. In June 2006 there were reports that at least five of fifteen detainees died from exposure after escaping from a detention facility in the southern part of the country.

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 do so on their behalf.

On July 8, 2005, police arrested eighteen students and a professor from Halhale College, approximately twenty miles from Asmara, as they finished their exams. At the end of the reporting period their status remained unknown.

On August 21, 2005, police arrested a bridal couple and eighteen wedding guests from an unregistered church at the private wedding ceremony at the bride's home. At the end of the reporting period their status remained unknown.

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, it was not known how many of the others were released or subjected to further detention.

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

Over the Christmas holiday, seventy-eight individuals were detained after raids on businesses owned by Evangelical Christians, Pentecostals and other members of unregistered churches. Two individuals were released after signing pledges not to practice their faith and paying a bail of \$10,000 (150,000 nakfa). During the raid several church members managed to escape and depart the country or go into hiding. Authorities threatened the 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.

In January 2006 a member of one of the unregistered churches was arrested and detained in Asmara. Several weeks later his wife was also detained in a separate facility. Both reportedly were still being held at the end of the reporting period.

In February 2006 thirteen members of the Kale Hiwot church were arrested in Mendefera in the home of a church member. They reportedly remained detained at the end of the reporting period.

Also in February 2006 a canon of the Evangelical Episcopalian Church, who was on a temporary visit from the United Kingdom, was ordered to leave.

While participating in short-term retraining at the Sawa military training facility, seventy-five Christians were detained and punished for reading the Bible. They continued to be held at Sawa.

In spring 2006 the BBC reported that a British missionary was detained for several days, and subsequently expelled, for distributing Bibles.

In May 2006 there were reports that fifty evangelical Christian students enrolled and boarding at Mai Nefhiy Educational Institution were allegedly subjected to severe punishment by authorities, ostensibly for refusing to participate in events surrounding Eritrean Liberation Day. At the end of the reporting period, they continued to be detained at Mai Nefhiy.

There were reports that authorities detained three members of an unregistered church in Nefasit. One church member, who had been forced to leave behind an extremely sick child who later died, was released on bail.

In June 2006 there were reports in the North Red Sea region that authorities detained six members of an unregistered church. They were held in a military camp and released after four days.

Throughout the reporting period there were reports of the detention of Muslims who oppose the mufti appointed by the Government more than ten years ago. Sources reported that approximately seventy Muslims continued to be detained.

During the reporting period there were significant changes orchestrated by the Government with the leadership of the Eritrean Orthodox Church that raised 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 to the 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 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. He remained essentially under house arrest. According to church officials, Dioscoros was the new patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

Following the deposal of Patriarch Antonios by the Synod, more than sixty members of a fellowship of the Orthodox Church were told to withdraw their signatures from a petition protesting the closure of their fellowship and to confess that the church leaders, namely the deposed patriarch, were heretics. There were reports that these sixty members were excommunicated from the Church by the new patriarch and that at least three of them were arrested by authorities.

In January 2005 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.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were reports that police forced some adherents of unregistered religious groups to sign statements to abandon their faiths as a precondition of their release.

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 government registered religious groups. Mosques and the principal 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.

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

Leaders of the four principal religions met routinely, enjoyed excellent interfaith relations, and engaged in efforts to foster cooperation and understanding among their followers. Few religious leaders in the country took a strong public stance in defense of freedom of conscience for all faiths.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officials met regularly with leaders of the religious community.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officers raised the cases of detention and restrictions on unregistered religious groups with officials in the President's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, 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" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The secretary renewed the designation the following year and applied sanctions under the Arms Export Control Act that prohibited the commercial sale of certain defense articles and services.

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