

ERITREA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The law and unimplemented constitution prohibit religiously motivated discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief as well as the freedom to practice any religion. The government recognizes four officially registered religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea. Unregistered groups lack the privileges of registered groups, and their members can be subjected to arrest and mistreatment and released on the condition that they formally renounce their faith, although some unregistered groups are allowed to operate, and the government tolerates their worship activities. International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and media continued to report members of all religious groups were, to varying degrees, subjected to government abuses and restrictions. Members of unrecognized religious groups reported instances of imprisonment and deaths in custody due to mistreatment and harsh prison conditions and detention without explanation of individuals observing the recognized faiths. Haji Ibrahim Younus, arrested in 2018 for taking part in the funeral for Al Daa Islamic School President Hajji Musa Mohammed Nur, reportedly died in prison in January following an extended period in detention during which, according to religious groups, he did not receive adequate medical care. Said Mohamed Ali, who also participated in the funeral, died in June after physical abuse in prison and delayed medical assistance. In successive waves between May and August, the government arrested approximately 300 members of unrecognized Christian groups. There was no information on the whereabouts of the detainees, the conditions under which they were being held, the charges against them, if any, or if they remained in detention. The government closed a number of Catholic and other religious-run secondary schools and health clinics, citing a 1995 law prohibiting religious institutions from providing social services. Authorities continued to confine former Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Abune Antonios to house arrest, where he has remained since 2006; in July Church officials excommunicated him for “heresy,” although he was allowed to live in a Patriarchate residence. NGOs reported the government continued to detain 345 church leaders and officials without charge or trial, while estimates of detained laity ranged from 800 to more than 1,000. Authorities reportedly continued to detain 52 Jehovah’s Witnesses for conscientious objection and for refusing to participate in military service or renounce their faith. An unknown number of Muslim protesters remained in detention following protests in Asmara in October 2017 and March 2018, although many reportedly were released. The government

continued to deny citizenship to Jehovah's Witnesses after stripping them of citizenship in 1994 for refusing to participate in the referendum that created the independent state of Eritrea.

The government's lack of transparency and intimidation of civil society and religious communities created difficulties for individuals who wanted to obtain information on the status of societal respect for religious freedom. Religious leaders of all denominations and the faithful regularly attended worship services and religious celebrations. Baptisms, weddings, and funerals organized by both the recognized and unrecognized religious groups were widely attended, including by senior government officials.

U.S. officials in Asmara and Washington continued to raise religious freedom concerns with government officials, including the imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses, lack of alternative service for conscientious objectors to mandatory national service that includes military training, and the continued detention of Patriarch Antonios. Senior Department of State officials raised these concerns during bilateral meetings with senior Eritrean officials in Washington, New York, and Asmara. The government welcomed the September visit of a U.S. government delegation to open a new dialogue on these issues. U.S. embassy officials met with clergy and other members of religious groups, both registered and unregistered. Embassy officials further discussed religious freedom on a regular basis with a wide range of individuals, including visiting international delegations, members of the diplomatic corps based in Asmara and in other countries in the region, and UN officials. Embassy officials used social media and outreach programs to engage the public and highlight the commitment of the United States to religious freedom.

Since 2004, Eritrea has been designated a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 18, 2019, the Secretary of State redesignated Eritrea as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act. Restrictions on U.S. assistance resulting from the CPC designation remained in place.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at six million (midyear 2019 estimate). There are no reliable figures on religious affiliation. Some government,

religious, and international sources estimate the population to be 49 percent Christian and 49 percent Sunni Muslim. The Pew Foundation in 2016 estimated the population to be 63 percent Christian and 37 percent Muslim. The Christian population is predominantly Eritrean Orthodox. Catholics, Protestants, and other Christian denominations, including Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals, constitute less than 5 percent of the Christian population. Some estimates suggest 2 percent of the population is traditionally animist. The Baha'i community reports approximately 200 members. Only one Jew remains in the country.

A majority of the population in the southern and central regions is Christian. A majority of the Tigrinya, the largest ethnic group, is Christian. The Tigre and the Rashaida, the largest minority ethnic groups, are predominantly Muslim and reside mainly in the northern regions of the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The law and unimplemented constitution prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and the freedom to practice any religion.

