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## Eritrea: Country Dossier

November 2020



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2021

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	94	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.2	94	93	94	93	89
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.3	9.8	92	92	91	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.4	15.9	16.3	16.3	12.4	92	90	87	86	78
5	Pakistan	13.9	14.2	15.1	14.9	13.5	16.7	88	88	87	86	88
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	11.1	88	87	86	86	82
7	Yemen	16.6	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	3.9	87	85	86	85	85
8	Iran	14.5	14.5	13.9	15.7	16.5	10.6	86	85	85	85	85
9	Nigeria	13.3	13.2	13.9	14.1	14.1	16.7	85	80	80	77	78
10	India	13.0	12.9	13.5	14.9	13.7	15.4	83	83	83	81	73
11	Iraq	13.6	14.6	14.2	14.8	13.8	11.5	82	76	79	86	86
12	Syria	13.3	13.9	13.5	14.5	14.0	12.0	81	82	82	76	86
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	13.7	13.6	15.7	9.1	79	85	87	87	87
14	Saudi Arabia	15.1	13.9	14.4	15.8	16.6	2.2	78	79	77	79	76
15	Maldives	15.4	15.5	13.9	15.8	16.6	0.4	77	78	78	78	76
16	Egypt	12.5	13.2	11.5	12.7	11.0	14.1	75	76	76	70	65
17	China	12.6	9.7	12.0	13.2	15.4	11.1	74	70	65	57	57
18	Myanmar	11.9	12.0	13.1	12.9	12.3	11.9	74	73	71	65	62
19	Vietnam	12.1	8.8	12.7	14.0	14.5	10.0	72	72	70	69	71
20	Mauritania	14.3	14.0	13.5	14.1	13.6	1.9	71	68	67	57	55
21	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	1.3	71	73	74	73	71
22	Laos	12.1	10.2	13.6	13.5	14.3	6.9	71	72	71	67	64
23	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.5	70	70	69	68	67
24	Algeria	13.9	13.9	11.5	13.1	13.4	3.9	70	73	70	58	58
25	Turkey	12.5	11.5	10.8	13.3	11.6	9.3	69	63	66	62	57
26	Tunisia	12.0	13.1	10.4	11.5	13.2	7.4	67	64	63	62	61
27	Morocco	12.6	13.5	11.2	12.4	14.1	3.7	67	66	63	51	49
28	Mali	9.4	8.2	12.7	10.3	11.5	15.4	67	66	68	59	59
29	Qatar	14.0	13.9	10.8	13.1	14.1	1.5	67	66	62	63	66
30	Colombia	11.4	8.8	12.4	11.0	9.7	13.9	67	62	58	56	53
31	Bangladesh	11.5	10.3	13.0	11.3	10.1	10.6	67	63	58	58	63
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.4	11.8	14.3	67	66	48	-	-
33	Tajikistan	14.0	12.3	11.9	12.5	13.2	2.2	66	65	65	65	58
34	Nepal	12.4	9.7	9.9	13.0	12.3	8.5	66	64	64	64	53
35	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.1	9.6	9.9	15.6	66	68	70	61	58
36	Ethiopia	9.9	8.5	10.7	10.3	10.8	14.4	65	63	65	62	64
37	Mexico	10.3	8.1	12.4	10.7	10.3	12.6	64	60	61	59	57
38	Jordan	13.1	13.9	11.4	11.6	12.4	2.0	64	64	65	66	63
39	Brunei	13.9	14.6	10.7	10.9	13.5	0.7	64	63	63	64	64
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	11.2	9.4	11.6	16.1	64	56	55	33	-
41	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	11.0	12.5	13.4	2.4	64	64	63	63	56
42	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.0	12.3	15.7	64	60	54	38	-
43	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	11.9	12.7	13.8	0.0	64	61	64	62	61
44	Oman	13.2	13.5	10.3	12.5	13.0	0.9	63	62	59	57	53
45	Mozambique	9.3	7.6	11.3	7.9	11.1	16.1	63	43	43	-	-
46	Malaysia	12.1	14.3	12.9	11.5	10.0	2.4	63	62	60	65	60
47	Indonesia	11.5	11.4	12.4	10.7	9.3	7.8	63	60	65	59	55
48	Kuwait	13.2	13.5	9.9	12.2	13.2	1.1	63	62	60	61	57
49	Kenya	11.7	9.2	10.5	8.0	10.3	12.8	62	61	61	62	68
50	Comoros	12.5	11.1	11.4	11.3	14.2	1.9	62	57	56	56	56

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
51	Cuba	10.9	7.7	11.8	12.9	13.4	5.4	62	52	49	49	47
52	Sri Lanka	12.2	9.1	11.7	12.2	9.7	7.0	62	65	58	57	55
53	UAE	13.4	13.3	9.7	12.0	12.4	1.1	62	60	58	58	55
54	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.6	10.6	62	60	52	45	47
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.2	10.4	12.0	1.3	58	57	56	54	48
56	Palestinian Territories	12.5	13.3	9.1	10.4	11.7	0.9	58	60	57	60	64
57	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	10.2	58	55	52	53	59
58	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.5	12.1	3.9	57	60	60	51	46
59	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.0	56	56	56	56	57
60	Bahrain	12.1	12.5	9.1	10.7	10.5	0.9	56	55	55	57	54
61	Azerbaijan	12.8	9.8	9.4	11.1	12.6	0.0	56	57	57	57	52
62	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	3.7	53	56	48	40	-
63	Nicaragua	6.9	4.6	9.9	11.3	10.0	8.1	51	41	41	-	-
64	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.9	48	48	43	-	-
65	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	12.0	47	48	47	46	53
66	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	5.9	47	45	46	-	-
67	Honduras	6.8	5.0	10.6	7.6	9.0	7.6	46	39	38	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	10.1	11.4	7.2	46	43	42	-	-
69	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	44	44	-	-
70	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	0.6	43	43	43	-	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	0.7	43	41	42	-	-
72	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	8.1	42	42	41	-	-
73	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.3	42	42	43	-	-
74	El Salvador	6.6	4.9	9.8	4.2	8.7	7.8	42	38	30	-	-

## Copyright notice

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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).
- The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.
- The WWL 2021 reporting period was 01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020.
- 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).

## Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2021 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of Open Doors field networks, research analysts, external experts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that the WWL 2021 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

## External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

# WWL 2021 Short country profile / Eritrea

## Brief country details

Eritrea: Population (2020 UN estimate)	Christians	Chr%
5,432,000	2,552,000	47.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

Eritrea: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	88	6
WWL 2020	87	6
WWL 2019	86	7
WWL 2018	86	6
WWL 2017	82	10

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

Islamic oppression	One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Non-Christian religious leaders
--------------------	--

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

## Brief description of the persecution situation

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. Protestants in particular face serious problems in accessing community resources, especially social services provided by the State. 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 group except the Eritrean Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran churches, and Islam. Both converts from a Muslim background and cross-denominational converts from an Orthodox Christian background face harsh mistreatment from their families and communities. Government security forces conducted many house-to-house raids and arrested hundreds of Christians. The extreme level of pressure and the very high level of 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

- [June 2020](#): In a crackdown on Christians belonging to unregistered denominations, the Government of Eritrea arrested 30 people that were attending a wedding ceremony held in the capital, Asmara. In April 2020, a group of 15 Christians that had been attending a church service was rounded up in the capital's Mai Chehot area and transported to a prison camp in Mai Serwa (Eritrea Hub Press Release, 7 July 2020).
- [20 February 2020](#): High ranking Roman Catholic dignitaries were denied entry into the country (ACIAFRICA, 4 March 2020). This is an example of how the Church is prohibited from global interaction.

## Specific examples of positive developments

There are no positive developments that can be cited.

## External Links - Short country profile

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: June 2020: - <https://eritreahub.org/news-of-further-arrests-at-wedding>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: 20 February 2020 - <https://www.aciafrica.org/news/915/bishops-in-eritrea-write-to-protest-ethiopian-cardinal-led-delegations-denied-entry>

# WWL 2021: Keys to understanding / Eritrea

## Link for general background information

- [Eritrea country profile - BBC News](#)

## 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 amend its relationship with the international community.



The year 2018 opened a period of significant changes in Eritrea internationally, if not domestically. In early July 2018, Eritrea signed an [historic peace agreement](#) with neighbor Ethiopia to end a two-decade-long conflict and to promote close cooperation in political, economic, social, cultural and security areas (CNN, 9 July 2018). This dramatic event in Asmara was followed by President Isaias 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 ago (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 since human rights conditions in Eritrea have [not improved](#) at all (Human Rights Watch - HRW, World Report 2020, Eritrea - Events in 2019).

The peace deal which the Eritrean government struck with Ethiopia has strengthened its current position rather than encouraging the regime to improve its poor record of [human rights violations](#) and government transparency and accountability (HRW, World Report 2019). There have been no significant changes in 2019 for ordinary Eritreans on the 28th anniversary of independence. The regime has remained as repressive as before: Mandatory military conscription has continued (despite the pretext of existential threat by Ethiopia being removed through the recent peace deal); 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.

## 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".

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 [2019 Country Report on Human Rights Practices](#), incidents in 2019 included "... forced disappearance, torture, and arbitrary detention, the preceding three actions all committed by the government; harsh and life-threatening prison and detention center conditions ...". 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 especially ethnic Tigrinya 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 have resumed economic and diplomatic cooperation, Ethiopia Airlines has resumed flying to Asmara and Ethiopia has begun using Assab port again. Saying that this is historic and unexpected news is no exaggeration. The two countries have been accusing each other for years for not accepting the borders set out by an international border commission and have been engaged in a proxy war in Somalia.

This 'deal', as many call it, brings hope and it is touching to see so many families separated by the war now reuniting for the first time after nearly 20 years. Yet, it is a legitimate question to ask: What does this mean for Christians who have been suffering for decades in Eritrean prisons? There has been no indication that hundreds of Christians currently in prison might soon be released. Any peace agreement that does not take human rights and freedom of religion as its core principle, will not be sustainable. In 2019 and 2020, there was no progress in this respect.

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; arbitrary and indefinite detention; inadequate implementation of existing legislation; and the disappearances of men and women in the State party.

Military service in Eritrea has been [likened](#) to an indefinite program of forced labor, despite a government decree limiting service to 18 months (Human Rights Watch, 8 Aug 2019, “They Are Making Us into slaves, Not Educating Us”). 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. In order to avoid enrolment at the SAWA military training center, families and girls consider [early marriage](#) as an escape route, as married or pregnant girls are usually exempt from service. Young men also seek alternative pathways (OECD, 2019, Social Institutions and Gender Index, p.3); Thousands of Eritreans are reported to have fled the country to embark on a perilous journey to Europe, many of whom are aged between 18 and 24 (Human Rights Watch, 8 Aug 2019).

