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U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Ethiopia

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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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 no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. Some Protestant and Muslim groups continued to complain that local officials discriminated against them when seeking land for churches, mosques, and cemeteries, but there was no infringement on religious practice.

Tensions between Muslim and Christian communities resulted in localized violent episodes on several occasions. Additionally, there was reported tension between the traditional Sufi Muslim majority and Salafi/Wahhabi Muslims who derived support from foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

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 a population of 77 million. An estimated 40 to 45 percent of the population belongs to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), which is predominant in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara.

Approximately 45 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. Islam is most prevalent in the eastern Somali and Afar Regions, as well as in many parts of Oromiya.

Christian evangelical and Pentecostal groups continue to be the fastest growing groups and constitute an estimated 10 percent of the population. Established Protestant churches such as Mekane Yesus and the Kale Hiwot are strongest in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State (SNNPR); western and central Oromiya; and in urban areas. In Gambella Region, Mekane Yesus followers represent 60 percent of the population. The Evangelical Church Fellowship claims 23 denominations under its religious umbrella throughout the country.

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

A large number of foreign missionary groups operate in the country.

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 Government sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors; however, some local administrators were implicated in several religious clashes.

The Constitution requires the separation of state and religion and prohibits a state religion, and the Government generally respected these provisions in practice.

The Government requires registration of religious groups. Religious institutions and churches, like 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. Mekane Yesus, the Evangelical Fellowship, and the Catholic Church believed that churches should be placed in a "different status than NGOs."

The EOC never registered with the Government and has never faced repercussions. The Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC), after registering ten 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. 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 results in a denial of legal standing, which prevents it from opening a bank account or fully participating in any court proceeding.

Religious groups, like private individuals or businesses, must apply to regional and local governments for land allocation. Religious groups are given use of government land for churches, schools, hospitals, and cemeteries free of charge; however, religious schools and hospitals, regardless of length of operation, are subject to government closure and land forfeiture at any time. An interfaith effort to promote revision of the law for religious organizations to obtain duty-free status continued.

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 interprets the Constitutional provision for separation of religion and state to mean that religious instruction is 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 teach as part of their curriculum are not free of religious influence. Churches are permitted to have Sunday schools, the Qur'an 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 Islamic 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 Islamic 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, through the Ministry of Justice and regional state authorities, continued to support the Interfaith Peace-Building Initiative, an NGO dedicated to promoting interfaith consultation and cooperation and ending religiously motivated violence. The Initiative's members include representatives of the Ethiopia's major religious institutions: the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church-Mekane Yesus, and the Baha'i Center.

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 were 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.

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. The EHRCO reported that no journalists were detained or charged during the reporting period with inciting religious groups or with defamation of religious leaders.

In contrast to previous years, there were no reported incidents relating to wearing conservative Islamic attire.

Minority religious groups complained of discrimination in the allocation of government land for religious sites. Protestants reported inequities in treatment and access by local officials when seeking land for churches and cemeteries. Evangelical leaders felt that as perceived "newcomers," they remained disadvantaged in the allocation of land compared with the EOC and the EIASC. The EIASC complained that it had more difficulty than the EOC obtaining land from the Government, while 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 and Amhara regional government officials chose not to interpret this provision liberally in the towns of Axum and Lalibela respectively, and the Federal Government did not overrule them. Muslims have had access to land since the country became a republic in 1995.

Following the numerous religious conflicts in late 2006 in the western part of the country, the federal and regional governments significantly increased the presence of government security forces. Additionally, the government replaced or transferred many local government leaders in the areas where the violence occurred, due to reports that some leaders had failed to prevent an escalation in local religious tensions. As a result, tensions had subsided at the end of the reporting period.

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 Oromiya some plots were provided free of charge to some religious groups to build places of worship.

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 still pending at the end of the period covered by this report.

The Meserte Kristos/Mennonite Church, Mekane Yesus Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the EIASC made no progress in securing the return of property confiscated by the Government under the Derg regime. The Seventh-day Adventists sought the return of two hospitals, among other property. The EIASC continued to try to obtain properties outside the capital that were similarly confiscated. In Addis Ababa and Oromiya, structures have been returned under federal provisions; however, edifices under regional statutes have yet to be returned. The Mekane Yesus and EIASC have reclaimed some property in the past.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In July 2006 in Addis Ababa, police clashed with Muslims protesting the demolition of a mosque being built without the necessary zoning permits. To remedy the situation, the Addis Ababa City Administration subsequently provided properly zoned land to the Addis Ababa Islamic Council to build a new mosque.

