

World Watch Research

Ethiopia: Background Information

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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Contents

Copyright and sources	1
Map of country	2
Recent history	2
Political and legal landscape	5
Religious landscape.....	8
Economic landscape.....	9
Social and cultural landscape.....	11
Technological landscape	12
Security situation	13
Christian origins	15
Church spectrum today.....	16
Further useful reports.....	16
External Links	17

Copyright, sources and definitions

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Ethiopia: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
129,720,000	77,509,000	59.8

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

For many centuries Ethiopia was part of the Aksumite Empire, which included present-day Yemen, Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia but this came to an end around 940 AD. Thereafter different dynasties ruled the country. In 1974 the army deposed the last king of the Solomonic dynasty and took control of the state. The military junta led by Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam followed Socialist ideology. After the ousting of the army by rebel forces in 1991, the current ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) - rebranded as the Prosperity Party after its dissolution, came to power and a constitution was finally drafted and adopted in 1995. The Eritrean–Ethiopian War took place from May 1998 to June 2000. In June 2018, the new Ethiopian prime minister, Dr Abiy Ahmed, signed a peace treaty with Eritrea formally ending that war. Both countries removed some of their armed forces from the front.

Before that, however, developments in Ethiopia had been changing thick and fast. In 2015, the then ruling party claimed to have won 100% of the contested parliamentary seats, a claim that sent a shock

among human rights groups and those who work on issues of democracy and rule of law. Although the country is said to have been developing at a very good rate in terms of economic development, in November 2015 the country faced a series of violent protests. Human rights groups reported that hundreds of people had been killed by security forces and thousands put in jail. The demonstrations started peacefully in the Oromia region and expanded to the Amhara region with demands for the respect of political, civil, social, and economic rights. In response, the government imposed martial law in October 2016.

The top leadership, beleaguered by more than two years of relentless protests and political unrest, held a closed-door meeting and came out announcing in January 2018 that it acknowledged its failures and the resulting public grievances, would [release political prisoners](#) and would close the infamous torture center Maekelawi (Human Rights Watch - HRW, 3 January 2018). After releasing political prisoners in early February 2018, including prominent opposition figures and journalists, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn [tendered resignation](#) unexpectedly, saying he would continue in office in a caretaker role until the ruling coalition EPRDF elected a new leader and the country's parliament appointed that person as prime minister (CNN, 15 February 2018). After intensive behind-the-scene deliberations, Dr Abiy Ahmed was elected as chairman of the ruling party and eventually became prime minister. Since he assumed office in April 2018, he has introduced a series of reforms including the release of thousands of political prisoners and proposing the privatization of some of the companies owned by the state. Other very important diplomatic and economic reforms were also introduced.

However, during the period between the resignation of the former prime minister and swearing-in of the new prime minister, the country saw a new state of emergency declared, and its army [kill civilians](#) in a southern town, causing many to flee across the border to Kenya (Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia, 12 March 2018). Then, on 10 April 2018, the US House of Representatives passed a non-binding [resolution](#) on Ethiopia, calling on the Ethiopian government led by the new prime minister to demonstrate a commitment to human rights, democracy, and rule of law and indicating future cooperation to be tied to it (HRW, 10 April 2018). In May and early June 2018, the Liyu police unit of the Somali regional state carried out [new rounds of killings](#) and the burning of houses in a neighboring regional state (Amnesty International - AI, 11 June 2018). In late June 2018, a deadly bomb blast considered an [assassination attempt](#) on the new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed hit a huge rally in Addis Ababa's Meskel square which had been called in support of the prime minister (CNN, 24 June 2018).

June 2018 was also a month during which significant positive events were registered under the leadership of the new prime minister. The state of emergency imposed in February was lifted two months earlier than its official date of expiry; the country's state-controlled telecoms and state-owned airline businesses were made open to private and international investors for the first time; parliament lifted proscription on three opposition groups and their members exiled abroad; the government also publicly admitted security forces relied on [torture](#) and it committed to legal reforms of repressive laws (HRW, World Report 2019). The government announced it was fully accepting the Algiers agreement and the decision of the boundary commission to end hostilities with Eritrea and in July 2018 the [historic peace deal](#) with Eritrea was signed (HRW, 18 July 2018). In October 2018, there was a cabinet reshuffle and the appointment of the [first female head of state](#) in the country's history (Al-Jazeera, 25 October 2018). In the same month, history was made as women held 50% of cabinet positions.

