

World
Watch
Research

Eritrea: Country Dossier

February 2020 update



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

February 2020

research@od.org

Contents

Introduction	3
World Watch List 2020	3
Copyright notice	5
Brief note on sources and definitions	5
WWL 2020: Persecution summary / Eritrea	6
Brief country details	6
Dominant persecution engines and drivers	6
Brief description of persecution situation	6
Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period	7
External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution Summary	7
WWL 2020: Keys to understanding / Eritrea	8
Introduction	8
Link for general background information	8
Recent history	8
Political and legal landscape	9
Religious landscape	10
Economic landscape	11
Social and cultural landscape	11
Technological landscape	12
Security situation	12
Trends analysis	13
External Links - WWL 2020: Keys to understanding	14
WWL 2020: Church information / Eritrea	16
Christian origins	16
Church spectrum today	16
WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics / Eritrea	18
Reporting period	18
Position on World Watch List (WWL)	18
Persecution engines	18
Drivers of persecution	20
Geographical hotspots of persecution	22
Christian communities and how they are affected	23
The Persecution pattern	23

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life.....	24
Violence.....	29
5 Year trends	30
Gender profile of persecution.....	32
Persecution of other religious minorities.....	34
Future outlook for the church.....	34
External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics	35
Additional reports and articles	36
WWR in-depth reports.....	36
World Watch Monitor news articles.....	36
Recent country developments.....	36

Introduction

World Watch List 2020

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017	Total Score WWL 2016
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	92	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	94	93	89	88
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.5	9.4	92	91	91	91	87
4	Libya	15.3	15.5	15.8	16.0	16.4	11.3	90	87	86	78	79
5	Pakistan	14.0	13.9	15.0	14.9	13.7	16.7	88	87	86	88	87
6	Eritrea	14.5	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	10.9	87	86	86	82	89
7	Sudan	14.2	14.6	14.5	15.7	16.1	10.4	85	87	87	87	84
8	Yemen	16.6	16.4	16.4	16.7	16.7	2.6	85	86	85	85	78
9	Iran	14.1	14.3	14.1	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	85	85	85	83
10	India	12.9	13.0	13.5	15.0	13.5	14.8	83	83	81	73	68
11	Syria	13.5	14.2	13.0	13.9	14.4	12.6	82	82	76	86	87
12	Nigeria	12.2	11.9	13.5	12.8	13.0	16.7	80	80	77	78	78
13	Saudi Arabia	15.1	14.9	14.1	15.5	16.5	2.4	79	77	79	76	76
14	Maldives	15.4	15.6	14.0	15.9	16.6	0.7	78	78	78	76	76
15	Iraq	14.0	14.6	13.9	14.5	13.6	5.6	76	79	86	86	90
16	Egypt	12.1	13.1	10.7	13.2	10.5	16.1	76	76	70	65	64
17	Algeria	13.5	14.3	10.4	12.8	13.2	9.3	73	70	58	58	56
18	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	3.0	73	74	73	71	70
19	Myanmar	11.8	11.9	13.5	12.5	12.2	10.7	73	71	65	62	62
20	Laos	12.8	9.9	14.1	14.4	14.9	5.6	72	71	67	64	58
21	Vietnam	12.3	8.5	12.9	13.6	14.5	9.8	72	70	69	71	66
22	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.2	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.9	70	69	68	67	66
23	China	11.6	8.4	11.6	12.8	15.1	10.2	70	65	57	57	57
24	Mauritania	13.9	14.0	13.0	13.7	13.4	0.2	68	67	57	55	50
25	Central African Republic	10.1	9.1	13.1	9.8	10.2	15.6	68	70	61	58	59
26	Morocco	12.4	13.3	10.8	11.7	14.1	4.1	66	63	51	49	47
27	Qatar	13.6	13.4	10.8	12.2	14.1	2.2	66	62	63	66	65
28	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	10.2	9.4	11.8	15.6	66	48	-	-	-
29	Mali	9.2	8.2	12.8	10.0	11.7	13.7	66	68	59	59	55
30	Sri Lanka	11.5	9.0	11.0	10.9	9.6	13.1	65	58	57	55	53
31	Tajikistan	13.9	12.3	11.9	12.4	13.1	1.1	65	65	65	58	58
32	Nepal	12.4	10.8	9.9	12.1	12.2	7.0	64	64	64	53	53
33	Jordan	13.1	14.1	10.7	11.7	12.5	1.7	64	65	66	63	59
34	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.3	10.8	12.3	5.4	64	63	62	61	58
35	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	10.7	12.4	14.0	1.7	64	63	63	56	55
36	Turkey	12.6	11.8	10.7	13.3	11.3	3.7	63	66	62	57	55

