

Situation of religious freedom for Christians 2024:

ERITREA

World Watch List 2024 position: 4

Key Findings: The government of Eritrea has refused to recognize any religious group except the Eritrean Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran churches, and Sunni Islam. Christians belonging to unrecognized churches 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 also face rights violations from their families and communities. Christians, particularly young people, are confronted with a bleak choice: either endure long-term detention in extremely hostile environments (such as shipping containers) or risk fleeing the country through perilous trafficking routes. These routes often pass through countries like Sudan, Egypt, and Libya, and across the treacherous Mediterranean Sea. Along the way, they face the dangers of death, extortion, and torture. The already perilous journey for Christians fleeing hostile conditions is further complicated by ongoing conflicts in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Libya. These conflicts add additional layers of danger and uncertainty, making the escape route even more treacherous for those in desperate circumstances.

Quick Facts: Eritrea

Leader	President Isaias Afwerki
Population	3,728,000
Christians	1,739,000 (Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. , World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023))
Main Religion	Islam
Government	Presidential Republic

Context: 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. In early July 2018, Eritrea signed an [historic peace agreement](#) with Ethiopia to end a three-decade-long conflict and to promote close cooperation in political, economic, social, cultural and security areas (CNN, 9 July 2018).

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.

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Eritrea): "A majority of the population in the southern and central regions is Christian, while the northern areas are majority Sunni Muslim. A majority of the Tigrinya, the largest ethnic group, is Christian."

How the situation varies by region: Islamic oppression exists particularly in the lowlands and Christian denominational protectionism is concentrated in the highland areas (the central part of the country).

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 and their families; the latter from Muslim families and society.
- **Non-traditional Christian communities:** This group faces the harshest persecution in the country and consists of Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations. They are regarded as agents of the West by the government and society in general. 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 from 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 Transparency International (CPI 2022), Eritrea ranks #162 out of 180 countries, scoring 22 points. Corruption mainly involves the army, which controls many aspects of life in the country.

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, house arrest, forced marriage, forced divorce and loss of child custody. In Eritrea, women are subjected to obligatory military training and national service. They may be trained at the infamous SAWA military training camps, a highly controlled environment in which every behavior and belief is scrutinized. Many women experience gender-based violence in military service and detention centers.
- **Female typical pressure points:**
 - Abduction;
 - Denied access to social community/networks;
 - Denied custody of children;

- Denied inheritance or possessions;
- Forced divorce; Forced marriage;
- Imprisonment by government;
- Incarceration by family (house arrest);
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience;
- 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
- **Male typical pressure points:**
 - Forced to flee town/country;
 - Imprisonment by government;
 - Military/militia conscription/service against conscience;
 - Violence – death;
 - Violence - physical.

Short description of the change in score and why: The persecution level in Eritrea has consistently remained at an extreme level over the past five years, with no change in the recorded score during WWL 2024. In fact, over the last five years, the score has consistently ranged between 87 and 89, depicting a sustained high level of persecution.

- **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.
- **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 Church. Such Christians 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. Typically, 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 on 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.

Situation of Other Religious Minorities: According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Eritrea)

- "The government continued to ban all non-Sunni practices of Islam."
- "Jehovah's Witnesses remained largely unable to obtain official identification documents, which left many of them unable to study in government institutions and barred them from most forms of employment, government benefits, access to bank accounts, and travel."

"According to the Jehovah's Witnesses Religious Freedom Report for Eritrea, authorities reportedly continued to detain 20 Jehovah's Witnesses, more than half of whom had been in prison for more than 20 years, for refusing to participate in military service or renounce their faith."