However, in 2018, the country saw a rise in communal violence which resulted in the displacement of [millions](#) of people (HRW, World Report 2019). In 2019, there was allegedly an attempted coup at the regional level which led to the killing of the president of the Amhara regional state and top leadership. The army's chief of staff was also killed. Some activists accused the government of imprisoning hundreds of people using the coup attempt as a pretext. But the government claimed that the arrested individuals were engaged in criminal activities that warranted their arrest. In 2020, the country saw more protests and violence - and also further human rights violations by security forces were [reported](#) (AI, 29 May 2020). In some places, Christians were targeted and attacked as well.

In November 2020, the federal government ordered its troops to conduct an operation in the northern part of the country after the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) attacked the Ethiopian National Defense Forces without any provocation or warning. The conflict in the Tigray, Amhara and Afar regions created one of the worst humanitarian crises in the Horn of Africa in recent years. Massive human rights violations including rape, extra judicial killings and displacements were reported. Churches were attacked, priests were killed. However, it is important that this is seen in the correct context:

- First, this was a conflict between the federal government and the regional government after the Tigray regional state attacked the federal army.
- Secondly, there was an element of ethnic conflict: In Western Tigray in particular, it is very contested who owns a given piece of land.
- Thirdly, it is true that churches and church leaders were attacked, but that happened within the wider context of the conflict, not because of their Christian faith. It is important to underline that thousands of civilians were killed. These factors mean that the situation is not one where Christians have been specifically targeted for their faith.

According to Amnesty International (AI, Ethiopia 2022), "government security forces and armed groups were responsible for the unlawful killings of civilians, which in some cases may have amounted to war crimes." The [evidence of some of those crimes was burned](#) and eliminated; mass graves were being dug up to burn hundreds of bodies and transport the remains away, according to BBC World News on 7 May 2022. Tigray forces likewise committed widespread atrocities against the local Amhara population (including [raping women and girls](#)), in the areas of the Amhara region they captured following renewed fighting that led to the withdrawal of government forces from Tigray and their southward retreat (AI 2021/22 Report, p.164).

This conflict has had a devastating impact on Tigray and Amhara regions in terms of food security: The WFP stated in January 2022 that 40% of people in Tigray were suffering "[extreme lack of food](#)" (Al-Jazeera, 28 January 2022). The USA sanctioned Ethiopian officials and [removed the country from a favorable trade program](#) due to their alleged gross human rights violations, unwillingness to de-escalate the conflict and refusal to open corridors to deliver humanitarian relief (Al-Jazeera, 2 January 2022). The fighting eased in March 2022, however, after Ethiopia's government declared an indefinite [unilateral truce](#) (Al-Jazeera, 24 March 2022) and the TPLF rebels followed suit by agreeing to a cessation of hostilities and declaring their [withdrawal from the areas of Afar region](#) which they had held (Al-Jazeera 25 April 2022). This development opened the door for delivering humanitarian relief to the affected areas and renewed hope for political and diplomatic resolution of the conflict.

In June 2022, it [was reported](#) that the government and the TPLF had agreed to high level negotiations as a major step towards ending the almost two-year conflict (Reuters, 14 June 2022). Despite the high hopes, a full blown war erupted shortly after the June 2022 agreement. After the federal government captured several key towns, a [breakthrough agreement](#) was announced from negotiations in Pretoria (South Africa). A permanent cessation of hostility was agreed along with "a detailed program of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration for the TPLF combatants" (CNN, 3 November 2022).

In [May 2023](#), the Ethiopian government initiated peace negotiations with a faction of the Oromo Liberation Army in Zanzibar. Although no deal was reached, the talks were reported to be productive. Additionally, in 2023, the peace process between the Tigray administration and the Ethiopian government, which began in late 2022, entered a crucial phase as the Tigray administration started demobilization efforts and engaged more frequently with the federal government and international partners.

Furthermore, Ethiopia expressed its commitment to resolving the issue with Egypt concerning the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). In July 2023, the Ethiopian Prime Minister [visited Cairo](#), and Russia also [offered](#) to collaborate with Ethiopia and Egypt to find a solution to the GERD crisis. However, the civil war in Sudan, which started in April 2023, has put Ethiopia in a delicate position as the conflict in Khartoum has the potential to spill over and affect the wider region.

In 2024, Ethiopia witnessed several significant developments that have impacted its political and regional dynamics. One of the major events was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Ethiopia and Somaliland, granting Ethiopia access to the strategic Berbera port. This agreement has intensified tensions with Somalia, which views the deal as an infringement on its sovereignty. The Somali government has enacted a law nullifying the agreement, reflecting the deep-seated regional disputes and the complex nature of Somalia's claims over Somaliland, a region that declared independence in 1991 but remains unrecognized internationally. The African Union and other international entities have called for calm and dialogue to resolve the escalating tensions peacefully ([VOA, 4 January 2024](#)).

