

The background of the right half of the cover is a photograph of two hands reaching towards each other against a cloudy sky. One hand is at the top, reaching down, and the other is at the bottom, reaching up. They are positioned as if they are about to grasp each other, symbolizing unity or reconciliation.

# COMING TOGETHER OR COMING APART

An Analysis of Resilience and  
Freedoms of Media and Religion



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**02 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**04 INTRODUCTION**

09 JOURNALISM AND MEDIA

12 RELIGION, INTOLERANCE  
AND REPRESENTATION

**15 CONCLUSION**

17 FURTHER RESEARCH

**18 RECOMMENDATIONS**

**20 BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**22 BRAZIL: RELIGION, TOLERANCE,  
AND POSSIBILITY**

26 KEY RESILIENCE BUILDING  
OPPORTUNITIES

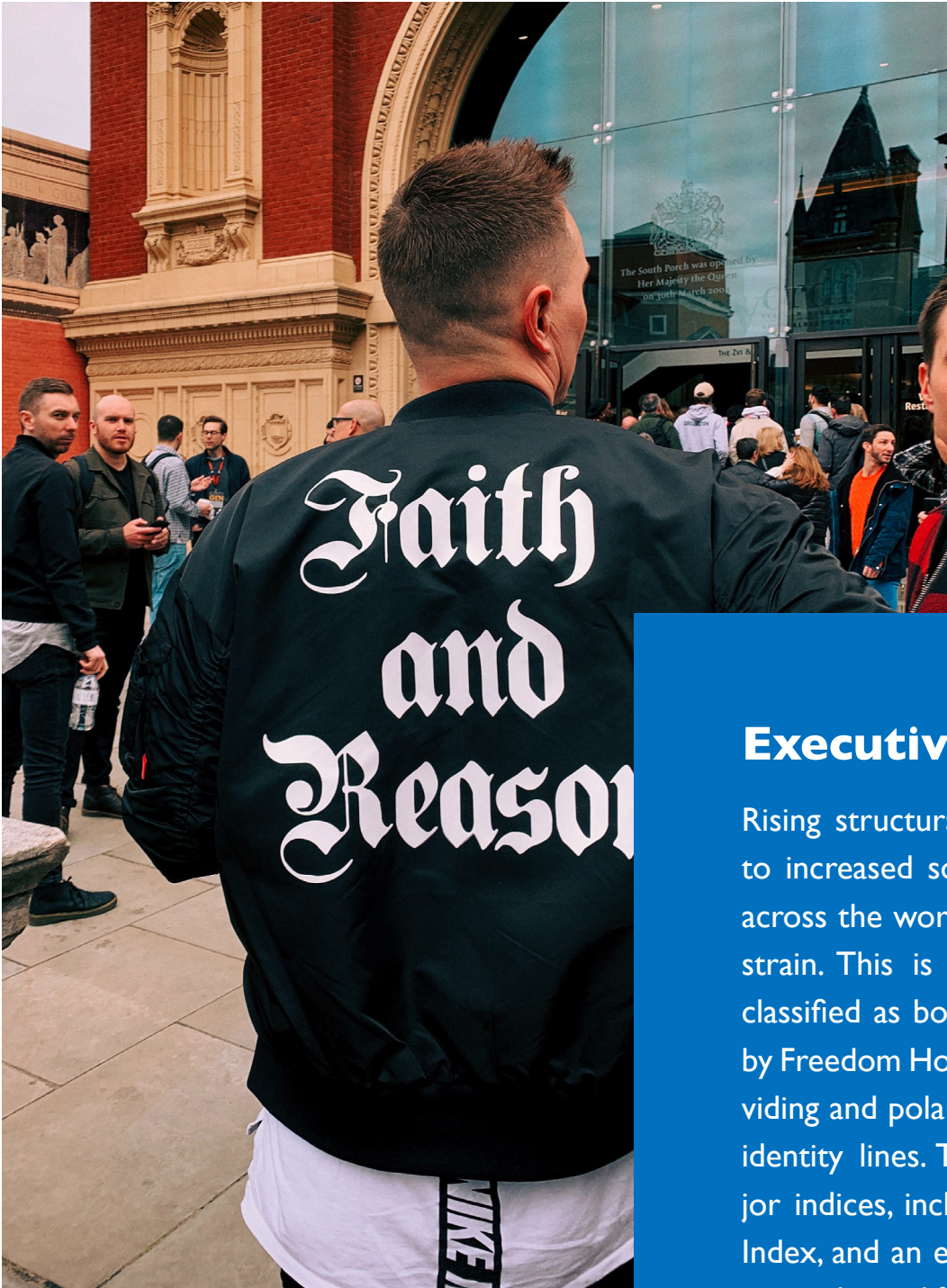
**27 INDIA: LARGE POPULATION,  
LARGE POTENTIAL**

31 KEY RESILIENCE BUILDING  
OPPORTUNITIES

**32 ETHIOPIA: MOVING  
FORWARD, HOLDING BACK**

35 KEY RESILIENCE BUILDING  
OPPORTUNITIES





## Executive Summary

Rising structural pressures are leading to increased social and political stress across the world. Civil society is under strain. This is happening in countries classified as both “free” and “not free” by Freedom House.<sup>1</sup> Populations are dividing and polarizing along group-based identity lines. Through analysis of major indices, including the Fragile States Index, and an exploration of case studies in three different regions – Eastern South America, the Indian subcontinent, and the Horn of Africa – this report investigates how to build resilience at the intersection of media and religion in these increasingly polarized regions.

1. “Freedom in the World: Democracy Under Siege.”

A prerequisite to resilience is a public square where people with different cultures, demographics, values, and belief systems can organize and take collective action to face common challenges. The media, inclusive of social media, print journalism, broadcast media, sees itself as the custodian of this public square. The media is an essential tool in building resilience. But inevitably the media, as a part of society, impacts and is impacted by the pressures and polarization of society. As such, its effectiveness at creating that civic space for constructive collective engagement is currently limited, particularly regarding fundamental issues of core identity, like ethnicity and religion. The media must acknowledge their role in spreading incorrect, incomplete, and biased information, as well as hate spin and outright hate speech, about different religious groups.

**With 80% of the world's population identifying with a religion, faith communities represent a powerful driver for transformation and change.**

Religion lies at the crux of individual and social identity and therefore is a key agent of connection or division in an increasingly divisive environment. Faith groups, both historically and today, play major roles in shifting social norms and catalyzing social action in ways that encompass groups beyond their own followers.

There is an increasing need to acknowledge and better understand the stabilizing and destabilizing role that faith and religious culture can play in society, and in particular recognizing increasing levels of extremism at the margins. Interactions between religion, culture, and the strength or weakness of economic and political environments can contribute to reduced resilience to pressures and shocks.

- Increase media literacy and critical thinking through public education and awareness campaigns.
- Investment should be made in initiatives to increase freedom of the press, including social media access.







- This progress can only be made if there is economic, cultural, and legislative power supporting free, ethical media.
- The current crisis is due in part to the necessary reliance on sensational headlines to drive clicks and ad revenue.
- The media can also be trained on how to both actively and passively mitigate hate speech and hate spin escalation, and on how to use their platform to directly counter extremist narratives.
- Investment must be made in localizing social media moderation and monitoring.



# INTRODUCTION

Populations around the world have more access to information and communication than ever before. For the first time, almost anyone in the world can connect with and learn from the rest of the world. And yet, nationally, regionally, and even locally, communities are polarized and divided.



This growing gulf between groups is leading to increased social and political stress across the world. Civil society is under strain, both those trying to continue dialogue between groups and those trying to balance their mission between conflicting ideals. Simultaneously, there has been a global reduction in freedom of religion.<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon is not just happening in countries experiencing oppressive re-

gimes or active conflict, populations are clustering and polarizing along group-based identity lines in countries classified as both “free” and “not free” by Freedom House.<sup>3</sup> Within this context, this report broadens the conversation on media and religion to focus on how strengthening this relationship can help build more resilient communities and countries.

---

2. “Freedom of Religion: GovData360.”

---

3. “Freedom in the World: Democracy Under Siege.”



