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2024

# Eritrea

LANDSINFORMATION

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I tjänst för världens förföljda **kristna**

World  
Watch  
Research

## Eritrea: Full Country Dossier

January 2024



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

January 2024

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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## Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors International website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

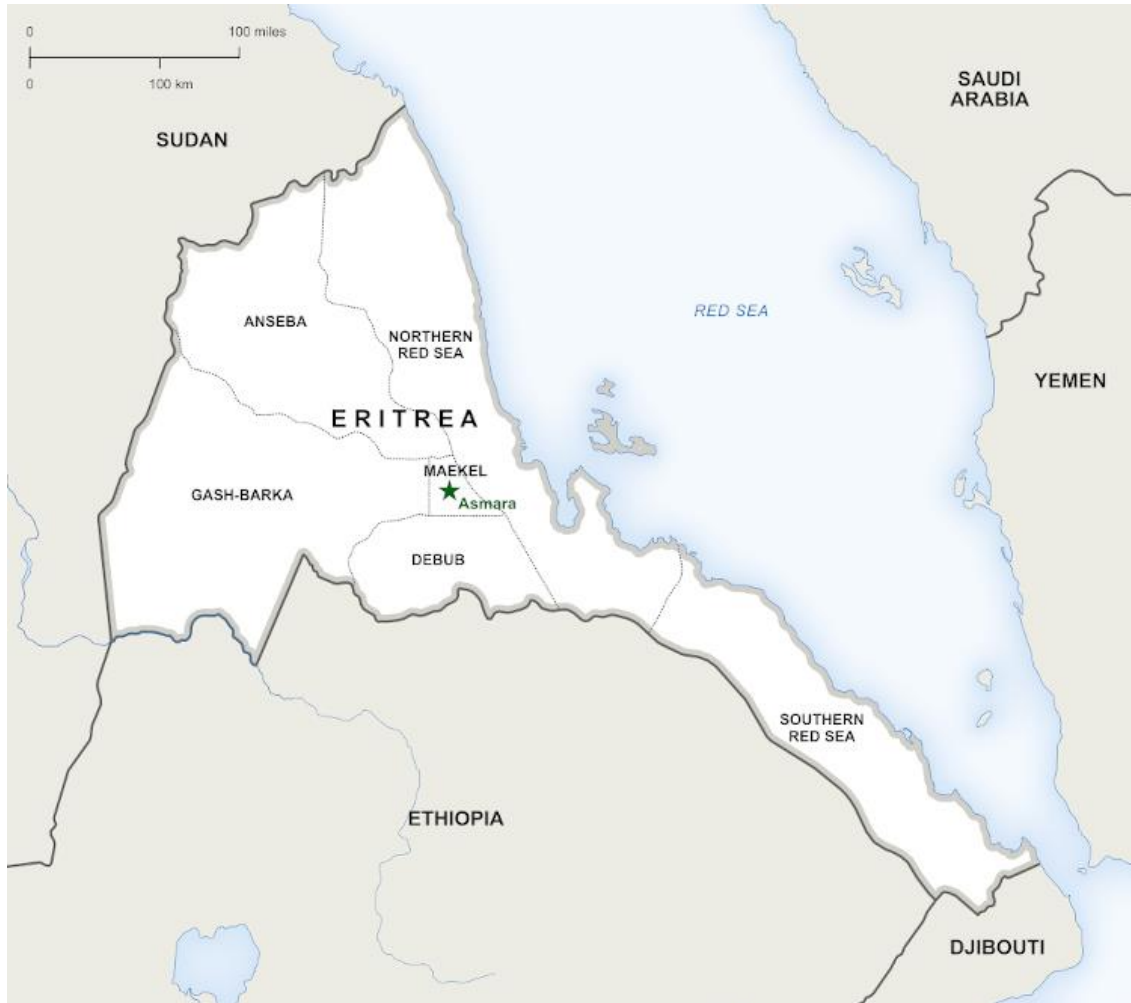
# WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Eritrea

## Brief country details

Eritrea: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
3,728,000	1,739,000	46.6

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

## Map of country



Eritrea: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	89	4
WWL 2023	89	4
WWL 2022	88	6
WWL 2021	88	6
WWL 2020	87	6

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Eritrea:	
Main persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Organized crime cartels or networks, Political parties
Christian denominational protectionism	Religious leaders of other churches, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family
Organized corruption and crime	Government officials, Organized crime cartels or networks
Islamic oppression	Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family

*Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.*

### Brief description of the persecution situation

Eritrea has many complex actors - as well as victims - of discrimination, hostility and other forms of persecution. Young Christians are being forced to join the armed forces indefinitely as per the law of the country but without upholding the right of conscientious objection. This intensified during the war in northern Ethiopia where Eritrea allegedly fought on the side of the Ethiopian government against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

Both recognized and unregistered Christian denominations face serious problems in accessing community resources, especially social services provided by the state authorities. Christians from non-traditional church groups face the harshest violations of their rights both from the government and from the Eritrean Orthodox Church (EOC).

The government has refused to register or recognize any religious groups except the Eritrean Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran churches, and Islam. Converts from a Muslim background (and those with an Orthodox Christian background joining a non-traditional church) face harsh mistreatment from their families and communities. Over the years, government security forces conducted many house-to-house raids and arrested hundreds of Christians. The extreme levels of pressure and state-sanctioned violence is forcing some Christians to flee the country. The ongoing conflict in Sudan has also restricted the escape route for Christians from Eritrea. In fact, there are fears that the Eritrean government might exploit this situation to enter Sudan and reclaim some of the Christian dissidents residing in Sudanese refugee camps.

### Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Eritrea has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR)
2. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR)



3. [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#) (CAT)
4. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW)
5. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC)

Eritrea is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christians die in prison because of torture, denial of medical care or other inhumane conditions (ICCPR Arts. 6 and 10)
- Christians are imprisoned in inhumane conditions and subjected to torture (ICCPR Arts. 7 and 10)
- Eritreans are forced to serve indefinite military and national service in inhumane conditions (ICCPR Art. 8 and ICESCR Art. 11)
- Christians are arbitrarily arrested and imprisoned without trial (ICCPR Art. 9)
- Christians from non-registered groups are not allowed to practice their religion (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians from non-registered groups are not allowed to gather or meet to worship (ICCPR Art. 21)

## Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

Obtaining detailed reports on the violation of rights of Christians in Eritrea is difficult because the media is tightly censored, and spreading information and news about Christianity may lead to arrest. Information is thus often obtained through refugees and defectors.

- [According to Human Rights Watch](#), (9 February 2023): The Eritrean government has in recent months punished relatives of thousands of alleged draft evaders as part of an intensive forced conscription campaign.
- According to Amnesty International (AI Eritrea 2022), the authorities continued to subject journalists, political dissidents, leaders, and members of religious congregations to arbitrary detention amounting to enforced disappearance.
- [According to Release International](#) (22 March 2023), police arrested 30 Christians in March 2023 who had gathered to worship in a home in the town of Keren, 60 miles northwest of the capital, Asmara.

## Specific examples of positive developments

### External Links - Situation in brief

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: According to Human Rights Watch - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/09/eritrea-crackdown-draft-evaders-families#:~:text=The%20Eritrean%20government,evaders%20or%20deserters.>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: According to Release International - <https://releaseinternational.org/eritrea-more-arrests-some-christians-freed/>

## WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Eritrea

### Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 Eritrea country report - 156 countries	AI Eritrea 2022	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/east-africa-the-horn-and-great-lakes/eritrea/report-eritrea/">https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/east-africa-the-horn-and-great-lakes/eritrea/report-eritrea/</a>	23 June 2023
BBC News Eritrea country profile - 18 April 2023 update	BBC Eritrea profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13349078">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13349078</a>	23 June 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 - 137 countries	BTI Eritrea Report 2022	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/ERI">https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/ERI</a>	23 June 2023
CIA World Factbook - June 2023 update	World Factbook Eritrea	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/eritrea/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/eritrea/</a>	23 June 2023
Crisis24 Eritrea report (Garda World) - 193 countries	Crisis24 Eritrea report	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/eritrea">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/eritrea</a>	23 June 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Eritrea profile 2023	EIU Eritrea profile 2023	<a href="https://country.eiu.com/eritrea">https://country.eiu.com/eritrea</a>	23 June 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 - 179 countries	FSI 2023 Eritrea	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	23 June 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index - 29 countries, Eritrea not included	Democracy Index 2023	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores</a>	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index - 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Eritrea	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/eritrea/freedom-world/2023">https://freedomhouse.org/country/eritrea/freedom-world/2023</a>	23 June 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report - 70 countries, Eritrea not included	Freedom on the Net 2023	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores</a>	
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Eritrea profile	<a href="https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/eritrea/">https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/eritrea/</a>	23 June 2023
Girls Not Brides Eritrea report	Girls Not Brides Eritrea	<a href="https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/eritrea/">https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/eritrea/</a>	23 June 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - Eritrea country chapter	HRW 2023 country chapter Eritrea	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/eritrea">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/eritrea</a>	23 June 2023
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 Eritrea	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#er">https://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#er</a>	23 June 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index - 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Eritrea	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/country/eritrea">https://rsf.org/en/country/eritrea</a>	23 June 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index Eritrea - 180 countries covered	CPI 2022 Eritrea	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/eritrea">https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/eritrea</a>	23 June 2023
UNDP: Human Development report Eritrea – 189 countries covered	UNDP HDR 2022 Eritrea	<a href="https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/ERI">https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/ERI</a>	23 June 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Eritrea	IRFR 2022 Eritrea	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/eritrea/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/eritrea/</a>	23 June 2023
USCIRF 2023 Eritrea report - 15 CPC /12 SWL	USCIRF 2023	<a href="https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Eritrea.pdf">https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Eritrea.pdf</a>	23 June 2023
World Bank Eritrea data – 222 countries covered	World Bank data 2021 Eritrea	<a href="https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=ERI">https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=ERI</a>	23 June 2023
World Bank Eritrea overview - 178 countries covered	World Bank overview Eritrea	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/eritrea/overview">https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/eritrea/overview</a>	23 June 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Eritrea	<a href="https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/bae48ff2f2fc5a869546775b3f010735-0500062021/related/mpo-eri.pdf">https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/bae48ff2f2fc5a869546775b3f010735-0500062021/related/mpo-eri.pdf</a>	23 June 2023

### Recent history

President Isayas Afewerki has governed Eritrea since it became an independent country in 1993. His People's Front for Democracy and Justice party (PFDJ) is the sole political party and has been facing serious pressure from the international community due to its human rights record. The country's economy is stagnant and thousands are fleeing the country. This led to a failed coup in January 2013 when a group of military officers tried to take control of state media. In recent years, the country has begun trying to mend its relationship with the international community.

