

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
39

Ethiopia



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LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

Persecution, intolerance, and discrimination are experienced by all Christian communities in different parts of the country in varying degrees. Non-traditional Christian groups face severe violations from the local (regional) government and from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background and cross-denominational converts from an Orthodox background face harsh treatment from their families and communities. There has also been an increase in persecution of Christians who left African traditional religious practices. Christians in some areas are ostracized and/or denied access to community resources.

Quick facts

LEADER

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali

POPULATION

120,813,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

72,396,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

GOVERNMENT

Federal Parliamentary Republic



clashed over ideology, power and resources, killing thousands of people and displacing more than three million. Ethiopia was scheduled to hold elections in August 2020, but they were [suspended](#) due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In November 2020, the disagreement between the TPLF and the Ethiopian federal government led to a major conflict, which the government called “law and enforcement operation”. TPLF was removed from regional government and a transitional caretaker government was established by the parliament. However, in June 2021, government forces withdrew and TPLF regained control of the region. Not only that, TPLF managed to push the government southwards and entered deep in the territories of Afar and Amhara regions. Following a brief cessation of hostilities, the insecurity continues in Tigray, Amhara, and Afar regions, [adversely affecting internally displaced persons](#) (IDPs) and hindering humanitarian efforts, according to the UN.

Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	72,396,000	59.9
Muslims	41,450,000	34.3
Ethno-religionists	6,804,000	5.6
Agnostics	92,200	0.1

Source²

The [1995 Constitution](#) established a federal form of government. The form of federal government and the ideology behind “what sort of federal arrangement” (i.e, language and settlement pattern), was supported by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and other ethnic-based political parties. In Ethiopia, ethnicity serves as the primary identity marker, not religion. While religion-based conflicts still do erupt, insecurity in Ethiopia mainly involves ethnic-based armed groups. A series of anti-government violent protests starting in 2015 forced the TPLF prime minister to resign in 2018. He was succeeded by Dr Abiy Ahmed, a Pentecostal Christian who established the Prosperity Party in 2019. The TPLF refused to join his government. In July 2018, a [peace treaty was signed](#) with Eritrea, formally ending the war which lasted from 1998 until 2000. However, in 2020, rival regional, ethnic, and political factions

Ethiopia remains one of the poorest countries in the world, although strong economic growth in the last decade has led to a reduction in poverty. Ethiopia has poor technological infrastructure due to communal violence, civil war repression, and other man-made or natural disasters. According to [Freedom House](#), political, social, and religious content has been blocked, networks deliberately disrupted, and – particularly around the war in Tigray – online discussion manipulated by government and other commentators. Ethiopia was one of the first countries to adopt Christianity as its state religion (the EOC) and while it no longer enjoys that status, the Church still yields much influence in the political arena. The interference of the Ethiopian government often generates resentment among the population, since religious institutions are perceived as being co-opted. In addition, a formal political organization on a religious basis is technically outlawed in Ethiopia. Within this context, Protestant churches are considered to be largely (apolitical) agents of Western ideology and interests. The apolitical character of the Protestant movement, including converts from Islam and some former members of the EOC, has increased the tension between these Christians and the Ethiopian government. The country has a very substantial Muslim minority. Sufism has a long tradition, and the more conservative Salafist streams have been present since the 1930s, expanding from the 1960s onwards. The Prime Minister also released all Muslim leaders who were arrested under the previous prime minister.

¹ Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

² Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

How the situation varies by region

The geographical distribution of violations against Christians in Ethiopia depends on what are the main sources of persecution in a particular area. For example, the hotspot of violations as a result of Christian denominational protectionism is in the Amhara region, Tigray, and some parts of Oromia. Hotspots for Islamic oppression are in some parts of eastern and western Oromia, Afar and the Somali region. Gurage, Silte, and Alaba are also some of the areas where violations are most severe.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Historical Christian communities

The EOC has a massive presence in the country. It is one of the factors contributing to the complexity of the dynamics of religious freedom violations in Ethiopia; as well as being a victim of violations itself, the EOC also plays a pivotal role as a perpetrator of violations. Historical Christian communities face violations, mostly from the government and Islamic radicalism. Also, in areas where tribalism is dominant, there is pressure on the EOC. Orthodox Christians are mostly concentrated in northern and central Ethiopia. Christians living in Muslim-dominated regional states (Harrari, Somalia, Afar), as well as local communities (e.g., among the Silte), face difficulties in living out their faith.

