



Bible Access List

Where Bible access is most difficult, and Bible shortage is greatest

Eritrea

Bible Restrictions Rank: **6**

EXTREME ACCESS RESTRICTIONS

Bible Shortage Rank: **35**

Bible needs estimate between one hundred and two hundred fifty thousand



An Overview of Bible access in Eritrea

Often referred to as the “North Korea of Africa,” Eritrea stands among the most repressive countries in the world when it comes to religious freedom. Nearly half of the nation identify as Christians, amounting to almost 1.7 million people. Yet, estimates show that not even 40% of believers have access to a Bible due to extreme restrictions in place. This underscores the profound spiritual gap in a nation where faith persists despite overwhelming obstacles.

Government control permeates nearly every aspect of religious life. Bible ownership, distribution, and even private reading are severely restricted under Eritrean law. While Orthodox and Catholic Christians (who make up about 95% of the Christian population) may encounter slightly fewer obstacles, their access remains tightly monitored. For Protestant house churches and Muslim Background believers or MBBs, the situation is drastically worse. Bibles are banned unless obtained through officially sanctioned channels, and the government rarely (if ever) grants permission to import or print them. Attempting to bring in Bibles illegally or owning multiple copies is treated as evidence of underground gatherings, often resulting in arrest, imprisonment, and the confiscation of Scripture.

There is only one legal body, the Bible Society in Asmara, that is technically allowed to import Bibles, but even they are subject to overwhelming bureaucratic hurdles. In practice, Bible printing, importing, or free distribution is nearly impossible. For unregistered Christian groups and MBBs, storing or reading a Bible at home can lead to harsh penalties, including indefinite detention in military camps or underground prisons known for inhumane conditions.

The limitations don't stop at the legal system. Eritrea's harsh socio-economic realities further restrict access. Almost half the population lives without electricity, and barely a third are connected to the internet. With telecommunications monopolized by the state and most of the country lacking basic infrastructure, accessing digital or audio Scripture is difficult outside the capital. Even for those with devices, internet use is heavily monitored, and Christian materials accessed online are considered subversive content.

Before we continue, would you take a pause to pray for Eritrea?

How can I pray for Eritrea?

- **Unity in the Church.** Reflecting on Jesus' prayer in John 17 for unity among His followers, pray for the Church in Eritrea. Ask God to unite believers, encouraging them to share the limited Bibles they have and work together with the global Church to improve Bible access.
- **Exposure of Corruption.** Pray for God to reveal and overcome the government's corruption and manipulation that blocks Bible imports and distribution. Ask for wisdom and creative solutions for Christians to overcome these barriers without compromising their integrity.
- **Opening Doors for Bible Access.** With the challenge of limited internet access in Eritrea, pray for God to open new pathways for Bible distribution. As the country makes progress, pray for increased digital opportunities to share the Gospel, touching more lives throughout the nation.

After praying for Eritrea, continue reading on the next page to learn more.





Bible Access Restrictions

Extreme Access Restrictions

-  Import restrictions
-  No Printing
-  Storage restrictions
-  Ownership restrictions
-  No distribution

Other Limiting Factors

Severe Other Factors

-  Extremely Poor
-  Poor internet access
-  Extremely poor infrastructure
-  50-70% of population access to electricity


Bible Shortages Among Believers

-  Bible ownership is very low, **estimated** Bible need is between 100 and 250 thousand

Main religion: Islam

Country population: 3,818,000

Christian population:

 1,687,000, 44.19% of total population

World Watch List: #6

WHAT'S BLOCKING BIBLE ACCESS IN ERITREA?

A Nation Under Lockdown

In Eritrea, Bible access is not just difficult; it is dangerous. The government enforces one of the harshest religious control systems in the world. Only four religious groups are officially recognized: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, Roman Catholicism, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

All other Christian denominations, particularly Pentecostal and Evangelical churches, are treated as illegal and face routine persecution. Christians from these unregistered groups cannot worship openly, gather for Bible study, or distribute Scripture without risking arrest, harassment, or imprisonment.

Daily Risks and Bible Possession

Security forces frequently conduct raids, often arresting Christians without charges. In just the past year, over a hundred Christians were detained, many from their homes in coordinated nighttime raids. Hundreds more remain in prison, some for over a decade, held in brutal conditions simply for belonging to unrecognized churches or possessing Christian materials. The fear of arrest forces many believers underground, making even the possession of a Bible a significant risk.