A resilient society is one with the ability to bounce back from a crisis, adjust to rising pressure, and/or make structural changes when faced with fundamental, irrevocable upheaval. It is the ability to prepare, prevent, manage, and recover from catastrophic change. Resilient states and communities are character-

ized by the following: stable social and political contracts; functional, inclusive, and accountable institutions; and the provision of basic services. A prerequisite to resilience is a public square where people with different cultures, demographics, values, and belief systems can organize and take collective action to face common challenges.

## What can media do to be a better broker of the vital conversations and dialogue needed to be resilient?



### FRAGILE STATES INDEX

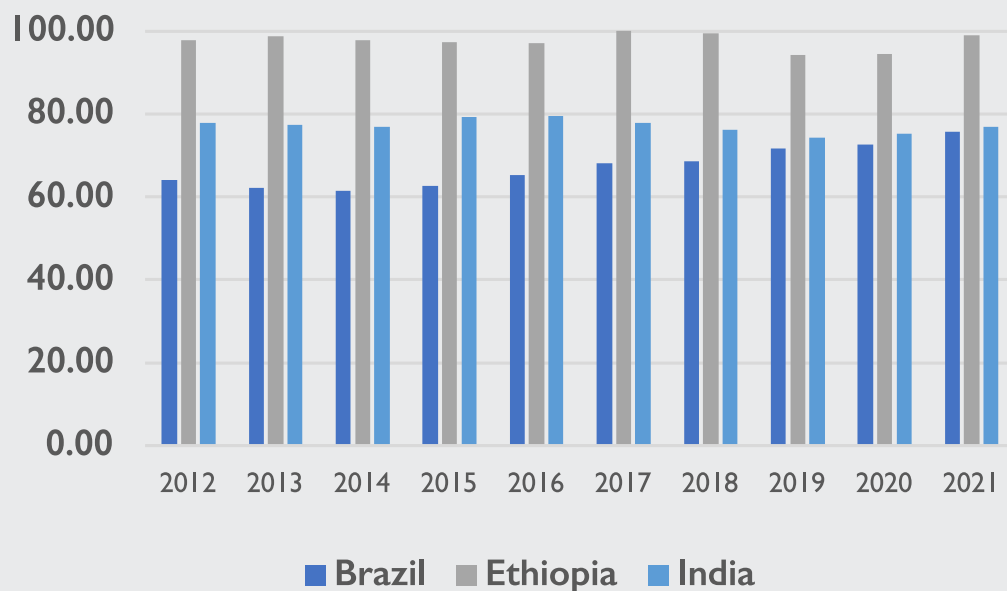


Figure 1 - Higher scores reflect higher fragility, as calculated by the Fragile States Index.

Through analysis of major indices, including the Fragile States Index, and an exploration of case studies in three different regions – Brazil, the Indian subcontinent, and Ethiopia – this report investigates what is happening at the intersection of media and religion in these increasingly polarized regions. These case studies were intentionally chosen for both their uniqueness from one another, as well as internal diversity. In focusing on the concept of faith as a cultural identity instead of focusing on the tenets or representatives of one religion, this report is emphasizing the broad implications of the relationship between media and faith writ large. Through these cases, the report illustrates key insights,

as well as highlights areas where further study is necessary.

Each case will be analyzed through seven pillars of resilience, as identified by the Fund for Peace. These pillars are: civic space, inclusion, social cohesion, state capacity, individual capabilities, environment, and economy. These seven pillars, defined below, will offer seven different aspects of how the case study countries can build resilience based on their current standing. The report will conclude with recommendations for ways to build resilience not only in the three case studies, but globally as well, through media and faith-based initiatives.





## CIVIC SPACE

The ability of citizens and civil society organizations to organize, participate, communicate, and effectively hold both leaders and each other accountable is critical to ensuring effective response to structural vulnerabilities and short-term shocks. In order to do so, the rights and liberties of both individual citizens and civil society organizations must be preserved. Information must also be accessible and reliable.

## INCLUSION

Socially marginalized or excluded groups – which may be excluded on the basis of race, ethnicity, caste, gender, religion, class, age, disability status or other characteristics – are more likely to have greater exposure to risks and vulnerabilities, to have limited resources to draw upon both to mitigate and respond to disasters, and to be under- or un-represented in decision-making and risk-management bodies.

## SOCIAL COHESION

Social cohesion, or interpersonal solidarity which may or may not cross group lines, has been highlighted as a key capacity to help cope with shocks and vulnerabilities, including but not limited to violent conflict. If the Inclusion pillar measures the degree to which societal cleavages exist between groups, Social Cohesion refers to interpersonal solidarity which may or may not cross group lines.

## STATE CAPACITY

State Capacity is the link between the intent of political leaders and outcomes, whether to enforce rules, implement policies, or exert control over its lands and citizens. Measuring state capacity includes its ability to enforce property rights, provide public goods, and preserve a monopoly on violence.

## INDIVIDUAL CAPABILITIES

Individual Capability assesses the degree to which individuals are able to pursue the fulfillment of basic needs – food, housing, health, and education – with the assumption that increased financial resources increases the available opportunities.

## ENVIRONMENT

Environment-Ecology examines the health of air, aquatic, and terrestrial environments; the ecological vitality of local ecosystems and biodiversity; the stability of the local climate; and the concept of environmental stewardship and the common good.

## ECONOMY

Economic success can be defined as a flourishing macroeconomy, one that is both resilient against economic crises, such as severe recessions and financial crises, and also provides capacity to cope, recover, and reconstruct in the face of other crises, such as extreme weather events.

# JOURNALISM AND MEDIA

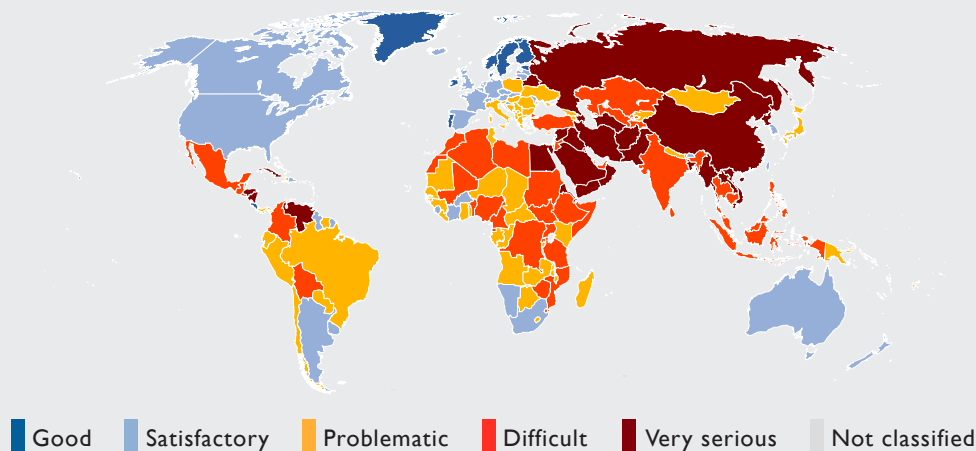
The media – including print journalism, broadcast media, and the social media management companies – sees itself as the custodian of discourse in the (now metaphorical) public square. But inevitably the media, as a part of society, impacts and is impacted by the polarization of society. For the context of this report, journalism is a periodic re-

port “based on the existence of events with newsworthy characteristics, and from the point of view of journalists and readers/listeners/viewers/users of digital media, they become news. The contents of journalism are, therefore, the events with the greatest degree of newsworthiness.”<sup>4</sup>

4. Cunha, “Journalism, Religious Intolerance and Violence in Brazil.”

## THE STATE OF WORLD PRESS FREEDOM

Countries ranked by level of press freedom in 2022





What this definition of journalism does not include is the potential for intervention, influence, and control by governments or corporations. According to the Reporters Sans Frontiers World Press Freedom Index and several related indices that were analyzed for this report, most of the world does not currently enjoy freedom of the press based on their criteria, which includes: pluralism, media independence, media environment and self-censorship, legislative framework, transparency, and the quality of the infrastructure that supports the production of news and information.<sup>5</sup>

Journalism, like many other fields, have a series of core values that are shared across cultural boundaries with members of their industry. These codes of

ethics, though they may vary slightly across national and subject matter, follow a similar trajectory. One of these is “fairness in coverage does not mean equal space for fringe groups. The BBC [for example] tells its journalists to provide ‘due weight’ instead.”<sup>6</sup> One study on this topic adds, “Journalism is a form of cartography: it creates a map for citizens to navigate society. Inflating events for sensation, neglecting others, stereotyping or being disproportionately negative all make a less reliable map.”<sup>7</sup> One of the core concepts of journalism is to strive for neutrality or objectivity in reporting. Journalists should “examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.”<sup>8</sup>

6. George, “Journalism and the Politics of Hate.”

7. Ibid

8. Ibid

5. “The World Press Freedom Index.”