37	Brunei	13.8	14.3	10.7	10.3	13.5	0.6	63	63	64	64	61
38	Bangladesh	11.1	9.9	12.7	11.1	8.9	9.3	63	58	58	63	57
39	Ethiopia	10.0	9.2	10.6	10.8	10.4	11.9	63	65	62	64	67
40	Malaysia	12.1	14.6	12.7	12.0	9.6	1.5	62	60	65	60	58
41	Colombia	8.9	7.8	11.9	9.8	8.9	15.0	62	58	56	53	55
42	Oman	12.7	13.1	10.0	11.5	12.7	2.0	62	59	57	53	53
43	Kuwait	13.2	13.1	9.9	11.5	13.4	0.7	62	60	61	57	56
44	Kenya	11.7	10.5	10.9	8.3	10.9	9.1	61	61	62	68	68
45	Bhutan	12.8	10.9	11.8	11.6	13.9	0.0	61	64	62	61	56
46	Russian Federation	12.2	8.3	10.7	10.4	12.1	6.9	60	60	51	46	48
47	United Arab Emirates	12.9	13.0	9.5	11.1	12.6	1.1	60	58	58	55	55
48	Cameroon	8.8	7.2	11.6	7.0	10.4	15.0	60	54	38	-	45
49	Indonesia	10.9	11.1	11.6	10.2	9.5	6.5	60	65	59	55	55
50	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.1	9.3	60	52	45	47	53
51	Palestinian Territories	12.2	13.0	9.2	10.2	11.9	3.1	60	57	60	64	62
52	Mexico	8.4	6.8	12.2	10.6	10.0	11.5	60	61	59	57	56
53	Azerbaijan	13.0	10.0	9.3	11.1	12.4	1.5	57	57	57	52	57
54	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.9	13.9	0.9	57	56	56	56	56
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.1	9.4	11.9	1.1	57	56	54	48	46
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.2	56	56	56	57	58
57	Democratic Republic of the Congo	5.6	6.7	10.6	7.4	10.4	15.6	56	55	33	-	53
58	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.9	56	48	40	-	51
59	Bahrain	12.1	12.3	9.1	10.1	10.5	0.9	55	55	57	54	54
60	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	7.0	55	52	53	59	57
61	Cuba	9.6	5.6	9.5	11.8	12.0	3.5	52	49	49	47	42
62	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	13.0	48	47	46	53	45
63	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.7	48	43	-	-	-
64	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	3.7	45	46	-	-	-
65	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.6	44	44	-	-	-
66	Mozambique	6.9	4.6	7.1	5.2	8.0	11.7	43	43	-	-	-
67	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.1	43	43	-	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	8.7	10.4	6.7	43	42	-	-	-
69	Venezuela	3.8	4.4	10.6	9.3	9.5	4.8	42	41	34	-	-
70	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.5	42	43	-	-	-
71	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	7.2	42	41	-	-	-
72	Nicaragua	5.8	4.2	8.5	9.8	9.0	4.1	41	41	-	-	-
73	Togo	8.6	6.7	8.5	7.1	8.4	1.1	41	42	-	-	-

Copyright notice

No copyright - This report is the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge WWR as the source.

Brief note on 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 2020 reporting period was 1 November 2018 - 31 October 2019.

The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”.

This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

WWL 2020: Persecution summary / Eritrea

Brief country details

Pop 2019	Christians	Chr%
Eritrea		
5,310,000	2,492,000	46.9

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

World Watch List Eritrea	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2020	87	6
WWL 2019	86	7
WWL 2018	86	6
WWL 2017	82	10
WWL 2016	89	3

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2016-2020 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
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials , Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Non-Christian religious leaders
Islamic oppression	Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family
Organized corruption and crime	Government officials , Organized crime cartels or networks

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

Brief description of 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 persecution both from the government and from the Eritrean Orthodox Church (EOC). Both converts from a Muslim

background and cross-denominational converts from an Orthodox 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.

Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period

- The hundreds of Christians under [arrest](#) are being held by the government in harsh conditions, some in shipping containers in scorching temperatures. (This is despite the reported release of some 30 Christians in July 2018.) In the period June-August 2019, over 150 Christians were [arrested](#) in Keren and Godayef. The report from Vatican News on 29 August 2019 states: "The 70 prisoners arrested in June are being held in prison in Ashufera. The term 'prison' refers to a number of underground tunnels that the prisoners are forced to extend, by digging".
- The pressure from the EOC against non-traditional church communities partly originates from theological differences but has historical roots as well. Well-organized and with a long tradition, the EOC tends to look down upon other types of Christianity as being newcomers. For the EOC leaders, Eritrea is the home of the Orthodox Church and its Christian history is defined by the Orthodox Church. Other denominations – in particular, the Pentecostal churches - are not regarded as legitimate.
- Thousands of Christians have been arrested and imprisoned over the years, some of whom have been imprisoned for well over a decade. Some of the known detention and prison centers are: Asmara police stations, Mai Sirwa, Adi Abieto (new for detaining Christians), Keren (new), Assab, Hashferai, Barentu, Mai Idaga, Alla (new). Many prisoners are forced to work very long hours in commercial flower fields. Some of the Christian leaders who have been imprisoned for more than ten years are: Haile Naigzhi, leader of Eritrea's Full Gospel Church (arrested in 2004); Kiflu Gebremeskel, founder and pastor of Southwest Full Gospel Church (arrested in 2004); Million Gebreselasie, medical doctor and pastor of Massawa Rhema Church (arrested in 2004); Tekleab Menghisteab, medical doctor and priest (arrested in 2004); Gebremedhin Gebregioris, priest (arrested in Nov 2004); Kidane Weldou, pastor of the Full Gospel Church (disappeared in 2005 but believed to be in prison); and Abune Antonios, Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch (under house arrest since 2007).