Proclamation 73/1995 calls for separation of religion and state; outlines the parameters to which religious organizations must adhere, including concerning foreign relations and social activities; establishes an Office of Religious Affairs; and requires religious groups to register with the government or cease activities. Some members of religious groups that are unregistered or otherwise not in compliance with the law reportedly continue to be subject to a provisional penal code that officially was replaced four years ago; the code sets penalties for failure to register and noncompliance. The current provisional penal code does not directly address penalties for religious groups that fail to register or otherwise comply with the law but includes a punishment for "unlawful assembly" of between one and six months' imprisonment and a fine of 5,001 to 20,000 nakfa (\$330-\$1,330).

The Office of Religious Affairs has authority to regulate religious activities and institutions, including approval of the applications of religious groups seeking official registration. Each application must include a description of the religious group's history in the country; an explanation of the uniqueness or benefit the

group offers compared with other religious groups; names and personal information of the group's leaders; detailed information on assets; a description of the group's conformity to local culture; and a declaration of all foreign sources of funding.

The Office of Religious Affairs has registered four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea (affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation). A 2002 decree requires all other religious groups to submit registration applications and to cease religious activities and services prior to approval. The government, which has not approved the registration of additional religious groups since 2002, states that it is willing to register new religious groups but has not received any applications.

Religious groups must obtain government approval to build facilities for worship.

While the law does not specifically address religious education in public schools, Proclamation 73/1995 outlines the parameters to which religious organizations must adhere, and education is not included as an approved activity. In practice, religious instruction is commonplace within worship communities.

By law, all citizens between 18 and 50 must perform 18 months of national service, with limited exceptions, including for health reasons such as physical disability or pregnancy. In times of emergency, the length of national service may be extended indefinitely, and the country officially has been in a state of emergency since the beginning of the 1998 war with Ethiopia. A compulsory citizen militia requires some persons not in the military, including many who had been demobilized, elderly, or otherwise exempted from military service in the past, to carry firearms and attend militia training. Failure to participate in the militia or national service could result in detention. Militia duties mostly involve security-related activities, such as airport or neighborhood patrolling. Militia training primarily involves occasional marches and listening to patriotic lectures. The law does not provide for conscientious objector status for religious reasons, nor are there alternative activities for persons willing to perform national service but unwilling to engage in military or militia activities.

The law prohibits any involvement in politics by religious groups.

The government requires all citizens to obtain an exit visa prior to departing the country. The application requests the applicant's religious affiliation, but the law

does not require that information. An exit visa or other travel documents are not required to cross the newly opened land border with Ethiopia, although the government has not yet established crossing procedures and closes the border at times.

The law limits foreign financing for religious groups, including registered groups. The only contributions legally allowed are from local followers, the government, or government-approved foreign sources.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Haji Ibrahim Younus, a Muslim elder arrested in 2018 for taking part in the funeral for Al Diaa Islamic School President Hajji Musa Mohammed Nur, reportedly died in prison in January following an extended period in detention during which, according to religious groups, he did not receive adequate medical care. Said Mohamed Ali, who also participated in the funeral, died in June after physical abuse in prison and delayed medical assistance.

In June security forces arrested five Orthodox priests from the Debre-Bizen Monastery, three of whom were older than 70, for protesting government interference in church affairs and for their support of Abune Antonios as the legitimate patriarch.

According to a report by Release International, the government imposed tight security throughout May in advance of Independence Day celebrations, and police raided several Protestant groups. The government reportedly arrested 141 Christians in Asmara, including 14 minors, on May 10, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), only 50 of whom were reportedly subsequently released. Another 30 Christians were arrested in early June, according to international media. On June 23, there were 70 more, including 10 children, arrested in Keren, followed by another 80 on August 18 in Godaif. No information was available as to the whereabouts of the detainees, the conditions under which they were being held, or the charges against them, if any.

CSW reported that authorities continued to imprison without charge or trial 345 church leaders, including some who had been imprisoned without charge for 23 years, while estimates of detained laity ranged from 800 to more than 1,000. Authorities reportedly continued to detain 52 Jehovah's Witnesses, more than half

of whom had been in prison for more than 20 years, for refusing to participate in military service and renounce their faith. There were unconfirmed reports that most of the Muslim detainees, arrested following protests in Asmara in 2017 and 2018, were released.

Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Abune Antonios, who last appeared in public in July 2017, remained under house detention since 2006 for protesting the government's interference in church affairs.

Determining the number of persons imprisoned for their religious beliefs was difficult due to lack of government transparency and reported intimidation of those who might come forward with such information.

