

Not Just Russia: Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea Are Being Imprisoned and Abused, Reports Reveal

By [Cristina Maza](#) On 6/1/18 at 5:05 PM
[World Jehovah's Witnesses Eritrea Religion](#)

At least 53 Jehovah's Witnesses are currently languishing in prison in Eritrea— an African country known for repressing Christians— and some have died in prison due to poor treatment, according to [a report on religious freedom released this week](#) by the State Department.

Eritrea officially recognizes four religions: the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the Eritrean Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church and Islam. Nevertheless, [even members of the sanctioned Christian groups face frequent repression](#), and fringe groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses face constant persecution and discrimination. The authoritarian government of Isaias Afwerki, [which came to power in 1993](#) when Eritrea first gained independence, stripped the Jehovah's Witnesses of their citizenship in 1994 because they object to participating in military service. Since then, many members of the group have been imprisoned or abused for practicing their religion or refusing to join the military.

“In February several NGOs [non-government organizations] reported Tsehaye Tesfamariam, a Jehovah's Witness arrested in 2009 and imprisoned at the Meqeter Prison Camp until 2015, died in November 2016 from an illness contracted in prison that authorities reportedly refused to treat,” [the State Department report said](#).

“Most places of worship unaffiliated with the four registered religious groups remained closed, but many of those buildings were protected and undamaged,” the report noted. “Jehovah's Witnesses, who were stripped of citizenship in 1994 due to their refusal to vote in the independence referendum, were largely unable to obtain official identification documents.”

The report went on to say that "without official identification documents, many Jehovah's Witnesses were effectively barred from most forms of employment, government benefits, and travel. The government did not recognize a right to conscientious objection to military service, and continued to single out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment such as arrest and detention."

Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses organization said that at least three of the group's members have been held without charge since 1994. Two elderly witnesses [also died in prison this year](#).

"Eritrea arrests and imprisons Jehovah's Witnesses and others without trial or formal charges. Witness men and women, including children and the elderly, are imprisoned for religious activity or for undisclosed reasons. Young men are imprisoned for conscientiously objecting to military service," [the Jehovah's Witnesses said in a statement](#).

The situation resembles that of Russia, which labeled the religious group an extremist cult last year and began jailing members and shutting religious institutions. At least 26 Jehovah's Witnesses [have been charged](#) in Russia under the country's strict laws on extremism.

Source:

<http://www.newsweek.com/not-just-russia-jehovahs-witnesses-eritrea-are-being-imprisoned-and-abused-954690>