OpenDoors

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

ETHIOPIA

WORLD WATCH LIST NO. **36**

LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE

VIOLENCE	**VIOLENCE**	15.6	
PRESSURE	**PRIVATE LIFE**	9.9	
	FAMILY LIFE	9.7	
	COMMUNITY LIFE	12.6	
	NATIONAL LIFE	10.4	
	CHURCH LIFE	12.1	
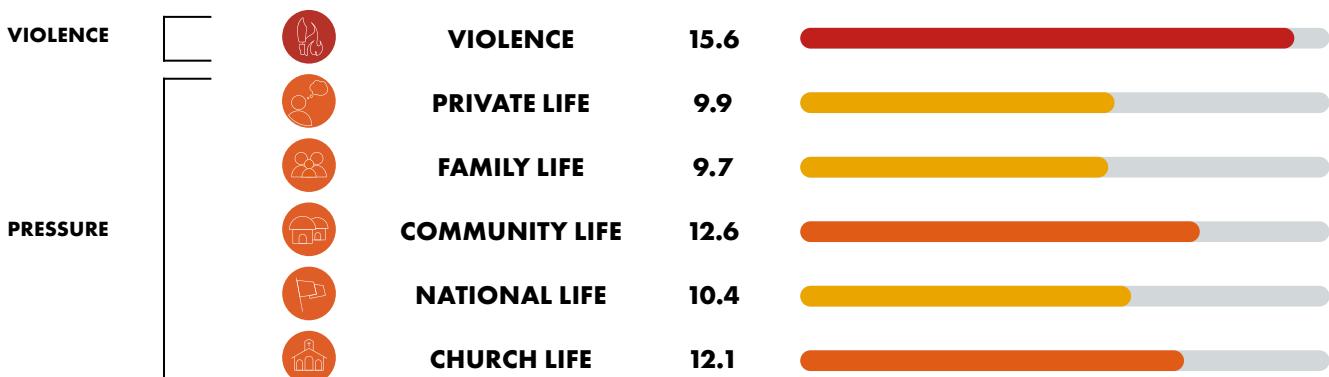
Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

Persecution in Ethiopia is complex and multifaceted, shaped by a blend of historical legacies, religious dominance, regional dynamics, and ongoing political instability. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), with deep historical ties to the state, has long influenced national identity. Its ultra-conservative factions often portray Protestant and evangelical Christians as foreign and unpatriotic, leading to widespread stigmatization and pressure, especially against converts from Orthodoxy. Converts from Islam, particularly in eastern and southeastern Ethiopia, face severe hostility, ranging from family rejection to physical violence. In Muslim-majority regions such as the Somali state and parts of Oromia, Christian converts suffer mob attacks, church burnings, and systemic discrimination. These patterns of persecution are further intensified by Ethiopia's fragile security environment. In conflict-affected areas like Tigray, Oromia, and Amhara, the collapse of law and order has emboldened actors to target Christians without fear of consequences, making persecution both localized and deeply entrenched.

Quick facts

LEADER
Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali

POPULATION
132,939,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS
81,388,000[1]

MAIN RELIGION
Christianity

GOVERNMENT
Federal Parliamentary Republic

Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	81,388,000	61.2
Muslims	43,655,000	32.8
Ethnic religionists	7,702,000	5.8
Others	194,000	0.2
	Total	**100%**

Source[2]

Ethiopia is navigating one of the most complex and volatile political landscapes in Africa, where identity politics, historical grievances, and contested narratives of nationhood fuel deep-rooted fragility and violent conflict. While some tensions take on religious overtones, the most destabilizing dynamics arise from disputes over governance structures, collective memory, territorial autonomy, and the nature of the Ethiopian state itself.

The outbreak of civil war in November 2020 between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) marked a turning point. What began as a "law enforcement operation" rapidly escalated into a brutal and protracted conflict. Although the Pretoria Peace Agreement of November 2022 formally ended hostilities, the root causes remain unresolved. Armed violence in Amhara and Oromia has intensified, while widespread displacement and a deteriorating humanitarian situation persist. The federal government's authority is increasingly contested amid insurgent activity, popular unrest, and institutional fragmentation.