## WORLD PRESS FREEDOM

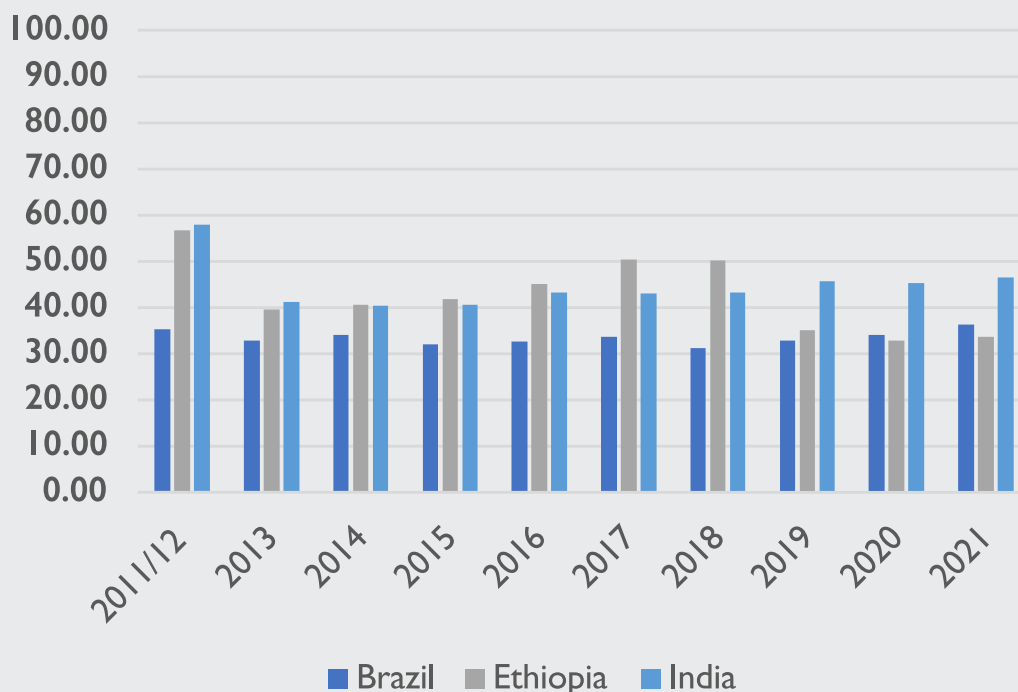


Figure 2 - Lower scores indicate more press freedom, as calculated by the World Press Freedom Index.

## FREEDOM ON THE NET

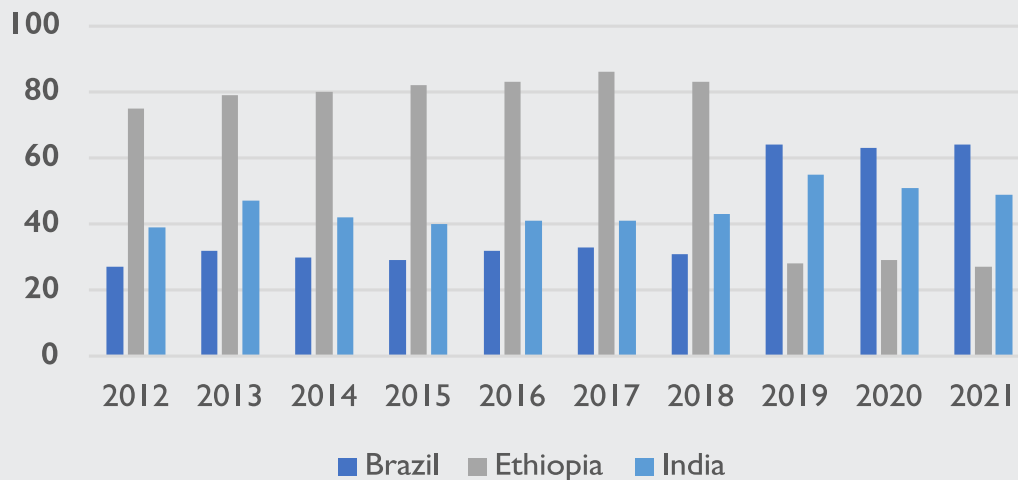


Figure 3 - "Free" (100 to 70), "Partly Free" (69 to 40), "Not Free" (39 to 0). Source: Freedom House Freedom of the Net report

While these two key tenets of journalism are of deep importance to the field and the craft, dogmatically applying them without criticism or context can result in exactly the kind of bias they are trying to avoid. One study points out, "First, their criteria for assessing the 'news-worthiness' of events predispose them to give disproportionate attention to the sensational, leaving moderate voices underreported. Second, the ritualistic application of 'objectivity' can result in undue weight being given to extreme points of view regardless of their merit."<sup>9</sup> While strict supporters of free speech encourage the media to always pursue a report with neutrality toward the subject matter, there is little evidence to support the idea that this *laissez faire* approach to journalism combats intolerance.

This abstract concept of neutrality is also breaking down as multinational conglomerates, government entities, and private individuals are controlling what and when the media can engage on certain topics. While this has always been true

to some extent, as societies have been more divided, so too have the media influences and influencers. News shared on social media and through online news is dependent on clicks to create ad revenue. Sensationalist titles and stories focused on violence and extremist views generate more attention and clicks, and thus provide income. As social media has become deeply embedded in the everyday lives of billions of users, who is able to share and disseminate information with authority becomes murkier. Tech companies seeking to operate at a profit now find themselves the arbiters of democracy.

Most countries now have access to global news and media. As a result, there is always a huge amount of news and information available. There is an assumption that more information leads to more informed decisions and greater transparency. Instead, there are several key issues that stem from the levels of access and availability for sharing:

9. George, "Journalism and the Politics of Hate."

1. More news access does not necessarily equate better journalism.
2. Not all of this news and analysis is coming from an informed or neutral place.
3. In order to fill the 24-hour news cycle, certain messages and people are amplified in the endless quest for new content.
4. People can share and regurgitate 'news' within their circle of like-minded friends or colleagues instantly, with little to no critical analysis to the source of the information.
5. Even good journalism must compete in the digital public square for attention, forcing them to use 'click-bait' style headlines, trade nuance for pithy commentary, and, crucially, give time and space to more extreme viewpoints because they bring in viewers.

In essence, the media's effectiveness at creating a civic space for constructive, collective engagement has been limited, particularly regarding fundamental and nuanced issues of core identity.

