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Executive Summary

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. The government used the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (ATP) and other measures to restrict organized opposition and anti-government protests, including through the detention and prosecution of Muslims engaged in protests against what the protestors said was continued government interference in religious affairs. On July 6, the Federal High Court found a group of 18 Muslims, known as the Arbitration Committee Members who were identified with 2012 protests, guilty of terrorism under the ATP. On August 3, the Federal High Court sentenced the individuals to imprisonment ranging from seven to 22 years. On September 15, the government pardoned and released five of those convicted. The government put on trial other groups of Muslims, reportedly due to their support of the Arbitration Committee Members. In January and February, authorities arrested 20 Muslims who protested on prayer days in mosques, wrote columns in Muslim newspapers, and posted comments on social media in support of the Arbitration Committee Members. On August 17, the government charged them with "participating in a terrorist organization." The defendants said they had only called for the release of the Arbitration Committee Members and protested government interference in Muslim affairs through writings in various media and peaceful protests in mosques. The court was hearing statements on the charges from the prosecution and the defense at year's end. Some religious groups reported discrimination in government land allocation and registration policies.

There were no reports of religiously motivated societal violence during the year. Some religious leaders reported interreligious tensions were at a five-year low. Nevertheless, there were lingering tensions between Christians and Muslims. Some Ethiopian Orthodox and Protestant groups engaged in mutual recriminations over conversions and charges of heresy.

The Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor met with the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) to discuss issues related to peace and security, tolerance, and religious freedom. The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials continued to discuss religious freedom with the government, and to engage with religious groups and faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to promote religious freedom. Embassy officials engaged with the Ministry of Federal and Pastoralist Affairs on religious tolerance and peace and security.

Embassy officials attended some of the trials of Muslims and met with members of the Muslim community to discuss their allegations of government interference in religious affairs.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 99.4 million (2015 estimate). The most recent census of 2007 estimated 44 percent of the population belongs to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), 34 percent is Sunni Muslim, and 19 percent belongs to Christian evangelical and Pentecostal groups. The EOC is predominant in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara and also present in Oromia. Islam is most prevalent in the Afar, Oromia, and Somali regions. Established Protestant churches are strongest in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region; Gambella; and parts of Oromia. There are small numbers of Eastern Rite and Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and followers of indigenous religions.

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. It permits limitations on religious freedom as prescribed by law in order to protect public safety, education, and morals, and to guarantee the independence of government from religion. The law criminalizes religious "defamation" and incitement of one religious group against another.

The government does not require the EOC, the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC), Roman and Eastern Rite Catholics, or Jewish communities to register as religious groups. All other groups must register with the Directorate of Faith and Religious Affairs at the Ministry of Federal and Pastoralist Affairs to gain legal standing, which is needed to open a bank account or fully participate in a court proceeding. Religious groups must renew their registration at least every five years; failure to do so could result in a fine. The registration process includes an application letter, information on the board, meeting minutes, information on the founders, financial reports, addresses of headquarters and offices, name, and symbol. Registered religious organizations are required to provide annual activity and financial reports. Activity reports must describe evangelical activities and list new members, new pastors ordained, and new buildings opened or built. The Charities and Societies Proclamation prohibits certain charities, societies, and associations, including faith-based organizations, that choose to engage in rights-based advocacy 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; protect the rights of children or persons with disabilities; advance conflict resolution or reconciliation; or enhance the efficiency of the justice system or law enforcement services.

The constitution prohibits religious instruction in schools, whether public or private. The government permits religious instruction in churches and mosques, and schools may organize clubs based on shared religious values.

All private individuals, businesses, and religious groups must apply to regional and local governments for land allocation because the government owns all land. The Charities and Societies Association and the Ministry of Health regulate religious schools and hospitals, which the government may close at any time for not following regulations.

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

The government mandates a two-hour break on Fridays for Islamic prayers.

Government Practices

The government used the ATP and other measures to restrict organized opposition and anti-government protests, including through the detention and prosecution of Muslims engaged in non-violent protests. There were Muslim protests against what the protestors said was continued government interference in religious affairs, including the government's refusal to allow elections in mosques because women would not be allowed to vote and the imposition of Al-Ahbash into Islamic religious practice. The Muslim community opposed Al-Ahbash because they said the government coopted leaders to impose this form of Islam, which has its roots in Lebanon and is different from domestically-developed Islam. The government stated it no longer supported the program to impose Al-Ahbash into Islamic religious practice. Muslims also said the government interfered in the selection of their community and religious leaders, although they did not provide specific examples.

