

ERITREA: Religious Freedom and Situation of Religious Minorities

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Introduction

Religions with belief in one God - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - are considered almost indigenous in what we today know as Eritrea and Ethiopia. Christianity was introduced to Eritrea and Ethiopia in the 4th century by St. Frumentius of Syria while Judaism at practice was already in the region. Islam was introduced by the very first disciples of the prophet of Islam, Mohammed, in 615 A.D. This is to confirm that religion and faith in one God is still inseparable part of daily life for the 5.5 million Eritreans of today. Thus, the presence of religious persecution in any form affects the population as a whole.

It is estimated that about half of the population of Eritrea is Christian and the other half Muslim, although there also exist about 2% professing indigenous beliefs. Of the Christian half, about 75% belong to the Orthodox Tewahdo/Monophysite Church, about 15% to the Roman Catholic Church and the remainder belong to the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church and other Protestant Churches such as the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Faith Mission, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals and other groups like Baha'is and Buddhists.

Because religious persecution cannot be separated to a large extent from the general violation of human rights, this piece of writing will first give a general picture of the political and human rights situation in Eritrea. This will be followed by a quick survey of the Government policies on religion and the ongoing harassment of religious groups, starting with the minority religions/churches which are known as the "unregistered" ones – meaning, legally considered non-existent in Eritrea. The paper also highlights the unhappy situation of the officially recognized four religions: Islam, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Eritrean Catholic Church and the Eritrean Evangelical (Lutheran) Church.

Political Situation in Eritrea

Eritrea attained its independence from Ethiopia 20 years ago after a protracted 30-year bloody war. The last phase of the war was led by an erstwhile Marxist liberation movement headed by Mr. Isaias Afewerki, born in an Orthodox family. Since his army's entry into Asmara, the capital, the new leader proclaimed that no opposition political organization will be allowed in the country. Thus, all political parties were alienated. A constitution was drafted and ratified in 1997 by an unelected assembly that consisted of his own front's leadership and selected regional "representatives".

Till this day, that constitution has not been put into effect. Even the unelected rubber stamp parliament formed in the early 1990s never met since February 2002.

In early 2001, a group of 15 high-ranking officials asked for government reform and the implementation of the constitution. By September 2001, all of them were taken to prison together with all journalists of the then thriving private press in the country. Therefore, one cannot talk about legal provisions or judicial procedures for individual or group claims on human rights violations. In short, Eritrea is a country:

- Without a constitution, where the rule of law is unknown;
- Without freedom of press where no private media is permitted to exist;
- Without freedom of association where civil society organizations and political parties are not allowed to function;
- Without the freedom to exercise one's religious faith.

Many political and human rights and observers call Eritrea the "North Korea of Africa". One would easily describe it as the modern Cambodia of Khmer Rouge with the Eritrean President, Isaias Afewerki, as the living Pol Pot.

The General Human Rights Situation in Eritrea

The regime allows no space for individual autonomy in political, religious and other spheres. Any person - religious or non-religious - is exposed to the whims of the regime and can easily fall victim of the arbitrary arrests, torture, forced labour and other maltreatments which are part of people's everyday life in Eritrea.

Incarcerated people remain for many Eritrean without any charge levelled against them or appearing at a court of law. Prisoners are not only denied access to lawyers, but have no right to be visited by families or the Red Cross. No one knows where prisoners are kept. However, reports keep telling that Eritrea has over 300 prisons housing up to 30,000 prisoners. Arrested persons just disappear. Death in custody is commonplace, and for years without end, family members have no way to know whether their relatives are dead or alive. A story told by a former prison guard who escaped to Ethiopia in 2010 gives a graphic account of the sad situation in Eritrean prisons. He said that at the top security prison he guarded at Era-Ero, there were 35 inmates, among them 11 former ministers and 13 journalists. By the time he escaped, half of the inmates were dead due to malnourishment and medical neglect. The remaining half were emaciated bodies, some of them blind or unable to move or mentally deranged.

Eritrean Government Policies on Religion

The 1997 constitution provides the freedom to practice any religion. Yet, that document is still drawing dust in Government shelves. Therefore, we cannot say

Eritrea has any legal document allowing its citizens the freedom to worship, to have faith and express it.

Eritrea is a party to a few international human rights conventions, among them the International Convention on Civic and Political Rights that it signed in January 2002. As we know, the first two sections of Article 18 of that Convention state as follows:

- Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.
- No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

Yet, everyday actions of the Eritrean Government even after its signature of that Convention contradict every sentence in the quoted parts of Article 18. Simply put, the existing Eritrean Government:

- Does not allow freedom of religion
- Does not allow people free practice and teaching of religion
- Does not allow people to adopt religion of their choice.

