

**Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale**

|                                 |                                                           |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Bilagsnr.:</b>               | <b>162</b>                                                |
| Land:                           | Etiopien                                                  |
| Kilde:                          | U.S. Department of State                                  |
| Titel:                          | 2010 Report on International Religious Freedom – Ethiopia |
| Udgivet:                        | 17. november 2010                                         |
| Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet: | 21. december 2010                                         |

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| <b>Title</b>            | 2010 Report on International Religious Freedom - Ethiopia                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Publisher</b>        | <a href="#">United States Department of State</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Country</b>          | <a href="#">Ethiopia</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Publication Date</b> | 17 November 2010                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Cite as</b>          | United States Department of State, <i>2010 Report on International Religious Freedom - Ethiopia</i> , 17 November 2010, available at: <a href="http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4cf2d09dc.html">http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4cf2d09dc.html</a> [accessed 21 December 2010] |

## 2010 Report on International Religious Freedom - Ethiopia

*[Covers the period from July 1, 2009, to June 30, 2010]*

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, occasionally some authorities infringed on this right. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

Localized tensions between Muslim and Christian communities resulted in some violent episodes. Several civic and government programs attempted to address sectarian violence.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom 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 80 million. According to the 2007 census, 44 percent of the population belongs to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), which is predominant in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara.

Thirty-four percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, of which the majority is Sufi. Islam is most prevalent in the east, particularly in the Somali and Afar regions, as well as in many parts of Oromiya. There is a growing presence of conservative/orthodox Muslims, but they remain a small fraction of the Muslim population.

Christian evangelical and Pentecostal groups constitute 19 percent of the population. Established Protestant churches such as Kale Hiwot, with 6.7 million members, and Mekane Yesus, with 5.3 million, are strongest in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State. They are also strong in western and central Oromiya and in urban areas. In Gambella Region Mekane Yesus followers represent more than 60 percent of the population. The Evangelical Church Fellowship claims 28 denominations under its umbrella organization throughout the country.

There are small numbers of Oriental Rite and Latin Rite Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), animists, and practitioners of indigenous religions.

Individuals claiming to be Falash Mura sought to emigrate to Israel. There was no further

information available at the end of the reporting period.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The constitution requires the separation of state and religion; the government generally respected this provision in practice.

Under a 2008 law, it is a crime to incite one religious group against another. The law also allows for prosecution of religious defamation claims as criminal cases.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Good Friday, Easter, Meskel, Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, and Christmas. The government also mandates a two-hour break on Fridays for Muslim prayers.

The government prohibits the formation of political parties based on religion. The government banned Waka-Feta, a traditional animist Oromo religious group, due to suspicion of the group leaders' relationship with the banned Oromo Liberation Front.

The government requires religious groups to register to gain legal standing; without legal standing a group cannot open a bank account or fully participate in a court proceeding. The Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSO law) went into effect on February 13, 2010. It established new registration requirements for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) but spared many religious groups the rigorous government scrutiny they endured in the past; however, religious organizations that undertake development activities must register their development wings separately as NGOs and follow the strict new guidelines of the CSO law, including a 10 percent limit on their foreign funding sources if they are to operate in certain rights-based fields. Leaders of major denominations reported no difficulties in registering the development wings of their organizations with the Charities and Societies Agency.

Religious organizations, like NGOs, must renew their registrations with the Ministry of Justice every three years. However, the EOC and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) do not reregister and do not face government sanctions, prompting some religious groups to complain of a double standard.

Religious groups, like private individuals or businesses, must apply to regional and local governments for land allocation. The government gives some religious groups use of government land for churches, schools, hospitals, and cemeteries without charge; however, religious schools and hospitals are subject to government closure and land forfeiture at any time.

Minority religious groups occasionally complained of discrimination in the allocation of land for religious sites. Protestants alleged inequities in treatment and access by local officials when seeking land for churches and cemeteries. Evangelical leaders felt disadvantaged in the allocation of land compared with the EOC and the EIASC. The Ministry of Federal Affairs characterized the perceived inequities as a result of poor governance at the local level, zoning regulations, and the allocations' affect on existing communal use functions. The Ministry of Federal Affairs began a new effort to standardize the management of land through the issuance of directives.

