

# eritrea

PERSECUTION 101




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## **Termed “Africa’s North Korea” by analysts, Eritrea is a closed country home to a dictator that has long looked to end free religious expression**

Unlike many countries that persecutes Christians, Eritrea has a significant Christian population. The government even grants official recognition to three separate Christian groups—the Orthodox Tewahedo church, the Catholic church, and the Lutheran church—estimated to make up 49-63% of the total population and one Muslim group. However, their large numbers do not protect Christian or Muslim believers from government repression, with officials enforcing the narrow bounds of state-approved worship with severe penalties including torture, imprisonment, and even death. Those that dare step outside those confines are dealt with swiftly, often in a penal system known for its inhumane treatment of prisoners.



## QUICK FACTS



### Type of Government

Presidential  
Republic



### Head of State

President Isaias  
Afwerki *since 1993*



### Total Population

6.27 million  
(2023 estimate)



### Religious Demography

49-63% Christian  
37-49% Muslim



### Ethnic Demography

50% Tigrinya	2-3% Bilen
30% Tigre	2-2.5% Beja
4-5% Saho	1.5% Nara
4-5% Afar	0.5-1% Rashaida
2-4% Kunama	



## TYPES OF PERSECUTION



### Government Restrictions

Government policies hinder both corporate and private religious practice



### Government Violence

The Eritrean government keeps an extensive judicial and penal apparatus designed to violently repress minority religious expression



## ICC IN ERITREA

As in many closed countries, faith-based humanitarian aid is severely frowned upon by the government in Eritrea. Though in dire need of outside aid —Eritrean GDP per capita, a common marker of economic health, is well within the bottom 10% in the world—Eritrea's government is deeply wary of the influence of foreign governments and nonprofit organizations.

Consequently, ICC's ministry to the Eritrean church takes place covertly and often across Eritrea's southern border with Ethiopia. There ICC works with Eritrean refugees fleeing the Afwerki administration's crackdown on religion. Frequently without the resources for basic survival, these believers receive temporary assistance that helps restore them to sustainable livelihoods in Ethiopia.



### **Backgrounder on Religious Freedom in Eritrea**

Eritrea's thirty-year war for independence from Ethiopia ended in 1991. Led by Isais Afwerki's Eritrean People's Liberation Front, the conflict created an environment ripe for the authoritarianism that has marked Afwerki's thirty-year long Presidency since. Under his rule, Eritrea has become a one-party state closed to independent media, political dissent, and foreign influence while Ethiopia—a country with its own human rights concerns, admittedly—has increasingly become an accepted part of the international community.

Proclamation 73 of 1995, the country's central regulation for religious groups, establishes an Office of Religious Affairs and creates a strict framework for groups limiting their ability to work with foreign organizations and the kinds of social activities they can organize. The Office of Religious Affairs has only approved four groups, punishing unregistered groups with imprisonment and fines.

"Unregistered religious groups lack the privileges of registered groups," a 2023 State Department report said, "and their members risked arrest, mistreatment, and renunciation of their faith as a condition of their release." Many cases target independent Christians, including pastors thrown in prison for leading their congregations outside the confines set by the government. Jehovah's Witnesses face especially severe restrictions, a result of their refusal to support the political formation of the Eritrean state in the 1990s and issues related to mandatory military service.

Though many of the most severe violations of religious freedoms are directed toward unregistered groups, approved religious groups—the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo church, Sunni Islam, the Catholic church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea—are far from free themselves.



In 2006, authorities detained Patriarch Abune Antonios, the head of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo church, after he protested the arrest of priests and refused government requests to excommunicate thousands of church members. His bravery in the face of intense government pressure led to his years in captivity and prompted a groundswell of support around the world.

Eritrean authorities moved Patriarch Antonios several times over the years, holding him in several undisclosed locations and refusing him the right to communicate with his family or other church officials. Once, in 2017, the authorities allowed him to make an appearance in Asmara, but they prevented him from making any public statements and did not allow congregants to speak with him.

Patriarch Antonios passed away in February 2022 after sixteen years of detainment during which authorities reportedly refused him medical treatment for his severe diabetes. A year before his death, in May 2021, the government appointed Reverend Abune Qerlos to take Patriarch Antonios' place at the head of the church despite church rules that forbid the appointment of a new patriarch while the last is still living.

Though detailed information from Eritrea is difficult to obtain, it is known that the country is currently holding at least dozens of prisoners of conscience despite periodic amnesties. The government's animosity toward free religious expression is unabated and shows no sign of easing despite consistent concern and sweeping sanctions from the international community.

## **Resources and Reports**

[State Department 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom — Eritrea Chapter](#)  
[USCIRF 2023 Annual Report — Eritrea Chapter](#)

