

World Watch Research

Eritrea:

# Background Information

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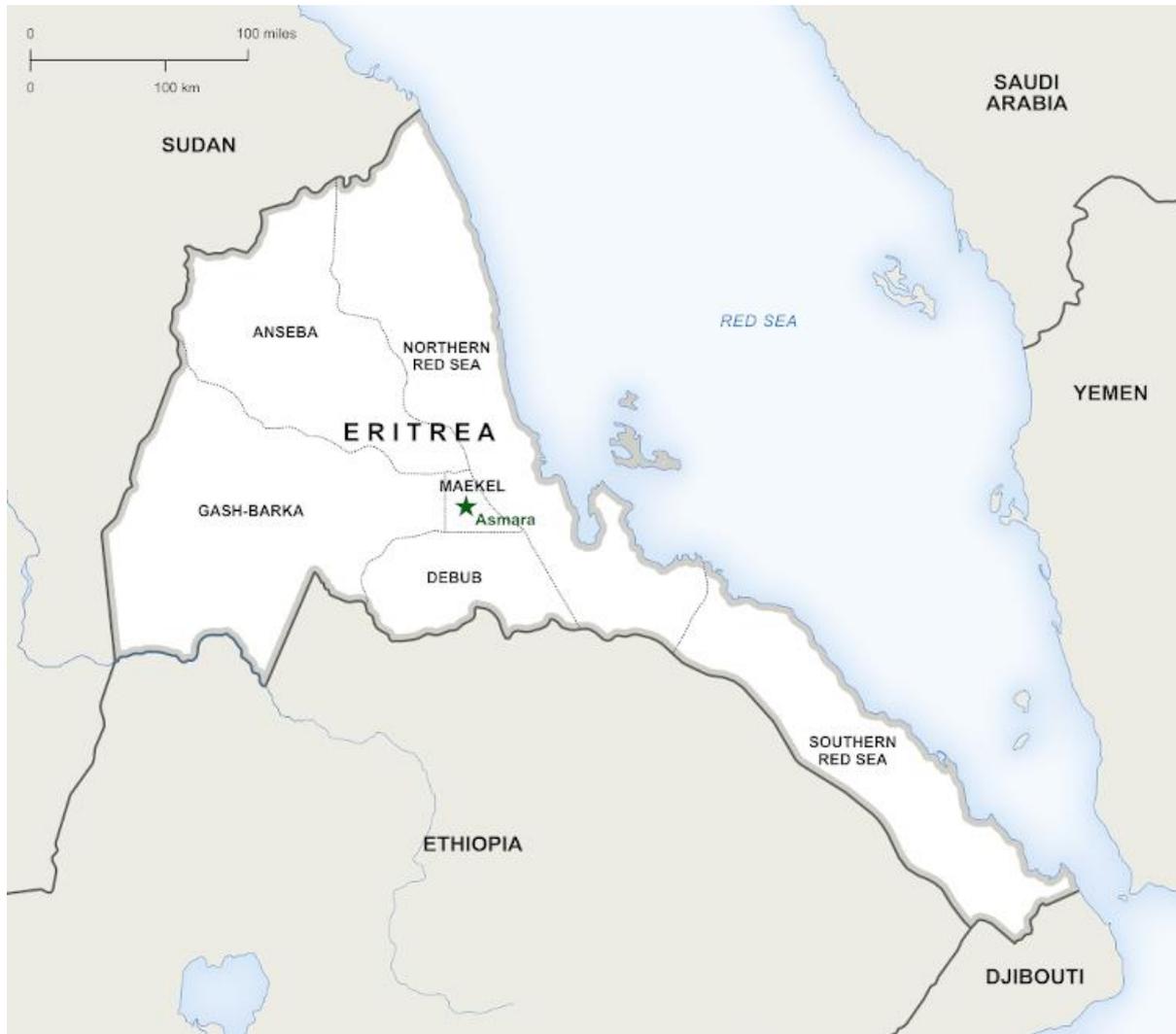
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World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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## Map of country



Eritrea: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
3,818,000	1,687,000	44.2

*Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024*

## Recent history

President Isayas Afewerki has governed Eritrea since it became an independent country in 1993. His People's Front for Democracy and Justice party (PFDJ) is the sole political party and has been facing serious pressure from the international community due to its human rights record. The country's economy is stagnant and thousands are fleeing the country. This led to a failed coup in January 2013 when a group of military officers tried to take control of state media. In recent years, the country has been trying to mend its relationship with the international community.