The year 2018 opened a period of significant changes in Eritrea internationally, if not domestically. In early July 2018, Eritrea signed an [historic peace agreement](#) with neighbor Ethiopia to end a two-decade-long conflict and to promote close cooperation in political, economic, social, cultural and security areas (CNN, 9 July 2018). This dramatic event in Asmara was followed by President Isaias Afewerki's historic visit to Addis Ababa, a week later. Further

[strengthening peaceful relationships](#) between the two culturally linked countries (Amnesty International, 14 July 2018). In an even further evidence of rapid improvement in relations, Eritrea reopened its [embassy in Addis Ababa](#) and named an ambassador to represent it (Al-Jazeera, 16 July 2018).

Peace in the Horn of Africa was [consolidated](#) when Eritrea ended hostilities with Djibouti and Somalia by signing peace agreements with the two countries following the Addis-Asmara diplomatic thaw in relations (Al-Jazeera, 11 September 2018). In November 2018, the UN [lifted sanctions](#) it had imposed on Eritrea nearly a decade earlier (Al-Jazeera, 14 November 2018). But these gestures of peace were not matched by improvements in human rights in the country. On 17 September 2018, a former finance minister of Eritrea was [arrested](#) barely a week after publishing a book which criticized the country's current political system under Isaias Afwerki (Amnesty International, 19 September 2018). Eritreans have been fleeing the country to Ethiopia as refugees (taking advantage of the opening of the border between the two countries), fearing this door to freedom might be closed again. Five years on after the peace deal with Ethiopia, human rights conditions in Eritrea did not improve (HRW 2023 country chapter). Indeed, the peace deal seems to have strengthened the Eritrean government's current position rather than encouraging it to improve its poor record of human rights violations, government transparency and accountability. Eritrea's government has remained one of the world's most repressive. Mandatory military conscription has continued (despite the pretext of existential threat by Ethiopia being removed); there has been no amnesty for political prisoners; the rounding up of Christians belonging to [banned Christian denominations](#) has continued (Al-Jazeera, 24 May 2019); and there is even evidence of a gradual shutdown of border crossings to Ethiopia.

In March 2021, the European Union (EU) took action against the Eritrean government for its role in the conflict in Tigray region (northern Ethiopia). It imposed [sanctions](#) on Eritrea over human rights violations and blacklisted the country's National Security Office, which is tasked with intelligence gathering, arrests and interrogations (Reuters, 22 March 2021). The EU stated: "The National Security Office is responsible for serious human rights violations in Eritrea, in particular arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances of persons and torture." The sanctions mean an asset freeze in the EU. Additionally, individuals and entities in the EU are prohibited from making funds available, either directly or indirectly, to those listed. The USA also targeted Eritrean Intelligence and military officials for their involvement in the Tigray conflict. Specifically, on the basis of executive order issued by the Biden administration to sanction individuals and entities "responsible for, or complicit in, prolonging the conflict in Ethiopia, obstructing humanitarian access, or preventing a ceasefire", the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated four Eritrean entities and two individuals on 12 November 2021 (HRW 2022 Eritrea country chapter). It should be noted that Tigray's People Liberation Front (TPLF) also retaliated against Eritrea by firing rockets targeting Asmara early in the conflict.

Freedom House reported (Freedom in the World 2023 Eritrea): "In September [2022], Eritrean authorities began a nationwide forced conscription campaign in order to send more troops to Tigray. The mobilization campaign intensified in October, when security forces violently tracked down those who attempted to escape being drafted. Reports emerged that authorities had begun to coerce individuals in hiding by detaining their family members."

## Political and legal landscape

Eritrea's socio-political dynamics, civil liberties and political system are all dominated by President Isayas Afewerki. As long as Eritrea has existed (since 1991 de facto and since 1993 de jure), he has been the ruler of the country. Afewerki's party –the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) - is the only legal political entity in the country and maintains a non-democratic form of governance. This militaristic ideological platform is based both on Eritrea's "liberation struggle" against Ethiopia –which lasted from 1961 to 1991 - and Afewerki's personality cult, leading to one of the most sustained dictatorships in Africa. Within this context, many Eritreans (including both Muslims and Christians) are taught to perceive Eritrea's national identity as more important than individual rights and ethnicity. The government's promotion of this national ideology has helped to channel potential social and ethnic-based conflicts into social harmony and has thus helped avoid any major social upheaval and conflict. However, the ruling elite is mostly from the Tigrinya ethnic group.

In terms of civil liberties, Western governments and human rights organizations consider Eritrea one of the most repressive countries in the world, similar to North Korea, Turkmenistan and Iran. For example, political protest is not allowed and the press is restricted to the point that there are no independent media organizations in the country. According to the [Committee to Protect Journalists \(CPJ\)](#) in an open letter to the UN dated 1 June 2019: "A free and independent press continues to be absent from the country and 16 journalists remain in detention without trial, many since 2001. Eritrean authorities are yet to produce evidence that those arbitrarily jailed are alive".

The Eritrean government has even engaged recently in forced return of its nationals who fled abroad by forging cooperation with some states like Sudan who are willing to deport Eritreans seeking asylum in their territory. For Eritrean refugees living in camps, the risk to their life in the camps is as grave. For example, thousands of Eritrean refugees who fled their country's repression and crossed the border to Ethiopia faced displacement by [attacks](#) on their camps (UNHCR, 18 February 2022) and severe health [risks due to deteriorating conditions](#) in their camp (UNHCR, 21 January 2022). These Eritreans face all these risks due in large part to the relentless repression of their government. According to Freedom House's Global Freedom Index 2023, Eritrea is considered 'not free' in terms of political rights and civil liberties, scoring just 3/100.

Those perceived as belonging to the opposition or as a threat to Eritrea's stability are detained and treated harshly. According to the US State Department's [2021 Country Report on Human Rights Practices](#), incidents in 2021 included "unlawful and arbitrary killings; forced disappearance; torture; harsh and life-threatening prison and detention center conditions; arbitrary detention; political prisoners; serious problems with judicial independence; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; serious abuses in a conflict, including reportedly unlawful and widespread civilian harm, rape, and enforced disappearances; serious restrictions on free expression and media, including censorship and the existence of criminal libel laws; substantial interference with the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental organizations and civil society organizations; severe restrictions on religious freedom; restrictions on freedom of movement" etc....". Consistent with this, there are also no free and fair elections in the country or other civil or political rights. In one of the most intense interviews ever held with

mainstream media, President Afewerki told an Al-Jazeera reporter in July 2012: "There is [no commodity called democracy](#) in Eritrea" (Al-Jazeera, 11 July 2012).

These restrictions on internationally recognized human rights (including freedom of religion) are justified by the government on the grounds that these rights form an existential threat to social and religious harmony in the country. This means that the introduction of non-indigenous types of Christianity (i.e. non-traditional Protestants such as Pentecostals) or certain forms of Islam (such as Salafism) will be seen as a potential threat to Eritrean society. Moreover, it seems that some Eritreans find the sacrifice of civil and political rights for the sake of internal stability and protection from Ethiopia acceptable.

The year 2018 provided the surprise of the decade, when it emerged that the new Ethiopian prime minister had visited Eritrea. On 9 July 2018, Ethiopia and Eritrea signed a peace treaty, officially ending decades of diplomatic and armed hostility. In 1998, a bitter two-year war had erupted between the two countries in which more than 70,000 people lost their lives and families were separated. Now 20 years on, the two countries resumed economic and diplomatic cooperation, Ethiopia Airlines resumed flying to Asmara and Ethiopia began using Assab port again. Saying that this was historic and unexpected news is no exaggeration. The two countries had been accusing each other for years for not accepting the borders set out by an international border commission and were engaged in a proxy war in Somalia. The peace treaty helped many families separated by the war now reuniting again after nearly 20 years. Yet, it is a legitimate question to ask: What has the peace treaty meant for Christians suffering for decades in Eritrean prisons? Many had expected that hundreds of imprisoned Christians would soon be released. Any peace agreement that does not take human rights and freedom of religion as its core principle, will not be sustainable. There has been little progress in this respect in the WWL 2024 reporting period.

Since November 2020, Eritrea is accused of getting involved in another country's political crisis when the country's intelligence and armed forces joined the Ethiopian army to fight the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Most European countries and the USA condemned Eritrea for its role. This military involvement abroad has created political unrest at home since some members of the Eritrean opposition are believed to be fighting alongside the TPLF. In November 2022, [Ethiopia and TPLF signed a peace agreement](#) whereby the TPLF will be disarmed and the government restores basic services to the Tigray region (UN News, 2 November 2022). There was nothing mentioned about Eritrea in the peace agreement.

Freedom House reported (Freedom in the World 2023 Eritrea): "The Eritrean government holds prominent dissidents and family members in detention; a group of 11 individuals has reportedly been held incommunicado since 2001. In September 2021, Amnesty International noted that nine may have died in detention. In addition, Ciham Ali Abdu, the daughter of former information minister Ali Abdu Ahmed, was detained in 2012 when she tried to flee to Sudan. Former finance minister Berhane Abrehe, meanwhile, was detained in 2018. Ciham and Berhane remained in custody in 2022."

## Gender perspective

Eritrea ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1995. In a [CEDAW periodic review](#) conducted in February 2020, Eritrea was praised for the introduction of the 2015 Civil Code, in which partners and spouses were granted equal status (CEDAW, 10 March 2020, “Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Eritrea”). It raised concerns however in relation to several areas, for instance: The indefinite nature of military service (for both men and women); arbitrary and indefinite detention; inadequate implementation of existing legislation; and the [disappearances](#) of men and women in the State party (US Dept. of State, Country Report on Human Rights Practices, 2021).

Despite the legal age for marriage being set at 18 years of age under the 1991 Marriage Law, the Transitional Civil Code of Eritrea (1991) recognizes marriages from the age of 15 in recognition of Eritrean customary marriage practices. Child marriage is high in Eritrea, with 41% of girls reportedly entering marriage before they reach the age of 18 (Girls Not Brides Eritrea). In addition to the fear of military service, other motives for early marriage include poverty, traditional gender norms and limited education access. Some families also arrange marriages as a means of preventing girls from engaging in pre-marital sex. Muslim marriages and divorces are regulated under Sharia Law. Non-Muslim men and women have equal divorce rights. Existing legislation fails to explicitly address domestic violence, which is reportedly pervasive.

## Religious landscape

Eritrea: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	1,739,000	46.6
Muslim	1,910,000	51.2
Hindu	1,100	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethno-religionist	23,900	0.6
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	1,400	0.0
Atheist	320	0.0
Agnostic	51,500	1.4
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

To understand Eritrea's religious landscape of today, it is necessary to look at history. Christianity dominated the life of Eritreans for many centuries. Islam was introduced by Arabs to the coastal areas of the Red Sea; according to Islamic tradition this occurred from the 7th century onwards. The establishment of a garrison around Massawa by the Turks in 1557 effectively made Eritrea a [colony of the Ottoman Empire](#) (ICE Case Study Eritrea, November 1997). In the 1860s, Egyptian rulers bought the port of Massawa from the Turks and made it their seat of local government. In 1890, Italy claimed ownership of Eritrea as a colony. The presence of Turks and Egyptians had made Muslims in the coastal area very powerful. The Highlanders (the Christians), though, gained some ground when Eritrea became an Italian colony. Italy was defeated in World War II and Great Britain took control of Eritrea in 1941.

In 1952, the United Nations decided to make Eritrea a federal component of Ethiopia. The federal structure was later abolished by the Ethiopian king to effectively make Eritrea a part of Ethiopia (a Unitary form of government), declaring Eritrea one of the provinces (not a federal state). This led to the formation of the Eritrean liberation movement. Overwhelmingly led by lowland Muslims, the liberation movement declared its intention to form a republic. As most of the Eritrean Orthodox Christians had a strong relationship with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, they saw the move by Muslims as dangerous. Some of the radical Islamic groups also regarded the Orthodox Christians as a major threat to the cause of independence. Since this time, both are suspicious of each other. Nevertheless, most of the leaders of the front who helped Eritrea become an independent nation were Orthodox Christians. These leaders then became increasingly hostile towards Christians of other denominations.

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Eritrea):

- "A majority of the population in the southern and central regions is Christian, while the northern areas are majority Sunni Muslim. A majority of the Tigrinya, the largest ethnic group, is Christian. Seven of the other eight principal ethnic groups, the Tigre, Saho, Afar, Bilen, Hedareb, Nara, and the Rashaida, are predominantly Sunni Muslim and reside mainly in the northern regions of the country. The Kunama are diverse, with Christians, Muslims, and animists."
- "The Office of Religious Affairs has registered four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Sunni Islam, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea (affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation). While the Baha'i faith is not one of the four officially recognized religious groups, the group has registered every year since its establishment in the country in 1959 and has "de facto" recognition from the government. A synagogue exists in Asmara, but there are not enough adherents for regular services. A decree requires all other religious groups to submit registration applications and to cease religious activities and services prior to approval."
- "The government continued to permit the last Jew known to remain in the country to maintain the synagogue in Asmara as an historic site."
- "The government allowed the Baha'i center in Asmara to remain open, and the members of the center had unrestricted access to the building. A Baha'i temple outside of Asmara was allowed to operate."

- "The government continued its confiscation and nationalization of nearly all private schools, including Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim-owned schools, citing Proclamation 73/1995's prohibition on religious institutions providing social services, which includes education. In September, the beginning of the 2022 school year, the last two remaining Catholic schools were closed or converted to public schools. In October, the government allowed one private school to reopen, limited to international non-Eritrean students only."

## Economic landscape

The ruling party and the army are crucial players in the economic system which Eritrea has adopted. They own farms, banks and other commercial establishments. Ordinary citizens may earn an income as subsistence farmers and herders, or by selling livestock to customers in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) cannot operate independently as their finances need to be channeled through the government, which itself faces high levels of corruption. Eritrea receives virtually no international aid from the West, primarily because of its pariah status as a human rights abuser. Having said this, it is the policy of the government not to rely on outside sources anyway. It seeks to be self-reliant in economic terms and shape its economic fortunes itself. However, Gulf countries, Iran and China all invest in the country and supplement the national budget. Through the wise investment in the establishment of key infrastructure projects such as power plants, dams, roads, and social services (schools, medical clinics, and clean water), Eritrea experienced a 7-10% growth after independence. This investment was stifled after the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia as more of its resources were channeled into supporting national defense.

According to the World Bank ([Document on Eritrea](#), accessed 9 January 2024): "[O]utside the mining industry, the private sector is virtually non-existent. Zinc, copper and gold account for over 90 percent of exports, under scoring the country's heightened exposure to external shocks."

The country has also been trying to have good bilateral relations with some countries to boost its economy and image. For example, after the Kenyan president's visit to Asmara in December 2022 to address trade and regional security matters, the governments of Kenya and Eritrea reached a [mutual agreement to eliminate visa restrictions](#) for their respective citizens. This significant step was taken with the objective of enhancing bilateral ties and promoting regional integration (The East African, 13 February 2023).

The [2023 Index of Economic Freedom](#) ranks Eritrea's economy the 171st freest in the world and 45th among 46 countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa region, with economic freedom score of 39.5. Eritrea's overall score is below the regional and world averages.

According to the World Bank's Macro Poverty Outlook Eritrea (2023):

- **GDP growth:** "After rebounding to 2.9 percent in 2021, GDP growth moderated to 2.5 percent in 2022, impacted by sluggish global demand. A convergence to pre-pandemic growth trends over the medium term is anticipated, helped by the ongoing recovery in China. Inflation would moderate from 2023 as commodity prices decline. Low global growth, climate



vulnerabilities, and geopolitical tensions cloud the medium-term outlook. National accounts and poverty statistics have not been produced over the last decade.”

"Real GDP growth is projected to grow by 2.7 percent in 2023, bolstered by the recovery in China, and continue at just below 3 percent over the medium term, consistent with its pre-pandemic trend. As the international prices of fuel, wheat, and other cereals begin subsiding, inflation is expected to decrease to 6.4 percent in 2023, before stabilizing at around 4.2 percent over the medium term, which would provide some respite to poor households."

- **Current account surplus:** "The current account surplus narrowed to 13 percent of GDP in 2022 from 14 percent in 2021, affected by the rising prices of oil and wheat, despite the partial compensation from higher prices of zinc exports."

"The current account surplus is expected to widen to 14.1 percent in the near term reflecting the decrease in imported commodity prices after sharp increases in 2022, but should narrow modestly over the medium term as the prices of zinc and other Eritrean mineral exports also drop."

- **Foreign exchange reserves:** International reserves are estimated at around 3 months of imports.
- **Fiscal deficit:** "High global zinc prices supported fiscal revenues in 2022, reducing the fiscal deficit to 5.6 percent of GDP from 5.8 percent in 2021."
- **Public debt:** "Public debt is estimated at around 239.8 percent of GDP, of which nearly 80 percent is owed to domestic banks, and the country is in debt distress."
- **Poverty:** Poverty is widespread in Eritrea. "The last population census in Eritrea took place more than 25 years ago, and little is known about poverty. Data from 1996/97, covering only urban areas, suggest that about 70 percent of the population lived in poverty."
- **Inflation:** "Headline inflation averaged 7.4 percent, fueled by rising international commodity prices stemming from pandemic-related value chain disruptions and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in addition to the continued closure of the Ethiopian border since April 2019."

### Gender perspective

Women and girls remain economically disadvantaged due to lower education and employment rates (UNDP HDR Eritrea). The impact of indefinite detention and military service means that they cannot rely on men to be the financial providers, however. With many men and unmarried women away from their families and villages for extended periods of time, many Eritrean households are run and financed by married women and widows.

### Social and cultural landscape

The country name "Eritrea" was given by Italy when it colonized a strip of land along the Red Sea in 1890. According to the [Every Country website](#) (accessed 24 July 2023): "The term 'eritrea' derives from Sinus Erythraeus, the name Greek traders of the third century B.C.E. gave to the body of water between the Arabian Peninsula and the Africa continent (now known as the Red Sea). Later, during the Roman Empire, the Romans called it Mare Erythraeum, literary meaning 'the red sea'."

According to UNDP Human Development Report Eritrea:

- Eritrea is ranked 176th out of 191 countries with a human development value of 0.492 (low) (2021 HDI value).
- As per [macrotrends](#), (which uses UN projections), the current life expectancy for Eritrea in 2023 is 67.48 years, a 0.52% increase from 2022. The life expectancy for Eritrea in 2022 was 67.13 years, a 0.52% increase from 2021.
- The numbers of HIV/AIDS patients are among the lowest in Sub-Saharan Africa and life expectancy is in the top ten of all African states. This shows paradoxically that grim government repression and economic self-reliance does lead to some positive results. However, poverty is still widespread in the country.

### Refugees

- As reported by Al-Jazeera on 23 May 2023: "There are an estimated [126,000](#) Eritrean refugees in Sudan, according to UN data, struggling to survive the conflict. They comprise 11 percent of the 1.1 million refugees in the country."
- According to HRW 2023 Eritrea country chapter: "There were over 580,000 Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers abroad as of the end 2021, and the overwhelming majority cited the indefinite national service as the principal reason they fled the country." ... "Eritreans seeking protection abroad have been targeted for abuses by Eritrean authorities and security forces, both while abroad (in Ethiopia), and after forced returns from other countries, such as Egypt."

### Gender perspective

The social and cultural landscape in Eritrea is marked by patriarchal norms, as well as close monitoring and scrutiny from government forces. Discriminatory social norms and deep-rooted stereotypes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and men persist, placing domestic responsibilities primarily with women, and decision-making power with men. [Domestic violence](#) remains an issue of concern, particularly as perpetrators are rarely brought to justice (Asylum Research Centre, September 2021).

The Eritrean government is investing in improving education for girls; in a [2018 report](#) the Ministry of Education highlighted the need for more female teachers and gender-awareness training materials (Eritrea Education Sector Plan, 1 February 2018). While such developments have been welcomed, the high school system remains a channel for forcibly recruiting young people into national service, requiring them to spend their final year in education at SAWA military camp. Conscientious objection is not recognized (HRW 2023 Eritrea country chapter).

## Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 Eritrea):

- **Internet usage:** 6.8% of the population – survey date: December 2021 (most recent at time of writing)
- **Facebook usage:** 0.3% penetration rate – survey date: January 2022. According to [NapoleonCat](#) (June 2023), the majority of Facebook users were men - 60.5%.

According to World Bank Eritrea data:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 50.8 per 100 people. Mobile phone ownership in Eritrea has recorded a visible growth. This is in departure from the state of mobile cellular ownership in the recent past – for example, according to a [2019 report](#): "Sim cards are like gold dust" (BBC News, 14 October 2019).

According to [BuddeComm research](#) (publication date: January 2023):

- "Eritrea's telecom sector operates under a state-owned monopoly for fixed and mobile services. Partly as a result of such restrictions on competition, the country has the least developed telecommunications market in Africa. Mobile penetration stands at only about 20%, while fixed-line internet use barely registers. This is exacerbated by the very low use of computers, with only about 4% of households having a computer, and most of these being in the capital, Asmara."
- "Although the provision of internet services is open to competition, about 2% of households have access to the internet. As a result, such growth as there is in the mobile and mobile internet sectors. The national telco, the Eritrean Telecommunication Services Corporation (EriTel), continues to roll out a 3G network which provides basic internet access to the majority of Eritreans."
- "Considerable investment in telecom infrastructure is still required to improve the quality of services. The government has embarked on a work program to do exactly that, specifically aimed at extending services to remote areas, improving the quality of services, and ensuring that more telecoms infrastructure is supported by solar power to compensate for the poor state of the electricity network."

Eritrea has made little advancement in terms of technology. Most of the country's infrastructure is outdated and not equipped with modern technology. Even with the low penetration rate, the use of the Internet is very risky especially when it comes to reporting and journalism. Journalists and citizens are not free to express themselves. As per Freedom House Freedom in the World 2023 Eritrea:

- "Freedoms of expression and private discussion are severely inhibited by fear of government informants and the likelihood of arrest and arbitrary detention for any airing of dissent. The authorities regularly block access to social media platforms and shutter internet cafés."
- Members of the Eritrean diaspora are, by comparison, better able to express dissent online. However, members of the diaspora are also subject to government surveillance and harassment."

This situation has also affected Christians to a great degree when it comes to using the Internet.

## Security situation

The Fragile States Index (FSI 2023 Eritrea) shows that Eritrea remained in the category 'Alert', ranking 19th out of 179 countries with a total score of 97.0 points, with some positive points change over the last five years and negative points change over the last ten years.

The regional situation has changed in recent months. In the past, Eritrea has allegedly been involved in other countries' domestic affairs in the region and has been accused by the international community of supporting terrorist groups in Somalia and elsewhere. Now the president of Somalia, the president of Eritrea and the prime minister of Ethiopia have established a tripartite agreement. There have been some reports that indicate that not only Eritrean troops, but also [Somali troops](#) participated in the War in Tigray that started in November 2020 (DW, 19 March 2021). After massive pressure from the international community, the Ethiopian prime minister declared on 26 March 2021 that Eritrean troops would start withdrawing from Tigray.

Eritreans continue to leave the country, often via treacherous routes. The current crisis in Sudan has made life difficult for Eritrean refugees. As mentioned above in *Social and cultural landscape*, there are around 126,000 Eritrean refugees in Sudan struggling to survive the conflict.

The main victims of the lack of human security in Eritrea are Christians. Many have been tortured and imprisoned by government security forces. Some decide to flee the country but they easily become prey for human trafficking organizations.

## Trends analysis

### 1) The government continues to impose authoritarian restrictions

For over a quarter of a century, Eritrea has been ruled by a one-party system. This rule has curtailed the freedom of citizens to enjoy their fundamental rights. The regime is still strong enough to impose authoritarian restrictions. Isolated and condemned by the international community, Eritrea had also suffered sanctions imposed by the UN, which were then lifted after the country signed a peace treaty with Ethiopia. Coupled with involuntary military conscription, persecution, and harsh economic conditions, thousands of Eritreans have been forced to flee the country. Some of them have ended up in the hands of human traffickers, for instance in Libya. Through the involvement of Eritrean troops in the conflict in Ethiopia, the Eritrean president is seen as an important leader whose role is crucial for security and stability in the region.

### 2) The government is trying to re-establish international relations

Despite protests from international human rights groups and the UN Human Rights Commission's report on crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Eritrean government in previous years, the regime has not yet faced serious consequences for its appalling human rights record. In fact, the country is trying to work out ways of re-establishing a strong relationship with Western countries. The visit to Asmara by a [senior US diplomat](#) in April 2018 was a testa-

ment to that effort (Africa News, 23 April 2018). More importantly, the country has resumed peaceful relationships with Ethiopia. The Eritrean president has visited the country on two occasions. This closer relationship was scaled up in 2020/2021 when Eritrea sent troops to support Ethiopia in the conflict with the TPLF. That attempt hit a roadblock when Eritrea was implicated in atrocities in Tigray region of Ethiopia. In 2022, the international community believes that Eritrean troops were still in Ethiopia to support the Ethiopian government against the TPLF rebel group. In November 2022, the Ethiopian government and the TPLF signed a peace agreement in South Africa to declare a permanent cessation of hostility. Even in 2023, there are some reports that suggest that the Eritrean troops are still occupying some territories in Tigray.

### 3) Many Eritreans are deeply dissatisfied with the current regime

Eritrea has been facing many challenges, of which poverty and security have been main issues. The number of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya and beyond clearly indicates that many Eritreans are deeply dissatisfied with the current regime and the living conditions in the country. Concerning foreign policy and aid, the Eritrean regime is likely to continue its cooperation with China, Iran and Gulf countries and resist pressure from the West to open up its doors to Western NGOs, including Christian organizations. The regime is likely to continue violating the human rights of citizens and suppress in this process those forms of Christianity and Islam, which are not perceived as indigenous, in an attempt to foster social harmony. This could play into the hands of Muslim groups aiming to further a radical Islamic agenda. However, it could equally well weaken both the Orthodox Church and non-traditional Protestant dominations and their ability to reach out to Eritrean Muslims.

## External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: historic peace agreement - <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/09/africa/ethiopia-abi-ahmed-eritrea-war-intl/index.html>
- Recent history: strengthening peaceful relationships - <http://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/07/eritrea-peace-with-ethiopia-must-be-catalyst-for-human-rights-change/>
- Recent history: embassy in Addis Ababa - <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/eritrea-reopens-embassy-ethiopia-thaw-relations-180716065621148.html>
- Recent history: consolidated - <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/eritrea-consolidates-horn-africa-peace-deal-180910174538098.html>
- Recent history: lifted sanctions - <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/lifts-sanctions-eritrea-years-181114170026561.html>
- Recent history: arrested - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/09/eritrea-release-former-finance-minister-immediately-and-unconditionally/>
- Recent history: banned Christian denominations - <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/eritreans-peace-freedom-190524074126019.html>
- Recent history: sanctions - <https://www.reuters.com/article/eritrea-politics-eu-sanctions-idAFL1N2LK1Q7>
- Political and legal landscape: Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) - <https://www.defenddefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/HRC41-Civil-society-letter-regarding-ERITREA.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: attacks - <https://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/briefing/2022/2/620f63574/thousands-eritrean-refugees-displaced-clashes-ethiopia-afar-region.html>
- Political and legal landscape: risks due to deteriorating conditions - <https://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/briefing/2022/1/61ea6fe74/deteriorating-conditions-eritrean-refugees-grave-risk-tigray.html>

- Political and legal landscape: 2021 Country Report on Human Rights Practices - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/eritrea/>
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## WWL 2024: Church information / Eritrea

### Christian origins

Christianity entered Eritrea well over a thousand years ago. “The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church traces its history to the founding of the Coptic Orthodox Church and its separation in the 5th century from the larger body of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Like the Ethiopians, the Eritrean church recognizes Frumentius (4th century) as its first bishop and it follows the beliefs and practices of [the] Ethiopian [Orthodox Church].” (See: Melton J.G. and Baumann M., eds., *Religions of the world, 2010, p.993.*)

In 1864, Protestantism entered Eritrea via three missionaries belonging to the Swedish Evangelical Mission (representing Lutheranism). As their original plan to go to Ethiopia was blocked, the missionaries decided to stay in Eritrea and started working with the Kunama people. The Kunama people are an ethnic group (Nilotic), the majority of whom live in Eritrea but are also found in Ethiopia (See: *Connell D. and Killio T., Historical Dictionary of Eritrea p.432.*). According to local sources, the church established by the three missionaries “became self-governing in 1926, the first autonomous Lutheran body in Africa.” (See: *Melton J.G. and Baumann M., p.993.*)

In the modern era, many other Protestant and Free Church bodies entered Eritrea: “Following WWII, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Evangelistic Faith Missions (an American-based sending agency) initiated work in Eritrea. The latter established what has become the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. A year after the declaration of independence in 1993, the Southern Baptist Convention initiated work. These groups all now work outside the official regulations.” (See: *Melton J.G. and Baumann M., p.993.*)

### Church spectrum today

Eritrea: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	1,517,000	87.2
Catholic	181,000	10.4
Protestant	78,500	4.5
Independent	13,700	0.8
Unaffiliated	1,900	0.1
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-52,300	-3.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,739,800</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	38,300	2.2
Renewalist movement	136,000	7.8

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

Christians are often located in the highlands while the Muslims dominate the lowlands of the country.

The main denomination in Eritrea is the Eritrean Orthodox Church which has been implicated in violating the rights of other Christian groups in the country, especially Pentecostal Christians.

## Areas where Christians face most difficulties

*Dictatorial paranoia* is present in the whole country. However, for *Islamic oppression*, particular hotspots are the lowlands, both in the western and the eastern part of the country. *Christian denominational protectionism* has its particular hotspot in the highland areas (the central part of the country).

## Christian communities and how they are affected

All four WWL categories of Christianity are present in Eritrea. The different types of Christians face varying levels and forms of violence, intolerance and discrimination.

**Communities of expatriate Christians:** The number of expatriates is significantly declining due to government pressure. This group of Christians experience difficulties in traveling in the country and meeting with other Christians.

**Historical Christian communities:** This is the biggest group in the country and includes the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Anglicans, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics. These Christians live mainly in the Christian-dominated areas of central and southern Eritrea. They are affected by *Islamic oppression* and also government action.

**Converts:** This category refers to Muslims who have converted to Christianity and face violence, intolerance and discrimination from their Muslim families and society.

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** This group faces the harshest persecution in the country. Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are regarded by the government as agents of the West. The Pentecostal communities in particular face serious pressure and violence and their rights are regularly violated by government officials and the Eritrean Orthodox Church. This category also contains those who have left the historical Christian communities (especially the EOC) to join non-traditional congregations; they face serious pressure and violence from EOC adherents.



# WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Eritrea

## Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

## Position on the World Watch List

Eritrea: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	89	4
WWL 2023	89	4
WWL 2022	88	6
WWL 2021	88	6
WWL 2020	87	6

Eritrea maintains its position at the 4th rank in the WWL 2024, with a score of 89 points, similar to the WWL 2023 score. Compared to the previous WWL 2023, the overall pressure on Christians remained largely stable, but the violence score has increased by 0.6 points. Across all *Spheres of life*, the pressure on Christians persists at an extreme level, notably prevalent in the National and Church domains, indicating government policies as the primary driver of this strain. Despite Eritrea's reintegration into the international community following the lifting of UN sanctions, this shift has yielded no perceptible benefits for Christians or the general populace in terms of freedom. The country's situation remains intolerable for many individuals.

Government security forces continue to conduct numerous raids, resulting in the detention of hundreds of Christians. The government encourages community surveillance by labeling certain Christian groups, particularly non-traditional Protestants, as unpatriotic. Individuals released from detention centers often experience temporary freedom, typically for favorable international publicity, with directives to renounce their unrecognized religion and regularly report to local authorities. Failure to comply leads to further imprisonment. Many individuals have endured harsh conditions in detention for over a decade, with some still languishing in jail. The complexity of Christian persecution in Eritrea deepens as perpetrators can also be victims. While the Eritrean Orthodox Church endeavors to suppress the growth of the Protestant church, particularly those encouraging the conversion of Orthodox Church adherents to Protestantism (referred to as Pentey locally), the Orthodox Church itself faces persecution through the engines of *Dictatorial paranoia*, *Islamic oppression*, and *Organized corruption and crime*.

## Persecution engines

Eritrea: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Medium
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Weak
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Very strong
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Strong

*The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.*

### Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong)

Eritrea became an independent nation following the 1993 referendum. Since 1993, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice party (PFDJ) has been exercising full control over Eritrea, under the leadership of President Afewerki. The regime has become synonymous with absolute authoritarianism and is doing everything possible to maintain its power: It has arrested, harassed and killed Christians because they are considered to be agents of the West and hence a threat to the state and the government.

Sources from inside the country are suggesting that the president is grooming his son to replace him. One country expert says: "After decades of bloody war for independence which is responsible for the loss of tens of thousands of lives and bodily and physiological injury for thousand others, the last thing that was expected of the current ruling party was another oppressive government. However, the current ruling party, in clear disregard of its promises during the armed struggle, formed an absolute authoritarian regime wherein any form of dissent is not tolerated. The number one goal of the ruling party is to stay in power at any cost." It is in this context that the government is persecuting Christians.

There have been suggestions from some analysts that the Eritrean government is now open to upholding human rights and is ready for democracy. However, that line of thinking misunderstands the nature of the Eritrean leadership. The Eritrean government - despite the recent attempts to heal relationships with neighboring and Western countries - has not shown in any way that it is ready to bring change to how it deals with domestic issues.

### **Christian Denominational protectionism (Very strong)**

The Eritrean Orthodox Church has a long historical presence in the country and sometimes puts pressure on Christians with a different background, looking down upon them as inferior newcomers. The Pentecostal groups in particular are not regarded as legitimate. One country researcher stated: "There is a serious reservation by Orthodox Christians to accept followers of other forms of Christianity as Christians. And such reservation manifests itself in different forms in different parts of the country. While the reasons for such actions could be mainly [theological differences], the fear of losing the dominant influence which the Orthodox Church has played in the lives of citizens of the country for centuries, plays a huge role." The irony is that this denomination also faces violence, intolerance and discrimination carried out by the government and drivers of *Islamic oppression*.

### **Organized corruption and crime (Strong)**

Eritrea is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. According to Transparency International (CPI 2022), Eritrea ranks #162 out of 180 countries, scoring 22 points. Corruption mainly involves the army which controls many aspects of life in the country. A country expert reported: "The military is the strongest amongst all sectors of the government, and abuse of power and corruption are rampant at different levels. One good example in this regard is the bribe that Christians are asked to pay if they get caught while trying to escape the country. Failure to pay such bribes could lead to arbitrary detention or death."

### **Islamic oppression (Medium)**

Approximately half of the Eritrean population is Muslim. Most Muslims reside in the lowlands along the Red Sea coast and the border with Sudan and are showing a tendency towards radicalism, partly due to what is going on in the wider region. This means that Christians living in those areas are particularly vulnerable, especially converts from Islam. Eritrean Muslims are "Muslim first" and "Eritrean second". Conversion to Christianity is seen as a betrayal of community, family and Islamic faith. One country expert states: "This engine is not as strong in the highlands of the country compared to the remote parts of the country where the majority of the population is Muslim. Despite the desire of such [radical] groups to form an Islamic state, the fact that the government is not willing to tolerate groups which are considered as a challenge to its power, has played a major role in preventing the spread of their [Islamist] ideas. However, it does not mean that such groups are not a danger to the way of life of Christians especially those living in the lowlands of the country. Christians cannot freely exercise their religion as they wish and getting schools for their children free from the influence of the teaching of the above-mentioned [radical Islamic] groups is not easy."

## Drivers of persecution

Eritrea: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	MEDIUM			WEAK	VERY STRONG			VERY STRONG	STRONG
Government officials								Very strong	Very strong
Ethnic group leaders				Weak					
Religious leaders of other churches					Strong				
Ideological pressure groups									
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong				Strong				
One's own (extended) family	Strong				Strong				
Political parties								Strong	
Organized crime cartels or networks								Strong	Strong

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- Government officials (Very strong):** Eritrea is not a democracy. Its government is known for suppressing the freedom of its citizens. Government officials are responsible for harassing and arresting Christians, especially those not recognized by the government. A country expert states: "It is very important to note that Eritrea is virtually under a one-man rule. There is a strong feeling among the leaders of the country including the President that churches, especially the Orthodox and Protestant churches, are a hindrance to the new national identity the ruling group wants to create in the country. It should also be noted that the Communist affiliation of the current leaders of the country plays a big role in their disliking of organized religious institutions. The extent of involvement of leaders at different level varies from one region of the country to another, but it should be noted that anything done by any churches or its members seen as a threat to the absolute control currently in place will be subjected to punishment. Detention of Christians who refused to take part in the national military training at the infamous SAWA Military Academy is one good example of the persecution faced by Christians at the hands of the leaders both at the local and national level."
- Political parties (Strong):** The ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice party (PFDJ) is responsible for many challenges that Christians in the country face. A country expert stated: "The current ruling party ... is the sole legal political party in Eritrea. The draft constitution is yet to be ratified and what the party decides will be the law in ab-

sence of any opposition party and democratic process in place. The PFDJ, as the ruling party in the country, was supposed to respect and protect the rights of Christians in the country. The reality, however, is that the party who was supposed to afford protection to religious groups is the one responsible for violating the rights of Christians. The PFDJ employs tactics of coercion, imprisonment, torture, intimidation, and killing to secure obedience while simultaneously pursuing divide-and-rule strategies among different groups (including religious groups)."

- **Organized crime cartels/networks (Strong):** In Eritrea, the entrenchment of crime and corruption within the governance system presents a dire reality, where security and military institutions, the ruling political party, and other government entities are deeply involved. This systemic corruption significantly impacts societal dynamics, especially for the Christian population, who are compelled to resort to bribery for basic freedoms like leaving the country, underscoring the oppressive nature of the government. The lack of judicial recourse for victims of persecution further exacerbates their vulnerability, leaving them without legal protection. Additionally, families of Eritreans who criticize the government from abroad face severe repercussions, illustrating the regime's intolerance towards dissent. Governance, human rights, and individual liberties are all deeply affected by pervasive corruption and control.

#### Drivers of Christian denominational protectionism

- **Religious leaders of other churches (Strong):** The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOC) is the oldest Christian community in the country and is home to the majority of Christian followers. Its leaders exert great influence on many aspects of life. The problem with such influence is that the leaders do not welcome new forms of Christianity in the country, above all the Pentecostal groups, and are known to actively support efforts to limit the growth of other church groups and denominations.
- **(Extended) Family (Strong):** Family members make life difficult for those who leave the EOC to join new denominations. They see such new denominational loyalty as a betrayal of family values and the 'faith of their forefathers'. Thus, it is not surprising to see a family relative informing government contacts about one of their family members who has joined a non-EOC church.
- **Government officials (Strong):** Some government officials act as protectors of their own Orthodox faith and will thus persecute followers of other church groups.

