

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**4**

## Eritrea



### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

### Key findings

The government has refused to recognize any religious group except the Eritrean Orthodox, Catholic, and Lutheran churches, and Sunni Islam. Christians belonging to unrecognized churches (not Protestants, since Evangelical Lutherans are Protestant, yet recognized) face serious problems accessing community resources, especially social services provided by the state. Young people are forced to join the military, and Christians have no right to conscientious objection. Those found practicing their unrecognized religion while doing national service have faced severe punishment. The extreme level of pressure and the very high level of state-sanctioned violence is forcing some Christians to flee the country. Christian converts from a Muslim background and cross-denominational converts from an Orthodox Christian background face rights violations from their families and communities.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Isaias Afwerki

### POPULATION

3,662,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

1,709,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



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## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	1,709,000	46.7
Muslims	1,882,000	51.4
Agnostics	46,300	1.3
Ethno-religionists	22,100	0.6

Source<sup>2</sup>

Eritrea's political system is dominated by President Isaias Afwerki, in power since Eritrea's de jure independence in 1991. His party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), is the only political entity in the country. Its platform is based on the president's personality cult and Eritrea's "liberation struggle" against Ethiopia, which lasted from 1961 to 1991. Eritreans are taught to perceive national identity as more important than individual rights and ethnicity. Human rights organizations consider Eritrea one of the most repressive countries in the world. Political protest is not allowed and there are no independent media organizations in the country.

Eritrea was previously a federal component of Ethiopia, which provoked the formation of an Eritrean

liberation movement, overwhelmingly led by Muslims. The Eritrean Orthodox Christians had a strong relationship with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and saw the move by Muslims as dangerous. Some radical Islamic groups regarded Orthodox Christians as a major threat to the cause of independence. Since this time, both are suspicious of each other.

## How the situation varies by region

Christians are often located in the highlands, while Muslims dominate the lowlands of the country. Islamic oppression exists particularly in the lowlands, both in the western and eastern parts of the country. Christian denominational protectionism is concentrated in the highland areas (the central part of the country).



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<sup>1</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

The number of expatriates is significantly declining due to government pressure. This group experiences difficulties 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* as well as government action.

### Converts to Christianity

This category refers either to Christians who have left historical Christian communities (especially the Orthodox Church) to join non-traditional congregations, or to Muslims who have converted to Christianity. The first category can face serious violence, intolerance, and discrimination from the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the latter from Muslim families and society.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

This group faces the harshest persecution in the country. This group consists of Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations. They are regarded by the government as agents of the West. Pentecostal communities, in particular, face serious pressure and violence and their rights are regularly violated by government officials and the Eritrean Orthodox Church.



## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Christian Denominational protectionism:

The Eritrean Orthodox Church has a long historical presence in the country and views Christians from a different background, especially Pentecostals, as foreign. The Orthodox, however, are not immune to external pressures such as interference in church affairs, including monitoring of church leaders, violence, intolerance, and discrimination from the government and perpetrators of Islamic oppression.

### Dictatorial paranoia:

Since the 1993 independence referendum, the PFDJ has exercised full control over Eritrea as a unitary party state under the leadership of President Afwerki. The regime goes to great lengths to maintain its grip on power and has arrested, harassed, and killed Christians critical of the regime, often under the pretext of being agents of the West.

### Islamic oppression:

Approximately half of the Eritrean population is Muslim. Of these, almost all are Sunni. In most Muslim-majority areas, Christians, and especially converts, are particularly vulnerable. Conversion is seen as a betrayal of community, family and the Muslim faith. Although there is pressure by radical groups to form an Islamic state, the government's totalitarianism has played a major role in preventing this from happening.

### Organized corruption and crime:

Eritrea is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. According to the [Transparency International report of 2021](#), Eritrea ranks 161 out of 180 countries. Corruption mainly involves the army, which controls many aspects of life in the country.

# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Female Christians are caught in a pincer of pressure between the Eritrean government and society. Converts face abduction within their community (including bridal abduction), house arrest, forced marriage, forced divorce, and loss of child custody. In Eritrea, women are subjected to obligatory military training and national service, either in the army or in a government department or project. They undergo training at the infamous SAWA military training camps, a highly controlled environment in which every behavior and belief is scrutinized. Hundreds of women also experience gender-based violence in detention centers.

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community / networks
- Denied custody of children
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Imprisonment by the government
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Military against conscience / militia conscription
- Targeted seduction
- Trafficking
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

## MEN

Christian men are subject to obligatory military conscription, which places them in a highly controlled environment. As a result, many young Eritreans seek to escape the country. 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. Pressure points most specific to Christian men include physical beatings, arrests, imprisonment by government, and being forced to flee. Because most underground church leadership positions are held by men, any arrests cause a leadership vacuum.