External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution Summary

- Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period: arrest - <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/eritreans-still-suffering-despite-peace-deal-with-ethiopia-says-priest/>
- Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period: arrested - <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2019-08/eritrea-persecuted-christians-arrested.html>

WWL 2020: Keys to understanding / Eritrea

Introduction

Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13349078>.

Recent history

President Isaias Afewerki has governed Eritrea since it became an independent country in 1993. His People's Front for Democracy and Justice (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.

According to [UN experts](#), this was a serious indication that the situation in the country might get even worse: "The failed military uprising of 21 January 2013 is the most serious indication yet of permanent cracks emerging within the regime. The evolving power struggle for control of the military steering committee has taken place amid growing tensions between Afwerki's ultra-loyalists, such as General Manjus, and regional military commanders, notably former regional military commander Filipos Woldeyohannes, who is known to have entertained contacts with individuals involved in staging the events of 21 January 2013 and whose relations with President Afwerki have soured since 2012." However, in latter years, the country began 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. The dramatic event in Asmara marking a resumption of harmonious relations 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. In an even further evidence of rapid improvement in relations, Eritrea reopened its [embassy in Addis Ababa](#) and named an ambassador to represent it.

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. In November 2018, the UN [lifted sanctions](#) it had imposed on Eritrea nearly a decade ago. 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. 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 once again since human rights conditions in Eritrea have [not improved](#) at all.

The peace deal which the Eritrean government struck with Ethiopia has strengthened its current position rather than encouraging the regime to bring changes to its poor record of [human rights violations](#) and government transparency and accountability. There have been no significant changes so far 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; 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 Eritrea'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 \(CPJ\)](#) "15 journalists remained in prison in Eritrea at the end of the year, the highest number in Sub-Saharan Africa".

Those perceived as belonging to the opposition or as a threat to Eritrea's stability are detained and treated harshly. It [is estimated that Eritrea has over 300](#) official and unofficial sites where approximately more than 20,000 people are held in detention without trial and without contact to the outside world. 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 he ever held with mainstream media, [President Afewerki told](#) an Al-Jazeera reporter: "There is no commodity called democracy in Eritrea."

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 strife”. 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 will resume economic and diplomatic cooperation, Ethiopia Airlines has resumed flying to Asmara and Ethiopia will begin using Assab port again. Saying 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.

Religious landscape

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 during the 7th century. The establishment of a garrison around Massawa by the Turks in 1557 effectively made Eritrea a [colony of the Ottoman Empire](#). 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.

Religious Context: Eritrea	Number	%
Christians	2,492,000	46.9
Muslim	2,723,000	51.3
Hindu	1,300	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0

Ethnoreligionist	34,400	0.6
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	1,800	0.0
Atheist	420	0.0
Agnostic	56,500	1.1
Other	0	0.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019). OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Economic landscape

The ruling party and the army are crucial players in the economic system Eritrea has adopted. They own farms, banks, and other commercial establishments. Ordinary citizens may make some money as subsistence farmers and herders, or by selling livestock to customers in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) cannot operate independently as their finances need to be channeled through the government, which itself faces high levels of corruption. Eritrea receives virtually no international aid from the West primarily because of its pariah status as a human rights abuser. Having said this, it is the policy of the government not to rely on outside sources anyway. It seeks to be self-reliant in economic terms, and shape its economic fortunes itself. However, Gulf countries (including Iran) and China invest in the country and supplement the national budget. Through the wise investment in the establishment of key infrastructure projects such as power plants, dams, roads, and social services (schools, medical clinics, and clean water), Eritrea experienced a 7-10% growth after independence. This investment was stifled after the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia as more of its resources were channeled into supporting national defense.

Social and cultural landscape

The term Eritrea is said to derive 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."

In many ways, culturally and socially Eritrea resembles Ethiopia. The country has more than seven ethnic groups. Biher-Tigrinya, Tigre, Saho, Afar, Kunama, Bilen, and Rashaida are the main ones. Some of these ethnic groups are also present in Ethiopia.

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, according to the [World Bank 2018 report](#): "Eritrea remains one of the least developed countries in the world. Poverty is still widespread in the country."

Technological landscape

Eritrea has made little advancement in terms of technology. Most of the country's infrastructure is outdated and not equipped with modern technology. The [%age of the population using the Internet](#) was 1.18 as of 2016. The country had [63,000 Facebook](#) users in December 2017, a 1.2% penetration rate. Even with this small penetration rate, the use of the internet is very risky especially when it comes to reporting/journalism. Journalists and citizens are not free to express themselves. As per [Reporters without Borders](#), 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 massively affected Christians when it comes to how to use this technology.

