

Eritrea

Ethnicity in Eritrea

Group selection

Colonized first by Italy and then administered by the United Kingdom, following the Italian defeat in the Horn of Africa during the Second World War, Eritrea was annexed by Ethiopia in 1952 (¹⁵⁹⁴, 2). Although initial political arrangements under the auspices of the UN had envisioned a significant autonomy for Eritrea within Ethiopia, these provisions were gradually restricted and finally abolished in 1962 (¹⁵⁹⁵, 2). The military struggle for independence was launched in 1958 in reaction to the gradual loss of autonomy and was first spearheaded by the predominantly Muslim Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which recruited primarily among ethnic Tigre Eritreans (¹⁵⁹⁶, 2). However, the marginalization of Christian Eritreans by Ethiopia led Tigrinya highlanders to increasingly take part into the armed struggle, by the mid-1960s (¹⁵⁹⁷, 2). Yet, criticisms against the perceived domination of the ELF by Muslims led to splits within the ELF and to the founding of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front in the early 1970s (¹⁵⁹⁸, 2). After two decades of fighting, the EPLF finally managed to capture the Eritrean capital of Asmara in 1991, at about the same time as Addis Ababa fell to the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Front (¹⁵⁹⁹: 3). Since 1991 the country has been de facto independent, although this state of affairs was only recognized by the international community in 1993, after a UN referendum on independence (¹⁶⁰⁰, 5, ¹⁶⁰¹). In line with common practice, EPR regards the first year of Independence of Eritrea as 1993. Although the prospects of democratization had been perceived at the outset of independence as promising, the country has since become a harsh reclusive authoritarian state under the leadership of President Isaias Afewerki, who does not tolerate any opposition and is deeply suspicious of the international community. In addition, borders disputes with Ethiopia led to a brutal war between 1998 to 2000, which was lost by Eritrea. Recurrent tensions with Eritrea's neighbors have led to military clashes since 2000 (¹⁶⁰², executive summary, 1, 5).

Ethnic identities in Ethiopia may be divided along different dimensions: geographic (highlanders vs low-landers), religious (Christians vs Muslims) and linguistic (Tigrinya, Tigre, Saho, Nara, Kunama, Hidareb, Bilen, Afar, and Arabic) (¹⁶⁰³, 138-9). In line with the coding rules, only the two latter dimensions will be considered

¹⁵⁹⁴ [International Crisis Group, 2010]

¹⁵⁹⁵ [International Crisis Group, 2010]

¹⁵⁹⁶ [International Crisis Group, 2010]

¹⁵⁹⁷ [International Crisis Group, 2010]

¹⁵⁹⁸ [International Crisis Group, 2010]

¹⁶⁰³ [Bereketeab, 2002]

when assessing the political salience of these identities. Hence, we code the **Christians, Other Muslims, Afar, Saho, and Kunama**.

Population figures are obtained from the U.S. State Department Background Notes (Christians 50%, Muslims 48%). The State Department's own "International Religious Freedom Report 2009" for Eritrea states that Muslims make up 50% of the population. Subtracting the 2% with indigenous beliefs (¹⁶⁰⁴; ¹⁶⁰⁵) from the remaining 50% gives an estimated 48% of Christians. The Afars make up 5% of the country's population, according to the U.S. State Department Background Notes. That leaves the category "Other Muslims" with 45%.

¹⁶⁰⁴ [U.S. State Department, 2012]

¹⁶⁰⁵ [U.S. State Department, 2009]

Power relations

1993-1999

Although the academic literature about Eritrea frequently refers to Eritrea's ethnic divisions (see e.g. ¹⁶⁰⁶, 658, 672; also ¹⁶⁰⁷), the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (EPDJ) is consciously trying to stimulate Eritrean nationalism and unity (¹⁶⁰⁸: 648, 655, 663, 669; ¹⁶⁰⁹, 464, 482; ¹⁶¹⁰, 139) following closely its direct predecessor, the rebel organization EPLF, in this regard. Ethnically/religiously based political associations are forbidden, and the administrative reorganization created new provinces which were intended to undermine the latent ethno-regional (self-)identification of the population (¹⁶¹¹, 463-4; ¹⁶¹², 139).