A proclamation issued in 1995 required religious entities to be registered and have their assets and sources of income accounted. It also demanded that religious groups should not engage with the outside world except in spiritual matters.

The already poor human rights record of the regime worsened after the border war of 1998-2000 with Ethiopia. In 2001, the Government wanted to put into effect its 1995 proclamation and reminded all religious entities to register. Requests for registration were submitted by many religious entities. However, only Islam, the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church and the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church were accepted as official religions in the country.

The rest of the religious entities were not registered although many of them did fulfil the legal requirements. Part of the story of religious repression in Eritrea – i.e. tip of the iceberg - is highlighted in the following paragraphs, starting with the “unregistered” minority religions. The legal measures and State policy enactments are mentioned as we go through the different experiences of the religious groups. There is little need to mention judicial practices in this writing because the judiciary branch is not required to meddle in religious or political cases.

Persecution of Religious Minorities in Eritrea

As noted earlier, gross violation of human rights in Eritrea affects almost every family, every religion in the country. Yet, according to a manuscript by a Western observer to be published within 2011, there are special groups affected more than others. It is asserted that “among the most severe human rights abuses documented

in Eritrea have been those directed at religious minorities and other alternative currents within the officially recognized religions.”

The registration requirements put into effect in 2002 included: a) history of the religious group; b) unique benefits it can give; c) conformity with local culture, and its d) sources of income. Many of those churches like the Seventh Day Adventist Church and the Faith Mission had a history of over 50 years of existence in Eritrea; they not given permission to legally be present and continue religious and humanitarian work. Between 2002 and 2005 alone, 18 churches or religious groups were shut down, their properties taken, and 23 pastors with 2,000 followers imprisoned without due process of the law. In almost all cases, political prisoners and prisoners of conscience are not taken to any kind of court of law in the country. They are automatically considered to have “committed” crime and kept in prison or endless forced labour.

In the eyes of the Eritrean Government, the so-called unregistered religious minorities are seen as forces of disunity, destabilization and as agents of foreign influences. Although not legally allowed to “exist”, members of these minority groups try to carry out religious activities underground while knowing well the risks awaiting them. During the past 20 years, there were unaccountable reports of mass arrests of worshipers while gathered for prayer or other religious events. Many others were taken away from their homes or hiding places.

The unregistered minority religions include Jehovah’s Witnesses, members of the Pentecostal movement, independent evangelical groups and even reformists of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. After arrest, they are subjected to harsh treatment under long periods of imprisonment, torture and in many cases death. Forced recantations are commonplace.

It was estimated that at any given time, there have been well over 3,000 people detained on account of religion. In addition to this, countless others were given different punishments within the military camps for possessing copies of the Bible/Qur’an or for having prayed or discussed religion. In many instances, the military officers collected and burned copies of the Bible and the Qur’an. The extent of the ongoing religious persecution in Eritrea can to a small extent be gauged by looking at how the regime has been treating the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Pentecostals.

The Jehovah’s and the Pentecostals: In 1993, the Jehovah’s Witnesses asked to be given the choice of not participating in the referendum for Eritrea’s independence. They also asked to be exempted from the military conscriptions and the national service, which also included military training for possible engagement in armed conflicts. They were denied exemptions and their persecution started soon after Eritrea’s independence. Of the twelve key leaders of the group were arrested in

1994, three are still languishing in prison without any due process of the law. Also as of 1994, Jehovah's Witnesses are denied the following very basic rights:

- Government jobs,
- Business permits,
- The right to buy property,
- The right to register births, marriages and deaths,
- ID cards and permits for internal movement,
- The right to own a passport,
- The right to issue an exit visa etc.

The Eritrean Ministry of Internal Affairs in 1995 officially admitted that the "Jehovah's Witnesses lost their citizenship because they refused to accept the Government of Eritrea and its laws".

Similarly, the Pentecostals were subjected to severe control and maltreatment of their members. The movement was registering fast membership growth in the country, especially in the capital, Asmara, where new adherents were estimated to have reached over 10,000. This was not liked both by the Government and the Orthodox Church, which was the major loser. Mainly for political purposes, the Government sided with the Orthodox Church. Already existing persecution intensified against Pentecostals as of the year 2000. Their members were arrested in big numbers.