Despite the legal age for marriage being set at [18](#) under the 1991 Marriage Law, the Transitional Civil Code of Eritrea (1991) recognizes marriages from the age of 15 in recognition of Eritrean customary marriage practices. Child marriage is high in Eritrea, with [41%](#) of girls reportedly entering marriage before they reach the age of 18 (Girls not Brides, accessed 23 November 2020). 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	2,552,000	47.0
Muslim	2,792,000	51.4
Hindu	1,000	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethno-religionist	27,000	0.5
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	1,400	0.0

Atheist	350	0.0
Agnostic	58,000	1.1
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 February 2020).

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.

## Economic landscape

According to the [World Bank's Macro Poverty Outlook 2020](#):

- Real GDP growth is estimated at 3.7% in 2019, supported by higher crop and mining output
- Growth in 2019 follows a rebound of 13% in 2018, driven by recovery in agriculture amounting to 24%
- The current account surplus is estimated at 12.2% of the GDP in 2019
- Foreign exchange reserves stood at USD 100 million or 2.2 months of imports
- Fiscal surplus narrowed to 2.7% of the GDP from 6.3% in 2018
- Due to the new salary structure for government employees with more than 12 years of education, the wage bill approximately tripled from 5.1% of the GDP in 2014 to an estimated 15% of the GDO in 2019

- Total public debt, including external arrears shrunk to an estimated 232% of the GDP in 2019 from 291% of the GDP in 2017

According to the World Bank (2020): “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.”

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 channelled 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 channelled into supporting the national defense.

According to projections in the [World Bank's Macro Poverty Outlook 2020](#):

- The real GDP is expected to contract 0.7% in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic
- Growth is expected to recover to around 5.7% in 2021 due to the recovery in private consumption, before moderating to 3.2% in 2022
- Once the Asmara and Colluli mines become operational around 2023 and after, growth could reach 5 1/2 %
- Inflation is expected to increase by 2% by 2021
- World Bank also predicts that the growth contraction will depend on domestic containment of COVID-19 and global developments impacting Eritrean remittances and mining exports to China. In addition, the government response to the locust outbreak will further affect economic growth. Furthermore, the rainfed agriculture sector is subject to frequent droughts as Eritrea is one of the most water-stressed African countries

The impact of indefinite detention and military service places economic strain on Christian families. 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. As of 2018, [74.3%](#) of women were in the workforce, mostly low-skilled jobs (Georgetown, 2019, “Women, Peace and Security Index”).

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 (1 Feb 2018, Eritrea Education Sector Plan). 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. A selection of these national service conscripts is later assigned teaching duties, many of whom are inadequately equipped to do so effectively.

Converts to Christianity may be pressured economically for their faith. Female converts from a Muslim background may be divorced by their husband, or be denied their due inheritance or custody of their children.

## Social and cultural landscape

In many cultural and social aspects, Eritrea resembles Ethiopia.

According to [the UNDP 2019](#) report and the [World Factbook](#) (December 2019):

- **Main ethnic groups:** The country has more than seven ethnic groups, some of which are also present in Ethiopia. Tigrinya 55%, Tigre 30%, Saho 4%, Kunama 2%, Rashaida 2%, Bilen 2%, other (Afar, Beni Amir, Nera) 5% (2010 estimates)
- **Main languages:** Tigrinya (official), Arabic (official), English (official), Tigre, Kunama, Afar, other Cushitic languages
- **Total population:** 3.5 million
- **Median age:** 19.2 years
- **Urban population:** 40.1%
- **Expected years of schooling:** 5.0 years
- **Literacy rate, adult (15 and older):** 64.7%
- **Employment to population ratio (adult):** 75.3%
- **Unemployment, total (of labor force):** 6.5%
- **Unemployment, youth (15-24):** 11.6%

According to the [UNHCR](#) report (2020):

- **Refugees:** There are about 148,981 Eritrean refugees live in the Afar and Tigray region in Ethiopia. In the first quarter of 2020 alone, 9,463 refugees arrived from Eritrea (of which 32.86% were children).

According to the UN [Human Development Indicators](#) (2019):

- **Human Development Index:** Eritrea is ranked 182th out of 189 countries with a human development value of 0.434
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 65.9 years

According to the [Every Country website](#), accessed 23 November 2020): "The term 'eritrea' derives from Sinus Erythraeus, the name Greek traders of the third century B.C.E. gave to the body of water between the Arabian Peninsula and the Africa continent (now known as the Red Sea). Later, during the Roman Empire, the Romans called it Mare Erythraeum, literary meaning "the red sea." When Italy colonized a strip of land along the Red Sea in 1890, they gave it the name Eritrea."

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.

The social and cultural landscape in Eritrea is marked by patriarchal norms, as well as close monitoring and scrutiny from government forces. Evangelical Christians and Christian converts from a Muslim background face considerable pressures from their families and local communities; they may be denied access to community resources such as State social services, or in more extreme instances they may be beaten, raped or killed.

## Technological landscape

According to [World Internet Stats](#) (accessed 5 July 5, 2020):

- **Internet usage:** 8.3% of the population – survey date 31 December 2019
- **Facebook usage:** 0.6% of the population – survey date 31 December 2019

According to World Bank's country profile (2018):

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 20.4 per 100 people

According to [BuddeComm research](#) (updated 20 April 2020): "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 as of early 2019 was only about 11%, 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 that 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](#) (accessed 20 July 2020): Eritrea is "a dictatorship in which the media have no rights." The report continues: "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.