## RELIGION, INTOLERANCE AND REPRESENTATION

The focus of this report is not on religion as a concept, but rather on the relationship between faith, how faith is reported on in the media, and how that feedback loop shapes and is shaped by

religious tolerance. Religion—broadly defined here as core values and belief systems—lies at the crux of individual and social identity and is therefore key to the connectors and dividers in an

### FREEDOM OF RELIGION

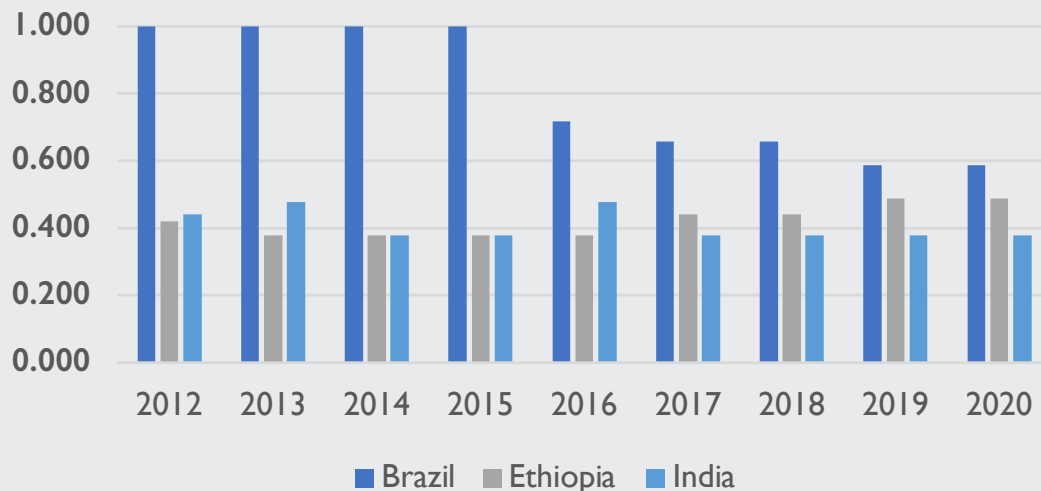


Figure 4 - High scores indicate higher levels of religious freedom, as calculated by the Global State of Democracy Indices. Source: World Bank, GovData 360




increasingly polarized environment. Religious intolerance, whether from a religious or social point of view, is characterized by exclusion and persecution in a horizontal power dynamic, for example between community members. This is not to be misinterpreted as a synonym for religious discrimination, which is the unequal treatment either by the government or other body with vertical power, which can in some cases be interlinked to racial, gender, social class, or religious prejudice.

While not the core of the issue, it is essential to discuss hate speech within the context of this report. Religious identity has been used both to identify targets for intolerance and discrimination as well as to rally a group behind a violent cause. Extreme speech or hate speech is “expressions of intolerance that are spread with the intention of persecuting a group.”<sup>10</sup> This persecution could include creating a hostile environment for a marginalized group, and extends to the progression of speech to action, and from violence against individuals to incitement of genocide.

10. George, “Journalism and the Politics of Hate.”

There is another important type of dangerous speech that is becoming more prominent. Some scholars are calling it ‘hate spin’: “Unlike classic hate speech, the violence does not flow in the same direction as the initial insult. Instead, it is meted out by the offended group against those who are seen as guilty of causing religious offense. In many cases, the targets of the ensuing violence have nothing to do with the original offense, other than sharing some markers of identity; in some cases, the expression at the heart of the controversy was not in itself hate speech, as it was never intended to offend.”<sup>11</sup> One recognizable example of this would be Starbucks holiday cups, and the manufactured outrage from media ‘hate spinners’ who claim this to be an offense against Christians celebrating Christmas, and violent words (and sometimes acts) are then perpetrated against Starbucks employees in retribution. Distinguishing between hate speech and hate spin is an essential task for members of the media, as well as those religious groups on whose behalf the ‘hate spinners’ purport to speak.

11. George, “Journalism and the Politics of Hate.”



**The key difference between hate speech and hate spin is the direction from which the harm flows after the initial offense.**



As ‘beat’ journalism has become less viable, there are fewer reporters whose focus is reporting on religious news and events in a local area.<sup>12</sup> This number was not large to begin with and today, most discussions to faith-based news do not appear in a standalone section. More often, religion is referenced as an aspect of other news or analysis, from the breaking news and politics section, to health and science, to the arts and culture section, to the justice and education sections. As a result, religion is not discussed in any one way, but through the lens of political scientists, theater critics, doctors, et cetera. While this can cause religious discourse to lack nuance and context, it also allows faith reporting to more closely match the ways in which religious identity works in most peoples’ lives: inextricably integrated and interwoven.<sup>13</sup>

This dearth of faith-based journalists has also led some religious organizations and individuals to eschew traditional media all together. These groups report religious news themselves on social media, with no

journalistic training, content editors, or the related ethical boundaries. The issue with this arises when all digital content presents as similarly reliable. Divorced from its context, be it a traditional newspaper, private magazine, or religious blog, these articles and headlines float through social media open for interpretation and cannot necessarily be recalled or updated if corrections need to be made. One study points out, “Information management has become a key aspect of [religious] power and authority. It has become more difficult to blatantly ignore certain minority religions, for instance, even as it has become easier to see a version of reality that screens out certain perspectives because an algorithm has already determined that you are unlikely to agree with or appreciate that view.”<sup>14</sup> This allows misinformation, as well as outright hate speech and propaganda, to circulate, proliferate, and escalate in echo chambers of similar worldviews. To be sure, this is not a new issue. But unlike traditional media, there is very little control over information or the emergent narrative once it has been shared.

12. Smith, “Differentiation.”

13. Smith.

14. Clark, “The Media and Religious Authority.”

# CONCLUSION

In examining the three case studies above and their potential implications, several key themes arise. These themes should serve as a basis for further consideration in terms of promoting resilience more broadly, as well as for future research on the related topics. Polarization is increasing in both unfree, fragile countries as well as “free,” wealthy democracies. This polarization is a major risk to society and could position even a country like the United States vulnerable to destabilization in the face of a social, economic, or political shock. It is very important to deal with the problem of a breakdown of social cohesion, particularly as it relates to communities of faith in countries all over the world. The findings from the case studies suggest the need for a general reassessment of what the media is—or is not—to itself, to governments, and to its consumers, as well as what society expects from traditional and social media. However, as will be further sharpened in the recommendations below, there are practical and concrete ways in which governments, development partners, and the private sector can prioritize and structure the allocation of resources, regulations, and incentives in such a way that supports their parallel goals.

As profiled throughout this report, the issue of building resilience in the public square extends far beyond just the relationship between media and faith. Analyzing these three cases through the seven pillars of resilience reveals the intricate threads of a complex system of pressures.

- **Increased freedom of the press, including social media access, may be part of the answer, but this must be balanced across the system with increased media literacy and critical thinking through public education and awareness campaigns.** While it is fair to argue against censorship, simply opening the flood gates and allowing unmitigated freedom of the press and unmoderated use of social media may result in a massive influx of stories and headlines that are untrue, heavily biased, hate spin, and outright hate speech. Without dedicated media literacy to help people recognize this, there is potential for the population to spiral from words to kinetic violence.
- **Economic, cultural, and legislative power limits what the media is able to discuss in different contexts.** A recurrent and pervasive finding in the literature and the case studies is that there is an important relationship between cultural and economic power and the media. This issue goes beyond the mere influence of what can or cannot be reported on. The ability of media houses to sustain themselves and their reporters’ salaries is incumbent upon on ad revenue. Local media and journalists especially cannot compete with global 24-hour news cycles who are able to continually produce content. Sensational headlines are every bit a symptom of media desperately seeking clicks or subscriptions, as they can be a symptom of bias.



- **The media can also be trained on how to use their platform to directly counter extremist narratives.** There is space for increasing religious tolerance within the media, even in controlled environments. Even the passive choice not to print or give credence to hate speech and hate spin can help to reduce inflammatory sentiment against one group or another.

In the face of increasing structural pressures worldwide, there are opportunities and avenues for creating positive change. There are valid reasons for individuals and institutions to be wary of enforced legislative solutions. First steps should be made toward a voluntary commitment by both traditional and social me-

dia consumers to a culture of tolerance and free expression. In order to build resilience in this sector, it is not enough to work in building the capacity of journalists and media influencers. As institutions of culture and identity, faith-based organizations can embrace their own agency in building religious tolerance at local, regional, and national levels. Similarly, traditional media can step into their role as the regulator of narratives, if given more freedom from economic constrictions. Civil society organizations and international investment can help guide these institutions to a leadership role in building resilience. While this alone will not bring an end to religious intolerance, free and ethical media is one step toward building more resilient societies.



# FURTHER RESEARCH

This report offers an opportunity to ask deeper questions on this important nexus of faith, media, and resilience. As such, in addition to delving deeper into the histories and contexts of each of these case studies, there are also avenues of further research arising from the report's own conclusions. Each of the seven pillars of resilience also offer space for further examination, and how that pillar can be sustainably reinforced at the national and local levels. This report is meant to offer a starting place from which to dive into these rich complexities.