It is to be noted that there always existed bias against religious minorities in Eritrea. During the years of armed struggle in the country (1961-1991), the mindset in the liberation movements was to be suspicious of everything foreign, mainly religious groups connected to foreign sources. From those early days, groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Pentecostal groups (whose members are pejoratively called "Pente") were seen as "foreign-inspired" and therefore a threat to the struggle for national sovereignty and the unity of the people. In post-liberation Eritrea, the allegation of "foreign connection" was one of the excuses used by the new regime to single out religious groups for persecution and control. However, none of the religious groups were spared of persecution in Eritrea. Even the "registered" religions suffered under the dictatorial regime, as briefly narrated below.

Control over Registered Religions in Eritrea

Situation of Eritrean Muslims From the start in 1991, the Eritrean regime did not take all necessary measures to win the hearts and minds of Eritrean Muslims. First it denied return to Eritrea of political groups, and planted obstacles to limit the return of refugees from the Sudan. Majority of the refugees and members of the banned fronts were Muslims. In contravention of Islamic laws, the new Government appointed a Mufti for Eritrea and imprisoned those who opposed this measure; Muslim religious charities and schools were shut down on allegations of teaching or espousing

fundamentalist ideas. It was reported that up to 150 Muslim prisoners were liquidated in one night alone without any judicial process. Many disappeared after being arrested for having “connections” with opposition organizations in the Sudan. Arrests were everyday occurrence. In 2008, about 180 Muslims were arrested in one go for failing to give “due respect” to the Government-appointed Mufti. This type of harassment and at times severe action against Eritrean Muslims continued throughout the past 20 years.

The Eritrean Orthodox Church

In recent years, the Eritrean regime divided the Orthodox Church between the traditionalist priesthood and the reformists who were trying to modernize practices within the Church. Presently, the Eritrean Government is giving huge privileges to the traditionalist priests in the Orthodox Church in order to obtain their support. In 2005, the Government deposed the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, Abune Antonius, when he condemned the arrest of a number of reformists of the Church and refused to excommunicate the 3,000 Sunday school attendants of the Medhanie Alem Church (Church of the Saviour) to which the reformist priests belonged. In the past few years alone, many charismatic Orthodox Church preachers and their parishioners were harassed, imprisoned and in many cases tortured for having “caused disunity” in the Church.

Many Orthodox Church priests and members are still fleeing the country in large numbers because of the ongoing persecution.

Today, Eritrean diaspora communities belong to either one of two camps: those supporting the regime and those defending and supporting the deposed Patriarch, They are opposed to the regime and its lay administrator, Yoftahe Dimetros, who literally controls the Church alongside a Government appointed Patriarch, Abune Dioscoros, who is not even recognized by the Orthodox Papacy in Egypt. It is appropriate to note that some Eritrean elite supporting the regime and its appointee are of the opinion that religious freedom also means “not letting your religion to be targeted by new influences”. In short, the Eritrean Orthodox Church is at war with itself both inside the homeland and abroad.

The Eritrean Catholic Church

From the early 1990s, the Eritrean Catholic Church and many of its priests have been critical of certain Government policies. The most notable critique was contained in the Catholic Bishops’ Pastoral Letter in 2001 which spoke against the war and the ongoing militarism and asked for reconciliation with Ethiopia and the Eritrean opposition in exile. The Bishops also complained of Government measures to curtail the Catholic Church’s charities for health care, education and development projects.

The Government banned not only the publication and distribution of the Bishops’ Letter but also shut down the Church’s press, the oldest in Eritrea. Some property

was taken by the Government, and the Church was refused permits to build new churches and new schools. Humanitarian assistance was stopped and Caritas barred from giving food, medicine and books to Eritrea. Priests were refused visa to travel abroad for education or even medication unless they are over the age of 50. They also were asked to make military service. Pope Benedict requested exemption of priests in 2005 and his call was ignored. In 2007, Catholic Bishops of Eritrea were again asked to give list of priests and they refused. More Catholic schools, orphanages, clinics and women's training schools were confiscated and 14 nuns expelled from Eritrea. The Church officials and the Government did not meet to discuss issues of mutual concern for the past 11 years. High tensions are still persisting.

The Eritrean Evangelical Church

The Eritrean Evangelical (Lutheran) Church, one of the four registered religions in the country, no doubt suffers of the general control measures imposed to restrict religious activities in the country. However, the Church is more or less considered as less confrontational and so far has not been severely affected by direct Government pressures, or at least not as much as is the case to the Catholic Church.