The year 2018 opened a period of significant changes in Eritrea internationally, if not domestically. In early July 2018, Eritrea signed an [historic peace agreement](#) with neighbor Ethiopia to end a two-

decade-long conflict and to promote close cooperation in political, economic, social, cultural and security areas (CNN, 9 July 2018). This dramatic event in Asmara was followed by President Isaias Afwerki's historic visit to Addis Ababa, a week later. further [strengthening peaceful relationships](#) between the two culturally linked countries (Amnesty International, 14 July 2018). In an even further evidence of rapid improvement in relations, Eritrea reopened its [embassy in Addis Ababa](#) and named an ambassador to represent it (Al-Jazeera, 16 July 2018).

Peace in the Horn of Africa was [consolidated](#) when Eritrea ended hostilities with Djibouti and Somalia by signing peace agreements with the two countries following the Addis-Asmara diplomatic thaw in relations (Al-Jazeera, 11 September 2018). In November 2018, the UN [lifted sanctions](#) it had imposed on Eritrea nearly a decade earlier (Al-Jazeera, 14 November 2018). But these gestures of peace were not matched by improvements in human rights in the country. On 17 September 2018, a former finance minister of Eritrea was [arrested](#) barely a week after publishing a book which criticized the country's current political system under Isaias Afwerki (Amnesty International, 19 September 2018). Eritreans have been fleeing the country to Ethiopia as refugees (taking advantage of the opening of the border between the two countries), fearing this door to freedom might be closed again. Five years on after the peace deal with Ethiopia, human rights conditions in Eritrea did not improve (HRW 2023 country chapter). Indeed, the peace deal seems to have strengthened the Eritrean government's current position rather than encouraging it to improve its poor record of human rights violations, government transparency and accountability. Eritrea's government has remained one of the world's most repressive. Mandatory military conscription has continued (despite the pretext of existential threat by Ethiopia being removed); there has been no amnesty for political prisoners; the rounding up of Christians belonging to [banned Christian denominations](#) has continued (Al-Jazeera, 24 May 2019); and there is even evidence of a gradual shutdown of border crossings to Ethiopia.

In March 2021, the European Union (EU) took action against the Eritrean government for its role in the conflict in Tigray region (northern Ethiopia). It imposed [sanctions](#) on Eritrea over human rights violations and blacklisted the country's National Security Office, which is tasked with intelligence gathering, arrests and interrogations (Reuters, 22 March 2021). The EU stated: "The National Security Office is responsible for serious human rights violations in Eritrea, in particular arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances of persons and torture." The sanctions mean an asset freeze in the EU. Additionally, individuals and entities in the EU are prohibited from making funds available, either directly or indirectly, to those listed. The USA also targeted Eritrean Intelligence and military officials for their involvement in the Tigray conflict. Specifically, on the basis of executive order issued by the Biden administration to sanction individuals and entities "responsible for, or complicit in, prolonging the conflict in Ethiopia, obstructing humanitarian access, or preventing a ceasefire", the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated four Eritrean entities and two individuals on 12 November 2021 (HRW 2022 Eritrea country chapter). It should be noted that Tigray's People Liberation Front (TPLF) also retaliated against Eritrea by firing rockets targeting Asmara early in the conflict.

Freedom House reported ([Freedom in the World 2023 Eritrea](#)): "In September [2022], Eritrean authorities began a nationwide forced conscription campaign in order to send more troops to Tigray. The mobilization campaign intensified in October, when security forces violently tracked down those

who attempted to escape being drafted. Reports emerged that authorities had begun to coerce individuals in hiding by detaining their family members.”

As reported by [Human Rights Watch 2024 Eritrea country chapter](#): "Eritrea is not a party to the November 2022 cessation of hostilities agreement signed between Ethiopian and Tigrayan authorities. The country's forces remained in parts of Ethiopia's Tigray region where they continued to commit serious violations, including widespread sexual violence and extrajudicial executions, and blocked humanitarian aid from reaching areas under their control."

There are [indications](#) that Eritrea is not only involved in regional conflicts in Ethiopia but also in the Sudanese civil war (Rift Valley Institute, May 2024).

## Political and legal landscape

Eritrea's socio-political dynamics, civil liberties and political system are all dominated by President Isayas Afewerki. As long as Eritrea has existed (since 1991 de facto and since 1993 de jure), he has been the ruler of the country. Afewerki's party –the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) - is the only legal political entity in the country and maintains a non-democratic form of governance. This militaristic ideological platform is based both on Eritrea's "liberation struggle" against Ethiopia – which lasted from 1961 to 1991 - and Afewerki's personality cult, leading to one of the most sustained dictatorships in Africa. Within this context, many Eritreans (including both Muslims and Christians) are taught to perceive Eritrean's national identity as more important than individual rights and ethnicity. The government's promotion of this national ideology has helped to channel potential social and ethnic-based conflicts into social harmony and has thus helped avoid any major social upheaval and conflict. However, the ruling elite is mostly from the Tigrinya ethnic group.

