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2009 Report on International Religious Freedom - Ethiopia

[Covers the period from July 1, 2008, to June 30, 2009]

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, 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 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. The U.S. Government promotes religious pluralism through a variety of outreach efforts.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 472,000 square miles and a population of 77 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 tiny fraction of the Muslim population.

Christian evangelical and Pentecostal groups constitute 19 percent of the population. Established Protestant churches such as Mekane Yesus and 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 28 denominations under its religious umbrella 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.

The Government of Israel finalized immigration of the remaining Falash Mura community

in August 2008. Many additional individuals claiming to be Falash Mura were also seeking to immigrate to Israel. The Government was screening remaining applicants individually 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 law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

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

Under a new press law adopted on December 4, 2008, it is a crime to incite one religious group against another. The law also allows defamation claims involving religious leaders to be prosecuted as criminal cases.

The Government observes both Christian and Muslim holidays as national holidays and mandates a two-hour lunch break on Fridays for Muslim prayers. Official holidays include Epiphany, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Good Friday, Easter, Meskel, Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, and Christmas.

The Government prohibits the formation of political parties based on religion. The Government bans Waka-Feta, a traditional animist Oromo religious group, because of suspicion that the group's leaders have close links to the banned Oromo Liberation Front.

The Government requires religious groups to register in order 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 Law (CSO Law), adopted on February 13, 2009, 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.

Religious organizations, like NGOs, must renew their registration with the Ministry of Justice every three years. 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. 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 during the reporting period.

Minority religious groups occasionally complained of discrimination in the allocation of land for religious sites. Protestants reported 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. An official at the Ministry of Federal Affairs characterized the perceived inequities as a result of poor governance at the local level, zoning regulations, and the allocations' impact on existing communal use functions.

Local authorities in the northern town of Axum, a holy city for the EOC, continued to deny Muslim leaders' repeated requests to allocate any 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 did not allocate land to build mosques, but provided plots of land for Muslim cemeteries.

Various religious groups seek the return of property the Government confiscated from them between 1977 and 1991. In Addis Ababa and Oromiya, such buildings were returned under federal provisions; however, structures registered under regional statutes were not returned.

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. This policy was not consistently enforced for Muslims or Orthodox Christians.

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. 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.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom 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 reporting period.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

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

On April 24, 2009, police broke up a demonstration by Addis Ababa University students, temporarily detaining 70 of them, who were asking the Government to respect the right of Muslims to wear a hijab and pray on the university campus.

On December 1, 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.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On February 16-17 and April 23-24, 2009, the Ministry of Federal Affairs held forums in each regional state, which included representatives from local government, security bureaus, and police commissioners, to build interreligious understanding and resolve sectarian conflicts.

In July 2008 the government-supported NGO Interfaith Peace-Building Initiative established a National Inter-Faith Peace Council to promote a culture of peace, improve

interfaith cooperation, establish trust and good relationships among religious groups, and help prevent future conflict.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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. However, there were some highly publicized religious conflicts that heightened tensions and precipitated government intervention. Additional reports of physical and verbal harassment aimed at religious officials and church members led victims to seek protection from local authorities.

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 who derived support in part from Saudi Arabian NGOs.

In March 2009 the EIASC banned Muslim groups from holding meetings and activities without prior permission from the council.

On January 25, 2009, one policeman was killed and eight civilians injured in a religious conflict in Gonder City. The conflict reportedly began when Muslims began to build a mosque in a place where two Tabots traditionally are brought together for Timkat (Epiphany), an important Orthodox holiday. Police arrested 40 persons and continued to detain them at the end of the reporting period.

From January 8-10, 2009, a series of localized religious clashes in Dire Dawa resulted in one dead and 20 injured. In one neighborhood, Muslim youth, reportedly angry about Israeli attacks on Gaza, threw stones at Christian youth who were singing religious songs in the street during the EOC Christmas holiday. Christian youth retaliated by throwing stones at Muslims until police intervened. These violent clashes spread from one neighborhood to another.

On November 6, 2008, officials arrested several members of a Muslim group known as Kawerj for planning and executing large-scale attacks against Christians in 2006 in the Illubabor, Jimma, and West Wellega zones of Oromiya State. As of the end of the reporting period, their status was not known.

On March 31, 2009, the Forum for Federalism and Democracy and the Addis Ababa Information and Public Relations Bureau held a panel discussion on religious equality and freedom in the Constitution in order to help prevent religious conflict.

In March 2009 the Addis Ababa city administration met with representatives from several religious groups to discuss ways to curb future religious conflict.

In February 2009 the Minister of Federal Affairs called on communities to reveal the identity of individuals or groups involved in attempts to incite religious conflicts.

In November 2008 local government officials in Seka Buyo mediated reconciliation efforts between Muslim and Christian leaders following an October 2007 attack on 25 Protestant families by Muslims.

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.

The U.S. Government promoted religious pluralism through a poster contest, sports programs, a "peace and unity" concert, and billboards depicting religious tolerance.