The World and Religious Persecution in Eritrea

One close observer of the Eritrean situation wrote not long ago that "Some of the most severe religious persecutions on earth take place in Eritrea. Unfortunately, these abuses of human freedom have escaped the notice of most mass media". This is a correct statement of the Eritrean situation.

Nevertheless, the Eritrean Government is from time to time reprimanded by a number of governments and organizations for its very poor record on religious freedom. In 2004, the United States designated Eritrea as Country of Particular Concern on religious persecution; this designation was repeated in 2009. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and a few other organizations also issue annual reports on the situation in Eritrea. But these actions have not been enough to make pressure bear on the regime in Eritrea.

After 20 years of its independent existence, human rights and religious freedom are non-existence in Eritrea. The situation is in fact worsening by the day. There is indescribable desperation in the country and the prolonged repression is driving every person to leave the country to end somewhere in the world. As a result, Eritrea has become the third largest refugee producing country in the world although it is 113th in population size. The exodus in thousands per month continues in spite of the risks people face while crossing the borders and abroad. At the borders, the Eritrean security agents are armed with the policy of shoot-to-kill. The refugee camps in Eastern Sudan and the Northern Ethiopia are among the worst of their kind in the

world. Those young Eritreans who try to reach Europe or Israel also die in the deserts, in the high seas or end victims of human traffickers in the Sinai. Needless to say, there is an emergency situation regarding Eritrea and its people. This distressing human rights violations and religious persecution in Eritrea have to be addressed in order to save lives and ward off a worse human tragedy from happening.

Recommendations

1. Engaging the Eritrean Government and the Orthodox Church:

- a) The WCC and sisterly organizations could help by initiating periodical reviews and issuing six-monthly Statements on the situation of churches in Eritrea;
- b) WCC and sisterly organizations to constantly communicate with concerned Eritrean authorities through joint delegations and messages urging them to allow freedom of worship to their own people; and to implement the constitution they ratified in 1997, and respect international conventions on freedom of religion and human rights;
- c) Tell the Eritrean Orthodox Church that its becoming a political tool to the Government has harmed freedom of worship in Eritrea;

2. Help Raise Awareness on Human/Religious Rights

- a) WCC and sister churches could organize from abroad radio and television broadcasts to Eritrea to raise awareness on human and religious rights, and teach tolerance, reconciliation, and non-violence to the entire population;
- b) Initiate awareness programmes for diaspora Eritreans on human and religious rights etc through workshops and conferences;

3. Intervene in Favour of the Divided Eritrean Orthodox Church Abroad

Members of the Eritrean Orthodox Church in diaspora are severely divided between those who support the deposed Patriarch Antonius and those with the Government appointee. WCC and sisterly organization could help by reviewing this negative development and take the appropriate measure to empower those in need of support;

4. Humanitarian Support to Refugees

- a) The vast majority of the newly arrived refugees in Northern Ethiopia and Eastern Sudan are young Christians, quite a good number of them leaving the country because of religious persecution. They deserve full support of the allied world churches. The European Union and other sources could be approached to direct the development grants suspended from reaching the regime in Eritrea for funding vocational education and other social service programmes to the benefit of the refugees.
- b) Eritrean, Ethiopian and Sudanese refugees have of late become victims of a strong network of human traffickers for organ “harvesting” in Egypt and

Sudan with its centre in the Sinai Desert. Action on this matter should be one of the urgent priority tasks of Churches. WCC could take the lead.

Among the main references used:

1. **Amnesty International:** annual reports for 2009, 2010 and other periodical reports: E.g.
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/eritrea-prisoners-conscience>
2. **Human Rights Watch:** regular and periodical reports, statement. Also see: (<http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2010/eritrea>)
3. “**Religion, Repression and Human Rights in Eritrea**” by Tricia Redecker Hepner (a manuscript due to be published in the Northeast African Studies within 2011).
4. **Religious Persecution in Eritrea:**
(http://www.inchainsforchrist.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=76:freedom-of-religion-eritreas-violation-of-domestic-and-international)
5. **Reporters without Borders:**
<http://en.rsf.org/eritrea-eritrea-07-02-2008,25386>
6. **US State Department:**
Annual Human Rights Reports: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/af/>)
7. Plus Harnnet.org and different Eritrean websites reporting on human rights.

(* The situation in Eritrea deserved more. However, my sincere apologies for limiting the scope of this writing due to the time constraint encountered within the short notice given me for this meeting).