On July 6, the Federal High Court found a group of 18 Muslims, known as the "Arbitration Committee Members" who were identified with the 2012 protests, guilty of terrorism under the ATP. On August 3, the Federal High Court sentenced them to imprisonment ranging from seven to 22 years. On September 15, the government pardoned and released five of those convicted.

Beginning in 2013 and during the trial of the Arbitration Committee Members, several groups of Muslims were arrested and charged with terrorism for "participating in a terrorist organization." Those arrested and on trial stated they were protesting the trial of the Arbitration Committee Members and government interference in Muslim affairs.

In January and February authorities arrested 20 Muslims from Addis Ababa and Jimma and on August 17, charged them with "participating in a terrorist organization." The defendants called for the release of the "Arbitration Committee Members" and said they were protesting government interference in Islamic affairs. The case continued at year's end.

On June 3, the Federal High Court sentenced Abdualaziz Jemal to three years and seven months in prison after finding him guilty under the ATP for participating in a terrorist organization. He was one of five Muslims from Adana arrested in August 2013 on these charges. Three were acquitted in December 2014, and another was found not guilty in May 2015.

The trial of another group of 16 Muslims, detained in 2013 from Addis Ababa and Wolkite town and charged under the ATP for "participation in a terrorist organization" continued through the year. The defendants said they were protesting government interference in Muslim affairs and had called for the release of the "Arbitration Committee Members" through writings in various media and peaceful protests in mosques.

The trial of 14 Muslims identified with a July 2013 killing of a sheikh in Dessie town continued. At year's end the defense was continuing to present evidence and witnesses. The government charged the individuals in November 2013 under the ATP law for terrorist activity.

There were reports of discrimination in registration and land allocation. Members of some religious groups stated the exemption of the EOC and the EIASC from the registration requirement with the government represented a double standard.

The government continued to give some religious groups use of government land for churches, schools, hospitals, and cemeteries without charge.

Protestants privately reported unequal treatment by local officials compared to the EOC and the EIASC with regard to religious registration and allocation of land for churches and cemeteries. The Ministry of Federal and Pastoralist Affairs, which had oversight responsibility for religious affairs, stated the perceived inequities were a result of poor governance at the local level and zoning regulations governing a property's existing and proposed communal use.

In Axum, the site of many of the country's oldest and most sacred EOC churches, Muslims continued to report difficulty gaining permission from local authorities to build mosques.

Some religious groups, mainly Protestant, continued to work through private and unofficial channels to seek the return of property confiscated between 1977 and 1991. Although some property was returned in previous years, the government did not return any property during the year.

Religious groups undertaking development activities were required to register their development arms as charities with the Charities and Societies Agency and follow legal guidelines.

The Ministry of Federal Affairs, working with the EIASC and other civil society groups, sponsored workshops and training of religious leaders, elders, and influential community members in what it said was an attempt to address the potential for sectarian violence.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In regions including West Oromia and Harar, tensions continued between Muslim and Christian communities, but unlike in previous years there were no reports of religiously motivated discrimination or violence.

In most regions, Orthodox Christians and Muslims reportedly generally respected each other's religious observances and tolerated intermarriage and conversion. Some Orthodox Christians and Protestants continued to accuse each other of heresy and of actively working to convert adherents from one faith to the other, and observers stated these mutual recriminations increased tensions between the groups.

Muslim community sources stated there was widespread sentiment in the community that the government exercised excessive influence over the EIASC. There were mostly peaceful protests by Muslims against this perceived interference.

The EIASC and the government continued to express concern about what they said was the increasing influence of some Salafist groups within the Muslim community. The EIASC stated it held these groups responsible for exacerbating tensions between Christians and Muslims and within the Muslim community.

Foreign aid officials reported IRCE took a leadership role in creating interfaith dialogue in the town of Jimma, Oromia, during protests in opposition to the expansion of the city of Addis Ababa into Oromo towns and villages.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives observed some trials of Muslims suspected of terrorism.

The Ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious freedom and tolerance with the government and religious leaders. They discussed a range of issues, including U.S. government views on the importance of religious freedom. Ethiopian officials and religious leaders worked with the embassy to assess opportunities for cooperation on faith-based community initiatives.

Embassy officials engaged with the minister of federal and pastoralist affairs on religious tolerance and peace and security.

The Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor met with the IRCE to discuss issues related to tolerance and religious freedom.

Embassy officials engaged with members of the IRCE in February and March on religious freedom and tolerance. The embassy's support of IRCE was designed to strengthen IRCE's resolve to curb violence through increased dialogue among religious communities.

In December the embassy hosted a Muslim expert on religious freedom from a U.S. university to engage with a host of religious, government, and civil society leaders on religious freedom. The expert said civil society dialogue was key to maintaining a peaceful religious environment.

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