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FREEDOM IN THE WORLD

Eritrea

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OVERVIEW:

Eritrea made tentative efforts to end its international isolation in 2012, but at home, the government continued to deny its citizens basic political rights and civil liberties. Four journalists, part of a group held without trial for up to 11 years, were confirmed to have died in detention.

Britain ended Italian colonial rule in Eritrea during World War II, and the country was formally incorporated into Ethiopia in 1952. Its independence struggle began in 1962 as a nationalist and Marxist guerrilla war against the Ethiopian government of Emperor Haile Selassie. The seizure of power in Ethiopia by a Marxist junta in 1974 removed the ideological basis of the conflict, and by the time Eritrea defeated Ethiopia's northern armies in 1991, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) had discarded Marxism. Formal independence was achieved in May 1993 after a referendum supervised by the United Nations produced a landslide vote for statehood. EPLF leader Isaias Afwerki was chosen by the Transitional National Assembly to fill the position of president until elections could be held; these elections were eventually scheduled for 2001 but were postponed and have yet to take place.

A territorial dispute with Ethiopia led to a war from 1998–2000, which killed tens of thousands of people. Under the terms of a peace treaty signed in December 2000, both countries accepted an independent ruling that set the common border, but Ethiopia later reneged on the agreement. The war and unresolved grievances stemming from the broken peace deal have driven the Eritrean government's fixation with national security and perpetuated the militarization of the state.

In May 2001, a group of 15 senior ruling-party members publicly criticized President Isaias and called for "the rule of law and for justice, through peaceful and legal ways and means." Eleven members of the group were arrested for treason, the small independent media was shut down, and a number of journalists were imprisoned. Many of the jailed dissidents and journalists were subsequently reported to have died in custody, but the government steadfastly refuses to divulge information about them.

The government clamped down on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in 2005, and ordered the U.S. Agency for International Development to end its operations in the country. In 2006, reports emerged that hundreds of followers of various unregistered churches were being detained, harassed, and abused. The government has continued suppressing civil society, religious practice, and political dissent. Arbitrary detention remains the authorities' most common method of stifling independent action by citizens.

A border dispute with Djibouti that led to a military confrontation in 2008 was resolved in 2010 when both sides agreed to a negotiated settlement. Tensions with Ethiopia escalated once more in 2011 when the United Nations accused Eritrean officials of masterminding a failed plot to bomb the African Union (AU)

2013 SCORES

STATUS

Not Free

FREEDOM RATING

7.0

CIVIL LIBERTIES

7

POLITICAL RIGHTS

7

headquarters in Addis Ababa. In March 2012, Ethiopian troops carried out a series of military incursions into Eritrea, the first since the end of the war. Ethiopia claimed that the attacks were aimed at camps used by Ethiopian rebels responsible for kidnapping a group of foreign tourists inside Ethiopia in January. In April, Isaias appeared on national television to dispel long-running rumors of ill health. Instead, it was his archrival, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who succumbed to illness. His death, in August, raised hopes of a rapprochement between the two countries, although there was no immediate improvement in relations.

Eritrea made tentative moves to improve relations with other neighbors in the region in 2012 by trying to reengage with the AU and the regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development. In July, a UN report found that Eritrea had scaled back direct support of Islamist militant groups in Somalia, including the Shabaab. However, it also found that Eritrea continued to violate UN Security Council resolutions and recommended that an arms embargo remain in place. In July, the United States imposed sanctions on Eritrea's spy chief and a senior military official, accusing them of providing financial and logistical support to the Shabaab.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES:

Eritrea is not an electoral democracy. Created in 1994 as a successor to the EPLF, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) is the only legal political party. Instead of moving toward a democratic system, the PFDJ government has become harshly authoritarian since the end of the war with Ethiopia.

A new constitution was ratified in 1997, calling for "conditional" political pluralism and an elected 150-seat National Assembly, which would choose the president from among its members by a majority vote. However, this system has never been implemented, as national elections planned for 2001 have been postponed indefinitely. The Transitional National Assembly is comprised of 75 PFDJ members and 75 elected members. In 2004, regional assembly elections were conducted, but they were carefully orchestrated by the PFDJ and offered no real choice to voters. The PFDJ and the military, both strictly subordinate to President Isaias Afwerki, are in practice the only institutions of political significance in Eritrea.

Corruption is a major problem. The government's control over foreign exchange effectively gives it sole authority over imports. At the same time, those in favor with the regime are allowed to profit from the smuggling and sale of scarce goods such as building materials, food, and alcohol. According to the International Crisis Group, senior military officials are the chief culprits in this trade. They have also been accused of enriching themselves by charging fees to assist some of the approximately 900 Eritreans who try to flee the country each month; using conscripts for private building projects; and seizing private property for their own use.

The law does not allow independent media to operate in Eritrea, and the government controls all broadcasting outlets. A group of journalists arrested in 2001 remained imprisoned without charge, and the government refuses to provide any information on their status. Reporters Without Borders said in August that it had received confirmation of the deaths of three of the journalists detained in 2001 as well as a fourth, held since 2009. Eleven members of the Asmara-based broadcaster Radio Bana, who were detained in 2009 on suspicion of collaborating with exiled opposition groups, remained in custody without charge. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, at least 28 journalists were in prison in Eritrea as of December 2012. The government controls the internet infrastructure and is thought to monitor online communications. Foreign media are available to those few who can afford a satellite dish.