¹⁶⁰⁶ [Iyob, 1997]

¹⁶⁰⁷ [Bereketab, 2002]

¹⁶⁰⁸ [Iyob, 1997]

¹⁶⁰⁹ [Tronvoll, 1998]

¹⁶¹⁰ [Jacquin-Berdal, 2002]

The emerging political parties before Eritrea's annexation to Ethiopia, however, did exhibit a clear ethnic division of the country, namely between **Christians** and **Muslims** (¹⁶¹³; ¹⁶¹⁴: 666). Also during the independence struggle, there was a politically relevant ethnic division between Christians and Muslims (¹⁶¹⁵: 8; ¹⁶¹⁶: 21-22; ¹⁶¹⁷, 253-4) - mirrored in the split within the first Eritrean Liberation Army, the ELF, when Christian elements founded a second, competing organization with predominantly Christian leadership, the EPLF (¹⁶¹⁸, 141; ¹⁶¹⁹, 8). The ELF had been "heavily Muslim in membership and orientation" and promoted an "Arab Eritrea" (¹⁶²⁰, 8; see also ¹⁶²¹, 23). Significantly, ELF claims were not only for a separate Eritrean state but also against domination of Muslims by Christians (¹⁶²², 238), and apparently there was a massacre of Christian recruits by an ELF security commander (¹⁶²³, 24). As a consequence, the Ethiopian government was able to recruit Christian Eritreans to fight against the ELF (¹⁶²⁴, 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).

¹⁶¹³ [Ellingson, 1977]

¹⁶¹⁴ [Iyob, 1997]

¹⁶¹⁵ [Clapham, 2001]

¹⁶¹⁶ [Pool, 1998]

¹⁶¹⁷ [Horowitz, 1985]

Today, this ethno-religious division seems to be latently existing and possibly resurfacing (¹⁶²⁵, 666; ¹⁶²⁶, 474-5). But it is hard to assess of how much salience it really is in the national political space of today's Eritrea. There seems to be no national, internally operating (opposition) organization claiming to represent Muslims, Christians

¹⁶²⁵ [Iyob, 1997]

¹⁶²⁶ [Tronvoll, 1998]

or any other ethnic group. However, the EIJM rebel organization – which also originated in the split between Muslims and Christians during the independence struggle (¹⁶²⁷, 78-81) – 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” (¹⁶²⁸, 83-4) and states as its goals the restoring of Islam “to its rightful place of honor in Eritrea” (¹⁶²⁹, 84) and the establishment of an Islamic state (¹⁶³⁰, 241). Thus, based on this conflict and in the light of the historical religious rift, it is appropriate to see as the main ethnic rift in independent Eritrea the religious division between Muslims and Christians.

¹⁶²⁷ [Medhanie, 1994]

¹⁶²⁸ [Medhanie, 1994]

¹⁶²⁹ [Medhanie, 1994]

A special note concerns the (Muslim) nomadic **Afar** group: The Afar have pursued their own ethno-nationalist agenda through their representative organizations, the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Union Front (ARDUF, with its military wing Ugugumo) and the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization which have made calls for Afar secession/autonomy. While ARDFUF has generally been more active in Ethiopia as opposed to the RSADFO, both groups have generally claimed to represent Eritrean Afars (¹⁶³¹; ¹⁶³², 2010-2014). This has led to their political discrimination by the Eritrean state (¹⁶³³). Therefore, 3 politically relevant ethnic groups are listed: Christians, Afar, and Other Muslims.