In terms of civil liberties, Western governments and human rights organizations consider Eritrea one of the most repressive countries in the world, similar to North Korea, Turkmenistan and Iran. For example, political protest is not allowed and the press is restricted to the point that there are no independent media organizations in the country. According to the [Committee to Protect Journalists \(CPJ\)](#) in an open letter to the UN dated 1 June 2019: "A free and independent press continues to be absent from the country and 16 journalists remain in detention without trial, many since 2001. Eritrean authorities are yet to produce evidence that those arbitrarily jailed are alive".

In recent years, the Eritrean government has even engaged in the forced return of nationals who fled abroad by forging cooperation with states like Sudan who are willing to deport Eritreans seeking asylum in their territory. For Eritrean refugees living in camps, the risk to their life in the camps is as grave. For example, thousands of Eritrean refugees who fled their country's repression and crossed the border to Ethiopia faced displacement by [attacks](#) on their camps (UNHCR, 18 February 2022) and severe health [risks due to deteriorating conditions](#) in their camp (UNHCR, 21 January 2022). These Eritreans face all these risks due in large part to the relentless repression of their government. According to [Freedom House's Global Freedom Index 2024](#), Eritrea is considered 'not free' in terms of political rights and civil liberties, scoring just 3/100.

Those perceived as belonging to the opposition or as a threat to Eritrea's stability are detained and treated harshly. According to the US State Department's [2023 Report on Human Rights Practices in Eritrea](#), incidents in 2023 included (as in previous years) "enforced disappearance; torture or cruel,

inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; political prisoners or detainees; transnational repression against individuals in another country; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for alleged offenses by a relative; serious abuses in a conflict, including reportedly unlawful civilian deaths, abductions, physical abuses, and conflict-related sexual violence; unlawful recruitment or use of children in armed conflict by the government; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including unjustified arrests or prosecution of journalists and censorship; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental and civil society organizations; restrictions on religious freedom; restrictions on freedom of movement and residence within the territory of the state and on the right to leave the country [etc.]...". Consistent with this, there are also no free and fair elections in the country or other civil or political rights. In one of the most intense interviews ever held with mainstream media, President Afewerki once told an Al-Jazeera reporter over ten years ago: "There is [no commodity called democracy](#) in Eritrea" (Al-Jazeera, 11 July 2012).

These restrictions on internationally recognized human rights (including freedom of religion) are justified by the government on the grounds that these rights form an existential threat to social and religious harmony in the country. This means that the introduction of non-indigenous types of Christianity (i.e. non-traditional Protestants such as Pentecostals) or certain forms of Islam (such as Salafism) will be seen as a potential threat to Eritrean society. Moreover, it seems that some Eritreans find the sacrifice of civil and political rights for the sake of internal stability and protection from Ethiopia acceptable.

The year 2018 provided the surprise of the decade, when it emerged that the new Ethiopian prime minister had visited Eritrea. On 9 July 2018, Ethiopia and Eritrea signed a peace treaty, officially ending decades of diplomatic and armed hostility. In 1998, a bitter two-year war had erupted between the two countries in which more than 70,000 people lost their lives and families were separated. Now 20 years on, the two countries resumed economic and diplomatic cooperation, Ethiopia Airlines resumed flying to Asmara and Ethiopia began using Assab port again. Saying that this was historic and unexpected news is no exaggeration. The two countries had been accusing each other for years for not accepting the borders set out by an international border commission and were engaged in a proxy war in Somalia. The peace treaty helped many families separated by the war now reuniting again after nearly 20 years. Yet, it is a legitimate question to ask: What has the peace treaty meant for Christians suffering for decades in Eritrean prisons? Many had expected that hundreds of imprisoned Christians would soon be released. Any peace agreement that does not take human rights and freedom of religion as a core principle, will not be sustainable. There has been little progress in this respect in the years following the 2018 peace treaty.

Since November 2020, Eritrea has been accused of becoming involved in another country's political crisis when Eritrean intelligence and armed forces joined the Ethiopian army to fight the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Most European countries and the USA condemned Eritrea for this role. Such military involvement abroad created political unrest at home since some members of the Eritrean opposition were believed to be fighting alongside the TPLF. In November 2022, [Ethiopia and TPLF](#)

[signed a peace agreement](#) whereby the TPLF will be disarmed and the government restores basic services to the Tigray region (UN News, 2 November 2022). There was nothing mentioned about Eritrea in the peace agreement.

