

# **ETHIOPIA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution codifies the separation of religion and the state, establishes freedom of religious choice, prohibits religious discrimination, and stipulates the government shall not interfere in the practice of any religion, nor shall any religion interfere in the affairs of the state. On January 20, security forces fired teargas on a group of youth singing politically charged messages in Woldia town during Epiphany celebrations. The Amhara regional government pledged to investigate the incident. The local Human Rights Council (HRCO) reported security forces subsequently shot and killed eight Orthodox Church members; this was followed by further protests and killings. On February 16, the government declared a state of emergency (SOE) that restricted organized opposition and antigovernment protests, which also affected religious activities. The House of Peoples' Representatives voted on June 5 to lift the SOE, effective immediately. There were no reports of religious communities engaging in protests either before or after the lifting of the SOE. On August 1, representatives of the exiled synod of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), headed by Patriarch Abune Merkorios, returned to the country and reunited with the synod in Ethiopia headed by Patriarch Abune Mathias. The reconciliation effort had the direct support of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali and ended a 26-year schism in the Orthodox Church. On August 4, three Muslim scholars, Sheik Seid Ahmed Mustafa, Sheik Jabir Abdella, and Sheik Sherif Muhdin, returned to the country after decades of exile in Saudi Arabia. The scholars told local media they returned in response to Prime Minister Abiy's calls to return and build the country.

On August 4, in the Somali region, an organized group of Muslim youth reportedly killed six priests and burned down at least eight Ethiopian Orthodox churches during widespread civil unrest in Jijiga. On August 25, in Bure town, followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church stoned a man to death after accusing him of attempting to set a church on fire. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) continued to report some Protestants and Orthodox Christians accused one another of heresy and of actively working to convert adherents from one faith to the other, increasing tension between the two groups. The Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) said it continued to hold foreign actors responsible for the exacerbation of tensions between Christians and Muslims and within the Muslim community. The Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) stated that the major faith communities in most of the country respected each other's religious observances and practices while permitting intermarriage and conversion.

U.S. embassy and Department of State officers met officials from the Ministry of Peace, which includes the previous Ministry of Federal and Pastoralist Development Affairs, throughout the year for continued discussions on religious tolerance, radicalization, and ongoing reforms led by Prime Minister Abiy. Embassy representatives also met with the leaders from the EIASC, Catholic Church in Ethiopia, IRCE, the Jewish Community, and EOC to discuss how these groups could contribute to religious tolerance. Embassy officials met with members of the Muslim community and with NGOs to discuss their concerns about government interference in religious affairs.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 108.4 million (July 2018 estimate). The most recent census, conducted in 2007, estimated 44 percent of the population adheres to the EOC, 34 percent are Sunni Muslim, and 19 percent belong to Christian evangelical and Pentecostal groups. The overall population, however, has since changed significantly, and observers in and outside the government state those numbers are not necessarily representative of the present composition. The EOC predominates in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara, while Islam is most prevalent in the Afar, Oromia, and Somali Regions. Established Protestant churches are strongest in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region, Gambella, and parts of Oromia. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Eastern Rite and Roman Catholics, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and practitioners of indigenous religions. The Rastafarian community numbers approximately 1,000 and its members primarily reside in Addis Ababa and the town of Shashemene in the Oromia Region.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution requires the separation of state and religion, establishes freedom of religious choice and practice, prohibits religious discrimination, and stipulates the government shall not interfere in the practice of any religion, nor shall religion interfere in state affairs. It permits limitations on religious freedom as prescribed by law in order to protect public safety, education, and morals, as well as to guarantee the independence of government from religion. The law criminalizes religious defamation and incitement of one religious group against another. The

law permits sharia courts to adjudicate personal status cases, provided both parties are Muslim and consent to the court's jurisdiction.

The SOE put in place on February 16 and lifted on June 5 included provisions affecting religious activities such as the requirement for authorization from the SOE Command Post for public gatherings and a prohibition on chanting political slogans during religious holidays.

