

Eritrea

Ethnicity in Eritrea

Group selection

Ethnic identities in Eritrea encompass different dimensions: geographic (highlanders vs low-landers), religious (Christians vs Muslims) and linguistic (Tigrinya, Tigre, Saho, Nara, Kunama, Hidareb, Bilen, Afar, and Arabic) (¹⁸⁶⁵, 138-9). However, only the two latter dimensions matter when assessing the political salience of these identities. Hence, we code the **Christians** and the Muslim groups of Afar, Saho, Kunama and “Other Muslims” during different periods of independent Eritrea.

¹⁸⁶⁵ [Bereketeab, 2002]

The U.S. State Department’s International Religious Freedom Report of 2009 for Eritrea states that Muslims make up 50% of the population. Subtracting the 2% with indigenous beliefs (¹⁸⁶⁶; ¹⁸⁶⁷) from the remaining 50% gives an estimated 48% of Christians. The Afar group makes up 5% of the Muslim population, leaving the category “Other Muslims” with 45%.

¹⁸⁶⁶ [U.S. State Department, 2012]

¹⁸⁶⁷ [U.S. State Department, 2009]

Power relations

Following Italian colonial control until 1941 and ten years of British administrative control, Eritrea was annexed by the Ethiopian federation in 1952. Although initial political arrangements under the auspices of the UN envisioned significant autonomy for the region, these provisions were gradually restricted and finally abolished by the Ethiopians in 1962. In reaction to the gradual loss of autonomy, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) launched a military struggle for independence in 1958, recruiting primarily Muslims among ethnic Tigre Eritreans. By the mid-1960s, marginalization by the Ethiopian government led Christian Tigrinya highlanders to increasingly take part in the armed struggle. Yet, criticism against the perceived Muslim domination of the organization led to splits within the ELF and eventually to the founding of the Christian dominated Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) in the early 1970s (¹⁸⁶⁸, 2-3). After two decades of fighting, the EPLF finally captured the Eritrean capital of Asmara in 1991. Eritrea thereby became de facto independent, although this state of affairs was only recognized by the international community in 1993, after a UN referendum on independence (¹⁸⁶⁹, 5, ¹⁸⁷⁰). In line with common practice, Eritrea’s first coding period in EPR thus starts in 1993.

¹⁸⁶⁸ [International Crisis Group, 2010]

¹⁸⁶⁹ [International Crisis Group, 2010]

¹⁸⁷⁰ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2003-2018]

The emerging political parties before Eritrea’s annexation to

Ethiopia followed clear ethno-religious lines, namely of Christians and Muslims (¹⁸⁷¹; ¹⁸⁷²: 666). This continued during the subsequent independence struggle (¹⁸⁷³: 21-22; ¹⁸⁷⁴, 253-4), mirrored in the split within the ELF, when Christian elements founded the EPLF as a competing organization (¹⁸⁷⁵). The ELF was “heavily Muslim in membership and orientation” and promoted an “Arab Eritrea” (¹⁸⁷⁶). Significantly, the ELF not only struggled for a separate Eritrean state but also against domination of Muslims by Christians (¹⁸⁷⁷, 238). As a consequence, the Ethiopian government was able to recruit Christian Eritreans to fight against the ELF (¹⁸⁷⁸, 23). After the founding of the EPLF, the two organizations even fought sort of a “civil war” against each other ending with the elimination of the ELF. The EPLF came to dominate the struggle from the early 1980s and later formed the government of the independent state of Eritrea.

¹⁸⁷¹ [Ellingson, 1977]

¹⁸⁷² [Iyob, 1997]

¹⁸⁷³ [Pool, 1998]

¹⁸⁷⁴ [Horowitz, 1985]

¹⁸⁷⁵ [Ofcansky, 2004]

¹⁸⁷⁶ [Clapham, 2001]

¹⁸⁷⁷ [Morrison, 1972]

¹⁸⁷⁸ [Pool, 1998]

1993-1999

Since independence, the former secretary-general of the EPLF, Isaias Afewerki, has ruled the country as president without ever having been confirmed in his office by a popular vote. He does not tolerate any opposition and is deeply suspicious of the international community (¹⁸⁷⁹, 1, 5). In 1994, the EPLF held its third and last organizational congress and changed its name to People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).

