

# FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

## ERITREA

### LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

(Reporting period: 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018)

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## Introduction

### Copyright Notice

### Introduction

World Watch List Eritrea	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	86	7
WWL 2018	86	6
WWL 2017	82	10
WWL 2016	89	3
WWL 2015	79	9

*Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country was among the fifty highest scoring countries (Top 50) in the WWL 2015-2019 reporting periods.*

**Please note:** 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”.

## WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Eritrea

### Link for general background information

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

### Recent country 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." Lately, the country has been trying to amend its relationship with the international community and this now seems plausible after Ethiopia and Eritrea signed a peace treaty in July 2018 ending hostilities. On 18 July 2018, it was reported that Eritrea [withdrew](#) its forces from the militarized zone. Similarly, Ethiopia [withdrew](#) its forces from the border with Eritrea.

Eritrea is still in a border dispute with Djibouti, however. Qatar pulled out its peacekeepers from the disputed border region in June 2017. In July 2017 [Djibouti asked the African Union](#) to deploy observers along its disputed borders with Eritrea. The new Ethiopian Prime Minister is also trying to help solve the problem between Eritrea and Djibouti.

### The religious landscape

To understand today's religious landscape of the country, it is necessary to look at Eritrea's 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.

## The political 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.

Eritrea has allegedly been involving itself in other countries' domestic affairs in the region. Eritrea 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 has [published](#) documentation 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.

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 will start 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.

## The socio-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 Organisations (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. Having said this, 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."

## Concluding remarks

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. On foreign policy and aid, the Eritrean regime will continue its cooperation with China, Iran and Gulf countries and will resist pressure from the West to open up its doors to Western NGOs, including Christian organizations. The regime will doubtless continue to violate the human rights of the 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 those Muslim groups aiming to further a radical Islamic agenda. However, it could equally well weaken the Orthodox Church and suffocate Christians

of 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.”](#)

In July 2018, Eritrea made amends with Ethiopia when it signed a peace treaty with the new Ethiopian Prime Minister. The two countries also signed economic cooperation. It is believed that the majority of Eritreans are behind this new agreement.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Eritrea

- Recent country history: UN experts  
[http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2006/913](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2006/913)
- Recent country history: withdrew  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-eritrea/eritrean-troops-withdraw-from-ethiopian-border-eritrean-press-agency-idUSKBN1K90QR>
- Recent country history: withdrew  
<https://ecadforum.com/2018/08/17/ethiopia-withdraws-troops-from-eritrea-border/>
- Recent country history: Djibouti asked the African Union  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-djibouti-eritrea-border-idUSKBN1901HR>
- The religious landscape: colony of the Ottoman Empire  
<http://mandalaprojects.com/ice/ice-cases/eritrea.htm>
- The political landscape: Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)  
[https://cpj.org/data/imprisoned/2017/?status=Imprisoned&start\\_year=2017&end\\_year=2017&group\\_by=location](https://cpj.org/data/imprisoned/2017/?status=Imprisoned&start_year=2017&end_year=2017&group_by=location)
- The political landscape: is estimated that Eritrea has over 300  
<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/af/154345.htm>
- The political landscape: President Afewerki told  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yO1EkKq8q1E>
- The political landscape: a UN Monitoring Group  
[http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2006/913](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2006/913)
- The political landscape: published  
[http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2006/913](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2006/913)
- The socio-economic landscape: World Bank 2018 report:  
<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/eritrea/overview>
- Concluding remarks: “being ruled by fear, not law.”  
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-33047544>

## WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

### How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
5,188,000	2,474,000	47.7

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

### How did Christians get there?

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. They also live 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.)

### What church networks exist today?

Church networks: Eritrea	Christians	%
Orthodox	2,264,000	91.5
Catholic	154,000	6.2
Protestant	69,400	2.8
Independent	26,300	1.1
Unaffiliated	1,700	0.1
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-40,600	-1.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,474,800</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	40,300	1.6
Renewalist movement	165,000	6.7

*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.*

*Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)*

The Tigrinya (mainly Orthodox) is the dominant Christian ethnic group in the country. Evangelical churches are growing but are limited in resources for training and outreach due to the restrictions imposed by the government.

