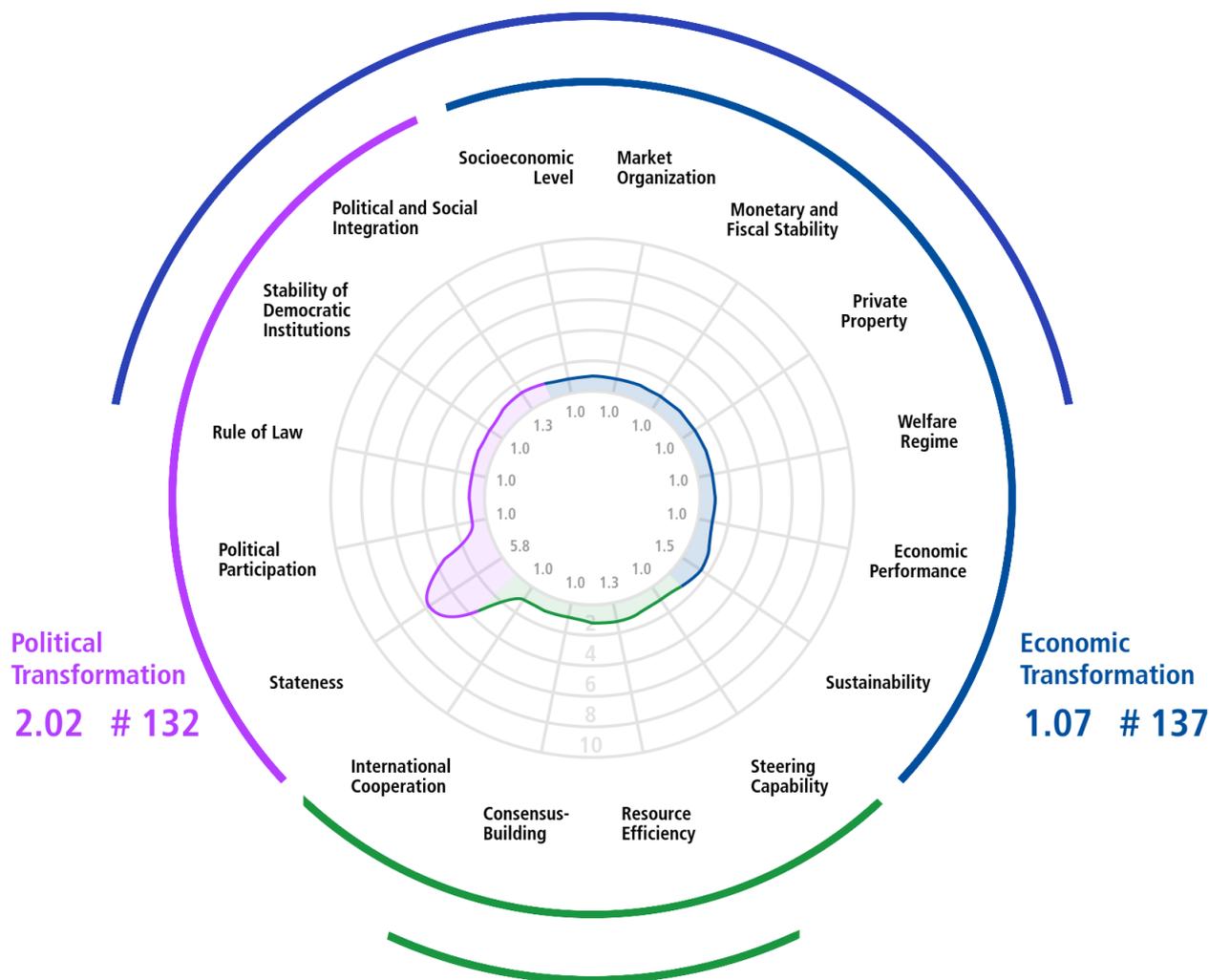


Eritrea

Status Index

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on 1-10 scale out of 137



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on 1-10 scale out of 137

This report is part of the **Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2026**. It covers the period from February 1, 2023 to January 31, 2025. The BTI assesses the transformation toward democracy and a market economy as well as the quality of governance in 137 countries. More on the BTI at <https://www.bti-project.org>.

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Key Indicators

Population	M	3.5	HDI	0.503	GDP p.c., PPP \$	-
Pop. growth ¹	% p.a.	1.9	HDI rank of 193	178	Gini Index	-
Life expectancy	years	68.6	UN Education Index	0.374	Poverty ³	% -
Urban population	%	43.9	Gender inequality ²	-	Aid per capita \$	37.2

Sources (as of December 2025): The World Bank, World Development Indicators | UNDP, Human Development Report 2025. Footnotes: (1) Average annual growth rate. (2) Gender Inequality Index (GII). (3) Percentage of population living on less than \$3.65 a day at 2017 international prices.

Executive Summary

During the review period, the Eritrean government made no changes to its political and economic agenda. The country continues to function as a surveillance state, and the political leadership has put a command economy and autocratic political system in place. The government actively participated in the war against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region from November 2020 to November 2022, collaborating with Ethiopian federal forces and Amhara militias. This collaboration has resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe, with an estimated half a million casualties. Despite the Pretoria Peace Agreement, which officially ended the conflict, Eritrea has maintained its military presence in Tigray, especially in the border areas.

The Eritrean economy remained under the control of the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) and the military. High-ranking military officers were involved in illegal activities, including the smuggling of goods and the human trafficking of Eritreans seeking to leave the country. They also engaged in the massive, systematic plundering of goods and materials in Tigray without being held accountable. As of January 2025, no trade agreements with Ethiopia had been established, and relations between Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had cooled significantly. Despite the ongoing civil war in Sudan, which started in 2023, smuggling across the border with Sudan has likely continued, with the involvement of corrupt Eritrean and Sudanese officials.

The economy remained weak, and chronic electricity blackouts continued alongside shortages of fuel and drinking water. Nutritional conditions in the country also remained poor. The government has not invested revenue from mining or politically motivated funds received from countries such as Saudi Arabia to improve living standards for the population, which suffers from shortages of goods, decaying infrastructure, and a lack of access to potable water and other primary goods. Military officers apply their own regulations in the administrative regions under their control, while the civilian administrative apparatus is powerless. Military and PFDJ leaders continue to

run their own shops. In fall 2022, a general military mobilization was announced, and the homes of many families with members who sought to evade the draft were sealed, leaving the families homeless. Despite the 2022 peace agreement, the general mobilization was not suspended.

Politically, Eritrea remains a dictatorship that renders political participation impossible for the general public. Civil rights and the freedoms of expression and assembly are not respected, and human rights are routinely violated. The 1997 constitution has not been implemented, and no new constitution has been drafted. The national service system, an unlimited-term obligation that U.N. agencies have described as institutionalized forced labor, continues without reform, exacerbating the situation. Men ages 18 to 60 and women ages 18 to 27 are compelled to serve in either the military or the national service.

Government functions are carried out by the president and a small group of advisers, including the PFDJ's financial head, the minister of information and leading military figures. Presidential adviser Yemane Gebreab, a decisive figure for decades, did not appear in public or receive mention in state media during the period under review for unknown reasons. The ruling PFDJ is the sole political party allowed to exist, and it maintains, along with the military, a monopoly on the economy. All state enterprises are controlled by the party-owned Hdri Trust Fund, with no external financial monitoring permitted. Despite the European Union's anti-refugee measures, the exodus from Eritrea has persisted. State institutions and social services remain weak, and arbitrary arrests and religious persecution continue.

During the period under review, there was no progress toward democratization, which the president has ruled out. The public cannot express civic interests without risking arrest. In the absence of free-market mechanisms, the import-export trade has remained under the firm grip of the ruling party's elite, while the military has engaged in large-scale contraband activities.

There is no public welfare system, and traditional social safety nets based on extended family structures have been weakened by the national service. However, most Eritreans in the diaspora provide financial support to their families in Eritrea, and many, voluntarily or under coercion, pay the 2% tax the government imposes on them. This financial support and these tax contributions help stabilize the regime.

Malnutrition and poverty remain endemic in Eritrea, and the general military mobilization has further aggravated the situation. The continued use of charcoal for cooking has accelerated environmental degradation. For more than two decades, Eritrea has followed a destructive path that runs counter to democratization and economic liberalization.

History and Characteristics of Transformation

Eritrea gained de facto independence from Ethiopia in 1991 and de jure independence in 1993 after a 30-year struggle (1961 – 1991). The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) dominated the struggle from the early 1980s and later became the government of the independent state of Eritrea. In 1994, the EPLF held its third and final organizational congress and changed its name to the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). Isaias Afewerki, the former secretary-general of the EPLF, has been the president of Eritrea since independence and has never been confirmed in office by popular vote. He has solidified his power base through a tough, authoritarian style of rule with totalitarian tendencies, although his popularity has declined sharply because of the continuous deterioration of the economic situation, gross human rights violations, the forced military conscription of a significant portion of the productive-age population and the complete absence of civil liberties in the country. The government has stressed that Eritrea is a secular state, although state interference in the legal religious institutions – Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran Christianity and Sunni Islam – has remained strong. During the period under review, President Isaias reportedly sought to win the sympathies of the Orthodox clergy, who have a significant impact on public opinion, to secure their support for the acceptance of his son Abraham Isaias Afewerki as his potential successor.

In recent years, relations with Western donor nations have become strained as the government has lacked transparency, refused to allow NGO activities in the country and even rejected emergency aid, asserting that the country has reached a point of self-reliance with regard to food production – an evidently untrue claim. The European Union terminated development cooperation with Eritrea in 2020 because of the country's involvement in the Tigray conflict and the government's perceived disinterest in EU funding.

Eritrea's relations with neighboring countries have not been driven by the desire for peace and mutual cooperation, but rather by the president's attempts to enter into shifting alliances to stabilize his own power. The 2018 peace agreement with Ethiopia was never implemented, and instead of establishing trade relations, the Eritrean army carried out widespread looting in Tigray during the war from 2020 to 2022. The border has not been demarcated, but the Eritrean army is occupying significant borderland areas while border crossings remain closed. In October 2024, Eritrea entered into a tripartite security agreement with Somalia and Egypt, which can be seen as an attempt to isolate Ethiopia regionally. The Eritrean government extended the extremely high level of military mobilization in the national service through a general mobilization call in fall 2022, which was still in place as of January 2025. The use of national service recruits as an unpaid labor force for party and military-owned enterprises continued, while some elements of the military continued to serve as soldiers in Tigray.