Security situation

The 2019 [Fragile States Index](#) (FSI) shows that Eritrea remained in a state of 'Alert', ranking 17th out of 178 countries with a total score of 96.4 points.

The regional issue has changed somewhat: In the past, Eritrea has allegedly been involving itself in other countries' domestic affairs in the region and has been accused of supporting terrorist groups in Somalia and elsewhere by the international community. In 2006, [a UN Monitoring Group](#) report stated, that "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.) The UN report also mentioned "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."

The Monitoring Group [published](#) documentation in 2006 on "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 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.

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 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 ending 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 the 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 is a testament to that effort. More importantly, the country has resumed peaceful relationships with Ethiopia.

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 also says 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 the West.
- 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 - WWL 2020: Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13349078>. - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13349078>
- Recent history: UN experts - http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2006/913
- Recent history: historic peace agreement - <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/09/africa/ethiopia-abiy-ahmed-eritrea-war-intl/index.html>
- Recent history: strengthening peaceful relationships - <http://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/07/eritrea-peace-with-ethiopia-must-be-catalyst-for-human-rights-change/>
- Recent history: embassy in Addis Ababa - <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/eritrea-reopens-embassy-ethiopia-thaw-relations-180716065621148.html>
- Recent history: consolidated - <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/eritrea-consolidates-horn-africa-peace-deal-180910174538098.html>
- Recent history: lifted sanctions - <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/lifts-sanctions-eritrea-years-181114170026561.html>
- Recent history: arrested - <http://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/09/eritrea-release-former-finance-minister-immediately-and-unconditionally/>
- Recent history: not improved - <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/business-hopes-fefugee-woes-eritrea-ethiopia-peace-deal-181023102329405.html>
- 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://cpj.org/data/imprisoned/2017/?status=Imprisoned&start_year=2017&end_year=2017&group_by=location
- Political and legal landscape: is estimated that Eritrea has over 300 - <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/af/154345.htm>
- Political and legal landscape: President Afewerki told - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yO1EkKq8q1E>
- Religious landscape: colony of the Ottoman Empire - <http://mandalaprojects.com/ice/ice-cases/eritrea.htm>

- Social and cultural landscape: - <https://www.everyculture.com/Cr-Ga/Eritrea.html#ixzz5tBcNmKwu>
- Social and cultural landscape: Arabian Peninsula - <https://www.everyculture.com/Cr-Ga/Eritrea.html#ixzz5tBcNmKwu>
- Social and cultural landscape: and the Africa continent - <https://www.everyculture.com/Cr-Ga/Eritrea.html#ixzz5tBcNmKwu>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Bank 2018 report - <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/eritrea/overview>
- Technological landscape: %age of the population using the Internet - <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/eritrea/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS>
- Technological landscape: 63,000 Facebook - <https://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#er>
- Technological landscape: Reporters without Borders - <https://rsf.org/en/eritrea>
- Security situation: Fragile States Index - <http://fundforpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/9511904-fragilestatesindex.pdf>
- Security situation: a UN Monitoring Group - http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2006/913
- Security situation: published - http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2006/913
- Trends analysis: "being ruled by fear, not law." - <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-33047544>

WWL 2020: Church information / Eritrea

Christian origins

Christianity entered Eritrea more than 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

Church networks: Eritrea	Christians	%
Orthodox	2,305,000	92.5
Catholic	172,000	6.9
Protestant	67,400	2.7
Independent	11,800	0.5
Unaffiliated	1,700	0.1
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-66,400	-2.7
Total	2,491,500	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	35,200	1.4
Renewalist movement	128,000	5.1

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

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: Believers 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.

WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics / Eritrea

Reporting period

1 November 2018 – 31 October 2019

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 87 points, Eritrea ranked 6 in WWL 2020.

The rise of one point compared to WWL 2019 is due to an increase in the score for violence by 1.5 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* (15.9 points), reflecting that government policy is mainly responsible for exerting pressure.

Even though there are high hopes that the peace agreement with Ethiopia and the reopening of the borders will 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 that targeted Christians. Christian materials were taken and some house churches were also damaged in the process. Hundreds of Christians were taken to detention centers. It is reported that there are thousands of prisoners of conscience in Eritrean prisons, with many Christians among them. Many are hoping that the improving relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia could ease the pressure on Christians and might even lead to the release of prisoners. However, following the opening of the borders between the two countries, large numbers of Eritreans took the opportunity to flee to Ethiopia, which indicates that there are no human rights improvements in the country yet.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Eritrea	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Clan and ethnic antagonism	CEA	Weak
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Very strong
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Strong

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

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 persecution from the government and 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 (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 staying 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 kids 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 February 2018 by [Transparency International](#), Eritrea ranks 165 out of 180 countries. This mainly involves the army which controls many aspects of life in the country. A country expert said: "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

Drivers of Persecution: Eritrea	IO	RN	CEA	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	-	WEAK	VERY STRONG	-	-	VERY STRONG	STRONG
Government officials	Very weak	-	-	Weak	-	-	Very strong	Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Weak	-	Weak	Weak	-	-	Weak	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong	-	-	Weak	-	-	Medium	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	Strong	-	-	Weak	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	Weak	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Weak	-	Weak	Weak	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Strong	-	Weak	Strong	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Very weak	-	Weak	Weak	-	-	-	-

Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	Weak	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

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 relation 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."