The government did not recognize a right to conscientious objection to military service and continued to single out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment because of their blanket refusal to vote in the 1993 referendum on the country's independence and subsequent refusal to participate in mandatory national service. The government continued to hold Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious prisoners for failure to follow the law or for national security reasons. Authorities prevented prisoners held for national security reasons, including religious prisoners, from having visitors. Former prisoners held for their religious beliefs continued to report harsh detention conditions, including solitary confinement, physical abuse, and inadequate food, water, and shelter.

Religious groups were able to print and distribute documents only with the authorization of the Office of Religious Affairs, which continued to approve requests only from the four officially registered religious groups.

The government continued to impose restrictions on proselytizing, accepting external funding from NGOs and international organizations, and groups selecting their own religious leaders. Unregistered religious groups also faced restrictions in gathering for worship, constructing places of worship, and teaching their religious beliefs to others.

In June the government closed at least seven Roman Catholic-run secondary schools and 22 Church-run health clinics, as well as some secondary schools run by other religious groups, citing a 1995 law prohibiting the provision of social services by religious groups. According to the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Daniela Kravetz, as well as international news organizations, the closures followed a call in April by the Catholic Church for the

government to effect urgent reforms to reduce emigration and to open a dialogue on peace and reconciliation. Catholic bishops characterized the school closures as motivated by “hatred against the faith and against religion” in a September letter to the minister of education. The Catholic Church was forced to transfer operation and administrative authority of clinics to the Ministry of Health. According to Catholic Relief Services, authorities closed the last Catholic hospital on July 5. Police forcibly removed the nuns who ran the facility and sealed the doors, preventing the nuns from taking hospital equipment with them. In June the Eritrean Permanent Mission to the United Nations in Geneva issued a press release responding to Kravetz’s comments that cited regulations limiting the activities of religious organizations specifically. According to the press release, Regulation 73/1995 does not allow religious institutions to “conduct developmental activities in areas of their choice” nor to solicit funds from external donors.

Jehovah’s Witnesses were largely unable to obtain official identification documents, which left many of them unable to study in government institutions and barred them from most forms of employment, government benefits, and travel.

Arrests and releases often went unreported. Information from outside the capital was extremely limited. Independent observers stated many persons remained imprisoned without charge. International religious organizations reported authorities interrogated detainees about their religious affiliation and asked them to identify members of unregistered religious groups.

The government continued to detain without due process persons associated with unregistered religious groups, occasionally for long periods, and sometimes on the grounds of threatening national security, according to minority religious group members and international NGOs.

Religious observers continued to report the government denied many exit visa applications for individuals seeking to travel to international religious conferences. According to a report by the European Asylum Support Office, the issuance of exit visas was inconsistent and did not adhere to any consistent policy; members of nonrecognized religious communities could be denied exit visas solely on the basis of their religious affiliation.

The government continued to allow only the practice of Sunni Islam and ban all other practice of Islam.

Official attitudes differed toward members of unregistered religious groups worshipping in homes or rented facilities. Some local authorities reportedly tolerated the presence and activities of unregistered groups, while others attempted to prevent them from meeting. Local authorities sometimes denied government ration coupons to Jehovah's Witnesses and members of Pentecostal groups.

Diaspora groups reported authorities controlled directly or indirectly virtually all activities of the four formally recognized groups. The leaders of the four groups continued to state their officially registered members did not face impediments to religious practice, but individuals privately reported, among other obstacles, restrictions on import of religious items used for worship. Whether authorities used these restrictions to target religious groups was unclear, since import licenses remained generally restricted. Individuals also reported restrictions on clergy meeting with foreign diplomats.

Most places of worship unaffiliated with the four officially registered religious groups remained closed to worship, but many of those buildings remained physically intact and undamaged. Religious structures used by unregistered Jewish and Greek Orthodox groups continued to exist in Asmara. The government protected the historic Jewish synagogue building, which was maintained by the last remaining Jew. Other structures belonging to unregistered groups, such as Seventh-day Adventists and the Church of Christ, remained shuttered. The government allowed the Baha'i center to remain open, and the members of the center had access to the building. A Baha'i temple built outside of Asmara was allowed to operate. The Greek Orthodox Church remained open as a cultural building, but the government did not permit religious services on the site. The Anglican Church building held services but only under the auspices of the registered Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Some church leaders continued to state the government's restriction on foreign financing reduced church income and religious participation by preventing churches from training clergy or building or maintaining facilities.

