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Violations of religious freedom of evangelical Christians in Oromia in post-1991 Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study examines violations of religious freedom affecting evangelical Christians in Muslim-majority areas of Oromia after 1991. Drawing on interviews with church leaders and Muslim-background believers, supported by secondary sources, it applies Galtung's framework of direct, structural, and cultural violence. Findings indicate that attacks and hostility are reinforced by discriminatory administration, inadequate protection, and narratives portraying converts and evangelical communities as outsiders. Decentralized governance enables local majorities to influence institutions and weaken constitutional guarantees. The study argues that religious freedom requires stronger institutional neutrality, vertical accountability, impartial enforcement, and effective protection of minority rights across local governance systems.

Keywords

Religious persecution, evangelical Christianity, religious freedom, Muslim-Christian relations, religious conflicts, Oromia, Ethiopia.

1. Introduction

Ethiopia is a religiously diverse country in which Christianity and Islam constitute the largest faith traditions.[2] Since 1991, evangelical Christianity has experienced significant growth,[3] including in Muslim-majority areas of Oromia, where

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2 Degwale Gebeyehu Belay et al. 2026. "Ethno-Religious Nationalism and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 1, no. aop:1-19.

3 Emanuele Fantini 2015. "Go Pente! The Charismatic Renewal of the Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia," in Gérard Prunier and Éloi Ficquet (eds.), *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*, Hurst & Company: 123-146.

evangelical expansion has sometimes generated resistance and conflict.[4] Islam became firmly established in Hararghe, Bale, Jimma, and Arsi in Oromia between the 16th and 19th centuries.[5] Evangelical Christianity expanded during the 20th century through missionary and indigenous church efforts.[6] This expansion introduced new religious dynamics, particularly in Muslim-majority communities where conversion to Christianity often became a source of tension.

The secular constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) has a provision for religious pluralism and for all religious groups to enjoy freedom of religious expression.[7] However, evangelical churches and Christians in Muslim-majority areas of the Oromia Region experience persistent, systematic, multi-layered violations of freedom of religion. These violations of religious freedom of evangelical Christians range from rejection by family, eviction from home, and dispossession of private property to public and collective violent attacks.[8]

In general, religious persecution has not been the focus of scholarship in Ethiopia, and existing studies on Ethiopia have focused extensively on ethnic federalism, ethnic conflict, and macro-level manifestations of religious violence.[9] Studies on religious conflict have primarily examined relations between the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and Islam, attacks on the Orthodox Church,[10] violence targeting Muslims,[11] and broader debates on secularism and state-religion

4 Terje Østebø 2023. "Religious Dynamics and Conflicts in Contemporary Ethiopia: Expansion, Protection, and Reclaiming Space," *African Studies Review* 66, (3):721-744.

5 UNESCO, *Harar Jugol, the Fortified Historic Town*, UNESCO, World Heritage Centre, 2006, Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3uhu6f7r; Terje Østebø 2009. "Religious Change and Islam: The Emergence of the Salafi Movement in Bale, Ethiopia," *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (2):463-476; Temam Haji Adem 2019. "Syncretism of Waaqeffannaa and Islam among the Arsi Oromoo of Ethiopia," *Gadaa Journal* 2, (2):1-20; Abdo Abazinab Abamoga 2023. "History of Islamic Education in Jimma from 1830 to 2007." Haramaya University.

6 Gustav Arén 1978. *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus.* EFS-förlaget; Nordic Africa Institute, Local History of Ethiopia: Jima - Jimonyetta. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3n2byncn; Wake Jeo Gerbi 2017. "Introduction of Evangelical Christianity in Oromia: The Five Major Expeditions," *African Journal of History and Culture* 9, (4):34-40; Nathan B. Hege 2020. *Beyond Our Prayers: Anabaptist Church Growth in Ethiopia, 1948-1998*. Wipf and Stock Publishers.

7 Endalcachew Bayeh 2015. "The Place of Customary and Religious Laws and Practices in Ethiopia: A Critical Review of the Four Modern Constitutions," *Social Sciences* 4, (4):90-93; Assefa Tolera 2017. "Interrogating Religious Plurality and Separation of State and Religion in Ethiopia," *Eastern Africa Social Science Research Review* 33, (1):39-72; Dereje Melese Liyew 2025. "The Politics of Secularism in Ethiopia: Repression and Co-Option towards the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church," *Insight on Africa* 17, (2):195-212.

8 Terje Østebø, "The Role and Relevance of Religion in Ethiopia's Current Conflicts," *Addis Standard - Special Edition* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia), 6 November 2019. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/hweyhjbn.

9 Østebø, "Religious Dynamics," 721-744.

10 Alene Agegnehu Waga and Kelemu Zelalem Berhanu 2024. "Political Reform and Religious Violence in Some Ethiopian Regions since 2018: Evidence from Sidama, Somali, and Oromo," *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 10:101082; Dereje Melese Liyew 2026. "Tradition in Peril: Epistemic and Physical Violence Against the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 2026:1-24 DOI: 10.1163/15718115-bja10288; Degwale Gebeyehu Belay et al., "Ethno-Religious Nationalism and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 2026:1-19, DOI: 10.1163/15718115-bja10250.

11 Terje Østebø et al. 2021. "Religion, Ethnicity, and Charges of Extremism: The Dynamics of Inter-Communal Violence in Ethiopia," *Brussels: European Institute of Peace*:15-23; Yihenew Alemu Tesfaye et al. 2026. "Reframing Religious Conflict in Gondar: Land, Public Visibility, and the Politics of Difference," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 20, (2):373-392.

relations. Consequently, the relationship between ethnic federalism, local governance, and religious freedom has received limited scholarly attention.