The analyst continues: "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 as to the prosecution 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 in the country, People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), is the sole legal political party in Eritrea. The draft constitution is yet to ratified and what the party decides will be the law in absence of any opposition party and democratic process in place. PFDJ, as a ruling party in the country, was supposed to respect and protect the right 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 the persecution instead. 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 influence on persecution is often carried out in collaboration with the authorities.

Drivers of Islamic oppression:

- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** In the low-land (both Eastern and western) part 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 the persecution of Christians.
- **(Extended) Family (Strong):** Converts from Islam to Christianity often face persecution at home. As a result, they often hide their faith and cannot keep religious materials at home. Since society is so close and a 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.

Geographical hotspots of persecution

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.

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 persecution.

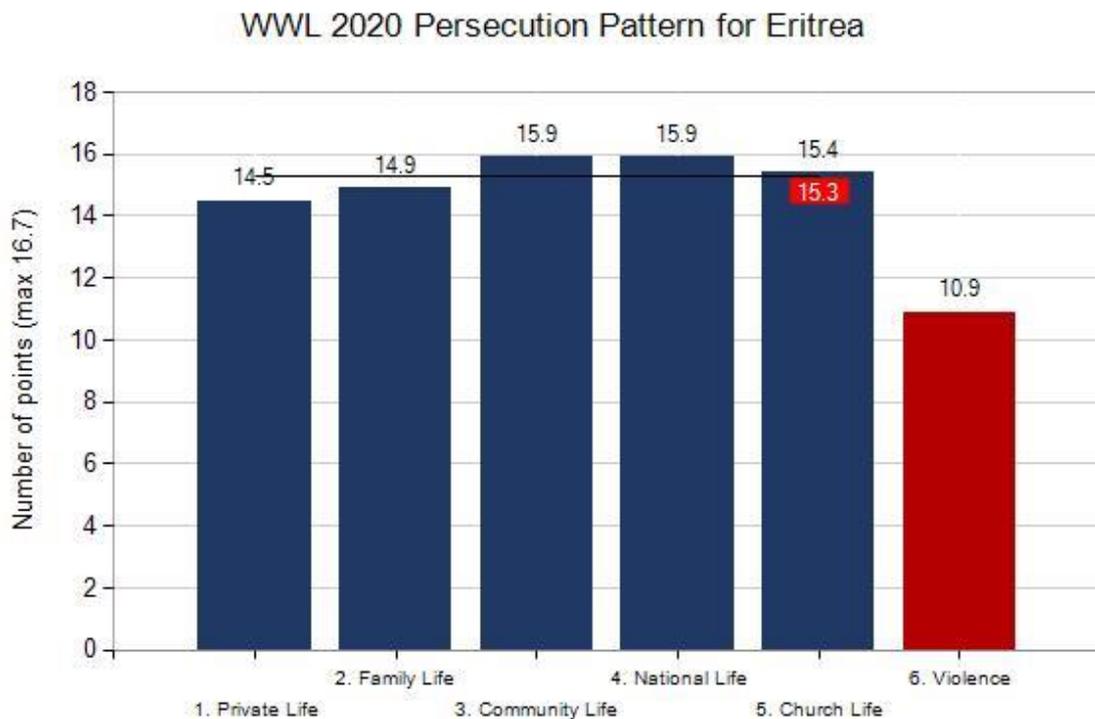
Communities of expatriate Christians: The number of expatriates is significantly declining due to government pressure. This group of Christians experience difficulties in traveling in the country and meeting with other Christians.

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 face persecution from the government.

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 persecution 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 persecution especially from government officials and the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2020 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* (15.9). 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 persecution at the community level, due in particular to *Christian denominational protectionism*.
- The score for violence is at a very high level (10.9 points) rising from 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.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, details are shown from four of the highest-scoring block questions, with those items scoring highest listed first. 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 0 – 4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Private life:

- ***It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression - including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc. (Block 1:4 / Score: 4 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."
- ***It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians (Block 1:9 / Score: 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.
- ***It has it been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian material on the Internet (Block 1:6 / Score: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."

- ***It has been risky for Christians to conduct acts of Christian worship by themselves - e.g. prayer, Bible reading, etc. (Block 1:2 / Score: 3.5 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.

Family life:

- ***Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs (Block 2:7 / Score: 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."
- ***Christian children have been pressured to attend anti-Christian or majority religion teaching in schools (Block 2:8 / Score: 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.
- ***Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith (Block 2:9 / Score: 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.
- ***Christian spouses and/or children of Christians have been subject to separation for prolonged periods of time by circumstances relating to persecution? (Block 2:10/ Score 3.5 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."

