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Executive Summary

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. On October 2, dozens or more were reportedly killed at a religious and cultural festival in Bishoftu. The government's handling of the highly charged event reportedly resulted in a stampede. The government used the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (ATP) and other measures to restrict organized opposition and anti-government protests, including through the detention and prosecution of Muslims engaged in protests against what the protestors said was continued government interference in religious affairs. On October 9 the government declared a six-month state of emergency. Under a state of emergency, the government limits constitutionally granted freedoms including religious freedom; individuals are prohibited from inducing fear or inflicting conflict during sermons in religious institutions. On December 21, the Federal High Court found 20 supporters of the Muslim Arbitration Committee guilty on charges of participating in a terrorist organization, a crime under the ATP, and for committing or conspiring to commit crimes.

Protestors in the West Arsi area of Oromia region burned down 15 churches and related facilities belonging to Kale Hiwot, Full Gospel, Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, and Orthodox churches in attacks carried out in February and confirmed by the independent Ethiopian organization Human Rights Council.

The U.S. Ambassador, Charge d'Affaires, and embassy officials continued to discuss religious freedom with the government and engage with religious groups and faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to promote religious freedom and discuss their role in society. Embassy officials met with members of the Ministry of Federal and Pastoralist Development Affairs (MFPDA) on religious tolerance, peace, and security. They also met with the president of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC), the head of the Catholic Church in Ethiopia, the chairperson of the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE), and the head of external relations for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). Embassy officials attended some of the trials of Muslims and met with members of the Muslim community to discuss their allegations of government interference in religious affairs.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 102.3 million (2016 estimate). The most recent

census of 2007 estimated 44 percent of the population adheres to the 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 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, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and followers of indigenous religions.

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. It permits limitations on religious freedom as prescribed by law in order to protect public safety, education, and morals, and 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.

Under the state of emergency, which went into effect on October 8, the government limits constitutionally granted freedoms, including religious freedom, for a period of six months that may be renewed. Individuals are prohibited from inducing fear or inflicting conflict during sermons in religious institutions.

Registration and licensing of religious groups are the mandate of the MFPDA. The MFPDA requires unregistered religious groups to submit a founding document, the national ID cards of its founders, and the permanent address of the religious institution and planned regional branches. The registration process also includes an application letter, information on the board members, meeting minutes, information on the founders, its financial reports, offices, name, and symbol. Religious group applicants must have at least 50 individuals for registration as a church and 15 for a ministry or association to be considered. 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.

All religious institutions, including the EIASC, are registered by the MFPDA. The EOC, however, is registered in a provision under the civil code passed during the imperial era, which is still in force.

All groups must register with the Directorate of Faith and Religious Affairs at the MFPDA to gain legal standing. Most religious groups are registered by the MFPDA. Religious groups must renew their registration at least every five years; failure to do so could 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, new pastors ordained, and new buildings opened or built. The Charities and Societies 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 were required to register their development arms as charities with the Charities and Societies Agency and follow legal guidelines.

The constitution prohibits religious instruction in schools, whether public or private. The law permits religious instruction in churches and mosques, and schools may organize clubs based on shared religious values.

Under the constitution the government owns all land and therefore individuals, private businesses, and religious groups must apply to both the regional and local governments for land allocation, including for land to build places of worship, schools, hospitals, and cemeteries. The Charities and Societies Association and the Ministry of Health regulate religious schools and hospitals, which the government may close at any time for not following regulations.

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

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

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights without reservations.

Government Practices

On October 2, at least 55 were killed at a religious and cultural festival in Bishoftu. The government's response to the highly charged environment reportedly led to the deadly stampede that resulted in most of the confirmed deaths. The initial cause of the disruption remained unclear, but according to media sources there were sounds of gunfire, teargas, and helicopters overhead. During protests that followed the incident and on social media, many individuals blamed the government for instigating the stampede and for incompetence in securing the gathering, among other accusations. On October 7, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights noted there was a need to investigate what occurred and urged the government allow independent observers access to Oromia and Amhara regions. On October 10, a group of UN human rights experts highlighted the October 2 events and urged the government to allow an international commission of inquiry to investigate the protests and any violence used against protesters since November 2015.

The government used the six-month state of emergency declared on October 9, the ATP, and other measures, to restrict organized opposition and antigovernment protests, including through the detention and prosecution of Muslims engaged in nonviolent protests. The state of emergency, in particular, restricted freedom of speech and media consumption while earlier restrictions prevented the use of social media. There were no new violent protests focused solely on Muslim grievances, but some Muslims participated in larger Oromo protests airing past Muslim grievances. Some Muslim community members stated the government co-opted religious leaders to impose Al-Ahbash, a Sufi religious movement rooted in Lebanon and different from indigenous Islam, on local Islamic religious practice. The government stated in 2015 that it no longer supported the program to impose Al-Ahbash on Islamic religious practice, although reports suggested Al-Ahbash teachings were still disseminated and Friday prayers generally conformed to Al-Ahbash teachings.

Muslim community sources stated there continued to be widespread sentiment in the community that the government exercised excessive influence over the EIASC. Some Muslim community members also reported government interference in religious affairs, including the government's refusal to allow elections in mosques because women would not be allowed to vote. Muslim groups continued to reject the 2012 EIASC elections for alleged government interference and the lack of new elections since then. There were mostly peaceful protests by Muslims against this perceived interference; however, the number of protests this year sharply declined compared to previous years and were incorporated into demonstrations addressing broader grievances, such as the rights of Oromo people. The state of emergency further discouraged such protests. Muslims in Jemo and Furi areas in Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, Chiro, Jimma,

and Gondar protested during the celebration of Eid al-Adha on September 12. Protestors showed red cards, crossed their arms above the head and carried placards that read "We Need Freedom!," "Hear our Voices!," and "A Government that Refuses to take Criticism, Will not Last long!"