Eritreans living in the diaspora must pay a 2% diaspora tax, and most send remittances to relatives in Eritrea to ensure their relatives' survival. The United Arab Emirates closed its military base in Assab in 2021, and relations have since deteriorated. In 2023, Eritrea entered negotiations with Russia to establish a military base in Massawa. These plans have so far not materialized, but relations with the Kremlin have remained close.

There were no internal political reforms during the period under review, and the 1997 constitution has not been implemented. The small ruling elite, composed of high-ranking PFDJ cadres and military officers, continued to dominate political and economic affairs. The military had free rein to engage in various illegal activities, including human trafficking and plundering. Eritrea ranked last worldwide in Reporters Without Borders' press freedom assessment during the period under review.

Levels of state and military intervention in the economy have remained high in recent years, while the private sector continues to be severely constrained by import-export regulations and a lack of hard currency. Local cash circulation also remains limited. Levels of political suppression are extraordinarily high, with arbitrary arrests occurring without due process. Political dissidents and journalists arrested in 2001 remain in detention, and hundreds of Christians and Muslims remain in jail for alleged religious extremism without having been formally charged or been brought to court appearances.

The mass exodus of the younger generation has continued because of widespread frustration and disillusionment with the unlimited scope of national service obligations, which have made it difficult for most people of productive age to support their families, and because of the absence of political reforms. The military campaign in Tigray, followed by the partial occupation of Tigrayan territory, as well as the overall mobilization have further exacerbated the situation, and Eritrea's president is unlikely to pursue peace in the future.

The BTI combines text analysis and numerical assessments. The score for each question is provided below its respective title. The scale ranges from 1 (worst) to 10 (best).

Transformation Status

I. Political Transformation

1 | Stateness

The state's monopoly on the use of force exists in principle. As in previous years, the commanders of the military administrative zones continued to exercise unconstitutional executive and judicial powers, and the civilian administration remained powerless.

Human trafficking and the smuggling of goods involving the military persisted, and Eritrea illegally occupied some areas along the border in the neighboring Ethiopian province of Tigray after the Tigray War ended following the Pretoria agreement in November 2022.

The mass exodus of the younger generation continued even as security conditions for Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia and Sudan deteriorated, further weakening the state's administrative capacity.

The legitimacy of the nation-state is rarely questioned, because most Eritreans see it as the legacy of a 30-year liberation struggle (1961 – 1991) that took a heavy toll on all segments of society. However, the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) enjoys very little support and credibility among the population, especially among youth. The unlimited national service requirements imposed on the younger generation have led to increasing levels of alienation from the state. The level of militarization further increased during Eritrea's undeclared military involvement in the war in Tigray alongside the Ethiopian Defense Forces from 2020 to 2022, and the end of the war did not lead to demilitarization.

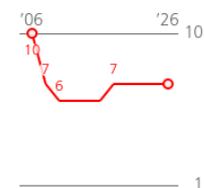
Therefore, most young Eritreans continued to believe that fleeing the country was the only way to lead a meaningful life and start a family, in contrast to meeting the state's extensive demands without meaningful citizens' rights and benefits in return.

Ethnic and religious minorities continue to be under-represented in higher education and state institutions. Jehovah's Witnesses do not enjoy citizenship rights such as the ability to own a business.

Question
Score

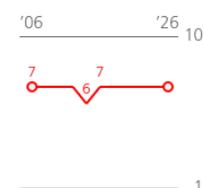
Monopoly on the
use of force

7



State identity

7



The state is defined as a secular order in which religion and the state are separate. The PFDJ ideology prioritizes “martyrdom for the nation” over spiritual values and demands that citizens act accordingly. The government considers religion to be a highly politicized issue and tries to maintain strict controls over religious practice. Members of Christian minority churches such as Pentecostals and Jehovah’s Witnesses, as well as Muslims considered “radical” (particularly adherents of Wahhabi Islam), remain under state scrutiny.

The Catholic Church, which has criticized certain government policies in the past, has remained under special scrutiny, and its charitable institutions remained closed during the review period.

Religious leaders of all “legal” communities in Eritrea are controlled by the state, including the Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran churches as well as Sunni Islam. However, the government shows greater sympathy toward Orthodox Christians, who belong to the Tigrinya ethnic group, than toward Muslims, who are perceived as critical toward the government. In late 2024, the Orthodox Church appointed a new patriarch, Basilios. He and Eritrea’s Grand Mufti, Sheikh Al-Amin Osman Al-Amin, have been considered puppets of the government.

However, the government has continued to accept the use of customary and religious laws – Shariah and Orthodox Church-related customary laws – in civil jurisdiction and conflict mediation in the absence of a functioning secular judicial system.

The state’s administrative structures continue to cover the entire country, but the quality of services provided is very poor in both rural areas and urban centers because of the massive outflow of qualified personnel. According to the World Bank, about half of all Eritreans had access to electricity in 2022. However, this information seems unreliable because even in Asmara, the electricity supply was highly unreliable, according to sources inside the country.

In Eritrea, access to water and sanitation was grossly inadequate. However, no data were available because of the government’s lack of transparency. Ethnic minorities residing in rural areas are notably marginalized and excluded from administrative services. The economy continues to suffer under the control of the state, and particularly of the PFDJ and the military, resulting in minimal output during the review period.

The banking sector has remained severely underdeveloped, and in the absence of electronic payment methods, checks are the most “modern” form of money transfer. Diaspora remittances, which provide the most important source of income for the population, are mostly handled through informal “hawala” systems.

Juridical services are inadequate. Civil litigation is primarily handled by customary law institutions. Corruption levels are high. Basic services and commodities, such as electricity, cooking fuels and staple foods, remained scarce throughout the reviewed period.

No interference of religious dogmas

7



1

Basic administration

2



1

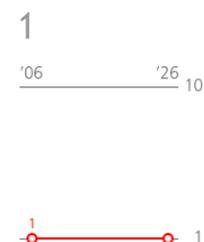
2 | Political Participation

Since Eritrea gained independence in 1993, no elections have been held at the national or regional (zoba) levels, and there have been no free elections at the subregional or local levels. The only legal political party has been the PFDJ, and President Isaias Afewerki, who has been in power since independence, has shown no willingness to allow elections or any change in the country's political status quo. He governs alongside a small group of advisers from the PFDJ leadership, notably Hagos "Kisha" Gebrehiwot (head of PFDJ's financial affairs) and Yemane Gebremeskel (the minister of information). Yemane Gebreab, who had been known as a "presidential adviser" and was responsible for diaspora indoctrination, was not heard from during the period under review, and his whereabouts and state of health were unknown. The military remains an influential political actor in the absence of civilian decision-making bodies. The defunct National Assembly has not convened since 2002, and even the aging cabinet of ministers has not come together in about four years. The 1997 constitution remains unimplemented.

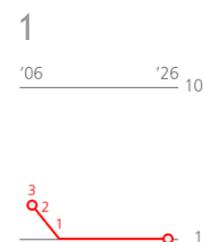
Political decision-makers in Eritrea are neither democratically elected nor constrained by any constitutional limits in their policymaking. More than three decades after independence, the country still has not implemented a constitution. Veto powers that might undermine democratic procedures do not exist, as democratic procedures are alien to Eritrea's policymaking process. The post of defense minister remains vacant, and the army lacks institutionalized power but is de facto the most influential political player apart from the president. High-ranking military officers have maintained their influence. They may be able to prevent the government from making political decisions that could threaten the profits they derive from contraband trade and the exploitation of national service conscripts. However, the absolute power of President Isaias Afewerki remains largely uncontested.

The rights of association and assembly are completely denied in Eritrea. Independent civic groups are prohibited, and the PFDJ is the only political party allowed in the country. The National Union of Women, the National Union of Youth and Students and the Confederation of Eritrean Workers are government-controlled satellites of the ruling party and are mostly inactive. Assembly rights are severely restricted, and even gatherings of religious groups such as Pentecostal Christians, reformist Orthodox Christians, followers of Wahhabi Islam and others are prohibited. There is an atmosphere of general suppression; surveillance by security agents; and widespread use of force by the police, the military and the state security services. In fall 2022, the government ordered a general military mobilization, which further increased surveillance, and families of draft evaders were evicted from their homes. Even after the end of the Tigray War in November 2022, the general mobilization was not revoked.

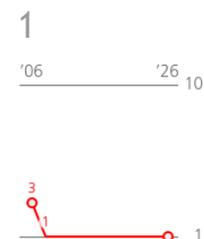
Free and fair elections



Effective power to govern

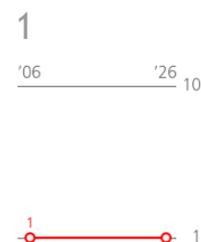


Association / assembly rights



The freedom of expression is completely denied in Eritrea. The private press has been banned since 2001, and the state media continue to be controlled by the Ministry of Information. Reporters Without Borders ranks Eritrea last in the world in its 2024 World Press Freedom Index – 180th out of 180 countries. Journalists who were imprisoned in 2001 remain detained, and the state media are limited to reporting on the supposed progress of development projects and on government welfare recipients. Occasionally, the president gives long interviews on EriTV, answering predetermined questions mostly about the state of the world rather than addressing local problems. Private conversations in bars, cafés, social gatherings and religious celebrations are monitored by a nationwide network of agents employed by the government and the military’s security apparatuses. These agents also search for individuals evading military draft obligations throughout the country.

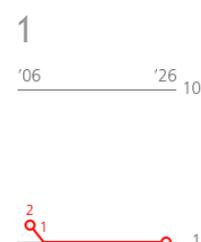
Freedom of expression



3 | Rule of Law

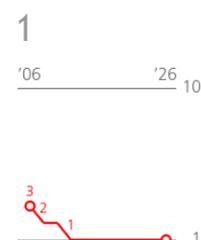
The separation of powers, including checks and balances, is nonexistent in Eritrea both de jure and de facto, because there is no constitution in force. A monolithic power apparatus is formed by a small number of high-ranking cadres from the ruling PFDJ and the government, while parliament does not convene. The president handpicks the cabinet of ministers, who have very limited decision-making power within their portfolio areas. Most ministers have held their positions for many years without challenging the president’s decisions, and there apparently has not been a formal cabinet meeting in years. Some ministers are reportedly in poor health because of their advanced age. The president, who rules by decree, controls the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. As a result, state power is not subject to the law. Military officers still exercise juridical functions over their conscripts, blurring the lines between civilian and military rule.