Mobile phone ownership in Eritrea is very low, particularly in rural areas. According to a [2019 report](#), "Sim cards are like gold dust" (BBC News, 14 October 2019). It is therefore difficult for Christian men or women to access digital resources.

## Security situation

The [2020 Fragile States Index](#) (FSI) shows that Eritrea remained in a state of 'Alert', ranking 18th out of 178 countries with a total score of 95.8 points.

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. According to a [2006 UN Monitoring Group](#) report (UN Security Council, 22 November 2006):

- "the Government of Eritrea provided at least 28 separate consignments of arms, ammunition and military equipment. It also provided troops and training to ICU in Somalia." (The Islamic Courts Union - ICU - was trying to set up a rival administration in Somalia.)
- There were "emerging fissures within the political and military leadership in Eritrea within the context of growing discontent in government circles over Eritrea's international isolation, the arbitrary detention of thousands of prisoners and the non-transparent management of hundreds of millions of dollars of revenues obtained from mining production."
- There were "a number of high-level defections of military and government officials. These are taking place amid continuing waves of emigration of Eritrea's youth as well as defections from the ranks of national service conscripts, a vast number of whom are required to serve indefinitely."

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, and the UN Security Council lifted sanctions imposed on Eritrea. The main victims of the lack of human security in the country



are Christians. They 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.

## 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. The economy of the country has collapsed and the quality of life has diminished. 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.

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

Despite protests from international human rights groups and the UN Human Rights Commission's report on crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Eritrean government in previous years, the regime has not yet faced serious consequences for its appalling human rights record. In fact, the country is trying to work out ways of re-establishing a strong relationship with Western countries. The visit to Asmara by a [senior US diplomat](#) in April 2018 was a testament to that effort (Africa News, 23 April 2018). More importantly, the country has resumed peaceful relationships with Ethiopia. The Eritrean president has visited the country a couple of times. However, the borders between the two countries remain closed even in 2020.

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

Eritrea has been facing many challenges. Poverty and security are among the 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. The report by the UN Commission of Inquiry in 2015 confirmed that the country is ["being ruled by fear, not law."](#)

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. Release still depends on Christian prisoners signing statements contrary to their beliefs (even though some 30 Christians were reportedly released in the WWL 2019 reporting period). 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, as Eritrea signed a peace treaty with Ethiopia, Ethiopia might not be an escape route much longer.
- 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.

## External Links - Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: Eritrea country profile - BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13349078>
- Recent history: historic peace agreement - <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/09/africa/ethiopia-abi-ahmed-eritrea-war-intl/index.html>
- Recent history: strengthening peaceful relationships - <http://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/07/eritrea-peace-with-ethiopia-must-be-catalyst-for-human-rights-change/>
- Recent history: embassy in Addis Ababa - <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/eritrea-reopens-embassy-ethiopia-thaw-relations-180716065621148.html>
- Recent history: consolidated - <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/eritrea-consolidates-horn-africa-peace-deal-180910174538098.html>
- Recent history: lifted sanctions - <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/lifts-sanctions-eritrea-years-181114170026561.html>
- Recent history: arrested - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/09/eritrea-release-former-finance-minister-immediately-and-unconditionally/>
- Recent history: not improved - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/eritrea>
- Recent history: human rights violations - <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/eritrea>
- Recent history: banned Christian denominations - <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/eritreans-peace-freedom-190524074126019.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) - <https://www.defenddefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/HRC41-Civil-society-letter-regarding-ERITREA.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: 2019 Country Report on Human Rights Practices - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/eritrea/>
- Political and legal landscape: no commodity called democracy - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yO1EkKq8q1E>
- Political and legal landscape: CEDAW periodic review - [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/ERI/CO/6&Lang=En](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/ERI/CO/6&Lang=En)

- Political and legal landscape: likened - <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/08/08/they-are-making-us-slaves-not-educating-us/how-indefinite-conscription-restricts?fbclid=IwAR3ExGw3ZhM57EIQ86Srf4EkE1hZlJsnpU41yPawmUZLGlhn8jyHexpGhQc>
- Political and legal landscape: early marriage - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/ER.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: 18 - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/ER.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: 41% - <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/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: World Bank's Macro Poverty Outlook 2020 - <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/720441492455091991/mpo-ssa.pdf>
- Economic landscape: World Bank's Macro Poverty Outlook 2020 - <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/720441492455091991/mpo-ssa.pdf>
- Economic landscape: 74.3% - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>
- Economic landscape: 2018 report - <https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/2018-01-eritrea-education-sector-plan.pdf>
- Economic landscape: Human Rights Watch - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/eritrea>
- Social and cultural landscape: the UNDP 2019 - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/attachments/summaries/ER-summary.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/ERI>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNHCR - <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/76622.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: Human Development Indicators - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/ERI>
- Social and cultural landscape: Every Country website - <https://www.everyculture.com/Cr-Ga/Eritrea.html#ixzz5tBcNmKwu>
- Technological landscape: World Internet Stats - <https://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#bf>
- Technological landscape: BuddeComm research - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Eritrea-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>
- Technological landscape: Reporters without Borders - <https://rsf.org/en/eritrea>
- Technological landscape: 2019 report - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-49727573>
- Security situation: 2020 Fragile States Index - <https://fragilestatesindex.org/data/>
- Security situation: 2006 UN Monitoring Group - [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2006/913](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2006/913)
- Trends analysis: senior US diplomat - <https://africatimes.com/2018/04/23/yamamoto-heads-to-djibouti-after-rare-eritrea-visit/>
- Trends analysis: "being ruled by fear, not law." - <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-33047544>

## WWL 2021: 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]." (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

<b>Eritrea: Church networks</b>	<b>Christians</b>	<b>%</b>
Orthodox	2,358,000	92.4
Catholic	175,000	6.9
Protestant	70,000	2.7
Independent	12,000	0.5
Unaffiliated	1,800	0.1
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-65,100	-2.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,551,700</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	36,000	1.4
Renewalist movement	130,000	5.1

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020).