¹⁸⁷⁹ [International Crisis Group, 2010]

The ethno-religious division between Christians and Muslims latently continued to exist although the PFDJ consciously stimulated Eritrean nationalism and unity (¹⁸⁸⁰). Political associations based on ethnicity or religion are prohibited and administrative reorganization created new provinces intended to undermine ethno-regional (self-)identification of the population (¹⁸⁸¹; ¹⁸⁸²).

¹⁸⁸⁰ [Iyob, 1997]

¹⁸⁸¹ [Tronvoll, 1998]

¹⁸⁸² [Jacquin-Berdal, 2002]

The EIJM rebel organization which also originated in the split between Muslims and Christians during the independence struggle is an Islamist grouping (based outside of Eritrea) appealing to Eritrean Muslims and making clear ethno-religious claims. It condemns the regime in power (or its predecessor EPLF) as “Christian chauvinist” and aims to restore Islam “to its rightful place of honor in Eritrea” (¹⁸⁸³, 84) by establishing an Islamic state (¹⁸⁸⁴, 241). In light of the historical religious fault line, it is appropriate to see the division between Muslims and Christians as the main ethnic rift in independent Eritrea.

¹⁸⁸³ [Medhanie, 1994]

¹⁸⁸⁴ [Eikenberg, 1998]

Within the former EPLF although Christian-dominated Muslims formed an important part of both the leadership and the ordinary fighters and the organization was essentially multi-ethnic (¹⁸⁸⁵, 24, 28, 34; ¹⁸⁸⁶, 12). Equally, the successor organization PFDJ and, more importantly, the cabinet seem to have always included both Muslims and Christians (see information about cabinet members in the “Afrika Jahrbücher” 1993-2003 (¹⁸⁸⁷; section on Eritrea). Eritrea’s very powerful president, Isaias Afewerki, is Christian (Eritrean Orthodox). Therefore, the Christians are coded as “senior

¹⁸⁸⁵ [Pool, 1998]

¹⁸⁸⁶ [Turton, 2006]

¹⁸⁸⁷ [Eikenberg, 1998]

partner” and the Muslims as “junior partner” for the period between 1993 and 1999.

The Muslim nomadic Afar group pursued their own ethno-nationalist agenda through representative organizations, namely the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Union Front (ARDUF, with its military wing Ugugumo) and the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization. While ARDUF in general was more active in Ethiopia, both groups claimed to represent Eritrean Afars (1888; 1889, 2010-2014). This led to their political discrimination by the Eritrean state (1890). Therefore, the Afar are coded as “discriminated.”

¹⁸⁸⁸ [Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2014]

¹⁸⁸⁹ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2003-2018]

¹⁸⁹⁰ [Minorities at Risk Project, 2009]

2000-2008

Afewerki continued to rule in an authoritarian way exercising strict, unlimited control over the political, social and economic sphere and allowing hardly any civil liberties (1891). No evidence suggests a significant change with regards to the ethno-religious power distribution between Christians and Muslims. The U.S. State Department’s Human Rights Reports (1892, 2008, 2009) state that some senior government and party officials were members of the Tigre group - which is a Muslim group. Islam remained one of the four legally allowed religious communities in Eritrea, together with Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism and the Eritrean Evangelical Church and Shari’a law could be applied to family cases when both involved parties were Muslim.

¹⁸⁹¹ [Freedom House, 1999-2017]

¹⁸⁹² [U.S. State Department, 2011-2016]

There were reports on governmental and societal discrimination against the **Kunama** ethnic group since 2000 (1893; see also 1894). The Kunama - allegedly culturally distinct from most Eritrean citizens - have resisted integration into national society, are viewed with suspicion for having backed a rival group instead of the EPLF during the independence war, and are also seen now as opponents of the regime. The Kunama are mainly Muslim (1895) and make up 2% of Eritrea’s population according to the U.S. State Department’s Background Notes (1896). Thus, a new period is introduced in 2000 with the Kunama as a separate relevant group coded as “discriminated.” The category of “Other Muslims” is reduced to a relative population size of 43%.