The 2018 peace accord between Ethiopia and Eritrea, once seen as a diplomatic breakthrough, has failed to yield lasting normalization. Implementation stalled, and relations have once again soured. Accusations of covert interference and hostile rhetoric have replaced early optimism, raising fears of renewed conflict in the Horn of Africa.

Domestically, Ethiopia's political space continues to narrow. The Freedom House 2024 report classifies the country as authoritarian, citing increased repression, diminished civic freedoms, and localized but interconnected violence. The federal system, designed to accommodate ethnic and cultural diversity, has instead become a site of recurring contestation, fueling intercommunal tensions and mistrust in state institutions.

Religious dynamics remain equally complex. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church continues to hold considerable influence, but evangelical and Protestant groups face growing social and bureaucratic pressure. Although the passage of Proclamation No. 1208/2020 legally recognized the Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers' Churches, implementation has been uneven, with many local authorities resisting compliance.

Ethiopia's crisis is more than a political breakdown; it reflects longstanding wounds and unresolved structural dilemmas. Without a shared national vision, robust institutional reform, and meaningful dialogue among diverse stakeholders, the country risks further fragmentation. The consequences of continued instability would extend beyond its borders, endangering regional peace and security across the Horn of Africa.

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[1] Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025
[2] Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

How the situation varies by region

Across Ethiopia, varied patterns of persecution against Christians are shaped by differing religious majorities, historical legacies, and localized power dynamics. The dominance of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the Amhara region, Tigray, and parts of Oromia, contributes to strong denominational protectionism, leading to hostility toward evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, especially converts. In regions such as eastern and western Oromia, Afar, and the Somali Regional State, Islamist extremism plays a greater role in targeting Christians, particularly Muslim-background believers. Additional hotspots include the Gurage, Silte, and Alaba zones, where Christian and Muslim pressures converge.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS
This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES
This group consists mainly of members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). They face violations from Islamist extremism, tribal pressures, and local authorities, particularly in Muslim-majority regions like Somali, Afar, and Harari. The EOC can also be a source of persecution, especially towards evangelical Christians.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY
This group consists mainly individuals from Islam, other Christian traditions, or ethnic religions. They face persecution from family, religious leaders, local authorities, and traditionalists. In Muslim-majority regions, converts endure intense pressure and violence. In Orthodox areas, extremist groups like Mahibere Kidusan drive persecution.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES
This group includes Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Baptist churches, which face significant hostility. They are targeted mainly at the local level by Orthodox and Muslim communities, as well as local officials, who view them as socially disruptive.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

ISLAMIC OPPRESSION
Radical Islam is increasing its influence in Ethiopia at local, regional, and national levels, placing Christian communities, especially converts, in a vulnerable position. In Muslim-majority rural areas, Christians often face harassment, exclusion from communal resources, and violent attacks, some of them fatal. Converts from Islam are particularly at risk, frequently disowned by family, denied inheritance and child custody rights, and targeted for public shaming or assault. The spread of extremism from neighboring countries like Somalia and Sudan has further deepened the threat, with cross-border radical networks affecting Ethiopia's border regions.

CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONAL PROTECTIONISM
The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), historically linked to state power, continues to assert religious dominance, especially through hardline factions like Mahibere Kidusan. Evangelicals and Protestants are often depicted as foreign intrusions, threatening Ethiopia's religious identity. Converts from Orthodoxy face discrimination, church registration barriers, and public vilification. These violations are most intense in northern and central Ethiopia, where the EOC retains institutional and cultural supremacy.

DICTATORIAL PARANOIA
Though Ethiopia has undergone political changes, authoritarian tendencies persist, especially at local levels. Successive governments have often viewed religion, and particularly Christian groups, with suspicion. Restrictions on civil society, surveillance, and bureaucratic harassment continue to affect Christian communities, even under newer administrations.