Separation of powers



The formal judiciary is poorly organized and dependent on the government, which often leads to direct interference by the president. The Supreme Court has been defunct since 2002. The special courts, headed by military officers acting as lay judges and operating without standard procedures, are defunct and have been replaced by even more informal and arbitrary activities by power holders. High-ranking military officers continue to exercise judicial power over army recruits. The police, state security and military personnel often arrest people, hold them for several months or years and release them without ever filing formal charges or bringing them before a court of law. The weakness of the formal judiciary has increased because there has been no opportunity to study law since the closure of Asmara University in 2006, after which many former judges left the country. Therefore, informal customary judicial institutions remain the backbone of judicial practice in civil matters and, to a certain extent, in criminal cases. There are also government-controlled community courts that are supposed to provide rulings based on customary law, but these institutions enjoy less confidence from the public than the informal customary institutions.

Independent judiciary



Corruption in the civil administration, particularly in the military, is widespread. High-ranking officers continue to engage in illegal activities such as smuggling, and their involvement in human trafficking between Eritrea and Sudan continued during the period under review. However, the ongoing civil war in Sudan may have reduced the number of people smuggled across the border. On the other hand, there were rumors that Sudanese nationals from Eastern Sudan who had fled to Eritrea were conducting smuggling activities in collaboration with Eritrean officers.

Army commanders encouraged the Eritrean military to commit severe human rights abuses in Tigray during its involvement in the armed conflict from 2020 to 2022. Soldiers regularly engaged in looting. These goods were likely sold in Eritrean markets for the benefit of army officials, and no punitive legal measures were taken against perpetrators at any level of the military hierarchy.

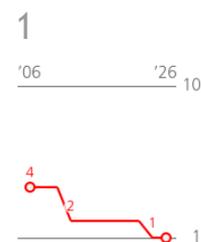
Civil rights are not protected in Eritrea. The country has never implemented a constitution, and civil rights are not guaranteed by law. Top government officials, including the president, openly express disregard for internationally accepted civil rights and due process of law. There is no freedom of the press, no right to habeas corpus, and no freedom of expression or assembly. Religious freedom is restricted to the four officially accepted faiths: Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, Lutheran Protestant Christianity and Sunni Islam. Even representatives of these religions are subject to surveillance, intimidation and arrest.

The rights to life and security are disregarded, and torture is prevalent in prisons and army prison camps. The lack of civil rights affects the entire population, but ethnic and religious minorities often face even harsher treatment. Furthermore, large segments of the population are still conscripted into unlimited-term national service and coerced into forced labor by party-owned companies such as Seghen Construction. Draft dodging is severely penalized in wartime and peacetime. Periodically, family homes are seized and entire families are left homeless when a relative evades military service and goes into hiding. Reportedly, there were mass arrests of people accused of sympathizing with the new opposition movement Brigade N'Hamedu in February 2025, mainly in Asmara.

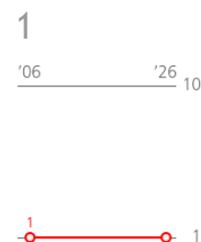
4 | Stability of Democratic Institutions

There are no democratic institutions in Eritrea. The president's position has not been confirmed through elections since he took power as a guerrilla leader in 1991, and no parliamentary elections have been held since independence. The only party allowed in the country is the PFDJ, and its leadership is not subject to intraparty elections. The party held its last congress in 1994. The National Assembly, a parliamentary body composed of members of the PFDJ's former politburo and central committee, has not convened since 2001 and is effectively defunct. Many of its members are either in prison or deceased, or have been forced into exile. Political power rests solely with the president and a few of his advisers within the PFDJ leadership. Three

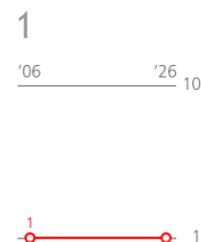
Prosecution of
office abuse



Civil rights



Performance of
democratic
institutions



decades after formal independence, the country has yet to implement a constitution. High-ranking military officers have broad decision-making powers in the regional administrations, and they control legal and illegal economic activities. In the absence of democratic procedures, the economy is controlled by a highly interlinked conglomerate of the PFDJ elite, the government and the military. The president, who is aware of the generals' power base, continues to use divide-and-rule strategies to limit the potential threat they pose to his monopoly on power. One of his most influential long-term advisers and head of the PFDJ's political affairs department has not been heard from for years. He was last mentioned by the Ministry of Information in 2019.

The few relevant political actors remain determined to obstruct the emergence of democratic institutions. Former supporters of political pluralization within the PFDJ (the so-called G-15) have been detained since 2001, and most are believed to be dead or in poor health because of unbearable conditions and a denial of medical treatment. Other potential proponents of democratic change have been arrested, forced into exile, or silenced by fear for their own lives and those of their families. Expressing political dissent inside Eritrea usually leads to immediate arrest and prolonged imprisonment without trial. The last prominent critic of the president, former Minister of Finance Berhane Abrehe, who was arrested in 2018 after publishing a book in which he called Isaias a dictator, died in jail in 2024. The political opposition abroad is fragmented and lacks a clear agenda for political change. Several youth movements in the diaspora have struggled on behalf of human rights and political change without success. One movement, Global Yiakl ("enough" in riTignya), emerged in 2019 and institutionalized under that name. During the period under review, a new and partly violent movement called Brigade N'Hamedu emerged in the diaspora and engaged in protest against festivals organized by the PFDJ and its diaspora supporters in Europe, North America and Israel.

5 | Political and Social Integration

The PFDJ has been the only permitted party since independence. The political leadership has no intention of allowing a multiparty system to develop in the foreseeable future. Over the past two decades, the population has become increasingly alienated from the ruling party, which was initially welcomed as the country's liberator. The majority of Eritreans now view it as a "mafia organization" rather than a political party, although there remains a considerable number of PFDJ supporters in the diaspora. However, the PFDJ, as the only existing party, has been severely weakened by the president. It is not in a position to articulate and aggregate societal interests, and it has lost its former interconnections with at least some parts of society. Nor has the PFDJ taken any steps to develop a road map for reforms and generational change in light of the advancing age of the ruling elite, whose members are all in their late 70s. The development of policy strategies is entirely up to the president, whose sole focus is to maintain his autocratic power.

Commitment to democratic institutions



Party system

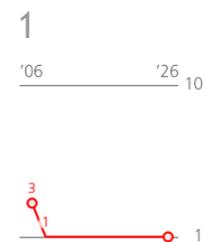


Associations and interest groups that act independently of the PFDJ are prohibited. The party claims that the Eritrean people are a single mass with the same interests and that it is the only organization representing the interests of all societal groups. It has suppressed the emergence of civil society organizations from the beginning and tightly controls those that do exist, such as unions of women, workers, youth and students. In reality, the party and the military represent their own narrow self-interest, while the social interests of the vast majority of the population are unrepresented. Among the population, local elders are highly respected and have acted as mediators when social groups' interests have collided – for example, in cases of land conflict. However, they are barred from intervening in political affairs. In Eritrea's ever-growing diaspora, numerous associations represent the interests of several ethnic, religious and regional groups. Some support refugees in dire situations in Sudan and elsewhere, but they have not been able to influence the situation on the ground inside the country.

There are no surveys conducted in Eritrea.

Social trust is rooted in networks based on customary law, common descent and religion. These networks have historically alleviated social hardships, but they have been steadily weakened by the structural militarization of society through the national service requirement. This requirement deprives a significant portion of the population of the opportunity to earn sufficient income to support their extended families. Additionally, existing local networks, such as “equbs” (savings clubs), have been infiltrated by government agents, leading to further mutual mistrust. However, social networks connect Eritreans in the diaspora with those residing in the country. The primary goal of many Eritreans who flee their homeland is to establish themselves in the diaspora and send remittances back to their extended families. This practice greatly contributes to the stability of the struggling economic system. Nonetheless, mutual mistrust remains prevalent in Eritrean society due to the extensive networks of informants employed by the national security services and the military. The alleged involvement of Eritrean soldiers in crimes such as looting, weaponized rape and massacres during the military engagement in Tigray from 2020 to 2022, along with the severe punishment of draft dodgers who had tried to avoid deployment there, has further eroded social trust.

Interest groups



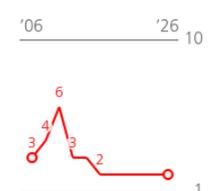
Approval of democracy

n/a



Social capital

2



II. Economic Transformation

6 | Level of Socioeconomic Development

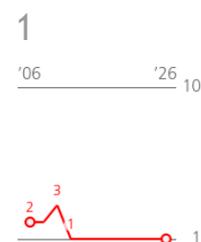
Eritrea remains one of the world's poorest countries, and poverty is endemic. The Global Hunger Index did not rank Eritrea in 2024 because of a lack of data. UNICEF also did not publish data on the number of malnourished children, but noted in its 2023 report on Eritrea that stunting rates among children were around 50%, indicating high rates of chronic malnutrition. As in previous years, the government did not provide details about the nutritional situation in the country. The prolonged national service requirement continues to impede subsistence farming and pastoral activities, from which an estimated 80% of the population earns a living. This situation was worsened by the general mobilization declared in fall 2022, which has not been revoked despite the Pretoria Peace Agreement, which put an end to the armed conflict in Tigray. The supply of basic consumer goods in urban and rural areas, such as potable water, cooking fuels and electricity, remained inadequate.

Statistical data are either unavailable or unreliable because of a complete lack of government transparency. Rankings based on the Gender Inequality Index and Gini Index are also unavailable, as is the poverty rate. On the UNDP's Human Development Index (2023 – 2024), Eritrea was ranked at 175th place out of 189 countries, with a score of 0.493, indicating a very low level of socioeconomic development. This low level is attributed in large part to the country's unlimited-term national service, which has been in place for 22 years and forces the majority of the adult population to serve as recruits in exchange for pocket money. As a result, the poverty rate is very high, and most Eritreans rely on support from relatives in the diaspora to survive. Consequently, the majority of the population is structurally excluded from opportunities to earn a decent living, leading to a continuous mass exodus.

