



**U.S. Department of State  
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:  
Ethiopia**

Released by the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor  
Washington, DC, September 9, 1999

**ETHIOPIA**

**Section I. Freedom of Religion**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; although the Government generally respects freedom of religion in practice, on occasion local authorities infringed on this right.

The Government requires that religious groups be registered. Religious institutions, like nongovernmental organizations (NGO's), are registered with the Ministry of Justice, and must renew their registration every year. Unlike NGO's, religious groups are not subject to a rigorous registration process. Under current law, a religious organization that undertakes development activities must register its development wing separately as an NGO. Religious groups are not accorded duty-free status, but they are given free government land for churches, schools, hospitals, and cemeteries. Religious groups, like private individuals or businesses, must apply to regional and local governments for land allocation. An interfaith effort is underway to promote revision of the law as it affects the duty-free status of religious groups. Protestant groups occasionally complained that local officials discriminated against them in favor of their own religious groups in the allocation of land for churches and cemeteries.

Over 40 percent of the population adhere to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), the single largest religious group. The EOC claims 50 percent of the country's total population of 61.7 million, or a total of 31,473,105 adherents, and 110,405 churches. The EOC is predominant in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara. Another 40 percent of the population are Muslim, although many Muslims claim that the actual percentage is higher. Islam is most prevalent in the Somali and Afar regions, as well as in parts of Oromia. Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestantism are the fastest growing faiths and now constitute more than 10 percent of the population. According to the Evangelical Church Fellowship, there are 7.4 million Protestants, although this figure may be on the high side. Established Protestant churches such as Mekane Yesus and Kale Hiwot are strongest in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region (SNNPR), western and central Oromia, and in urban areas around the country. Roman Catholics, animists, and other traditional indigenous religions make up most of the remaining population. Atheism is negligible.

In Addis Ababa and western Gondar in the Amhara region there are very small concentrations of Ethiopian Jews (Falashas) and those who claim that their ancestors were forced to convert from Judaism to Ethiopian Orthodoxy (Feles Mora). Approximately 3,000 Feles Mora migrated voluntarily from the western Amhara region to Addis Ababa in 1991 at the time of "Operation Solomon," when a large

number of Falashas were airlifted to Israel. The Feles Mora also seek immigration to Israel. The number of Feles Mora in the country has grown to approximately 9,000.

There are more than 3,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in the country. When the Government began deporting Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin in 1998, it decided that Jehovah's Witnesses of Eritrean origin, who might face religious persecution in Eritrea, were not to be subject to deportation.

Although precise data are not available, active participation in religious services is high throughout the country.

A large number of foreign missionary groups operate in the country. In addition to Catholic missionaries, the following Protestant organizations, operating under the umbrella of the Evangelical Church Fellowship of Ethiopia, sponsor or support missionary work: the Baptist Bible Fellowship, the New Covenant Baptist Church, the Baptist Evangelical Association, Mekane Yesus Church (associated with the Lutheran Church), Kale Hiwot Church, Hiwot Berhan Church (associated with the Swedish Philadelphia Church), Genet Church (associated with the Finnish Mission), Lutheran Church of Ethiopia, Emnet Christos, Full Gospel Church, and Messerete Kristos (associated with the Mennonite Mission). There is also missionary activity among Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. American Protestant missionaries have been active in the country since the beginning of the century.

Evangelical leaders have complained of strict regulations on the importation of Bibles, as well as heavy customs duty on Bibles and other religious articles; however, Bibles and religious articles are subject to the same customs duty as all imported books and most imported items.

The Government officially recognizes both Christian and Muslim holidays, and has mandated a 2-hour lunch break on Fridays to allow Muslims to go to a mosque to pray.

On occasion, local authorities disrupted religious services. In February 1998, despite generally good relations with the Government, Jehovah's Witnesses reported that regional officials in Tigray disrupted religious services, which they termed illegal meetings, and briefly detained some 50 believers. Authorities in Tigray also sought to prevent Jehovah's Witnesses from proselytizing. In March 1999, Jehovah's Witnesses reported that a court in Tigray had sent them a letter of apology for the arrests.

In mid-1998, there were reports that zonal officials harassed church workers and tried to seize control of a Seventh-Day Adventist hospital construction project in western Oromia.

Before 1998 there were instances of conflict among religious groups, most noticeably between Orthodox Christians, on the one hand, and evangelicals and Pentecostals, on the other. While some Pentecostals and evangelicals complained in past years that the police failed to protect them adequately during instances of interreligious conflict, there were no complaints of inadequate police protection during the period covered by this report. In most inter-religious disputes, the Government maintains neutrality and tries to be an impartial arbitrator. Some religious leaders have requested the establishment of a federal institution to deal with religious groups, and the Government was considering the request at the end of June 1998.

The Government does not permit religious instruction in public schools, but it does permit the formation of clubs, including those of a religious nature. Muslim leaders complained that public school authorities sometimes interfered with their free practice of Islam. Certain public school teachers in the SNNPR, Addis Ababa, and in the Amhara region objected to Muslim schoolgirls covering their heads with scarves while at school. In February 1999, a school in Wolde in the Amhara region closed for 3 weeks when Muslim girls insisted on wearing their scarves to class. Muslim leaders also complained that in April 1999 Addis Ababa University refused to serve food appropriate for the Muslim Eid feast to Muslim students. When three Muslim students complained, the University expelled them.

