



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Ethiopia**International Religious Freedom Report 2004**

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, on occasion local authorities infringed on this right.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Some Protestant and Muslim groups continued to complain that local officials discriminate against them when seeking land for churches and cemeteries, but there were reports during the period covered by this report of good relations between the Ministry of Education and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) regarding the use of headscarves.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. In general, there was a decrease in interreligious conflict and clashes; however, intrareligious tension and government criticism increased among Muslims, which divided traditionalists from the stricter fundamentalists.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 435,186 square miles, and its population is approximately 71 million. Approximately 40 to 45 percent of the population adheres to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC); however, the EOC claims 50 percent of the country's total population, or more than 31 million adherents, and 110,450 churches. The EOC is predominant in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara. Approximately 45 percent of the population is Muslim, although many Muslims claim that the actual percentage is higher. Addis Ababa has 1 million Muslims, according to the Supreme Islamic Council. Islam is most prevalent in the Somali and Afar regions, as well as in all the major parts of Oromia. Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestantism continue to be the fastest growing faiths and constitute more than 10 percent of the population. According to the Evangelical Church Fellowship, there are 11.5 million Protestants, although this figure may be a high estimate. Established Protestant churches such as Mekane Yesus (with 4.03 million members—an increase of 195,000 in 2003) and the Kale Hiwot followers (with 4.6 million members) are strongest in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Regional State (SNNPRS), western and central Oromia, and in urban areas around the country. In Gambella in the western part of the country, where ethnic clashes broke out in December 2003, the Mekane Yesus followers represent 60 percent of the population, according to the president of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus. The Evangelical Church Fellowship claims there are now 22 denominations under their religious umbrella and that the number of adherents increased by 4 million in the period covered by this report.

There are more than 7,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in the country. Oriental Rite and Latin Rite Roman Catholics (Roman Catholics number 500,000), Jews, animists, and other practitioners of traditional indigenous religions make up most of the remaining population. In Addis Ababa and western Gondar, in the Amhara region, there are those who claim that their ancestors were forced to convert from Judaism to Ethiopian Orthodoxy (Feles Mora). There are very few atheists. Although precise data is not available, active participation in religious services is high throughout the country.

A large number of foreign missionary groups operate in the country, including Catholic and Protestant missionaries. Protestant organizations, operating under the umbrella of the 22-member Evangelical Church Fellowship of Ethiopia, sponsor or support missionary work: the Baptist Bible Fellowship; the New Covenant Baptist Church; the Baptist Evangelical Association; Mekane Yesus Church (associated with the Lutheran Church); Kale Hiwot Church (associated with SIM—Service in Mission); Hiwot Berhan Church (associated with the Swedish Philadelphia Church); Genet Church (associated with the Finnish Mission); Lutheran-Presbyterian Church of Ethiopia; Emnet Christos; Muluwongel (Full Gospel) Church; and Messerete Kristos (associated with the Mennonite Mission). There also is missionary activity by Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, on occasion government authorities infringed on this right. The Constitution requires the separation of religion and the state and prohibits a state religion, and the Government generally respects these rights in practice. The Federal Government interfered during 2003 in the internal affairs of the EIASC by orchestrating the installation of EIASC officials following an internal power struggle.

The Government requires that religious groups be registered. Religious institutions, like nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), are registered with the Ministry of Justice and must renew their registration every 3 years. The new registration policy obliging churches to re-register every 3 years went into effect in December 2002, supplanting a previous annual registration requirement. The Ethiopian Human-Rights Council (EHRCO) stated that the change in the registration requirement does not reflect any progress or improvement in the Government's treatment of "newer religions," specifically Protestant churches.

