

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) released, on 29 April 2019, its Annual Report. It has routinely placed Eritrea on its infamous list of “Countries of Particular Concern.”

Once again, it has relied on dubious sources for its information and repeats previous allegations that have been addressed by Eritrea at various United Nations and International fora. Instead of serving as a bipartisan group of experts making informed recommendations to the Administration and Congress, USCIRF has been, for the last 15 years, regurgitating unfounded allegations against the State of Eritrea and unfairly using its office and forum to harass Eritrea's people and leadership.

It is also contributing to the disinformation about Eritrea at US institutions of government, including the US State Department, to whom its recommendations are directed.

Had the USCIRF bothered to conduct its investigation without bias, it would have known that it is not the Government of Eritrea that refused to register the new religious groups, but rather that the group themselves refused to register. No Eritrean in civil or military service or otherwise has been denied his or her right to practice their religion. Eritrea is a secular state where the freedom of religion is fully and solemnly enshrined in its laws. Furthermore, Eritrea has an exemplary tradition of religious respect, tolerance and co-existence nurtured over several centuries.

USCIRF tries to concoct non-existent ethnic and religious persecution. Eritrea is widely acknowledged to be a model of ethnic and religious harmony. In a region racked by ethnic and religious strife as well as fundamentalism and terrorism, it has been able to maintain peace. A secular country where every village is dotted with churches and mosques, and a pious people who have been Christians and Moslems since the 4th and 7th century respectively are dubbed as “religiously persecuted” simply because the laws of the country regulate new, foreign-funded faiths.

USCIRF's statement that the government interferes in the affairs of the church is categorically false. Proclamation 73/1995, issued to “Clarify and Regulate Religions and Religious Institutions”, enshrines the principle of secularism by limiting government activities to the political administration of the country and religions/religious institutions to religious matters;

without one crossing into the mandate of the other.

It is also responsible for taking actions against those instigating and stoking misguided religious polarization in the country.

USCIRF, whose commissioners are appointed by the United States Congress and the President, wrongly asserted that “the government appoints leaders to key positions and closely monitors their activities both in Eritrea as well as in Eritrean diaspora religious communities.” Again, this is not true.

In all the faiths, all echelons of religious leadership, from the Patriarch/Mufti downwards, are elected by their respective independent institutions – the Synod or equivalent bodies in the case of Christianity, and the Higher Council for Islamic Affairs Central Office in the case of Islam.

In as far as the allegation of the government “closely monitoring activities of Eritrean Diaspora religious activities” is concerned, this is ludicrous and impractical as Eritrea has relatively few, mostly one-diplomat staffed, foreign embassies in its almost one million citizens in the Diaspora. But practicalities aside, this is not done outside or inside the country.

In addition, Office of International Religious Freedom officials were present at several high-level delegation talks at the US State Department in Washington, DC and most of the issues raised in the report were discussed in great detail. The USCIRF report does not reflect this dialogue. Relying on self-serving third parties to portray religious freedom in Eritrea is widely at variance with the prevailing reality in the country.

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