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July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report - Ethiopia

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
September 13, 2011

[Covers six-month period from 1 July 2010 to 31 December 2010 (USDOS is shifting to a calendar year reporting period)]

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and 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 approximately 82 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 Oromia. 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 members, are strongest in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State. They are also strong in western and central Oromia, and in urban areas. In Gambella, 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 Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), animists, and practitioners of indigenous religions.

In November the Israeli cabinet agreed to allow up to 7,846 Ethiopian Falash Mura, who live primarily in the Gonder area, to immigrate to Israel in a series of staggered arrivals. The plan calls for 600 Falash Mura to emigrate from Ethiopia in the months following the cabinet's decision, and for 200 per month to follow after that, with this pattern to last 12 months. The balance of eligible Falash Mura will then travel to Israel over the course of four years. The Israeli government stated that this will be the last group of Ethiopians allowed to immigrate en masse, although it made the same statement in 1991, 1998, and 2008. Falash Mura is a distinct category from the Falasha Jews who immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia during the famine in the late 1980s. Falasha are practicing Jews. Falash Mura claim matrilineal Jewish heritage, but do not actively practice Judaism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

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 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 (CSP) went into effect in February, establishing new registration requirements for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) but will spare many religious groups the rigorous government scrutiny they endured in the past. However, religious organizations that undertake development activities must register their development arms separately with the Charities and Societies Agency (CSA), as NGOs, and follow the strict new guidelines of the CSP. This includes a 10 percent limit on foreign funding if they are to operate in certain rights-based fields. Leaders of major denominations did not report any difficulties in registering the development wings of their organizations with the CSA.

Religious organizations, similar to NGOs, must renew their registrations with the Ministry of Justice every three years. However, the EOC and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) are not required to 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 from local officials when seeking land for churches and cemeteries, as compared to the EOC and the EIASC. The Ministry of Federal Affairs (MoFED) characterized the perceived inequities as a result of poor governance at the local level, zoning regulations, and the allocations' effect on existing communal use functions. MoFED began a new effort to standardize the management of land through the issuance of directives.

Local authorities in the northern towns of Axum and Lalibela, considered holy cities by the EOC, have historically denied requests by Muslim leaders to allocate land for construction of mosques and Muslim cemeteries within city limits. Muslims have access to land to build homes and nonreligious buildings in Axum. Tigray and Amhara regional government officials have historically convinced Muslim leaders to accept sites for religious buildings outside city limits. The parties have settled these issues informally, without recourse to the courts.

Various religious groups, mainly Protestant denominations, continued to seek the return of property confiscated between 1977 and 1991 by the previous regime, whose stern Marxist ideology held religion in contempt, especially what it considered "newcomer" religions. In Addis Ababa and Oromia, federal provisions granted the return of such buildings; however, this did not include structures registered under regional statutes.

The government does not issue work visas to foreign religious workers unless they are associated with the development arm 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 are not allowed to teach religion as a course of study. The government permits churches to have Sunday schools, the teaching of the Qur'an in mosques, and religious clubs in public schools.

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 continued to ban Waka-Feta, a traditional animist Oromo religious group due to suspicion of a relationship between the group leaders and the banned Oromo Liberation Front.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and 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

There were few reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country, including religious prisoners and detainees.

On November 19 officials in Somali Region Zone Five sentenced a Christian man to three years in prison three months after arresting him for allegedly writing "Jesus is Lord" on the Qur'an. Prosecutors failed to produce at trial the copy of the Qur'an on which the man had allegedly written the statement.

On January 25 a federal high court judge sentenced Ezedin Mohamed, the editor of the Muslim-oriented newspaper *Al-Quds*, to one year in prison for attempting to incite religious conflict. The charges 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's 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 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. While Ezedin was released on September 11, his 17-year-old son, Ahmed Ezedin, was arrested the same day in the Afar region. Ahmed was serving as the acting editor of *Al-Quds* during his father's imprisonment. The arrest was purportedly the result of articles Ahmed had written criticizing the Islamic Council of Afar.

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 (face veil) 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 June 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 was on property owned by Muslims. Several persons suffered injuries during the violence, and one woman died when she fell off a cliff.

There were only scattered reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of 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.

A report from near the city of Jimma claimed that Muslim kebele (district) leaders, including police, set fire to the homes of 10 Christian families in July. The families were composed of converts from Islam. In November the responsible parties, 15 persons in all, were arrested, and nine received prison sentences.

The EIASC continued to express concern over the increasing influence of some Saudi-funded Wahhabi groups 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 allowed the monitoring of the activities of all foreign NGOs by requiring registration and limiting foreign funding, in part to prevent potential extremist activities.

On July 16 five Somali men attacked a Christian man for reading a book they said was offensive and attacked the honor of the Prophet Muhammad. The incident was reported to the police.

On August 21 two Somali Muslim men attacked a Somali Christian church leader who had fled Somalia in 2005.

On September 13 three Muslim men stabbed a Christian convert in Dufti. When the three men suspected the victim of converting, they forcefully brought him to a mosque and told him to pray, and stabbed him when he refused. Police arrested two of the alleged perpetrators.

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 and exchange programs, small grants, publications, and representation events. Through a small grant, the embassy supported the formation of interfaith peace-building councils in two regional cities. The U.S. ambassador traveled to Bahir Dar in July and met with council members to support local efforts to promote tolerance and respect for religious diversity. During Ramadan, the embassy provided a small grant to the Assas Muslim Women's Charitable Association to support distribution of iftar (evening meal during Ramadan) food supplies to orphans and other

vulnerable children, as well as contribute to the cost of the children's school fees. The embassy makes an effort to ensure that participants in public affairs outreach programs reflect the religious diversity of the country.