CLAN OPPRESSION
Ethnic politics, dominant since the 1991 transitional period, has blurred religious and cultural lines. In regions like Afar and Somali, Islam is tightly bound with ethnic identity. Converts and Christian minorities face hostility from tribal leaders and pressure to join ethnic conflicts. Non-participation is often met with retaliation, deepening the cycle of local persecution.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Christian women and girls face persecution at the intersection of gender violence, conflict and food insecurity. Despite laws, bride abduction and forced marriage remain widespread, with reports of Muslim men are incentivized to marry Christian women. Converts are particularly vulnerable: families may force them into marriage, confine them under house arrest, or evict them. Within marriage, sexual and physical abuse is common, often tolerated by communities. In some instances, and some places, rape is used to punish Christian women, leading to stigma, trauma, divorce, loss of child custody, and long-term community destabilization.

Female typical pressure points:
- Abduction
- Denied custody of children
- Denied legal ability to marry a Christian spouse
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

MEN

Christian men and boys face physical attack, displacement, robbery, and killings, often during raids or civil unrest. They are strategically targeted as family providers and church leaders, making families and congregations more vulnerable. Many risk forced conscription into armed groups. The state violates men's religious freedom through imprisonment, particularly in Muslim-majority regions, where officials fail to protect Christians and interfere in church leadership. Converts are pressured by families, denied livelihoods, and often forced to flee. Some are lured by financial incentives to abandon Christianity.

Male typical pressure points:
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Targeted seduction
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	36	70
2025	33	70
2024	32	69
2023	39	66
2022	38	66

With a score of 70 points, Ethiopia records a very similar level to WWL 2025. The country's overall pressure remains high because Christians face different forms of persecution in various regions, shaped by local power dynamics, ethnic tensions, and the security vacuum created by multiple armed conflicts. Abductions of Christians have become a persistent and deeply unsettling pattern in the last couple of years, particularly in areas where armed groups operate with impunity. Churches in contested zones experience intimidation, restrictions on movement, and periodic attacks, while political instability erodes the state's ability to protect vulnerable communities. These overlapping pressures, regional conflict, fragmented governance, targeted kidnappings, and localized hostility, combine to keep Ethiopia at the 70-point level.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- In 2025, armed groups carried out widespread attacks in the Oromia region and in parts of Amhara. At least 25 churches were burned, demolished, or looted. Worshipers were assaulted, religious materials destroyed, and entire congregations scattered, with Christians accused of refusing to support the militants.

- Christians are increasingly being kidnapped, especially in Oromia's rural districts and border areas with Amhara. Families report that captives are often released only after large ransoms, ranging from hundreds of thousands to millions of Ethiopian Birr, are paid. Some who cannot afford to pay remain missing.

- The violence has forced thousands of Christians from their homes in both Oromia and Amhara, with many fleeing to safer towns or temporary camps. Displaced Christians report being specifically targeted because of their faith and lack of alignment with armed groups' political agendas.

WWL Year	Christians abducted	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted
2026	16	40	18	100*
2025	100*	11	25	100*

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period – for full results see the violence section of the country's corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. 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. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*.*

PRIVATE LIFE

In Muslim-majority areas of Ethiopia, conversion from Islam is seen as a grave betrayal, religiously and culturally, often interpreted as a rejection of family, ancestry, and identity. Converts face intense familial and communal pressure, especially in rural settings where honor and reputation are deeply embedded. Common consequences include forced isolation, arranged marriages, and physical violence. In northern Ethiopia, where the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) is dominant, conversion to Protestantism or Evangelicalism also leads to severe repercussions. Converts may be expelled from their families, denied community support, and subjected to religious shaming rituals, such as forced consumption of "holy water" to exorcise supposed demons. Possessing non-Orthodox Bibles or Christian music can provoke accusations of heresy. Meanwhile, online Christian expression increasingly triggers harassment. However, in southern Ethiopia and parts of Oromia, where Protestantism is more culturally accepted, conversions tend to provoke less hostility and are often tolerated.