Government control of all mass media, as well as fear of imprisonment or other government actions, continued to restrict the ability of unregistered religious group members to bring attention to government repression against them, according to observers. Restrictions on public assembly and freedom of speech severely limited the ability of unregistered religious groups to assemble and conduct worship, according to group members. The government permitted church news services to

videotape and publish interviews with foreign diplomats during the public celebration of the Eritrean Orthodox Meskel holiday.

Observers noted that the government exerted significant direct and indirect influence over the appointment of heads of recognized religious communities, including the Eritrean Orthodox Church and Sunni Islamic community, and some NGOs said that authorities directly controlled the appointments. The government continued to deny this, stating these decisions were made entirely by religious communities. The sole political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, led by President Isaias Afwerki, de facto appointed both the acting head of the Sunni Islamic community and the acting head of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, as well as some lower level officials for both communities. Observers said that since the 2017 death of the former mufti, Sheik Alamin Osman Alamin, the government-friendly executive director of the mufti office, Sheik Salim Ibrahim Al-Muktar, in effect was acting as head of the Islamic community.

The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church remained without a patriarch since the 2015 death of the fourth patriarch, Abune Dioskoros. In July the Holy Synod of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church excommunicated the third patriarch, Abune Antonios, in home detention since 2006, for "heresy." In July the BBC reported that some analysts believe he was expelled so the government could have full control of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. Lay administrators appointed by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice managed some Church operations, including disposition of donations and seminarian participation in national service.

The government continued to permit a limited number of Sunni Muslims, mainly the elderly and those not fit for military service, to take part in the Hajj, travel abroad for religious study, and host clerics from abroad. The government generally did not permit Muslim groups to receive funding from countries where Islam was the dominant religion on grounds that such funding threatened to import foreign "fundamentalist" or "extremist" tendencies.

The government continued to grant some visas permitting Catholic dioceses to host visiting clergy from the Vatican or other foreign locations. The government permitted Catholic clergy to travel abroad for religious purposes and training, although not in numbers Church officials considered adequate; they were discouraged from attending certain religious events while overseas. Students attending the Roman Catholic seminary, as well as Catholic nuns, did not perform national service and did not suffer repercussions from the government, according to Church officials. Some Catholic leaders stated, however, national service

requirements prevented adequate numbers of seminarians from completing theological training abroad, because those who had not completed national service were not able to obtain passports or exit visas.

While the overwhelming majority of high-level officials, both military and civilian, were Christian, three ministers, the Asmara mayor, and at least one senior military leader were Muslims. Foreign diplomats, however, reported that individuals in positions of power, both in government and outside, often expressed reluctance to share power with Muslim compatriots and distrusted foreign Muslims.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Government control of all media, expression, and public discourse limited information available concerning societal actions affecting religious freedom. Churches and mosques were located in close proximity to each other, and most citizens congratulated members of other religious groups on various religious holidays and other events. Senior Muslim, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran religious leaders sat as honored guests alongside the ranking Eritrean Orthodox officials during the high profile public celebration of Meskel on September 28.

Some Christian leaders continued to report Muslim leaders and communities were willing to collaborate on community projects. Ecumenical and interreligious committees did not exist, although local leaders met informally, and religious holidays featured public displays of interfaith cooperation. Representatives of each of the official religions attended the state dinners for several visiting foreign officials. Some Muslims expressed privately their feelings of stress and scrutiny in professional and educational settings because of their faith.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives met with government officials to raise religious freedom concerns, including seeking a path forward for unregistered groups. They also advocated for the release of Jehovah's Witnesses and an alternative service for conscientious objectors refusing to bear arms for religious reasons and expressed concern over the continued detention of Patriarch Abune Antonios. Senior Department of State officials raised these concerns during a series of bilateral meetings with senior country officials in Washington, New York, and Asmara on multiple occasions during the year. Embassy officials raised issues of religious freedom with a wide range of partners, including visiting international delegations, Asmara-based and regionally based diplomats accredited to the government, UN

officials, and other international organization representatives. Embassy officials used social media to highlight the importance of religious tolerance and public diplomacy programs to engage the public and highlight the commitment of the United States to religious freedom.

Embassy staff met with clergy, leaders, and other members of some religious groups, including unregistered groups. During the year, however, some embassy requests via the government to meet with religious leaders went unanswered.

Since 2004, Eritrea has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, section 402(b), for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 18, the Secretary of State redesignated Eritrea as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act. Restrictions on U.S. assistance resulting from the CPC designation remained in place.