- From a Do No Harm perspective, how do international investors and civil society organizations support the localization of media?
- What does media literacy look like in different contexts, how should it be taught, and by whom?
- What is the mechanism that turns religious intolerance into violence, and is it different across cultures/genders/ages?
- Can the power of social media be harnessed effectively for building tolerance instead of deepening polarization?
- How can international organizations and the media educate the public on different religions for the purpose of building tolerance and understanding without proselytizing?
- How does the resilience/media/religion nexus present in different contexts, e.g., different countries, regions, or majority religions, and what kind of interventions will perform most effectively within that context?
- How do the different recommendations manifest for international and domestic civil society, development, and advocacy organizations, and how can they be carried out on the ground?
- How does building a more resilient public square intersect with initiatives supporting democracy and democratic institutions?

# RECOMMENDATIONS

In the near-term, the focus of development and resilience should be on the protection of minority populations from hate speech and hate spin and the violence that follows. Then, prioritizing civil space and social cohesion, efforts can build upon current media initiatives to use those same channels and communication methods to encourage religious tolerance and media literacy. Investing in initiatives that encourage local reporting are key to decreasing incorrect interregional reporting that can result in retributive action. In addition, localized media and monitoring can reduce the use of defamatory or dehumanizing code words that might not be recognized by global- or even country-level hate speech monitors. Below are recommendations to build resilience across the seven pillars, but it should be understood that these recommendations, like the issues they address, are crosscutting.

## CIVIC SPACE

- Engage with and support faith voices who are opposed to ethnic, religious and other forms of identity-based violence
- Encourage local and independent media as partners in accountability with the government and state-run media.
- Increase digital and media literacy, media consumers have a choice of where they find their news and cultural programming, and they will be able to better recognize—and thus not follow or share—those sources that peddle extremist views.
- Rebuild trust in traditional media sources by publically engaging with bias sources and recognizing them as such.

## INCLUSION

- Provide a platform for moderate sources who can counter hate speech.
- Increase diversity within media, including reporters, journalists, researchers, and influencers who can bring different perspectives to stories.
- Increase human and AI ‘watchdogs’ to flag hate speech on social media, with recognition of localization of key words or phrases.
- Specifically and intentionally engage with youth.





## SOCIAL COHESION

- Enforce civility norms, both in traditional media and in online discourse.
- Foster dialogue among faith leaders to cross religious boundaries.
- Train faith leaders in de-escalation techniques as leaders in their communities.
- Seek non-controversial issues as intervention avenues when mediating dialogue between groups, i.e. sports and the arts.
- Increase advocacy efforts and coalition building, both in interfaith and media spheres.

## INDIVIDUAL CAPABILITIES

- Identify the impetus behind extremist views/incidents and seek to address through positive engagement. Ignoring or covering up this content often allows it to gain credibility and support.
- Train individuals and teams on how to effectively counter hateful rhetoric on social media.

## ENVIRONMENT

- Build coalitions around positive narratives, like environmental stewardship.

## STATE CAPACITY

- Speech should be regulated for mass media based on more restrictive standards than would apply to individual citizens. Unrestricted freedom of speech serves the interests of the stronger group.
- Protect democratic institutions; repressive, authoritarian governments reduce both religious and media freedom.
- Build direct communication routes between grassroots organizations and policy makers.
- Reduce politically charged language in campaign efforts.
- Make information more accessible through consistent, affordable internet and data.

## ECONOMY

- Support local journalists and local news making sources. Small media companies, local journalists, and long, nuanced stories on religion cannot garner the attention needed to sustain themselves.
- Reduce media reliance on government subsidies or advertising.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

- The Persecuted. "A Timeline of Religious Violence in Modern India: From the 1947 Partition to the Modi Government's Hindu Supremacy," November 3, 2020. <https://thepersecuted.org/religious-violence-in-modern-india/>.
- World Bank. "Freedom of Religion: GovData360," 2022  
Partition to the Modi Government's Hindu Supremacy," November 3, 2020. [https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=BRA&indicator=41930&countries=ETH,IND&viz=line\\_chart&years=1975,2020](https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hd6a18526?country=BRA&indicator=41930&countries=ETH,IND&viz=line_chart&years=1975,2020).
- Addley, Esther. "Why Is Brazil's Government in Crisis?" The Guardian, March 17, 2016, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/17/brazil-government-crisis-briefing-dilma-rousseff-lula-petrobras>.
- Bellotti, Karina Kosicki. "From Good Press to Fake News: Who's Got the Word? Religion, Authority and Journalism in Brazil." In The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Journalism, 109–21. London: Routledge, 2020.
- Reporters Without Borders. "Brazil," 2021. <https://rsf.org/en/country/brazil>.
- CIA World Factbook. "Brazil," April 14, 2022. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/brazil/>.
- Clark, Lynn Schofield. "The Media and Religious Authority." In The Media and Religious Authority, edited by Stewart M. Hoover, 253–68. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.5325/j.ctv14gp1zt.16>.
- Cunha, Magali do Nascimento. "Journalism, Religious Intolerance and Violence in Brazil." In The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Journalism, 296–310. London: Routledge, 2020.
- Debasish Roy Chowdhury. "India's Media Is Partly to Blame for Its COVID Tragedy." Time (blog), May 3, 2021. <https://time.com/6033152/india-media-covid-19/>.
- Reporters Without Borders. "Ethiopia," 2021. <https://rsf.org/en/country/ethiopia>.
- CIA World Factbook. "Ethiopia," April 14, 2022. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/ethiopia/>.
- The Fund for Peace. "Fragile States Index: Indicators." Accessed April 14, 2022. <https://fragilestatesindex.org/indicators/>.
- "Freedom in the World: Democracy Under Siege." Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2021. <https://freedomhouse.org/>.

- George, Cherian. "Journalism and the Politics of Hate: Charting Ethical Responses to Religious Intolerance." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 29, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 74–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08900523.2014.893771>.
- Reporters Without Borders. "India," 2021. <https://rsf.org/en/country/india>.
- CIA World Factbook. "India," April 14, 2022. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/india/>.
- Morris Kiruga. "In Ethiopia, Religious Extremism Fans the Flames of Ethnic Division." *The Africa Report.Com*, September 18, 2019. <https://www.theafricareport.com/17355/in-ethiopia-religious-extremism-fans-the-flames-of-ethnic-division/>.
- Rana Ayyub. "Journalism Is under Attack in India. So Is the Truth." *Washington Post*, February 21, 2020, sec. Opinion. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/02/21/journalism-is-under-attack-india-so-is-truth/>.
- Reuters. "Brazil Fell Into Recession in First Half of Year, as Investments Dropped." *The New York Times*, August 29, 2014, sec. Business. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/30/business/international/brazil-fell-into-recession-in-first-half-of-year.html>.
- Sahgal, Neha, Jonathan Evans, Ariana Monique Salazar, Kelsey Jo Starr, and Manolo Corichi. "Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation." *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (blog)*, June 29, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/religion-in-india-tolerance-and-segregation/>.
- Smith, Joyce. "Differentiation: When More Sometimes Means Less." In *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Journalism*. London: Routledge, 2020.
- "The Future Role of Civil Society." *Switzerland: World Economic Forum*, January 2013. [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_FutureRoleCivilSociety\\_Report\\_2013.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_FutureRoleCivilSociety_Report_2013.pdf).
- Singh, Amit. "Conflict between Freedom of Expression and Religion in India—A Case Study." *Social Sciences* 7, no. 7 (July 2018). <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/socsci7070108>.
- Reporters Without Borders. "The World Press Freedom Index," 2021. <https://rsf.org/en/world-press-freedom-index>.
- Jewish Virtual Library. "Timeline of Ethiopian Jewish History," 2021. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/timeline-of-ethiopian-jewish-history>.
- BBC News. "Why Is the Ethiopian Diaspora so Influential?," November 24, 2016, sec. Africa. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-38076389>.



# BRAZIL: RELIGION, TOLERANCE, AND POSSIBILITY

Rising fragility and fractionalization and reduced religious and press freedoms in Brazil present key challenges to social cohesion that need to be addressed. While Brazil is one of the most ethnically diverse countries of South America, just under 65 percent of the population identify as Roman Catholic, including current President Jair Bolsonaro. While the focus of this paper is not on one specific religion or faith practice, it is important to note the majority power dynamics that one religion can have over the rest of the country.



