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2017 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. In August the government lifted the state of emergency (SOE) it had proclaimed in 2016 and had used to restrict organized opposition and antigovernment protests, which also affected religious activities. There were no reports of religious communities engaging in protests either before or after the lifting of the SOE. The Federal High Court in January sentenced all 13 Muslim defendants to prison for terrorism for their roles in the 2012 killing of an imam. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission's (EHRC) investigation assigned blame to local officials and the Oromo Media Network for the dozens of deaths at the October 2016 Irreecha festival. An EHRC report documented authorities' torture and inhumane confinement of 16 inmates, which included targeting of Muslim inmates, in a federal prison. In January a nongovernmental organization (NGO) reported the Federal High Court acquitted three Protestants who had been sentenced to nine years in prison by a lower court judge in 2014 for allegedly burning down an Ethiopian Orthodox church. According to NGO reports, in June authorities ordered a Pentecostal church in Amhara State to stop meeting in a residential area in the wake of a mob attack on the church. Some Muslim community members reported continued governmental interference in religious affairs, including a denial of access to mosques during Ramadan. Protestants reported unequal treatment by local officials with regard to religious registration and allocation of land for churches and cemeteries. There were reports government officials demolished a purportedly illegal Ethiopian Orthodox church in Oromia Region.

On July 16, a group of local Muslims attacked a Christian evangelist with machetes, according to NGO reports. Observers reported the major faith communities throughout most of the country respected each other's religious observances and practices. There continued to be reports of some Protestants and Orthodox Christians accusing each other of heresy, which increased tensions between the groups. The Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) expressed continued concern about what it said was the increasing influence of foreign Salafist groups within the Muslim community.

U.S. embassy officers met officials from the Ministry of Federal and Pastoralist Development Affairs (MoFPDA) throughout the year for continued discussions on religious tolerance. Embassy representatives also met with the leaders from the EIASC, Catholic Church in Ethiopia, Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE), and Ethiopia Orthodox Church (EOC) to discuss how these groups could contribute to religious tolerance. Embassy officials met with members of the Muslim community and with NGOs to discuss their concerns about government interference in religious affairs.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 105.4 million (July 2017 estimate). The most recent census, conducted in 2007, estimated 44 percent of the population adheres to the EOC, 34 percent are Sunni Muslim, and 19 percent belong to Christian evangelical and Pentecostal groups. The EOC predominates in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara, while Islam is most prevalent in the Afar, Oromia, and Somali Regions. Established Protestant churches are strongest in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples’ Region, Gambela, and parts of Oromia. Groups together constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Eastern Rite and Roman Catholics, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews, and practitioners of indigenous religions. There is also a Rastafarian community, numbering approximately 1,000, whose members migrated from the Caribbean in the 1950’s and reside in Addis Ababa and in 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.

The SOE, which was put in place in October 2016 and affected religious activities, was lifted on August 4.

Registration and licensing of religious groups fall under the mandate of the Directorate of Faith and Religious Affairs of the MoFPDA, 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 includes an application letter, information on the 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 church, and 15 for registration as a ministry or association. 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.

Unlike other religious groups, the EOC is not registered by the MoFPDA 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 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 evangelical 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.

The constitution prohibits religious instruction in schools, whether public or private, 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, an agency of the government accountable to the federal attorney general, and the Ministry of Education regulate such religious schools, which provide both secular and religious instruction. The Ministry of Education oversees the secular education provided by religious schools.

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

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 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.

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

Government Practices

On January 26, the Federal High Court found all 13 Muslim defendants guilty of crimes of terrorism for their role in the 2012 killing of an imam in Dessie, Amhara Region. The group received prison terms ranging from three years and eight months to 16 years.

In April the EHRC reported to the parliament on its investigations into the dozens of deaths at the October 2016 Irreecha festival, a large Oromo religious and cultural celebration. The commission recommended the government hold local and regional officials of Oromia accountable for failing to stop the festival in advance. The commission attributed blame for the deaths to the Oromo Media Network, a diaspora-based media outlet, for fueling the unrest leading to the incident. The government filed terrorist charges against the network (in absentia) in March for allegedly rendering support to terrorists, which was listed as a crime under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation and punishable by imprisonment from 10 to 15 years. The trial continued as of year’s end.

A court-ordered EHRC report documented what it stated was the authorities’ torture of 16 inmates, which included targeting of Muslim inmates, in a federal prison. Inmates told the EHRC prison officials in Shoa Robit Prison subjected them to various forms of torture during a three-month period in 2016 and holding them in what was described by the report as inhumane conditions for five months in 2017. Muslim inmates reported the officers shouted anti-Muslim language and further harassed, threatened, and intimidated them based on their religious beliefs. Inmates criticized the EHRC for not extending its findings of torture by prison officials to cover the 176 other inmates they alleged were tortured, objected to the report’s failure to hold prison officials or Federal Police officers who carried out the torture accountable for their actions, and requested an independent investigation be conducted.

