

Eritrea

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Overview:

President Isaias Afwerki's personal authority was publically challenged in 2013 for the first time in more than a decade when, on January 21, more than 100 soldiers occupied the Ministry of Information, took over the state-run television channel, Eri-TV, and demanded democratic reforms, including the implementation of Eritrea's constitution and the release of thousands of political prisoners. The revolt was quelled within hours, as the government reportedly negotiated with the soldiers. Their message was pulled off the air mid-broadcast, and calm was restored following negotiations in which the soldiers agreed to return to their barracks. Reports suggest there were between 60 and 200 arrests in the days following the incident, though details are vague due to the intense secrecy surrounding the Eritrean regime.

Several other incidents in 2013 suggested that, for some, discontent with the regime was reaching a breaking point. A number of high-profile defections were confirmed, including Eritrea's former information minister, two senior Air Force pilots, and the national football team, all of whom left the country in late 2012. In October, more than 250 Eritreans and Somalis tragically drowned as they tried to reach the Italian island of Lampedusa in an overcrowded boat. Another 200 people were missing, and presumed dead. The incident illustrated to many the plight of ordinary Eritreans.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 1 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12

Following Eritrea's formal independence from Ethiopia in 1993, Isaias Afwerki was chosen by a Transitional National Assembly to serve as president until elections could be held. He has remained in charge ever since. His rule has become harshly authoritarian, particularly since the end of a bloody border war with Ethiopia in 2000.

A new constitution, ratified in 1997, called for "conditional" political pluralism and an elected 150-seat National Assembly, which would choose the president from among its members by a majority vote. This system has never been implemented, and national elections planned for 2001 have been postponed indefinitely. The Transitional National Assembly is comprised of 75 members of the ruling party—the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ)—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.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 0 / 16

Created in 1994, the PFDJ is the only legal political party. The PFDJ and the military are in practice the only institutions of political significance in Eritrea, and both entities are strictly subordinate to the president.

C. Functioning of Government: 1 / 12

Corruption is a major problem. The government's control over foreign exchange effectively gives it sole authority over imports, and 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. The UN Eritrea and Somalia Monitoring Group has accused senior officers of running a lucrative criminal network smuggling people and arms out of the country.

The government operates without public scrutiny and few outside a small clique around the president have any insight into how policy and budget decisions are made and implemented.

Civil Liberties: 2 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 0 / 16

The law does not allow independent media to operate in Eritrea, and the government controls all broadcasting outlets. A group of 10 journalists arrested in 2001 remains imprisoned without charge, and the government refuses to provide any information on their status. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, at least 28 journalists were in prison in Eritrea at the end of 2012. In September 2013, a dissident group drawing inspiration from January's army mutiny said it had begun circulating an underground newspaper in Asmara written by a team based inside and outside the country.

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 strict limits 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. 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. Abune Antonios, patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, has been under house arrest since speaking out against state interference in religion in 2006.

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.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 0 / 12

Freedoms of assembly and association are not recognized. The government maintains a hostile attitude toward civil society, and independent nongovernmental organizations (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.

F. Rule of Law: 0 / 16

The judiciary, which was formed by decree in 1993, is understaffed, unprofessional, and has never issued rulings at odds with government positions. Most criminal cases are heard by the Special Court, composed of PFDJ loyalists chosen by the president himself. 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, for indefinite periods. In 2013, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that there were between 5,000 and 10,000 political prisoners in Eritrea. They include surviving members of a group of ruling party-members who publicly criticized Afwerki in May 2001. Eleven of them were arrested for treason, along with a number of journalists, but were never charged. Many of the jailed dissidents and journalists were subsequently reported to have died in custody, but the government refuses to divulge information about them.

Torture, arbitrary detentions, and political arrests are common. 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. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals face legal and social discrimination due to the criminalization of same-sex sexual relations.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 2 / 16

Freedom of movement, both inside and outside the country, is tightly controlled. 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 tens of 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 harassment. In reality, a conscription system ties most able-bodied men and women to 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 conducted raids in several cities in October 2013, detaining young men of fighting age and sending them to military training camps. Reports suggest as many as 1,500 men were seized in Asmara alone. 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.

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.

The U.S. State Department's 2013 Trafficking in Persons Report ranks Eritrea at Tier 3, describing it as a source country for individuals subjected to forced labor and sexual exploitation.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)