

# ETHIOPIA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution requires the separation of religion and the state, establishes freedom of religious choice and practice, prohibits religious discrimination, and stipulates the government shall not interfere in the practice of any religion, nor shall any religion interfere in the affairs of the state. Despite international attention to an alleged attack on the Orthodox Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in November in Axum, in Tigray Region, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) stated that there was no evidence this event occurred, while local human rights groups could not confirm the allegation without on-the-ground verification. The EHRC based its findings on a rapid investigative mission sent to the area. The EOTC deployed a task force to provide humanitarian assistance in Tigray, and one of its senior representatives said reports of the Axum attack were unfounded and false. In August, there were reports that government security forces killed two imams (one with his wife and infant) and injured a third in Assasa and Shashemene towns in Oromia Region in the wake of August 17 and 18 protests demanding the release of Oromo opposition politicians. The Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) released a statement condemning the acts. Government security forces also broke into mosques in Shashemene and Kofele in Oromia Region, injuring a religious leader and his student in one incident and opening fire on a mosque in another; no one was injured in the second incident.

A number of human rights groups stated that societal violence was on the rise. However, because ethnicity and religion are closely linked, and because criminality also played a role, it was difficult to characterize many incidents as solely based on religious identity. On September 6, 7, and 13, an unidentified armed group attacked several villages in the Bulen, Guba, and Wembera *woredas* (county equivalent) in the Metekel Zone of Benishangul Gumuz Region. The armed group stole livestock, ambushed travelers on roads, robbed communities, attacked churches, and killed approximately 160 civilians. Following the attacks, EOTC followers closed churches, fled the affected areas, and hid public signs and displays of their faith. On August 26, the EOTC released a statement saying that 67 of its followers were killed in Oromia Region during violence that followed the killing of the popular nationalist singer Hachalu Hundessa. The EOTC sent teams to investigate the affected areas where they concluded EOTC members were specifically targeted. According to a Christian aid organization, between Hachalu's killing on June 29 and the beginning of September, groups of Oromo

youth belonging to a nationalist youth movement called “Qeerroo” targeted and killed a number of Christians in Oromia Region. Human rights organizations and others, however, stated that it was unclear if the attacks in Oromia Region were religiously motivated. A local nongovernmental organization (NGO) that also conducted an assessment stated that the perpetrators used ethnic slurs when killing their victims, some of whom were Christian. On January 19 to 20, clashes between youths led to several deaths and destruction of property during the EOTC’s Epiphany celebrations in Dire Dawa, Harar, and Abomssa in the Arsi Zone of Oromia Region. The region’s police commissioner reported that 19 individuals, including 15 security personnel, suffered minor injuries and public and private property was destroyed.

The U.S. Secretary of State met with the Interreligious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) in February to discuss the important role religious leaders play in social cohesion and to understand how the IRCE was engaging communities to decrease tensions before the national elections. U.S. embassy officials also engaged religious leaders at senior levels and during times of crisis to advocate for peaceful conflict resolution. The embassy reached out to key religious leaders in July during the violence surrounding the killing of Hachalu and called for calm. The embassy also reached out to religious leaders in Beninshangul Gumuz in September to understand the nature and targets of the attacks. The embassy funded a program to build religious cohesion with more than 25 influential community and religious leaders in Harar, Dire Dawa, and Jijiga. The project’s goal was to identify and mitigate violent conflict, create strategies for preventing electoral violence and developing community peacebuilding coalitions, and promote religious tolerance.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 108.1 million (midyear 2020 estimate). The most recent census, conducted in 2007, estimated 44 percent of the population adheres to the EOTC, 34 percent are Sunni Muslim, and 19 percent belong to evangelical Christian and Pentecostal groups. Most observers believe the evangelical and Pentecostal proportion of the population has increased since the census was conducted. The EOTC predominates in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara, while Islam is most prevalent in the Afar, Oromia, and Somali Regions. Established Protestant churches have the most adherents in Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) and Gambella Regions and parts of Oromia Region.

Groups that together constitute less than five percent of the population include Eastern Rite and Roman Catholics, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and practitioners of indigenous religions. The Rastafarian community numbers approximately 1,000, and its members primarily reside in Addis Ababa and the town of Shashemene in Oromia Region.

