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Ethiopia

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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

There was little change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, although some Protestant and Muslim groups continued to complain that local officials discriminated against them when seeking land for churches, mosques, and cemeteries.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society continued to contribute to religious freedom. In general, there was a slight increase in interreligious conflict and clashes. Government criticism of some Muslim elements continued. There was reported tension between traditionalist Muslims and followers of the Wahhabi sect, an interpretation of Islam that reportedly receives support from Saudi Arabia.

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 an area of 472,000 square miles, and its population was approximately 74 million. An estimated 40 to 45 percent of the population belonged to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). The EOC was predominant in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara.

Approximately 45 percent of the population was Sunni Muslim. Islam was most prevalent in the eastern Somali and Afar regions, as well as in all the major parts of Oromia in the east and south.

Christian evangelical and Pentecostal groups continued to be the fastest growing faiths and constituted an estimated 10 percent of the population. Established Protestant churches such as Mekane Yesus and the Kale Hiwot were strongest in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Regional State (SNNPR), western and central Oromia, and in urban areas. In Gambella in the west, Mekane Yesus followers represented 60 percent of the population. The Evangelical Church Fellowship claimed 23 denominations under its religious umbrella.

Oriental Rite and Latin Rite Roman Catholics numbered more than 500,000. There were reportedly more than 7,500 Jehovah's Witnesses adherents and 105 Kingdom Halls in the country. Jews, animists, and other practitioners of traditional indigenous religions made up most of the remaining population. In Addis Ababa and north Gondar, in the Amhara region, some claimed that their ancestors were forced to convert from Judaism to Ethiopian Orthodoxy (Feles Mora) many centuries ago. There were very few atheists. Although precise data was not available, active participation in religious services was generally high throughout the country.

A large number of foreign missionary groups operated in the country. Protestant organizations that sponsored or supported missionary work included 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 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). Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) also had active missionary operations.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, on occasion local government authorities infringed on this right. The constitution requires the separation of

state and religion and prohibits a state religion, and the Government generally respected these provisions in practice. In 2003, the Federal Government interfered in the internal affairs of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) by orchestrating the installation of EIASC officials following an internal power struggle.

The Government requires that religious groups be registered. Religious institutions and churches, as with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), must renew their registration with the Ministry of Justice every three years. The Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) stated that this registration requirement reflects a lack of progress or improvement in the Government's treatment of "newer religions," specifically Protestant churches.

The EOC never registered with the Government and has never faced repercussions. The EIASC, after registering nine years ago, never re-registered. Protests from other religious groups over these exceptions did not result in equal treatment from the Government. The Apostolic Nuncio in the country wrote repeatedly to the Prime Minister's Office seeking equal treatment before the law. Mekane Yesus, the Evangelical Fellowship, and Roman Catholic Church believed that churches should be placed in a "different status than NGOs." However, there was no change in the government policy during the period covered by this report.

Under the law, any religious organization that undertakes development activities must register its development wing separately as an NGO with the Ministry of Justice. 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. A group's failure to register resulted in a denial of legal standing, which would prevent it from opening a bank account or fully participating in any court proceeding.

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, religious schools and hospitals, regardless of length of 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.

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

In most interreligious disputes, the Government maintained neutrality and tried to be an impartial arbitrator. Some religious leaders requested the establishment of a federal institution to deal with religious groups; however, no action was taken to establish such a federal institution by the end of the period covered by this report.

The Government interpreted the constitutional provision for separation of religion and state to mean that religious instruction was not permitted in schools, whether public or private. Schools owned and operated by Catholic, Orthodox, evangelical, and Muslim groups were not allowed to teach religion as a course of study. The Government Education Bureau in Addis Ababa complained that the morals courses most private schools taught as part of their curriculum were not free of religious influence. Churches were permitted to have Sunday schools, the Qur'an was taught at mosques, and public schools permitted the formation of clubs, including those of a religious nature.

The Government officially recognizes both Christian and Muslim holidays and continues to mandate a two-hour lunch break on Fridays to allow Muslims to go to a mosque to pray. Recognized government holidays include the Christian holy days of Christmas, Epiphany, Good Friday, Easter, and Meskel, as well as the Muslim holy days of Eid al-Adha (Arefa), the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and Eid al-Fitr (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 took steps to promote interfaith understanding by including religious leaders in major societal campaigns. All principal religious leaders were present at the launching of the National Partnership Forum against HIV/AIDS and at the 2004 national rollout of antiretroviral treatment. 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. There were no religious political parties in the country, and the ban was not tested in practice.