**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.

## Church spectrum today - additional information

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.

# WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / Eritrea

## Reporting period

01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020

## Position on the World Watch List

Eritrea: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	88	6
WWL 2020	87	6
WWL 2019	86	7
WWL 2018	86	6
WWL 2017	82	10

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

Average pressure remained the same as in WWL 2020, but there was a slight rise in violence which caused an overall increase of 1 point in score. There is no *sphere of life* where the pressure on Christians is not at an extreme level. It is strongest in the *National* and *Community* spheres of life, reflecting that government policy is mainly responsible for exerting pressure. Even though there were high hopes that the peace agreement with Ethiopia and the reopening of the borders would improve human rights conditions in the country, especially freedom of religion, 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 non Christians, especially non-traditional protestants of being anti-nationalistic.

## Persecution engines

Eritrea: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Medium
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Weak
Clan oppression	CO	Not at all
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.*

### **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 newcomers. The Pentecostal groups in particular are not regarded as legitimate. One country researcher says: “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 at different parts of the country. While the reasons for such actions could be mainly [theological differences], the fear of losing the dominant role the Orthodox Church in the way of life of citizens of the country for centuries plays a huge role.” The irony is that this denomination also faces violence, intolerance and discrimination from the government and drivers of *Islamic oppression*.

### **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 in any form 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.

#### **Islamic oppression (Strong):**

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."

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

Eritrea is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. According to a report released in 2019 by [Transparency International](#), with a score of 23, Eritrea ranks 160 out of 180 countries. This 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."

## Drivers of persecution

Eritrea: Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	MEDIUM	-	WEAK	-	VERY STRONG	-	-	VERY STRONG	STRONG
Government officials	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Very strong	Very strong
Ethnic group leaders	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong	-	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Strong	-	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	Strong
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

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

### Drivers of Christian denominational protectionism:

- **Religious leaders of other churches (Strong):** The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOC) is the oldest Christian community in the country and has the most number of Christian followers. Its leaders exert great influence on many aspects of life. The problem with such influence is that the church does not welcome new forms of Christianity in the country, above all the Pentecostal groups. Leaders of the Orthodox Church are known to actively support efforts to limit the growth of other Christian churches.
- **(Extended) Family (Strong):** Family members make life difficult for those who leave the EOC to join new denominations. They see such inter-denominational conversion 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 converted.



- **Government officials (Strong):** Some government officials act as protectors of their own Orthodox faith and will thus persecute other church followers.

#### **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. Because of a number of factors that occurred during a number of years during the armed struggle for independence, the President and most of his closest associates do not have a positive attitude towards the role of the church in the daily lives of Eritreans. 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 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-

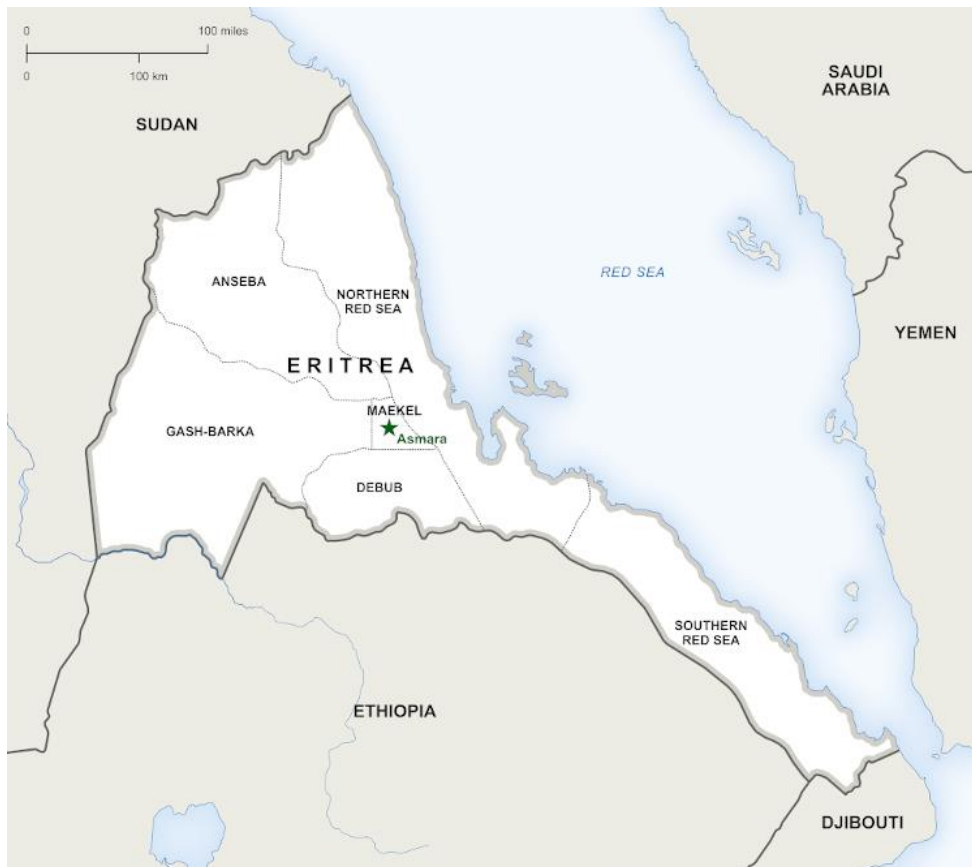
Christian attitude among their followers which has, in turn, resulted in discrimination, intolerance and violence towards Christians.