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

### **Legal 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, nor shall religion interfere in state affairs. It permits limitations on religious freedom as prescribed by law to protect public safety, education, and morals as well as to guarantee the independence of government from religion. The law criminalizes religious defamation and incitement of one religious group against another. The law permits *sharia* courts to adjudicate personal status cases, provided both parties are Muslim and consent to the court's jurisdiction.

Registration and licensing of religious groups fall under the mandate of the Directorate of Faith and Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Peace, which requires unregistered religious groups to submit a founding document, the national identity cards of its founders, and the permanent address of the religious institution and planned regional branches. The registration process also requires an application letter, information on board members, meeting minutes, information on the founders, financial reports, offices, name, and symbols. Religious group applicants must have at least 50 individuals for registration as a religious entity and 15 for registration as a ministry or association; the rights and privileges are the same for each category. During the registration process, the government publishes the religious group's name and logo in a local newspaper. If there are no objections, registration is granted. Unlike other religious groups, the EOTC is not registered by the Ministry of Peace but obtains registration through a provision in the civil code passed during the imperial era that is still in force. Registration with the ministry confers legal status on a religious group, which gives the group the right to congregate and to obtain land to build a place of worship and establish a cemetery. Unregistered groups do not receive these benefits. Religious groups must renew their registration at least every five years; failure to do so may result in a fine.

Registered religious organizations are required to provide annual activity and financial reports. Activity reports must describe proselytizing activities and list new members, newly ordained clergy, and new houses of worship.

Under the constitution, the government owns all land; religious groups must apply to both the regional and local governments for land allocation, including for land to build places of worship.

Government policy prohibits the holding of religious services inside public institutions, per the constitutionally required separation of religion and state. The government mandates that public institutions take a two-hour break from work on Fridays to allow Muslim workers to attend Islamic prayers. Private companies are not required to follow this policy.

The constitution prohibits religious instruction in public and private schools, although both public and private schools may organize clubs based on shared religious values. The law permits the establishment of a separate category of religious schools under the auspices of churches and mosques. The Charities and Societies Agency, a government body accountable to the federal attorney general, and the Ministry of Education regulate religious schools, which provide both secular and religious instruction. The Ministry of Education oversees the secular component of education provided by religious schools.

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

The law allows all civil society organizations and religious groups to engage in advocacy and lobbying activities and to collect and obtain funding from any legal source.

Religious groups undertaking development activities are required to register their development arms as charities with the Charities and Societies Agency and to follow legal guidelines originating from the Charities and Societies Proclamation.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

## **Government Practices**

International media and human rights NGOs stated that on November 28 and 29, Eritrean forces, fighting alongside Ethiopian government forces to retake the town

of Axum from a Tigrayan militia committed indiscriminate killings of hundreds of civilians, including those attending services at the Orthodox Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion (*Maryam Ts'iyon*), on the anniversary of the day EOTC followers believe the Ark of the Covenant arrived at the church. The soldiers allegedly entered the church and killed worshippers and others as they fled. Eyewitnesses reported as many as 800 civilians were killed in Axum. The EHRC conducted an investigative mission to Axum and found no evidence that the attack on the church occurred. According to CNN, in a similar attack on November 30, Eritrean forces opened fire on Maryam Dengelat Church in Dengalat Village while hundreds of worshippers were celebrating Mass, killing dozens. The EOTC deployed a task force to provide humanitarian assistance in Tigray, and one of its senior representatives denied these claims by international media. Local human rights groups could not confirm the allegations of these attacks without on-the-ground verification.

In August, there were reports that government security forces killed two imams and injured a third in Assasa and Shashemene towns in Oromia Region in the wake of protests on August 17 and 18 demanding the release of Oromo opposition politicians. In one of the attacks, the imam's wife and three-month-old baby were also killed. The EIASC released a statement condemning the killings and expressed its disappointment with what it stated was the failure of government officials and the media to report on and condemn the killings.

In August, government security forces entered Qemer Mosque in Shashemene, Oromia Region, and injured a teacher and his student. In the same month, regional government security forces reportedly forcibly entered Kofele Mosque in Kofele, Oromia Region, and opened fire on the mosque while the *Mmaghrib* (sunset) prayer was underway. It was reported that no one was injured. The incidents took place during a period of unrest following the killing of Oromo singer and activist Hachalu Hundessa, during which some reported that authorities took “disproportionate” measures to control violence.