¹⁸⁹³ [U.S. State Department, 2011-2016]

¹⁸⁹⁴ [Freedom House, 1999-2017]

¹⁸⁹⁵ [Joshua Project, 2014]

¹⁸⁹⁶ [U.S. State Department, 2012]

2009-2021

Reports on political, social and economic rights in Eritrea do not paint a positive picture for any group, as freedom of association is restricted and only certain branches of Christianity and Islam are permitted by the state. Corroborating previous assessments, the ruling PFDJ party continues to have both Muslim and Christian members (1897, 2016). The coding of the Christians as “senior partner” is justified as Christians (especially highlanders) are perceived being the majority holders of the executive power, while Tigre (Muslims) continue to hold a number of party and government positions (1898, 12-13; 1899, 2014; 1900, 2016: 4).

¹⁸⁹⁷ [U.S. State Department, 2011-2016]

¹⁸⁹⁸ [International Crisis Group, 2010]

¹⁸⁹⁹ [U.S. State Department, 2011-2016]

¹⁹⁰⁰ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2003-2018]

Opposition to the regime is not dealt with lightly. In January 2013, a alleged coup attempt carried out by prominent Muslim members of the party was answered with arrests or sacking of many of the PFDJ's top Muslim leaders, military officers and ministers, including Presidential Adviser Yemane Gebreab (¹⁹⁰¹, 2016: 2; ¹⁹⁰²). According to Al Jazeera, the mutineers were calling for constitutional change and the release of certain political prisoners (¹⁹⁰³). The event brings into question the “junior partner” status of Muslims, particularly considering the level of power President Afewerki holds (¹⁹⁰⁴). However, wikipedia searches revealed that Muslims still hold prominent positions in the cabinet, such as the foreign affairs minister, Osman Saleh Mohammed. Therefore, they remain “junior partner.”

According to various assessments, Kunama and Afar people continued to suffer from discrimination by the Eritrean state (¹⁹⁰⁵; ¹⁹⁰⁶). In addition, reports also suggest that ethnic **Saho** are targeted by state-led discrimination and are not represented in governmental structures under President Afewerki. 40 Saho elders (also referred as Saho Muslim scholars) were allegedly arbitrarily arrested in 2008 and remain in custody to this day, with no charge leveled against them (¹⁹⁰⁷; ¹⁹⁰⁸, 24). In addition, it appears that members of the Saho people were also the victims of a resettlement program, in which land belonging to ethnic Saho was confiscated and reallocated to highlanders. No financial compensation has been offered for the loss of land incurred by the Saho. Noteworthy, the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Eritrean Saho was formed in 2009 (¹⁹⁰⁹) and has waged a low-level insurgency since (¹⁹¹⁰). In lights of these events, the Saho are therefore coded as politically relevant from 2009 onwards, with a “discriminated” power status. Thus, from 2009 on, the category “Other Muslims” is listed with a reduced relative population size of 39%.

Although freedom of association is restricted in Eritrea and they have not met since 2008, all three liberation organizations are involved in the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA) - an opposition umbrella organisation which is based in Ethiopia (¹⁹¹¹). The fact that they are not allowed to meet regularly, and are based outside the country, supports reports that President Afewerki does not countenance organised opposition (¹⁹¹²). Overall, political discrimination of the three groups, combined with their exclusion from the cabinet, justifies their “discriminated” status. This assessment is confirmed by recent reports for the Kunama and Afar (¹⁹¹³) and indigenous groups in general, which further include the Saho (¹⁹¹⁴).

