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# ETHIOPIA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution requires the separation of religion and the state, 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 any religion interfere in the affairs of the state. The conflict that erupted in northern Ethiopia in November 2020 spread to other regions during the year and victims of violence included religious figures. According to media, at least 78 priests were killed in Tigray during the first five months of the year by soldiers from the national army and Eritrean troops. *The Telegraph* reported the killings based on a church letter to the Synod of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) that said “priests, deacons, choristers and monks” had been “massacred” over a period of five months. In April, according to media, EOTC Co-Patriarch Abune Mathias accused the government of genocide in Tigray. On February 25, the Belgium-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) Europe External Programme with Africa reported that one monk was killed during the bombing and looting of Debre Damo Monastery in January in Tigray. Reportedly, Eritrean troops aligned with the Ethiopian National Defense Forces committed the attack. According to media, on May 9, security forces violently shut down iftar celebrations at Meskel Square in Addis Ababa during Ramadan and turned away thousands of attendees. Numerous individuals stated the shutdown was religiously motivated, as some members of the EOTC said Meskel Square was EOTC’s traditional property. City officials, however, stated the shutdown was due to safety concerns. According to media, in July, police officers raided a cathedral in Addis Ababa, interrupting prayers and forcing a dozen ethnic Tigrayan priests and monks into a pickup truck; they were released several weeks later. On January 5, the BBC reported the government agreed to repair the al-Nejashi Mosque that was damaged in 2020 during the conflict in Tigray. The government said a nearby church would also be repaired.

In October, the Amhara Region Islamic Affairs Supreme Council said the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) had demolished a historic mosque in Zarema town, North Gondar, Amhara Region. Some human rights groups stated that societal violence was on the rise, especially in the context of the ongoing conflict in the northern part of the country. Because ethnicity and religion are often closely linked, and because criminality also played a role, according to knowledgeable observers, it was difficult to characterize many incidents of societal violence as solely based on religious identity. On March 5, according to the *Addis Standard*,

members of the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) killed 29 individuals in Abo Church in Debos Kebele, East Wollega, Oromia Region. Witnesses said victims were marking the beginning of the EOTC's two-month period of fasting. Reports stated members of the OLA stormed into the church, immediately killed the church administrator, took the rest of the victims to a nearby forest and killed them.

U.S embassy officials met with senior religious leaders to advocate peaceful resolution to the conflict in Tigray. The Ambassador met with the Co-Patriarch of the EOTC following a viral video in which the Co-Patriarch warned of genocide against the Tigrayan people. The embassy provided funding to faith-based organizations, including the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE), to implement community projects aimed at long-term peacebuilding and religious tolerance, among other goals.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 110.9 million (midyear 2021). According to 2016 U.S. government estimates, 44 percent of the population adheres to the EOTC, 31 percent are Sunni Muslim, and 23 percent belong to evangelical Christian and Pentecostal groups, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church, and Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. Most observers believe the evangelical Christian and Pentecostal proportion of the population has increased since the last national census was conducted in 2007. The EOTC predominates in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara, while Islam is most prevalent in Afar, Oromia, and Somali Regions. Established Protestant churches have the most adherents in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's (SNNP) Region and Gambella Region 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 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 once 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 to allow Muslim 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 body 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.

The law allows all civil society organizations and religious groups 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 to follow legal guidelines originating from the Charities and Societies Proclamation.

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

### **Government Practices**

The conflict that erupted in northern Ethiopia in November 2020 spread to other regions during the year and victims of violence included religious figures. According to media, at least 78 priests were reportedly killed in Tigray during the first five months of the year by soldiers from the national army and Eritrean troops. *The Telegraph* reported the killings based on a church letter to the Synod of the EOTC that said “priests, deacons, choristers and monks” had been “massacred” over a period of five months.

In April, according to media, Co-Patriarch Mathias, an ethnic Tigrayan, accused the government of genocide in Tigray. In a video shot the previous month on a mobile phone and taken out of the country, the Co-Patriarch addressed the

Church's millions of followers and the international community, saying his previous attempts to speak out were blocked. "I am not clear why they want to declare genocide on the people of Tigray," the Co-Patriarch said, speaking in Amharic. "They want to destroy the people of Tigray," he added, listing alleged atrocities including massacres and forced starvation as well as the destruction of churches and looting.

On February 25, the Europe External Programme with Africa reported that one monk was killed during the bombing and looting of Debre Damo Monastery in Tigray in January. Reportedly, Eritrean troops aligned with the Ethiopian National Defense Forces were responsible for the attack. *The Times* reported other buildings had been completely destroyed, including monks' ancient dwellings. Many reporters cited ethnic grievance as the basis of the attack and said there was no evidence the attack was religiously motivated.

On May 9, according to the *Addis Standard*, government security forces dispersed thousands of Muslims from Meskel Square where the Muslim community in Addis Ababa had organized a Grand Iftar event during Ramadan. In response to videos and photos showing security forces firing teargas at the crowds, Muslim activists and clerics on social media decried the government's actions as religiously motivated. Some members of the EOTC said Meskel Square was the EOTC's traditional property. City officials, however, said the violent dispersal was due to safety concerns arising from the unexpectedly large number of attendees and ongoing construction in Meskel Square. City officials consequently canceled the event and rescheduled it for May 11. According to the Ethiopian News Agency (ENA), the rescheduled event was held peacefully. ENA also reported that the purposes of the event included demonstrating that Ramadan was a time of compassion, sharing, and supporting one another in line with Islamic teachings and praying for the unity of the country. Despite the delay, event organizers thanked city administrators for allowing the event to take place. Mayor of Addis Ababa Adanech Abiebie stated that the square belonged to all citizens – not just Christians – and called for Ethiopians to unite and celebrate religious differences.