The EOC has never registered and has never faced ramifications for not registering. Similarly, the Supreme Islamic Council, after registering 8 years ago, has never re-registered since it protested this requirement to the Prime Minister's Office. Protests from other religious groups over these exceptions have not resulted in equal treatment from the Government. Evangelical Church Fellowship representatives reported that they met with the Speaker of the House (Parliament) in December 2002 and complained about the registration requirement, requesting that they be treated equally with other groups. The Speaker assured the leaders that the issue would be discussed in Parliament. However, the Chairman of Parliament's Social Affairs Committee does not recall Parliament ever discussing the matter. The Roman Catholic Nuncio in the country has written repeatedly to the Prime Minister's office seeking a reversal of this policy. However, there was no change in the government policy during the period covered by this report. The Mekane Yesus leadership confirmed their frustration with the registration requirement of every 3 years as well and sent their complaints to the Ministry of Justice by means of a document signed by Mekane Yesus, the Evangelical Fellowship, and the Roman Catholics. The statement requested that religions be placed in a "different status than NGOs." The president of Mekane Yesus stated that the lack of feedback from the Government on this issue makes it clear that the present leadership does not treat all religions equally.

Unlike NGOs, religious groups are not subject to a rigorous registration process. Under current law, any religious organization that undertakes development activities must register its development wing separately as an NGO. To register, each religious organization must complete an application form and submit a copy of its bylaws, curriculum vitae of the organization's leader, and a copy of the leader's identity card. Failure to register results in the lack of any legal standing. For example, any organization that does not register with the Ministry of Justice would not be allowed to open a bank account and would be severely disadvantaged in any court of law.

Religious groups are not accorded duty-free status. Religious groups are given the free use of government land for churches, schools, hospitals, and cemeteries; however, schools and hospitals, regardless of how long they have been in operation, are subject to government closure and land forfeiture at any time. Religious groups, like private individuals or businesses, must apply to regional and local governments for land allocation. An interfaith effort to promote revision of the law for religious organizations to obtain duty-free status continued during the

period covered by this report.

The Meserte Kristos/Mennonite Church suffered a setback during the period covered by this report. Although the Derg seized their church and church school many years ago, the Church was able to reclaim its building with the fall of Mengistu. The Church received permission to reclaim the building for worship, but the adjacent Sunday school building was converted to a government school, a deviation from extant provisions protecting land used for prayer houses and cemeteries from government reclamation (unless they had been built illegally). After the Church received a letter in November 2003 stating it could not continue to use the building for worship and had to vacate the premises, the Government seized the church building to use it as part of the government school on the same compound.

After reports that mosques built by squatters had been demolished in 2003, the Addis Ababa Municipality appears to have suspended plans to demolish other mosques built illegally by squatters.

In most interreligious disputes, the Government maintains neutrality and tries to be an impartial arbitrator. Some religious leaders have requested the establishment of a federal institution to deal with religious groups. In 2001 a charter signed by the Roman Catholics, Mekane Yesus, and the Evangelical Church Fellowship was presented to the Speaker of the House requesting a federal arbitrator. According to the president of the Mekane Yesus Church, the Government considered the request; however, no action had been taken to establish such a federal institution by the end of the period covered by this report.

The Government has interpreted the constitutional provision for separation of religion and state to mean that religious instruction is not permitted in schools, whether they are public or private. Schools owned and operated by Catholic, Orthodox, evangelical, and Muslim groups are not allowed to teach religion as a course of study. Most private schools teach morals courses as part of school curricula, and the Government Education Bureau in Addis Ababa has complained that such courses are not free of religious influence. Churches are permitted to have Sunday schools, the Koran is taught at mosques, and public schools permit the formation of clubs, including those of a religious nature.

The Government officially recognizes both Christian and Muslim holy days and continues to mandate a 2-hour lunch break on Fridays to allow Muslims to go to a mosque to pray. Recognized Christian holy days include Christmas, Epiphany, Good Friday, and Easter. Muslim holy days recognized are Arefa, Moulid, and Id Al Fetir (Ramadan). The Government also agreed to a request from Muslim students at Addis Ababa Commercial College to delay the start of afternoon classes until 1:30 p.m. to permit them to perform afternoon prayers at a nearby mosque.