## Religious context

Religious Context: Eritrea	Numbers	%
Christians	2,474,000	47.7
Muslim	2,604,000	50.2
Hindu	1,200	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnoreligionist	32,000	0.6
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	1,700	0.0
Atheist	390	0.0
Agnostic	74,200	1.4
Other	0	0.0

*OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.*

*Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)*

## Notes on the current situation

- A large number of Eritrean Christians have been subjected to severe regulations imposed by the state. In 2002, Eritrean authorities announced a new registration policy. The policy officially exempted the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church from the registration process. The new law demanded the disclosure of membership and other internal documents. Many institutions chose not to comply with this, since doing so would endanger the safety and security of their members.
- Government fear of radical Islam and Christian evangelicalism has closed down virtually all international NGO projects and aid, and has also restricted the entry of expatriate Christian workers.
- It is estimated that there are many Christians who are still in prison for their faith. Sadly, it is very difficult to tell the exact number, who have died in the prisons due to torture, denial of medical attention and outright negligence by prison authorities.

## WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

With a score of 86, Eritrea ranks 7th in WWL 2019 with a score of 86, the same number of points as in WWL 2018. As in previous reporting periods, government security forces conducted many raids that targeted Christians.

### What type of persecution dominates?

**Dictatorial paranoia:** President Afewerki's regime has become synonymous with absolute authoritarianism. 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.

**Denominational protectionism:** The Eritrean Orthodox Church looks down upon other types of Christianity as being dangerous newcomers, especially Pentecostal groups.

**Islamic oppression:** Christians - especially converts – are particularly vulnerable in Muslim majority regions.

**Organized corruption and crime:** Eritrea is one of the most corrupt countries in the world; very often these activities involve the army.

### Who is driving persecution?

Since 1993 the country's regime under the leadership of President Afewerki is doing everything to maintain power and reacts harshly against any opposition. Eritrean Muslims are showing a tendency towards radicalism partly due to the increase in Islamic militancy in the region. This means that Christians living in Muslim dominated areas are particularly vulnerable, especially converts from Islam. The Eritrean Orthodox Church (EOC) has a long historical presence in the country and sometimes puts pressure on Christians with a different background.

### What it results in

Christians are being forced to join the armed forces, and 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 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. This extreme pressure and state-sanctioned violence is forcing some Christians to flee the country.

## Violence

The following table is based on reported cases. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures.

Eritrea	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
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.*

## Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

- In the WWL 2019 reporting period, government security forces have [continued](#) conducting numerous raids on Christians and house-churches and arrested hundreds of Christians. These Christians are being held by the government in miserable conditions, some in shipping containers in scorching temperatures. This is despite the reported release of some 30 Christians in July 2018.
- The pressure from the EOC 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, its Christian history is defined by the Orthodox Church, and 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. Asmara police stations, Mai Sirwa, Adi Abieto (new for believers to be detained in), Keren (new), Assab, Hashferai, Barentu, Mai Idaga, Alla (new) are some of the detention and prison centers. Many prisoners are forced to work very long hours in commercial flower fields. Some of the notable Christians 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). In June 2018, Pastor Oqbamichel Haiminot of the Asmara Word of Life church was [released](#) after 11 years in prison without charges.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: continued  
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/eritreans-still-suffering-despite-peace-deal-with-ethiopia-says-priest/>
- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: released  
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/eritrean-pastor-released-after-11-years-in-prison/>

## WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 201 - 31 October 2018

### Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 86, Eritrea ranks 7th in WWL 2019 with a score of 86, the same number of points as in WWL 2018. 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. After more than a decade, there are still more than ten Christian leaders languishing in government prisons without charges and under atrocious conditions. It is reported that there are thousands of prisoners of conscience in Eritrean prisons, with 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.

### Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Eritrea	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Weak
Denominational protectionism	DPR	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 (long version).*

#### **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. This pressure partly originates from theological differences but has practical roots as well. Well organized and with a long tradition, the Orthodox Church looks down upon other types of Christianity as being newcomers. For the Orthodox Church leaders, Eritrea is the home of the Orthodox Church, its Christian history is defined by the Orthodox Church, and other denominations – in particular, the Pentecostal groups - 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 some suggestions among some analysts that the Eritrean government is now open to upholding human rights and ready for democracy. That line of thinking emanates from not understanding the nature of the Eritrean government. The Eritrean government - despite the recent attempts to heal relationships with neighboring and Western countries - is not ready to change when it comes to how to deal with its 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 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 got 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	EA	DPR	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	-	WEAK	VERY STRONG	-	-	VERY STRONG	STRONG
Government officials	Medium	-	-	Strong	-	-	Very strong	Very strong
Ethnic group leaders	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong	-	Very weak	Strong	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Strong	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	Very strong

*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 (long version).*

### Drivers of Denominational protectionism:

The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOC) is another driver that is behind persecution. The EOC is the oldest Christian community in the country and has the most number of Christian followers. It exerts a huge 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 churches. And there is no denying that the leaders of the Orthodox Church actively support efforts to limit the expansion of other Christian churches. Family members and community leaders are also drivers of persecution, especially where ("cross-denominational") converts live.

### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

Eritrea is not a democracy. Its government is known for suppressing the freedom of its citizens. As such, one of the main drivers of persecution are the government officials. They constantly harass and arrest Christians, especially the ones belonging to churches that are not recognized by the government. The ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice party (PFDJ) is also another driver that is behind many challenges that Christians in the country face.

**Drivers of Islamic oppression:**

In the lowland part of the country (in both eastern and western regions), imams in mosques and madrassas sometimes preach anti-Christian sentiment. In those areas, Christian converts face serious persecution from family, extended family members and the community at large.

**Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:**

Government officials, especially the security forces, operate with impunity and are undermining the rule of law in the country. They often extort money from Christians. The existence of these networks of corruption within the army and the ruling party has made life for many Eritreans very difficult (especially for Christians); there is nowhere for them to appeal to for their rights to be respected.

**Context**

Dubbed the “North Korea of Africa,” Eritrea ranks among the very worst countries in terms of freedom of religion, freedom of press, rule of law and other human rights records. Eritrea entered the World Watch List in 2002, and in 2004 the country jumped into the top 20, even ranking 3rd on WWL 2016. In WWL2017 it ranked 10 and on WWL2018 6. The Eritrean regime is absolutely authoritarian and intolerant towards any form of unregistered organization, dissent, and free expression. There is no safe place in the country – as is confirmed by a large number of Eritrean refugees in Europe and elsewhere. The fact that those who are oppressed are fleeing the country is an advantage for the government since some of those fleeing could be among the ones who would otherwise have been pressing the government for changes and reforms. It is also financially advantageous for the government since Eritreans abroad are required to pay an expatriate tax.

According to Reporters Without Borders reporting in April 2017, at least 11 Eritrean journalists were known to be in prison without trial: “Eritrea systematically violates freedom of expression and information. It is Africa’s biggest prison for journalists.” The president of the country is on the Reporters Without Borders’ list of “Predators of Press Freedom”. [This report](#) states that Aferwerki has “brutally eliminated his political rivals and has jailed all independent media journalists since 2001.” Also, the Press Freedom Index ranked the country lowest (only above North Korea) for the past eight years - even below Somalia, Sudan, China, and Iran.

The Eritrean government has made it clear that only officially recognized religious bodies can operate in the country, namely: Sunni Islam, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Roman Catholics and Lutherans. For other Christian denominations it is very difficult to function in the country and as a result, they have to face the brunt of the persecution. The introduction of a registration system in 1997 completely outlawed a large category of Christians. Except for the recognized religious institutions named above all other groups were asked to apply for registration. At some point, those who applied were labeled as compliant, but no licenses were issued. The government’s attempt to control all religious institutions culminated in the deposing of the Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch in 2007 who has been under house-arrest ever since.

Government abuse and the hardships suffered led to dissatisfaction amongst the population and it eventually resulted in an attempted coup in 2013. It failed and, putting all the blame on the West and Ethiopia, the government now had another excuse to intensify its persecution of Christians, named by the government as 'agents of the West'. The incident also gave a chance for Muslims to get closer to the government on the basis of 'my enemy is your enemy'.

