

Ethiopia (19)

**2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:
Ethiopia**

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ETHIOPIA

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

In general government policy contributes to the free practice of religion. However, Muslim leaders complained that public school authorities sometimes interfered with their free practice of Islam. Protestant groups occasionally complain that local officials discriminate against them when seeking land for churches and cemeteries. While the relationship among religions in society is generally amicable, there continued to be pockets of interreligious tension and criticism between followers of evangelical and Pentecostal churches, on the one hand, and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, on the other.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. The U.S. Embassy meets regularly with the leaders of all of the religious communities.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion**Legal/Policy Framework**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, on occasion local authorities infringed on this right. The Constitution requires the separation of church and state.

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. Most religious groups, with the exception of Jehovah's Witnesses, are given free government land for churches, schools, hospitals, and cemeteries; however, the title to the land remains with the Government, and the land, other than that used for prayer houses or cemeteries, can be taken back at any time. 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 since it affects the duty-free status of religious groups.

Religious Demography

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 more than 31 million adherents, and 110,405 churches. The EOC is predominant in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara. Approximately 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. There are very few atheists.

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. Israeli officials evaluate the Feles Mora immigration claims on a case-by-case basis and estimate that approximately 20 percent of the Feles Mora eventually may be able to immigrate under Israel's law of return. In June 1999, the Israeli Government announced that 3,500 Falashas requesting citizenship would be airlifted from Quara, Ethiopia to Israel. All of the eligible Falashas in Quara left for Israel by December 31, 1999.

There are more than 6,000 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, including Catholic and American Protestant missionaries. Protestant organizations, operating under the umbrella of the 12-member 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 (associated with Sim-Service in Mission), Hiwot Berhan Church (associated with the Swedish Philadelphia Church), Genet Church (associated with the Finnish Mission), Lutheran-Presbyterian Church of Ethiopia, Emnet Christos, Muluwongel (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.

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. The Government also agreed to a request from Muslim students at Addis Ababa Commercial College to delay the start of afternoon classes until 1:30 p.m. to permit them to perform afternoon prayers at a nearby mosque.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government does not issue work visas to foreign religious workers unless they are attached to the development wing of a religious organization.

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.

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 September 1999, Muslim girls who had boycotted classes in Woldeia in the Amhara region over the issue of wearing headscarves to class, returned to classes with their scarves.

The Government has interpreted the constitutional provision for separation of church and state to mean that religious instruction is not permitted in schools, whether they are public or private schools. Catholic, Orthodox, evangelical, and Muslim-owned and operated schools are not permitted to teach religion as a course of study. Most private schools teach a morals course as part of the school's curriculum, and the Government Education Bureau in Addis Ababa has complained that such courses are not free of religious influence. Churches are permitted to have Sunday schools, the Koran is taught at mosques, and public schools permit the formation of clubs, including those of a religious nature.

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 with 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); however, the Government still has not returned other properties to the Mekane Yesus Church, including three student hostels and two schools. The Government also has not returned to the Seventh-Day Adventists properties taken by the prior regime, including two hospitals.

In past years 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 in past years some Pentecostals and evangelicals complained 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 interreligious disputes, the Government maintains neutrality and tries to be an impartial arbitrator.

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

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

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. 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. There are credible reports that the bodies of non-Orthodox Christians have been disinterred from Orthodox cemeteries and left exposed outside the cemetery grounds. In past years, Protestant and Pentecostal leaders have complained that, on occasion, Orthodox or evangelical adherents interrupted Protestant and Pentecostal religious meetings; however, there were no such reports during the period covered by this report. Orthodox and evangelical adherents attempted on a few occasions to prevent the construction of Protestant and Pentecostal churches in predominately Orthodox or evangelical areas.

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 nonmembers as well as to members.

In April 2000, the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the chairman of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council, the Archbishop of the Ethiopian Church and the president of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus issued a joint statement appealing to the international community for immediate humanitarian assistance to victims of drought in the country.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. 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. Embassy officers met with the Supreme Islamic Council, Sim-Serving in Mission, Mekane Yesus, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Catholic Church, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church during the period covered by this report.

The U.S. Ambassador held a series of meetings with religious leaders, including the Ethiopian Orthodox Patriarch and the president of the Supreme Islamic Council to discuss their responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The Ambassador also met with the Vatican Papal Nuncio, the executive director of the Mekane Yesus Church, the director of Sim-Serving in Mission, and the president of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church to discuss the status of religious freedom and development issues. The U.S. Ambassador remains in regular contact with the American Joint Distribution Committee to discuss the situation of the country's Jewish population.

In 1998 the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) entered into a 5-year agreement with the Ethiopian Orthodox Development Assistance Authority to provide food commodities and grants to support food security programs in four areas. The value of the program during the period covered by this report was approximately \$4,700,000.

In August 1999, USAID awarded the Ethiopian Orthodox Church a \$350,000 grant to support programs to contain the spread of HIV/AIDS. The development arm of Mekane Yesus Church has been a USAID contractor since 1996. In December 1999, USAID renewed the contract with Mekane Yesus and increased the amount to \$258,000 annually. In May 2000, USAID awarded the Supreme Islamic Council a \$145,000 grant to support programs to contain the spread of HIV/AIDS.

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