- Imprisonment by the government
- Military / militia conscription / service against conscience
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	4	89
2022	6	88
2021	6	88
2020	6	87
2019	7	86

*Eritrea's score increased by one point compared to WWL 2022 mainly because of an increase in violence. The average level of pressure for Eritrean Christians remains extreme and unbearable for many in all spheres of life. It is strongest in the National and Church spheres, reflecting government policies that are mainly responsible for exerting pressure.*



# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **At the end of 2021**, several Christians were arrested. On 25 December a group of 13 Christians, celebrating Christmas in one of their homes, was arrested and detained in Mai Sirwa prison, outside the capital Asmara and two were taken to Asmara’s 2nd police station.
- **In the new year**, 12 Christian college students from Barentu (six male and six female) as well as 13 Christians from Asmara were arrested and detained.
- **In the week of 13 March 2022**, Eritrean police arrested 29 Evangelical Christians (Pentecostals) and raided their homes in Asmara (Debubawi Mierab, Maekel) while they were praying. The officers took them to the Mai Sirwa prison.
- **Around 5 September 2022**, as reported, Eritrean security forces entered Akrur Medhanealem, a Catholic Church in Akrur, Seghenety, and arrested several young people who were praying there. The security forces also arrested the deacons, the church ministers, and choir during the raid.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Christians detained	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government	Christians’ private property damaged or confiscated
2023	2	224	100*	100*
2022	0	55	100*	10

*This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* or 1000\*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

## Private life

Freedom of expression in all its forms is restricted. Christian homes are raided, resulting in arrests and the confiscation of Christian materials. Often, government surveillance continues until authorities can uncover secret cell groups and make mass arrests. This applies to all Christians (even registered ones). Everyday life is under scrutiny; phone calls are monitored, bandwidth is kept slow, and a network of citizens is tasked with spying on their neighbors. Indeed, the level of monitoring has been compared with [North Korea](#) (The Economist, 14 Aug 2018).

## Family life

Parental rights are restricted, especially those of non-traditional Christians. To oppose the government is to risk arrest, torture, and the denial of legal protection. Government propaganda in schools and during youth military training often directly contradicts Christian values. The term ‘P’ent’ay’ (Pente) is a pejorative term used to describe Christians who are not members of the Orthodox Tewahedo churches. P’ent’ays and their children face considerable pressure from teachers and fellow students. Children are usually stigmatized,

bullied, and even assaulted, especially if their parents are or were imprisoned. Often, family members are forced to flee their country, leaving vulnerable family members behind.

Eritrea’s involvement in the war in Tigray, Ethiopia, has also added pressure to families. Forced conscription has intensified, and no resistance is tolerated. Family members are punished for youth who escape.

## Community life

In Eritrea, there are networks of citizens (particularly women who were former freedom fighters and are now representatives of the ruling party) tasked with monitoring the activities of their neighbors. These informers report to public administrators about anyone suspected of hosting underground church meetings. Government monitoring of internet usage and telecommunications forces many Christians to exercise extreme caution, so as not to risk violations.

## National life

The government has made it clear that only four recognized religious groups can 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 the post and arrest. Denial of recognition by the State is taken as enough grounds for local authorities to arrest and intimidate Christians belonging to non-registered fellowships. Punishments can include being sent to one of the prison camps located in remote areas. Upon release from such detention centers, the individual will be ordered to denounce his/her (non-recognized) religion and report to the local police regularly. The government sees civil society and political parties as enemies of the State.

### **Church life**

All churches are under government surveillance. However, non-recognized churches are the most monitored and obstructed. Leaders are specifically targeted and risk arrest, torture, starvation, and hard labor. Even Orthodox churches are under pressure not to preach anything that might be considered an anti-government message. The government also interferes in the election of religious leaders of recognized churches.



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## International obligations & rights violated

**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 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)

# Situation of other religious minorities

According to [US 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. At least 20 Muslim protesters reportedly remained in detention following protests in Asmara in October 2017 and March 2018. 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.”



## Open Doors in Eritrea

Open Doors has been involved in Eritrea through the local church since the 1990s. Our vision is to see a strong Eritrean church that is holistically empowered to support one another, and disciple members so they remain strong in the faith and reach out to others in the face of persecution, through:

- Persecution preparedness
- Economic empowerment
- Discipleship

#### About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

*Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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