

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

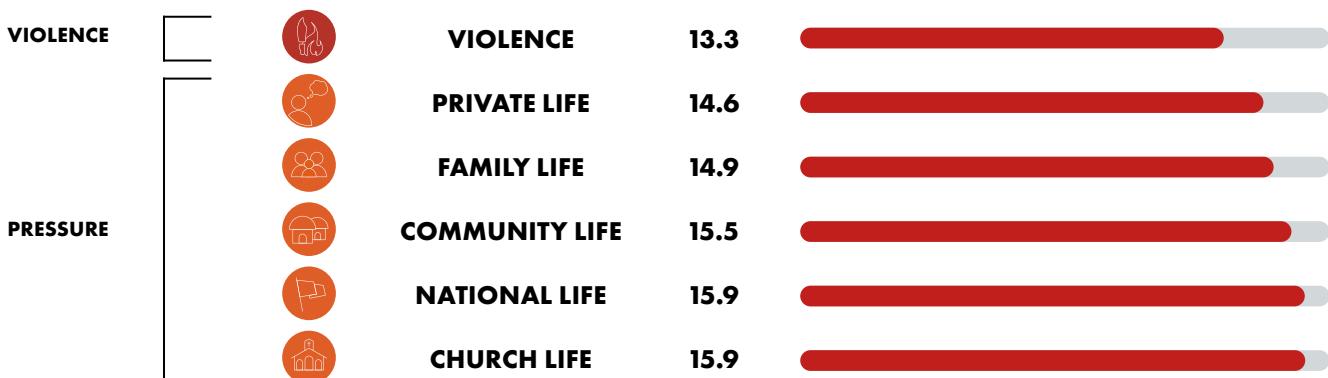
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
5

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 ($6 \times 16.7 = 100$).

Key findings

Eritrea is one of the world's most repressive states for Christians. The government recognizes only four religious groups, excluding most evangelical and Pentecostal communities, which are treated as illegal. Christians outside state-sanctioned churches face intense surveillance, violent raids, and indefinite imprisonment—often in shipping containers or underground cells, with no trial, medical care, or basic rights. Converts from Islam or the Eritrean Orthodox Church risk familial rejection and social exclusion in addition to state persecution. The militarized nature of society compounds repression. Indefinite national service, akin to forced labor, offers no exemption for conscience, and Christians who worship while serving are punished severely. As youth flee the country in large numbers, traditional escape routes have become perilous. Conflict in Sudan, lawlessness in Libya, and deteriorating ties with Ethiopia have closed off regional exits. Eritrea's alleged role in the Sudanese war further jeopardizes refugees. Christians face a devastating dilemma: endure persecution and forced conscription at home, or flee through routes marked by trafficking, torture and danger.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Isaias Afwerki

POPULATION

3,890,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

1,713,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



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Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	1,713,000	44.0
Muslims	2,093,000	53.8
Atheists/Agnostics	49,460	1.3
Others	35,000	0.9
	Total	100%

Source²

Eritrea remains one of the world's most repressive and militarized authoritarian regimes, ruled without interruption by President Isaias Afwerki since independence from Ethiopia in 1993. The People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) is the only legal political party, and no national elections have ever been held. The 1997 constitution was ratified but never implemented. Political life is shaped by a personality cult, a narrative of national martyrdom, and the institutionalization of indefinite national service. Arbitrary detention, forced labor, and suppression of dissent are entrenched. Independent media have been banned since 2001, and thousands of political prisoners remain in secret detention without access to legal counsel.

The brief thaw in relations with Ethiopia following the 2018 peace agreement collapsed after Eritrea's military intervention in the Tigray conflict. Despite the November 2022 ceasefire between Ethiopia and the TPLF, Eritrean troops remained in Tigray throughout 2023 and were accused of atrocities, including sexual violence

and forced displacement. Tensions with Ethiopia escalated again in 2024, fueling further domestic repression under the banner of national security.

Religious freedom in Eritrea remains dire. Only four religious groups are legally recognized: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church. All others—including Pentecostals, Baptists, Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses—are banned. In 2024 alone, over 80 Christians were arrested in the first five months, with an estimated 350 imprisoned, often in inhumane conditions such as shipping containers or underground cells. No new religious registrations have been accepted since 2002.

