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SOMALIA

Submission by:

ADF International
Rue du Pré-de-la-Bichette 1
1202 Geneva, Switzerland

Web: www.ADFinternational.org
Email: UN@ADFinternational.org

Introduction

1. ADF International is a faith-based legal advocacy organization that protects fundamental freedoms and promotes the inherent dignity of all people.
2. This report outlines concerns regarding the protection of freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression in Somalia. In particular, it highlights laws prohibiting the peaceful propagation of minority religions, the criminalization of offenses to religion, and the vulnerability of Christians, particularly converts, who face discrimination and violence at the hands of militant groups as well as communities.

(a) Freedom of Religion or Belief

Background

3. As of 2025, Somalia's population is estimated at 11 million, of which approximately 99% Muslim, predominantly Sunni.¹
4. According to the 2025 World Watch List, Somalia ranks second among the top 50 countries most difficult for Christians to live.² This reflects a pattern of increasing religious oppression over the past five years, as well as within community and family contexts in the case of converts.³
5. Another major factor is the presence of terrorist groups, including Al-Shabaab and Daesh-affiliated factions, who exert de facto control over large parts of the country and enforce an extremist ideology. Their human rights abuses include summary executions, abduction, forced recruitment of boys, sexual violence, and forced marriage.⁴

Legal Framework

6. Article 2 of the Provisional Federal Constitution of Somalia establishes Islam as the State's religion and Shari'a as the governing source of legislation, with no exemptions made for non-Muslims from its application. It also explicitly prohibits the propagation of any other religion in the country.⁵
7. While Article 11 prohibits discrimination, including on the basis of religion, and guarantees equality before the law, these guarantees are effectively jeopardized by conflicting provisions.⁶
8. Article 17 guarantees that "every person is free to practice his or her religion", yet simultaneously prohibits the propagation of any religion other than Islam.⁷ This

¹ Association of Religion Data Archives 'National Profile: Somalia' (2025) <https://www.thearda.com/world-religion/national-profiles?u=205c>.

² Open Doors International '2025 World Watch Research, Somalia Persecution Dynamics' (December 2024), https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Somalia-Full_Country_Dossier-ODI-2025.pdf, 4.

³ Id., 10.

⁴ See inter alia UN Special Rapporteur on Terrorism, 'Country Visit to Somalia: End of Mission Statement' (21 May 2025) <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/terrorism/sr/statements/20250521-eom-somalia-sr-terrorism-en.pdf>.

⁵ Provisional Constitution of the Federal Republic of Somalia (2012), art 2.

⁶ Id., art. 11.

⁷ Id., art. 17.

appears to directly contradict Article 18, which establishes that “Every person has the right to have and express their opinions and to receive and impart their opinion, information and ideas in any way.”⁸

9. Articles 313 to 315 of Somalia’s Penal Code criminalize actions deemed disrespectful to Islam, including “bringing the religion of the State into disrepute” and disrupting religious functions, with punishments of up to two years of prison time.⁹
10. Article 559 further punishes with a fine “whoever publicly blasphemes, with invective or insulting words, the Deity or the symbols or the person venerated in the religion of the State [Islam].”¹⁰

Violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Private and Family Life

11. Societal and familial antagonism towards Christianity is felt throughout Somalia.
12. This environment means that Christians in Somalia are compelled to conceal their faith entirely. Private prayer, possession of religious materials, and expression of religious beliefs carry significant risk of discovery and retaliation from family, including extended family members, and the community at large.¹¹¹²
13. In August 2025, a Christian woman and her infant daughter were abducted by relatives upon discovery of her conversion from Islam and marriage to a Christian man. She was confined in a dark room without adequate food, subjected to physical abuse, and threatened with death unless she renounced her faith. She conveyed these threats to her husband during a brief phone call.¹³
14. In June 2025, another Christian convert—a mother of three—was forcibly evicted from her home by relatives upon the revelation of her faith. Subsequently, her husband divorced her. She has since attempted to flee with her children to Kenya to escape further persecution.¹⁴
15. In January 2025, Christian convert Abdulai Ramadan was reportedly violently assaulted by his spouse after she discovered that he had been hosting Christian gatherings in secret. She struck him in the head with a heavy metal object, leaving him unconscious. The attack resulted in the loss of his speech.¹⁵
16. In May 2024, Somali Christian convert Mohammad Abdul was attacked with a knife by his relatives near Kismayo due to his religious beliefs. During his recovery, his wife

⁸ Id., art. 18.

