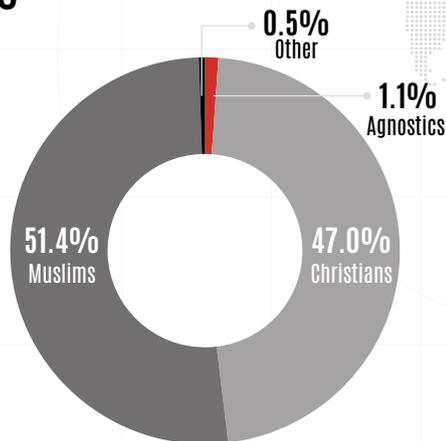




ERITREA

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

In 1997, four years after its independence, Eritrea's National Assembly approved the country's constitution. Article 19 (1) states: "Every person shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief." Article 19 (4) further adds: "Every person shall have the freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practice."¹

However, the constitution as such has never been implemented, and the authorities have always governed by decree. In one such decree, issued in 1995, the government recognises only four religious communities, namely the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea, the Catholic Church, and Sunni Islam.² Other religions are not allowed and are considered illegal.³ Furthermore, the religions that are allowed to operate, do so under certain restrictions.⁴

Generally, the government keeps strong control on all Christian churches, with some exceptions, and on the Muslim community. The ruling party, the People's

Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), appoints the top leaders of the Muslim community and the Orthodox Church. The government also pays the salaries of top Church officials and controls their means of transport, including fuel rations, as well as their activities and financial resources. By contrast, the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church have maintained a certain degree of autonomy.

The country's four authorised religious communities still require permission from the Office of Religious Affairs to print and distribute religious literature among their faithful.⁵ Religious leaders and religious media are not allowed to comment on political matters. To assure compliance, every year the Office of Religious Affairs reiterates to Church leaders the provision contained in the decree of 1995 with regard to religious organisations.⁶ The religious leaders are required to submit reports about their activities to the government every six months. The Office also forbids the four recognised religions from accepting funds from abroad; this restricts financial resources to monies generated locally generally limiting religious activities to worship. The decree further states that if the churches wish to engage in social works, they must register as NGOs and concede the supervision of their funding from abroad to the au-

thorities.

The registration procedure that non-recognised religious communities have to follow is complex and leaves the door open to harassment of the affected groups.

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Because of government restrictions, strict media control, and an “extremely secretive society,”⁷ it is difficult to find reliable information about the current situation of religious freedom in Eritrea. The lack of government transparency and a fear of reprisal for those who would testify make it equally hard to know how many people have been imprisoned for their faith. Those who appear to suffer the most, however, are members of the unrecognized religious groups - the majority belonging to Pentecostal or Evangelical communities although Muslims are also known to suffer detention and abuse - who reported instances of imprisonment and deaths in custody due to mistreatment. Human rights observers calculate that in 2018 some 345 Church leaders were imprisoned without charges or trial and the number of lay faithful incarcerated is estimated to be between 800 to 2000.⁸ In prison, “praying aloud, singing, preaching, and possessing religious books”⁹ is banned.

The majority of places of worship not affiliated with the four officially registered religions remained closed, even though some unregistered Greek Orthodox and Jewish groups continued to use various existing religious buildings in Asmara.¹⁰

Christians have been detained just for gathering and participating in ceremonies. Police have conducted raids in homes arresting believers of non-recognised religions gathered to pray; release from imprisonment is conditional on the repudiation of their faith.¹¹ In March 2018, 35 Christians held in prison for four years were released under certain conditions, namely that they “no longer attend meetings or worship services of their Churches”.¹² Some were told to renounce their faith or join the Eritrean Orthodox Church; if they did not, they would be transferred to a place with worse conditions.¹³

Some 53 Jehovah’s Witnesses were detained after refusing to renounce their faith or do their military service.¹⁴ An unreported number of Muslims also remained in detention after being arrested in protests in October 2017 and March 2018 in Asmara.¹⁵ The Patriarch of the

Eritrean Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios, continues to remain under house arrest throughout 2019, incarcerated in 2006 for protesting the government’s interference in Church affairs.¹⁶

In October 2017, a private Muslim educational establishment, al Diaa Islamic Secondary School, was shut down by the authorities provoking unprecedented protests in the capital. The principal, Haji Musa Mohammed Nur, along with other colleagues, was arrested for opposing the closing; he died in detention in March 2018. The school was later allowed to reopen.¹⁷

In the summer of 2019, about 150 Christians were arrested because of their faith;¹⁸ the first 70 on 23 June 2019 in Keren. In addition to the 150, many more were brought before a judge to renounce their faith, more specifically, to “renounce Christ.”¹⁹

In April of 2020, 15 Christians were detained at a prayer service in the region of Asmara as they attended a worship service in a private home. They were incarcerated in the Mai Serwa Prison, infamous for its inhumane conditions.²⁰ In June of 2020 a group of 30 Christians and non-Christians, was detained at a wedding of a Christian couple.²¹

In an April 2020 statement, Daniela Kravetz, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea, reported that in 2019 alone over 200 individuals were imprisoned because of their faith.²²

Despite being one of the four registered communities, the Catholic Church is also under pressure and frequently attacked. In mid-June 2019, the Eritrean military forcibly closed down more than 20 Catholic health facilities²³. According to local witnesses, the authorities destroyed windows and doors, and harassed staff and patients. A Franciscan sister, the director of a hospital in northern Eritrea, was arrested when she resisted the closure.²⁴

In September 2019, authorities shut down eight schools - one of these the well-known Saint-Joseph Catholic School in the city of Keren.²⁵ In the same month, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference wrote a letter to the Minister of Education, Semere Re’esom, protesting against the closure of Catholic schools, noting “if this is not hate against religion, what is this?”²⁶

The authorities said that the Christian and Muslim schools were shut down because of rules adopted in 1995, limiting the activities of religious organisations.²⁷

Observers suggest that the closing of clinics and schools is a consequence of the government seeking sole control of the social sector.²⁸

In February 2020, the government refused a delegation of the Catholic Church of Ethiopia to enter the country.²⁹

PROSPECTS FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION

Even though granted in the constitution, Eritrea's authoritarian government does not allow freedom of religious belief and the country suffers one of the worst records for religious freedom in the world. The authorities deny most Eritreans their civil and political rights and as a result, thousands are trying to emigrate. With crackdowns and arbitrary detention on members of non-recognised religious groups commonplace, and increasing restrictions on authorised groups - for example the recent closure of Catholic schools and health centres - the situation of freedom of religion is dire and does not seem likely to improve in the near future.

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