

↓ Eritrea

Population: 4,600,000

Capital: Asmara

Political Rights: 7

Civil Liberties: 6

Status: Not Free

Trend Arrow: Eritrea received a downward trend arrow due to heightened legal restrictions on religious minorities.

Overview:

The repressive government of President Isaias Afwerki clamped down further on civil society and grew more isolated internationally in 2006. Leading journalists and democracy activists remained jailed for a fifth year, and Christians who belonged to unrecognized churches were increasingly persecuted. Meanwhile, the government continued its policy of refusing to permit competitive elections. The authorities also expelled a number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and UN peacekeepers, and were accused of supporting Islamist militants in Somalia.

In 1950, after years of Italian occupation, Eritrea was incorporated into Ethiopia. Its independence struggle began in 1962 as a nationalist and Marxist guerrilla war against the Ethiopian government of Emperor Haile Selassie. The seizure of power by a Marxist junta in Ethiopia in 1974 removed the ideological basis of the conflict, and by the time Eritrea finally defeated Ethiopia's northern armies in 1991, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) had discarded Marxism. Internationally recognized independence was achieved in May 1993 after a referendum supervised by the United Nations produced a landslide vote for statehood.

War with Ethiopia broke out in 1998. In May 2000, an Ethiopian military offensive made significant territorial gains. Eritrea signed a truce with Ethiopia in June 2000, and a peace treaty was signed in December 2000. The agreement provided for a UN-led buffer force to be installed along the Eritrean side of the contested border and stipulated that further negotiations should determine the final boundary line. The war had dominated the country's political and economic agenda, reflecting the government's habitual use of real or perceived national security threats to generate popular support and political unity.

In May 2001, 15 senior ruling-party members known as the Group of 15 publicly criticized President Isaias Afwerki and called for “the rule of law and for justice, through peaceful and legal ways and means.” Eleven members of the dissident group were arrested for treason in September 2001. Three members who were out of the country at the time escaped arrest, and one withdrew his support for the group. The small independent media sector was also shut down, and 18 journalists were imprisoned.

In 2005, the Eritrean government clamped down on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) by withdrawing tax exemptions and increasing registration requirements. The government ordered the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to end its operations in the country. Separately, tensions remained high with Ethiopia, as Eritrea objected to the inconclusive results of an internationally mediated solution to its long-standing border dispute. It claimed that the Ethiopians were not respecting the 2000 agreement, and the authorities banned UN helicopter flights in Eritrean airspace, restricted UN ground patrols, and expelled some of the peacekeepers.

Isaias’s government added to its restrictions on civil society and isolated itself internationally in 2006. The journalists and democracy activists detained in 2001 remained jailed for a fifth year despite widespread international calls for their release, and competitive elections continued to be blocked. Reports appeared in 2006 of hundreds of followers of various unregistered churches (mostly Protestant) being detained, harassed, and abused. Approximately 2,000 individuals remained in detention at year’s end because of their religious affiliation, according to the NGO Compass Direct.

The government also expelled several development NGOs, including Concern Worldwide, Mercy Corps and Acord. Five UN peacekeepers were expelled without cause, and the government was accused of supporting Islamist militants in Somalia. The UN-backed transitional government there, which the militants opposed, was receiving Ethiopian military aid.

The 2006 UN Human Poverty Index ranked Eritrea at 70 out of 102 countries measured. Per capita GDP was \$977. The government is estimated to have the highest level of per capita military spending as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), at 36.4 percent, in the world.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Eritrea is not an electoral democracy. Created in February 1994 as a successor to the EPLF, the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) maintains complete dominance over the country’s political life. Instead of moving toward creating a framework for a democratic political system, the PFDJ has taken significant steps backward since the end of the war with Ethiopia. The 2001 crackdown on those calling for greater political pluralism,

and subsequent repressive steps, clearly demonstrate the Eritrean government's authoritarian policies.