Moreover, existing research has largely overlooked the less visible forms of discrimination embedded within local administrative and bureaucratic practices. The experiences of evangelical Christians, particularly in Muslim-majority areas of Oromia, remain underrepresented in the literature despite evidence of social exclusion, administrative restrictions, and direct violence. Academic literature primarily focuses on national-level religious freedom violation incidents,[12] leading to a critical gap in empirical studies on various local hostilities. Although a few incidents have been documented by international advocates of religious freedom,[13] little is known about the violations of the freedom of religion of evangelical Christians at the grassroots level.

This study aims to address this gap by examining violations of the religious freedom of evangelical Christians within seven Muslim-majority zones in the Oromia Region. It identifies three aspects of the violation of freedom of religion in the Oromia Region. First, it examines the strategies employed by local state authorities to restrict the religious freedom of evangelical Christians in Muslim-majority areas of Oromia. Second, it evaluates the extent of collusion, if any, between state actors and local social community forces in the violations of the freedom of religion of evangelical Christians and examines the role of a close-knit community in violating the religious freedom of converts from Islam to Christianity. Third, it analyzes the nature of violations of the freedom of religion encountered by evangelical Christians in the Muslim-majority areas of Oromia, ascertaining whether they are sporadic or systematic and assessing them against the religious freedom provisions guaranteed by the FDRE Constitution.

Religious discrimination is a global phenomenon that can be perpetrated by a variety of actors, including states, local authorities, and social groups.[14] Scholarship on state regulation of religion demonstrates that governments may persecute religious minorities through laws, policies, and administrative practices that restrict religious expression and religious practice, especially when the states perceive that the religious minorities compete with the state-supported re-

12 Østebø, "Religious Dynamics"; Jörg Haustein et al. 2023. *Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia: History, Politics, and Inter-Religious Relations*. Rift Valley Institute; Tinsae Ashagrie Dagnew et al. 2025. "Living as Neighbors: Neighborhood Networks and Interfaith Coexistence between Muslims and Christians in Southern Wollo, Ethiopia," *Discover Global Society* 3, (1):155.

13 Voice of the Martyrs USA. *Ethiopia Archives: Stories*, Non-Profit Organization, n.d. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3wdwxrfn; Open Doors International, *World Watch List 2026: Situation of Religious Freedom of Christians in Ethiopia*, Dossier. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/y5dfa9bc.

14 Laszlo Pokorny 2026. *The Hidden Costs of Faith: A Socioeconomic Analysis of Christian Persecution and Community Resilience in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (2000-2025)*. Doctoral Dissertation, ICL Institute. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yye4ca95.

ligion.[15] Authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, in particular, frequently employ legal and bureaucratic mechanisms to suppress religious freedom.[16] However, religious persecution does not always result from explicit state policies. In many contexts, violations of religious freedom emerge from the state's inability or unwillingness to enforce constitutional protections equally across its territory.[17]

This study is primarily concerned with the latter phenomenon. Jonathan Fox argues that weak state capacity can enable local authorities to violate the rights of religious minorities when the preferences and pressures of dominant local religious communities influence them.[18] Similarly, Roger Finke and his colleagues contend that when states fail to protect religious minorities and do not hold local officials accountable for discriminatory practices, discrimination can become institutionalized at the local level. Over time, discriminatory behavior becomes normalized within local administrative systems and is reproduced by successive officials. Consequently, religious discrimination evolves from isolated acts of prejudice into a persistent pattern embedded in local governance practices.[19] These perspectives suggest that the effective protection of religious freedom depends not only on constitutional guarantees but also on the consistent enforcement of those guarantees and the accountability of state actors.

2. Religious freedom in Ethiopia

2.1. Ethiopian ethnic federalism and the emergence of local autocracy

In Ethiopia, federalism was introduced to address the country's longstanding diversity challenges by decentralizing political authority to ethnically defined regional states.[20] While federalism was intended to dismantle centralized authoritarianism and create a more inclusive political order, scholars argue that it has decentralized repression instead and created localized forms of majoritarian rule.[21] Jon Abbink argues that, by treating conflicts and administrative issues as local matters, the Ethiopian federal government distanced itself from responsibility while allowing local authorities to manage local affairs,[22] yet retaining the

15 Roger Finke et al. 2017. "Explaining Discrimination against Religious Minorities," *Politics and Religion* 10, (2):389-416.

16 Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke 2011. *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge University Press.

17 Dane R. Mataic and Roger Finke 2020. "Compliance Gaps and the Failed Promises of Religious Freedoms," *Religion, State and Society* 47, (1):124-150. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2018.1528788.

18 Jonathan Fox 2016. *The Unfree Exercise of Religion: A World Survey of Discrimination against Religious Minorities*. Cambridge University Press.

19 Finke et al., "Explaining Discrimination,"416.

20 Asnake A. Chanie 2026. "Rethinking Ethnicity and Democratic Transition in Ethiopia: Identity, Federalism, and the Crisis of Statehood," *Politics & Policy* 54, (3):e70145.

21 Sujit Choudhry (ed.) 2008. *Constitutional Design for Divided Societies: Integration or Accommodation?* Oxford University Press.