Additionally, Ethiopia's security situation remains volatile, with ongoing conflicts in regions like Oromia and Amhara. These areas continue to face violence, which has further complicated the humanitarian and political landscape. The conflicts have also contributed to internal displacement and exacerbated the vulnerabilities of affected populations, particularly Christians, who face increased persecution amidst the instability .

Political and legal landscape

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 TPLF and other ethnic-based political parties. The TPLF was the main body ruling with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) until April 2018. During the armed struggle in the 1970s and 80s, they articulated a very specific role for ethnicity in Ethiopia, which they established after coming to power. Hence, ethnicity served as the primary identity marker, not religion. However, for certain ethnic groups, religion still plays an important role in their identity. For example, the Amhara and Tigray historically have close ties with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), the ethnic Somalis are Muslims. Nonetheless, it is important to note that political mobilization still takes place

primarily along ethnic lines. While religious-based conflicts still do erupt, insecurity in Ethiopia mainly involves ethnic-based armed groups. These groups are motivated primarily through feeling marginalized by the Tigray-dominated society, rather than on the basis of religion.

After the TPLF lost control of the federal government (after the series of protests starting in 2015 forced the prime minister to resign) many Ethiopians believed that the new prime minister, Dr Abiy Ahmed, would successfully solve the problems the country had been facing. However, according to [International Crisis Group](#) reporting on 15 April 2020, “the prime minister has struggled to maintain order as a divided and discredited ruling coalition increasingly lost its grip on the systems it had used for decades to maintain control over a diverse and sometimes restive population. Rival regional, ethnic, and political factions clashed over ideology, power, and resources, killing thousands of people, and displacing more than three million.” To revitalize the transition, in late 2019 the prime minister and his allies created a new ruling party called the Prosperity Party. The TPLF refused to join. Tensions continue to escalate between the different ethnic groups.

The International Crisis Group article of 15 April 2020 also explains how the government has come under fire from opposition parties for failing to create conditions for fair elections, which it had promised would be in place before polls took place on the constitutionally prescribed schedule. They complained that the government is resorting to tactics belonging to past authoritarian days, including the arrest and harassment of activists, and denial of permission for meetings and rallies. They also accuse the new Prosperity Party of using government resources for its own advantage.

After five years of political turmoil, the country was scheduled to hold elections in August 2020. However, due to the public health risks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, on 31 March 2020 the electoral board [suspended](#) preparations for the elections (Reuters, 1 April 2020). Consequently, on 10 April 2020, parliament approved a five-month state of emergency, giving the authorities sweeping powers to battle the COVID-19 crisis. The general election (for voting in officials to the House of Peoples' Representatives) was finally held on 21 June 2021. The ruling party won the election with what can be called a landslide victory. The government's early lifting of the state of emergency in February 2022, the release of high-profile political prisoners (including some under house arrest) and the launching of national dialogue appeared to have opened an avenue for settling fundamental political questions facing the country through negotiation and compromise. However, views on whether the announced [national dialogue could be realized](#) were initially mixed (Al-Jazeera, 27 January 2022), reflecting the deep divide among the Ethiopian elite on the prognosis of potential political and structural issues for delivering inclusive peace.

According to [Freedom House \(Freedom in the World 2024 Ethiopia\)](#), the political landscape in Ethiopia remains unstable despite the government's attempts to implement reforms. The country continues to grapple with internal conflicts, particularly in the Amhara, Oromia, and Tigray regions. The federal government has faced significant challenges in asserting control and ensuring security, leading to widespread displacement and human rights abuses. In 2023, clashes in the Amhara region escalated, resulting in a state of emergency that extended into 2024. This ongoing violence has severely impacted civilian lives and hindered efforts to achieve peace and stability.

The Ethiopian government has also tried to engage as a neighboring mediator in the conflict between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese army. In July 2023, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy

Ahmed met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, primarily discussing the ongoing [Sudanese crisis, among other things](#) (Reuters, 12 July 2023). Reports suggest a division in support, with Egypt backing the Sudanese army while Ethiopia is reported to support the RSF faction. This regional involvement underscores the complexities and differing perspectives surrounding the Sudanese conflict.

Religious perspective

In 2023, Ethiopia witnessed religious issues, particularly concerning Muslims and the Orthodox Church. Oromo Orthodox clergy led a break away group, accusing the Ethiopian Orthodox Church of discrimination. Additionally, there was a notable division between the Tigray Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The Tigray Church accused the leadership of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church of supporting the war campaign against the Tigray people. Efforts to reconcile the differences by the Ethiopian Church did not yield meaningful results, as the Tigray Church appointed its own leadership. These divisions created tensions and challenges within the religious landscape of Ethiopia.