The government places significant limitations on the exercise of religion. Since 2002 it has officially recognized only four faiths: Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and Lutheranism as practiced by the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. Members of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches face persecution,

but the most severe treatment is reserved for Jehovah's Witnesses, who are barred from government jobs and refused business permits or identity cards. Abune Antonios, patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, has been under house arrest since speaking out against state interference in religion in 2006. The Ecumenical Canonical Orthodox Church Worldwide said in March 2012 that it had received reports that the patriarch was in poor health and was being denied adequate treatment. According to Amnesty International, members of other churches have been jailed and tortured or otherwise ill-treated to make them abandon their faith. As many as 3,000 people from unregistered religious groups are currently in prison because of their beliefs. Three Christians incarcerated at a military detention center died from mistreatment in 2011. A Jehovah's Witness also died in prison in 2011 following an extended period of solitary confinement. In October 2012, 17 Christians were arrested near Asmara while holding a prayer meeting. Witnesses say they were beaten by security officials and taken away on military trucks.

Academic freedom is constrained. Students in their last year of secondary school are subject to obligatory military service. Academics practice self-censorship and the government interferes with their course content and limits their ability to conduct research abroad. Eritrea's university system has been effectively closed, replaced by regional colleges whose main purposes are military training and political indoctrination. Freedom of expression in private discussions is limited. People are guarded in voicing their opinions for fear of being overheard by government informants.

Freedoms of assembly and association are not recognized. The government maintains a hostile attitude toward civil society, and independent NGOs are not tolerated. A 2005 law requires NGOs to pay taxes on imported materials, submit project reports every three months, renew their licenses annually, and meet government-established target levels of financial resources. The six remaining international NGOs that had been working in Eritrea were forced to leave in 2011. The government placed strict controls on UN operations in the country, preventing staff from leaving the capital.

The government controls all union activity. The National Confederation of Eritrean Workers is the country's main union body and has affiliated unions for women, teachers, young people, and general workers.

The judiciary, which was formed by decree in 1993, is understaffed, unprofessional, and has never issued rulings at odds with government positions. Constitutional due process guarantees are often ignored in cases related to state security. The International Crisis Group has described Eritrea as a "prison state" for its flagrant disregard of the rule of law and its willingness to detain anyone suspected of opposing the regime, usually without charge. Torture, arbitrary detentions, and political arrests are common. In February 2012, an Eritrean opposition group accused the government of kidnapping one of its officials who had been living in eastern Sudan. In June, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that there were between 5,000 and 10,000 political prisoners in Eritrea. The police are poorly paid and prone to corruption. Prison conditions are harsh, and outside monitors such as the International Committee of the Red Cross are denied access to detainees. Juvenile prisoners are often incarcerated alongside adults. In some facilities, inmates are held in metal shipping containers or underground cells in extreme temperatures. Prisoners are often denied medical treatment. The government maintains a network of secret detention facilities.

The Kunama people, one of Eritrea's nine ethnic groups, face severe discrimination. Members of the Afar ethnic group have also been targeted, and several hundred Afars were arrested in 2010, according to Human Rights Watch. In October 2012, members of the Afar diaspora condemned plans by the authorities in Yemen to deport 300 Afar asylum seekers back to Eritrea, claiming they would be persecuted upon return. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals face legal and social discrimination due to the criminalization of homosexual conduct.

Freedom of movement, both inside and outside the country, is heavily restricted. Eritreans under the age of 50 are rarely given permission to go abroad, and those who try to travel without the correct documents face

imprisonment. The authorities adopt a shoot-on-sight policy toward people found in locations deemed off-limits, such as mining facilities and areas close to the border. Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers who are repatriated from other countries are also detained. These strict penalties fail to deter thousands of people from risking their lives to escape the country each year.

Government policy is officially supportive of free enterprise, and citizens are in theory able to choose their employment, establish private businesses, and operate them without government harassment. However, few private businesses remain in Eritrea, and the country is ranked 182 out of 185 in the World Bank's October 2012 Doing Business report. Successful private businesses have been expropriated by government officials, without compensation. A conscription system ties most able-bodied men and women to an indefinite period of obligatory military service and can also entail compulsory labor for enterprises controlled by the political elite. The official 18-month service period is frequently open-ended in practice, and conscientious-objector status is not recognized. The government imposes collective punishment on the families of deserters, forcing them to pay heavy fines or putting them in prison. The enforced contraction of the labor pool, combined with a lack of investment and rigid state control of private enterprise, has crippled the national economy. The government levies a compulsory 2 percent tax on income earned by citizens living overseas, and those who do not pay place their relatives back home at risk of arrest.

The U.S. State Department 2012 Trafficking in Persons Report ranks Eritrea at Tier 3, describing it as a source country for individuals subjected to forced labor and sexual exploitation. The report found that the government had taken no known measures to address this problem.

Women hold some senior government positions, including four ministerial posts. The government has made attempts to promote women's rights, with laws mandating equal educational opportunity, equal pay for equal work, and penalties for domestic violence. However, traditional societal discrimination against women persists in the countryside. While female genital mutilation was banned by the government in 2007, the practice remains widespread in rural areas.

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