22 Jon Abbink 2006. "Ethnicity and Conflict Generation in Ethiopia: Some Problems and Prospects of Ethno-Regional Federalism," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 24, (3):389-413, 391.

power to intervene or withdraw when it chooses. Abbink further contends that the Ethiopian federal government maintained a centralized, top-down system of control that was even stronger than that of its predecessors.[23] It is important to note that Abbink arrived at this conclusion based on his analysis of Ethiopia's federal experiment during the first two decades of the federal government's tenure.

Assefa Fiseha identifies the treatment of "internal minorities" as one of the major shortcomings of Ethiopian federalism. Internal minorities, defined as citizens residing outside their designated ethnic homelands, often remain vulnerable to discrimination because they are subject to the authority of regional governments dominated by local majorities. Without strong federal oversight, these groups may find themselves politically marginalized and inadequately protected by state institutions.[24]

Several studies examining ethnic federalism have similarly highlighted challenges in the protection of minority rights. These studies show that minority communities have frequently experienced systematic exclusion from economic opportunities, political participation, and public institutions at the hands of localized majorities.[25] More broadly, scholars argue that the devolution of significant political and administrative authority to regional states, special zones, and local administrations has contributed to the intensification of ethnic tensions and the proliferation of interethnic conflicts throughout the country.[26]

2.2. Constitutional guarantees in Ethiopia

The Ethiopian Constitution of 1995 guarantees freedom of religion, equality among religious communities, and the separation of religion and state.[27] These constitutional protections created favorable conditions for the expansion of evangelical Christianity throughout the country, including in Muslim-majority areas.[28] Never-

23 Jon Abbink 2011. "Ethnic-Based Federalism and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Reassessing the Experiment after 20 Years," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, (4):596-618, 604, 606.

24 Assefa Fiseha 2006. "Theory versus Practice in the Implementation of Ethiopia's Ethnic Federalism," in David Turton (ed.), *Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective*, Addis Ababa University Press: 131-164.

25 Yonatan Tesfaye Fessha and Christophe Van der Beken 2013. "Ethnic Federalism and Internal Minorities: The Legal Protection of Internal Minorities in Ethiopia," *African Journal of International and Comparative Law* 21, (1):32-49; Christophe Van der Beken 2015. "Federalism, Local Government and Minority Protection in Ethiopia: Opportunities and Challenges," *Journal of African Law* 59, (1):150-177; Assefa Fiseha 2017. "Intra-Unit Minorities in the Context of Ethno-National Federation in Ethiopia," *Utrecht Law Review* 13, (1):170-189; Muluneh Kassa Eresso 2021. "Challenges in Ethiopia's Post-1991 Ethnic Federalism Entwined with Ethnic-Based Political Parties," *Mizan Law Review* 15, (2):313-350.

26 Hiwot Demelash 2022. *Does Ethnic Federalism Promote Conflict? Ethiopia as a Case Study*, available at: https://tinyurl.com/34xe692f; Takele Bekele Bayu 2022. "Is Federalism the Source of Ethnic Identity-Based Conflict in Ethiopia?" *Insight on Africa* 14, (1):104-125; Asnake Kefale 2024. "Federal Constitutional Design and Ethno-Nationalist Conflicts in Ethiopia," in André van Dokkum, Alexander Meckelburg, Shauna LaTosky (eds.), *Ethnography, History, and the Politics of Knowledge in Africa,* African Studies Centre: Leiden: 105-113.

27 Yihenew Misrak et al. 2023. "The Demands and Contests of Constitutional Amendment in Ethiopia: Analysis on the 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution," *Insight on Africa* 15, (1):88-107.

28 Jörg Haustein and Terje Østebø 2011. "EPRDF's Revolutionary Democracy and Religious Plurality: Islam and Christianity in Post-Derg Ethiopia," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, (4):755-772.

theless, increased religious visibility and political transformation, especially since 2018, have coincided with renewed debates concerning religion, ethnic identity, and state neutrality.[29]

Despite constitutional guarantees, the implementation of religious freedom remains uneven. Limited efforts to address local tensions, combined with the state's preoccupation with broader political and ethnic conflicts, have left many local grievances unresolved.[30] Governmental failure to provide equal legal protection can create conditions in which minority religious groups become vulnerable to discrimination and violence.[31] Moreover, the inability or unwillingness of local authorities to prevent or respond effectively to religiously motivated violence undermines public confidence in state institutions.[32] Where local officials display religious bias, institutional neutrality is weakened, and the practical exercise of religious freedom becomes constrained.[33]

3. Theoretical framework

This study uses Johan Galtung's violence triangle as its principal analytical framework. Rather than treating violations of religious freedom only as isolated acts of physical harm, the framework distinguishes among direct, structural, and cultural violence and examines how they interact. This approach is appropriate for analyzing the experiences of evangelical Christians in Muslim-majority areas of Oromia because the findings include visible attacks, unequal institutional practices, and social meanings that legitimize exclusion.

According to Johan Galtung, direct violence refers to identifiable acts that inflict immediate physical, psychological, or material harm.[34] In analyzing the findings, this category is used to interpret assaults, killings, threats, intimidation, attacks on worshipers, destruction of churches and Christian-owned property, harassment, and forced eviction. Attention is given to the actors involved, the forms of harm reported, the contexts in which attacks occur, and the consequences for the exercise of religious freedom.

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29 Jörg Haustein et al. 2026. "Introduction: Religion and Politics in Post-EPRDF Ethiopia," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 20, (2):313-333.

30 Haustein et al., "Introduction: Religion and Politics in Post-EPRDF Ethiopia"; Selahadin Eshetu Getahun, "What Went Wrong with Islam in Ethiopia?," *Addis Standard*, 29 June 2012. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/c9fzpar5.