Registration and licensing of religious groups fall under the mandate of the Directorate of Faith and Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Peace, which requires unregistered religious groups to submit a founding document, the national identity cards of its founders, and the permanent address of the religious institution and planned regional branches. The registration process also requires an application letter, information on board members, meeting minutes, information on the founders, financial reports, offices, name, and symbols. Religious group applicants must have at least 50 individuals for registration as a religious entity, and 15 for registration as a ministry or association. During the registration process, the government publishes the religious group's name and logo in a local newspaper and, if there are no objections, registration is granted.

Unlike other religious groups, the EOC is not registered by the Ministry of Peace but obtains registration through a provision in the civil code passed during the imperial era that is still in force. Registration with the ministry confers legal status on a religious group, which gives the group the right to congregate and to obtain land to build a place of worship and establish a cemetery. Unregistered groups do not receive these benefits. Religious groups must renew their registration at least every five years; failure to do so may result in a fine.

Registered religious organizations are required to provide annual activity and financial reports. Activity reports must describe evangelical activities and list new members, newly ordained clergy, and new houses of worship.

Under the constitution the government owns all land; religious groups must apply to both the regional and local governments for land allocation, including for land to build places of worship.

Government policy prohibits the holding of religious services inside public institutions, per the constitutionally required separation of religion and state. The government mandates that public institutions take a two-hour break from work on

Fridays for workers to attend Islamic prayers. Private companies are not required to follow this policy.

The constitution prohibits religious instruction in public and private schools, although both public and private schools may organize clubs based on shared religious values. The law permits the establishment of a separate category of religious schools under the auspices of churches and mosques. The Charities and Societies Agency, an agency of the government accountable to the federal attorney general, and the Ministry of Education regulate religious schools, which provide both secular and religious instruction. The Ministry of Education oversees the secular component of education provided by religious schools.

The law prohibits the formation of political parties based on religion.

A government proclamation prohibits certain charities, societies, and associations, including those associated with faith-based organizations that engage in rights-based advocacy, and prevents civil society organizations from receiving more than 10 percent of their funding from foreign sources. Rights-based advocacy includes activities promoting human and democratic rights or equality of nations, nationalities, peoples, genders, and religions; protecting the rights of children or persons with disabilities; advancing conflict resolution or reconciliation; and enhancing the efficiency of the justice system or law enforcement services. Religious groups undertaking development activities are required to register their development arms as charities with the Charities and Societies Agency and follow legal guidelines originating from the Charities and Societies Proclamation.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

On January 20, during Orthodox Christian Epiphany celebrations, also known as the Timket festival, security forces fired teargas in Woldia town, North Wollo Zone of the Amhara Region, on a group of youth who, while following a replica of the Ark of the Covenant (Tabot), the most sacred item in the church, shifted to political messaging in their cheers and songs, according to media reports. The Tabot fell to the ground during the incident, after which the youths threw rocks at the security forces. According to an August 9 report by independent rights group Human Rights Council (HRCO), government security forces shot and killed eight and wounded 16 followers of the EOC during the protest. Subsequently, residents of Woldia and nearby towns Kobo, Robit, Mersa, Wurgessa and Dessie staged

protests, which the report stated turned violent; according to the HRCO, security forces killed eight of those protesters and injured nine others. Government officials promised to investigate the incident, but as of year's end there was no public report of findings or of anyone being held accountable.

The government released Ahmedin Jebel and his co-defendants from Kality Prison on February 14. Ahmedin, a member of the Muslim Arbitration Committee, a group formed in 2011 to protest the government's interference in religion and to advocate for the resolution of Muslim grievances, was arrested in 2012 along with several other activists. The government brought terrorist charges against him and several codefendants, and they were found guilty. In August 2015, the court sentenced Ahmedin to 22 years in prison. Prior to his release, he was one of the few Muslim activists who remained in jail following the pardoning of several other detainees in recent years.

The SOE made protests illegal for four months. There were no reports of religious communities engaging in protests either before or after the lifting of the SOE. No religious group reported repression of religious freedom under the SOE.

Reports of government imposition or dissemination of Al-Ahbash teachings (a Sufi religious movement rooted in Lebanon and different from indigenous Islam) declined during the year.