The Government did not issue work visas to foreign religious workers unless they are associated with the development wing of a religious organization licensed by the Government. However, this policy was not consistently enforced for Muslims or Orthodox Christians. 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, Wakafeta, for unspecified reasons.

The EIASC oversees the activities of foreign imams and screens out perceived Wahhabi influence.

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. There were no further developments nor were there likely to be any developments in the Government's defamation case against two journalists in 2001. The EHRCO reported that no journalists were detained or charged during the reporting period with inciting religious groups or with defamation of religious leaders.

Evangelical leaders complained that, in general, regulations on the importation of Bibles were too strict and that customs duty on Bibles and other religious articles were excessive; however, Bibles and religious articles were subject to the same customs duties as all imported books, donated or otherwise. Continuing discussions between the Government and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus yielded progress on this issue. In 2005, parliament passed a proclamation lifting taxation on imported books and printed materials, effectively addressing this issue.

In contrast to previous years, there were no reported incidents relating to wearing headscarves. However, the case of a Muslim nursing student who refused to change her hijab while attending patients required local religious leaders to successfully mediate the dispute, which resulted in the student wearing a headscarf instead.

Minority religious groups complained of discrimination in the allocation of government land for religious sites. Protestant groups occasionally complained of discrimination by local officials when seeking land for churches and cemeteries. Evangelical leaders complained that because they are perceived as "newcomers," they remained disadvantaged in the allocation of land compared with the EOC and the EIASC.

The EIASC complained that it has more difficulty than the EOC obtaining land from the Government; others believed that the EIASC was 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, even though the constitution provides for freedom to establish institutions of religious education and administration. Tigray regional government officials chose not to interpret this provision liberally in the town of Axum, and the Federal Government did not overrule them. 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.

Providing adequate space for churches within Addis Ababa continued to be a major issue among Protestant groups. These groups noted that the Orthodox Church built at least twenty churches between September 2003 and July 2005, but no other groups were authorized to construct new edifices.

The EIASC also raised concerns about the equitable celebration of religious holidays in the country, noting Orthodox Christian holidays such as Meskel and Epiphany are celebrated in Meskel Square and Jan Meda, two large public squares in Addis Ababa, while the celebration of Eid al-Fitr had been relegated to the less prominent Addis Ababa stadium. The EIASC's request to the Addis Ababa City Council for land to build a venue for this celebration was pending at the end of the period covered by this report.

Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses continued to lease their own plots of land in the capital and throughout the country, due to lack of suitable properties available from the Government. However, in Oromia some plots were provided free of charge to some religious groups to build places of worship.

The Meserte Kristos/Mennonite Church, Mekane Yesus Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the EIASC made little progress at securing the return of property confiscated by the Government under the Derg regime.

Although the Meserte Kristos/Mennonite Church was able to reclaim its place of worship after the Derg fell from power, the Government seized it again in 2003. The Government defended its action under existing legal mechanisms for seizing property.

The Government did not return properties to the Mekane Yesus Church that were also seized under the Derg regime, including three student hostels and two schools. The Mekane Yesus leadership stated that these issues were still unresolved.

The Seventh-day Adventists also did not make progress in obtaining the properties taken by the Derg regime, including two hospitals. The Supreme Islamic Council continued to try to obtain properties outside of the capital that were similarly confiscated. In Addis Ababa and Oromia, structures have been returned under federal provisions; however, edifices under regional statutes have yet to be returned. There was a precedent and a perception that the Government favored the EOC, yet government officials stated that there was no discrimination.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Two men charged with the 2002 killing of Full Gospel Church leader Pastor Demtew remained in prison while their trials continued. The pastor was allegedly killed when a mob led by EOC priests forcibly entered his home. The case was pending at the conclusion of the reporting period.

In another instance, while apparently not religiously motivated, the killing of a Muslim man by a Protestant, whom authorities have prosecuted for the murder, was reported as "martyrdom" on a few websites.

In March 2006 an individual believed to be a Christian and mentally unstable drew demeaning cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in the town of Kemisse in the Amhara region. Local Muslims, allegedly considered to be Islamic extremists, organized a protest and caused a riot in Kemisse town, which injured several persons, destroyed four evangelical churches, and caused an estimated \$160,000 (1.4 million Birr) in property damage. Perpetrators of the riot were detained and under investigation at the end of the reporting period.

