

Eritrea

Political Rights: 7
Civil Liberties: 6
Status: Not Free

Overview:

The government of President Isaias Afwerki continued in 2004 its repressive policy of allowing no opposition or independent organizations in the political or civil sphere. A group of political dissidents and journalists imprisoned in 2001 remain in jail despite widespread international calls for their release. Tensions with neighboring Ethiopia over their disputed border continued.

In 1950, after years of Italian occupation, Eritrea was incorporated into Ethiopia. Eritrea's 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 succeeded in making 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 further negotiations to determine the final boundary line. The war had dominated the country's political and economic agenda and reflected deeper issues of nationalism and political mobilization by a government that has long used the threat of real or perceived enemies to generate popular support and unity.

In May 2001, a dissident group of 15 senior ruling-party members (the "Group of 15") publicly criticized Isaias and called for "the rule of law and for justice, through peaceful and legal ways and means." Eleven members of this group were arrested in September 2001, allegedly for treason (three members who were out of the country at the time escaped arrest and one withdrew his support of the group). The small independent media sector was also shut down, and 18 journalists were imprisoned. An increasingly unpopular policy of obligatory national service for extended and open-ended periods of time and with no conscientious objector clause has also heightened tension. Critics have called it "forced labor."

In 2004, the Eritrean government showed no sign of altering its repressive policy of allowing no opposition or independent organizations in the political or civil sphere. International criticism has been muted, perhaps because of Eritrea's support in the war against terror.

During the year, the Eritrean government claimed that Ethiopians were not respecting the border agreement, and it did not rule out the possibility of renewed conflict. In addition to the war with Ethiopia, since 1993, Eritrea has engaged in hostilities with Sudan and Yemen, and has also had strained relations with Djibouti.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Eritreans have never had the opportunity to choose their leaders through open elections. Created in February 1994 as a successor to the EPLF, the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) maintains a dominance over the country's political and economic life that is unlikely to change in the near or medium-term future. Instead of moving towards creating a framework for a democratic political system, since the end of the war with Ethiopia, the PFDJ has taken significant steps backwards. The 2001 crackdown against those calling for greater political pluralism has chilled the already tightly controlled political atmosphere.

In 1994, a 50-member Constitutional Commission was established. In 1997 a new constitution authorizing "conditional" political pluralism with provisions for a multiparty system was adopted. The constitution provides for the election of the president from among the members of the National Assembly by a vote of the majority of its members.

In 2000, the National Assembly determined that the first elections would be held in December 2001 and appointed a committee that issued draft regulations governing political parties. These draft regulations have not 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 was ranked 102 out of 146 countries surveyed in the 2004 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index.

Government control over all broadcasting and pressures against the independent print media have seriously constrained public debate. 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 re-open. The newspapers were accused of contravening the 1996 Press Law, but their alleged offenses were not specified. Ten leading journalists were arrested by the police in the capital of Asmara. They had protested in writing to the minister of information concerning the arrest of members of the Group of 15 and the closure of the newspapers. Other journalists were arrested in 2002, and the independent media in Eritrea has in effect ceased to exist. Internet use remains limited, with an estimated 9,500 users in 2003 out of a population of over 4 million.

Religious persecution of minority Christian faiths 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. The government does not recognize the right to conscientious objection. Members of other minority churches have been jailed and tortured or ill-treated to make them abandon their faith. Muslims have been targeted too, some held in secret incommunicado detention for years on suspicion of links with an Islamist armed opposition group operating from Sudan.

Academic freedom is constrained, and high school students are required to spend their 12th-grade year at a high school based at a military camp in Sawa, in the far western part of the country, near the Ethiopian border.

The government continues to maintain a hostile attitude towards civil society. Independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are not allowed, and the legitimate role of human rights defenders is not recognized. International human rights NGOs are barred from the country. 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.

A judiciary was formed by decree in 1993 and has yet to adopt positions that are

significantly at variance with government perspectives. A low level of training and resources limits the courts' efficiency. Constitutional guarantees are often ignored in cases relating to state security. The provision of speedy trials is limited by a lack of trained personnel, inadequate funding, and poor infrastructure, and the use of a special court system limits due process.

According to a 2004 report by Amnesty International 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. Political prisoners and members of minority churches are said to be particularly singled out. Prison conditions are poor, and prison 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 nine ethnic groups, who reside primarily in the west.

Official government policy is supportive of free enterprise, and citizens generally have the freedom to choose their employment, establish private businesses, and function relatively free of government harassment. Until recently, at least, government officials have enjoyed a reputation for relative probity.

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 named 3 women to the party's executive council and 12 women to the central committee in 1997. Women participated in the Constitutional Commission (filling almost half of the positions on the 50-person committee) and hold senior government positions, including the positions of minister of justice and minister of labor. 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.