The Directorate for Registration of Religious Groups within the Ministry of Peace reported 816 religious institutions and 1,640 fellowships and religious associations were registered as of late in the year.

The EIASC remained the lead religious organization for the country's Muslims, managing religious activities in the approximately 40,000 mosques and annual Hajj pilgrimages to Mecca. Some Muslims stated there was continued government interference in religious affairs, and some members of the Muslim community stated the EIASC lacked autonomy from the government.

Protestants continued to report that local officials discriminated against them with regard to religious registration and the allocation of land for churches and cemeteries.

On August 1, the exiled synod of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, headed by Patriarch Abune Merkorios, returned to Ethiopia after 27 years of exile in the United States, to reunite with the synod in Ethiopia headed by Patriarch Abune

Mathias. The reconciliation ended 26 years of schism in the Orthodox Church. Following the reconciliation, the two patriarchs were designated as equal heads of the reunited church, with Abune Merkorios assuming spiritual leadership and Abune Mathias assuming administrative leadership. Media reported that Prime Minister Abiy played a central role in the mediation efforts by tasking mediators, and by personally attending and addressing a mediation conference in Washington D.C.

In collaboration with the government-sanctioned rights body Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), an inquiry committee of the EOC on August 8 reinstated 300 priests of the Addis Ababa Diocese, who were suspended in 2016 by the diocesan leadership. In addition to concluding the priests should be paid their two-year salary in full, the committee dismissed 14 individuals, including the manager of the Addis Ababa Diocese, for illegally suspending the priests and violating their rights.

On July 3, Prime Minister Abiy initiated an effort to resolve disputes within the Muslim community by bringing together leaders of the EIASC and the Muslim Arbitration Committee (MAC), previously rival groups. The prime minister's office stated the government maintained its neutrality when arbitrating between the two groups. In a joint meeting, the two sides apologized to each other and pledged to resolve their disputes. They agreed and set up a committee of nine members, three from each group as well as three elders and religious scholars.

On August 4, three Muslim scholars, Sheik Seid Ahmed Mustafa, Sheik Jabir Abdella, and Sheik Sherif Muhdin, returned to the country after more than two decades of exile in Saudi Arabia. The scholars told local media that they returned in response to Prime Minister Abiy's calls to return and help build the country.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

On August 4, according to national and international media reports, an organized group of Muslim youth killed six priests and burned down at least eight EOC churches in the Somali Regional State during widespread civil unrest in Jijiga.

Participants at the annual Irreecha festival in late September celebrated peacefully, free of the violence that marred the event in 2016. The PM's office issued the following statement: "As we celebrate Irreecha, let's all cherish our rich cultural heritages and unite in a shared purpose to build a bright future for our children."

The IRCE, an organization established by seven religious institutions and operating independently from the government and whose mission is to promote interfaith harmony throughout the country, reported that major faith communities in most of the country respected each other's religious observances and practices while permitting intermarriage and conversion.

In May Muslim community leaders said that Islam in the country was threatened by internal fracturing due to discord within the community.

The EIASC expressed continued concern about what it said was the influence of foreign Salafist groups within the Muslim community. The EIASC said it continued to hold these foreign groups responsible for the exacerbation of tensions between Christians and Muslims and within the Muslim community.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Embassy officers continued to engage with the Ministry of Peace and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on religious tolerance, countering violent extremism related to religion, and promotion of shared values.

Embassy representatives held meetings with religious leaders, including the Office of the Patriarch of the EOC, the president of the EIASC, and the cardinal heading the Catholic Church in the country, to discuss the role of faith-based organizations in improving religious tolerance within society. Embassy officials met with recently released leaders of the MAC.

Embassy officials engaged with members of the IRCE to discuss religious tolerance and attacks on places of worship. The embassy's dialogue with the IRCE sought to strengthen the IRCE's capacity to reduce religious violence through increased dialogue among religious communities and to assist the IRCE in achieving its stated goal of creating a platform to unify disparate religious groups around common interests and promoting interreligious harmony.