- **(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.

#### Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:

- **Government officials (Strong):** Government officials, especially 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.

### Map of country



### 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.

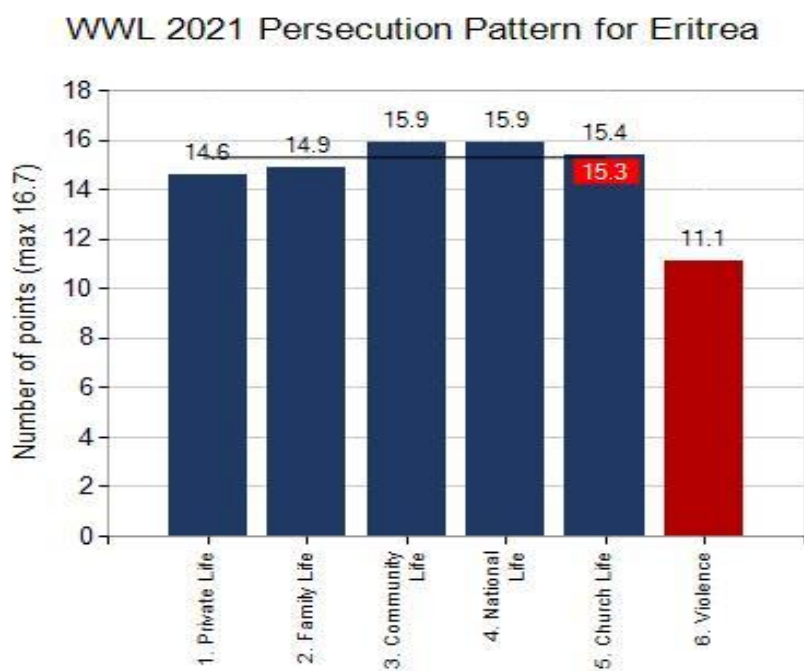
**Communities of expatriate Christians:** The number of expatriates is significantly declining due to government pressure. This group of Christians experience difficulties in traveling in the country and meeting with other Christians.

**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 either to Christians who have left the 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. 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.

## The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern for Eritrea shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Eritrea is at an extreme level of 15.3 points.
- There is no *sphere of life* where the pressure on Christians is not at an extreme level. It is strongest in the *National sphere* and *Community sphere* (each at 15.9 points). 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 at a very high level (11.1 points) compared to 10.9 points in WWL 2020. (It was 9.4 points in WWL 2019.) 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. Some Christians were released in September 2020, but hundreds are still imprisoned and others are becoming victims of human trafficking and end up lost at sea while trying to cross to Europe.

## 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 2021 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: <http://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)**

Generally speaking, freedom of expression in all its forms is restricted. Posting expressions of personal faith on social media is risky and leads to arrest if discovered. Such a post also leads to deeper surveillance so that the authorities can uncover the person's secret cell group and then make a group/mass arrest. This applies to all Christians (even registered ones). A country expert stated: "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)**

The government 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 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."

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

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)**

Private possession of basic Christian 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)**

Christians have been facing severe problems in raising their children according to their faith. A country expert stated: "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 kids about their religion."

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

This is done via the mandatory government propaganda in schools, indoctrinating schoolchildren. During the military training of youth, there is much that directly contradicts Christian values. There is also much indoctrination carried out during primary and secondary school education. However, this does not affect the expatriate church.

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

This issue 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 a few cases reported of the children of Evangelical parents being treated harshly.

**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 their country often leaving vulnerable family members at home. A country expert states: "Various reports indicate that there are 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 be victims in that they will be 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.). (4.00 points)**

This issue has been 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 sources of persecution apply here. The government, Muslims and Orthodox pose challenges."

**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.). (4.00 points)**

In Eritrea, 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. Most of the arrests in the WWL 2021 reporting period were as a result of these reports. The government monitors internet usage and regularly listens in to telephone conversations, so underground believers have to be careful whenever they communicate by phone or emails.

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

Pressure to renounce Protestant Christian faith 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. Converts from an Orthodox or Muslim background also face high levels of pressure from their community to renounce their faith.

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

Police are known to compel Christians, especially Evangelicals, to report to them as a means of harassment. The networks of informers that look for any house churches in the country is 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.

## 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)**

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 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.

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

Traveling within and outside the country is very challenging for Christians. Some Christians have to report every single day or every other day to show the fact 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.

**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)**

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 is going through positive change: It has amended its relationship with Ethiopia and signed a peace treaty. However, for Christians, nothing has changed. Thus, there are no changes in circumstances that warrant a lowering of score from the previous reporting period.

**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)**

The government is known to force 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 churches experience some form of monitoring in the country. However, the non-recognized churches are the most monitored, hindered and obstructed. 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 thus in 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 and 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)**

Security officers keep tabs on Christians preaching and teaching in case anyone speaks against the government. Published 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 5.5: Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities outside church buildings. (3.75 points)**

All churches must make sure that they are not violating public order. During the holidays, Orthodox churches can organize events outside but are still under pressure not to preach any



anti-government message. Such outside events are unthinkable for all unrecognized church groups.

**Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (3.50 points)**

Religious groups in Eritrea must by law either register or cease operating. However, 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. Furthermore, religious groups cannot print and distribute any materials without prior approval from the Office of Religious Affairs.

## 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. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (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 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure. The symbol "x" denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security considerations.*

Eritrea: Violence Block question	WWL 2021	WWL 2020
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	2
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?	27	21
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	930	785

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	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	10	3
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	10	100
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	10	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	1000	785
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?	10	20
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	20
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?	1000	1000

## 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

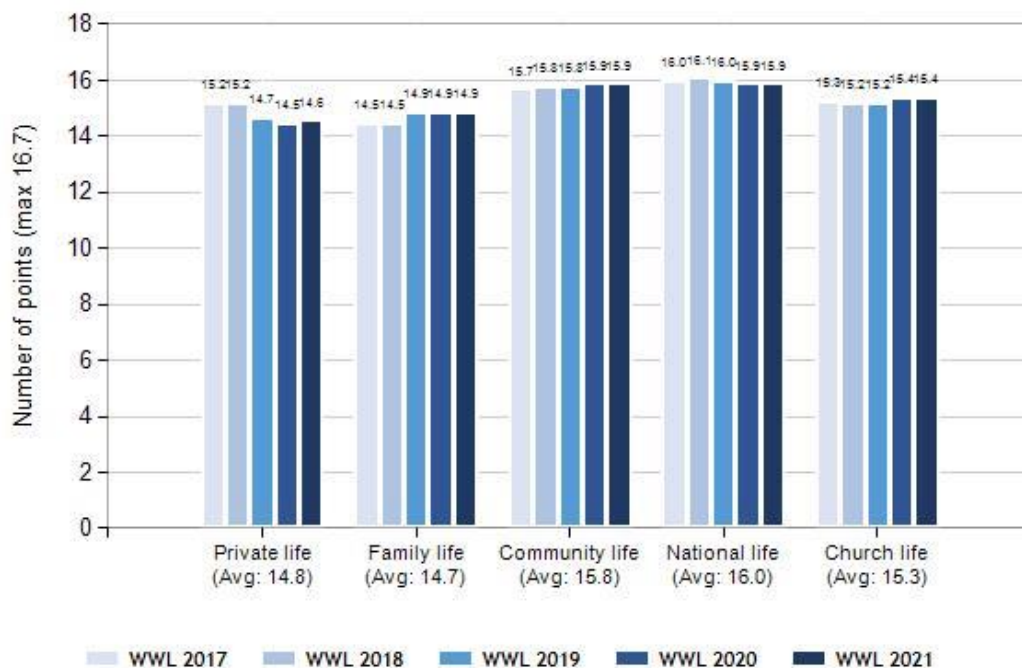
<b>Eritrea: WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern history</b>	<b>Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life</b>
2021	15.3
2020	15.3
2019	15.3

2018	15.4
2017	15.3

In the table above it can be seen that the average pressure on Christians has consistently been at an extreme level of around 15.3 points. This is consistent with how other organizations have described the human rights situations in Eritrea including UN commission of inquiry which blasted the country for its unacceptable human rights record. The government has not shown any sign of changing its behavior despite the fact that the demand for change in the country is growing and it is re-entering the international community with the lifting of the UN sanctions.

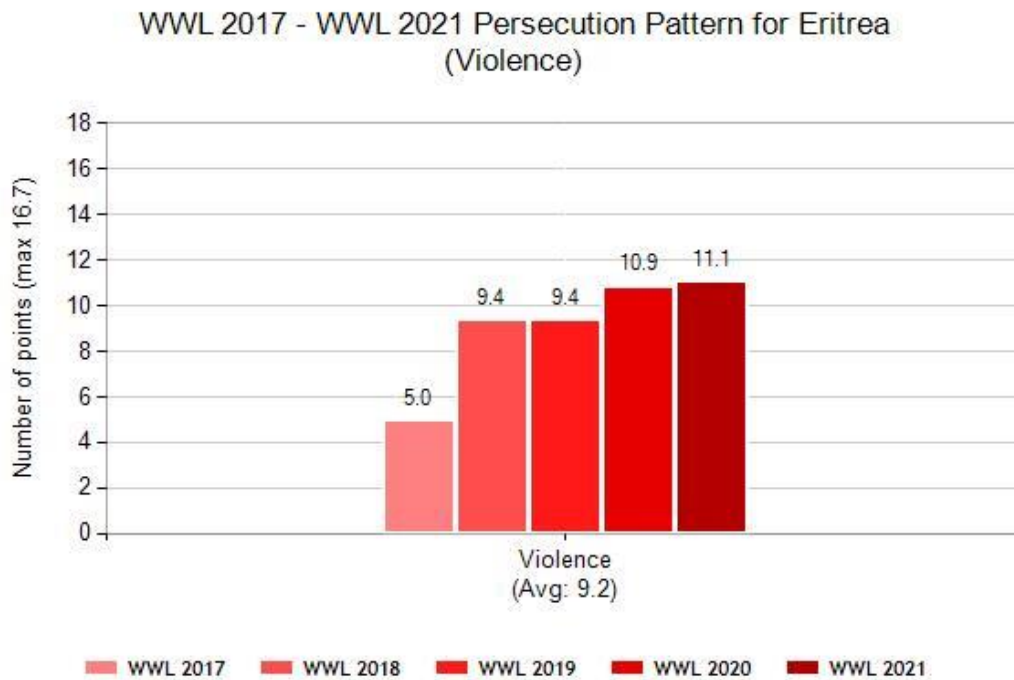
### 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern for Eritrea (Spheres of life)



The chart above shows how the suffering of Christians in all spheres of life has been extreme. Pressure in the *National sphere of life* is highest with the average score of 16.0 points. This is a reflection of the fact that persecution in Eritrea is more or less a national phenomenon, where the government plays a key role. The *Community sphere* has the next highest scores, an indication that the role of *Christian denominational protectionism* in the country is very strong - the average score of 15.8 points of the last five years is a testament to that problem. The Church sphere has also repeatedly scored 15.0 points or more (and 15.3 five year average) and this also reflects the restrictions that the government has imposed on churches (including official recognition and licenses).

