

## **The Pastoral Letter of Eritrean Catholic Bishops: A Ground Breaking Trend in State-Religion Relations in Eritrea<sup>1</sup>**

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Eritrea is a one-party state with an appalling record on freedom of belief. In May 2014, four Eritrean Catholic bishops published a pastoral letter, addressing fundamental issues of social justice in Eritrea. The document is widely viewed as the most critical public document of the last fourteen years, when the country saw the establishment of a full-blown totalitarian regime in Eritrea. This paper analyses the contents of the 2014 pastoral letter, using the theoretical framework of human rights and state-religion relations, by focusing mainly on its impact in the ongoing fight against impunity in Eritrea. The paper will also examine the extent to which the pastoral letter was influenced by Catholic “liberation theology,” as was widely experienced in a number of Latin American countries during the 1960s and 1970s. Of particular relevance to this paper is the likelihood of the pastoral letter in facilitating the long-awaited transition of the country to a democratic system of governance, by ending the pervasive situation of gross human rights violations.

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