

# **ETHIOPIA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **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. There were frequent Muslim protests against what the protestors characterized as continued government interference in religious affairs. 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. In June security forces clashed with demonstrators at the Anwar Mosque in Addis Ababa and arrested 14 protestors (who were later released on bail), some of whom were injured. On February 3, the Federal High Court reopened public, press, and diplomatic community access to the trial proceedings of 19 Muslims identified with July 2012 protests and charged under the ATP. The government had closed the trial because of what it said were security concerns. The government put on trial other groups of Muslims, reportedly due to their support of those involved in 2012 protests. Some religious groups reported discrimination in government land allocation and registration policies.

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of religiously motivated societal violence. 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 U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials continued to discuss religious freedom with the government, and engage with religious groups and faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to promote religious freedom. Embassy officials met with members of the Muslim community in response to allegations of government interference in religious affairs. In April an interagency team, led by the Department of State's Senior Advisor for Faith Based Community Initiatives, traveled to Ethiopia to engage with the government and faith-based communities on religious freedom issues.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 96.6 million (2014 estimate). The 2007 census estimated 44 percent of the population belongs to the

## ETHIOPIA

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 (SNNPR); 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 adherents of indigenous religions.

### Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

#### Legal/Policy 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), the Catholic Church, or Jewish communities to register as religious groups. All other groups must register with the justice ministry 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. The registration process includes an application letter, information on the board, meeting minutes, information on the founders, number of 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 charities, societies, and associations, including faith-based organizations, that receive more than 10 percent of their funding from foreign sources from engaging in activities that promote human and democratic rights or equality of nations, nationalities, peoples, genders, and religions; protect the rights of children or persons with disabilities; advance

## **ETHIOPIA**

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 government may close religious schools and hospitals at any time.

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**

There were frequent Muslim protests against what the protestors characterized as continued government interference in religious affairs. 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 protests.

On October 14, the Federal High Court sentenced a group of 12 university students and one teacher to six-month prison terms. Since the group had already served 16 months in prison, the court released the students and teacher, crediting them with time served. They had been arrested in 2012 and charged with plotting, in violation of the law, to protest a Ministry of Education directive aimed at secularizing campuses.

Authorities charged 17 Muslims from Dessie under the ATP for the 2013 murder of Sheik Nuru Yimam. The trial was ongoing at year's end.

On July 18, police detained 14 individuals, primarily Muslim worshippers, after security officers clashed with thousands of demonstrators at the Anwar Mosque, resulting in an unknown number of injuries. An individual was shot in the stomach, and two police officers were hospitalized in critical condition; all three recovered. The 14 detainees, some of whom suffered injuries during the clashes, were released on bail. The government suspended the charges against them, and it

## ETHIOPIA

appeared they would not be tried. There were unconfirmed reports the government had closed its investigation of the incident.

On February 3, the Federal High Court reopened to the public, press, and diplomatic community the trial of 19 Muslims who were identified with a July 2012 protest and charged under the ATP. The government said it had closed trial proceedings because of national security and witness safety concerns.

There were at least two additional ongoing trials involving 21 Muslims from Addis Ababa, Adama (Nazret), and the SNNPR, who were charged under the ATP, reportedly due to their vocal support of Muslim activists arrested in 2012.

The government continued to ban Waka-Feta, a traditional animist Oromo religious group, due to a suspected relationship between group leaders and the banned Oromo Liberation Front, which the government designated as a domestic terrorist organization.

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 quinquennial 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 when compared to the EOC and the EIASC with regard to religious registration and allocation of land for churches and cemeteries. The Ministry of Federal Affairs, which had general 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

## **ETHIOPIA**

1991. Although some property has been returned, the government did not return any property during the year.

Some 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, attempted to address the potential for sectarian violence through workshops and training of religious leaders, elders, and influential community members.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Tensions continued to exist between Muslim and Christian communities, but unlike in previous years these did not result in reports of religiously motivated discrimination or violence.

In most regions, Orthodox Christians and Muslims 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. These mutual recriminations served to increase general tensions between the groups.

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

The EIASC and the government continued to express concern about the increasing influence of some Salafist groups, purportedly funded by Saudi Arabia, within the Muslim community. The EIASC held these groups responsible for exacerbating tensions between Christians and Muslims and within the Muslim community.

In late July the EIASC announced it had formed a new task force, composed of elders, business persons, religious leaders, clerics, and youth, to work closely with the EIASC to respond to the needs and demands of the Muslim community

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

## **ETHIOPIA**

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the government and religious leaders. Embassy representatives observed the trials of Muslims suspected of terrorism.

In October Department of State officials raised religious freedom concerns with key government officials as part of the bilateral Democracy, Governance, and Human Rights working group.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials met with members of the national and regional Islamic Affairs Councils and the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. They discussed a range of issues, including U.S. government views on the importance of religious freedom. Ethiopian officials and religious leaders worked actively with the embassy to assess opportunities for cooperation on faith-based community initiatives in the country.

In April an interagency team led by the Department of State's Senior Advisor for Faith Based Community Initiatives engaged with faith-based communities. The interagency team met with leaders from the EOC, the Muslim community, interfaith organizations, religious charity associations, civil society, and government, and discussed the promotion of religious freedom among other issues.