Freedom House reported ([Freedom in the World 2024 Eritrea](#)): “The Eritrean government holds prominent dissidents and family members in detention; a group of 11 individuals has reportedly been held incommunicado since 2001. In September 2021, Amnesty International noted that nine may have died in detention. In addition, Ciham Ali Abdu, the daughter of former information minister Ali Abdu Ahmed, was detained in 2012 when she tried to flee to Sudan. Former finance minister Berhane Abrehe, meanwhile, was detained in 2018. Ciham and Berhane remained in custody in 2023.”

According to the Human Rights Watch, “For over two decades, the government has denied religious liberty to anyone whose religious affiliation does not match the four denominations that the government “recognizes”: Sunni Islam, Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Evangelical (Lutheran) churches. People affiliated with “unrecognized” faiths continue to be imprisoned, and torture has been used to force them to renounce their religion...The government continued to take control of schools and other institutions run by the Catholic church. In August 2022, media reported that the government planned to take over two Catholic-run vocational training centers” ([Human Rights Watch 2023 Eritrea country chapter](#)).

### **Gender perspective**

Eritrea ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1995. In a [CEDAW periodic review](#) conducted in February 2020, Eritrea was praised for the introduction of the 2015 Civil Code, in which partners and spouses were granted equal status (CEDAW, 10 March 2020, “Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Eritrea”). It raised concerns however in relation to several areas, for instance: The indefinite nature of military service (for both men and women); arbitrary and indefinite detention; inadequate implementation of existing legislation; and the [disappearances](#) of men and women in the state party (US State Department, [2023 Report on Human Rights Practices in Eritrea](#)).

Despite the legal age for marriage being set at 18 years of age under the 1991 Marriage Law, the Transitional Civil Code of Eritrea (1991) recognizes marriages from the age of 15 in recognition of Eritrean customary marriage practices. Child marriage is high in Eritrea, with 41% of girls reportedly entering marriage before they reach the age of 18 ([Girls Not Brides Eritrea](#), accessed 1 August 2024). In addition to the fear of military service, other motives for early marriage include poverty, traditional gender norms and limited education access. Some families also arrange marriages as a means of preventing girls from engaging in pre-marital sex. Muslim marriages and divorces are regulated under Sharia Law. Non-Muslim men and women have equal divorce rights. Existing legislation fails to explicitly address domestic violence, which is reportedly pervasive.

## Religious landscape

Eritrea: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	1,687,000	44.2
Muslim	2,049,000	53.7
Hindu	1,200	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnic religionist	31,000	0.8
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	1,300	0.0
Atheist	250	0.0
Agnostic	47,800	1.3
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

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; according to Islamic tradition this occurred from the 7th century onwards. The establishment of a garrison around Massawa by the Turks in 1557 effectively made Eritrea a [colony of the Ottoman Empire](#) (ICE Case Study Eritrea, November 1997). In the 1860s, Egyptian rulers bought the port of Massawa from the Turks and made it their seat of local government. In 1890, Italy claimed ownership of Eritrea as a colony. The presence of Turks and Egyptians had made Muslims in the coastal area very powerful. The Highlanders (the Christians), though, gained some ground when Eritrea became an Italian colony. Italy was defeated in World War II and Great Britain took control of Eritrea in 1941.

In 1952, the United Nations decided to make Eritrea a federal component of Ethiopia. The federal structure was later abolished by the Ethiopian king to effectively make Eritrea a part of Ethiopia (a Unitary form of government), declaring Eritrea one of the provinces (not a federal state). This led to the formation of the Eritrean liberation movement. Overwhelmingly led by lowland Muslims, the liberation movement declared its intention to form a republic. As most of the Eritrean Orthodox Christians had a strong relationship with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, they saw the move by Muslims as dangerous. Some of the radical Islamic groups also regarded the Orthodox Christians as a major threat to the cause of independence. Since this time, both are suspicious of each other. Nevertheless, most of the leaders of the front who helped Eritrea become an independent nation were

Orthodox Christians. These leaders then became increasingly hostile towards Christians of other denominations.

