

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Eritrea remained extremely poor. The government continued to systematically persecute individuals based on their religious beliefs. The government has registered and officially recognizes only four religious groups: Sunni Islam, the Tewahedo Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and evangelical Lutheran churches. It did not register any new religious organizations during the year. Without formal registration, the government can prohibit religious communities from building or owning houses of worship or engaging in religious practices such as praying in groups. During the year, members of officially recognized religions also faced obstacles and government punishment for practicing their religion, including stripping of citizenship. The government continued to use its diplomatic missions to harass Eritreans living in other countries who criticize its human rights abuses, including restrictions on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

In 2025, the Eritrean government incarcerated members of religious communities under egregious conditions in facilities across the country, including police stations, civilian and military prisons, and undisclosed structures. FoRB detainees in Eritrea endure particularly severe mistreatment, including sexual violence and physical abuse such as electrocution, exposure, waterboarding, hanging, noise torture, and denial of medical treatment, any of which can result in death. Government officials also coerced detainees to renounce their religious beliefs and banned praying aloud, singing, preaching, and possessing religious books. The government utilizes many detainment facilities that are severely dilapidated concrete structures, while others are metal cargo shipping containers that might house hundreds of detainees. Officials also hold detainees in simple holes in the ground, subjecting them to harsh weather conditions. The government is detaining approximately 10,000 prisoners of conscience and detainees of all types in over 300 facilities around the country.

In January, authorities detained 44 Christians including 27 teenagers from a private service at a home in Asmara. In May

2025, the government had reportedly picked up, interrogated, and released 245 Christians and was detaining 100 others long-term. Another 1,000 Christians had fled abroad to avoid detention. Government authorities targeted specific communities, including Baptists, Pentecostals, and evangelical Christians, for persecution and arrest. As in prior years, the government encouraged community surveillance of nontraditional Protestant Christians. Authorities sometimes release detainees on a short-term basis and apprehend them again subsequently if they do not renounce their faith and regularly report to authorities. The month of May marked the 21st anniversary of the arrests of Pastors Kiflu Gebremeskel and Haile Naizghe, both associated with the banned Full Gospel Church of Eritrea and whom the government is still imprisoning. September 27 marked the one-year anniversary of the two still-held elderly Jehovah's Witnesses, [Letebrhan Tesfay](#) and [Berekti Habte](#), who were both attending a private religious service. In October, Jehovah's Witnesses marked the 31st anniversary of the Eritrean president's 1994 revocation of Jehovah's Witnesses' citizenship, which resulted in the group's subsequent ban and mass detention for refusing on religious grounds to participate in the country's independence referendum. The government detains Jehovah's Witnesses in both Mai Serwa and Adi Abeto prison facilities but rarely formally charges or sentences them. In 2025, 64 Jehovah's Witnesses remained detained. Government officials declined invitations to meet with Jehovah's Witness representatives to discuss the status of detainees from that community.

The government has detained Rev. [Gebremedhin Gebregergis](#) of the Eritrean Orthodox Church since 2004. Gebregergis is currently incommunicado at the Wengel Mermera Central Criminal Investigation Interrogation Center. Wengel Mermera is a dungeon-like maximum security prison in Asmara that houses many prominent FoRB prisoners, including church leaders, along with political dissidents.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Eritrea as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Eritrean government officials, including those in the police, judiciary, and correctional system, who are responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities; and
- Engage with the Eritrean government directly and through multilateral partners to end religious persecution of unregistered religious communities with the return of a nonmilitary, national service option for Jehovah's Witnesses as a path toward gaining full citizenship; and release the remaining detainees held for their religious activities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Highlight religious freedom issues in Eritrea, with an emphasis on FoRB detainees and prisoners, through legislation, hearings, briefings, delegations, and other activities.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Spotlight Podcast:** [A Former Prisoner's Story and the Path to Religious Freedom in Eritrea](#)
- **USCIRF Event:** [Standing with the Silenced – Leveraging the Frank Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

## Background

Eritrea has an estimated population of 6.3 million people. Approximately 52 percent of the population identify as Sunni Muslim and 39 percent as Tewahedo Eritrean Orthodox, five percent identify as Roman Catholic, two percent as Protestant, and one percent as Shi'a Muslim. The government allows the only known Jew in the country to maintain a historic synagogue and cemetery near Asmara.

In 2002, Eritrea [acceded](#) to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), obligating it to use policies and practices that are in compliance with the Covenant. The Eritrean constitution nominally protects citizens' rights to FoRB, and laws in Eritrea ostensibly prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief as well as the freedom to practice any religion and to change one's religion. The government, however, regularly violates these rights in practice, favoring certain denominations when applying registration requirements and obstructing the religious practices of minority groups.

Proclamation No. 73 of 1995 grants the government authority to completely regulate religious activities and institutions in the country by separating political and faith-based affairs. The law also strictly forbids any foreign financial support for churches, permitting only local donations. Finally, the law formalized the establishment of the Office of Religious Affairs, which itself monitors religious groups and requires them to register with the government or cease activities.

## Conscientious Objection

The ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice Party engages in coercion, imprisonment, torture, and killing as part of a strategy to divide and control different religious groups. The government justifies its detainment of members of Jehovah's Witnesses because Witnesses steadfastly refuse to serve in the military on the basis of their religion. As a result, the government generally holds them indefinitely, imposing egregiously long periods of incarceration on community members. Eritreans between the ages of 18 and 50 are subject to forced conscription and must serve in the military for 18 months, and there is no national service alternative to military duty. Government officers apprehend both male and female objectors and take them to military camps where they remain indefinitely to endure various punishments. Authorities, however, grant some exemptions to service to pregnant women and people with a physical disability. Jehovah's Witness school students also face detainment if they decline to participate in patriotic ceremonies such as national anthems or refuse to engage in any form of political participation.

In February, as a result of the ongoing political confrontation with neighboring Ethiopia regarding the Tigray region and access to the Red Sea, the president directed officials to mobilize potential conscripts under the age of 60 for readiness to serve in military units, prohibiting any individuals under 50 years of age from leaving the country. The government also persecutes family members of those who seek to evade military service by enforcing severe penalties on them. In March, at the behest of the Eritrean government, the Egyptian government forcibly returned 150 Eritrean refugees and migrants to Eritrea and requested that deportation processes continue, likely affecting many conscientious objectors.

## Multilateral Observations of Religious Freedom Violations in Eritrea

In June, the Eritrean government announced it was seeking to end the United Nations (UN) annual mandate to investigate alleged abuses of human rights and religious freedom in the country. The UN special rapporteur [reported](#) in June that the government continues to "systematically violate civil and political rights and deny due process to thousands of Eritreans who remain in arbitrary detention or subjected to enforced disappearance" and that "freedom of religion is severely suppressed." The special rapporteur expressed particular concerns over the prolonged arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance of religious leaders and laity as well as the government's interference in religious institutions, including schools, adding that the regime sees such entities as sources of political dissent. In July, the UN Human Rights Council [rejected](#) Eritrea's attempt to end the mandate and instead renewed the mandate for another year.

## Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government maintains diplomatic relations with the Eritrean government and operates an embassy in the capital, Asmara. The two governments, however, have not exchanged ambassadors since 2010. At the same time, the Eritrean economy remains [closed](#) to U.S. investment and trade due to existing sanctions, the lack of an Eritrean commercial code, and strict government control of all imports and exports. In June, the U.S. government [listed](#) Eritrea as "restricted," thereby denying entry of Eritrean nationals into the United States as a way to advance U.S. foreign policy, national security, and counterterrorism objectives.

The U.S. Department of State last [redesignated](#) Eritrea as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.