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2013 International Religious Freedom Report - Ethiopia

Executive Summary

The constitution and most laws and policies protect religious freedom. Large and frequent Muslim protests were usually peaceful and generally met with a restrained response by security forces; however, there were exceptions. Clashes between police and Muslim protesters in August resulted in the death of three protesters and the injuries of seven police. In August security forces detained more than 1,000 persons in Addis Ababa during Eid al-Fitr celebrations. Most were released shortly thereafter. Citing national security concerns, in January the Federal High Court closed the trial of 29 Muslims charged under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (ATP) to the press, public, and diplomatic community. The Federal High Court dismissed charges against ten of the defendants and reduced charges against 18 others on December 12. Although the Federal High Court temporarily closed the trial of 28 additional Muslims with alleged links to al-Qaida and al-Shabaab, the court reopened the trial to the public on October 29. There were periodic reports throughout the year that police carried out night raids of Muslim homes in Addis Ababa to collect evidence against alleged terrorists. Some Muslims continued to allege government interference in religious affairs.

There were reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials discussed religious freedom with the government, and engaged with religious groups and faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to promote religious freedom. Embassy officials met with members of the Muslim community in response to allegations of government interference in religious affairs.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 93.9 million (July 2013 estimate). The 2007 census estimated that 44 percent of the population belongs to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), 34 percent is Sunni Muslim, and 19 percent belongs to Christian evangelical and Pentecostal groups. The EOC is predominant in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara and also present in Oromia. 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.

There are small numbers of Eastern Rite and Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and adherents of indigenous religions.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and most laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The constitution requires the separation of state and religion. The law criminalizes religious “defamation” and incitement of one religious group against another, although no cases were reported during the year.

The government does not require the EOC or the Muslim community (or Jews, known as Falashas, most of whom emigrated to Israeli during the 20th century) to register as religious groups because of their historic dominance. All other groups must register with the justice ministry to gain legal standing, which is needed to open a bank account or fully participate in a court proceeding. The Charities and Societies Proclamation prohibits charities, societies, and associations that receive more than 10 percent of their funding from foreign sources from engaging in activities that promote human and democratic rights or equality of nations, nationalities, peoples, genders, and religions; protect the rights of children or persons with disabilities; advance conflict resolution or reconciliation; or enhance the efficiency of the justice system or law enforcement services.

The government prohibits religious instruction in schools, whether public or private. The government permits churches to teach Sunday school, mosques to teach the Quran, and public schools to organize clubs based on shared religious values.

All private individuals, businesses, and religious groups must apply to regional and local governments for land allocation because the government owns all land. The government may close religious schools and hospitals at any time.

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

The government mandates a two-hour break on Fridays for Muslim prayers.

Government Practices

In August clashes broke out in the West Arsi Zone of the Oromia region between police and Muslim protesters demanding the release of three imams who had been detained. State media reported that three armed demonstrators were killed and seven police were injured.

Citing national security concerns, the Federal High Court in January closed the trial of 29 Muslims charged under the ATP to the press, public, and diplomatic community. Of these persons, the authorities identified 28 as members and organizers of the Muslim protest movement, and accused an additional person of accepting funds illegally from a foreign embassy. The Federal High Court dismissed charges against 10 of the defendants and reduced charges against 18 others on December 12. In April prosecutors charged 28 additional Muslims under the ATP for suspected links to al-Qaida and al-Shabaab. Trial proceedings were temporarily closed to the public in July after prosecution witnesses expressed concerns about their personal safety and legal proceedings were re-opened on October 29. On August 8, security forces detained more than 1,000 persons in Addis Ababa during Eid al-Fitr celebrations marking the end of Ramadan. Some Muslims carried banners during the event calling on the government to respect the constitution and release Muslim prisoners. Most detainees were soon released. On August 2, police detained Darsema Sori and Khalid Mohammed, editors at the Muslim-affiliated Radio Bilal. They were later released.

There were periodic reports throughout the year that police carried out nighttime raids of Muslim homes in Addis Ababa to collect evidence against alleged terrorists. The government claimed the police had warrants for the searches in accordance with Ethiopian law.

Some Muslims continued to state there was government interference in Islamic affairs. The government ended a training program advocating the Islamic movement known as al-Ahbash, founded in Lebanon by an Ethiopian scholar. Many Muslim critics had charged that the program was a government-led effort to impose a foreign religious movement.

The government continued to ban Waka-Feta, a traditional animist Oromo religious group, due to a suspected relationship between group leaders and the banned Oromo Liberation Front.

There were reports of discrimination in registration and land allocation. The government did not require the EOC or the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) to re-register every year, unlike other religious groups. Members of some religious groups stated this represented a double standard.

The government continued to give some religious groups use of government land for churches, schools, hospitals, and cemeteries without charge.

Protestants privately alleged unequal treatment by local officials when compared to the EOC and the EIASC with regard to seeking land for churches and cemeteries. The Ministry of Federal Affairs, which has general oversight responsibility for religious affairs in the country, stated that the perceived inequities were a result of poor governance at the local level and zoning regulations that determine a property's proposed and existing communal use functions.

In Axum, the site of many of Ethiopia's oldest and most sacred Orthodox Christian churches, Muslims continued to report difficulty in gaining permission from local authorities to build mosques. Protestants in the Oromia Region reported an inability to construct churches in predominantly Muslim areas.

Some religious groups, mainly Protestant, continued to work through private and unofficial channels to seek the return of property confiscated between 1977 and 1991.

Some religious groups undertaking development activities were required to register their development arms as charities with the Charities and Societies Agency and follow legal guidelines.

The Ministry of Federal Affairs, EIASC, and civil society groups attempted to address the potential for sectarian violence through workshops and training of religious leaders, elders, and influential community members.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In most regions, Orthodox Christians and Muslims generally respected each other's religious observances and tolerated intermarriage and conversion.

In July gunmen shot and killed Sheikh Nuru Yimam, an imam in the northern Amhara region. Police arrested five suspects. The government issued a statement condemning the killing, attributing it to "religious fundamentalists," but at year's end there was no information available on the investigation or the motivation for the killing.

Some Orthodox Christians and Protestants continued to accuse each other of heresy and of actively working to convert adherents from one faith to the other. These mutual recriminations served to increase general tensions between the two groups.

The EIASC and the government continued to express concern about the increasing influence of some Salafist groups, purportedly funded by Saudi Arabia, within the Muslim community. The EIASC blamed these groups for exacerbating tensions between Christians and Muslims and within the Muslim community.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the government, including the detention and treatment of Muslim protesters and implementation of the government and EIASC-led Islamic training programs. Embassy representatives attended the trials of Muslims charged with terrorism until the Federal High Court closed the cases to members of the public, press, and diplomatic community.

Embassy officials met with members of the national and regional Islamic Affairs Councils, and the Ambassador met with the newly-appointed Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to convey U.S. government views on the importance of religious freedom.