In this case, the Roman Catholic church has significant cultural and political power, which it can wield over large portions of the population. Even among other forms of Christianity, Roman Catholicism is at the top of the religious hegemony. Brazil's violent history of religious intolerance did not necessarily begin with Portuguese colonization, but the legacy of the Indigenous and enslaved groups' forced conversion to Christianity, and its intertwined relationship with white supremacy and colorism, continue to ripple through Brazilian society.

Brazil is home to over 217 million people over 8.5 million square kilometers, mak-

ing it the 6th largest country in the world. As noted above, while 65 percent of this population identifies as Roman Catholic and another 23 percent identify as Protestant Christians, there are two other groups worth noting: 2 percent of Brazilians identify as Spiritist and 8 percent do not identify with a religion at all.<sup>15</sup> While these numbers seem small in proportions, that is 4,700,000 Brazilians who identify with Spiritualism (included under this umbrella is Afro-cultism and Indigenous Animism), and 17,360,000 Brazilians for whom a religion is not part of their identity.

15. "Brazil," April 14, 2022.

Despite the high percentage of the population identifying with a religion, it is not widely considered a 'newsworthy' theme, which in this case often includes day to day acts of religious intolerance.

In addition to engaging with the 167,000,000 Brazilians about Christianity and its role in creating inclusive spaces for non-Christians, there are 22,060,000 Brazilians for whom the discussion of faith portrayal and intolerance in the media is already relevant in their lives and who can be engaged and empowered to further this conversation.

In 2014, a study was done on two of the top media organizations in Brazil: Folha de S. Paulo (FSP) and Jornal Nacional (JN). Of the stories that were produced that year, only 1.5 percent mentioned religion. Of that, 73 percent focused on Christianity and 19 percent focused on Islam. Despite being the second largest identified religion in Brazil, Spiritism was barely discussed. When religions outside of Christianity were highlighted, this study found they were usually under the themes of “violence and curiosities”.<sup>16</sup> What this reveals is that despite the high percentage of the population identifying with a faith community, religion itself is not widely considered a ‘newsworthy’ theme, which in this case often includes day to day acts of religious intolerance.<sup>17</sup> Acts of violence, tragedies, and curious facts garner the most attention. Further studies argue that the media only superficially presents

that content around religious intolerance, which can be then exacerbated by this coverage.<sup>18</sup>

Many Brazilians feel that the crises facing Brazil are coming both more frequently and with more intensity since the economic and political crisis in 2014.<sup>19</sup> Some argue it only seems that way because there is more media coverage and information dissemination available. Others contend that it is not that there are more crises, but rather that the political, economic and humanitarian crises are cascading across sectors, intensifying each other. This is due in part to the reduced economic and government capacity, loss of trust in the government, and disillusionment with the political system.<sup>20</sup>

When President Bolsonaro took office in 2019, the freedom of religion indicators declined steeply, and have continued on a downward trend since. At the same time, there is a sharp decrease in press freedom, a trend that has continued under President Bolsonaro. In the last decade, Brazil has plummeted from the 58th spot to the 111th (out of 178) on the Press Freedom Index.<sup>21</sup> The combination of these two factors has a major impact on the ability of the media

16. Cunha, “Journalism, Religious Intolerance and Violence in Brazil.”

17. Bellotti, “From Good Press to Fake News.”

18. Cunha, “Journalism, Religious Intolerance and Violence in Brazil.”

19. Reuters, “Brazil Fell Into Recession in First Half of Year, as Investments Dropped.”

20. Addley, “Why Is Brazil’s Government in Crisis?”

21. “Brazil,” 2021.







to report on issues of cultural and political importance. This is specifically notable for this report as the state continues to have influence over the media, not because the government is so large, but rather due to the government's ability to manipulate and control the narratives.

Individual capacity for creating change in Brazil is highly diverse, which is part of what contributes to the continuing polarization. In

multicultural societies like Brazil, it is necessary to establish communication, dialogue and discourse among the different coexisting—and occasionally competing—groups in a public sphere, of which the media is key. According to the Fragile States Index (FSI), Brazil's Factionalized Elites indicator score was 6.5 in 2021, which is a continuation of a worsening trajectory that has been going on since the FSI began in 2006.<sup>22</sup>

22. "Fragile States Index: Indicators."



The Factionalized Elites indicator considers the fragmentation of state institutions along ethnic, class, clan, racial or religious lines, as well as and brinksmanship and gridlock between ruling elites. It also factors the use of nationalistic political rhetoric by ruling elites, often in terms of nationalism, xenophobia, communal irredentism or of communal solidarity.





It is these Factionalized Elites who have the cultural, political, and economic power to call for greater inclusion and freedom of media and faith. Alternatively, these are the same people who have been able to come into and maintain their power through the polarization of the population and government. Many of these elites are invested in maintaining the status quo, or even increasing polarization, for their own purposes. Despite this, it is important to engage with these groups because of their ability to influence media, as well as their potential philanthropy. This group may not consider themselves to be in need of capacity building or training. Instead, they can be mentored on how to use their positionality in spheres of influence to increase tolerance and build a more peaceful Brazil.

As Brazilian society became more polarized, the space in which civil society organizations operate became both narrower and more treacherous. Organizations whose missions were previously politically neutral, or apolit-

ical altogether, found themselves navigating the us versus them binary in surprising ways. This has to do in part to the ways in which media discuss and portray civil society actors working in complex environments. For example, an organization whose work focuses on maintaining the rainforest may suddenly find themselves demonized in the media as anti-farmer. This narrative becomes intricately entangled in identity-based markers as well if this environmental group is working with Indigenous groups, for example, who may be painted as irrelevant at best, or anti-Christian at worst. The stories get picked up by media groups or social media influencers and collapsed into easy to read, easy to share, inflammatory headlines that define a civil society organization as “us” or “them”. In this way, the localization of discourse is essential. When the ‘them’ in discussion are re-humanized into the shape of a neighbor, family friend, or team member, it’s harder to collapse their identity down into a soundbite.

# KEY RESILIENCE BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES



## INCLUSION

Train and invest in journalists and media influencers from minority populations to diversify the media landscape.

Engage both religious and non-religious communities in intercommunal dialogue.

## ENVIRONMENT

Support parallel goals and identity markers, like pride in Amazonian beauty and biodiversity as a way to build bridges.

## CIVIC SPACE

Engage with religious and cultural leaders about local stereotypes and open interreligious dialogue to break down common myths.

## STATE CAPACITY

Increase access for diverse candidates to run for positions in government and cultural leadership.

## ECONOMY

Increase transparency of advertising and funding.





# INDIA: LARGE POPULATION, LARGE POTENTIAL

As the second largest population in the world, India has a broad depth of diversity across its 1.4 billion person population.<sup>23</sup> In addition to being home to most of the world's Hindus, Jains and Sikhs, India has one of the largest Muslim populations, as well as millions of Christians and Buddhists.



Secular and religious Indians are facing the need for compromises in order to accommodate and tolerate different views in their complex, multicultural society.<sup>24</sup> Indians of different religions agree on the importance of religious tolerance, and most feel they are able to openly practice their religion without fear. Despite this, new research has found that most Muslims and most Hindus in India believe that they should not intermarry, and many feel that religious anti-miscegenation should be legislated.<sup>25</sup> This study goes on to describe that though most religious people would not mind having a neighbor of a different religion, they report most of their friends only identify within the same

religious community. Indians have created a series of separate communities, like a patchwork quilt, that come together at each edge but do not overlap: “among Hindus who say it is very important to stop the interreligious marriage of Hindu women, 82 percent also say that respecting other religions is very important to what it means to be Hindu.”<sup>26</sup>

This contented religious separatism chafes, though, when confronted with Indian national identity politics and language. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been criticized for promoting a Hindu nationalist ideology. In 2020, the Press Freedom Index ranked India 142<sup>nd</sup> out of 180 countries, citing Prime Minister Narendra Modi

23. “India,” April 14, 2022.

