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Background

Ethiopia has a long history of religious tolerance and inter-religious cooperation, and its constitution protects freedom of religion or belief and provides for separation of religion and state. In 2011-2012, however, in response to concerns about rising extremism, the government imposed the al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam on the country's Muslim community, including through required training for imams; interfered in the independence of the community's representative body, the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC); and then arrested and prosecuted Muslims who opposed these actions and engaged in peaceful protests.

Convictions for Peaceful Protests

On July 6 and August 3, 2015 respectively, the Ethiopian government convicted and sentenced 18 leaders of the 2012 Muslim protest movement. They were convicted of plotting to institute an Islamic government and sentenced to seven to 22 years in prison under Ethiopia's controversial Anti-Terror Proclamation. U.S. government officials and human rights organizations have criticized the Ethiopian government's use of the Anti-Terror Proclamation to silence critics. On September 16, the Ethiopian government pardoned six of those convicted.

Increased EIASC Oversight of Mosques

The EIASC is the Ethiopian Muslim community's representative body, but due to the government's interference since 2011 many in the community no longer support it and view its members as government figureheads. During the reporting period, the EIASC increased its management of the Muslim community. It issued two directives giving it greater oversight, and even ownership, of Ethiopia's mosques. The directives include detailed rules regulating the administration of mosques; give the EIASC authority to issue internal mosque regulations and appoint mosque employees; and prohibit public meetings, speeches and preaching, and fundraising events without the EIASC's written approval.

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