The government continued to take actions regarding the Muslim Arbitration Committee, a group identified with the 2012 protests. In 2015, the Federal High Court found 18 members and supporters of the Muslim Arbitration Committee guilty of terrorism under the ATP and sentenced the individuals to imprisonment ranging from seven to 22 years. Later that year, the government pardoned and released five of those convicted. In early September the government pardoned two arbitration committee leaders (Abubeker Ahmed Mohamed and Kemal Shemsu Siraj), four members (Bedru Hussein, Sheik Seid Ali, Sheik Mekete Muhe, and Mubarek Adem) and three journalists (Yusuf Getachew, Murad Shekur Jemal, and Nuru Turki Nuru). On December 21, the Federal High Court found guilty 20 supporters of the Muslim Arbitration Committee. The defendants were convicted for "participation in a terrorist organization," a crime under the ATP, and for committing or conspiring to commit crimes. The defendants found guilty included a leading Muslim scholar, Kedir Mohammed, and two radio journalists.

On January 19, the Federal High Court sentenced all 16 defendants in the 2013 Elias Kedir case to seven years in prison under the charge of participation in a terrorist organization, a crime punishable under the ATP. The defendants said they were protesting government interference in Muslim affairs and called for the release of the Muslim Arbitration Committee members through writings in various media and peaceful protests in mosques. Police arrested the defendants in 2013 in Addis Ababa and Wolkite town in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's (SNNPR) Region. On December 16, the Federal Supreme Court reduced the sentences of 12 of the defendants from seven years to three years and four months following the defense's appeal of the High Court's original sentences. Authorities also pardoned and released four other defendants in September.

The Federal High Court heard the case of 28 Muslim individuals, 11 of whom were tried in absentia, and found 24 of the defendants guilty of terrorism under the ATP. Some of the defendants told the court they had taken military and political training with Al-Shabaab and worked towards establishing an Islamic state in their country. The court acquitted four individuals of the charges in February. In March the court passed sentences ranging from four-year to 21-year prison terms.

The trial of 14 Muslims charged with the July 2013 killing of Sheikh Nuru in Dessie town continued into its third year. According to media sources, Sheikh Nuru was a follower of Al-Ahbash teachings and defended the government's policy of imposing the new teachings. The government charged the individuals in November 2013 under the ATP law for "terrorist activity." At year's end, the prosecution and defense rested their cases and were awaiting a verdict. One of the 14 defendants reportedly died while in prison.

In November three teenage Christian girls and one young woman were sentenced to one month in prison after distributing a Christian book that allegedly sought to counter widely-circulated writings by a well-known Islamic critic. The four individuals were charged with inciting religious violence in October in Babile. Muslim communities in the area stated the book was an insult to Islam. Four teenagers attacked a local church shortly after the book was distributed; four suspects in the church burning were arrested in October.

The Directorate for Registration of Religious Groups within MFPDA reported it registered 1,600 religious groups and associations as of year's end.

There were reports of discrimination in registration and land allocation. Members of some religious groups stated the exemption of the EOC and the EIASC from the registration requirement amounted to a double standard between the EOC and EISAC, on the one hand, and other religious groups on the other.

Protestants privately reported unequal treatment by local officials compared to the EOC and the EIASC with regard to religious registration and allocation of land for churches and cemeteries. The MFPDA, which had oversight responsibility for religious affairs, stated the perceived inequities were a result of poor governance at the local level and of zoning regulations governing a property's existing and proposed communal use.

Some religious groups, mainly Protestant, continued to work through private and unofficial channels to seek the return of property confiscated between 1977 and 1991. Although some property was returned in previous years, there were no reports the government returned any property during the year.

The MFPDA, working with the EIASC and other civil society groups, sponsored workshops and training of religious leaders, elders, and influential community members with the stated intention of addressing the potential for sectarian violence.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Protestors in the predominantly Muslim West Arsi area of Oromia region reportedly burned down 15 churches and related facilities belonging to Kale Hiwot, Full Gospel, Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, and Orthodox churches in attacks carried out in February and confirmed by the independent Human Rights Council. The attacks followed an incident several days earlier in which police stopped a bus en route to a wedding and then fired shots. The government stated that the attacks on the places of worship were carried out by "Islamist extremists" who received funding from foreign sources and opposition political groups. Some residents said the attacks were also linked to ethnic tensions and economic disparities. The government brought the suspects to trial at Oromia regional courts.

In most regions, Orthodox Christians and Muslims reportedly generally respected each other's religious observances and tolerated intermarriage and conversion. 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; observers stated these mutual recriminations increased tensions between the groups.

The EIASC and the government continued to express concern about what they said was the increasing influence of foreign Salafist groups within the Muslim community. The EIASC stated it held these groups responsible for exacerbating tensions between Christians and Muslims and within the Muslim community.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy officials engaged with the MFPDA and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on religious tolerance and peace and security.

U.S. embassy representatives observed some trials of Muslims accused of terrorism charges, including the trials of Elias Kedir et al., Kedir Mohammad et al., and Aman Assefa et al.

The Ambassador, embassy representatives, and visiting U.S. officials discussed religious freedom, the role of faith-based organizations, and tolerance with religious leaders, including the Office of the Patriarch of the EOC, the president of the EIASC, the cardinal heading the Catholic Church in Ethiopia, and leaders from Kale Hiwot Church. They discussed a range of issues, including the importance of religious freedom.

Embassy officials engaged with members of the IRCE to discuss religious tolerance and attacks on places of worship in the Oromia region and to emphasize religious freedom and tolerance. The embassy's support of IRCE was designed to strengthen IRCE's resolve to curb violence through increased dialogue among religious communities.

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