Most vocational training centers, colleges and health centers are in the capital and the Southern Region, which is predominantly inhabited by the Tigrinya ethnic group. Other groups have limited access to education and are typically conscripted into the Sawa military training center at age 18. They are then used as forced labor in PFDJ- and military-owned enterprises or in the civil service and administration. Ethnic minority groups such as the Saho, Afar, Kunama, Nara and Hedareb tend to be more vulnerable and poorer, experiencing higher rates of malnutrition. These communities also face high child mortality rates because of limited financial support from family members residing in industrialized countries.

Question
Score

Socioeconomic
barriers



Wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few corrupt army officials and PFDJ cadres who control the command economy and engage in contraband trade and illegal activities such as human trafficking. Even after the 2022 peace agreement, Eritrean troops were accused of stealing cattle in Tigray's border regions close to Eritrea. Significant amounts of money are believed to have been transferred to foreign bank accounts in the names of the president and his son. Gender inequality persists, particularly in educational settings, as does indirect discrimination against citizens who do not belong to the dominant Tigrinya ethnic group.

Economic indicators		2021	2022	2023	2024
GDP	\$ M	-	-	-	-
GDP growth	%	-	-	-	-
Inflation (CPI)	%	-	-	-	-
Unemployment	%	6.2	5.7	5.6	5.6
Foreign direct investment	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Export growth	%	-	-	-	-
Import growth	%	-	-	-	-
Current account balance	\$ M	-	-	-	-
Public debt	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
External debt	\$ M	772.1	727.1	725.9	-
Total debt service	\$ M	19.3	15.7	16.1	-
Net lending/borrowing	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Tax revenue	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Government consumption	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Public education spending	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Public health spending	% of GDP	0.9	0.9	-	-
R&D expenditure	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Military expenditure	% of GDP	-	-	-	-

Sources (as of December 2025): The World Bank, World Development Indicators | International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Military Expenditure Database.

7 | Organization of the Market and Competition

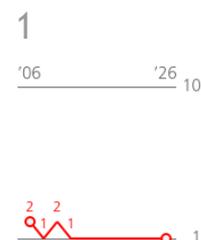
In Eritrea, the conditions for market organization are extremely weak. Starting a business is nearly impossible, and most existing private businesses have been forced to cease operations because of severe cash-flow restrictions. This poor performance has political roots, as the government has maintained a command economy in which government activity dominates private enterprise. There is a noticeable absence of government commitment to structural reform, and the small ruling elite views Eritrea as its personal property. To date, the government has not shown any intention to implement specific measures to reform the command aspects of the economy or to promote broad-based growth and market development. It has also failed to facilitate private business practices, as it regards a strong private business sector as a threat to its absolute control over the population. The legal and regulatory frameworks for economic activities are underdeveloped, and Eritrea's judicial system lacks the independence needed to safeguard the integrity of contracts. Moreover, weak enforcement of property rights and the absence of the rule of law have pushed many individuals into the informal sector. However, even microbusinesses have faced increasing restrictions in recent years. The public sector, which operates inefficiently, remains the primary source of paid employment, but most public servants are unpaid national service recruits. Subsistence agriculture has been further weakened by movement restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic and by significant recruitment into the armed forces, culminating in a general mobilization in fall 2022 due to the country's involvement in the armed conflict in Tigray.

Market-based competition was absent in Eritrea during the period under review. Eritrean traders had to adhere to strict monetary controls, with the government – through the PFDJ and the military – dominating the economy. The state and the PFDJ continue to control trade, production and cash-crop agriculture. In the construction sector, private sector activities have been prohibited since 2006, resulting in a monopoly for PFDJ-owned companies such as Seghen Construction.

The scarcity of consumer goods and kerosene for cooking, as well as regular blackouts caused by electricity shortages, persists. Illegal activities by military officers – such as contraband trade and human trafficking – are tolerated by the government. Eritrean-Sudanese cross-border trafficking networks continue their activities despite the instability in Sudan caused by the civil war that began in 2023.

Levels of foreign investment, including from Eritreans in the diaspora, remain low. Instead, the government relies on remittances from the diaspora and continues to levy a 2% diaspora tax on all Eritreans living abroad. Eritreans in the diaspora also contribute significantly to their relatives' survival by sending private remittances. However, opportunities to earn a living through business have become almost nonexistent, and remittances can be used only for consumption rather than productive investment.

Market
organization



In Eritrea, there is no separate agency to protect competition and review transactions for competition-related concerns. The country does not have a domestic competition law regime and thus lacks a legal framework for competition policy. However, Eritrea is a member of the Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). As part of its efforts to promote economic integration, COMESA has adopted a competition law regime to address anti-competitive business practices and to exercise merger control. COMESA's competition regulations are binding on all member states. Enforcement of the regime is entrusted to the COMESA Competition Commission, based in Lilongwe, Malawi. The commission's responsibilities include enforcing prohibitions against anti-competitive business practices and overseeing merger control.

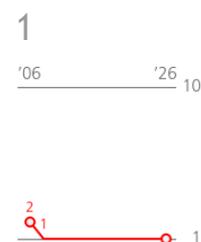
Eritrea's membership in COMESA, with its regional competition law regime, has thus indirectly introduced competition law into the country. However, the Eritrean leadership consistently ignores these laws, resulting in continued control of Eritrea's economy by the ruling PFDJ and its enterprises in sectors such as trade, retail, construction, cash crops, and mining of copper and other precious metals. The PFDJ also maintains exclusive joint-venture agreements with Chinese corporations for mining activities in the country. This monopolistic conglomerate, formed by the government, the PFDJ and the military, leaves no room for fair competition. The Hdri Trust Fund, overseen by PFDJ Financial Director Hagos Ghebrehiwet (also known as Hagos Kisha), controls all relevant companies operating in Eritrea. The government has not implemented any measures to prevent the emergence of monopolies and has made no effort to rectify inefficiencies in the monopolistic structures that were intentionally established to stabilize the ruling elite's rule over the country and its economy.

Eritrea remains the only African country that has not joined the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

All foreign trade and trade in foreign currencies is under state supervision and control. Withdrawals of local currency (nakfa) and foreign currency from bank accounts have been severely restricted. Import-export trade is controlled by the PFDJ-owned Red Sea Corporation, while contraband activities – mainly run by the military – persist.

Eritrea is the only country that has not joined the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). In 2020, Eritrea established a Horn of Africa Cooperation Agreement with Somalia and Ethiopia; however, this did not improve trade relations, and relations with Ethiopia's government deteriorated following the 2022 Pretoria Peace Agreement, rendering the agreement obsolete. There has been no trade between Eritrea and Ethiopia since Eritrea closed its borders in early 2019. Nevertheless, Eritrean troops looted goods in Tigray throughout the Eritrean army's participation in the armed conflict and afterward.

Competition policy



Liberalization of foreign trade

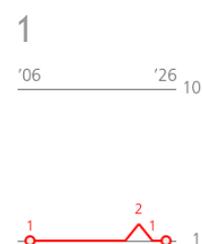


Farm laborers and local merchants are prohibited from transporting agricultural goods from one zoba (region) to another; attempts to do so risk confiscation. The military is involved in seizing such goods and selling them on the black market for significant profit. Tessenei, a town on the border with Sudan, remains a major smuggling hub where corrupt Eritrean and Sudanese officials collaborate in the illicit trade.

The government continues its policy of alleged self-reliance and isolation from global free-market trade, but maintains an undocumented shadow economy through the Hdri Trust Funds' activities.

There are three state-controlled banks in Eritrea – the Bank of Eritrea, the Commercial Bank and the Commercial and Housing Bank – while the PFDJ runs Himbol Financial Services. Himbol handles remittances and tax payments from diaspora Eritreans, which are channeled through Eritrean embassies and consulates abroad or through appointed government “money collectors.” Private banks are prohibited, and there is no free capital market. Eritrean banks operate in a severely outdated manner; there are no ATMs in the country, and online banking is not available. Checks are the most modern money-transfer method allowed.

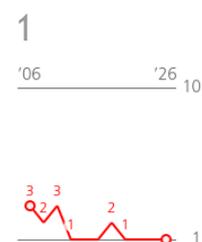
Banking system



8 | Monetary and fiscal stability

The government continued to pursue an irrational financial policy during the period under review, fixing the nakfa to the U.S. dollar at a rate of ERN 15 to USD 1. This decision has severely overvalued the nakfa for decades. The government maintained firm control over import-export trade, and the foreign currency market was extremely limited. Eritrea's monetary policy is controlled by the president and Hagos “Kisha” Ghebrehiwot, the PFDJ's head of financial affairs. The Bank of Eritrea has been dysfunctional for many years and does not have the capacity to shape the country's monetary policy.

Monetary stability



The IMF did not publish an inflation rate for Eritrea in 2024 because of a lack of data. Hard currency reserves remained very low, and dependence on diaspora remittances continued for both the government and private consumers. Because of the chronic scarcity of hard currency and limits on importing essential consumer goods and spare parts, numerous corrupt government and military officials engaged in contraband activities that undermined the official austerity policy. The country's chronic food scarcity seemed to be alleviated by above-average annual rains during the period under review, but because of a lack of data, it is unclear whether this led to falling consumer prices for basic goods.

Statistical data on Eritrea’s macroeconomic stability are either nonexistent or unreliable because the country has not published a budget since independence. In addition, all significant economic enterprises are controlled by the PFDJ or the military and are not subject to financial oversight, including those in the mining sector.

The local currency, the nakfa, remained artificially fixed to the U.S. dollar at a severely overvalued rate of ERN 15 to USD 1, a policy that has been in place for decades. In 2015, the government implemented a currency reform requiring all citizens to exchange their nakfa notes for new ones. Since then, access to cash has been greatly restricted. The currency black market, which employs the “hawala” system, still facilitates diaspora remittances, but its activities have been restricted because cash flows within the country are severely limited.