Eritrea has also been consistently accused of supporting the rise and spread of radical Islamic militants in the Horn of Africa, mainly to gain political advantage. The UN sanctions against Eritrea for this

support – for arming al-Shabaab in particular - implies that the Eritrean government is also an accomplice in the persecution of Christians outside Eritrea by supplying the means and methods of persecution to jihadist groups. In addition, the Eritrean government has close ties with the Islamic government of Sudan and is close to countries of the Middle East like Qatar, Iran and Saudi Arabia in terms of culture, policy and geography, where Christians are facing constant opposition. Many Christians are leaving the country via neighboring countries - Sudan, Ethiopia, and Egypt - and have become easy prey for human traffickers, especially in the Sinai desert. Some of them were caught and beheaded in Libya by Islamic State in 2015, but thousands have made it to Europe across the Mediterranean Sea.

Eritrea is one of two African countries re-designated as a “[Country of Particular Concern](#)” (CPC) by the US State Department on 22 December 2017 due to severe violations of freedom of religion. In its [press release](#) issued on 4 January 2018, the State Department said: the designation is about "governments that have engaged in or tolerated systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom." Robert P. George (Chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom) and Thomas J. Reese (USCIRF Commissioner) suggested that “Eritrea’s track record on human rights crimes and religious freedom warrant a referral to the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague.” A Commission of Inquiry set up by the UN Human Rights Commission also suggested that the Eritrean regime should be [referred to the ICC](#). The government suspects that the report by the Commission of Inquiry would not have been possible without cooperation from people inside Eritrea.

The surprise of the decade emerged when the new Ethiopian prime Minister visited Eritrea and a peace treaty was signed on 9 July 2018, officially ending decades of diplomatic and armed strife. In 1998, a bitter two-year war 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 are resuming economic and diplomatic cooperation, Ethiopia Airlines will start flying to Asmara and Ethiopia will begin using Assab port again. Saying this is historic and unexpected news is no exaggeration. However, there has been no indication that hundreds of Christians currently in prison might soon be released.

## 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 the government’s pressure. This group of Christians experience difficulties in traveling in the country and meeting with other Christians.

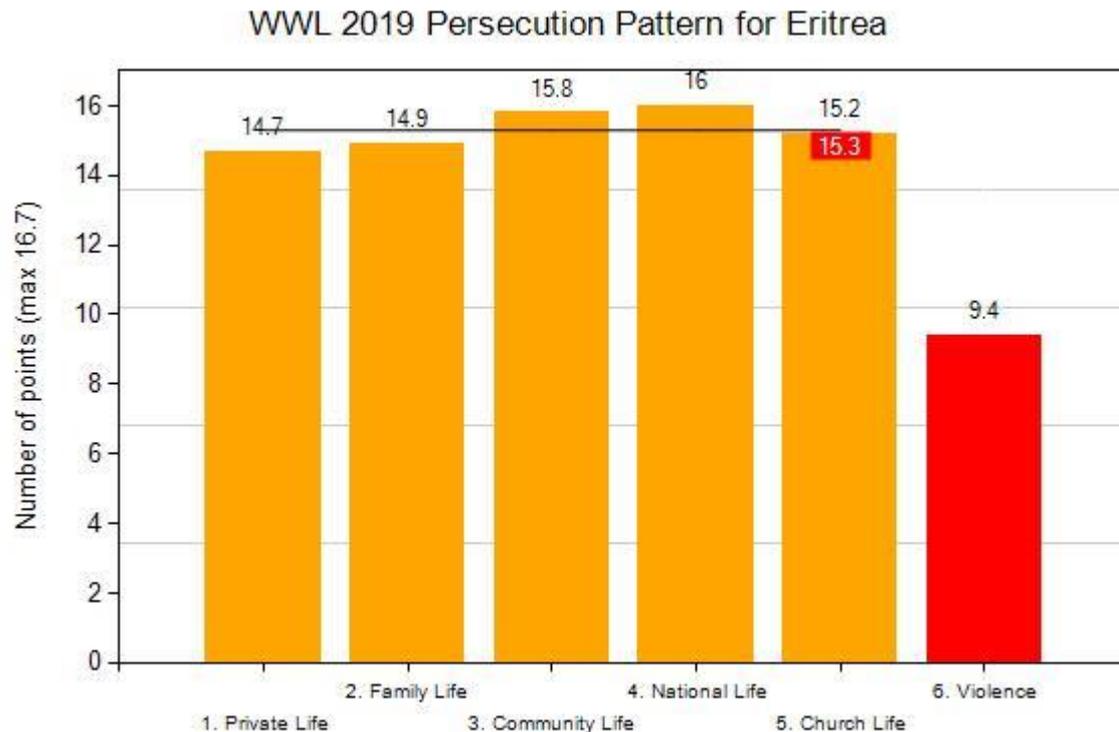
**Historical Christian communities:** This is the biggest group in the country and includes the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Anglicans, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics. These Christians live mainly in the Christian-dominated areas of central and southern Eritrea. They are affected by *Islamic oppression* 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 seen as agents of the West. The Pentecostal