⁹ Somalia Penal Code (1962), art. 313-315.

¹⁰ Id., art. 559.

¹¹ Voice of the Martyrs Canada ‘Somalia: The Extreme Dangers of Following Jesus’ (November 2021) <https://www.vomcanada.com/pk-videos/video/cttf-so-extreme-danger.htm>.

¹² Open Doors International ‘Somalia Persecution Dynamics 2025’ (December 2024) *World Watch Research*, https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Somalia-Full_Country_Dossier-ODI-2025.pdf, 13-17.

¹³ International Christian Response Canada ‘Trapped Christian Mother and Baby Persecuted in Somalia’ (19 August 2025) <https://www.icrcanada.ca/trapped-christian-mother-and-baby-persecuted-in-somalia/>.

¹⁴ Morning Star News ‘Mother in Somalia Loses Husband, Home for Accepting Christ’ (18 June 2025) <https://morningstarnews.org/2025/06/mother-in-somalia-loses-husband-home-for-accepting-christ/>.

¹⁵ Morning Star News ‘Christian in Somalia Loses Voice in Attack by Wife’ (3 February 2025) <https://morningstarnews.org/2025/02/christian-in-somalia-loses-voice-in-attack-by-wife/>.

and five children were taken. He was forced to flee.¹⁶ After reuniting with his family and relocating, they were attacked again in July 2024 and once more in October 2024—all assaults carried out by extended family members.¹⁷

17. In December 2024, a Christian mother was assaulted by her husband after her conversion became known to his family. She was forced to flee for her safety, leaving her two children behind. The information was reportedly disclosed by her mother-in-law.¹⁸

18. Christians in Somalia also face systemic civil discrimination. Registering life events such as births, marriages, or deaths risks exposing a person's non-Muslim identity, subjecting them to retaliation. Children born to Christian parents are automatically registered as Muslim, and attempts to amend religious affiliation expose families to significant danger. Christian burials are often carried out in secrecy, as public ceremonies may provoke threats or violence. This has led to numerous cases where Christians are denied burial according to their beliefs.¹⁹

Violence from Non-State Actors

19. The terrorist group Al-Shabaab continues to perpetrate serious human rights violations in Somalia, including attacks targeting Christians, civilians, and military personnel. The group has explicitly threatened execution against individuals who convert from Islam to Christianity and routinely carries out violent reprisals against suspected converts.²⁰ In July 2025, Al-Shabaab seized control of the towns of Sabiid and Anole near Mogadishu, part of a broader campaign of territorial expansion marked by repression, religious persecution, and violations of international humanitarian law.²¹

20. In April 2024, six Kenyan Christian men were killed in the town of Dhobley in an attack reportedly carried out by Al-Shabaab on Good Friday. Four were shot while conducting business, and two others died after their shop was set on fire by the same assailants. These acts constitute targeted killings on the basis of religion and reflect a continuing pattern of impunity for religiously motivated violence in the region.²²

Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Expression in International Law

21. Somalia acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1990 without reservations.

22. Article 18 of the ICCPR guarantees the right to the “freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in

¹⁶ Christian Daily International ‘Christian convert in Somalia wounded, loses family’ (28 May 2024) <https://www.christiandaily.com/news/christian-convert-in-somalia-wounded-loses-family>.

¹⁷ Morning Star News ‘Christian Convert in Somalia Suffers Third Attack’ (21 October 2024) <https://morningstarnews.org/2024/10/christian-convert-in-somalia-suffers-third-attack/>.

¹⁸ Christian Daily International ‘Christian mother beaten by husband in Somalia flees for safety’ (13 December 2024) <https://www.christiandaily.com/news/christian-mother-beaten-by-husband-in-somalia-flees-for-safety>.

¹⁹ Open Doors International ‘2025 World Watch Research, Somalia Persecution Dynamics’ (December 2024), https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Somalia-Full_Country_Dossier-ODI-2025.pdf, 14.

²⁰ *Id.*, 10.