In 1994, a 50-member Constitutional Commission was established. A new constitution was adopted in 1997, authorizing "conditional" political pluralism with provisions for a multiparty system. The constitution calls for the 150-seat legislature, the National Assembly, to elect the president from among its members by a majority vote. In 2000, the National Assembly determined that the first general elections would be held in December 2001 and appointed a committee that issued draft regulations governing political parties. The regulations have never been enacted, and independent political parties authorized by the constitution do not exist. National elections have been postponed indefinitely. In 2004, regional assembly elections were conducted, but they were carefully orchestrated by the PFDJ and offered no real choice.

Eritrea has long maintained a reputation for a relatively low level of corruption. In recent years, however, graft appears to have increased somewhat. Eritrea was ranked 93 out of 163 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Government control over all broadcasting outlets and the repression of independent print media have eliminated the vehicles for dissemination of opposing or alternative views. In its September 2001 crackdown, the government banned all privately owned newspapers while claiming that a parliamentary committee would examine conditions under which they would be permitted to reopen. Journalists arrested in 2001 remain imprisoned, and other journalists have subsequently been arrested. In 2006 the Committee to Protect Journalists listed Eritrea as one of the ten worst countries limiting press freedom in the world. Internet use remains limited, with an estimated 50,000 users in 2005 out of a population of more than four million.

The government places significant limitations on the exercise of religion. It officially recognizes only four faiths—Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and Lutheranism as practiced by the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. Persecution of minority Christian sects has escalated in recent years, particularly against Jehovah's Witnesses, who were stripped of their basic civic rights in 1994, and evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Members of other minority churches have been jailed and tortured or ill-treated to make them abandon their faith. Some Muslims have also been targeted. The U.S. Department of State's 2006 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom cited Eritrea as one of eight top abusers of religious freedom in the world.

Academic freedom is constrained. High school students are required to participate in a highly unpopular policy of obligatory military service, often at a station far from their homes, such as the training camp in Sawa, in the far western part of the country, near the Ethiopian border. The conscription periods are open-ended, and no conscientious objector clause exists. Critics have alleged that such activities constitute forced labor.

The government continues to maintain a hostile attitude toward civil society. Independent NGOs are not allowed, and the legitimate role of human rights defenders is not recognized. In 2005, Eritrea enacted legislation to regulate the operations of all NGOs, requiring them to pay taxes on imported materials, submit project reports every three months, renew their licenses annually, and meet government-established target levels of financial resources. International human rights NGOs are barred from the country, and in 2006 the government expelled three remaining development NGOs.

The civil service, the military, the police, and other essential services have some restrictions on their freedom to form unions. In addition, groups of 20 or more persons seeking to form a union require special approval from the Ministry of Labor. The military conscription of men aged 18 to 45 has also created a scarcity of skilled labor.

A judiciary was formed by decree in 1993. It has never issued rulings significantly at variance with government positions, and constitutional guarantees are often ignored in cases related to state security. The provision of speedy trials is limited by a lack of trained personnel, inadequate funding, and poor infrastructure.

According to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, torture, arbitrary detentions, and political arrests are widespread. Religious persecution and ill-treatment of those trying to avoid military service are increasing, and torture is systematically practiced by the army. Prison conditions are poor, and outside monitors such as the International Committee of the Red Cross have been denied access to detainees.

There have been reports of government and societal discrimination against the Kunama, one of the country's nine ethnic groups. Historically, the Kunama, who reside primarily in the west, have resisted attempts to integrate them into the national society.

Official government policy is supportive of free enterprise, and citizens generally have the freedom to choose their employment, establish private businesses, and operate them without government harassment.

Women played important roles in the guerilla movement, and the government has worked in favor of improving the status of women. In an effort to encourage broader participation by women in politics, the PFDJ in 1997 named three women to its executive council and 12 women to its central committee. Women participated in the Constitutional Commission, filling almost half of the positions on the 50-member panel, and hold senior government positions, including minister of justice and minister of labor. Approximately 40 percent of all households are headed by women. Equal educational opportunity, equal pay for equal work, and penalties for domestic violence have been codified. However, traditional societal discrimination persists against women in the largely rural and agricultural country.