The Government has taken steps to promote interfaith understanding by including religious leaders in major societal campaigns. In the launching of the National Partnership Forum against HIV/AIDS in the country, all principal religious leaders were present in the forum organization. No interreligious exchanges were conducted during the period covered by this report.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government bans the formation of political parties based on religion.

The Government does not issue work visas to foreign religious workers unless they are attached to the development wing of a religious organization licensed by the Government. The Government requires religious organizations to separate their development activities from their religious ones and imposes different licensing processes for each. The Government issued licenses for religious organizations' development activities in the period covered by this report but not for their religious activities. Licenses are required for all religious groups domestic and foreign. The Ministry of Justice denied a license to at least one traditional Oromo religious organization, called Wakafeta, for unspecified reasons, presumably because the Government suspects the group of collaborating with the outlawed Oromo Liberation Front. The Papal nuncio of the country reported that Roman Catholic religious workers, unless linked to development work, have a difficult time gaining work permits. This is a common problem facing religious groups except for Muslims and Orthodox Christians.

Under the press law, it is a crime to incite one religion against another. The press law also allows defamation claims involving religious leaders to be prosecuted as criminal cases. Charges against two journalists detained and charged with defamation in 2001 after writing articles critical of the EOC were pending at the end of the period covered by this report. Also during the reporting period, the EHRCO reported that no journalists had been detained or charged with inciting religious groups or with defamation of religious leaders.

Evangelical leaders have complained that, in general, regulations on the importation of Bibles are too strict, and that customs duties on Bibles and other religious articles are excessive; however, Bibles and religious articles are subject to the same customs duties as all imported books, donated or otherwise.

While some Muslim leaders complained in the past that public school authorities sometimes interfered with their free practice of Islam because they prohibited the wearing of headscarves in schools, the leaders reported that the Ministry of Education (MOE) has accepted the practice of headscarves in schools not only in Addis Ababa but in regional areas as well. In the Southern Nations and Dire Dawa, there have been scattered problems but the local Islamic Council has addressed them. Three years ago the problems with headscarves centered on the complete covering (hijab) worn by some female students. The EIASC does not support this position, which they claim originates in the Middle East and not from the Koran.

Minority religious groups have complained of discrimination in the allocation of government land for religious sites. Protestant groups occasionally complain that local officials discriminate against them when seeking land for churches and cemeteries. Evangelical leaders have complained that because they are perceived as "newcomers," they remain at a disadvantage compared with the EOC and the EIASC in the allocation of land.

The EIASC has complained that it has more difficulty than the EOC obtaining land from the Government; others believe that the EIASC is favored for mosque locations. Local authorities in the northern town of Axum, a holy city for the EOC, continued to deny Muslim leaders' repeated requests to allocate land for the construction of a mosque there, even though the Constitution provides for freedom to establish institutions of religious education and administration. Tigray regional government officials choose not to interpret this provision liberally in the town of Axum; however, the Federal Government has not overruled the regional officials' interpretation. Muslims have had access to land since the country became a republic in 1995. In 2003 a group of Muslims attempted to build a mosque in Axum, but it was torn down by a local mob because it was built without permission from the regional government. Local officials ordered the Muslim community not to resume construction.

Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses have stated in the past that they have leased their own plots of land in the capital, due to lack of suitable properties available from the Government. They have also purchased buildings to use as places of worship throughout Addis Ababa. In a few places in Oromiya plots have been free.

The Government has not returned to the Mekane Yesus Church some properties that had been seized under the Mengistu regime, including three student hostels and two schools. The Mekane Yesus leadership stated that these issues were still pending. The Church has been attempting to repossess the Sidist Kilo hostel building for the past 16 years, with no resolution. Only the headquarters building has been returned to the Church; ownership of the remaining property was unresolved. The issue of providing adequate space for churches within Addis Ababa continued to be a major issue among Protestant groups. Protestants noted that the Orthodox Church has built at least 20 churches within the past 2 years, but no other groups have been able to construct new edifices.