communities in particular face serious persecution especially from government officials and the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2019 Persecution pattern for Eritrea shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Eritrea is at the extreme level of 15.3 (decreasing from 15.4 in WWL 2018).
- There is no *sphere of life* where the pressure on Christians is not at an extreme level. It is strongest in the *National sphere* (16.0), which reflects that government policy is mainly responsible for the pressure on Christians in the country.
- The score for violence remains at the very high level of 9.4 points, as it was in WWL 2018. There are still many Christians languishing in prisons because of their faith.

### Private life:

The government continuously targets individuals in their private life, making their everyday lives complicated. Many Christian homes were targeted for raids which resulted in arrests and the confiscation of Christian materials. 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 ruling party can search any private residence without the need to get a court warrant. Underground Christians at prayer are the main targets. Private possession of basic materials for a Christian life (e.g. the Bible, Bible dictionary, books by Christian scholars, CDs of Christian sermons, T-shirts with biblical quotes) are considered treason by the ruling party and will lead to arbitrary

detention for an indefinite period without the need to get any court decision to that effect.

### **Family life:**

For Christians, family life is under threat in Eritrea. Due to government arrests, imprisonment and abductions, Christian families disintegrate. Some family members are forced to flee their country often leaving vulnerable family members at home. Due to *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 controlled by the government. 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 detained 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:**

The government is known to enlist the help of the community to spy on all Christian activities in their locality. This can give rise to strange alliances: e.g. Muslims monitoring Evangelical activities on behalf of the government - especially any outreach to Muslims in their communities. To operate businesses, Christians are required to produce a certificate of military service. Christians cannot get access to higher education if they are not enlisted to serve in the army. Because of the communal way of life practiced in this part of the world, it is unthinkable for the day-to-day life of a Christian not to be affected because of his religious beliefs. Fearing that they will persuade their children to become Christians too, the majority of Eritrean families will not allow their children to play with the children of converts. Such marginalization goes even to the extent of family to family relationships. The level of threat and obstruction is higher in rural areas where the level of tolerance and acceptance is very low compared to the urban areas. In most cases, converts in rural areas will not disclose their religious beliefs for fear of discrimination. It should be noted here that in some instances the level of threat against converts goes to the extent of forcing the converts to either renounce their new faith or leave the community once and for all. There have also been instances where converts have been denied access to basic needs like health care, drinking water, schools for their children because of their new faith.

### **National life:**

Eritrea is referred to as "The North Korea of Africa" and designated a "Country of Particular Concern" by the US State Department because the country has a policy that severely restricts freedom of religion. That is why the *national sphere* score is the highest. The country has made it clear that only recognized religious groups 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. 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 not wanting to enlist on religious grounds. Religious groups have thus faced enormous pressure and violence for refusing to take part in or for quitting national service.

The pressure mentioned above goes hand in hand with the refusal by the state to recognize religious groups other than the four officially registered groups. It is worth noting that Compliance status was given to those groups that applied for registration – leading to some benefits initially (at least in 1997 when the government ordered them to register). 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 concentration camps located in remote corners of the country. After release from such unjust detention, the individual will be ordered to denounce his religion and also report to the local police on a weekly or monthly basis. Failure to report will lead to further detention.

#### **Church life:**

Religious groups in Eritrea must by law either register or cease operating. However, getting a registration permit is virtually impossible. Raids on underground Christian meetings are common and the government has a strong intelligence machinery. Christians from churches not recognized by the government 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. 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 documents/materials without prior approval by the Office of Religious Affairs. 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.

