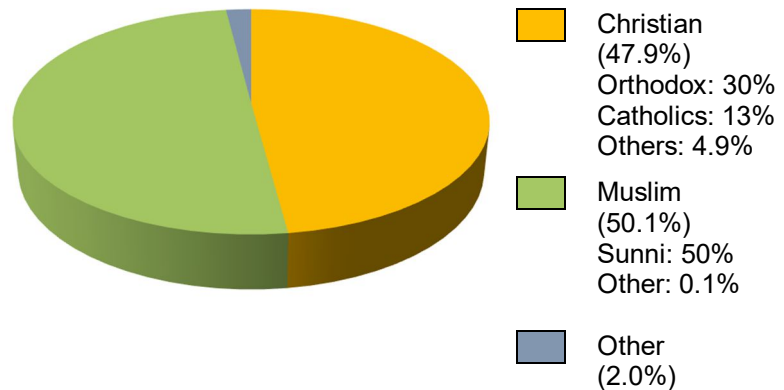


ERITREA



Area:	Population:	Political system:	Major Language(s):
117 600 km ²	6,536,000	Autocracy ¹	Tigrinya, Arabic, English

Legal framework of freedom of religion and actual application

In 1997, five years after Eritrea's independence, the National Assembly approved the country's constitution. Article 19 states that "Every person shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief." It further adds that: "Every person shall have the freedom to practise any religion and to manifest such practice."² However, the constitution as such has never been implemented and the authorities have always governed by decrees. In one of them, issued in 1995, the government indicated that just four religious communities were to be recognised by the state – the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea, the Catholic Church and Islam.

For the last few years, the government has secured the leadership of the Orthodox Church and the Muslim community under its own control, not only paying their hierarchies' salaries and providing them with means of transport, but also controlling their activities and financial resources. However, the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church have continued to maintain their autonomy.

The four authorised religious communities still require permission from the religious affairs' office to print and distribute religious literature among their faithful. Their religious leaders and the media with whom they have formal links are forbidden to comment on political matters. They are also required to submit reports to the government every six months on all their activities. Every year the Religious Affairs Department reiterates the provision contained in the decree of 1995 in regard to the religious organizations. It instructs the four recognised religions to cease accepting funds from abroad, to operate on the basis of financial self-sufficiency and to limit their activities to religious worship only. The decree further states that if the churches wish to engage in social works, they must register as NGOs and cede the supervision of their funding from abroad to the authorities. In practice, however, these prohibitions are not enforced or observed.

Apart from the four officially recognised religions, the other main faith groups are the Pentecostal Christians, evangelicals and Jehovah's Witnesses. These were tolerated until 2002 when it was required by decree that their organisations submit requests for registration with detailed supporting information about their leaders. They were warned that failure to comply would result in their being declared illegal.

Extreme human rights violations, including abuse of fundamental religious liberty, is described as a core factor in Eritrea becoming what Amnesty International calls “one of the biggest refugee producing countries”.³ The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has reported that 5,000 people have been leaving Eritrea every month.⁴ The threat of indefinite military service was explained as a principal cause of people fleeing the country but reports also highlighted an increasing clampdown on religious expression and severe penalties for non-compliance with government efforts to control the faith life of the nation. At least 3,000 Christians are among religious groups imprisoned for their beliefs.⁵

Incidents

During the reporting period, the government continued to detain or harass members of some religious groups, including at least 85 jailed members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who have been singled out for particularly harsh treatment because of their refusal to bear arms or participate in the citizen’s militia programme.⁶ Members of this denomination are reported to be systematically refused government jobs and issued with national identity cards.

One of the bones of contention between the government and the religious groups has always been the fact that even clergy and other religious individuals are required to undertake military service. Military conscription is organized at the discretion of the authorities for individuals up to the age of 50. In practice, however, even this limit is theoretical and in reality there are many men aged over 50 who continue to do military service. In the past a partial exception was agreed for the priests and seminarians of the Catholic Church, but since 2005 the Catholic clergy and seminarians have, in principle, been liable to be called up for military service and they are forbidden from travelling abroad. Because of this, Catholic religious orders are unable to send their seminarians and religious Sisters for studies outside the country.⁷

Between 2007 and 2008, the government in Asmara forced 18 Catholic missionaries (both male and female) to leave the country by refusing to renew their residence permits in the country, and no foreign missionary has been able to obtain a permanent visa. Even those religious temporarily visiting the country, for example to guide religious retreats for the congregations, are unable to obtain visas for religious purposes, but are instead obliged to apply for tourist visas and required, in theory at least, to reside in hotels.

Despite the repressive atmosphere that reigns in the country, in June 2014 the four Catholic bishops published a pastoral letter entitled “Where is your brother”, marking the 23rd anniversary of the country’s independence. In the document the bishops decry the mass exodus of youth from the country and they criticise the lack of religious freedom in the country.⁸ The government did not comment on the letter, at least in public.