In January an NGO reported the Supreme Court had acquitted three Protestants who had been sentenced to nine years in prison by a lower court judge in 2014 for allegedly burning down an EOC church. The ruling left the three still liable for paying for the damage to the church, but a separate court order in May released them from that responsibility. According to the NGO account, the three maintained they had been falsely convicted and had offered witnesses in support of their innocence, but the lower court judge had ignored their testimony.

According to NGO reports, in June authorities ordered the Full Gospel Church in Tikil Dingaye, a Pentecostal church in Amhara Region, to stop meeting in a residential area in the wake of a mob attack on the church. The attackers had assaulted some of the church members and then destroyed the church’s meeting hall, offices, and the accommodations of a church worker. After the attack, according to the NGO, a church member was arrested for “illegal activities” that “incited religious clashes,” and when the

church officials asked authorities in Gondar for protection against further attacks, they received a letter informing them they were no longer allowed to conduct religious services there. According to media accounts, the attackers were believed to be members of the student association Mahibere Kidusan, an organization established under the auspices of the EOC to support and preserve EOC traditions. Representatives of Mahibere Kidusan denied involvement in the attack, saying no members of their association had been questioned or charged by police in connection with the attack.

The SOE made protests illegal for most of the year, and there were no reports of religious communities engaging in protests either before or after the lifting of the SOE.

Muslim community members continued to assert the government had 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, despite government statements made in previous years saying it no longer supported a program to impose Al-Ahbash. Reports from the Muslim community suggested the government continued to arrange for the dissemination of Al-Ahbash teachings, and, consequently, Friday prayers still conformed to Al-Ahbash teachings.

In June during Ramadan, Muslims in the town of Adwa, Tigray Region, reported authorities denied them access to their mosques, alleging the community supported a movement for religious freedom for the country's Muslims.

Muslim community members reported widespread sentiment in their community that the government exercised excessive influence over the EIASC, which remained the lead religious organization for the country's Muslims, managing religious activities in the approximately 40,000 mosques and annual Hajj pilgrimages to Mecca. Some Muslim community members also reported continued governmental interference in religious affairs.

The Directorate for Registration of Religious Groups within MoFPDA reported it had registered 1,600 religious groups and associations as of 2016.

Members of some religious groups continued to state the EOC exemption from the registration requirement for all other religious groups constituted an unfair double standard.

Although holding religious services inside public institutions remained banned per the constitutionally required separation of religion and state, the government continued to mandate public institutions take a two-hour break from work on Fridays for workers to attend Islamic prayers. Private companies were not required to follow this policy.

Protestants continued to report local officials discriminated against them with regard to religious registration and the allocation of land for churches and cemeteries.

In July the media reported a government announcement saying it would issue national identity cards to the nearly 1,000 Rastafarians who had been living in the country for many years as stateless persons. The measure reportedly would grant the Rastafarians residency but would not give them citizenship.

Two opposition parties (the All Ethiopian Unity Party and Blue Party), in what the media characterized as an attempt to embarrass the government, reported government officials in the town of Legetafo Legedadi, Oromia, had demolished a church belonging to the EOC and confiscated sacred items on August 7. The town’s administration told the media that authorities had demolished the church because it was built illegally, thereby violating the master development plan of the town.

The MoFPDA continued to work with the EIASC and civil society groups to sponsor workshops and training of religious leaders, elders, and community members with the stated purpose of decreasing the potential for sectarian violence.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to NGO reports, on July 16, a group of local Muslims attacked with machetes a Christian man at his home in Hirna, a rural town east of Addis Ababa. The gang who attacked the man was reportedly angry because he was proselytizing. The gang had first attacked the local Full Gospel Church and partly damaged its roof and a wall before going to the man’s house. The man required lifesaving surgery.

In contrast with the previous year, there were no reports of attacks on places of worship in Oromia Region, although there were reports that some of the previously destroyed places of worship and affiliated facilities, such as health centers, had not been rebuilt. The annual Irreecha festival was peaceful, although the main ceremony ended much earlier than in recent years and, in a break with tradition, neither the Abba Geddas (the traditional leaders/elders who organized the event) nor government officials offered remarks or blessings.

The IRCE, an organization established by seven religious institutions and operating independently from the government throughout the country, reported the major faith communities in most of the country respected each other’s religious observances and practices while permitting intermarriage and conversion. 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; observers stated these mutual recriminations increased tensions between the groups.

The EIASC expressed continued concern about what it said was the influence of foreign Salafist groups within the Muslim community. 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 MoFPDA and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on religious tolerance. Embassy representatives held meetings with religious leaders, including the Office of the Patriarch of the EOC, 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. U.S. embassy representatives observed the trial of Muslims accused of terrorism charges and attempting to overthrow the government.

Embassy officials engaged with members of the IRCE to discuss religious tolerance and attacks on places of worship in Oromia Region. 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 stated goal of creating a platform to unify disparate religious groups around common interests and promote interreligious harmony.

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Austrian Red Cross

Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research
and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien

T (Telefon) +43 1 589 00 583

F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589

info@ecoi.net

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