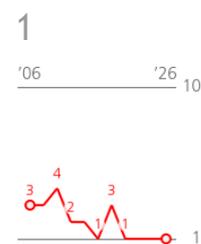
9 | Private Property

Property rights and regulations are formally defined by law. However, because there is no constitution or rule of law, there is no protection against arbitrary confiscation of land and property. Although the 1994 land reform declares that all land belongs to the state, highland farmers are usually granted usufruct rights based on customary law. No major resettlement projects occurred during the period under review, but people are generally at risk of arbitrary expulsion from land over which they hold usufruct rights. Individuals and families suspected of sympathizing with opposition movements in exile are targeted by the military and PFDJ leaders, who can confiscate their property with impunity.

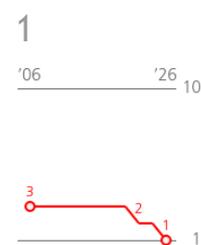
The western lowlands have been the focus of several resettlement programs in which the indigenous population was not compensated for the loss of its land. Similarly, the eastern lowlands and highland escarpments on the Red Sea coast have undergone resettlement programs in which members of the indigenous Saho population were not compensated. This lack of compensation also extends to those who have lost their land to the military, which has established cash-crop farms run by conscripts, primarily in the Gash-Barka region. The government’s handling of property rights lacks transparency and is unpredictable.

In 2022, Australian company Danakali Ltd. sold its share of the Colluli Mining Share Company (CMSC) to a Chinese company. This decision was prompted by a failure to realize plans to construct a potassium mine covering 400 square kilometers in the Southern Red Sea region. The local Afar population has raised concerns that their customary land usufruct rights may be disregarded once the joint-venture with Eritrea’s mining company, the Eritrean National Mining Corporation (ENAMCO), becomes operational. During Eritrea’s involvement in the Tigray war (2020 – 2022) houses belonging to family members of draft dodgers were sealed by the government to force them out of hiding.

Fiscal stability

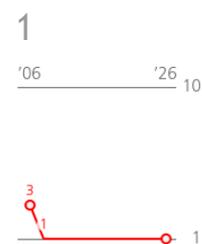


Property rights



The government's hostile policy toward the private business sector continued as usual, and all economically significant companies remained under the ownership of the PFDJ, the government or the military. Foreign companies seeking gold, other precious metals or raw materials must enter into joint ventures with government companies to obtain a license. Currently, China is the only country that remains active in Eritrea's mining sector; all companies based in democratic countries have left. Outside the mining sector, foreign investment is discouraged. The government has a record of extracting money from Eritreans in the diaspora for investment projects that fail to be finalized, for example, in the housing construction sector. Hardly any private companies remain in Eritrea. Those that do are mainly small enterprises and shops, and they cannot convert profits into hard currency to purchase spare parts and other materials. Smuggling of goods is common, with such operations run by high-ranking military personnel and PFDJ cadres.

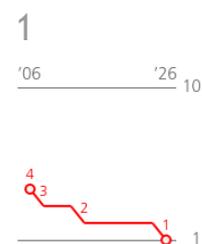
Private enterprise



10 | Welfare Regime

The state does not provide a social security system that covers risks such as unemployment, illness, old age or disabilities, except for the Martyr's Trust Fund, which raises money from diaspora Eritreans for the benefit of the relatives of fighters and soldiers killed in action. These funds are distributed in a nontransparent manner, and many potential recipients have died of old age. The provision of social security is left to traditional solidarity networks based on clan and enda (extended family) structures. However, these traditional security networks have been weakened substantially by the unlimited-term national service program, which has now been in place for 20 years. Most Eritrean men and many women of working age – 18 to 50 and older – are conscripted. They are thereby prevented from earning enough income to care for themselves and their nuclear families, let alone their extended families. The state does not provide compensation for the relatives of conscripts. Even traditional solidarity networks are under scrutiny by the ruling elite because they are based on ethnic, clan and religious affiliations, which are seen as holding the potential to develop into political resistance movements in collaboration with the diaspora's political opposition movements. Consequently, the only options left for many Eritreans are to flee the country to sustain themselves abroad or to depend on diaspora remittances from their relatives to survive. Meanwhile, a transnational network has evolved in which the diaspora is responsible for caring for relatives at home to compensate for the lack of social security provided by the state.

Social safety nets



Eritrea has a functioning basic health care program, including malaria prevention. According to the World Bank, 4.2% of GDP was spent on health care in 2021. However, the system is plagued by growing institutional weakness because of the significant exodus of doctors and other qualified medical personnel in recent years. There is no adequate treatment for common diseases such as diabetes and cancer. As a result, many Eritreans seek to leave the country for medical treatment if they have

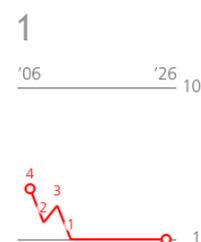
the financial means and can obtain an exit visa for this purpose. Eritrea's transnational institutions (embassies and consulates) have turned this into a new source of income by providing patients with "counselors" who charge them large sums of hard currency for their advice.

In principle, all social groups have equal access to the limited services provided by the state, including basic health care, education and food coupons in urban areas. Schools and a limited number of health care centers are concentrated in cities and towns dominated by the Tigrinya ethnic group, while other ethnic groups – especially pastoral and agropastoral social groups – are excluded from many services. Food coupons are often withheld for political reasons. In practice, women, Muslims and ethnic minorities are under-represented in higher education and the administration, which is dominated by Tigrinya men. Gross enrollment at the primary level was 83% in 2022, with a completion rate of 57%. Secondary school enrollment stood at 46%, and the tertiary rate was just 2% in 2016 (the latest years with data provided by the World Bank). The literacy rate was allegedly 77% in 2018, but is likely much lower because of low school enrollment rates. All these numbers are highly unreliable.

The proportion of girls attending school in each age cohort is significantly lower than that of boys. Structural disparities exist between urban and rural areas. Many qualified teachers have left the country because they would otherwise be forced to work without pay as national service recruits. They have regularly been replaced by young college graduates who lack technical qualifications, motivation or experience, and who themselves are attempting to leave the country rather than continuing to serve as unpaid teachers for indefinite periods. This situation has contributed to a steady decline in the quality of instruction. During Eritrea's involvement in the armed conflict in Tigray, many young people went into hiding to avoid conscription, leading them to drop out of school.

Jehovah's Witnesses are denied all civil rights, while Christian and Muslim denominational minorities face persecution. All students nationwide complete their 12th year of schooling at the Sawa military training camp, where female students often experience sexual harassment. This reality discourages female students from attending school. Only a small minority of students who pass 12th grade gain access to tertiary education at institutions known as colleges, while the majority are conscripted directly into the army and national service. As a result, a significant number of citizens are deprived of the opportunity to pursue personal careers. According to the World Bank, women comprised 46.7% of the total labor force in 2011 (no more recent data are available). However, the Eritrean Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare has never released any data regarding the labor market. Many women either serve in the military as national service conscripts or engage in informal sector labor such as domestic or service work.

Equal opportunity



11 | Economic Performance

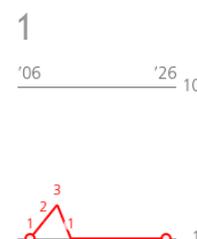
The African Development Bank estimates that the national debt-to-GDP ratio stood at 165.1% in 2019, 175.6% in 2021 and 164% in 2022, indicating severe debt distress. The shortage of basic consumer goods persists, and the government has neither invested in existing state-run factories nor created new business opportunities. The government has been unable to import sufficient fuel to generate a stable electricity supply, and investment in renewable energy has been limited, with only two hybrid solar-diesel mini-grids operating in the country. The use of national service conscripts as forced laborers in return for only minimal pay continued during the period under review. Due to Eritrea's involvement in the armed conflict in Tigray, a general mobilization was announced in fall 2022 and has not been revoked, which has further fueled the ongoing mass exodus. The continued large outflow is largely attributable to the poor macroeconomic situation and the impossibility of making a decent living in Eritrea for most of the population. The current situation is a vicious circle in which the government's misguided economic policies, including recruiting the workforce into national service, fuel the exodus. This further undermines macroeconomic stability over the long term and cements the government's dependence on remittances. Hopes for political and economic reforms as a result of the reconciliation with Ethiopia in 2018 did not materialize, and bilateral relations have since deteriorated significantly, with closed borders and no trade agreements or other measures facilitating economic cooperation in place.

The command economy controlled by the PFDJ and the military remained in very poor shape during the review period. Copper mining at the Bisha mine (a joint-venture of the Chinese Zijing Mining Company and the Eritrean National Mining Corporation) was the only source of stable income. The World Bank has not released figures on Eritrea's economic growth rate since 2011 due to a lack of data. It appears that the government still receives financial support from Saudi Arabia and possibly from Russia, as relations between Eritrea and Russia have warmed since the start of Russia's war against Ukraine, while relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have deteriorated.

Shortcomings in the electricity supply and infrastructure neglect persisted during the period under review, and no maintenance measures were applied.

Asmara was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2017, but no action has been taken to halt the deterioration of the historic structures in the city center. Similarly, the once-vibrant port city of Massawa is being left to decay. Essential consumer goods remain scarce, with most imports consisting of contraband consumer goods and fuel brought in by the military. Looting continued after the Pretoria Agreement in November 2022, which ended the war in Tigray, but parts of Tigrayan territory remain occupied by Eritrean forces. The formal economy is restricted to small

Output strength



businesses, and there is a complete lack of reliable statistical data due to an utter lack of transparency and the government's failure to produce a state budget or other statistical information. The ongoing militarization of society, which compels the majority of the adult population to either work in the national service for meager compensation or serve as soldiers, has distorted the labor market and continues to drive the mass departure of young people and educated individuals, thereby further weakening the state's institutions. Diaspora remittances can be used only for consumption, and private investments are heavily restricted.

12 | Sustainability

The government's environmental policy remained unchanged during the period under review. While environmental protection is promoted in theory, it does not seem to be a government priority in practice. Pollution levels are low because industrial production is minimal and exploitation of marine and coastal resources is limited. However, chronic shortages of fuel and kerosene have forced people to rely on firewood for cooking for extended periods, even in urban areas, leading to country-wide deforestation. Contraband trade in illegally harvested wood, with military involvement, is common. The informal production of charcoal for sale by poor households remains widespread and is largely tolerated by the government. It is unknown whether pollution created by the Bisha mine's activities in the Gash-Barka region is addressed appropriately because access to the area is heavily restricted. Plans to use alternative energy sources such as solar panels have progressed but are still constrained by import restrictions.