²¹ The Soufan Center ‘Al-Shabaab’s 2025 Offensive and the Unraveling of Somalia’s Federal Counterinsurgency’ (24 July 2025) <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2025-july-24/>.

²² International Christian Concern ‘Six Christians Killed on Good Friday in Somalia’ (8 April 2024) <https://www.persecution.org/2024/04/08/six-christians-killed-on-good-friday-in-somalia/>.

worship, observance, practice and teaching”. This freedom “may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others”.²³

23. Article 19 protects the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including the right to seek, receive, or impart information and ideas of “all kinds”. Restrictions on this right are only permitted where they are necessary “for the respect of the rights and reputations of others” or “for the protection of national security, public order or public health or morals”.²⁴

24. Article 26 further mandates States Parties to “prohibit any discrimination and guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection from discrimination” including on the ground of religion.²⁵ Relatedly, Article 27 ensures that religious minorities “shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of their group, [...] to profess and practice their own religion”.²⁶

25. As noted by the Human Rights Committee:

“The fact that a religion is recognized as a State religion or that it is established as official or traditional or that its followers comprise the majority of the population, shall not result in any impairment of the enjoyment of any of the rights under the Covenant, including articles 18 and 27, nor in any discrimination against adherents to other religions or non-believers.”²⁷

26. The criminalization of “bringing the State religion into disrepute” and public blasphemy is incompatible with the narrow and strictly defined grounds for limiting freedom of expression under Article 19 of the ICCPR. This finding is supported by the Human Rights Committee, which has explicitly affirmed that laws which prohibit expressions deemed disrespectful toward a religion or belief system—including blasphemy laws—are not compatible with the Covenant. Such laws are inherently vague, prone to abuse, and serve to suppress dissent and minority beliefs rather than protect legitimate public interests.²⁸

27. The constitutional prohibition on the “propagation” of any religion other than Islam constitutes a sweeping and unjustified restriction on both freedom of expression and the freedom to manifest one’s religion or belief, as protected under Articles 18 and 19 of the ICCPR. This ban further amounts to overt discrimination against minority faiths, in clear violation of Articles 26 and 27, which guarantee equal protection under the law and the right of religious minorities to freely profess and share their beliefs.

²³ International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) 999 UNTS 171 (ICCPR), art. 18.

²⁴ *Id.*, art. 19.

²⁵ *Id.*, art. 26.

²⁶ *Id.*, art. 27.

²⁷ Human Rights Committee ‘General Comment No.22 – Article 18: Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion’ (30 July 1993) UN Docs CCPR/C/GC/22, 9.

²⁸ Human Rights Committee ‘General Comment No. 34 – Article 19: Freedom of Opinion and Expression’, Human Rights Committee (12 September 2011) UN Docs CCPR/C/GC/34, 48.

28. Somalia is under an international legal obligation to ensure that individuals belonging to religious minorities are afforded equal and effective protection from all forms of discrimination and violence, regardless of whether the perpetrator is a family member, member of the community, State actor, or non-State group. Failure to take such measures constitutes a breach of its duties under international human rights law.

(b) Recommendations

29. In light of the aforementioned, ADF International suggests the following recommendations be made to Somalia:

- a. Guarantee full respect for right of everyone to freedom of religion or belief and expression without discrimination, including for Christians and other religious minorities;
- b. Amend articles 2 and 17 of the Provisional Federal Constitution consistent with international obligations, to guarantee the right of persons belonging to religious minorities to peacefully share their religion and beliefs;
- c. Amend articles 313 to 315 of the Penal Code in accordance with international obligations on freedom of religion or belief and expression, including by repealing the criminalization of defamation of religion;
- d. Repeal article 559 of the Penal Code criminalizing blasphemy;
- e. Guarantee effective protection of persons belonging to religious minorities, particularly converts, from discrimination, violence and harassment, including perpetrated by community, State and non-State actors;
- f. Amend civil status procedures to eliminate discrimination against members of religious minorities and ensure the privacy and safety of those registering births, marriages or deaths;
- g. Redouble efforts to eliminate the threat of militant groups including Al-Shabaab, and ensure investigation and prosecution of all cases of religiously motivated violence, including against religious minorities;



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