

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Eritrea improved slightly, but overall, they remain poor. The government released approximately 130 religious prisoners from various prisons. Allegedly, some of these releases were made due to fears of COVID-19 spreading in prisons. Eritrean authorities continue to recognize only four religious groups as official: Sunni Islam, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea.

The government deems unregistered religious groups to be illegal and punishes them for practicing their faiths publicly. The government regularly invokes [Proclamation No. 73](#) to prosecute members of unregistered religious groups and intervene in the internal affairs of registered groups. This law was passed in 1995, shortly after Eritrea's independence, to justify the persecution of political, civic, and religious dissidents. The law enables the government to intervene in and regulate political and religious activities as well as pursue those who disagree with the government's position. President Isaias Afwerki and his government use this and other restrictive laws to torture, imprison, and even kill individuals who oppose the government. Based on Proclamation No. 73, authorities [brought](#) nine Catholic Church-run primary schools under the administration of the government and threatened to do the same to 19 other schools, including Muslim-run ones.

All Eritreans above the age of 18 are required by law to participate in military service. Military conscription can extend indefinitely, and the government often restricts religious expression during that service. The government only exempts the physically disabled and pregnant women from mandatory military service. Individuals who refuse to participate are stripped of their citizenship and punished with long jail time. When Jehovah's Witnesses refused to take part in the Eritrean War of Independence (1961-1991), the government imprisoned many of them and denied them citizenship. As of December 2021, there were [20 Jehovah's Witnesses in jail](#), some of whom have been imprisoned for more than 20 years.

At least a thousand individuals are believed to be imprisoned due to their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy. These prisoners include Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience Abune Antonios. Patriarch Antonios was illegally removed from his position in May 2007 and placed under house arrest. He passed away after 16 years of house arrest in February 2022. The government also continues to jail other religious leaders, including ones from the Full Gospel Church, the Orthodox Church, and the Salafi Muslim community. Some of these religious leaders have been in imprisonment since 2004.

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);
- Maintain the existing, ongoing 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 CPC designation, to encourage religious freedom improvements;
- 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;
- Call on the Eritrean government to end religious persecution of unregistered religious communities, grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah's Witnesses, and release the remaining detainees held on account of their religious activities; 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 Eritrea to engage with Eritrean officials to encourage them to advance human rights and religious freedom.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Eritrea](#)
- **Issue Update:** [The Condition of Nonbelievers in Africa](#)
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project:** [Patriarch Abune Antonios](#)

Background

The Democracy and Justice party (PFDJ), under the leadership of President Afwerki, has been leading Eritrea [since](#) its independence in 1993. Although the constitution [protects](#) citizens' rights to freedom of thought, belief, and conscience as well as individuals' rights to practice the religion of their choice, the government regularly violates these rights in practice. As of July 2021, the U.S. government [estimates](#) the total population of Eritrea at a little over six million. The population is divided in half between Muslims (49 percent) and Christians (49 percent). The majority of the Muslim population lives in the northern region and Christians reside in the southern and central regions of the country. Eritrean Muslims are predominately Sunni, and the Christian community is mainly Orthodox. The other Christian communities consist of various denominations, including Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals. The remaining two percent of the population are followers of different religions. These mainly [include](#) adherents of African traditional religions, Baha'is (approximately 200 individuals), and a tiny Jewish community. Those who practice African indigenous religions reside in the southwestern part of the country.

Eritrean authorities [signed](#) the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship with neighboring Ethiopia in July 2018. The accord ended over two decades of war between the two countries. Following the peace treaty, President Afwerki delivered a much anticipated [speech](#) on Independence Day, saying "the beginning of a new era" had come to Eritrea. Historically, Eritrea justified its [oppression](#) of political and civil rights by citing the ongoing war with Ethiopia. Many observers anticipated that the President's commitment would translate into advancements on human rights, including religious freedom. However, three years after the agreement, over a thousand political [prisoners](#), including many imprisoned for exercising their freedom of religion or belief, remained behind bars.

The 2020 Ethiopian civil war has had a direct impact on religious freedom issues in Eritrea. Eritrean troops were spotted [participating](#) in the civil war alongside the Ethiopian national army, fighting against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The TPLF accused Eritrea of committing gross human rights violations as the Ethiopian army engaged in an armed struggle in the Tigray region, including the [destruction](#) of the two oldest places of worship: the al-Nejashi Mosque in Negash and the Church of St. Mary in Mekelle. Eritrean troops also [detained hundreds of Eritrean refugees](#)—who had crossed the border into Ethiopia to flee torture, forced military services, and imprisonment—and forcibly returned them to Eritrea. Some of these refugees were living in the Hitsats and Shimelba refugee camps since the war of independence. To retaliate against Eritrea, the TPLF has launched airstrikes into Eritrea, forcing thousands of Eritreans to flee to neighboring Sudan, Ethiopia, and beyond.

Government Oppression of Unregistered Religious Groups

The Eritrean government [requires](#) all religious groups to register with the Office of Religious Affairs. The government considers

unregistered groups illegal and therefore bans them from practicing their faith in public. The most prominent of these groups [include](#) Shi'a Muslims, Salafi Muslims, Protestants (Pentecostals and Seventh-day Adventists), Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Baha'is, and adherents of African indigenous religions. The government consistently deprives the practitioners of these religions of their civil and human rights by harassing and arresting them. The government particularly perceives Jehovah's Witnesses and Salafi Muslims as political forces and severely restricts their activities and punishes them with long prison sentences for practicing their faith. Similarly, Eritreans professing atheism or casting doubt on any religion or deity run [the risk](#) of arrest and social ostracization. Nontheists are often forced to [associate](#) online on platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups because in-person association carries the risk of arrest.

Positive Developments

Eritrean authorities continued to take some steps that enhanced religious freedom. Similar to its actions in 2020, in 2021 authorities in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, set free approximately 130 prisoners of conscience from various religions and denominations. Most of those released were women, and some were released conditionally. In February 2021, the Eritrean government released on bail [70 prisoners](#) of conscience from different prisons. The government followed with the release of [21 prisoners](#) in March and 36 prisoners in April 2021, many of them Christians. In August 2021, the Eritrean embassy in Washington, D.C. engaged with USCIRF on issues of freedom of religion or belief for the first time. USCIRF acknowledged the Eritrean authorities' release of more than 350 prisoners and encouraged them to release the remaining religious prisoners as well as remove legal barriers to promote religious freedom.

Key U.S. Policy

Due to disagreements on critical issues, the United States and Eritrea have not exchanged ambassadors since 2010. In recent years, however, diplomatic engagement has increased. In May 2021, newly appointed U.S. Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa, Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman, and Deputy Ambassador Payton Knopf [traveled to](#) Eritrea during a regional visit focused on the crisis in Ethiopia and pressed the Eritrean government to withdraw its troops from the Tigray region where they reportedly had been committing grave human rights violations, including religious freedom abuses. Finally, the U.S. Embassy in Asmara continues to [highlight the importance](#) of advancing human rights issues by releasing all human rights and religious activists who are still imprisoned as well as allowing the registration of political and religious organizations.

Since 2004, the U.S. Department of State has designated Eritrea as a CPC for systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom. Most [recently](#), on November 15, the State Department redesignated Eritrea as a CPC under IRFA and maintained an arms embargo on the country under 22 CFR 126.1 of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations.