

World
Watch
Research

Eritrea: Full Country Dossier

January 2023



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Contents

Introduction	3
World Watch List 2023.....	3
Copyright note.....	4
Sources and definitions.....	4
WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Eritrea	5
Brief country details	5
Map of country.....	5
Dominant persecution engines and drivers	6
Brief description of the persecution situation	6
Summary of international obligations and rights violations.....	6
Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period	7
Specific examples of positive developments	7
External Links - Situation in brief	7
WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Eritrea	8
Links for general background information.....	8
Recent history	8
Political and legal landscape	10
Religious landscape	12
Economic landscape.....	13
Social and cultural landscape	14
Technological landscape	15
Security situation	16
Trends analysis	17
External Links - Keys to understanding	18
WWL 2023: Church information / Eritrea.....	20
Christian origins.....	20
Church spectrum today.....	20
Areas where Christians face most difficulties.....	21
Christian communities and how they are affected.....	21
WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics / Eritrea	22
Reporting period	22
Position on the World Watch List	22
Persecution engines	23

Drivers of persecution.....	25
The Persecution pattern.....	27
Pressure in the 5 spheres of life.....	27
Violence.....	33
5 Year trends	35
5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life.....	35
Gender-specific religious persecution / Female	37
Gender-specific religious persecution / Male.....	38
Persecution of other religious minorities.....	39
Future outlook.....	39
External Links - Persecution Dynamics.....	41
Further useful reports.....	41



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Introduction

World Watch List 2023

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	94	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.7	92	91	92	92	91
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	88	87	85	86
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.2	89	88	88	87	86
5	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.1	16.3	9.1	88	91	92	90	87
6	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.6	14.8	14.4	16.7	88	87	85	80	80
7	Pakistan	13.4	13.8	14.8	14.8	12.9	16.7	86	87	88	88	87
8	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.8	15.8	16.5	10.7	86	85	86	85	85
9	Afghanistan	15.4	15.7	15.4	16.1	16.6	4.6	84	98	94	93	94
10	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	9.4	83	79	79	85	87
11	India	12.3	13.1	13.0	14.8	13.3	15.7	82	82	83	83	83
12	Syria	13.2	14.1	13.6	14.1	14.1	11.3	80	78	81	82	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.9	15.8	16.7	2.4	80	81	78	79	77
14	Myanmar	12.5	11.6	13.9	13.9	12.9	15.4	80	79	74	73	71
15	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.8	16.0	16.4	0.2	77	77	77	78	78
16	China	12.9	10.0	12.7	14.5	15.6	11.1	77	76	74	70	65
17	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	10.3	15.1	15.0	76	70	67	66	68
18	Iraq	14.1	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	4.6	76	78	82	76	79
19	Algeria	14.1	14.1	11.5	13.7	15.1	4.8	73	71	70	73	70
20	Mauritania	14.5	14.2	13.3	14.1	14.2	1.3	72	70	71	68	67
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	13.9	12.7	15.6	1.5	71	71	71	73	74
22	Colombia	11.8	8.9	13.1	11.3	10.4	15.4	71	68	67	62	58
23	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.5	9.6	13.8	15.6	71	68	67	66	48
24	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	68	66	68	70
25	Vietnam	11.8	9.6	12.8	14.6	14.4	6.9	70	71	72	72	70
26	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	14.1	15.7	0.6	70	69	70	70	69
27	Cuba	13.1	8.3	13.1	13.2	14.9	7.0	70	66	62	52	49
28	Niger	9.4	9.5	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.4	70	68	62	60	52
29	Morocco	13.2	13.8	10.9	12.2	14.5	4.8	69	69	67	66	63
30	Bangladesh	12.6	10.7	12.8	11.3	10.6	10.7	69	68	67	63	58
31	Laos	11.7	10.2	13.3	14.2	14.0	5.0	68	69	71	72	71
32	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.6	68	65	63	43	43
33	Indonesia	11.3	12.0	11.6	11.1	9.2	12.8	68	68	63	60	65
34	Qatar	14.2	14.1	10.5	13.2	14.4	1.5	68	74	67	66	62
35	Egypt	12.7	13.5	11.6	12.1	10.8	7.0	68	71	75	76	76
36	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.4	12.0	13.5	6.5	67	66	67	64	63
37	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.6	67	66	64	56	55
38	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	11.0	10.5	13.9	67	65	64	60	61
39	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.4	12.1	10.6	66	66	65	63	65
40	Bhutan	13.2	12.3	11.6	13.9	14.2	1.1	66	67	64	61	64
41	Turkey	12.8	11.5	11.8	13.0	11.5	5.7	66	65	69	63	66
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.5	66	63	62	57	56
43	Malaysia	12.8	14.3	11.4	12.2	11.1	3.9	66	63	63	62	60
44	Tajikistan	13.8	12.2	12.3	12.8	13.4	1.1	66	65	66	65	65
45	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.9	65	65	64	60	54
46	Brunei	14.8	14.6	10.1	10.9	14.4	0.4	65	64	64	63	63
47	Oman	14.0	14.1	10.3	13.3	12.9	0.6	65	66	63	62	59
48	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.6	11.9	12.7	14.2	1.1	65	64	64	64	63
49	Jordan	13.0	14.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	2.0	65	66	64	64	65
50	Nicaragua	10.8	5.9	11.9	12.8	13.6	9.4	65	56	51	41	41