The Government also has not returned the Seventh-day Adventists properties taken by the prior regime, including two hospitals. The Supreme Islamic Council continued to try to obtain properties that were confiscated outside of the capital under the Derg regime. In Addis Ababa and Oromia, structures have been returned under federal provisions; those edifices under regional provisions have yet to be returned. There is a precedent and a perception that the Government favors the EOC, yet government officials state there is no discrimination.

A March 2002 declaration by the Oromia Regional State Parliament called for the return of all nationalized property originally belonging to religious organizations; however, no property was

returned by the end of the period covered by this report.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Two men charged with the July 2002 murder of Full Gospel Church leader Pastor Demtew remain in prison while their trials continue. The Pastor was killed when a mob of EOC priests and other adherents forcibly entered his home at night.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, some minor conflicts between religious groups continued during the period covered by this report. These occurred most noticeably between Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and evangelical Protestants, and between Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and Muslims. In addition, there continued to be pockets of interreligious tension and criticism between some religious groups.

Followers of evangelical and Pentecostal churches continued to complain about favoritism given to Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and their churches. During the period covered by this report, no major clashes occurred between Protestants and members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, although there were reports of clashes between Muslims and members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as well as between the Protestants and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church during the period covered by the previous report.

According to EHRCO, while the Government allows for freedom of religion, the EOC has tried, under the Patriarch, to consolidate its power and strengthen its influence. For example, members of newer faiths, such as Pentecostals, have encountered overt opposition from the public that has required police intervention to protect them while proselytizing. Muslims and Orthodox Christians report proselytization by Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses. Ethiopian Orthodox leaders report that sometimes Protestants fail to respect Orthodox holy days and Orthodox customs. Muslims report that some Pentecostal preachers disparage Islam in their services. There were complaints by Muslim and Protestant leaders that the EOC's desire to "show supremacy" sometimes caused irritation in the regions.

The Roman Catholic Church has reported good relations with the Supreme Islamic Council as well as with the Mekane Yesus and EOC leadership, while the non-Orthodox Church leaders continue to address the "supremacy issue" exhibited by the EOC. There is a higher degree of respect between the Roman Catholic Church and the EOC than between the EOC and Protestant religions. The Catholic Church does not actively try to convert EOC members to Catholicism. Protestant religions, particularly Mekane Yesus, actively try to convert Orthodox followers, resulting in the charge by Protestants of the EOC's exhibited supremacy.

An investigation by the Federal Police into the November and December 2002 confrontations between members of Lideta Maryam Orthodox Parish in Addis Ababa and EOC officials in which police officers raided the church compound and forcibly dispersed members of the congregation concluded that police officers acted properly and did not use excessive force. According to the Federal Police, an off-duty soldier—not a policeman—killed a man who was outside the church compound. The soldier remained in army custody. According to the EHRCO, police indiscriminately beat many persons in the compound, including nuns, monks, elderly

women, and other bystanders, including two journalists. The EHRCO also reported that, after the raid, police detained approximately 700 persons at Kolfe police training camp and subjected them to physical abuse; however, the Federal Police estimated that the number of detainees was about 300. Police required them to sign statements under duress admitting to their roles in inciting riots at the church before they could be released. At the end of the period covered by this report, no one remained in custody for involvement in those confrontations.

In most sections of the country, Orthodox Christians and Muslims generally respect each other's religious observances, and there was tolerance for intermarriage and conversion in certain areas, most notably in Welo, in the Amhara region, as well as in urban areas throughout the country. The new challenge of Wahhabism and the lack of tolerance for others have disturbed the more traditional Ethiopian Muslims of the present EIASC. Members of the EIASC state that the Wahhabists believe in supremacy and do not tolerate a mix of Muslims and Christians. The majority of Ethiopian Muslims continued to enjoy collegial relationships with their neighbors, attending cross cultural and religious ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. The Wahhabists within the country shun this type of social mixing.