In June, the House of Peoples' Representatives (lower chamber of parliament), during its regular proceedings approved into law two draft proclamations that conferred legal personality on the EIASC and the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia (ECFE) without the need for separate registration. Conferring legal status on the two faith groups marked a direct recognition of the groups as legal entities that may form organizations affiliated with them and exempted them from requirements of regular renewal that apply to civil society organizations.

Prime Minister Ahmed Abiy continued to engage religious leaders in his stated efforts to promote reconciliation among ethnic groups in the country. In May, he met with leaders of the EOTC, EIASC, Ethiopian Catholic Church, and ECFE and urged them to build stronger interfaith ties and to promote peace.

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

Several human rights groups stated that societal violence (locally referred to as “citizen-on-citizen violence”) was on the rise. Because ethnicity and religion are closely linked and because criminality also played a role, it was difficult to characterize many incidents as solely based on religious identity.

On September 6, 7, and 13, an unidentified armed group attacked several villages in Bulen, Guba, and Wembera woredas in the Metekel Zone of Benishangul Gumuz Region. The armed group stole livestock, ambushed travelers on roads, robbed communities, attacked churches, and killed approximately 160 persons. Mahibere Kidusan, an association under the EOTC, said the attackers killed 80 EOTC followers, burned down one church, caused 6,000 members to flee their communities, and forced followers to close their churches and remove all symbols that would identify them as Orthodox Christians. The EOTC and an Amhara-based opposition party said the attacks specifically targeted their followers. Regional government officials, however, said the attacks were not ethnically based because the perpetrators randomly stole cattle, committed extortion and robberies, and attacked residences in multiple communities that were home to several different ethnic and religious groups. The government deployed the Ethiopian National Defense Force to restore calm and established a task force to investigate the violence. On September 28, the *Ethiopian Monitor* daily news website reported 45 regional officials were dismissed for failing to carry out their duties and that 10 of these officials were under investigation. At the end of the year, the incident remained under investigation, and the identity and motivation of the attackers remained unconfirmed.

Following the June 29 killing in Addis Ababa of popular singer and Oromo nationalist Hachalu Hundessa, widespread violence occurred in Oromia Region and parts of Addis Ababa. Among the areas most affected by the violence were the towns of Arsi, Assasa, Sahshemene, Bale Robe, Ginir, Asebot, Chrío, and Awedaye. The EHRC estimated that 123 persons were killed from June 29 to July 2. On August 26, the EOTC released a statement saying that 67 of its followers were specifically targeted, based on an investigation carried out by the Church in

the affected areas in the Oromia region. The EHRC and local NGOs also conducted investigations and reported that groups of youths in trucks had arrived at communities with lists of non-Oromos to target and that they also demanded residents' identification. Watchdog groups also reported that some of the perpetrators used ethnic slurs against those they attacked. A local NGO that conducted an assessment stated that the perpetrators used ethnic slurs when killing their victims, some of whom were Christian. According to the Barnabas Fund, a Christian Aid Agency, between Hachalu's killing on June 29 and the beginning of September, groups of "Qeerroo" targeted and killed more than 500 Christians in Oromia Region. According to combined estimates of police from Oromia Region and Addis Ababa, however, 239 persons were killed – the police did not specify the victims' religious affiliation or indicate a religious motivation. Observers had differing views concerning whether the attacks were religiously rather than ethnically motivated.

The Barnabas Fund reported that on November 1, 60 gunmen suspected to be members of the Oromo Liberation Army-Shane opened fire on a group of approximately 200 individuals in Gawa Qanqa Village, Oromia Region, killing at least 54 of them. According to the Barnabas Fund, most of those killed were ethnic Amhara, who are predominantly Christian. Some observers also said the attacks were ethnically and not religiously motivated. Soon after the killings, approximately 200 families fled the area according to regional police.