Data on public education expenditure were not available for the period under review, but spending likely remained low at about 2% of GDP. According to 2018 UNICEF estimates, the percentage of students with a minimum level of literacy and numeracy in grades 3 and 5 in that year was respectively 46% and 38%.

Most students have no desire to reach 12th grade and finish secondary education, which is held at the Sawa military center and boarding school. Enrollment rates are especially low among disadvantaged minority groups attending mother-tongue primary schools, especially in the case of pastoral and agropastoral groups. These mother-tongue schools are situated in remote rural areas and suffer from severe shortages of personnel and facilities. They are primarily staffed by unqualified and unpaid national service teachers, many of whom are themselves seeking to flee the country. The military often targets and conscripts underage students in rural areas without seeking parents' consent. In urban and rural areas alike, early school dropout rates have been rising. Only about 2% of each age cohort proceeds to tertiary education, while the remainder are compelled to join the open-ended national service, which offers vocational training to some individuals. Consequently, many Eritrean youths prefer to drop out of school or flee to neighboring countries as unaccompanied minors before turning 18 in order to evade conscription.

Environmental policy

2

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Education policy / R&D

1

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During the Tigray war, even more students went into hiding to avoid being conscripted as soldiers. In 2019, the literacy rate was estimated at 76.6%, though the functional literacy rate is likely much lower. The absence of paid employment opportunities, which is attributable to the implementation of the open-ended national service, has undermined students' motivation to pursue their studies. No investments were made in research and development during the period under review, and the University of Asmara remained closed. Research is seen as risky and challenging, as scholars are required to obtain permission from the president's office before engaging in any research project. Furthermore, the subject must have the authorities' approval. Tertiary education is limited to institutions known as colleges, which do not confer internationally recognized degrees, and only a small number of students have access to these educational facilities.

Governance

I. Level of Difficulty

When the current government came to power in 1991, it inherited structural constraints from the 30-year struggle for liberation, including poor infrastructure, widespread poverty and illiteracy. Another structural constraint is the dry climate, which limits the productivity of rain-fed agriculture. However, the government also inherited a fairly developed and diversified industrial sector that had been created under Italian colonization and continues to form the heart of the country's industrial production.

The development efforts of the 1990s ended with the outbreak of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war (1998 – 2000), which exacted a heavy toll on the population and destroyed parts of the newly built infrastructure. Since the end of the “border war,” the government has neither loosened political, social or economic restraints nor shown interest in policies that would lead to democratization or a market economy. Indeed, the government actively works against democratization, claiming that educated people and merchants are the primary enemies of its so-called development strategy. It has imprisoned or exiled hundreds of thousands of citizens who have criticized the government's economic policies, most prominently former Finance Minister Berhane Abrehe, who was arrested and died in jail after publishing a book criticizing the president's economic policy.

Because of misguided economic policies, the lack of democratic transformation and the militarization of society, Eritrea has continually created new constraints that hinder sustainable development. For more than two decades, the government has forced its population into indefinite national service, a policy that has resulted in widespread poverty and driven hundreds of thousands of Eritreans to flee. The continuing exodus over the past two decades has led to a severe shortage of educated labor and has critically weakened state institutions and public services.

Since the 2018 peace agreement with Ethiopia, no trade or economic cooperation agreements have been put in place, and relations with the government in Addis Ababa have deteriorated since the end of the Tigray war in 2022.

The government's policies impose additional constraints by strictly limiting opportunities for entrepreneurship; tolerating contraband trade and human trafficking by military officers; and severely hampering higher education and, increasingly, the

Structural
constraints

9



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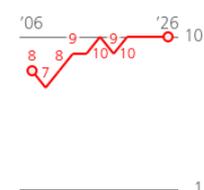
rest of the education sector. Through these failed policies, the government is increasing the risk of state failure from year to year and depriving generations of Eritreans of the ability to make a dignified living in their home country. Revenues created by the mining sector are not used to benefit the population or for investment. They probably end up in the coffers of government and military officials, including the president himself. Sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council in 2009 and 2011 were lifted in late 2018 after Eritrea's reconciliation with Ethiopia and Djibouti. However, in 2021, the United States imposed economic sanctions against a number of Eritrean bodies, including the PFDJ, the Eritrean Defense Forces, the Red Sea Trading Corporation and the Hdri Trust Fund because of Eritrea's involvement in the Tigray war. The effect of these unilateral sanctions has likely been limited.

Civil society organizations such as NGOs, labor unions and organized interest groups of all kinds are prohibited in Eritrea. Attempts to create independent civil society organizations have been suppressed since the state's inception. The national unions for women, youth and students as well as the workers' confederation are remnants of the former mass organizations of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and are effectively branches of the government. They have become increasingly inactive in recent years. On the other hand, traditional civil society networks, which rely on elaborate mediation procedures conducted by religious and local elders, have deep roots in Eritrean culture and continue to serve as a means of resolving conflicts between different interest groups in the absence of a democratic judicial system. Additionally, these networks have acted as the main support system because of the absence of a state-run welfare program. However, the establishment of PFDJ-loyal community courts in 2004 has weakened these traditional mediation networks somewhat, particularly in urban areas. Furthermore, the militarization of society through the compulsory national service program, in place for a decade and a half, has eroded traditional civil society networks within Eritrea by disconnecting individuals from their social ties and preventing them from establishing and caring for families. Nevertheless, a significant number of Eritreans living in the diaspora still feel obligated to send remittances to their extended families in their homeland. These private remittances function as the only social safety net for Eritreans and provide a lifeline for a growing number of households.

According to government dogma, there are no conflicting interests among the various ethnic and religious groups in Eritrea, and the people are unified under the PFDJ's doctrine of "one people, one heart." In reality, there are cleavages between the dominant ethnic group, the Tigrinya, and smaller ethnic groups that feel disadvantaged and excluded from the limited services provided by the state, such as education and employment in the state administration or the military leadership. The existing tensions between different segments of society are officially denied by the government. However, informally, the government applies a divide-and-rule strategy to strengthen its power base. Muslims also feel discriminated against, since Arabic, their lingua franca, is suppressed in educational institutions and is not used in the

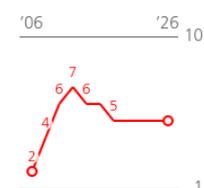
Civil society traditions

10



Conflict intensity

5



state administration. The Tigrinya ruling elite and President Isaias portray any criticism or protest from Muslim PFDJ leaders and intellectuals as being jihadist or terrorist attempts at resistance, and some Christian intellectuals in the diaspora follow this line of argument.

II. Governance Performance

14 | Steering Capability

The government's goals and strategies focus solely on regime survival. Its long-term goals and the strategies it has implemented run counter to the establishment of democracy and a market-based economy. President Isaias has made clear several times that he has no intention of standing for election or giving up power in the foreseeable future. It remains unclear how his succession will be organized. There are rumors that he plans to install his eldest son, Abraham Isaias, as his possible successor.

Eritrea's political leadership has ruled out a market economy as a viable model for the country. Instead, the government's ideology rests on militarism, state control of the economy, and collectivization of the population within the framework of unlimited-term national service. The system's inherent lack of sustainability has led to rising corruption and a decline in values among the leadership, high- and middle-ranking military officers, and segments of the population. The military's involvement in the war in Tigray, during which Eritrean soldiers committed severe atrocities against civilians and engaged in large-scale plunder, has worsened the situation. The government has continued to ignore the negative impacts of its policies, such as a steadily deteriorating economy, a lack of essential consumer goods, widespread poverty and an ongoing mass exodus. Despite such circumstances, the leadership seems unaware of or heedless of the long-term consequences of its policies – a fact that may result in state failure if policies are not changed in the near future.

The government lacks clear implementation policies. The politics of the day are contingent on the shifting moods and attitudes of President Isaias and his small circle of advisers, who appear oblivious to the unsustainability of their “development model.” Despite the deteriorating economy and the mass exodus from the country, the government has no plans to reform its policies by introducing a market economy or pursuing a path of democratization. It continues to adhere to its policy of achieving development and social justice solely through self-reliance and the sacrifices of the population. The primary instrument for the government's development policy remains the recruitment of the working-age population into unpaid, indefinite-term national service. These recruits are expected to enhance the country's infrastructure

Question
Score

Prioritization



Implementation



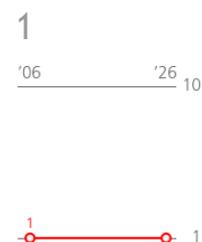
by constructing dust roads, micro-dams and similar projects. By employing this policy of compulsory labor while simultaneously suppressing any private sector economic initiatives, the government has not only failed to accomplish its objective of developing the country but also driven the nation into a profound economic and social crisis. The government has increasingly tolerated the mass exodus of people fleeing national service and has regarded Eritrean refugees abroad as a reliable source of income, coercing them to pay a 2% diaspora tax imposed on all Eritreans overseas. Eritrean embassies worldwide compel deserters from national service to sign a “letter of regret,” promising to pay the tax, which is levied even on social welfare benefits provided by Western governments. The government depends on private remittances sent by refugees and diaspora members to compensate for the domestic lack of a welfare system and income opportunities. Periodically, the government uses the mass exodus as a political tool with Western donors who have expressed a willingness to finance aid programs in Eritrea with the goal of curbing the outflow of refugees. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and possibly Russia supply the government with significant resources because of their strategic interests in the region.

Since the 2001 political crisis, the government has shown no willingness or ability to engage in policy learning. The policymaking process is controlled by the president and a small group of advisers. There is no constitution, no functional parliament, no independent press and no NGOs. The cabinet of ministers lacks decision-making power and has not convened in years. Thus, the leadership has not been challenged in its decision-making and continues to ignore serious problems arising from its failed development policies and the militarization of society.

The peace agreement with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed did not lead to demobilization. On the contrary, both leaders engaged in a protracted conflict with the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) in Tigray that lasted from late 2020 through November 2022. President Isaias and his followers in the diaspora still consider Eritrea to be a model for other African countries, ignoring the dire straits of a population forced to flee the country en masse.