#### **Violence:**

Hundreds of Christians are still in prisons. These Christians are being held by the government in miserable conditions, some in shipping containers in scorching temperatures. Thousands of Christians have been arrested and imprisoned over the years, some of whom still have been in prison for over a decade. See the Short & Simple Persecution Profile section for a summary of statistics and further details.

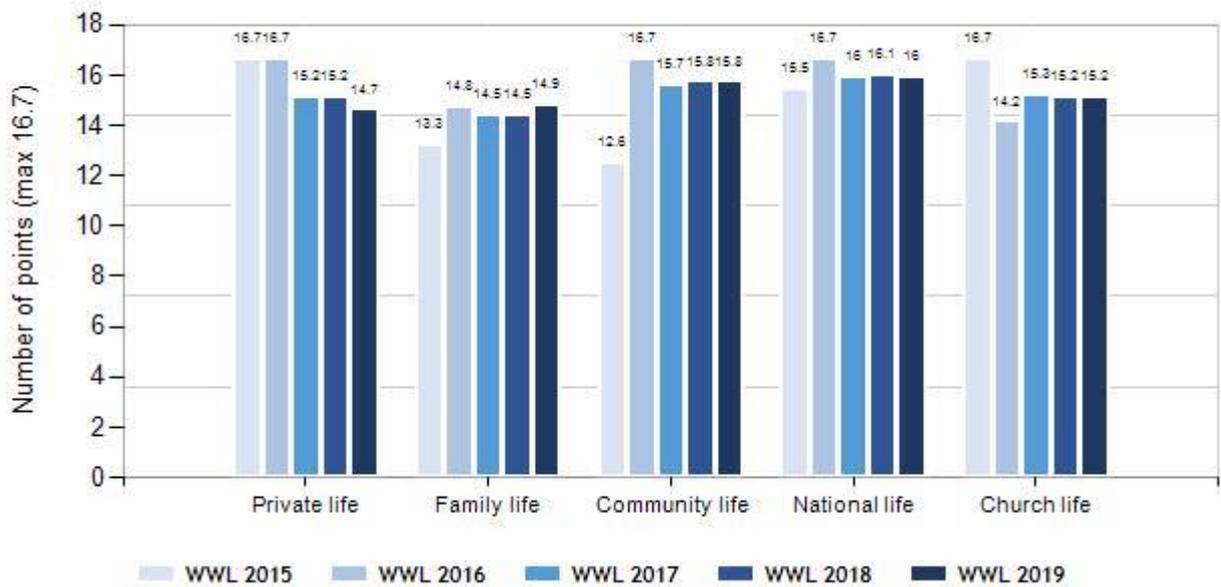
### 5 Year trends

The three charts below show the situation for Christians in Christians over the last five reporting periods. Chart 1 clearly shows that the suffering of Christians in all *spheres of life* has been extreme, although the maximum levels reached in WWL 2016 have since levelled off at a lower extreme score. The *national sphere* of life has consistently scored 16.0 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 *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). In Chart 2 it can be seen that the average pressure has consistently been at extreme and has now levelled off to around the 15.3/15.4 mark. 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.