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.3	64	63	62	61	61
52	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	64	63	62	60
53	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.6	63	61	58	55	52
54	UAE	13.4	13.4	9.9	11.2	12.8	1.1	62	62	62	60	58
55	Nepal	12.0	9.8	9.4	13.0	12.6	4.4	61	64	66	64	64
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	0.6	60	59	56	56	56
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.3	9.7	10.3	12.0	2.0	60	59	58	60	57
58	Azerbaijan	13.2	10.0	9.5	12.0	13.6	0.6	59	60	56	57	57
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.2	11.0	10.4	12.0	2.0	59	58	58	57	56
60	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	7.6	58	55	53	56	48
61	Russian Federation	12.3	7.9	10.3	11.8	12.8	2.0	57	56	57	60	60
62	Sri Lanka	12.8	9.1	10.6	11.3	9.5	3.9	57	63	62	65	58
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	8.9	57	50	42	42	41
64	Venezuela	6.0	4.6	11.7	10.2	11.4	11.7	56	51	39	42	41
65	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	11.1	55	52	48	48	43
66	Bahrain	12.7	13.3	8.7	10.7	8.8	0.9	55	57	56	55	55
67	Honduras	7.1	5.0	11.9	7.6	9.8	11.9	53	48	46	39	38
68	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	51	46	43	42
69	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	9.2	14.8	51	48	47	48	47
70	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	5.4	49	44	43	41	42
71	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	3.0	48	43	47	45	46
72	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.0	46	43	43	44	44
73	El Salvador	7.7	4.2	10.6	7.4	9.1	6.7	46	45	42	38	30
74	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	42	42	42	43
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	1.1	44	44	43	43	43
76	Belarus	9.5	3.8	4.8	9.4	12.1	3.3	43	33	30	28	35

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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 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- 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 including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

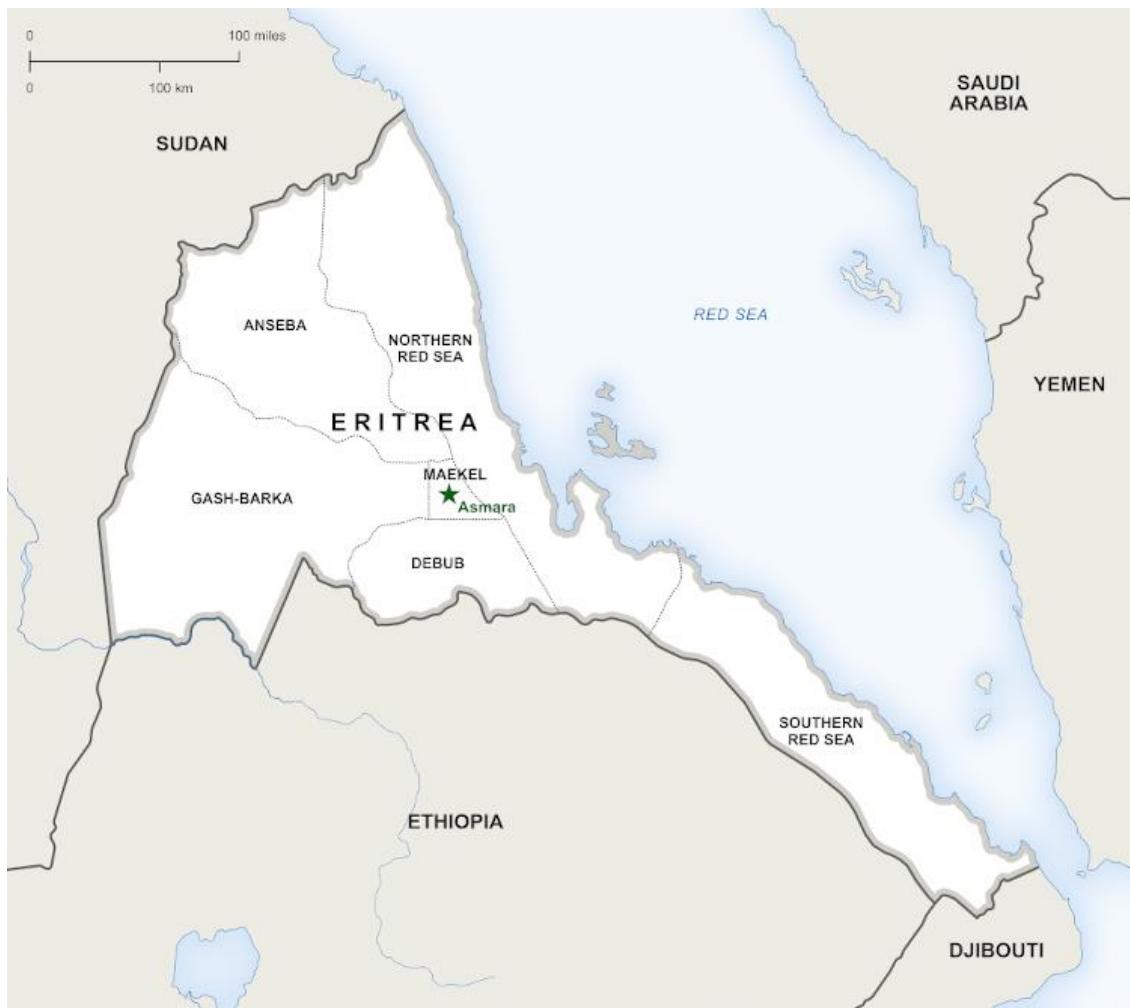
WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Eritrea

Brief country details

Eritrea: Population (UN estimate for 2022)	Christians	Chr%
3,662,000	1,709,000	46.7

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

Map of country



Eritrea: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	89	4
WWL 2022	88	6
WWL 2021	88	6
WWL 2020	87	6
WWL 2019	86	7

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Eritrea: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Political parties, Organized crime cartels or networks
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

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 persecution actors as well as persecuted. 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 has been 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.

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

December 2021: On 25 December, thirteen Christians were detained in Asmara. The police took them from their home while they were celebrating Christmas. Eleven were taken to Mai Sirwa prison and two to Asmara's 2nd police station.

March 2022: In the week of 16 March, Eritrean police arrested 29 Pentecostal Christians and raided their homes in Asmara (District of Debubawi Mierab in Maekel region) while they were gathered for prayer. They were taken to the Mai Sirwa prison, outside Asmara.

September 2022: As reported on 5 September, Eritrean security forces entered the Catholic church in Segheneity (in Debub region) and arrested several young people who were gathered for prayer. The security forces also arrested the deacons, the church ministers and choir during the church raid.

Specific examples of positive developments

According to Human Rights Watch (HRW 2022 country chapter):

- In 2021, “in the first two months of the year, the government released dozens of Evangelical and Orthodox Christian detainees held for their religious beliefs and practices, who had reportedly been detained for between 2 to 12 years.”

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>

WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Eritrea

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2021/22 country report - 154 countries	AI country report 2021 - pp.160-161	https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf	18 May 2022
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13349078	18 May 2022
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 - 137 countries	BTI report 2022	https://btiproject.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/ERI	18 May 2022
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/eritrea/	18 May 2022
Crisis24 country report (Garda World) - 193 countries	Crisis24 country report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/eritrea	18 May 2022
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 - 167 countries	EIU 2021 - p.16	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIO-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf	18 May 2022
FFP's Fragile States Index 2022 - 179 countries	FSI 2022	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	3 August 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Democracy index - 29 countries, Eritrea not included	Democracy Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2022 Global Freedom Index - 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/country/eritrea/freedom-world/2022	18 May 2022
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2021 report - 70 countries, Eritrea not included	Freedom on the Net 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores	
Human Rights Watch World Report 2022 - 100+ countries	HRW 2022 country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/eritrea	18 May 2022
Internet World Stats 2022	IWS 2022	https://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#er	18 May 2022
RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index - 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2022	https://rsf.org/en/country/eritrea	18 May 2022
Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index - 180 countries	CPI 2021	https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/eritrea	18 May 2022
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (country profile) - covering 189 countries	HDI profile	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/ERI	8 June 2022
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom country report	IRFR 2021	https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/eritrea/	6 June 2022
USCIRF 2021 country reports - 15 CPC/12 SWL	USCIRF 2021	https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/2022%20Eritrea.pdf	18 May 2022
World Bank country profile data - covering 222 countries	World Bank profile (2020 data)	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=ERI	27 May 2022
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 - covering 147 countries (divided per region)	Macro Poverty Outlook 2021 (pp.30-31)	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/bae48ff2fefc5a869546775b3f010735-0500062021/related/mpo-ssa.pdf	27 May 2022

Recent history

President Isaias 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, eco-

nomic, social, cultural and security areas (CNN, 9 July 2018). This dramatic event in Asmara was followed by President Isaias Afwerki'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 hostility 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. Four years on after the peace deal with Ethiopia, human rights conditions in Eritrea have not improved (HRW 2022 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 all 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 country chapter, p. 231). It should be noted that Tigray's People Liberation Front (TPLF) also retaliated against Eritrea by firing rockets targeting Asmara early in the conflict.

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 Eritrean'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 2022, 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 2023 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.

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 (OECD, 2019). [Child marriage](#) is high in Eritrea, with 41% of girls reportedly entering marriage before they reach the age of 18 (Girls Not Brides, accessed 2nd August 2022). 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](#) (OECD, 2019).

Religious landscape

Eritrea: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	1,709,000	46.7
Muslim	1,882,000	51.4
Hindu	1,100	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethno-religionist	22,100	0.6
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	1,400	0.0
Atheist	290	0.0
Agnostic	46,300	1.3
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

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 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 IRFR 2021:

- "A majority of the population in the southern and central regions is Christian, while the northern areas are majority 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 Muslim and reside mainly in the northern regions of the country. The Kunama are diverse, with Christians, Muslims, and animists."
- "While Baha'is are not one of the four officially recognized religions, they have registered every year since 1959, the year the chapter was established, and have 'de facto' recognition from the government."
- "A synagogue exists in Asmara, but there are not enough adherents for regular services."

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.

The [2022 Index of Economic Freedom](#) ranks Eritrea's economy the 171st freest in the world and 44th among 47 countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa region, with economic freedom score of 39.7. Eritrea's overall score is below the regional and world averages.

According to the World Bank's Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 for Sub-Saharan Africa (pp. 30-31):

- **GDP growth:** “After contracting by 0.6 percent in 2020 amid the Covid-19 crisis, real GDP rebounded by an estimated 2.9 percent in 2021, supported by external demand uptake and the resumption of economic activity as the restrictions imposed at the onset of the pandemic were lifted.” The outlook for real GDP growth is that it is “expected to accelerate to 4.7 percent in 2022 as the Colluli and Asmara mines start exporting at full capacity.”
- **Current account surplus:** The external current account surplus increased to 13.6 percent of GDP in 2021 from 11.4 percent the year before as commodity exports grew faster than the recovering imports, and the 13.6 percent is projected to continue 2022.
- **Foreign exchange reserves:** These are estimated to hover at about two months of imports.
- **Fiscal deficit:** This narrowed to 3.7 in 2021 from 4.2 percent of GDP in 2020, and is projected to narrow further to 0.8 in 2022.
- **Public debt:** This recorded above 260 percent of GDP in 2020, decreased to 242.7 percent in 2021 and is estimated to further decrease to 215.4 by 2022, the large percentage of which is owed to domestic banks.
- **Poverty:** “Poverty is widespread in Eritrea, but lack of data limits evidence. Data on poverty are outdated and cover urban areas only. The latest Household Income and Expenditure Survey, from 1996/1997, suggests poverty is widespread, affecting 70 percent of the urban population. Meanwhile, almost 60 percent of employed Eritreans were in vulnerable employment in the large rain-fed agricultural base.”
- **Inflation:** Inflation is expected to increase to 6.2% in 2022 from 4.5% in the previous year.
- **COVID-19 recovery:** After contracting by 0.6 percent in 2020 amid the COVID-19 crisis, real GDP rebounded by an estimated 2.9 percent in 2021, supported by external demand uptake and the resumption of economic activity as the restrictions imposed at the onset of the pandemic were lifted. A significant boost to growth is expected in 2022 from new mining developments and rising prices of mineral exports. The country has no COVID-19 vaccination campaign.

Gender perspective

Women and girls remain economically disadvantaged due to [lower education](#) and employment rates (HDI, 2020). 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

According to the UNDP's HDI profile:

- **Human Development Index:** Eritrea is ranked 180th out of 189 countries with a human development value of 0.459
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 66.3 years
- **HIV/AIDS:** 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.

According to the [UNHCR](#) Fact Sheet (19 January 2022):

- **Refugees:** At the end of December 2021, Ethiopia was hosting 158,521 Eritrean refugees. Most were living in the Afar and Tigray region but thousands also reside in Addis, this number is particularly increasing since the conflict in Tigray and Afar started in 2021.

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 18 July 2022): "The term 'eritrea' derives from Sinus Erythraeus, the name Greek tradesmen 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, literally meaning 'the red sea'."

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 ([OECD, 2019](#)). [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, Human Rights Watch notes that 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 (HRW 2022 country chapter).

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2022):

- **Internet usage:** 6.8% of the population – survey date: December 2021 (most recent at time of writing)
- **Facebook usage:** 0.3% of the population – survey date: January 2022

According to [NapoleonCat](#) (December 2022), there were 7,700 Facebook users in the country (59.7% male / 40.3% women).

According to World Bank's country profile:

- **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 Reporters without Borders (RSF/World Press Freedom 2021):

- Eritrea is "a dictatorship in which the media have no rights. ... The peace accord signed with neighboring Ethiopia in 2018 has unfortunately not led to any relaxation in a dictatorship that leaves no room for freely-reported news and information. Ever since the suppression of independent media and the accompanying wave of arrests of journalists in 2001, RSF has constantly called for the release of the detainees and for evidence that they are still alive. RSF believes at least 11 journalists are still languishing in the regime's prisons, without access to their families or to lawyers."

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

Security situation

The Fragile States Index (FSI 2021) shows that Eritrea remained in the category 'Alert', ranking 17th 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 Novem-

ber 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. However, one year later, [Eritrean forces were still occupying large areas](#) of northern and western Tigray (Eritrea Hub, 25 March 2022).

Eritreans continue to leave the country, often via treacherous routes. Following the recent changes in Ethiopia, the region has embarked on creating a platform for peace in the region. Eritrea signed a peace treaty with Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia in September 2018, and the UN Security Council lifted sanctions imposed on Eritrea. The main victims of the lack of human security in the country are Christians who have been tortured and imprisoned by government security forces. Some of them have decided to flee the country, many of whom have become the victims of human trafficking organizations.

Gender perspective

In order to avoid enrolment at the infamous SAWA military training center, families and girls consider [early marriage](#) as an escape route, as married or pregnant girls are usually exempt from service (OECD, 2019). Young men also seek alternative pathways; many choose to embark on a perilous journey to Europe (OECD, 2019). Military service in Eritrea has been likened to an indefinite program of [forced labor](#), despite a government decree limiting service to 18 months (CSactu, 29 December 2021). Unlike most other African countries, women are not exempt from military service. Women have reportedly been victims of sexual harassment and rape at the hands of officers, who [act with impunity](#) (HRW, 14 March 2022).

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, but failing due to its alleged involvement in the Ethiopian civil war

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 testament to that effort (Africa News, 23 April 2018). More importantly, the country has re-

sumed 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.

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-abiy-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>
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- 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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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yO1EkKq8q1E>
- Political and legal landscape: Ethiopia and TPLF signed a peace agreement -
<https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130137>
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https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/ERI/CO/6&Lang=En
- Political and legal landscape: disappearances - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/eritrea/>
- Political and legal landscape: legal age - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/ER.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: Child marriage - <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/atlas/eritrea/>
- Political and legal landscape: reportedly pervasive - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/ER.pdf>
- Religious landscape description: colony of the Ottoman Empire - <http://mandalaprojects.com/ice/ice-cases/eritrea.htm>
- Economic landscape: 2022 Index of Economic Freedom - <https://www.heritage.org/index/country/eritrea>
- Economic landscape: lower education - <https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/Country-Profiles/ERI.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNHCR - <https://reliefweb.int/attachments/f88579f3-f683-3926-a86a-2aa81db4f14b/UNHCR%20Fact%20Sheet%20Ethiopia-December%202021.pdf>
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- Security situation: Somali troops - <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-are-other-nations-involved-in-the-war-in-tigray/a-56891431>
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WWL 2023: 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	1,498,000	87.7
Catholic	178,000	10.4
Protestant	75,500	4.4
Independent	13,100	0.8
Unaffiliated	1,900	0.1
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-57,100	-3.3
Total	1,709,400	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	37,500	2.2
Renewalist movement	134,000	7.8

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

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 2023: Persecution Dynamics / Eritrea

Reporting period

1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022

Position on the World Watch List

Eritrea: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	89	4
WWL 2022	88	6
WWL 2021	88	6
WWL 2020	87	6
WWL 2019	86	7

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

With a score of 89 points, Eritrea ranks 4th in the WWL 2023. The average pressure level remained the same as in WWL 2022, but the violence score increased by one point, which led to the overall increase of one point (from 88 in WWL 2022 to 89 points 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* and *Church spheres of life*, reflecting that government policy is mainly responsible for exerting pressure. Eritrea's re-integration into the international community after the lifting of the UN sanctions did not seem to do any good to Christians or even the general public in terms of freedom. The situation in Eritrea remains unbearable for many. As in previous reporting periods, government security forces conducted many raids and hundreds of Christians were taken to detention centers.

It is also important to underline that the government motivates surveillance by the community by accusing some Christian groups (especially non-traditional Protestants) of being unpatriotic. Those who are released are often only released for a temporary period - or they are released for good international press coverage. Upon release from such detention centers, the individual will be ordered to denounce his/her (non-recognized) religion and report to the local police on a weekly or monthly basis. Failure to report will lead to further detention. Many have been imprisoned in harsh conditions for over ten years and are still languishing in jail. What makes the persecution of Christians in Eritrea very complicated is that in some cases persecutors can be the persecuted as well: While the Eritrean Orthodox Church tries to suppress the growth of the Protestant church (especially those groups converting Orthodox Church followers to Protestantism - locally referred to as *Pentey*), the Orthodox Church itself is persecuted through the Persecution engines *Dictatorial paranoia, Islamic oppression and Organized corruption and crime*.

It is also important to mention the fact that Eritrean government forces raided several refugee camps in Ethiopia's Tigray region where many Eritrean refugees were residing having fled Eritrea. There have been many Christians among those abducted and taken back to Eritrea.

Some are believed to have been tortured.

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 2021), Eritrea ranks #161 out of 180 countries, scoring 21 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
				WEAK	VERY STRONG			VERY STRONG	STRONG
Government officials								Very strong	Very strong
Ethnic group leaders				Very weak					
Religious leaders of other churches					Strong				
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs					Strong				
One's own (extended) family					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 absence 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)."

- ***Non-Christian religious leaders (Medium)***: Generally, Islamic leaders manifest themselves as drivers of *Islamic oppression*. However, their violation of the rights of Christians is often carried out in collaboration with the authorities.

Drivers of Christian denominational protectionism

- ***Religious leaders of other churches (Strong)***: The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOC) is the oldest Christian community 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

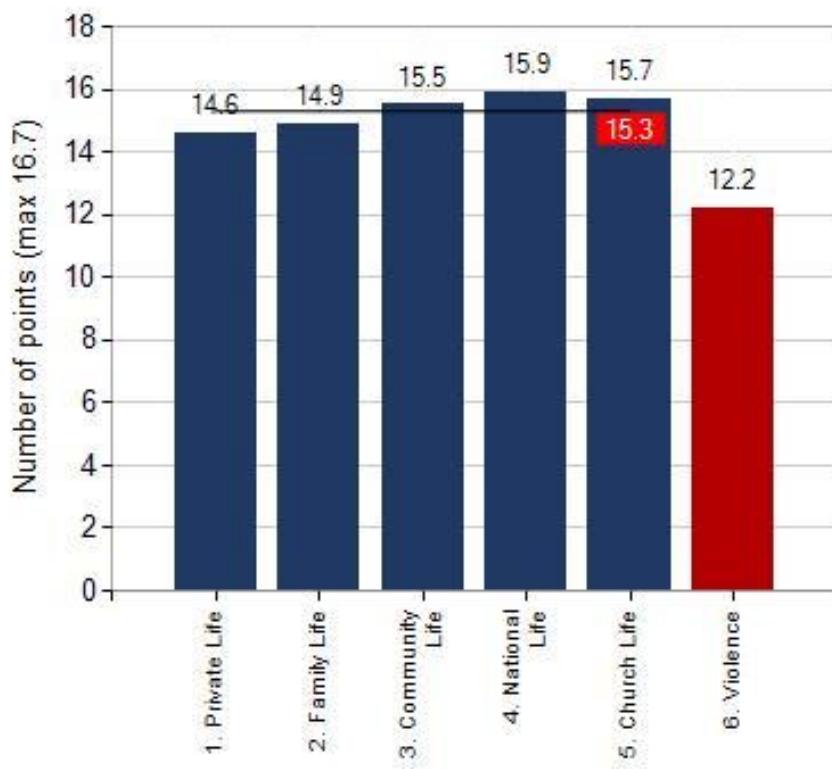
- ***Government officials (Strong)***: Government officials, especially the security forces, operate with impunity. They undermine the rule of law in the country and are known to extort money from Christians.
- ***Corruption networks (Strong)***: The existence of criminal and corruption networks within 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

WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Eritrea



The WWL 2023 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 2022.
- 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*. 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' - 12.2 points - an increase of over one point compared to WWL 2022. 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. Although some Christians were released in the WWL 2023 reporting period, hundreds are still imprisoned.

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 2023 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)

Freedom of expression is very curtailed in Eritrea. The government only officially recognizes a small number of church groups. Generally speaking, freedom of expression in all its forms is restricted. Posting expressions of personal faith on social media is risky and can lead to arrest, if discovered. Such posts also lead to deeper surveillance so that the authorities can uncover the person's secret cell group and then make a group arrest. This applies to all categories of Christian community (even registered churches). A country expert concludes: "The government is very tough on freedom of expression in general and on Christians in particular, as an expression of faith is still considered a sign of defiance."

Block 1.6: It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian material on the Internet. (3.75 points)

Access to the media in whatsoever form is problematic. The government monitors who is listening to what and continuously targets individuals in their private life. Many Christian homes were raided which resulted in arrests and the confiscation of Christian materials. This means it is always risky to access Christian radio or TV programs as government agents might show up at any time or they might be eavesdropping. A country expert states: "Even without adding the element of a sensitive matter like religion into the mix, media outlets are censored and anything deemed by the ruling party to be a threat will be eliminated. The government has absolute control over what citizens will access from the media, ... if a Christian is found accessing a Christian media outlet restricted by the ruling party, such a person will most likely end up in jail." The Internet itself is very limited and those who browse know that what they browse is closely watched.

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

Constant monitoring and an unannounced visits by government security agents to houses has made virtually any meeting of Christians risky. Also, Eritrea is a country where one needs a permit to travel from one village to the other. The restriction on freedom of religion against Christians in Eritrea goes to the extent of officials conducting house-to-house searches against anyone suspected of being a member of the so-called new forms of Christianity. The controlling nature of the ruling party seeks to monitor the daily activities of members of the minority Christian groups. Cadres and security forces of the country can search any private residence without the need to get a court warrant. Underground Christians and their prayer-groups are the main targets. Thus, Christians find it difficult and dangerous to meet up for prayer and Bible study.

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)

Local Christians who are part of unrecognized church groups often make sure that their Christian materials are not specific to those churches. Private possession of those materials (e.g. the Bible,

commentaries, CDs of Christian sermons, T-shirts quoting biblical verses) are considered treason by the ruling party and will lead to arbitrary detention for an indefinite period without the authorities needing to obtain any court decision to that effect.

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)

Every aspect of life in Eritrea is controlled. Christians have been facing severe problems in raising their children according to their faith. The country is under the absolute control of the ruling group. One of the downsides of such absolute control is a restriction on the right of parents (especially followers of non-traditional Christian groups) to raise their children based on the teachings of the religion they follow. Starting from denying the right to get legal protection, forced military training contradicting religious teaching, arrest and torture for no reason other than being Christian - these are some of the manifestations of the brutality of the ruling group and show how hard it is for families to freely teach children about their religion. It is also important for the family to teach Eritrean patriotism to their children; if they do not, they can face difficulties with the authorities.

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.75 points)

The teaching and education system in Eritrea include numerous anti-Christian aspects, which have become part of mandatory government propaganda in schools, indoctrinating children particularly throughout primary and secondary school education. During the military training of youth, there is also much that directly contradicts Christian values.

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

This problem has become very common. As noted on many occasions, persecution in Eritrea is complex and has many layers. Children of parents who are known as '*pentes*' (a derogatory term for Pentecostals) often face considerable pressure from teachers and fellow students. Some children are stigmatized, especially if their parents are or were imprisoned. There have been cases reported of the children of Evangelical parents being treated harshly. This has become normal practice in many places.

Block 2.10: Christian spouses and/or children of Christians have been subject to separation for prolonged periods of time by circumstances relating to persecution. (3.50 points)

Some family members are forced to flee the country often leaving vulnerable family members at home. There have been thousands of Christians detained at different detention centers for no reason other than being Christian. And at the end of the day, those detained or forced to escape the country to save their lives are not the only victims; the families and children of such detainees and escapees will also suffer by being denied all contact with their loved-ones.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

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)

Harassment and hindrances, making it difficult to live as Christians, are common characteristics of persecution at the community level. As it happens all the time, it has become 'normal' and is seen by many as being a 'non-issue'. This is the case especially for non-registered Evangelicals who face tremendous challenges, especially from the EOC and the government. A country expert emphasizes that this pressure occurs where all the main persecution engines are in operation: All drivers of persecution apply here: The government, Muslims and Orthodox Christians all pose a combination of challenges.

Block 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (3.75 points)

Pressure to renounce Protestant Christian faith usually comes from many quarters. For the unrecognized churches, it comes from the government as well. When detained Christians are released, they are forced to sign a renunciation form. If they go back to what they renounced, they will be picked up again and put in very harsh detention centers. Converts from a Muslim background and Christians who have left the EOC to join another church group also face high levels of pressure from their community to renounce their new faith.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)

This is very common. Police are known to compel Christians, especially Evangelicals, to report to them regularly as a means of harassment.

The networks of informers that look for any house churches in the country are very efficient. When a house-church has been located, police raids follow and the church members are then held in custody without trial for days, weeks, months or even years. Those who are detained and released are then often obliged to report daily or weekly to the authorities.

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.50 points)

This is part of controlling all citizens who are perceived as being opponents of the ruling party or who refuse to be part of the dominant religion in a given place. Eritrea is known for monitoring its citizens, which is done by government officials or by people from the local community. There are networks of citizens (particularly women who were former freedom fighters and are now representatives of the ruling party) who are tasked with the responsibility of monitoring the activities of their neighbors. These informers report to the sub-zonal public administrator about any person or home that is suspected of hosting underground cell or church meetings. Many of the arrests in the last few reporting periods were as a result of these reports. The government also monitors Internet usage and regularly listens in to telephone conversations, so under-

ground Christians have to be careful whenever they communicate via phone or emails.

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)

Eritrean laws fail to satisfy any minimum threshold of the requirements of Freedom of religion as espoused by Article 18 of the UDHR. Eritrea is a typical example of state-sanctioned violation of freedom of religion as enshrined under the UNDHR and other international human rights conventions. The government has made it clear that only recognized religious groups - four in total - can exist and operate in the country. It is the government that appoints the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and, as happened in 2007, any dissent by a religious leader can lead to removal from post and arrest. It is worth noting that "Compliance status" was given to other churches that applied for registration in 1997 – leading to some benefits initially. However, these benefits withered away as time went by. Such denial of recognition by the state is taken as a legal ground for local community leaders and local police to harass and intimidate Christians belonging to non-registered fellowships.

It is very common for ruling party cadres and local police to arrest and interrogate anyone suspected of being a follower of an unregistered religious group. If the individual being interrogated is found to be a member of an unregistered religious group, he or she will in most cases be sent to one of the prison camps located in remote corners of the country. Upon release from such detention centers, the individual will be ordered to renounce his/her (non-recognized) religion and report regularly to the local police.

Block 4.4: Christians have been hindered in travelling for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

This is Eritrea: A country that demands full control of people's movements. Traveling within and outside the country is very challenging for Christians. Some Christians have to report to the police every single day or every other day to show that they have not left the country. A country researcher also reports that no Eritrean under 40 years of age can travel outside of their town/village/city unless they have a clearance card proving that they have gone through military service: "There are roadblocks at which all must disembark (public and private cars) and present their cards. If anyone does not have such a card, that person is immediately taken to military prison and then on to military training and service. Those above 40 years do not need to carry the card." This hinders the movement of those involved in Christian activities outside their home-towns. The conflict in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia has made the situation even more difficult since the government has imposed further restrictions on freedom of movement.

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (4.00 points)

Organizations in Eritrea have been under intense pressure to leave or operate as prescribed by the state's draconian laws. It is well known that Freedom of association/assembly does not exist in the country. Eritrea is one of the few countries that see civil society and political parties as enemies of the state. Viewed from outside the country, since the election of the new Ethiopian

prime minister, Eritrea would appear to be going through a period of positive change: It has amended its relationship with Ethiopia and signed a peace treaty. However, for Christians (whether as individuals, or responsible for the running of political parties or NGOs), nothing has changed.

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)

Eritrea is known for its strict national service and for forcing Christians to act against their conscience. Pursuant to Article 6 of Proclamation on National Service No. 82/1995 of 1995, any Eritrean citizen between the age of 18 and 50 has the obligation to enlist for national service. The Proclamation does not provide any exception for citizens refusing to enlist on religious grounds. Religious groups have thus faced high levels of pressure and violence for non-participation in national service.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

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

All known churches experience some form of monitoring in the country - this is the nature of *Dictatorial paranoia*. However, the non-recognized churches are monitored and obstructed the most. By imprisoning their leaders, the government is attempting to make these Christian groups cease to function. The regime's focus is particularly on finding the full-time church leaders and Bible teachers. These are in constant danger of arrest which can lead to torture, near starvation and hard labor for undetermined periods of time. The non-recognized churches are not free to openly undertake activities such as baptisms, weddings, funerals, Bible teaching, Sunday services, evangelism outreaches, election of church leaders, Sunday school, youth ministry, the support of the poor, or to engage in socio-economic projects.

Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (4.00 points)

This is part of the control phenomenon in the country. Everything is monitored in Eritrea. Security officers keep tabs on preaching and teaching in case anyone speaks against the government. Published Christian material can only be bought from the Bible Society (and is heavily censored). The secret police regularly sit in and record sermons in the registered churches in order to ensure that they remain 'compliant'. This includes seminars held on church premises or under the auspices of any registered church. Published material is also scrutinized to ensure it does not go against what the government deems 'acceptable'.

Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (3.75 points)

This has been a problem for over 20 years. Getting a registration permit is virtually impossible. Since 2002 the state authorities have not approved any registrations beyond the country's four principal religious groups: The Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea, the Roman Catholic Church and Islam. Raids on the meetings of non-recognized Christian

groups are common and the government has strong intelligence machinery. Christians from such churches have to constantly make sure they are not being followed. Never in the history of Eritrea since independence have members of non-traditional Christian communities been able to freely conduct prayers without the risk of getting arrested, arbitrarily detained or even killed. The government also interferes in the election of religious leaders of recognized churches. For example, the Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch, Patriarch Abune Antonios, has been under house arrest since May 2007.

Block 5.5: Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities outside church buildings. (3.75 points)

In Eritrea, any form of outside activity is highly monitored. During the holidays, Orthodox churches can organize events outside but are still under pressure not to preach anything which could be understood to oppose the government. They must also make sure that do not violate public order in any way. Such outside events are unthinkable for unrecognized church groups. Those who are not licensed would not even think of planning such public events since they would face instant arrest.

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 5 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. For further discussion (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor's article dated 13 November 2013 available at:

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

4. 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.

5. The symbol “x” in the table: This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.

Eritrea: Violence Block question	WWL 2023	WWL 2022
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	2	0
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (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?	244	55
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)?	100 *	1000 *
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 *	10
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?	10 *	10 *
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	100 *	1000

- **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 Reverend Haile Naizge, chairman of the Full Gospel Church, and Kuflu 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.

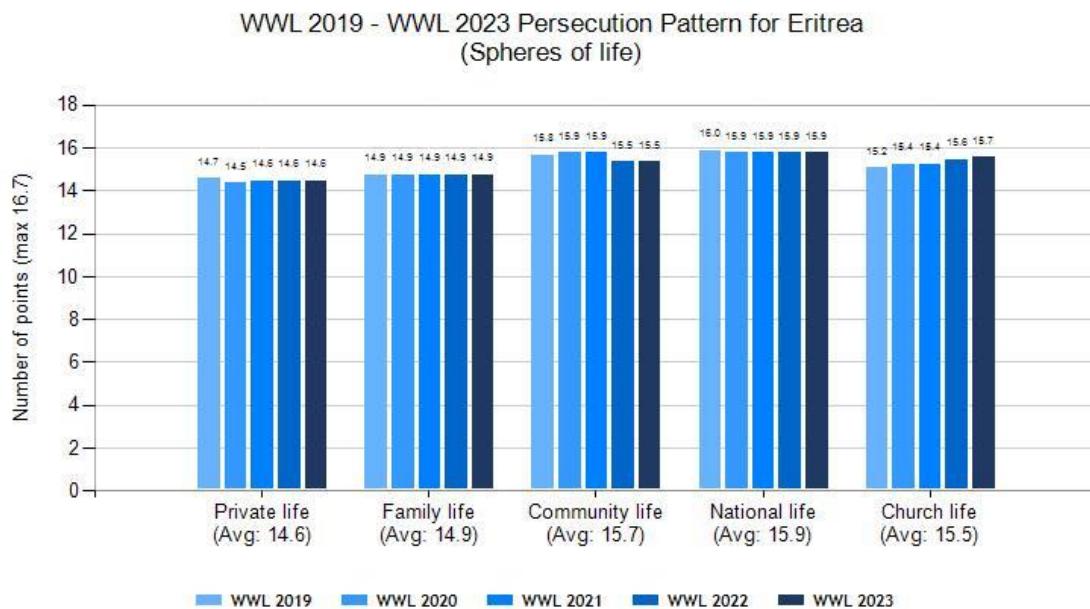
5 Year trends: Average pressure

Eritrea: WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2023	15.3
2022	15.3
2021	15.3
2020	15.3
2019	15.3

