



ERITREA

In a turbulent corner of Africa sits one of the most repressive countries in the world – Eritrea. Located in the Horn of Africa on the Red Sea, Eritrea, with its small population of roughly 3.8 million inhabitants, is one of the poorest countries in the world. Controlled by the dictator Isaias Afwerki since 1993, there are no political freedoms, free elections, independent judiciary, or free press. And religious freedom for all Eritreans is repressed, which impacts the majority Eritrean Orthodox Church but also smaller protestant communities and religious minorities. For good reason, Eritrea is often called the “North Korea of Africa” because of its intense authoritarian government and abuses towards religion.



Though Eritrea’s 1997 constitution guarantees civil rights and protects religious freedom, the government has never implemented the constitution, allowing Afwerki to govern with an iron fist. His regime only recognizes four registered religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea, and Sunni Islam. If not worshipping with one of these “official” faith groups, individuals risk arrest and the closing of their churches—even forcing individuals to renounce their faith as a condition of release.

Through a 1995 proclamation on religion in the country, the government exerts full control over religious activities in the country. Since the country’s registration requirement came into existence in 2002, no religious group has passed the registration process, thus leaving all independent religious practice as illegal and individuals subject to arrest. Unregistered religious groups face restrictions in constructing places of worship, teaching their beliefs to others, proselytizing, and gathering for worship.

Even members of the four recognized religious groups face restrictions and government backlash for practicing their faith, including charges of blasphemy or apostasy. For instance, the patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios, was deposed and placed under house arrest in 2006 for his refusal to endorse oppressive government policies, where he remained until his death 16 years later. In its most recent World Watch List, Open Doors notes how the government monitors recognized Christian churches, especially those who convert from Islam. Open Doors estimates that well over 1,000 Eritrean Christians remain imprisoned without official charges, enduring “shocking” and “abysmal” conditions— some for nearly two decades. Some face torture and death, and some of these “prisons” are actually shipping containers.

Given its location across the Red Sea from Yemen and Saudi Arabia, Sunni Muslims make up nearly 50% of the population. While the law prohibits religiously motivated discrimination, the government bans all non-Sunni practices of Islam.

Jehovah’s Witnesses, constituting less than 5% of the total population, have faced particularly harsh treatment dating back to the early 1990s for their refusal to vote in a referendum after Eritrea’s secession from neighboring Ethiopia following 30 years of war. Because of this, the government stripped members of their citizenship in 1994 and detained many without due process, restricting visitation rights as well as access to adequate food and water, even forcing solitary confinement or other inhumane conditions.



Other small, unregistered groups (including Seventh-Day Adventists, Baha'is, and members of the Church of Christ) regularly face persecution and are forced to gather, worship, and pray in secret. Only one Jewish individual is known to remain in the country.

Because of its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, the U.S. Department of State has designated Eritrea a "Country of Particular Concern" every year since 2004.

MAY SCRIPTURES

Amos 5:24 (NIV)

24 But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Proverbs 18:10 (NIV)

10 The name of the Lord is a fortified tower;
the righteous run to it and are safe.

PRAYER

Lord, we honor and glorify your name because you are worthy. Even in heartache and suffering, you remain worthy of our praise. Today, Lord, we come before you to pray for our Eritrean brothers and sisters in Christ who face discrimination, violence, and imprisonment for their faith. Specifically, we pray for those bound within four small walls and terrible prison conditions, asking that your Holy Spirit would continue to fill their hearts with faith and hope and that your supernatural strength would fill their bodies with life even when food and water are scarce. Keep them free from sickness and disease as they wait for their release. Set these prisoners free in Jesus' name.

And Lord we also come before you today to pray for Eritrean Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, and others who similarly face violence and fear for their beliefs, unable to practice their faith in freedom. Change the hearts of the authorities who persecute them, so the situation across the country would begin to change. We know that with you nothing is impossible, nothing is too large a challenge or ask. We know that you, Lord, care for each and every Eritrean man, woman, and child, and that you want them to live in freedom and peace.

And as your children, we hate violence, pain, and suffering and thus ask that you would continue to remind our hearts of those around the world who suffer for their faith, who are held captive, that we would not forget them. Whether or not they know you personally, they are your creation and created in your image; we will love them. As your children, fill us with continued empathy and compassion for the nation of Eritrea that we would see the prisoners set free, those praying in fear unburdened, the hungry fed, and the worshippers uplifted with hope.

In Jesus name, we pray, Amen.