Military Conscription and Surveillance

Indefinite military service, mandated for all citizens aged 18 to 40, places Christians under constant state surveillance, especially those who refuse on grounds of conscience. Those who decline military training for religious reasons—often held at the infamous SAWA Military Academy—are punished with imprisonment.

Government informants and internet monitoring create an atmosphere where Christians are silenced, watched, and restricted from sharing or accessing Scripture through digital platforms or gatherings.

Poverty, Infrastructure, and Information Control

Even beyond direct persecution, systemic barriers make Bible access extremely difficult. Eritrea remains one of the most economically repressed countries in the world. The majority of its population lives in poverty, and internet access is among the lowest globally.

Less than 30% of Eritreans have access to the internet, and not even one percent uses social media. The country's state-run telecom monopoly restricts mobile and online services, making it risky and often impossible to download or read digital Bibles. Government control extends to print as well, as churches face enormous challenges in printing or distributing Scripture legally, especially outside of recognized denominations.

Community and Family-Level Opposition

Christians from Muslim backgrounds or those who leave the Eritrean Orthodox Church face not only state persecution but also familial and community hostility. MBBs are often disowned, reported to authorities by relatives, or pressured to return to their former faith traditions. In the lowlands, where Islamic oppression is more prevalent, even public display of Christian symbols or Scripture can provoke violence and discrimination.

Unmasking the Forces That Restrict Bible Access in Eritrea

Eritrea	Islamic Oppression	Religious Nationalism	Ethno-religious hostility	Clan oppression	Christian denominational oppression	Communist and post-Communist oppression	Secular intolerance	Dictatorial paranoia	Organized corruption and crime
Persecution Engines →									
Persecution Drivers ↓	Medium	Not at all	Not at all	Weak	Very strong	Not at all	Not at all	Very strong	Strong
Government officials								+++++	
Ethnic group leaders				++					
Non-Christian religious leaders	+++								
Christian religious leaders					++++				
Violent religious groups									
Normal citizens	++++				++++				
Extended family	++++				++++				
Political parties								++++	
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups									
Organized crime									++++
Multilateral org. & Embassies									

Reference

The more fully shaded the circle in orange, the stronger the level of persecution. The number of "+" signs indicates the frequency or intensity of the driving factors behind it.

Very Strong

Strong

Medium

None

In Eritrea, multiple persecution forces work in tandem to suppress Bible access—most notably **dictatorial paranoia**, **Christian denominational protectionism**, **organized corruption and crime**, and **Islamic oppression**. These are driven by government officials, Orthodox religious leaders, family members, and local communities, forming a tightly woven system of state and societal control.

The World Watch List of Open Doors sheds light on the broader context of persecution of Christians. But now we have to ask the question: How does this affect Bible access? Furthermore, where can we pinpoint the problem so we can address the need and demand for Bibles in Eritrea?

A CLOSER LOOK AT PERSECUTION ENGINES

A persecution engine is simply this: the source of persecution in the country. A persecution driver (or actor) is the one “driving” the persecution. Taking a closer look at these engines and drivers, in proper context, will give us insight on how we can solve the problems of Bible access in the country.



A Regime That Fears the Word of God

Since independence in 1993, Eritrea has been ruled by an authoritarian regime under President Isaias Afewerki. The government exercises near-total control over religious life, suppressing any form of Christianity not recognized by the state. Only four religious groups are permitted—Sunni Islam, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church. All others, including Evangelicals and Pentecostals, are deemed illegal and often branded as agents of Western influence and a threat to national unity.

Hundreds of Christians are imprisoned in inhumane conditions, without trial, often indefinitely. In May 2024, Pastor Ghirmay Araya, a founder of the Full Gospel Church, died in prison after three years in detention with no formal charges. In the same year, over 120 Christians were arrested without charges, with 35 of them taken during nighttime raids in Agordat, Barentu, and Teseney. These arrests are carried out by a surveillance-heavy state that tightly monitors Christian gatherings, media access, and even family life.

Refusal to participate in the mandatory national military service, especially when based on Christian conscience, leads to immediate arrest and often torture. In some cases, those released from prison are forced into military service against their will. The regime's grip leaves Christians isolated, underground, and without safe access to Scripture.