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. Muslims have access to land to build homes and nonreligious buildings in Axum. Tigray and Amhara regional government officials also refused to grant land to Muslims to

build mosques; the federal government did not overrule them. In Lalibela, another holy city for the EOC, the local administration allocated land for the construction of a mosque, as well as for Muslim cemeteries.

Various religious groups seek the return of property a previous government confiscated between 1977 and 1991. In Addis Ababa and Oromiya, federal provisions allowed for the return of such buildings; however, this did not include structures registered under regional statutes. The Mekane Yesus Church reported the return of the Evangelical College of Debre Zeit, a seminary in the Oromiya Region, in May 2010. Negotiations began several years ago.

The government does not issue work visas to foreign religious workers unless they are associated with the development wing of a religious organization registered with the government. The government did not consistently enforce this policy for Muslims or Orthodox Christians.

The government interprets the constitutional provision for separation of religion and state to include the prohibition of religious instruction 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 permitted churches to have Sunday schools, the teaching of the Qur'an in mosques, and clubs in public schools.

#### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, occasionally some authorities infringed on this right. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

#### *Abuses of Religious Freedom*

On January 25, 2010, a federal high court judge sentenced editor Ezedin Mohamed, of the Muslim-oriented newspaper Al-Quds, to one year in prison for attempting to incite religious conflict. The charges were related to a 2008 column in which Ezedin allegedly criticized Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's statements concerning religious affairs. The Al-Quds column challenged Meles' characterization of the country as "Orthodox Christian." Ezedin appealed his sentence to the Supreme Court, which upheld the charges in March. He made a further appeal to the Court of Cassation. On August 6, 2010, the Court of Cassation ruled there was no error in the interpretation of the law and upheld the decisions made by the two lower courts. Ezedin was scheduled to be released early in October after serving three-quarters of his sentence, an early release granted to prisoners who exhibited good behavior.

On June 30, 2009, police in Dessiet Town shot and killed two persons in a crowd that was demonstrating after being forced to stop unlawful construction of a church. Muslims claimed the construction site. Several persons suffered injuries during the violence, one woman died when she fell off a cliff.

In April 2009, police broke up a demonstration by Addis Ababa University students, temporarily detaining 70 persons who had asked the government to respect the right of Muslims to wear a niqab and pray on the university campus. Police released the students on bail and told them they might have to appear before the court. There were no further updates at the end of the reporting period.

In 2008 police shot and injured three persons near a church in Arba-Minch town in Gamo Gofa Zone in an attempt to disperse a crowd following a disagreement between Orthodox priests.

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

### *Forced Religious Conversion*

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

### *Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom*

From November 2009 through March 2010, the Ministry of Federal Affairs conducted training for civil servants on the importance of serving all citizens equally, regardless of their religious affiliation. The training emphasized the constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion, equality of religions, and the duty to respect such guarantees.

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

There were few reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In most regions Orthodox Christians and Muslims generally respected each other's religious observances and tolerated intermarriage and conversion in certain areas.

The EIASC continued to express concern over the increasing influence of some Saudi-funded entities within the Muslim community, which the EIASC blamed for exacerbating tensions between Christians and Muslims. There was tension between the traditional Sufi Muslim majority and Muslims supported in part by Saudi Arabian NGOs. An official from the Ministry of Federal Affairs reported that the CSO law attempted to monitor the activities of all foreign NGOs by requiring registration and limiting foreign funding to prevent potential extremist activities.

In February 2010 in Wolenkomi, West Shoa Zone, Oromiya, EOC members burned a Mekane Yesus church, destroying the church and all of the property inside. EOC members also allegedly attacked Mekane Yesus members; two required hospitalization in the capital. The local government made an effort to mediate the situation and asked the EOC to rebuild the church.

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

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

In reaching out to faith communities, the embassy employed a full range of public diplomacy tools, including speaker exchange programs, small grants, publications, and representation events. For instance, the embassy invited Muslim representatives to participate in a February 2010 Internet chat on religious freedom and defamation of religion.

The U.S. government's Media Information Support Team promoted religious pluralism through a poster contest, theatrical performances, and soccer and basketball programs, a "Peace through Unity" music concert, billboards, banners, and posters depicting religious tolerance, and comic books.

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