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2019 REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: ETHIOPIA

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 July 18, violence broke out in Sidama Zone, Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) Region, in connection with demands for regional statehood. According to media affiliated with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC), attackers killed a priest and two followers of the Church, burned three churches to the ground, and partially destroyed four churches in the violence. On February 3, youth members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Mekane Yesus, Amhara Region, burned mosques and vandalized Muslim-owned businesses. The Addis Ababa Diocese of the EOTC reported that security forces detained 55 followers of the Church on September 27 during processions for the eve of the Meskel holiday (finding of the true cross). In March the government lifted restrictions on charities and societies, including faith-based organizations, from engaging in rights-based advocacy and accepting foreign funding. In May the National Bank of Ethiopia (NBE) revised a directive that had limited the formation of fully fledged Islamic (interest-free) banks.

In December attackers burned down four mosques and one church in Mota Town, Amhara Region, prompting condemnation by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and sparking protests by several thousand Muslims across the country. 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. EOTC followers in several towns of Amhara Region staged peaceful protests on September 15 and 22 to condemn attacks against the Church, religious leaders, and followers in Sidama Zone in the SNNP Region.

U.S. embassy and Department of State officials met officials from the Ministry of Peace throughout the year for continued discussions on religious tolerance and radicalization. Embassy representatives met with prominent members of the Protestant Christian community and with NGOs to discuss the government's role in religious affairs and their assessment about the growing influence of Protestantism in the country.

SECTION I. RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 111.5 million (midyear 2019 estimate). The most recent census, conducted in 2007, estimated 44 percent of the population adheres to the EOTC, 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. Most observers believe the evangelical and Pentecostal proportion of the population has increased. The EOTC predominates in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara, while Islam is most prevalent in the Afar, Oromia, and Somali Regions. Established Protestant churches have the most adherents in the SNNP and Gambella Regions and parts of Oromia Region. 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 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.

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; the rights and privileges are the same for each category. During the registration process, the government publishes the religious group's name and logo in a local newspaper; if there are no objections, registration is granted.

Unlike other religious groups, the EOTC 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 proselytizing 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, a government agency 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.

In March the government revised a law that had restricted rights-based advocacy activities and foreign funding sources of charities and societies, including faith-based organizations. The new law allows all civil society organizations to engage in advocacy and lobbying activities and to collect and obtain funding from any legal source.

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.

In May the NBE revised its directive to allow the formation of fully fledged Islamic (interest-free) banks. Seven business groups started the process of establishing Islamic banks. Previously, 10 commercial banks provided interest-free banking service through dedicated windows. In an emergency session on July 31, the House of People's Representatives approved a revised proclamation on banking and customs providing the legal basis for the NBE to implement its directive and facilitate the establishment of Islamic banking services.

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

Government Practices

On July 18, groups of individuals from the Sidama ethnic group demanding regional statehood attacked a church in Sidama Zone, SNNP Region. Ministry of Peace officials confirmed that mobs attacked religious institutions but did not give details. Media affiliated with the EOTC reported that the mob killed a priest and two followers of the Church, burned three churches to the ground, and partially destroyed four others. Local researchers who investigated the media claims could not determine the motivation of the attack. Organized groups of youth vandalized the Chironie St. Emmanuel Church, according to local press reporting. The chief priest of Bore Debre Genet St. Mary Church in neighboring Oromia Region told media that his church sheltered 474 internally displaced persons, including deacons and priests whose churches were burned during the conflict. Media reported police arrested hundreds of suspects as well as leaders of a Sidama youth group known as Ejjetto.

In Dire Dawa on January 21, an unidentified group of youth hurled rocks at followers of the EOTC returning from Epiphany celebrations. Orthodox youth retaliated by physically attacking the unidentified youth. Police intervened, using tear gas and arresting some participants in the incident. The clash was followed by unrest that evolved into broader political protests in the week that followed. On January 24, the Police Commission announced it had arrested 84 individuals suspected of participating in the clashes that broke out on January 21.

On February 3, youth members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Mekane Yesus in the Amhara Region burned mosques and vandalized Muslim-owned businesses. According to local government officials and religious leaders, Christians found an icon of St. Mary scattered among pieces of paper used to decorate the floor of a tent constructed for an Islamic wedding. Youth angered by this perceived desecration burned down two mosques, partially damaged a third, and vandalized shops owned by Muslim community members. Regional special police forces deployed to the area to help local police quell the unrest. Local media did not report any casualties associated with the incident. Federal and regional governments dispatched a team of officials to the town to hold public discussions between Muslims and Christians. Both Muslim and Christian groups condemned the incident and pledged to collaborate on rebuilding the destroyed mosques.