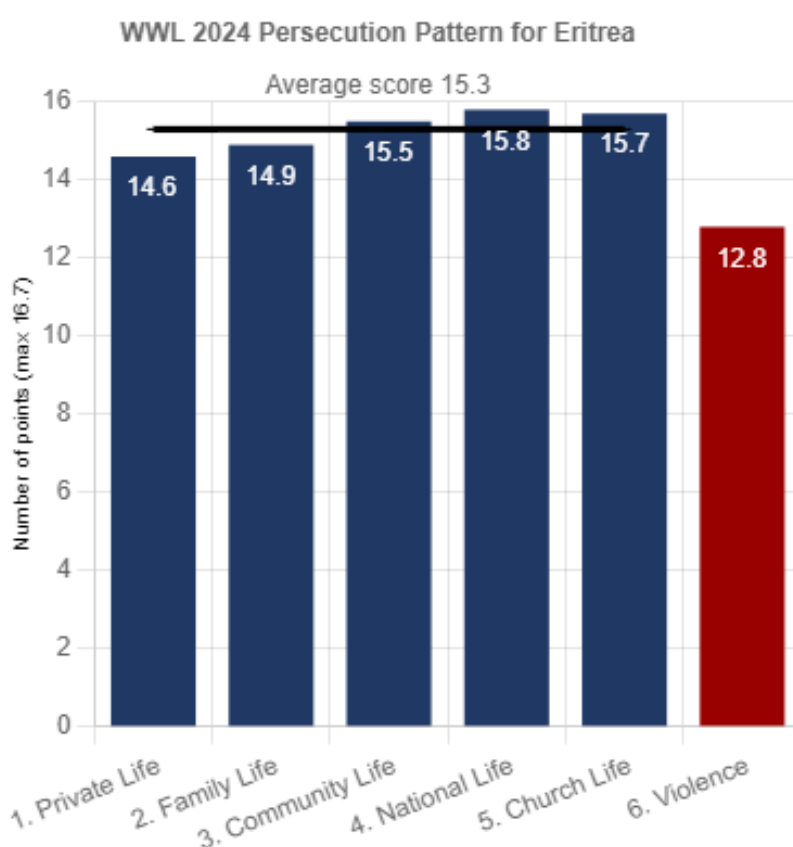
#### Drivers of Organized corruption and crime

- **Government officials (Strong):** Government officials, especially the security forces, operate with impunity. They undermine the rule of law in the country and are known to extort money from Christians.
- **Corruption networks (Strong):** The existence of criminal and corruption networks within the army and the ruling party has made life for many Eritreans (especially Christians) very difficult; there is nowhere for them to appeal to for their rights to be respected.

## Drivers of Islamic oppression

- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** In the lowlands (in both eastern and western parts of the country), imams in mosques and madrassas sometimes preach anti-Christian sentiments. Muslim religious leaders have played an important role in creating an anti-Christian attitude among their followers which has, in turn, resulted in discrimination, intolerance and violence towards Christians.
- **(Extended) Family (Strong):** Converts from Islam to Christianity often face violence and severe pressure at home. As a result, they often hide their faith and cannot keep religious materials at home. Since a close, communal way of life is the norm, the extended family has extensive power.

## The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution Pattern for Eritrea shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Eritrea is at an extreme level of 15.3 points, the same as in WWL 2023.
- There is no *sphere of life* where the pressure on Christians is not at an extreme level. It is strongest in the *National, Church and Community spheres* all scoring 15.5 points or more. This reflects that government policy is mainly responsible for the pressure on Christians in the country. It also reflects the fact that Christians face tremendous intolerance and discrimination at the community level, due in particular to *Christian denominational protectionism*.

- The score for violence is also in the category 'extreme' (12.8), an increase of 0.6 point compared to WWL 2023. There are still many Christians languishing in prison because of their faith. There are some whose whereabouts are not known, nor whether they are still alive.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

*In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).*

## Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

**Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (4.00 points)**

In private life, Christians face substantial risks when expressing their faith through written forms like blogs and social media platforms such as Facebook. The risks extend beyond governmental scrutiny; there's a constant fear of betrayal within their own communities, revealing the intricate web of mistrust woven into society.

**Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (3.75 points)**

Christians face significant risks when gathering with fellow believers. Government-supported raids by ultra-conservative Orthodox youth create an atmosphere of fear and danger for congregating Christians. Those without recognized places of worship resort to house churches and often face detention as a result

**Block 1.2: It has been risky for Christians to conduct acts of Christian worship by themselves (e.g. prayer, Bible reading, etc.). (3.50 points)**

Individual acts of Christian worship, such as prayer and Bible reading, carry substantial risks, particularly for converts from a Muslim background, who face threats from family or community if discovered. Those transitioning from Orthodox Christianity to Protestantism also often severe repercussions from family and community.

**Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.50 points)**

The private lives of Christians in Eritrea are entangled in an oppressive environment, where exhibiting Christian symbols becomes a subtle yet risky declaration of faith. In regions dominated by Muslim beliefs, displaying Christian symbols is dangerous, particularly for converts who face severe repercussions if discovered. A similar experience can occur for those leaving the Orthodox Church for the Protestant faith.

## Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

### **Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.75 points)**

Many parents encounter significant hindrances in nurturing their children in adherence to Christian beliefs. All active Persecution engines play a part in such hindrances.

### **Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.75 points)**

Children of non-traditional Christian families face discrimination and harassment due to their parents' faith. *Dictatorial paranoia* creates an atmosphere of fear, restricting the family's practice of their faith openly. Denominational barriers can also hinder the transmission of beliefs within these families.

### **Block 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (3.50 points)**

The process of Christian burials confronts formidable hindrances characterized by the coercive imposition of non-Christian rites. The problem with burials serves as a concrete illustration of the wider religious persecution that people who are considered non-traditional Christians in this context experience.

### **Block 2.12: Christian spouses of non-Christians have been excluded from the right or opportunity to claim custody of the children in divorce cases. (3.50 points)**

Christian spouses of non-Christians are excluded from claiming custody of children in divorce cases, particularly impacting converts from Muslim backgrounds or those transitioning from Orthodox Christianity to non-traditional Christian denominations. *Dictatorial paranoia*, *Christian denominational protectionism* and *Islamic oppression* can all operate in a way that impacts child custody in divorces. This complex scenario, influenced by organized crime and a lack of religious freedom, significantly hinders non-traditional Christians' ability to assert their rights within their families, particularly in legal matters such as custody battles arising from divorce cases.

## Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

### **Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (4.00 points)**

Christians from non-traditional groups often face challenges in education because of their faith. Policies favoring recognized religions leave them with fewer chances for furthering their education. This discrimination shows how their faith beliefs affect their opportunities and future career possibilities. These communities struggle to access quality education due to barriers and biases, limiting their potential and contribution to society. This unequal treatment in education reflects the wider oppression these Christian groups endure when their faith acts as a barrier.



**Block 3.11: Christians have been hindered in the operation of their businesses for faith-related reasons (e.g. access to loans, subsidies, government contracts, client boycotts). (4.00 points)**

Non-recognized Christians encounter significant barriers in running their businesses due to discrimination linked to their faith. They face hurdles like limited access to loans, government contracts, and customer boycotts, hindering their business growth and often causing financial difficulties. This economic disadvantage is a result of societal intolerance towards their faith, restricting their financial independence. By denying resources and opportunities, both society and government perpetuate their marginalization, making them particularly vulnerable. These economic restrictions not only harm individual livelihoods but also highlight the widespread religious persecution these Christians face, denying them the same opportunities as others in society.

**Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (3.75 points)**

Christians in Eritrea often face harassment, threats, or obstacles in their daily lives because of their faith. Being targeted for their beliefs affects their safety and well-being, making it hard for them to feel accepted in their communities. The pressure to conform to certain religious norms leads to discrimination and violates their rights.

**Block 3.4: Christians been hindered in sharing community resources because of their faith (e.g. clean drinking water). (3.75 points)**

In some communities, Christians have been stopped from accessing vital resources like clean water because of their faith. This unfair treatment shows how Christians from certain denominations face discrimination. Not having equal access to these resources does not just make life hard practically, but it also makes them feel left out and vulnerable.

## Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

**Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points)**

Eritrea's Constitution and national laws significantly restrict freedom of religion, contradicting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' Article 18. These constraints particularly impact non-recognized Christian groups, favoring specific denominations in registration requirements and obstructing the religious practices of these minority groups. This bias extends into various aspects of life due to cultural and political influences, limiting individuals' ability to freely exercise their faith, especially if it differs from state-endorsed beliefs. These systematic constraints directly oppose the principles of religious freedom, highlighting the substantial challenges non-recognized Christians face in practicing their faith without fear of persecution or bias in Eritrea. Even the recognized Christian groups in Eritrea face limitations in their religious freedom due to the authoritarian nature of the government.

**Block 4.7: Christians have been hindered in running their own businesses without interference for faith-related reasons (e.g. personnel policy, client admission policy). (4.00 points)**

Christians often face hindrances in managing their businesses according to their faith beliefs due to cultural norms, national laws, and prevailing practices. The dominant position of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and government influence can limit Christians ability to align their business decisions with their religious values. This clash may cause conflicts between their business practices and expectations from the authorities or dominant religious institutions.

**Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (4.00 points)**

Christians encounter barriers in expressing their opinions publicly in Eritrea. National laws, and practices restrict individuals, especially if their views differ from the norms backed by the ruling authorities and the dominant Eritrean Orthodox Church. Government control and influence from religious institutions often lead to censorship, creating an environment where people feel pressured to withhold dissenting opinions. This suppression stifles diverse voices, limiting open discussions and hindering the free expression of beliefs and concerns.