According to media, on January 19 to 20, clashes between youths resulted in several deaths and destruction of property during the EOTC's Epiphany celebrations in Dire Dawa, Harar, and Abomssa in the Arsi Zone of Oromia Region. On January 19, in Harar, youth groups believed to be predominantly Muslim blocked EOTC processions on the eve of the Epiphany holiday. On January 20, groups of Christian youth attacked Muslim-owned businesses, homes, and vehicles in Harar. Individuals in that city spray painted Coptic crosses on vehicles outside of a mosque. Similar violence occurred on January 19 in Dire Dawa, where 21 followers of the EOTC were wounded by gunfire and one individual died after being attacked with rocks. The attacks were followed by vandalism of vehicles, houses, and businesses. Fourteen police officers were beaten and injured trying to stop the confrontation. During the same period, a group of local youths attacked EOTC followers in Abomssa, killing two. Christian youths killed one of the attackers; other youths targeted Christian-owned property, cattle, and businesses and wounded several individuals. Arsi Zone police reported that 19 individuals, including 15 security personnel, suffered minor injuries and a

mosque as well as public and private property were destroyed. Federal Police intervened to defuse tensions.

Media outlets reported that on March 10, a group of Orthodox Christians in the town of Enewari in the northern part of the country severely beat a group of Protestant Christian missionaries who were proselytizing and providing basic medical care to the community. The missionaries took refuge in a nearby hospital; local and regional police responded to the incident and provided an armed escort from the area. The same day, an EOTC youth group robbed and burned the Full Gospel Church, a Protestant church not associated with the missionaries. Media outlets reported a similar incident in the town of Jeru in the northern part of the country, in which EOTC members attacked Protestant Christians, and burned their church to the ground.

In July, *Afrobarometer* conducted a survey regarding freedom, human rights, and governance. The survey randomly sampled 2,500 adults in nine Ethiopian regions. It found that 75 percent of the respondents had trust in religious leaders, who were judged the most trustworthy of the 12 societal and governmental groups measured. Religious leaders were followed by traditional leaders, the National Defense Force, and Prime Minister Abiy.

In October, the first Islamic bank in the country, ZamZam Bank, obtained a license from the national banking regulator to provide Islamic banking activities. ZamZam Bank became the first officially recognized institution to specifically offer financial services and products that comply with Islamic law following action in 2019 by the National Bank of Ethiopia and the House of People's Representatives to establish the legal and procedural framework for the establishment of Islamic banking.

Religious leaders and organizations played key roles in peacebuilding, according to scholars and activists. Before the Ethiopian New Year celebration on September 11, the Patriarch of the EOTC, the Cardinal of the Catholic Church, the President of the EIASC, and the secretary general of the ECFE all conveyed messages calling for unity and peace. On June 16, a 52-member delegation of the IRCE traveled to Tigray to mediate growing disagreements and political disputes between the Tigray regional government and the federal government. In July, Oromia Region imams worked closely with communities afflicted by violence after the killing of the nationalist singer Hachalu Hundessa to restore calm and prevent incitement to violence.



The EIASC expressed continued concern about what it said was the influence of foreign Salafist groups within the Muslim community. In one example, the EIASC accused foreign Salafist groups of forcibly taking control of local mosques. The EIASC said it continued to hold these foreign groups responsible for the exacerbation of tensions between Christians and Muslims and within the Muslim community.

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

The Secretary of State met with the IRCE in February to discuss the important role that religious leaders play in social cohesion and to understand how the IRCE is engaging communities to decrease tensions before the national elections. The Ambassador hosted an *iftar* with Muslim community leaders during Ramadan and made remarks in which he highlighted the importance of religious freedom and tolerance as well as the joy of peaceful and supportive coexistence. The embassy reached out to key religious leaders in July during the violence surrounding the killing of Hachalu Hundessa to call for calm. The embassy also reached out to religious leaders in Beninshangul Gumuz in September to ascertain if churches were attacked and whether the attacks on certain communities were ethnically or religiously motivated.

The embassy supported peacebuilding and reconciliation dialogues at Jimma, Haramaya, Ambo, Bahir Dar, and Gondar Universities as part of its strategy to promote dialogue to prevent and reconcile conflicts. The project assembled students from diverse ethnic, religious, and political and ideological groups to engage in structured and intensive dialogue on diversity, including religious diversity, and to learn to build social cohesion through mutual trust and understanding. The embassy also funded a program to build religious cohesion with more than 25 influential community and religious leaders in Harar, Dire Dawa, and Jijiga. The project's goal was to identify and mitigate violent conflict, create strategies for preventing electoral violence and developing community peacebuilding coalitions, and promote religious tolerance.

The embassy helped the IRCE translate and print its Amharic-language peace promotion training manuals into English and Afan-Oromo to expand the use of the manual and IRCE's reach in conflict resolution initiatives.