In February a group of Muslims attacked and burned seven Protestant churches in Halaba Kulito in the SNNP Region, according to local officials. Regional officials said the attacks were spurred by false news reports claiming mosques had been attacked by non-Muslims in the area. According to one report, the suspects chanted a jihadist slogan while attacking places of worship belonging to different Christian denominations. According to the report, municipal police were present but took no action, and order was not restored until state police arrived in the early afternoon.

In May there were reports of armed groups attacking Orthodox churches in North Shoa Zone of Oromia Region.

The Addis Ababa Diocese of the EOTC reported that security forces detained 55 followers on September 27 during processions on the eve of the Meskel holiday. Police said that 33 of the detainees wore T-shirts with messages demanding an end to attacks against the Church and that 12 of those detained carried sharp objects. Police released 37 of the detainees hours after the celebrations concluded.

In October there were reports of fighting during protests in Oromia Region. While the fighting was primarily along ethnic lines, the regional police commissioner stated that there were attempts to burn churches and mosques and that "there was a hidden agenda to divert the whole protest into an ethnic and religious conflict." According to the mayor of the city of Adama in Oromia Region, 68 persons were arrested on suspicion of robbing and

attempting to burn a mosque and an Orthodox church. In Dodala an Orthodox priest stated Orthodox Christians were targeted. In one week, eight persons were killed and buried in his church while 3,000 sheltered inside its compound.

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.

In 2018 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.

On May 1, Prime Minister Abiy brought together leaders of the Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (IASC) and the Muslim Arbitration Committee, a rival group, in an effort to resolve disputes within the Muslim community. Prime Minister Abiy's effort prompted representatives from the Muslim community to agree at the meeting to replace the IASC (also referred to as Majlis) with a transitional council of Ulamas (Muslim scholars). The prime minister, accompanied by Minister of Peace Muferiat Kamil, addressed the May 1 meeting of Muslim leaders and stated, "A united Muslim community is the foundation for national unity." The goal of the 23-member transitional council is to prepare the legal and institutional framework for a new leadership structure for the Muslim community. Majlis leaders formally handed over power to the transitional council, which then elected Mufti Haji Oumer Idris, a respected elder, as its chairperson.

A group of local youth and police in the town of Bishoftu, Oromia Region, stopped Sunday School youth of Debremetsehet Kidanemihret Church of the EOTC during processions for the Meskel holiday on September 27, stating the EOTC followers wore clothes depicting an unauthorized version of the Ethiopian flag. The unauthorized version of the flag is closely linked with the country's ethnic Amhara population and the EOTC. The Sunday School youth refused to change their uniforms and returned to the premises of the church. Reports stated that participants from other EOTC churches heard of the controversy and decided not to light a *demera* (large bonfire) in the absence of their fellow church members.

SECTION III. STATUS OF SOCIETAL RESPECT FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

On December 20, attackers burned down four mosques in Mota Town, Amhara Region, north of Addis Ababa, during an outbreak of violence in which Muslim-owned businesses were also targeted, according to media reports. State-owned media reported that one church was also attacked. Prime Minister Abiy condemned the attack, calling it an attempt "by extremists to break down our rich history of religious tolerance and coexistence." In the week following the incident, several thousand Muslims across the country demonstrated in protest. Police subsequently arrested 15 individuals suspected of involvement in the attacks.

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.

Followers of the EOTC in several towns in Amhara Region staged peaceful protests on September 15 and 22 to condemn attacks against the Church, its religious leaders, and its followers in Sidama Zone in the SNNP Region. Organizers of the protest told media they wanted those behind the attacks brought to justice.

The Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) expressed continued concern about what it said was the influence of foreign Salafist groups within the Muslim community. One example the EIASC cited was foreign Salafist groups forcibly taking control of local mosques. 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 religious violent extremism, and promotion of shared values. Embassy officials specifically engaged the Ministry of Peace on the religious aspects of ethnic violence, seeking to identify ways to mitigate conflict and areas of partnership.

Embassy representatives held meetings with religious leaders, including the Office of the Patriarch of the EOTC, 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 engaged with members of the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) to discuss religious tolerance and attacks on places of worship. In November a visiting senior official from the U.S. National Security Council and embassy officials met with IRCE and religious leaders to discuss the root causes of religious violence. 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 goal of creating a platform to unify disparate religious groups around common interests and promoting interreligious harmony.