Even recognized denominations face tight state control. Clergy appointments and church operations are monitored. Patriarch Abune Antonios died in 2022 under house arrest, and Catholic schools were seized the same year. Jehovah's Witnesses face extreme persecution, including loss of citizenship, largely due to their conscientious objection to military service.

Raids on house churches, forced renunciations of faith, and religious bans on detainees remain widespread. Escape routes have narrowed as conflict in Sudan and insecurity in Libya close traditional exits. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom again recommends Eritrea as a "Country of Particular Concern" due to its systemic and ongoing violations of religious liberty.

¹ Gina A. Zurlo, ed., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

² Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

How the situation varies by region

In Eritrea, regional dynamics shape the persecution experienced by Christians. Islamic oppression is more pronounced in the lowland regions, where social pressure against Christian converts from Islam can lead to threats, or violence. Meanwhile, in the highland areas, especially the central region dominated by the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Christian denominational protectionism is present. Here, members of state-recognized churches often view evangelical or Pentecostal Christians with hostility. Converts or members of unregistered denominations may be reported to authorities, excluded from community life, or accused of undermining national unity and tradition.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

Expatriate Christians face increasing restrictions, with declining numbers due to government pressure. They cannot move freely or gather for worship.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Eritrean Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, and Catholic churches are the largest Christian groups. Concentrated in central and southern Eritrea, they face pressure from the state and Islamic communities.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Converts to Christianity face double persecution: those leaving the Orthodox Church suffer rejection from family and church authorities, while Muslim-background converts face hostility from their communities.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Non-traditional Christian groups, such as Evangelical, Pentecostal and Baptist churches, face the harshest repression. Unrecognized by the state, they endure raids, imprisonment, and systemic marginalization. Worship is banned, members are labeled foreign agents, and their gatherings criminalized. The Orthodox Church at times supports state efforts to suppress these groups, reinforcing their legal invisibility.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONAL PROTECTIONISM

The Eritrean Orthodox Church, with its deep historical roots, often regards other Christian groups, particularly Pentecostals and Evangelicals, as foreign or heretical. Converts from the Orthodox tradition to non-traditional denominations face intense social pressure, stigma, and denunciation. However, the Orthodox Church itself is not immune to persecution. Government authorities regularly interfere in internal church affairs, monitor clergy, and punish religious leaders seen as politically independent or critical.

DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

Since its independence in 1993, Eritrea has functioned as a one-party dictatorship under President Isaias Afwerki and the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). The regime equates religious independence with political dissent. Christians, especially those from unregistered or independent congregations, are frequently labeled "agents of the West" or "unpatriotic." They face arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention without charge, torture, and, in some cases, extrajudicial execution. This persecution is rooted in a state ideology that views religious pluralism as a threat to national unity and authority.

ISLAMIC OPPRESSION

While the Eritrean government represses religious extremism, Christians, particularly converts from Islam, are at risk in Muslim-majority areas. Conversion is widely regarded as a betrayal, often resulting in community shaming, threats, or violence. Though Islamist radicals are not dominant nationally, localized pressure remains intense in parts of the lowlands.

ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

According to Transparency International's [2024 Corruption Perceptions Index](#), Eritrea ranks 173 out of 180 countries. Corruption is especially entrenched in the military, which dominates the economy and wields unchecked power, often targeting Christians for extortion, intimidation, or property seizure under the guise of national security.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Christian women in Eritrea face pressure from both government and society. Converts risk abduction, forced marriage, isolation, or expulsion from their families. Hundreds are held in detention, where rape and sexual violence are used as tools of persecution. Eritrea's indefinite national service forces women into military camps like Sawa, where they face sexual abuse and harsh conditions. Movement restrictions further disadvantage Christians. Families of detained women often suffer ostracism and hardship, while many flee abroad to escape systemic oppression.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Travel bans/restriction of movement
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Christian men in Eritrea face indefinite military conscription, with harsh conditions, forced labor, and torture driving many to flee abroad. Daily life is heavily surveyed, with phone calls monitored and neighbors recruited as informants. Christians outside the state-recognized churches risk arrest and indefinite detention, particularly pastors and leaders, many imprisoned for decades without trial. Their absence leaves church communities without leadership, and families stigmatized or impoverished. Released detainees are often forced back into military service. Eritrea remains one of the world's most repressive environments for Christian men.