¹⁶³¹ [Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2014]

¹⁶³² [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2003-2018]

¹⁶³³ [Minorities at Risk Project, 2009]

Within the former EPLF – although rather Christian-dominated – Muslims had formed an important part of both the leadership and the ordinary fighters and the organization was essentially multi-ethnic (¹⁶³⁴, 24, 28, 34; ¹⁶³⁵, 12). Equally, its direct successor 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 (¹⁶³⁶; section on Eritrea). Eritrea’s very powerful president, Isaias Afewerki, is Christian (Eritrean Orthodox). Therefore, the Christians are coded as “senior partner” and the Other Muslims as “junior partner” for the period between 1993 and 1999. The Afars are coded as discriminated.

¹⁶³⁴ [Pool, 1998]

¹⁶³⁵ [Turton, 2006]

¹⁶³⁶ [Eikenberg, 1998]

2000-2008

Afewerki continued to rule in an authoritarian way with the 1997 Constitution still not activated. The government exercised strict, unlimited control over the political, social and economic sphere allowing almost no civil liberties (¹⁶³⁷).

¹⁶³⁷ [Freedom House, 1999-2017]

Regarding the ethno-religious power distribution, there is no evidence of any significant change between Christians and Muslims. The U.S. State Department’s Human Rights Reports (¹⁶³⁸, 2008, 2009) state that some senior government and party officials are members of the Tigre group - which is a Muslim group. The upholding of Islam can also be seen in the fact that Shari’a law can be applied to family cases in Eritrea when both involved parties are Muslims. (Islam is also one of the four legally allowed religious communities in

¹⁶³⁸ [U.S. State Department, 2011-2016]

Eritrea, together with Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism and the Eritrean Evangelical Church.)

The U.S. State Department's HR Reports report government and societal discrimination against the **Kunama** group since 2000 (¹⁶³⁹; see also ¹⁶⁴⁰). 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. Thus, a new period is introduced from 2000 on with another politically relevant ethnic group, the Kunama, coded as "discriminated". The Kunama are mainly Moslems (¹⁶⁴¹), and according to the U.S. State Department's Background Notes they make up 2% of Eritrea's population (¹⁶⁴²). Thus, from 2000 on, the category "Other Muslims" is listed with a relative population size of 43%.

¹⁶³⁹ [U.S. State Department, 2011-2016]

¹⁶⁴⁰ [Freedom House, 1999-2017]

¹⁶⁴¹ [Joshua Project, 2014]

¹⁶⁴² [U.S. State Department, 2012]

2009-2017

According to various assessments, Kunama and Afar people continue to suffer from discrimination by the Eritrean state (¹⁶⁴³; ¹⁶⁴⁴). In addition, reports also suggest that ethnic **Saho** are also target of state-led discrimination. 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 (¹⁶⁴⁵; ¹⁶⁴⁶, 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 (¹⁶⁴⁷, 2014: 17). Although not speaking specifically for their political discrimination, it is of note that the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Eritrean Saho was formed in 2009 (¹⁶⁴⁸) and has waged a low-level insurgency since (¹⁶⁴⁹, 2014: 6). 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 relative population size of 39%.

¹⁶⁴³ [U.S. State Department, 2011-2016]

¹⁶⁴⁴ [Freedom House, 1999-2017]

¹⁶⁴⁵ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2003-2018]

¹⁶⁴⁶ [Amnesty International, 2013]

¹⁶⁴⁷ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2003-2018]

Regarding the salience of Christian and Muslim identities, there is no indication suggesting either a strengthening or a reducing of the relevance of these identities for the period. In addition, the coding of the Christians as Senior Partners appears to be justified as Christians (especially highlanders) are perceived as holding a majority of the executive power, while Tigre (Muslims) continue to hold a number of party and government positions (¹⁶⁵⁰, 12-13; ¹⁶⁵¹, 2014).