FAMILY LIFE

In both Muslim and EOC-dominated areas, Christian families face significant challenges. Children of converts or non-EOC Christians may be bullied, excluded, or coerced into attending Islamic or Orthodox schools. Burial rights are another source of discrimination; non-Orthodox Christians often struggle to secure burial plots in religiously homogenous areas. Converts to Protestantism (known locally as Pentay) are pressured by relatives, priests, and EOC hardliners to return to Orthodoxy, sometimes under threat of expulsion or familial rupture.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Communal discrimination is pronounced in both Orthodox and Muslim regions. Converts may be denied access to education, social services, and community protection. In rural Muslim areas, girls as young as 10 or 11 are still subjected to bridal abduction or forced marriage, often involving Christian converts. Surveillance is widespread: neighbors, and even children, are used to monitor Christian households and report religious activities.

NATIONAL LIFE

Legal and structural barriers continue to limit religious freedom. Broadcasting restrictions, discrimination by local officials, and smear campaigns by religious leaders are common. Pentecostals and Evangelicals are falsely accused of converting for foreign aid, while some retaliate by disparaging Orthodox beliefs. Political and civic space remains constrained.

CHURCH LIFE

Pastors, especially from newer denominations, are harassed and attacked in regions hostile to religious plurality. Radical groups monitor churches, and attacks on worship gatherings are documented. Converts face the harshest conditions, often forced to worship in secret to avoid violence.

International obligations & rights violated

Ethiopia has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under 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 against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)

4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

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

Religious minorities in Ethiopia face legal and social restrictions, particularly due to registration laws and limited broadcasting rights. While Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish groups are exempt, newer minorities must meet strict thresholds—50 members for community registration and 15 for associations. This disproportionately affects small groups like Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, who often struggle to gain recognition or secure worship spaces, especially in areas hostile to minority faiths.
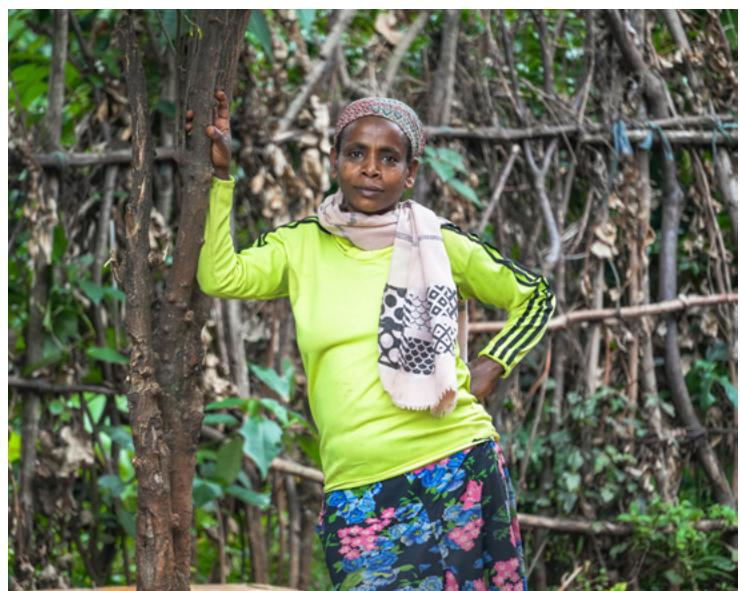
Open Doors in Ethiopia

Open Doors has supported the Church in Ethiopia since the late 1980s. Our vision is to see a well-discipled and unified persecuted church that is well prepared and empowered in the face of persecution to fulfill its holistic mission. We seek to accomplish the vision through:

- Psychosocial care and spiritual resilience training

- Intergenerational ministry skills training and economic empowerment

- Economic empowerment

- Increased influence for the church and justice for persecuted believers

ABOUT THIS DOSSIER

- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.

- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed here.

- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.

Some photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.

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