Male typical pressure points:

- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by 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
2026	5	90
2025	6	89
2024	4	89
2023	4	89
2022	6	88

Eritrea's WWL score has remained broadly stable, hovering around 88-89, for roughly five consecutive reporting cycles. In the WWL 2026 cycle, the score rises by one point, driven entirely by a one-point increase in the violence block. The pattern itself is unchanged: Christians live under a tightly controlled security state that criminalizes unregistered religious activity, detains believers indefinitely without due process, and treats independent Christian expression as a threat to national cohesion. Eritrea remains on the U.S. State Department's "Countries of Particular Concern" list, reflecting the long-standing, severe, and systematic nature of the pressure.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Hundreds of Christians, belonging to unregistered denominations, face arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance. Many are held incommunicado in severe conditions, including overcrowded metal shipping containers, where detainees endure torture, physical abuse, denial of medical care, and forced renunciation of faith.
- Eritrea's compulsory national service systems have grown even more repressive amid rising tensions, including potential for renewed conflict with Ethiopia. The government has intensified night raids in Asmara, Keren, Massawa, and other cities, dragging young people—including Christians—from their homes and forcing them into military camps.
- In 2025 (the whole reporting period), security forces confiscated dozens of Christian-owned properties, including house churches, schools, small businesses, and community centers, accusing congregations of operating "illegally" or being influenced by foreign agendas. State-controlled media has vilified independent Christian groups, branding them "agents of foreign destabilization" to justify property seizures.



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WWL Year	Christians detained	Christians killed	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government	Christians forced to flee the country
2026	300	10	100*	1,000*
2025	245	2	100*	1,000*

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period – for full results see the violence section of the country's corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. 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. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*.

PRIVATE LIFE

Freedom of expression in Eritrea is severely restricted. Christian households are regularly raided, resulting in the confiscation of Bibles and religious materials, as well as believers being arrested. Government surveillance is constant, often continuing for weeks or months, before sweeping arrests are made of entire underground church cells. Even members of recognized churches are not immune. Daily life is heavily monitored—phone calls are tapped, internet access is limited, and a vast civilian network reports suspicious behavior, especially religious activity.

FAMILY LIFE

Family life is disrupted by both government repression and societal hostility. Parents from non-traditional churches often lose custody of their children or face harassment from schools. Christian values are undermined through state propaganda, especially during youth military training. The derogatory term *P'ent'ay* is widely used to stigmatize evangelicals. Children of imprisoned Christians face bullying and exclusion. Forced military conscription tears families apart, and relatives of those who escape are punished or detained. Eritrea's military role in the Tigray war has intensified pressure, particularly on families of draft evaders.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Christian converts and unregistered believers live in constant fear. A pervasive network of

informants—often older women loyal to the ruling party—monitors religious activity. House churches, Bible studies, and unfamiliar visitors are swiftly reported, leading to raids and arrests. Converts from Islam face harsh rejection, violence, and social isolation. Those leaving the Orthodox Church are similarly branded traitors. Evangelicals are treated as heretics or foreign agents. Trust within communities is scarce; faith is practiced in secrecy.

NATIONAL LIFE

Eritrea officially recognizes only four religious groups; all others are banned. Even within the approved denominations, the government controls leadership and doctrine. Abune Antonios, the deposed Orthodox Patriarch, died under house arrest after resisting state interference. Unregistered Christians are arrested, tortured, and pressured to recant. Civil society and religious pluralism are equated with disloyalty, reinforcing the regime's totalitarian grip.

CHURCH LIFE

Churches, registered or not, operate under surveillance. Services are raided, leaders imprisoned, and sermons monitored. Pastors face solitary confinement and torture. Recognized churches, including Orthodox and Catholic, are forced to align with state propaganda. The church's prophetic voice has been silenced, stripped of independence and reduced to a mechanism of state legitimacy under Eritrea's authoritarian rule.



