

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Eritrea improved incrementally, though overall remained poor. Authorities in Eritrea released 240 religious prisoners on bail, allegedly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and eased restrictions on the Baha'i community, the Jewish community, and the Greek Orthodox Church. However, the repressive system governing religious groups remained in place, and members of "unofficial" religious groups continued to face systematic and egregious persecution for practicing their faiths. Since 2002, the Eritrean government has recognized and permitted only four religious entities to operate in the country: Sunni Islam, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. Although these groups were allowed to practice their faiths publicly, the government consistently intervened in their affairs to limit and direct their activities. The government also continued to invoke [Proclamation No. 73](#) to persecute both religious and secular activists throughout the country on a regular basis, especially those who disagree with the government's stated positions.

The government continued to require all Eritreans above the age of 18 to participate in mandatory military service indefinitely

and restricted religious expression during that service. As a result, Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to serve in the military due to their faith were stripped of their citizenship and thrown in jail. As of December 2020, 24 Jehovah's Witnesses were [imprisoned](#) in Eritrea, some of whom have been in jail for more than 20 years.

In 2020, approximately 500 to 1,200 individuals were estimated to be in prison in Eritrea due to their faith. Authorities continued to hold the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience [Abune Antonios](#) under house arrest. The government illegally removed Patriarch Antonios from his position in May 2007. In addition to Patriarch Antonios, the government also continued to imprison religious leaders—including from the Full Gospel Church and the Orthodox Church—and Sunni and Wahabi Muslims. The leaders of the Full Gospel Church and the Orthodox Church have been in jail since 2004. Despite positive regional political changes, including in neighboring Sudan and Ethiopia, Eritrea continued to resist religious and secular activists' ongoing calls for democratic reform. In 2019, security forces met the demands of both religious and secular activists with lethal force, injuring and even killing tens of them.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Eritrea as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1 (a) of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Eritrean government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the

United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;

- Urge the Eritrean government to release the remaining detainees held on account of their religious activities, including Patriarch Antonios;
- Call on the Eritrean government to end religious persecution of unregistered religious communities and grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah's Witnesses; and
- Encourage the Eritrean government to extend an official invitation for unrestricted

visits by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Red Cross.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Highlight religious freedom issues in Eritrea through legislation, hearings and briefings, and a congressional delegation trip to Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, to engage with Eritrean officials to encourage them to advance human rights and religious freedom.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [The Global Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses](#)

Background

Eritrea is a single-party state led by the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice party (PFDJ) under the leadership of President Isaias Afwerki [since](#) its independence in 1993. The constitution of Eritrea states that the government must [protect](#) freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, as well as the right of individuals to practice the religion of their choice, but this right is not protected in practice. Eritrea's population is [split in half](#) between Christians (49 percent) and Muslims (49 percent). The Christian population mainly resides in the southern and central regions of the country, whereas the Muslim population lives predominantly in the northern region. The Muslim population is predominantly Sunni, and the Christian community is predominantly Eritrean Orthodox, with various denominations including Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals also represented. In addition to these two main religious groups, there is a small community of Baha'is (approximately 200 individuals) and a tiny Jewish community. Finally, about [2 percent of the population](#), who resides in the southwestern region, practice African traditional religions.

In 1995, the government passed [Proclamation](#) No. 73, allowing it to intervene in and exert full control of political, civic, and religious activities. Using this law, the government systematically oppresses secular and religious activists for advocating for human rights or dissenting from the government's positions. Using intimidation, imprisonment, and torture against those who oppose his government, President Afwerki has consolidated power in Eritrea. For example, in 2019 when Eritreans took to the street to demand the advancement of basic human rights, including religious freedom, the government deployed its security forces to disperse the protests, [killing](#) and injuring tens of peaceful protesters.