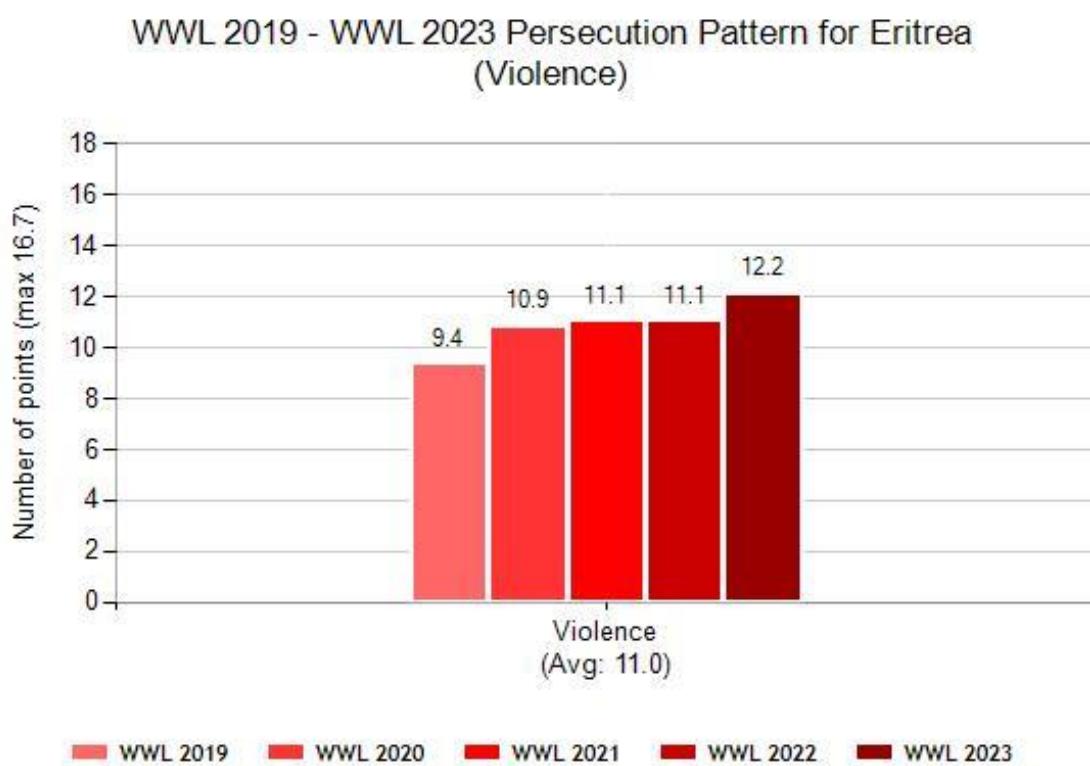
In the table above it can be seen that the average pressure on Christians has been stable at an extreme level of 15.3 points. This is consistent with how other organizations have described the human rights and freedom of religion problems in the country. The government has not shown any sign of changing 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 Ethiopian to forcefully recruit the youth without considering the right of conscientious objectors.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

The chart below shows how the pressure Christians are facing in all spheres of life has been extreme of all the five WWL reporting periods shown. Pressure in the *National sphere of life* is highest with the average score of 15.9 points, followed by the *Community* and *Church spheres of life* which scored 15.7 and 15.5 respectively. This is a reflection of the fact that persecution in Eritrea is a national phenomenon, where the government plays a key role.



5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The chart above, which depicts the violence scores over the last five WWL reporting periods, shows scores rising from 9.4 to 12.2 points. One of the main reasons why the score for violence against Christians is not as high as in other countries like CAR, Mali or Burkina Faso etc. is mainly due low number of Christians killed (often due to a lack of concrete evidence even though there are reports that suggest many Christians are getting killed or are the victims of forced disappearances).

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	Denied inheritance or possessions
Political and Legal	Denied custody of children; Forced divorce; Forced marriage; Imprisonment by government; Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Security	Abduction; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Denied access to social community/networks; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Female Christians 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, incarceration in the home, forced marriage, forced divorce and loss of child custody, particularly in rural areas. If a female Christian 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 country chapter, p.228). 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. A country expert explained: "Women and girls are prone to rape and sexual violence as a form of persecution especially when under detention on religious grounds." 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.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

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

As is the case for women, male Christians are subject to the system of obligatory military conscription, which places them in a highly controlled environment. As a result, 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 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. 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. The Pressure Points that are most specific to Christian men are physical beatings including torture leading to fatalities, imprisonment by government, and being forced to flee.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to IRFR 2021:

- "Authorities reportedly continued to detain 24 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. ... The government continued to single out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment because of their blanket refusal to vote in the 1993 referendum on the country's independence and subsequent refusal to participate in mandatory national service, for which the government stripped them of their citizenship in 1994. The government continued to detain Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious prisoners for failure to follow the law or for national security reasons and continued to deny them citizenship."
- "At least 20 Muslim protesters reportedly remained in detention following protests in Asmara in October 2017 and March 2018."
- The government continued to ban all other practices of Islam other than Sunni Islam.

Future outlook

As stated above in *Trends analysis*:

Christians, especially those the government considers to be 'agents of the West', are likely to continue suffering. 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. The COVID-19 crisis added another dimension to the existing problems.

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 Muslims have been organizing themselves for many years and view 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

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), it remains to be seen what will happen with Eritrea's involvement. In 2020, the TPLF accused Eritrea of joining forces with Ethiopia and fired rockets at the Eritrean capital. If President Afwerki can come out of the war with a good reputation as being a successful peacemaker or regional stabilizer, it would be unlikely to bring any benefit to the Christian community. It would simply mean that Afewerki will gain acceptance with the international community, despite doing nothing to alleviate the suffering of Christians within the country.

However, his regime is being sanctioned by some Western countries for its alleged involvement in human rights violations in Tigray. This could make the already paranoid government more hostile towards non-Orthodox Christians.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: Transparency International -
<https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/eritrea>
- 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-eritrea/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 countries -
<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: 3 November 2022 - <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 new Research & Reports page of the website od.org. As in earlier years, they are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) using the following links:

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