## 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The chart above, which depicts the violence scores over the last five reporting periods, shows a varied picture. One of the main reasons why the score for violence against Christians changes is mainly due to the varying number of Christians arrested or churches destroyed or closed. Violence peaked in WWL 2020 where it scored 10.9 points. Only in WWL 2018 and WWL 2019 did the score remain stable with 9.4 points. In WWL 2021, the score rose again - a clear indication that the situation for Christians in the country is far from getting better. The average score of 9.2 of the last five years indicate that violence is very high in Eritrea.

## Gender-specific religious persecution Female

### Female Pressure Points

Abduction

Denied access to social community/networks

Denied custody of children

Denied inheritance or possessions

Discrimination/harassment via education

Forced divorce
Forced marriage
Imprisonment by government
Incarceration by family (house arrest)
Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
Targeted Seduction
Trafficking
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological
Violence – sexual

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 within their community (including bridal 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 a Muslim background and Eritrean Orthodox Church- families have also been known to look down on converts, isolating them within the home. While parents may appear to fulfill their parental responsibilities, paying school fees, clothing and housing them for example, 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](#) are vulnerable to various forms of gender-based violence, including from prisoner guards and commanders (Eritrea Hub, Jan 15 2020, “No peace for Eritrea’s long-suffering female conscripts”). Many choose to flee the country in order to evade such a fate.

Hundreds of women also experience gender-based violence within the context of detention centers. Eritrea’s practice of indefinite detention has sparked fierce criticism; according to various reports there are hundreds of Christians detained at different detention centers for no reason other than being Christian. Many have been there for years.

Women detained or forced to escape the country are not the only victims. The families and children of such detainees and escapees will also be victims in that they will be denied the chance to see their loved ones, in addition to other punitive acts, simply for being a family member. 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. As men are typically the providers in Eritrea society, many families end up impoverished.

## Gender-specific religious persecution Male

Male Pressure Points
Abduction
Forced to flee town/country
Imprisonment by government
Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
Trafficking
Violence – death
Violence – physical

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. It was hoped that the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia might change this compulsory situation, but two years on from the deal tensions between the countries [remain high](#) (Institute for Security Studies, 11 Sep 2020).

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 [“Africa’s North Korea”](#) (The Economist, 14 Aug 2018). Those suffering the most are Christians who are not recognized by the state.

In Eritrea, there seems to be little difference in gender treatment as all who are found in secret cell group meetings suffer the same fate of arbitrary arrests and indefinite detention. Many are also 'released' into the forced military service after such arrests. The Pressure Points that are most specific to Christian men however are physical beatings, forced labor and killings.

Because most underground church leadership positions are held by men, 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.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the [US State Department's IRF 2019 report](#) (pages 44-49): Muslims and Jehovah Witnesses were also targeted by the government for controlling their exit from the country and their communication with the global community. The report noted that "the government exerted significant direct and indirect influence over the appointment of heads of recognized religious communities." The government has continued to detain 52 Jehovah's Witnesses, more than half of whom had been in prison for more than 20 years.

## Future outlook

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), is 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 has also added another dimension to the existing problem.

### **Christian denominational protectionism:**

The Orthodox Church is still very strong in the country. Some of the conservatives 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.

### **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 as they have been considering 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 on the Red Sea.

### **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.

### **The influence of the current conflict in northern Ethiopia:**

The conflict that is ongoing in northern Ethiopia between the Federal government and the regional forces of Tigray Liberation Front (TPLF) could involve Eritrea in the future. The TPLF accused Eritrea of joining the Federal troops and fired rockets at the Eritrean capital. The future outlook for the country and the Horn of Africa depends upon who wins the war. In any case, if President Afwerki can come out of this war between TPLF and the Ethiopian Federal army 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 Afwerki will gain acceptance with the international community, despite doing nothing to alleviate the suffering of Christians in the country.

## **External Links - Persecution Dynamics**

- Persecution engines description: Transparency International - <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/eritrea>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: F - <https://reliefweb.int/report/eritrea/empowerment-during-war-eritrean-women-must-fight-gender-discrimination-new-peace%22%20/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: emale conscripts - <https://reliefweb.int/report/eritrea/empowerment-during-war-eritrean-women-must-fight-gender-discrimination-new-peace>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: remain high - <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/the-eritrea-ethiopia-peace-deal-is-yet-to-show-dividends>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: “Africa’s North Korea” - <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2018/08/14/why-eritrea-is-called-africas-north-korea>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: US State Department’s IRF 2019 report - <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>
- Future outlook: reconciliation and healing - <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-africa/2019/05/bishops-say-eritrea-needs-truth-reconciliation-plan-ban-on-hate-speech/>



## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Eritrea>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Eritrea>