24. Singh, “Conflict between Freedom of Expression and Religion in India.”

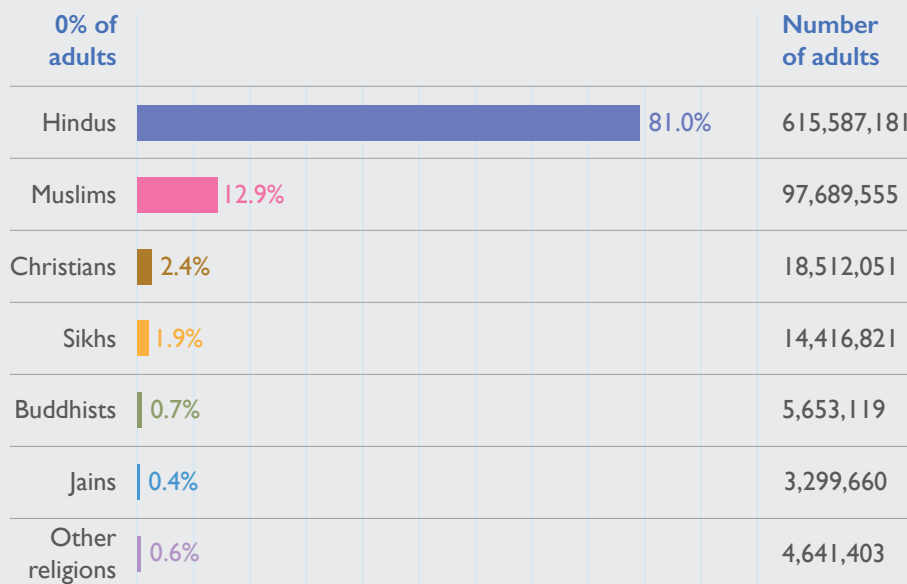
25. Sahgal et al.

26. “India,” 2021.



## INDIA IS MAJORITY HINDU, BUT RELIGIOUS MINORITIES HAVE SIZABLE POPULATIONS

INDIA'S ADULT POPULATION BY RELIGION (2011 CENSUS)



Note: Based on adults ages 18 and older, excluding the union territories of Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep. Source: Census of India, 2011. "Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation" - PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The desire and support for religious freedom directly contradicts many peoples' ideas of 'Indian-ness' and national identity.

and the BJP exerting greater control of the media. Journalists are pressured to conform to the Hindu nationalist narrative that BJP has made central to their platform.<sup>27</sup> When asked what makes a person "truly Indian," 64 percent answered, "being Hindu," 59 percent answered, "speaking Hindi," and 51 percent said both.<sup>28</sup> This series of answers illustrates an ongoing issue in Indian society: the desire and support for religious freedom directly contradicts many peoples' ideas of 'Indian-ness' and national identity. This cognitive dissonance creates a gap in which hate speech, hate spin, and other kinds of dangerous speech can be, and has been, utilized by bad actors to incite violence.

Journalists in Kashmir are especially burdened with deeply regressive content regulations due to the ongoing tensions in the

area. In a unique use of 'hate spin', the government has used defamation, sedition, and hate speech laws to discourage, threaten, and silence those critical of the BJP narrative. Decentralized Hindu nationalist campaigns violently discourage forms of expression deemed "anti-national", which has exacerbated self-censorship in the media.

This change has not gone unnoticed; many Indians report feeling that the media is less nuanced and neutral than it was 10 years ago. The term *Godi* media, meaning 'lapdog media', or *Modia* is used to refer to the sensationalist or biased journalism perceived to be reporting in the interest of the BJP.<sup>29</sup> Outside of direct censorship or this 'lapdog' manipulation, Indian media faces the same issue traditional media is facing worldwide: heavy reliance on advertising, in both print

27. "India," 2021.

28. Sahgal et al.

29. Rana Ayyub, "Journalism Is under Attack in India. So Is the Truth."



and online news, which can influence what does or does not get reported on. In India's case, the government itself is a major advertiser, spending approximately \$270,000 daily across media outlets during the 2019-2020 fiscal year.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to the influence of BJP, Indians report feeling as though the media perpetuates stereotypes and normalizes extremist speech. As noted previously, this is due to a variety of reasons, from needing to fill the news cycle to competing for clicks. India also has many users who connect with social media through WhatsApp and Telegram, which do not have a newsfeed style platform. Rather, articles and video clips are circulated through groups, which are accessible through invitations or linked contacts. As noted above, India has a highly segregated society and there is little appetite for interreligious mixing in person, or online. As a result, these groups tend to replicate the divided religious communities in insular echo chambers.

Any study on issues of religious intolerance in India would be remiss to not mention the 1947 partition following British colonial rule. The dissolution of India into two countries,

30. Debasish Roy Chowdhury, "India's Media Is Partly to Blame for Its COVID Tragedy."

one for Muslims and one purportedly secular state for Hindus, provided less than one year for 10 to 12 million people to uproot their lives and their families to move across the new border. It is estimated that 500,000 people were killed during this transition through riots, massacres, and hardships on the journey.<sup>31</sup> The trauma initiated during this time continues to reverberate through the India and Pakistani populations, and this delineation of religious-based nation states contributes to intolerance, hate speech, violence, and anti-Hindu or anti-Muslim legislation respectively, as well as violence against other religious minorities.

The issue of dialogue within the civic space is one of the key issues for India. Social media users of TikTok, for example, can reach millions of followers with their messaging on short videos. These quick online clips have real world consequences as they continue to mainstream and normalize dangerous speech.

This final step of this escalation is physical, identity-based violence in the form of genocidal riots or massacres. Key to this process is communication and message dissemination, which is why the discussion of both traditional and social media is essential.

31. "A Timeline of Religious Violence in Modern India."

One study explains: “the most dangerous form of bigotry takes years to develop, until it becomes culturally acceptable first to libel, then to discriminate, and finally to persecute outgroups...[this is] described as a ‘spiral of conflict escalation’, starting with a collective sense of anxiety that makes people vulnerable to manipulation. First, leaders agitate to construct a collective identity, at the expense of an out-group that is portrayed as the object of the community’s anxiety. Leaders then engage in a process of alienation, to dehumanize the outgroup such that it is seen as deserving of no empathy or no moral obligation.”<sup>32</sup>

32. George, “Journalism and the Politics of Hate.”



With a highly segregated population of over a billion, it is to be expected that there is high potential for friction between large groups. That said, there is also high potential for collaboration toward common goals, especially on the local level, that can help to soften the

boundaries between communities and re-humanize the groups to one another. With collaboration between civil society organizations and cultural and religious leaders, the media could be used as a force for community integration instead of inflammation.



# KEY RESILIENCE BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES



## INCLUSION

Encourage traditional media and influencers to reflect the diversity of the area on which they are reporting.

## STATE CAPACITY

Engage with rhetoric in official sources intertwining Hinduism with Indian national identity.

## CIVIC SPACE

Invest in historically strong civil society network to act as 'watchdogs' for media bias.

## SOCIAL COHESION

Invest in media literacy awareness and bias identification in traditional and social media to reduce ill-informed escalation events.

## ENVIRONMENT

Build dialogue around common issues, like air pollution, to break down community barriers.





# ETHIOPIA: MOVING FORWARD, HOLDING BACK

The recent downturn in security in Ethiopia has caused a sharp increase in fractionalization and fragility, and a return to regressive policies. The Ethiopian population is much more evenly divided across religions than most other countries. Of the 114 million people, 44 percent of the population identifies as Ethiopian Orthodox (a Christian sect), while 31 percent and 23 percent of the population identify as Muslim and Christian Protestant, respectively.<sup>33</sup>



There is also an important minority of Beta Israel, or Ethiopian Jews, whose community has lived in Ethiopia since the 4th century.<sup>34</sup> Ethiopia's level of peace and inclusion have been extremely inconsistent over the last decade. Despite their variable scores on the Fragile States Index, the Factionalized Elites Score has been consistently high, belying an underlying divide ripe for polarization.<sup>35</sup>

The 2018 election of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia's first ethnically Oromo prime minister, signaled a new era in Ethiopian freedom of the press, with the release

of imprisoned journalists and an end to the online blockade of dozens of news and blog websites. But as clashes grew in the Tigray region, the Ethiopian government reinitiated many of its old tactics. These include imprisoning journalists, cutting access to the internet, and initiating news laws on hate speech and disinformation that have since only been applied to anti-government sources.<sup>36</sup> The main radio and television news sources are owned and operated by the government, which allows them to dictate the content on those channels. There are independent news and media sources, though most are

33. "Ethiopia," April 14, 2022.