31 Jonathan Fox 2015. *Political Secularism, Religion, and the State*. Cambridge University Press; Grim and Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied*.

32 Aberham Kinfe Arega 2022. "The Ignored Tears of Religious Minority Group in Ethiopia: The Case in West Arsi Zone," *Global Scientific Journal* 10, (3):1114-1151. Available at: http://www.globalscientificjournal.com/.1144-1146.

33 Solomon G/Egziabher, "Managing Religious Conflict under the Federal System of Ethiopia: The Case of Jimma Zone in Oromiya National Regional State" (Thesis, St Mary University College, n.d.). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4p5hskbu.

34 Johan Galtung 1969. "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, (3):170-171.

For Galtung, structural violence refers to preventable harm produced through unequal institutional arrangements, administrative practices, and failures of protection.[35] This category guides the analysis of land and burial-site denials, delayed permits and title transfers, selective regulatory enforcement, taxation and licensing pressures, police inaction, judicial favoritism, and the absence of effective vertical oversight. These practices are interpreted not merely as bureaucratic inefficiency but as institutional processes that systematically limit evangelical Christians' ability to realize constitutionally guaranteed rights.

Galtung's cultural violence consists of beliefs, symbols, narratives, and norms that make direct or structural violence appear legitimate, necessary, or normal.[36] The findings are therefore examined for representations of evangelical Christians and Muslim-background believers as outsiders, traitors, infidels, threats to public peace, or persons who do not properly belong to the local community. The analysis also considers how the fusion of religious and communal identity can normalize ostracism, unequal treatment, and official inaction.

The three categories are used relationally rather than as separate boxes. Cultural narratives can justify structural discrimination; structural arrangements can create impunity and opportunities for direct attacks; and recurring direct violence can reinforce fear, exclusion, and the apparent legitimacy of discriminatory institutions.[37] Galtung's triangle therefore enables the study to trace how community norms, local bureaucracies, and identifiable perpetrators mutually reinforce violations of religious freedom.

In practical terms, each finding is interpreted by asking three related questions: What visible harm occurred and who enacted it? Which institutional arrangements, decisions, or omissions enabled or reproduced that harm? Which cultural meanings made the unequal treatment appear acceptable? This sequence links evidence from interviews and documents to the three dimensions of violence while preserving distinctions among perpetrators, institutions, and legitimizing narratives.

Applied together, these concepts support the study's central interpretation: violations of religious freedom are neither solely episodic attacks nor solely administrative failures. They constitute a mutually reinforcing pattern in which direct harm, institutional inequality, and cultural legitimation sustain one another. The framework thus provides a consistent basis for interpreting the empirical evidence on bureaucratic barriers, state inaction, and non-state social hostilities.

35 Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," 170.
36 Johan Galtung 1990. "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27, (3):291.
37 Galtung, "Cultural Violence," 294-295.

4. Research methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive, and historically informed approach to examine reported violations of the religious freedom of evangelical Christians in Muslim-majority areas of Oromia after 1991. The study covers Jimma, Bale, Arsi, West Arsi, East Hararghe, West Hararghe, and Illuababor. These zones were selected because interview and documentary sources identify them as settings in which interreligious tension, discrimination, or violence has occurred.[38] The study is therefore designed to explain mechanisms and patterns within selected cases rather than to estimate the prevalence of violations across Oromia as a whole.

Participants were recruited from two groups: local evangelical church leaders, including pastors, elders, evangelists, and a regional mission coordinator; and Muslim-background believers who had experienced or witnessed religious hostility. Initially, participants were identified through regional mission coordinators using purposive sampling, and subsequent participants were recruited through chain referrals on the basis of relevant direct experience. The final sample comprised 21 interviewees across seven zones: Arsi (N=3), Bale (N=6), East Hararghe (N=2), Illuababor (N=2), Jimma (N=2), West Arsi (N=4), and West Hararghe (N=2). This strategy provided access to participants with relevant experience but concentrated the sample within evangelical networks; the sample is therefore used to identify mechanisms and reported patterns rather than to represent all evangelical Christians of the selected zones.

Interviewees comprised four categories: 4 church leaders (CL-01 to CL-04), 5 frontline male pastors/evangelists (PE-01 to PE-05), 1 frontline female evangelist (FE-01), 6 Muslim-background believers acting as indigenous missionaries (IM-01 to IM-06), and 5 lay Muslim-background believers (MBB-01 to MBB-05). These identifiers were used in the findings and analysis of the study. Data was collected through indepth interviews, document analysis, and historical review. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The study was limited by its focus on evangelical perspectives and reliance on qualitative data, suggesting the need for broader research.

5. Findings and analysis through Galtung's violence framework

5.1. Structural violence: bureaucratic and administrative restrictions

5.1.1. Weaponization of land allocation

This section analyzes bureaucratic barriers as structural violence. The central issue is not simply whether individual officials act unfairly, but whether routine institutional procedures repeatedly produce unequal access to land, burial sites,

38 Girma Defere and Jörg Haustein 2023. *Religion, Conflict and Social Cohesiveness: Insights from Jimma.* Rift Valley Institute.

permits, legal recognition, and public religious activity. The evidence is interpreted by examining the institutional mechanism involved, the unequal outcome it produces, and the way decentralized authority and weak oversight allow that outcome to persist.