¹⁶⁵⁰ [International Crisis Group, 2010]

¹⁶⁵¹ [U.S. State Department, 2011-2016]

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 from the state – such as the Eritrean Orthodox Church of which the President is part. However, corroborating previous assessments, the ruling PFDJ party, which is the only party allowed

to exist, encapsulates both Muslim and Christian members (¹⁶⁵², 2016). That the President is a Christian suggests that Christians are “senior partners”, supported further as he is reported to have a monopoly of control over decision making institutions (legislature, executive and judiciary) (¹⁶⁵³, 2016: 4). Opposition to the regime is not dealt with lightly. In January 2013, a failed coup allegedly 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 (¹⁶⁵⁴, 2016: 2; ¹⁶⁵⁵). According to Al Jazeera, the mutineers were calling for constitutional change and the release of certain political prisoners (¹⁶⁵⁶). It seems that such an event brings into question the “junior partner” status of Muslims, particularly considering the level of power the president has (¹⁶⁵⁷). However, wikipedia searches show that Muslims do still hold prominent positions in the cabinet, such as the foreign affairs minister, Osman Saleh Mohammed. Overall, there is no solid evidence that would denote Muslims as discriminated or excluded following this mutiny, therefore they remain “junior partner”.

The political inclusion of ethnic minority groups Afar, Kunama and Saho has not improved in this time period. Reports of unjust detainment and political discrimination of the Kunama and Afar groups are verified by Freedom House (¹⁶⁵⁸, 2016) and U.S State Department (¹⁶⁵⁹, 2016). The Saho group remain politically significant, and are not represented in governmental structures under President Aferwerki (¹⁶⁶⁰, 2016). 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 (¹⁶⁶¹). The fact that they are not allowed to meet regularly, and are based out of the country, supports reports that President Aferwerki does not countenance organised opposition (¹⁶⁶², 2016). Overall, political discrimination of the three groups, combined with their exclusion from the cabinet, justifies their “discriminated” status.

¹⁶⁵² [U.S. State Department, 2011-2016]

¹⁶⁵³ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2003-2018]

¹⁶⁵⁴ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2003-2018]

¹⁶⁵⁵ [Gettleman, 2013]

¹⁶⁵⁶ [Al Jazeera, 2013]

¹⁶⁵⁸ [Freedom House, 1999-2017]

¹⁶⁵⁹ [U.S. State Department, 2011-2016]

¹⁶⁶⁰ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2003-2018]

¹⁶⁶¹ [Norwegian Peace Building Resource Centre, 2015]

¹⁶⁶² [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2003-2018]

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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 2017

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



Figure 287: Political status of ethnic groups in Eritrea during 2000-2008.



Figure 288: Political status of ethnic groups in Eritrea during 2009-2017.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Eritrea

From 1993 until 1999

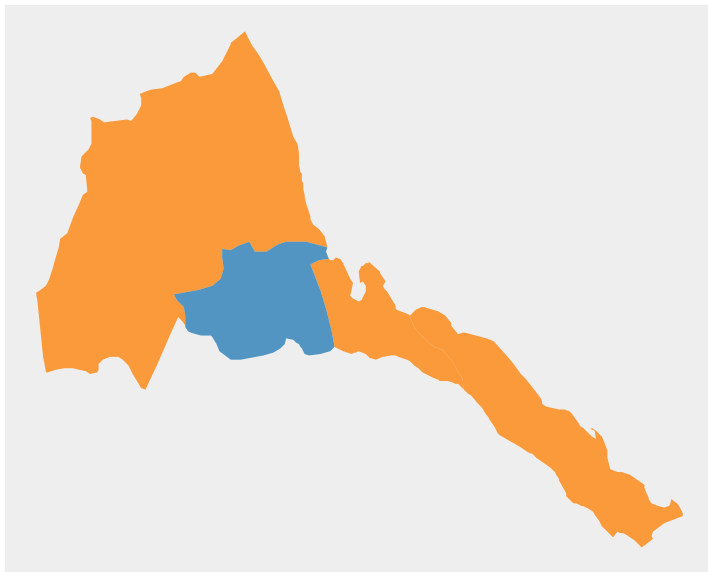


Figure 289: Map of ethnic groups in Eritrea during 1993-1999.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
Other Muslims	81 687	Regionally based
Afar	21 454	Regionally based
Christians	17 486	Regional & urban

Table 94: List of ethnic groups in Eritrea during 1993-1999.