34. "Timeline of Ethiopian Jewish History."

35. "Fragile States Index: Indicators."

36. "Ethiopia," 2021.

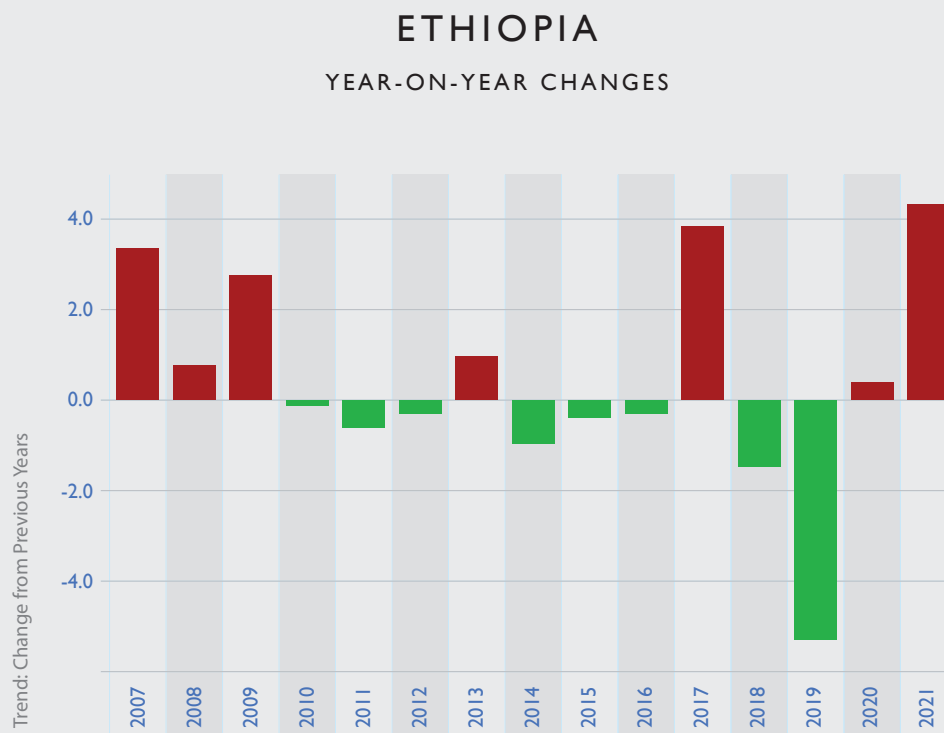


Figure 5 Annual total score changes, as calculated by the Fragile States Index.

in Amharic and have a limited distribution. Currently only 25 percent of Ethiopians have internet access, with more having limited access on mobile phones through SMS based online platforms, but the number is constantly growing.<sup>37</sup> Despite this fact, the government continues to rely on state-run traditional media for their news dissemination, often falling behind the much quicker spread of hate speech or hate spin on social media. Instead of adapting and integrating social media into their messaging, the government has blocked many social media sites, and will sometimes cut off the internet all together to stem spiraling escalation.<sup>38</sup>

Religious violence in Ethiopia has ethno-nationalist implications, as different major

religions come from different regions. Tensions are especially high between Christian and Muslim Ethiopians, and have become the subject of interregional violence. For example, in February of 2019 fake reports circulated online that mosques had been attacked in Durame, a town in south-east Ethiopia, as a result, ten churches were destroyed in Southern Ethiopia. The next day, two mosques were attacked in Amhara and a third mosque was burnt a few days later, though it is unconfirmed if these tertiary attacks were directly related.<sup>39</sup> Tit-for-tat style violence across regions relies heavily on social media reports encouraging their religious brethren to take revenge. This cascade of deadly events started with a group of people believing an event such as this could

37. "Ethiopia," April 14, 2022.

38. "Why Is the Ethiopian Diaspora so Influential?"

39. Morris Kiruga, "In Ethiopia, Religious Extremism Fans the Flames of Ethnic Division."





By the time information has been corrected and shared, the facts of the event can matter less than the momentum on the ground.

have happened, and were willing to believe the accounts shared across social media. As one study notes, “Such escalation, it should be stressed, is not unplanned or uncoordinated like the workings of the invisible hand of the market. It is invariably the result of deliberate actions by actors who stand to gain from such ruptures.”<sup>40</sup>

This growing intolerance and sensationalist media has also laid the groundwork for another major issue facing Ethiopia. Extremist groups target Ethiopians, especially young men, who have already been exposed to this escalation of polarization, and then use familiar religious-based rhetoric to convince them to join their group. In this volatile region of North Africa, bordering Somalia, the compounding stresses of poor economic opportunity, low education rates, and a constant barrage of hate-based indoctrination make joining extremist groups a seemingly viable option.

The diaspora population is another group interacting with and influencing Ethiopians on social media. There are approximately 200 million Ethiopians outside of the country, many of whom have strong economic and social ties back to their home country. The volume of one-sided and incomplete news stories, both from government-owned

media sources and from those who claim to tell the story the government will not, makes it very difficult for the diaspora community to get a complete picture of an event. This is especially difficult when the government turns off cellular and internet services, and those outside Ethiopia have no way of contacting friends and family, or reporters and eyewitnesses. As a result, this highly influential group can be advocating from a place of poor information, sharing and resharing media reports that draw international attention. Without the immediate potential of arrest or censure by the Ethiopian government, the diaspora community can be more critical, and encourage action from their kin or other activists still in the country. By the time information has been corrected and shared, the facts of the event can matter less than the momentum on the ground.

The Ethiopian people and their government know what needs to be done to increase press freedom because they have done so in the past, but fear has forced them to return to oppressive tactics rather than adapt. With such a broadly diverse population, interreligious and intercommunal dialogue is essential. Current tight restrictions on speech inhibit that progress.

40. George, “Journalism and the Politics of Hate.”

# KEY RESILIENCE BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

## INCLUSION

Invest in artificial intelligence and human monitors for social media to recognize and flag incorrect or incomplete information before it is widely shared.

## CIVIC SPACE

Train religious leaders, especially at the local level, to de-escalate rhetoric and build spaces for dialogue.

## STATE CAPACITY

Provide reliable and consistent access to the internet and data sources, and increase internet saturation rate throughout the country.

Integrate social media platforms in order to disseminate timely information.

## SOCIAL COHESION

Encourage interreligious and/or inter-communal coalition building.

## ECONOMY

Invest in the creation and protection of privately held media sources.





# PHOTO CREDITS

Cover: Youssef Naddam / Unsplash

Page 2: Jon Tyson / Unsplash

Page 4: Brett Sayles / Pexels

Page 5: Andrik Langfield / Unsplash

Page 7: Nicolas Rizzon / Pexels

Page 14: Christina Morillo / Pexels

Page 16: Maurício Mascaro / Unsplash

Page 17: Headway / Unsplash

Page 19: Sébastien Goldberg / Unsplash

Page 22: Krys Amon / Unsplash

Page 23: Tiago Celestino / Unsplash

Page 24: Maria Fernanda Pissioli / Unsplash

Page 25: Joel Muniz / Unsplash

Page 26: Sebastien Goldberg / Unsplash

Page 27: Tofin Creations / Unsplash

Page 29: Ajith S / Unsplash

Page 30: Raj K Raj / HindustanTimes / Shutterstock

Page 31: Tom Watkins / Unsplash

Page 32: ITSAYG / Unsplash

Page 34: Oromia Movies

Page 35: Eyoel Kahssay / Unsplash

This study was conducted by the Fund For Peace in 2022. The contents and conclusions are solely those of the authors as listed. Sources and references have been cited in the attached document and referenced throughout the study. This project was made possible with support from the Faith and Media Initiative.