Past and present governments have attempted to mobilize support by controlling religious groups and influencing religious life in the country. For example, after coming to power in 1991, the EPRDF party replaced the patriarch of the Orthodox Church - a position that is typically held for life. This implies that the role of the government in religion is stronger than the influence of religious groups on the government. Moreover, 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. Various informal, politically organized religious groups do exist, especially within Ethiopia's diaspora, but the dominant narrative within Ethiopia's political system remains tied to ethnicity. Against this backdrop Muslim groups have become more active, which has led to the development of specific religious-based publications, such as YeMuslimoch Guday (Muslim Affairs) and Sewtul Islam.

Ethiopia has always had deep Christian roots, but there is also a very substantial Muslim minority of 34.3% according to WCD 2024 estimates. Salafist streams have been present since the 1930s but have been growing in influence among the Ethiopian population in all areas in recent years. There have been claims that the marginalization policy which left the Muslim community devoid of any political or economic influence in the country under previous regimes is continuing under the current administration. The government, however, refutes such allegations. The current prime minister has released all Muslim leaders who had been arrested when the previous prime minister was in office. He also mediated between the two factions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and as a result, the exiled former Patriarch also returned to Ethiopia before his [death](#) in March 2022 (Addis Zeybe, 4 March 2022).

The apolitical character of the Protestant movement, including converts from Islam and some former members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), has brought these Christians into increasing conflict with the Ethiopian government and the two main religious bodies in the country. Experts believe that the current political dynamics might improve relations between Orthodox and Protestant Christians. There are still others who believe that the main problem that emanates from the EOC is from ultra-conservative groups not from the leadership. It is unlikely that the 2018 change in the leadership of

the Ethiopian government has altered the view of these ultra-conservative groups. Indeed, ultra-conservative groups in the ranks of the EOC are becoming very vocal; for instance, they are continually pushing for a tougher stance against any reformist influence in the EOC and against the general Protestant movement in the country.

Gender perspective

By law, men and women have equal rights to enter marriage and must freely consent to the union (Family Code, Articles 6 and 12). Child marriage rates are on the decline, but nevertheless remain high in Ethiopia, with 40% of girls and 5% of boys marrying before the age of 18 ([Girls Not Brides Ethiopia](#), accessed 20 August 2024). The legal age for marriage (18) is rarely enforced and early marriages are particularly common in the case of religious or customary marriages. Child marriage is commonly cited as the main reason women file for divorce. Regarding custody, children under five years commonly live under the custody of the mother, and those over five are placed with their father ([OECD, Social Institutions and Gender Index 2023](#)). Domestic violence is criminalized (under Article 564 of the Criminal Code) but is rarely reported to the police due to a lack of trust in the authorities, and the widespread societal belief that it is a private matter ([Semahegn and Mengistie, August 2015](#)).

Religious landscape

Ethiopia: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	77,509,000	59.8
Muslim	44,512,000	34.3
Hindu	10,100	0.0
Buddhist	2,200	0.0
Ethnic religionist	7,511,000	5.8
Jewish	18,000	0.0
Bahai	35,800	0.0
Atheist	16,300	0.0
Agnostic	105,000	0.1
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Historically, Ethiopia has always had deep Christian roots. The main Christian groups in Ethiopia are the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the various Protestant denominations. The latter entered the country from the 19th century onwards. According to Islamic tradition, Islam has a long history in

Ethiopia dating back to the *hijrah* (flight of Muslims to Axum in northern Ethiopia in 615 AD). However, the Roman Catholic Church (introduced in the 16th century) shaped the identity of Ethiopia to a large extent. In fact, Ethiopia presents itself as a bulwark of Christianity surrounded by Islamic neighbors. Within the context of the “global war against terror”, this narrative is often employed by Ethiopians.

This does not change the fact that Ethiopia 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. These conservative streams were originally concentrated along Ethiopia’s eastern fringes, but have been growing in influence among the Ethiopian population in all areas and causing deep concern for the present government. The Muslim community, especially the leadership, has become very assertive.

Relations between Orthodox and Protestant Christians are strained. Ultra-conservative groups within the EOC are constantly pushing for a tougher stance against the emerging EOC reformist movement and Protestant church activity.

Economic landscape

According to the [African Development Bank's 2024 Ethiopia Economic Outlook](#) (accessed 20 August 2024):

Economic growth

Ethiopia's economy experienced significant growth in 2022/23, with a rate of 7.1%, up from 6.4% in the previous fiscal year. This growth was primarily driven by the services sector, which expanded by 7.9% and accounts for 40% of the country's GDP. The industry sector, contributing 28% to GDP, grew by 6.9%, while agriculture, making up 32% of GDP, saw a growth rate of 6.3%. Key drivers of this economic performance included private consumption and investment. Despite high inflation driven by money supply growth and imported inflation, it decreased from 34% in 2021/22 to 29.2% in 2022/23, due to a tightening of monetary policy. The fiscal deficit also improved, narrowing from 4.2% to 3.3% of GDP.

