

Situation of religious freedom for Christians 2024:

ETHIOPIA

World Watch List 2024 position: 32

Key Findings: Non-traditional Christian groups endure the harshest violations from both local authorities and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), especially in areas where EOC is very dominant. Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background, especially in the eastern and south-eastern regions, and 'cross-denominational converts' from Orthodox backgrounds face significant mistreatment from their families and communities. In certain areas, Christians are denied access to community resources and face social ostracization. For instance, regions like the Somali state and parts of Oromia are prone to attacks on churches by Islamic mobs. Moreover, the ongoing political violence in the country over the last three years has exacerbated the vulnerability of Christians, exposing them to increased pressure and violence in Tigray, Oromia and Amhara regions.

Quick Facts: Ethiopia

Leader	Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali
Population	123,771,000
Christians	74,679,000 (Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. , World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023))
Main Religion	Christianity
Government	Federal Parliamentary Republic

Context: In Ethiopia, ethnicity serves as the primary identity marker, not religion. While religion-based conflicts still erupt, insecurity in Ethiopia mainly involves ethnic-based armed groups. In November 2020, a disagreement between the ethnic-based party Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the federal government led to a major conflict, which the government called a "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 into 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. In 2022, a peace agreement between the TPLF and the federal government was brokered and signed in Pretoria South Africa. It is also important to note that there are conflicts in the Oromo and Amhara regions resulting in death, destruction and displacement of civilians.

In July 2018, a [peace treaty was signed](#) with Eritrea, formally ending the war which lasted from 1998 until 2000.

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. 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 the 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 apolitical character of the Protestant movement has increased the tension between these Christians and the Ethiopian government. The recent enactment of Proclamation no. 1208/2020, a proclamation to prove the legal personality of Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers' Churches and Members is a significant sign of improvement, although its impact is not yet felt at regional and other lower level administrative tiers of the country.

How the situation varies by region: The geographical distribution of violations against Christians in Ethiopia depends on what the main sources of persecution are in a particular area. For example, the hotspot of violations because 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 huge 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 living out their faith.
- **Converts to Christianity:** This category includes Christians of Muslim or traditional African religious backgrounds. Converts from a Muslim background experience the most serious persecution from their families and communities.
- **Converts to Christianity:** This category includes i) Christians with a Muslim background, ii) cross-denominational converts, 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, many of whom belong to an extremist group within the EOC, called Mahibere Kidusan. 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:** Radical 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) and often under the influence of the Mabihere Kidusan radical group inside the church. 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. Until 1974, the EOC was 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 formed from different ethnic groups. The ethnic groups were promised respect and acknowledgment of their culture and identity during the 1991 Ethiopian Transitional Charter. The government has since 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:** Rights violations of 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 female 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.
- **Female typical pressure points:** Abduction; Denied access to social community/networks; Denied custody of children; Denied inheritance or possessions; Discrimination/harassment via education; Forced divorce; Forced marriage; Forced out of home – expulsion; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – physical; Violence – sexual; Violence – verbal.
- **Men:** Christian men can suffer physical attacks, forced 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.
Male typical pressure points: Denied inheritance or possessions; Forced to flee town/country; Imprisonment by government; Violence – death; Violence – physical

.Short description of the change in score and why: During the latest World Watch List (WWL) report in 2024, there was a notable surge in violence against Christians, marking a significant increase of over 3.0 points compared to the previous period. This surge caused the overall score to escalate from 66 in WWL 2023 to 69 in WWL 2024.

- **Private Life:** Conversion from Islam in Muslim-majority areas 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 families, whose reputation is compromised by a member converting, especially in rural areas. In northern Ethiopia, the EOC heartland, converts to Protestantism are often cut off or forced to leave the community. There have been attacks on Christians for owning gospel music or "versions" of the Bible contrary to the teaching of the Orthodox Church. Sometimes the convert is forced to drink "holy water" because he or she is thought to be possessed by a devil. Abuse against Christians who speak about their belief online is increasing. In contrast, Protestantism is the norm in areas of southern Ethiopia and Oromia so converts there would not face such opposition.
- **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. 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, and 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 being attacked during worship and property destroyed. As always, converts are especially vulnerable and often hide their faith for fear of attack.

Situation of Other Religious Minorities: Religious minorities in Ethiopia are affected by broadcasting legislation, the role of faith in education, and civil society law. Generally, 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 a serious impact on newer religious minorities: In some areas, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses (where their numbers are fewer 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.