

# ERITREA 2020 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 Tewahedo 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 international media continued to report that 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 detention without explanation of individuals observing the unrecognized faiths. In December, the government released 28 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses who had served prison sentences of between five and 26 years, in some cases for refusing compulsory military service. The government did not comment publicly or privately on the releases. In April, the government reportedly arrested 15 Christians engaged in a worship service at a private home, and in June, another 30 persons were arrested at a Christian wedding. 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. Authorities continued to confine former Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Abune Antonios to house arrest, where he has remained since 2006. International 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 24 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 at least 101 of these reportedly were released in August. During the year, the government also reportedly released 115 Christian detainees. 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 recognized and unrecognized religious groups were widely attended, including by senior government officials.

U.S. officials in Asmara and Washington regularly raised religious freedom concerns with government officials throughout the year, 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. A return visit by a U.S. delegation that visited Asmara in 2019 to continue dialogue on these issues was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. 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 members of the diplomatic corps based in Asmara, 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 2, 2020, 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 6.1 million (midyear 2020 estimate). The UN estimates a population of approximately 3.5 million. Reliable population data in the country is difficult to gather, however. There are no reliable figures on religious affiliation. The Pew Foundation in 2016 estimated the population to be 63 percent Christian and 37 percent Muslim. Some government, religious, and international sources estimate the population to be 49 percent Christian and 49 percent Sunni 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 500 members, half of whom reside in the capital, Asmara. Only one Jew is known to remain in the country and on a part-time basis.

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, which serves as the guiding law on religious issues, 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 the former provisional penal code, which sets penalties for failure to register and noncompliance. A new penal code was promulgated in 2015 that 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-\$1,300); however, the new code has not yet been implemented.

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 group's history in the country; an explanation of the uniqueness or benefit the group offers compared with other registered 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). While the Baha'i are not one of the four officially recognized religions, they have registered every year since 1959, the year the chapter was established, and have "de facto" recognition from the government. A 2002 decree requires all other religious groups to submit registration applications and to cease religious activities and services prior to approval.

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 ages 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 from National Service, are elderly, or are otherwise exempted from military service in the past, to carry firearms and attend ad hoc militia training. Failure to participate in the militia or national service may 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.

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**

In December, the government released 28 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses who had served prison sentences of between five and 26 years, in some cases for refusing compulsory military service. The government did not comment publicly or privately on the releases.

In April, the government reportedly arrested 15 Christians engaged in a worship service at an individual's home, and in June, another 30 persons were arrested at a Christian wedding. Local contacts reported some, but not all, were released within a few weeks of arrest. 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 at year's end.

The International NGO Christian Solidarity Worldwide (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 the number of detained laity ranged from 800 to more than 1,000. Authorities reportedly continued to detain 24 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 at least 101 of Muslim detainees arrested following protests in Asmara in 2017 and 2018 were released.

International media reported that authorities released from prison 22 Christians in July and at least 69 Christians in September. The released prisoners were not allowed to leave the country. According to CSW, those released in September had been in prison between two and 16 years without charge or trial prior to their release.

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

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

The government 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 detain Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious prisoners for failure to follow the law or for national security reasons. Authorities' treatment of religious prisoners appeared to have been inconsistent. In some prisons, religious prisoners reportedly were not allowed to have visitors, but in others, visitors were allowed. Former prisoners held for their religious beliefs continued to report harsh detention conditions, including solitary confinement, physical abuse, and inadequate food, water, and shelter. Other former religious prisoners reported acceptable conditions, adequate food, and no physical abuse.

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 international 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, although they reported that in many cases the government unofficially allowed them to worship in private homes as long as it was done discreetly.

The government, which has not approved the registration of additional religious groups since 2002, stated that it is willing to register new religious groups. A representative of the Office of Religious Affairs said that the office had received applications since 2002 but that all had been "defective." Unrecognized religious groups expressed fear that applying would open them to further repression.

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.

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 unrecognized religious communities could be denied exit visas solely on the basis of their religious affiliation. Commercial air service was suspended from March through year's end due to the COVID-19 pandemic, making it impossible for most citizens to acquire exit visas.