According to the [US State Department \(IRFR 2023 Eritrea\)](#):

- "A majority of the population in the southern and central regions is Christian, while the northern areas are majority Sunni Muslim. A majority of the Tigrinya, the largest ethnic group, is Christian. Seven of the other eight principal ethnic groups, the Tigre, Saho, Afar, Bilen, Hedareb, Nara, and the Rashaida, are predominantly Sunni Muslim and reside mainly in the northern regions of the country. The Kunama are diverse, with Christians, Muslims, and animists."
- "The Office of Religious Affairs has registered four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Sunni Islam, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea (affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation). While the Baha'i faith is not one of the four officially recognized religious groups, the group has registered every year since its establishment in the country in 1959 and has "de facto" recognition from the government. A synagogue exists in Asmara, but there are not enough adherents for regular services. A decree requires all other religious groups to submit registration applications and to cease religious activities and services prior to approval."
- "The government continued to ban all non-Sunni practices of Islam."
- "The government allowed the Baha'i center in Asmara to remain open, and the members of the center had unrestricted access to the building. A Baha'i temple outside of Asmara was allowed to operate."
- "The government continued its confiscation and nationalization of nearly all private schools, including Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim-owned schools, citing Proclamation 73/1995's prohibition on religious institutions providing social services, which includes education. In September, the beginning of the 2022 school year, the last two remaining Catholic schools were closed or converted to public schools. In October, the government allowed one private school to reopen, limited to international non-Eritrean students only."

## Economic landscape

There is little credible information regarding many aspects of Eritrea, including the economy, because of the authoritarian government that tightly controls the outflow of information. The country is considered "repressed" according to the [Economic Freedom Index 2024 Eritrea](#). The index notes that:

- "Eritrea's economic freedom score is 39.5, making its economy the 170th freest in the 2024 Index of Economic Freedom. Its rating is unchanged from last year, and Eritrea is ranked 44th out of 47 countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa region. The country's economic freedom score is lower than the world and regional averages. Eritrea's economy is considered "repressed" according to the 2024 Index. Eritrea's long-standing problems include poor governance, a lack of commitment to structural reform, poor management of public finance, and underdeveloped legal and regulatory frameworks. Weak enforcement of property rights and fragile rule of law have driven many people into the informal sector. Businesses face the constant threat of government interference. Few sizable private businesses exist, and employment opportunities are limited. Reliable economic and labor statistics are difficult or impossible to find. Monetary stability is fragile, and the most recent available inflation rate is 7.5 percent".

According to the [World Bank Country overview for Eritrea](#) (last updated 7 October 2021):

- “Poverty appears to have remained widespread in Eritrea, but the lack of data limits available quantitative evidence. The most recent available survey data from 1996/97 indicate a 70% poverty rate. The country has seen consistent improvements in life expectancy (rising from 50 years in 1990 to 65 years in 2015) and expected years of schooling (from 3.8 years in 1995 to 5.4 years in 2010) and strong social outcomes in the face of limited resources. Nevertheless, challenges remain. An unfinished maternal and child health agenda is compounded by a significant rise in Non-Communicable Disease (NCDs). Skilled birth attendance remains low, between 35-60%, maternal mortality ratio high at 485 deaths per 100,000 live births and under-five malnutrition also high with 52% of children underweight”.

According to [Crisis 24 Country Report/Eritrea](#):

- “The current economic situation in the country is bleak and the majority of Eritreans live in poverty. The investment climate has historically been undermined by state authoritarian rule, poor infrastructure, and international sanctions, although the removal of UN sanctions in November 2018 and rapprochement with Ethiopia have recently led to a slight improvement in investor confidence. The country's border regions have also proved to be unstable and Eritrea has a history of clashing with its neighbors over territorial disputes. In June 2018, Eritrea began a rapprochement process with Ethiopia after Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced that his government would cede the town of Badme to Eritrea, ending the two countries' 20-year border dispute”.

The ruling party and the army are crucial players in the economic system which Eritrea has adopted. They own farms, banks and other commercial establishments. Ordinary citizens may earn an income as subsistence farmers and herders, or by selling livestock to customers in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) cannot operate independently as their finances need to be 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, Iran and China all invest in the country and supplement the national budget. Through the wise investment in the establishment of key infrastructure projects such as power plants, dams, roads, and social services (schools, medical clinics, and clean water), Eritrea experienced a 7-10% growth after independence. This investment was stifled after the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia as more of its resources were channeled into supporting national defense.

According to the World Bank ([Document on Eritrea](#), accessed 9 January 2024): “[O]utside the mining industry, the private sector is virtually non-existent. Zinc, copper and gold account for over 90 percent of exports, under scoring the country's heightened exposure to external shocks.”

The country has also been trying to have good bilateral relations with some countries to boost its economy and image. For example, after the Kenyan president's visit to Asmara in December 2022 to address trade and regional security matters, the governments of Kenya and Eritrea reached a [mutual agreement to eliminate visa restrictions](#) for their respective citizens. This significant step was taken

with the objective of enhancing bilateral ties and promoting regional integration (The East African, 13 February 2023).