From 2000 until 2008

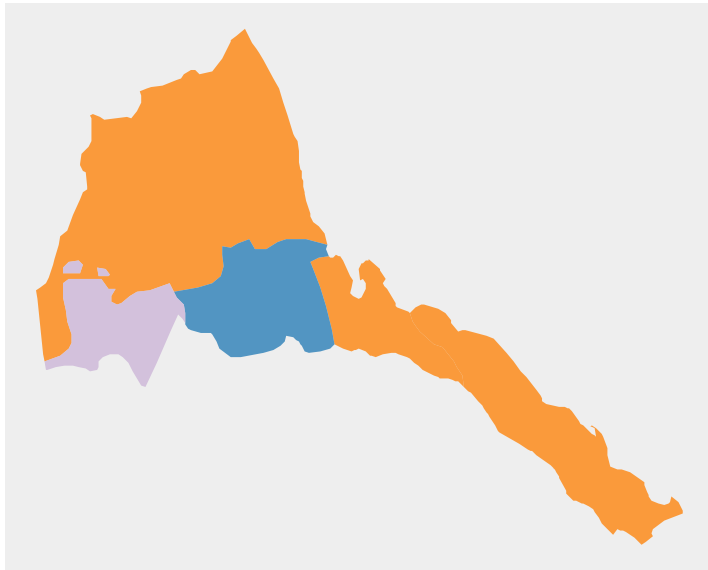


Figure 290: Map of ethnic groups in Eritrea during 2000-2008.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
Other Muslims	69 723	Regionally based
Afar	21 454	Regionally based
Christians	17 486	Regional & urban
Kunama	11 964	Regionally based

Table 95: List of ethnic groups in Eritrea during 2000-2008.

From 2009 until 2017

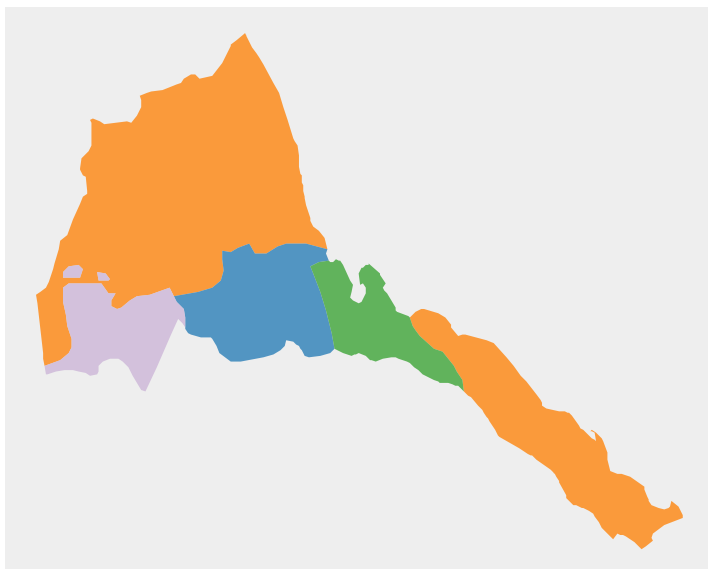


Figure 291: Map of ethnic groups in Eritrea during 2009-2017.

	Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■	Other Muslims	59 159	Regionally based
■	Afar	21 454	Regionally based
■	Christians	17 486	Regional & urban
■	Kunama	11 964	Regionally based
■	Saho	10 564	Regionally based

Table 96: List of ethnic groups in Eritrea during 2009-2017.

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			