The regime has perfected its capacity for learning only insofar as it compensates for its own economic failures by deriving income from foreign sources seeking advantages for their own political agendas. During the so-called refugee crisis, European governments were Eritrea’s major financiers. Later, Saudi Arabia and the UAE became the major financiers, but relations with the UAE have deteriorated in recent years. Instead, the Eritrean regime has strengthened its relations with the Russian government by voting in favor of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in U.N. votes. Reportedly, Russia is interested in building a military base in a port city in Eritrea, potentially Massawa, which would result in financial advantages for the Eritrean government. It is unclear how stable Eritrean-Russian bonds will be in the future.

Policy learning

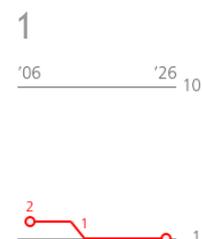


15 | Resource Efficiency

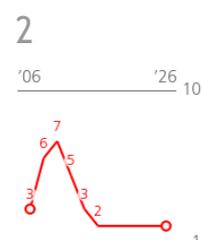
Substantial portions of the state administration are staffed by national service recruits who are compelled to work for pocket money. Since 2002, the government has enlisted high school graduates into the national service and employed them in the administration to carry out routine tasks daily. The top levels of the administration are occupied by older ex-combatants who often have only a basic education. This arrangement has significantly hindered the efficiency of public services. Increasing numbers of qualified personnel trapped in the national service program, including teachers and doctors, have fled the country, leading to a continual weakening of state institutions and public services. Despite their advanced age and lack of necessary skills, veterans from the struggle for independence continue to be employed in the administration, while a considerable portion of the younger generation is denied vocational training or higher education and instead used as a low-cost labor force for infrastructure projects, military-run cash-crop farms or within the administration itself. In recent years, it has increasingly been reported that every college graduate has been required to serve as a teacher for one or more years, often providing instruction in subjects for which they are not qualified, to compensate for the severe shortage of teachers as the previous generation of educated teachers grows older. Eritrea has not made its state budget public since independence, and there is no auditing of government expenditures. Regional administrations operate in a decentralized manner, with civilian administrators and military commanders overseeing the country’s four military command zones. Each zone is intended to be self-sufficient, gathering funds both legally and illegally through land and trade taxation, as well as through the illicit trade of consumer goods and spare parts across borders. While a basic public health service exists, a significant number of qualified health personnel have left the country, further diminishing the sector’s effectiveness. The mass exodus resulting from the mandatory national service represents an enormous waste of human resources, as educated individuals attempt to leave the country rather than endure forced labor within the current system. Financial proceeds from mining enterprises have not been properly accounted for or used to address urgent problems such as energy shortages and the availability of affordable food items.

Policymaking is concentrated in the hands of the president and a select group of PFDJ advisers. Key figures in this group have in the past included presidential adviser Yemane Gebreab and Hagos “Kisha” Gebrehiwot, head of the PFDJ’s financial department. However, state media last mentioned Yemane in 2019, and he has not been seen accompanying Foreign Minister Osman Saleh on visits abroad in recent years, a practice that had been common for many years. No explanation has been given for his “disappearance.” The government’s policy objectives have become increasingly uncertain since the 2001 political crisis, when Isaias cracked down on PFDJ reformists and the free press. The military maintains significant influence and

Efficient use of assets



Policy coordination

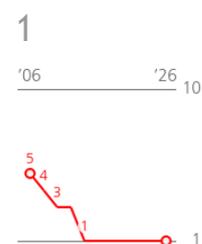


plays crucial roles in the economy, contraband trade and the human trafficking of Eritreans seeking to escape the country. Its importance has grown further following Eritrea's involvement in the armed conflict in Tigray and its occupation of Tigrayan territory, especially in the border areas.

The government's overall policy is coherent in principle, but only negatively: Its core policy – the militarization of society within the framework of a command economy based on forced labor – has had adverse effects on all other policies, such as those relating to economic development and social welfare, and has triggered an alarming population outflow. Coordination among the various ministries is poor, and there have been no official meetings of the cabinet in recent years. The president's unpredictable decision-making often depends on his unstable moods, and most state institutions are affected by corruption. The post of minister of defense was still vacant in January 2025. The president's office continued to appease high-ranking military officers by tacitly tolerating all the generals' methods of self-enrichment, including contraband trade, human trafficking, the use of forced labor to reap private profits, and bribes of all kinds.

The government has effectively abandoned its stated goal of containing corruption, and military personnel and civil servants engaged in such practices are usually not prosecuted. State spending and income are not audited due to a complete lack of checks and balances. This includes revenue derived from copper and other precious-metal mining, which began in 2011. All major companies in the country (engaged in trade, construction, retail, etc.) are controlled by the PFDJ's Hdri Trust Fund, which is "audited" by one person, the PFDJ's financial head. Eritrea ranks last worldwide on measures of press freedom, and state media are barred from reporting negative developments. There is no public accountability for mismanagement or corruption, and even the military-led special courts, which were supposed to handle corruption cases in the past, have remained largely inactive. High-ranking military officers continue to engage in contraband trade and human trafficking. They accept bribes to smuggle young Eritreans out of the country and work with corrupt Sudanese officials and members of the Rashaida tribe to traffic goods and refugees. They also took advantage of Eritrea's involvement in the armed conflict in Tigray to carry out extensive looting, targeting public infrastructure and private household goods.

Anti-corruption policy



16 | Consensus-Building

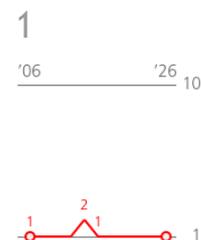
None of the few political actors who remained in decision-making positions in Eritrea during the review period wanted democracy; on the contrary, they seemed determined to continue autocratic rule. Consequently, Eritrea is ranked last worldwide on measures of press freedom, and state media sources remain prohibited from reporting on any negative developments. There is no public accountability for mismanagement or corruption, and even the military-led special courts, which were ostensibly intended to handle corruption cases, have been inactive in recent years.

The government continues to operate a command economy based on the systematic use of forced labor by national service recruits and has no plans to liberalize the economy, which remains firmly under the control of the military and the PFDJ elite. There are also no plans to reform the national service system or reduce its length within the context of a demobilization program. Despite the 2022 Pretoria Peace Agreement, Eritrean troops remained in Tigray during the review period, occupying parts of its territory. Reconciliation with Ethiopia's federal government did not lead to any economic reforms. Borders remained closed during the period under review, and no trade agreements were reached. Eritrea remained the only country that had not joined the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

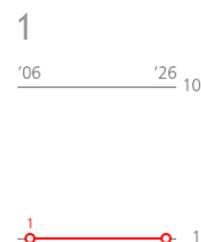
The country's key political actors – meaning the president and his top PFDJ advisers – remained firmly opposed to the establishment of democracy during the period under review. Political actors who had once promoted reform from within the PFDJ (the so-called G-15 group) were still in jail without access to due process, with few of them probably still alive. Other critics of the government's policy have been forced into exile or remained silent because of the authoritarian political system. Former Minister of Finance Berhane Abrehe, who published a book criticizing the president's policies and was arrested in 2018, died in jail without standing trial.

The opposition in exile is fragmented, and no opposition party has developed a convincing political program for implementing democracy. A new opposition movement called Brigade N'Hamedu or "Blue Revolution" emerged around 2023, and has organized protests that were partly violent against pro-government festivals in democratic countries in Europe, North America, Australia and Israel. Its main aim has been to curb repressive transnational activities carried out by the PFDJ's diaspora institutions. Eritrea's four Catholic bishops remained critical of the government, but their range of action was severely restricted. Because of extreme repression, the government has successfully suppressed any potential resistance within the country.

Consensus on goals



Anti-democratic actors



The government denies the presence of cleavages along ethnic and religious lines in Eritrea. By claiming that all societal groups have equal rights and form an inseparable unity of Eritrean nationalists, the state conceals the structural discrimination faced by ethnic and religious minorities. The administration, the education system and the military are dominated by the Tigrinya ethnic group, which comprises about 50% of the population. While the entire population is subject to political oppression and human rights abuses, there is structural discrimination against the other eight ethnic groups, which are predominantly Muslim. The political leadership instrumentalizes ethnic and religious cleavages to maintain its power and political control. It also plays individual clans within ethnic groups against one another by dividing them into alleged government loyalists and opponents. On the one hand, the political leadership declares the existing cleavages to be taboo, while on the other hand, it exacerbates them by marginalizing pastoral groups, using the western and eastern lowland regions for large cash-crop agricultural projects, suppressing Arabic in the administration and as a medium of instruction, and pursuing a controversial mother-tongue policy. The existing cleavages are evident in the diaspora, where most newly arrived refugees organize into religious or region- or ethnicity-based communities.

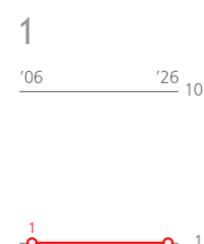
The government has prevented the emergence of an independent civil society since it came to power, and has banned all NGOs and other civic groups except the former Eritrea People's Liberation Front (EPLF) mass organizations (the National Union of Eritrean Women, the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students, and the Confederation of Eritrean Workers). However, these organizations are under strict government control and play no role in representing the interests of the groups they ostensibly represent. Their purpose is to impose the government's ideology on their members, although they did not engage in any significant activities during the period under review. Traditional civil society, represented by religious and local elders and mediators, is still excluded from political decision-making. Private charities and religious civil society groups are prohibited. The PFDJ claims to represent the entire society and denies the existence of other interest groups.

Historical injustices date to Ethiopia's annexation of Eritrea and the independence struggle from 1961 to 1991. The current regime has also committed numerous atrocities against the population, some of which have been partly documented by the U.N. Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea. During the war in Tigray (2020 – 2022), the Eritrean army committed numerous atrocities against civilians. Although it offered no public justification for this policy, the government has described Tigrayans as enemies of the Eritrean people, especially since the border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia (1998 – 2000), which the then-TPLF-led Ethiopian government won. A future government will need to reconcile the regime's current victims with the perpetrators and work to rebuild trust with Eritrea's neighbors.