**Block 4.3: Christians have been forced by law or in practice to act against their conscience, e.g. regarding military service or in certain professions. (3.75 points)**

In Eritrea, Christians encounter situations that conflict with their conscience due to government mandates. There's no provision for conscientious objection, and various practices enforced by the regime compel actions contrary to personal beliefs.

## Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

**Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 points)**

Church activities, both registered and non-registered, encounter monitoring, hindrances, disturbances, and obstruction, creating immense challenges for Christians, even those registered under government-approved denominations. The government's tight control over religious operations imposes limitations on worship, gatherings, and outreach efforts, curbing the free expression of faith. For non-registered Christians, predominantly from non-traditional denominations, the hurdles are more severe. Operating underground due to their unregistered status, they face the constant threat of surveillance, harassment and arrest. Reports indicate disruptions in worship services, property confiscations, and pressure on leaders and members to abandon their faith, affecting both registered and non-registered churches. This oppressive climate has forced many Eritrean Christians to practice their faith covertly or seek sanctuary in other countries where they can worship without fear of persecution.

**Block 5.16: Churches, Christian organizations, institutions or groups have been prevented from using mass media to present their faith (e.g. via local or national radio, TV, Internet, social media, cell phones). (4.00 points)**

In Eritrea, freedom of expression is severely restricted, impacting Christians' ability to use mass media for sharing their faith. The absence of a free press over the past two decades has further limited their right to express themselves through these channels, creating significant challenges for religious organizations in communicating their faith and values more widely.

**Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (3.75 points)**

The scrutiny of Christian teachings and materials imposes significant challenges within church communities, fostering an environment of self-censorship and fear. This pervasive control impedes open discussions and opinion-sharing, leading to restricted teaching and inhibited expression of beliefs. For some, this oppressive climate prompts individuals to flee the country in search of an environment where they can freely practice and share their faith without fear of surveillance or persecution.

**Block 5.9: Christians have experienced interference when choosing their own religious leaders. (3.75 points)**

The Eritrean government's broad agenda to control religious and other institutions operating in the country extends to the selection of religious leaders within registered Christian communities; these leaders are then expected to align with government-approved perspectives. This interference restricts independent decision-making and self-governance among these congregations.

## Violence

*Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:*

**1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced.**

*Possible reasons for this may be:*

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

**2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:**

- Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).
- In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.
- Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.

**3. The use of symbolic numbers**

*In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10\* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100\* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000\* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000\*, 100,000\* and 1,000,000\*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.*

Eritrea: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	3	2
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	10 *	10 *
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	300	244
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	100 *	100 *
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	10 *	10 *
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	10 *	10 *
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	10 *	10 *
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	1000 *	100 *
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	100 *	100 *

Eritrea: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	10 *	10 *
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	100 *	10 *
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	100 *	100 *

- **Christians arrested:** Hundreds of Eritreans are still detained from earlier reporting periods without charge or trial in various detention sites across the country, often in horrific conditions, many are being held on account of their political views or religious beliefs. Among those held are also Haile Naizge, Chairman of the Full Gospel Church, and Kufllu Gebremeskel, Chairman of the Eritrean Evangelical Alliance and member of the executive committee of the Full Gospel Church of Eritrea.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** In some cases, it was government agents who ransacked and looted houses of evangelical Christians during raids; in other circumstances, ultra-conservative EOC followers targeted property belonging to members of unregistered churches.

## 5 Year trends

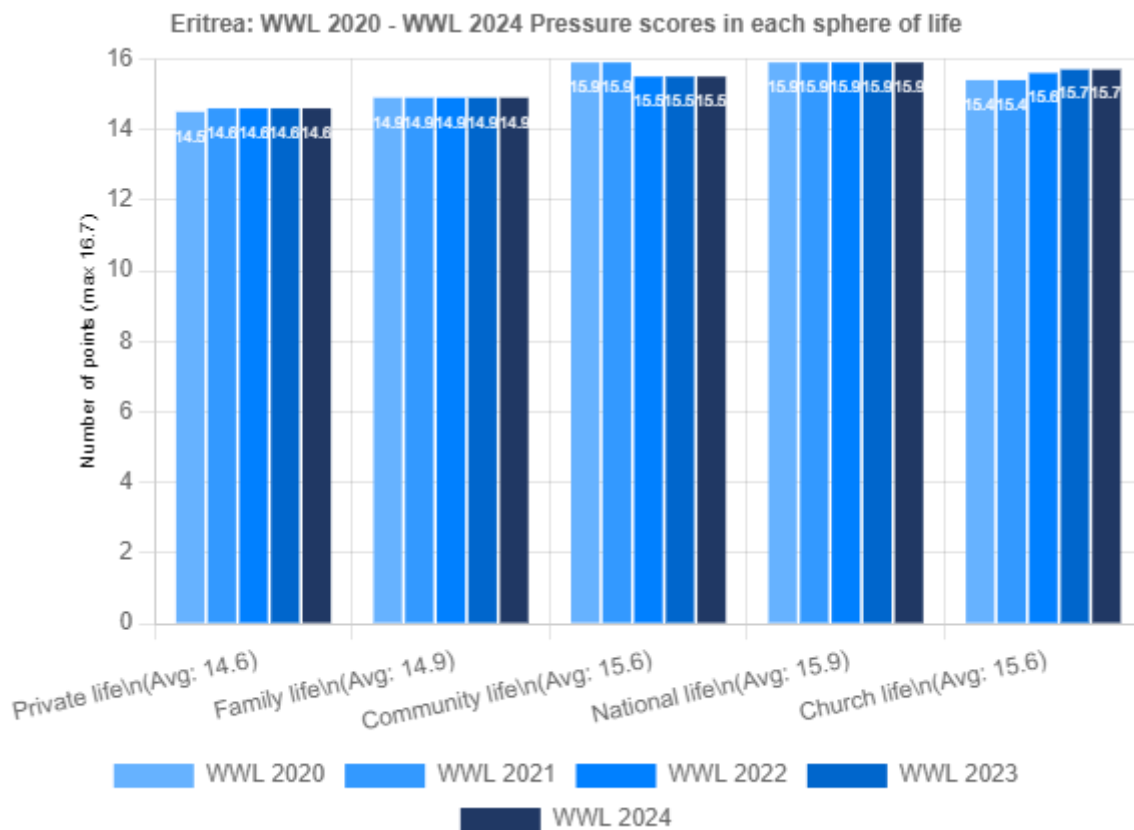
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Eritrea: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	15.3
2023	15.3
2022	15.3
2021	15.3
2020	15.3

In the table above it can be seen that the average pressure on Christians has been stable at an extreme level of 15.3 points. This is consistent with how other organizations have described the human rights and freedom of religion problems in the country. The government has not shown any sign of changing its behavior despite the fact that the demand for change in the country has been growing and it is re-entering the international community with the lifting of the UN sanctions. In fact, the government has used the civil war in northern Ethiopia to forcefully recruit young adults without considering the right of conscientious objectors.

## 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The chart above shows the extreme levels of pressure that Christians are currently contending with across various aspects of their lives over the five WWL reporting periods highlighted. Notably, the most substantial pressure is evident in the *National sphere*, with an average score of 15.9 points, signifying the pervasive and overarching nature of persecution at the governmental level in Eritrea. This trend is further emphasized by the closely trailing *Community* and *Church spheres*, both scoring 15.6 points, indicating that the challenges faced by Christians extend beyond the confines of religious institutions to impact their communal and national existence. The extremely high scores across these spheres suggest a comprehensive and systemic form of persecution, highlighting the government's influential role in orchestrating and perpetuating these challenges (*Dictatorial paranoia*). The chart paints a vivid picture of Eritrea as a context where Christian persecution is not occurring in isolated pockets but is rather a nationwide phenomenon.

## 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians

The chart below with an average score of 11.6 over the last five years, illustrates a progressive increase in violence scores across the last five WWL reporting periods, advancing from 10.9 to 12.8 points. The comparatively lower score for violence against Christians, in contrast to countries such as CAR, Mali, or Burkina Faso, primarily stems from a lower recorded count of Christians killed. This low score often arises from a lack of substantiated evidence, despite existing reports indicating numerous instances of Christian fatalities or incidents of forced disappearances.



## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied access to social community/networks; Forced marriage; Imprisonment by government; Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Security	Abduction; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Christian women are caught in a pincer of pressure from the Eritrean government and social pressures. Not only are Evangelicals and converts alike subject to increasing government persecution, but they experience the usual social and domestic pressures of belonging to an unacceptable minority. Converts face abduction and forced marriage, particularly in rural areas. If a Christian woman is abducted by a Muslim and forcibly married, or lured into a romantic relationship by one, she will be forced to accept his religion as well. Forced marriage is a widely reported tool utilized against female converts in Eritrea.

While pressure is reportedly highest against converts both from Muslim and Eritrean Orthodox Church backgrounds, families have also been known to look down on converts, isolating them

within the home. While parents may appear to fulfill their parental responsibilities, such as providing school fees, clothing and housing, they may ignore them entirely, causing psychological distress. In some situations, they could be expelled from home, shunned without any help.

Whereas in many countries women are exempt from military service, in Eritrea, women are also subjected to obligatory military training and national service at the infamous SAWA military training camps, a highly controlled environment in which every behavior and belief is scrutinized. [Female conscripts](#) – mostly unmarried women subjected to indefinite military service – are vulnerable to various forms of gender-based violence, including from prisoner guards and commanders (HRW 2022 Eritrea country chapter). Many choose to flee the country in order to evade such a fate.

Hundreds of women also experience gender-based violence in detention centers. This is within the context of Eritrea's practice of indefinite detention for no reason other than being Christian. Women and girls are prone to rape and sexual violence as a form of persecution especially when under detention on religious grounds. A country expert explains: "Though not officially recognized, Christian women and girls are particularly prone to this mode of persecution. They are easy targets because they cannot report to authorities if they are harmed".

Women detained or forced to escape the country are not the only victims. The families and children of such detainees and escapees will likely also become victims. In addition to being denied the chance to see their loved ones, they are likely to face other punitive acts, simply for being related to the detainee or defector. In a similar vein, when men flee the country, or are killed or imprisoned for their faith, women are responsible for taking on family responsibilities in their absence, with many families ending up impoverished due to the ostracization and lack of financial provision.