International obligations & rights violated

Eritrea has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under 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

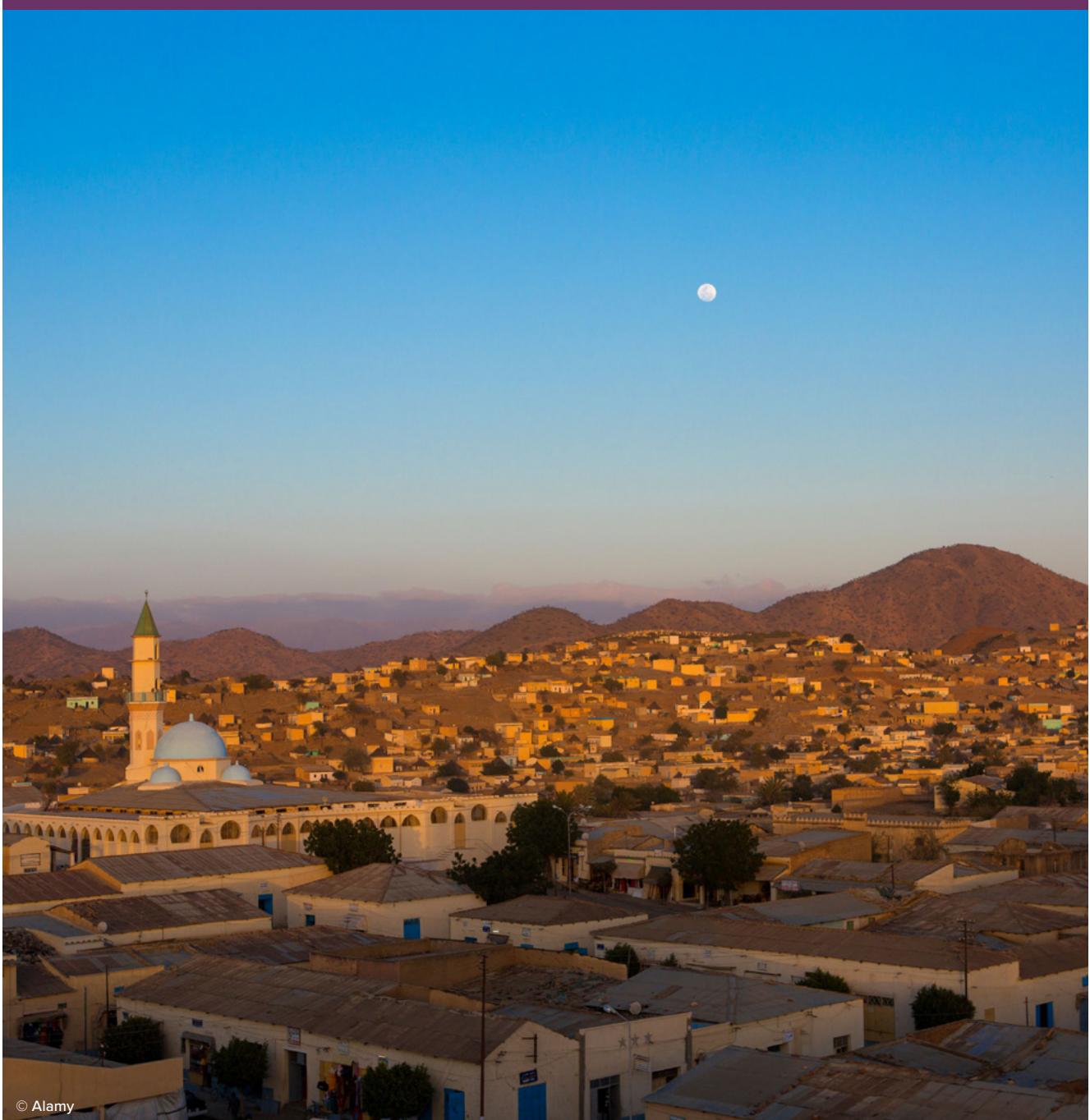
In Eritrea, religious minorities outside the four government-recognized faiths; Sunni Islam, Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Evangelical Lutheran, face severe repression. Jehovah's Witnesses are especially targeted, with ongoing arrests, detentions, and deaths in custody. Non-Sunni Islamic practices are banned, and religious expression outside state-sanctioned structures is treated as subversive, leading to widespread fear and the silencing of minority faiths.



Open Doors in Eritrea

Open Doors has supported the Church in Eritrea since the 1990s. Through strategic partnerships and the local church network we work towards a strong Eritrean church that is holistically empowered to support one another, and disciple members:

- Persecution response training
- Discipleship



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- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.
- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.