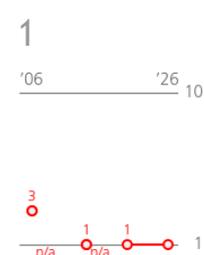
Cleavage / conflict management



Public consultation



Reconciliation



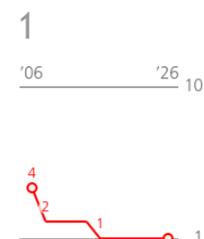
17 | International Cooperation

The government aims to achieve economic and social development through a strategy of self-reliance – a status it evidently intends to reach by recruiting the working-age population into the unlimited-term, poorly paid national service program, in which recruits perform coerced labor for government- and military-led enterprises. Generally, the leadership considers international cooperation to be undesirable, believing that it creates dependency. One purpose of the government’s refusal to cooperate with international donor organizations is to deny expatriates access to the countryside, thus hiding effects of its misguided policies such as malnutrition, mass displacements and the use of forced labor in infrastructure projects. Foreigners, including diplomats, are not allowed to leave Asmara without gaining prior permission from the Eritrean authorities. The European Union ended cooperation with Eritrea due to Eritrea’s involvement in the Tigray war, citing, among other things, a lack of government interest in development cooperation. Foreign investment is tolerated in the mining sector, but China is currently the only active foreign investor, since companies from Canada and Australia sold their shares to Chinese enterprises. Mining companies are required to enter into joint ventures with the Eritrean National Mining Corporation (ENAMCO) and abide by its rules and regulations. Eritrea’s president has always sought unconditional support from foreign authoritarian governments, and, during the period under review, his government courted Russia in order to garner support from the Kremlin.

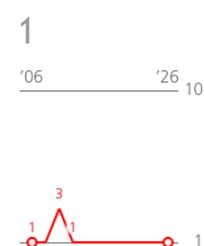
The Eritrean government has no policies aimed at democratic and market reforms. It has severed relations with bilateral and multilateral donors and expelled all foreign NGOs from the country. In the mining sector, a few Chinese companies have made local investments while Canadian and Australian firms have withdrawn; otherwise, there are scarcely any foreign investors. The sole official investment agreement is with Italy, yet this appears outdated despite recent confirmations by the current right-wing Italian government that it aspires to closer cooperation with the PFDJ government.

In 2018, Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki signed a peace and friendship agreement, pledging to work together for regional development. As a result, the U.N. Security Council terminated all sanctions against Eritrea in November 2018, and the country regained its full membership in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) regional organization. However, by the end of that same year, the borders between the countries had been closed again, and no economic cooperation agreements have since been established. Instead, Abiy and Isaias formed a strategic military partnership against their common adversary, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) in Tigray, which once held significant power in Ethiopia’s government before Abiy’s rise to power.

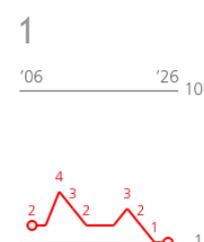
Effective use of support



Credibility



Regional cooperation



Eritrea was involved in Ethiopia's war against the TPLF leadership from November 2020 to November 2022. This conflict resulted in a human catastrophe, with approximately half a million casualties due to mass killings and forced starvation. During the period under review, relations between President Isaias and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed deteriorated for several reasons: First, Isaias was not content with the termination of the Tigray war because it did not lead to the dissolution of the TPLF, which he considers his arch-enemy, as a political organization. Second, Abiy Ahmed's claims that Ethiopia, as a large nation, had a legitimate right to access the sea irritated the Eritrean government. In 2024, Eritrea, Egypt and Somalia entered a tripartite agreement to fight terrorism in the region, which could be seen as an attempt to isolate Ethiopia, which had fallen out with the Somali government after offering the unofficial government of Somaliland recognition as an independent state in return for a lease of parts of its coast, where Ethiopia could then establish a port. Egypt has had tensions with Ethiopia for many years due to a water dispute related to Ethiopia's construction of the Grand Renaissance Dam.

Regarding Sudan's ongoing civil war, the Eritrean government supports General Abdelfattah al-Burhan, the leader of the Sudanese Sovereign Council.

Strategic Outlook

President Isaias has ruled Eritrea autocratically since 1992. All ministries receive their orders from the president's office, and he has sown mistrust among cabinet members through his Machiavellian style of rule. Since 2001, the Eritrean government has pursued a destructive strategy that has blocked democratization, strangled the economy through control by the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) and the military, and militarized society to an extremely high degree. The practice of indefinite conscription into the army and national service has continued unabated, and hundreds of thousands of Eritreans have served for up to two decades without earning noteworthy salaries. Between November 2020 and November 2022, they were forced to participate in the civil war against the neighboring Tigray region as allies of Ethiopia's prime minister, and as of the close of the review period, an unknown number of Eritrean army members were still occupying Tigrayan soil. The ruling elite has consolidated its decade-long stranglehold on political and economic power through harsh repression, and not even a façade of democratic institutions and mechanisms remains. There is no active parliamentary body, no functioning judiciary, and even the cabinet of ministers has not convened in years. Instead, the president continues to rule the country by decree.

Although the PFDJ government claims that Eritrea is a secular state, it has placed strict limits on the exercise of religion. In January 2025, President Isaias, government officials and members of the diplomatic corps celebrated the enthronement of Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Basilios, which angered Muslim communities inside and outside the country, who feel marginalized and not treated equally. Some intellectuals claim that Isaias's sympathetic behavior toward Orthodox Christians in recent years aims to ensure their loyalty so he can hand over power to his son Abraham with the support of the Orthodox clergy, which would minimize popular resistance. The international community should be aware of Isaias's plans to install his son as his successor, which would most likely perpetuate Eritrea's autocratic political system.

The government has consistently refused to abolish the open-ended national service or pursue demobilization and economic liberalization. The regime has used refugees in the expanding diaspora as a source of support for the state budget by levying a 2% diaspora tax often collected through coercion. Diaspora remittances are remarkably substantial and constitute more than one-third of the national budget. Even more important, the majority of the population inside Eritrea depends on private remittances from relatives in the diaspora for survival. The ongoing exodus has resulted in weakened state institutions and deteriorating services. The health and education sectors have suffered greatly as teachers, doctors and nurses have fled. The government has emphasized that, even during peacetime, it expects the population to make sacrifices as a remnant of the struggle for independence, while high-ranking military officers and other officials from the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) directly benefit from the forced labor of national service recruits. The system also fuels contraband trade because of the suppression of private sector activities and has left the rural population in a desperate situation. The international community should be aware that the government does not accept development aid with conditionalities or any interference in its political decision-making process.

The mass departure of economically active youth hinders any uprising against the government. Most young Eritreans are seeking to leave the country, where harsh surveillance and repression make protest impossible. However, a growing number of Eritreans in the diaspora have organized demonstrations against the autocratic regime in Asmara and against its transnational institutions in democratic countries.

Despite income from the mining industry and the inflow of undisclosed funds from Saudi Arabia and other countries, the government has been unable to provide reliable services. It has also been both unable and unwilling to contain widespread poverty and malnutrition, or to provide basic consumer goods at affordable prices. In addition, the private economy has remained suppressed.

The president's popularity levels have remained extremely low, especially among disadvantaged minorities and the youth. The diaspora remains divided between staunch PFDJ supporters and a fractured opposition camp. The opposition in exile remains fragmented and lacks a convincing program for democratic change and economic liberalization. In recent years, however, a younger generation of activists has formed new opposition movements, such as the Blue Revolution, also known as Brigade N'Hamedu. Over the past two years, this organization has tried to mobilize youth in the diaspora to challenge the Isaias government in Asmara and establish a transitional government in exile. Their voices have reached the youth inside Eritrea, and in February 2025, state security arrested several people in the capital and the southern region on the basis of their suspected sympathy for Brigade N'Hamedu. However, the organization lacks transparency and a clear political agenda for a future Eritrea after regime change. Most of its members belong to the Tigrinya ethnic group, particularly those from the southern region (Zoba-Dehub/Akele Guzay). Reportedly, they are receiving direct support from the Ethiopian federal government as well as from parts of the Tigray diaspora communities and some TPLF politicians, either with the goal of destabilizing Eritrea's political system or because some members of the organization are known for their sympathy for the "Greater Tigray" or the "Agazian" movements, which aim to unify all Tigrinya-speaking regions in Tigray and Eritrea based on ethnic nationalism. Western policymakers came to know Brigade N'Hamedu as a group that staged violent anti-PFDJ demonstrations in Europe, North America and Australia. Even if such activities have declined in recent months, doubts about the organization's political goals should remain, and policymakers are advised to watch its development cautiously.

Eritrean authorities have not developed any road map for development in recent years because of severe state dysfunction. At the same time, the diaspora tax and private remittances from Eritreans abroad help stabilize the regime. The president's physical health appears stable, and no official mechanisms for his succession were in place as of the close of the review period, although there are indicators that he is preparing for the installation of his son Abraham Isaias as his successor at some point in the future.

The international community's impact on the internal policies of Eritrea is very limited, and there has been no consistent pressure on the government to reform its economic policies, end its strategy of militarization and introduce democratic reforms. All attempts by EU policymakers to motivate the authoritarian government in Asmara to engage in reform through dialogue and financial support have failed. Eritrea has mostly refused to accept conditional aid and has sought to obtain

financial support from various non-democratic states. However, the European Union did support the country in the areas of agriculture and food security, health and energy production until 2021. The international community condemned the war in Tigray and Eritrea's involvement, and the European Union terminated economic cooperation under the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), in part due to a lack of interest from the Eritrean side. Instead, the government of Eritrea continues to cooperate with the authoritarian governments of China, Russia and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) supported Eritrea as a means of curbing Iranian influence in the Red Sea and the Horn regions. Reportedly, the Eritrean government was also involved in the Yemen war and sent young soldiers there to fight the Houthis in exchange for undisclosed financial support from the UAE, though not during the period under review. Relations between Eritrea and the UAE have deteriorated recently.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Eritrean regime has firmly sided with President Vladimir Putin, who reportedly plans to establish a military base at Massawa. It voted against all U.N. resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This stance is probably driven by the Eritrean government's desire for financial and military support from Russia, while the Kremlin has strategic interests in gaining a foothold in the Horn of Africa due to the region's important geostrategic location. In fall 2024, the Eritrean government entered a strategic partnership with Egypt and Somalia, which seems directed at isolating Ethiopia and may pose yet another risk to regional stability.

Generally, it is inadvisable to enter into development agreements aimed at containing Eritrean migration to Europe, as has been the case in the past, most recently by Switzerland. As long as the national service is not reformed, young Eritreans will leave the country, and financial support will only stabilize the unsustainable militarized economic system.