

ETHIOPIA

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom; however, some local authorities, acting independently, occasionally infringed on this right. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Local tensions between Muslim and Christian communities resulted in some violent episodes. Several civic and government programs attempted to address the potential for sectarian violence.

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The bilateral relationship between the United States and the government consists of three broad pillars: economic growth and development; regional peace and security; and democracy, governance, and human rights, including religious freedom. Embassy officials also engaged with the country's religious communities, religious groups, and faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the most recent census (2007), 44 percent of the population belongs to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), which is predominant in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara. Thirty-four percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, of which the majority is Sufi. Islam is most prevalent in the Somali and Afar regions, and in Oromia. Christian evangelical and Pentecostal groups constitute 19 percent of the population. 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), animists, and practitioners of indigenous religions.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution requires the separation of state and religion. Under a 2008 law, it is a crime to incite one religious group against another. The law also allows for prosecution of religious “defamation” claims as criminal cases.

The government requires religious groups to register to gain legal standing, without which a group cannot open a bank account or fully participate in a court proceeding. The Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSO law) went into effect in February 2009. It established registration requirements for NGOs. Religious organizations that undertake development activities must register their development agencies separately with the Charities and Societies Agency (CSA) as charities, and follow the guidelines of the CSO law. This includes a 10 percent limit on foreign funding if charities take part in activities that advance or promote human and democratic rights; the equality of nations, nationalities, peoples, genders, and religions; the rights of children and persons with disabilities; conflict resolution or reconciliation; or the efficiency of justice and law enforcement services. Leaders of major denominations did not report any difficulties in registering the development wings of their organizations with the CSA.

The government does not issue work visas to foreign religious workers unless they are associated with the development arm of a religious organization registered with the government.

The government interprets the constitutional provision for separation of religion and state to include the prohibition of religious instruction in schools, whether public or private. The government permits churches to have Sunday schools, mosques to teach the Qur’an, and public schools to have clubs based on shared religious values.

Religious groups, like private individuals or businesses, must apply to regional and local governments for land allocation. The government gives some religious groups use of government land for churches, schools, hospitals, and cemeteries without charge; however, religious schools and hospitals are subject to government closure and land forfeiture 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

The government generally respected constitutional protections of religious freedom and separation of church and state. However, there were reports of abuses of religious freedom.

There were reports of detention during the year. In December police held three journalists from *Muslim Affairs* magazine briefly without charge after the magazine published articles critical of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC). In addition, there were scattered reports of religious detainees allegedly held briefly by local officials in Oromia and SNNPR who were acting on their own authority and independently of central government policy.

During the year, there were allegations of government interference in the affairs of religious groups. For example, there were reports of government interference in the leadership and activity of the EIASC, and of complaints that this alleged meddling violated the constitutional protection of religious freedom.

The government continued to ban Waka-Feta, a traditional animist Oromo religious group, due to suspicion of a relationship between the group's leaders and the banned Oromo Liberation Front.

In July an anti-extremism training platform, run jointly by the EIASC and the Ministry of Federal Affairs (MoFED), began to propagate the tenets of anti-extremism to imams and other Muslim religious leaders. Some Muslims complained, however, that the anti-extremism training was a vehicle to import an alien Islamic tradition called "al-Ahbash" into Ethiopia from Lebanon and Syria.

There were reports of discrimination including in the areas of registration and land allocation. Religious organizations, similar to NGOs, must renew their registrations with the Ministry of Justice every three years. However, the EOC and the EIASC are not required to reregister and do not face government sanctions, prompting some other religious groups to say there is a double standard.

Protestants alleged inequities in treatment by local officials when seeking land for churches and cemeteries, as compared to the EOC and the EIASC. MoFED characterized the perceived inequities as a result of poor governance at the local level and zoning regulations that govern a property's proposed and existing communal use functions. MoFED began a new effort to standardize the management of land through the issuance of directives.

Various religious groups, mainly Protestant denominations, continued to seek the return of property confiscated between 1977 and 1991 by the previous regime, whose policies of land nationalization disproportionately affected religious institutions, especially those the regime considered "newcomer" religions. In Addis Ababa and Oromia, federal provisions granted the return of such buildings; however, this did not include structures registered under regional statutes. In practice, there are very few cases in this category and none has been publicly active in recent years.

In November 2010 the Israeli cabinet agreed to allow up to 7,846 Ethiopian Falash Mura, who live primarily in the Gonder area, to immigrate to Israel in a series of staggered arrivals. That emigration began during the year, with about 2,800 Falash Mura moving to Israel. Falash Mura is a distinct category from the Falasha Jews who immigrated to Israel from the country during the famine in the late 1980s. Falasha are practicing Jews. Falash Mura claim matrilineal Jewish heritage, but do not actively practice Judaism.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses and 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.

In March a group of hundreds of Muslims reportedly espousing what the government described as a "Wahhabist" or "Salafist" ideology burned down more than 60 homes and churches of evangelical Protestants in Asendabo, a small town in the Oromia region. Police arrived and contained the violence relatively swiftly; authorities arrested a reported 500 persons and charged them with involvement in the attacks. The leaders of the violence received prison sentences ranging from three months to 18 years. Local Muslims participated in the rebuilding of some of the churches.

There was tension between the traditional Sufi Muslim majority and Muslims affiliated with the so-called “Wahhabist” strain of Islam. The EIASC continued to express concern over the increasing influence of some allegedly Saudi-funded “Wahhabist” groups within the Muslim community, which the EIASC blamed for exacerbating tensions between Christians and Muslims.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom, including the implementation of the government’s anti-extremism training, with the government.

In reaching out to religious communities, the embassy employed a full range of public diplomacy tools, including speaker and exchange programs, small grants, publications, and representation events. The U.S. ambassador traveled to Afar in August to meet with local leaders and participate in the observance of Ramadan. In October the U.S. special envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation met with government officials and local religious leaders, and spoke to students at Addis Ababa University on the topic of Muslims in the United States. The embassy made an effort to ensure that participants in public affairs outreach programs reflected the religious diversity of the country.