Access to land for places of worship emerged as one of the most significant challenges facing evangelical churches in Muslim-majority areas of Oromia. Interview participants reported that while mosques often receive prompt approval and can sometimes be constructed before formal permits are obtained, evangelical churches frequently face delays or denials when applying for land. In response, some churches purchase private land and later seek permits and title transfers. However, local authorities reportedly delay these processes, refuse title transfers, or claim that the land is not designated for religious purposes.

As one church leader (CL-01) stated, "The most prevalent challenges we face are the denial of land for church construction and the refusal to transfer the titles of ownership for land that churches have purchased." He further noted that authorities occasionally halt church construction even when it takes place on privately owned land. This suggests that land administration has become an important mechanism through which evangelical religious activities are restricted.

Interviewees reported that the denial of burial sites was used to intimidate evangelical Christians. A church leader (CL-02) explained, "In a community where having a burial place is honored, not providing one for evangelical Christians is, in a way, discouraging others from joining this faith due to their concerns that, if they were to die, they would not have a place to rest." A local pastor (PE-01) similarly stated, "When we requested a burial place, the local authorities told us to be buried where we originally came from." International religious freedom reports have also documented cases in which evangelical Christians living as religious minorities were denied burial rights.[39] Taken together, these accounts suggest that the denial of church-construction sites and burial places can operate as both administrative discrimination and a means of discouraging religious affiliation.[40]

The interviewees stated that when they appealed their cases to higher levels of government, such as zonal and regional authorities and, in some instances, even to the federal government, they did not receive the support they needed. The mission coordinator (PE-02) explained that higher-level government officials typically received their appeal letters and responded by saying that they would contact lower-level authorities and ask them to reconsider the cases.

39 U.S. Department of State 2017. *Ethiopia 2017 International Religious Freedom Report*, 6. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2v4affke.

40 Open Doors International 2025. *World Watch List: 2025 Situation of Religious Freedom for Christians in Ethiopia*, Country Dossier 17. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4jcfpf6v.

However, he and other interviewees claimed that these officials rarely provided written responses. The interviewees perceived this practice as a means of avoiding the creation of documentary evidence. They argued that verbal communications could not serve as proof of official action. Furthermore, because of the high turnover of government personnel, they often encountered different officials each time they visited an office and were required to present their cases repeatedly. During the fieldwork, the researcher reviewed letters concerning land-related disputes that four local churches had submitted to zonal and regional government offices. Despite these submissions, no written responses were provided by the respective authorities.

5.1.2. Selective regulatory enforcement

Local authorities seem to employ existing laws, such as those restricting noise in residential areas and governing public assembly permits, disproportionately against evangelical Christians. A pastor from a zonal city in southeastern Oromia (PE-02) stated, "Muslims can engage in any religious activities on the streets, including blocking traffic during their prayers, yet we are prohibited from preaching on the streets." A similar case was reported in another study conducted in Jimma.[41] The pastor further added that young people were imprisoned for months for peacefully preaching the gospel on the city streets. He cited an incident in which Muslims attacked the young people, but no one held them accountable even though they posted their attacks against Christians on social media in 2025, encouraging others to do the same if they see Christians preaching their faith on the streets.[42]

Other interview participants also asserted that local authorities impose restrictions on evangelical Christians, limiting their ability to gather in public spaces to celebrate their holidays, while Muslims are granted this privilege. Furthermore, when such occasions arise, local authorities engage in celebrations and deliver speeches for the Muslim community. One study corroborated the interviewees' accounts by demonstrating that Protestant Christians faced significant challenges in obtaining permits for public religious activities and evangelistic events in venues such as stadiums. Although they have recently been allowed to use stadiums without rental fees, the security charges imposed by local authorities often remain prohibitively expensive, thereby restricting the practical exercise of religious freedom.[43]

5.1.3. Administrative threats and fines

Participants reported that taxation and licensing procedures were used to pressure some evangelical Christian business owners. According to their accounts,

41 Defere and Haustein, *Religion, Conflict and Social Cohesiveness*, 17.
42 See TikTok video @abdeeumar5, https://tinyurl.com/3ycw7yt3., 7 June 2025.
43 Defere and Haustein, *Religion, Conflict and Social Cohesiveness*, 12.

Christian-owned businesses were sometimes subjected to higher tax assessments or unofficial demands for additional payments, and refusal could result in threats to revoke business licenses. One church leader (CL-04) stated, "They wanted us to choose between our Christian faith and bribing them or shutting down our businesses." These accounts indicate a perceived use of economic and administrative discretion against evangelical Christians, although the study does not independently establish the comparative tax treatment of Christian- and Muslim-owned businesses.

Other interviewees also reported that church leaders employed in government institutions occasionally face pressure when seeking services on behalf of their churches, creating tensions between their religious commitments and professional responsibilities. A church leader (CL-03) claimed that he was denied promotion due to his active engagement in public church activities. These experiences suggest that economic and administrative mechanisms may be used to discourage evangelical activities and limit support for local churches.

The findings may indicate that due to local bureaucratic barriers, evangelical Christians encounter significant obstacles in obtaining land, building permits, burial sites, and authorization for religious activities in Muslim-majority areas of Oromia. These barriers suggest that local institutions can restrict religious freedom even in the absence of explicit discriminatory laws.

These findings parallel previous studies, which contend that Ethiopia's ethnic federalism has inadequately protected internal minorities and has enabled local majorities to exercise considerable power over local institutions. The absence of institutions for internal minorities makes them vulnerable to discrimination.[44] Similarly, Goitom Gebreluel, a political analyst, argues that post-2018 federalism decentralized authoritarian practices, creating localized centers of power that may operate with limited accountability.[45] The findings of this study suggest that similar dynamics affect religious minorities. Although evangelical Christians are not necessarily ethnic minorities, they frequently occupy a minority position within political and social environments dominated by a particular ethnoreligious majority.

