



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# COUNTRY UPDATE: ERITREA

August 2023

Abraham Cooper  
*Chair*

Frederick A. Davie  
*Vice Chair*

### Commissioners

David Curry

Susie Gelman

Mohamed Magid

Stephen Schneck

Nury Turkel

Eric Ueland

Frank Wolf

Erin D. Singhsinsuk  
*Executive Director*

### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

## Religious Freedom Conditions in Eritrea

*By Michael Ardovino, Policy Analyst*

This country update provides an overview of religious freedom conditions in Eritrea and highlights recent developments. It also discusses U.S.-Eritrean diplomatic relations, which generally have been poor in recent years. The U.S. government has continued to advocate for religious freedom with the government of Eritrea, including urging authorities to release religious prisoners of conscience and remove all legal barriers to the enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief.

### Background

Eritrea became independent in 1993 under the leadership of President Isaias Afwerki and the state-controlled and sole political party, currently the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (EPLF). Isaias used the historically conflictual relationship with neighboring Ethiopia to consolidate his power and, in 2018, ended the long-standing border war.

In 2020, Eritrean military units joined Ethiopian troops in combatting the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, support that Eritrea's leadership publicly acknowledged only in Spring 2021. A November 2, 2022 truce ended the hostilities. Witnesses [reported](#), however, that Eritrean troops, along with their Ethiopian counterparts, had committed human rights violations, including killing approximately 300 civilians from several villages near Adwa only a week before the cessation of hostilities.

The Eritrean state remains strongly repressive to ordinary citizens. In March 2023, the [United Nations Human Rights Council](#) warned that the government continued to punish collectively relatives of those who evaded military service and the military's involvement in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. The Council also urged the government to uphold the right to freedom of religion and to guarantee the exercise of freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

In June 2023, the government announced it was [rejoining](#) the-then six member East African bloc, the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD). In 2007, the government suspended its membership after protesting the bloc's decision to request that the Kenyan government act as arbiter in the ongoing Ethiopia-Eritrea border dispute.



## Government Control of Religion

*Eritrean law* and the country's 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 revised penal code, pending implementation since 2015, does not directly address penalties for religious groups that fail to register or otherwise comply with the law, but includes a punishment of between one and six months' imprisonment and a fine of 5,001 to 20,000 nakfa (\$330 to \$1,300) for "unlawful assembly."

The Office of Religious Affairs has registered four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Sunni Islam, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea (affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation). While the Baha'i faith is not one of the four officially recognized religious groups, the group has registered every year since its establishment in the country in 1959 and has "de facto" recognition from the government. A synagogue exists in Asmara, but there are not enough congregants for regular

services. A decree requires all other religious groups to submit registration applications and to cease religious activities and services prior to approval. Religious groups must also obtain government approval to build facilities for worship.

Systematic government restrictions on registered and unregistered religious groups continue to remain in place regarding proselytizing, accepting external funding from international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other international organizations, and groups selecting their own religious leaders. Unregistered religious groups face restrictions in gathering for worship, constructing places of worship, and teaching their religious beliefs to others. Some groups, however, reported in 2022 that in many cases the government unofficially allowed them to worship in private homes as long as it was done discreetly. 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 persons imprisoned because of religion reported they had the option to worship together in prison if they did so quietly. The government, which has not approved the registration of additional religious groups since 2002, has continued to withhold approval of religious groups in recent years. These religious groups have expressed fear that applying would open them to further repression.

The government does continue to [allow](#) the only known Jew living in the country to maintain the historic synagogue in Asmara.

### **Mandatory Military Service**

Eritrean law requires all Eritreans between the ages of 18 and 50 to serve in the military for 18 months. Authorities grant exemptions only to pregnant women and people with a physical disability. Eritrea's government imprisons those who refuse to serve, including on the basis of their religious beliefs.

The government continues 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, for which the government stripped them of their citizenship in 1994. Jehovah's Witnesses report that the government continues to detain their members and other religious prisoners for failure to follow the law or for alleged national security reasons and continues to deny them citizenship.

As of July 2023, there were 27 Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrean prisons including 18 men and 9 women. The state arrested and charged 12 of them with holding religious meetings.

### **Religious Prisoners of Conscience**

Eritrea continues to systematically detain individuals based on their religious beliefs. In February 2022, Archbishop [Abune Antonios](#), formerly the head of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, [died](#) while in solitary confinement after being imprisoned for 16 years because of his religious beliefs and advocacy. As of [April 2023](#), the state was holding more than 500 Christian prisoners because of their religious identity. This number includes 103 congregants, mainly students, whom police arrested in the capital Asmara during a singing and recording session for social media.

On April 9, Pastor Tesfay Sevoum [died](#) in Mai Serwa prison two months after suffering a brain hemorrhage. He was the founder and leader of the of Meserete Kristos Church. According to local reports, authorities took him to [Dembe Sempel](#) hospital in Asmara for treatment, but he died five days afterwards. His body remained unburied for ten days because the government would not grant permission to inter him near his birthplace in the Eritrean Orthodox Godayf cemetery or the Hazhez public cemetery. Orthodox tradition requires a body be buried near the time of death, and the delay created additional stress on his grieving family. They finally buried him on April 22 in [St. Teklehaymanot Cemetery](#) in the HazHaz suburb in the north of Asmara.

In a positive development, Eritrean authorities released 52-year-old [Bishop Fikremariam Hagos](#) in [December 2022](#) of the Eritrean Catholic Eparchy of Segheneity, along with parish priest [Abba Mihretab](#) of St. Michael's Parish in the same eparchy, after their October 2022 detainment.

### **Conclusion**

As of July 2023, the Eritrean government continues to hold prisoners based on their religious beliefs and practices, with the great majority of the prisoners being members of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The government has held most of these prisoners arbitrarily for several years, and some over a decade. Eritrea's requirement of mandatory military service continues to be a justification for the detention.

The U.S. Department of State [designated](#) Eritrea as a "country of particular concern" (CPC) in November 2022, and maintains an arms embargo referenced in [22 CFR 126.1\(a\)](#) of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations as the presidential action imposed as a consequence of the CPC designation to encourage religious freedom improvements. Targeted sanctions on Eritrean government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom would provide further accountability and should be implemented.



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

### Professional Staff

---

**Michael Ardovino**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Danielle Ashbahian**  
*Chief of Public Affairs*

**Keely Bakken**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Susan Bishai**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Mollie Blum**  
*Researcher*

**Elizabeth K. Cassidy**  
*Director of Research & Policy*

**Mingzhi Chen**  
*Senior Policy Analyst*

**Patrick Greenwalt**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Sema Hasan**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Thomas Kraemer**  
*Chief Administrative Officer*

**Veronica McCarthy**  
*Public Affairs Associate*

**Hilary Miller**  
*Researcher*

**Nora Morton**  
*Operations Specialist*

**Dylan Schexneydre**  
*Researcher*

**Jamie Staley**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Scott Weiner**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Kurt Werthmuller**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Luke Wilson**  
*Researcher*

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.

[www.USCIRF.gov](http://www.USCIRF.gov)

[@USCIRF](https://twitter.com/USCIRF)

[Media@USCIRF.gov](mailto:Media@USCIRF.gov)

732 N. Capitol Street, NW, Suite #A714

Washington, DC 20401

202-523-3240