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Eritrea

Dictatorship of the PFDJ

The government of President Isayas Afewerki, who is the head of both the ruling party People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), again postponed presidential and legislative elections. Eritrea is a one-party state. A constitution approved by a referendum in 1997 has been implemented. In September 2001 11 PFDJ leaders were arrested for criticising President Afewerki and are still detained without charge or trial. They are denied family visits and medical treatment. The interim parliament last time met in 2002. Afewerki said in 2008 that elections might not take place for another 30 or 40 years.

Freedom of Speech and Press

There is no independent press in Eritrea. Citizens are regularly dissuaded from visiting "opposition websites". Three students were arrested in an internet cafe in Asmara on 26 December 2008 for visiting "opposition websites. Undercover police posing as clients made the arrests. Internet cafes were ordered to monitor the websites visited by the students.

Some 40 community leaders were arrested in September 2008 after they had publicly criticised the economic policy of the government. After the crackdown on the media in September 2001 at least 15 editors and publishers were arrested and remain detained in secret detention centers without charge or trial. The independent watchdog Reporters without Borders ranked Eritrea last of 173 countries on its Press Freedom Index. Foreign correspondents in Eritrea's capital Asmara are directly accountable to the information minister, Ali Abdu. In 2008 a british reporter was expelled after he refused to name the sources for a report about veterans of the war of independence to the ministry of information.

On February 22, 2009 the government authorities ordered a raid on the premises of Radio Bana which is a small station that broadcasts educational programmes. The entire staff of around 50 journalists was arrested and taken to the Doboziro detention centre in Asmara. Some were released, several remain detained, such as the essayist Yirgalem Asfha and the young teacher Senait Habtu.

Also arrested in 2009 were a journalist of public Erit TV, Isaac Abraham, a journalist of radio Dimtsi Hafash, Girmay Abraham, a journalist and writer, Mulubrhan Habtegebriel and the young writer and poet Meles Negusse. They are detained at an unknown place.

Military Conscription

In 2008 the World Bank estimated that 320,000 Eritreans are in the military. Since a 1995 decree, all men between 18 and 50 and women between 18 and 27 are obligated to serve 18 months of military service. Effectively, men must serve indefinitely. Boys under 18 are increasingly conscripted. All students have to spend their last year of high school at the military training camp in Sawa. Members of the military are mostly used as labor in infrastructure. It is reported that dozens of conscripts died due to heat and malnutrition. Female members are often raped. Detention center conditions for persons temporarily held for evading military service are

harsh and life-threatening. It is estimated that there are hundreds of deserters currently held in Eritrean prisons. Some are held in an underground hall with no access to light and ventilation. The *International Committee of the Red Cross* (ICRC) or local human rights groups were not permitted to monitor prison conditions. There is an increasing number of soldiers who desert Eritrea. During a border incident in early 2008, when Eritrean clashed with Djiboutian forces some 40 members of the military deserted.

Religious persecution

Orthodox Christians, Catholics, members of the Lutheran church and traditional Islam are the only ones allowed to practice their faith. No other denominations have been registered, even though in 2002 four applied for registration. Currently the government incarcerates some 3,000 members of unregistered churches. They are often beaten and forced to denounce their faith; most of them are held indefinitely in metal containers, often underground. In 2008 some young people criticized the confiscation of religious books at a military training school. Subsequently they were locked into shipping containers.

The patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios remained in solitary confinement since May 2007.