Women are also reported to be subject to restricted movement, due to the implication of legal requirements stating that documentation is required to travel. Even if children are not travelling with them, women are obliged by law to present one of their children's baptism certificates in order to travel ([Equal Rights & IRAP, April 2021](#)). Whilst baptism of children is common practice for the Eritrean Orthodox church, which is the predominant religion in the highlands of Eritrea, Pentecostal believers do not practice infant baptism and other identity documents they may present are not officially accepted. Pentecostal believers are seen as the intended targets of this legislation.



## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government
Security	Forced to flee town/country; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – death; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	-
Technological	-

Christian men are subject to the same system of obligatory military conscription that women are subject to, which places them in a highly controlled environment. Compulsory military service is identified by a country expert as having particularly severe consequences on men. The result is that many young Eritreans seek to escape the country. There remains no hope in sight for Christian men and boys forcibly mobilized as the latest peace accord [signed](#) by the Ethiopian government and the Tigrayan rebels does not include provisions for the withdrawal of Eritrean troops from the Tigray region (NPR, 3 November 2022). It was hoped that the 2018 peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia might change this compulsory situation but despite the respite of the five-month humanitarian truce and the promise of a final truce amidst peace talks, the Eritrean military continued to be engaged in cross-border fighting alongside Ethiopian federal soldiers against the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) in Ethiopia’s two-year civil war. While this was primarily limited to Tigray, the conflict, considered one of the world’s deadliest, rapidly progressed into the neighboring Afar and Amhara regions, with an estimated half a million casualties so far ([The Washington Post, 23 March 2022](#)).

Everyday life is under scrutiny; phone calls are monitored, bandwidth is kept slow and a network of citizens (usually women) are tasked with spying on their neighbors. Indeed, the level of monitoring has caused Eritrea to hold the infamous title of “[North Korea of Africa](#)” and topping the list of the [most censored](#) countries (The Economist, 26 May 2022; Committee to Protect Journalists, 2019). Those suffering the most are Christians who are not recognized by the state.

In Eritrea, there typically is no disparity in the treatment of both men and women found in secret cell group meetings; all suffer the same fate of arbitrary arrests and indefinite detention. However, pastors, who tend to be men, can be especially targeted by imprisonment. Pastors, Christian leaders, and their family members often find themselves subjected to targeted harassment due to their faith-related roles and beliefs. This persecution extends not only to non-traditional Christian denominations but also to registered ones, reflecting the broader challenges faced by Christians in the country. These Christian leaders, who play a vital role in guiding and shepherding their communities, often face various forms of intimidation, threats, and harassment by both government authorities and societal groups. The government’s stringent control over religious activities and expressions significantly impacts the lives of pas-

tors and Christian leaders. They are frequently monitored and their activities restricted. This environment of surveillance and pressure makes it difficult for these leaders to carry out their pastoral responsibilities and to provide spiritual guidance to their congregations freely. Moreover, the restrictive social and religious landscape can also lead to stigmatization and hostility from local communities, causing additional challenges for pastors and their families. All of these factors combined contribute to the deeply challenging and hostile environment that Christian leaders face. A country expert describes how pastors are always the main target for persecution and arrest, stating that many have been in prison for more than 16 years. Any arrests among them causes a leadership vacuum. In cases where an arrested man is the breadwinner, his arrest causes economic distress to his family, an unstable childhood for his children and consistent fear. His children find they are often taunted by fellow children and branded as a 'Pente', a label which is deemed to be shameful across Eritrea. Many are also 'released' into forced military service after such arrests.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Eritrea)

- "The government continued to ban all non-Sunni practices of Islam."
- "Jehovah's Witnesses remained largely unable to obtain official identification documents, which left many of them unable to study in government institutions and barred them from most forms of employment, government benefits, access to bank accounts, and travel."
- "According to the Jehovah's Witnesses Religious Freedom Report for Eritrea, authorities reportedly continued to detain 20 Jehovah's Witnesses, more than half of whom had been in prison for more than 20 years, for refusing to participate in military service or renounce their faith."

## Future outlook

As stated above in *Trends analysis*:

Christians, especially those the government considers to be 'agents of the West', are likely to continue facing violations of their rights. The hundreds of Christian still languishing in prison are not likely to be released in the short-term, since release still depends on Christian prisoners signing statements contrary to their beliefs. As well as the government, the Eritrean Orthodox Church and radical Muslims are not likely to stop persecuting converts and Evangelicals/Pentecostals. In conclusion:

- Oppressed and persecuted Eritreans are likely to continue fleeing the country. However, the war in Tigray has blocked the Ethiopian route at the moment.
- The Eritrean government is likely to continue its authoritarian course and regard non-traditional Christian communities as agents of the West, despite the positive development that is emerging between Eritrea and Western nations.
- The Eritrean government will probably continue forcing all Eritreans to join the national army and do national service for extended periods of time without upholding the rights of conscientious objectors. Some observers are hoping that the scale of conscription might be reduced now that Eritrea signed the peace-treaty with Ethiopia.

The outlook for Christian as viewed through the lens of:

### **Dictatorial paranoia**

Eritrea has suffered for almost 30 years under the regime of President Afewerki. There is now a mass exodus of the younger generation; many Eritreans have taken the opportunity offered by the open border with Ethiopia and can now see how badly Eritrea's economy is faring in comparison. After the removal of President al-Bashir in Sudan, there are now increasing calls for similar action to be taken in Eritrea. All the above factors are putting pressure on President Isaias Afewerki. The call by the bishops for [reconciliation and healing](#) (Crux Now, 1 May 2019), was seen by the government as a clear demand for his removal. As it stands, the president might be able to stay in power; however considering what is happening in the region (i.e. mass movements forcing repressive regimes in Sudan and Ethiopia to stand down), it is not unreasonable to expect a more serious challenge to the current Eritrean government. This pressure on the government could, however, lead to more rights of Christians being violated as the government might see churches (especially the non-traditional Protestant groups) as a pro-change movement.

### **Christian denominational protectionism**

The Orthodox Church remains very strong in the country. Conservative EOC members see Evangelicals as a threat to their influence in society. Thus, they often side with the government to suppress the development of non-traditional Christian communities. This problem is likely to continue.

### **Organized corruption and crime**

The existence of organized corruption is connected to the existence of the incumbent regime. It has penetrated the security and armed services of the country and will remain a potent force in violating the rights of Christians unless the country is reformed.

### **Islamic oppression**

There are two possible scenarios whereby *Islamic oppression* could become a more aggressive Persecution engine in the country:

- The first scenario could occur if the country falls into chaos and if the influence of the Saudis and Qataris increases in the country. Some analysts believe that the Muslim community has been organizing itself for many years and views the current Eritrean regime a Christian government. Thus, if the government falls apart and the army remains corrupt and only loyal to the party (or also becomes divided), hardline Muslims who are disinterested in human rights and freedom of religion could seize power.
- In a second possible scenario, with demands in the country increasing, the government might succumb to the Islamic pressure which Middle Eastern countries have been applying for years. That would lead to an increased influence of radical Islamic teaching and schools, creating a more radical Muslim society in the Red Sea area.

## The influence of the conflict in northern Ethiopia and Sudan

Since the [peace treaty](#) between the Federal government of Ethiopia and the regional forces of Tigray Liberation Front (TPLF) came into effect on 3 November 2022 (UN News, 2 November 2022), there remains a looming uncertainty regarding Eritrea's involvement. In 2020, the TPLF accused Eritrea of collaborating with Ethiopia and launched rockets at the Eritrean capital. If President Afwerki were to emerge from the conflict with a reputation as a successful peacemaker or regional stabilizer, it might not bode well for the Christian community within Eritrea. This outcome could indicate international acceptance of Afewerki's regime while failing to address the plight of Christians within the country. Notably, Western countries have imposed sanctions on Afwerki's government over alleged human rights violations in Tigray, potentially fostering increased hostility toward non-Orthodox Christians by the already apprehensive administration.

Adding to the complexities, the conflict in Sudan poses additional risks, particularly for Eritrean Christians who sought refuge there. Similar to the Tigray conflict in northern Ethiopia, there is a heightened risk that the Eritrean government might exploit this opportunity to deploy clandestine operatives, kidnapping Christian dissidents and forcibly repatriating them to Eritrea. Furthermore, the conflict in Sudan could effectively block the escape routes utilized by some Eritrean Christians, consequently restricting their means to flee the country amidst the escalating tensions.

## External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Female conscripts - [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media\\_2022/01/World%20Report%202022%20web%20pdf\\_0.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2022/01/World%20Report%202022%20web%20pdf_0.pdf)
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Equal Rights & IRAP, April 2021 - [https://refugeerights.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/report\\_access\\_to\\_official\\_documents\\_eritrea\\_equalrights\\_irap.pdf](https://refugeerights.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/report_access_to_official_documents_eritrea_equalrights_irap.pdf)
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: signed - <https://www.npr.org/2022/11/03/1133848992/ethiopia-tigray-war-peace-deal-truce-eritrea>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: The Washington Post, 23 March 2022 - [https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/the-worlds-deadliest-war-isnt-in-ukraine-but-in-ethiopia/2022/03/22/eaf4b83c-a9b6-11ec-8a8e-9c6e9fc7a0de\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/the-worlds-deadliest-war-isnt-in-ukraine-but-in-ethiopia/2022/03/22/eaf4b83c-a9b6-11ec-8a8e-9c6e9fc7a0de_story.html)
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: North Korea of Africa - <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2022/05/26/containing-eritrea-the-north-korea-of-africa>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: most censored - <https://cpj.org/reports/2019/09/10-most-censored-eritrea-north-korea-turkmenistan-journalist/>
- Future outlook: reconciliation and healing - <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-africa/2019/05/bishops-say-eritrea-needs-truth-reconciliation-plan-ban-on-hate-speech/>
- Future outlook: peace treaty - <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130137>.

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Eritrea>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.