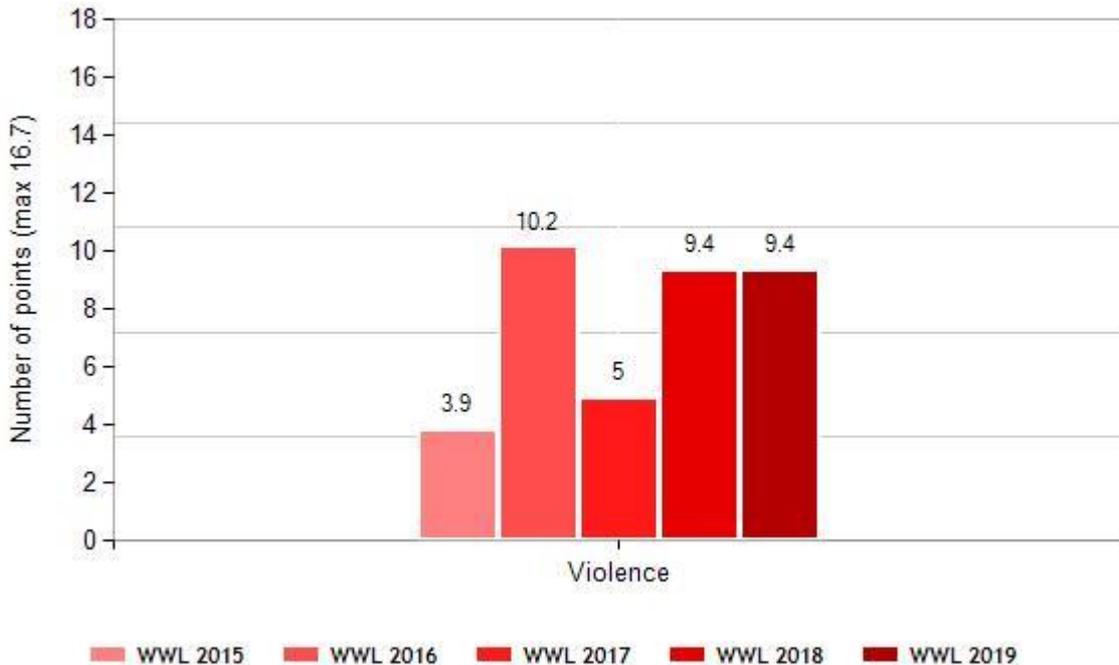
Chart 3, depicting the violence scores over the last five reporting periods, shows a varied picture. One of the main reasons why the score for violence against Christians changes is basically due to the varying number of Christians killed or churches destroyed/closed. Violence peaked in WWL 2016 where it scored 10.2. Only in WWL 2018 and WWL 2019 did the score remain at the same level (9.4 points).

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Eritrea (Spheres of life)



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Eritrea	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	15.3
2018	15.4
2017	15.3
2016	15.8
2015	14.9

## WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Eritrea (Violence)



### Gender specific persecution

**Female:** Female Christians face enormous challenges. Cross-denominational converts from the EOC as well as Christians from a Muslim background face forced marriage and forced renunciation of their new faith. Women are also subjected to obligatory military training and national service; however, men are more impacted by this.

**Male:** Male Christians in the country are mainly victims of the system of [obligatory military conscription](#). 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. This is on the assumption that there is no need to force Eritrean to join the army as one the main reasons that the government was using to force people to join the army, the nemesis Ethiopia, has become a friend of the country.

### 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 2017, Muslim teachers were arrested for running schools.

## Future outlook

### The political outlook:

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 its harsh rule on the people. Isolated and condemned by the international community, Eritrea has also suffered sanctions by the UN (listed after the country signed a peace treaty with Ethiopia). The economy of the country has crashed. 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.

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 reestablishing a strong relationship with Western countries. The visit of Asmera by a senior US Diplomat is a testament to that effort. More importantly, the country has resumed a relationship with Ethiopia.

### The outlook for Christians:

Christians, especially those the government considers '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 will doubtless continue persecuting converts and Evangelicals/ Pentecostals.

### 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 2019: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: Transparency International  
[https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption\\_perceptions\\_index\\_2017](https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2017)
- Context: This report  
[https://gallery.mailchimp.com/5cb8824c726d51483ba41891e/files/Predator\\_of\\_press\\_freedom.02.pdf](https://gallery.mailchimp.com/5cb8824c726d51483ba41891e/files/Predator_of_press_freedom.02.pdf)

- Context: Country of Particular Concern  
<https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/01/276843.htm>
- Context: press release  
<https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/01/276843.htm>
- Context: referred to the ICC  
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20779&LangID=E>
- 5 Year trends: A UN commission of Inquiry in 2016  
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=20067&LangID=E>
- Gender specific persecution: obligatory military conscription  
<https://www.economist.com/blogs/baobab/2014/03/national-service-eritrea%20>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: died in prison  
<https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/04/30/news/3941/article.htm>

## Additional Reports and Articles

### WWR in-depth reports

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

### Open Doors article(s) from the region

A selection of articles is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

### World Watch Monitor news articles

Use the country search function at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

### Recent country developments

Use the country search function at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/> (password: freedom).