According to the World Bank's [Macro Poverty Outlook Eritrea](#) (April 2024):

**GDP growth:**

- Real GDP growth is estimated to have remained relatively stable at 2.6 percent in 2023, underpinned mainly by the construction of the Colluli potash project".
- "Economic growth is projected at 2.8 per cent in 2024".

**Current account surplus:**

- Lower fuel and food imports helped maintain the current account surplus above 14 percent of GDP.

**Public debt:**

- "Public debt was estimated at around 219 percent of GDP at end-2023, of which nearly 80 percent is owed to domestic banks. The country is in debt distress, and as of January 2023, Eritrea was at a pre-decision point in the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) list."

**Poverty:**

- "Poverty is assessed to be widespread, although national accounts and poverty statistics have not been produced for more than a decade".
- "[T]he last official poverty rate for the country dates from 1996/97, when it was calculated that 70 percent of urban households lived in poverty".

**Inflation:**

- In 2023, "inflation moderated to just over 6 percent".
- Lower global food prices are expected to help reduce inflation to 5.1 percent in 2024".

**Gender perspective**

Women and girls remain economically disadvantaged due to lower education and employment rates ([UNDP Human Development Report Eritrea](#), updates as of 13 March 2024). The impact of indefinite detention and military service means that they cannot rely on men to be the financial providers, however. With men and unmarried women often away from their families and villages for extended periods of time, many Eritrean households are run and financed by married women and widows.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Eritrea](#), updates as of 13 March 2024:

- **Human Development Index:** Eritrea is ranked #175 out of 193 countries with a human development value of 0.493 (low) (2022 HDI value).
- **Life expectancy in 2023:** 67.48 years, a 0.52% increase from 2022. Life expectancy in Eritrea in 2022 was 67.13 years, a 0.52% increase from 2021.

- **HIV/AIDS:** The numbers of HIV/AIDS patients are among the lowest in Sub-Saharan Africa and life expectancy is in the top ten of all African states. This shows paradoxically that grim government repression and economic self-reliance does lead to some positive results. However, poverty is still widespread in the country.

## Refugees

- According to Al-Jazeera reporting on 23 May 2023: "There are an estimated [126,000](#) Eritrean refugees in Sudan, according to UN data, struggling to survive the conflict. They comprise 11 percent of the 1.1 million refugees in the country."
- According to [HRW 2024 Eritrea country chapter](#): "Indefinite national service has continued to drive Eritreans from their country. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reported 345,000 Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in East Africa alone, as of June [2023], out of over 580,000 Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers globally. Eritreans seeking protection in several countries faced threats to their safety, pushbacks, or forced returns in 2023 by the country's authorities or by Eritrean forces, including in Ethiopia, Israel, and South Sudan and reportedly in Sudan. Forcibly returned Eritreans face serious risks of persecution or other human rights violations. Egypt had previously deported Eritrean asylum seekers in 2022 who were subsequently held in incommunicado detention, according to the UN special rapporteur on Eritrea."

## Forced conscription - as reported by [HRW 2024 Eritrea country chapter](#):

- "The government continued to use its uniquely abusive form of national and military service to control the population. Despite legal provisions limiting its duration to 18 months, the service—which is compulsory for all Eritreans aged 18 to 40, male and female—has often been indefinite since the start of the country's border war with Ethiopia between 1998 and 2000. The conscription has forced many Eritreans into military service for years, some decades. Releases from service, if they occur, happen arbitrarily."
- "The conscription system continues to have a devastating impact on children's education. Students of Warsai Yekalo Secondary School, in the Sawa military camp, some of them still children, are pushed into military service before they finish secondary school, compelling many to drop out. Conscripts have no say about the place and duration of their assignment after Sawa. Conscientious objection is prohibited."

The country name "Eritrea" was given by Italy when it colonized a strip of land along the Red Sea in 1890. According to the [Every Country website](#) (last accessed 1 August 2024): "The term 'eritrea' derives from Sinus Erythraeus, the name Greek traders of the third century B.C.E. gave to the body of water between the Arabian Peninsula and the Africa continent (now known as the Red Sea). Later, during the Roman Empire, the Romans called it Mare Erythraeum, literary meaning 'the red sea'."

## Gender perspective

The social and cultural landscape in Eritrea is marked by patriarchal norms, as well as close monitoring and scrutiny from government forces. Discriminatory social norms and deep-rooted stereotypes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and men persist, placing domestic responsibilities primarily with women, and decision-making power with men. [Domestic violence](#) remains an issue of

concern, particularly as perpetrators are rarely brought to justice (Asylum Research Centre, September 2021).