Importantly, the findings do not suggest that ethnic federalism causes violations of freedom of religion but rather that it creates a decentralizing structure that allows majoritarianism. Ethnic federalism appears to facilitate these dynamics by empowering local authorities and majoritarian communities while pro-

44 Getaye Mulugeta Kasse and Gizachew Asrat Woldemariam 2022. "The Matrix of Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia in Protecting Internal Minority Rights: Examining Perceptions in Oromia Regional State," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 9, (1):206-225.

45 Goitom Gebreluel 2019. *Should Ethiopia Stick with Ethnic Federalism? Al Jazeera*, 5 April 2019. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2dnftykm.

viding limited institutional mechanisms for protecting minority rights. In this respect, local government institutions may become instruments through which majority interests are advanced at the expense of minority religious groups.

Interpreted through Galtung's concept of structural violence, these practices extend beyond administrative inefficiency or isolated bureaucratic delay. In this study, the denial of land, burial places, permits, title transfers, and written responses demonstrates how formally neutral administrative systems can produce unequal religious outcomes. Because these restrictions are embedded in routine bureaucratic procedures, they limit evangelical Christians' religious freedom without necessarily relying on overt physical force or explicit discriminatory legislation.

This study shows that local state actors did not establish the structures that enabled discrimination; instead, they utilized formally neutral institutional arrangements in ways that harmed religious minorities. Their actions suggest a deliberate exploitation of bureaucratic loopholes and administrative discretion to disadvantage evangelical Christians. Consequently, structural violence was reproduced not simply through the existence of institutions but through the way local actors weaponized those institutions to restrict the rights and opportunities of a minority religious group.[46]

5.2. Direct violence enabled by structural inaction

5.2.1. Law enforcement inaction

This section examines direct violence together with the structural conditions that enable it. Assaults, killings, intimidation, attacks on worship services, and property destruction constitute direct violence because they involve identifiable actors and immediate harm. Police delays, failure to arrest suspects, adverse action against victims, and judicial favoritism constitute structural violence because they reduce protection and accountability. The analysis therefore asks both what harms occurred and how institutional action or omission made their occurrence or repetition more likely.

According to several Christians' accounts, evangelical churches typically report imminent threats and incidents, such as the burning of churches and properties, attacks during worship services, and even killings of evangelical Christians, to the police. They said that the police often respond with significant delays, refuse to arrest suspected individuals, or claim that these incidents fall outside their jurisdiction. An evangelist (PE-03) cited an example in which a group of Muslims murdered an evangelist in Jimma in March 2007, and the police did not arrest the suspects.[47]

46 Grim and Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied*, 32, 40-43, 86-87.

47 Jennifer Gold 2007. "No Justice for Murdered Ethiopian Christian," *The Christian Post*, 14 July. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5n6dhm3e.

An evangelist (PE-04) reported an incident that occurred at his church in Illuababor. In 2024, a group of armed Muslims stormed the evangelical church in his town, attacked worshipers, and assaulted the preacher. He stated, "We reported the incident to the police. However, they arrived only after the attackers had fled. The police arrested several church leaders whom they found at the site and placed them in jail." The case was appealed to the zonal level, and a few of the attackers were arrested but subsequently released on bail. A 2024 letter from the local church to the zonal security office provided evidence for this claim. Previously, in 2011, churches were burned, Christians were attacked, and people were killed over several days in areas near Jimma, including Asendabo and Omo Nada; local government authorities did not intervene to restore peace until the federal government stepped in.[48]

5.2.2. In the name of maintaining public peace and safety

Interview participants reported that local authorities often accuse evangelical Christians of disturbing community peace and use such allegations to justify inaction or adverse measures against them. In one incident, an indigenous missionary (IM-01) stated that a mob attacked a house used for evangelical worship, destroying property and assaulting worshipers. When victims sought assistance, some were reportedly labeled as collaborators with "anti-peace groups" and discouraged from pursuing complaints. Previous studies have documented cases in which local authorities characterized evangelical street preachers as "terrorists," thereby restricting their public religious activities.[49]

These accounts suggest that state actors may indirectly legitimize hostility toward evangelical Christians by framing religious activities as threats to public order. Such narratives shift attention away from religious discrimination and portray restrictions on Christians as necessary measures for maintaining community peace. Open Doors reported that, despite political changes at the national level, local authorities have often retained the earlier regimes' distrust of Christians, thereby limiting the full enjoyment of religious freedom by Christian communities.[50]

5.2.3. Judicial favoritism

Respondents perceived local judicial institutions as favoring members of the religious majority. Participants reported that judges and prosecutors do not consider evidence, nor do they verify the accuracy of the evidence when Muslims accuse evangelical Christians of defaming Islam. The Muslims have reportedly

48 VOA 2011. "Ethiopia Charges 130 in Church Burning Incidents," 7 March. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mwcwjked.
49 Defere and Haustein, *Religion, Conflict and Social Cohesiveness*, 16.
50 Open Doors International, *World Watch List: 2025 Situation of Religious Freedom for Christians in Ethiopia*, 4.

organized false witnesses to testify in the courts against innocent Christians, leading to unjust prison sentences for the evangelical Christians. In one reported case in southern Oromia in 2010, an evangelical Christian was imprisoned after being falsely accused of desecrating Islamic scriptures.[51] This pattern indicates how localized governance structures may allow majority preferences to shape the implementation of constitutional protections.

