

## ERITREA

### U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: 2013 Annual Report

**Bottom Line:** Religious freedom conditions continue to be extremely grave in Eritrea, with torture or other ill-treatment of 2,000 to 3,000 religious prisoners, arbitrary arrests and detentions without charges, a prolonged ban on public religious activities, and interference in the internal affairs of registered religious groups.

Systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations continue in Eritrea under the regime of President Isaias Afwerki. The religious freedom situation is particularly grave for Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses. The government dominates the internal affairs of the Orthodox Church of Eritrea, the country's largest Christian denomination, and suppresses Muslim religious activities and those opposed to the government-appointed head of the Muslim community. Government-deposed Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios, who protested government interference in his church's affairs, has been under house arrest since 2007 and is in poor health. In light of these violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2013 that Eritrea be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Since 2004, USCIRF has recommended, and the State Department has designated, Eritrea as a CPC.

### **Background**

President Isaias and the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) have ruled Eritrea since the country gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993. Despite a short-lived "coup d'etat" in January 2013, President Isaias maintains absolute authority and suppresses all independent activity. Thousands of Eritreans with religious or civil society affiliations have been imprisoned for their real or imagined opposition to the government, and arbitrary arrests, torture, and forced labor are extensive. No private newspapers, political opposition parties, or independent non-governmental organizations exist, and independent public gatherings are prohibited.

In 2002, the government increased its control over religion by imposing a registration requirement on all religious groups other than the four officially-recognized religions: the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea; Sunni Islam; the Roman Catholic Church; and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea, a Lutheran-affiliated denomination. The requirements mandate that the non-preferred religions communities provide detailed financial and membership information, as well as background on their activities in Eritrea. No other religious groups have been registered, although several submitted the required applications.

### **Religious Freedom Conditions**

The government of Eritrea continues to arrest, detain, and torture people because of their religious beliefs and imposes strict controls on all religious groups.

**Arrests, Detention, and Torture:** The State Department, non-governmental human rights organizations, and Christian advocacy groups estimate that 2,000 to 3,000 persons are imprisoned on religious grounds in Eritrea, the vast majority comprised of Evangelical or Pentecostal Christians. The government tortures and beats detainees imprisoned in violation of freedom of religion and related human rights. Released religious prisoners report to USCIRF and other Eritrea monitors being confined in crowded conditions, such as in 20-foot metal shipping containers or underground barracks where some have been subjected to extreme temperature fluctuations. Evangelicals and Pentecostals released from prison report being pressured to recant their faith in order to be freed. Persons detained for religious activities, in both short-term and long-term detentions, often are not formally charged, permitted access to legal counsel, accorded due process, or allowed access to their families. Prisoners are not permitted to pray aloud, sing, or preach, and religious books are

banned. During the past year, there were reports of deaths of religious prisoners who refused to recant their beliefs, who were denied medical care, or who were subjected to other ill treatment.

Reports of arbitrary arrests and short-term detentions of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians continued in 2012 with a small increase following the temporary January 2013 “coup.” In 2007, the government officially deposed Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios and placed him under house arrest after he protested the Eritrean Department of Religious Affairs’ interference in his church’s affairs. He has been prevented from communicating with the outside world, is in poor health, and reportedly is denied medical care. Other reformist members of the Orthodox clergy are also imprisoned. Fifty-three Jehovah’s Witnesses remain detained without trial or administrative appeal; of these one-third are over the age of 60, and three have been imprisoned for more than 15 years. More than 180 Muslims are detained for opposing the state’s appointment of the Mufti of the Eritrean Muslim community.

**Registration Requirements:** All religious groups other than the four officially-recognized religions are required to register with the government. However, no religious group has been registered since 2002, although the Baha’i, Presbyterian Church, Methodist Church, and Seventh-day Adventists have all submitted the required applications. As a result of the registration requirement and the government’s inaction on applications, all of Eritrea’s religious communities, except for the four government-sanctioned ones, lack a legal basis on which to practice their faiths publicly, including holding prayer meetings or weddings. The government’s campaign against religious activities by persons belonging to unregistered denominations frequently targets Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, and Jehovah’s Witnesses who are denied citizenship by an October 1994 Presidential Decree. Furthermore, Eritrean security forces conduct mass arrests of followers of these faiths, including at clandestine prayer meetings and religious ceremonies.

**Restrictions on Recognized Religious Groups:** The government controls the internal affairs of the four recognized religions, including appointing religious leaders and controlling religious activities. The recognized groups are required to submit activity reports to the government every six months. In December 2010, the Eritrean Department of Religious Affairs reportedly told these groups to stop accepting funds from co-religionists abroad, an order with which the Eritrean Orthodox Church reportedly said it would not comply. Despite community protests, the Department of Religious Affairs also appoints the Mufti of the Eritrean Muslim community and hundreds of Muslims who protested this appointment remain imprisoned. Reports indicate that the government targeted Muslim military and political officials for imprisonment following the 2013 “coup,” claiming they were engaged in jihad. In a reversal of policy, in 2010 the Eritrean government began requiring all religious workers including those from registered religious communities to participate in national military service; according to the State Department, 3,000 religious workers from recognized religious communities have been compelled to participate in the national military service against their will.

### **Recommendations for U.S. Policy**

In response to the policies and practices of Eritrea’s government, the U.S. government should continue to designate Eritrea as a CPC and:

- employ the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to impose economic sanctions on senior Eritrean officials who have engaged in human rights abuses;
- work to limit the Eritrean government’s ability to levy and forcibly collect a “diaspora tax” on Eritreans living in the United States;
- work with other nations, especially those with mining interests in Eritrea and large diaspora communities from Eritrea, to draw attention to religious freedom abuses in Eritrea and advocate for the unconditional and immediate release of religious prisoners, including Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios;

- further target assistance to UNHCR and nongovernmental organizations to provide support to Eritrean refugees, especially those with psychosocial needs due to torture and other ill-treatment; and
- urge the government of Eritrea to: release unconditionally and immediately detainees held on account of their peaceful religious activities, including Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios; implement the constitutional guarantees of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; institute a voluntary registration process for religious groups and promptly register those groups that comply with the requirements issued in 2002; and extend an official invitation for visits by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.

**Please see USCIRF's 2013 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Eritrea.**