Inflation

Inflation in Ethiopia has remained a critical issue, albeit with some improvement. Inflation dropped from 34% in 2021/22 to 29.2% in 2022/23. This reduction was primarily achieved through tighter monetary policies aimed at controlling money supply growth. However, inflation remains high due to external pressures, including imported inflation. The exchange rate depreciation further complicated the situation, with the official market seeing a 5.3% drop and the parallel market experiencing a 15% depreciation. Looking forward, inflation is projected to reduce to 21.0% in 2023/24 and 15.4% in 2024/25, as the government continues to implement stringent monetary policies.

Short-term outlook

The short-term economic outlook for Ethiopia remains cautiously optimistic. Economic growth is projected at 6.7% for 2024–25, driven by continued fiscal consolidation efforts. However, several risks could impede this growth, including structural bottlenecks, debt vulnerabilities, ongoing conflicts, and global supply chain disruptions affecting oil and food prices. The government aims to mitigate these

risks through comprehensive economic reforms focusing on monetary, fiscal, financial, public debt, investment, and trade policies. Successful implementation of peace agreements and national dialogues are expected to enhance stability, promoting recovery in tourism and attracting further investment. Additionally, reforms in the global financial architecture, particularly regarding debt restructuring under the G20 Common Framework, are anticipated to create fiscal space for productive investment.

According to [Heritage Foundation's 2024 Economic Freedom Index](#) (accessed 14 July 2024):

- Ethiopia's economic freedom score is 47.9, ranking it 156th out of 184 countries, which categorizes its economy as "repressed." This ranking places Ethiopia 37th out of 47 countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa region, reflecting significant challenges in achieving economic freedom. The country scores below both the world average of 58.6 and the regional average of 52.4.
- The overall economic environment in Ethiopia is hindered by weak rule of law, with property rights, judicial effectiveness, and government integrity all scoring well below global averages.
- The business environment is constrained by inefficient regulatory frameworks, with business freedom, labor freedom, and monetary freedom significantly lagging behind. Additionally, the high inflation rate, almost reaching 40%, exacerbates these economic challenges.
- On the fiscal side, Ethiopia's tax burden is relatively low at 6.2% of GDP, but public debt stands at 46.4% of GDP. Trade and investment freedoms are also limited, with high tariff rates and political instability further impeding economic growth.

Gender perspective

As far as addressing the conflict-induced displacement, violence against vulnerable communities and destruction of infrastructure is concerned, the World Bank came to Ethiopia's aid by approving a \$300 million International Development Association (IDA) grant for the [Response-Recovery-Resilience for Conflict-Affected Communities in Ethiopia Project](#). According to the World Bank's Press Release No. 2022/065/AFE of 12 April 2022:

- "The project will support efforts to address the immediate needs of communities, rehabilitate/recover infrastructure destroyed by conflict, and increase community resilience to the impacts of conflict in a sustainable manner. Specifically, the project will help to improve access to basic services, as well as rebuild climate-resilient infrastructure, prioritized by communities. To urgently meet the needs of conflict-affected communities, mobile units will be dispatched to provide key services including in the areas of education, health, water, and sanitation. The project will also provide GBV [gender-based violence] survivors with improved access to the services and comprehensive care needed to recover from the impacts of the violence they experienced. Furthermore, it will support prevention interventions to address the underlying norms and dynamics that perpetuate GBV."

Within this context women are typically financially dependent on men due to gender gaps in relation to access to education and employment ([USAID, 2 December 2020](#)). Making it additionally challenging for women to attain financial independence, customary and religious practices deny women their due inheritance, despite equal rights being enshrined in law.

Social and cultural landscape

In general, Ethiopia is a country with more than 80 different ethnic groups each with its own language, culture, customs and tradition. Despite its lauded economic growth, Ethiopia still remains one of the poorest countries in the world.