Interviewees from all zones under study reported that when a case presented by evangelical churches against alleged violations of their rights by Muslims in the areas was substantiated, it was often referred to traditional elders for mediation. However, most of these community elders were reportedly Muslim leaders, who were allegedly biased against Christians. Consequently, the issue was frequently resolved in favor of Muslims. When evangelical Christians refused to accept these resolutions, they were accused of spreading misinformation, claiming a lack of peaceful coexistence with Muslims and disrespect for local leaders. The reliance on locally embedded conflict-resolution mechanisms may reinforce majority preferences and reduce evangelical minorities' ability to obtain impartial legal protection.

In Oromia, the diversion of many civil disputes to traditional customary courts is also attributed to weak state judicial infrastructure and heavy backlogs.[52] The Ethiopian Constitution allows Sharia courts to handle family, inheritance, and civil cases when both parties consent. Because the government does not oversee these courts, this dynamic creates a loophole for internal favoritism that strips religious dissenters or women of their constitutional rights under the guise of "mutual consent."[53]

These findings suggest that dominant community preferences may influence local security institutions and may operate with limited accountability to higher levels of government. Such patterns are consistent with the argument that state inaction can encourage further violence by creating perceptions of impunity.[54] Consequently, violations of freedom of religion are reinforced not only by acts of intolerance but also by institutions' failure to provide equal protection under the law.

From Galtung's perspective, direct violence includes visible acts of harm, such as assaults, killings, intimidation, and property destruction. The findings seem to

51 Compass Direct News 2010, "Christian Jailed in Ethiopia Accused of Desecrating Quran," *The Christian Post*, 8 October. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3pvvw24d.

52 Teferi Bekele Ayana 2023. "Administration of Justice in Customary Courts in Oromia," *Haramaya Law Review* 12, (1):1-24.

53 Mohammed Abdo 2011. "Legal Pluralism, Sharia Courts and Constitutional Issues in Ethiopia," *Mizan Law Review* 5, (1):72-104; Girmachew Alemu Aneme 2018. *The Coupling of State and Sharia Justice Systems in a Secular State: The Case of Ethiopia*, SFB-Working Paper Series, No. 75, available at: https://tinyurl.com/mpcbhwcd; Jamaluddin Ahmed 2020. "The Structural and Organizations of Sharia Courts in Ethiopia; The Case Study of Goro Gutu Woreda Sharia Court". Thesis, Wollo University. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/bddmvhj3.

54 Heiner Bielefeldt 2013. "Misperceptions of Freedom of Religion or Belief," *Human Rights Quarterly* 35, (1):33-68; Grim and Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied*, 86-89.

show that such violence is closely connected to structural violence because police delays, failure to arrest perpetrators, and judicial favoritism create a permissive environment for further attacks. In this sense, state inaction functions as more than passive neglect; it becomes an enabling condition through which direct violence against evangelical Christians can be repeated with limited accountability.

5.3. Cultural violence and its direct social manifestations

This section analyzes the beliefs, labels, and communal norms that make exclusion and coercion appear legitimate. Representations of converts as traitors, infidels, outsiders, or threats to social peace constitute cultural violence because they normalize unequal treatment. Ostracism, dispossession, harassment, mob attacks, and property destruction are then interpreted as the structural or direct manifestations of those legitimizing meanings. The analysis thus connects discourse and identity boundaries to their material consequences.

5.3.1. Ostracization of converts

Social ostracism emerged as one of the most common forms of violations of religious freedom experienced by Muslim-background believers (MBBs). Interview participants (IM-01 to IM-06 and MBB-01 to MBB-05) reported being labeled as traitors or infidels and subjected to pressure from family members and clan elders to return to Islam. Those who refused often faced social and economic isolation, exclusion from community support networks, and restrictions on social interaction. One participant (IM-04) explained that ostracism was intended to force converts to abandon their new faith, although it often strengthened their commitment to Christianity.

Several MBBs reported more severe consequences, including loss of income, marriage breakdown, denial of inheritance rights, and eviction from family land. One participant (IM-02) recounted being divorced by his wife under pressure from clan leaders and subsequently losing access to his home and land after refusing to renounce Christianity. Interviewees also stated that appeals to local authorities frequently resulted in referrals to community elders, whose decisions generally favored the Muslim majority.

Participants further emphasized that conversion to Christianity is often viewed not only as religious apostasy but also as a rejection of community identity. An Open Doors country dossier indicates that, in many Muslim-majority communities, conversion from Islam to Christianity is understood as both a religious and cultural rupture, often resulting in social hostility toward converts.[55] The in-

55 Open Doors International, *World Watch List 2026: Situation of Religious Freedom of Christians in Ethiopia*, 6.

terviewees described a close association between Oromo and Muslim identities, which causes converts to be perceived as having betrayed both their faith and their community. As a result, MBBs were frequently excluded from local associations, funeral groups, and other community institutions, reinforcing their social marginalization. The same report by Open Doors documents various forms of hostility, discrimination, and violations of religious freedom directed against Muslim-background believers in Muslim-majority areas.[56]

5.3.2. Mob mobilization and property destruction

The destruction of churches and Christian-owned property was frequently reported as a form of violation of religious freedom in the study areas. Interview participants (CL-01, IM-05, IM-06, PE-03, and PE-05) alleged that some attacks were organized through local religious networks and were often directed at churches, businesses, and homes belonging to evangelical Christians. All respondents noted that periods of political unrest created opportunities for such attacks. One pastor (PE-04) explained that perpetrators sometimes exploit chaotic situations to target churches and Christian property.

