

ETHIOPIA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and most laws and policies protect religious freedom. In practice, the national government generally respected religious freedom, although the government's respect for religious freedom declined during the year. Some Muslims continued to allege government interference in religious affairs. Large and frequent Muslim protests were usually peaceful and generally met with a restrained response by security forces, although there were instances of violence. In April police killed four protesters after the arrest of an imam in a mosque resulted in a riot. In July police detained as many as 1,000 Muslims who protested alleged government interference in religious affairs, quickly releasing most of them. On October 29, authorities charged 29 Muslims under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, including 28 persons identified with the protest movement.

There were no reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Several civil society and government programs attempted to address extremism and the potential for sectarian violence.

The U.S. ambassador and embassy officials discussed religious freedom with the government, and engaged with religious groups and faith-based nongovernmental organizations to promote religious freedom. Embassy officials met with members of the Muslim community in response to allegations of government interference in religious affairs.

Section I. Religious Demography

The population is 85 million, according to a U.S. government estimate. The 2007 census estimates that 44 percent belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), 34 percent is Sunni Muslim, and 19 percent belong 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, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and adherents of indigenous religions.

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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and most laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution requires the separation of state and religion. The law criminalizes religious “defamation” and incitement of one religious group against another, although no cases were reported during the year.

The government does not require the EOC or the Muslim community to register as religious groups, because of their historical dominance (along with Ethiopian Jews, or Falashas, most of whom emigrated to Israel in the twentieth century). All other groups must register with the Justice Ministry to gain legal standing, needed to open a bank account or fully participate in a court proceeding. All religious groups undertaking development activities must register their development arms as charities with the Charities and Societies Agency (ChSA) and follow legal guidelines. The law imposes a 10 percent limit on foreign funding if the group’s activities advance or promote human and democratic rights.

The government prohibits religious instruction in schools, whether public or private. The government permits churches to have Sunday schools, mosques to teach the Quran, and public schools to have 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 gives some religious groups use of government land for churches, schools, hospitals, and cemeteries without charge. However, the government may close religious schools and hospitals at any time.

The government prohibits the formation of political parties based on religion.

The government mandates a two-hour break on Fridays for Muslim prayers.

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.

Government Practices

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There were reports of abuses of religious freedom, including reports of killings, imprisonment, and detention.

In April police in Oromia Region entered a mosque after Friday prayers and arrested a preacher for allegedly “trying to instigate jihad.” After a crowd tried to intervene, police opened fire, killing four people. There were no reports that anyone filed charges against either the preacher or the police.

In late July authorities detained as many as 1,000 Muslim demonstrators, including members of a self-appointed committee claiming to represent the interests of the Muslim community, for protesting alleged government interference in religious affairs. The government quickly released the majority without charge. On October 29, authorities charged 29 persons under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation. The authorities identified 28 arrestees as members of the protest movement, and accused one of accepting funds illegally from the Saudi Arabian embassy.

Police allegedly detained Muslims on occasion without cause and released them shortly afterward without charge. The government denied such reports.

Some Muslims alleged that a training program jointly administered by the government and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) constituted government interference in Islamic affairs. A majority of Ethiopian Muslims reportedly saw the program as a government-led attempt to impose a foreign religious philosophy known as “al-Ahbash.” Protests against the program continued throughout the year. In response, the government agreed to permit Muslims to elect new leadership for the EIASC. Some Muslims objected to the plan to hold the vote in government facilities, and called for voting to take place in mosques. The EIASC determined that voting in mosques would have excluded women and posed a security threat; many Muslims reportedly perceived this as a sign of additional government interference. The elections proceeded as planned in October. The press reported that the government attempted to force Muslim participation in the EIASC election process through intimidation. Some members of the Muslim community complained that this alleged interference violated the constitutional protection of religious freedom.

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.

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There were reports of discrimination in registration and land allocation. The government did not require the EOC and the EIASC to reregister every year, unlike other religious groups. Members of some religious groups characterized this as a double standard.

Protestants privately alleged unequal treatment by local officials when seeking land for churches and cemeteries, compared to the EOC and the EIASC. The Ministry of Federal Affairs, which has general oversight responsibility for religious affairs in the country, characterized the perceived inequities as a result of poor governance at the local level and zoning regulations that determine a property's proposed and existing communal use functions.

In Axum, the site of many of the country's Ethiopia's oldest and most sacred Orthodox Christian churches, Muslims reported difficulty in gaining permission from local authorities to build new mosques. Protestants in the Oromia Region reported an inability to construct new churches in predominantly Muslim areas.

Some religious groups, mainly Protestant, continued to work through private and unofficial channels to seek the return of property confiscated between 1977 and 1991.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or 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. The Ministry of Federal Affairs, EIASC, and civil society groups attempted to address extremism and the potential for sectarian violence through workshops and training of religious leaders, elders, and influential community members. Some members of the Muslim community, however, stated that the training program's promotion of the "al-Ahbash" religious philosophy constituted government interference in religious affairs.

Some Orthodox Christians and Protestants continued to accuse each other of heresy and actively working to convert adherents from one faith to the other. These mutual recriminations served to increase general tensions between the two groups.

The EIASC continued to express concern about the increasing influence of some allegedly Saudi-funded Salafist groups within the Muslim community. The EIASC

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blamed these groups for exacerbating tensions between Christians and Muslims, and within the Muslim community.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious freedom, including the implementation of the EIASC-led training program, with the government. Embassy representatives attended the trial proceedings of Muslim protestors charged with terrorism.

In June the ambassador met with a delegation from the Inter-religious Council of Ethiopia to discuss the council's work and to promote tolerance. Embassy officials met with newly elected members of regional Islamic Affairs Councils following the October elections, and the ambassador met with the newly elected head of the EIASC in December to convey U.S. government views on the importance of religious freedom.