The Eritrean government is investing in improving education for girls; in a [2018 report](#) the Ministry of Education highlighted the need for more female teachers and gender-awareness training materials (Eritrea Education Sector Plan, 1 February 2018). While such developments have been welcomed, the high school system remains a channel for forcibly recruiting young people into national service, requiring them to spend their final year in education at SAWA military camp. Conscientious objection is not recognized ([HRW 2024 Eritrea country chapter](#)).

## Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Eritrea](#) (23 February 2024) - survey date: January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 26.6% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 0.4% of the total population.
- **Active mobile cellular mobile connections:** 41.9% of the total population

According to [BuddeComm research](#) (publication date: August 2024):

- "Eritrea's telecom sector operates under a state-owned monopoly for fixed and mobile services. Partly as a result of such restrictions on competition, the country has the least developed telecommunications market in Africa. Mobile penetration stands at only about 20%, while fixed-line internet use barely registers. This is exacerbated by the very low use of computers, with only about 4% of households having a computer, and most of these being in the capital, Asmara."
- "Although the provision of internet services is open to competition, about 2% of households have access to the internet. As a result, such growth as there is in the mobile and mobile internet sectors. The national telco, the Eritrean Telecommunication Services Corporation (EriTel), continues to roll out a 3G network which provides basic internet access to the majority or Eritreans."
- "Considerable investment in telecom infrastructure is still required to improve the quality of services. The government has embarked on a work program to do exactly that, specifically aimed at extending services to remote areas, improving the quality of services, and ensuring that more telecoms infrastructure is supported by solar power to compensate for the poor state of the electricity network."

Eritrea has made little advancement in terms of technology. Most of the country's infrastructure is outdated and not equipped with modern technology. Even with the low penetration rate, the use of the Internet is very risky especially when it comes to reporting and journalism. Journalists and citizens are not free to express themselves.

As per Freedom House Freedom in the World 2024 Eritrea:

- There is no free and independent media, as the government shut down all independent media in 2021. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), as of late 2023, 16 journalists remain imprisoned for their work in Eritrea; none have ever been charged.

- “Freedoms of expression and private discussion are severely inhibited by fear of government informants and the likelihood of arrest and arbitrary detention for any airing of dissent. The authorities regularly block access to social media platforms and shutter internet cafés.
- Members of the Eritrean diaspora are, by comparison, better able to express dissent online. However, members of the diaspora are also subject to government surveillance and harassment.”

This situation has also affected Christians to a great degree when it comes to using the Internet.

## Security situation

The security situation in Eritrea, especially regarding human security, is extremely challenged. According to the [Human Rights Watch 2024 Eritrea country chapter](#), the following factors were reported:

- “Eritrea continues to suppress basic rights, including to freedom of opinion, religion, and expression, with heightened restrictions in the context of forced mass conscription. Eritrean security forces continued to commit serious rights violations in Ethiopia’s Tigray region.
- The country has had no elections since independence in 1993, and the unelected president has refused to implement the 1997 constitution guaranteeing civil rights and limiting executive power. Since 2010, no legislature has met. There is no free press or civil society to keep check on the executive. Impunity remains the norm and due process rights are systematically flouted.
- Alleged draft evaders are rounded up by police through raids known as *giffas*. From mid-2022 through early 2023, the government of Eritrea conducted an intensive forced recruitment campaign, including of 50- to 60-year-old reservists called up to serve in border areas. The government collectively punished relatives of alleged draft evaders and deserters, which is illegal under regional and international human rights law.
- Mass roundups and prolonged arbitrary arrests and detentions without access to legal counsel, judicial review, or family visits, sometimes for decades, targeting the government’s many perceived opponents are widespread. Detainees are held in horrific conditions”.

The Fragile States Index ([FSI 2024 Eritrea](#)) shows that Eritrea remained in the category ‘Alert’, ranking 26th out of 179 countries with a total score of 92.1 out of a maximum of 120 points.

The main victims of the lack of human security in Eritrea are Christians. Many have been tortured and imprisoned by government security forces. Some decide to flee the country but they easily become prey for human trafficking organizations.

## Christian origins

Christianity entered Eritrea well over a thousand years ago. “The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church traces its history to the founding of the Coptic Orthodox Church and its separation in the 5th century from the larger body of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Like the Ethiopians, the Eritrean church recognizes Frumentius (4th century) as its first bishop and it follows the beliefs and practices of [the] Ethiopian [Orthodox Church].” (*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

Eritrea: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	1,564,000	92.7
Catholic	183,000	10.8
Protestant	77,600	4.6
Independent	12,500	0.7
Unaffiliated	2,000	0.1
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-152,000	-9.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,687,100</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	38,600	2.3
Pentecostal-Charismatic	140,000	8.3

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as “Renewalists”.

Christians are often located in the highlands while the Muslims dominate the lowlands of the country.