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Ethiopia](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024) and [World Factbook Ethiopia](#) (accessed 20 August 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Oromo 35.8%, Amhara (Amara) 24.1%, Somali (Somalie) 7.2%, Tigray 5.7%, Sidama 4.1%, Gamo-Goffa-Dawuro 2.8%, Gurage 2.6%, Wolaita 2.3%, Afar 2.2%, Silte 1.3%, Kefficho 1.2%, Other 10.8% (2022 est.)
- **Main languages:** Oromo (official working language in the state of Oromiya) 33.8%, Amharic (official language) 29.3%, Somali (official working language of the state of Sumale) 6.2%, Tigrigna (Tigrinya) (official working language of the state of Tigray) 5.9%, Sidamu 4%, Wolayta 2.2%, Gurage 2%, Afar (official working language of the state of Afar) 1.7%, Hadiyya 1.7%, Gamo 1.5%, Gedeo 1.3%, Opuuo 1.2%, Kafa 1.1%. other 8.1%, English (major foreign language taught in schools), Arabic (2007 est.)
- **Urban population:** 22.7% of the total population (2022)
- **Rate of urbanization:** 4.4% annual rate of change (2020-2025)
- **Median age:** 19.8 years (2020)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 8.8 years (Female 8.3, Male 9.3). This gender gap widens at the tertiary level. (9 years according to CIA Factbook 2022)
- **Literacy rate, adult (15 years and older):** 51.8% (2017)
- **Employment to population ratio (15 years and older):** 77.9%
- **Unemployment, total (% of labor force):** 2.1%
- **Labor force participation rate:** Female 73.4%, male 85.8%

According to [UNHCR Ethiopia](#) (Statistics Refugees February 2024), Ethiopia is the third largest refugee-hosting country in Africa, accommodating over 972,000 refugees and asylum seekers, primarily from South Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea. Following the outbreak of armed conflict in Sudan in April 2023, Ethiopia has seen an influx of forcibly displaced individuals at various entry points. The UNHCR, in collaboration with the Ethiopian Government's Refugees and Returnees Service (RRS), regional authorities, other UN agencies, and NGOs, is actively working to provide safe asylum access, documentation, protection, and humanitarian solutions to those in need.

According to the Operational Data Portal Ethiopia, as of [February 2024](#), Ethiopia has an estimated 4,385,789 internally displaced persons (IDPs), including those in both accessible and inaccessible areas. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the latest Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) National Displacement Report 18, there are 3.3 million IDPs in accessible locations. This data is derived from the Ethiopia Humanitarian Needs Overview 2024.

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Ethiopia](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Human Development index:** Ethiopia ranked 175 out of 191 countries in the world with a value of 0.498
- **Average life expectancy at birth:** 66.6 years

- **Gender development index (GDI):** 0.921
- **Gender inequality index (GII):** 0.520. This score is a composite measure reflecting inequality in relation to reproductive health, empowerment and the labor market. Providing an indication of how it performs, Ethiopia ranks 129th out of 170 countries (2021).

Gender perspective

In Ethiopia's patriarchal context, a woman's worth is commonly measured in terms of her role as a wife and mother ([Wright A: Global Majority E-Journal, Vol.11, No.1, June 2020, pp.47–60](#)). Despite legal protection aimed at providing gender inequality, social and cultural norms that place women as subordinate remain prevalent. According to [UN Women \(2021\)](#), 20% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence in the last 12 months. Many choose to remain in abusive marriages due to the stigma and shame attached to divorce, as well as the fear of losing property or child custody. Improving access to justice for victims was highlighted as a key recommendation by a [2019 CEDAW committee report](#) (pp.3-4).

Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital: 2024 Ethiopia](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 19.4% internet penetration. This reflects an increase of 616 thousand users (+2.5%) from the previous year. Despite this growth, 80.6% of the population remained offline. The median mobile internet connection speed reached 27.19 Mbps, a 42.4% increase from the previous year, while fixed internet speeds increased by 48.7% to 7.72 Mbps.
- **Social media usage:** 5.5% of the total population. This marked a 17.5% increase (1.1 million users) compared to January 2023. Notably, 32.4% of these users were female, and 67.6% were male. Facebook was the most popular platform, with 7.05 million users, followed by Instagram and Facebook Messenger. However, LinkedIn and Twitter (X) had smaller user bases, with 1.10 million and 312.3 thousand users, respectively.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 60.4% of the total population. This marked an 11.9% increase (8.2 million connections) compared to January 2023. Despite the high number of mobile connections, challenges such as limited internet penetration and low fixed internet speeds continue to affect overall digital connectivity and access in the country.

According to a [2017 World Bank report](#), men are twice as likely as women to have access to a mobile phone and the internet. An article in the [British Medical Journal](#) (March 2020) further indicated a gender gap of 25% in mobile phone ownership. In light of this, it is more challenging for female Christians to access Christian resources and digital community. Indicating that this gender gap is closing, [Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20](#) highlighted Ethiopia as one of the top ten countries that reported recent gains in women's cell-phone use (p.35).

Ethiopia has poor technological infrastructure caused by communal violence, civil war repression and other man-made or natural disasters. However, the government has been investing in infrastructure in many forms (buildings, roads, technology institutes etc.): In February 2022, Ethiopia [began producing electricity](#) from its massive hydropower plant Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) (Al-Jazeera, 20 February 2022). However, its communication technology is still lagging far behind. The

country has only one telecommunication provider owned by the government. This company provides cell-phone, Internet and landline services.

Freedom House lists Ethiopia as 'Not Free' on its [Freedom on the Net 2023 Index](#) (coverage period: 1 June 2022 - 31 May 2023):

- "Authorities restricted access to the social media platforms TikTok, Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube from February 2023 until after the end of the coverage period in response to efforts by the EOTC to organize antigovernment rallies via social media (see B1)."
- "Several online journalists were arrested and detained for up to two months at a time—before being released without charges—in retaliation for their reporting during the coverage period (see C3)."
- "Four online journalists and activists were abducted by security forces during the coverage period, and several journalists fled the country to avoid renewed detentions (see C7)."

Security situation

Security in Ethiopia has become precarious since the changes that materialized in 2018. For example, Human Rights Watch ([HRW 2023 country chapter Ethiopia](#)) lists some of the major security issues:

- "The two-year armed conflict in northern Ethiopia, which began in November 2020, continued to inflict a terrible toll on civilians. A truce was reached by the main warring parties in November. State security forces and armed groups committed serious abuses, in other regions, notably Oromia. Authorities sporadically cut internet and telecommunication services in conflict-affected areas, with internet and other forms of communications cut in Tigray since June 2021."
- "Conflict and unrest in several regions, followed by drought also exacerbated one of the world's largest humanitarian catastrophes. Over 20 million people required humanitarian assistance in 2022."
- "In western Oromia, fighting between government forces and armed groups resulted in serious abuses committed by all sides."
- "Journalists, civil society organizations, and outspoken public figures in the country faced an increasingly hostile and restrictive reporting environment."

The [US State Department](#) Travel Advisory (last updated on 31 July 2023) states: "The security situation in Addis Ababa is stable. However, there is sporadic violent conflict and civil unrest in other areas of Ethiopia, and the security situation may deteriorate without warning."

International Crisis Group also mentioned that even though the agreement between TPLF and the federal government and the start of a peace negotiation between Oromo Liberation Army and the federal government were positive steps "toward ending the long-running insurgency in Oromia, both sides' uncompromising stances impeded progress and violence continued. The decision on the TPLF's political party status marked a setback in otherwise improving federal-Tigray relations" (ICG, [Crisis Watch Digest Ethiopia - May 2023](#), published on 13 June 2023)

Putting the country's risk level at 'High', Crisis24 stated ([Crisis24 Ethiopia report](#), accessed 20 August 2024):

- "Ethiopia has continued to face ethnic-driven clashes, religious tensions, armed groups attacks, civil unrest, COVID-19-related economic hardship, border disputes due to increasing claims of self-autonomy, and ongoing conflict in Tigray region. The ruling Prosperity Party (PP) has also been hindered by regional issues such as the border conflict between Sudan and Ethiopia over the Al-Fashqa area and the controversy between Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia over the filling of the controversial Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam (GERD)."
- "The military confrontation between the federal government and the former Tigray state ruling party (TPLF) ceased on Nov. 2, 2022, after both parties signed a peace agreement in Pretoria, South Africa. Since then, several steps have been implemented, including the formation of an Interim Regional Administration (IRA) led by Getachew Reda, a former advisor to the president of Tigray and executive committee member of Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The move comes after parliament's removal of the TPLF from the designated terrorist list in March 2023. Despite the progress, key issues remain, including the complete disarmament of the TPLF's forces and the withdrawal of non-government forces (Eritrean troops and Amhara militias) from rural areas of Tigray. The IRA will be in place until regional elections are held; the date has not yet been set."

According to BTI Ethiopia country report 2024: In [2023 and 2024](#), Ethiopia's security landscape was marked by severe conflicts and human rights violations. The Amhara region remains a significant conflict zone, with ongoing clashes between federal forces and the nationalist militia, Fano. Despite the June 2023 expiration of the state of emergency, military operations continued, leading to numerous civilian casualties and displacements. Efforts to broker peace, including a regional conference, have not yet resulted in lasting stability, and the federal government has been criticized for its heavy-handed approach and lack of accountability.

Similarly, in the Oromia region, the conflict between federal forces and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) has continued to exacerbate inter-ethnic tensions. Attacks by Fano militants in border areas and deeper within Oromia have worsened the situation. The government's counterinsurgency campaign has resulted in the destruction of infrastructure and widespread displacement of civilians. The unresolved Tigray-Amhara territorial dispute adds another layer of complexity to the national security environment. Additionally, Ethiopia's strained relations with neighboring countries, such as Somalia, further complicate its security challenges.