¹⁹⁰¹ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2003-2018]

¹⁹⁰² [Gettleman, 2013]

¹⁹⁰³ [Al Jazeera, 2013]

¹⁹⁰⁴ [CIA, 2007]

¹⁹⁰⁵ [U.S. State Department, 2011-2016]

¹⁹⁰⁶ [Freedom House, 1999-2017]

¹⁹⁰⁷ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2003-2018]

¹⁹⁰⁸ [Amnesty International, 2013]

¹⁹⁰⁹ [BBC Monitoring, 2012]

¹⁹¹⁰ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2003-2018]

¹⁹¹¹ [Norwegian Peace Building Resource Centre, 2015]

¹⁹¹² [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2003-2018]

¹⁹¹³ [U.S. State Department, 2019]

¹⁹¹⁴ [International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs]

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Political status of ethnic groups in Eritrea

From 1993 until 1999

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Christians	0.48	SENIOR PARTNER
Other Muslims	0.45	JUNIOR PARTNER
Afar	0.05	DISCRIMINATED

From 2000 until 2008

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Christians	0.48	SENIOR PARTNER
Other Muslims	0.43	JUNIOR PARTNER
Afar	0.05	DISCRIMINATED
Kunama	0.02	DISCRIMINATED

From 2009 until 2021

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Christians	0.48	SENIOR PARTNER
Other Muslims	0.39	JUNIOR PARTNER
Afar	0.05	DISCRIMINATED
Saho	0.04	DISCRIMINATED
Kunama	0.02	DISCRIMINATED

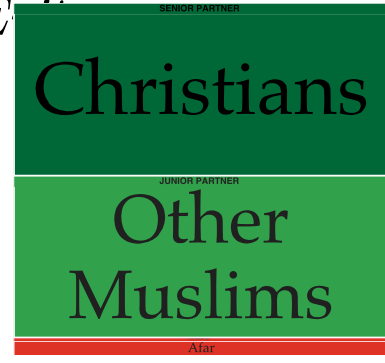


Figure 336: Political status of ethnic groups in Eritrea during 1993-1999.

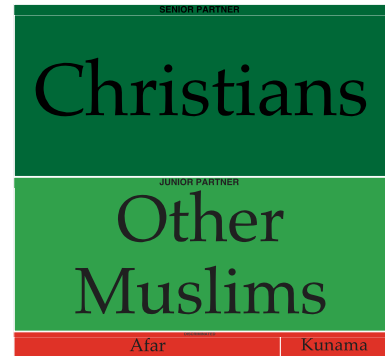


Figure 337: Political status of ethnic groups in Eritrea during 2000-2008.

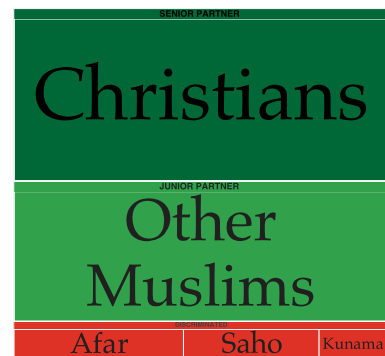


Figure 338: Political status of ethnic groups in Eritrea during 2009-2021.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Eritrea

From 1993 until 1999

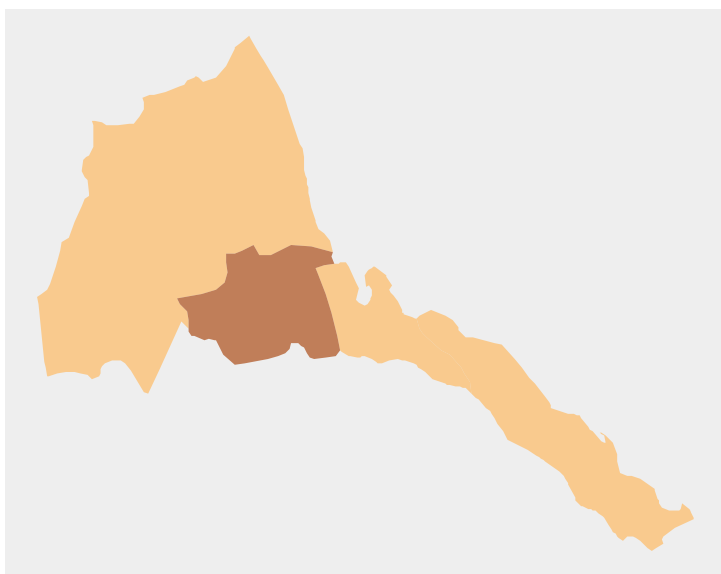


Figure 339: Map of ethnic groups in Eritrea during 1993-1999.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
Other Muslims	81 404	Aggregate
Afar	21 374	Regionally based
Christians	17 424	Regional & urban

Table 119: List of ethnic groups in Eritrea during 1993-1999.