In July 2018, Eritrea signed the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship with its neighbor, Ethiopia, ending years of hostility and conflict between the two countries. The peace accord was anticipated to usher in a new era of respect for civic and political liberties as it ended Eritrea's diplomatic isolation. However, the government continued its systematic oppression of political, human rights and religious activists by severely limiting their activities and imprisoning many of them.

The 2020 internal war in Ethiopia had a direct impact on religious freedom issues in Eritrea. According to [reports](#), the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) [accused](#) Eritrea of supporting and aiding the Ethiopian military to carry out air strikes against it. In retaliation, the TPLF launched attacks against Eritrea, forcing tens of thousands of Eritreans to flee to neighboring Sudan and Ethiopia, further exacerbating the humanitarian [crisis](#) in the region. Using this as a [pretense](#), the Eritrean government further limited freedom of expression, including religious freedom. In 2020, refugees continued to flee Eritrea on a regular basis to the neighboring countries of Sudan, Ethiopia, and beyond to escape persecution and inhumane treatment by their government.

Repression of Unregistered Religious Groups

The government of Eritrea deems unregistered religious groups illegal and bans them from openly practicing their faiths. The most prominent unregistered religious groups include: Protestants (Pentecostals and Seventh-day Adventists), Salafi Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Baha'is, Shi'a Muslims, and adherents of African Indigenous

Religions. According to [reports](#), members of these groups are constantly harassed, arrested, and deprived of their civic and human rights. Nontheists are also denied legal rights and equal protection and run the [risk](#) of arrest. Coming out as an atheist or agnostic in Eritrea would [provoke](#) arrest by the government and social pressure and isolation. The government particularly views Jehovah's Witnesses and Salafi Muslims as political forces and therefore severely restricts their activities and punishes them with long prison sentences for practicing their faith.

Positive Developments

In 2020, authorities in Asmara released from prison a total of 244 prisoners of conscience from various religions and denominations. Some of those religious prisoners were released conditionally. Releases included 22 Methodist Christians in July, 101 Muslims in August, 27 Evangelical Christians and 66 Pentecostals in [September](#) and 28 Jehovah's Witnesses in [December](#). Observers [suggested](#) these releases were made to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in overcrowded prisons. While these releases were positive steps, hundreds of individuals remain detained for practicing their faith. In addition to these prisoner releases, the government also eased some restrictions on the Baha'i community, the tiny Jewish community and Greek Orthodox by allowing their members to worship openly in 2020. Specifically, the government permitted the Baha'i community to operate its center in Asmara as well as join the international Baha'i community as an active member. However, the government banned the Baha'i community from soliciting or accepting foreign funding. Additionally, the Greek Orthodox church in Asmara was open to the public as a heritage site as well as a worship place in 2020. The Greek Orthodox congregation worshiped there regularly throughout the year. Finally, the tiny Jewish community was allowed to worship at its synagogue in Asmara.

Key U.S. Policy

Since 2010, Eritrea and the United States have not exchanged ambassadors due to poor diplomatic relations. In recent years, however, the two countries have been engaging to improve their bilateral relations. In May 2019, a congressional [delegation](#) led by Representative Karen Bass (D-CA) visited Eritrea—the first congressional visit in 14 years. In September 2019, a U.S. Department of State delegation visited Asmara to open a direct dialogue with Eritrean officials. The delegation also met with human rights activists and faith leaders. During both visits, the delegations highlighted the importance of advancing human rights issues, including freedom of religion or belief. They also discussed the unlawful imprisonment of religious leaders, human rights activists, and political leaders, as well as the need to allow for alternative civilian services for conscientious objectors. Finally, the [U.S. Embassy](#) in Asmara has engaged young Eritreans to build their leadership skills by participating in the East Africa regional leadership academies and attending trainings in Washington, DC, to advance civic and political rights in Eritrea. The State Department has designated Eritrea as a CPC for systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom since 2004. Most [recently](#), on December 2, the State Department redesignated it and maintained an arms embargo on Eritrea under 22 CFR 126.1 of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations.