



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# COUNTRY UPDATE: ERITREA

August 2021

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### 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 Mohy Omer, Policy Analyst*

### Introduction

Since its independence in 1993, Eritrea has been under the authoritarian [leadership](#) of President Isaias Afwerki and his political party, the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). Although the Eritrean constitution guarantees freedom of speech, religion, conscience, and assembly, the government perceives these fundamental human rights as threats to its authority. [Proclamation](#) No. 73 of 1995 permits the government to exert full control over religious activities in the country. The government recognizes only four religious groups: Sunni Islam, Eritrean Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and Evangelical Protestantism, but restricts their activities, and it systematically persecutes members of unregistered religious groups, including through arrests, imprisonments, and property confiscations.

[Approximately](#) 2,000 to 2,500 individuals are reportedly detained in the Mai Serwa maximum-security and other prisons, 500 of whom are imprisoned because of their religion or belief. These include both Muslims and Christians from different denominations. Notably, members of the Jehovah's Witness community have been in prison for over 25 years for refusing to participate in the war of independence and the mandatory military service due to their faith.

However, Eritrean authorities took some positive steps in 2020 and earlier this year. These steps included the [release on bail](#) of 240 prisoners in 2020 and [over 70](#) in 2021, reportedly due to concerns about COVID-19 in prisons though some prisoners were released on bail and others were not, and the easing of restrictions on worship for the Baha'i community, the only remaining Jewish family, and the Greek Orthodox Church.

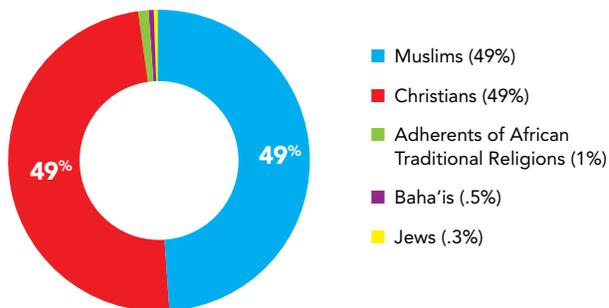
This country update provides an overview of religious freedom conditions in Eritrea and highlights recent developments. It also discusses U.S.-Eritrean diplomatic relations, which have long been poor but have improved slightly in recent years. It concludes by recommending that the U.S. government urge Eritrean authorities to release remaining religious prisoners of conscience and remove all legal barriers to the enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief.



### Religious Demographics

As of 2020 the U.S. government estimates the total population of Eritrea at six million. The population is *split equally* 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 predominately Sunni, and the Christian community is predominantly Eritrean Orthodox with various denominations including Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Pentecostals. In addition to these two main religious groups, there are small communities of Baha’i (approximately 200 individuals) and a handful of Jews. Finally, about *2 percent of the population* are adherents of African traditional religions.

#### Religious Demographics in Eritrea



### Government Control of Religion

The Eritrean constitution and laws state that they *protect* freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, as well as the rights of individuals to practice the religion of their choice. However, the Eritrean government does not implement these provisions in practice. Authorities in Eritrea officially recognize only four religious *denominations*: Sunni Islam, Eritrean Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and Evangelical Protestantism. Despite this recognition, authorities place restrictions on these groups’ activities. For example, in May 2021, the government *targeted* the Catholic Church, closing or nationalizing nine schools, and threatened to do so for 19 additional Church-run primary schools. Additionally, in September 2019, the Eritrean government took control of seven religious *schools* affiliated with Sunni Muslim, Catholic, and Lutheran communities. Affiliates of “unrecognized” religious groups such as Shi’a Muslims, adherents of African traditional religions, and Jehovah’s Witnesses face even greater *challenges* to practicing their beliefs. The government *systematically* persecutes members of unregistered religious groups by arresting them and confiscating their property.

Citing the fear of extremism and foreign influence, the government does not allow any religious organization to have external contacts with international religious institutions. Accordingly, the Eritrean government *limits* foreign funding to both registered and unregistered religious organizations and religious freedom advocates. Religious organizations are only allowed to receive donations from local followers and the government.

Eritrean authorities continue to hold the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, [Abune Antonios](#), under house arrest in an unknown location, after forcibly removing him from his position in 2005. Authorities accused him of political activism after he refused to excommunicate 3,000 prisoners who opposed the government. After immense international pressure, the government allowed Patriarch Antonios to make a [public appearance](#) at a church service in 2017. It was his first public appearance in 10 years. In April 2019, a secretly [recorded](#) video of Patriarch Antonios appeared online showing his health deteriorating. Patriarch Antonios is currently a USCIRF [religious prisoner of conscience](#).

## Mandatory Military Service

The [law](#) requires all Eritreans between the ages of 18 and 50 to serve in the military for 18 months. Exemptions are given 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. It [requires](#) prisoners of conscience to renounce their religious affiliation in order to be released from prison.

Jehovah's Witnesses have been stripped of their citizenship, denied access to job opportunities and government benefits, and imprisoned under poor conditions because of their refusal to serve in the military based on their religious beliefs. As of 2021, [52](#) Jehovah's Witnesses were being held at the Mai Serwa prison, just outside of the capital, Asmara. Some of these religious prisoners have spent more than 25 years in jail without standing trial. Due to harsh prison conditions and inhumane treatment of prisoners, [two](#) elderly Jehovah's Witnesses are known to have died in prison in 2018.

## Positive Developments

In 2020, Eritrean authorities [set free](#) over 240 religious prisoners and eased restrictions on the Baha'i community, the only remaining Jewish family, and the Greek Orthodox Church as well as other faith backgrounds. Some of these positive developments continued in 2021. For example, in February 2021, the Eritrean government [released](#) on bail more than 70 prisoners of conscience from different prisons. The government followed with the release of [21 prisoners](#), mostly women, in March and [36 people](#) in April 2021. These steps were positive, but approximately 400 individuals are believed to still be detained due to their faith. International human rights organizations have called on Eritrea to continue to release all prisoners of conscience or grant them due process in a court of law.

## Key U.S. Policy

The State Department has designated Eritrea as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom since 2004, most recently in December 2019. In its April 2021 [Annual Report](#), USCIRF recommended that the State Department redesignate Eritrea as a CPC in 2021 and maintain the arms embargo that remains in place. Since 2010, Eritrea and the United States have not exchanged ambassadors due to poor diplomatic relations. However, in recent years, the two countries have been engaging to improve their bilateral relations. In May 2021, the U.S. Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa, Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman, visited Eritrea where he [discussed](#) human rights issues with the Eritrean leadership.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

While the U.S. government should welcome Eritrea's decisions to ease some restrictions on the Baha'i community and the Jewish family and to release religious prisoners, it should also continue to encourage Eritrean authorities to advance other religious freedom issues in the country. This includes urging the release of all remaining religious prisoners as well as removing the legal barriers to allow all Eritreans full religious freedom. Finally, the U.S. government should continue to engage Eritrean officials through official congressional visits to encourage reforms that promote religious freedom.



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