A confidential report given to the Roaco meeting in Rome in June 2015 decried the alleged discrimination that the Catholic Church was suffering at the hands of the Eritrean government because of its resistance to state control. The report stated: “It is only the Catholic Church which is still active and relatively independent. The government does not like this and has set plans to weaken her. First, it is by trying to take the young pastoral agents (priests and religious) for unlimited time of military service. Second, it is wanting to confiscate...schools, clinics, kindergartens and women promotion centres. Third, it is wanting to control and limit the Church’s financial activities. Bringing money from abroad is not wanted and income generating initiatives by the Church are considered commercial.”

In October 2015, a man named Benyam, who fled Eritrea and who eventually gained asylum in the UK, described being threatened with violence by state forces for refusing to recant his conversion from Eritrean Orthodoxy to Pentecostal Christianity. The man, who recalled fighting for Eritrea’s independence from Ethiopia, stated: “The very same freedoms I had fought for started to seem a long way away.” In an account published by human rights organisation Christian Solidarity Worldwide, he stated: “Eritrea is one of the world’s most repressive nations – a single party state

that has been ruled for more than 20 years by a cruel dictator. There is no freedom of expression, no freedom of religion or belief.” Underlining the threat of “indefinite military service”, he said: “I decided to flee. I set off on foot towards the border with Sudan.” At great risk to his safety, he made it across the border and travelled to the UK. He said: “I was lucky. I didn’t go to one of the desert prisons where people are kept in shipping containers or in pitch-black solitary confinement. You cannot be a Christian in Eritrea.”⁹

The UN Commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea produced its long-awaited report in June 2015. It stated: “The [Eritrean] Government perceives religion as a threat to its existence and has set about controlling it.” Even the four authorised faith groups – Eritrean Orthodox, Catholics, Lutherans and Sunni Muslims – “are to varying degrees targeted by restrictions and attacks by the Government. Interference in religious structures is rampant”. As for unauthorised religions, the report stated that their gatherings are “prohibited. Religious materials are confiscated, adherents are arbitrarily arrested, ill-treated or subjected to torture during their detention and prisoners are coerced to recant their faith. Many religious followers have been killed or have disappeared.”¹⁰ It goes on to state that Jehovah’s Witnesses have been deprived of their citizenship which means they have no legal protection as their national identity documents are immediately confiscated.

Prospects for freedom of religion

Egregious and systematic denial of religious freedom is not least of the reasons why thousands upon thousands of people are fleeing Eritrea. With 2015 reports stating that after Syrians, Eritreans are the second most common nationality to arrive on Italian shores – as reported in The Guardian newspaper in the UK,¹¹ it is no surprise that Eritrea has been named the “The North Korea of Africa”.¹² Even the four registered faith groups are under pressure and for everyone lies the threat of unlimited military service for failure to comply with repressive measures contravening essential tenets of religious liberty. Unauthorised faith groups in particular have suffered ongoing government monitoring, interference, detention without charge, forced labour, torture and illegal execution. Problems are compounded by reports that, as human rights organisation Open Doors puts it, “radical Muslims appear to be gaining support and the government has sympathy for extremist groups such as Rashaida and al-Shabaab – they have reportedly supplied al-Shabaab with weapons at times.”¹³ Recommending once again that Eritrea be designated by the U.S. Government as “a country of particular concern”, the US International Commission on Religious Belief, stated in its report for 2016 that “The Eritrean government continues to repress religious freedom”. With a failed economy, people fleeing en-masse, unrelenting international pressure to bring President Isaias Afwerki before the International Criminal Court, there is little or no sign that the situation is likely to improve as regards religious freedom at least in the short term.¹⁴

In 2014, Eritrea was named by the US State Department among the eight “countries of particular concern” (6) that severely violate religious freedom rights within their borders (Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan). The fact that the government has pursued the same policy of exerting tight control over the religious institutions and curtailing their activities shows that little has changed since. As far as religious freedom is concerned, nothing seems to suggest that any positive changes may occur in Eritrea in the near future

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy_Index

² <http://www.eritrea.be/old/eritrea-constitution.htm>

³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr64/2930/2015/en/>

Eritrea: Just Deserters – Amnesty International – p6

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Aid to the Church in Need, Persecuted and Forgotten, A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2013-15 (October 2015); Executive Summary, p23

⁶ U.S. State Department – International Religious Freedom Report for 2014 - <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/238424.pdf>

⁶ Interview with Eritrean clergy

⁸ <http://www.tesfanews.net/four-eritrean-catholic-bishops-issue-pastoral-letter-decrying-emigration/>

⁹ <http://www.csw.org.uk/2015/10/29/feature/2846/article.htm>You cannot be free.

¹⁰ United Nations General Assembly —Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea, 4th June 2015
<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G15/114/50/PDF/G1511450.pdf?OpenElement> – Sections 25-6

¹¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/mar/19/eritrea-ruthless-repression-human-rights-violations-un-commission>

¹² <http://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/worldwatch/eritrea.php>

¹³ Open Doors - <http://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/worldwatch/eritrea.php>

¹⁴ <http://www.uscirf.gov/reports-briefs>