From 2000 until 2008

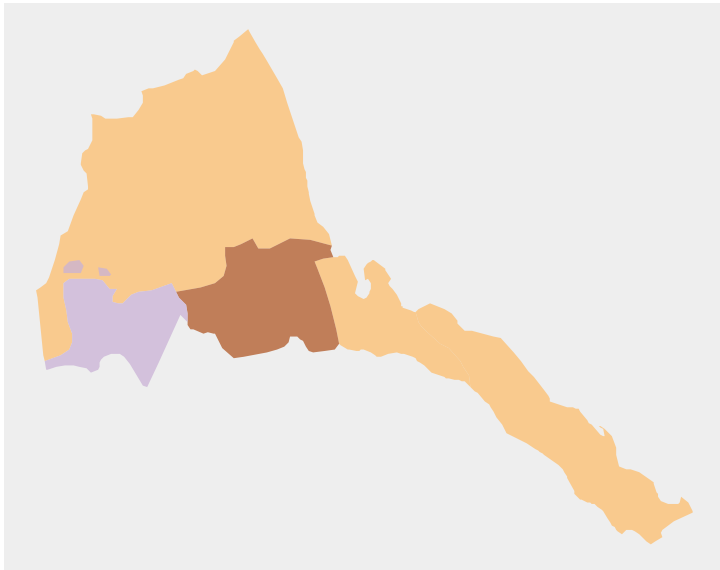


Figure 340: Map of ethnic groups in Eritrea during 2000-2008.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
Other Muslims	69 872	Regionally based
Afar	21 374	Regionally based
Christians	17 424	Regional & urban
Kunama	11 921	Regionally based

Table 120: List of ethnic groups in Eritrea during 2000-2008.

From 2009 until 2021

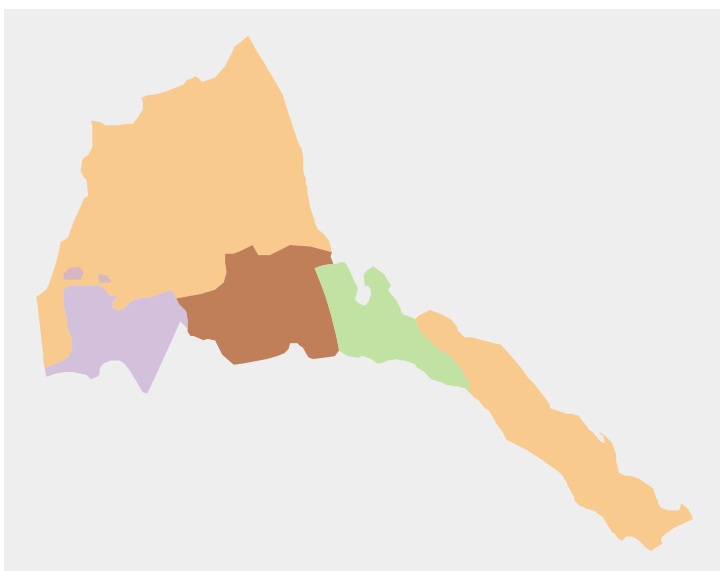


Figure 341: Map of ethnic groups in Eritrea during 2009-2021.

	Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■	Other Muslims	59 346	Regionally based
■	Afar	21 374	Regionally based
■	Christians	17 424	Regional & urban
■	Kunama	11 921	Regionally based
■	Saho	10 526	Regionally based

Table 121: List of ethnic groups in Eritrea during 2009-2021.

Conflicts in Eritrea

Starting on 1993-12-15

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Eritrea	EIJM - AS		1993-12-15			

Starting on 1998-05-05

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Eritrea	Government of Ethiopia		1998-05-05			

Starting on 2008-06-09

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Djibouti	Government of Eritrea		2008-06-09			