The main denomination in Eritrea is the Eritrean Orthodox Church which has been implicated in violating the rights of other Christian groups in the country, especially Pentecostal Christians.

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Eritrea>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

## External Links

- Recent history: historic peace agreement - <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/09/africa/ethiopia-abi-yahmed-eritrea-war-intl/index.html>
- Recent history: strengthening peaceful relationships - <http://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/07/eritrea-peace-with-ethiopia-must-be-catalyst-for-human-rights-change/>
- Recent history: embassy in Addis Ababa - <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/eritrea-reopens-embassy-ethiopia-thaw-relations-180716065621148.html>
- Recent history: consolidated - <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/eritrea-consolidates-horn-africa-peace-deal-180910174538098.html>
- Recent history: lifted sanctions - <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/lifts-sanctions-eritrea-years-181114170026561.html>
- Recent history: arrested - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/09/eritrea-release-former-finance-minister-immediately-and-unconditionally/>
- Recent history: banned Christian denominations - <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/eritreans-peace-freedom-190524074126019.html>
- Recent history: sanctions - <https://www.reuters.com/article/eritrea-politics-eu-sanctions-idAFL1N2LK1Q7>
- Recent history: Freedom in the World 2023 Eritrea - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/eritrea/freedom-world/2023>
- Recent history: Human Rights Watch 2024 Eritrea country chapter - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/eritrea>
- Recent history: indications - [https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/War-and-the-Borderland-2\\_Sudan-Ethiopia-Eritrea\\_final-.pdf](https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/War-and-the-Borderland-2_Sudan-Ethiopia-Eritrea_final-.pdf)
- Political and legal landscape: Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) - <https://www.defenddefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/HRC41-Civil-society-letter-regarding-ERITREA.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: attacks - <https://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/briefing/2022/2/620f63574/thousands-eritrean-refugees-displaced-clashes-ethiopia-afar-region.html>
- Political and legal landscape: risks due to deteriorating conditions - <https://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/briefing/2022/1/61ea6fe74/deteriorating-conditions-eritrean-refugees-grave-risk-tigray.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Freedom House's Global Freedom Index 2024 - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/eritrea/freedom-world/2024>
- Political and legal landscape: 2023 Report on Human Rights Practices in Eritrea - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/528267-ERITREA-2023-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: no commodity called democracy - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yO1EkKq8q1E>
- Political and legal landscape: Ethiopia and TPLF signed a peace agreement - <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130137>
- Political and legal landscape: Freedom in the World 2024 Eritrea - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/eritrea/freedom-world/2024>
- Political and legal landscape: Human Rights Watch 2023 Eritrea country chapter - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/eritrea>

- Political and legal landscape: CEDAW periodic review - [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CEDAW/C/ERI/CO/6&mp;Lang=En](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CEDAW/C/ERI/CO/6&mp;Lang=En)
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- Political and legal landscape: Girls Not Brides Eritrea - <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/eritrea/>
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- Economic landscape: Economic Freedom Index 2024 Eritrea - <https://www.heritage.org/index/pages/country-pages/eritrea>
- Economic landscape: World Bank Country overview for Eritrea - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/eritrea/overview>
- Economic landscape: Crisis 24 Country Report/Eritrea - <https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/eritrea>
- Economic landscape: Document on Eritrea - <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099621204122312420/pdf/IDU0b875ebd80878004a190a8a4037a044036cdd.pdf>
- Economic landscape: mutual agreement to eliminate visa restrictions - <https://www.theeastafrikan.co.ke/tea/rest-of-africa/eritrea-seeks-to-return-to-igad-4119964>
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- Economic landscape: UNDP Human Development Report Eritrea - <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/ERI>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP Human Development Report Eritrea - <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/ERI>
- Social and cultural landscape: 126,000 - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/23/eritrean-refugees-caught-between-crisis-at-home-unrest-in-sudan>
- Social and cultural landscape: HRW 2024 Eritrea country chapter - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/eritrea>
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- Social and cultural landscape: Every Country website - <https://www.everyculture.com/Cr-Ga/Eritrea.html#ixzz5tBcNmKwu>
- Social and cultural landscape: Domestic violence - <https://eritreanrefugees.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Asylum-Research-Ctr-USStateDept-Reported-Info-year-by-year-9-2021.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: 2018 report - <https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/2018-01-eritrea-education-sector-plan.pdf>
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- Technological landscape: DataReportal Digital 2024: Eritrea - <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-eritrea>
- Security situation: Human Rights Watch 2024 Eritrea country chapter - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/eritrea>
- Technological landscape: BuddeComm research - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Eritrea-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>
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