On April 15, 2006, unidentified groups of individuals suspected to be Muslims from the local community threw a hand grenade at Emanuel United Church of Ethiopia in Jijiga, injuring several worshippers. Police were searching for the perpetrators at the end of the reporting period.

The desecration of the Qur'an by a Christian student at the Southern University on April 17, 2006, angered Muslims throughout the country. Police investigated the case and detained the alleged perpetrator. The case was pending at the end of the reporting period.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

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.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, some minor conflicts between religious groups continued. These occurred most noticeably between Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and evangelical Protestants, between evangelical Protestants and Muslims, as well as between Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and Muslims. In addition, there continued to be pockets of interreligious tension and criticism between other religious groups.

Members of newer faiths, such as Pentecostals, requested police protection against overt public opposition. There were several reports of low-level physical and verbal harassment targeted at religious officials and church members that led victims to seek protection from the local authorities. Ethiopian Orthodox leaders reported that sometimes Protestants failed to respect Orthodox holy days and customs. Muslims reported that some Pentecostal preachers disparaged Islam in their services. Some Muslim and Protestant leaders complained that the EOC's desire to show its dominance caused irritation in the religious community.

In most regions, Orthodox Christians and Muslims generally respected each other's religious observances, and there was tolerance for intermarriage and conversion in certain areas. In Addis Ababa, persons of different faiths lived side-by-side. Most urban areas reflected a mixture of all religious faiths. The Roman Catholic Church and evangelical Protestant denominations provided social services such as health care and education to nonmembers as well as to members.

The EIASC continued to express concern over increasing external Wahhabi influence within the Muslim community. The EIASC alleged that money flowed into the country through Saudi-funded entities, raising concern over external non-Ethiopian Islamic influences.

In 2004, the EIASC struggled with Wahhabist fundamentalism within its ranks and replaced all executive members with staunch anti-Wahhabists. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative attended the election sessions to demonstrate the Government's interest in the issue. Additionally, the EIASC expressed concern over the prospect of Wahhabists gaining seats on the council.

In May 2005, religious institutions deployed 1,554 members throughout the country to observe the national election. The EIASC deployed 558 observers, Protestant denominations deployed 607, the EOC deployed 359, and the Catholic Church deployed 30. On June 9, 2005, leaders of religious organizations, including the EOC, EIASC, Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus, and the Catholic Church, made a call for peace following demonstrations in Addis Ababa.

Leaders of the EIASC in collaboration with local EOC leaders diffused tension created by the politically motivated

killings of members of the community in Kofele District of Oromia region in July 2005. Following a pair of religiously motivated killings and reports of harassment of Christians by the Muslim majority in this area, religious leaders worked closely together to bring an end to the increasing violence. Upon hearing reports that local imams provided shelter and protection for EOC priests after they were reportedly targeted by local renegade Muslim individuals, religious leaders of both faiths from Addis Ababa came to the region to broker a peace. They convinced local community leaders to work with the population to remind them of the long history of cohabitation that has occurred in the area and that through tolerance they would be building a better community.

Evangelicals claimed that they were not able to bury their dead in cemeteries given to them by the Government because Muslims and Orthodox prevented it. In November 2003, in the Buta Jira area, a Protestant family buried a child in a local cemetery. Muslims reportedly dug up the body at night and dumped it in town. The family reported the incident to the local police and zonal administration, but reportedly authorities took little action to resolve the case. In Harar, evangelicals also were not able to bury their dead in the same cemeteries used by Orthodox and Muslims. Local and regional governments assign burial plots to various faiths. However, isolated incidents occur and in such instances, local government officials generally address the problem.

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 encouraged the Government to ensure that no religious groups were channeling funds through the country to finance terrorist goals. Embassy officials also made an active effort to visit all of the religious groups and faith-based 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. On the same day, the embassy invited twenty-eight members of local Muslim Youth Councils for a wide-ranging discussion with visiting American imam Daryl Wainwright.

The Defense Department's Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) projects sought to propagate positive images of the United States in the Muslim community in Somali Region.

In December 2005, the embassy awarded a \$26,500 grant for the preservation of the Sheikh Hussein shrine, a historic Muslim pilgrimage site located in Oromia and established in the thirteenth century. The ambassador continued to hold regular meetings with religious leaders around the country.

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