

# Eritrea

**Population:** 4,700,000

**GDP/capita:** \$190

**Life Expectancy:** 58

**Religious Groups:** Muslim, Coptic Christian, Roman Catholic, Protestant

**Ethnic Groups:** Tigrinya (50 percent), Tigre and Kunama (40 percent), Afar (4 percent), Saho (3 percent), other (3 percent)

**Capital:** Asmara

**Political Rights:** 7

**Civil Liberties:** 6

**Status:** Not Free

## Ratings Timeline (Political Rights, Civil Liberties, Status)

Year Under Review	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Rating	6,4,PF	6,4,PF	6,4,PF	7,5,NF	7,5,NF	7,6,NF	7,6,NF	7,6,NF	7,6,NF	7,6,NF

## Overview:

In 2005, the government of President Isaias Afwerki continued its repressive policies, forbidding pluralism in the political and civic arenas. In fact, stricter regulations regarding the functioning of local and international development nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were enacted, and the government asked the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to end its operations in the country. Tensions remained high with Ethiopia, as the government objected to the inconclusive results of an internationally mediated solution to its long-standing border dispute.

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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 stipulated that further negotiations should determine the final boundary line. The war had dominated the country's political and economic agenda, reflecting 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 for the group). The small independent media sector was also shut down, and 18 journalists were imprisoned.

In 2005, the Eritrean government further clamped down on the NGO sector by withdrawing tax exemptions and increasing requirements for registration. Political dissidents and journalists imprisoned in 2001 remained in jail despite widespread international calls for their release. The United Nations warned that the humanitarian situation in Eritrea was deteriorating, mainly because of recurrent drought and the protracted stalemate in the peace process with Ethiopia.

During the year, tensions remained high with Ethiopia. The Eritrean government claimed that Ethiopians were not respecting the 2000 border agreement, and in 2005 the authorities banned U.N. helicopter flights in its airspace, restricted U.N. ground patrols, and expelled some of the peacekeepers. The conflict has taken a toll on the economy. The UN Human Development Index ranks Eritrea 156 out of 177 countries, with an average \$130 in per capita annual income.

### **Political Rights and Civil Liberties:**

Eritreans cannot change their government democratically. 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 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, and subsequent repressive steps, have chilled the already tightly controlled political atmosphere.

In 1994, a 50-member Constitutional Commission was established. In 1997, a new constitution was adopted, authorizing "conditional" political pluralism with provisions for a multiparty system. The constitution provides for the election of the president from among the members of the 150-member 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 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, it appears to have increased somewhat. Eritrea was ranked 107 out of 159 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2005 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. Journalists arrested in 2001 remain imprisoned, and other journalists have subsequently been arrested. The Committee to Protect Journalists determined in 2005 that Eritrea had the worst record in Africa in terms of imprisoning journalists. 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 more than four million.

The government places significant limitations on the exercise of religion. It recognizes only four officially sanctioned religions—Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Roman Catholicism, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. In 2005, the Eritrean government allegedly dismissed the leader of the Orthodox Church, Patriarch Abune Antonios, from his position, although a government spokesman denied this action was taken. Reports suggested that he had objected to government interference in the church and the arrest of three priests. 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. 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. High school students are required to undertake a highly unpopular policy of obligatory national service, often at a station far from their homes such as at the military training camp in Sawa (in the far western part of the country, near the Ethiopian border). This conscription lasts for extended and open-ended periods of time. No conscientious objector clause exists. Critics have alleged that such activities constitute forced labor.

The government continues to maintain a hostile attitude towards civil society. Independent NGOs are not allowed, and the legitimate role of human rights defenders is not recognized. International human rights NGOs are barred from the country. In June 2005, Eritrea enacted legislation to regulate the operations of all NGOs, including requiring them to pay taxes on imported materials. In addition, NGOs are required to submit project reports every three months and will have to renew their licenses annually. Local NGOs will be required to have \$1,000,000 in operating capital; international groups will have to have twice as much. Of Eritrea's current 58 registered NGOs, 20 are international.

Reflecting the government's hostile attitude toward international aid organizations, in August 2005 the U.S. ambassador confirmed that the Eritrean government had asked the USAID to cease its operations. Relations between the aid community and the Eritrean government had deteriorated following the government's impounding of more than 100 vehicles and a new proclamation requiring aid agencies to pay taxes on the import of relief items, including food.

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. Conscription of men aged 18 to 45 into the military has also created a scarcity of skilled labor.

A judiciary was formed by decree in 1993. It has never adopted positions 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.

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. Historically, the Kunama 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 function relatively free of government harassment. Until recent years, government officials 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. 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.