In June, police accused a preacher from the Mahibere Kidusan – an EOTC congregation – of supporting the TPLF, which parliament had designated as a terrorist group. Police reportedly arrested members of the Mahibere Kidusan for taking pictures of police officers during a demonstration outside the home of EOTC Co-Patriarch Mathias. Demonstrators marched to show solidarity with Mathias after he publicly condemned the ongoing war in Tigray and characterized abuses against Tigrayans as genocide.

According to media, in July, police officers raided a church in Addis Ababa, interrupting prayers and forcing a dozen ethnic Tigrayan priests and monks into a pickup truck; they were released several weeks later.

In August, Minister of Health Lia Tadesse thanked the IRCE for holding a high-level advocacy meeting on reduction of stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS and their families. She tweeted, “Our Creator does not stigmatize and discriminate; let’s not stigmatize and discriminate.”

On January 5, the *BBC* reported the government agreed to repair the al-Nejashi Mosque that was damaged in 2020 during the conflict in Tigray. Local Muslims said the mosque was the oldest in Africa. The government said a nearby church would also be repaired.

During the year, the government provided funding to religious schools, including 250 Catholic schools and 219 Islamic schools.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Human rights groups stated that societal violence was on the rise, especially in the context of the conflict in the northern part of the country. Because ethnicity and religion are often closely linked and because criminality, politics, access to resources, and historical grievances were also drivers of violence, it was difficult to characterize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

In October, the Amhara Region Islamic Affairs Supreme Council said the TPLF had demolished a historic mosque in Zarema town, North Gondar, Amhara Region. The secretary general of the council said the attack proved TPLF’s continued antireligious stand. He said the TPLF had destroyed several other mosques and religious sites in the region and massacred religious students in madrassahs.

On March 5, according to the *Addis Standard*, members of the OLA killed 29 individuals in Abo Church in Debos Kebele, East Wollega, Oromia Region. Witnesses said victims were marking the beginning of the EOTC’s two-month period of fasting. Reports stated members of the OLA stormed into the church, immediately killing the church administrator. The OLA members took the rest of the victims to a nearby forest and killed them.

In May, the EOTC stated that the government allowing Muslims to hold the Grand Iftar celebration in Meskel Square – of which the EOTC claimed traditional “ownership” – could threaten coexistence between the country’s Christians and Muslims. The EOTC advised Muslims to hold the event at its usual venue, Abebe Bikila Stadium. After the government disrupted the celebration on May 9 and despite the EOTC’s protests, the rescheduled celebration took place peacefully on May 11 in Meskel Square.

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. The EIASC accused foreign Salafist groups of 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.

According to the Catholic Near East Welfare Association and the EIASC, the number of Islamic religious schools was growing. Abdul Geni Kedir, a headmaster at one school, said that the expansion of the schools, which were “significantly contributing to the spread of the faith,” reflected the steady increase of the community’s influence in society. He said, “Islamic education has been reinforced by the burgeoning Islamic media and related public activities. Now, we have private newspapers, television stations, educational videos, and there is an increase in the production of multilingual traditional and modern Islamic hymns.” Observers described a small revival of Waaqeffanna – an indigenous religion in Oromia – especially on university campuses.

The IRCE continued to include representatives from the EOTC, EIASC, Catholic Church, and several evangelical Christian groups, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church, and Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

In May and December, the Ambassador hosted EOTC Co-Patriarch Mathias to discuss the humanitarian crisis in Tigray and Mathias’ public statement that genocide was occurring in Tigray. In a Facebook post following the May meeting, the embassy reported that the Ambassador discussed the humanitarian situation in Tigray as well as the Co-Patriarch’s video message on the crisis released a week earlier and reported widely in local press. The Ambassador invited the Co-



Patriarch to attend future interfaith community meetings to “further explore and continue their conversation.”

The U.S. government awarded several grants to the IRCE and other faith-based organizations to fund projects that encouraged religious tolerance. In September, the embassy awarded funding to the Ghion Peace, Reconciliation and Development Association for a program promoting religious tolerance. The program trained 60 youth and faith-based organizations to facilitate consultative workshops on peacebuilding and conflict mitigation within Amhara and Qimant communities. Participants then led discussions with over 200 youth from the towns of Gondar and Chilga/Aykel on peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

In October, the embassy provided funding to the IRCE to design a two-day program for religious leaders on conflict prevention and mitigation, to be conducted in 2022. This program, designed to encourage peacebuilding and religious and ethnic tolerance, would bring together IRCE members across the country to engage on security issues, including the conflicts in Tigray, Amhara, and Afar. The embassy provided logistical and technical support to the IRCE as it began organizing the meeting and identifying potential conflict mitigation roles for regional and religious leaders at the community level. The two-day program would establish a six-month engagement plan framework.

In August, the embassy provided funding to the Inter-Religious Council in Dire Dawa to facilitate a program to promote interreligious peacebuilding and tolerance in Harar, Chiro, and Dire Dawa by empowering leaders to work with youth and women in their constituencies to promote interreligious peace.