Hostility from Within

While unrecognized churches suffer under government oppression, they also face systemic exclusion and hostility from the state-backed Eritrean Orthodox Church (EOC). This persecution engine is unique, as we see one branch of Christianity actively suppressing others.

EOC leaders view Pentecostal and Evangelical groups as illegitimate, often treating them as heretical threats. This view filters down into families and communities, particularly in the Christian-majority highland regions, where leaving the Orthodox Church for a non-traditional denomination is seen as betrayal. MBBs are sometimes reported to authorities by their own relatives.

Even within the government, some officials act in defense of their Orthodox faith by harassing and arresting members of other denominations. As a result, non-traditional Christians are denied access to community spaces, social services, and legal protections, severely impacting their ability to gather, worship, or receive Bibles.



Bribes for Freedom

Corruption in Eritrea is rampant, especially within the military. The armed forces control vast portions of public life and regularly exploit vulnerable Christians. One of the starkest examples involves Christians caught attempting to flee the country—many are forced to pay bribes to escape, and failure to pay can result in imprisonment or even death.

This organized corruption affects Bible access in two major ways: (1) Christians are extorted or blocked when trying to obtain or transport religious materials, and (2) corruption delays or blocks the approval and delivery of any non-state-sanctioned literature.

Even if Bibles could be printed or brought into the country, the cost of navigating a deeply corrupt system places them far out of reach for most believers.



Danger in the Lowlands

Though less dominant than other persecution engines, **Islamic oppression** poses a serious threat in the eastern and western lowland regions where Muslim populations are concentrated. Christians, especially MBBs, are often targeted by their own families and local communities. Conversion is viewed not just as religious betrayal but as a violation of cultural and social identity.

In some areas, Islamic leaders incite hostility toward Christians, making Bible possession or display a dangerous act. In homes where a family member is a MBB, Bibles may be destroyed, and believers may be forced to practice in secret. Open faith expression, especially through Scripture, is met with harassment or even violence, often with no legal recourse or community support.

THE URGENT NEED FOR BIBLES IN ERITREA

Amid one of the world's harshest environments for Christians, Bible access in Eritrea remains critically low. With over 1.6 million Christians in Eritrea, an estimated number of up to **250,000 additional Bibles** will make a huge difference to bridge the gap of access.

A Declining Church and an Escalating Need

Unlike other countries where the church is growing, Eritrea's Christian population is declining. This amplifies the urgency to solve the problem of Bible access. With Christian leaders imprisoned and church communities forced underground, those who remain need the support of the global Church more than ever. Bibles are not just tools for discipleship; they are lifelines of faith and courage in a country suffocating under spiritual and political pressure.

Bible Formats for a Disconnected Nation

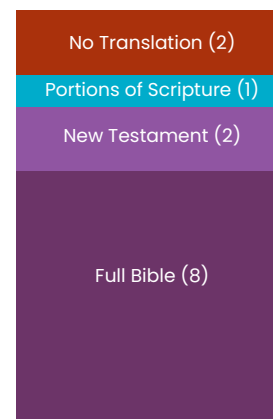
In Eritrea, most believers rely on **printed Bibles**, which is still the priority. **Bible apps** can serve Christians in urban centers, but for the majority—especially those in isolated regions or living under surveillance—print remains the safest and most effective format.

The Challenge of Bible Translations

Christians in Eritrea speak at least 13 languages. Of these languages:

- Only **8** have a full translation of the Bible.
- **2** additional languages have only the New Testament.
- **1** has only a portion of Scripture translated.
- **2** languages that have no Scripture translation

These gaps leave entire communities without the opportunity to hear or read the Word of God in their heart language. In a country where non-traditional denominations already face steep barriers to practicing their faith, the absence of Scripture in local languages further isolates believers and undermines efforts to disciple the next generation.



Spoken Languages with Believers in Eritrea

THE CLARION CALL

The Bible is a national treasure for Christians in Eritrea. Each copy of Scripture has the potential to sustain a persecuted believer, encourage an underground church, or bring the Gospel to an unreached language group. The need is urgent. The cost is high. But the reward is eternal.

Let us come together and rise to meet this urgent need. Through intentional Bible distribution, expanded translation work, and strategic partnerships, we can help ensure that every believer in Eritrea has access to the life-giving truth of God's Word.

Now is the time for the global Church to act. Now is the time to stand with the Eritrean Church. Let us flood this dry land with living water. Let us deliver the Word to our brothers and sisters.