In the capital, Addis Ababa, persons of different faiths often live side-by-side. Most urban areas reflect a mixture of all religious denominations. The Roman Catholic Church and evangelical Protestant denominations, particularly the Mekane Yesus Church and Kale Hiwot Churches, provided social services such as health care and education to nonmembers as well as to members.

Clashes between Muslims and Orthodox Christians were minimal during the period covered by this report. However, the Evangelical Fellowship reported conflicts between Protestants and Muslims and also between Protestants and Orthodox Christians.

Leaders of the EIASC struggled with Wahhabist fundamentalism within their ranks during the period covered by this report. The growing influence of intolerant elements within Islamic communities in the country, aided by funding from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states for mosque construction and social services, continued to concern the Council.

In January 2004, the Council voted to remove all executive members of the Council, and staunch anti-Wahhabists were elected to fill the top leadership positions. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative attended the election sessions to demonstrate the Government's interest in the issue.

The evangelicals of Kotebe reported that in December 2003 locals on their way to church beat worshippers coming to the Ethiopian Gospel Deliverance Church. While the incident was reported to the police, neither police officials nor the local administration took any action.

In December 2003, the current leader of the Evangelical Fellowship received a letter from the Mahabare Kedusan (an ultra-conservative Orthodox group) that had been circulated among Sunday school groups in Addis Ababa. The letter named the pastor specifically and accused him of attempting to "dismantle the Orthodox Church." In December 2002, there was an article in an independent Addis Ababa newspaper that mentioned specific names of individuals in the evangelical movement and accused them of trying to undermine the Orthodox Church.

In 2002, the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the chairman of the EIASC, the Archbishop of the Ethiopian Church, and the president of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus met with their Eritrean counterparts and officials from the Eritrean Foreign Ministry in Eritrea. The religious leaders then traveled to the country to continue their discussions. They issued statements appealing for peace and reconciliation between the two countries. No further progress on this issue was noted during the period covered by this report.

In 2002, in the Gurage zone (Muhur and Aklil Woreda), evangelical believers were beaten, their property taken, and their houses destroyed. By the end of the period covered by this report, there had been no resolution. The victims alleged the police have not been helpful either in giving them assistance or bringing the perpetrators to justice.

In November 2003, in the Buta Jira area (Silte Zone) a Protestant family buried a child in a local cemetery. Muslims reportedly dug up the body at night after the burial and dumped it in town.

Members of the family reported the incident to the local police and zonal administration, but authorities took little action to resolve the case. The evangelicals claim that they are not able to bury their dead in cemeteries given to them by the Government because the Muslims and Orthodox refuse to allow it. In Harar evangelicals also were not able to bury their dead in the same cemeteries used by the Orthodox and Muslims.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

The U.S. Embassy has encouraged the Government to ensure that no religious groups are channeling funds through the country to finance terrorist aims. Embassy officials also made an active effort to visit all of the religious groups and religious NGOs during the period covered by this report. The Embassy paid close attention to attempts by Wahhabist elements to exert their influence over the EIASC and discussed the matter with government officials.

The U.S. Ambassador continued to hold regular meetings with religious leaders to promote HIV/AIDS awareness. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) continued to work with the Ethiopian Orthodox Development Assistance Authority to provide food commodities and grants to support food security programs in four areas. USAID supported a variety of programs through Catholic Relief Services, World Vision International, and Family Health International. USAID continued to work with the EOC and Mekane Yesus Church, as well as with the Ethiopian Kale Hiwot Church and the Missionaries of Charity Sisters, to support HIV/AIDS programs. During the period covered by this report, the EOC received a \$5 million grant from USAID for the next 3 years to fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Orthodox communities.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)