The government continued to ban all other practices of Islam other than Sunni 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. Some religious prisoners reported they were allowed to worship together in prison as long as they did so quietly.

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 say that their officially registered members did not face impediments to religious practice. 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 formerly used by the Jewish and Greek Orthodox communities in Asmara have been preserved. The government protected the historic synagogue, which was maintained by the last

Jew known to be remaining in the country. The Greek Orthodox Church remained open as a cultural building, and as there is no longer a Greek Orthodox community, members of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church sometimes held religious services on the site. Other structures belonging to unregistered groups, such as the Church of Christ, remained shuttered. The government allowed the Baha'i center in Asmara to remain open, and the members of the center had unrestricted access to the building. A Baha'i temple outside of Asmara was allowed to operate. Other unregistered groups, including Seventh-day Adventists and the Faith Mission Church, operated to some degree and contributed to the government's COVID-19 fund. 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 a fear of imprisonment or other government actions, continued to restrict the ability of unregistered religious group members to bring attention to government actions 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 in a designated place of worship, according to group members.

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 the Sunni Islamic community, and some international NGOs said that authorities directly controlled the appointments. The government denied this, stating these decisions were made entirely by religious communities. The sole political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), 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 executive director of the mufti office, Sheik Salim Ibrahim al-Muktar, who was seen by observers as friendly to the government, 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. Lay administrators

appointed by the PFDJ managed some church operations, including disposition of donations and seminarian participation in national service.

COVID-19-related travel restrictions, including the closure of the airport in March, prevented Eritreans from taking part in travel abroad for religious reasons and hosting 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 the importation of foreign “fundamentalist” or “extremist” tendencies.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government continued to grant some visas permitting Catholic dioceses to host visiting clergy from the Vatican or other foreign locations. However, the Catholic Church reported that in February, officials barred Ethiopian Cardinal Berhaneyesus Souraphiel and his delegation from entering the country after they arrived in Asmara at the invitation of Archbishop Menghesteab Tesfamariam. According to the BBC, the officials stated they were following orders from those “higher up” not to permit the delegation to enter the country. The delegation was forced to spend the night at the airport and return to Ethiopia the next day. Delegation members said they had one-month visas and did not know the reason authorities turned them away.

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 Roman Catholic seminaries, 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, that 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, four ministers in the 17-member cabinet, the Asmara mayor, and at least one senior military leader were Muslims.

The government, through National Service, the Warsay Yikealo Secondary School at Sawa that all 12th graders attended, and official party doctrine promoted a sense of national citizenship above religious sectarianism and stated that it does not officially prefer any religion.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

While government control of all media and public discourse limited information available concerning societal actions affecting religious freedom, religious tolerance appeared to international observers to be widespread within society. Churches and mosques are located in close proximity to each other, and most citizens congratulated members of other religious groups on the occasion of religious holidays and other events. There were no reports of sectarian violence, and most towns and ethnic groups included members from all of the major religious groups.

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 state dinners for several visiting foreign officials. Some shrines were venerated by both Orthodox and Muslim believers. Some Muslims expressed privately their feelings of stress and scrutiny in professional and educational settings because of their religion.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Embassy representatives met regularly with government officials to raise religious freedom concerns, including seeking ways to accommodate unregistered groups. They also advocated for the release of Jehovah's Witnesses, including the remaining 24 still in prison, and for an alternative service option for conscientious objectors refusing to bear arms for religious reasons, and they expressed concern over the continued detention of Patriarch Abune Antonios. Officials in Washington shared similar concerns with officials at the Eritrean embassy. A return visit by a U.S. delegation to continue dialogue on these issues, following its 2019 visit, was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. 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. They used social media to highlight the importance of religious tolerance and employed public diplomacy programs to engage the public and highlight the commitment of the United States to religious freedom.

Embassy officers met with clergy, leaders, and other members of some religious groups, including unregistered groups. During the year, however, some embassy

official requests conveyed through 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 2, 2020, 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.