Protestant groups occasionally complain that local officials discriminate against them when seeking land for churches and cemeteries. Evangelical leaders complain that because they are perceived as "newcomers" they remain at a disadvantage compared to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Supreme Islamic Council when it comes to the allocation of land. In January 1998, the Government returned evangelical church property that was seized under the Mengistu regime (including the Mekane Yesus Church headquarters, which served as Federal Police headquarters until 1997).

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

There were unconfirmed but credible reports that at least one Orthodox hermit monk, arrested in 1995, remained in detention for advocating the downfall of the ruling party in sermons he delivered.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

## **Section II: Societal Attitudes**

Despite the country's broad level of religious freedom and tolerance for established faiths, there were instances of open conflict among religious groups before 1998, most noticeably between Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, on the one hand, and Pentecostals and evangelicals on the other, and there continued to be pockets of interreligious tension and criticism during the period covered by this report. Newer faiths such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals have encountered overt opposition from the public. Muslims and Orthodox Christians complain about proselytization by Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses. Early in 1998, Jehovah's Witnesses encountered difficulties in holding meetings and proselytizing in a handful of communities in the highly Orthodox Christian region of Tigray, where local officials arrested some members of Jehovah's Witnesses and warned them not to hold prayer sessions (see Section I). Ethiopian Orthodox leaders complain that sometimes Protestants fail to respect Orthodox holy days and Orthodox customs. Muslims complain that some Pentecostal preachers disparage Islam in their services. There were complaints by Muslim leaders that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's desire to "show supremacy" sometimes caused irritation in the regions.

Protestant and Pentecostal leaders complained that, on occasion, Orthodox or evangelical adherents interrupted Protestant and Pentecostal religious meetings and attempted to prevent the construction of Protestant churches in predominately Orthodox or evangelical areas. For example, on April 8, 1999, representatives from the Ethiopian Kale Hiwot Protestant Church reported that in 1998, in Agaro,

local individuals acted to prevent the construction of a Protestant church. On two occasions in 1997, Orthodox Christians disrupted Pentecostal revivals in Debre Zeit and Arba Minch, apparently incited by Orthodox clergy. Orthodox Church members inflicted injuries and destroyed property before police intervened to restore order.

In April 1999, two Muslim communities attempted to construct new mosques but abandoned the construction when local Orthodox Church members caused damage to the construction sites and beat one Muslim who tried to prevent their actions.

In February 1999, a Seventh-Day Adventist minister rented a room in a building in Bahir Dir and conducted a religious service. Local Ethiopian Orthodox Church members gathered outside the building and threw stones. There were no reported injuries.

Nevertheless, in most sections of the country Orthodox Christians and Muslims participate in each other's religious observances, and there is tolerance for intermarriage and conversion in certain areas, most notably in Welo, as well as in urban areas throughout the country. In the capital, Addis Ababa, persons of different faiths often live side-by-side. Most urban areas reflect a mixture of all religious denominations. Longstanding evangelical Protestant denominations, particularly the Mekane Yesus Church and Kale Hiwot Churches, provide social services such as health care and education to non-members as well as to members. Mekane Yesus and Kale Hiwot leaders reported improved relations with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church during the period covered by this report.

Ethiopian and Eritrean religious leaders representing the two countries' major faiths traveled to Oslo, Norway in November 1998 for a Norwegian Church aid-sponsored peace conference. While the religious leadership's peace efforts failed to avert the renewal of conflict, the endeavor enhanced communication links among the religious leadership.

### **Section III: U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Embassy meets regularly with the leaders of all of the religious communities. Embassy officers made an active effort to visit all of the religious groups and religious NGO's during the period covered by this report. In late 1998 and early 1999, embassy officers visited the Supreme Islamic Council twice, the Ethiopian Evangelical umbrella organization, Mekane Yesus, Jehovah's Witnesses, Kale Hiwot, the Catholic Church, and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church.

In March and April 1999, the Ambassador held a series of meetings with religious leaders, including the Ethiopian Orthodox Patriarch and the executive councils of the Kale Hiwot and Mekane Yesus Churches, to discuss religious freedom and the Churches' responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In November 1998, the Ambassador met with the President of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church to discuss land and resource allocation problems with local officials in western Oromia. The Ambassador remains in regular contact with the American Joint Distribution Committee to discuss the situation of Ethiopian Jews. In February 1999, during a visit to the Somali region, the Ambassador met with the local Mekane Yesus development assistance representative.

An embassy officer also visited the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, a Seventh-Day Adventist NGO, in November-December 1998, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Development Assistance

Authority in March 1999. Embassy officials met with the Supreme Islamic Council, the Ethiopian Catholic leadership, the Ethiopian Evangelical Council, Mekane Yesus, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Patriarch in November 1998 to discuss the ecumenical Ethiopian-Eritrean peace mission, and to arrange for meetings with presidential envoy Anthony Lake. In November 1998, Special Envoy Lake met separately with the Ethiopian Orthodox Patriarch, the Supreme Islamic Council, and the Protestant and Catholic leadership.

During Senator Arlen Specter's January 1998 visit, the Senator, accompanied by embassy officers, met with the Ethiopian Orthodox Patriarch and members of the Supreme Islamic Council.

[End of Document]