Interviewees (CL-01, CL-04, IM-03, and IM-05) described the destruction of churches and properties belonging to Christians during the unrest following the assassination of the musician Hachalu Hundessa in 2020. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) documented attacks on religious institutions in several Oromia towns in the aftermath of the incident.[57]

Interviewees further argued that attacks on church buildings serve purposes beyond immediate physical damage. As visible symbols of evangelical presence and community identity, churches represent the public legitimacy of the faith within predominantly Muslim communities. Consequently, their destruction functions not only to disrupt worship activities but also to discourage the growth and visibility of evangelical Christianity.

5.3.3. Microaggressions

According to interview participants, another sign of intimidation is constructing mosques near evangelical church buildings without following the necessary laws that prohibit the construction of worship places of other religious groups near established places of worship of a religious group. Interviewees alleged that some Muslims purchase property close to churches and subsequently build mosques. These Muslims secure permits for constructing mosques from local authorities

56 Open Doors International, *World Watch List 2026: Situation of Religious Freedom of Christians in Ethiopia*, 3.
57 EHRC 2021. *Violence & Human Rights Violations Following Musician Hachalu Hundessa's Assassination*, Investigation Report. Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mwsukzxj.

who are Muslims without encountering any difficulties. The interviewees claimed that the Muslims use loudspeakers to disseminate Islamic songs to interfere with the services of the church. An indigenous missionary (IM-02) stated, "We appealed to the local authorities and were told that the Muslims own the land," implying that the Muslims are the indigenous owners of the land and the Christians do not belong there. The researcher received a list of places where mosques were built in proximity to the evangelical churches and verified some of them.

The interviewees also reported that Muslim young people stand on the roads and abuse Christians going to or returning from church services. Speaking of rural areas, an evangelist (FE-01) said, "We do not let girls and women walk alone as they are often harassed and physically assaulted." Another indigenous missionary (IM-06) added, "Christians are often robbed of their phones and money by Muslim young people waiting for them in secluded areas."

Finally, the findings document incidents of direct violence. Church destruction, mob attacks, assaults on worshipers, and attacks on Christian-owned businesses emerged as recurring themes across the study areas. Such attacks often occurred during periods of political instability and frequently targeted visible symbols of evangelical presence, including church buildings and religious gatherings.

The findings also record verbal harassment, threats, intimidation, and interference with worship services. These experiences created a climate of insecurity that discouraged public expressions of faith and reinforced broader patterns of religious exclusion. The recurrence of similar incidents across multiple zones suggests that these acts are not merely isolated events but form part of a broader pattern of hostility directed toward evangelical Christians. The combination of physical violence, administrative discrimination, and social exclusion indicates that violations of freedom of religion operate through multiple and mutually reinforcing mechanisms.

The experiences of Muslim-background believers further demonstrate the social dimensions of violations of freedom of religion. Many participants reported family rejection, social isolation, economic exclusion, loss of inheritance rights, and the breakdown of marital relationships following conversion to Christianity. These responses reflect the close relationship between religious affiliation and communal identity in many parts of Oromia.

The findings further demonstrate that cultural violence operates through the stigmatization of religious conversion, the social ostracism of converts, and the construction of conversion to Christianity as a betrayal of communal identity. These beliefs and normative assumptions legitimize discrimination and sustain both structural and direct forms of violence. In Muslim-majority areas, cultural violence against evangelical Christian minorities appears to justify violations of

religious freedom in three interrelated ways. First, it reinforces a clear boundary between the majority and the minority by representing evangelical Christians as outsiders who lack legitimate belonging within the local community, thereby enabling unequal treatment by local authorities. Second, it legitimizes bureaucratic discrimination through narratives that present restrictive measures as necessary for safeguarding social harmony, public stability, and majority norms. Third, it normalizes the inaction of local authorities by shifting responsibility from perpetrators to evangelical Christians themselves, particularly when they gather in private homes after being denied land for worship or when they exercise their constitutional right to share their faith and are subsequently accused of coercive proselytization.

Taken together, the findings show a mutually reinforcing configuration of violence. Galtung's framework therefore indicates that the reported violations are not a collection of isolated incidents, but a pattern in which social narratives, institutional arrangements, and visible acts of harm sustain one another.

6. Conclusions

This article shows that violations of the religious freedom of evangelical Christians in selected Muslim-majority areas of Oromia cannot be understood solely as episodic attacks or interpersonal intolerance. Applying Galtung's framework reveals a mutually reinforcing relationship among direct violence, including assault, intimidation, eviction, and property destruction; structural violence, including unequal access to land, burial sites, permits, protection, and adjudication; and cultural violence, including narratives that portray converts and evangelical communities as outsiders or threats to social peace. The study's principal contribution is to demonstrate how these forms of violence operate through localized governance; broad administrative discretion, weak vertical oversight, and majoritarian pressure can prevent constitutional guarantees from producing effective protection. The findings support stronger institutional neutrality, documented administrative decision-making, impartial law enforcement, and effective review of local decisions affecting religious minorities. Because the evidence derives from evangelical participants in selected areas, the article identifies mechanisms and patterns rather than their prevalence across Oromia or Ethiopia; comparative research incorporating officials, Muslim community leaders, other religious minorities, and additional regions is needed to test the wider applicability of the argument.