Converts to Christianity

This category includes i) Christians with a Muslim background, ii) cross-denominational converts (from one Christian denomination to another), and iii) converts from ethnic traditional beliefs to Christianity. Converts in the country face violations from different persecution sources. In Muslim-dominated areas, converts from Islam face pressure and violence mainly from family, extended family, community leaders, and non-Christian religious leaders. In areas dominated by the EOC, violations are mainly driven by EOC followers. Converts also face violations from the government (local authorities) in all parts of the country. In areas with a prevalence of clan oppression, converts may face violations from adherents of ethnic traditional belief systems and Muslims seeking to force participation in various religious activities.

Non-traditional Christian communities

This category includes Baptist, Evangelical, and Pentecostal congregations which have a large presence in the country. These communities attract serious violations mainly from the government, EOC, and Islamic groups. They are growing very fast compared to other types of Christianity. Protestants who live in areas dominated by Muslims and Orthodox Christians face various forms of rights violations. This category of Christianity is seen as a threat by many, as it keeps growing in number and influence. As a result, Christians face pressure and violence from many sides.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

This poses a real threat to Christians, especially in areas dominated by Muslim communities. With the rise of radicalism in the region and beyond, radical (or political) Islam is growing at the local, regional and national levels. In the process, various types of Christianity have become increasingly vulnerable to pressure in almost all spheres of life. Particularly in rural areas where they are in the majority, Muslims harass Christians and often deny them access to communal resources. Furthermore, Christians are victims of violence, and sometimes even death. Converts from Islam to Christianity are ostracized and often denied family rights such as inheritance rights and child custody. It is also important to note that the growth of radical Islam in neighboring Somalia and Sudan is spilling over into Ethiopia.

Christian denominational protectionism:

This is mainly driven by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). It is particularly opposed to Evangelical Christians, viewing them as followers of a Western religion that poses a threat to Ethiopian nationalism and culture that has long been preserved by the EOC. It is common to hear sermons and songs that strongly criticize Evangelical Christians. The EOC has been seriously violating the rights of Christians who leave their ranks to join (mostly) Protestant churches, or who join the renewal movements within the EOC. Violations manifest themselves in various ways. EOC members use their connections in government to curtail the development of non-Orthodox churches, and sometimes attack Christians physically. These violations are prevalent mostly in the northern and central parts of the country, where most people follow the Orthodox church.

Dictatorial paranoia:

In former years, the Ethiopian government had become more authoritarian and restricted rights for civil society and religious institutions. The previous Ethiopian government had shown itself to be suspicious of religion in general and Christians in particular.

Clan oppression:

For the past quarter of a century, ethnic politics has dominated all areas of public life in the country. This political discourse has led to the search for “roots and identity” which has caused some individuals and groups to become hostile to Christianity. Until 1974, the EOC represented the state religion. The country was under Communist rule from 1974 to 1991, when it was overthrown (after 17 years of civil war) by a coalition of various rebel groups formed from different ethnic groups. The ethnic groups were promised respect and acknowledgment of their culture and identity during the 1991 Ethiopian Transitional Charter, which was set up after the fall of the Communist regime. This was initially seen as being a politically sound move, but the government stirred up resentment towards Christianity among some ethnic groups. In regions like Afar and Somali (Ogaden), Islam is interconnected with ethnicity. Other tribes also demand that Christians participate in tribal clashes, and they retaliate if Christians fail to do so.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Violations of rights against Christian women and girls (both converts and non-converts) often occur in the form of abduction and forced marriage to a non-Christian. Following her marriage, the wife is expected to take on the religion of her husband. Rape is effective as a tool to punish Christians, resulting in community isolation, family shame, and restricted future marriage prospects. Converts from Islam face the most severe violations. They risk family isolation, house arrest, physical abuse, and loss of inheritance. If married, they face divorce and loss of child custody.

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community / networks
- Denied custody of children
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage

- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Christian men can suffer physical attacks, displacement, robbery, or even killings. They are strategically targeted as the family provider; attacking them weakens their whole family. Converts have been forced to flee to avoid attacks and harassment. The state also violates men’s religious freedom through the imprisonment of Christian men, a particular risk in Muslim-dominated areas. There is also government interference in church elections and appointments. As the majority of church leaders are male, this mainly affects Christian men.

- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Forced to flee town / country
- Imprisonment by the government
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	39	66
2022	38	66
2021	36	65
2020	39	63
2019	28	65

Ethiopia’s score remained at 66 points, the same as last year (WWL 2022). The score for violence increased slightly, but not enough to affect the overall number. The overall pressure for Ethiopian Christians remains high, particularly in the community and church spheres of life.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Over 20 churches and church buildings were attacked, damaged, or looted.
- **April 2022:** a group of Muslims burned two Orthodox churches and three Protestant churches in Worabe (Silt'e, southern Ethiopia).
- **April 2022:** a group of Muslims burned another Orthodox church in Worabe.

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians forced to marry	Christians physically or mentally abused
2023	22	20	10*	100*
2022	25	1	10	215

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

Private life

Conversion from Islam is seen as a betrayal of one's forefathers and a renouncing of identity. It is forbidden and punishable by family and society. Immense pressure comes from family, whose reputation is compromised by a member converting, and from the wider community. This pressure is exacerbated in rural areas. In northern Ethiopia, the EOC heartland, converts to Protestantism are often cut off or forced to leave the community. In contrast, Protestantism is the norm in areas of southern Ethiopia and Oromia so converts there would not face such opposition. It is dangerous for converts to own Christian material, and there have been attacks on Christians for owning gospel music or "versions" of the Bible contrary to the teaching of the Orthodox Church. Abuse against Christians who speak about their belief online is increasing. Displaying Christian symbols, such as wearing a cross, could be seen as an act of defiance in remote, Muslim-majority regions.

Family life

In some areas, children of Christians have been bullied and even attacked. In Muslim-majority areas, children are obliged to attend Islamic schools. When an Orthodox-background Christian joins a Protestant group (locally called Pentay), family members, priests, and ultra-conservative groups in the EOC put pressure on the individual to recant. Sometimes the convert is forced to drink "holy water" because he or she is thought to be possessed by a devil. Obtaining burial places in both Muslim and EOC-dominated areas is very difficult for non-EOC Christians.



Community life

In EOC-majority areas, those who have left the EOC face serious challenges from community members, such as finding schools where their children would be safe. In Muslim-majority areas, especially rural, Christians are subjected to discrimination and harassment. Bridal abduction and forced marriage of children as young as 11 is common in Ethiopia, especially involving converts in rural areas. Christians can be monitored by community members, who even sometimes send in children to spy on churches and Christian homes.

National life

Laws made by the previous government restricted religious broadcasting and religious teaching. Expressing a Christian opinion publicly remains challenging, especially for converts or followers of minority Christian groups. Civil society organizations continue to be restricted by law, although there is a new draft law that would lift most of these limitations. New political parties have not been formed for many years. Authorities, especially local, discriminate against non-EOC Christians in EOC- or Muslim-dominated areas. Many Muslim and EOC preachers run smear campaigns against Pentecostals and Evangelicals, often claiming they have faked their faith in order to receive foreign aid. In return, some Pentecostal preachers make statements against Orthodox Christians, painting them as backward.

Church life

Pastors, especially from newer denominations, have been harassed in rural areas dominated by Islamic oppression and Christian denominational protectionism. Pastors are the most visible targets and are often accused of corrupting societal values. Speaking out against instigators can provoke reprisals. Non-state actors, such as radical Islamic groups, monitor Christian activities and there have been cases of churches attacked during worship and property destroyed. As always, converts are especially vulnerable and often hide their faith for fear of attack.



International obligations & rights violated

Ethiopia has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
4. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Ethiopia is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian converts are ostracized and denied their right to freedom of religion or belief (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians are denied their right to freedom of expression (ICCPR Art. 19)
- Christian peaceful religious gatherings are restricted, in violation of the right to peaceful assembly (ICCPR Art. 21)
- Christian women are forcibly married and forced to recant their beliefs (ICCPR Art. 23.3; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)
- Christian women are denied their equality of rights and responsibilities during marriage and at its dissolution (ICCPR Art. 23.4 and CEDAW Art.16)

Situation of other religious minorities

There are a few religious minorities in the country and these are also affected by the broadcasting legislation, the role of faith in education, and the civil society law. Generally, the civil society law requires an application for registration for any religious group except Orthodox and Catholic Christians, Muslims, and Jews. In addition, the registration law requires a minimum membership of 50 persons for registration as a religious community and a minimum of 15 persons for a ministry or association to be registered and granted permission. This has had serious impact on newer religious minorities. In some areas, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses (where their numbers are less than 50) struggle to have an official place of worship. This is particularly true where majority groups are known to be hostile towards religious minorities.



Open Doors in Ethiopia

Open Doors has been active in Ethiopia since the late 1980s. We work through the local church to provide theological training, practical, and spiritual support, skills training for socio-economic development, and trauma care.

About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