For Christians, family life is under threat in Eritrea. Due to government arrests, imprisonment and abductions, Christian families disintegrate. Due to Christian denominational protectionism, some Christians are also denied inheritance as well as other family-related rights. Due to Islamic oppression, Christians face multifaceted challenges in Muslim-dominated areas. For example, Christians with a Muslim background cannot conduct a Christian wedding in public, and when they die, they are buried according to Muslim rites.

When planning a wedding, the problems for followers of the so-called "new religion" (often Pentecostal Christians) start when a hall needs to be found for conducting the ceremony. Most halls are under government administration and unless the wedding planners hide the fact that the wedding is for Protestants, no one will be willing to rent a hall to them for fear of repercussions from government officials. This is of course in addition to the fact that most owners of private halls are anyway unwilling to rent their hall to Protestants. Another problem is then to find a pastor willing to conduct the wedding. There have been instances where wedding couples, pastors and guests have all been arrested for participating in a wedding. Non-Orthodox church leaders are risking their personal freedom whenever they conduct weddings for Christian couples. Even after getting married, the law of the land will not give legal recognition to such marriages since it is claimed that unregistered churches have no authority to hold weddings.

Community life:

- ***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.) (Block 3:1 /Score 4 points):*** This issue has been the case especially for non-registered Evangelicals who face tremendous challenges from various sources, 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."
- ***Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups -t his includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc. (Block 3:2 / Score: 4 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 2020 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.
- ***Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons (Block 3:13 / Score: 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.

- **Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith (Block 3:7 / Score: 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.

National life:

- **State law limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Block 4:1 / Score: 4 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.
- **Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions (Block 4:9 / Score: 4 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.
- **Christians have been hindered in traveling for faith-related reasons (Block 4:4 /score 4 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.

- **Christians have been forced by law or in practice to act against their conscience, e.g. regarding military service or in certain professions (Block 4:3 / Score: 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 enormous pressure and violence for non-participation in national service.

Church life:

- **Activities of churches have been monitored (Block 5:1 / Score: 4 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.
- **Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored (Block 5:8 /score 4.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 in the 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'.
- **Organizing events outside is difficult/impossible (Block 5:5 / Score: 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 preach any anti-government message. Such outside events are unthinkable for all unrecognized church groups.
- **Getting registration legal status has been difficult/impossible (Block 5:2 / Score: 3.5 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

The following 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.

Eritrea	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2020	01 Nov 2018 - 31 Oct 2019	2	888	785	21	40
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	0	380	370	9	20
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	1	395	385	8	20

Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). *Christians attacked* refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. *Christians arrested* refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. *Churches attacked* refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. *Christian-owned houses and shops attacked* refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.

For the WWL 2020 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** At least two Christians died in prison in the WWL 2020 reporting period. According to a report by a country expert: "Both of them died in prison (one is from Massawa and the other is from Assab) after they were jailed for many years." It should also be noted that there could be many Christians who have by now died in prison, but it is impossible to know since the government has refused to release details about their whereabouts and status.

- **Christians arrested:** Arrests are frequent and there are hundreds of Christians in prison and detention centers. These Christians are being held by the government in poor conditions, some in shipping containers in scorching temperatures. Thousands of Christians have been arrested and imprisoned over the years, some of whom have been in prison for over a decade.
 - On 3 June 2019, over 30 Christians were rounded up and [detained](#) after assembling for prayer in three different locations in the nation’s capital of Asmara.
 - On 10 May 2019 more than 141 Christians were [arrested](#) in the Mai Temenai area of Asmara. They were detained after gathering for a private meeting ahead of the country’s Independence Day.
 - On 13 June 2019, Orthodox priests (Abba Kebreab Tekie, Abba Markos Ghebrekidan, Abba Ghebretensae Teweldemedhin, Abba Kidanemariam Tekeste and Abba Ghebretensai Zemichae from the Debre-Bizen Monastery in the country’s Northern Red Sea Region) were [arrested](#). They were detained, reportedly for supporting the legitimate patriarch of the Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios, and protesting government interference in church affairs.
- **Churches attacked:** On 12 June 2019, 21 health facilities owned by the Catholic Church were [seized](#) by the government as retaliation after four bishops of the Catholic church issued a pastoral letter on 29 April 2019 calling for “resolute and historical change” in the country through the setting up of a comprehensive truth and reconciliation plan. The government promptly closed the health facilities, most of which are located in remote areas. The government attempted to justify the act based on the 1995 law which provided the pretext for the closures. The law states that all social institutions – including schools and clinics – are to be operated by the state.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** Whenever the government security agents raid Christian homes, the raids are often followed by ransacking and looting the properties.

5 Year trends

The following three charts show the situation for Christians in Eritrea over the last five reporting periods.

Chart 1:

In the table below it can be seen that the average pressure on Christians has consistently been at an extreme level and has now leveled off at around 15.3 points. This is consistent with how other organizations have described the human rights situations in Eritrea. A [UN commission of Inquiry in 2016](#) said the government of Eritrea has been committing crimes against humanity for over a quarter of a century. The government has not shown any sign of changing its behavior despite the fact that the demand for change in the country is growing.

WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern history: Eritrea	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2020	15.3
2019	15.3
2018	15.4

2017	15.3
2016	15.8

Chart 2:

The chart below shows how the suffering of Christians in all spheres of life has been extreme, although the maximum levels reached in WWL 2016 have since leveled off at a lower extreme score. The National sphere of life has consistently scored 15.9 or above. 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 Church sphere has also repeatedly scored 15.0 points or more (except for the WWL 2016 reporting period) and this also reflects the restrictions that the government has imposed on churches (including official recognition and licenses).

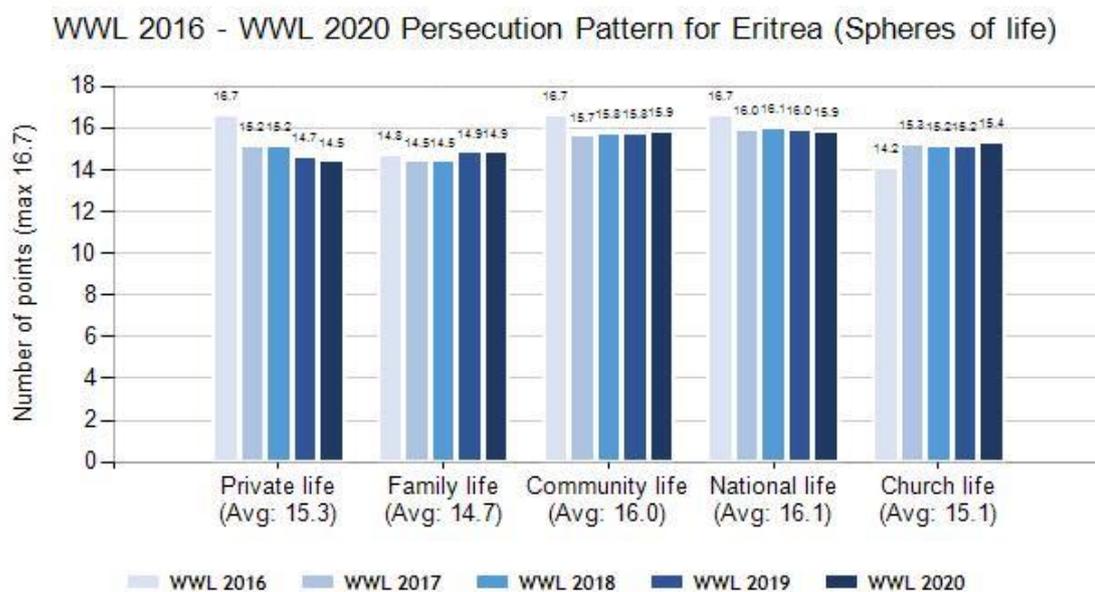
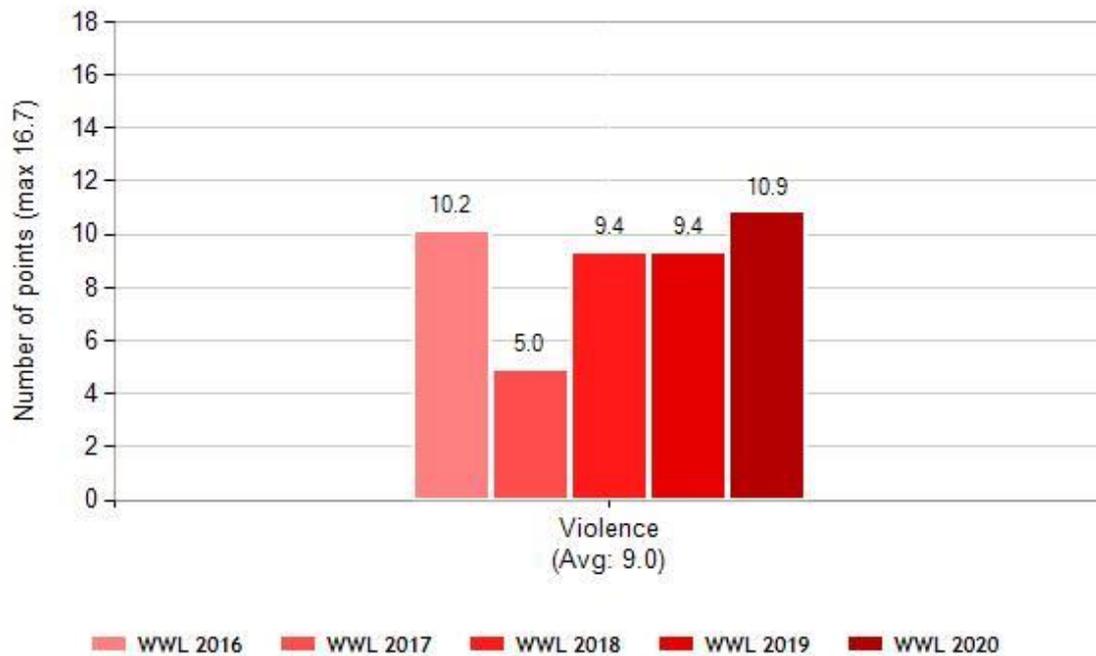


Chart 3:

The chart below, 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 killed or churches destroyed/closed. Violence peaked in WWL 2016 where it scored 10.2 points. Only in WWL 2018 and WWL 2019 did the score remain at the same level (9.4 points). In WWL 2020, the score rose to its highest level (10.9 points), another indication that the situation for Christians in the country is far from getting better.

WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern for Eritrea (Violence)



Gender profile of persecution

Female Pressure Points:

- ***Abduction***
- ***Denied access to social community/networks***
- ***Denied custody of children***
- ***Denied inheritance or possessions***
- ***Forced divorce***
- ***Forced marriage***
- ***Incarceration by government***
- ***Incarceration by family/house arrest***
- ***Trafficking***
- ***Violence - physical***
- ***Violence - sexual***

Female Christians are caught in a pincer of pressure from both the increasing government persecution and the usual social and domestic pressures of belonging to an unacceptable minority if they are converts or Evangelicals. Whereas in many countries, women are exempt from military service, in Eritrea, women are also subjected to obligatory military training and national service. This is a highly controlled environment in which every behavior and belief is scrutinized.

[Female conscripts](#) are generally subject to various forms of gender-based violence; detained or imprisoned female Christians also face gender-based pressure from prison guards and commanders. According to various reports there are hundreds 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 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.

Abduction and forced marriage are still prevalent especially in the countryside. While it is practiced even among followers of the same religion, if a female Christian is abducted by a Muslim and forced to marry him, she will be forced to accept his religion as well. Further, there is no legislation specifically addressing [domestic violence](#) in Eritrea, so female converts will often face physical abuse, house incarceration, threat of being reported to the government, loss of custody of children and forced divorce.

Male Pressure Points:

- ***Denied access to social community/networks***
- ***Economic harassment via work/job/business***
- ***Incarceration 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 is hoped that the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia might change this compulsory situation.

Even everyday life is under scrutiny, and phone calls are monitored, or bandwidth is kept slow or spied upon by the state. Those suffering the most are Christians who are not recognized by the state.

In Eritrea, there seems to be no 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. Killings, beatings and forced labor are also part of the intimidation experienced by Christian men.

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. An arrested Christian's children find they are often taunted by fellow children.

Persecution of other religious minorities

In addition to Christians, especially from those denominations that are not recognized by the government, other religious minorities also face challenges, for instance, Muslims who oppose the government and Jehovah's Witnesses (JW). CSW reported in April 2018 that two adherents of JW had [died in prison](#). In November 2017, Muslim teachers were [arrested](#) for opposing government plans to stop them running private schools.

Future outlook for the church

The outlook for Christian as viewed through the lens of:

- **Dictatorial paranoia:** A country expert states: "The government of Eritrea is facing challenges from various quarters. For instance, there is a social media campaign gaining momentum under the title 'Enough is enough' which is demanding political change in the country. Also, a growing number of influential artists and others are speaking out. One example is a recent [protest song](#) by Korchach, one of the most famous musicians in the country, in which the singer addresses the government saying in one verse: 'Your level of evil is becoming unacceptable...'" On top of this, there is the 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](#), made in April 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 persecution for Christians as the government might see churches (especially the non-traditional Protestant groups) as a pro-change movement.

- **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 for persecution unless the country is reformed.

External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: Transparency International - https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2017
- Violence: detained - <https://www.persecution.org/2019/06/07/eritrea-continues-crackdown-pentecostal-christians-30-christians-arrested/>
- Violence: arrested - <https://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Eritrea2019.pdf>
- Violence: arrested - <https://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Eritrea2019.pdf>
- Violence: seized - <https://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Eritrea2019.pdf>
- 5 Year trends: UN commission of Inquiry in 2016 - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=20067&LangID=E>
- Gender profile of persecution: F - <https://reliefweb.int/report/eritrea/empowerment-during-war-eritrean-women-must-fight-gender-discrimination-new-peace%20>
- Gender profile of persecution: emale conscripts - <https://reliefweb.int/report/eritrea/empowerment-during-war-eritrean-women-must-fight-gender-discrimination-new-peace%20>
- Gender profile of persecution: domestic violence - <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/926401524803880673/pdf/125804-PUB-REPLACEMENT-PUBLIC.pdf%20>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: died in prison - <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/04/30/news/3941/article.htm>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: arrested - <https://www.christianpost.com/news/priest-arrested-students-clash-with-guards-as-eritrea-cracks-down-on-catholic-islamic-schools.html>
- Future outlook for the church: protest song - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kpd8t8kSSNc&feature=youtu.be>
- Future outlook for the church: reconciliation and healing, - <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-africa/2019/05/01/bishops-say-eritrea-needs-truth-reconciliation-plan-ban-on-hate-speech/>

Additional reports and articles

WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
(password: freedom).

At the time of publication there were no items specifically on Eritrea.

World Watch Monitor news articles

Articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/eritrea>.

Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Eritrea>
(password: freedom).