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

Forced Religious Conversion

There were reports of forced religious conversion, but not of U.S. minors 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. In September and October 2006, several hundred Christians were forced to denounce Christianity and accept Islam following religious conflicts in Dembi and Beshesha. The majority of those coerced into Islam converted back to Christianity after the upheaval.

Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom

Following a series of interreligious conflicts in the western part of the country between Muslim and Orthodox Christian religious groups, the federal and regional governments significantly increased the presence of government security forces. Additionally, the government replaced or transferred many local government leaders in the areas where the violence occurred, due to reports that some leaders had failed to prevent an escalation in local religious tensions. As a result, tensions had subsided at the end of the reporting period.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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 Protestants sometimes 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.

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 and NGOs, raising concern over external non-Ethiopian Islamic influences.

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. Most urban areas reflected a mixture of all religious groups. However, during the reporting period, a series of violent interfaith conflicts in the western part of the country threatened historic tolerance and stability.

On April 2, 2007, in Bambasse, a town in southwest Ethiopia, local Muslims raided the house of evangelist Tolosa Megersa, resulting in the death of six of his cattle and sheep. Five days later, the home of Full Gospel Church leader Lemmu Abdissa was raided. All his property was destroyed, including 8,815 pounds of grain.

On March 26, 2007, a group of Muslim youth attacked and killed evangelist Taddese Tefera Akufo, in Jima, Oromiya Region. At the time of the report, no suspects were in police detention.

In February 2007 the Federal High Court in Jima sentenced six of the perpetrators of an October 15, 2006, massacre in Beshesha to death and sentenced over 100 others to prison terms ranging from one year to life imprisonment. Hundreds of Muslims stormed an Ethiopian Orthodox church during a religious celebration. The attackers set the church on fire and attacked churchgoers as they fled, also forcing many to immediately denounce Christianity and adopt Islam. The clash resulted in four deaths and dozens of injuries. Amateur video taken of the aftermath of the event, including footage of victims killed by machete, was distributed throughout the country. While other factors may have exacerbated tensions, this incident was the most violent attack on Orthodox Church members in recent history.

In December 2006 a joint statement issued by the heads of the EOC, EIASC, Evangelist, and Catholic churches called on followers to work together towards peace and reconciliation. The government encouraged secular and faith-based organizations to find a lasting solution to their conflicts. These organizations, in collaboration with federal and newly installed local government officials, have taken the initiative to formulate frameworks for healthy dialogue aimed at reconciliation.

On October 18, 2006, in Begi and Gidami, Oromiya Region, clashes between Muslims and Protestants resulted in 9 deaths, including the death of two Protestant preachers, whose throats were slashed, and over 100 injured. Additionally, 21 churches, 1 mosque, and dozens of houses were burned, leading to the displacement of over 400 people. Orthodox churches were burned, but the incidents were primarily between Protestants and Muslims.

On September 26, 2006, in several parts of western Ethiopia, a series of clashes occurred between the Muslim community, the EOC community, and members of the Protestant or Evangelical communities. The conflict began as a result of smoke from an EOC religious celebration entering a nearby mosque in Dembi, Oromiya Region. This escalated into a violent conflict that resulted in the deaths of six Christians and four Muslims. Additionally, four EOC churches and many houses were burned, displacing hundred of local residents.

In response to the violent clashes between Muslim and Orthodox religious groups in late 2006 in the western part of the country that were referenced in Section II, Restrictions on Religious Freedom, the federal and regional governments significantly increased the presence of government security forces. Additionally, the government replaced or transferred many local government leaders in the areas where the violence occurred, due to reports that some leaders had failed to prevent an escalation in local religious tensions. As a result, tensions had subsided at the end of the reporting period.

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.

On April 16, 2007, the Embassy sponsored the Overseas Speaker Program in which 8 members of the Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora delegation spoke to over 100 secondary school students and faculty of Awelia Muslim Missionary School on the importance of religious tolerance. The delegation included four American citizens and residents of Sweden, Canada, Germany and Saudi Arabia. The Embassy also sponsored a visit from an American imam, who met with members of local Muslim Youth Councils and other community representatives to discuss religious tolerance and freedom with local Muslims.

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