According to the [Human Rights Watch 2024 Ethiopia country chapter](#), abuses by security forces and armed groups have continued unabated. In Tigray, even after the cessation of hostilities agreement in 2022, serious human rights violations persisted, including acts of sexual violence and extrajudicial executions by Eritrean forces. The situation in Amhara saw significant deterioration, with clashes between federal forces and local militias causing numerous civilian casualties. The government's counterinsurgency efforts in Oromia against the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) also led to increased violence and instability in the region.

The [International Crisis Group June 2024 Crisis Watch Report](#) highlighted that the security situation in Ethiopia's Amhara region remains dire, with ongoing clashes between federal forces and the Fano

militia. This has resulted in numerous civilian deaths and widespread displacement. The federal government's efforts to integrate regional police into the national military structure have been met with resistance, further complicating the security landscape. Additionally, tensions between the Amhara and Tigray regions continue to simmer, with incidents of violence and ethnic cleansing reported in disputed territories.

Christian origins

Ethiopia is one of the oldest nations in Africa to accept Christianity. Christianity entered the country in the [fourth century](#) - during the Axumite period - when the royal family became Christians - and the Christian faith gradually came to dominate the land (Smithsonian Magazine, 10 December 2019). Following the acceptance of Christianity by the ruling elite, the Ethiopian church created a strong relationship with the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt. As a result, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church received its Patriarch from Alexandria, Egypt, right up until 1959. Orthodox Christianity remained the state religion until 1974. (Source: Melton J.G. & Baumann M., eds., *Religions of the world*, 2010, p.1004.)

The second form of Christianity to enter Ethiopia was the Roman Catholic Church. This was the result of the relationship between Ethiopia and the Portuguese during the 16th century. The Portuguese tried to change the Ethiopian state religion to Catholic. This attempt caused bloodshed as the peasants reacted angrily. As a result, Catholic missionaries were expelled from the country and were not allowed to return until the 19th century. Ethiopia followed a 'closed door policy' for 150 years from 1632 onwards. Today a community of several hundred thousand Roman Catholics exists in Ethiopia and is led by the Archbishop of Addis Ababa.

The third type of Christianity to enter Ethiopia was Protestant. It managed to enter the country "through the efforts of a spectrum of Lutheran missionaries, beginning in 1866 with some from the Swedish Lutheran Mission". In the second decade of the 20th century, Swedish missionaries representing the Independent True Friends of the Bible arrived in the country. These united with the Swedish Lutheran Mission to coordinate work. Missionaries from different parts of the world continued to arrive: "German missionaries from the Hermannsburg Mission arrived in 1927. Missionaries from Norway, Denmark, Iceland, and the United States arrived through the 1940s and 1950s. Much of the Lutheran work was brought together in the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. American Presbyterians arrived in 1920 and began work among the [Oromo] people. When the Italians arrived, the Presbyterian missionaries were expelled, and before leaving they organized their mission as the Bethel Evangelical Church. In the mid-1970s, it merged into the Mekane Jesus Church." (Source: *Religions of the world*, p.1006.)

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church tried to restrict the influence of the missionaries among the populace. However, attempts to remain the sole Christian witness in the country were also rendered futile by the arrival of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM). SIM launched its [expansive work](#) in Ethiopia in 1927 under the direction of Dr Thomas A. Lambie (Dictionary of African Christian biography, accessed 24 August 2020).

The expulsion of Italy and the conclusion of World War II brought more Christian groups into the country. The Baptist General Conference of America entered the country in 1950 with its first organized mission in Ambo - West of Addis Ababa. (Source: Brackney W.H., *Historical Dictionary of the Baptists*,

p.201.) “Pentecostalism came into the country in the post-war years, and two large indigenous churches have resulted, the Full Gospel Believers Church and Gods All Times Association. Both of these churches have been encouraged by assistance and personnel from Scandinavian Pentecostal bodies.” (Source: *Religions of the world*, p.1006.)

Church spectrum today

Ethiopia: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	51,021,000	65.8
Catholic	1,060,000	1.4
Protestant	22,725,000	29.3
Independent	2,863,000	3.7
Unaffiliated	206,000	0.3
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-366,000	-0.5
Total	77,509,000	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	24,083,000	31.1
Pentecostal-Charismatic	15,682,000	20.2

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as “Renewalists”.

Religion in Ethiopia is complex due to historical claims, competitiveness and accusations of heresy. A previous US State Department IRFR report stated ([IRFR 2019](#)): “[S]ome Protestants and Orthodox Christians accused one another of heresy and of actively working to convert adherents from one faith to the other, increasing tension between the two groups.”

In terms of geographical location, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is dominant in Amhara, Tigray and Central Oromia, while Protestant Christians dominate in Western Oromia and SNNP.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Ethiopia>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

External Links

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